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Women, religion and social inequality in India

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Introduction

The South Asia region encompasses a large geographical and culturally diverse area, including the countries of Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Iran, the Maldives, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka, and comprises around 25% of the total world population. It is also one of the poorest regions of the world with high levels of gender inequality. According to the 2019 UN Gender Inequality Index, Afghanistan (157) and Pakistan (135) have the lowest rankings in the region, and Sri Lanka (90) and the Maldives (82) the highest. Levels of religiosity are high not only in terms of individual religious observance, but also in terms of the impact of religion on politics and in public life (despite varied configurations of state-religion relationships), and intra-religious tension is often a factor in conflict and violence, including sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV).

India is the largest country in South Asia in terms of both landmass and population. However, until independence from British colonial rule in 1947, its current borders had not yet been defined as part of the process of partition, which eventually gave rise to India, Pakistan and Bangladesh. Socio-cultural and religious links are strong with its neighbouring countries in the South Asia region, but geopolitical tensions increase instability, with the eruption of sometimes violent standoffs around border and territory issues, as well as over water-sharing and immigration. At the time of the 2011 census, out of a population of 1.2 billion, the country’s religious communities were made up from Hindus, 79.8%, Muslims, 14.2%, Christians, 2.3%, Sikhs, 1.7%, Buddhists, 0.7%, Jains, 0.4%, and other, 0.9% (Kramer 2021). India is the only country in the South Asia region that has a clear commitment to secularism in its constitution, with the Indian version of secularism meaning equal treatment of all religions by the state rather than the absence of religion. However, the rapid rise of right-wing Hindutva politics, gaining pace within the past four decades, has led to the erosion of India’s commitment to secularism.

In a country of this size and diversity, both culturally and ecologically, it is no surprise that a wide range of different cultural groups exist, participating in varied livelihoods and economic activities. Some of these groups have privileges according to their caste, religion, gender and the nature of their economic contribution, with upper-caste Hindu male urban educated professionals enjoying the highest status, and Dalit women, across all religious and ethnic groups, the
lowest status. Despite rapid economic growth since the liberalisation of the economy in 1991, the most recent Socio-Economic and Caste Census (2011) indicated that 73% of households were rural and around 56% of rural households did not own any land. Within the lowest castes in rural India, the number of landless was up to 70%.

Therefore, large inequalities exist not only between urban and rural areas but also between people of different castes, religions and genders. A system of welfare policies, including reservations for education and government jobs, aims to even out entrenched inequality, with the poorest classified into the different groups of Scheduled Caste (SC), Scheduled Tribe (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC). However, this is uneven in its impact across the country, with the same groups classified differently in different places, members of poor communities often strategically seeking to be defined in the poorest category to increase their advantage and the political class using the reservation system as a vote bank.

My aim in this chapter is to undertake an examination of the relationships between religion and gender inequality in India, with a focus on the two largest religions—Hinduism and Islam. While the high levels of religiosity in India coupled with high levels of gender inequality is no coincidence, the relationship between them is not straightforward. First, religion must be considered in intersection with other factors that combine to exacerbate the discrimination and disadvantage linked to gender inequality. These factors include, amongst others, caste, class, ethnicity, politics, geographical location and occupation/livelihood. Despite the fact that it might seem obvious to consider religion as a relevant dimension, the literature from within feminist/women’s studies and development studies that has approached women’s oppression from the point of view of intersectionality has been hesitant to engage with religion, and has either ignored it or has done little more than ‘occasionally list religion as one in a list of relevant differences’ (Weber 2015: 22–23; Singh 2015). This, I argue, reveals a secularist bias that limits productive social analysis that can lead to social transformation.

My focus in this chapter, however, takes a different direction to this important discussion of women’s religious agency, in drawing out an aspect of the intersectionality method that has not received sufficient attention. Crucially, an intersectional approach to women, religion and social inequality must also look at the intersection between different religions in particular settings, and how the historical, social and political context has shaped the relationships between them in ways that have an impact on women’s lives. This has a salience in India where the rise of Hindu nationalism shapes how other religions respond and reconfigure. As Desai and Temsah write, ‘With rising communalism, religious identities have sharpened, resulting in the politicization of gender identities and the co-option of women’s bodies as symbols and repositories of community and national identity’ (2014: 7; Chhachhi 1994; Hasan 1994). Religions do not exist in isolation from other religions and the socio-political contexts within which they jostle for adherents and a public voice.
In this chapter I draw on existing literature as well as data from a project titled ‘Sustainable Development for Pastoralist Women in India: Heritage, Dignity and Adaptations in Times of Rapid Change’. Funded by the British Academy and running between 2018 and 2020, this project involved a research team in the UK and in India, led by Professors Caroline Dyer (PI) and Emma Tomalin (Co-I) at the University of Leeds. As a collaborative endeavour, I want to acknowledge the input of all the project team, but particularly Sushma Iyenga and Dr Archana Choksi for their work in assisting me with identifying relevant parts of our data for this chapter and contributing to its interpretation. Within the very large rural population of India, around 35 million of them practice mobile animal husbandry or pastoralism, a livelihood which involves moving with animals across ‘forests, grasslands, and farm fallows . . . as they migrate between summer and winter grazing grounds, often over hundreds of kilometres’.4 The women we spoke to during the research were from both Hindu and Muslim communities, some were still practising pastoralism, whilst others had settled, with their families involved in small-scale agriculture alongside pastoralism and/or urban occupations. According to the Centre for Pastoralism, the many contributions of pastoralist communities ‘have rarely received the recognition they have deserved, as mainstream society has tended to see pastoralism as an outdated mode of life’.5 They are increasingly forced to abandon their traditional livelihoods and cultural traditions due to the lack of policies at the federal and state level, which has facilitated the shrinking or disappearance of their traditional grazing lands.

I will first set the scene with a brief examination of the role that caste plays in women’s lives across all religious traditions in India, yet outline the ways in which religious-nationalist/populist politics in both Hindu and Muslim communities serves to homogenise each community as undifferentiated, thereby hiding the particular struggles and needs to minorities within those communities. This is particularly significant for Muslim Dalit women, a largely unrecognised group.6 Religious-nationalist/populist movements are also well known for viewing women’s roles in terms of ‘tradition’, tending to coincide with conservative social attitudes. I follow my discussion of religion, caste and nationalism by looking at traditional views of women in Hinduism and Islam in India. How do Hinduism and Islam in India play a role in shaping women’s place in society and the family, and how are women’s movements in India seeking to address the inequalities this brings? This is followed by a discussion of literature that looks at women’s roles within their religious traditions, including their opportunities for leadership and the ways that they practice their religion. I will also draw attention to examples of where women are negotiating for and demanding greater inclusion. I finish the chapter with some observations about the religious and social lives of pastoralist women in India and how these are undergoing changes in ways that are related to increased sedentarisation in intersection with the intensification of religio-nationalist politics.

Religion, caste and nationalism

The caste system in India plays a large role in maintaining social inequality and makes it difficult for people to improve their social and economic status. It is an endogamous system of socially differentiated groups that people are believed to have been born into because of their actions in previous lives (karma), which categorises people according to relative levels of purity within the Hindu social universe. Caste has given rise to a large group of people across all religious and ethnic groups, viewed as outside the caste system who are known as Dalits (downtrodden), and today there are social movements and systems of reservation to uplift these groups. While caste is typically associated with Hinduism as a religion, Mosse has argued that the idea that caste has a religious basis is a colonial and Christian missionary invention, where the material and the spiritual became separated in ways that reflected the Christian world view but not the local one (2015). A significant
number of Dalits today are converts to Christianity, a trend which started in the last quarter of the nineteenth century. Mosse explains,

to avoid the criticism that their converts were insincere, materially driven ‘rice Christians’, missionaries were constrained to represent this political-economic change as spiritual transformation, and Dalits as oppressed by a Hindu religious system and in need of salvation from ‘spiritual slavery’.

(2015: 202; Viswanath 2014)

Female Dalits are the most marginalised group given the double discrimination due to their caste status and their sex. While the category of Scheduled Caste is given to Hindu, Sikh and Buddhist Dalits, this has not been extended to those from non-Indic traditions of Islam and Christianity, and they miss out on the benefits given to other Dalit groups (Sachar Committee 2006: 14; Trivedi et al. 2016). According to the International Dalit Solidarity Network (IDSN) the number of Dalit Muslims is likely to ‘far exceed 100 million’ (no date), which suggests that there are at least 50 million Muslim Dalit women in India who are not getting the same treatment as their Hindu sisters. As Varisha Tariq, a young Muslim female journalist who writes on gender and intersectionality in India, asks, ‘Why don’t we talk about Muslim Dalit Women?’ She argues,

many people are aware that there is a huge population of Muslim women who belong to the Dalit community . . . it seems that we choose to ignore Muslim women who are also Dalits . . . And by not recognising them or making their issues a part of the public discourse, we are further suppressing them. This homogenisation of the Muslim population makes it easier for the emergent Hindutva politician to discriminate against them. It is easier to discriminate against one identity or maybe one religion, but it is harder to discriminate against a community which is an intermesh of caste and religion.

(2019)

This tendency to homogenise religious communities is a wider strategy of nationalist or populist politics. Just as it is useful for the Hindu Right in India to depict Muslims as all uniformly aligned against the Hindu nation, in symbiosis with this, the dominant Muslim groups depict the Muslim community as one undifferentiated whole that can unite against Hindu oppression. This has the effect of subsuming the struggles of minority Muslim groups, including Dalit women, within the broader aims of a homogenised oppositional religio-nationalist politics. For both Muslim and Hindu women in India of all castes and ethnicities, however, religious-nationalist/populist politics has far-reaching effects on their efforts to have greater equality with men in both the private and the public sphere, with nationalist/populist versions of both religions tending to fall back on religiously conservative views of women’s roles (Hansen 1994; Banerjee, Chapter 33). In the next section, I examine traditional views of women in Hinduism and Islam in India.

Religion, social inequality and the family

Wadley writes that within the Hindu tradition there is an ambiguous portrayal of the female where ‘on the one hand, she is fertile, benevolent—the bestower; on the other, she is aggressive, malevolent—the destroyer’ (1977: 113). This is seen in depictions of the goddess—which O’Flaherty (1980) has described as either ‘goddesses of the tooth’ or ‘goddesses of the breast’—as
well as of actual women, thereby shaping attitudes towards their position and roles in society and the family. The Laws of Manu (manusmriti), a one of the Hindu legal texts (dharmashastra), clearly depicts this duality, as seen in the following passages from the text:

3.55. Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, brothers, husbands, and brothers-in-law, who desire (their own) welfare.

3.56. Where women are honoured, there the gods are pleased; but where they are not honoured, no sacred rite yields rewards.

3.57. Where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but that family where they are not unhappy ever prospers (Buhler 1886: 34).

5.164. By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world, (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment of) her sin (Buhler 1886: 84).

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

9.4. Reprehensible is the father who gives not (his daughter in marriage) at the proper time; reprehensible is the husband who approaches not (his wife in due season), and reprehensible is the son who does not protect his mother after her husband has died.

9.5. Women must particularly be guarded against evil inclinations, however trifling (they may appear); for, if they are not guarded, they will bring sorrow on two families (Buhler 1886: 139).

The extent to which these diktats ever reflected lived reality can be questioned, as they were normative legal positions rather than depictions of what people actually did. Nonetheless, they do reflect a social situation where women were considered to be a lower rebirth than men and the property of men and where the ‘goddesses of the breast’ are portrayed as role models for women (Bradley 2015). Manusmriti also suggests a society that had a preference for the birth of boys over girls when it states, ‘A barren wife may be superseded in the eighth year, she whose children (all) die in the tenth, she who bears only daughters in the eleventh, but she who is quarrelsome without delay’ (9:81; Buhler 1886: 145). While this bias persists to this day, to view it as a religious injunction per se is again making the mistake that Mosse points to in his discussion of caste (2015), where what we now call Hinduism was not differentiated from the socio-economic systems of the time. Traditionally, sons are valued over daughters not least because they look after their parents in old age, and this was a socio-economic fact that was backed up in legal texts such as manusmriti. Today, however, the birth of a daughter gives rise to unaffordable dowry costs, which have become inflated over the past decades (Bradley et al. 2009). Although dowry was made illegal in 1961 in the Dowry Prohibition Act, the practice continues and exacerbates the son preference problem, which gives rise to sex-selective abortion of female foetuses and is widely attributed as the major factor underlying the reversed sex ratio in India (Bradley et al. 2009). Moreover, dowry-based violence against women is a widespread form of domestic violence in India, which can exist throughout a marriage and can result in death. Bradley examines the links between SGBV and the Hindu tradition more widely, taking an intersectional approach to looking at the impact of the promotion of women’s submissiveness through religion, upon violence against women in India. She argues that although religion is not a direct cause of violence, it plays a role in practices such as dowry murder and other forms of sexual and gender-based violence, since it normalises women’s inferiority and lack of agency (2015).
While Muslim marriages involve the practice of *mehr*, a type of ‘bride-price’, rather than dowry, where the bride receives gifts from the groom’s family, there is evidence of dowry alongside this and that this is intensifying in some communities. As Waheed writes, ‘Muslim women, too, are victims of dowry practices, facing much harassment’, and he suggests that dowry is an Indian cultural practice that cuts across different religious groupings (2009). A recent article by Pallikadavath and Bradley (2019) looks at the relationships between dowry, ‘dowry autonomy’ and domestic violence among young married women in India, using data from a survey carried out across six India states in 2006–7. They found, ‘one striking finding is the higher prevalence of dowry practice among Muslims compared with Hindus’ (2019: 368), and that these Muslim women had less autonomy to use it themselves. They note that the reasons for the apparent escalation of dowry amongst Muslims are unclear and needs further research. One suggestion, although not rigorously studied, is that dowry is adopted as a practice as a sign of upward economic and social mobility and of the increasing impact of the globalised economy (Mishra 2006).

As for Hindu women, roles for Muslim women in India in society and the family have emphasised their reproductive responsibilities in the home as caregivers to their husband, children and wider family. While some literature emphasises that this implies the complementarity of male and female roles, that can be justified with respect to the Qu’ran and does not mean that women are viewed as inferior to men, others draw attention to the ways that women’s domestication is rationalised in terms of the need to restrict women’s social interaction due to ‘the notion of women as *fitna* (potential disorder)’ (Kazi 1999: 7). As Kazi writes, ‘Accordingly, women’s social interaction with men had to be regulated, which in effect translated into a control over female sexuality, and female seclusion from public space’ (1999: 7). While modernising movements within Indian Islam, emerging in the pre-independence period, have attempted to reduce the seclusion of Muslim women and to increase their participation in education and employment, barriers remain. A study by Desai and Temsah indicates that Muslim women in India are more likely to wear a veil than Hindu women and are less likely to venture outside the house on family outings (2014: 15). However, in their analysis of this, they argue that this difference is as much a product of the impact of the Hindu nationalist environment than it is directly to do with the influence of Islam, where ‘political forces construct a modest and pious notion of womanhood in which women’s engagement with obvious markers of identity, such as the veil or widow burning, come to represent a distinctive community identity’ (2014: 7). Thus, for both Muslim and Hindu women, the ‘functioning of gendered ideologies and behaviors is not solely a function of religion or religiosity’ (2014: 16) but instead also reflects religio-nationalist/populist politics. As Desai and Temsah argue, ‘the rising tide of fundamentalist Hinduism has targeted gender as an arena in which to fight communal battles‘ not only for Hindu women but also Muslim (2014: 3; Mankekar 1997; Sunder Rajan 2000). This important point is also drawn attention to by the 2006 Sachar Committee Report, which tells us,

> Women in general are the torchbearers of community identity. So, when community identity is seen to be under siege, it naturally affects women in dramatic ways. Women, sometimes of their own volition, sometimes because of community pressure, adopt visible markers of community identity on their person and in their behaviour. Their lives, morality, and movement in public spaces are under constant scrutiny and control. A gender-based fear of the ‘public’, experienced to some degree by all women, is magnified manifold in the case of Muslim women. The lines between ‘safe’ and ‘unsafe spaces’ become rigid.  

*(Sachar Committee 2006: 13)*
Another area in which we can see the interplay between Hindu and Muslim communal politics and its impact on women's lives is with respect to the campaign of Muslim women's groups against the discrimination inherent in the system of Muslim personal law in India, which is used instead of secular law for issues around divorce, inheritance and child custody. A widely reported case in 1978 set the scene for activism in this area over the following decades. An elderly Muslim woman called Shah Bano managed to secure main maintenance from her ex-husband through the court under section 125 of the Code of Criminal Procedure which she would have been denied under personal law (Bradley and Kirmani 2015: 216). Muslim conservative groups were very critical of this, arguing that it amounted to the state interfering in religious affairs, which it was not permitted to do. At the time, the women's movement demanded a Uniform Civil Code that would supersede religion-based personal laws, but later backed down and instead called for reforms to the existing personal laws (Chhachhi 1991). Bradley and Kirmani suggest, ‘This was partially a reaction to the growing influence of the Hindu Right, which was also calling for an abolition of Muslim personal laws as part of its agenda to impose a Hindu identity on the nation’ (2015: 217). Bradley and Kirmani write,

In the end the Congress-led government conceded to the demands of Muslim conservative groups by passing the Muslim Women (Protection of Rights on Divorce) Act, 1986, which stated that Muslim family laws would not be dealt with under the Indian Civil Code and would be decided by local waqf boards, which are generally in charge of managing religious endowments and charity, instead. This case sparked a wider national debate in which Muslim women became symbols for various political interest groups, with the voices of actual Muslim women remaining largely absent at this time . . . This case brought national attention to the conflict between Muslim women’s rights and those of religious conservative groups to define the interests of ‘the community’.


While these debates and competing claims have never left the stage, more recently, the Hindu Nationalist Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) government has outlawed the practice of ‘triple talaq’ or instant divorce. This again has given rise to mixed responses with Muslim women's groups, such as the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (BMMA) welcoming this move, arguing that it increases women's rights (Jones 2020, 2019b; Krishnan 2019). However, others have opposed it: with religious conservatives arguing that the state is interfering in religion, which it has no right to do, and some women arguing that it does not go far enough because women are still not granted equal rights of divorce to men or that the criminalisation of triple talaq with up to three years in prison is going to leave many Muslim women vulnerable to greater poverty (Purohit 2020; Jones 2019b). What is clear, however, was that this was a strategic quick win on the part of the Hindu state, where it could portray itself as the saviour of Muslim women from the patriarchs within their tradition without actually doing anything more substantial to improve Muslim women's lives. This is part of an enduring discourse, where the civil society and the State locate Muslim women's deprivation not in terms of the 'objective' reality of societal discrimination and faulty development policies, but in the religious-community space. This allows the State to shift the blame to the Community and to absolve itself of neglect.

(Sachar Committee 2006: 13)
Inequality within religion: women's leadership and religious lives

In both Islam and Hinduism in India, women have limited opportunities for taking leadership roles within their religious traditions. In Hindu temples the role of temple priest, or *pujari*, is typically performed by men from the Brahmin caste. Traditionally women and lower-caste men were not permitted to learn Sanskrit and recite the Vedic texts used in formal Brahminical temple ritual (Hüsken 2016: 21). However, as Wadley explains, ‘Hindu religious activity is not based solely on Vedic rituals. Today, the dominant form of ritual activity is bhakti or devotion to a deity’, a religious movement that started around AD 700 as anti-Brahmin, anti-Vedic and indeed anti-temple (1977: 121). Bhakti does not require the intermediation of a Brahmin priest and is more egalitarian for women and lower-caste men. Furthermore, across India, styles of non-Brahminical Hinduism also exist at the village level that are not reliant upon Brahmin males for their services.

There are usually no barriers to women entering Hindu temples; caste is more of a barrier to temple access, apart from when they are menstruating, since this is considered to be impure. Recently, however, it has been widely reported that in January 2019 two women—40-year-old law professor Bindu and 39-year-old government supplies officer Kanakadurga—entered the Lord Ayyappa temple in Sabarimala, southern Kerala, following a Supreme Court ruling in September 2018 that a ban on women between the ages of 10 and 50 (i.e. the ages of menstruation) from coming inside the temple was unlawful. This gave rise to a rather extreme reaction, as Mohan writes:

Outraged male protesters surrounding the temple have chased and abused the women, and threatened to beat them up. After Bindu and Kanakadurga entered, the head priest shut the temple doors for an hour-long ‘purification ceremony.’ Across Kerala, mobs claiming to be offended devotees are going on a rampage, damaging buses, burning effigies and throwing stones and crude bombs in the streets. One man has died, and hundreds have been injured. The Kerala police have arrested more than 5,700 people.

Again this example of women’s attempts to secure agency over their social, family and religious lives has been refracted through the lens of religious nationalism/populism with Sandeep Vachaspati, the BJP’s media coordinator for Kerala and member of the Save Sabarimala Movement, arguing that women ‘can go to any other temple, can’t they?’ and holding the belief that the ‘temple entry movement is a ploy by activists to “put an end to Hindu values”’ (Mohan 2019). Alongside this attempt to restrict women’s freedom in the name of Hinduism, there are moves for women to play greater leadership roles in their traditions, drawing on examples from the past as well as forging new paths. The work of Hüsken on priestesses (*stri purohitii*) in Pune focuses on a movement beginning in the late 1970s to train women in reciting the Vedas and performing life-cycle rituals. She writes that the opposition to this is not as great as one might expect, and that there was an appetite for women to take up this role given the ‘lack of a sufficient number of male priests’ and the fact that many are dissatisfied with the services of traditional male priests who do not take enough time for their performances, who demand excessive monetary compensation for their services, and who are not able to explain the content and meaning of the rituals they perform to the clients who sponsor the rituals (*yajamiina*).
While this is not very widespread, it does suggest that even with rising Hindu nationalism in India, the Hindu tradition is also able to accommodate roles for women that indicate greater opportunities for leadership and participation than they have had in the past.

Leadership roles for Muslim women in India are also limited. Only men are usually eligible for the role of imam (the person who leads prayer in the mosque), while women might do this if the congregation is all female. The case of a woman, Jamida Beevi, leading Friday prayers in Kerala for a mixed male and female audience, apparently for the first time ever in India, in 2018, was widely reported on, and ‘provoked a backlash, with local media reporting that members of Muslim organisations have threatened to kill her’ (Dhillon 2018; Salam 2019). An area where more concrete progress has been made is the growth of a network of so-called shari’ah adalat (‘Islamic courts’) started by the Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan (Indian Muslim Women’s Movement, known as the BMMA), ‘a lobby of prominent Islamic feminist activists founded in 2007’ (Jones 2019a). These non-state shari’ah councils operate in parallel to the formal court system to adjudicate in family disputes according to Islamic law and are normally run by men. In 2013 the BBMA launched its shari’ah adalat programme, to develop Islamic courts run by women (Jones 2019a: 438). Responses to this have been mixed. On the one hand, as Jones reports, ‘Members of the Jama’at-i-Islami took to media claiming that, while there is no explicit restriction within Islamic law on female qāzīs, women may be prone by their fundamental character (shahṣ) to make erroneous decisions’ (2019a: 445). On the other hand, there has been concern from the secular women’s movement that while this could make shari’ah more gender equitable and would bring the lofty academic discourses of Islamic feminism into practice in women’s everyday lives, it also risks pushing women more into informal legal frameworks (2019a: 445).

Unlike men, women are not expected to pray in mosques and may do so at home. However, while women are permitted to enter mosques, many believe that they are not able to do so, and most are practically prevented from praying in mosques as there are no separate prayer facilities for them. Salam writes about Muslim activist V.P. Suhra, president of the Nisa Progressive Muslim Women’s Forum, from Kerala, who was inspired by the Sabarimala Supreme Court ruling perspective, which ‘spurred her on to demand access to all the mosques for Muslim women . . . and resolved to approach the Supreme Court for redressal even as the patriarchal clergy sought to limit the access of women’ (2019: chapter 17, para. 1). In most Sunni mosques in the country, the largest denomination comprising about 85% of the Muslim population, there are no separate prayer facilities for women (Johari 2020; Salam 2019). Around 10%–15% of Indian Muslims are Shia, and the remaining few percent are made up from smaller groups including Ahmadiyya and Quranism. Sufism also continues to have an influence, with many communities who identify as Sunni or Shia, also considered to be Sufis, which as Specia writes is ‘a broader style of worship that transcends sects, directing followers’ attention inward’ (2017). While Sufi styles of religious practice are traditionally less likely to marginalise women and women have been welcome to pray at Sufi shrines (pir dargah), which mark the burial site of Sufi saints (pir), we also need to be careful not to romanticise Sufism and need to remember that such examples ‘remained a minority in a world in which women were often seen as seductresses and potential sources of moral and social disorder’ (Sharify-Funk 2020; Pemberton 2013; Haddad and Esposito 1998: xiii; Werbner 2010: 375).

**The changing religious lives of pastoralist women in India: intersections between economy, livelihood and religious nationalism**

Pastoralist livelihoods are undergoing rapid change in India because of shifting patterns of land use and the impact of climate change, alongside pressures to become sedentary. As
Dyer writes, ‘Despite being a specialist aspect of agricultural production in regional rural economies . . . pastoralism has been made marginal by state interests in promoting settled agriculture’ (2014: 41). The Indian state has no specific policies for pastoralism, with policy discourses suggesting ‘low productivity and backwardness’ as well as that it makes a large contribution to ecological destruction, despite evidence to the contrary (2014: 41; Sharma et al. 2003: iii; Saberwal 1996). In this section I discuss research that was carried amongst pastoralist communities in Kachchh, a region of Gujarat, the state where the current BJP prime minister, Narendra Modi, was chief minister between 2001 and 2014. It was the bedrock of the growth of the Hindu nationalist movement in the 1980s and 1990s (Jaffrelot 1996; Shani 2007). A devastating earthquake in 2001 led to both socio-economic and religious change, with Hindu nationalists and Islamic revivalists seizing opportunities to expand their impact and presence as part of the reconstruction process and ‘catalysed changes that would have far reaching effects on pastoralists’ (Dyer and Choksi forthcoming; Simpson 2004, 2006). As Dyer and Choksi write, the

approach to post-earthquake reconstruction was entirely cast in the neo-liberal industrial model of development on which the government of Gujarat prides itself . . . within a State where, in as much as mobile pastoralism is seen at all, it is seen as antithetic to ‘progress’ within this model.

(forthcoming Dyer 2014; Simpson 2006)

Pastoralists in India traditionally follow both Hinduism and Islam, with religious practices strongly reflecting relationships with animals, local geography and sacred sites along their migration routes as well as in ancestral villages. There are 13 subgroups of pastoralists in Kachchh, and as part of our project we interviewed people from the Rabari subgroup, who are Hindu, and from the Fakirani Jat subgroup, who are Sufi/Muslim. Fakirani Jats are classified as OBC, as are most Rabaris, with some also being ST. Both herd camels, as well as goats and sheep, with myths about how they came to this livelihood having a firm connection in their religious traditions. The Rabari myth of origin is that they were created by Lord Shiva to tend camels owned by his wife Parvati; both the camels and the Rabari people had been fashioned by Parvati from the dust and sweat that covered Shiva’s body as he meditated in the Himalayas (Dyer 2014: 58–60). The story of how the Fakirani Jats came to herd camels is interlinked with the Rabari community. There was a dispute between two Rabari brothers and Savla Pir, their most revered Sufi saint, stepped in to resolve it. Using his magical powers, he gave many camels to the younger brother and called them ‘pirani camel’ and said that only Jats should graze them. However, they were forbidden by Savla Pir to sell the milk of these camels, and they continue to observe this prohibition.

Women we spoke to described how their religious lives were changing with the socio-economic shifts particularly since the earthquake in 2001. Interviews with both Fakirani Jat women and Rabari women outlined the increasing separation between the two communities over the past few decades, including previous instances where they worshipped together at the same spot becoming a distant memory. A Fakirani Jat woman explained to us that it had been traditional for Fakirani Jats and Rabaris to worship together at a site where Savla Pir’s boat had been washed up. Where the planks washed up on the shore the people established a sacred place, to mark the goddess and Savla Pir. She told us,

They made a high hillock with soil and people of every community used to worship it. In those days, people didn’t have this kind of uchhnat [differentiation].
However, three years ago, the Hindu community had decided to build their own separate temple on the site, which had meant that the Fakirani Jats had to move somewhere else:

We brought one wooden plank from there and second one from the village and established a sacred place here. Now, we are praying here and our community gathers here. We do our niyaj [food offerings] by tying religious flags here and those people follow their practice on the other side.

Another example of the interconnectedness of the communities’ religious observances came from an interview with an elderly Hindu Rabari woman, who told us how the people of her village take care of the Abhramshah Dargah (dargah is the word for a shrine built on the burial ground of a Sufi pir/saint, in this case called Abhramshah), where:

We believe that if we devote a flag to this dargah, he protects our mal [animals]. He protects our mal from diseases. So we offer one ear of a sheep and offer it to him. We take a mannat [vow] that we will offer an ear, and all our flock should be protected. They do it, who have flock. Then, when that sheep is sold and whatever the amount you get out of it, is being devoted to dargah.

While the older women—and men—continue to worship the Sufi pir, alongside Hindu deities, the younger generation is less interested in maintaining this plurality, particularly as they move out of pastoralism. As is common elsewhere in India, with modernisation and the rise of distinct religious identities under the pressure of religious nationalism, this kind of hybridity is being lost as religious traditions become more sharply differentiated from each other. For local forms of Hinduism, this has meant an escalating ‘sankstritisation’ as vernacular deities and narratives become incorporated within pan-Indian Hinduism and many Hindus seek affiliation with the Hindu Right, both religiously and politically. For local Muslim practices and identities, these shifts are accompanied by the influence of Islamic revivalist groups, responding to rising forms of Hindu nationalism since the pre-independence period, including Deobandi, Tablighi-Jamaat and Ahl-i Hadith movements, which seek to unite all Indian Muslims into their own version of a uniform Islam.

In terms of the impact of this upon women’s social and religious lives, one middle-aged Fakirani Jat woman we spoke to—who is still herding camels and lives in a traditional pakhra (reed) house, in north-west Kachchh—outlined how their local Sufi practices are becoming overwhelmed by the growth of mainstream Islam and how this is affecting women. While her community’s Sufi practices remain strong, the influence of the Ahl-i Hadith movement in the region, since the earthquake, has meant significant changes for women. She explained that each morning and evening she prays to Savla Pir, the Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif Bhithai, the Prophet Muhammad and Allah. However, women are no longer permitted to go inside the Sufi shrines (dargah) and are not allowed to enter the mosque for namaz (prayer), although they can find ways around this to meet their religious needs:

When we feel like going inside the mosque... we have mannat [vow] if someone is ill and we pray for them to get better. Then we go in with a broom to clean the mosque with the hidden intention and light an incense stick. We go on Friday to clean and then fill water from the mosque and come back.

The changes that had been brought about during the reconstruction process opened up opportunities not only for economic and industrial growth but also for a reconfiguration of
religio-political space. Urdu-speaking maulvi (teacher of Islamic law) of the Ahl-i Hadith movement moved to the Kachchh villages from the Northern State of Uttar Pradesh, bringing with them their revivialist brand of Wahabi Islam. Our interviewee explained that before this time there were few mosques, but now there is one in every village:

Earlier the mosque was far away so we read namaz at home. If some people were close to the mosque then they would go, if it's far away, then they read namaz in their homes... The mosque was far away before, now it is close by... I'll tell you what was there earlier. We used to clean the floor and keep a stone and that was our mosque. We used to read namaz there.

Prior to this, women had been at the centre of Sufi religious life, playing music and leading prayer, but she told us that the maulvi had come with the 'new Quran of Ahl-i Hadith' (in Urdu) that had replaced their old Quran (which had been in Sindhi):

In the old book there was more respect... for women. According to the old book, the women could walk or go in the carts to auliya [Sufi saints], they were free to attend four or five days of fairs, and to distribute prasad-niyaj themselves. Now the number of maulana [Islamic religious teachers] have increased. Now they have made such rules that the women cannot go to a dargah, they are forbidden. So I feel in the new book, ijjat [respect] for women has gone down.

Our discussions with members of the Hindu Rabari pastoralist community also revealed changing religious dynamics following the earthquake. As one male interviewee explained:

After earthquake many temples which were small got destroyed so people built bigger ones. If there is a dispute people built two temples instead of one... But what you see now is different and there are two reasons for that. Now people have more money. Previously the amount people earnt through labour or salary they didn’t get enough to show off. So when they are rich... first thing they catch is ‘dharam’ [religion]... then people like you and me will start thinking he is a good man. He built a temple he prays everyday.

Within the community, as the Hindu Right has grown in influence and, alongside increased sedentarisation, people are more likely to worship the mainstream Hindu gods, as well as their local pastoralist deities, and to celebrate the pan-Hindu feasts and festivals. This is also shifting the balance of power from the traditional bopa, a religious/tradi*ional leader trusted by people who can also advise on issues around marriage, read horoscopes and suggest spiritual cures for illness, towards the Hindu pujari (priest) who has knowledge of how to perform puja to the Hindu temple deities. While the bopa is usually male, women can also perform this role, and the pujari is much more likely to be male and from the Brahmin caste. An example where this shift has impacted women is with respect to marriage ceremonies. Both Fakirani Jat Muslim women and Rabari Hindu women spoke about how the increased involvement of new types of religious specialists in their marriage ceremonies had resulted in them being alienated from the process.

The pandit (Hindu religious teacher) has also brought with him teachings about the traditional pastoralist way of life of selling goat and sheep for meat as being paap (sinful), which combines with socio-economic pressures to reinforce the idea of pastoralism as outdated. Indeed, pressure to move away from pastoralism has not just come from the government but also from religious
leaders. A younger Rabari woman explained that after the earthquake their local religious teachers became influenced by mainstream Hinduism, when

Our *sadhu* and *sants* [holy persons] told us after the earthquake to send our children to the school and get them educated and also to sell off the *mal* [animals] as this business gets sin [paap].

While the local form of Hinduism practiced by the pastoralists had not viewed the killing of animals as sinful, this new ethic was part of the wave of Hinduisation spreading across Gujarat as well as the rest of India. In addition to being used as moral pressure upon the community to conform to neoliberal livelihoods that were becoming part of a broader Hindutva vision for India, supported by the BJP (Chacko 2019), as Rabari pastoralists sendentarise, the desire to align with the Hindu right wing becomes part of a strategy to secure political voice and representation. But what has been the impact on women? The analysis of our data so far suggests a complex narrative with sedentarising women pastoralists caught within the interstices of neoliberal economics, the rise of the right wing, the consolidation of *Hindutva* and a larger space for women to assert their own aspirations. One area that demonstrates this complexity is the political economy of marriage. The Rabaris have traditionally practised bride price—where the groom’s family gives gifts to the bride’s. This is in contrast to the dominance of the practice of dowry elsewhere in India amongst Hindus. In the communities we spoke to, bride price is continuing, but larger prices are being demanded from the bride’s family and girls are rejecting suitors from pastoralist communities, as part of their aspiration for a better future as well as on the part of their parents. We suggest that far from enhancing the social status of girls, as this would seem, it looks like they—the daughters—may be becoming instruments in fulfilling the socio-economic and political aspirations of their fathers and brothers. In this nexus of intersecting factors, the escalation of bride price reflects buy-in to the neoliberal Hinduised vision of the BJP, where daughters are socialised to favour marrying outside pastoralism to raise their social status and to align with this vision whilst at the same time materially improving their situation through demand for large payments.

**Conclusion**

My aim in this chapter has been to undertake an examination of the relationships between religion and gender inequality in India, with a focus on the two largest religions in India—Hinduism and Islam. For both Muslim and Hindu women, religion plays a role in intersection with other factors, including, amongst others, caste, class, ethnicity, politics, geographical location and occupation/livelihood, in contributing to the gender inequality that they experience in both their religions and their wider socio-economic lives. However, given that India is a Hindu nationalist state, where the government and its supporters shape religious dynamics for both Hindus and Muslims, I argue that an intersectional approach to women, religion and social inequality must also look at the intersection between different religions in particular settings, and how the historical, social and political context has shaped the relationships between them in ways that have an impact on women’s lives. I finished the chapter with a current-day example of how changing socio-economic conditions for pastoralist communities in Kachchh in the state of Gujarat are taking place alongside shifts in religious configurations that reflect and reinforce the pressure of Hindu nationalism and the Muslim response to it, in ways that impact anew on women’s roles and responsibilities.
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Notes

5 http://pastoralism.org.in/ (accessed 29/12/20).
6 In addition to Muslim Dalits in India, there are also groups of Christian Dalits. Both have previously converted to Islam and Christianity from Hinduism.
7 They are classified as OBC and share this category with other groups who are not as marginalised as they are.
8 Olivelle dates the *manusmriti* between 200 BC and AD 200 (2005: 24–25).
10 While the earthquake is seen as a catalyst for rapid change, shifts to a more legalistic form of Islam had arrived earlier. As Bond explains, a fatwa against the use of music in Sufi poetry performance in Kachchh was made in the early 1970s by the foremost representative of the Ahl-e Sunnat wa-l-Jamá’at (Barelwi) movement in Kachchh, himself also a leading Sufi master (2020: 106).

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