CHAPTER THREE

*The position of women in Indian society*
An astrologer makes a statement that a woman had entered the sanctum sanctorum of the Sabarimala temple, thus defiling it. Elaborate purification rites are undertaken after Kannada actress Jayamala declares that she had indeed entered the sanctorum two decades back. The Sabarimala temple, one of the most visited temples in India has no religious bar on entry, but women of menstrual age are not allowed into its premises even today.

The Guruvayur temple, again in Kerala, reacts angrily to reports that a supposed non-Hindu had entered the temple thus defiling it. As controversy erupts, yet again elaborate and expensive purification rituals are undertaken.

The above mentioned incidents are a pointer to the fact that even today, thousands of years after inception, and more than 50 years since its official abolishment by the Government, caste, religious and gender discrepancy and exploitation continue to be a part and parcel of Indian society. One still hears stories about how Dalits are refused water from a village well, and the ‘punishment’ that they are subjected to for daring to break age-old religious and social codes, about how inter-caste marriages are opposed by village panchayats and political parties even make statements that the life of a cow is more precious than that of a Dalit’s!!! The recent controversies that have seen students out on the streets on the proposal to reserve 27.5% of seats for Other Backward Classes (OBC) in institutes of higher education have also fuelled caste divisions, especially in urban India. People are polarised between the pro-reservationists and the anti-reservationists – there seems to be no middle path. Caste has become a topic of conversation in urban middle class India, which had hitherto maintained a distance from such a volatile issue. On the other hand, the champions of caste-based politics in India are perhaps, not surprisingly, the most reticent when the issue of gender parity is raised. Political parties are quick to raise the issue of reservation in higher education, but one does not notice the same action on the Women’s’ Reservation Bill, which has been lying on the back burner for considerable time now. And while caste and gender are both crucial
issues that dominate the socio-political discussions and debates, the intersections between the two need greater examination.

The writings of Mahasweta Devi bring to the fore the complexities of the equations between caste, tribe, class and gender that exist in India today. In the neo-colonial set-up, these dichotomies only serve to further subjugate and marginalise women and deny them their rightful position in the societal framework. These subjugations are invariably located in history and are part of a continuing tradition of exploitation and oppression. The following sections of this chapter will thus trace the historiography of the caste system and the tribal societies with a special focus on gender issues.

HISTORY AND DEVELOPMENT OF THE CASTE SYSTEM

The caste system has been a cause of tremendous debate at the intellectual and social level, both in India as well as internationally. Many different definitions of caste have been offered. The common factor in all these definitions is the description of caste as an isolated unit, and not as a group that has relations to the other castes and sub-castes. The advent of the caste system has often been attributed to the arrival of the Aryans in India around 1500 BC, and it is often believed that the Aryans succeeded in subjugating the indigenous non-Aryan population. Max Weber too, supported this hypothesis to a certain extent, relating caste distinctions with racial differences. As Tapan Basu comments, this has posed certain problems:

.... not the least of these being the prevalence of the caste system among both the 'fair-skinned', purportedly 'Aryan' progeny of North India and the 'dark-skinned', purportedly 'non-Aryan' progeny of South India.

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1 Senart defines caste as "a close corporation... equipped with a certain traditional and independent organisation... bound together by common occupations which relate more particularly to marriage and to food and to questions of ceremonial pollution." On the other hand for Nesfield, caste is "a class of the community which disorders any connection with any other class and can neither intermarry nor eat nor drink with any but persons of their own community." For Risley, caste is a single homogeneous community of "families or groups of families bearing a common name which usually denotes or is associated with specific occupation." And according to Ketkar, caste is a social group with two primary characteristics: (i) membership is confined to those born of members and includes all persons so born and (ii) the members are forbidden by an inexorable social law to marry outside the group.


3 Tapan Basu Translating Caste. p.xiii.
Others have talked about the beginning of the caste system from the days when certain food gathering tribes began to claim dominance over other such tribes in order to claim a greater proportion of the surplus generated. From the colonial period however, caste has been a dominant issue in India that has affected all sections and strata of society. This has arisen primarily out of the works of Indologists such as Max Mueller and Dubois, who consulted Hindu Pandits and scriptures for their writings. The British administrators of colonial India too did the same, resulting at times, as Partha Chatterjee has commented, to “inflated references about the importance of caste to Indians” and in a rather homogenised view of the caste system. Most traditional academic discourses on the caste system are based on the Brahminical view, and tend to justify it in terms of purity and pollution. Many texts also link one’s caste with ‘karma’ or the fact that a caste that a person is born into is a direct outcome of his/her deeds in the previous life. This view has been popular historically and is conveniently used as the dominant argument favouring the caste system; the main reason perhaps being that most such discourse till recently has tended to be written by members belonging to the privileged castes.

Even today, popular notions about the caste system would like to believe that there is a single caste hierarchy that is in place in India. However, as Dipankar Gupta points out:

... there are probably as many hierarchies as there are castes in India. To believe that there is a single caste order to which every caste, from Brahman to untouchable, acquiesce ideologically, is a gross misreading of facts on the ground.

He goes on to assert, quite rightly, that no caste is willing to accept the reason for its so-called degradation. “Harijans... do not accept the upper-caste view that their bodies are made of impure substances, that its own members are defiling, they readily allege that there are other castes that are indeed polluting. This tendency holds even among the so-called untouchable castes.”

In reality therefore, the caste system in India consists of multiple hierarchies and consequently, multiple identities, within the primary levels of gradation, on ritual

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4 Ibid., p.xiv.
5 Dipankar Gupta. Interrogating Caste. p.i.
6 Ibid., pp.1-2.
status. This grading system, it is believed, has its roots in the Dharmashastras and the Vedas. It is in the Rig Veda that the order of the castes is defined and visualised as different parts of the human body:

...the Brahmins occupied the topmost position, succeeded by the Kshatriyas (warriors) and the Vaishyas (traders and farmers). Together, these varnas, or ceremonial ranks, each of which accommodated several hereditary groups or jatis in society... comprised the upper castes, who were characterised as dvija or (twice-born) because the males among them went through an initiation ritual (upanayana) at which they were ritualistically reborn. ... The above scheme did not include the remaining varna, the Shudras (menials).

The caste system, at inception, was essentially a class system, wherein it was believed that a person could change his/her class when qualified. However, over time, this concept gradually transformed itself into caste, and the process of endogamy set in. According to the Rig Veda, the Brahmins, or the scholarly classes, constituted the head, the Kshatriyas or the warrior clan were the arms, the Vaishyas were the body, and the untouchables, or Shudras, whose job was to do menial labour, constituted the legs. Documentary evidence suggest that Brahmins were responsible for endogamy, as they detached themselves from the rest and became a caste onto themselves, and in doing so, aggravated formations of the ‘Other’ in Indian society:

Endogamy... was a fashion in Hindu society, and as it had originated from the Brahmin caste, it was whole-heartedly imitated by all the non-Brahmin sub-divisions or classes, who in their turn became endogamous castes.

It may seem therefore that the non-Brahmins continually strived to reach up to the level of the Brahmins. The idea of caste hegemony is thus extended to the idea of imitation. The lower castes, seek to imitate the Brahmins. Nevertheless, in every attempt to aspire towards such a level, they find the doors being closed further, intensifying concepts of endogamy. M.N. Srinivas defines this process of caste movement as one of Sanskritisation, where the middle and lower castes attempt to use the caste system to move up the social hierarchy. He writes:

It is well known that occasionally a Shudra caste after the acquisition of economic and political power, sanskritised its customs and ways, and succeeded in laying claim to be Kshatriyas. The classic example of the Raj Gonds, originally a tribe, but who successfully claimed to be Kshatriyas after becoming rulers of a tract in Central India, shows up the varna classification.

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7 Tapan Basu. op cit. p.xviii.
8 Castes in India: Their Mechanism, Genesis & Development.
The term Kshatriya for instance, doesn’t refer to a closed ruling group which has always been there since the time of the Vedas. More often it refers to the position attained or claimed by a local group whose traditions and luck enabled it to seize socio-economic power. In fact, in peninsular India there are no genuine Kshatriyas or Vaishyas. In this area these two categories only refer to the local castes which have claimed to be Kshatriyas and Vaishyas by virtue of their occupation and martial tradition.9

Srinivas argues that varna therefore is a distorted way of looking at the caste system, as each community has its own internal system of hierarchy that may not conform to the stated image. Consequently, prevalent notions of identity and superiority do not hold true in such situations, and in fact, reverse the prevalent notions of inherent hegemony. Therefore, while in most areas Brahmans do occupy the top rung of the hierarchical ladder, there are significant cases where Brahmans are in a minority, especially in South India. In many of the states of Southern India, like Karnataka, Lingayats claim equality, if not superiority to the Brahmin, and orthodox Lingayats do not eat food cooked or handled by the Brahmin.10 In such a manner, many castes seek to prove their social superiority and equality to a recognised “superior” caste. And they do so by forwarding various arguments.11

One crucial differentiation that needs to be made clear while conducting any study of caste in India is the distinction between jati and varna. Indologists believe that while varnas have their origin in Brahmans body, castes are units within the varna system. Therefore, varnas are “divine” and “immutable”, while “castes may fuse together or split into smaller castes; new castes may also be enrolled.”12 Jaiswal continues that varna therefore has more relations with ‘order’ or ‘estate’ as opposed to ‘caste’ or ‘class’. Sevart is the first to invoke such a distinction between varna and caste, while Weber too talks of the relation of varna with ‘estate’ as opposed to an economic constituent. However, Suwira Jaiswal points out that in spite of making such a distinction, Weber continues to use the word ‘caste’ for varna, and such a confusion continues to persist till date.13 Panini’s Astadhyayi uses varna for groups that later became what is today known as jati, while jati was used by him to specifically denote the Brahmanas. Over the years, the works of different scholars has intensified the

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9 M.N. Srinivas. ‘Varna and Caste’ in Dipankar Gupta ed. Social Stratification.p.30
10 Ibid., p 31
11 See M.N. Srinivas op cit. for a discussion on the reasons given for the assertion of social superiority pp.31-32
13 Ibid., p.41.
debate over these distinctions.\textsuperscript{14} The four orders above ultimately became the four castes. It is also significant to note that there was no hierarchical difference between the four varnas during this period. The distinctions were clearly based on division of labour:

Members of each varna performed different functions... worshipped different deities and followed different rituals, but there were no restrictions on the communal or social relations or even on the change of membership from one to another varna.\textsuperscript{15}

It was only with the passage of time and the Brahminic period (230 B.C. – 700 A.D.) that these four orders took on a hierarchical nature, with the Brahmins at the top of such a hierarchy. Many critics have also attributed the entire origin, growth and development of the caste system to the Indian ethos, going back to the Harappan culture. Romila Thapar comments that while the varnas represent the theoretical, jatis represent the functional aspect of caste. This implies the existence of three things. Firstly, hereditary groups that governed marriage relations and promoted endogamy, secondly, the hierarchical division of labour that came to be known as the jajmani system, and third, the idea of ritual purity and impurity of social groups.\textsuperscript{16} Oliver Cromwell Cox, in his work \textit{Caste, Class and Race – a Study in Social dynamics} however attempts to depict how varna cannot be synonymous with colour.\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{Bhagavad Gita} too has numerous references to four orders based on “guna” and “karma” and a division of labour according to present lives and nature. There is no mention of a hereditary belonging to any particular caste. However, while discussing the notion of hierarchy within the caste system, one needs to mention Louis Dumont and his thesis of \textit{Homo Hierarchus}. As Dipankar Gupta states:

Dumont is not only the most systematic exponent of the dominant conceptual view of the caste system... he attained this distinction by undermining almost all the known conceptual views on the subject... Dumont's plea to undertake the macro level as the only legitimate level for Indian sociology has

\textsuperscript{14} See Suvira Jaiswal op cit. p.40 onwards for a detailed discussion on the issue.
\textsuperscript{16} Romila Thapar cited in Suvira Jaiswal. op cit p.43.
\textsuperscript{17} He points out that the term “varna” has other meanings in Sanskrit, apart from colour. In fact, it is derived from vr which means screen, veil, covering, external appearance. It is therefore more closely linked to the term “guna.” Also, the term “Shudra” is not synonymous with “Dravid”, who, it was presumed had dark skin colour.
significantly altered the format of research on the caste system... In addition, terms such as stratification and hierarchy receive major renovations.18

According to Dumont, the hierarchical notion of the caste system – the relation between the encompasses and the encompassed, has universal acceptance, as the caste system is ultimately an idea, a state of mind, "expressed by the emergence... of groups of various orders generally called ‘castes.’"19 There is only one true system behind the caste system, "the opposition of the pure and the impure"20 which ultimately translates into caste hierarchy and is responsible for the "linear order of castes from A to Z..."21

Dumont's theory therefore serves to strengthen the Brahminical view of the caste system and assumes that there was no resistance to the idea from any quarter. Not surprisingly therefore, many critics have criticised Dumont's argument, particularly the idea of consensus around the caste system. Joan Mencher and Gerald Berreman in fact castigate the caste system as an example of inhuman hierarchy and a "system of economic exploitation", which led to plenty for some and penury for others. Michael Moffatt, on the other hand argues that caste rules have become so thoroughly internalised, that the lower castes "participate willingly in what might be called their own oppression"22 and actually end up replicating the hierarchy at the subordinate levels as well: the 'higher' members of the scheduled castes dominate the 'lower' just as 'upper' castes dominate them. However, as Dipankar Gupta points out:

At the end, however, he [Moffatt] gives the game away when he admits that when replication of the hierarchy at the 'lower' levels breaks down it is because of all exhaustion of material resources'... In other words, caste domination is wrought by material resources and not by spiritual, ideological and ritual compliance.23

So it is clear that the caste system in India, with its strict codifications and hierarchies is an off-shoot of varna, having developed out of it. It has also been proved by many people, that in spite of misconceptions that continue to the present day, including a recent UNHCR report, varna does not equal colour. As Andre

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20 Ibid., p.81.  
21 Ibid.,  
23 Dipankar Gupta. op cit. p.63.
Beteille has pointed out, a definition of the term "caste", which actually has its origins in the Portuguese word "casta", in English is roughly used as a translation of both varna and jati. As he states:

They are not unrelated to each other but they are not the same, as it is very important to understand the distinction between the two in order to understand the social logic of caste.24

In a similar manner, Edward Webber writes:

Jati means real working community of birth, marriages, of profession, culture, and religions... Varna does not mean the work-sharing assignment of the "jatis."... The socio-cultural evaluation of the "jatis", their ranking place... is expressed by the hierarchical varna.25

In the Mauryan period however, one sees a different scenario. India was politically and culturally united for the first time. The writings of Kautilya (a Brahmin Minister in the court of Chandragupta Maurya, a Shudra King) try to remove various restrictions imposed earlier by the Brahmins by declaring that the royal law would supersede the dharma laws. During the reign of Ashoka too, the caste system could not enforce its rigid notions, as Ashoka’s philosophy of universal brotherhood did not recognize the caste system. It was only in the post-Mauryan period that the caste system got a fresh lease of life. The Manusmriti (185 B.C.) gave special privileges to the Brahmins and imposed restrictions on the Shudras. It prescribed severe punishment to Shudras, such as cutting off their tongues, pouring hot oil into ears and thrusting hot nails into the mouth if they were to talk of caste equality. The laws developed during Ashoka’s reign were gradually destroyed and the caste system assumed a more rigid and horrific structure. During the Gupta period, as Brahminism became more dominant, the caste system received further incentives. However, marriage rules remained elastic and Shudras were permitted to become traders, artisans and agriculturalists, even though they had to live on the outskirts of society, outside the main settlements. During the medieval period (1700 A.D. – 1757 A.D.), there was not much change in the social life of the country. However, Brahmins continued to give themselves more privileges. As Ahuja states:

The mathas, established by Shankaracharya, became the centres of luxurious life. The system of devadasi fostered the growth of temple prostitution which led to... the loosening of moral codes... New castes and sub-castes came into being which were so circumscribed by vested interests that they had evil repercussions on the social and political life of the country.\textsuperscript{26}

During Muslim rule, the caste system became more rigid, as Muslims were excluded from the Hindu order and system. In response, the Bhakti movement took shape, when some saints or bhaktas like Ramanuj, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Chaitanya, Tukaram, Tulsidas, Naudev preached equality and denounced idolatry, excessive rituals and Brahmin domination. Yet, this did not have much of an effect on the caste system. Rather, as the Brahmins controlled the temples and other places of religious worship, they intensified caste divisions by declaring that all those who worked with or for Muslims would be treated as polluted, or Malechha (Muslims). This led to further sub-divisions and the creation of sub-castes among the ‘lower’ castes.

With the onset of colonialism, the caste structure underwent crucial changes. The judicial powers of the caste councils were transferred to the civil and criminal courts. Various acts such as the Caste Disabilities Removal Act of 1850 and other social reform measures sought to remove some of the discrepancies associated with the caste system. However, as many critics have certified, such measures were undertaken purely for administrative reasons, and not because the British had any real desire to abolish the caste system. In fact, it may be argued that the caste system was in many ways beneficial for the British. They took advantage of the divisions within society to achieve their ends. However, in the nineteenth century many social activists within India began working towards the eradication of the caste system by starting movements against it. Among these were the Brahma Samaj movement led by Raja Rammohan Roy and the Prarthana Sabha movement supported by Justice Ranade, which paid special attention to inter-caste marriage, inter-dining and widow remarriage. Similarly, the Arya Samaj, the Ramakrishna Mission and the Lingayat movement in South India all preached for the abolition of the caste system. With increased industrialisation and urbanisation, the taboos were definitely weakened. Industrial growth provided occupational mobility and new sources of livelihood as well as new modes of transport, which led to the common mingling of people from different castes, which loosened the moral taboos that had so far governed the caste

\textsuperscript{26} Ram Ahuja. op cit.p.45-46.
system. And as critics such as Kingsley Davis, M.N. Srinivas and Ghurye comment, industrialisation also led to the questioning of the superior authority of the Brahmins. Faced with situations where they were eating and living together, many non-Brahmins refused to show Brahmins the same respect as they had previously done, and this drastically altered the functioning of the caste system.

In post-Independence India too, caste continues to play a dominant role in society. Untouchability was officially abolished in India in 1955 through the Untouchability (Offences) Act, but as the examples have shown, it continues to be rampant in many parts of the country. Today, caste manifests itself in Indian society in many ways. The last two decades have seen various caste groups becoming politically active, and using politics as a mode through which they can assert themselves and challenge the Brahminical order. Thus, one sees Lalu Prasad Yadav's Rashtriya Janata Dal (RJD) championing the cause of the Other Backward Classes (OBC), particularly Yadavs, Ram Vilas Paswan's Lok Jansakti Party (LJP) proclaiming to uphold the rights of the SC's, particularly the Paswan Community and Mayawati's Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), raising issues related to 'Bahujans' against the 'Manuvadi' Brahminical order, at least till recently. The tribes of India have been perhaps the most deprived lot. The Vedas have no mention of them, and although various Governments have taken steps and legislations, the tribal communities continue to be the most neglected. As a result, it is perhaps not surprising to see that in recent times, a number of political parties have come up to assert the rights of the tribals, especially in states like Chattisgarh (Chattisgarh Vikas Party), Madhya Pradesh (Gondwana Ganatantra Party), Jharkhand (Jharkhand Mukti Morcha), Mizoram (Mizo National Front, Mizoram People's Conference), Nagaland (Nagaland People's Front, Meghalaya (United Democratic Party), which have a large chunk of tribal population. The position of tribals will be discussed in detail later in the chapter.

The various regional political formations in recent times, have only reasserted the heterogeneity and lack of unity among the castes. Some castes among the 'untouchables' have certainly taken advantage of Government policies and made steady progress, while, for others, the situation has remained more or less the same over the years, with hardly any means of development.
The term ‘Dalit’, which is today commonly used to denote the Scheduled Castes, was born out of the movement of the Dalit Panthers, created in Bombay in 1972. Previously, of course, terms like Harijan (or God’s children, as Gandhi termed them) were used to denote these communities; however, many people argue that such a term is actually insulting. As Gopal Guru describes in his essay “The Politics of Naming”, one of the earliest efforts at abrogation of the term “Untouchable” in recent times was by S.M. Mate, who used the term “asprustha” or untouched to describe them. As already mentioned, Gandhiji called them “Harijans”, but this term generated a lot of controversy, placing Gandhi and Ambedkar on opposite poles. Ambedkar rejected this term due to its rather patronising connotations; and preferred to use the term “depressed classes.” In fact, it has been pointed out that it was in fact Ambedkar, who used the term “Dalit”, before it became accepted as common usage. He defines it in the following manner:

Dalithood is a kind of life condition, which characterises the exploitation, suppression, and marginalisation of the lower castes by the social, economic, cultural and political domination of the upper caste Brahminical order.27

Of course, the term “Dalit” too does not have universal acceptance. Several middle class intellectuals regard this term as “an elite imposition which is derogatory as well as denigratory insofar as it reinforces upon the Dalit people the demeaning realities, past and present, of their condition, and constantly reminds them that they are underdogs.”28 These people prefer to use the term ‘bahujan’ – or the majority, and it is from here that Mayawati has coined the term Bahujan Samaj Party for her political party.

WOMEN IN THE CASTE SYSTEM

A conspicuous factor in the entire caste discourse discussed so far is the total absence of any mention of women. As in other parts of the world, women in India have been an exploited, subjugated lot. What has made the situation worse is the added caste oppression, in addition to gender exploitation and subjugation. In this context, a study of the oppression suffered by Dalit women would be amongst the most extreme. Therefore while they have shared biological experiences, their socio-

28 Ibid.
political experiences differ from community to community, region to region, caste to caste and tribe to tribe. Women living in urban middle class India find it difficult to relate to women living in the same city but belonging to a different social class. The differences that are clearly apparent between Sujata and Somu’s mother in Mahasweta Devi’s *Hajaar Churashir Maa* is a glaring example of this disparity, wherein in spite of their shared grief and loss, the two women fail to relate to each other. This will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

The lives of women in India have been traditionally governed by the historical, political, economic and social factors that have moulded Indian society through the ages. Most of the norms and values that govern them even today have their roots in the past and especially in the scriptures. What makes a generalised perspective on the state of Indian women even more difficult is the total heterogeneity of experiences across regional, religious, ethnic groups and castes. M.N. Srinivas writes:

> While in certain contexts the Indian sub-continent is a single cultural region, in many others it is heuristically more rewarding to look upon it as a congeries of micro regions, differences between which are crucial.  

Similarly, Romila Thapar comments:

> Within the Indian subcontinent, there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging according to cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals.

It is clear that it is almost impossible to posit a monolithic picture of the Indian woman. No woman, anywhere in the world, would perhaps be faced with all dichotomies associated with being born a woman at the same time, as the Indian woman has to face. From the time of her birth, she not only has to contend with having been born a woman, but also takes on identities of caste, class, region and religion. And considering that some of the scriptures placed women at par with the Shudras and the untouchables, who could be summarily disposed of, one can imagine the added problems for the Indian women. The *Dharmashastras* have set out a role for the woman a role that is naturally subservient and which does not give her a

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30 Romila Thapar. *Looking Back in History*. p.6

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separate identity. Like women elsewhere in the world, the Indian woman becomes a victim of male patriarchal and ideological practices.

WOMEN IN PRE-COLONIAL INDIA

Research has proved significantly that in ancient, pre-Vedic India women were certainly in a better position than in Vedic times. The beginnings of women’s studies in Indological literature have been traced to people like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar.31 These studies led to a greater interest in the position of women in ancient India. B.S. Upadhyay’s Women in Rig Veda and A.S. Altekar’s The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization have been seminal tracts in this regard. Vedic representations of the Indian woman have largely been influenced by the Manusmriti. Manu saw four roles for a woman – as someone’s daughter, sister, wife or mother. Altekar’s views however still continue to inspire studies on the position of women in ancient India.32 Altekar’s work is based on Brahminical studies and outlines the position of women from the earliest times till the mid 1950’s. It covers within its ambit various issues related to women such as education, marriage, divorce, position of the widow, property rights and the general position of the woman in society, it is “steeped in the nationalist understanding of the women’s question.”33 A criticism of Altekar’s argument is that it concentrates on the woman in the context of the family, and regards them as the “stock breeders of a strong race”34 and sees them as incapable of competing equally with men or possessing the authority and the ability to own property. And although his work shows some flashes of foresight, it is by and large couched within the traditional and popularly held notions about the status of women in Indian, and particularly Hindu society.

Women certainly occupied an important position in pre-Vedic ancient Indian society. In fact, it has even been suggested that in many respects, her position was superior to men. The evidence from the ancient epics also pays tribute to the power or “Shakti” of the Indian woman. For example, the swayamvara ceremony gave the woman the right to choose her husband, although of course, her choice was limited to

31 Ibid.
33 Uma Chakraborty. ‘Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of gender relations in early Indian history.’ in Kumkum Roy ed. Women in early Indian societies.p.77
34 Ibid., p.78
those present in the gathering. Both *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata* depict wars that were fought because a woman’s dignity and pride were insulted. It is also perhaps not a coincidence that the plethoras of Goddesses that have existed in Indian society since time immemorial have depicted the inherent power of the female. Whether it is the all-conquering Durga, or the Vanquisher of evil, Kali, the Goddess of wealth, Lakshmi or even the Goddess of learning, Saraswati, women were seen as the epitome of power and luck in all sections of society. It is therefore extremely ironic to note how over the ages, the position of women in Indian society has degenerated to the extent that today, women continue to struggle for their rightful position and due in society. This will be discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

Women in ancient societies could have more than one husband, and could remarry if widowed. Altekar believes that even primitive societies had some degree of barbarism and there were few checks on the tyranny of men over women. Anthropological studies too are divided on the issue. A traditional male bias among anthropologists has depicted ancient society as egalitarian, while some have stressed on the traditional notions of male superiority. The truth perhaps lies somewhere in the middle. At the comparative level, women in pre-Vedic period were certainly in a better position vis-à-vis later ages, but some kind of hegemony did exist. Suvira Jaiswal writes:

... while some anthropologists emphatically maintain that early societies were sexually egalitarian, having relations of reciprocity rather than subordination, others point out that hunting societies did subordinate women to men in certain respects, but men did not exercise the amount of control over women as they did in class societies.\(^{35}\)

It was in the Vedic period that the condition of women really started degenerating and deteriorating. The creation of texts such as *Manusmriti*, the *Rig Veda*, *Atharva Veda* and others proposed a codified structure of caste in which the life of women became almost non-existent in terms of recognition and independence. The strict compliance of the codes laid down in these documents also made equality non-existent. One needs to just take a look at some of the verses from the *Manusmriti* to see how women were treated:

\(^{35}\) Suvira Jaiswal, op cit.
By a girl, by a young woman, or even by an aged one, nothing must be done independently, even in her own house. (V. 147)

Her father protects... in childhood, her husband protects ... in youth, and her sons protect... in old age; a woman is never fit for independence (IX. 3).

Women have no right to study the Vedas. That is why their Sanskaras are performed without Veda mantras. Women have no knowledge of religion, because they have no right to know the Vedas. The uttering of the Veda Mantras is useful for removing sin. As women cannot utter the Veda Mantras, they are as unclear as untruth. (IX. 18)36 (my emphasis)

It is true however that in the early days of the Vedic period, women were still allowed to study and take part in religious ceremonies. They participated in public sacrifices alongside men. Some Vedic hymns have also been attributed to women:

Some Vedic hymns, are attributed to women such as Apala, the daughter of Atri, Ghosa, the daughter of Kaksivant or Indrani, the wife of Indra. Apparently, in early Vedic times women also received the sacred thread and could study the Vedas... 37

However, in spite of all these records, the fact remains that only 1% of the Rig Veda was actually written by women. There does exist contradictory evidence within the Vedas, suggesting egalitarianism and degradation simultaneously for women. The Rig Veda also states how in ancient times women would participate in samhotra or communal sacrifice and Samana or community festival.38 Indrani is believed to be the maker of rta or ‘law’39 while Sinivati has been described as vispatni, or protector against vis or poison. Women who stayed on in their parents household were entitled to a portion of the property. On the other hand, the same Veda, in other places presents a somewhat negative view of women. A brotherless woman is portrayed as one who pursues men in search of a husband. It was difficult for such a girl to find a husband as her son, when born, would be claimed by her father’s side of the family and the child would thereby be lost for the husband’s family. The institutionalisation of this custom is evident in later Vedic texts which speak of the appointment of a brotherless daughter as putrika so that the son (putrikaputra) may inherit the father’s

36 Manusmriti cited in Mahey. p.150
39 It has also been variously interpreted as ‘tribal law’. ‘truth’ and sacrifice'
property, carry forward his lineage and perform ritual services for his maternal grandfather.\(^{40}\)

This aspect may have later grown into such a stage where there was an aversion towards the girl-child, for whom, it was believed, the paramount duty of life was to reproduce and carry on the lineage of her in-laws’ or her parental family. Whatever the case, one thing was clear – a woman’s sexuality was under male, patriarchal control even at this point.\(^{41}\) Irawati Karve visualises an archaic stage of society where brothers and sisters were ‘mates’ in marriage, the terms here “denoting young boys and girls of the same generation in the clan.”\(^{42}\) Ultimately, therefore such women had to search for husbands outside the clan, thus promoting exogamy. Karve’s views on the evolution of clan exogamy in the Vedic period are certainly not universally accepted. Scholars like S.V. Karandikar and G.S. Ghurye argue that exogamy was a concept borrowed from the indigenous population by the Aryans when they came to India, while others such as Benveniste and John Brough maintain that gotra exogamy came to India through the Indo-European Aryans. Exogamy further added to the subordination of women. As the girl had had to move out of her parental home after marriage, her freedom and her independence were significantly curtailed.

**COLONIALISM AND INDIAN WOMEN**

Colonialism brought with it a whole new gamut of problems for the Indian women. The years in between had not alleviated her position to any extent, if anything, it had made it worse. The Britishers brought with them the “white man’s burden” – of “civilising” the natives, “educating” them and also converting them to Christianity. In doing so, they betrayed their total ignorance of ancient Indian history. After all, the world’s first university was started in Takshila, with 10,500 students back in 700 B.C.\(^{43}\) However, the first historical accounts of Indian women in history date from the nineteenth century and are a product of the colonial experience. The colonisers sought to define the entire colonised nation space and its inhabitants, especially the males, as effeminate, and secondly, attempted to rewrite the past in a

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\(^{40}\) Suvira Jaiswal op.cit. p.10.

\(^{41}\) Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Ibid.

manner that sought to justify the colonial enterprise. The woman’s question became a crucial part of the re-writing of history, and as Indian educated men sought to reassert their own masculinity and past during the colonial period, they, unintentionally and unknowingly perhaps contributed to a greater understanding and delineation of the woman. Thus, one of the more positive consequences of colonialism, however unwittingly, may be said to be an introduction and recognition of women’s roles, abilities and capabilities:

...this somewhat precarious focus on women’s history had to do with the challenge posed to indigenous male identities. One defensive strategy in the face of charges of effeminacy may have been to focus on the separate histories of men and women.44

Until recent times, it is this history that has dominated thought and academics. It was the establishment of the subaltern school in 1982, as stated, in the introductory chapter, which gave a whole new dimension to the woman’s experience, culminating in Gayatri Chakraborty Spivak’s pronouncement that the subaltern female voice has continued to remain gagged and cannot speak.

It is a fact that most accounts of the women’s position in colonial India are largely male, patriarchal accounts by British scholars or the educated Indians of the nineteenth century. Women’s voices of the period were discovered much later – for instance, Rassundari Devi’s Aamar Jibon (My Life) – the first autobiography by a woman published in 1876 or the writings of Pandita Ramabai, Tarabhai Shinde etc.

The name of Raja Rammohun Roy is among the most prominent of all nineteenth century reformers concerned with improving the women’s situation in India. Rammohan Roy stands out as the figure who took a firm stand against the practice of Sati. Sati was the custom through which a woman was condemned and pressurised by society to sacrifice her life by dying alongside her husband on his funeral pyre. The practice was officially abolished by the British in 1829, an act through which they justified their colonial conquest of the Nation, but as Lata Mani points out in her treatise, although this was a founding moment in the history of women in modern India, it has its genesis in the colonial discourse of the period. Ultimately, sati was not about whether the Vedic scriptures prescribed such self-

immolation, nor was it about the individual women’s wishes and desires. Rather, it was a part of the traditional behaviour that Indian women had internalised within themselves. Many of them saw it as an essential part of the “duty” expected from them as a good wife – to sacrifice her life in order that her husband could gain ultimate salvation. 45 Within the context of “social reform” that became the buzzword in nineteenth century India, “accounts of Indian women...are often imbedded within discussions of sati, child marriage, widowhood, polygyny and prohibitions on education.” 46 It has also been pointed out, quite rightly, that the dominance of discussion on these issues has left the other part of a women’s life totally ignored; and this leads to further ignorance on issues such as “women’s work and occupations, values and emotional lives, and health and physical well-being.” 47 Women were thus either heroes or villains in the narrative of the nation; their identities as complex personalities and possible agents of change were totally denied. Lata Mani comments:

Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. 48

Thus, it may be argued that women became the “subject” of discussion by male reformers and academicians, and in spite of the positive results, it does seem to further highlight the subordination of women as the few women whose achievements were considered significant, even by male standards, were seen as anomalies rather than the norm.

For Rammohar Roy, the fight against sati began with reason and rationalism, and gradually shifted towards a view that showed a greater willingness to accommodate the possibility of religious sanction in the discourse. Using the same religious scriptures that had been seen as sanctifying sati, Roy countered the British attacks on Indian society, and examined the necessity for the practice. He concluded that documents like the Manusmriti and people like Yagnavalkya proved that a widow was enjoined to live with either of her families after her husband’s death. It is largely

45 Lata Mani. 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India.' in Recasting Women. pp. 117-18
47 Ibid.
48 Lata Mani. op cit.
this view that has prevailed since then, although the life of the Hindu widow in the
teneteenth and early twentieth century was nothing short of tragic.

Apart from sati, the other areas of social reform in the colonial period were
related to widow remarriage and the education of women. As already discussed, the
Manusmriti and other Vedic texts justify a woman’s inferior status in society on the
basis of her inherent moral weakness. She could only hope to improve her prospects
in her next life by faithfully following the duties prescribed in these texts. A woman
was bound to her husband till eternity, and required to be faithful to him in thought
and deed, irrespective of whether this faith was reciprocated or not:

Though destitute of virtue, or seeking pleasure elsewhere, or devoid of good
qualities, yet a husband must be worshipped as a god by a faithful wife. 49

In order to ensure that caste purity was maintained, there were severe
restrictions on the freedom of women. However, women continued to enjoy a certain
degree of importance as long as they were married. With the death of her husband
however, a woman’s “utility” 50 was over, particularly if she had no children. For
widows who did not commit sati, the options were few. She was condemned to lead a
life totally withdrawn from society with an imposition of severe discipline that made
her existence a virtual social death. Any breach in lifestyle was supposed to endanger
the life of her dead husband in his after life. The Dharmashstras prescribed that:

... a widow should give up adorning her hair, chewing betelnut, wearing
perfumes, flowers, ornaments and dyed clothes, taking food from a vessel of
bronze, taking two meals a day, applying collyrium to her eyes; she should
wear a white garment, should curb her senses and anger; she should not resort
to deceit and tricks, should be free from laziness and sleep, should be pure
and of good conduct, should always worship God, should sleep on the floor at
night on a mat of 'Kusa' grass, she should be intent on concentration of mind
and on the company of the good. 51

Widowhood therefore meant one of the following: “immediate death, lifelong
condemnation to segregation and drudgery, and subjection to clandestine sexual
exploitation by the males of the family or locality.” 52 The heads of the widows were
also tonsured in an attempt to de-feminise and de-sexualise them and to ensure that

49 Manusmriti V.154
51 P.V. Kane. History of Dhar Mashastras: Ancient and Medieval Religious and Civil Law. cited in
Sojani. op cit. p.7
52 Rajul Sojani. op.cit. p.7
their lives were totally barren, and that they were totally marginalised from mainstream society.

Just as Rammohan Roy spoke out in favour of the abolition of sati, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar waged a battle in favour of widow remarriage and the education of women. He published a large number of articles and tracts articulating his views on the subject and substantiating his position, like Roy, with scriptural citations and historical data. For instance, in his first tract on widow remarriage, he pointed out that the “Kaliyug” or “Dark Age” permitted such marriages. This pronouncement met with encouragement as well as pronounced disapproval. However, Vidyasagar remained undeterred, and his efforts culminated in the passage of a bill that legalised Hindu widow remarriage, including those of brides who had never left their parental homes or consummated their marriage. The law generated tremendous controversy, with huge number of petitions filed against it. Underlying the reason for these petitions was the primary fear about the sexuality and sexual promiscuity of women, deemed dangerous for society, and the fear that widow remarriage would herald a return to the medieval period, whereby “whosoever may wish will run away with any one’s wife.” The Hindu Widows Remarriage Act XV 1856 did not yield sufficient returns. Vidyasagar himself paid for the cost of a number of such widow remarriages. Govind Ranade, addressing a gathering in Bombay in 1900, remarked that only about 300 remarriages of upper-caste women had taken place in the years since the legislation was passed. A reason for this may be the difficulty of translating the commitment into practice, due to long-held social taboos and patriarchal mindsets. However, the writings of women during this period tell another story. Janki Nair writes:

Many women did not see the resolution of their problems within the framework of marriage, and sought educational and work opportunities for widows instead, aspiring to economic independence rather than a return to the domestic fold. What made widow remarriage even more difficult were the various clauses on property rights. Before the Property Acts and Hindu Succession Acts of 1937 and 1957 respectively, a woman could only succeed to property in the absence of any

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54 Janki Nair. op cit. p.63
male heir even in succeeding generations, and after her death, the estate reverted to
the nearest living heir of her dead husband.

From the latter years of the nineteenth century, the educated woman’s voice
began to be heard publicly for the first time. These voices did echo the male discourse
on womanhood but at the same time, offered a critique of the system from within the
system. For instance, in 1881, a court in Surat, Gujarat tried a young Brahmin widow
Vijayalakshmi, for killing her illegitimate child. She was first sentenced to death, but
later this was changed to 5 years imprisonment. Tarabai Shinde (c. 1850-1910) was so
angered by this fact that she wrote the tract *Stri-purusha tulana* (A Comparison
between men and women) in which she made it clear that this judgement was simply
a metaphor for the general mistreatment of women. Shinde wrote of the plight of
widows:

> “Once a woman’s husband has died, not even a dog would swallow what
she’s got to.”

Shinde’s tract was a critique of patriarchal society that went far beyond
envisioning remarriage as a solution for the problems of widows. It exploited the
discrepancies within the *Shastras* and recognized the complicity between British and
Indian patriarchy “in refusing to acknowledge the responsibility of men for sustaining
moral standards.”

Before Shinde however, women like Rassundari Devi and Pandita Ramabai
too highlighted the plight of women. Rassundari Devi had taught herself to read
in extremely difficult circumstances, spurred on by her intense desire to learn. She
writes:

After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in
me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read…
People used to despise women of learning… In fact, older women used to
show a great idea of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a
woman.

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55 Rosalind O’Hanlon. ‘Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Renaissance in Colonial Western India’.
cited in Geraldine Forbes. op.cit. p.22
56 Janki Nair. op.cit. p.69
57 Rassundari Devi. *Aamar Jibon.*
The passage succeeds in bringing out the complexities and the dilemma of the women of the period, caught between individual desires on the one hand and societal mores and pressures on the other. Similar accounts can be seen even later:

...I had no right to education. Though I lived like a boy in every respect, in matters of education I remained a woman. It is a popular superstition in our country that women, if educated, have to suffer widowhood; hence that path was entirely closed for me.⁵⁸

Pandita Ramabai’s case was slightly removed. From her childhood she had been encouraged by her parents to pursue her education, and was therefore well-versed with the scriptures. After being widowed, Ramabai campaigned for women’s education and their right to a life of freedom and dignity. She later converted to Christianity and started Sharada Sadan, a home for widows that was aimed at making them financially and emotionally independent. In recognition of her great learning, she was awarded the title “Pardita.”

Although these attempts were limited, it did create some kind of foundation from which later movements towards education of women and their empowerment could take place. The first missionary schools were begun at the beginning of the nineteenth century, but the number of educated women only grew substantially by the end of the nineteenth century, although this was limited to the educated, elite classes. The Government too offered support towards this movement. When one recalls the fact that in ancient India women were able to read the scriptures, participate fully in community life and remarry if widowed, the situation of women in India in the nineteenth century is a painful pointer towards the level to which their lives had degenerated.

The spread of women’s education of course had its impact on other aspects of society. Most particularly, the freedom movement saw large-scale, mass level participation of women. Geraldine Forbes writes:

From liberal homes and conservative families, urban centres and rural districts, women – single and married, young and old – came forward and joined the struggle against colonial rule. Women’s participation called into

⁵⁸ Geraldine Forbes. op cit. p.32
question the British right to rule, legitimised the Indian nationalist movement and won for activist women, at least for a time, the approval of Indian men.\textsuperscript{59}

Also, while education and social reform were limited to a particular section of Indian society, the nationalist movement for freedom appealed to all. Even men, otherwise strict followers of societal laws wanted the women in their families to participate in the freedom movement, not least because it showed them in a positive progressive light.

In India, a common comparison of the woman figure is with the nation or the "motherland." Even the National song is titled \textit{Vande Mataram} (Hail to the Motherland). The question of the woman’s body is thus an important aspect, which may, as stated by Foucault, provide "both an entry as well as a site for the visualisation of the nation."\textsuperscript{60} The image of the woman as the ideal mother, as "Mother India" has not only been the subject of films, it has also been an assertion of the male gaze, which continues to view the woman as a symbol of femininity, patience, tolerance and suffering. The feminising of the nation as mother therefore allows one to respect and revere them as families. The women of a country are seen as its most emotive symbols, saddled with the burden of "carrying the identity and sanctity of the nation on their backs and their bodies" and also acting as the "moral borders."\textsuperscript{61} Butalia goes on to state:

If the nation can keep its women pure and chaste, it can preserve at least its moral borders, if not the physical ones. The ‘enemy’ nation, the ‘other’ knows this, and it is their attempt always to violate the bodies of women, so that this profound, inner, sacrosanct border is violated.\textsuperscript{62}

It was through the nationalist movement that the distinction between the private and public sphere began to be blurred. In fact, the private domain often served as a convenient cover for the public activities that these women undertook. "Women hid weapons, sheltered fugitives and encouraged the men, their domestic roles providing cover for these subversive and revolutionary acts."\textsuperscript{63} The participation of women also gave legitimacy to the Indian National Congress, formed in 1885, the

\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 121
\textsuperscript{60} Sadan Jha. ‘Visualizing the Nation: Gender and the Construction of Symbolic Nationhood in colonial and Postcolonial India.’
\textsuperscript{61} Urvashi Butalia. ‘Gender in the Construction of Nation.’
\textsuperscript{62} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{63} Geraldine Forbes,op.cit.p.123
political party that spearheaded the campaign for Independence. Women started attending AICC sessions from 1889, although mostly as observers rather than delegates. They participated actively in the non-cooperation movement, in Civil Disobedience, the Dandi March, Satyagraha and the Quit India movement. They were particularly inspired by Gandhi, who urged them to take up Swaδeṣhi, and who evoked examples of Sita, Damayanti and Draupadi to inspire women to recognise their complementary nature to men. What was significant was that at no time did Gandhi ask women to forsake their domestic responsibilities. Ultimately, women from all provinces and all parts of the country came forward in reply to Gandhiji’s call. Even prostitutes answered his call and collected funds for the congress in 1922. Muslim women too answered his call. The likes of Bi Amma, the mother of Khilafat leaders Mohammed and Shaukat Ali began addressing public gatherings, and even lifted her veil by redefining the entire audience as her ‘family.’ The massive participation of women in the Civil Disobedience movement, in particular, across the country made it clear to all that women deserved the right to vote. As a result, women’s organisations refused to accept the proposals presented at the Round Table Conference in 1931, which talked of reservation of seats for women. The Congress had always argued for political representation of women based on universal adult franchise and therefore Sarojini Naidu and others bitterly opposed the move for reservations, and there was thus a demand for a larger women’s contingent for the second Round Table Conference. It was here that Sarojini Naidu and Begum Shah Nawaz declared that “to seek any form of preferential treatment would be to violate the integrity of the universal decision of Indian women for absolute equality of political status.” This was a major victory for the Congress and Indian women.

The campaign for women’s rights ran parallel to the nationalist agenda. The latter in fact, provided the platform through which women could extend their horizons and boundaries and form a larger front for their rights. The Women’s Indian Association (WIA) was formed, with Dr. Annie Besant as President. It was dedicated to issues of female franchise and social reform. The All India Women’s Conference (AIWC) was set up in 1927 to advance the cause of women and children. The AIWC demanded universal adult suffrage, mixed general electorates with no reservations,

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64 Ibid., p.128.
65 Radha Kumar. The History of Doing. p.81
co-option or nomination for women. Several women’s organisations were formed across the country demanding women’s suffrage and emancipation like the Bangiya Nari Samaj, the Rashtriya Stree Sanghta, which led to the development of the Desh Sevika Sangha (DSS). One thing is clear; women in India did not have to wage a protracted struggle for universal adult suffrage as in many other countries of the world, including developed countries like USA, where the demand for suffrage has today culminated in a celebration of 8th March as International Women’s Day. Madras was the first city to grant women the right to vote in 1920, followed by Bombay in 1921, and ultimately by 1929 other provincial legislatures gave women the right to vote, although not without opposition and resistance. For instance, the first resolution for women’s suffrage was defeated in Bengal in 1921, an ironic fact considering that Bengal had been the hotbed of activities for women’s social reform in the nineteenth century. Granting suffrage to women was another blow for patriarchy which sought to marginalise women. Some reasons for denying women the right to vote was their supposed inherent incapability to exercise these rights responsibly, the mixing, of the ‘respectable’ world with the ‘not-so-respectable’ world of prostitutes or even on communal lines:

....Since Muslim women were less educated than Hindu women, few of them would turn out to vote: as a result, the percentage of Hindus going to the polls would rise disproportionately, constituting a disadvantage for Muslims.66

However, even with the granting of female suffrage, some problems continued to remain. The right to vote was linked to ownership of property, from which most Indians were excluded, and as a result very few women were actually able to cast their vote in spite of the historic legislation. Also, women were still not allowed to actually sit in legislatures. The first woman to the nominated to the Madras Legislative Council was Muthulakshmi Reddy, who initiated legislations such as bills to abolish the devdasi system, child marriage, reduction of educational fees for poor girls, establishing children’s hospitals and bills that made medical examination compulsory for girls in all schools and colleges.67

It can be seen therefore that Indian women were able to earn basic rights for themselves after tremendous struggle. The freedom movement did succeed in seeking

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66 Janki Nair. op.cit. p.133
67 Ibid., p.134.
to improve the women's condition in significant ways by passing numerous legislations, which cannot be discussed in such limited space. However, as has also been in the discussion, implementation of these legislations continued to remain a struggle. Men had perhaps no choice in passing the legislations due to the consistent pressure, but they certainly did not make things easy.

WOMEN IN POST-INDEPENDENCE INDIA

The question thus arises, has the situation for Indian women changed today, nearly 60 years after Independence? In some respects things have certainly improved, although in others, the woman continues to remain a victim of society, customs and circumstances. Today, 322 million of the total electorate of 671 million are women. However of the 548 seats in the Lok Sabha, only 8%, or 43 are represented by women. While the literacy rate among men is 73%, among women it is still only 47.8%, highlighting the fact that a lot more needs to be done to improve literacy levels for women in the country. When one sees figures that 13 million children do not attend school in India, one does not hesitate to conclude that a large number of this figure would be accounted for by girls, who are not sent to school by parents in many parts of the country. One also hears reports of declining sex ratios in states like Haryana and Rajasthan, increasing rates of female foeticide or infanticide and tales of dowry deaths continue to flood the media. It would seem that the efforts of women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century have gone to waste, and the situation of women continues to remain grim even today.

There are however a number of positives that have been achieved by Indian women in these years. The Bills against Domestic Violence and the Amendments to the Hindu Succession Act are just two of the recent legislations enacted by the current government at the Centre to benefit women. One of the major initiatives taken to empower women politically however was initiated during the Prime Ministership of Rajiv Gandhi, between 1984 and 1989. The introduction of the Panchayati Raj system at the grassroots level gave mandatory 33% reservation of all seats at Panchayat level to women. Although initially this led to a number of women being elected but remaining mere “rubber-stamps” and signing authorities, the real control being

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exercised by men, over the years, this has proved to be an extremely powerful tool to
give women real power at the grassroots. Another important and historical legislation
enacted by Rajiv Gandhi was to lower the voting age to 18 years for both men and
women, start more IIT’s and IIM’s, which saw new avenues for education for the
youth of the country. Indira Gandhi, India’s first woman Prime Minister did not
believe herself to be a feminist, not unlike many other women of postcolonial
societies. She once stated:

I am not a feminist and I do not believe that anyone should get a preferential
treatment merely because she happens to be a woman.69

At the same time Indira Gandhi believed that Indian women had been
handicapped from birth. She extolled the role that women played within the family
system but also felt that simultaneously, she should “be able to exert her influence for
the good and benefit of the community.”70 This rather ambiguous statement of course
couched a number of issues, as there was no dearth of ways in which a woman could
be beneficial to the community and create a revolution in society. One of the
landmarks for the women’s movement worldwide was the United Nations declaration
of 1975 as the International women’s year and its directions to all constituent nations
to prepare documents and reports regarding the position of women in their countries.
As a result a committee was appointed in India in 1971 to look into the various
constitutional and other provisions that affected the stature of women, and their report
*Toward Equality* was published in 1974. This was a scathing report and indicted the
administration, by stating that women’s status had not improved but had, in fact
decayed since Independence, and that the “majority of women are still very far from
enjoying the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the constitution.”71 As a
result of the publication of this report, steps were undertaken to conduct further
studies on the women’s situation in India with the formation of various advisory
councils, the formation of the Centre for Women’s Development Studies (1980) and
the Centre for Advanced Research in Women’s Studies by the University Grants
Commission also in the same year.

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69 Indira Gandhi. ‘What does Modern Mean?’ In *Great Women of Modern India*. vol.VII. p.169, cited
in Forbes. p.253
71 Toward Equality. p.359
Today, Indian women are at a crossroads, confused with their position within the ambit of Indian society. While many Indian women have done exceptionally well in fields like business, Information Technology and Administrative services; many have represented India in foreign missions and the United Nations; while others have excelled in the fields of sport, performing arts and other extracurricular activities. On the other hand, in rural India, the picture has remained different. While a significant portion of women have benefited due to steps taken for political empowerment, a large section remain confined to their roles as wives, and more importantly, mothers; subject to exploitation by males both in the house and the village; particularly the village landlords. It is in rural India that caste hierarchies are today visible in their most corrupt and latent form; where colonial structures of subordination have been replaced by neo-colonial discourses and discrepancies between the have and the have-nots. It is this India that largely forms the backdrop of Mahasweta Devi’s stories. Ashish Nandy has termed this apparently paradoxical image of Indian women today as the commonplace paradox of every social interpretation of Indian women, stating that women’s political and scientific success may be explained in terms of the culture’s non-gendering of aggressive and activist tracts. Patriarchy continues to make itself manifest in various ways: the laws and law-makers who make rules for women’s empowerment also enact rules for their subordination. It is not surprising perhaps therefore that while there is a great hurry by all political parties to pass the Bill for Reservations for OBC’s in higher education, keeping in mind the prevailing political situation in the country and their respective vote banks, the Women’s Reservation Bill enacting 33% of seats in Parliament for women has run into repeated rough water. In spite of repeated agitations by women’s organisations, NGO’s and women MP’s, as well as verbal, superficial support by all political parties, the Bill runs into roadblocks. Off the record, many parliamentarians admit that they do not want the bill to be passed as their own seats may be lost and they are not prepared to concede power to women.

It has thus been seen that women’s role and status within the Indian social system has been a construction of patriarchal structures, wherein the general attempt has been at their subordination, subjugation and exploitation through the codified rules of society. But the struggles and problems of women in India are certainly not

— Geraldine Forbes, op. cit. p.235
homogeneous. It is also not true that Indian women have not countered or resisted the various modes of oppression that they have had to suffer. Upper caste and upper class women (More often than not, the two are synonymous) are relatively less subjugated than women of the lower castes, and also lower caste men. The caste hierarchy places them above the lower caste man, while gender hierarchies give the male a superior position. In the discourse on the caste system and the role of women within this system, it is clear that the Dalit and tribal women have been the worst victims through the ages, an exploitation that continues unabated even today.

THE POSITION OF DALIT AND TRIBAL WOMEN IN INDIA

It has already been discussed that most writing on the caste system in India and the position of the woman within this system have been written by men. These texts focus on the Brahminical view as seen through the Vedic texts and over-emphasise the ideological and ritualistic aspects of the caste system. The counter-view of the other side – by Dalits, by women, by Dalit and tribal women – which provide experiential dimensions to caste-based oppression has often been ignored. Dr. B.R. Ambedkar defined caste as a system of ‘graded inequality’, where the power and status increases as one goes up the scale, and conversely, as one moves downwards, the degree of contempt for a caste increases, their power and status decrease and they are regarded as dirty and polluting. This cultural and social oppression is far more acute in the case of women of the lower castes, and consequently, the response to such oppression has also been the most intensely personal and subjective.

A personal account by a Dalit woman student in Hyderabad University provides one with a first-hand contemporary account of how women are subjugated even within the Dalit community. In an article written for Insight, M. Swathy Margaret defines herself as a “Dalit Middle-class, University educated, Telugu speaking Dalit-Christian-Woman” and states that it is important for her to define herself in this manner in order that others do not have the liberty to describe her. The identities that Margaret constructs for herself are significant. Technically as a Christian, Swathy should be out of the purview of the prescribed Hindu codes of society, but that has obviously not been the case. Her Dalit and female identity has

73 Tapan Basu, op cit. p.7
74 M. Swathy Margaret. ‘Dalit Feminism.’ Insight. 3rd June, 2005
been powerful enough to subvert her other identities. Swathy goes on to write that the room she was given in the hostel was nice, except that it had been unallotted for a couple of years, as the last inhabitant, a Dalit girl had committed suicide there. She writes of her lack of ideological and emotional bonding with upper-caste "feminist" students at the university, who did not seem too bothered about their bodies or their caste. But most importantly and significantly perhaps, she writes of the sense of alienation she feels from her male Dalit comrades:

Most men only acknowledge a Dalit woman's presence as fit for handing over bouquets... At the most, she can give the vote of thanks. They do not consider her in important discussions or in writing papers... Later I learned that excluding women... was a deliberate policy they followed as they believed women's presence would cause problems and come in the way of serious politics. Women inevitably mean "problems", their sexuality being an uncontrolled wild beast waiting to pounce upon the unassuming Dalit men in the movement. It is assumed that they divert the attention from the larger concerns of the movement.\textsuperscript{75}(my emphasis)

Shared oppression has not led to an obliteration of stereotypes, and Margaret's experiences are only an echo of the actual, unfortunate reality. The hardships of Dalit women are not simply due to their poverty, economic status, or lack of education, but a result of the severe exploitation and suppression by the upper castes, and as seen above, even by male Dalits. Dalit women are thus a distinct social group, which cannot be masked under the general category of 'women' or 'Dalit.' \textit{The Manusmriti} reserves the lowest place in the hierarchy of society for the Dalit woman stating that "A Brahmin, Kshatriya, or Vaishya man can sexually exploit any Shudra woman\textsuperscript{76} and that the killing of a Dalit woman is explicitly justified as a minor offence for Brahmans, equal to the killing of an animal. One can therefore imagine the kind of life that Dalit women have led throughout the centuries, both in terms of their caste as well as their gender. A report from the National Commission for SC/ST's published in 2000 states that even now 75% of Dalit girls drop out of primary school, despite all Government regulations. It has also been seen that literacy rates are among the lowest in Dalit girls. This has been attributed to a number of factors including the lack of educational resources, especially in rural areas, increased privatisation of schools and colleges, which this section cannot afford due to their extreme state of poverty, demand for increased dowry from educated girls and humiliation and bullying by high

\textsuperscript{75} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{76} Manusmriti. IX. 25
caste students and teachers.\textsuperscript{77} Most Dalits, men or women, have no choice but to work as labourers, sweepers, manual scavengers and disposers of human waste, even though many of these occupations have been banned. A recent media report has shown how, in spite of manual scavenging being outlawed in 1993, many Dalit women continue to do this work. The women interviewed in the report stated how they did this work for their sustenance. What was more shocking however was the statement of the Government official, who almost pleaded helplessness and admitted that the activity continued to exist, in spite of it being proved that these constituted tremendous health hazards for these women.\textsuperscript{78} Many of these women and men continue to work for minimal wages, with their bodies exposed to relentless and unending violence, humiliation, molestation, gang rape, and even at times, a burning down of their houses.

It is still considered sacrilege in many parts of India for a Dalit and non-Dalit to fall in love, as this is considered to break all the rules of society. The question of honour is paramount in such cases, honour of course being one of the most valued ideals in sub-continental patriarchies. Relationships are manifested through marriage relations, where both exogamy and endogamy play crucial roles. In such cases, inter-caste marriages are regarded only slightly above inter-religious marriages, no matter how compatible or suitably qualified both the partners are. It is considered that women are the visible markers of a family’s honour, and ironically, women themselves become complicit in spreading such notions by passing on this ‘advice’ to the future generations. There are also different laws that apply for men and women. One recalls the mother of a friend who was in love with a lower caste boy telling her daughter that one could accept a lower caste girl into the house as a daughter-in-law, but the same did not apply when one had to marry one’s daughter to a lower-caste boy, as the family’s ‘honour’ was involved. The implication was clear. Boys still had a certain degree of freedom to choose their partner, but not women. They were not considered the torch-bearers of their family’s honour in a manner that a woman is considered to be so. Misdeeds by men are often sought to be justified, by stating that “Boys will be boys”, but the same misdeed by a girl invites only wrath and humiliation. Uma Chakraborty writes:

\textsuperscript{77} Sonia Mahey. The status of Dalit Women in India’s Caste based system.
\textsuperscript{78} NDTV Report. 19\textsuperscript{th} August. 2006.
...because the purity of women in crucial to maintaining the blood purity of the lineages, and also the position of the family within the larger social hierarchy, women are seen to have a special place in families. Women are the repositories of family honour – of their own family as daughter, and of their husband’s family as wife and mother... The concept of honour serves as a link between the behaviour of an individual woman and the idealised norms of the community. By constantly evoking the twin notions of honour and dishonour families either condition or shame women into appropriate and inappropriate behaviour.79

Is it not strange how the same people who quote Manusmriti and other such Vedic texts to subordinate women and deny them a caste, suddenly use these same structures to remind them of their caste and ‘position’ and deny them choice even in matters of their own lives? The hegemony of Gramsci is seen here in its clearest manifestation; and choice, particularly when exerted by an upper-caste woman is seen as being disruptive of the whole social order. Such relationships “will almost certainly be contested and criminalised; the whole weight of the police and even of the legal system works to uphold the cultural codes of marriage.”80

In many parts of India today, especially in states like Bihar, Dalit women have developed a framework of resistance to upper castes and the newly emerging middle classes and foregrounded their identity as Dalits. They have begun to retaliate as Dalits and challenge the privileged position and power the upper castes uphold through caste violence. At the same time, in aligning with armed Dalit women, they expose the vulnerability and helplessness of their own men in protecting them from sexual and physical violation, from primarily upper caste men. The political situation in Bihar since the early 1990’s, when the rise of Laloo Prasad Yadav saw the rise of the OBC’s, led to a situation where the Dalits also began to assert themselves, in spite of all attempts to suppress them. Prakash Louis argues that Dalits no longer accept the existing oppressive feudal social system and are prepared to fight for their honour, freedom, proper wages and redistribution of land, but the powerful gentry class cannot tolerate such defiance.81 Dalit women in many cases have taken to armed violence supported by organisations like the CPI(ML) in an attempt to carve out their own identity.

79 Uma Chakraborty. op.cit. p.157
80 Ibid., p.153
81 Prakash Louis. cited in Deliege. op cit.
As far as tribal societies and the status of women in these societies are concerned, it is somewhat different although some similarities do of course exist. Today, the tribal population of India, as classified under the ST category is 84,326,240 or approximately 8.2%. To be included as a Scheduled Tribe, a group must have had “tribal origins, a ‘primitive’ way of life, habitation in remote and inaccessible areas and ‘generally backward’ in all aspects.” In Mizoram and Lakshadweep, the tribal population comprises 94.5% of the total population and this is closely followed by Nagaland (89.1%) and Meghalaya (85.9%). These figures corroborate the fact that India has the second highest tribal population in the world, second only to the entire continent of Africa. Numerically, the Gonds of Madhya Pradesh constitute the largest tribal population, while the Great Andamanese are the smallest, with latest figures putting the number at around 19, almost near to extinction. The Scheduled Tribes are not treated as a category unto themselves. They are for all administrative and other purposes, grouped along with the Scheduled Castes. In fact, back in 1959, Ghurye commented that these Scheduled tribes or ‘aborigines’ or ‘adivasis’ are envisaged as one group of the Backward Classes.

The notion of what constitutes a tribe is certainly not clear. According to Shereen Ratnagar, some people see the term ‘tribe’ as pejorative, implying backwardness, while some believe that it is result of the colonial encounter. For some people, there exists little difference between caste and tribe. Ratnagar states:

Tribes are characterised not by this or that race, habitat or religious practice, but...by the bonding fabric of kinship and joint ownership of the natural resources from which they make their living. Jointly held resources comprise agricultural land, wells, forest trees and game, river water, river fish etc. There is no private property in these.... Associated as it is with ancestors, jointly held tribal land, unlike a commodity is inalienable, and all members by birth have rights to share. Title to such land is a matter of prestige, not just a source of livelihood.

It was the colonial encounter and state recognition of individual ownership that changed the dynamics of tribal society, and transformed a hitherto joint community into one indebted to landlords and moneylenders. Forest legislation too

82 Census of India. 2001.
83 Shereen Ratnagar. *Our Tribal Past*. p.18
85 Shereen Ratnagar. op cit. p.18
86 Ibid.
has deprived many tribes of their traditional livelihoods.\textsuperscript{87} This is not to say however, that all tribes in India are homogeneous. Ghanshyam Shah points out that it is wrong to group all tribes of India into a monolithic category as Scheduled Tribes. This method “ignores differentiation among tribes, and also legitimises a tribe as tribe with distinct social and cultural identity.”\textsuperscript{88} Historically, administration and bureaucracy has tended to see all tribes as economically homogeneous entities, ignoring the minute regional, cultural and historical differences that exist among tribes, even within a single state. Shah uses the example of Gujarat to state the fallacy of such homogeneous classifications:

...Some of the tribes like the Dubla and the Rathwa are economically very poor and educationally backward. They are mainly landless labourers. There is 6\% literacy among Rathwas. On the other hand, Dhodias and Chaudhris are economically advanced. Literacy among the Dhodia is 31\%.\textsuperscript{89}

And although a large bulk of tribal India follow the rituals of Hinduism, they belong to various racial groups such as the Proto-Australoid group and the Mongoloid groups. Although most tribes are patrilineal, some tribes follow a matrilineal system of society even today. And across the country, there is wide variation in their levels of socio-economic development, the above example of Gujarat being a small instance of the same. Today, in spite of various Government legislations to improve the situation of the tribal community, some fundamental problems continue to persist. Some of these are the low levels of literacy rates among the tribes of India, the transferring of land to non-tribals, in many cases, either legally or even immorally. For instance, in Meghalaya, non-tribals are not allowed ownership of land. Thus, many non-tribals marry tribal women for their share of the property, and divorce them later. This is today leading to a situation where divorce rates and numbers of single parents are on the rise in the state. A third problem is the continuing ruthless exploitation of tribals from the colonial period to the present day; large scale corruption means that funds allocated for tribal development do not show any distinct results. In the colonial period the British administration favoured the feudal landlords. Today, when funds are at the hands of moneylenders and contractors, this historical exploitation has led to

\textsuperscript{87} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{88} Ghanshyam Shah. Social Stratification. p.288
\textsuperscript{89} Ibid.
further depravation for the tribals. Fourthly, large scale unemployment continues due to lack of educational facilities and low literacy rates.

In recent years, tribal communities too have started to demand their fair share of Government resources. These have taken the shape of various movements. The most significant of these have been the demands of separate statehood that has led to the creation, in 2000, of three new states (Chattisgarh, Jharkhand and Uttarakhand). The politics of protests, resistance and affirmative action has begun to manifest itself among many of the tribes, led by those who have been able to take advantages of the system and reached a degree of empowerment.

There are conflicting accounts regarding the position of women in tribal society. Anthropologists have been diametrically opposed on this issue. While some anthropologists maintain that pre-colonial primitive societies accorded a high degree of respect to tribal women, as they did to women in general; others believe that women were a repressed, oppressed and suppressed group. This wide divergence has often been ascribed to methodological errors that have looked at limited and specific data without consideration of all aspects of relations between the sexes. The truth in this matter perhaps lies in the fact that just as all tribal societies are not homogeneous or equally developed, the roles, status and position of women in these societies are equally varied. For example, amongst the Todas, the dairy is the centre of all economic activity, where milk and milk products are produced. Women of the tribe are regarded as impure and may not enter the dairy; in fact, they may not milk the buffaloes or even produce any dishes where milk is a constituent. Yet, the women of these communities are pampered, and the taboos, although maintained, are not enforced. On the other hand, in Andamanese society, men and women participate equally in the socio-economic life of the community. Women work alongside the men in the fields, in addition they also ensure that their duties as a homemaker are not sacrificed.

Often, it is said this discrepancy among the status of women within tribal societies may be due to the prevalence of matrilineality or patrilinearity. This seems logical. In matriarchal societies, where the lineage passes from mother to daughter, women are in an advantageous position. The Khasi tribe of Meghalaya are a
matrilocal and matrilineal society, tracing their ancestry from females who are often depicted in folk-tales as princesses of tribal legends. In such societies, property is inherited from mother to daughter, and all ceremonial and religious ceremonies are controlled by women, with men only in the role of deputies. Similarly, in Garo society, property can never pass out of the motherhood. A son is unable to inherit property because he would bequeath it to his children, and would consequently transfer the motherhood, which is impossible. In Garo society however, widows with small children are not permitted to marry till the children become mature. However, if a nephew or relative of the deceased husband desires to marry a widow, this must be complied with, otherwise compensation must be paid.

In patrilineal societies, the role of the woman is certainly not as central or as powerful. As stated earlier, the taboos associated with women are crucial determiners of their position within the community. Many tribal societies practice polygamy, which further serves to denigrate the woman. Recently, one heard of an account where a Raja of Arunachal Pradesh has 19 wives. Every night each of the wives lie side by side in a room with partitions between the beds. The Raja unties his ‘lungi’ and walks the length of the room. Where the ‘lungi’ falls off, it is the turn of the particular wife to enjoy the pleasures of matrimony that night! This kind of practice is naturally humiliating for the woman, who has no choice in the matter. One reason for this is the abominably low rate of literacy among ST women, which is approximately half of the national average. Many reasons are given for this discrepancy including non-availability of schools, of female teachers or even of young girls looking after the home while their mothers go to work in the fields. Many women are also not aware of their constitutional rights, and this is also a major factor contributing to their deprived status.

If one observes the status of tribal women in states like Bihar, Jharkhand or West Bengal, which serve as the location for most of Mahasweta Devi’s stories, one notices similar dichotomy and confusion amongst women regarding their role in society. In the past, the hunting of small game was a regular feature of the foraging tribes, with the jani shikar (women’s hunt) comprising an important ritual of the

90 D.N. Majumdar and T.N. Madan. Social Anthropology. p.123
91 As per 1991 census. General Literacy Rate among Women was 39.3% while among tribal women it was only 18.19%.
Oraon, Munda, Santhal and Ho tribes. With the passage of time however, as patriarchal domination increased, women became relegated to mere spectators in this ritual. The lack of access to resources affected their participation in the hunting rituals. The tribal or adivasi population of Jharkhand are divided into two main linguistic groups – the Santhal, Ho and Munda tribes belong to the Austro-Asiatic family, while the Oraon and the Chero tribes speak a language of the Dravidian group. For many centuries, the adivasis and the various artistic and service castes have lived together in symbiotic harmony, resulting in a composite culture and common world outlook. At the height of the movement for state autonomy, the Jharkhand Coordination Council (JCC) set out cultural markers that reasserted the state’s uniqueness – “harmony with nature, equality in society, including a relatively equal position for women and collectivism in economic activities.” And as in other sections of society, it is the eroding of these values and qualities that are the cause of social disharmony and social stratification.

Tribal women in Jharkhand, as in many other tribal societies have certainly had a more prominent position traditionally, although inequality has persisted in the domain of property rights and political participation. Property traditionally passes through the male line, with society being both patrilineal and patrilocal. Within this system however, women enjoy limited rights which may be summarised as being of two types – a life interest in land with the right to manage land and its produce, or alternatively, a right to a share of the produce of the land. This second type may be further sub divided into two kinds – maintenance or khorposh or a share of the produce over and above maintenance needs, for instance, of an unmarried daughter to a small portion of any crop that she may have helped harvest. The right to decide one’s own consumption places daughters and women in a privileged position compared to a situation where every act of consumption needs prior approval from the head of the family. All accumulations from each income also remain the sole property of the woman, even after marriage. In case of breakdown of the marriage, her father or her brother may give her a small section of land, but this is often a temporary phenomenon, as remarriage is a common occurrence, and in that case, the land is surrendered. In cases where remarriage is not possible, the woman has to depend on

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93 Ibid., p.88
her husband for maintenance. For tribal widows, the land is an important source of survival and sustenance. A widow is, in a sense a “substitute father.” In case her children are adults, she becomes the head of the household, and if they are of minor age, she “inherits all the land and the moveables, exactly as if she were their father.”

Thus,

...she administers the land and supervises the cultivation. In the event of partition...she gets exactly what her dead husband could have claimed....This gives her not just a right to be maintained but a real life interest in the land.

Also,

In cases where the widow has only daughters or no children at all, the woman acts as a substitute for her late husband.

In recent times however, one notices erosion in these traditional rights enjoyed by tribal women in these regions. As patriarchy becomes more dominant, the equal rights enjoyed by the widow have been replaced with rights only over a plot of land sufficient for her survival and maintenance. The scope for any independent access to the land is negated, with the widow reduced to surviving on maintenance provided by her husband’s male heirs. The situation is thus becoming similar to that of the rest of Hindu society.

The progressive deterioration in the rights of women in tribal societies also has other serious ramifications. One such phenomenon is witch-hunting. The generally prevailing opinion is that witch hunting is related to the attempt of male agnates to remove the threat to their property rights posed by the widow’s life interest in land. It is perhaps no surprise that victims of witch hunting are often the old and the unprotected, and often in some way related to their accusers. As an official of Jharkhand’s Social Work department comments in a newspaper report, superstition regarding witch hunting is only an excuse for its continuing practice. Often a woman is branded a witch so that she can be thrown out of the village and her land seized, or to settle scores, family rivalry, or because powerful men want to punish her for spuming their sexual advances. Sometimes it is used to punish women who question

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95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.,p.93
social norms. It is therefore not surprising that women from well-to-do homes in the village are never branded witches. It is always the socially and economically vulnerable women who are targeted and boycotted. 98 Recent times have seen a sharp increase in incidents of witch-hunting, with over 522 cases been registered in Bihar alone between 1991 and 2000. Other states such as Assam, Madhya Pradesh, Gujarat, Rajasthan, Andhra Pradesh and Maharashtra have also seen a sharp increase in witch-hunting rituals, as traditional tribal customs undergo a change. As Brinda Karat writes:

...there are cases where such identification has been made when upper castes want to grab the land distributed to Dalit or tribal families. Sometimes whole families are declared "witches" and eliminated. In other cases, individual financial disputes can also be the reason for witch-naming. Political lobbies and vested interests working with their own narrow agendas among tribal or Dalit communities, often use the ojha’s position to influence tribal communities. It is in the interests of these very 'modern' political forces to preserve the position of the ojha. 99

The process of construction of the witch is commonly known. It begins with the identification of the so-called "witch" by the local ojha. This woman is then ostracised and driven out of the village, or alternatively, killed. Witch naming, hounding and punishing can include stripping and parading the victim, tonsuring, blackening the face, slashing the victim with knives or any other sharp instrument, beating, burning, burying alive. 100 So what could be the reasons for increase in the medieval practice of witch-hunting? The introduction of witch-hunting in adivasi communities was historically been linked to the colonial "civilising" project. And today, its continuance can also be traced to the same powers and structures located, in the main, outside the communities in which they occur. As Karat comments, it is no coincidence that the so-called tradition of witch-hunting remains, while other traditions of today's marginalised communities, which are far more advanced in their democratic content than those practised by the upper caste, 'educated' people, are being destroyed. 101 The Washington Post states that even today, in spite of Bihar and Jharkhand outlawing witch-hunting, an average of five women a month continue to be

98 Rama Lakshmi. 'From Superstition to Savagery: Women Accused of Witchcraft Face Violence in Rural India.' The Washington Post. 8th August, 2005.
100 Ibid.
101 Ibid.
branded as witches.\textsuperscript{102} Mahasweta Devi's \textit{Bayen} provides a critical account of one such "witch", separated from her husband and child and forced to live a life of segregation and loneliness till her death. The story will be discussed in greater detail in Chapter 5.

It has already been pointed out that in traditional tribal societies, women participated pro-actively, if not equally, in the realm of hunting and gathering of the produce. The \textit{jani shikhar}, the rights of women over their own cultivation and produce have traditionally been markers of egalitarianism in tribal societies. Gathering was the source of sustained food supply, and this was the job of the woman. Even today, in Jharkhand, Bihar, West Bengal and Orissa, women participate fully in the market – as buyers of produce, as vendors and as retailers. Significantly, a number of marriages too are fixed within the market space. However, the \textit{jani shikhar}, as already mentioned, has now been reduced to a mere ritual, and as males take over the land of women, as discussed above, this feature of tribal communities too risks dying a slow but rapidly hastening death.

Thus, one can conclude that in most tribal societies of India, and especially in eastern India, which is the focus of this study, the socio-political milieu is considerably different from 'normal' caste societies. There is less of a taboo associated with the interaction between youth of the two sexes; there are also fewer restrictions on pre-marital sex. Menstrual taboos are not generally present; there is no concept of purdah. The only place in the house that visitors are forbidden from entering is the kitchen. Community dancing is an integral part of tribal life. Bride price is an accepted custom, although in recent times, the practice of dowry is increasing. In spite of such freedom however, attempts at subjugation of the woman have become more common – whether in the usurping of her land rights, reduction of her societal position, especially in the case of divorce and widowhood, and physical and sexual violence by male members. As greater amalgamation takes place with non-tribal societies, as young men and women seek benefits and advantages of Government policies, there has been a proportional reduction in the status of women. Patriarchy has made its impact.

\textsuperscript{102} Rama Lakshmi. op cit.
Thus, it can be seen that in the Indian context the position of women within society has been considerably complex. From pre-Vedic times to the present day, highly educated women have existed alongside those who never had the opportunity to learn, bound as they were by the pressures of patriarchal societal structures. One has to remember that while during colonisation, the colonisers attempted to locate all the colonised population as ‘effeminate’ or ‘female’, Indian men attempted to reassert their authority vis-à-vis Indian women by reclaiming and reconstructing history that glorified them. Indian women too have not remained silent spectators of history as has widely been reported. Recent recovery of documents and the rewriting of history from the subaltern perspective have brought to the fore the long neglected role of women in Indian society, whether in pre-Vedic times, during the Bhakti movement, during the freedom movement or in the post-Independence period. The historiographical account of the position and status of women in Indian society, and more particularly in Dalit and tribal society bring to the fore the various contradictions that are perhaps the root cause of the lack of women’s development. Veneration and an idealisation as ‘Mother India’ co-exist with attempts by the power structures to further repress and subjugate the woman and deny her rights in society. Quite naturally, these contradictions have been reflected in a lot of the literature written by women. The representation of women, especially of Dalit and tribal women from eastern India, in literature, and especially in the writings of Mahasweta Devi, will be examined in greater detail in Chapter 5.

Chapters 2 and 3 have therefore shown that the condition of women in South and Southern Africa and India are largely governed by the prevailing socio-historical-political conditions in these countries. Although the shared gender oppression of women in these countries may have certain similarities with the oppression of women world-wide, it is clear that both these countries have had to contend with situations that are unique to their milieu – caste and apartheid respectively, that overrides all other forms of subjugation and dominates the everyday lives of women. As discussed above, the women in both these countries have by no means been mute spectators to this continual humiliation that has sought to deprive them of their basic rights. They have formed organisations and social groups and resiliently fought the battle for equality at every step. And although the Governments in both the countries have undertaken considerable steps to improve the condition of women, unfortunately,
these steps have not percolated down to the grassroots level, where caste and community prejudices continue to prevail. Literature is another domain that these women have used to express their viewpoints and their innermost desires, the struggles that they have had to undertake even to be able to read and write. It is in this manner that they serve to fulfil two functions – challenge the hegemony created by the patriarchal order of society and also and perhaps more importantly create an identity for themselves. This will be discussed in detail in the following two chapters, with special focus on the representation of women in the writings of Bessie Head and Mahasweta Devi.