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# Society,Gender and Reform in Modern India: A Historiographical Review

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***Abstract:****The paper presents a historiographical review of gender, reform and nationalism in modern India. Critical feminist interventions and debates from colonial discourses to current perspectives are acknowledged to reflect on the synthesis of gender images in Indian historiography. From the colonial "woman question" to subaltern and intersectional analyses, the paper synthesises selected historical moments and their implications for the gendered construction of Indian society. It reviews the changing perceptions of female agency under colonialism, nationalism, and social reform movements while mapping the present challenges in feminist historiography. Methodologically, the review adopts a historiographical perspective to look into feminist, subaltern and intersectional critiques. By putting these perspectives in the frontline, this study illuminates how successive schools of thought have redefined women's subjectivities, from being symbolic representations in colonial and nationalist discourse to the recognition of their lived realities and diverse voices in contemporary feminist historiography.*

***Keywords****: Feminist Interventions, Gender Historiography, Social Reform Movements etc.*

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## Introduction

This study aims to analyse the interrelated themes of gender, reform and society in modern India by focusing on the conceptions of women that have historically been defined, contested, and debated within colonial and postcolonial discourses. The main point of discussion is about the colonial representation of Indian women either as a symbol of cultural purity or as victims of oppressive traditions. Many scholars have critically engaged with these perspectives. For instance, in the case of the woman question, there have been debates about

colonial and nationalist reform, with Lata Mani, Gayatri Spivak and Partha Chatterjee being particularly concerned.

The paper also provides a reconstruction of Indian social reform movements, stating that they were ambivalent in their approach because they claimed to be alleviating the circumstances of women while simultaneously strengthening preexisting patriarchal structures.

This was challenged by feminist historians such as Uma Chakravarti, Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid, who foregrounded the realities of women and questioned the male-centered historical narratives. Their study marked a decisive transformation in historiography, moving women from the margins to the center of analysis. Furthermore, following Gayatri Spivak and Sharmila Rege, subaltern and intersectional perspectives highlight how caste, class, and gender intersect to produce different experiences of Indian women, thereby complicating any one-dimensional narrative of oppression or resistance.

The importance of this review could be attributed to its attempt to provide a particular understanding of how gender was constructed in the views of Indian history and consequently, how women's agency was limited by colonial, nationalist, and reformist discourses. At the same time, it demonstrates that feminist historiography has broadened the horizon of inquiry, bringing women's voices from the sidelines into the mainstream and promoting more inclusive readings of Indian society. This paper does not furnish fresh empirical material but presents a systematic review of major historiographical debates. Tracing the differing scholarly responses, it follows the transformation of historiographical approaches from colonial reformist narratives to feminist critiques and from subaltern histories to intersectional analyses. This brings into sharp relief questions of women's agency, subjectivity and representation in the context of modern Indian history.

## Colonial Discourse and the "Woman Question"

The colonial construction of the "woman question" in nineteenth-century India has been a subject of utmost intensity in historical discourse, with scholars emphasising how women were at once central to and yet silenced in reform discourses. Lata Mani (1989, p. 2), in *Contentious Traditions*, demonstrates that the colonial debates on sati were based on authority granted to the scripture and not on the procedure concerning the widows; hence, rendering women 'central and yet marginal'. In her famous formulation, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak

(1988, p. 297) describes this erasure by saying that *"white men saving brown women from brown men,"* arguing that both colonial officials and Indian reformers denied women any agency. Partha Chatterjee (1993, pp. 116–120) demonstrates how nationalist critiques of colonial interventions created a "new patriarchy" that located women within the "inner domain" of cultural purity while still embracing modern reform. Tanika Sarkar (2001) similarly notes the fleeting appearances of women's voices, almost always mediated by male reformers, though some autobiographies like that of Rassundari Devi's *Amar Jiban* (Forbes, 1996, p. 57) open up alternative self-representations. Uma Chakravarti (1998) draws attention to the fact that Pandita Ramabai exposed colonial paternalism and the hypocrisy of upper-caste reformers, thus showing that the woman question cannot be taken out of caste hierarchies. Broader surveys such as that of Geraldine Forbes (1996, p. 27) claim that reforms like women's education were aimed at producing better wives and mothers, not at liberating women, while Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989, p. 15) maintain that the discourse of reform actually concerned itself with the control of tradition and modernity more than gender justice. Furthering the exposition is Mrinalini Sinha (1995, p. 34), who traces the victimisation of women to colonial constructions of effeminate Indian masculinity, while Leela Dube (1997, pp. 112–115) stresses that women became the symbols of cultural difference in the construction of community identity. Taken together, these works show that the colonial construction of the 'woman question' was less about women's emancipation and more a contested site where the powers of empire, the anxieties of reform, and the projects of nationalism were inscribed. Tragically, this process was almost always to the detriment of women's subjectivity. Lata Mani (1989) has argued the colonial discourse on practices such as sati depended much on scriptural authority, privileging interpretations of texts over the lived experiences of women, thereby further marginalising them in the very discourses purporting to be concerned over their welfare.

## Indian Social Reform Movements and Gender

The subject of gender in the nineteenth-century Indian social reform movements has received greater attention, with scholars debating the progressive nature of these movements versus their inherent drawbacks. Geraldine Forbes (1996, p. 42) argued that widow remarriage and women's education reforms were usually framed as ways to create "better wives and mothers" rather than independent human beings. Partha Chatterjee (1993, pp. 120–124)

conceives it through his notion of the "new patriarchy," whereby women were placed in the “inner domain” of cultural identity, maintaining male control even through the reforms. Tanika Sarkar (2001, p. 54) regards reforms as deeply ambivalent because, while people like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar fought against child marriage and sati, they also reinforced patriarchal assumptions about women’s roles. Uma Chakravarti (1998, p. 81) highlights the fact that most reform movements represented elite upper-caste concerns, neglecting the struggles of Dalit and lower-caste women. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989, p. 23) consider that the debates over widowhood, education, and female isolation did not truly concern humanitarian issues but rather felt even deeper conflicts between tradition and modernity, with the bodies of women figuring as the identity of the community. Lata Mani (1989, p. 118) shows that although women emerged at the forefront of issues related to the abolition of sati, their voices were silenced once scriptural authority was preferred in the matter. Meanwhile, autobiographical accounts such as *Amar Jiban* by Ramsundari Devi (Forbes, 1996, p. 57) uncover how education provided agency to women outside reformist concerns. Thus, the historiography illustrates that while reform movements launched a debate concerning women's rights, the movements themselves remained trapped within the necessarily patriarchal and caste-ridden social structure, turning the "woman question" into an arena where colonial power, nationalist aspirations, and indigenous patriarchy negotiated.

Historiography also points out differences in reform movements at a regional level, emphasising that trajectories in Bengal were quite different from those in Maharashtra with respect to widow remarriage and women's education. In contrast, women in Maharashtra, such as Pandita Ramabai, articulated distinct critiques of patriarchy.

## Nationalism, Women and the Public Sphere

The question of nationalism and women in the public sphere in colonial India has been widely debated in feminist historiography. Partha Chatterjee (1993, pp. 116–134) brought forth the idea that nationalist discourse set up a contrast between the “outer or material” domain of Western modernity and the “inner or spiritual” domain of Indian tradition, with women therein placed as mere symbolic custodians of the latter. This conferred a form of agency upon women in the home but paradoxically rationalised the image of women for nationalist projects. Tanika Sarkar (2001) further develops this by showing how Hindu

nationalist rhetoric promoted the image of the chaste and sacrificial wife as a symbol for the nation itself, thereby strengthening patriarchal control in the guise of cultural purity.

Geraldine Forbes (1996, pp. 85–110) also observes that while men and women entered arenas of social reform, education, and later nationalist activities, their social participation was much delineated by gender expectations of respectability and motherhood. Mrinalini Sinha (1995, pp. 20–48) situated this in a larger discourse of colonial masculinity, whereby nationalist valorisation of women as "mothers of the nation" combined with critiques of colonial portrayals of effeminate Bengali men. An area of feminist theory was introduced by Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, p. 287), whereby she cautioned that nationalist appropriation of the "woman's question" silences subaltern women, rendering them mere symbols instead of subjects of history.

They emphasise how women came out into the public sphere during nationalist struggles through a dual space of empowerment and constraint, decreasing to being a mere icon of the nation rather than independent political entities, depending on the author. Such nationalist discourse further appropriated women into symbols of ‘Bharat Mata’, the chaste, sacrificial wife, thereby essentialising their identity and confining their agency within idealised cultural roles. The nationalist discourse also appropriated women as symbols, such as ‘Bharat Mata’ and the chaste, sacrificial wife, thereby essentialising their identities and conferring agency upon them in their own right within idealised cultural roles.

## Feminist Interventions in Historiography

Feminist interventions with regard to Indian historiography have considerably reshaped understandings of gender, power, and social hierarchies. Uma Chakravarti (1998), in her biography of Pandita Ramabai, challenges male-dominated nationalist narratives by recovering women’s voices, showing how their lived experiences provide an alternative avenue of historical insight. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989), whose edited volume Recasting Women was a landmark in women’s history, discuss how women were relegated in the dominant colonial and nationalist histories and how there was a need to place women at the heart of socio-political analysis. Similarly, Leela Dube (1997) shows through anthropological and kinship studies how such gender relations structured not only the home but also socio-economic structures outside, thus offering methods for theorising histories from a very gendered standpoint. Tanika Sarkar (2001, pp. 95–120) discusses the

interrogations of cultural nationalism in feminist historiography, exposing those systems as gendered under the constructs of community, religion, and purity. At the more theoretical end of the spectrum, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, p. 271) critiques colonial and nationalist historiographies alike for erasing the agency of subaltern women, asking pointedly, “Can the subaltern speak?” These feminist interventions shall endow a shift whereby women were taken from being symbolic to historic subjects whose lived narratives revealed new dimensions of colonialism, reform, and nationalism. It was a major historical divide when feminist historians began tracing women's histories through alternative sources like autobiographies, oral traditions, and kinship studies, rather than relying on the colonialist or nationalist archives.

## Subaltern and Intersectional Perspectives

The subaltern and intersectional approaches to Indian women’s history situate marginalized voices and layered identities above elite nationalist and reformist narratives. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988, pp. 287–308) famously questioned if the subaltern woman can “speak” at all, arguing that nationalist and colonial discourses appropriated her voice, and she therefore suffered a double silencing. Inspired by this, Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies collective foregrounded the recovery of the histories of peasants, tribals, and women away from elite politics. Tanika Sarkar (2001, pp. 120–148) has revealed how women of the lower classes were subjected to new patriarchal controls in nationalist rhetoric, while Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (1989, pp. 9–20) presented the intersections between caste, class, and gender constraining women's agency. Leela Dube (1997, pp. 63–81) began to use kinship as an important analytical tool, showing how women’s identity and status are realized through intersecting relations of caste, class, and family. These approaches highlight that gender is never studied in a vacuum; it must be looked at through intersecting structural power matrices—colonialism, caste hierarchy, class inequality, and patriarchy—which channel women’s historical experiences and possibilities for resistance. Intersectional approaches help historians move beyond treating 'woman' as a homogeneous category and allow them to emphasize multiple subjectivities shaped by caste, class, religion, and region, which define the diverse experiences of women in Indian society.

## Contemporary Debates

During the last few decades, the focus has shifted from treating women always as passive subjects of reform or nationalist discourse to issues of their agency, voice, and multiple subjectivities. Feminist historians inquire about how women's experiences intersect with class, caste, religion, and region, and this is a departure from the stereotypical narratives of "Indian womanhood."

Nandita Chatterjee (2014) interrogates the workings of women's labour, migration, and everyday negotiations in postcolonial India to upset and complicate versions of respectability and reform. Likewise, Charu Gupta (2009) interrogates intersections of gender, sexuality, and communal politics to show how women's bodies continue to be sites of contestation in debates on nationalism and morality in present times.

Intersectional authors bring focus to Dalit and Adivasi women's histories, which were normally sidelines in previous historiography. Sharmila Rege's (2006) Writing Caste and Writing Gender presents that caste acts as an important axis for understanding the realities of life of women and that mainstream feminist histories tend to reinforce upper-caste perspectives. This is congruent to the push for including oral narratives and subaltern voices in feminist historiography.

Hence, through a theoretical lens, scholars influenced by postcolonial feminism, like Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and Chandra Talpade Mohanty, oppose the universalizing tendencies within Western feminist discourses and set their attention to local specificities and the spread across the world of concepts on gender and modernity. This area has been theoretically enriched by discussions on global feminism, transnational networks, and the commodification of women's identities in neoliberal economies (John, 1996; Kapur, 2005).

While feminist historiography has restored women as active historical agents, it must constantly guard against re-inscribing exclusions basing on caste, class, and community. Today, the field concentrates on plurality, intersectionality, and critical reflexivity while writing histories of women**.** Recent work highlights pluralism, intersectionality, and reflexivity as the core principles of writing women's history. In addition, the use of oral history projects, memory studies, and digital archives presents new methods of recording

pluralism to address previous exclusions, thereby opening new frontiers for feminist historiography.

## Conclusion

This review has traced the changing trajectories of gender, reform, and society in modern India through one historiographical lens-from colonial constructions of the "woman question" to its nationalist appropriations, the reform movements, feminist interventions, and contemporary intersectional debates. Methodologically, the paper is not offering new empirical evidence but rather critically surveying the evolution of historiographical positions, engaging with feminist, subaltern and intersectional critiques to map the conceptualisations of women as actors and their agencies through time.

The findings state that the historical representation of women may be broadly divided into four phases: (1) the colonial reformist discourse that constructed women either as symbols of cultural purity or victims of tradition, (2) the nationalist appropriation which claimed them as icons like “Bharat Mata”, yet simultaneously suppressed their subjectivities, (3) the feminist interventions which challenged both colonial and nationalist frameworks by foregrounding lived realities of women, and finally (4) intersectional and transnational paradigms that highlight plurality, intersections of caste-class-gender, and comparative South Asian frameworks.

In the future, this should be remedied by research filled with comparative contexts in South Asia (e.g., India-Sri Lanka or India-Bangladesh), and more emphasis must be granted to those voices previously excluded from mainstream narrative, particularly those of Dalit, Adivasi, tribal, and queer women. This can get Indian feminist historiography to inch toward its stated aim of a truly inclusive, diverse and critically reflexive account of gender in South Asia.

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