



Discourses on Gender in Ancient India

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- veiled and enslaved woman by Western Feminist

Historians have classified woman's life in the traditional Indian society into the following stages:

- Vedic Age
- Epic Stage
- Upanishads' Age
- Age of the Sutras and
- Age of the Rajputs (Bhagavat Charana Upadhyaya 1986)

Pre-vedic age

- it is believed that Dravidian culture was more popular in practice
- Idols of pregnant women, women wearing head gear etc., imply that women were treated with a lot of honour during this time.
- The reproductive function of women was held in high esteem.
- They came to be worshipped as denoting the entire universe.



Vedic Period

- Patanjali and Katyayana
- women enjoyed a very high and equal status in the early Vedic, Vedic or in ancient India
- It is also stated that much before the commencement of the civilization, matriarchy was very much in vogue across many parts of India.
- woman was a symbol of strength (Shaksthi) and generosity.
- She had a share in property as a daughter and the freedom to choose her husband
- The status of wife was very high and sacred

Woman a symbol of strength (Shaksthi) and generosity



power and authority

- women in the Rg Vedic period were very close to men in terms of holding power and authority
- used to take care that the fire in the Yagna never gets extinguished; got educated like her brothers, learnt the use of arms, warfare etc (like her brothers); participated in Yaga-Yagnas (like her husband) and took part in warfare, ran behind enemies
- shuns the veil (purdah) and openly shows her face while participating

Women were saints and poetesses

- Apala, Ghosha, Vishwavara, Lopamudra, Shachi-Poulami, and Vagumbhruni , Gargi, Maitreyi
- They have authored many 'Mantras' (chanting) of the Rg-Veda.
- The Aryan women used to recite the Mantras with equal devotion and respect as they did while reciting the Mantras written by the male saints
- Shachi-Poulami, another woman sage, says 'Just as the sun rises to the centre of the sky, even my luck is going high
- There were no child marriages and women married at an adult age, freely selecting their husband

Dharmasastras of Apastamba (450 – 350 BCE)

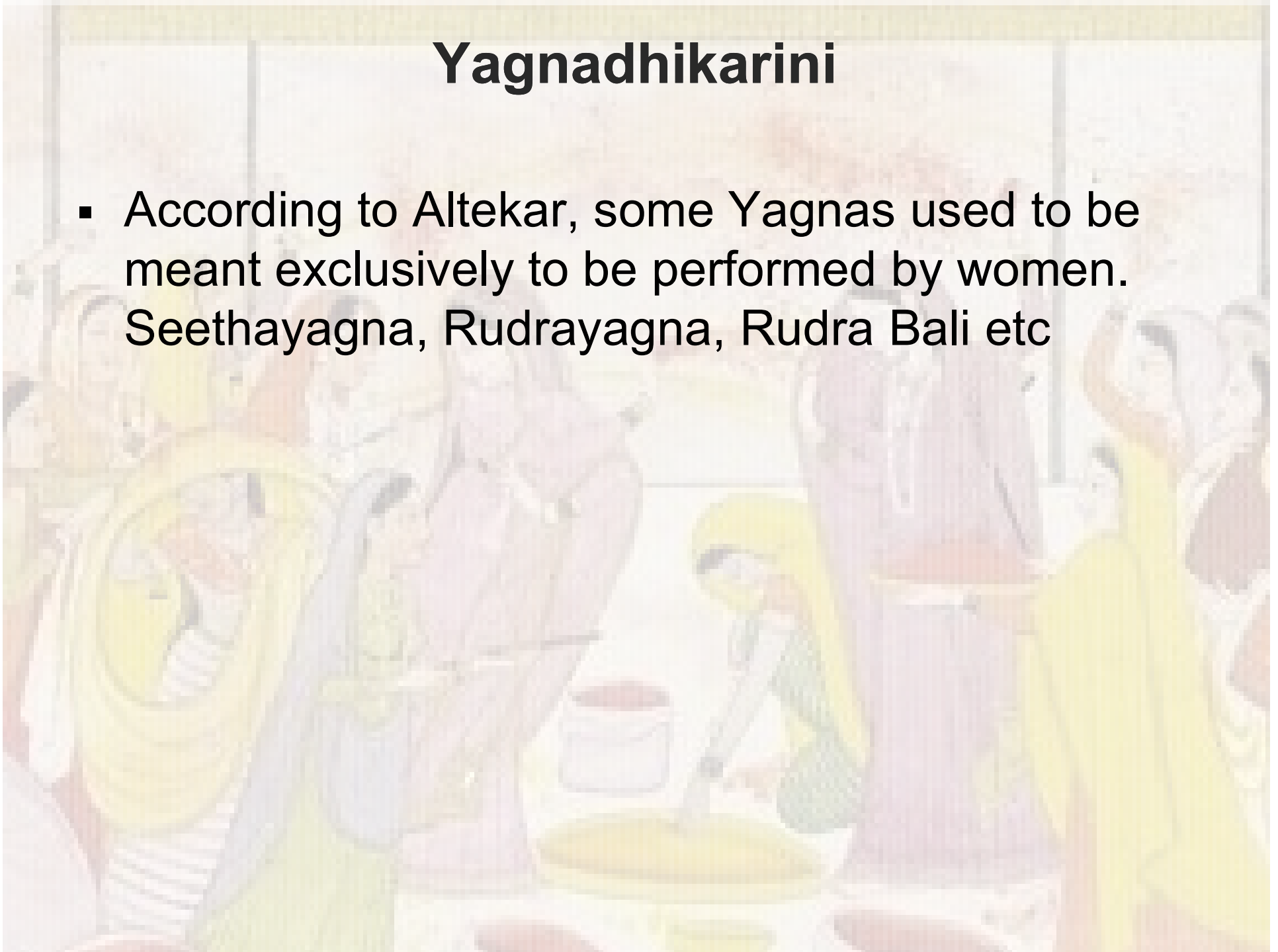
- There were also kingdoms that boasted of a *Nagarvadhu*, who was the most beautiful woman. She was respected as a goddess but was treated as a courtesan
- Brahnavadinis: There are a number of illustrations of how women scholars like Gargi and Maithreyi who tackled sage Yagnavalkya with their knowledge on Vedas.
- Ghosha studied and spent much time in chanting Vedas and got married at a very late age

Dharma Sadhana

- the role of the wife was very important. As an unmarried man's worship is not going to please the devathas, it was considered proper to have a wife and then take on Gruhasthashrama Dharma.
- **Sadhyavadhus** were those who did Vedadhyayana in childhood and in youth as far as possible, and got married after they attained puberty
- **Brahmavadinis** were those who remained unmarried for a long time engaged in Vedadhyayana,

Yagnadhikarini

- According to Altekar, some Yagnas used to be meant exclusively to be performed by women. Seethayagna, Rudrayagna, Rudra Bali etc



Age of the Sutras

- men started to change the boundaries of the matriarchal society and constructed those of the patriarchal one.
- They also started to bring as hostage women belonging to other castes and communities
- We get a number of references about the many wives of a common man.
- According to another reference, the women brought from conquered kingdoms as slaves and servants
- They came to be mortgaged by the gamblers and when they lost in the game, women came to be taken as their *dasi* by the winners

Gruhya Sutras

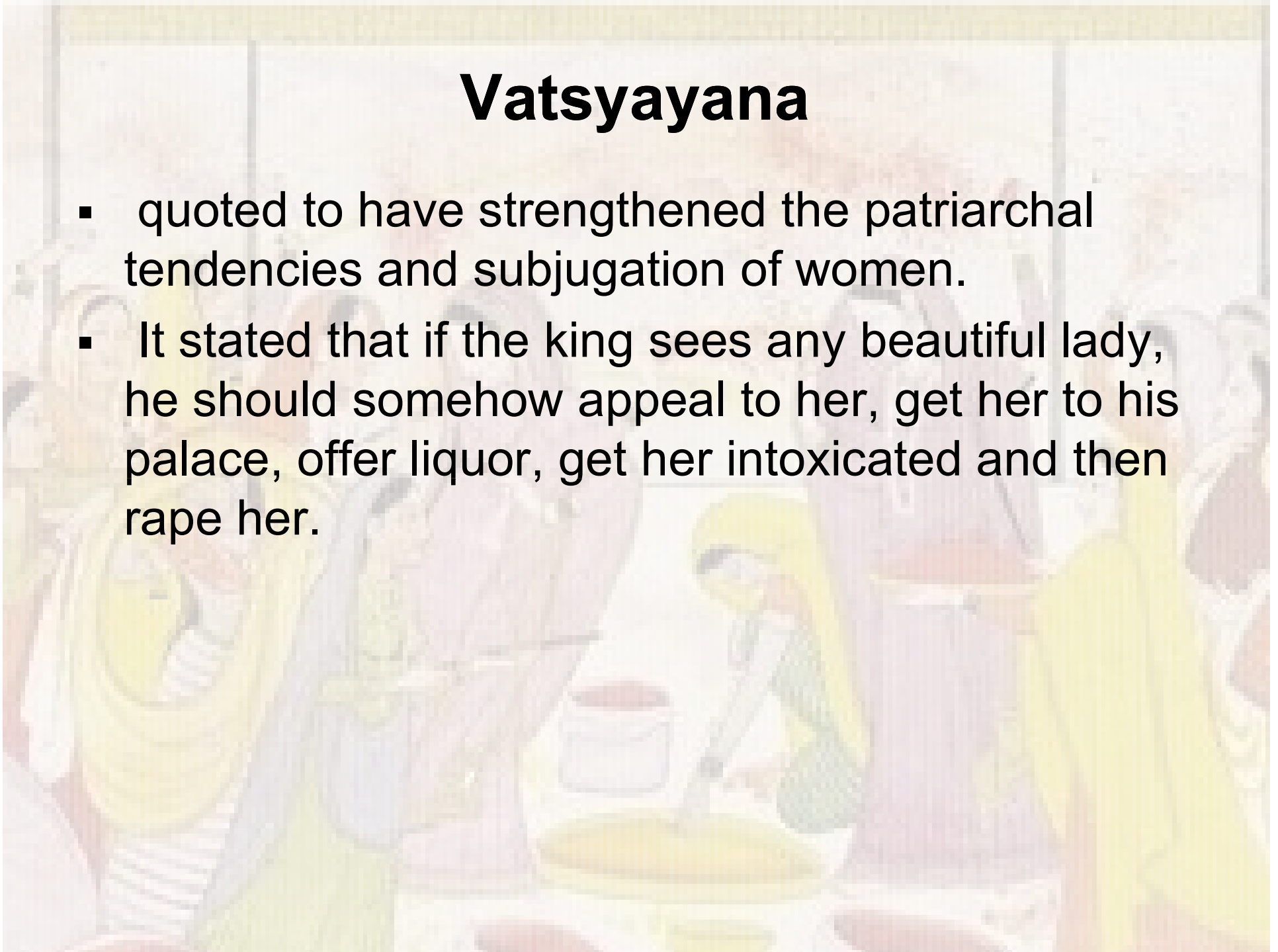
- All the Samskaras had to take place for the men with the chanting of Mantras, Mantropadesha, Upanayana, Veda studies, marriage etc.
- Samskaras of Ashrama life became associated with the man and his personality development.
- All should happen to him, but for the women,. All her Samskaras can be without Mantras like Jataka in childhood, naming ceremony, Choodakarma etc., without any Mantras.
- Although she was called as Yagnopaveethini, no thread was used. Only a small cloth was put on her waist from left to right.

Manu Dharma Shastra

- Manu thinks of a woman as one who does not deserve any freedom.
- All her Dharmic achievements, philanthropy, freedom are irrelevant
- But he felt that all the Samskaras of men need to happen to women too and with Mantras – according to Manu.
- Marriage itself is upanayana to a woman.
- By serving her husband well, she gets everything to herself too. Women should not conduct Yagnas and even if they did, Brahmins should not attend them

Vatsyayana

- quoted to have strengthened the patriarchal tendencies and subjugation of women.
- It stated that if the king sees any beautiful lady, he should somehow appeal to her, get her to his palace, offer liquor, get her intoxicated and then rape her.



androcentrism

- the original Vedic ideas were recorded, interpreted, discussed, translated, and established in society by men.
- : *“This fact is referred to as androcentrism, which is, viewing the world from a male perspective, whilst women are viewed and treated as passive objects, rather than active, subjects of history.”*

Two schools of thought on women

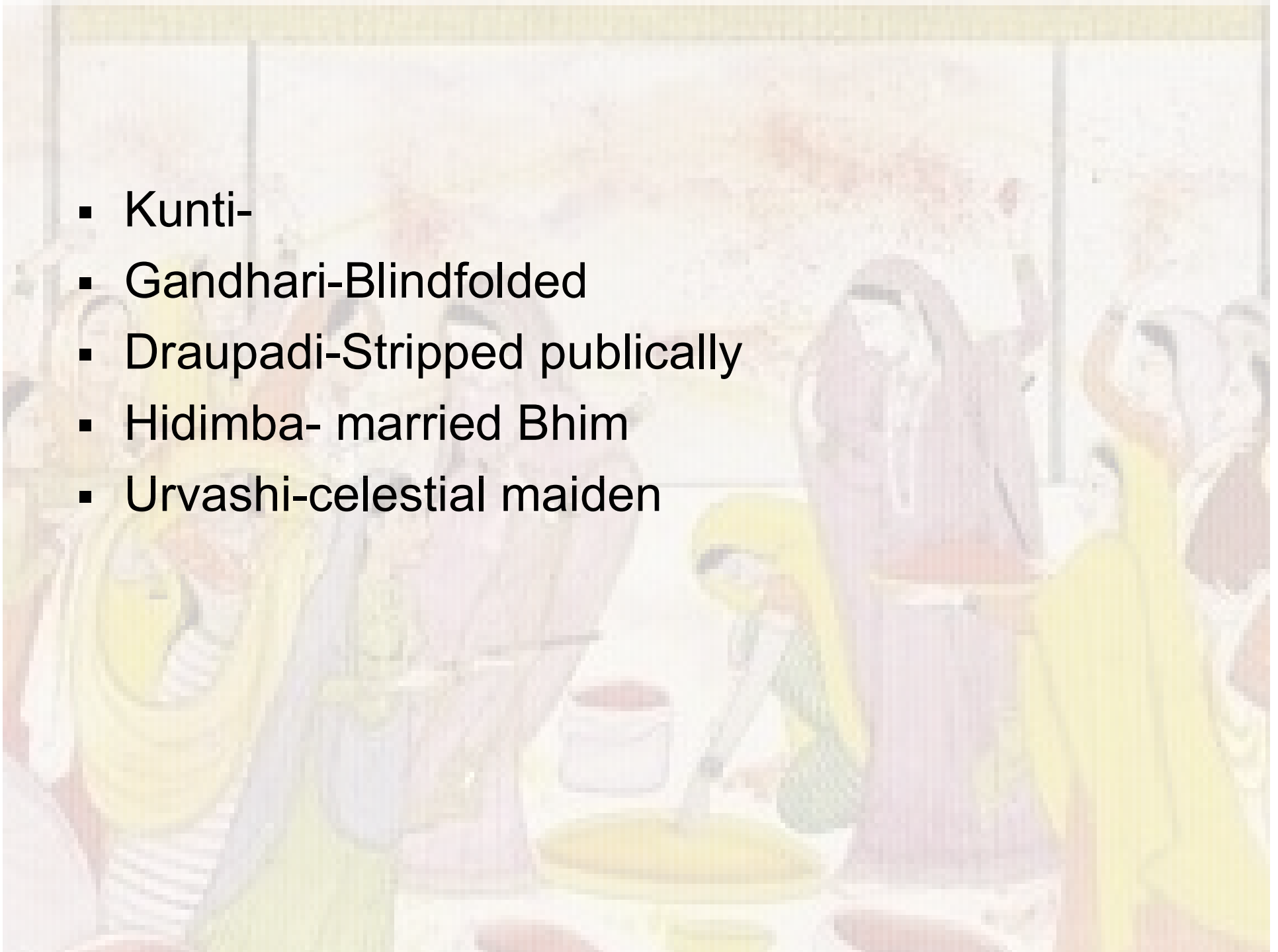
- One considered women as 'equal to men';
- the other holds them as objects of hatred.
- Manu- "*where the female relations live in grief, the family soon wholly perishes; but where they are not unhappy, the family ever prospers*".
- Yagnavalkya-, 'women are the embodiment of all divine virtues on earth'; for example, Soma bestowed all his purity on them; Gandharva has given them sweetness of speech and fire has showered all his brilliance to make them most attractive'.

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Epics Ramayana and Mahabharatha

- present statements about lofty ideals of womanhood.
- The latter considered women as the pillars of social organization and centres of domestic life.
- It also held that a man is inferior to a woman before whom he should bend his will. He should serve and adore her.
- in some context that ‘there could be no more or higher sinful object than a woman.’
- She is the root of all evil and the most sinful of all creatures. Woman is like a burning fire. She is also an illusion (Maya) and like the sharp edge of a razor.

- Kunti-
- Gandhari-Blindfolded
- Draupadi-Stripped publically
- Hidimba- married Bhim
- Urvashi-celestial maiden



Beyond Manu: Kautilya and Varahamihira

- Kautilya who believed that '*ashubhadweshanah streeshu navishvaseth*' who ever expects good things to occur should not trust women or have belief in their deeds.
- Astronomy Varahamihira, in his Bruhat Samhithe has provided proof of how strong women was during his times with examples and quotations.
- He expresses appreciation for the good character of women as well as his sense of considering them as equal to men.
- every month the bad qualities are pushed out of her body in the form of menstruation

What about Buddhism?

- It is argued that it gave women followers (Bhikshunis) equal rights and opportunities.
- There is also an opinion that Buddha did not have a definite stand and clarity about women's issues.
- His disciple Ananda is quoted to have insisted on this separation (of male and female followers). Beliefs like 'naari narakakke daari' or a woman is the route to hell strong among Hindus are found in Buddhist literature also.

Jathaka

- Kunaljathaka went to the extreme and quoted woman as, by nature, wicked and somebody taken birth to destroy man.
- A male role in the jataka story by name Aanithigandha is somebody taken birth only to destroy women, just as the birth of Parasurama to destroy the Kshatriyas.

Jainism

- The Jain culture or Jainism also did not give women any high status. They were considered as taking sinners in the past who took birth as females only because of the past bad deeds .
- Digambara Jainism, 'there is no Moksha for women after death; in case a woman desires to attain moksha, she has to be born again as a man in her next life'
- Shwethambara Jainism, on the contrary, declares t for a woman Moksha is attainable after her death, there is no need to be born as a man to obtain Moksha.

Slokas

- Slokas like *'women and mud are as they are kept (maintained); 'a girl born is like a wound on the body', 'a girl given away in marriage is away from kin and family', etc.*
- These sayings reaffirmed faith in the patriarchal system of family prevalent in the society.

A Gender Critique of the Eight Forms of Hindu Marriages

- Eight marriage forms: Brahma, Daiva, Arsha, Prajapatya, Asura, Gandharva, Paisacha and Rakshasa.
- In seven of the forms, marriage is an arrangement made by men.
- patriarchy operates jointly with religious values to oppress women and to subject them to cultural, social and religious norms in at least five ways
- Dharma clearly outlines the roles of males and females in terms of the division of labour, leadership, kinship and family life. This has gender consequences as the male is the leader of the family and the chief beneficiary of the practice of Dharma

Brahma Marriage

- The Brahma form characterizes marriage as a father's prerogative to gift his daughter to a suitor he has approved of on her behalf
- The Brahma form is the most popular because it rests on the ideals promoted by parents about the value of education, the reputation of families, maintaining Varna purity (of the same class and caste) and the parents' rights to choose.
- personal desires of the couple are sublimated and sacrificed for the social and cultural advancement of the families

Daiva Marriage

- The Daiva form of marriage is based on the principle of sacrifice.
- Fathers seek young Brahmin suitors for their daughters.
- The Brahmin, a priest, who is usually approached while he is conducting a sacrificial prayer, is offered the daughter as a wife and as an item of sacrifice.
- In other words, offering a daughter is constituted as the ultimate sacrifice a parent can make to placate the gods or to fulfill his karmic duty

Arsha Marriage

- In the Arsha form of marriage, the arrangement is, once again, a decision between men.
- The daughter is given away as a bride to a sage or a rishi (holy man) in exchange for two cows
- . The groom may or may not have suitable qualities to be a husband, which appears to be immaterial to the bride's family.
- The exchange of cattle for a bride is thus an economic transaction which ignores the future aspirations and desires of a girl and commodifies females.

Asura Marriage

- Unsuitable or undesired suitors are accommodated in the Asura form of marriage.
- In this form, a man purchases a wife by paying an enormous sum of money to her family, kinsmen and to the bride.
- The father gives his daughter away in exchange for the acquisition of wealth. According to Kane this form of marriage is “practically a sale of a girl for money” or money’s worth.³³

Prajapatya Marriage

- In the fifth form, Prajapatya, by comparison, it is the bride's father who actively seeks a marriage partner for his daughter.
- Through marriage, the daughter becomes a wife and thus, a possession of her husband
- When she is disposed off by her father, her future is determined by the impulses and desires of her husband and his family.

Gandharva Marriage

- The Manusmriti III, 32, describes the Gandharva marriage as the voluntary union of a maiden and her lover.
- In the verse (III, 32), Manusmriti says that such a union springs from desire and has sexual intercourse for its purpose, ignoring the fact that in all marriages there is an expectation to consummate the relationship.
- This was the most common form of marriage in Vedic times.³⁶ A verse in the Atharva Veda suggests that parents usually allowed a daughter to select her lover.
- According to the Manusmriti, however, the Gandharva marriage may be suitable for males from warrior, military, administrator and royal families, suggesting that free choice is reserved for the upper castes

Rakshasa Marriage

- The Rakshasa form condones bride abduction following an attack on the bride's kinsmen who have been slain or beaten and wounded.
- The women are doubly victimized through the loss of family and captured as prizes of violent conquests.
- The acquisition of brides in this way means that there is no recourse to a family that has been slain, and fear of violence against surviving relatives prevents any acts of agency.

Paisacha Marriage

- The Paisacha form occurs through planned dishonourable means or opportunities available to engage in premarital sexual activity with a female.
- The female is raped when she is asleep, intoxicated or in a disordered state of mind.
- This can be compared to the modern description of 'date rape'
- The excessive value attached to virginity and purity makes a girl extremely vulnerable to exploitation by dishonourable men and abandonment by her own family

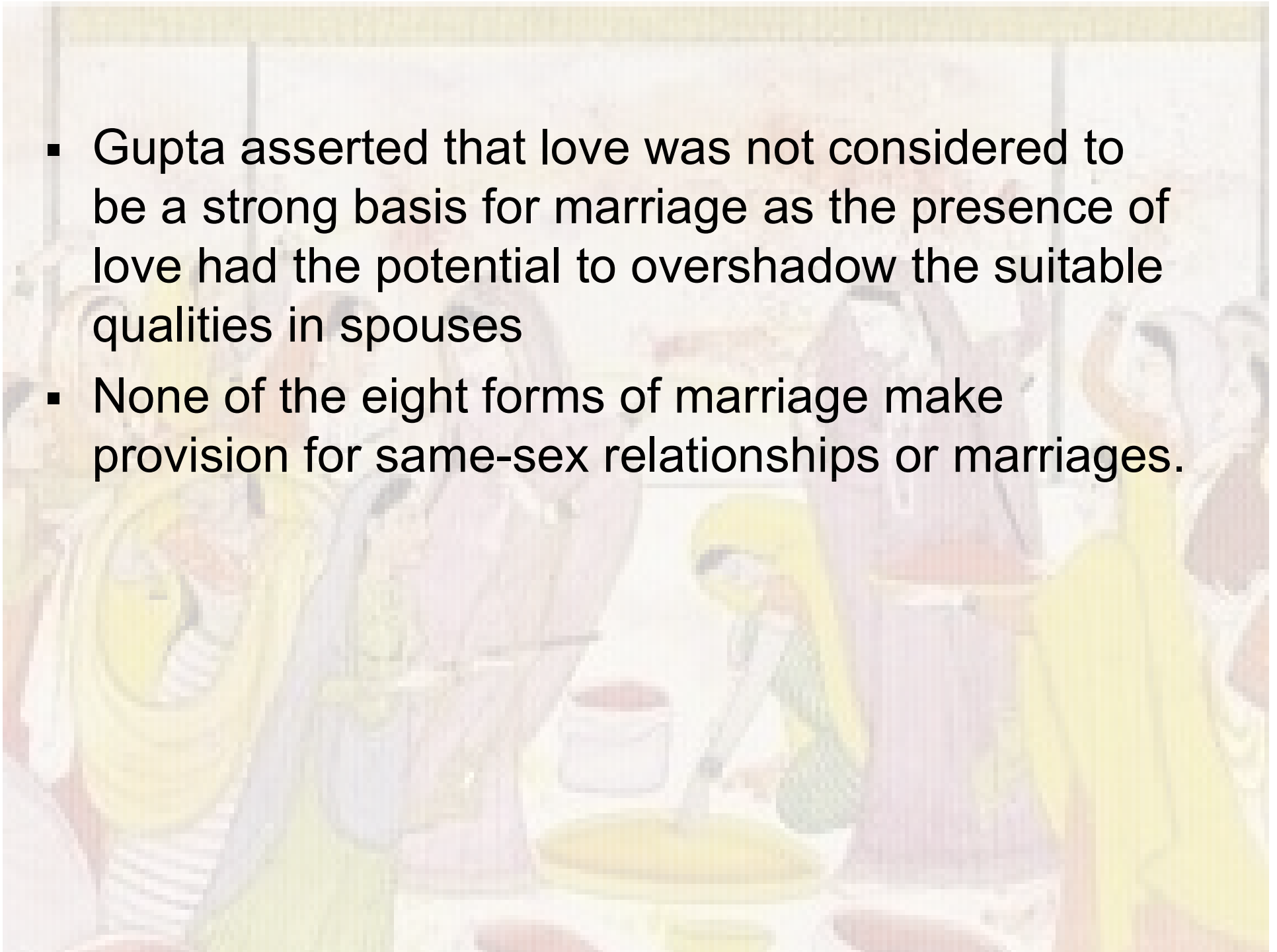
critical gender perspectives

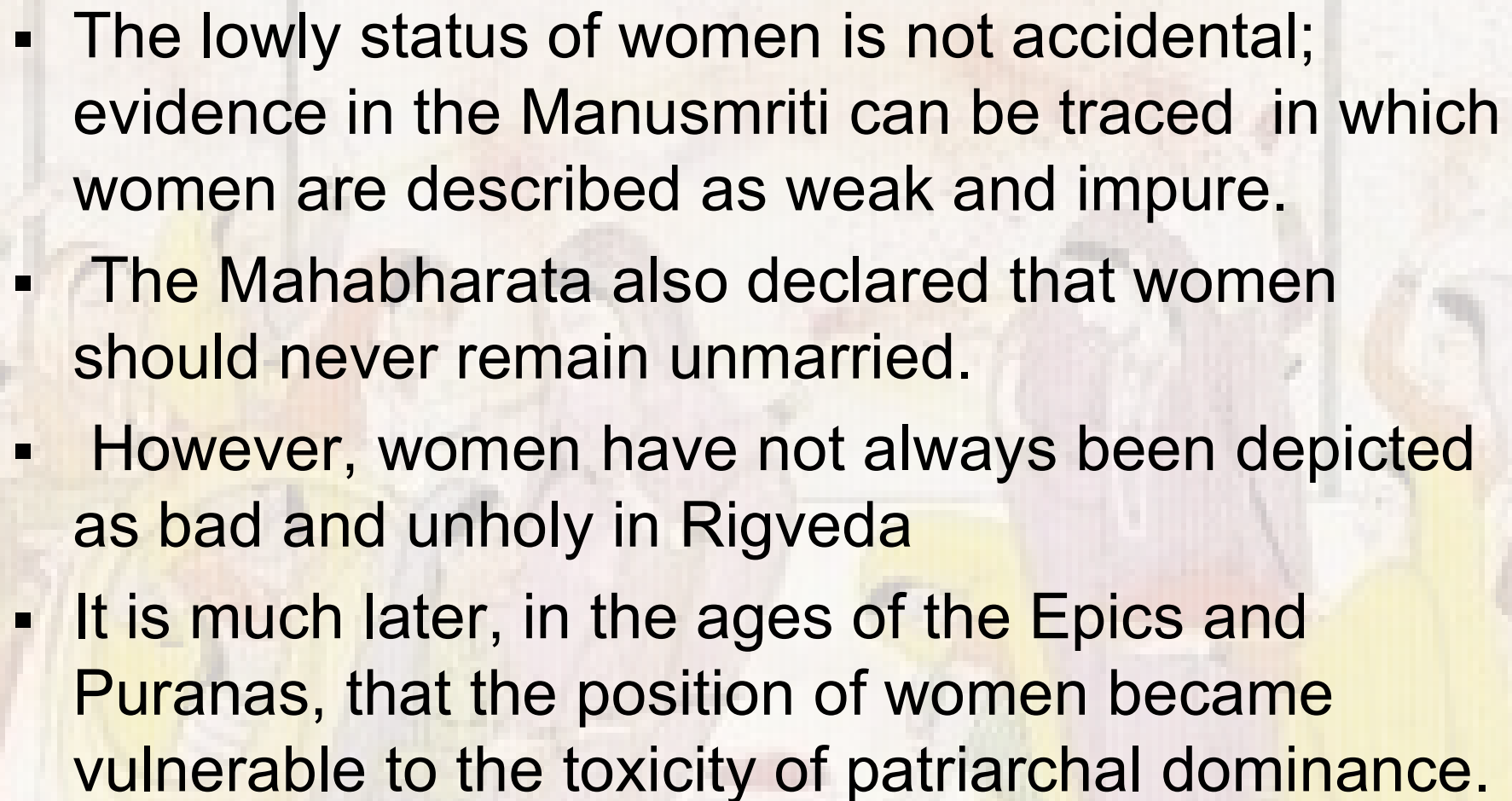
- The bride is regarded as the most important gift and underpins the ritual giving away (kanyadaana) of the daughter to a suitable person by her parents.
- the word, daana (gift), is used in the sense of ceding the father's right of guardianship and control of the daughter to the husband.
- The exchange of gifts is, in effect, an exchange and a transfer of the ownership of a woman from one male to another

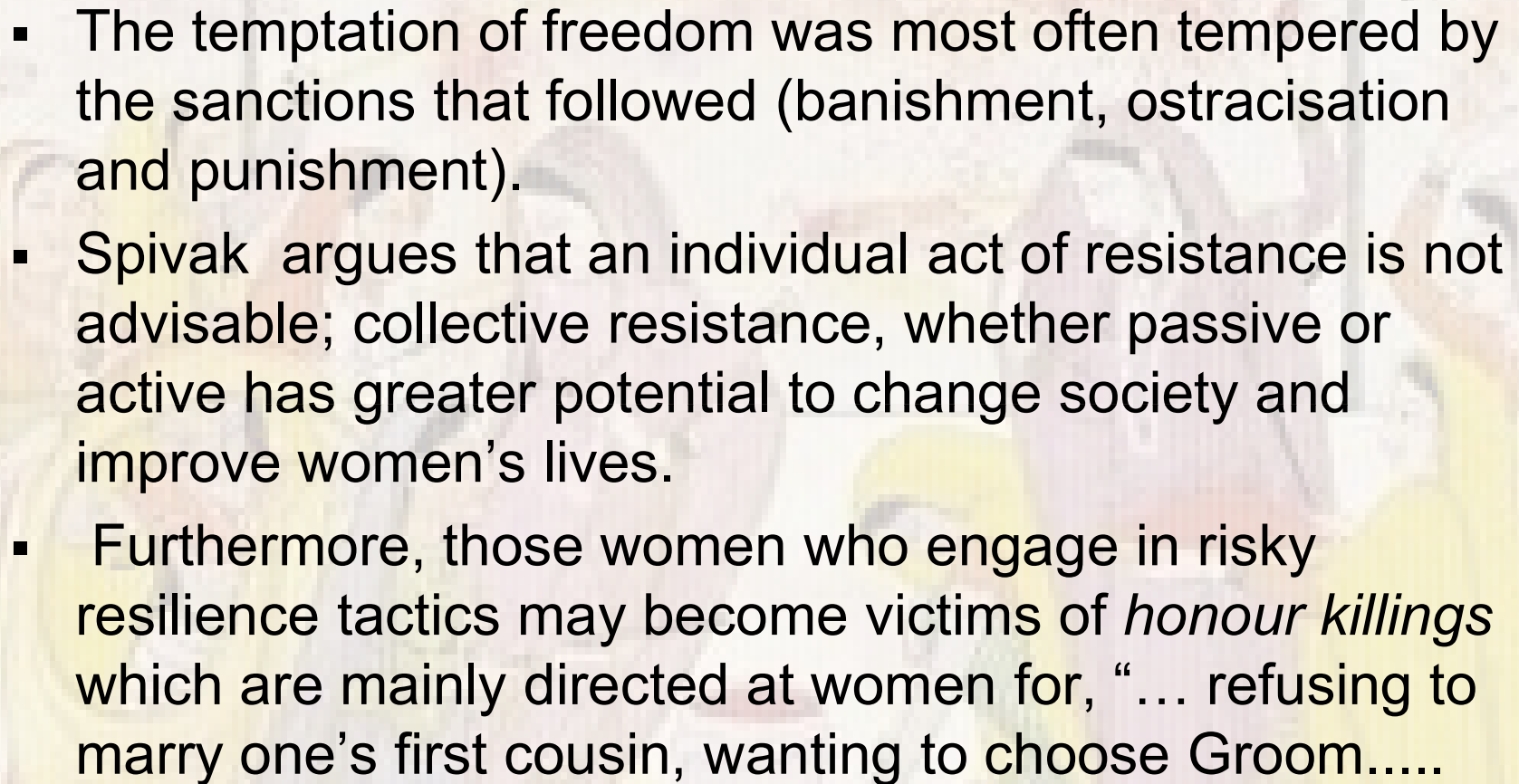
commercial and economic benefits for men

- Even worse, is the use of the institution of marriage for commercial and economic benefits for men, as narrated by Mahasweta Devi to Gayatri Spivak about the bodily hexes of tribal women:
- Women are just merchandise, commodities. In the border districts of West Bengal there are women from Bangladesh being sold in the name of marriage in the bridegroom's house. For the flesh trade all you have to invest is two saris, a bit of food, some trinkets and a bit of money for the parents.⁴⁴

- Gupta asserted that love was not considered to be a strong basis for marriage as the presence of love had the potential to overshadow the suitable qualities in spouses
- None of the eight forms of marriage make provision for same-sex relationships or marriages.



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- The lowly status of women is not accidental; evidence in the Manusmriti can be traced in which women are described as weak and impure.
 - The Mahabharata also declared that women should never remain unmarried.
 - However, women have not always been depicted as bad and unholy in Rigveda
 - It is much later, in the ages of the Epics and Puranas, that the position of women became vulnerable to the toxicity of patriarchal dominance.

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- The temptation of freedom was most often tempered by the sanctions that followed (banishment, ostracisation and punishment).
 - Spivak argues that an individual act of resistance is not advisable; collective resistance, whether passive or active has greater potential to change society and improve women's lives.
 - Furthermore, those women who engage in risky resilience tactics may become victims of *honour killings* which are mainly directed at women for, "... refusing to marry one's first cousin, wanting to choose Groom.....

A group of women in traditional attire, including headscarves and long dresses, are seated around a table. In the center of the table is a white teapot and several cups. The women appear to be engaged in a social gathering or a meal. The background shows a window with a view of a building.

Thank you