CHAPTER ONE

Women in Indian Patriarchy

1.1 Introduction

Indian society is rather a complex one, because of its construction of a hierarchical social order on the basis of class, caste and gender. If one wants to know the conflicts which women face today in India then one has to investigate the traditional position of women in early Indian society. Thapar contends “events concerning the more remote periods often take the form of a myth. Myth is in a sense prototype history since it is a selection of ideas composed in narrative form for the purpose of giving significance to an important past” (Thapar, 1978: 294). This is a contentious debate on the historical background of women and it is very difficult to come up with any specific or clear conclusion.

In this chapter a study has been made about the status of women in Indian society starting from Vedic age. Prior to this period there is no textual document and the written texts are available only from the Vedic time and therefore, this specific period has been selected to know the status of traditional Hindu women. The second reason to study the Vedic women is that, Vedic time is attributed as a golden era for the women of Indian society. My search is for the truth about this general perception and to know the history. The third and most significant factor is that the low status of Hindu women in modern India which is being attributed as the cause of Muslim invasion. This break in the glorious nationalist history by the demonic ‘other’ (Muslim Rule) is a crucial factor. The above three factors are the basic reasons to take up the study of the status of Hindu women in history, specifically started with Vedic women as a ‘historical myth’.
1.2 Women in Hindu society

Apparently it seems Hindu women per se Indian women perform very dignified roles. Majority of the Indian population have a belief that traditional India or Vedic society was a Golden Age, where Indian women enjoyed high dignity. All the evils of the nineteenth century – purdah (seclusion), sati, female infanticide, and child marriage were explained as outcome of fears for women, which originated in Muslim ‘invasions’. This is a Bramhanical concept, which most Indians seem to argue, is the product of a mythical past, which forms a ‘false consciousness’.

In this context false consciousness is used to interpret gender discrimination, where women cannot realise their oppression and domination within patriarchal social structure as a ‘class’. Originally Marx employed the term ‘false consciousness’ where he used the term ‘inverted consciousness’ in the context of capitalistic society where the proletariat is exploited by the bourgeoisie, but they are unable to realise their exploitation as a class for itself. For Marx and Engels, “ideology is ‘false consciousness’ a distorted understanding of the world that legitimised the domination of the ruling class”. They wanted to show, “the existence of a necessary link between inverted forms of consciousness and man’s material existence” (Bottomore, 1987: 219).

In general, false consciousness can be denoted as, ‘any form of social imagery, which is held to be inappropriate to the real or objective class situation or interest of the actor’. In particular Bramhanical ideologies and consciousness of the ‘mythical past’ about women are the products of ancient India’s patriarchal social structure. The mythical past of the women folk is a false consciousness, which does not represent the relationship of domination and oppression. “Gender is important in the maintenance of caste hierarchy and ‘womanhood’ accordingly takes a caste complexion not merely that woman in each caste category has a distinctness but the caste system knitted the upper and lower segments in symbolic and material ways” (Chakravarti, 1995: 11). Further she argues that

1 ‘...the practice, prevalent predominantly among high caste Hindus, of the immolation of widows on the funeral pyres of their husbands. These immolations were sometimes voluntary and at other times coerced’ (Mani, 1986: WS32).

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in the post-Vedic period especially with the establishment of private control over land, held and transmitted within a patrilineal system accompanied by the beginning also a patrilineal succession to kingship, the preservation of caste purity meant that the sexual behavior of certain categories of women needed to be closely guarded. Wives in particular required to be under male control and the view finds explicit mention in the text, the Apastamba Dharma Sutra (Circa 6th Century B.C), which rules that a husband should ensure that no other man goes near his wife lest his seed gets into her (Chakravarti, 1993: 581). Therefore “a sharp distinction required to be made between motherhood and female sexuality with the later being legitimate motherhood within a tightly controlled structure of reproduction which ensured caste purity (by mating only with prescribed partners) and patrilineal succession (by restricting mating only with one man)” (ibid: 581). Manu, the prominent ideologue of Bramhanical system most explicitly argued that “women must be closely guarded by day and night regardless of their age…. carefully guarding the wife of a man preserves the purity of his offspring, his family, himself and his means of acquiring merit. It is women’s nature, which requires them to be thoroughly restrained. He also explained that, their essential nature will drive women into seeking satisfaction anywhere, anytime and with any one” (ibid: 581).

In Hindu patriarchal society, which is dominated by Bramhanical concepts, the ‘purity of women’ specifically for the upper caste Brahmins is to maintain the ‘purity of caste’. “Women’s general subordination was essential in this stage, because it was only then that the mechanism of control upon women’s sexuality could actually be effective…. In the case of Hindu society the design of patriarchal caste-class structure was mapped out by the Brahmins, ‘pativrata’ (Wife’s loyalty to her husband), the specific dharma of Hindu wife then became the ideology by which women accepted and even aspired to chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest expression of their selfhood.” (ibid: 582,583).

Chakravarti also argues that “the success of any system lies in the subtle working of it’s ideology and in that sense to control chastity came to be viewed as the means of salvation and was therefore self-imposed. ‘Pativrata’ the ideological ‘purdah’ of the Hindu women was thus the mask by which the hierarchical and inegalitarian structure of social order
was reproduced with the complicity of women. One of the most successful ideologies or hegemonic power constructed by any patriarchal system, one in which women themselves controlled their own sexuality... ‘Stridharma’ is clearly an ideological mechanism for socially controlling the biological aspect of women” (ibid: 583).

Thus the ‘Stridharma’ or ‘Pativratadharma’ is a theoretical device to take control over women’s sexuality through the institutions like purdah, arranged marriage, pre-pubertal marriage, widowhood which are ‘naturalised’ in Indian caste structured society. Women folk internalised the norms pointed by Manu that, “a woman who controlling her thoughts, speech and acts violates not her duty toward her lord, dwell with him after death in heaven and is called ‘sadhvi’, a chaste woman, a faithful wife by the virtuous” (Ibid: 584). Acceptance of these norms by upper castes women create a form of false consciousness about their subordination in the larger class-caste structure where they themselves invests complete reliance on this purity - pollution belief. They fail to conceptualise, how they are victimised in this endogamous and close end caste structured society, which give them explicit reward of caste and class position but implicitly they are subordinated in patriarchy. “The structure that came into being, has shaped the ideology of the upper castes and continues to be the underpinning of beliefs and practices extant today” (ibid: 585).

Even today for women in India, it can be argued, “they tend to be confined to a ‘private’ domain – the domestic world of the family, children and the household. Men, on the other hand, live more of a ‘public life’ and they determine how wealth and power are distributed. Their world is that of paid work, industry and politics. Class inequalities largely govern gender stratification. Since the majority of Indian women are in a position of economic dependence on their husbands, it follows that their class position is most often governed by the husbands class situation”. (Devi, 1999: 8) This is a strange satisfaction which majority of Indian women likes to enjoy by remaining happy under the clout of their husband’s social status because they don’t identify themselves as a separate social entity.

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This kind of conscious about women’s own class position in a social order is nothing, but lack the sense of ‘self’. The subjugation of women was so complete that they considered themselves to play a secondary and passive role. Therefore, “the idealization of chastity and wifely fidelity as the highest duty of women, reinforced through custom and ritual, and through construction of notions of womanhood which epitomize the wifely fidelity as in the case of Sita, Savitri, Anasuya, Arundhuti and a host of other similar figures in Indian mythology” (Chakravarti, 1993:585).

The above discussion relating to different social elements such as gender, class, caste roles, sexuality, which are dominated by Bramhanical concepts or ideology and implicitly create false consciousness in women’s psychology. Women explicitly remain satisfied with a secondary position they have been given and play an active part in reproducing passive roles and behavior by reinforcing all the normative beliefs of patriarchy. This results a continuous formulation and transference of old and static values and norms, help to formulate a typical ‘Indian femininity’, which is central to Bramhanical Patriarchy.

1.3 Politics of colonialists and nationalists

Prior to acquiring India’s political control, colonialists naturally and self-consciously modeled themselves on the cultural and institutional legacy of Mughal Empire. Not only that, they also, “on condition not legally but structurally enforced that they did not intrude into the everyday life process of the communities, and did not take upon themselves the right to legislate fundamental restructuring of relation as long as their appetite for reasonable rent was satisfied” (Kaviraj, 1999: 144, 145). The Company on getting political power in India, started “stretching its reach towards the state was proposing not only a shift in the locus of political authority, but a change in the fundamental map of social relations” (ibid: 144). Once their political control was secured, the colonial administration went for a strategy –legitimation (ibid: 152). In this context colonialists started justifying their colonial power in Indian society and started establishing it’s need for the upliftment of the Hindu civilization.
In 1817, the colonialist historian James Mill published, 'The History of British India', a lengthy work divided into three major sections: Hindu Civilisation, Muslim Civilisation and the British Period. For Mill, the principle value of culture was the degree to which it contributed to the furtherance of rationalism and individualism. He saw neither of these two values in Hindu civilisation and condemned it severely. He also mentioned that, “Indian society had remained substantially unchanged from the periods of its origin, the coming of Aryans until the arrival of the British. In the Indian context this belief implied that British administrators through legislation could change India from traditional, unchanging society.” (Thapar, 1978: 5). Mill in his book tried to establish that Hindu women are in extreme degradation. By system they are deprived of education and entirely excluded from the sacred books, as they have no business with the texts of Vedas. They are not accounted worthy to share religious rites but in conjunction with their husbands. He mentioned ‘the wife held unworthy to eat with her husband, is an extreme proof of uncivilized social order and prevalent in Hindustan’ (Mill, 1997: 312). He also pointed out, divorce and polygamy appear to be reserved to the husband, the established custom of the Hindus (ibid: 314, 315). Mill denoted that the practice of seclusion for women is fully recognised in the ancient writings and obviously beyond the range of Mohammedan influence (ibid: 318).

Colonialists justified British rule in India by arguing that Hindu women and civilisation required the protection and intervention of the colonial state. For this purpose they extended western education with vigour, to produce a social group, which would ensure an ideological relay of this language and structure of self-evidence (Kaviraj, 1999: 152). Colonialists intended to change traditional India to modern or capitalist India, that means from thin, rent receiving and partly marginal state to thick (in terms of size of its bureaucracy and their functions), non-marginal (means legally and structurally enforced) welfare state. In historical terms, the ideas associated with colonial state’s intervention in the traditional Indian society, is related to ‘modernity’. Since it is connected with the replacement of traditional society by modern social forms.
The reaction to this kind of characterisation of Indian or Hindu society took the form of a school of nationalist history writing by historians like Altekar, Dutt and Shastri who challenged colonial history writing by presenting arguments about the evils of Indian society, being were attributable to Muslim invasions. Nationalists created a picture of Vedic society as a golden era, where Indian women enjoyed the ultimate civilized position. Contemporary feminist scholars argue that such a history is the product of the nineteenth century interaction between nationalists and colonialists. According to Menon, "a significant tool used by colonial ideology to prove the inferiority of the subject population was the question of the status of women. The moral inferiority of Indians specially Hindus was supposed to be demonstrated by the barbaric practices followed against women." (Menon, 1999:2).

British imperialist paradigm gives us a completely poor status of women in Hindu society to establish their need (British Rule) in future and on the other side nationalists justified their own paradigm where they focused women’s question in a very positive manner and described the condition of women in Vedic era as completely civilized. Altekar in his book ‘The Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation’ shows that in Vedic literature there are several references, which show that women enjoyed all the religious rights and privileges which men possessed (Altekar, 1938: 231). They could be initiated in Vedic studies and were entitled to offer sacrifices to Gods and son was not necessary for this purpose (ibid: 4). Women students were divided into two classes Bramhavadinis and Sadyodvahas. The former were life long students of theology and philosophy, the latter used to pursue their studies till their marriage at the age of fifteen or sixteen. Thus, the eight or nine years that were available to them for study, used to learn the Vedic hymns prescribed for the daily and periodical prayers. Women were also given training those rituals and sacraments in which they could take an active part after marriage (ibid: 13). Altekar wanted to establish that women and men both had the equal rights to participate in everyday prayers.

Dutt, another nationalist historian found the existence of women who were Rishis (scholars). They composed hymns and performed sacrifices like their male counterparts.
There was no restriction for women in those days and not keep them secluded or debarred from their legitimate place in society. He also mentioned, the existence of veiled wives and brides, but they were not being kept in seclusion rather they were visible everywhere in their legitimate sphere of action. He named some of the outstanding women of that age like Lopamudra, Apala, Ghosa, Paulomi, and others (Dutt 1963: 59,60).

Nationalists argued there were no references of the evil customs like female infanticide in the Vedic epic or classical literature (Altekar, 1938: 8). They explained that till the advent of British rule the evil customs seems to have prevailed to some extent, due to prejudice among lower sections of society. However, it is a malicious report of some foreign writers where they exaggerated the presence of evil customs (ibid: 10).

Altekar explained, ‘purdah’ or seclusion was quite absent in the Vedic age and girls took the education along with the boys. Love marriage was the frequent phenomena as youth could approach their sweet-hearts to win their love and both often went together to shows and sports (ibid: 197). Similarly, Dutt shows, there is no religious obligation about the marriage of girls, rather there were several unmarried girls who remained in the homes of their father and naturally shared the paternal property. (Dutt, 1963: 60). He mentioned that child marriage was not prevalent in Vedic period and girls were married after they had attained their puberty (ibid: 60). In this regard, Altekar specified a perusal of the marriage hymn from Rig Veda (X, 185), where marriageable women were described, ‘she is .. blooming with youth and pinning for a husband’. It shows that the bride was fully mature, and quite grown up at the time of marriage. In other words, this would have been possible only in case of grown up brides as at least sixteen or eighteen years of age (Altekar, 1938: 58). Women also had more or less effective voice in the selection of their partners in life (ibid: 77).

Another nationalist historian Shastri described the existence of the word ‘Amajur’ meant who grew old at her father’s house. He also denoted name of some unmarried female Rishis as Apala-Atreyi-Ghosa and wanted to establish that there was no limitation on the age of marriage (Shastri, 1960: 15). Even widowhood did not very much weigh upon the
mind of parents in Vedic age, because remarriage was quite common and acceptable for
girls (Altekar; 1938: 3). Shastri pointed Rig Veda hymns (X; 40,2) where he referred
‘Niyoga’ which clearly shows ‘the younger brother marrying the widow’ (Shastri, 1960:
25). He also explained, it is evident from the word ‘Dampati’ that the husband and wife
were viewed as the unit of society during Vedic period. Shastri marked the Rig Veda
hymn (II; 39,2) where the word ‘Dampativa Kratuvida’ refers to the aspect of
womanhood, which means a wife, is the husband’s companion in weal and woe, mistress
of the household and partner in all his activities, temporal or spiritual (ibid: 20).

Dutt in his book, “Early Hindu Civilisation” wanted to establish that in Vedic society
caste system did not exist. The very word ‘Varna’ in Rig Veda indicates that it was being
used to distinguish the Aryans and non-Aryans, but not to separate sections within the
Aryan community. Similarly the word ‘Brarnhana’ which means the ‘priestly caste’, used
in hundreds of places in Rig Veda to imply composers of hymns and merely as an
adjective (Dutt, 1963: 57).

Altekar, to support Hindu civilisation, justified that “the general adoption of ‘purda’
system by the ruling and the aristocratic families of Hindu community is subsequent to
the advent of Muslim rule. It was accepted by Hindu society partly as imitation of the
manners of the conquerors and partly as an additional protection for the women folk. In
the Muslim ruling families the ‘purda’ was so strict that a message had to pass through
three intermediaries before it could reach the desired person in the Zenana (inner domain
of women)” (Altekar, 1938: 206). He also argued accepting and following the theory of
post-puberty marriages by sanctioning the Sarada Act in 1929, Hindu society is returning
to the old custom of Vedic and Epic times” (ibid: 74). Altekar wanted to establish that
Vedic society and modern society both tried to give concern about the education for girls.
He further argued that post-puberty marriage should not be regarded as anti-religious
because it was prevalent in Vedic period and now the moderns adopt it. He analyzed, “the
main reason that was responsible for popularizing post-puberty marriages in the early
period of Hindu history was the great concern with girls education. Precisely the same
reason is now helping the cause of post-puberty marriages. In the past a few ladies known
as Bramhavadinis used to remain for ever unmarried, as they were anxious to devote themselves entirely to the cause of learning and religion. The phenomenon is repeating itself in modern times” (ibid: 75).

The above arguments and descriptions of the nationalist historians about the social condition of the women depict ‘women as occupiers of a central place in society’. And any kind of enforcement or control of the male was totally absent, rather Hindu civilisation provided all the potential rights to women to construct the ideal notion of womanhood. As a ‘historical truth’ it is a critical to accept. Devi points out, the position of woman sprang from the need to counteract the criticism of Victorian Englishman against the degradation of woman in India. Therefore, these authors (Nationalists) strove to prove that at the beginning of Hindu civilisation this degradation was not to be found or not in the same measure, as of today. This revivalistic reinterpretation of the old literary sources had the important function of shielding the social reform laws on women against the criticism of Hindu orthodoxy and at the same time to legitimise them by drawing on tradition. Moreover, for preserving the sense of self-respect of the Indian intellectuals, it was necessary to prove that the condition of women in ancient India was not as degrading as it appeared (Devi, 1999: 2).

Likewise, Krishnaraj shows that “stung by British (and Christian) condemnation of practices such as ‘purdah’, ‘sati’, ‘child-marriage’ and ‘prohibition of widow remarriage’, Nationalists responded diversely by justifying these customs in the light of Hindu religion, by claiming that in the earlier purer age women had enjoyed a much higher status, by calling for reforms, by holding up to ridicule the behavior of western women and elevating virtues attributed to Indian women into a key symbol of the struggle for independence” (Thorner and Krishnaraj, 2000:1). Thus, the patriarchal features of Hindu society were explained entirely as a response to external threats (Menon, 1999: 3).

The patriarchal features of nineteenth century Hindu Society was commonly believed among the middle classes as the evils of Muslim invasions and as a response to external threats, whereas the Vedic period was the Golden Age of Indian womanhood. Historians
like Chakravarti (1993) and Roy (1995) question the construction of the nationalist historians about Vedic period at several levels.

Firstly, they point out that the evidence is drawn from Bramhanical sources and is therefore, a partial history at best. Moreover they argue, if the status of upper caste women was high, then it was at the expense of the exploitation of non-Aryan peoples, especially women.

Nationalists tried to establish the Vedic age as Golden era, when women enjoyed freedom in every sphere of life. They failed to realise the ideology of the hierarchy of advantages, where non-Aryan women were not supposed to get the facilities like Aryan upper caste women. Here, I want to argue that this kind of perception is based on Bramhanical thought and is parallel to the study of ‘caste’ adopted by Dumont and later critiqued by Gupta. Like the Nationalists, Dumont used the Bramhanical concept in his ‘Homo Hierarchicus’, where he made caste hierarchy on the principle of ‘purity and pollution’. Dumont primarily depended on the ancient Bramhin lawgiver, Manu. From the highest (Brahmin) to the lowest caste (Sudras) everybody subscribes to this elaborate ideology, duly accepting as just his position in the ranking (Gupta, 1991: 119). “The caste rule in this sense, which holds that the subaltern castes must serve the privileged ones, is an expression of power and Bramhin ideology attempts to cloak it” (ibid: 118). Gupta is the first indologist who analytically demonstrated that caste can not be looked at, in terms of hierarchies but in terms of discrete categories or classes” (ibid: 113). He denoted that, “a true hierarchy is an unambiguous linear ranking on a single variable”(ibid: 116). Gupta wanted to show that there are many ‘facts’ against Dumont’s theory of caste hierarchy. There may be other sources or other categories that can be the basis of hierarchy and to depend upon single criterion is partial and dominant conceptual view. The limitation is, there was no other written thought except Bramhanical text and the fact is Bramhanical ideology cannot be the single parameter to cover the whole Hindu society. Similarly, in our case, nationalists show the traditional women of Vedic period as rich in culture, where they possessed a high status and dignity. In fact, if we accept the above statement, our thinking would be incomplete and biased. Because, the reality is only the upper caste
Hindu women had the access to education. Women of lower caste had no provision to write and preach hymns, and their voice is completely absent in history. Therefore, it can be argued that nationalists interest to establish women of Vedic age as dignified is also a partial truth, like Dumont.

Secondly, Chakravarti argued there is sufficient evidence to show from the Bramhanical sources alone, that the subordination of women was complete long before Muslims as a religious community had even come into being. She explained upper caste women had no freedom in the public sphere in early Christian era, and Manu and other lawgivers recommended early marriage for girls. ‘Sati’ was associated with the ruling class women, which is evident from the seventh century account of Harsa’s early career (Chakravarti, 1993: 75).

Thirdly, Vedic texts focused on specific geographical areas, early text referred to the North-West of the subcontinent, later text to east around the mid- Gangetic valley and the Manusmriti to India north of the Vindhyas. From these texts, historians of nineteenth century extrapolated a picture of ‘Vedic India’ whose homogeneity is false. Because “the notion of the nation-state is absent in the early India” rather ‘India’ as an entity or nation conceptualized by nationalist historians through the encounter with colonialism; and ‘external’ intervention is explained as the cause of violation of this ‘Vedic India’ (Roy, 1993: 12). Roy argued that ‘defining the past in terms of ‘Vedic India’ for instance obliterates the past of non-Vedic peoples and in fact, contains an implicit denial of the need to investigate into the existence and beliefs of such people’ (ibid: 12).

Fourthly, Nationalist historians of ancient India, to prove the superior position of women in Vedic period referred the scholarship and property rights for women. Contemporary feminist historians specifically criticized this mythical explanation. Roy shows Rig Veda consists over a thousand hymns and of which those attributed partly or wholly to women seers not more than twelve or fifteen in numbers, that is approximately one per cent, which clearly presents the marginal position of women scholars (Roy, 1995: 14). The other important factor is ‘women rarely figure as students or teachers in formal situations

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of transmitting learning. In other words, such women were probably interlopers rather than participants in routine scholarly activities’ (ibid: 14).

Chakravarty points out the famous and oft-repeated story about the debate between Gargi (female philosopher) and Jyajnavalkya (male philosopher) in which Gargi is finally silenced and eliminated from the context by Jyajnavalkya, not by the force of his arguments but by threatening her – ‘Gargi, do not question too much, lest your head falloff..’ (Menon, 1999: 4).

Referring to the property right feminist historians argued, women not only were excluded from property, rather they were considered to be property. For example, the bride being gifted to the groom along with other goods. Women were also kept out from participating in a variety of material transactions, like giving and receiving ‘dakshina’ (remuneration) on ritual occasions, giving and receiving tribute and taxes etc. Women had a certain limited recognition only as wives and mothers within the patriarchal kinship structure (Menon, 1999: 4).

Another argument can be made, if we accept nationalists’ argument that women of Vedic India were very rich in culture, then the critical question arises, ‘is there any history of protest or movement made by the women of subsequent era against their sudden seclusion from the world of knowledge and culture’? Sukumari Bhattacharji denoted that, “marriage had notionally became obligatory even during the Vedic age; maids were there, but they were presumably not held in high respect. Soon after, marriage at least for the women, became compulsory” (Bhattacharji, 2001: 147). She also argued, polygamy was not only sanctioned in Vedic age, it was also looked upon with favour. It was widely practiced and became a status symbol, when co-wives were a social reality. The King could marry four wives legally; besides he had a large ‘harem’ of para-wives (upa patnis). The priests were given hundreds of women and they were their short time enjoyment (ibid: 155). Contemporary feminist scholars wanted to substantiate, the ‘golden age’ of Indian womanhood as a selective picture of the past, created in the context of the politics of nineteenth century.
The status of Indian women exists as the subtle religious politics where gender and female sexuality are used to reproduce and maintain the inegalitarian society. Hinduism produced a patriarchy where the position of women can be apparently interpreted as primary and free from any social discrimination. Nationalist historiography established a ‘golden’ Vedic age and substantiated it with positive image of traditional India and this Vedic model for women became part of the general consciousness. The acceptance and reconstruction of traditional women became ideological device for the middleclass, upper caste women where patriarchal concepts are maintained both spiritually and materially. The tragedy involves the false generalization of the dignified status of womanhood in Vedic period and became the ideal of Indian patriarchal construct, which represents the lack of understanding the subjugated status of Indian women.

1:4 Indian Womanhood and marginalisation of social acceptance

Indian womanhood gets its proper place within ‘wifehood’ and ‘motherhood’; and Manusmriti enunciates the ideals and norms for becoming an ideal wife. The primary ideology of Hindu patriarchy was (denoted in Manusmriti V. 149), “the wife was expected to be thrifty and do her work cheerfully, to obey her husband in life and devoid of qualities and observe celibacy after death’ (Roy, 1995: 22).

In Hinduism, women like sudras and untouchables have religious power, but completely non-legitimate and non-authoritative. Wadley clearly denoted, “Hindu women have considerable religious involvement. Women as non-specialists are ‘invisible’ religious practitioners, since most of their observances are performed non publicly (in the home or domestic sphere) and their role is not textually sanctioned; indeed, the laws of Manu forbid a woman to fast or participate in rituals without her husband ”(Wadley, 1988: 39).

The notion of ideal Indian womanhood receives its social acceptance when they fit within the patriarchal kinship structure and were condemned socially when they exist out of the patriarchal family structure and norms. Roy explained, “the marginalisation of non-wifely
kinswomen and the denial of non-kin identities to women, which completed the focus on wifehood, further narrowed down the options legitimately open to them...only option which was valorised was one of cheerful subordination”(ibid: 24).

Women acquire the cultural ideas and values, which shape their image of womanhood and become capable to be subordinated. The requirements of the specific society fulfilled through envisaging definite norms and values. Through the process of constructing ‘femininity’, women prepared their body and mind completely to become ‘invisible’. Because, in a patriarchal society like India, explicit notion of female sexuality was viewed as indecent and abnormal.

Women’s activity is defined through the society at large and by the culture of social action of a particular society. A variety of social agents prepare her ‘wifehood’ and ‘motherhood’ where she finds her identity. On the other hand, her controlled sexuality determines her essentially benevolent nature. Different mythic figures like ‘Sita- Savitri’, she acquires defence against the recognition and acceptance of one’s ‘sexual freedom’.

In a patriarchal society like India, Female sexuality is viewed as wanton, wild, which is difficult to control. Marriage is an important institution to socialise a woman, which is attributed as a central domain to play sacred roles, that is domesticity. A woman’s primary duty is to maintain and continue the purity of the line of her in laws. Women can achieve her complete ‘self’ through marriage, where she gifts her husband ‘her virginity’ or ‘sexual purity’. The gift of her virginity guarantees the purity of one’s line. In relation to purity and pollution, to maintain this purity woman has to perform a standard action keeping conformity with the behavioral norms and culture of that particular social system. For an unmarried girl marriage is the only way to safeguard her sexual purity. Fruzzetti denoted, “the arrival of menstruation is a sure sign of her readiness for marriage. Since the performance of the menstrual rites, make the virgins’ sexuality ‘operative’....becomes danger to men of her father’s house. Marriage is the only way of removing the potential occurrence of impure acts: sexual intercourse with one’s own men whether in marriage and out of the marriage” (Fruzzetti; 1990: 96). In general, a girl or
married woman desired to perform a submissive, religious, benevolent act. For a married woman complete subjugation to the new rules and laws of the home and to the wider group like family or caste-kinship, which helps her to maintain her responsibilities, and to restrict her movement in inner and outer domain. The only qualities they are to act are femaleness, motherhood and wifehood, where the ideals of auspiciousness (sexual purity) are related with a woman’s appearance and character or in other words ‘femininity’.

The ideal of womanhood that is constructed through social and psychological processes makes her an active performer in the domestic world and gives her body a reproductive function. Vedic myths constructed by the emerging nationalism became an important discourse in the making of femininity in India. It sets the tone for a more detailed discussion on sexuality per se without which, we argue, it would not be possible to understand the construction of femininity.