In Search of Our Past

A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India

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Women, like other subordinate groups in society are among the muted or even silent voices of history. They have been excluded both as actors and as authors from featuring in history as they should and remain one of its most neglected subjects. The exercise of rewriting the past has been confined to invisibilising women: their presence has only been negatively registered, mainly through a vast silence.

However, it is necessary to draw attention to the fact that while in general women have been invisible in historical writing this invisibility varies vastly over time and space according to differences in social and cultural practices. The Indian situation represents an example of the relative visibility of women in historical writing particularly with regard to 'ancient' India wherein historians created a certain space for women in the reconstruction of the past, but the space conceded to them existed only within clearly defined parameters as this review will show.

In this paper we undertake, first, a broadly representative rather than comprehensive historiographical survey of studies on women in early India. The survey does not concentrate on factual details, important though these may be, but on the preconceived notions or assumptions which may have determined the kinds of facts considered historically relevant. Second, attention is paid to the kinds of explanations offered for changes in women's status. And finally we examine possible alternatives.

I

WOMEN in ancient India have been the focus of scholarly attention since the 19th century. Both Indian and western scholars undertook to study the position of women in early India, although from different perspectives. Such scholars, as often Indologists or Sanskritists as historians, contributed significantly, especially insofar as unearthing information about women in early India was concerned. Hence, works of pre-independence authors such as Upadhya (1933), Altekar (1938, 1959), Bader (1867), Meyer (1952) and Horner (1930) although lacking in analytical rigour remain useful, at least for the wealth of detail they incorporate.

Further, these works are in many ways crucial, as they have directly and indirectly served to provide a paradigm for post-independence studies as well. The influence of Altekar in particular may be recognised both explicitly and implicitly in later works. Hence we will examine the works of these and other scholars which may be regarded as representative of certain trends, rather than attempt to provide a detailed survey of the entire list of works available at present. We will also attempt a general assessment of the problems involved in the writing of the history of women in early India as well as an examination of possible alternative approaches. While the limitations of a wide-ranging survey are obvious, the present endeavour will have served its purpose if it provokes discussion and debate on an issue which has often been distorted or neglected.

To start with the western scholars, some of whose works are amongst the earliest (for example, Bader 1867 and Horner 1930), there is, in the first place, an almost unquestioning dependence on textual sources. The fact that women, the subject of the studies, had very little to do with the composition of such texts, with the notable exception of the *Therigatha*, and the problems this might pose in terms of an understanding of women's situations, are unfortunately, nowhere recognised. Thus, while Meyer is aware of the *varna* bias of his sources (1952: 151, 169) and its possible implications, he does not even seem to be aware of the existence of an inbuilt gender bias in the same.

That the nature of the sources used could significantly influence the kinds of conclusions arrived at is evident from Horner's work (1930) entitled *Women in Primitive Buddhism*, based primarily on Buddhist Pali literature. The shift is evident in the very scheme of chapterisation. Thus, while most works on women in early India deal with the categories of daughters, wives, mothers and widows, Horner introduces a new category of women workers. This is possibly the first attempt to analyse the role of women outside the kinship network—shaking off the domestic aspect of women and attempting to see her as an independent entity in the context of wider society. Despite this conceptual advance, Horner's sketch of the woman worker is superficial, since it contains only a few instances of labouring women, the rest of the section being a description of various courtesans. However, she compensates in her section on the women in the *sangha*, where she outlines the efforts of women to pursue non-familial goals. This analysis of the importance of asceticism for women is in marked contrast to Altekar's assessment of the ascetic ideal, to be discussed later.

Apart from the problems inherent in an uncritical use of the sources, a certain tendency to romanticise the early Indian situation is evident in these works. This is perhaps most apparent in Bader's study. Thus she exclaims (1867: 48) "the wife! the wife in ancient India! With what a shining aureole is she crowned there!". Such an idealisation, possibly explicable in terms of disillusionment with a western civilisation in the throes of industrialisation, is however, not conducive to a realistic assessment of the early Indian situation.

In a similar vein she eulogises the women of the Vedic age (1867: 29): "Unfettered in their movements, they listened to the discourses of men, though decorum did not permit of their answering directly", without even pausing to consider whether 'decorum' thus defined was not acting as a fetter.

Problems are also posed by certain racist and sexist assumptions. Thus Bader (1867: 23) talks of the white Aryan family which encounters an indigenous 'yellow' race "uncultivated in their customs, rude in their tastes and having no idea of a deity" while 'Woman' (with a capital W) is for Meyer (1952: 3) "that great bundle of contradictions". This statement is used by him to explain the contradictory utterances about women in the epics, although elsewhere he postulates an explanation in terms of the tensions inherent in a patriarchal system which however he is reluctant to develop as an argument (1952: 208).

A further drawback of these works is the superficial explanation they offer for change when they recognise it. Thus according to Bader (1867: 331) the decline in women's status from the glorious Vedic age has to be linked to the growing popularity of the

Krishna cult which included a certain grossness in the religion of the Hindus. More significant in the long run is the tendency to explain the preference for sons over daughters in terms of the requirement of a son for the funeral rites (Bader 1867: 28, Meyer 1952: 46). This assumes an autonomous development of the ritual which then influences the kinship structure. This simplistic connection is one that is repeated time and again in later works, thus taking for granted much that needs in fact to be explained.

Before turning to the works of Indian authors in the pre-independence period, we will briefly examine why they undertook studies of the status of women at all, and why they remained confined essentially to ancient India. The setting for the interest in the status of women may be found in the reaction of the indigenous elite to their perception of their own society in the context of colonialism. As part of this reaction, the socio-religious reform movements of the 19th century advocated a reform of Hindu society whose twin evils were seen as the existence of the caste system and the low status of women. The perceived indications of the low status of women, institutions such as *sati*, female infanticide, child marriage and enforced widowhood, were attacked by virtually all the major reformers of the 19th century, whether they belonged to the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal, the Prarthana Samaj in Maharashtra, or the Arya Samaj in north India. The preoccupation with these questions in particular was derived at least partly from the dominance of Sanskritic models, since the major thrust in the debate came from within the upper sections of the Hindu community, which was responding to the challenge posed by western notions of liberalism. The influence of Sanskritic models is evident from the fact that both the proponents and the opponents of reform attempted to justify their positions by invoking the sanction of the *Shastras*. The deciding factor in the debate was the relative antiquity of the sources utilised, the underlying assumption being that the older the source, the more authoritative and authentic it was.

Amongst the works under consideration, this preoccupation with the earliest literary sources is reflected in B S Upadhya's concentration on women in the Vedic age (1933) as well as in the importance Altekar (1959) assigns to the Vedic phase, and his characterisation of it as the pinnacle from which a gradual decline is noticeable.

The attempt to focus on the earliest texts available was also, to a considerable extent, related to the ideals associated with the national movement, which influenced history writing in a number of other areas as well. The search for origins and for an ideal situation was both a means of instilling national and occasionally communal pride, as well as a reflection of it.[1] Apart from providing the context within which historians worked, the perceived requirements of an emerging nation were also one of the explicit areas of concern for them. Thus, both Upadhya and Altekar conclude their works with specific prescriptions for the future in areas such as legal and educational reform. In this, the objectives of these writers were markedly different from those of their western counterparts.[2]

The concerns noted above determined to a great extent the focus of such works which were preoccupied with legal and religious questions such as the right to remarriage, the existence of the practice of *niyoga*, the right to property, the origin and development of the institution of *stridhana*, the right of the childless widow to adopt and so on. On the religious front, there is a near obsession with the right to sacrifice, either on one's own, or with the husband, as well as with the possible interest and involvement with the pursuit of religious goals. The social position of women is usually visualised in terms of their inclusion or exclusion from public assemblies and their right to education. On the whole, the perspective on women was confined to seeing them within the context of the family. Such a definition of the criteria relevant for assessing women's lives had certain obvious limitations, as not all aspects of women's lives were regarded as worthy of attention. Further, a bias in favour of the areas of interest to the brahmanical male authors was almost in-built into such works, given the nature of the sources commonly used.

This interest in certain specific criteria, defined in terms of concerns of the 19th and 20th centuries, also often resulted in a rather unhistorical attitude in some cases, as the emergence and development of individual traits are traced over time, instead of viewing such features within a total conext. Altekar to some extent attempts to remedy this situation through the use of what he describes as the "horizontal method" (1959: 335), but this suffers from the limitation of becoming a source-based survey, beginning with the *Rig Veda* and ending with the later *Smritis*, commentaries and digests. Thus, a contextual analysis of the data is virtually missing.

Perhaps one of the major problems faced by these authors was that they were compelled, unlike their western counterparts, to postulate a certain amount of historical change in the status of women. Thus, if the Vedic age was the golden age, then this had to be justified in terms of the indices of status noted earlier, and changes had to be located in time and space. Further, and more significantly, such change had to be explained. This was useful insofar as a certain historical perspective was regarded as essential. However, in many cases, the underlying assumptions of these historians as well as the explanations they offer for change suffer from serious limitations. Despite these limitations, these works have proved influential in shaping popular perceptions of the problem. Given this popularity, a critical examination of such studies seems particularly necessary. Hence we will examine the work of Altekar in particular in detail.

Altekar's (1959) study on the *Position of Women in Hindu Civilisation* is a comprehensive review of the position of women in India based almost exclusively on brahmanical sources from the earliest times down to the mid-fifties of this century when the Hindu Code Bill was under consideration. However, his overwhelming concern is with women in the family, more specifically on women in upper caste families and the undercurrent through much of his work appears to be that the status of women needs to be raised mainly in order to ensure the healthy development of the future race of India.

Altekar's preoccupation with the propagation of the race often assumes fascist overtones. Thus on the subject of the antiquity of *sati* as a custom, Altekar (1959: 342) puts forward the view that the custom was prehistoric and that it subsided during the Vedic period. He says: "The exigencies of the political situation in the Vedic period were responsible for the abolition of the prehistoric *sati* custom and the sanctioning of *niyoga* and remarriage." For Altekar even a comparison with Hitler and Mussolini seems perfectly in order and he goes on to suggest that like Hitler and Mussolini the Vedic chiefs were anxious for "heroes, more heroes and still more heroes. The gospel they preached to the householder was not that of eight sons of the later days but of ten. The non-Aryans were probably outnumbering the Aryans and they were anxious to have as strong and numerous an army as possible. Under these circumstances it would have been suicidal policy to encourage the revival of the obsolete custom of *sati* or to prohibit widow remarriages. Society came to the conclusion that its vital interests demanded that the custom of *sati* should be interdicted and that widows should be allowed to marry and multiply the stock" (ibid: 342).

Apart from Altekar's underlying assumption that women were ideally baby-producing machines he often reiterates existing male stereotypes about women as for example when he says that women were "naturally more conservative" (ibid: 158, 297) "even in matters that affect their own welfare" (ibid: 158). Further they are supposed to be by nature "more religious and devotional than men" (ibid: 206). It is also evident that to some extent women are, for him, ornamental show pieces whose dress and finery are perceived merely in terms of giving an idea of the wealth of the community and enabling "us to obtain a glimpse of its progress in trade, mining and metallurgy, and skill in inlaying, tailoring and embroidery" (ibid: 1-2).

These inherently sexist assumptions were compounded with racist ones as well. Thus he attempts to explain the relative decline in the status of women from the Vedic (when

everything was tickety-boo) to the post-Vedic period in terms of the unions between Aryan men and non-Aryan women. According to him (ibid: 345-346) "The introduction of the non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household is the key to the general deterioration of the position of women that began imperceptibly about 1000 BC and became quite marked in about 500 years. The non-Aryan wife with her ignorance of Sanskrit language and Hindu (sic) religion could not obviously enjoy the same religious privileges as the Aryan consort. Association with her must have tended to affect the purity of the Aryan co-wife as well." Ultimately, and due to the non-Aryan wife, all women, Aryan and non-Aryan lost their religious privileges. One is left wondering why, using the same logic, Aryan men who associated with such non-Aryan women, were not deprived of their religious privileges.

Such underlying assumptions, combined with the links with the national movement noted earlier, are reflected in similar explanations of dubious value. A procedure frequently adopted is to justify, implicitly if not explicitly, the existence of a number of institutions in terms of parallels drawn from other western or eastern cultures. This is evident from the discussion of child marriage (ibid: 64), divorce, (ibid: 83, 108), the theory and practice of the wife's subordination (ibid: 93, 331), the husband's right to beat his wife (ibid: 108), *sati* (ibid: 116), levirate (ibid: 143), the seclusion of women (ibid: 177), the association of dancing girls with temples (ibid: 184), the participation of or lack of it in public life (ibid: 191), exclusion from religious rights (ibid: 194), the non-recognition of the importance of housework (ibid: 233), the lack of recognition of proprietary rights (ibid: 212), the double standard in sexual norms (ibid: 312), and the tendency to attribute "all real and imaginary faults to women alone" (ibid: 325). While focusing on such parallels may have served a certain purpose in convincing Indian men that they were not alone in indulging in certain practices which were regarded as repulsive from the 19th or 20th century liberal stand-point, it had certain limitations as an explanatory device, as each of these features was wrenched out of the historical context, which alone could have lent it meaning.

The explanation Altekar offers for the relative dislike of daughters as compared to sons also suffers from severe limitations and would have had the effect of reinforcing existing stereotypes about women. Thus he says: (ibid: 3 ff) "In ancient times in all patriarchal societies the birth of a girl was generally an unwelcome event. Almost everywhere the son was valued more than the daughter. He was a permanent economic asset of the family... He perpetuated the name of his father's family. As he grew into adolescence and youth he could offer valuable co-operation to his family when it had either to defend itself or to attack an enemy. The daughter on the other hand had no fighting value whatever." Altekar hastily adds however that "it is no doubt true that women have potential military value: by giving birth to sons they contribute indirectly to the fighting strength and efficiency of their community. (But) primitive man found the woman a handicap rather than a help in actual fighting. He therefore hardly ever welcomed the birth of a daughter." Thus in justifying primitive man especially in India a patrilineal, patriarchal, militaristic society is taken for granted for no discernible reason. This is in many ways an extension and elaboration of the argument that the reason why women were assigned a low status was that they could not perform the funeral rites for their fathers.

Elsewhere the explanation offered becomes even more specious as when Altekar suggests (ibid: 5-6) that the reluctance displayed at the birth of a daughter had its roots in the 'trauma' of parents who would have to see the misery of their daughters who might be faced with widowhood. It is also possible that the poignant pain felt by the parents at the time of the first separation from their daughter after her marriage may be partly responsible for the general dislike for the daughter. Of course, the possibility that the miseries of a daughter who had to endure separation from her natal family, or possible widowhood, may have been augmented by parental dislike, is not even considered.

One of the major problems with Altekar's study is that he makes very little connection between the status of women and the social formation in which they are placed. Thus he characterises (ibid: 339) the position of women in the Vedic age as being "fairly satisfactory", particularly because they occupied a prominent place in social and religious occasions, where in his opinion they had absolute equality with men. However, he concedes that their main disability during this age was that they could not hold or inherit property. His explanation for this takes into account, in some measure, the lack of a clearly developed system of proprietary rights in this period, but his explanation (ibid: 339) for women's exclusion from them shows no analytical rigour. He says: "The transition from the communal to the family ownership of land was just taking place; the conception of the rights of the different members was yet to crystallise. Naturally therefore women, like many other male members of the family were incapable of owning property; the patriarch was its sole owner and guardian." This analysis is not carried through in his more decisive explanation for women's exclusion from landed property when he says "Landed property could be owned only by one who had the power to defend it against actual or potential rivals or enemies. Women were obviously unable to do this and so could hold no property."

The lack of conceptual rigour in analysing a given society of which women were a part is also evident in Altekar's attempt to account for the absence of queens in the Vedic age, which was an unnecessary exercise, given the fact that specialised political institutions were barely developing during the period under consideration.

Only in one area does Altekar connect the status of women with the economic context in which they were placed, and this was in discussing their contribution to production. In analysing the high position of women during the Vedic period (ibid: 342) he stated that it was because they took an active part in agriculture and the manufacture of cloth, bows and arrows, and other war materials. He also suggests that the Aryan conquest of the indigenous population and its incorporation in the social structure of the victors as the *sudra varna* had given rise to a huge population of semi-servile status. In such a situation women ceased to be productive members of society and as they became parasites (sic) they lost the esteem of society. The distinction between participation as producers and participation in terms of controlling production is, however, not made, with the result that the explanation offered remains superficial.

One of the explanatory devices frequently invoked by Altekar is the ascetic ideal. This is associated with a number of ills affecting women. Thus it serves to explain the lowering of the age of marriage, which according to Altekar (ibid: 32) was a reaction to 'maidens' joining the Buddhist and Jain orders and not living up to the 'ideal'. Moreover, the introduction of *sati* is also attributed in part to the same ideal (ibid: 125) as is the fact that widow remarriage was opposed in later texts (ibid: 110). As noted earlier, asceticism, especially of the kind associated with the nunneries of the heterodox sects, offered women an alternative outside the restrictions of the kinship structure and an opportunity for self-expression. Hence to view it as the source of all evils is not only unhistorical but smacks of Hindu defensiveness in relation to other sects and traditions. It is pertinent also that Altekar fails to explain why asceticism had no impact on the Hindu widower. However, despite its inadequacies as an explanation, the ascetic ideal and its impact are frequently referred to in almost parallel terms in later literature as well.

In summing up Altekar's work on the position of women in Hindu civilisation what emerges from the mass of detail that he has enumerated is the absence of analytical rigour required of a historian: what we are left with is a picture of the idyllic condition of the Aryans in the Vedic age, and within that of the utterly respectable status of women. It is a picture which now pervades the collective minds of people of the upper castes in India. Further, it has set the tone for almost all the works on women that followed it for decades. Thus, Altekar's influence has almost crippled the emergence of a more analytically rigorous study of women in ancient India.

II

The influence of nationalist historians manifests itself in the works of post-independence scholars at a number of levels. To start with, the notion that the Vedic age was a golden age is reiterated time and again and is rarely, if at all challenged. For example, Indra (1955: no page number) states that his thesis throughout has been that "in the early Aryan society represented by Vedic literature, women enjoyed a much better position... social, religious, political, than they did in the later ages of the *Dharmasastras*".[3] Thus, alternative possibilities remain unexplored, once the direction of change in women's status is taken for granted.

Assumptions about the immutable nature of women also persist, with some variations. Thus Chaudhuri (1956: 29) states that "women, owing to their conservative nature, always stick to things of time immemorial", while others such as Das (1962: 40) support Manu with evidence from Freud to argue that women lack the ability of 'true' appreciation and 'balance' of mind and do not possess much depth of reason. The stereotype is only occasionally challenged, as for example by Jayal (1966: 253) who suggests that "many of the traits associated with women were... not simply based on biological facts or organic defects... but may have been later developed due to the cultural pattern of society which denied all intellectual, educational, religious and property rights to women".

Racist assumptions likewise, surface occasionally. Jayal (1966: 298) for instance echoes Altekar's views on the responsibility of the non-Aryan wife for the general decline in the ritual status of women in the post-Vedic phase, while Indra (1955: 50) suggests that the "admixture of races" was one of the causes leading to child marriage.

At a different level, a tendency to confine discussion to issues defined as important in the pre-independence phase is clearly evident. Thus, possibly the most recent work, Gulati's (1985) study of *Women and Society* in the 11th and 12th centuries in north India, deals with family relationship and the status of women, rituals and samskaras, the status of the widow, legal status of women, and the status of women in social institutions. Related to this is a tendency to marginalise the role of women in production. Even where the possibility of a role is recognised, it tends to be trivialised in the course of discussion. Thus Indra (1955: 151) refers briefly to women in agriculture and weaving, but tries to explain away the participation of women in the latter activity, dismissing cloth making as "indeed a healthy occupation which necessitated no great intellectual skill or no heavy physical exertion".

Perhaps the only recognition of a category of women outside the socio-legal framework thus defined is Moti Chandra's study of the *World of Courtesans* (1973). However, this study rarely moves beyond listing references to courtesans or prostitutes culled from different texts and organised in terms of sources. Thus the institution is not related to the wider social context; its integration into the patriarchal system and the kind of thematic treatment which would have resulted in a meaningful analysis remains undeveloped.

At times the analysis offered, such as it is, appears communal, as when he suggests that "the institution of the courtesan degenerated during the medieval period, as courtesans cared more for money than for arts, and the low characters visiting them were reduced to mere pimps and abject flatterers" (1973: vi) implying that men who visited prostitutes during the early period were invariably 'noble'.

The unity in underlying assumptions and concerns of most post-independence scholarship is reflected in the continued reliance on virtually fixed patterns of explanation. Thus the low status of women continues to be explained in terms of the spiritual and material requirements of the patrilineal family. Chaudhuri, for instance, after eloquent, if slightly misplaced, pleas for the revival of Vedic rituals for women, concludes "Sons as members of the family contributed to its welfare or suffered the same fate as the family might be driven to. Daughters had not to bother about the parents' family after the fullfledged development of the joint family system. So the daughter was considered a lesser necessity" (1956: 60).[4] Such explanations persist even in more recent works as for example in Gulati's (1985: 22-23) analysis of the reasons for preferring sons, which reiterates the requirements of Vedic warfare, the patrilineal system of inheritance, the requirements of the *shraddha* and the fact that sons could look after their parents during their old age.

The possible impact of the ascetic ideal is also occasionally reiterated (e g, Jayal 1966: 227, Gulati 1985: 3) as is the tendency to justify Indian practices in terms of parallels in or comparisons with other cultures by Chaudhuri (1956: 135) and Indra (1955: 172) respectively.

The latter declares that "taking into view the contemporary conditions of other countries in this respect, ancient India had no reason to be less satisfied with the legal status which she allotted to her women". Das (1962: 209) also takes pride in the fact that in "early times the proprietary rights of women were hardly recognised in any civilisation. They themselves were an item of the movable property of the patriarch. But it was not so in India", a statement which would be contested in any case.

This tendency to justify early Indian practices and precepts is sometimes pursued to absurd lengths in some of the works under consideration. Perhaps the most striking example of this is Das (1962) whose work on *Women in Manu and the Seven Commentators* seems to be devoted to justifying virtually all the recommendations of the text. His justification of Manu's prohibition of widow remarriage while permitting it for the widower, is revealing. We are told that those who consider this unfair or unjust to women "fail to understand the spirit of this rule in the context of giving religious benefits to the family of the man. The widow could not give such benefits if she had been permitted to remarry, but the male person could do so by marrying a second time" (ibid: 175). Further, it was "conducive to the safety and well-being of the husband. For if a woman knows that her husband alone is her sole support, protector and saviour, she would strain all her nerves to keep him peaceful and free from worries. On the other hand if she felt that she could lead a happy life with another man, she might well afford to be a bit different to him and in some cases might even try to harm him positively" (ibid: 228).

Das's work abounds in such statements. Another classic example justifying the restrictions imposed on menstruating women runs as follows: (ibid: 190) "Apart from the question of filth and dirt, the rule is based upon very sound physiological principles. During the periods, the anatomic condition of the woman is in a state of great turmoil... There will be no pleasure also to either party, and the man himself is likely to catch some disease. Moreover, the very object of the act which is to produce a male child will be defeated for conception is quite impossible as long as the flow is going on." Das, however, is not alone in this tendency to provide justifications. Talim, for instance (1972: 16) argues that the Buddha was justified in his reluctance to confer the right of renunciation on women as "perhaps he also knew that *sanyasa dharma* would never be in harmony with womanhood". Further on, in discussing the provisions which serve to subordinate the order of nuns to that of monks, she concludes (ibid: 52) "There appears no motive to degrade woman by way of introducing these extra 84 rules as critics hold".

Despite these limitations, post-independence scholars show a certain awareness of the need to view 'the woman question' within a wider perspective. Thus Thomas (1964: vi) deliberately attempts to bring 'non-Aryan' women within the picture and collates useful information on types of marriage and variations in the kinship structure evident in different parts of the country. This, to an extent serves as a corrective to the monolithic 'Aryan' model which tends to dominate most of the discussion.

Other scholars such as Jayal (1966: vi) recognise the need to interpret data in terms of a sociological or anthropological approach. Such an attempt is also evident in Mukherjee's endeavour (1978: 1) to study the status of women within a given social context and in Gulati's discussion on types of families which she correlates with different

economic activities (1985: 12). Gulati also recognises the need to study the position of women within a given socio-economic context (1985: 1). However, in effect, the attempt to integrate the two often proves problematic, as is evident from the explanations Gulati proposes for *sati* (ibid: 99ff). These include the rigidity of the caste system (ibid: 74), the ban on *niyoga* (ibid: 103), a possible excess of women over men (ibid: 110-11), polygamy practised by members of the upper strata (ibid: 112), the break up of the joint family resulting in a situation where there would be nobody to look after women (ibid: 114), the attacks of the invaders (ibid: 121), the inability of widows to produce legitimate children (ibid: 122), the threat posed to the morals of the group (ibid: 123), the fact that the *brahmana* women could inherit property (ibid: 134), as well as that the wives of merchants were faced with economic uncertainties. As will be evident, many of these explanations simply reiterate the preoccupations of a patrilineal society. Further, the link between *sati* and property rights for women tends to be viewed as a circular relationship. Thus, it is stated that the *smritikaras* gave women limited rights to property as a means of preventing *sati* (ibid: 178), but at the same time society encouraged women to commit *sati* owing to the fact that they had this new right to own property (ibid: 172).

Gulati's (1985: 3) explanation for the deterioration of women's position in society also reflects an attempt to integrate rather diverse concepts. These include "The sanction of brahmanical austerities... foreign invasions of India... the discontinuance of the *upanayana* for girls, lack of educational facilities for women, and the role of the caste system, joint family system, feudalism and other such social institutions". However none of these causal explanations is worked into a coherent argument nor is the relationship between these diverse criteria assessed.

It will thus be evident that despite a certain tacit recognition of the inadequacies of some of the earlier studies, no radical breakthrough is discernible in post-independence works which concern themselves exclusively with women in early India. This seems to be remarkable in view of the fact that socio-economic history in general, of which women's history should have ideally formed an integral and crucial part, has made considerable progress in the past few decades, and one would have expected these developments to be reflected in the studies on women. If this has not followed, however, the reasons need to be explored.

The subsequent discussion is based on the pioneering works of Kosambi, (1962, 1975, 1977), Thapar (1978) and R S Sharma's recent contributions (1983). While it is obvious that the works selected are limited in number, they are significant in that they attempt to deal with a range of issues regarded as crucial to an understanding of early Indian social and economic history. Kosambi, one of the acknowledged pioneers in the field, is specifically oriented towards an understanding of history which moves beyond the confines of traditional political history. His commitment is obvious in his statement that "to maintain that history has always been made by such backward, ignorant common people and that they and not the high priest, the glittering aristocrat, warlord, financier or demagogue must shape it better in the future, seems presumptuous formalism. Nevertheless it is true" (1975: xii). One would have thought that such an approach would result in a serious and systematic consideration of women as a category, which has by and large been excluded from the realms of power, but such an expectation is sadly belied. To start with, the index under "w" lists waterworks, wheat and Wheeler, but not women, possibly a classic example of the invisibility of women. Nevertheless, Kosambi does, in the same work briefly mention the sexual division of labour and its implications (ibid: 22). Further, both his major works (1975-1977) contain a number of illuminating incidental references to women. Kosambi is possibly at his most stimulating when analysing mother goddess cults and their significance (1962) but one would probably not be mistaken in suggesting that by and large, women remain peripheral to his main concerns. They are rarely, if at all, considered as a social category and are in no sense crucial to his analysis. Similarly, Thapar's perceptive analyses of *Ancient Indian Social History* (1978), which break new ground in discussing and utilising the concept of lineage, do not incorporate an analysis of gender. This is somewhat ironical, given the overwhelming importance attached to studying women within the kinship network evident in studies which pertain to women in early India.

While the limitations noted above remain by and large true for almost all works on social history, R S Sharma's studies (1983) have been somewhat exceptional in providing systematic information and analyses on a number of crucial linkages which are commonly overlooked. Thus his discussion on traces of promiscuity in early literature, on the equation of women with property, and with *sudras*, focus attention on significant connections. His analysis of the *varna*, economic and kinship dimensions of the eight types of marriage is also valuable. However, when it comes to an analysis of the material culture and social formations in general, women are once again relegated to the background.

A survey of the proceedings of the Indian History Congress also tends to corroborate the view that women's history has been considered to be of marginal significance within the framework of socio-economic history. This survey is based on the published proceedings of the last ten years (1975-34). The choice of the time-span is deliberate, as 1975 marked the beginning of what developed into the International Women's Decade, which has been a phase during which women's issues in general and women's studies in particular have emerged as major foci of attention at a number of levels. However, this concern is barely reflected in the Indian History Congress. For example, presidential addresses for 1976, 1979, 1980, 1983, 1984 ignore women altogether. Others, however, raise certain interesting problems: thus R S Sharma, in his presidential address (1975) raises the question of the nature of the connections between changing family laws and land-ownership, Jaiswal (1977) attempts to link the gender with the *varna* hierarchy, while M G S Narayanan (1978) suggests an investigation into "various aspects of the feudal social formations including temple property, brahmanical supremacy, caste rigidity, sex-dominated sculptural art forms and Devadasi Bhakti literature". However, as in other studies on social history, such issues are not pursued beyond a passing mention.

In some instances moreover preconceived notions of the social ideal prevent an adequate discussion. Thus B N Mukherji (1981) refers to a situation in the Kushana empire where "women adorn themselves with goodly garments of men and with many ornaments of gold and pearls, and their female and male servants minister to them more than to their husbands, and they ride horses caparisoned with gold and precious stones; and there women do not observe chastity, but have connection with their slaves and with strangers who may have come to their country and their husbands do not blame them and they have no fear, for the Kushanas regard their wives as mistresses". The historian wonders whether "moral bankruptcy infected the rich society throughout the empire". It is not clear whether Mukherji finds role reversal or role differentiation morally bankrupt, but one suspects it is the former. In the process of passing moral judgment the historian loses sight of an interesting deviation from the ideal of a gender stratified society.

Turning to the papers presented in the ancient Indian history section, one finds two or three papers specifically devoted to women every year, obviously a small number of the total number presented. Despite quantitative limitations, some of the contributions have been significant. Thus Jaiswal (1981) in her paper entitled *Women in Early India: Problems and Perspectives* discusses the possible connections between women's status and their involvement in production within the framework of what she perceives as an emerging class divided society, and postulates links between the kinship structure and the mode of production. While the need for working out and testing such formulations remains, the suggestions certainly open up new possibilities.

Most of the other papers are useful as they collate information not generally known or available.[5] What is possibly more significant is that most of these studies relate to women outside the socio-legal framework

which dominates traditional studies, and in this sense represents a much-needed widening of horizons.

It would thus be evident that apart from a few exceptions, women's history has been viewed as an area of marginal concern even by serious social historians. It seems likely that this neglect to some extent explains the near stagnant situation as far as studies on the position of women in early India are concerned. The question of why socio-economic historians have overlooked the need to undertake studies on the history of women is in itself an issue of considerable importance. While some possible answers are implicit in the subsequent discussion, dealing with it adequately is beyond our scope at present.

The combined impact of the limited perspective of what we may categorise as specialist works (concerned exclusively with the study of women in early India) and the neglect of women or gender as an analytical category by social historians has had serious implications. It has meant that certain ill-founded notions about individual women and about women as a group have not only gone unchallenged, but have often been reinforced through constant reiteration. This is evident in a number of spheres. For purposes of illustration, however, we focus on answer scripts of students in Delhi University, who, when faced with a question on the main features of Rig Vedic society, produced answers which clearly reflected the formulations based on specialist works.

In the first place, most of the answers refer to the presence or absence of *sati* and *purdah*, the position of women within the family and their ability to participate in rituals, all typically specialist concerns. Very often, an understanding of such institutions reflects a communal bias, evident in statements such as the following: "Evils like *sati* and *purdah* and early marriage belong to later times when the Muslims came". A typical example runs "Rig Vedic society was a patriarchal society. The male elder in the family was recognised as the head of the family. The position of women in Rig Vedic society was fairly good. They participated in ceremonies and also attended the gathering of people in the *samiti*. We even hear of certain hymns being composed by women in *Rig Veda*. *Purdah* and *sati* systems had not yet arrived. A widow could cohabit with her brother-in-law till the birth of a son. The people prayed for *praja*, the birth of boys and girls, but they prayed especially for the birth of sons so that they could participate in the wars."

The notion of the Vedic age as the ideal is also evident. "The social life of the Aryans was simple, sacred and smooth (*sic*). They lived in the villages and lived the life of purity and chastity. *Aryans had healthy social life based on the patriarchal system*" (italics ours).

Finally contradictory statements are made with ease. "The women in the Rig Vedic age were under the care of the father, then under the care of the husbands or sons and they enjoyed full freedom." Or, "The position of women was not equal to men but they were given the full respect that was *due* to them". Examples of such statements can be multiplied nauseum but what is important is that while the above may be dismissed as the naive opinions of students, we feel that the basis for such formulations is the absence of rigorous historical work on women in early India and the continuing impact of the Altekarian brand of women's history. Unless new work is undertaken, it is likely that such half-baked formulations will continue to hold their sway.

Turning to the treatment of individual women, the most striking examples of distortions occur in situations where women wield power from which they are conventionally excluded. This is possibly because this is viewed as a potentially dangerous or threatening situation. While some examples of this perception are available in early India such as the treatments of Didda in Kalhana's *Rajatarangini*[6] the most well-documented example is that of Razia, the early medieval sultan. She is one of the extremely rare examples of a woman who succeeded to the throne and wielded power 'legitimately'. However, Razia has yet to receive her due place in history. According to Minhaj-us-Siraj in the *Tabaqat-i-Nasiri*, "Sultan Razia was a great monarch. She was wise, just and generous, a benefactor to her kingdom, a dispenser of justice, the protector of her subjects and the leader of her armies. She was endowed with all the qualities befitting a king but she was not born of the right sex, and so in the estimation of men, all these virtues were worthless".

The apparent futility of Razia's qualities seems to have been conceded by modern historian by default, thus leaving a historical vacuum for film-makers like Kamal Amrohi to fill. In a society where the oral tradition is strong, it is easy to create a myth, and that is what the film has succeeded in doing. While the historical Razia has yet to find her place, the mythical Razia, her polar opposite in every sense, has found an audience of many lakhs of people. The real Razia fought tooth and nail to keep herself in power, the mythical Razia proclaims in a Laila-like fashion that the 'emperor's garb' is a 'shroud' which she would relinquish without the slightest hesitation, because it was an impediment to the fulfilment of her love. Not a single historian protested against the gross distortion of history, and the government of India, which is apparently committed to raising the status of women, considered its duty towards women complete when it gave the film a tax exemption. In contrast to the treatment which Razia and Didda receive, women who act as regents, combining the mother-role with that of the ruler, are not so threatening. All the mothers who preserved power for their sons have been mythified in the famous dictum "The hand that rocks the cradle rules the world". It is women like Rani Lakshmibhai and Chandbibi whose persence in history has been most acceptable. They combined heroic valour and resistance against imperial power with actions to preserve the throne for their sons.

In sharp contrast to the acceptability of women wielding power on behalf of their sons is the case of women acting on behalf of their husbands. Take for example the case of Nur Jahan and Jahangir. For historians it has either represented the 'effete' rule of an 'emasculated' king or a case of 'manipulation' by Nur Jahan, a power hungry woman. Of course it goes without saying that manipulation by women is different from the manipulation by men.

It is amply evident that from the above examples if historians abdicate their responsibilities towards ensuring an informed popular perception of the past, others will step in for reasons of their own, with consequent distortions, which can have a powerful impact. In such a situation, the need do evolve alternative, more meaningful perspectives on women's history is evident.

III

The quest for such alternative perspectives is by no means new. In many ways the debate begins to take its present shape from Engels (1972). However, perhaps some of the most fruitful and stimulating suggestions have emerged from the ongoing discussions within the western feminist movement which both challenge existing theoretical formulations and attempt to explore alternatives. The debate has been vigorous, with at least two distinct perspectives, the socialist-feminist and the radical feminist, which have despite differences, influenced and enriched one another.[7] Further, subtle and not-so-subtle differences are discernible within each of these broad categorisations, which is perhaps inevitable given the complexities involved. While a detailed discussion of such theoretical concerns is not possible in the present context, we will focus on some of the more crucial formulations which appear relevant for attempts to understand women's history in particular and in the long run, history in general.

To start with, some of the new perspectives have been extremely useful in providing new insights into the connections between women's status and their participation and control of productive processes. In this sphere, while there has been no serious attempt to redefine production, the mere effort to correct the inherent male bias in disciplines such as anthropology,[8] has led to an understanding which, in some areas at least, considerably modifies accepted notions. Perhaps the most striking example of this is the recognition of women's importance in hunting-gathering societies, where ethnographic data establishes that in certain environment at least, gathering is substantially more important than hunting, and women's participation and control over the

former activity is to a great extent responsible for the high status they enjoy in spite of the fact that there is a fair degree of role differentiation based on sex differences. While there are certain problems in projecting such evidence backwards on to specific prehistoric hunting-gathering societies, these studies are useful in suggesting that the fragmentary archaeological evidence at our disposal may be interpreted in more ways than one, and in sensitising scholars to the possible variations, rather than a uniform pattern applicable to all hunting-gathering societies.

The attempts to use anthropological and other evidence to study and explain the connections between the decline in the status of women with increased dependence on plough agriculture, however, run into complications. In the first place, evidence from studies of contemporary populations such as Draper's (1975) account of the Kung who are sedentarising, is not very useful, as such sedentarisation occurs in a context where settled agriculture is the norm rather than the exception, unlike primary historical situations, where the transition from shifting cultivation to intensive agriculture was probably occurring for the first time. Further, some of the explanations offered for the impact of the transition on women tend to be speculative. Thus Stanley argues that men being stronger could probably handle the plough better and hence gain control over agricultural production, although she also suggests that women had probably invented the plough initially, as they were the ones most closely associated with agriculture, and western mythology recognises goddesses such as Athena and Minerva as the inventors of the plough (1981). Her other speculations postulate links between the declining importance of hunting in a society increasingly dependent on agriculture as a source of food, and the consequent desire of males to be a part of the crucial production process, their advantage in possessing knowledge of animals which could be harnessed to the plough and inability of overburdened women to resist the takeover of the production process.

Ember's (1983) analysis is possibly more useful, as she locates the transition within the context of a pre-existing sexual division of labour and provides data from contemporary agrarian societies which indicate that while the total contribution of women to agriculture in terms of human hours increases, with the shift from horticulture to agriculture, their contribution declines in relative terms. This is also linked to the increased pressure on women as both population and housework tend to increase with sedentarisation, as does the time spent in processing foods, especially cereals. Thus, important connections are suggested. It is possible that some of these will be specific to certain situations whilst others may have a more universal validity; nevertheless, such connections need to be explored if we are to arrive at a clearer understanding of the processes which possibly led to alteration in women's status.

A systematic investigation of the connections between women's status and their participation in productive activities, both as producers and as controllers of production, would require a thorough investigation of the sources, textual, epigraphic and archaeological. It is likely that, even in terms of information, much data in this specific area remains to be unearthed and collated for a systematic analysis of the spheres exclusive to men and women, as well as the extent to which both might participate in certain areas. We also need to examine the relationship between women and the productive process as mediated through the connections between women and men, including variations, as well as variations between different recognised categories of women based on the *varna-jati* system for example. Further, such variations need to be examined over space and time.

Such an investigation, apart from contributing to a meaningful history of women, is also likely to modify historical analysis of production which have so far generally focused only on the relations between different categories of men.

One specific problem related to the early Indian context which could be investigated for instance is a certain dichotomy between textual prescriptions and epigraphic evidence. Thus while the brahmanical tradition places severe restrictions on the property rights of women, there is epigraphic evidence from the Saka-Kusana period onwards to suggest that women occasionally made independent grants to religious institutions, indicating a certain amount of control over productive resources.

Perhaps of even more far-reaching significance would be an attempt to reconstruct women's history by focusing on the process of social reproduction, which based on domestic labour, involves the day-to-day recreation of labour power, which, in contemporary industrial societies, involves cooking, servicing the domestic area, and the provision of sexual services—biological reproduction and the socialisation of children (Bujra, 1978: 20). Domestic labour is invisible in the capitalist economy as it is 'free', i e, unpaid labour as opposed to wage labour and this invisibility appears to be reflected in the absence of any serious recognition of this concept in historical studies. Even Marx's analysis of capitalism overlooks the connection. Thus Bland et al (1979-80) observe, "the site of the replacement and replenishment of the capital labour relation, the sphere of procreation and domestic labour, is not contained within *Capital*'s analysis of the capitalist mode of production". Even a superficial examination would suggest that the role of women in this process can by no means be ignored. Although in reality "there is evidence that by the unceasing creation of modes, principles and symbols of continuity men have obscured the fact that the material base of human history is human reproduction" (O'Brien, 1982: 10).

It is also obvious that the process of social reproduction, like that of production, has been subject to change. Concern with the nature of such change has led scholars such as Hartmann (1981: 368) to suggest that the conventional view of the family as a unit consisting of members sharing common interests needs to be challenged. She perceives it as a locus of struggle, as a unit where both production and redistribution take place. How such struggles are resolved needs to be studied, as well as the implications of this concept for an analysis of kinship structures.

If one recognises the importance of the process of social reproduction, certain related questions assume considerable importance. How, for instance, and by whom is the process controlled? What are the changes discernible over time? What are the links between the process of production and reproduction? And how do these connections change? We might also need to reexamine the present periodisation of socio-economic history based on changes in the mode of production, if, for instance, recognition of the importance of social reproduction suggests, alternative, possibly more fundamental changes. Can we then also consider a mode of social reproduction?

It is obvious that an analysis of women's history which recognises the importance of domestic labour will be complex, rich and has immense possibilities. For example, the numerous *dasis* who appear in our literary sources from the *Rig Veda* onwards, and who have commonly been dismissed as simply involved in domestic activities, will probably acquire a new importance, once the sphere of domestic activities is recognised as an area of crucial importance.

Despite its obvious usefulness in focusing attention on an area where the presence of women is indisputable, the concept of social reproduction has certain limitations. Thus as Barrett (1980: 27) observes, "it has not yet adequately explained how and why it is that *women* (emphasis in original) should be assigned any special role" in spheres other than biological reproduction. This critique implies the need to evolve an understanding of gender, an area in which feminist contribution has been particularly significant.

Perhaps one of the most succinct definitions of gender has been offered by Rubin (1975: 159) who regards it as "the set of arrangements by which a society transforms biological sexuality into products of human activity and in which these transformed sexual needs are satisfied". It also generally implies "obligatory heterosexuality and the constraint of female sexuality" (ibid: 179) in most historical situations. Rubin (ibid: 178) also suggests that "the division of labour by sex can be seen as a 'taboo', a taboo against the sameness of men and women, a taboo dividing the sexes into two mutually exclusive categories, a taboo which

exacerbates the biological differences between the sexes and thereby *creates* gender" (emphasis in original). The concept of gender implies that masculine and feminine characteristics are socially imposed and not biologically inevitable. This is evident from the fact that the specific elements regarded as crucial to definitions of masculinity and feminity vary considerably over space and time.

A recognition of the importance of gender as an analytical category leads to certain fundamental reformulations of commonly accepted divisions such as the 'private versus the social' and the 'private versus the political'. Once it is recognised that the gender hierarchy is essentially a construct related to notions of power and powerlessness and that politics may be viewed as "a system of power relationships and value hierarchies which necessarily includes both women and men" (Tsing and Yanagisako: 1982: 513), then it is obvious that spheres of activity which are commonly defined as personal have a significant political dimension as well. As Barrett (1980: 78) observes, "Although the state is formally only interested in such 'private' matters as sexuality only insofar as they affect the 'public' good, it is clear that the degree of state involvement in sexuality and procreation renders the public/private distinction untenable".[9]

The use of gender as a category enabling us to arrive at an understanding of the relationship between women and men in any society is obvious. A historical analysis would involve a thorough study of the ways in which men and women are differentiated from one another, the significance of such differences in terms of the definitions of power specific to each instance, the changes in the definitions of gender and their implications, as well as links between gender and social reproduction and production. Further, the use of gender in ideological discourse needs to be examined.

It is evident that the process of evolving a historical analysis which takes into account sexuality, social reproduction and production and their relationship, may not prove to be simple. There may not, for instance, be an easy fit between changes in one sphere and changes in another. Further, the usefulness or otherwise of each of these formulations needs to be tested through the analysis of specific bodies of evidence, and, if necessary, modifications specific to the Indian context may be required. In the ultimate analysis, it is important that we are able to *explain* rather than *explain away*. This needs to be stressed in view of the fact that there is an occasional tendency to treat women's history as a soft option, which can be as detrimental as the problems of distortion and neglect noted earlier.

It is also likely that there may be limits beyond which our sources may prove inadequate to answer many of the questions which must necessarily be posed. For instance, to what extent were women as a category acted upon, and to what extent did they act, either in the sense of actively accepting or resisting or even initiating changes in various spheres? As mentioned earlier, women have had little to do with the composition of almost all the textual evidence at our disposal. Hence we need to be sensitive to the various ways in which women's collective consciousness[10] may be reflected or refracted in these texts.

One wonders why, for instance, the *Purana* and the epics were recommended especially for women. It is obvious that at one level an attempt was made to incorporate diverse and often conflicting traditions within an overarching brahmanical tradition. Do elements of a women's 'subculture' survive in the extant literature? and how are we to recognise it?

The challenge needs to be taken up in order to arrive at a fresh understanding of the history of women in early India, and in the long run, to evolve a more meaningful and comprehensive historical perspective in general.

Notes

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1 For a detailed discussion of such linkages see Thapar (1975) and Sharma (1983).

2 It may be noted that while Bader (1867: 224) suggests the introduction of Christianity as a possible solution, she does not pursue this beyond a suggestion.

3 Other opinions along similar lines include Chaudhuri's (1956: 3) statement that the "time is now ripe when Indians should look back to their glorious Vedic life and allow the girls to enjoy the same Vedic rights as our holy scriptures declare". Jayal (1966: 292) also considers the Vedic age as the ideal. Less explicit is the aim of Thomas (1964: v) who attempts "to give the reader a connected account of the gradual subjection of women in India, which started from very early times and continued right down to the eighteenth century".

4 Das (1962: 45) is amongst the most explicit in this context: "During the war time she was more a liability than an asset, after her marriage she migrated to another family and on account of the change in her *gotra* she ceased to be of any direct spiritual benefit to her parents; substantial amounts of money had to be spent on the occasion of her marriage; she had to be maintained in case of her husband's poverty or death, in the event of her remaining unmarried she had to be provided for by the apportionment of a share in the family property, and she had to be sedulously guarded against going astray". Such an explanation is also briefly hinted at in Rao Shastri (1962: 72) and Thomas (1964: 54).

5 As for example Asopa's study on *Feudal Rights over Courtesans* (1977), Balambal's account of *Kundavai: A Chola Princess* (1978), M Sumathy's study of the *Social Status of the Courtesan in Early Medieval Kerala* (1978), A K Prasad on the *Functions and Gradations of Devadasis* (1984) and A K Tyagi's (1984) account of women workers in the Jatakas.

6 The treatment of Kaikeyi in the *Ramayana* also probably reflects a tendency to condemn women who violated the 'proper' gender hierarchy.

7 For a review which examines the crucial differences in perspective and includes an exhaustive bibliography on the debate, see Mackinnon (1982).

8 Discussions of current anthropological evidence on the issue in Slocum (1975) and Lee and De Vore (1972) is particularly revealing. Binford's ethno archaeological studies are also relevant in this context.

9 For example, the political dimension of kinship relations can no longer be ignored. Gender, moreover, has a very important symbolic dimension, and gender hierarchies often serve as idioms for other kinds of social differentiation (ibid).
An illustration of this from the early Indian context is the tendency in the *brahmanas* to equate gender with the emerging *varna* hierarchy.

10 Keohane and Gelpi's (1982) discussion focuses on at least three distinct analytical levels at which women's collective consciousness might be studied, a "feminine consciousness" (ibid: ix) "which involves consciousness of oneself as the object of attention of another... woman as defined by male gaze, construct and desire", a "female consciousness " of "women as life-givers and life-sustainers, bonded together by this common capacity and obligation" and a "feminist consciousness" which "draws attention to the pervasive patterns of subordination, limitation and confinement that have hampered and crippled the development of the female half of humankind" (ibid: x). It is quite likely that at any given moment more than one if not all three levels of consciousness might co-exist.

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