

New trends in social histories

Subject : History

Lesson: New trends in social histories

Course Developers

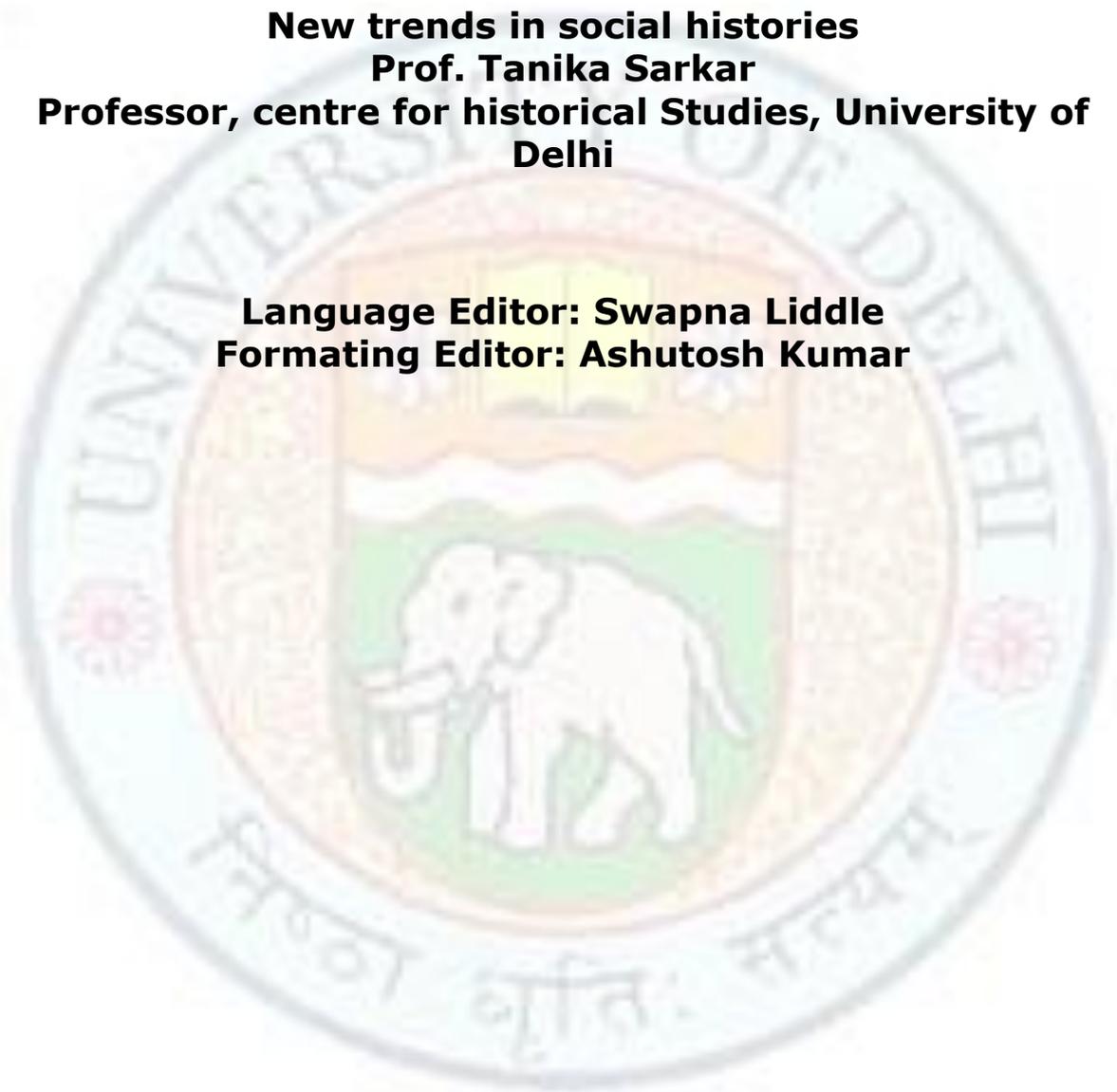
New trends in social histories

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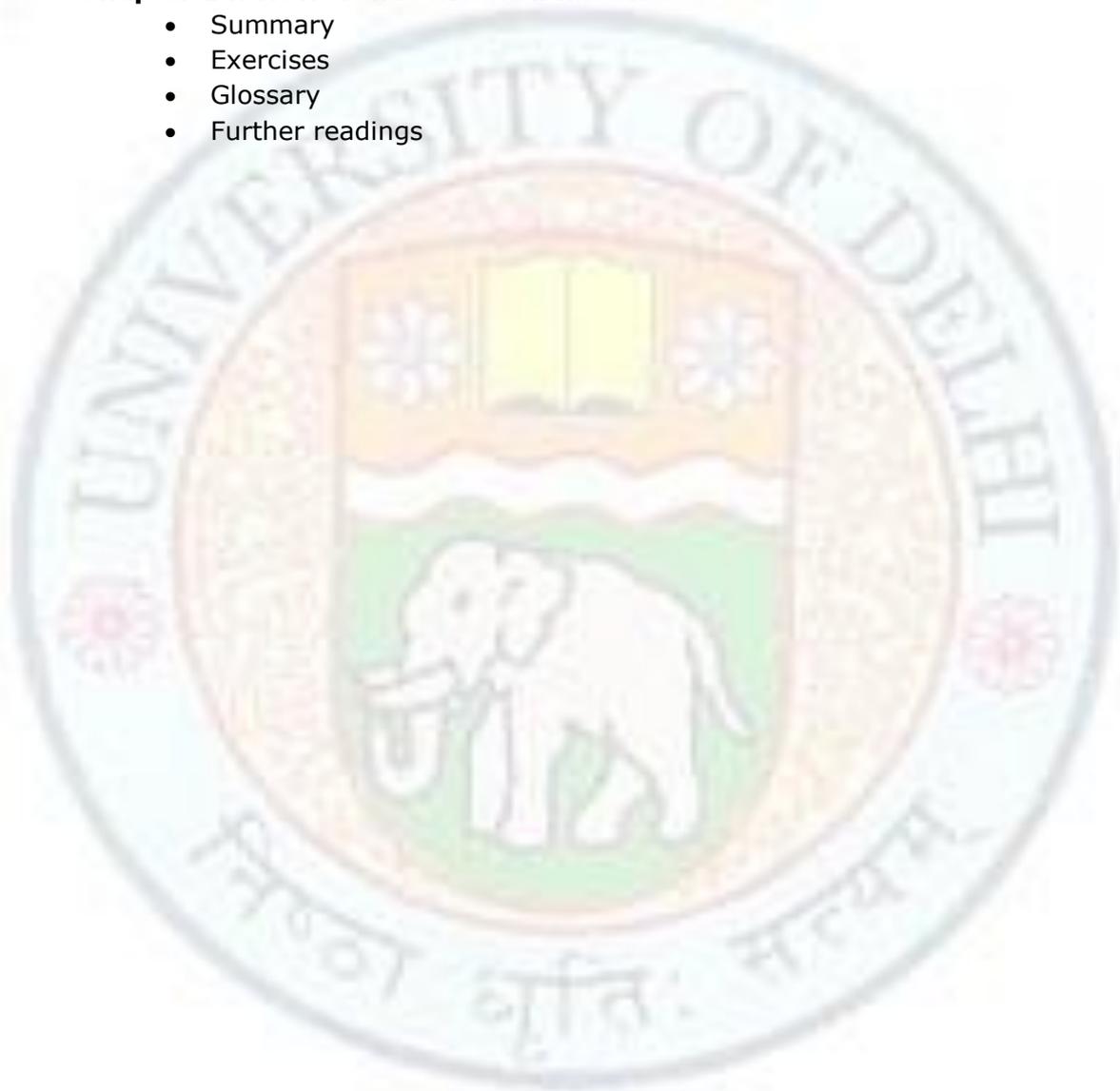
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14: New trends in social histories

Modern times under colonial governance brought in startling changes for all men, women and children in India. Some changes were sudden: the appearance of railways or print culture, for instance. Some made themselves manifest more gradually, through long and bitter debates and slowly changing thought patterns: new educational institutions or changes in gender relations, among others. The very things that you study now and the conditions under which you study them provide a good example. History as a subject, to be taught at schools, colleges and universities, to men as well as to women, often studying together in the same institutions, is one such change that would have been entirely unthinkable earlier.

The two kinds of changes – in material culture and in expanded possibilities of intellectual-political debates – were not unrelated. The spread of new communication technologies, like print culture from the early 19th century, allowed widespread collection, composition and circulation of texts, old and new. It also facilitated arguments among different groups of people who would not necessarily meet face to face but would still discuss matters of general relevance through newspapers, journals, fiction, biographies and autobiographies: through the medium of popular vernacular prose writings and printed pictorial matter. Not only did the new and cheap print culture help words and pictures circulate widely among a very large group of people, often little educated, enabling them to become a part of the discussions. Lives of ordinary men and women, too, became the subject matter of the writings and the pictures, the subject of colonial lawmaking, the object of social reform by educated and upper caste people.

By the late 19th century, quite a few women, 'low castes', and little educated poor people entered into these discussions and debates : both as objects to be discussed as well as active subjects, forming and offering opinion of their own in this new public sphere. The late 19th century also saw the spread of new cultural audio-visual forms that were very popular among the middle classes as well as among poor people. For instance there was urban theatre, or the roving rural drama troupes, where many different lives, experiences and problems were dramatized, helping people to look at their own lives and the lives of others in new ways. In the late 19th century, the use of photography began to develop and more and more people were exposed to sights of places, monuments, and other people they had not seen earlier. They also would now see their own faces and bodies, arranged in different stances, as they were photographed for different occasions. By the early and mid 20th century, the cinema and the radio came into popular use, widening such circuits of information, knowledge and perception. The late 20th century added television viewing, bringing to homes such a thick cluster of daily spectacles, fantasies and drama that they often would appear inseparable. Modern times, thus, brought different lives very close together.

From the early 20th century, when mass struggles against colonial rule began to be organized, men and women from highly diverse walks of life joined these movements, working closely together. Conversations among castes, genders, classes and regions became all the more frequent. They were intimate as well as acrimonious. Through such interactions and controversies, new ways of thinking about and among ordinary people became systematized: about their conditions of life, their livelihoods and cultures, about their mutual relationships. All this can be called the domain of the social.

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Figure 14.1: Kalighat Pat (1870) 'Bengali baboo'

Source: http://www.contemporaryart-india.com/arthistory/kalighat_beng_s.jpg

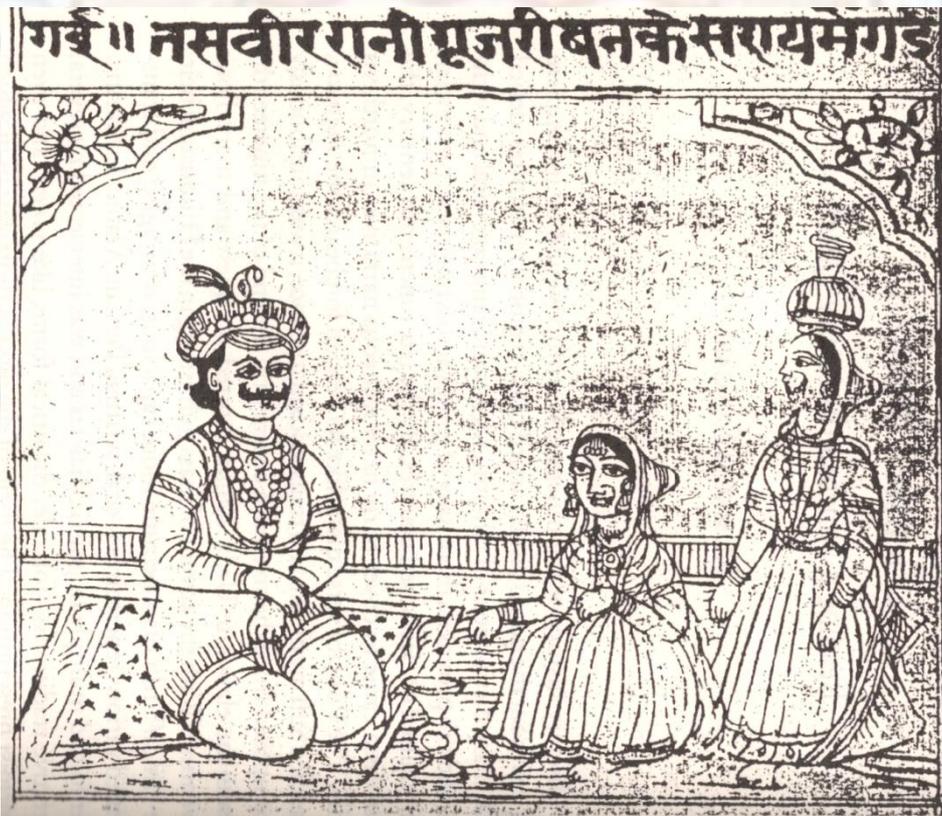


Figure 14.2: Illustration from a work of popular literature, 1873

Source: Blackburn, S. and V. Dalmia eds. 2004. *India's Literary History*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 214.

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Figure 14.3: Parsi theatre actors Sundari and Bapulal

Source: Blackburn, S. and V. Dalmia eds. 2004. *India's Literary History*. Delhi: Permanent Black, 107.

Gender

Let us begin this section with a very brief review of recent historical writings on gender relations in modern times. For a very long time, historians used a rather simple and a very problematic scheme to describe changes in women's status and conditions through the ages. It went somewhat like this: in Vedic times women enjoyed an exalted status and equality with men. Gradually, they began to be restricted more and more. By the middle ages, they were, by and large, confined within their homes, considered as capable of nothing more than housework, subordinated to men under very discriminatory norms and customs. In modern times, however, the situation began to be corrected. The 19th century was an age of progressive reforms, especially liberating for Indian women. Humanitarian reformers like Rammohun Roy and Vidyasagar abolished multiple forms of violence and discrimination against women like widow immolation and

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enabled them to acquire education and the right to widow remarriage. Freedom struggles found women in large numbers, taking their place by the side of men under Gandhian leadership. This enabled them to gain franchise rights and other reforms after Independence.

Such histories did not consider what women themselves did, thought or wrote, or what happened to their relations with men in actual lives. In other words, with few exceptions, the writings were about what great men did for women. If they at all looked at actual women, these would be the few exceptional achievers, not ordinary women.

A major change occurred with the growth of feminist historiography from the late 1980s. In 1989, two very important publications appeared. Among them, *Recasting Women: Essays on Colonial History*, used early Marxist and post colonial frameworks to talk about modern times in India as a period when colonialism introduced a capitalist mode of production. This, in turn, threw up a modern middle class of bourgeois men, dissatisfied with older feudal values and family arrangements. Such men tried to emulate British middle class families and create educated Indian wives and mothers who could become good companions to their modern husbands and who would run their families on reformed, enlightened lines. The various essays reflected on texts written by men who tried to educate women on lines that would serve their own new needs. Uma Chakravarty's extremely important article critically discussed, for the first time, the ways in which different categories of modern nationalists have mythicized ancient Hindu histories. Partha Chatterjee, in another very influential article, talked about the way in which nationalist thinkers divided the world into private and public domains, reserving the public world for male activities and allowing women an exalted, spiritual authority over the home. The articles mostly discussed middle class men and women. They did not, moreover, explore what women themselves did with the new education, how they thought about the new times. The general editorial argument was that reforms re-imprisoned modern women into a new cage of male desires. This framework, however, does not really explain how and why many critical voices and political actions in the public arena became possible for very large numbers of women precisely in these times.

The other collection of essays – *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* – did not introduce an overarching framework to explain gender in modern times. The essays explored, instead, specific categories of women and different facets of women's activities: their work as factory workers, agricultural labourers, or their home based production, their use of lawcourts, their deployment in electoral processes and nationalist movements. Together, the essays examined many new areas of experience and change in women's relations with modern state institutions, labour forms, and political movements. Histories of gender since then have moved along these two main trajectories: one focusing on what patriarchal men thought or did, the other focusing on women's work. Many rich histories subsequently began to discuss women's writings, their place in very different kinds of politics, new laws about gender, new modes of personal relationship. We will now look at some of these developments in modern gender with the help of the new histories.

Modern politics introduced new gender relationships, new modes of being men and women, new models for masculinities and femininities. Colonial rulers had stereotyped Indian men as ineffably conservative and often effeminate, except for the designated

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martial races, like the Sikhs of Punjab. Their opinion had points of rupture as well as points of collaboration with Indian views on gender. Some of the new Indian gender imaginaries that were thought out within the parameters of modern politics, aspired towards a political masculinity that was warlike, heroically militant, violent. This image found a strong purchase among Hindu Extremists, revolutionary terrorists and, later, among Hindu and Muslim communalists. On the other hand, Gandhi's was a vision of gentle, patiently constructive, non violent, self abnegating, practically androgynous malehood. Revolutionaries, moreover, equated maleness with youth alone.

At the same time, the difference between Gandhians and revolutionaries may be exaggerated. The two did share certain commonalities, apart from the passionate patriotism that characterized both. For both, a renunciation of sexual desire was a patriotic necessity, and both advocated celibacy for the ideal patriot. Both shared a notion of highly controlled and disciplined, ascetic masculine selves. Such an ideal was strongly opposed by Rabindranath Tagore's preference for individual self fulfillment rather than for selves which were hollowed out, emptied by sacrifice. He advised patriots to first experience freedom in their personal lives and relationships. Otherwise, the freedom of the country would be meaningless. He feared that an overdisciplined and regimented nationalist politics – however noble in its purpose – would constrain and repress individual thinking, imagination and moral sense. In such a condition, political freedom would be bought at the cost of freedom of thought.

In actual nationalist political *practice*, however, roles and functions of women soon became multiple and conflicted, according to terms that were increasingly set by women themselves. For late 19th century Hindu revivalist-nationalists like Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay who wrote the nationalist novel, *Anandamath*, the Motherland was imagined as the Mother Goddess. In such discourses, Hindu female chastity and the woman's fidelity to strict domestic discipline were configured as the hope for a future nationhood. The woman was valued as a sacred symbol of the Hindu nation.

In the first anti-colonial popular movements against the partition of Bengal between 1905 and 1908, in contrast, women were approached by the nationalist leadership for more concrete and active political involvement: to boycott British goods, to buy indigenous Swadeshi products for domestic use, to shelter revolutionary terrorists. From 1930, Bengali revolutionary terrorists began to arm women for assassinations of important colonial official figures. Later, women joined the underground band of insurrectionaries at Chittagong, took part in the raids on the armoury, and hid in the jungles for years with the men to escape arrest. This created, within a violent movement, an area of gender equality, even though the revolutionaries themselves were not interested in social issues.

Gandhi expanded anti colonial agitations into formidable movements of peasants, tribal and middle class people from the early 1920s for non violent non cooperation against the colonial administration. He at first hesitated to call women into active forms of agitation. Women, however, poured into them from all social ranks, forcing open the entire spectrum of Congress organizations. This meant an open and active female defiance of social norms that had traditionally restricted them to their homes. Sometimes this was powered by a strategic use of traditional kinship practice and emotions. In the course of the Khilafatist movement in 1921, the mother of the Ali brothers – a woman from an

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orthodox Muslim family - began to address large crowds of Muslims protesting the British abolition of the Turkish Caliphate after the War. Such a revolutionary violation of the principle of female seclusion was managed by the fact that she at first spoke from behind the veil and addressed the crowds as her children. There came a time, however, when she unveiled her face in public, since all were now to be considered as her sons.

By the time of the Civil Disobedience movement of 1930-1934, peasant women had emerged as 'dictators' of local organizations and movements. They courted arrest and led demonstrations, they faced police terror and they made contraband salt. Middle class women were prominent public speakers, organizers, active in demonstrations, in courting arrests. Swaruprani, mother of Jawaharlal Nehru, was beaten by police lathis during a scuffle over the sale of salt. Thousands of women from all walks of life went to prisons. During the Quit India movement of 1942, women led the underground networks in different places. Most of these struggles did not pause long enough to develop a gender ideology that would fit the dimensions of the new political woman that they themselves helped to shape. Gandhi and many other nationalist leaders clung to the image of the woman as self sacrificing, self abnegating mother, nurturing and modest. At the same time, the very inundation of the movement by women activists distinctly altered women's actual location within the family, opening up new possibilities and problems in domestic relationships, just as they had to forge an altogether new range of gender interactions with their male comrades.

Autobiographies of such women talk of striking and unprecedented relationships, predicaments and exhilaration. The wife of a senior Bengali bureaucrat, for instance, followed Gandhi into Noakhali in Bengal in 1946, a district, then devastated by Hindu Muslim violence. She left her children behind and they were brought up by their father, while she lived for nearly a year in a remote village with her baby daughter to organize relief and rehabilitation for victims of rape. Her political choice abruptly tore her out of her own social and familial matrix. It also recreated her husband's role in the family in a way that could not have been imaginable earlier. An upper class Muslim husband resented his politicized wife who was imprisoned and who no longer seemed her old, domesticated self.

By casting nationalist masculinity as in some ways androgynous – slowly changing oppression through peaceful disobedience of unjust laws without retaliating against attacks, as women sometimes tend to do within their homes – Gandhi's ideology bridged the gulf between gender norms. By insisting that men do what women often do at homes – cleaning, spinning, healing – he also bridged the gap between gender practices. At the same time, he applauded such feminine qualities as the hallmark for the ideal patriot, asking women always to remain gentle and self sacrificing. In a paradoxical way, he doubled the force of conventional feminine norms and values: self sacrifice, submission, self denial.

Other Congress leaders like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Chandra Bose were committed to equal rights for political women. They invited women to form their own organizations and volunteer corps within the Congress, they were enthusiastic about female franchise in independent India, they questioned domestic constraints forcefully. When he built up the Azad Hind Fauj, an army from among prisoners of war under Japanese occupation in

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1941, Bose encouraged the formation of an all women's militia: the Rani Jhansi Brigade that was engaged in active combat with British forces.

Outside the arena of nationalist politics, women's own exclusive political organizations began to develop from the early 20th century. Located in large cities with recruits from rich, educated women from all religious communities, these were sometimes divided about their political choice: whether to utilize colonial enquiry commissions into franchise and cooperate with colonial rulers to bargain for gender rights: or to throw themselves into anti colonial mass movements, shelving issues of female franchise for the moment and wait for independence and the Congress promise of universal adult franchise. Their participation in the Congress agitations had brought them into close touch with poor, 'low caste' women on fairly equal terms. This had not been possible in their own, rather elitist, womens' organizations. At the same time, nationalist struggles required that they put gender concerns on hold as long as colonialism lasted. There was yet another major dilemma. As the Congress and the Muslim League drew apart from the thirties, involvement in Congress movements meant a separation from Muslim women colleagues, whose presence had been a remarkable feature of their otherwise socially elitist and politically non-confrontationist organizations.

By and large, the Congress had stayed away from struggles of peasants, adivasis and workers on issues of class power, even though it had extremely large working class, tribal and peasant contingents which were mobilized for anti colonial movements. From the 1920s, Leftist and Communistic political groups - very often banned and severely repressed by the state - filled up this space, cooperating with or leading peasant and working class struggles for class based rights. Women workers would often act in a highly confrontational mode during working class strikes in Bombay, Calcutta, Kanpur: attacking the police, shaming blacklegs who broke strikes. In Bombay, they would publicly target noses of blacklegs as a symbolic attack on their masculinity. In Calcutta, during a municipal scavengers' strike, women attacked European sergeants with pots of excreta, making them tear off their uniforms and flee in terror. Their needs and demands as women working in extremely difficult conditions, nonetheless, rarely emerged as a prominent part of the workers' charter of demands. Nor were they usually accommodated within the trade unions.

In the 1940s, there were huge peasant and tribal upheavals in Bengal and in the Telengana region within the native state of Hyderabad. The Tebhaga movement in Bengal was a struggle of sharecroppers, demanding a larger share of the harvest. The Telengana movement was an armed struggle against landlord and state oppression. Women were very active in both. They would become especially prominent in political struggles in moments of intense repression, when male leaders were either behind bars or were underground and could not function very effectively. However, after the struggles were over, they would lose their place in the political organizations and leaders would expect them simply to return home as if nothing had happened to their old lives. The struggles thus were experienced by women as their entry into history, even as they were left stranded in a renewed domesticity as the movement receded.

Even though the Party did not theorize adequately on a communist ideal of gender relations, in practice it was often transgressive, easily accepting intercaste, intercommunity love matches as the norm and, in Bombay, experimenting with living in

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communes, beyond the family environment. Communist women were very active later in campaigning for marriage reform, equal property and inheritance rights and the right to divorce. Muslim women in the Leftist Progressive Writers' movement wrote deeply critical accounts of Muslim social conservatism in Urdu.

Within the politics of religious communalism, women's access to rightwing political organizations came somewhat later. The Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh allowed women of its families to form the Rashtrasevika Samiti only from 1936, and the Muslim League formed a female cadre around 1940, at times when intercommunity competition was at its peak. The public and political identity that rightwing politics allowed to their women would have partially reformulated the domestic balance of power to some extent. However, the organizations continued to valorize the cultural texts of gender inequality. They did not provide legal counseling for women in distress, nor did they initiate movements for better gender laws. Masculinity was recast on markedly militant lines, and political methods were devised to inculcate a will to mutual communal aggression and violence. Women were a part of this militaristic political machinery, promoting hate campaigns against other religious communities.

Some of the modern gender imaginaries and practices unfolded within the agenda of religious and social reform. The liberal reformism of the Indian middle classes may now appear as rather modest by our present standards. But it still carried dangerously transgressive resonances in their own, far more rigidly orthodox times. In the 19th and early 20th century, these reforms were proposed within a context where strict female seclusion, illiteracy, celibate widowhood were mandatory as well as commonsensical. The Hindu orthodoxy could openly proclaim that since women were naturally fickle, it was safer to burn living widows, that female education would turn women into male bodies quite literally, that infant marriage was both a scriptural and social necessity.

Undoubtedly, in such a context, reforms bred their own problems and limits. Rammohun Roy, in his eagerness to save Hindu widows from the ritual of burning alive, insisted that they were fully capable of chaste widowhood and, therefore, should be allowed to survive their husbands. He, thus, tried to purchase their lives at the cost of affirming the norms of chaste widowhood. This created great problems for the next generation of Hindu reformers, wanting to legalize widow remarriage. Pleas for widow remarriage, on the other hand, had to strive hard for social acceptance: they did so by playing on fears of immoral widowhood, of foeticide or infanticide among widows.

At the same time, pleas for the abolition of widow immolation were accompanied by a passionate discourse on gender inequalities, on the many sufferings and deprivations of women of all categories, the unfair norms that believed women to be innately immoral. Similarly, the idea of widow remarriage, especially among upper castes, violated strongly held codes of female monogamy, which, for upper caste widows, were supposed to last beyond the death of the husband. Education for Muslim women was justified on the ground that this would segregate them from a world of false ritual and custom that was shared by Hindu women. It was, simultaneously, a ploy for the communalization of Muslim women, as well as an argument for an intellectually and morally self reliant female identity. Reforms, despite their many limits and failures – very few widows married anywhere, despite intense campaigns – had unexpected consequences, especially in terms of social thinking.

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From the 1860s, women, especially in Bengal and in Bombay, began to write and publish highly critical pieces about their constraints and deprivations, about the unjust family and social norms. Kailshbashini Debi and Pandita Ramabai wrote about the miseries of the upper caste Hindu women, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein wrote against the seclusion of Muslim women. Women began to edit journals that allowed other women to publish their writings. From the second decade of the 20th century, women began to set up their organizations for social reform. They began to now take the leadership in the reform movement into their own hands.

Reformism, therefore, was a very complex movement, carrying many different and often contradictory possibilities within itself. Reformers were men and women limited by their own times. Given the power of the orthodoxy, it is still remarkable how strongly they questioned their own belief structures and argued with scriptural and customary prescriptions. Periods of historical change have to be visualized as difficult and ambiguous times, not black and white pictures of completely clear cut negative or positive developments.

Social reform was often translated into movements for change in the 'personal laws' of the religious communities. It is important, therefore, to look at social and legal change together. The colonial legal apparatus had made a sharp distinction within civil law from the early days of the Company's rule. Production relations and economic activities were governed by a new set of Anglo-Indian norms, neither fully derived from English law, nor following older Indian precedents substantially, but developed through responses to the changing drifts of the Company's politico-financial requirements. In the entire arena of other private matters – marriage, divorce, dower, inheritance, succession, caste, belief and custom – the different religious communities were to be governed by their scripture and custom. A new law would be enacted within this entire domain only if it could be proved that current practices violated more authentic religious scripture and custom. At first, there were three sets of 'personal laws' that were demarcated: Hindu, Muslim and Christian. Parsis and Sikhs were subsumed under Hindu laws. In the 1850s, Parsis agitated against this and extracted a separate code for themselves that was remarkably advanced for the times. It abolished polygamy, allowed divorce and widow remarriage and disallowed infant marriage. Adivasi practices, with their widely varying gender regimes, were slotted under the category of customary law.

In Bengal, on the whole, ancient and written scripture was considered as a more reliable basis for judgements than oral custom which varied from caste to caste, and whose provenance and authenticity were difficult to establish firmly. Hindu texts were, however, extremely variegated. This opened up a play on different textual and exegetical traditions, on strategies of authentication, that would uphold one or other competing truth claims. In the first two decades of the 19th century, Rammohun Roy, a Hindu reformer, managed to persuade a nervous colonial state, markedly reluctant to abolish an established religious practice, that the immolation of widows on the pyres of their deceased husbands, was a custom and not a scripturally sanctioned injunction. He also referred to the *Manusmriti*. Manu had been silent about widow immolation and had praised celibate widowhood. Rammohun stretched this to imply that Manu was actually opposed to immolation. In the next generation, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, campaigning to legalize widow remarriage, found Manu's strictures on mandatory celibacy to be an

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impediment. He then identified a fragment of a verse in the *Parasharasamhita* which he interpreted as a sanction for remarriage.

In other parts, as in Bombay Presidency or in Punjab the situation was slightly different. There was a detailed compilation of actually existing caste custom in western India, and in Punjab the construction of a category of 'tribal custom' that would apply to all rural communities irrespective of religious difference among Hindu Muslim and Sikh landholders. In the 1930s, the Muslim League forced an entry into Punjab politics on the question of female shares in paternal property which Islamic law sanctioned but which tribal custom disallowed. The League insisted that Muslims should secede from shared tribal custom and abide by religious law, thus knitting women's interests with communal ones. In the South, there was an oscillation between vernacular sources and customary practices, on the one hand, and Sanskrit scripture, on the other, as the authentic source of law.

Wherever scriptural law was followed more closely, a tendency existed to brahmanize gender practices, since scripture reflected upper caste norms: or to align practice to classical Islamic injunctions as found in the medieval text *Hedaya* or in the Hanafi school of law. The divergent and various marriage and inheritance traditions among Khojas, Memons or Mapillas were considered non Islamic. At the same time, it is important to recognize that neither were they disallowed. In fact, the uncertainty about the relative weight of text and custom, about the precise meaning of each, lingered throughout the colonial era. It allowed very interesting reformulations of traditional injunctions and practices. Courts were extensively used by Hindu widows and by upper class Muslim women, and litigation became a mode of altering domestic practice. Even Muslim women in deep seclusion innovated methods of speaking in courts without violating the purdah.

An interesting bargain was struck by Muslim women in 1939, desirous of the right to initiate dissolution of marriages which was difficult under the Hanafi law. They threatened apostasy to persuade leaders of politicized Islam to concede an application of Maliki law in this instance. Similarly, in the 1880s, Rukmabai, an educated girl from the carpenter caste in Bombay, refused to live with her illiterate and dissolute husband who demanded his conjugal rights over her. She argued her case on the basis of her caste custom which, she said, allowed her the right to dissolve her marriage. Lower caste widows, similarly, would argue in court that their caste custom allowed them to inherit the first husband's share of property even on remarriage, which both brahmanical scripture and colonial law denied to them. Law was trapped in a dilemma here, since the new colonial legislation of 1856 allowed widow remarriage on condition that widows would forfeit rights to the first husband's property. Colonial rulers were not yet entirely familiar with lower caste norms which allowed different forms of remarriage along with inheritance rights. Some High Courts ruled in such cases that the entire community be governed by a single set of laws and follow the letter of the 1856 law which denied them inheritance rights while allowing remarriage. The Allahabad Court, however, decided that law should be 'most enabling', i.e., it would grant entitlements that did not exist before, such as the right to remarriage for upper caste widows. But it should not take away any existing entitlements, such as inheritance claims of lower caste widows whose custom had already allowed remarriage and hence who stood to gain nothing and to only lose from the new law.

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Despite the timid and highly circumscribed interventionist possibilities of legal reformism, the making of new laws was surrounded by debates and exchange of views. These often stimulated the creation of new and daring social imaginaries. Even if they could not be translated into practice, they allowed people to imagine other modes of living and relating. For instance, in the debates over widow immolation in the early 19th century, both defenders and opponents of the practice built their cases on claims to representing the woman's 'own will and pleasure'. Unnoticed and unintended, female consent had slipped into the legal regime as a valid argument. The orthodoxy had referred to 'willing satis' who defied all dissuasion and followed their husbands to the pyre. To meet their claim, Rammohun Roy then critically described how women were socialized into accepting a life structured by exploitation, humiliation, inequality. He talked about the inequalities, injustices and exploitations that all women meet in different ways in their everyday lives. Nothing like this can be found in our earlier literature.

We have here, in such close and guilty observations of female lifeworlds, the composition of a new male gaze: a new language which some men now used to write about women. While classical and folk literature has abounded with elaborate and detailed erotic descriptions of the desirable and sexually- emotionally active woman, we now move towards a male discourse that focuses on her labour, her punishments, her deprivations: but which insists, at the same time, on her intellectual and moral resources. This is linked to the growth of a reformist masculinity that questions its own male privileges with some degree of guilt and shame.

In 1890, a little Bengali girl died of marital rape in great agony, and the colonial court had to acquit the husband since she had been more than ten years old and thus just above the statutory age limit, below which intercourse counted as rape under the Indian Penal Code. The Age of Consent Act that was passed as a result of this death in 1891 raised the age of consent within and outside marriage from ten to twelve. It was met with outraged Hindu nationalist agitations in Bengal and Bombay on the ground that a foreign state could not legislate on Hindu religious ritual practice. Lokamanya Tilak was especially hostile to the reform and he delinked the reformist National Social Conference from the National Congress. Things changed substantially in the next century as Indians were increasingly nominated and elected into the legislative bodies. In 1929, a new kind of nationalism had replaced the revivalist emphasis with a liberal accent. The legislature had come to include a substantial segment of elected Indians. They debated the child marriage issue and raised the minimum age of marriage with staunch support from women's organizations, even though the new law clearly defied scriptural injunctions. Female suffrage, too, albeit on a very limited scale, came to be debated and granted only when provincial legislatures and ministries came to be run by elected Indians, and when an organized women's movement had established itself as a force of some weight. Indians, thus, could defy their own traditions and initiate social change with far greater readiness than did their colonial masters. In this context, it is interesting to point out that Indian universities formally admitted women and granted them degrees decades before English universities did.

Political and financial expediency, rather than designs for cultural imperialism, ultimately governed the decisions of the colonial state on these matters. A brief utilitarian phase in the mid 19th century had produced a temporary alliance between colonial rulers and Hindu liberal reformism and had led to the legalization of widow remarriage and state

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funding of a few schools for girls. In Eastern Punjab, on the other hand, the regional state was entirely committed to status quoism vis a vis the custom of levirate that landholding Hindu, Muslim and Sikh Jats practiced: this meant that the widow had to be married off to the husband's brother. The primary motive was to preserve family holdings intact in order to ensure agricultural revenues in a resource-poor state. Widows were condemned, often against their will, to remarriage with brothers in law, to preserve family fortunes, and also to ensure the reproduction of army recruits who would then only come from Jat families, supposedly characterized by martial qualities. Widows' pleas for marriages outside the family, or for continued widowhood with some property entitlements, for refusal of levirate, were firmly refused.

State conservatism is evident especially in the state's reluctance to provide assistance to women who converted to Christianity. In 1872, Huchi, a young Hindu girl, converted and resisted cohabitation with her Hindu husband. Courts and even missionaries allowed her husband to take her back by force, even though the conjugal family treated her as an outcaste. Her commitment to her chosen faith was not extended to a choice to her husband and to her family. A similar accord with patriarchal interests became evident when in Malabar, groups of Nayar men began to oppose the traditional matrilineal residence and inheritance patterns. These rules had kept married women within their natal households where property was transmitted from mother to daughter. In theory, this put Nayar women through an initial form of marriage with brahman Namboothiri men and then allowed them serially monogamous relationships with Nayar men. In practice, the first marriage with Namboothiris could be merely notional. Under this regime, Nayar men – now educated and employed in the modern employment sector, and earning individual incomes – could not leave their self earned property to their children. The Malabar Marriage Act of 1896 retained the system with few changes, but its procedures initiated a large debate on the validity of matriliney. In 1933, by a further act of legislation, Nayar men were allowed to bequeath their own incomes to their children. Their right to set up conjugal households was also recognized. It was the product of a new social and aesthetic upsurge that valorized the break up of matrilineal, impartible households and the formation of smaller, patrilocal conjugal units, the end of the sambandham relationship with Namoothiri men, and the emergence of a new notion of educated, "modern", dominant caste Nayar masculinity, contesting brahman claims to Nayar women and to landholding privileges.

All this goes against the nationalist and post colonial scholarship that believes that the colonial state was primarily interested in procuring a cultural colonization of Indian minds, bent on creating a class of Anglicized Indian collaborators, saving the brown woman from the brown man. I would say that there was something of a change for three decades between the 1820s and the 1850s, when the state was somewhat more willing to accept readily a liberal brahmanical interpretation of scripture rather than a deeply orthodox one. After the 1857 rebellion, that too passed, limited in scope as it was. That supposedly Utilitarian moment – guided by an ideology that distrusted time honoured institutions and wanted state policy to be guided by the criterion of present utilities alone – had been both modest and transient. Initiative for change, moreover, came from Indian liberal reformers. By the end of the 19th century, it was increasingly associations of Indian women who would seize the initiative for reform, in female education, health, and for suffrage.

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In the course of the 19th century, the Koran was translated into Persian and then into Urdu. As the sacred book got delinked from the sacred language, maulvis also pioneered the growth of Urdu religious tracts and newspapers through the lithographic press. Their intention was to overcome the crisis in faith which had lost the protection of Muslim state power. There was also the possibility that the alien government might convert Muslims or force them to live under non Islamic personal laws.

Even though by the late 19th century, such fears had largely been allayed, the sense of a crisis of faith and of community remained overpowering. Faith was now seen to lie in the hands of individual Muslims, men as well as women. There was a vigorous campaign to ensure that its true tenets should be disseminated to the entire community of the faithful or the umma. Modern religious seminaries competed among themselves to educate religious teachers and specialists and to standardize conduct and belief. Oral disquisitions and inter faith as well as intra faith debates penetrated remote villages and fatwas were printed in massive numbers, dealing with queries about everyday lives. Though each group tried to singularize the community, the print culture actually pluralized ways of being Muslim men and women.

A few Muslims in the 19th century tried to combine Islam with modernity, especially with western education and western science: the Delhi College in the earlier half of the century, and the Aligarh University in the latter part. More common were disputations within the tradition about freedom of interpretation. Among the older gentry in North India, gradually, the older courtly values of fabulous hospitality, strict orthodoxy and ostentatious, extravagant, investments in cultural products, were overtaken by somewhat different conceptions of how to be a modern sharif man. Education and seriousness, piety and self reform, were conjoined to the conception of a new Muslim household. This, ideally, should be thrifty, self contained, where familial emotional ties should partially replace older notions of male patronage of cultivated guests. It also queried the traditional enclosed female world, secluded from the Muslim male domain, but partaking often of Hindu female linguistic usages and custom. The male householder became far more obviously an active ruler within the household, educating children and wives with Urdu books, and ensuring true Muslim practice within homes.

A more acute and pervasive sense of community identity bred worries about the interior of the household. Islamicization of Muslim women in this context appeared as a problem, as they were not exposed to preaching in the mosque or to the teaching in seminaries or makhtabs, nor used to reading religious literature with comprehension, since the holy book was in Arabic, a language most women could read, parrot like, but could not understand. The new attentiveness with which they were now regarded as mothers of future Muslim generations, and as Muslims in their own right, produced anxieties about the unreformed zenana where women spoke the begumati zaban or a language filled with Hindu references, and where they practiced ritual that often could be syncretic. The modern households of an emergent middle class required personal management skills and economies. There was a dispute about how to create the new Muslim woman. Here, increasingly, women seized the initiative, especially from the early 20th century.

Some of the reformers prohibited Urdu reading for women, since Urdu literature had a low life of its own, or contained dangerous erotic and romantic elements. Bi

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Ashrafunnissa later revealed how she taught herself to read Urdu in great secrecy. Begum Rokeya Hossein wrote in Bengali for Bengali Muslim girls. Other male authors, however, wrote novels in Urdu to combine entertainment with instruction. These were wildly popular among women, creating in them a new self image and self esteem as pious Muslim mothers and wives, as ideal home keepers. Some of the novels – of Nazir Ahmad Dehlavi's, for instance, – were sensitive to the anguish of secluded domesticity. Some others, like Maulana Ashraf Thanawi's, more determinedly reformist and pious, tried to exclude Hindu influence from Muslim women's language, ritual and domesticity. At the same time, the segregated and enclosed Muslim female identity was combined with notions of an individuated female selfhood, separate from and equal with men in the presence of God.

Some reformers, like Sayyad Ahmad Khan would, encourage female education at home but would be outraged at the thought of schooling for girls. Others, like Mumtaz Ali, would try and exploit scriptural resources to encourage the notion of gender equality as the distinctive hallmark of Islam. By the turn of the century, the decision no longer rested with them alone. The Begums of Bhopal set up primary schools for Muslim girls in the teeth of public opposition, and in the next decades, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein would do so in Patna and in Calcutta.

There was a similar fear of schooling among the Hindu orthodoxy as well, even among those who supported female education within the family. Schools were non familial spaces, where girls acquired an individual identity and a peer group that lay beyond the control of the family and the kin group. However carefully secluded in special transport, they also left their homes and travelled along public spaces. In Bengal, where Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar set up the first schools for girls in Calcutta, and even in villages, schoolgirls and their families were lampooned, intimidated, ostracized. There was, for much of the 19th century, a widespread reluctance to provide for home based education, even bare literacy, since that was supposed to lead to widowhood. Rashundari Debi, a timid, upper caste, rural housewife, developed an uncontrollable yearning to read: she fearfully taught herself the letters in her kitchen, in the middle of her household burdens. Later, she wrote the first full length autobiography in the Bengali language. Other women like Ramabai Ranade wrote of the conflict within their marital households as their reformer husbands pushed them to become literate, and their female kin perceived this as a threat to their domestic power. Women justified some of the orthodox fears. When they wrote, they often described their domesticity with a ferocious criticality. Tarabai Shinde or Pandita Ramabai in western India, or Kailashbashini Debi in Bengal, produced critiques of upper caste Hindu households in language that was sometimes sharper than the words of male reformers. Pandita Ramabai eventually left the Hindu fold and converted to Christianity. Rokeya was suspected of Christian leanings. Educated women were caricatured in folk art and in farces as males in female garb, as men in habits and in demands, as home wreckers and as biologically disabled from bearing and rearing children. Their reformist friends and husbands were, similarly, portrayed as feminized, henpecked, weak, without male organs or strength.

Liberal reformers had referred to female deprivations with shameful guilt and wanted to rectify them with legal rights to women that would withstand the wills of families. Revivalists, later in the century, sometimes initiated reforms without recourse to legal

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change. The Arya Samaj, founded by Swami Dayanand, in late 19th century Punjab and western UP, encouraged female education, schooling, widow remarriage. The grounds, however, were different. Little was said about universal natural justice or gender equality. Legal rights were not the mode for reform. Instead, the hope was that remarried widows would enhance the Hindu population. Dayanand advised widows to marry widowers alone and to terminate the relationship after a few children had been born to them. The presence of the Samaj did expand female education remarkably in societies which were so far notably deficient in it. Educated women sometimes became leading lights in womens' organizations. The Child Marriage Restraint Act was passed at the initiative of Harbilas Sarda, an Arya Samajist. Some of the reformist Sikh movements and sects also formulated schemes for marriage reform and female education. Yet they recreated norms of 'pativrata' for Sikh women, expressed fears on the breakup of the joint family, and advised women against giving up domestic labour on acquiring education. For men, new householder norms were created that envisioned greater domestic responsibilities, piety and education instead of an exclusively martial ethos.



Figure 14.4: Pandita Ramabai and her daughter Manorama

Source: http://www.churchtimes.co.uk/uploads/images/p21_Pandita%20Ramabai%231%23.jpg

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Figure 14.5: Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain

Source: <http://www.banglapedia.org/httpdocs/Images/HossainRoquiahSakhawat.jpg>

Caste

It is interesting that many historians have tried to record and interpret the transformations in gender practices, diligently and in different ways, for the last half a century. Histories of modern caste, in contrast, had a very late development. Caste studies had long been the preserve of sociologists and political scientists. Nationalist historians assumed that the national movement unified all castes, especially in the broad mass struggles initiated by Gandhi who also engaged in anti untouchability campaigns. They dismissed untouchable political separatism from the Congress politics as sectarian in nature, damaging to larger national interests. Marxist historians ignored caste problems as secondary to class: class struggles, they assumed would abolish caste distinctions and usher in complete equality in all spheres.

Cambridge school historians, from the late 1960s and 1970s, were the first to seriously study caste groups as a primary social unit, increasingly important for political mobilization from the level of local factions to that of the provincial electoral arena as well as in national politics. They were, however, not interested in caste movements, nor in exploring the relationship between 'low caste' and nationalist politics.

There had been some very interesting historical works on lower caste religious sects and tenets that either questioned caste relations or allowed lower castes a place in multi caste sects on somewhat unequal terms. There were also political biographies of untouchable and 'low caste' leaders like Jyotirao Phule and B. R. Ambedkar. Colonial Censuses and their attempts to understand and classify jatis had been extensively studied. But it was the political unrest around the Mandal Commission Reports that recommended reservation for Other Backward Castes and which the Central Government tried to operationalize in 1990, that finally convinced historians that caste was a live and urgent issue in modern times. Since then, reflections on caste relations have come to

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inflect most studies of modern Indian history. One can no longer try to write a serious history of any aspect of modern India without seriously engaging with caste issues.

Most notable have been complex studies of the purpose and implications of subaltern sects like the Matuas in late 19th century Bengal by Shekhar Bandyopadhyaya. He reflected on the strength of its anti caste resistance as well on its appropriation of upper caste domestic norms as adherents of the sect – the Chandalas - shifted from their traditional degraded occupations to cultivation and asked for a new nomenclature along with an economic boycott of upper caste landlords. Nandini Gooptu looked at urban chamars in 20th century North Indian towns, in a state of relative prosperity in interwar years as their traditional craft of shoemaking boomed with Army demand. They formed the Adi Hindu sect which imagined a pre caste ideal realm, destroyed by the wily brahmanical religion. Scholars like Koji Kawashima studied the role of Christian missionaries in the Hindu native state of Travancore in the 19th century, who encouraged self esteem movements among low castes and untouchables. M. S. S Pandian, V. Geetha and Rajadurai have explored the non brahmanical, Dravidian movements in the South, their anti caste ideologies and the work of Periyar in bringing together anti Brahman, anti Sanskrit and Hindi language and atheistic movements to create a radical south Indian untouchable identity and politics. Most interesting and controversial have been the studies of Ambedkarite politics and its complex relationship with Gandhian movements and ideals : by Eleanor Zelliott, Christophe Jaffrelot, Gail Omvedt, D. R. Nagaraj, David Hardiman among many others.

Liberal reformers who sought to transform gender norms were usually well born men and women, upper caste and propertied. 'Low castes' threw up their own leaders from the mid 19th century. Some emerged with new resources of modern education and urban jobs, newly acquired petty trade and some landholding: all of which allowed them to partially escape from the day to day domination and exploitation by upper castes that structured their labour burdens and humiliating everyday lives. Even very arduous and inferior urban paid jobs in factories, mines or municipality scavenging departments were somewhat empowering: this was self earned service, not a caste imposed inherited burden.

An older tradition of slow, gradual upward mobility had long been possible when a jati or a fragment of a jati would change a particularly stigmatized profession and take to a somewhat more respectable one, generally agriculture. This was accelerated enormously under the decennial colonial census operations. Every ten years, all jatis or segments of jatis which had become economically solvent and had started emulating upper caste ritual habits, would ask for a higher ritual ranking in the forthcoming census. Sometimes they got their way, making the castes fluid and porous. Sometimes they incorporated themselves into a bhakti sect which had been dominated by upper castes, thereby gaining some exemption from upper caste exploitation, as was the case with the Sivanarayanai sect in Madhopura in Eastern UP. Sometimes they founded their own sects, questioning brahmanical caste norms and ascribing a superior status to themselves, as with the Satnamis of Central India or the Matuas of Bengal. In all these cases, however, they would try to abandon the habits that were found particularly abhorrent by the upper castes, like the eating of carrion or removal of dead animals, usually, they also went in for more conservative domestic norms, disallowing non domestic labour to women or banning widow remarriage.

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In western India, a warrior origin and identity had been particularly sought after by Shudra castes, desiring access to self esteem. The term Maratha had been traditionally contested. Sometimes, successful peasant jatis, like Kunbis, laid claim to it, sometime brahmans and upper castes would close down access, making it a marker of upper caste identity alone. In the process of contestations, a new emphasis opened up, linking the peasant and the warrior. Jyotirao Phule, coming from a caste of cultivators, and educated initially by missionaries, inverted Hindu mythological resources to construct a theory of brahmanical interlopers who stole the realm of indigenous people and degraded the sons of the soil – peasant-warriors in occupation and social ethos - as low castes. He re-mythologized low castes as an ancient, indigenous nation of warlike, powerful and egalitarian cultivators. The rejuvenated vision of non brahman men was one that combined productivity and martiality. He was, moreover, a fierce critic of brahmanical patriarchy. A similar warrior ethos was claimed and used by Mahars of western India who had made their way into the army, and had gained some educational and job privileges over and above their untouchable status. When upper caste Maratha protests led to a dissolution of the Mahar soldiery in the late 19th century, there were storms of protests, invoking pre colonial records of service in the Peshwa's army and in the colonial army. The martial claim was quite central to the formation of untouchable and Shudra protestant identity. Ambedkar defined Shudras as original Kshatriyas, demoted to lower ranks by brahmanical conspiracy.

In a very different way, and moving away from this martial aspiration, many untouchable leaders began to reinterpret Buddhism as a resource against caste. In the South, from the early 20th century, Iyothee Thass claimed that Buddhism had been the ancient tradition of untouchables and both had been ravaged by upper castes invading from North India. To this was added the new history of an original Dravidian race based ancient civilization, equitable and equal in its social perspective, throwing up a rich Tamil literature; this was vanquished by Aryan upper caste outsiders who relegated the original inhabitants to the status of low castes and ruled over them. In the North, too, somewhat similar histories were composed by untouchable leaders in the early 20th century: in UP, of an Adi Hindu monarchy without caste and destroyed by brahmanical Hinduism; and in Punjab, of a pre Hindu kingdom without caste, among Adi Dharm adherents. Ambedkar described untouchables as 'broken men', originally Buddhists, who were vanquished and scattered around by their new brahmanical rulers, losing their occupations, self esteem and communities. History, thus, became a major weapon in the hands of the new 'low caste' upthrust.

Politically, all would try to bargain with the colonial state for educational and professional concessions and electoral opportunities: often finding the state a better ally than the Congress, dominated by upper caste Hindus and quite determinedly opposed to any of their demands. After the Poona Pact which Gandhi won with a fast unto death to avoid Ambedkar's electoral demands, the Gandhians did begin to work seriously for removal of untouchability. However, Gandhi maintained that the problem was quite separate from caste as such and that the four varna order was entirely justifiable. Ambedkar, however, argued that the problem of untouchability was inseparable from the problem of caste and could not be solved without a wholesale annihilation of caste.

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B. R. Ambedkar, the leading light of 20th century untouchable or dalit politics who would, in mid century, convert with half a million Mahars to Buddhism, however, composed a dalit or politically conscious untouchable masculinity that would not depend on martial ethos. Nor would it use brahmanical legends to subvert upper caste privilege and tyranny. His was a form of masculine leadership that was self consciously intellectual, rationalist and reliant on a vocabulary of rights and universal justice.

In much of lower caste reforms, brahmanical orthodoxy was repudiated along with its gender hierarchy. Dalits claimed a different and equal gender relationship as the marker of their difference from brahmins. All major modern dalit reformers - Phule, E. V. Ramaswamy Naicker as well as Ambedkar - wove in the sufferings of upper caste women into their narratives of caste oppression. They were absolutely radical and uncompromising in their efforts to bring in education, marriage reform and political awareness to dalit women who were prominent in the political movements in western India as well as in the south.

However, the radical tradition of Phule-Ambedkar-Periyar did not exhaust all of low caste reform. More widespread were Sanskritizing moves among upwardly mobile low castes who might abandon their 'polluted' occupations and move to 'cleaner ones. They would then claim an improved ritual status. Very often, this would be justified on the grounds of their gender practices. By the mid 19th century, the prohibition of widow remarriage and the practice of infant marriage had been generalized among wide segments of low or untouchable castes. Earlier in the century, the number of low caste widows who immolated themselves along with their husbands, had exceeded the number of satis from upper castes. Prosperous peasants tended to pull their women back from agricultural operations. In Punjab, where women continued to work on the fields, they would not enter themselves in Census documents as anything except housewives. Domestication and seclusion became the norm wherever they were affordable.

Lower caste political activism would often declare an altered relationship with the world through a transformed disposition of caste marked bodies. Christian missions in the South encouraged low caste Shanar female converts from the late 18th century to cover their breasts in public spaces. Since the breast cloth was enjoined upon upper caste women, lower caste women were made to go around without it to designate their different and lowly status. In the princely state of Travancore, and in British ruled Tinnevely in Madras Presidency, the breast cloth movement raged up to the early decades of the 19th century, as Shanars faced immense persecution, and some European missionaries too were harassed on the streets. The movement spread among unconverted Shanars as well. In the early 20th century, there were clashes between the Nayers from the dominant castes and untouchable Pulayas who were erstwhile slaves when Pulaya women began to wear a particular kind of necklace which was reserved for Nayar female use. The sect of Shri Narayana Guru, which encompassed low caste Izhavas, demanded the appropriation of upper caste dress signifiers that were forbidden to low caste bodies. Low caste and untouchable men, too, conspicuously began to use umbrellas and shoes in public places to defy the physical signs of caste hierarchy. Such cross dressing became a code for radical dissent against caste discipline. That signified the right to inhabit unmarked bodies.

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The focus so far in historical writings had been on large and influential social categories, what passes for the mainstream. Categories that disappeared, like women slaves in royal or gentry households after early colonial rule, or, at the other end of the pole, men and women in mixed marriages with Europeans, 'Anglo Indians' and European vagrants, slip through the numerically formidable blocks of Hindus, Muslims, dalits, tribes. Some of the smaller yet old minority communities - Jews, Armenians, Chinese, Abyssinians - similarly await their social histories. Yet another category of migrants that has recently acquired a rich crop of literature are refugees: from Punjab and Bengal, displaced by the conjoint processes of Partition and Independence. Refugee women have been intensively studied, in their relations and experiences with men of other communities, of their own communities, and with the new nation states of India and Pakistan. Often structured by great violence and loss, the experiences, however, also reveal, new resources for self-fashioning and a more active and public identity that emerged out of the struggles for survival.

Labour

Social histories of the labouring poor have been rare and a very recent development. The most significant changes have occurred in the field of urban labour history. Rajnarain Chandravarkar explored the culture of the cotton mill workers in Bombay city, within and outside the factory space. He looked at patterns of recruitment, the organization of the working class mohallas and chawls, the politics of trade unionism, solidarities and strikes, as well as of communal riots. He also placed the workers within the city landscape and showed how their presence affected many other dimensions of urban work and experience. Dipesh Chakravarty studied the jute mills in colonial Bengal, arguing that both millowners and workers remained caught up in pre-capitalist, mercantilist-speculative or feudal-rural traditions of work and did not develop modern corporate or working class identities. Chitra Joshi's recent monograph on Kanpur cotton textile mill workers is path-breaking. It develops many new themes and considerably refines older modes of writing urban and labour histories. She discusses the ties of caste, community and gender among the workers in the colonial period as well as the patterning of their workspace and residential quarters. She has uncovered working class poets and has done extensive fieldwork among present generations who recall the memorable and heroic strikes of past decades with pride. But when she returned to the mill areas again in the 1990s - now depleted of work as textile production is rearranged as the production of synthetic fibre made in small, scattered workshops on powerlooms - she finds workers recalling earlier times of factory production as a time of relative security: when they had stable work, an identity as a mill worker, and strong bonds of mutual solidarity as union members. Now casualization of work, its transient and shifting nature, results in a sense of demoralization and loss of their masculine identity. They nostalgically recreate the memory of the very form of work that their fathers and grandfathers had protested against.

In new rural labour regimes like plantations, there was a steady demand for female labour from the mid 19th century. Tea picking was considered best done by women and the tea plantations deliberately feminized large parts of their labour force. Moreover, managers wanted to ensure a labour force that would reproduce itself, given the harshness of the plantation work. Women workers were doubly in demand as producers

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and as reproducers. Samita Sen has shown how the deliberate female recruitment – often by fraud and by coercion – was resisted by middle class reformers, exposing, especially, the sexual oppression of labouring women by European managers and the breakdown of family structures. The agenda was to close down female recruitment in the name of female purity and family values, irrespective of the consent of the female labour force. Charges of female oppression within the remote tea plantations, where colonial laws allowed European managers a despotic authority, were, of course, accurate. At the same time, the economic compulsion of ensuring a steady reproduction of labour force, induced the authorities to invest in maternal health. Dagmar Engels found the health statistics of women workers there to be above all-Bengal averages.

Coal mines, similarly, economized by allowing women even into underground labour till fairly late. The sharing of a dangerously risky workload would have created a self confidence and a sense of equality among women workers, along with the sense of despair within a terribly oppressive and exploitative labour situation. In the Kolar goldmines in the princely state of Mysore, on the other hand, women workers were completely excluded from mine work. Janaki Nair provides an account of the self assured and independent female sex workers whose 'modern' ways were both feared and admired by the mineworkers. The male labour force, engaged in particularly horrible labour forms in some of the deepest mines in the world, nonetheless, celebrated their freedom from upper caste domination in the villages. They, moreover, despised their rural existence since they were both more demeaning and more colourless. Even with low wages, great fatigue and arduous work in the mining town, they found a joyous release in the possibilities of urban consumption, especially in the varieties of non vegetarian food. A rather macho and brash young male labour force thus emerged within the interstices of the cruel mining economy, men who savoured a limited but real freedom from caste humiliation and the drabness of traditional rural existence. Nandini Gooptu, similarly, identifies an empowering release from the direct domination that low caste labourers had faced in villages. Even caste-marked lowly jobs in urban municipalities were preferred, since they were 'government jobs', which put them within the same continuum of employment that the educated middle classes engaged in.

In large scale urban factories, female recruitment was generally low. Rural families received back aged or ill workers and the urban workspace provided few facilities for the sustained reproduction of the workforce. There was, therefore, a tendency for male migrant workers to keep their women back in the villages. Moreover, early factory legislation reduced womens' working hours and excluded them from certain categories of particularly risky work, making it somewhat uneconomical to employ female labour. Factory owners preferred that non working mothers should bear the burden of sustaining production and reproduction, exempting the state and the employers from the expenses of labour welfare. However, in times of strikes, or of increased production, destitute urban women could be utilized as a cheap, reserve army of labour. We have already referred to the strident militancy of factory women as well as to their marginal position within the organized labour movement. Few male workers enjoyed home lives, being often migrants and transients in the city. Their working lives were violent, contentious, meagre, uncertain and unprotected. At the same time, the city, with its multitude of cheap pleasures, was something of a release from the drabness of rural poverty. The work with heavy machinery and the solidarities of collective labour and union politics imparted their own sense of pride, skill and political weight. Chitra Joshi's work shows

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how, in the present moment of deindustrialization, those times of organized work and politics are recalled, now bathed in the melancholy glow of a lost value.

Deviance

Modern times multiplied the self disclosure and the self assertion of deviant men and women, even as laws were tightened to regulate their activities. Prostitutes resisted humiliating lock ups in military hospitals when a mid 19th century law tried to protect European soldiers from the threat of venereal diseases by intrusive medical check ups and forced confinement of sex workers. The law was finally withdrawn. Growing urbanization expanded red light areas in cities and towns. Prostitutes came to enjoy a larger clientele even as their growing numbers stirred middle class anxieties and pleas for stricter spatial segregation. If they suffered from more explicit social stigma, they also acquired some self esteem through new, highly paid professions in the public theatre and in the early cinema. Sumantra Banerjee and Ashwini Tambe have done very interesting work on Calcutta and Bombay prostitutes. There are no serious historical studies of deviant communities like the transgender ones, homosexuals and lesbians. To ask ourselves questions about the history of such lives, we need to turn to ethnographic studies and to creative literature.

There was a greater thrust to the composition and articulation of individual selves through cultural texts. Such selves, in order to capture an interested market, needed to declare some distance between themselves and the social identity they inhabited, to demonstrate points of rupture and a sense of a unique individuality. That had been earlier a sign of mystics, great poets, men of privilege and importance. Now, even ordinary people and quotidian lives would be heard, seen and read, if they could portray a distinctive individuality successfully. A new appetite grew for consuming lives of ordinary men and women, of housewives and prostitutes, of autodidacts and low caste savants . At the same time, experiences of collective life, especially of the self chosen ones, were valued in cultural representations. Nationalist literature and theatre, and from the 1940s, Left writings and drama, depicted political solidarities and movements to urban and rural mass audiences and readers. New political identities sometimes meshed with older, given ones. Class identity, for instance, was created as much through political literature, performance and speeches as it was through actual experiences of particular forms of life and labour.

Literature and cultural performance like music, theatre and cinema expressed imaginings and desires that were socially transgressive but culturally valued or, at least, found to be profoundly interesting: extra and pre marital love, love for widows, love for the prostitute. As these themes were enacted on the popular public stage, alternative worlds became visible, and thus, more possible. Novels and drama, moreover, depicted altered lifestyles, changes in characters and fortunes, conveying a sense of the fleetingness, transitoriness of the actual. There was a constant search beyond the known, the expected, the familiar. Seeking novelty, authors and performers turned to history, mythology, unfamiliar milieus and fantasies, thus expanding the range of possible and different modes of being. Autobiographies, moreover, enabled new ways of addressing the world: the shelter of the simulated lonely speaker, talking to herself in words that, nonetheless, were entirely meant for public consumption.

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If, in the process, some of the more fuzzy, indistinct boundaries among different communities of people became more visible, harder and inflexible – as among religious communities - the givenness, naturalness of earlier identities and their imposed compulsions and obligations also turned fuzzy, contentious and quite elusive: all that was solid tending to melt into air.



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Summary

- The colonial period in Indian history saw transformations both in technology – such as railways and the printing press, and in intellectual life. These changes were often connected, as the establishment of stronger connections between social and regional groups increased interactions between them and led to new ways of thinking.
- The study of women's history has undergone many changes over time. Initially the simplistic assumption was that Indian women enjoyed a high status and personal freedom under a 'golden age' in ancient India, but this was eroded in the medieval period, until social reformers in the nineteenth century took up the cause of the uplift of women.
- From the late 1980s a more complex understanding of the gender question in history has been developed, with greater emphasis on the imperatives behind men's concern for reform, and women's own experiences.
- In the national movement the women's question took on ambiguous tones – women were idealized as self-sacrificing, chaste, and nurturing while at the same time women stepped out of their traditional domestic roles to actively join the freedom struggle sometimes.
- By the late nineteenth century women had begun to write about their own condition in society based on personal experiences, and then they began to reach out to other women, cutting across class and caste lines.
- The process of social and religious reform relating to women was often tied up to change in laws, which was brought about through complex interactions between reformers, those with conservative views, and the colonial state.
- On the other hand revivalist movements stressed a non-legislative path to social reform.
- The struggle of the 'lower castes' for equality was in the colonial period generally initiated by upwardly mobile members of these castes.
- This was in contrast to the process of Sankritization, where a 'lower caste' might translate economic and social success into a higher status for the entire caste, without challenging the caste system itself.
- Studies of the modern labour force reveal the transformations brought about by the relocation of the rural poor into the socially less restrictive atmosphere of urban life. At the same time the connections of the urban labour force with their villages often remains alive and influences their living conditions and outlooks.

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- Finally, identities were also expressed and shaped through the avenues of literature, theatre and cinema.

14: Exercises

Essay questions

- 1) How has feminist writing since the late 1980s changed our understanding of the gender question in colonial India?
- 2) What were the limitations of anti-colonial movements of different types when it came to women's participation in them?
- 3) What were the different strategies used by the 'lower castes' to fight their depressed position in society?
- 4) How did the migration of rural poor into towns and cities and their transformation into an urban working class affect their social conditions?

Objective questions

Question Number	Type of question	LOD
1	True or False	1

Question

Which of these statements is false regarding the 'lower castes' creation of alternate and empowering histories of their origins:

- a) They claimed they were peasant-warriors
- b) They claimed they were original inhabitants of the land
- c) They said they were the original Brahmins

Correct Answer / Option(s)	c)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

Most of the struggles by 'low castes' to challenge their depressed status centred around the creation of a history of being the original warrior peasant inhabitants of the land, subjugated by upper caste Hindus.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

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Upper caste Hinduism or Brahminism was seen as the enemy in all cases, as a force dispossessing and exploiting the indigenous population, and labelling it 'lower caste'.

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
2	True or False	1

Question

Which of these statements is true regarding the 19th century reformers?

- a) They felt guilty about the deprivations of women in their society
- b) They often sought to use the colonial state's machinery to push forward progressive legislation
- c) They felt reform of women's lives would lead to reform of society as a whole
- d) They wanted women to be equals in the workplace

Correct Answer / Option(s)	a), b) and c)
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Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

The 19th century reformers were motivated by the need to reform society as a whole and to remove the severe disabilities women laboured under, and they were mostly willing to use legislation to push through their agenda for reform.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

d): The reformers of the 19th century by and large argued that women's education and social reform would fit them better for a domestic role. That women should aspire to roles similar to those of men was not considered desirable or probable.

Reviewer's Comment:

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Question Number	Type of question	LOD
3	Multiple choice question	2

Question

New trends in social histories

Indian women participated in the anti-colonial movement by:

- a) leading demonstrations
- b) boycotting foreign goods
- c) taking up revolutionary violence
- d) going to prison

**Correct Answer /
Option(s)**

All of the above

Justification/ Feedback for the correct answer

Women, often from conservative backgrounds, played equal roles in the anti-colonial movement.

Resource/Hints/Feedback for the wrong answer

Reviewer's Comment:



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Further readings

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