

## 1. Details of Module and its Structure

Module Detail	
<b>Subject Name</b>	<b>Sociology</b>
<b>Paper Name</b>	<b>Sociology of India</b>
<b>Module Name/Title</b>	<b>Approaches to the study of Indian society</b>
<b>Pre-requisites</b>	<b>Basic idea about the feminist thought in social sciences.</b>
<b>Objectives</b>	<b>The objective of this module is to explore how the discipline of sociology of India or the study of Indian society can be done from a feminist lens and how that makes a difference from other perspectives of studying Indian society.</b>
<b>Keywords</b>	<b>Feminist anthropology, kinship, gender, patriliney.</b>

### Structure of Module / Syllabus of a module (Define Topic / Sub-topic of module )

- 1. Construction of Gender in the Hindu context.**
- 2. Women and kinship.**
- 3. Anthropological Explorations in Gender.**

## 2. Development Team

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## **INTRODUCTION:**

Leela Dube<sup>1</sup> has perhaps been the first anthropologist in the country, whose work has centered on gender and kinship underlined by explicit feminist perspective. It is reckoned that both Irawati Karve and Kathleen Gough had studied kinship systems and women's positions within them, and they both hugely influenced Leela Dube. Leela Dube was different on account of having the advantage of being part of the initiation of the women's studies movement in India in the context of the second wave of feminism. This led to her having wider and more critical frameworks for viewing gender relations in kinship systems.

The systematic study of gender and kinship together is of relatively recent vintage, catalyzed by the women's movement and women's studies scholarship. In India, the public discourses in the 1970s and 1980s on Personal Laws and the Uniform Civil Code, on dowry and domestic violence, and on the imbalance in sex ratio inevitably led to questions about the nature of marriage and the ideological constitution of the household-family. But among the core group of early women's studies scholars, there was little cognition of ethnographic materials or anthropological approaches. Conversely, in the existing vast anthropological literature on kinship and sociological literature on family, there were descriptions of the role of women but no problematization of gender. Leela Dube bridged these fields, catalyzing the development of gender and kinship studies in India. She sensitized women's studies scholarship to the methods and theoretical insights of anthropology, not to mention the reverse, alerting anthropology to the possibilities of women's studies scholarship. In the early debate about multi-disciplinarity and inter-disciplinarity in women's studies, she held that feminists must also engage with the fundamental debates of their own primary disciplines to avoid being ghettoized and marginalized (Ganesh, 2012).

This paper will situate Leela Dube's feminist perspective in social anthropology by discussing some of her most important works. Thus, for the sake of clarity, the paper is classified into three parts based on her major works:

- Construction of Gender in the Hindu context
- Women and Kinship
- Anthropological Explorations into gender

### **1. CONSTRUCTION OF GENDER:**

In her article "The Construction of Gender: Hindu Girls in Patrilineal India", Dube discusses the mechanisms through which women acquire the cultural ideas and values through which they shape their own image. She focuses on aspects of the process of socialization of Hindu girls through rituals, ceremonies, use of language and narratives, and practices within and in relation to the family (Dube, 1988).

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<sup>1</sup> Dube was a student of Nagpur University, where she read Sanskrit, Philosophy, and English literature for her bachelor's and political science for her Master's degree. She came into anthropology quite late in her life, for her PhD degree, influenced by her husband, S.C. Dube. Her feminist concerns were shaped out of observations and experiences of her own family life. She was born in a Maharashtrian Brahmin family who, though were liberal about women's education, were not so liberal about their careers. Leela Dube taught at the Sagar University from 1957 to 1975, and has been a visiting professor at institutes and universities throughout India.

Dube uses various cultural idioms and expressions to convey how language too is a tool through which the subsidiary position of women is constructed in daily life. To extrapolate, she gives the example of a Telugu expression which translates into “Bringing up a daughter is like watering a plant in another’s courtyard”. This expression brings to attention the clear dissent of having to bring up daughters or being parents of only daughters. This one sentence summarizes the problems of dowry, inequality experienced by women and the lack of support that parents might feel in their old-age if they only have daughters. It also points to the expected short stay of a girl in her natal home. The birth of her girl and her socialization is underlined by the norm of patri-locality which is largely followed in the Indian sub-continent. Therefore girls grow up with the notion of temporary membership with their natal home (Dube, 1988).

The relationship of a girl with her natal home is further explained by Leela Dube by using the metaphor of Durga Puja or Gauri Puja that is celebrated in various parts of the country. It is a festival which commemorates Gauri’s (Shiva’s wife in Hindu mythology) visit to her natal home after marriage. Songs sung by women during the festival describe how Gauri implores to Shiva to let her go home for a short visit and he replies with a series of arguments which encapsulate the duties and responsibilities of a good wife. According to Leela Dube (1988), one interesting argument put forth by Shiva is that Ganesha (their son) is used to luxuries and can make some demands which might prove to be embarrassing for Gauri’s parents since they were poor. This metaphorical visit lasts for a brief period of three to four days and is celebrated with a lot of enthusiasm. Then is the stage of the farewell, which is dramatized as a sad and heavy atmosphere.

The entire celebration establishes, re-instates and perpetuates the temporary connection of the girl with her natal home. It also signifies the lack of autonomy on part of the girl to decide whether to visit her natal home, and for how long. The ideals of a good wife narrated by Shiva are a metaphor on how much weight the wish and demands of a husband carries over his wife and her autonomy regarding mobility, and her submissiveness and obedience as feminine attributes.

Another interesting wedding ceremony Leela Dube looks into is the ritual of a bride throwing rice over her shoulder while leaving her natal home after marriage in Bengali weddings. This is a symbolic metaphor for the bride acknowledging that she has eaten and lived in her parent’s house for all the years before marriage and she throws the rice as gesture of returning her debt to her parents and thus terminating all possibilities of further economic dependence on them. The dowry giving in marriage is another important custom with its own consequences. It implies that once a woman has taken her dowry and left her natal home, she has no further obligations towards the maintenance of that household. It also raises the issue of why boys don’t react against dowry. Considering they are seen as the future providers of the home, there is huge pressure on them to live up to that expectation. He is induced to do well not just for himself but for his family which makes it more difficult to say no to dowry because it has the capability of improving one’s lifestyle overnight (Dube, 1998). These practices, construed into the everyday language of people constructs an unequal social reality for women.

The construction of femininity is another important topic covered under this paper. Dube gives numerous examples of various customs and rituals which mark the pre-pubertal and post-pubertal phases of girls. Beginning from Kashmir in the north-west the custom of worshipping and the ritual feeding virgin girls (kanya) on special occasions is widespread in India. In most of the pre-pubertal rituals, the girl is worshipped as a form of some Devi or goddess, which is mostly a feminine role and the purity and consecrated position assigned in these rituals help make a stark contradiction in the post-pubertal rituals. The onset of puberty is a tremendous change for girls and is likened to the processes of flowering or blooming. It signifies the readiness for marriage and fertility. In Andhra Pradesh, pre-pubertal girls wear a long skirt and a blouse but after puberty, she is gifted a half-sari, which is shorter in length and easier to manage but also serves the function of covering the upper portion of the body. It is a sign of acknowledging publicly that the girl has come of age. The post-pubertal phase then is characterized by restrictions on movements and on interaction with males and by the imposition of special safeguards. This is done to manage her sexuality which is tied to her future as wife and mother.

The discussion of controlling women's sexuality brings in the concept of 'boundary maintenance' which is crucial element in the definition of the cultural vulnerability of young women and emphasis on their purity and restraint in behavior. This leads to the construction of 'legitimate' and 'proper' codes of conduct that young girls have to adhere to, not only in terms of their behavior but also in their organization of space and time. The need to control female sexuality is construed as protection for the girl from not only other males but also from her own sexuality. This is expressed in metaphors such as, the need to emphasize the maintenance of a physical distance between a man and a woman, it is said that, unless a physical distance is maintained between hay and fire, there is nothing to prevent the hay from catching fire. A girl is often demanded to create a separate space for herself even in public or when with strangers because the prescriptions regarding the ways girls behave and act are set out in the context of space and time. If the space outside the house has to be negotiated in determinate ways by girls, this is also true of spatial divisions within the house (Dube, 1998).

Socialization is undertaken through ideology disseminated through gender specific tasks. Such as, girls are taught to do household work from a young age and this gets cemented as they grow up. The notions of tolerance and self-restraint are also rooted in a consciously cultivated feminine role which is legitimized through cultural ideology. Thus according to Leela Dube (1988), the structuring of women as gendered subjects through Hindu rituals and practices is fundamentally implicated in the constitution and reproduction of a social system characterised by gender asymmetry and the overall subordination of women.

## **2. WOMEN AND KINSHIP:**

According to Leela Dube, Gender relations are constructed differently in different cultures. A key area of cultural diversity is kinship, which form important systems which form the context within which gender relations are located. In her *Women and kinship: Perspectives on Gender in*

South and South-east Asia (1997), she focuses on the institutions that make up the structural and cultural dimension of kinship systems. According to her, kinship is often left out of gender studies because of deficient understanding of the organizing principles of kinship on everyday living. Kinship systems determine the allocation of resources, constitution of production relations, immediate context of women's lives, and sustaining a specific ideology of gender. Thus, for Dube, studying kinship systems can better illuminate the location of gender relations in different cultures.

Her basic argument in the book is that differences in kinship systems and family structures account for some critical differences among societies in the ways in which gender operates (Dube, 1997). Her central concern in the book was to bring out how gender roles are conceived of and enacted, the processes through which men and women are turned into gendered subjects who are then implicated in the maintenance and sustenance of a social system. She studied family and kinship among some populations of Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Nepal, Pakistan, The Philippines, and Thailand- a comparative perspective. According to Dube, Asia has mainly three kinds of kinship systems: patrilineal, matrilineal, and bilateral. South Asia is predominantly patrilineal, with two pockets of matrilineal systems in the south-west and the north-east. South Asia is predominantly bilateral, with both parents being important for reckoning kinship and claiming rights to resources, but there are also certain populations that follow either matrilineal or patrilineal.

Dube argues in her book that it is not enough to just confine one's study to the structural characteristics of these institutions but to also look into their interplay with religion and wider political and economic structures. Following from this, her work also assesses the relevance of family and of the ideological and material aspects of kinship to understand the nature of gender relations. To elucidate, she mentions in her introductory chapter that at any point in time, the composition of a family is not just a function of demography but it also reflects the rules of marital recruitment, residence, and the normative and actual patterns of re-arrangement of the family structure. She further points out that her endeavor is not to study kinship in isolation, as relevant to understanding gender relations. She mentions the importance of looking at cultural conceptions of biological processes and the nature of male and female sexuality.

Dube points towards the inherent dangers of such a study, like while comparing and contrasting patrilineal and bilateral kinship systems, one should keep in mind that there are no uniform, undifferentiated patterns for either. This also applies to matrilineality. She also warns against the danger of using a single generalized Asian model. For example, the apparent commonality in religious norms and legal codes- as among the Muslims of Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Indonesia and Malaysia- tends to fog the interplay between the cultural and structural matrices of societies and religions practiced in them. For instance, whereas there is corporate or individual control over female sexuality and a strong emphasis on seclusion and segregation among the patrilineal Muslim populations of Bangladesh, Pakistan, and India, the situation among the Muslims of Indonesia and Malaysia and also on the Lakshadweep islands are very different. South Asia shows a special kind of male control over female sexuality, rooted in the patrilineal ideology and consciousness of territoriality and group solidarity. Dube terms it as *corporate control*. In South-East Asia however, women are not placed under such severe restrictions. Besides the absence of caste, other

factors which contribute to this are the system of descent, inheritance, group membership, as well as residence and nature of conjugal relations (Dube. 1997).

The notion of protection of women and control over them by men seems alien to the bilateral systems of kinship that exist in South-East Asia. The placement of children also does not create an acute problem as it would in India or most of the rest of South Asia.

Her book assesses the various implications that different kinship systems can have for understanding gender in terms of differing economic and productive roles that women can have, management of female sexuality, differing patterns of seclusion and segregation, and the limitations imposed on the female body. It tries to provide a comprehensive reading of the intersections of kinship, gender, religion, location, economic and political implications, etc. It talks about the nuances of power or control through ideology- exercising control over distribution of resources, women's bodies and sexuality through ideology.

### **3. ANTHROPOLOGICAL EXPLORATIONS INTO GENDER:**

The process of forming a gendered identity begins much prior to the birth of a child. It is a part of collective cultural consciousness of a particular group or society. This process is encapsulated in the dictum 'Gender is a social construct and sex is a biological phenomenon'. It is a process of gender socialization, which is not just a consequence of the belief system, culture and ritual practices, but also determines the structural needs of production relations of a society's economy (Datar, 2001). With the progression of society, there is constant restructuring of these cultural practices.

With the beginning of the women's movement in the 1970's, many women anthropologists led the search for the beginning of gender subordination in order to provide evidence for a much needed theory of gender transformation. The sources for these explorations were mostly traditional texts such as the manusmriti and puranas, which gave numerous examples of practices of gender discrimination. There had been a lack of comparative studies of diverse gender socialization processes, reflected through anthropological investigations of different groups in one place, till Leela Dube's 'Anthropological Explorations in Gender: Intersecting Fields' (2011). According to Chaya Datar, this book is interesting in the way it compares South-Asian women's situation (strong matrilineal traditions) to the patrilineal and patrilocal backgrounds of women in India. It highlights the role of culture in maintaining property structures and economic processes that inherited from one generation to another.

Anthropological Explorations represents over 50 years of Leela Dube's work. A common thread running through the essays is the complex and diverse relationship between gender and other axes of stratification like caste, class and religion, and the significant role of kinship organization in determining structures of power that keep women subordinated in the family and community. It becomes important to note that not only are the contents of the book a very important contribution to the beginning of feminist theory building in India but also she bring to the forefront a different array of sources that can be brought to an analysis of women's status and kinship relations: insights from ethnographies, autobiography and biography, folklore, texts, rituals, myths, beliefs and practices of everyday life.

In the first essay, 'Women's worlds- Three encounters', she gives a narrative on the ethnographic fieldwork within the 'gendered field' of anthropology. She discusses three of her fieldworks: her doctoral fieldwork experience among Gond women in the late 1940s; fieldwork in a village in western Uttar Pradesh in the 1950s to assess women's responses to

government-sponsored community development programmes; and her work on matriliney and Islam in Lakshadweep in the 1970s. Each of these experiences derives from the perspective of a woman ethnographer exploring the inner worlds of women, which are usually inaccessible to male ethnographers. She delicately identifies her location as a researcher who is Brahmin, married and employed and the impact that has on her data gathering and interactions with the groups she visited. In case of the Lakshadweep population, she found herself having greater freedom in movement and notes that because of religious differences, there were some initial skepticism regarding her kumkum (Sindoor) but removing it had the desired effect of free conversation.

In her fieldwork experience in Uttar Pradesh, she was expected to conform to certain patterns of behavior, given her Brahmanical background which was not expected of the American women on the research team.

In the second essay, 'On the Construction of Gender', Dube portrays the everyday life of girls and women in Hindu patrilineal households by interpreting rituals, songs, ceremonies and other practices which help in determining the religious-cultural aspect of defining gender relations and gender roles. Dube asserts that an analysis of kinship is necessary to understand family ideology and how it impacts the socialization patterns of women which lead to their devaluation within the structure. Her essay provides insight into how women are central to boundary maintenance between castes, through regulation and control over their sexuality. Thus, kinship and caste becomes the larger contextual framework within which the social relationships for women are defined. According to Dube, kinship is also the organizing principle for allocation of resources within the family, duties and responsibilities of the members towards the maintenance and production value of the family unit, which in turn leads to the segregation or differentiation of work based on gender. She analyzes all these interconnections through folklore and rituals in different communities (Datar, 2001).

In her third essay, 'Seed and Earth', She analyzes this largely used metaphor of role of the man and the woman in reproduction. The general saying is that man provides the seed for sowing and the woman is the earth/soil in which the seed is sown. The implicit idea of this saying is that the nature of the crop (off-spring/child) depends largely on the seed which is the most important contribution while the earth provides only nutrition to the seed. Therefore, the child owes his/her identity to his father, whereas the mother has no material rights but only moral rights to the child. This idiom is used by Dube to explore the Materiality of patrilineal kinship that exists in the country since a paternal identity is most important in securing group placement and rights to resources (like inheritance).

The fourth essay in the book, 'Caste and Women', Dube examines how women are implicated in three overlapping areas: occupational continuity and the reproduction of caste; food and rituals; marriage and sexuality. The first area of occupational continuity is self-explanatory in the sense that women help in reproduction and extension of the family line and thereby the caste line. Food and rituals is the domain of women. Restrictions on commensality are a common way of maintaining caste boundaries and women's knowledge of food and the rituals associated with it help in maintaining the hierarchical caste boundaries. This area leads to the formation of an active role which enhances the self-esteem of women. Their control over the domain of domestic amongst the subordination and discrimination caused by the patrilineal structure will obviously have implications for the

construction of the self-identity. Dube mentions the need to further study this particular field. Control over women's sexuality is central to the maintenance of caste hierarchy and can transgression can lead to extremely severe measure. This is because the reproductive value of the woman in terms of caste line extension and also collective sentiment of honor, based on the ritualistic notion of purity and pollution, make women the centre of all mechanism of sexual control. Ritualization of virginity (purity), glorification of marriage and motherhood are all methods of exerting sexual control. By looking at the complexity of caste in relation to female sexuality, Dube is able to bring out an analysis of primary and secondary marriages, caste endogamy and its relation to dowry and the violence against women that is underwritten in all these articulations of caste and gender (Manjrekar, 2002)

Her fifth essay, 'Who gains from matriliney?' is an investigation on how asymmetry of gender is based on the biological difference between man and women. It provides insight into the life of women in the matrilineal island of Lakshadweep. It looks at how a matrilineal structure functions within a religion marked by patrilineal emphasis. Women in this community, yield considerable power as originators of lineages, but matrilineally related men manage property and are the more visible decision makers in public. Although, there is a marked sexual division of labor present here as well, women lead a qualitatively more autonomous life than the ones within the patrilineal systems of South Asia. Administrative and legal interventions like the prohibition of polygamy, marriage and divorce laws, inheritance and property laws have led to a transformation within the community but there are still instances of matrilineal backdrop to all this. For example, men of Kalpeni (location of research on Lakshadweep) refused the amendment to the system of inheritance of the Taravad property, because under the pressure of changing economic and social aspects, men could draw support and security from the closely knit matrilineal units of the island.

The last essay in her book entitled 'Kinship and gender in South and South-East Asia' accounts for a comparative perspective of kinship systems. She comes to the conclusion that matrilineal and bilateral kinship systems offer women more autonomy than the patrilineal way of kinship in South Asia.

Her book helps to raise questions which can be taken up for further feminist research. It leads to questions like how do structures of power and domination influence the socialization of women and their responses. It brings to the front the intersecting fields of anthropology and gender, feminist scholarship and the discipline, caste, religion and gender, various others which have been important to the development of the feminist perspective of the discipline.

## **CONCLUSION- LEELA DUBE'S FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE OF FEMINIST SOCIAL ANTHROPOLOGY:**

Leela Dube's feminist perspective comes not only from anthropological studies of different groups but also from how she takes into account her own life and the context that it provides for her anthropological explorations. For example, In 'The Construction of Gender: Hindu girls in patrilineal India (1988)', she restricts her focus on the socialization of Hindu girls for two reasons: Firstly, because most of her data was gathered from Hindu informants, and secondly, because of her own upbringing in a Hindu family gave her first hand information for understanding and interpreting the collected data. Her methodology resonates the feminist view that personal is political and that the researcher's position and life history provides contextual framework to the research undertaken by one. Dube has also written an auto-biographical account on her work and experience and their interaction with her personal life in a paper entitled "Doing Kinship and Gender (2000)", where she relates her personal experiences to her academic pursuits and also to her field experiences. The article is an activity of self-reflexiveness, which is also seen in most of her works.

Leela Dube's methodology of a feminist social anthropology helps to identify and investigate the myriad of ways in which women are in-subordinated. In the introduction to 'Visibility and power', Leela Dube emphasized the harm done in social sciences by using the term "man" in a generic sense, since it resulted in getting the term 'woman' subsumed under it. This was decades before the notion of gender as different from biological sex had established itself in the discipline in the country. She analyzed the inadequacy of academic literature in incorporating non-exclusive concepts and theories which do not take cognizance of the existence of women. She provided social sciences with new analytical frameworks by bringing in folklore and symbolic representations in society about women's position in order to show they have ideological hold and influence customs and practices.

Dube's work on kinship and its importance also opened up an alternative world view from that of western theories which postulated that patriarchy was a universal category unmediated by anything else. It opened up the pathways to look at caste and class as mediating factors which contribute to the degree and nature of subordination for women, which later scholars have taken up and highlighted. She opened a new area of research within the discipline of social anthropology, which earlier was taken as the study of tribes, in distant locations, with their different customs and exotic practices. She demystified this 'exotic' nature of traditional anthropology by relating and comparing it to everyday lived reality of one's own society (Krishnaraj, 2012). Her analysis of gender based division of labor of work and consideration of issues of women in household management have opened up debate and discussion regarding the 'value of work' done by women and their contributions to the field of economy. Its provided a more inclusive framework of analysis of social reality. Dube has played an important role in enriching the fields of social sciences and social anthropology by employing and thus making known multiple sources of knowledge such as symbolic representations and their ideological significance, kinship and its perpetuation of sexual asymmetry in everyday lives of women, and that notion that generalizations and theoretical formulations developed in specific regional contexts are not always to be transformed into universalities. Her work has helped transform social anthropology as a discipline which used to study other cultures to one which can be used to explore and interpret one's own as well.