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Review Article

The End of Seclusion. New Studies on Gender History in South Asia

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Confined to a corner in the academic house, well sheltered from the public gaze, the research on women has for a long time formed a world of its own, separated from "real" history, where men and their "important" topics, war and peace, politics and economics, dominated. Like the Hindu and Muslim reformers of the beginning of this century, male historians viewed this *purdah* world with suspicion – not taking it too seriously, but at the same time anxious to keep the borders intact, for fear that this woman-world would cause disruption in the fields which were entrusted to male control.

Without waiting to be "reformed" by men, however, women studies broke away from their seclusion in the last four or five years and came into the open, establishing themselves as an integral part of history. Aided by the current trend towards subalternity and post-modernism, research on women is today one of the leading disciplines in Indian historiography and certainly among the most innovative. Though still dominated by female scholars, the topics of study have been extended to include men's history and the construction of masculinity and aim at a gendered view of every aspect of the past.

1. General Works

As befits a new topic, much of the research is of a tentative, experimental and fragmented character, which renders reading a thrilling adventure, while at the same time making it difficult to gain an overall picture. To venture to write a handbook in this situation requires courage, extensive knowledge and the talent to limit oneself to central lines of development. Geraldine Forbes[1] meets this challenge. Her volume of the *New Cambridge History of*

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[1] Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern* India (= The New Cambridge History of India, IV.2), Cambridge / Delhi: Cambridge University Press / Foundation Books, 1996 (ISBN 81-7596-023-X)

India is a comprehensive study of Indian women in the 19th and 20th century. Guided by the belief that "patriarchal systems offer women few opportunities until men decide it is time for change"[2], the first chapter concentrates on the efforts of male reformers in the last century to modernise women. The reformist discourse on women was part of the dialogue between the incipient national movement and the colonial power, in which "Aryanisation" and "modernisation" went hand in hand.[3] The aim, however, was not to accord women more freedom or a choice about how their lives should be spent. On the contrary, making women, their comportment and the place accorded to them, the indicators of a caste's or a nation's status could well, at least in the shorter run, lead to a situation where women's lives were submitted to even tighter male control.

Similarly, education for girls did not in the first place aim at the development of the individual's inborn faculties, but at the creation of a certain kind of woman, no longer entrenched in popular culture and superstition, a helpmate for her husband, aiding him in gaining social eminence, an educated wife for the civil servants "to further ensure their loyalty"[4]. Female education, however, tended to develop a dynamism of its own. Once having learnt to read and write, women did so extensively. Geraldine Forbes mentions 400 literary works by women in Bengal, for the years between 1850 and the First World War, while for Hyderabad city alone, more than 150 female Urdu writers are known for the period 1880 to 1940.[5] Belying the conventional assumption that women's voices are not recoverable, this field certainly deserves further study, a study which might well lead to a rewriting of large parts of women's history from a female perspective.[6]

> "The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the conditions of women. The second generation acted. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions."[7]

This development proceeded from the traditional image of women as the embodiment of the nation's values, as the guardians of its culture, an image

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2 Ibid., p. 6

3 Uma Chakravarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past', in: Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women. Essays in Colonial History*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, pp. 27-88 (ISBN 81-86706-03-8)

4 Forbes, p. 60

5 Nasir ud Din Hashmi, *Khawatin-e Dakn ki Urdu Khidmat*, Hyderabad 1940

6 The first large-scale project on the recovery of women's literary voices was the anthology by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, 2 Vols., Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1991 and 1993 (ISBN 019563219-1/2).

7 Forbes, p. 61

originally designed to cover women's role in their homes and families, assigning them the duties to uphold religious and cultural traditions and to educate the youth. Conceiving the whole nation as an "extended family"[8], women succeeded in carving out new spheres of influence without immediately having to challenge the old image. Geraldine Forbes follows up the early women's organisation, specially the upper-class and conservative Women's Indian Association and National Council of Women in India, and the All-India Women's Conference, socially middle-class oriented and politically close to the Indian National Congress.

These movements, however, were "too Hindu, too middle-class and too urban to appeal to or adequately represent all Indian women".[9] Breaking away from the older women studies, which tended to reproduce these limitations, Geraldine Forbes tries to widen her scope to include women as workers as well as the involvement of lower-class women in the anti-colonial movement and in agrarian revolts like the Telengana struggle and observes a twofold result of the broadening of women's activities: "First they lost their identification with the goddess and became 'enemies' who could be beaten or killed without a moment's notice. The other significant change was the decline in their influence."[10] Preliminary works on these aspects are still sketchy and uneven, but this hypothesis, pointing as it does to the tensions between gender and class identity, should certainly be followed up.

The Hindu women of Bengal and Bombay perhaps get somewhat more than their due attention in this study. However this is compensated for in the recent work of Gail Minault, in which she concentrates on Muslim women in North India, specially on the Urdu-medium ladies in the old cultural centres of the Moghul empire.[11] If invisibility can be compounded, Muslim women were even more concealed from the public gaze and the possibility of historical enquiry than their Hindu counter-parts. Gail Minault evolves a fourfold strategy to lift the veil that hides women's life. Concentrating on women as "an issue in the colonial encounter", as "symbols of the reformers' hopes and fears", as the "object of men's programmes of reforms"[12] reproduces male views on women. These three strategies provide the bulk of the material the study draws on. Not withstanding possible theo-

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[8] See Gail Minault (ed.), *The Extended Family. Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, Delhi 1981, in particular the editor's introduction 'The Extended Family as Metaphor and the Expansion of Women's Realm', pp. 3-19.

[9] Forbes, p. 189

[10] Ibid. p. 222

[11] Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars. Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (ISBN 019564190-6)

[12] Ibid., pp. 2, 6, 9

retical objections to what may seem the perpetuation of a hegemonic discourse, it appears quite justifiable for a pioneering work of this kind to first concentrate on sources which are comparatively easier to locate (that this is only a comparative advantage is shown by the extensive bibliography, which obligingly provides future researchers with the exact location of those materials which are not commonly available – a proceeding hopefully to be copied by other scholars as well). Nevertheless, this information needs to be supplemented by the "views of Muslim women concerning their family relations, religion, education, purdah, and the changes taking place in their lives."[13] This is the fourth strategy.

In a first part, Gail Minault follows up the role models for women as well as the didactic literature written for them. In detail she analyses treatises and fiction, concentrating not only on such well known educationalists as Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Deputy Nazir Ahmad and Hali[14], but includes works of Maulana Thanavi, Sayyid Mumtaz Ali, Sayyid Ahmad Dehlavi and the best-selling novels of Rashid ul Khairi as well as the Ladies' Magazines in Urdu, which she analyses right from their inception.

The transition from the *nawabi* culture, based on economic affluence and stable social hierarchies, to the worldview of the *sharafat*, men, who though still conscious of their inherited rank, emphasised self-control and discipline, hard work and the husbanding of resources, and who inclined towards the scriptural reform Islam, needed new role models for women as well. What appears striking in comparison with the contemporary Hindu movements is that these ideals are not so much evolved with reference to the colonial "Other" – Maulana Thanavi's Bihishti Zewar, for instance, written as late as 1905, contains but very few and fleeting references to the British presence[15] – but in opposition to popular female culture[16] and what was labelled as un-Islamic customs and traditions.

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[13] Ibid., p. 10

[14] Whereas the works of Sayyid Ahmad Khan have been subject to intensive academic discussion, and two of Hali's poems on women have been translated by Gail Minault some years ago (*Voices of Silence. English translation of Khwaja Altaf Hussain Hali's Majalis un-Nissa and Chup ki Dad*, Delhi 1986), the novels of Nazir Ahmad still await translation.

[15] Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Perfecting Women. Maulana Ashraf Ali Thanavi's Bihishti Zewar. A Partial Translation with Commentary*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992 (ISBN 0 19 563025 4)

[16] For a discussion of the ambivalence of the project of female education at the cost of a female culture that had evolved autonomously, see Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Sangari/Vaid (1989), pp. 127-180.

The second part of the book follows up the impact of these ideas on social life. Women, once schooled to these new ideas, started writing and organising themselves in "networks of reform".[17] Even if hardly any women of this first generation voiced ideas which differed radically from the male project, the very fact that women themselves claimed rights, that they attacked the rigidity of the purdah system with arguments drawn from the Quran and the Hadith, drew forth opposition, sometimes from the very men who had themselves voiced similar ideas.[18]

Whereas the first generation of "new women" had been educated at home, the years between 1900 and 1920 saw a whole wave of foundation of schools for *purdah* girls – the Muslim Girls' College in Aligarh (1906) was followed by the Mahbubia in Hyderabad (1907), while the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in Calcutta and the Karamat Hussain Girls' College in Lucknow were established in 1911 and 1912 respectively, to name just the most important. The graduates of these schools were the first women to leave the seclusion and to build up careers of their own – whether as social workers, teachers, poets or politicians.

2. Women and Law

Janaki Nair has presented a very readable book on women and law in colonial India[19], written primarily for law students, but making profitable reading for everyone looking for an introduction to the subject. Starting from the assumption that law formed an integral part of patriarchy, she concentrates less on the declared intentions of colonial legal arrangements than on the manner they were implemented and the results they produced for women. Together with the consequent refusal to limit her field of investigation to high class urban women, this approach permits her to assess the impact of "progressive" measures such as the Widows Remarriage Act, which brought legal chances to Brahmin widows, while at the same time depriving lower-caste widows, who were customarily permitted to remarry, of their property rights. "What may have been construed as progressive legislation for the women of upper caste households, then, frequently succeeded in undermining or reversing privileges women may have enjoyed in non-upper caste

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17 Minault (1998), p. 158

18 Ibid., p. 290

19 Janaki Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India. A Social History*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1996 (ISBN 18-85107-82-3)

households."[20] What was long labelled modernisation – whether due to British efforts to raise the status of Indian women, or as a result of indigenous reform movements – appears in this analysis as a homogenisation, which aimed at a Brahmanisation of society and extended the patriarchal control.

Janaki Nair no longer takes the unequivocal opposition between colonial state and national movement for granted, but discovers instead a joint project of expanding patriarchalism into areas, where women had previously preserved a certain freedom. "One of the colonial state's preferred modes of seeking collaborators amongst Indians was to support and buttress Indian patriarchies, rather than rescue women from them."[21] Whether, however, matriarchy, the lifestyle of courtesans [22] and *devadasis* and the "un-reformed" *zenana* really provided a space in which not the male gaze but the women's own desires constructed their social identities and contributed to women's empowerment, certainly needs more research and discussion.

In two aspects the book transcends the traditional scope of female legal history: firstly, Janaki Nair does not limit herself to the classical debates on women's rights – sati, widow remarriage, age of consent, personal law and women's enfranchisement – but includes the results of labour legislation for female workers, the way it impeded, rather than strengthened, working opportunities for women.[23] The second aspect is the comparison with social legislation in the south Indian princely states, with which she is well acquainted through her previous research[24] – a comparison which allows a new assessment of the role of the colonial state in the reform of scriptural and customary Indian law.

The impact of the state on the reformulation of the concept of marriage, the rights and duties resulting thereof and the possibility to enforce them through the legal system forms the leading question in Sudhir Chandra's case-study of a late 19th century *cause célèbre*, the refusal of the twenty-two year old Rukhmabai to join her husband.[25] Child-bride at the age of eleven, she nevertheless had remained with her mother and stepfather and had been allowed to continue her education. Her husband, for his part, refused to

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[20] Ibid., p. 37

[21] Ibid., p. 42

[22] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, 'Life-style as Resistance: the Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow', in Violette Graff, *Lucknow. Memories of a City*, Delhi 1997, pp. 136-155

[23] Nair, p. 96

[24] Janaki Nair, *Miners and Millhands. Work, Culture and Politics in Princely Mysore*, Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998 (ISBN 81-7036-708-5)

[25] Sudhir Chandra, *Enslaved Daughters. Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (ISBN 019564213-9). The following paragraphs draw on my more extensive review, which was published in *The Book Review*, Delhi 1998.

pursue either education or career and led a dissipate life. When he finally claimed his bride, she refused to come and found support for her decision with her family. Social pressure having failed, her husband in 1884 filed a case for reconstitution of conjugal rights, which he lost in the first instance, the judge refusing to extend the applicability of the English law for "restitution" to cover an "institution" of conjugal rights as well. This decision, however, was reversed by the Bombay High Court, who ordered Rukhmabai to go "back" to her husband, or else to face imprisonment.

A seemingly private quarrel had become a political issue, which received extensive coverage by the media. Which were the issues involved beneath what were apparently only fine judicial points – whether the English law for the restitution of conjugal rights covered the institution as well, and whether or not this law was applicable in the Indian context?

First: The differentiation between the restitution and the institution of conjugal rights, which came quite naturally to common feeling, nevertheless raised thorny issues. Was sexual contact necessary for the legal validity of a Hindu marriage? If the marriage was considered complete only after consummation, what would be the consequence for the alimentation of the child widows? If moreover, as Rukhmabai and her supporters argued, consent was essential for Hindu marriage, the legality of most of the marriages would become open to doubt. Second: What rights flow from a valid marriage? The English law viewed marriage as a contract in the fulfilment of which both partners acquired a legal right. Marriage according to Hindu law, however, was nearer to the sacrament than to the contract. Did this give the partners more or less rights? Which were these rights? Third: Were these rights enforceable, who was called upon to enforce them and by what means?

Where English law, if strictly applied, would have annulled Rukhmabai's marriage because of lack of consent, where Hindu law could have proved more flexible, the administration of Hindu law by a British Court according to the English Civil Procedure Code decidedly gave her the worst of both systems. But was the application of Hindu law before the advent of the British really so much more favourable to women, as Sudhir Chandra would have the reader believe? Certainly a buttressing of the sentence of a panchayat court solely by spiritual pressure, such as sending a reluctant wife to hell after death or condemning her to be a worm for the next 10.000 years[26] may appear more human to an English educated young woman living in a city, but what about the villager, who believed in the reality of the condemnation, and who moreover had no means to evade the consequences of the ensuing social boycott? Were the chances of obtaining a judgement

[26] Ibid., pp. 87 and 91

respecting female self-determination greater in the hands of a panchayat composed of the leading men of a village or caste, and backed by the power of the *Peshwa*?

3. Gender and Social History in Maharashtra

These questions are taken up in an impressive book by Uma Chakravarti, which is not just a biographical study of Pandita Ramabai, as the title seems to suggest, but a carefully researched and well reflected history of society and gender in Maharashtra from the 18th to the beginning of the 20th century.[27] Ramabai, daughter of a nonconformist and unorthodox wandering Brahman, had been taught the holy scriptures by her father since a very early age. As a young girl, she was acclaimed by the reformist circles in Calcutta as an icon of the pure and highly educated Hindu woman of ancient times. However, this icon was endowed with the ability and desire to think for herself, and very soon started to speak and act on her own, no longer conforming to the male script. Whereas her cross-caste marriage could still be tolerated, at least among the reformers of Calcutta, influenced by the Brahmo Samaj, the fact that she refused her role as Brahmanic widow, when her husband died after a short span of married life, that she moreover started establishing schools and homes for other widows, taking them away from the control of their families and providing them with the possibility of leading an independent life, that she, finally, tired of the constant attacks, left the fold of Hinduism and converted to Christianity, proved too much even for the most liberal reformers.

This biography, which some years ago would probably have provided just another tale of woe of patriarchal oppression, is used by Uma Chakravarti as starting point to investigate the relations between caste, gender and the state. Like Christopher Bayly[28] and with the same opposition to an undifferentiated criticism of Orientalism which in turn remains fixed on the encounter between colonisers and colonised and fails both to take into account pre-colonial traditions and to further differentiate among the colonised, thus obliterating the possibility of the oppressed themselves turning oppressors, she starts her analysis in the 18th century, the period immediately preceding colonial penetration.

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[27] Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History. The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998 (ISBN 81-85107-79-3)

[28] Christopher Bayly, *Empire and Information. Intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780-1870*, Cambridge 1996; and Christopher Bayly, *Origins of Nationality in South Asia. Patriotism and Ethical Government in the Making of Modern India*, Delhi 1998.

The rule of the *Peshwa* in Maharashtra combined ritual and secular power in the hands of the Brahmans. Although customary law was differentiated according to caste status, it was guaranteed by the power of the state, which moreover assumed the responsibility for the upholding of the caste system, and thus perforce the control of female behaviour. "In Brahmanical patriarchy the relationship between caste and gender is crucial: ultimately the degree to which the sexuality of women is controlled is the degree to which a caste group is regarded as maintaining the purity of blood and can thereby establish its claims to be regarded as high. This is the key to understanding gender in 18th century Maharashtra under the Peshwas."[29] Sexual "offences" by women, especially by high-caste women, therefore came under the purview of the state and were punishable with imprisonment or enslavement.[30]

The advent of the British colonial power enhanced social mobility. As rising groups aimed at higher status, they not only did not challenge the framework of the caste system, but tried to emulate the stricter Brahmanic code, particularly with regard to female behaviour.[31] Dovetailing with the British perception of a uniform "Hindu" – but in reality Brahmanic – legal system, this development tended to further curtail women's freedom.

It certainly would be tempting at this stage to replace the dichotomy between British and Indians by a new one and to attempt to show a common project of "the men" oppressing "the women". It is to Uma Chakravarti's credit that she consistently avoids all facile approaches and explanations. Instead, she devotes a whole chapter to the ambiguities of family structures and attempts to delineate the power structures within the female world and the complicity of women with the patriarchal system. Seen from this angle, both the ideals of education and of companionship between husband and wife, appear ambivalent, as they not only curtailed the power of the senior women in favour of an enhanced control of the husband, but also aimed at "schooling" women to a new domestic ideology, instead of empowering them by the development of new faculties.[32] "The new educated woman did not, and was not expected to, shed the unique virtues of chaste, suffering Hindu womanhood. Further, the 'companionate' marriage of the new domestic ideologies was one-sided; it gave the husband the right to have expectations and desires, but denied them to the wife."[33]

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[29] Chakravarti (1998), p. 17

[30] Ibid., p. 18

[31] Ibid., p. 57

[32] Ibid., p. 210

[33] Ibid., p. 214

In what is perhaps the most interesting aspect of her study – and which shows how gender history not only adds to existing information, but fundamentally restructures our knowledge of the past –, Uma Chakravarti analyses the national movement in Maharashtra as an attempt to consolidate Brahmanic leadership in society. The refusal of men like Tilak to be drawn into reforms affecting social and gender relations hereby loses much of its contingency – it is no longer fortuitous "lack of modernity" in an otherwise progressive position, nor a pragmatic postponement of irrelevant side issues until the real problem, Indian freedom is solved, but an integral part of a Brahmanical worldview. "It was not that Phule and Ramabai betrayed the nation – rather they were the ones who were betrayed – as were their concerns – by the 'narrow' basis of a nationalism which itself was merely a construct of upper caste men."[34]

4. History of Masculinity

If gender history is not to be just another, more fashionable name for women studies, it is necessary to include the history of men as gendered beings – as opposed to depicting of male history as the "normal" and general, whereas the female constitutes the "other" and specific. Mrinalini Sinha was one of the first to take up the construction of images of British and Indian masculinity as a part of the colonial project. Her pioneering study on "Colonial Masculinity" has been re-edited by Kali for Women, now making it available on the South Asian market as well.[35]

Following up the creation of images of masculinity – or the lack of it – in four case studies, Mrinalini Sinha analyses both the British and the Indian discourse, how they defined the coloniser and the colonised[36] and how they were "shaped in the context of an imperial social formation that included both Britain and India".[37]

The Ilbert Bill had proposed to extend the criminal jurisdiction of Indian judges to European subjects living in the districts. The acrimonious debate which followed centred on the question whether giving Indians power over Europeans would result in a dangerous reversal of the "natural order", in

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[34] Ibid., p. 342

[35] Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity. The 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late 19th century*, Manchester 1995 / Delhi: Kali for Women 1997 (ISBN 81-85107-93-9)

[36] Ibid., p. 1

[37] Ibid., p. 2

which the strong were supposed to rule over the weak and the male over the female. Where positions of power were open to challenge, the construction of the Indians as a female or effeminate race, biologically determined their position and rendered it unchangeable.

The native volunteer movement, the second case study Mrinalini Sinha takes up, evolved round the question whether Indians were entitled to enrol as volunteers, or whether the masculinity and martial habitus associated with the port of arms should remain a racial privilege. The same differentiation between martial and effeminate races, the first not supposed to submit to the rule of the second, was the ideological centre of the debates round the Public Service Commission. This resulted in limiting Indian access to the imperial bureaucracy to the level of the provincial services, in order to avoid placing "effeminate" social upstarts in positions where they might wield authority over more "manly" natural leaders, thus transferring what was an issue between the colonial power and its critics to a conflict between Indians, grounded in biological differences.

The Age of Consent controversy, purporting to be an attempt by the colonial government to rescue Indian child brides from sexual abuse, quickly turned into a "test of native masculinity – a handy stick with which to beat Indian nationalists".[38] Drawing both on the long established topos that the place accorded to women was an indicator of the stage a civilisation had reached as well as on the Victorian ideal of the gentleman, which gave self-control a central place in the construction of masculinity, the British used the discussion to draw an image of the Indian male, which denied him this very manliness, and thus implicitly the right to rule the country. For the Indian nationalists on their part, it was the ability to protect the private sphere from colonial intervention, the power to resist any curtailment of their rights as husband and to keep intact the control over their womenfolk which constituted the real test of manliness.

Indira Chowdhury has written a slim, but highly modern – or should one rather call it post-modern – volume on virile history in Bengal,[39] which will certainly find an enthusiastic readership. None of the concepts, which are so fashionable at the moment, the discourse and the construction, the image and the icon, the self and the other, identity, resistance and of course orientalism are left out. Nevertheless, the realisation that, despite the promises held out by publicity, fashionable clothes seldom suffice to provide the person who wears them with a new personality, perhaps also holds true for

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[38] Ibid., p. 142

[39] Indira Chowdhury, *The Frail Hero and Virile History. Gender and the Politics of Culture in Colonial Bengal*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (ISBN 019564429-8)

fashions in historiography. More serious, however, are the objections to a cultural history which refrains from taking into consideration the social and economic anchoring of ideas, where the main impact of British colonialism seems to reduce itself to the creation of a discourse and to the "otherisation" of Indians, and where it is possible to write long chapters about male and female identities and about the icon of motherhood, without correlating them to the changing structures of family and employment taking place at the same time.

5. Women in Bengal

That these dangers are not inherent in post-modern theories themselves, is amply proven by the excellent work of Dagmar Engels on Bengali women.[40] Focusing on the creation of meaning, she emphasises the central position of language, without however neglecting non-verbal constructions. This broad definition of discourse allows her to integrate the analysis of debates and of social and economic changes as well as to take into account power relations, not only between colonisers and colonised, but also between men and women, senior and junior women and between different classes.

Worship of powerful female deities, the respect accorded to the mother, the homage paid to women as the embodiment of eternal Hindu/Indian values seem to stand in marked contrast to the subordinate position of women in everyday life. Dagmar Engels shows that women's power, based on the perception of female sexuality, was "apparently destructive [but] can become both creative and positive. Women are regarded as aggressive, malevolent and destructive if their *sakti* (power) is not under male control."[41] This very veneration therefore necessitated the construction of a separate and subordinate social space for women, which was only very gradually eroded with their participation in the national movement.

To record these changes, Dagmar Engels does not limit her attention to the analysis of the "symbolic structure of religious ideals"[42] – though she presents a penetrating and differentiated analysis of the position accorded to women in the traditions of Kulinism[43], Tantrism and Vaishnavism – but

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[40] Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal 1890-1939*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1996 (ISBN 019563720- 8); paperback edition 1999

[41] Ibid., p. 74

[42] Ibid., p. 42

[43] The Kulin Brahmin caste of Bengal was distinguished by a strict practice of hypergamy, leading not only to claims to a high dowry, but also to extensive polygamy.

takes into consideration marriage patterns that reacted not only to changing ideologies, but even more to the "break-up of close-knit communities due to urbanisation"[44] and to the migration to the larger cities, in which wives increasingly accompanied their husbands, thus evading the control of the joint family. Medical policy, too, which is investigated with special reference to childbirth, not only constructed the female body, but impacted decisively on the living conditions, and sometimes even the chances for survival of girls and women. This certainly is a field which should be explored in greater detail by further historical research.

Compared with the importance attached to the evolution of role models for women of the upper and middles classes, by both the colonial power and the national movement, working women receded into the background. Caught between a middle-class notion of respectability they could not live up to and declining chances of employment, they were "trapped between two worlds and got the worst of both".[45] This enlargement of the frame of reference to include women of very different economic backgrounds permits Dagmar Engels to show how the same discourse affects women not only differently, but in an almost opposite way. "Throughout our period women conquered social space which hitherto had been the prerogative of men. But it was a matter of class, not gender or culture, whether this implied greater or lesser opportunities for self-realisation, economic power and social and political representation."[46]

Gender, race and class criss-cross in the figure of the British woman in India. Metropolitan ideology, which was supposed to be no less valid east of Aden than in London, endowed the female with characteristics, encompassing everything men were not or rather did not want to be. Nature and biology, so the argument ran, had provided women with greater softness and emotionality, predestining them for a life in the protected home, whereas the men had to leave this home and enter the struggle for life, which required hardness, the ability not to be led by emotions. Where women were guided by their heart, the men used their brain. They personified order and method, and thereby were made for the governance of people. These same characteristics, so unequivocally male when opposed to the female, were expected from the Memsahib, once she was confronted with natives and expected to be obeyed.[47] These clear distinctions were once again broken in the figure

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[44] Ibid., p. 46

[45] Ibid., p. 228

[46] Ibid., p. 246

[47] Thomas Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (= The New Cambridge History of India, III.4), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995, pp.178-179

of the British women, who by their class-origin were clearly not destined to become Memsahib, who came to India as members of travelling theatres, who followed the army, or who took up "low-caste" work, and who thereby proved an embarrassment to the establishment, to the point of being seldom referred to, even in historical research.

6. Colonial Memsahibs

Indira Ghose has published an anthology of the writings of British women, who travelled in India in the 19th century, in which she succeeds in giving voice to these very different strands of thought.[48] No less than men, women travellers were prone to see only what they expected to see, when they travelled on horseback or glided past Indian reality on a boat. None of the orientalist clichés is missing, the "lazy, dissipated, depraved habits"[49], the "horrible darkness of the most corrupt and abominable superstitions"[50], but also the picturesque quality of everyday life, "come down to them out of a dim past and through countless generations"[51].

At the same time, quite a few ladies evinced rather an extraordinary distance towards British society and its attitude vis-à-vis India. Brushing aside warnings not to enter native bazars, not to allow the space separating the races to be encroached upon, they set out to see the "real India", in which they find much to admire, whether it is architecture, nature, or even music and religion. The most interesting chapter of Indira Ghose's book deals with the encounter of British and Indian women. Though seldom a meeting between equals, shared gender at times led to a feeling of solidarity, rarely recorded in other circumstances. At times, this common femaleness was supplemented by common interests, as in the conversations between Frances Isabella Duberly, who had taken part in the Crimean War, and the Rani of Gwalior, who had never been permitted to actually join a battle, though she was an excellent horsewoman and had often directed the army form behind *purdah*.

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[48] Indira Ghose (ed.), *Memsahibs Abroad. Writings by Women Travellers in 19th Century India*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (ISBN 019564423-9)

[49] Ibid., p. 26

[50] Ibid., p. 42

[51] Ibid., p. 49

7. Female Gazes on Partition

The personal side of official history which these travelogues supplement, also forms the topic of two very different books, dealing with women's suffering during Indian partition. Both Urvashi Butalia's *The Other Side of Silence* and *Borders and Boundaries*, written by Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin[52], are deeply committed and personal books, trying to lay emphasis on the particular, very often traumatic experience of women, which goes unheeded in the generalisations of history books. Drawing on oral history and – to a much lesser extent – on contemporary source material, the authors sketch a tormenting image of the violence in the partition period which was directed specially against women. That rape and abduction of women had been used to humiliate the men, whose honour was supposed to rest on their ability to protect the female members of their family and community, is already known. The extent, however, in which this equation of male and communal honour with female virtue and chastity has led to violence against the women within the community, which would rather kill the next of kin than permit their dishonouring, has never been described. Women to a large extent connived in this ideology, directing the violence against themselves, and exhorting hesitating members of the community to chose heroism rather than a life in shame and join the common suicide.

Unlike the case of men, violence against women did not end with the communal riots, but gained a new, institutionalised quality, as the newly founded states of India and Pakistan proceeded to the "recovery" of their respective abducted women. The wishes of the women themselves, many of whom had married in the meanwhile and had children from their erstwhile abductors, were at no point taken into consideration – any woman, irrespective of her age, belonging to the Hindu community in Pakistan or the Muslim community in India, and who had been separated from her family during partition, was claimed by "her" state. Secularism notwithstanding, India claimed the guardianship for all Hindu women on the subcontinent, who were not under "rightful" male protection or dominance. "If Partition was a loss of itself to the 'other', a metaphorical violation and rape of the body of the motherland, the recovery of women was its opposite, the regaining of the 'pure' [...] body of the women, essential, indeed crucial for the State's and the community's self legitimation. Extensive as it was, then, the detailed discussion in the Assembly on the Abducted Persons Recovery

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[52] Urvashi Butalia, *The Other Side of Silence. Voices from the Partition of India*, Delhi: Viking Penguin India, 1998 (ISBN 0-670-87892-8); Ritu Menon and Kamla Bhasin, *Borders and Boundaries. Women in India's Partition*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998 (ISBN 81-86706-00-3)

and Restoration Act had very little to do with the *women* who were its subject [...] the debate in the Assembly was an exercise in restoring or reaffirming the self-image of India."[53]

Both these books are highly unconventional, as shown by their courage to take up topics on which women's voices have effectively been silenced to date, and by the source material they use. Historians should take up the challenge of utilizing personal and subjective material, notably oral history, and at the same time evolve a methodology of how to make accessible to other scholars the large pool of information anyone working in this field is apt to gather, and thus to make it possible to verify and perhaps also to dispute the conclusions reached.

8. Beyond Sex and Gender

Methodological questions are accorded a central place in a volume edited by Patricia Uberoi on *Social reform, Sexuality and the State*, outcome of a conference held in Delhi in 1993.[54] The articles convincingly demonstrate that gendered history does not consist in adding some aspects of women's history – or for that matter men's history – to the general knowledge about the past, but in restructuring the whole of the canonical knowledge. They show that "women, and the relation of the sexes, are typically central to the operation of identity politics – the construction of selfhood and the projection of otherness – whether at the level of caste, class, community, region or nation"[55], and proceed to dismantle the conventional notion that social reformism is "animated by the progressive modern ideals of individualism, egalitarianism and humanism"[56], asking instead which groups profited by these reforms. This in turn leads to questioning the role of the state in furthering certain notions of male and female sexuality, not only in the area of personal law, but for instance also through public health[57] and a gendered

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[53] Butalia (1998), p. 144

[54] Patricia Uberoi, *Social reform, Sexuality and the State* (= Contributions to Indian Sociology, Occasional Studies 7), Delhi: Sage Publications, 1996 (81-7036-542-2)

[55] Patricia Uberoi, 'Introduction: Problematising social reform, engaging sexuality, interrogating the state', ibid., pp. IX-XXVI, quotation p. XIII. See also the volume by Zoya Hasan (ed.), *Forging Identities. Gender, Communities and the State*, Delhi 1994, notably the introduction by the editor.

[56] Uberoi, 'Introduction', p. IX

[57] Judy Whitehead, 'Modernising the motherhood archetype: Public health models and the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929', ibid., pp. 187-211

construction of insanity.[58] Particularly the relation between the laws governing property and inheritance on the one hand, and the control of female sexuality on the other, yield surprising results. Veena Poonacha studies the way the growth of the concept of private property in Coorg affected women's control over economic resources, which were previously owned collectively by the family. "With the development of the concept of property as something to be handed down only through lineal descent, women's sexual purity became a paramount consideration, and women were increasingly confined to the house."[59]

Prem Chowdhry shows how "inheritance and sexuality emerge as two faces of the same coin" in colonial Punjab.[60] With the aim of preserving the village community as the basis of imperial power in the province, the British sanctioned the customary law which favoured levirate marriage for widows as a means of keeping property together. If, on the other hand, the widow remarried outside the family, she lost her claim to inheritance, a situation which led in a considerable number of legal cases against widows who denied having officially been remarried, to their accepting "the charge of unchastity, and in British eyes, the notoriety of bearing illegitimate children, rather than forfeit their inheritance by admitting remarriage".[61]

In a fascinating study on contemporary wrestling culture, Joseph S. Alter shows that the definitions not only of female but also of male sexuality impacted on the construction of the political space and the nation.[62] Purity can only be achieved, so the philosophical background providing meaning to wrestling training, if the different forces in the body and the mind of the individual, which permanently threaten disruption, become balanced by hard training, a regimen encompassing all aspects of daily life, from food to the clothes worn, and celibacy. Wrestling contests, which are based on this virile purity while at the same time endangering it, provide the blueprint for political action. "The art and practice of wrestling are directly related to a kind of public critique of modern Indian politics wherein the moral, economic and administrative state of the nation is regarded as inherently corrupt. Many wrestlers claim that the nation's moral economy is thoroughly bankrupt and in need of radical reform; a kind of reform which must

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58 Amita Dhanda, 'Insanity, gender and the law', ibid., pp. 347-369

59 Veena Poonacha, 'Redefining gender relationship: The imprint of the colonial state on the Coorg / Kodava norms of marriage and sexuality', ibid., pp. 39-65, quotation p. 61

60 Prem Chowdhry, 'Contesting claims and counter-claims: Questions of the inheritance and sexuality of widows in a colonial state', ibid., pp. 65-83, quotation p. 65

61 Ibid., p. 76

62 Joseph S. Alter, 'The celibate wrestler: Sexual chaos, embodied balance and competitive politics in north India', ibid., pp. 109-131

be effected on the level of the individual body. The basic idea is, in effect, to turn everyone into a balanced wrestler so as to root out the primary agency of corruption and rebuild the nation from the ground."[63]

If the concept of "gender" was an answer to the attempt to reduce women to their bodies, the time has now come, so the argument of Meenakshi Thapan, to transcend this dichotomy between sex and gender, and draw emphasis on the "lived body in everyday life".[64] Vehicle for an individual's identity, the body is at the same time socially constructed and mediated by individual experience, a thesis which is followed up by Seemanthini Niranjana with reference to the female experience of space,[65] while Anna Aalten shows to what extent even "sex", once supposed to provide the biological raw material out of which cultural definitions could be constructed, is itself a cultural affair.[66]

In addition to these articles, which concentrate on the development of a new theoretical framework, a number of case studies are to be found, some of which contain both a wealth of material and deep analytical insight. Tanika Sarkar analyses a series of "scandals" in late 19th century Bengal, events which show "the quotidian and the domesticated at a moment of rupture" and "thereby set up an interpretative community that reads the text of the event".[67] The public sphere, in which these "scandals" were discussed, was not limited to law courts and newspapers, but found its expression in stories both printed and narrated by professional story, as well as in the popular theatre. Patricia Uberoi for her part focuses on the popular Hindi cinema, a medium unique both by its influence as by its possibility to translate discourses into powerful images.[68]

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[63] Ibid., p.127

[64] Meenakshi Thapan (ed.), *Embodiment. Essays on Gender and Identity*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997 (ISBN 019564179-5). The volume is the outcome of a conference held at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library in November 1994. Quotation from Meenakshi Thapan, 'Introduction: Gender and Embodiment in Everyday Life', ibid. pp. 1-35, p. 2.

[65] Seemanthini Niranjana, 'Femininity, Space and the Female Body. An Anthropological Perspective', ibid., pp. 107-125

[66] Anna Aalten, 'Femininity and the Body of Female Ballet Dancers in The Netherlands', ibid. pp. 125-145

[67] Tanika Sarkar, 'Scandal in High Places. Discourses on the Chaste Hindu Woman in Late 19th Century Bengal', ibid. pp. 35-74, quotation pp. 36-37

[68] Patricia Uberoi, 'Dharma and Desire, Freedom and Destiny. Rescripting the Man-Woman Relationship in Popular Hindi Cinema', ibid. pp. 145-172. See also the analysis by Mukul Kesavan, ' Urdu, Awadh and the Tawaif: the Islamicate Roots of Hindi Cinema', in Zoya Hasan (1994), pp. 244-258; and the recent publication by M. Madhava Prasad, *Ideology of the Hindi Film. A historical construction*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998 (ISBN 019564218-X)

9. Women, Development and Politics in South Asia Today

Roger and Patricia Jeffrey have been researching on women's lives in Bijnor District (U.P.) for more than fifteen years and have already presented several widely acclaimed studies on childbearing, marriage and women's everyday life.[69] Their latest book investigates the claim, propagated notably by the Cairo Conference on Population and Development in 1994, that a connection exists between the empowerment of women, for instance through schooling and access to economic resources, and the decline in fertility.[70] Aiming "to move social demography away from a concern solely with measurable features of individuals [...] towards a concern with relationships which link the decisions (or non-decisions) of individuals to the social collectivities of which they are a part"[71], the study focuses on the comparison between the dominant castes of two different villages, the Jats of Nangal and the Sheikhs of Qaziwala and searches for an explanation why the fertility rate of the Jats, but not of the Sheikhs had dropped since the 1950s and why today, Sheikh families with a comparable class situation and length of marriage have at least one more child than equivalent Jats.[72]

Carefully investigating and finally dismissing the hypothesis that changes in fertility might reflect economic rationalities, changing patterns in the relations between the sexes, female empowerment through schooling, Jeffrey and Jeffrey finally come to the conclusion that decisions about the size of the family were rarely "taken" by the woman or even the couple concerned, but rather were embedded in the perception of the kin-group about their economic and political chances. The Jats are a well-connected caste with political influence – reflected at the village level for instance in the location of schools and health care centres –, confident about their possibilities of effecting a further economic and political rise in the next generation. In this context it makes sense for a family to limit the number of children and to invest heavily in their education. The Sheikhs, for their part, hesitate to adopt family-planning, not because of the religious imperatives of some essentialised Islam, but because as "Muslims in a Hindu-dominated

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[69] Roger Jeffrey, Patricia Jeffrey and Andrew Lyons, *Labour pains and labour power. Women and childbearing in India,* London 1989; Roger Jeffrey and Patricia Jeffrey, *Don't marry me to a plowman! Women's everyday lives in rural north India*, Boulder 1996

[70] Roger Jeffrey and Patricia Jeffrey, *Population, Gender and Politics. Demographic Change in Rural North India* (= Contemporary South Asia 3), Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997 (ISBN 0-521-46653-9)

[71] Ibid., p. 35

[72] Ibid., p. 103

society"[73], even having few and highly educated children would not lead to a socio-economic improvement of their position[74], as they lack the connections necessary to translate educational qualifications into jobs.

With great clarity this study shows that neither schooling, nor the change in the patterns of marriage and residence – factors which are often claimed as leading to the enhancement of women's possibilities to shape their own lives – by themselves promote women's empowerment but are dependent on the larger political context for their actual impact.

Contrary to orientalists' clichés, which are nowadays popular in some circles of Western feminists, South Asian women are no longer solely passive victims. Notably the movements of politicised religion bring women to the forefront – the pictures of Sadhvi Rithambara and Vijayraje Scindia exhorting the men to destroy the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya went round the world. The "implication of women's agency for their emancipation and empowerment" is the central topic of a volume edited by Patricia Jeffrey and Amrita Basu on *Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia*.[75] Being symbols of their respective communities and drawing on traditional symbols like the suffering mother[76], enables the women to become visible and to actively participate in the political process, transcending the private sphere without having to challenge the values which separate women's worlds from and subordinate them to their male counterparts. At the same time this emphasis of religious identity commits the women to an agenda established by men and precludes a female solidarity transcending the boundaries of community and class. Analysing the current debate on the Uniform Civil Code, Zoya Hasan brilliantly demonstrates how this emphasis on the religious identity of women, both by the Congress and the BJP, leads to the marginalisation of the issue of their equal rights in favour of the discussion of the nature of Indian secularism.[77]

As Patricia Jeffrey concludes, "the question is not whether women are victims or agents, but, rather, what sort of agents women can be despite their subordination. We need to explore the distinctive ways and diverse arenas in

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[73] Ibid., p. 246

[74] Ibid., p. 228

[75] Patricia Jeffrey / Amrita Basu (eds.), *Resisting the Sacred and the Secular. Women's Activism and Politicised Religion in South Asia*, Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999 (ISBN 81-86706-09-7); quotation from Amrita Basu, 'Resisting the Sacred and the Secular', ibid., pp. 3-15

[76] Malathi de Alwis, 'Motherhood as a Space of Protest. Women's Political Participation in Contemporary Sri Lanka', ibid., pp. 185-202

[77] Zoya Hasan, 'Gender Politics, Legal Reform, and the Muslim Community in India', ibid., pp. 71-89

which women deploy their agency, the different people over whom they may exercise it and the agendas that orient and direct it."[78] This conclusion holds true for the historical research as well.

Studies on women and men and their relations certainly may be counted among the best-selling subjects of today's historiography, specially in South Asia. Whereas this may in part be attributed to fashion, to the curiosity raised by a subject which has long remained hidden from the common gaze, gender studies have made it clear that they have come to stay in the open and to claim their part of the inheritance. The remarkably high standard these studies have reached make it very probable that they will realise their claim.

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[78] Patricia Jeffrey, 'Agency, Activism and Agendas', ibid., pp. 221-243, quotation p. 223