



Shifting Paradigm on Women Studies from Altekar to the Recent Epigraphical Approaches

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The province of Epigraphy is, in one respect, wider than that of Palaeography, for, while Palaeography confines itself to the study of the forms of writing found in ancient manuscripts, Epigraphy not only deals with the lettering, but is even apt to concern itself with the subject-matter of ancient inscriptions, thus unduly encroaching on the provinces of History, and of Public and Private Antiquities.¹

Epigraphy today is considered indispensable for the study of history for the reason that the information provided by epigraphic evidence is considered as the most authoritative, technically correct, scientifically accurate as well as authenticated source material for writing social, economic cultural and even political history. Prior to decipherment of Indian inscriptions by Europeans in India, literature was the main-stay of writing history. But in several old world civilizations, authors, especially Greek historians, cite and quote inscriptions to support their literary arguments.² Also certain Greek inscriptions record historiographical narratives of a sort more normally associated with literary works.³

Since the decipherment of a large number of inscriptions from different parts of India opened up the new era for Indian history writing, writings on women history also did not remain unaffected. As Altekar produced a nationalist answer to Smith's and Mill's denigration of Hindu civilization published a century ago, the study of female history through epigraphical sources is being championed these days with the strong argument of being free from male bias, and more closer to historical reality than an idealized Indian women portrayed in literature.⁴

D.C. Sircar emphasized the importance of inscriptions by stating that 'they generally offer information about personages and events of Indian history, about which nothing is known from any other sources.'⁵ Epigraphical material is being frequently used as a means of checking the evidence from literary sources. The use of inscriptions for such studies is comparatively new, since earlier historians tended to use inscriptions largely for collecting information on dynastic history.⁶ Nevertheless, we agree that epigraphic material has its own limitations.

A change has occurred in the attitude of historians from conservative and nationalistic writings to liberal and Marxist approach as it was felt that there were occasions when injustice was done to women by social ordeals; yet the force of tradition was so strong that this injustice found no challengers. Historians with a bit liberal outlook called for educational, economic and political rights to be given to the women to maintain social equality.⁷

The status and condition of women have been analysed by numerous social historians from different stand-points. To challenge the oriental approach, important studies from the beginning of twentieth century were undertaken to analyse their status in ancient India. Bimla Churn Law's *Women in Buddhist Literature* that appeared in 1927 is one of the earliest works. This study deals with the position of women specifically in Buddhism. I.B. Horner's *Women Under Primitive Buddhism* analysed the entry and various levels provided in Orders to Buddhist nuns. Also laws related to nuns given in Buddhist scriptures were discussed. Simultaneously it pointed to the limitation of Buddhism favouring monkdom to male more than to female. A.S. Altekar's work *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* came in 1938 which provided a comprehensive view on the position of women in different stages of life stretched from the vedic period to post-independence period. He was a pioneer in utilizing the available literary texts and produce a source-book for all researchers working on women's condition. Though maintaining a traditional approach in an attempt to challenge VA Smith and James Mill, this work was successful in providing an alternate to colonial writers. This approach also got support with the views of Tara Ali Beg in *Women in India* (1958).

Such attitude in our traditional writing indicated the fixed brahmanical set of norms that also seem to have adhered to by P.H. Prabhu in his work *Hindu Social Organisation* (1940) which has kept a firm opinion about sanctity and validity of Hindu traditions. He tried to touch the nerve of Hindu sentiments by favouring age-old traditions. His approach more or less stresses upon justifying the value of age-old traditions in present context of Indian society. R.C. Majumdar continue the same trend in *Age of Imperial Unity* (1951) provided a complete picture of political, social, religious and economic condition of the period between AD 985 to the end of twelfth century. Swami Madhavananda and R.C. Majumdar made an attempt in *Great Women of India* (1953) to identify women in various colours such as saints of the Bhakti movement, strong administrators and poetess. But their work did not provide an exhaustive study of any particular period either utilizing literary or archaeological sources. K.M. Kapadia's *Marriage and Family in India* (1955) deviated from the earlier works and the author declared that equality was not followed in the case of women and she was deprived of her due share. He tried to validate his viewpoint with the help of various literary sources.

During the 1960s and 1970s several historians worked on social, economic and cultural history of India with special reference to early medieval period. Chapters were devoted to the condition of women. Lallanji Gopal's *Economic Life of Northern India: AD 700-1200* (1965) provided a very compact look at the political, economic and some information on the social conditions of early medieval period. His work explained how women slaves, prostitutes and

dancing girls contributed in economic development of the state by citing specific literary works available on early medieval period. Almost similar attempts were made by Brij Narain Sharma in his book *Social Life in Northern India* (1966), Brijendra Nath in his work *Social and Cultural History of India* (1972) and D.N. Jha in *Economy and Society in Early India* (1993). All these works tried to see women's position with contemporary realities. All their observations were based primarily on literary sources. They followed almost the same pattern in explaining the position of women.

In 1970s and 1980s a few historians tried to cover religious aspects of women of early medieval period. Besides Shakuntala Rao Shastri's work also included Urmila Bhagoliwala's *Vaisnavism and society in Northern India* (1980). In 1981, M.P. Singh's *Life in Ancient India* appeared where he collected the observations of almost all the foreign traveller's visiting India during early medieval period and tried to explain their observations on the position of women. In 1985, Saroj Gulati in *Women and Society* examined with the help of both literary and inscriptional sources the contradictory aspect of sati on the one hand, and widow as an administrator on the other hand. *Women in Ancient India* (1987) by Clarisse Bader, is a book highlighting the part played by women in ancient Hindu society. By citing various episodes from hymns and poems of paucan and epic tales the history of women from various period has been woven.

In 1988, Uma Chakravarti made a bold attempt in her article, '*Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm : Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History*' to improve upon and look from a different angle rather than the Altekarian study on *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*. Chakravarti stresses not to keep Altekarian traditional approach as the sole basis of all research works on women as it cannot help in developing new outlook on female issues in modern perspectives and in historical reference. She declared the urgent need to move forward and rewrite history, a history that does justice to women by examining social processes and the structures they create, thus crucially shaping and conditioning the relations between the men and women.⁸

In 1991 came, Susie Tharu and K. Lalita with *Women Writing in India*, vol. I where they try to touch a different sphere in which women wrote and addressed various issues in her poetic and prose works. Although their work is very exhaustive and authors have tried to present a deep insight into women's sentiments on various issues but it is solely based on literary sources. A perceptive study was made by Vijaya Ramaswamy in her work titled *Walking Naked* (1997). The focus of this work is on women saints, and the concept of spiritual gain in south India. She declared that important historical and structural changes were responsible for influencing orthodox and conservative attitude of society towards women. Thus in later half of 1980's feminist writings appear with two approaches to deal with the problems of women development. These approaches are: (1) Moderate or Liberal Feminism, and (2) Radical or Marxist Feminism, and both are found in women's liberation movement which is spreading in different forms and intensity in all parts of the world. In India, radical and socialist feminist groups are relatively of recent origin and they are few and scattered far and wide.⁹ Many feminists believe that women should be considered to be 'equal' to man. But, their concept of 'equality' was within the framework of Hindu religious texts.¹⁰

New developments and interpretations in textual and inscriptional sources for analyzing the position of women in early medieval period has given rise to the thought that Altekarian shift is the call of the time now. In 1999, Kumkum Roy came with her edited piece of work, '*Women in Early Indian Societies*', where several authors provide fresh insights or explore alternative paradigms and possibilities. In 2001, Kirit K Shah made bold attempt through, '*The Problem of Identity: Women in Early Indian Inscriptions*', by trying to remove andocentric bias in ancient Indian historiography, to highlight women as participants and agents in history, and to create a new paradigm for understanding women in ancient India.¹¹

In, '*Invisible Women, Visible Histories: Gender, Society and Polity in North India*', in 2009 Devika Rangachari try to work on Early Medieval Kashmir, Kanauj, Bengal and Bihar through selected study of epigraphs and literary sources to create a different set of interpretations of the sources but its impact was not very challenging. '*The Power of Gender and the Gender of Power*' by Kumkum Roy proved another landmark in exploring gender identities and spaces.

Year 2015 seems to be full of readings exploring new interpretations of female history through same, added or new sources. In 2015 appears Kumkum Roy's another edited work, '*Looking Within, Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time*', where discussions are based on archaeology, visual representations, the Sanskrit epics, medical literature, early Tamil texts, compositions drawn from religious traditions, official documents including court records, and inscriptions. Vijaya Laxmi Singh came with, '*Women and Gender in Ancient India: A Study of Texts and Inscriptions*', where she tries to see women through multiple lenses having multiple voices with sources brought to bear on particular argument- drawing out alternative positions-sometimes subtle, at another times unpopular in relation to men.¹²

In the same year another attempt to explore female sentiments through her writings was undertaken by Annie Zaidi through her edited work, '*Unbound: 2,000 years of Indian Women's Writing*', where she tried to narrate through novels, poetry, memoirs and stories, the feelings of Buddhist nuns in *Therigatha*, female saint Andaal and Avvaiyar etc. These readings from vast literary and inscriptional sources now tend to create a space for dialogue, debate and difference as distinctive perspectives and questions on position of female that is often considered static and taken for granted.

The future vision to create a balanced history of women in ancient Indian context with the help of both the sources is seen in the observation of Leslie Orr while reviewing the book, '*Invisible Women, Visible Histories: Gender, Society and Polity in North India*', of Devika Rangachari she quotes, 'The hope that using inscriptions and literary texts together might provide a resolution, complementing one another as background and foreground sources, cannot, unfortunately, be sustained¹³... Yet even if they cannot be *coordinated*, it is of the utmost importance to bring these various kinds of historical materials into relation with one another, and, as Romila Thapar suggests, the manner in which we do this is most realistically and effectively a *juxtaposition*, where we attempt to discern both the links among and the distinctiveness of our sources'.¹⁴

From above readings, it is clear that, historians of nationalist, Marxist and feminist approaches are 'trying to make visible, the invisible female'. In literature and epigraphs, her silent visibility is there. Shortcomings of both the sources will remain there but a balanced paradigm is needed that can connect the missing history links of gender history instead of women history.

Notes and References

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