

Her Story of Ideas: Reading Lives of Lesser Known Women

Priyanka Jha

Abstract

Most scholarly accounts of India's journey to independence have been limited because of the almost sole focus on the ideas, philosophies, and perspectives of a masculinist paradigm, dominated by men. This paper reflects on what kind of narration and construction of the nation could replace this lopsided frame? How can 'other' kinds of stories, narratives and ideas, displaced by 'male' hegemony, be brought into the discussion? How can we overcome the failure to include women's struggles in the recording of 'his-tory'?

Author Profile

Priyanka Jha is a teaching and post-doctoral Fellow at the Department of Philosophy and History of Ideas, Aarhus University, Denmark. She is affiliated with the DFF Sapere Aude funded research project "An Intellectual History of Global Inequality, 1960-2015". Trained as a Political scientist, her interests are largely in the domain of Intellectual History of Ideas, Political Theory and Indian Political Thought. She is interested in gendered intellectual history, engaging with women thinkers from a post-colonial perspective and their ideas on normative categories and concepts. She has taught at Ambedkar University and University of Delhi.

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The bulk of history writing in post-independence India has been driven by a masculinist paradigm of history writing. This historiography invisibilized and marginalized non male ideas and thinking. For instance, although the writing of historians of Modern India such as Bipan Chandra, Sumit Sarkar, Shekar Bandopadhyay gave to the nation its history of nationalist struggle for Independence, it failed to adequately bring in the experiences and contributions of women who were actively involved in the anti-imperialist struggles and mobilization. The history of India, like of many other nations, has largely been ‘His Story’, suggesting a lack of agency of Indian women. It is as though women were either completely absent on the journey towards nationhood, or mere followers in the struggle for independence. They were simply considered to be absent or mere followers or passive spectators of the journey to nationhood. It is clear that the framing of the nation has been selective, and suffers from serious omissions, even elisions.

This results in the reproduction of a frame of passivity for young women in the nation, as opposed to highlighting the possibilities of agency, autonomy, and independent thought. There has been failure to disseminate the ideas and politics of women thinkers and leaders who struggled against the grain. This epistemic violence has persisted into the 21st century, though over a period of time, this frame of thought has been challenged with the emergence of Indian/South Asian Political thought as part of the ‘critical shift’ in History and Political Science. Despite, this new critical shift has failed to create a place for women thinkers.

How can ‘other’ kinds of stories, narratives and ideas, displaced by ‘mainstream’ discourse be brought into the discussion? How can we overcome the failure to include women’s struggles in our pedagogy? There is a serious need to change the way we study the past, a nation’s historical origins, and our conceptions of social transformation. In 1983, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay wrote:

‘I was induced to write this book to fill a vacuum whose very emptiness is proof of an important missing link. There are not many books on the history of social reform movements in India, but even those few have chosen to completely ignore the role of women in it. It is as though whatever changes were brought about, were the outcome of men’s endeavours alone for social changes and thereby amelioration of the women. A grievous injustice has been done to the heroic efforts of the countless women who strove against unimaginable deterrents to serve the cause of their betterment. Women did valiant service by not only pushing forward for their own progress but acting as levers to help other oppressed sections.’ (Chattopadhyay 1983,1)

The approach to teaching modern Indian thought has not changed much in Indian classrooms over the decades since Independence. There is little serious discussion about the absence of women thought leaders/women thinkers.

In India, especially in the social sciences, there is a dearth of writings on women thinkers and scholars. Gender is used as a tool of analysis for political processes, however the gendered nature of the processes themselves are not discussed. For instance, syllabus committees discuss gender as either an optional paper to be taught separately or as a category to be understood separately. What is taught in universities and schools is largely informed by the works of male scholars. An important question to probe is what prevents the inclusion of the work and writings of women thinkers?

The 'social reform movement' foregrounded the 'women question' thus creating some space within history writing to examine the role and position of women in India, as did the participation of women in the nationalist movements.

Dominant modes of doing history do not consider gender to be a significant marker of difference. Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay wrote a scathing critique of the limited freedom that the independence of India brought, arguing that Independence was incomplete without addressing women's concerns.

'Selective memory on the part of the men who recorded and interpreted human history has had devastating impact on women. Women are everywhere and have always been at least half of the humankind. It is inconceivable that their actions and thoughts were inconsequential in shaping of historical events, yet women have to be presented as though they had no history worth recording.' (Lerner 1997, 205)

In South Asia, India was not alone in embarking upon nation-building enterprises that sought to establish its sovereignty and autonomy. Many South Asian nations could not find their 'missing' women thinkers and over the years failed to invoke them in the nationalist imagination. The women citizens of the newly independent nations would have benefitted from women exemplars who represented the national values.

There were a few women who were either part of the nationalist struggle or Constitution making such as Sarojini Naidu, Madame Blavatsky, Annie Beasant, Bhikaji Cama with Rajkumari Amrit Kaur who began to be held up as possible exemplars. Accompanying the euphoria of independence were also the voices of the critics who cautioned the young Indian nation against political complacency once independence had been achieved. Dr B.R. Ambedkar for instance, argued that India would not be able to attain complete independence until it resolved social and economic unfreedom for the oppressed. Women thinkers too articulated similar ideas. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Durgabai Deshmukh, Godavari Parulekar, Anasuya Sarabhai, Annie Mascarene, and others.

Shifts Towards Her Story

The first attempt to shift towards a gender perspective of history emerged in the 1970s and 80s with the women's movement. Women's activism found its alliance in academics and other writers. Women scholars challenged the flawed understanding and limited nature of history writing and narrativization of the nation. Their acts of rewriting, claimed for women the

position within the nation that they had been denied by historians, narrators, and makers. This rewriting came to be termed feminist historiography and was crucial to the women's movement because it was evidence of a systematic move towards reclaiming positionality and voice. It not only located the experiences of women but also shifted the manner in which the colonial and nationalist responses were read and understood. Feminist historiography recovered the struggles and experiences of pioneering women who were engaged in setting up institutions and organizations that championed social change. The works of thinkers like Pandita Ramabai, Savitri Bai Phule, Tarabai Shinde, and Anandibai Joshi were recovered and shared.

Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) gave a scathing critique of the intertwining of religion with patriarchy in her work *The High Caste Hindu Women* (1887). This was a text that would prove instrumental in challenging the patriarchal milieu. It was a challenge to the Hindu social order and critique of the violence that women bore. Pandita Ramabai worked towards a better life for Hindu widows and provided an alternative imagination for Indian womanhood. She later went on to establish the Sharda Sadan and Mukti Sadan as alternative spaces for the widows. Her contributions were enormous in setting the groundwork for nascent women's awakening. Scholars like her sowed the seeds for autonomous womanhood as an ideal for the women of this country, a womanhood of agency, control over their own lives, and access to resources. This allowed women to claim their own past.

Geraldine Forbes¹ wrote about the contributions of women in the establishment of indigenous education systems and institutions. These institutions were different from both the traditional schooling for women as well as the institutions set up by the colonizer. Names of women such as Rassundari Devi, Haimavati Sen, Pandita Ramabai, Sister Subbalakshmi, Mataji Maharani Tapaswini, and Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain are closely associated with these efforts. These early efforts were further consolidated by scholars such as Vina Mazumdar, Lotika Sarkar, Leela Dube, and Devaki Jain among others in post-independence India. However, the task of teaching feminist academics was difficult and daunting. Maitrayee Chaudhuri writes that it was only by the mid-1990s that teachers of regular sociology courses began to include components on women. Women's Studies Departments across universities worked to bring women to the fore as both the researcher and the researched. This was a means to reverse the exclusion of women from academic spaces and work and replace persisting androcentric views with more inclusive feminist scholarship.

Struggles Engaging With Marginalization & Invisibilisation

As a student and teacher of Modern Indian Political Thought, Political Theory and the History of ideas, I find myself surrounded by thinkers who played a significant role in the mapping of the Modern Indian State. These thinkers had two characteristics in common: that they were nation builders, and that they were all men. This is something that could be traced across nations. It did not occur to me, as a student, that this was a problem that needed to be contested. The routinization of patriarchy results in this kind of thinking: we passively accept the absence of women from public thinking.

¹ Geraldine Forbes in her article Education for women, essays the challenges that the Indian women had to face to establishing systems of education. She highlighted the contribution of some women who played crucial role.

Select Bibliography

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