

Women's History Writing in Modern India

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Any assessment of the status of women has to start from the social framework. Social structures, cultural norms, and value systems influence social expectations regarding the behaviour of both men and women and determine a woman's roles and her position in society to a great extent. The most important of these institutions are the systems of descent, family and kinship, marriage and religious traditions. They provide the ideology and moral basis, for men's and women's notions about their rights and duties. The normative standards do not change at the same pace as changes in other forms of social organisation brought about by technological and educational advances, urbanization, increasing population, and changing costs and standards of living. The social status of women in India is a typical example of this gap between the position and roles accorded to them by the Constitution and the laws, and those imposed on them by social traditions. Some scholars believe that in ancient India, the women enjoyed equal status with men in all fields of life. However, some others hold contrasting views. Works by ancient Indian grammarians such as Patanjali and Katyayana suggest that women were educated in the early Vedic period. Rig Vedic verses suggest that the women married at a mature age and were probably free to select their husband. Scriptures such as Rig Veda and Upanishads mention several women sages and seers, notably Gargi and Maitreyi. According to studies, women enjoyed equal status and rights during the early Vedic period.

The status of women began to decline with the Smritis (esp. Manusmriti) and with the Islamic invasion of Babur and the Mughal Empire. Child marriage, Sati, Purdah system, prejudices against female children and women education, forcible widowhood etc. were some of the practices crept into the united society to save the honour of women against foreign conquerors. The British had come to India with the establishment of East India Company. The British brought new ideas and technology to India that had both positive and negative aspects. Western contact began to influence Indian thought. Men like Raja Ram Mohan Roy arose who took up the cause of women's reforms and emancipation.

Women history in modern India can be categorised in the following stages. The initial one is the existing historical framework where historians emphasize on reform movements for Indian women, that is, the regeneration from a subdued status of the medieval period has been considered. Here feminist history is related to reformist movement of nineteenth century starting from the efforts of Raja Ram Mohan Roy. The idea of writing history of this period includes humanitarianism, utilitarianism, Social Darwinism and nationalism¹.

This reform is met by the Indian response to feminist approach. Not all agreed that gender

Women's History Writing in Modern India

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relations needed modifications. A number of Indian intellectuals praised their own cultural treatment of women, or compared the conditions of Indian women with those of European women and concluded in their writings that females in both countries suffered hardships.² These feminist writers and workers focused their attention on Sati, female infanticide, polygamy, child marriage, pardah, female education, devadasis and the patriarchal joint families.³

The second stage is of existing master narratives in women history writing, as of Ishwar Chandra vidyasagar championing for female education and widow remarriage. Keshab Chandra sen narrates the importance of reforms of women. Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Mahadev Govind Ranade in National Social conference, Parsee journalist Behramji Malbari in his articles in The Times writes on the evils of child marriage. Some feminist like Pandita Ramabai writes for female education as well as Mataji Maharani Tapaswini of Bengal also writes for female education.⁴

Then were the first generation of educated women who found a voice and wrote about their lives and about the condition of women and development. These women even developed their own institutions as Ramabai worked to educate women through the Arya Mahila Samaj (Aryans women's society).⁵ Mataji Maharani Tapaswini opened a school, The Mahakali Pathshala for imparting women education.⁶ In 1909 Begam Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) began an institution for muslim girls in Bhagalpur. In 1911 in Calcutta she opened a Sakhawat Memorial School.⁷ At the same time sister Subbulakshmi established a school for young high caste widows in Maharashtra.⁸

In the next stage of feminist history writing we found history of women participating in the nationalist movement as R.C. Majumdar made a passing reference to women freedom fighters as Annie Besant, Kasturba Gandhi, Basanti Devi Das, Ansuja Ben Sarabhai, Mrs J. N. Sengupta, Sarojini Naidu, Matangini Hazara, Pritilata Waddadar, Kalpana Dutta, Bina Das, Amrit Kaur etc. There are more writers in this context who have narrated the women sacrifices in the national movement as Nawaz B. Mody, Yasmeen M. Lakhmani.

In the third stage women history writing is concerned with feminist history of post colonial era. Historiography of feminist Indian post colonial period is wide and contemporary. It is concerned with social, economic, gender equality requirements of women. The next most important reflection is gender bias which is the trend of post structural arena.

In the post colonial period the status of Indian women is depicted as deteriorating. The problems regarding female infanticide, Dowry, rape, sexual harassment had increased. Although various NGOs and state legislations have tried to help the feminist groups to solve such problems.

So the history writing trends towards women organizations, women movements, personal diaries, eventual photographs. A special department is founded by C. S. Lakhshmi called Sparrow (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) which is a breakthrough in feminist history writing.

The latest trend of feminist historiography is concerned with Gender Biasedness. Gender refers to the qualitative and interdependent character of women's and men's position in society. Gender relations are constituted in terms of relations of power and dominance that determine the life chances of women and men.⁹ It emphasizes women's dual economic role in the family economy,

Women's History Writing in Modern India

Dr. Nidhi Chaturvedi

changes in sexual composition of labour force, transforming consciousness towards politics of women and making women important in decision making of a family. This is also related to women empowerment .As Naila Kabeer states” Neither the organizations nor the employment to be generated were to be the means of mobilizing poor rural women to participate more effectively in the wider process of socio political development to wrest from society the rights, the dignity and the resources to which they were entitled for their own development, through collective action to increase their voice in development decision that affected their lives.¹⁰

Now we are contemporary to postmodern women history. We can become the preservationists and recoveries by necessity and can theorize the postmodern feminist historiography today.

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