HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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GENDER IN SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY

General features Classical India developed a cultural framework for patriarchal gender relations that was different from that of classical China, though many features of family structure were similar. Later changes in premodern India primarily reflected new religious factors, particularly the establishment of Islam as the most important minority religion. British imperialism brought new influences in the 19th and early 20th centuries, though the British ultimately shied away from too much intervention. Indian and Pakistani independence in 1947, and subsequent economic development, introduced major changes, most obviously in political rights, but South Asia continues to maintain distinctive features in modern gender relations most clearly in family structure and religious cultures.

Classical period As the Hindu religion developed, in included mixed signals on women's characteristics and capacity. On the one hand, women were spiritually inferior to men. Intellectuals debated whether women could ascend directly after reincarnation, if they had led a worthy life, or if they must first be reincarnated as a man. Early in the period, women may have had greater access to religious education and function than became true later on. By the end of the classical period, women could not be priests, and could perform religious services only in their husbands' name. On the other hand, female deities had a range of powers, and stories also told of heroic actions by women – though mainly on behalf of fathers or husbands. Interestingly, the divinity most clearly associated with shame was female (for harm she inadvertently did to her husband). Arranged marriage prevailed, to assure larger family goals through exchanges of property, and girls were sometimes married quite young. However, early legal codes specified the women could retain property ownership and could act make independent decisions when their husbands were away. As in China several manuals spelled out women's obligations to serve fathers and then husbands faithfully. However, motherhood was widely celebrated. The manual *Kama Sutra,* written during the classical period, urged attention to women's emotional and sexual pleasure, along with that of men. Lives of men and women alike were obviously affected by the emerging caste system, which established rules for the types of work and interactions (including marriage) appropriate at each social level. Finally, throughout the classical period including under the Gupta empire, individual women wielded considerable political and military powers, again suggesting a more complicated pattern than in classical China.

Postclassical and early modern periods On the whole, the position of women in South Asia deteriorated in the centuries after the classical period. Individual women continued to wield political and military power, In a region that was often highly decentralized. And there were contributions in literature and the arts, showing that some women also had access to education. However, emphasis on female seclusion unquestionably increased. This reflected influence from the new Islamic minority and areas of Islamic rule, but also efforts to shield upper-class women from unwanted attention. In some Hindu regions the practice of *sati* developed in the postclassical period, in which new widows were expected to hurl themselves on their husbands' funeral pyres, dying because a woman without a husband had no reason to live. Muslims did not adopt this practice, but in other respects Hindu-Muslim interaction often worked to women's disadvantage. In some Islamic families, husbands' control over property, including dowries, increased, though this was technically contrary to Islamic law. The most important result of religious encounter, however, was the spread of the system of *purdah,* or the substantial seclusion of women in the home – initially imported from Persia. Some Muslim rulers urged seclusion and concealing dress on their followers; as one put it, "We are now in the land of idolatry and amongst a strange people, the women of their families should be strictly concealed from the view of strangers." But upper-class Hindu families gradually adopted the practice as well. It became more widely enforced in the Mughal period, particularly under the emperor Akbar. (It was also under the Mughals that rulers characteristically assembled substantial harems, with multiple wives and concubines.) The custom of purdah would be a powerful factor in gender relations well after the early modern period, often inhibiting women's participation in public life. However, it had far less effect in the lower classes, where women's work remained essential and where foreign observers often noted the shared efforts of husbands and wives. And even among Mughal rulers, powerful wives could exert real influence.

British rule Under British rule, gradually established from the later 18th century onward, gender patterns changed in a number of contradictory directions. In the first place, British pressure to reduce Indian manufacturing, through laws limiting import of Indian goods and then the competition of British factory exports, threw many Indian women out of work, or forced increasingly low wages and long hours. British administrators were often strongly inclined to leave gender relations alone, as irrelevant to holding onto power. Many, living in isolated compounds with British wives who were often deeply suspicious of Indian customs, knew little about Indian conditions in the first place. Hindu artistic depictions of women, often highly sensual, roused suspicions among British moralists. But there were some reform impulses, particularly during the first half of the 19th century and then again after 1918. British observers issued many shocked reports about the treatment of women by fathers and husbands. As one noted, "the condition of Indian women" can be described as "miserable, uneducated, mere animals kept for burden or for slaughter." Practices like *sati* and female infanticide drew particular attention. The British claimed some success in limiting infanticide. *Sati* weas officially banned in 1829, and many Indian reformers, like Rammohun Roy, though hostile to British rule, also agreed that the practice was inhumane. Roy argued that *sati* demeaned women, denying them "the excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature". British law also sought to introduce greater protection for widows' property or opportunities to remarry; a 1859 law legitimized remarriage. Overall, however, reform measures were limited and roused considerable resistance; and the British pulled back after a major rebellion in 1857 prompted reconsideration of efforts to interfere with Indian traditions of any sort. Later in the 19th century, spurred by some missionary and feminist leaders and now joined by some female reformers like Pandita Ramabai (who published a scathing critique of women's lives in India), some attention was given to expanding educational opportunities, at least for the upper classes. By the early 20th century some new women's magazines appeared, either in English or Hindi, that often criticized customs like arranged marriage, in which girls or young women had no voice.

Nationalism and reform The development of Indian nationalism, from the later 19th century onward, had ambiguous implications for gender. On the one hand, most leaders were male and many, like Gandhi, harbored many traditional ideas about women's roles. Nationalists also praised many Indian traditions, particularly those associated with Hinduism, as a vital part of Indian heritage. Many criticized Western practices. As one put it, "With all the sorrow and pain that an educated Hindu feels for the present position of Indian womanhood, he would not have his daughters and sisters go out into the world in search of employment as the girls in Europe do, not to speak of other excesses to which they are all liable by virtue of their conditions of life." On the other hand, most nationalists did argue for better education – though possibly with some distinctive features that would prepare women to be better wives and mothers. Gandhi himself urged that "India's salvation depends on the sacrifices and enlightenment of her women." Many Indian leaders urged modifications of *purdah* in order to permit fuller participation in public life. In this context, women were quickly granted rights to suffrage after independence, in Pakistan in 1947 and in India in 1949.

Change and continuity A variety of measures accelerated the reform momentum from independence onward. Education spread steadily, if gradually. By the 21st century about 70% of all women were effectively literate in India – a major change, though notably below male rates of about 84%. In India the right to vote was gradually supplemented by measures designed to free women from the influence of fathers and husbands, and efforts were also directed at increasing the percentage of female officeholders. Both in India and Pakistan, a woman held the position of prime minister at a crucial point. New economic opportunities, particularly in India, provided urban women with jobs in a variety of industries. Birth rate decline did not proceed as rapidly as some reformers hoped – a major campaign in India in the 1970s fell short – but it did occur, another huge change in women's lives and roles. Groups of women took increasingly active stances in pressing for further reforms, particularly in India –for example, in the 21st century, pressing for more effective legal action against rape and domestic abuse. On the other hand, change was also limited for several reasons. The majority of the population continued to live in the countryside, where the hold of tradition was particularly strong. Religious traditions, both Hindu and Muslim, also retarded change. There was considerable opposition to women's education, including violent attacks and threats against schoolgirls. In India, a considerable majority continued to support arranged marriage (some women's groups argued that this freed women from the need to compete for men), and there were occasional religiously-inspired attacks on dating couples. While rates of child marriage

declined, the practice continued on the subcontinent. So did the preference for sons, leading to disproportionate rates of abortion for female embryos and a marked resultant gender imbalance among adults similar to that in China.

Study questions

1. Were gender patterns more complicated in classical India than in classical China? What were some of the main tensions?
2. How and why did conditions for women deteriorate in the postclassical and early modern periods?
3. Did British rule make much difference in gender patterns on the subcontinent? What were the principal limitations to change?
4. What have been the principal constraints on change on the subcontinent since independence?

Further reading

Barbara Ramusak and Sharon Sievers, *Women in Asia: restoring women to history* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999).

Zinai Kauser, *Muslim Women in Medieval India* (Patna: Janaki Prakashan, 1992).

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R.C. Mishra, *Women in India: towards gender equality* (New Delhi: Authorspress, 2006).