

Module name/ title: Cultural and political aspects of marginalization in India

Paper: Media and Margins

Component I: Personal Details

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Component II: Description of the Module

Items	Description of Module
Subject Name	Media and Communication Studies
Paper Name	Media and Margins
Module Name/Title	Cultural and political aspects of marginalization in India
Module ID	P9M15
Pre-requisites	
Objectives	
Keywords	Gender, Identity, Politics, Marginal, Marginalization

1. Introduction:

In the previous modules, you have been introduced to the concept and meanings of marginalization. We have already addressed the questions on social diversities, nation building, identity, class, caste vis-à-vis marginality.

In this module, you will be introduced to the concept of gender, identity and politics. Such understanding will help you comprehend the interrelationship between gender, identity and politics in India.

2. Learning Outcome:

After doing this module, you will be familiarized with the contemporary discourses on gender, identity and politics in India. This module will also help you to move beyond the everyday understanding of gender, identity and politics.

3. Doing Gender:

When someone utters the word gender, does it ring a bell? Well, we all seem to understand gender in our own sense. Most often we either distinguish or categorize gender into male and female and try to use gender as a synonym for sex and vice-versa. Now you must be thinking if there is a difference between gender and sex? Yes, there lies a basic difference between gender and sex. One can say that gender is a social construct and it is the social, cultural and psychological traits which makes us masculine and feminine. Sex, on the other hand, is a pure biological term and it is based on the genitals. Thus based on the organs, we can be identified as male or female. In identifying our gender roles, we should relook at the processes of socialization and acculturation. In other words, we can also say that sex is ascribed and gender is achieved i.e. one is born with a sex and one gets the social training to behave in a way to perform the gender role. For example, at birth a child is unaware whether it is he or she but with time as the process of socialization begins the child identifies the roles and fits (him/ her) self into the same. For example, the child cannot distinguish between the colors, toys and the kind of childhood games. It is the training that the child receives which puts everything into a direction.

You must now be curious about what if a child does not fit into either of the categorizations. What if a child has, by birth male genitals but behaves in a completely different way or vice versa. Unfortunately, our society fails to recognize such cases and through different mechanisms tries to push them into either of the above stated categories. Let us ask ourselves, how many of us have ever seen three categories of gender in any important form that we fill. There will be a handful of us who must have seen such categories. Hence in certain sense, it has been stigmatizing to not fall in either of the categories of male or female. Thus, a significant part of doing gender should also do with the process of socialization and performance of the body in a way defined by the social norms and taboos. This performance gives the identity of 'self' and there begins the politics of doing and performing gender.

4. History of Gender and Identity:

But what is history of gender? Why do we speak of a history of gender? Does it mean we must read and understand the gender roles and stereotypes? No. History of gender means a systematic study of the processes through which gender becomes an indispensable part of socialization. As mentioned there are binaries in which different societies have categorized people vis-à-vis gender. Based on such categorizations, individuals associate meanings to such situations which shape their identity. Such meanings are to be found within the society. Thus, in simple words the meanings that people associate with the binaries are to be found in human history. In the words of Joan Scott, "gender is a primary way of signifying relationships of power". In certain sense, how we behave and identify ourselves is already predefined through certain rules. However, it would be incorrect to categorize history of gender into the binaries of masculinity and femininity. Writers concerned with the women's history emphasize on the inter-sectionality of race, ethnicity and class as important factors influencing gender. But how far these women's history writers have been successful in moving beyond the binaries becomes a pertinent question.

History of gender over the years has been influenced by many scholarships. The focus of such scholarship was to reflect the history of the group which could not find a place in the history and hence were not represented. There were different historical anecdotes which influenced the gender history. Early 20th century witnessed the suffragette movement. The movement marked the entry of women in the political discourses. This was followed by their demand for a space in the public sphere. Both industrialization and the French Revolution in Europe had influenced history writing in its own sense. Industrialization marked its way for distinct gender roles. Men were to take up the industrial roles and women had to take care of the household chores. Thus, the glorification of the housewife began in the western society. Ann Oakley, points that compared to the pre-industrial Britain, women now must undertake the mature roles of housewife. Women in the 20th century were undergoing the 'feminine mystique' as Betty Friedan calls it. There was a problem which had no name. Women were unhappy despite being married, with children and possessing all material comfort. There was something which was missing. This was the beginning when women started losing their identities in modern industrialized society. In India, however, gender history took a different discourse. Women did not have to fight for their voting rights, neither for their participation in the independence movement. But, does that mean Indian women were better represented in the history? Women were to fight the shackles of Sati, child marriage and many more. Caste with its tentacles of endogamy and purity, time and again, restricted women's sexuality. While caste was pervasive, its doings varied across class and caste. Women belonging to the upper-class/caste families had to fight a different battle. This was a battle within, of finding their own selves. 20th century Indian literature also shows such duality of women. For instance, Rabindranath Tagore and his 20th century novel 'Ghore-Baire' reflect such duality of women at the backdrop of India's independence. What happened to Indian women after independence? They were granted voting rights but despite having the political rights, women were to behave in a way that the society approved of. The women's movement in India gained its impetus even before India's independence. Unlike the Western world, in India such social movements were initiated by men.

Over the years, the nature and momentum of the movement has changed. The nature of subsequent events was different, for instance the constitution guaranteed equality of women. In 1974, the 'Towards Equality Report' was prepared by the Committee on the Status of Women. Such efforts also led to various grass-root women's movements. But was it enough to establish that women today are better off than they were in the past. While the issues of women, time and again, caught public attention through such initiatives, women in general were caught in the stereotypes of caste, custom and traditions. Thus, we can draw certain parallels between women across the globe. While the context of women varies, their social situation positions them to perform certain pre-conditioned acts.

By now you must be clear that gender and identity are intertwined. It is the stereotyping of a gender that enables one to identify his/her gender role. The entire course of identity formation and gender is a continuing process. It starts at a tender age, when children strive to identify their roles and try to put themselves across such roles. There are many discourses on gender and identity formation yet it is difficult to identify the exact age at which a child becomes conscious of his/her gender vis-à-vis identity. There are various agents which help a child grasp their gender identity. They are family, school, peer group and so on.

There are many factors influencing the process of identity formation. One of the most significant factors is nature and culture. In the essay 'Is female to male as nature to culture', Sherry Ortner refers to the symbolic categorizations of 'male' and 'female' to that of culture and nature. She focuses that women's body and physiology are socially perceived to be closer to nature, while men are more associated with culture. Thus, men have the power to control and dominate women.

Women are confined to the familial roles and more so with the act of giving birth. She is associated with nature and men due to their characteristics like rationality relate to the cultural endeavors like religion. Women are seen by society as an intermediary between the nature and culture. She should nurture and socialize the child to participate in various activities and men are to be left free to participate in abstracts of culture.

Anthropologists, such as Robin Fox and Lionel Tiger, disagree with the arguments favoring the dominating role of culture upon individuals. They argue that scholars have ignored a major part which they consider the 'human bio-grammar'. It predisposes individuals to behave in a way based on their genes. 'Human bio-grammar' cannot be equated with instincts as they can be considerably modified through culture. Thus, the way men behave and act are because of the way in which their 'human bio-grammar' is programmed and because of the social circumstances.

Another anthropologist, G. P. Murdock, refers to the biological difference between men and women as the crux of the sexual division of labour. While, he does not give any importance to the role played by human predispositions in understanding the sexual division of labour, he refers to the biological differences of male and female as practical and necessary. The organization of a society based on the sexual division of labour according to him is most effective.

Countering the arguments of Murdock, Ann Oakley a British sociologist comes strongly on the role of sexual division of labour. She questions the premise of the argument and claims that it is not a universal law. She further argues that Murdock has a pre-conceived idea of western housewife-mother in mind and surrounding the same he draws the parallels.

The above discussion must have familiarized you with gender roles, and the social-cultural construction of gender. While, the discourses on gender signaled towards a society where pre-conceived ideas dominated individual's understanding of the masculine and the feminine, there was a third aspect of gender which has been sidelined in its main stream discourses.

Sexuality in the common usage refers to the natural or essential property of an individual which finds expression through the sexual activities and relationships (Collins, 2006). It becomes an area of social and cultural behavior subject to state regulation and control, particularly in the context of prostitution and homosexuality (ibid, 2006). Sexuality, as Foucault says, since the 18th century deals with repressive hypothesis where individuals are forced to behave in an explicit way i.e. power in different forms have repressed sex to behave in a defined way. Sex became a part of the private/personal space. Thus, sex became an affair strictly confined to the limits of marriage. Thus, any one indulging in any pleasurable activity outside of marriage was not only to be repressed but also prohibited. The successive centuries were also no different in terms of repressing sexuality. There were different agencies which acted as agents for the state.

In the 19th century women/men who did not confirm to the set norms and roles of society were put under pressure to behave the way the society expected them to. Doctors played a crucial role in the process. They would put such women/men through a corrective mechanism of medical care and would ensure that they behave the way their respective gender roles were designed. Foucault in 'Madness and civilization' refers to the growing popularity of 'medical gaze' and the doctor. He refers to hysteria and madness as a social problem and any person especially women and children who were hysteric were to be corrected through appropriate 'medical gaze'. Thus, the patient's body completely gets disassociated from his/her identity. Thereby they just become objects and get highly impersonal. The whole idea was to discipline the body as per the norms of the society.

Society did not approve of any behavior which was not socially acceptable. Thus, the laws were enacted which penalized the persons who would behave out of the set norms and roles. The mental asylum, jail and the police kept an absolute control on the individuals through its mechanism of surveillance. Thus, whether it is the human bio-grammar, sexual division of labour or the repressive hypothesis, society had its own set notions of gender roles and these roles were to be confined to the binaries of masculine and feminine. Generally they do not stretch beyond the set ideals. In Indian society, social scientists have been working on the issues of gender since 1980s. But they have failed to move beyond the binaries of gender. For instance, V. Geetha in her famous work on *Gender* fails to explain beyond the binaries of gender. She writes:

[T]here are many young men who feel uncomfortable having to prove, insistently and unhappily, that they are macho. These men probably dislike fast bikes, do not want to tease girls, nor do they feel that world is theirs to appropriate and own. Such young men are bound to feel uneasy with the shadowy ideal of a powerful and authoritative masculinity that looms large over them...We need to ask ourselves whether there is anything 'normal' about our world being arranged this way, and if there are other ways of arranging it (V. Geetha 2006: xiv-xv)

The above paragraph highlights the dichotomy of gender. The burden of performing in a way which is accepted as a standard and any irregularity a pathology makes gender a public rather than a private affair. The pathologies, therefore, are to be treated with law, rule, and different agencies of state depicting power.

5. Gender, Identity and Politics:

If gender and identity are products of socialization and a part of society then why does it become political? Is gender identity political? Politics of gender has to do with the sexuality of an individual. As discussed, Foucault emphasizes on the nature of 19th and 20th century society. These discussions clearly underline that sexuality, more than an individual choice, became a matter of the political identity of the community/society. Thus, the bodies become the subject and surrenders themselves to the forces which dominate. The domination comes in the form of state agencies which try to normalize the defiant bodies and act within the binaries.

Critiquing the ideas put forth by the social construction of gender and identity, in the 1990's the queer theory developed in the field of post-structuralist critical theory. Queer theory examines the discourses of homosexuality developed in the last century. Does it mean that homosexuality is a product only of the last century? The answer is no. But, the process of deconstructing the normative social order is certainly a product of the last century. This school of thought deconstructs the hetero-normativity or the belief of the normative ideology of being straight. It questions the social order, identifies people who are outside this hetero-normative order and studies them. Basically, it criticized the existing monolithic ideas of sexuality. But who are the Queers? Queer includes those who openly wear sexual identities like lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) and those who use indigenous terms like hijra, kothi, panthis to describe themselves. In addition to this, there are regional identities of sexual non-conformity, such as jogappa and jogtas in northern Karnataka and Maharashtra or the shivshaktis and ganacharis in parts of south India who are real and potential participants in 'queer azadi' (Narain and Bhan, 2005; Pande, 2004; Menon 2007 cited in Kumar Pushpesh).

In India, sexuality has been a whispered affair. Individual issues of sexuality becomes problematic more so when the intense community policing stigmatizes such issue. Lack of familial support also pushes people to extreme ends. Pushpesh in his article on 'Queering Indian Sociology' highlights the overwhelming presence of endogamy and caste in the Indian society. Thus, he explains that heterosexuality becomes predisposed to the Indian society and culture. Often in considerable discourses on Indian sexuality, for instance Nivedita Menon's 'Sexuality', issues of caste and

sexuality do not find its space. The issue seems to be completely missing from the Indian society.

Pushpesh in his piece on 'Queering Indian Sociology', speaks of the dalit perspective which challenges the notions of 'purity', 'untouchability' and 'materialist' dimension of caste but it too fails to accommodate voices of 'sexual outcasts'.

Apart from the social construction, the Indian state through its various forms time and again has reiterated hetero-normativity as the order of the state and natural. Article 377 of the Indian Penal Code is a resurrection stating homosexuality not only as unnatural but also a punishable offence. While there are demands to repeal homosexuality as offence, Supreme Court in India is yet to give its final judgment on the same. So, where do homosexuals go? Studies have found that compared to the rural and semi urban areas in India, the queer are contented in the urban and metropolitan areas. The lack of anonymity and individual space makes it rather difficult for them to survive in the rural and semi urban areas. Studies indicate that lack of upper caste norms and anonymity makes living in urban areas more comfortable for them. But what do they do for living? Are they accepted anywhere and everywhere in urban areas or do they have stereotyped roles? We can certainly keep these questions open to ourselves and try to find an answer.

6. Summary:

You have learnt the meaning of gender, its socio-cultural orientation. You have also been familiarized with the history of gender, and ways of doing gender. We have seen that often discussing gender we tend to typecast gender into binaries ignoring the possibility beyond normativity. Issues of sexuality and gender become crucial as they must address the political underpinnings of a society. Sexuality thus, becomes a major issue as it involves other corollaries like community policing and social honour. But to understand gender and identity, one must move beyond the politics of regularizing normativity.