

Panel Discussion: Feminist Theory: 3

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One must begin at the outset by suggesting that the unwelcome attention that women's studies centres in India have attracted recently is a measure of their success. The recent UGC directive, which has rechristened Women's Studies Centres as Women and Family Studies Centres is a sign of the successful inroads into the Indian academy made by the very substantial work in this field of study over the past twenty years. I would like here to consider the specific effects of the emergence of feminism on the practice of history. And I would like to take the time allotted to me to make two basic points:

One, that the questions and methods of feminist historiography in India have been primarily, and with powerful and insightful effect, been driven by certain critical events (and the links between the women's movement and academic feminism in India are too well known to bear repetition here). This is not to highlight a deficiency or even describe a secondary mode of intellection, but a particular institutional and pedagogical practice within which the effects of theory have been slighter, and, consequently, the mode of feminist theorisation in India has been quite different from those of what we might poorly describe as the global west.

Two, I would like to propose that, once more for reasons to do with the uneven institutional spaces within which such intellection takes place, the effect of feminist history has been to make historical understandings an imperative for many other social science disciplines — literary criticism, sociology and anthropology, even economics — and thus feminist history has made a far more substantial difference laterally to many of the feminist approaches to these practices than to the more general professional practice of history. The gains, therefore, though they have been substantial and impressive, have nevertheless not translated into the kinds of paradigm shifts within the discipline that are more than amply warranted.

First let me consider some of the broad ways in which feminist history contributes to a different perspective of the Indian past. If at one time, only exceptional women were talked about in our standard histories, certainly one of the earliest tasks was to give more ordinary women a voice, "make them visible", "bring women in from the seams of history" and remove them from the large list of people without history. This work focused on the achievements of a range of women - writers, lawyers, saints, and politicians.

But more striking, the burgeoning of social history as a genre opened up newer questions for feminist historians, questions which allowed them to go beyond the exceptional, and into the structure of the social formation itself. We may well be, as Kumkum Roy has recently reminded us, further away from answering the question, "what was the real position of women in early India?" but what we have instead are many answers and even more questions: there are rich accounts today of Buddhist nuns,

medieval saints, rebels and warriors, courtesans, Bible women, travellers, and those who simply survived with no male support at all. This kind of social history takes the life of individuals as the biography of a social group. But this form of history writing remains within the additive or contributory mode.

Today, there are other and perhaps more crucial ways in which the feminism has transformed the practice of history: mainly by demonstrating that bringing questions about women to the foreground can transform entirely our perspectives on law or political movements, or cultural practices. And this is what I will focus on briefly in this lecture.

1. Lata Mani's study of sati in colonial India was among the first texts to critically interrogate the sources from which a well known narrative has been fashioned, one which we were all well taught in schools and colleges, namely that the 19th century was the period of social reform. In particular, we were told, it was the period in which the status of women was transformed, taking Rammohun Roy's intervention in the abolition of sati in 1829 as the founding moment of this transformation. The abolition of sati thus became emblematic of a wide range of struggles to reform a backward social order.

Mani's work, however, revealed not only the complicity between Indian reformers and their colonial counterparts, whether official or missionary, but most important, noted the silence of the women in this enormous outpouring of concern about sati which prompted more than 2000 parliamentary papers, raging debates in India and Britain, and a series of legal regulations. This, she further suggested, was a struggle that concerned itself more with the status of Indian tradition than the status of Indian women. It was tradition and its meaning that was at the heart of this discourse rather than the position of women (and let us remind ourselves of the ambiguities which are not allowed into our textbooks, namely that the Indian Penal Code in 1860 finally smuggled in the concept of a legal sati by allowing the "voluntary culpable homicide by consent")

Mani's method was inspired in large part by the analysis of discourse enabled by Foucault, and by Said's analysis of Orientalism. From a completely different perspective came the work of legal scholars who, through their analysis of the case law showed up the flaws of the century of social reform. Lucy Carroll and Prem Chowdhury for instance told us that the effects of the widow remarriage act were detrimental to those communities that already permitted widow remarriage and conversely, the compulsions on widows to remarry often resulted in their losing their rights to property as in Punjab.

These and countless other pieces of work should have led to the revision of the narrative of 19th century social reform. But that has not happened. Indeed Lata Mani's text even had some unintended and disturbing effects in being seized by the Hindu right to triumphantly suggest that all colonial interventions in the sphere of the Indian cultural or social reform had been misplaced! (I have just finished reviewing the official textbooks of the Karnataka state, and find to my dismay that the celebration of Rajput women who committed sati and jauhar continues undisturbed: it is wifely duty, conjugal

love and so on which are valorised throughout these texts, while the normalisation of violence against women remains unquestioned.)

2. To take another example: the narrative of modernisation after the encounter with colonialism, its destruction of Indian industry and the new opportunities that it engendered was disrupted by historical research that showed how women were marginalised by the introduction of new technologies (Mukul Mukherjee and Nirmala Banerjee), which alternately recruited or dismissed women as the needs of the new economy demanded (Radha Kumar). But such work has not really rewritten the narrative of the modernisation that was inaugurated by colonial rule.

3. Therefore, feminism has had only an uneven impact on historiography. There is, however, much more of a lateral impact in the increased attention paid by other disciplines to the practice of history. There were two moments in the post-colonial historiography of colonial India which brought history the recognition it deserved: one, a body of work which engendered something of a paradigm shift in Indian historiography, namely, the Subaltern Studies project. But let us recall that while the SS project was scrupulously attentive to the role of women, the function of women as a sign was largely ignored, (i.e. the ways in which movements for political change used or altered the terms of gender hierarchies and so on).

So two, it was the work of specifically feminist scholars that drew additional attention to the practice of history and to the great benefit of history. It is striking that many of those who took to writing history were scholars from other disciplines: notably English literature, sociology, anthropology, and economics. Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, K. Saradmoni, and numerous others come readily to mind.

The work of these feminist scholars showed that even in those instances which paid scrupulous attention to the role of women in movements for political change, new questions brought other elements into focus, and questioned the narrative that emphasised the empowerment of women: the troubling question of sexuality and the burdens of chastity placed on women, for instance, cast a different light on even revolutionary movements. What, moreover, was striking was that while the public record of the struggle may have acknowledged the role of women, it did much to depoliticise and marginalise it. The monumental “We Were Making History...” collection by bringing audibility to the women who participated in the Telengana armed struggle significantly transformed the celebratory narratives of how the communist party functioned in those crucial years between 1948 and 1951. The emphasis here was on allowing the experience of these women to come through, and indeed the theorisation of the interviews was left until a later date.

“We Were Making History. . .” produced an account which gave a well-known struggle a whole new meaning. The interviews of women who had participated in this struggle were all the more poignant and revealing since many of them spoke of the

ephemeral gains of their political participation, as women were thrust back into families and home, or even behind sewing machines as one of them put it.

Other scholars reviewed exceptional arrangements in which women were positioned within the family to enjoy a certain amount of power. Nair matriliney for instance, was always acknowledged as a site of female power, but in ways that suggested women stood to gain from the introduction of recognisable marriage forms.

However, an economist, K. Saradmoni, in the course of examining the effects of land reforms on women, turned to history. Saradmoni began an investigation into the relationship between women and land in Palghat district of Kerala, "While writers of the twentieth and earlier centuries" she said, "who dealt with land or society in Kerala found it impossible to ignore woman none of them saw her in this light" namely as one who is part of a wider caste structure which is upheld in part by women themselves (p.26). Therefore, she undertook a "peep into history" (and this peep accounted for close to 100 pages of her book) which revealed the ways in which women have successively lost out in their property rights from the days of marriage reform right through into a period of acclaimed land reforms. In a way what Saradmoni invited from her informants was a moment of "speaking bitterness" about land reforms and changes in the practice of marriage. Her study, which was undertaken for a non-aligned meet in 1979, evoked the personal as well as the social scientific mode. Although it was mainly descriptive, Saradmoni's account is one in which the personal jostles with the social scientific as a mode of description. Methodologically, the "God's eye view" is abandoned in this account.

What Saradmoni finds is that there is no clear cut opinion or memory of the time when Maramukaathayam was prevalent and empowered women, a fact which she said that social scientists should pay attention to. Questions of feminists may thus not lead to predictable answers. She called into question the usual narrative that spoke of more than 100 years of "progressivism" in reforming marriage patterns and land relations. More than 10 years later, she investigated similar questions in a different region of Kerala, the Travancore State, conceding that matriliney did ensure women more stability than the patrilineal home, but following the attack on matriliney and its economic base, could not become the basis for a liberatory family order. In this work too, there was a productive commingling of the personal with the social scientific mode, an audacious crossing of disciplinary boundaries to generate a range of historical sources (economic /legal/ literary) leading to an insightful piece of history.

4. Perhaps nothing demonstrates the role played by critical events in structuring feminist history as the many and wide ranging investigations of the Partition of India. Feminists such as Urvashi Butalia traced their investigations of Partition to the moment of the anti-Sikh riots in Delhi: "It took 1984 to make me understand how ever present Partition was in our lives too, to recognize that it could not be so easily put away in the covers of history books. I could no longer pretend that this was a history that belonged to

another time, to someone else." Following this interest, many other historians were drawn to that painful birth of the two nations.

5. Unwittingly perhaps, feminist historiography has pushed consistently towards an understanding of history that resembles what was prescribed by Walter Benjamin in his critique of history as "empty homogenous time." Feminist historians have consistently denied Indian history the continuity and homogeneity that it had long been burdened with, in order to make new subjects visible and to raise questions about familiar notions of the golden ages. And even feminist attempts at producing such golden age narratives — the time of matriliney, the time when women were the sole guardians of music and dance and so on — have not been spared from feminist critique. This is particularly important at the time when the Golden Ages are being eagerly revived by the current political dispensations. Still, it is somewhat chastening to learn that despite the work of scholars such as Kumkum Roy in unpacking the meaning of the Vedic Age by careful textual analysis and imaginatively contextualised reinterpretation, mainstream scholars pay scant heed to it: R.N. Nandi does not even cite this work in his recent book *Aryans Revisited*. Feminist history therefore remains within a somewhat restricted sphere of circulation.

But this does little to undermine the very substantial contributions of feminist history to the understanding of Indian history, if only within the feminist spheres. Indeed, let me conclude by saying that although the current attempt to redefine women's studies within the rubric of women and the family bodes ill for the future of feminist historiography, it must be seized as a moment to say things about the Indian family that the votaries of "familism" would not like to hear. This has been the most lasting contribution of feminist history, interrogating and disrupting the smooth and homogenous narratives of the Indian past.

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