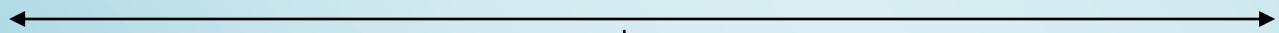


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## HISTORIOGRAPHY OF WOMEN & WOMEN SAINTS

DR. JOHN MOHAMMAD PAUL

Women studies have been looked upon from the point of view of sex and gender, by sex related to the biological difference between men and women. Gender relates to the social roles assign to men and women by society, e.g. women must cook and men must go out to work.

Three terms relating to women has distinctly understood in the context of Historiography of women.

(a) Femalness, (b) Feminity, (c) Feminism.

Femalness related to the biological conditions of women. Feminity realities to the ideas impose upon by women by society. Feminism - By Feminism, we understood the movement for the betterment of women as individuals as society.

James Mill in 1817 had said that Indian Society had remained unchanged through the ages. "*History of British India*"<sup>1</sup> and he had called Indian culture as "unethincal and rude". He was shocked with the fact that Indian women did not eat meal with the women folk.

Catherine Mayo wrote, "*Mother India*" in 1927<sup>2</sup>, which related the sufferings of childhoods.

As a reaction to the above views R.C. Dutt (1848-1908), "*History of Civilization in Ancient India*".<sup>3</sup> Criticized this view and he wrote about the exaulted status of Vedic women, who was a perfect companion of her husband.

Then Altekar in 1938 wrote the book "*Position of Women in Hindu Civilizations*". Altekar has a significant chapter on women's property rights dealing with both co-parcenary rights and stridana. He had made extensive references to women's education in "*Women and Vedic Studies*". According to him their was a gradual decline in the position and status of women (later). He speaks highly of the intellectual women in the Vedic age, and says that there was a difference between intellectual women and wife of intellectual. Then he also points the distinction between the house wife and the intellectual women. Women debated freely with men on spiritual matters.

Recently women studies in India have criticised the view of 'Altekar.' They have called it the "*Alteuarian Paradime*". Despite critiques of Altekar it must be stated that his reading of the texts is not always uncritical. For example in a subheading 'Clever explanation of Histile Texts', he points out the subtle duplicity practised by them in attributing the dispossessing of widows by calling them 'unchaste'.<sup>4</sup> Some efforts to go beyond the Brahnavadini' icon of the Vedic times has been made by feminist Historians. A good example would be Uma Chakravati<sup>5</sup> argues that in talking about the 'high' position of women in Vedic times, Altekar had a nationalist agenda which was to displace the imperialist agenda of James Mill's "*A History of British India*" that describes

Hindu civilization as barbaric essentially because of women's low status within it. Charkravarti sees Altekar's comments on widows and the undesirability of the girl child as stemming from a passive acceptance of canonical texts or as tacit support to the Patriarchal order. She quotes from Altekar the following lines: "Landed property could be owned only by those who had the power to defend it against actual or potential rivals and enemies. Women were obviously unable to do this and so could hold no property". She describes his argument as facile and attributes it to his inability to recognize patriarchal subordination of women, concluding, "like others he was reflecting a deeply internalized belief in biological determinism and therefore in a physical inferiority of women".<sup>6</sup>

The scholar who worked with women studies in India has criticized the Altekar. They say that it suffers from two difficulties, first it reveals the status of only upper class women. Secondly, the entire writing is based on two Suktas. But this criticism is not true the word Aryan is not coninographical term. Second point is also not true because we learn a lot about women from the Vedic hymn, there were many Rishikas, Appalo, Gosha, Lopamudra, Gargi, Matrawi, Bramvadas, and Vasnipala.

In Taittiriya Brahmin comes a story of "Sita Savitri" wanted to marry Soma, but he loved her sister. Sita Savitri went for help; father gave some powder "Sathagar". But then Soma was attracted to her and wanted to marry her, then she said first he would give her Brahmavida.

Shakuntala Rao Shastri's has brought out the status of women in "Sutras" and Simritis. Hence R.C. Dutt, R.K. Mukherjee, K. R. Jaswal and Altekar glorified the position of women in ancient India. Women within the epic traditions have been studied by women scholars in the traditional mould beginning with Shakhbari jayal in her book "Status of women in the epics."<sup>7</sup> Jayal's agenda is clearly set forth as the need to re-look at women in religion at a time when Indian women were raising their voice against sexual exploitation and stressing the need for women's social and economic emancipation based on gender equality. Despite her own problematic, Jayal does not move beyond the 'male' gaze of Dharmasastra writers and ends up by valorizing / glorifying the sacrifices of Sita, Kunti, Sarmista and other characters in the epics.

Among the Dharmasastra texts the Manusmrti has been the most cited text in defining the place of women within the Hindu religious tradition.<sup>8</sup> The multi layered reading of the Manusmriti by both Feminists and non-Feminists is important for understanding the debates on gender and religion. The Manusmriti more than any other Dharmasastra text has been used as the site of contestation by the votaries of both orthodox Hinduism and feminist critics of Brahmanical Patriarchy. Manu's belief in women's inferiority, both mental and physical, is in-built in his epistemological framework. To quote a key verse:

When creating women aganu (here in the sense of creator) envisaged for them (the word used is akalpayt) a bed of love, desire for ornamentation, impure desires, anger, dishonesty, malic and misconduct.

(Manusmriti: 1X: 17)

Feminist critics have however turned Manu's statement on its head. Kumkum Roy shows the insidious Patriarchal implications of this text.<sup>9</sup> According to Manu honouring women meant pleasing them with ornaments, clothes and food on festive occasions. As Roy puts it, "Any claims to similarity with the worship offered to the Gods are at best superficial and at worst fraudulent". Women who accept unquestioning the will of the male Patriarch and conform to the role model of the long suffering, self-sacrificing, silent daughter / wife / mother are worthy of honour in society. The accessories of worship would in effect enable the woman to comply with her designated function as a procreative instrument they would hardly be an acknowledgement of her power which is what is implied in the worship and invocation of Gods and Goddesses.

It is important to add a caveat here about the appropriation of canonical texts by both feminist and traditional historians in writing women's religious history. Even in the contexts interpretations of the Manusmriti, it must be pointed out that the canonical texts like the Dharmasastras do not speak in a monolithic voice. This point can be demonstrated on the basis of just one text - Manusmriti. Manu stresses the equality of men and women in many respects and enjoys equal treatment to the girl child. However Patriarchy manifests a harsher face when it comes to the medieval commentators of Manu like Medhahithi (10th century), Govndaraja (cirea 12th century) and Kulluka Bhatta (Cirea 15th century).

K. Lalita and Suzi Tharu "*Women writing in India*". These writers say that "Position of women becomes better with the coming of Buddhism. As they obtain the right to leave the family to join the Sangha because spiritual is not different from the social life living in this Sansar (world) they can achieve the spiritual knowledge. This is the first stage of women's life when she enters society. Social reaction at her birth throws ample light on how a society accepts her life. According to the Buddhist agama Samyuktnikaya,<sup>10</sup> when queen Mallika gave birth to a daughter, Prasenjit became upset. But Lord Buddha consoled him by saying that some women are virtuous, intelligent, faithful to their husband and serve the mother-in-law. Moreover, their sons are brave, winning the quarters and skilled in statecraft. This makes it clear that the Vedic tradition of discontent at daughter's birth came down to Buddha's time on account of Martial considerations. Secondly Buddha opposed discriminatory attitude towards son as against a daughter. He pointed out that the military quality for which the son is given superiority is also indirectly present in the daughter.

A brief reference to women's literacy and spiritual achievement gets reflected through the songs of nuns or the "Therigatha". This context proves the very high standard of learning rached by women of that age. The volume consists of stanzas attributed to 71 Buddhist Theris or sisters. The theme is particularly the same, that is glorification of the Buddhist ideal of renunciation and perfection that is Nirvana. Among the authoresses of the Therigatha 32 were unmarried, namely, eighteen, but in addition to these must be reckoned Patacara's five hundred.<sup>11</sup>

I. B. Horner wrote a book, "*Women under Primitive Buddhism*", is among the very perceptive texts written on the specific place occupied by women within any single religious movement. Horner begins by deconstructing the glorious image of women within Theravada Buddhism and ruthlessly exposes the 'double speak' which was

part of the Buddhist Canonical literature. In her classical translation of the Vinaypitaka, Horner brings to light the Buddha's commandments which, among other things, made it mandatory for a hundred year old nun to bow down to a Monk irrespective of his age. In the seventies and eighties, many scholars have taken off from Horner's brilliant Pioneering work.<sup>12</sup>

The study by Miranda Shaw in her book *passionate enlightenment: Women in Tantric Buddhism*.<sup>13</sup> Concentrates exclusively on the place of women within Zideology and the emerging gynocentric balance. She details the place of female Gorus like Kumudara withn Tantric Buddhism.<sup>14</sup>

A recent book on women within the Jaina tradition is N. Shanta's "*the unknown pilgrims: The voice of the Sadhris - The History spirituality and life of the Jaina women Ascetic*".<sup>15</sup> This outstanding study combines experiential wisdom of Jainism with the theoretical paradigm of gender. Shanta clearly states that her motives in writing this time on Jain Sadhvis is to close the historical and universal feminine monasticism and spirituality and in particular in the history of Jaina asceticism. It has special sections on Mallimatha, the only female Tirthankara to whom a special sanctuary has been dedicated in the medieval construction at Girinagara in Saurashtra. It is said that Mani, the Princess of Mithila and the daughter of King Kumba was wooed by six princes who were ready to to war in order to win her hand. Mani summoned them to Mithila and convinced them at it was folly to desire a body filled with phlegm, mucus, bile and blood. Her teaching turned the lustful pricncess into Jaina ascetics.<sup>16</sup> Another valuable section of this book is one the 'Kurahi Adigal' the 'Teacher Ascetic',<sup>17</sup> one encounter in peninsular India. Shanta also has a longish passage on Kaunti Adigal<sup>18</sup> who is an important protagonist in the silappadikaram epic. She is the spiritual and physical guide of the main protagonists Kovalan and Kannagi escorting them from Kavesipumpahimam to the bustling town of Madurai. Kunti Adigal is described as carrying a begging bowl in her string bag and holding a peacock feather fan in her hand. She takes them to a convent of Jaina nuns called 'Kavundipalli' where they receive succour and solace. What Shanta has missed out in this account of Kavundi Adigal is that she ended her life by taking the vow of Sallekhana or voluntary starvation, considered the noblest way of being liberated from the body.

Having looked briefly at the historiography dealing with women within the ritual traditions of Brahmanism I would now like to look at what women have to say about the more radical presence of women in the domain of religious. While women within religious traditions have been shackled by legal and more injunctions, they have played a cathartic role in the spiritual domain both within the bhakti movement and outside them as individual seekers of salvation.

Two recent studies have focused on women within the radical lingayat movement of the twelfth century. Leela Mullati titled her book "*The Bhakti Movement and the status of women*".<sup>19</sup> Although the book deals exclusively with women within the ligayat tradition. It provides an insightful study because Mullatti herself belongs to this religious traditon and hence supplements her training as a sociologist with the perceptiveness of an 'insider'. My own study *Divinity and Deviance: Women in virasaivism*, attempts to deconstruct the imaging of women within the lignayat tradition. It also attempts to transcreation of nearly a hundred of the vacana or religious poems written by the lingayat Shiva Sharanes.

In the reconstruction of women's history through the Bhakti mode, autobiographies and biographies play a very important part? A pioneering role in this area was played by "Justin Abbot" who translated the autobiography of the medieval saint-poet Bahina Bai titled "*Atamanivedana*" with an introduction describing her life and literary creations.<sup>20</sup>

In 1959, Prem nath Bazaz published his book "*Daughter of the Vitasta*". Which went beyond the narrow confines of the canonical tradition in the imaging of women and attempts short hagiographical sketches of medieval mystic women like Lal Ded?

While the vakh of Lal Ded has been translated by many including Sir George Abraham Grierson, Richard Carne temple, N. K. Kotru's J. K. Odin. It was only Jayalal Kaul who attempted an imaginative reconstruction of Lal Ded including the translation of her poems in his book '*Lal Ded*'. Her times and Milieu.<sup>21</sup>

Vijaya Ramaswamy wrote a book titled "*Walking Naked*" gives us information about the "Akka Mahadevi" gives us a detailed information regarding the Akka Mahadevi.<sup>22</sup>

The Medieval saint-poet Mira has been the subject of some serious studies. This includes the Parita Mukta's upholding the common life. The community of Mirabai is an excellent account which goes well beyond a hagiographical paradigm and looks at Mirabai and the Mirapanthis in terms of their socio-historical milieu.

There is a class of hagiography which is the most frequently encountered in the Indian context, one that is panegyric and non-critical. The entire literature on the Pondicherry Mother falls in this category. This is not to devalue the importance of such studies and the three volume work by Satprem entitled *Mother. The divine materialism, Mother: the mutation of Death*<sup>23</sup> provides a most comprehensive picture of the life and the times of Mirabai. Recently on empowerment of woman a UGC sponsored Seminar in Gurkpur University on 17<sup>th</sup> february 2011 Dr. Susmita Pande gives a special lecture about Woman in Buddhims<sup>24</sup>.

The symbol used in the context of spiritual realization is lover and beloved which is also arises in the context of Male epistemological paradigm, where the virtues of giving and sacrifice essential to a woman are highlighted in the spiritual realm. These virtues of women becomes more important in the spiritual context. Gradually these marginalize groups like women and Sudras because of these virtues came to the centre but in actuality we can understand the symbol of lover and beloved in different way also these symbol Mediates between two worlds. The imperial and the spiritual. Although the ultimate experience is beyond this symbol. This symbol has two edges "Signifier and Signified". This symbol succeeds when it breaks out of its semiotics and the self is liberated to its pure consciousness. The self moves beyond the symbol. In spiritual life the spiritual experience cannot be expressed in words or symbols but in order to express this experience a similar or somewhat parallel notion is taken from society, but ultimately this symbol is transformed for the real experience which cannot be expressed.

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