

Reconstruction of Women's History of India

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Abstract:

The patriarchal orientation of history writing has made history silent about women's past. She has been neglected not only in the patriarchal society of India but also in historical records and contemporary works. The traditional historiography if at all talks about women, then it mostly concentrates on the history of "worthy women" or notable women. Many traditions and customs were created to suppress women. Religious beliefs and male hegemony of the society forced them to live as inferior group. They were not free to speak or move. Their freedom and rights were slashed. At the same time, historical records have maintained silence about women's contribution towards society. It is not that women did not take part in the progress of the society but it was the patriarchal culture which was standing against women's name and fame. As a result women lost her place in the historical records. However, in the middle of the twentieth century, scholars, and historians basically women writers and thinkers started focusing their attention on women's history and tried to write them into history. Though it is a difficult task to reconstruct women's history of India but the new historical approaches, new methods to study past helped to make a framework for understanding the history of women of India.

Key words: Women's History, India, Reconstruction of History.

Introduction

Why should we study women's history, because we need to know our past to understand the present? "The present is a product of the past; we are moulded and conditioned by the past of which we are alarmingly ignorant. We need to look backward to seek the reason and development of many of wrong and inequalities which women suffer today..."¹ Studying and writing women's history is not easy. Women are indoctrinated in a male-defined value system and conduct their lives accordingly. The available sources of the past show the patriarchal mentality of the writers or recorders. Women always and in every aspect remained invisible in the historical records. There were two types of identity for women: in public sphere, she was considered important for the society but in private life she was facing restrictions on her freedom and movements. Therefore, it is essential to study women centred works of the contemporary periods to reconstruct their history as well as to evaluate their position and status in the society. The literary accounts have been taken as major sources for historical writings on women but looking towards works, sources like poems, biographies, religious works, dairies and other works related to women or composed and written by women should be given importance while we are going to reconstruct women's history.

Studying women's history should be a 'rescue mission' where past must be unearthed and a permanent record made of the findings. Gerda Lerner argues that male dominance over women is not "natural" or biological, but the product of an historical development begun in the second millennium B.C. As patriarchy as a system of organizing society was established historically, she contends, it can also be ended by the historical process. Focusing on the contradiction between women's central

¹ Mary M. Flekre, *Discovering Women's History: A practice guide to Researching the lives of Women since 1800*, London/Newyork: Longman, 1998, 1.

role in creating society and their marginality in the meaning-giving process of definition and interpretation, Lerner explores such fascinating questions as: What can account for women's exclusion from the historical process? What could explain the long delay--more than 3,500 years--in women's coming to consciousness of their own subordinate position? She goes back to the cultures of the earliest known civilizations--those of the ancient Near East--to discover the origins of the major gender metaphors of Western civilization. Using historical, literary, archaeological, and artistic evidence, she then traces the development of these ideas, symbols, and metaphors and their incorporation into Western civilization as the basis of patriarchal gender relations.²

Here arguments are about nature and its connection with culture and women /men as oppressed/ oppressor. It made women...the bearers of ignorance and men of knowledge, rather a baffling notion to set as the basis of feminist discourse. Some time the position of women depicted as imaginary and symbolic figure, they are excluded from reality and represented as belonging to the outside realm of the culture. Even were not listing women/s languages, not even trying to understand their mythologies and their voices. But some poets and scholars speak for women for their own languages. It is often assumed that when writing history of men and society eighteenth century thinkers were subsuming women within the notion of men.³

Historians writing on women revealed and highlighted that if the condition of women is deplorable or worsen in civilized nation then the guilt is committed by men's society which always thinking in individualistic manner as men. John Millar [1735-1801], in "*The Origin of the Distinction of Ranks*",

² Gerda Lerner, *Placing Women in History: Definition and Challenges*, *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 3, No. ½, Autumn, 1975, 5 -14.

³ Mary M. Flekre, *Discovering Women's History: A practice guide to Researching the lives of Women since 1800*, London/Newyork: Longman, 1998, 106.

argued that we may form ideas of the state and condition of the women in the ages most remote from improvement. Having little attention paid them, either upon account of these pleasures to which they are qualified to exercise, they are degraded below the other sex, and reduced under that authority which the strong acquire over the weak: an authority, which in early periods is subjected to no limitation from the government, and is therefore exerted with a degree of harshness and severity suited to the disposition of the people.⁴ Miller also argues that coming of pastoral age was a blessing for women. As life became less pre-carious, as mankind no longer needed to spend all its waking hours hunting and gathering, more effort and time could be diverted away from these tasks towards those of making living conditions more agreeable. Men is led to the pursuit of those objects which may render his situation more easily and comfortable and among these the enjoyments derived from the intercourse of the sexes claims a principal share, and became an object of attention.⁵

During eighteenth century, Russian women writers mostly poetess wrote poetries. The most common theme of the poem was love. Many poems describe the psychology of love and relationships in love and praising the beloved etc. Nature was also very common; gods and god's creation and morality were common features of women's writings. Some poems describe evils of forced marriage and the disrespect to wife by husband. Women were portrayed as virtue holders. Forced marriage was a common tactics in Russia and after marriage husband used to abandon wife. Women scholars who depict the sorrow of women, tears of tortured girls concluded that women were ill treated by male society. Male writers were not giving importance to women and their contribution to the society in their works. There were very less discussion on women. Catherine -II [1729-1796] Russian Empress had taken some

⁴ Ibid., 110-111.

⁵ Ibid., 111.

action to improve women's condition. Education for women improved during her reign. But it was limited among the urban and aristocrat families. Later it was spread to the provinces and middle nobility.⁶

During nineteenth century, position and status of women improved and valued. However, lower class women did not achieve it. It was very surprising that women writers who were generally from noble class wrote only about their experiences, the social and cultural life that they belonged to. Though they did not give a place to the lower class women in their poems but began to print and publish their poems and raised voice against male hegemony and injustice against women. And their writings founded the stone of feminism revolution and also brought a mile stone of women's representation in Russian history culture.

Vivien Jones has used various work of the period such as fiction, novels, anthology poems, passages etc. to portray the image of eighteenth century women. Mostly, literature based on sexuality or femininity has been taken to reconstruct women's past. These works generally focused on middle class society because their ideology influenced deeply to the society. Methodologies which are adopted to analyse the texts have followed historical rationality to earn historical authenticity. Chronologically passages and texts are analysed and comparative methods to study texts also adopted which made the story more reliable and valuable from historical point of view. Methodology which target to construct women's history by studying and analysing contemporary works, texts, fictions etc. tried to avoid exaggeration and influential feelings in the texts. Importance to historical facts and narratives are the primary elements of methodology which has been adopted to write and construct women's history.

⁶ Rosslyn Wandy, Making their Way into Printing: Poems by Eighteenth Century Women, *The Slavonic and East European Review*, Vol. 78, 3, July, 2000, 407- 438.

It's not enough to study contemporary works to reconstruct women's history. It is essential to look at the works based on the sexuality and femininity because women were invisible and neglected characters in the literary works which were generally written by male persons. Eighteenth century brought some changes to their cultural and economic life but these changes were only limited among the middle class and high class society. Lower class women and working women were marginalized from every aspects of the society. However, the liberty and equality which influenced much to the middle class women not only produced women readers or text consumers but also women writers who wrote their life experience, suffering, discriminations towards them. But the history of women's writing could not attract much attention of the society and their writings also became marginalized. Publishing women's works were not simple things, dominant ideologies always stood against gender based works. And again writing against patriarchal system was not easy, for that writer had to face public as well as private fury.

We are facing many problems to represent women in history but the availability of literature basically from medieval period can help us to solve the problems which creating obstacles on the path of reconstructing women's history.

Reconstruction of Women's History of India

History writings and historical records are silent about women's past life. Literary works depicted them as inferior, and luxury commodity. Though literature is the mirror of society but the patriarchal nature could not recognise their talents and give equal position with men. Male dominated society mostly during medieval times neglected them in all records for future purpose.

Kumkum Roy who has raised these questions in her debatable work "*Women in early Indian societies*" views that the

reconstruction of women's history began with Altekar's work 'The position of women in Hindu civilization'. She also analyses Harner's work 'Women under primitive Buddhism', 'Beyond the Altekerian paradigm: towards a new understanding of gender relations in early Indian history' of Uma Chakravarti, 'Urvasi and Parruravas' of Kosambi, 'Turmeric Land: women's property rights in Tamil society since early medieval times' of Kanaklata Mukund, 'Rural-Urban dichotomy in the concept and status of women' of Chitrarekha Gupta etc.

Roy argues that "there are certain fundamental problems in our historical process of writing on women's position in the society. Women are viewed as passive receptacles, with their 'status' or 'position' changing to reflect the state of the world around them. As a corollary, variations in the status of women are then treated as indices of relative barbarity or civilization".⁷ Women are always treated as secondary elements in historical process as well as historical writings.

Altekar who gave a constructive framework to Indian women's history from Vedic age to modern period made comparison between periods and civilizations. Vedic age women were imparting education for long time, no sati system, purdah system were prevalent in the society. Early marriage was not a popular custom during this period but in the later stage it became a dominant tradition.⁸

Harner's analysis on women in Buddhism is also a great attempt to evaluate women's position and construct their history. He has given importance to Buddhist literature which has been taken as major source of rewriting women's history. Harner categorised women into two groups like one is common women and other one is almswomen. Both had relation with family but lay women had to work beyond the domestic and

⁷ Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian societies*, New Delhi: Monahar Publishers and Distributers, 2001, 3.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.

family life. They were working in agriculture, cloth industry, court and could adopt music, dance, and slavery system for their livelihood. Women made her position outside of domestic life.

To get a positive image of women in the society is very hypothetic and again categorical study of their status on the basis of caste, clan, and class also is more difficult. But the way scholars and historians made a framework to give a conceptual identity to women of the past is admirable. To define women's space with partially recorded documents and limited sources is a commendable job by scholars.

Mostly the contemporary works written on Brahmanical ideology strongly opposed women's life beyond domesticity. These works represent women as a marginalized community. Therefore, reconstruction of women's history depends on rational historical process and mind to study their position and status in the contemporary society. On the other hand to represent women into history, it is essential to understand regional history which have been gaining importance in the present day history writings. Especially Orissa which is far behind in the case of gender history and hope attempts will be made to focus on gender relations within such frameworks in future.⁹

In India, even after reformation movements against social evils related to women's life, history writing on women did not achieve much success. Traditional notions towards womenfolk still had great influence in the society. Patriarchal ideology caused them suffering in every sphere. It's difficult to reconstruct women's past history, because she has been neglected in historical records as well as in literary works of the contemporary period since Vedic age.

In many cases women are wrongly represented in records and orally also to mislead the society and critics. Thus we need to see carefully how women's life converted from a well

⁹ Ibid., 11.

status society/group (Rigvedic period) to a lower class community. Scholars argue that it is a natural process which had started during pre historic time when muscle power was important for hunting and providing safety to family or community. Women were respected for her reproductive quality only. She had to depend on male muscles for food and safety. But we have many historical records which indicate women's equal participation in hunting and agriculture also. In Vimvetaka pre-historic cave art we have found that women were helping men in hunting. During Neolithic time women played very important role in domestication of plants and food production. She had discovered baskets for saving food for future. Along with bearing child in womb she was to take all care of family as well as outside works. Maitri Krisnaraj nicely depicts these issues in her article "*Writing women's history or writing women into history*". Women sacrificed her to take care of children and other works. Women also played equal role like men for the existence of the society but how she became inferior? And how she achieved a status of lower class in the society? We need to look into history in a rational manner. Though many scholars like Uma Chakravarti, Maitry Krishnaraj, Romila Thapar (for '*Sakuntala*'¹⁰) Kumkum Roy, Latamni, Kasambi, Altekar, Mill, and others have tried and succeeded to construct their story of past and more or less they have influenced a lot to change the social behaviour towards Indian women but still there are far way to go.

Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid nicely portrays women's emergence during colonial period. Before colonial period women were facing all ideologies decided in a patriarchal manner. But during colonial period there were various reform movements organized to bring justice for women. Abolition of sati, child marriage and introduction of various laws to protect women's rights and freedom took place during this time. From

¹⁰ Romila Thapar, *Sakuntala: texts, readings, histories*, New Delhi: Kali for Women, Women Unlimited, 2010.

these social reform crusades middle class women who also took active participation with these movements achieved more success than lower class and working class women were still in the backside of the social reform scenario. And on the other hand, movements were not only for social cause but also against agricultural exploitation and other injustices. However, it is difficult to say women's participation in movements was only for above material cause or anything else.¹¹

Many times women faced lots of problem in the outside world. When she stepped out from home the whole society started criticizing her for crossing patriarchal boundary imposed on her by male dominant society. Even within the same women community also she was facing same patriarchal agony. Some women wanted to break the silence against discrimination towards them and enjoy the status like men and earn respect for women but on the same time some women were against it and criticized women's freedom. Mahatma Gandhi succeeded in influencing Indian women and attracted them into democratic movements through the epic characters like Sita, Savitri, Damayanti. However he did not raise voice directly against patriarchal domination in the society. Women and many women organizations came forward to establish their image in the society. They raised voice against social discrimination in the name of gender. They also participated with other democratic and independent movements such as Non-cooperation, Civil-disobedient and Quit India Movements. And their representation in the movements which started in early nineteenth century established a new era in Indian History. Their representation in socio, economic and political scenario brought many changes in their life as well as in the society. Women's social and political role could not have achieved much success against this feudal ideology which had

¹¹ Kumkum Singeri and Sudesh Vaid, Introduction, in *Recasting Women*, ed. by Kumkum Singeri and Sudesh Vaid, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 20.

an in-depth root in the society but succeeded to draw a positive image of them.

Patriarchal system did not exist within certain class or group like middle class and high class society; it also existed in the lower strata also. However, women from lower strata enjoyed more freedom than other classes. "Patriarchy becomes an historical category within an originating myth of male coercion. The strength of this position, however, lies in the fact that it foregrounds patriarchal oppression as a socio-cultural system cutting across class division. Its weakness lies in treating women as class by themselves, leading to a disregard of the fact that women of the exploited classes may indeed have closer group interests with men of their own classes than with women belonging to the dominant classes".¹² Thus it is difficult to think that representation of women in production sector and politics would remove biasness for women. Even women followed this system in many ways encouraged it. Some of them supported this patriarchal domination and criticised women's freedom and equality. So existing tradition and customs against women are not feudal remnants alone which will vanish in time but are products of sustained reformation of patriarchies.¹³

Understanding women in the past is always depended on many things such as literary works, folklores, art-artefacts etc. Since Vedic period we have literary records which are considered the most important source for history and women's history writing but nature of patriarchy used to neglect women's deeds, talent, and her contribution and sacrifice for the society. So it is difficult to understand and construct her image and position in the past society.

Uma Chakravarti has analysed this matter in a unique and constructive manner. She says, perception of the past is constantly being constituted and reconstituted a new. At specific junctures the sense of history may be heightened and

¹² Ibid., 23.

¹³ Ibid., 25.

past may be dramatically reconstituted, bringing into sharp focus the need of people for a different self image from one that they hold of themselves.¹⁴

During nineteenth century when historical consciousness emerged among the Indian scholars and then they thought about women's history and how to reconstruct Indian women's past life and status in the society. Though socio-cultural reformation and spread of education created a situation to think about women's life and history but the political struggle which had started against British government in India in early nineteenth century always stood in the forefront and women's history did not get enough attraction from scholars who were busy in making nationalistic history for independent awareness. Even after independence also they did not get time to construct women's history. During post independent era sharp attacks on historical biasness towards women's history started. Then after women's history became important and reconstruction of their lost image became vital for social and feminist historians.

During Vedic age women had created their position and importance but what happened in the later ages where she confined herself within the four wall of house. How women had lost her past glory? Why they disappeared from historical records? Since no one had noticed her existence, it is natural that there was no one to mourn her disappearance.¹⁵

Europeans have contributed a lot to Indian history as well as women's history. They reconstituted Indian history from pre historic period to contemporary period. Orientalists glorified Indian society, culture and portrayed Indian women in a glorified manner. Asiatic society had played important role in the construction of Indian women's history and depicted that they had a glorious past and enjoyed equal status like men in

¹⁴ Uma Chakravarti, Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism and a script for the past, in *Recasting Women*, ed. by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 27.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

the society. Western scholars also criticized Indian society for its discriminative attitude towards women.

Although women was not a concern subject in the earliest time of historical analysis in India but during the later period, Orientalist historians like H.T. Colebrooke, Max Muller, and others depicted Indian women as a respected and well positioned class in the society. They had given various examples from ancient texts of India and describes about Gargi, Viswambara from Vedic period who achieved high places in the society. They also show a negative side of Indian society which contains many evil customs like sati, child marriage, widowhood, purdah, and prostitution etc. in the later period. Then scholars started questioning about historical writings and research which has been neglecting women's role and contribution to the society in their historical works.

Mill's ideology had great impact on Indian scholars. M.C. Deb, Peary Chand Mitra and others provided strong historical approach for Indian women. They portrayed them as learned and respected persons in the society. Mitra criticised contemporary position of Bengal women and argues that Indian women had a good position and status in the past time. From Tamil literature to Kalidas's works, scholars and historians have analysed the position of women and frame out the picture of Indian women with high dignity of culture.¹⁶

Even before Mill there were number of scholars who had started representing women into their works. J. A. Dubois in his work '*Hindu Manner, Customs, and Ceremonies*' has described about women's position and status. Macauley, Orme and Bentick also had raised voice against barbaric Indian traditions like *sati*, infanticide, child marriage etc. And the beginning of women revolution started after banning *sati* system which established the legal foundation for women's

¹⁶ Uma Chakravarti, Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*? Orientalism, Nationalism and a script for the past, in *Recasting Women*, ed. by Kumkum Sangeri and Sudesh Vaid, New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989, 27. 38.

revival and representation with a respectable manner. Though it took a long time to reconstruct a perfect image of women's position and status in the past society but could not succeed to give an equal status to them like men. Even today patriarchal notions of the society forced womenfolk to stay inside the line of men domination.

Rammohun Roy argues against the subjection of women. He cited many examples from ancient texts and probed them. He says that in the case of spirituality women never be inferior to men.¹⁷ Roy describes about Maitrayi and Yajnavalkya episode of Veda where Maitrayi achieved highest divine knowledge. On the philosophical ground Maitrayi was a figure of famous in the Vedic period. In Hindu religion, acquirement of divine knowledge was considered as highest achievement of life and Matrayi succeeded in that case. Thus women were not at all inferior to men in that period and she had respected position in the society. Rammohun says that women had pursued the highest goal of Hindu religion and it was the wicked pundits who distorted the *Shastras* in subsequent times.¹⁸

Max Muller who had worked on Vedic literature has contributed a lot to place Indian feminine character into a good position in historical works. He says that Indian or Aryan patriarchal culture did not pay attention towards women's works and contribution for society. They were considered as weak and inferior to men. Muller narrates the Maitrayi-Yajnavalkya episode of Veda and concluded that although women participation in the rituals were not initiated and still less were they admitted to the highest knowledge of the atman or Brahman.¹⁹ On the shadow of Strabo's analyses on Indian women Muller argues that "Indians did not communicate their metaphysical doctrines to women, thinking that if their wives understood these doctrines and learned to be indifferent to

¹⁷ Ibid., 33.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid., 41.

pleasure and pain and to consider life and death as the same they would no longer continue to be the slaves of others; or if they failed to understand them they would be talkative and communicate their knowledge to those who had no rights to do it".²⁰

Mrs Speir, an European scholar worked on women's position in ancient India. She raised her voice against the partiality meted out to women by the Indian society. She argues, a thousand years BC Hindu women appear to have been as free as Trojan dames or the daughters of Judaea. Hymns in the Rig-Veda mention them with respect and affection ...even in the succeeding phase when Brahmans contemplated the soul beneath the *Himavat* women attended their discourses...in Upanishads a king holding a solemn sacrifice and inviting his chief guests to state their opinions on theology. Amongst these guests a learned female named Garga is conspicuous.²¹ Speier has also analysed Manu's code of conduct for women. A husband should be respected like god by wife. This was the beginning of women's suffering. Manu code disrespects women's position and ignore their rights and freedom.

Kumkum's description on reconstruction of women's history is unique and very nice. The way she has given analytical point of views on recasting women into history is admirable. Starting with Orientalist to nationalist historians, she conglomerated them into a single framework for reconstructing women's past. This is a valuable and revolutionary attempt to represent them into history.

Conclusion

Reconstruction of women's history of India is not easy. All records, deeds, literary work glorified male chauvinism. Women

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.,43.

were absent in every sphere. However, the way Orientalist and then nationalists adopted the methodologies to make a frame work of women of the past was a revolutionary step. Gargi, Viswavara, Maitrayi, Ahalya, Damayanti of the ancient India provided many ways to construct their history. Hence the medieval women characters that have been depicted in the contemporary literary works are the main elements to reconstruct the women's history of India. Apart from these characters there are other sources like art, paintings, travel accounts and foreign records, social customs, traditions, culture and political and economic discriminations towards women that are the major facts to study and reconstruct women's history.

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