

INEVITABILITY OF REWRITING INDIAN HISTORY FROM A FEMINIST PERSPECTIVE

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It was Voltaire who for the first time put forth the idea of history as philosophy. Since then even this idea of what does History as Philosophy mean has been debated. As a result there can be no single answer to the question what is history. The nature of history as a body of knowledge and the nature of the sources of history make it difficult, if not impossible, for all of us to have one common understanding of history. For, we see the past through someone else's eyes, someone whose knowledge of the past depends on her own views, her own 'present'. Besides, the whole past cannot be recovered, it is only fragments of it as has been recorded by the then historians, or what has been discovered and unearthed that can be compiled and interpreted. Every fact can be interpreted in many ways depending on what we are looking for and why. While historians do not invent facts, they prioritize facts and ignore others. Since, to a great extent, history is an interpretation of such evidences that have come down to us, history that we read is the interpretation of the historian. Therefore, the idea of history that any people hold is a reflection of their view of society at that particular time in history. This explains why even the very focus of history has varied from age to age. This also explains the absence of women in history. After all who has written history so far? What has been the dominant view of history? What has been the object of the history written so far?

In the nineteenth century, in Europe, in the context of the industrial revolution and the emerging liberal philosophy and the democratising processes people were interested in constitutional and political history. In a situation where women were not even recognized as legal persons and, thus, not enjoying equal status in the society, women were not written about or they were, almost always, made subordinate to the main theme.

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Even in the twentieth century the meaning, understanding and purpose of history as understood by historians in that period was not the same. While some studied economic history, others chose to study intellectual history and yet some others examined the possibility of a "total history" but to almost all of them, women in the respective societies and periods have been as good as non-entities.

We see that just as E. H. Carr suggested in 1961, history is a "constantly moving process, with the historian moving within it,"¹ that it is "a dialogue between the events of the past and progressively emerging future ends. The historian's interpretation of the past, his selection of the significant and the relevant, evolves with the progressive emergence of new goals."² He was writing in the context of a society that seemed to have lost all hope in the future in the aftermath of the world wars and the economic depression. He was trying to inject renewed interest in the world and especially in the future. In this context, for those of us who live in a world in which democratic values, including equality, are the determining factors of state and law a relook at what history is becomes extremely necessary.

Writing in 1976, Jean Chesneaux said that one should go beyond asking what is history, to what is history for. Quoting Lu Xun he said: "For whom are you writing?" is the basic question. "The past is both a stake in current struggles and an essential factor in the political relationship of forces."³ To be able to create spaces within civil society various groups have been using history as an instrument to legitimize their claims, to create an identity for themselves. The ruling classes, the dominant groups are past masters in such a use of history and have been delegitimizing the claims of the marginalized groups in favour of maintaining the status quo, which will continue to leave them in a position of power. Thus, when the marginalized groups organize on their own they have to empower themselves by rewriting history in order to write themselves back into the past from which they have been displaced. This

¹E. H. Carr, *What is History?* New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1964, 133.

²Carr, *What is History?* 123.

³Jean Chesneaux, *Past and Futures or What is History For?* London: Thames and Hudson, 1978, 2-3.

enables them to assert their rightful place in the society of the present and that of the future.

In the ongoing social and political struggle of the various marginalized groups, especially women, it is very important to reject "the Establishment version" or, as Keith Jenkins would put it, the dominant version of the past and build their own relationship to it.⁴ The dominant version disempowers women by writing them out of history. The past is interpreted from a dominant male perspective and the women appear as mere *appendages*, as *nobodies*, as people who did not contribute to the evolution of human society. As human beings and individuals, our memory helps us grow from stage to stage by recording the good and the bad that we have been part of, so that we may learn and give ourselves a sense of self. For centuries historians have been doing this and by undermining or marginalising the role of women in history they have destroyed women's sense of self and their place in society. This explains why women see themselves only in auxiliary roles, supporting men as they, the men, go about the business of life, thus denying themselves and their children the reality of their experiences and the ensuing contribution. Having presented history from the male perspective, women, then, are viewed as a burden to society, and, therefore, the low status accorded to them is justified. Apart from that there is the need to identify oneself with one's society's past. How can anyone do that if her history has never been recorded or written about?

It is in this context that one has to understand what Jean Chesneaux has quoted in his work *Pasts and Futures or What is History For?* "The repossession of our history is the first step toward the repossession of ourselves, a precondition for the repossession of our future."⁵ For the future of our society to be better than the past it is our understanding of our past that will help us find the best way there. This is because historians analyse, rationalise, provide symbols and stereotypes that enable us to move from one period to another. So, if we want a future in which women and men will be equals despite their differing roles and functions,

⁴Keith Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, London: Routledge, 1991.

⁵Leandre Bergeron, preface to the *Petit Manuel D'histoire du Quebec*, Montreal 1972, cited in Chesneaux, *Past and Futures*, 26.

if we want a future where every individual will be valued for whatever he/she contributes to society without some kind of functions being prioritised over others, then it is important that we take control of the history that is being written.

If we agree that history is a discourse then we have to acknowledge that it "is a shifting discourse constructed by historians and that from the existence of the past no one reading is entailed: change the gaze, shift the perspective and new readings appear."⁶ Against this background, the need for a reinterpretation of history, especially Indian History, from a feminist perspective becomes natural. For every discourse in its operation, includes and excludes actors, events and issues. As a result, we find that women have been omitted in the narrations about our society's past. This has been done despite the fact that "Women have been active, competent and important through all the ages of man, and it is devastating for us if we do not understand this. But history is also without meaning for men if the centrality of women is denied. Like racist myths, these one-sided accounts of the human past are no longer acceptable: intellectually spurious and devoid of explanatory power, they more and more betray the void of unknowing at their heart."⁷

To read a general history book is to come away wondering what were the women doing while the men fought battles, ruled the country, administered justice, produced food and articles for the society. The men did all the hard work and it looks as if the women had a good time living off men's efforts. To find evidence of women's existence in history is difficult. This is for the simple reason that records of their deeds are rarely there and when their actions have been recorded the women were considered too insignificant and, so, their names were omitted. Further even where their names may be recorded and their actions too the historian interpreting this data ignores that information as his focus does not include the activities of the women and therefore his narration omits this information or glosses over the role that women played in that specific context. This may often be the case even where the women were crucial to a particular transaction or a particular event.

⁶Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 14, 15.

⁷Rosalind Miles, *The Women's History of the World*, London: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993, 16.

The reality, however, is that women have done a variety of things which has made possible the evolution of our society down the ages – be it giving birth, working in the fields, cooking for the family or community, or nurturing and caring for the young, participating in the social movements for change. Yet all this and more are forgotten in history because of the narrow, and almost, exclusive focus on the actions of men of the dominant sections of society. This version of history is an incomplete history. It cannot be treated as the universal history of the entire humankind.

Women are there in history as a general body of women, as mothers, wives and daughters needing the protection of men. They functioned neither as subjects nor objects of men's activities. Any activity or record that included women was that which served men's goals or satisfaction of their desired objectives. The best example would be the socio-religious reform movements in British India during the nineteenth century. In *India's Struggle for Independence* it is stated that "The campaign for the improvement of the condition and status of women was not a purely humanitarian measure either. No reform could be really effective without changes in the domestic conditions, the social space in which the initial socialization of the individual took place. Women, in fact, played a crucial role in this process. Therefore, there could be no reformed men and reformed homes without reformed women. Viewed from the standpoint of women, it was, indeed, a limited perspective."⁸ Thus, the much touted social-reform movement of the nineteenth century was not seeking to make women's lives better but was aiming at changing certain aspects of their lives in order to create women who will rear men who would be able to fit into the new society they sought to create. This means that the women were marginal to the movement which also explains why the women were never consulted regarding what they wanted.

Women's history has just begun to be written as a result of the awareness and empowerment made possible through education, democratic political processes and changing social and economic situations. Writing women's history cannot only be the creation of the female equivalents of male figures of authority and ability. Women are no

⁸Bipan Chandra, et al., *India's Struggle for Independence 1857-1947*, Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990, 88.

doubt competent to assert authority and administer society like their male counterparts but this would not be the history of the majority of women who did not have the opportunity or the desire to participate in these male dominated activities.

Considering the fact that men have had a head-start in collecting evidence, documenting and writing history it is a difficult task to uncover women's history and in attempting to do this it might seem as if there is over-emphasis on women's role in history but what must be remembered is that for too long history has been weighed down on one side. It may, therefore, seem necessary to counter-balance that lop-sided emphasis by bearing down heavily on the other.

To the argument that both men and women have been marginalised so why should women be singled out for special pleading, Rosalind Miles response should answer. "The male peasant, however poor and lowly, always had the right to beat his wife; the black male slave, though he laboured for the white master by day, did not have to service him by night as well. Nor have changing social conditions had the same impact on men's and women's lives – the industrialization of Europe and America in the nineteenth century that improved the quality of so many people's lives, itself depended upon the introduction of the ferocious consumerism that more than anything else has devalued women in twentieth-century society."⁹

What does it mean to rewrite history from a feminist perspective? It can mean several things depending on who is writing history and why. Rosalind Miles is concerned with two key questions: How did men succeed in enforcing the subordination of women? And why did women let them get away with it? To subaltern historians it could be important to explore the range of meanings imbued in women's speech for women themselves. To others it would involve recording the different activities and actions of women in the past and wherever possible in their own voices.

⁹Miles, *The Women's History of the World*, 16.

In the context of Indian history we could explore the different time periods using these different approaches which would be a tremendous task for anyone to even attempt. There have been several historians, women and men who have already done considerable research in the context of colonisation, nationalism and women, and it would be useful to examine, at least, a few such works here. We have Kumkum Sangari, Janaki Nair, Gayatri Spivak, Kamala Visweswaran, Susie Tharu, Tejaswini Niranjana, Lata Mani, as a few examples of historians who have been considering the question of writing history from the women's perspective and the issues arising out of it.

Subaltern Studies have broken the ground in Indian history writing by raising doubts and uncertainties with the dominant discourse of history. Their approach in several studies that they have published has brought to light many new aspects of the events that have already been discussed and more often bringing to light ideas and narrations no one had even thought of before. Understanding the subaltern perspective of several of these events like the 1857 upheaval, the Chauri Chaura, the peasant and tribal uprisings, has enabled us to see the agency that the subaltern has always exercised but been denied in the imperialist, nationalist and even in the Marxist histories. However, even this school of thought, in their analysis, has glossed over the gender questions involved. Critiquing the subaltern historians approach to gender, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her discussion on "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography" in *Subaltern Studies IV*, writes that while the subaltern historians have been very careful to consider questions of women suffering because of gender discrimination they tend, however, to "overlook how important the concept-metaphor woman is to the functioning of their discourse." Citing an example of subaltern-led revolts in the early nineteenth century she points out how on two occasions the struggles began because the men were unwilling to accept female leadership:

With the deposition in 1836 of Ananta Bhupati, the 17th Zamindar of Golgonda, the Collector of Vishakapatnam installed Jamma Devamma, widow of the 15th Zamindar, in his place. This was an affront to the *muttadars* and *mokhasadars* of Gudem who were not consulted ... and who protested that they had never before been ruled by a woman... In Rampa, the death of the Mansabdar Ram Bhupati

Dev in March 1835 was followed by a revolt of *muttadars* against the daughter who had been appointed as the successor (1.102).¹⁰ She raises a question regarding this kind of division that exists in the subaltern approach to the study of issues be it regarding man-eating goddesses, objects of reverence and generators of solidarity, on the one hand, and secular daughters and widows, unacceptable as leaders, on the other. There are several such instances where the subaltern focus seems to overlook the gender question. She takes another illustration to support her argument, that of the Patidars.

It was not uncommon for a 'superior' Patidar to spend his dowry money and return his wife to her father so that he could marry for a new dowry. Amongst Patidars, it was considered very shameful to have to take back a daughter [!]... *Gols* were formed to prevent ruinous hypergamous marriages with 'superior' Patidar lineages... Here, therefore, we discover a strong form of subaltern organization within the Patidar caste which provided a check on the power of the Patidar elite... Even Mahatma Gandhi was unable to break the solidarity of the Patidar *gol* of twenty-one villages.¹¹

In examining this Gayatri Spivak is unable to understand how this "crucial instrumentality of woman as symbolic object of exchange can be overlooked." "Male subaltern and historian are here united in the common assumption that the procreative sex is a species apart, scarcely if at all to be considered a part of civil society." Further, while exploring the way in which women are left out of the notions of territoriality and of the communal mode of power even though they are the instruments which facilitate the consanguinal or mythic patrilineage she points out how the subaltern historian mentions but does not reflect upon the exclusion of the subaltern as female subject: "In each of these [rebel villages] nearly all the population, barring females acquired by marriage, claimed descent from a common patrilineage, consanguinal or mythical, and regarded themselves as members of the same clan or *gotra*. This belief in a shared ancestry made the village assert itself positively by acting as a solidarity unit and

¹⁰Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography," in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999, 357.

¹¹Spivak, "Subaltern Studies," 358.

negatively by operating an elaborate code of discrimination against aliens."¹²

Similarly, in the early medieval period in the Deccan and Karnataka, matrimonial alliances were one of the chief means of cementing bonds between kingdoms, especially when the dynasty with which such a relationship was considered very important, and in such cases the name of the woman finds mention. Yet, not many serious studies have been made about this important bond that women facilitated. It is looked at almost entirely from the political importance to the men involved, or in terms of the new kinship ties that were being created through this process. The women themselves were, however, not the subject matter of such a discussion.

Just discussing these few events and the nationalist, Marxist or subaltern historians' neglect of the female subject should give us an idea of the difficulty of writing an Indian history from a feminist perspective. At the same time it reveals the need for analysing and understanding the silence and the omissions of women in all histories. It also reveals the possibilities that are inherently present in these very omissions of rewriting a history of women.

Subaltern history writing in India which is one of the most recent approaches to the study of history itself, as we have seen, possesses another problem in its approach to the female subject. In the words of Kamala Visweswaran, "two distinct problems mark the theorization of gender by the Subaltern Studies group. Either gender is subsumed under the categories of caste and class, or gender is seen to mark a social group apart from other subalterns, (which is symptomatic of the formulation 'women and the subaltern')."¹³ Kamala Visweswaran's contention is that while some of them may have looked at how the domesticization of women helped in the formation of the nationalist subjectivity, they do not examine how the women have become a subaltern nor, as a class, how this domesticization has turned out to be a strategy for the containment of

¹²Spivak, "Subaltern Studies," 359.

¹³Kamala Visweswaran, "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender: Nationalist Ideology and Its Historiography," in Shahid Amin and Dipesh Chakrabarty, ed., *Subaltern Studies IX*, OUP, 1999, 88.

women's agency. Discussing this particular process she points out that studying nationalist ideology and its critique would necessarily mean that it is the voices of the nationalist middle class or elite subject which is being recovered. She is conscious of the fact that lower class subjects are being displaced.¹⁴

Examining the colonial and nationalist representations of women in the national movement we can see how women were not seen as having common goals. Rather the women were split up as married women who were considered more respectable, especially if they came from a middle or upper income group, being able to afford servants to carry out the domestic work. Their political motives were, therefore, not suspect. On the other hand, unmarried women, lower-class women or other women who could not establish their respectability might have the label prostitute or paramour attached to them and their political motives became suspect. Their participation in the national movement was seen as an effort to gain respectability. As a result, only the middle-class and elite women were seen as actors in the national movement and the others were left out.¹⁵

Similarly, as is often done in the present context, to deny women's agency is to attribute their political participation to their husbands' influence and machinations. The possibility of women being their own agents and voicing their own concerns is completely denied. They are only seen as instruments of the men speaking and doing things as they dictated. Through this process, once again, the role of women and their capacity for individual action are refuted, and, therefore, the argument for creating space for women in the political sphere is considered irrelevant if all that women do is to speak on behalf of the men.

It must, however, be pointed out that there is not a complete absence of information regarding women's role in India's past. Even where there is information because of the gaze being focused on other objects such information is neglected. For example, there are quite a few inscriptions and literature which refer to women donors in the land grants of the period 700-1000 A.D. Some of these women were heads of the villages while others (like Amrapalli in the days of the Buddha) were courtesans who had

¹⁴Visweswaran, "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender," 89.

¹⁵Visweswaran, "Small Speeches, Subaltern Gender," 89-90.

substantial property, which they bequeathed, to a temple for its maintenance or for worship in the temple. An analysis of the records referring to such a situation together with the records that Gayatri Spivak¹⁶ has referred to negates the proposition that women did not have property or that they had no role in the political system of their day. What we need is an approach that does not gloss over the references to the women in the historical records. Rather, we need a perspective that includes these references in order to analyze the nature of the society and polity of the respective period more holistically.

The Malkapuram Stone Pillar Inscription¹⁷ of the time of Rudramba, dated 1261 A.D., for instance, records that in the Kakatiya dynasty Rudradevi was the ruling queen. She confirmed the grant of the village Mandara in Kandravati in the *vishaya* of Velivada bounded by the Krishnaveni in the north, made by her father, Ganapati, the former ruler to his preceptor. She also made additional grants at this time. This inscription also records grants of land to ten dancing girls and fourteen songstresses besides several men of different occupations and categories. It is also said that the lands so granted are to pass on to the sons of these men on their death and to their wives in the absence of sons. This is a very interesting inscription which brings to light several factors. Firstly, that a daughter of the ruler was the reigning queen and not just a regent for a young prince who had not come of age. The fact that she, indeed, was the reigning queen is gathered from the fact that the grant was issued in her name, confirming a grant that her father had made earlier and making new grants of land to several people associated with the particular gods named in the inscription. Even more interesting is the fact that the dancing girls and songstresses were also granted land through this inscription. Given the status of women and their limited rights to property, even in the twenty-first century India, this information is useful to reconsider the status of women in the early medieval period and also the right to property that widows had.

¹⁶Spivak, "Subaltern Studies," 357.

¹⁷Malkapuram Stone Pillar Inscription of the time of Rudramba, Saka year 1183 (1261 A.D.), no. 15, D. C. Sircar, *Select Inscriptions Bearing on Indian History and Civilization*, Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1983, 574ff.

In addition, a perusal of cases from British period¹⁸ reveal that dancing girls had property that was, later, inherited by the daughters and unmarried sisters who led the life of a *dasi*. The courts held that as per their custom daughters were preferential heirs over the sons. This was a customary practice which the colonial courts recognized, and ruled, therefore, in favour of the dancing girls even though in that period Hindu law did not recognize the right of daughters to inherit the property of their parents. Examining this particular information against the background of the donation of land to dancing girls made in the thirteenth century changes our understanding of the history of, at least, some women in history. Similarly, dancing girls had a right to inheritance which was denied to married women under the Hindu law. The courts recognized this practice as well and decided the cases accordingly.¹⁹ There is need to examine the available sources from a fresh standpoint. Reinterpretation of the existing records can provide a wealth of information regarding women in history when studied from a feminist perspective. We do not even need to unearth new source materials or even new evidence. It is already there; it is only a question of seeing it and weaving it into our analysis of society in the past.

These pieces of evidence from different periods of Indian history and from different regions reveal that the history of women in India cannot be studied as one grand narrative of the history of all women in India. It points to the fact that women whether now or then come from different strata of society and are influenced by their caste, class, marital status, the political and economic power of their families, and, as a result, their individual status varies accordingly. Whereas in most histories of India even when there is some reference made to women's status only the status of women from the upper castes, mainly the brahmana caste is taken into consideration and even reform efforts in the nineteenth century targeted them. Practices like *sati* and ban on widow remarriage were seen as widely prevalent and the bane of Indian society when they were practices restricted to a few castes in some parts of the Indian subcontinent.

¹⁸Jaya Madhav Kalavani v. Manjunath Tai Chandu AIR 1916 Bombay 64 (2) Shanmugathammal v. Gomathi Ammal and others in AIR 1935 Madras 58.

¹⁹Nagamuthu Pillai and another v. Dasi Sundaram AIR 1917 Madras 472 (1).

The effort to reinterpret Indian history from a feminist perspective is hard, but not impossible. We have to acknowledge the existence of various approaches even among the broad category of feminists and realize that any reinterpretation will not be a simple matter. However, such an effort will result in the process of writing into history the accomplishments of women from different sections of society. This will not only enable them to regain their place in society but also make our understanding of society more comprehensive. There, naturally, cannot be one history of India or of women but all the histories together will widen our knowledge and deepen our understanding of Indian history. As it exists now, Indian history is incomplete without these narrations.

History is a discourse, a text that logically makes possible infinite and varying readings. The raw material of history consists of literary and non-literary material which has been read and discussed by using the analytical and methodological tools that historians construct from age to age;²⁰ for we must remember that history is not the synonym for the past that has already occurred. History is, to a great extent, the reflection of the historian's perspective and since the historian is a part of the society that shapes his thinking and his views, history "is a dialogue not between abstract and isolated individuals, but between the society of today and the society of yesterday."²¹ Since this is the nature of history there cannot be one 'true' narrative. No one can uncover the entire past from the perspective of every individual in society. There are, then, inevitably, dominant perspectives of history that gain ground. Given the fact that today more and more women are becoming vocal and adopting the tools of the mainstream society it is inevitable that history will be rewritten from feminist perspectives. It is not only that they will do so but that they should do so in order to make possible a more realistic history that all sections of society can relate to and find it meaningful.

Such efforts have already begun in Indian history writing but there is plenty of room yet to be explored. New technologies and novel methodologies make possible not only availability of new information but also the reinterpretation of already existing data. As many new histories

²⁰Jenkins, *Re-thinking History*, 9.

²¹Carr, *What is History?* 55.

from feminist perspectives get written they will facilitate the reconstruction of ourselves, individually and socially, helping us chart the course for the future of our society. "To move towards a fairer society in the ideal of full humanity for all, men must be ready to dispense with patriarchy's rigid orthodoxies and life-denying hierarchical systems... All future developments from now on must be assessed from the perspective of both sexes, since both men and women are equally important to the making of history. The hope for the future, like the triumph of the past, lies in the co-operation and complementarity of women and men."²²

²²Miles, *The Women's History of the World*, 16.