

Her Story: Notes on Women's History

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Abstract

Women had for long been a marginalised presence in history. The second wave of feminism unfolding in the 1970s entailed a feminist intervention in historical scholarship triggering the emergence of women's history in the west. In India, women's history began its journey a few years later. While women's history is being increasingly embraced as a preferred and to a certain extent, 'soft' option for research, it continues to be neglected in the curriculum of the discipline in colleges and universities. The present paper will attempt to write a history of women's history both in the international and Indian context. It will outline the evolving conceptual frames of women's history in both contexts, highlighting the shifts and redefinitions in perspectives and paradigms underpinning feminist historical scholarship. Finally, this paper will locate women's history within the institutionalised teaching-learning curriculum of history, highlight its continued marginality in institutional praxis, and expose the persistent androcentrism of the discipline.

Keywords: *History, women, gender, patriarchy, androcentric, marginalised, resistance, agency*

History is not the past. It is the historian's reconstruction of the past. When historians reconstruct the past, their own preconceptions and bias come into play. The idea that men are superior to women and do more meaningful things in life is one of the preconceptions that had for long determined their understanding of the past. From the very incipience of this discipline, history had largely been the story of men and their doings in the domains of politics, diplomacy, statecraft and economy. Because women, with a few exception of queens, princesses and rebels, had been excluded from these domains, they had remained mostly outside the purview of history. In Sheila Rowbotham's phase, women were 'hidden from history'.² In the 1970s, women's history emerged in reaction to patriarchal tendencies to hide, obscure and marginalise women. Historians of women seek to foreground the hitherto invisibilised role of women in the public domain. More significantly, the supposedly trivial aspects of life, the life within the home, have drawn the attention of feminist historians who have begun to focus on different aspects of women's quotidian existence: their health, education, their leisure, culinary styles and sartorial habits, their domestic roles, their roles as

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² Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History: 300 Years of Women's Oppression and the Fight against It* (London: Pluto Press, 1977).

nurturers and caregivers, their sexuality, the love and violence pervading their intimate relationships, friendships and sub-cultures, their worlds of custom and ritual, and so on.

Women's history seeks to enable the 'majority find its past'.³ Women's history not only aims to bring women into history but also challenges the analytical paradigms on which the discipline of history is founded. Women's history has led to a reconceptualisation of history itself and a radical transformation of its foundational paradigms. Women's history challenges the conventional chronology and periodisation of history predicated on changes in men's lives, and the notions about what is significant to the historian and what is not. The burgeoning of women's history has triggered a hunt for sources that often lie scattered away from the official archive – diaries, letters, notebooks, memoirs and photographs of women, their creative writings, oral testimonies, folklore and other sources, thus redefining the notion of the archive and also the methods of historical research. Further, archival records and other conventional sources are revisited to uncover exclusions and silences, and more strategised readings undertaken to retrieve the lost voices of women.

The present paper will discuss the rationale, goals and sources of women's history and also write a history of women's history in the international and Indian contexts. It will outline the evolving conceptual frames of women's history in both contexts, highlighting the shifts and redefinitions in perspectives and paradigms underpinning feminist historical scholarship. The first section will delineate the emergence and evolving trajectories of women's history in the west. The second section will map the journey of women's history in India, focusing on the diversity of issues and perspectives informing this field. The final section will examine to what extent the insights and findings of women's historians have been incorporated in the curriculum of the discipline at the college and university levels. It will locate women's history within the institutionalised teaching-learning curriculum of history and highlight its continued marginality in institutional engagements with the discipline of history.

A History of Women's History in the West

The first wave of feminism was inaugurated with the publication of Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman* in 1792.⁴ An early advocacy of women's rights to education, property and employment, this text was followed by Mary's *An Historical and Moral View of the Origin and Progress of the French Revolution; and the Effect it has Produced in Europe*.⁵ In the latter text, Wollstonecraft analysed the origins and changing trajectories of the French Revolution along with the role women played in this. She defended the women who had mobbed the palace, and argued that aristocratic values corrupted women and made them manipulative, producing the likes of Marie Antoinette. This was probably the first attempt at bringing women into history.

³ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 1979).

⁴ Mary Wollstonecraft, *A Vindication of the Rights of Woman with Strictures on Political and Moral Subjects* (London: Penguin Classics, 1975[1792]).

⁵ Mary Wollstonecraft, *An Historical and Moral View of the French Revolution and the Effect It has Produced in Europe* (London: Joseph Johnson, 1794).

In the nineteenth century, more and more women began to campaign for their rights to education, property and employment in the UK, the various countries of the European mainland, the USA and other parts of the imperial world such as Australia and New Zealand. Alongside these demands, they pressed for the right to vote in various representative institutions. A few men such as John Stuart Mill joined the movement. Mill, together with Harriet (Taylor) Mill wrote one of the earliest historical accounts of women's subjection.⁶ Women suffragists wrote books and articles to voice their demands as well as histories of the suffrage movement. Susan B Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton, leaders of the National Woman Suffrage Association (NWSA) in the US, along with Matilda Joselyn Gage and others, wrote a 5700 page *History of Women's Suffrage* which was published in six volumes from 1881 to 1922. Gage in her individual capacity also wrote several historical essays, including a long assessment of Christianity's attitude toward women throughout history. Women's struggle for the ballot and other rights went hand in hand with historical explorations in women's past. However, such forays remained largely sporadic and isolated and their theoretical underpinnings were not well-developed.

In the USA, a pro-slavery group of white women in the early twentieth century, the wives and daughters of men who had fought and lost their lives in the Civil War, formed a group called the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC). This group coordinated efforts across the South to tell the story of women on the Confederate home front, while male historians spent their time with battles and generals. The UDC emphasised female activism, initiative, and leadership, reporting that when men left for war, women took command, and began to write about their experiences. According to historian Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, the UDC was a powerful promoter of women's history.⁷

In 1929, the English writer, Virginia Woolf, in her *A Room of One's Own*,⁸ summed up the paradox characterising women's existence. Woolf contrasted the manner in which women were idealised by male authors in literature and glorified in history, and drew attention to the miserable lives they actually led. She wrote:

She pervades poetry from cover to cover; she is all but absent from history. She dominates the lives of kings and conquerors in fiction...Some of the most inspired words and profound thoughts in literature fall from her lips; in real life she could hardly read; scarcely spell; and was the property of her husband.⁹

However, were women really present in history the way Woolf understood them to be? Elsewhere in her book, Woolf asked women who had the privilege of studying at the best colleges of the University of Cambridge, to take up the task of writing their own histories, to document the lives of their foremothers and to recreate the lives of the average Edwardian women. She wrote,

⁶ John Stuart Mill, *The Subjection of Women* (London: Nine Books, 2015 [1869]).

⁷ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, "'You must remember this': Autobiography as social critique." *Journal of American History* (1998): 439–465, p. 450.

⁸ Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One's Own* (London: Hogarth Press, 1929).

⁹ Woolf, *A Room of One's Own*, p. 35.

What one wants, I thought – is a mass of information; at what age did she marry, how many children had she as a rule; what was her room like, had she a room to herself; did she do the cooking; would she be likely to have a servant? All these facts lie somewhere, presumably in parish registers and account books; the life of the average Elizabethan woman must be scattered about somewhere, could one collect it and make a book of it. It would be ambitious beyond daring, I thought, looking about the shelves for books that were not there, to suggest to the students of those famous colleges that they should rewrite history. Though, I own, that it often seems a little queer as it is, unreal and lopsided; but why should they not add a supplement to history? Calling it, of course, by some inconspicuous name so that women might figure there without impropriety.¹⁰

Woolf was content with suggesting only a supplement to history, a supplement for which she suggested only some inconspicuous name for the sake of decorum.

Simone de Beauvoir, the French existentialist philosopher and feminist thinker, in *The Second Sex*, drew attention to the social constructedness of the biological category of ‘woman’, writing of how a girl child gradually became ‘embodied’, and pointed to the historicity of a woman’s identity.¹¹

An early Marxist attempt at explaining women’s subjection was made by Friedrich Engels in 1844. Engels drew attention to the origins of family and the historicity of gender relations.¹² In the early and middle decades of the twentieth century, the lives and experiences of ordinary men and women, far removed from the realms of governmental politics and diplomacy, receive attention from English socialist historians such as E.P. Thompson, Christopher Hill and Eric Hobsbawm. Their endeavour to write a history ‘from below’ – the history of marginalised and less powerful men and women – and to foreground those aspects of life hitherto considered trivial and insignificant, was also carried forward by the French Annales school. Historians of the Annales school brought the nitty gritty of everyday life, emotions and sexuality into the arena of historical research,¹³ shifting focus from individuals and their actions to structures and processes, and from great men to ordinary men and women. The sphere of life and activity conventionally designated as private and as the women’s domain was brought within the purview of historical analysis.

The first systematic initiative to write women’s history was, however, triggered by the second wave of feminism that originated in the USA in the 1960s. Radical feminism, a dominant strand in the second wave of feminism, unmasked the pervasiveness of patriarchy, exposed the sexual politics pervading all realms of life, and harped on the politics inhering in the personal. Feminist historians pointed out the absence of women in standard texts of history and tried to rediscover women’s

¹⁰ Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, p. 31.

¹¹ Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (London: Vintage Books, 1989 [1949]).

¹² Friedrich Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (London: Penguin Classics, 2010 [1884]).

¹³ See, for instance, Philippe Aries and Georges Duby, *A History of Private Life* Volumes 1-4 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1987-1988); Theodore Zeldin, *An Intimate History of Humanity* (London: Harper Perennial, 1995).

active role in the past. Sheila Rowbotham broke new ground with her study, *Hidden from History*,¹⁴ a work that was followed by in-depth explorations of various facets of women's lives, including employment, trade unionism, women's organisations, family life and sexuality. How women lived in the past became important because feminists wanted to understand the roots of gender inequality and women's oppression, and also the challenges posed by women to such inequality in the past. Moreover, history revealed that women's role was socially constructed in a specific historical context and was not natural and universal, and therefore held out the promise of openness to change. If the drive to change existing conditions was a prime mover of the feminist movement, history proved that the lives of women had indeed changed over the past and further change was possible.

The first courses on women's history were introduced in US universities in the early 1970s. Gerda Lerner's trailblazing book, *The Majority Finds its Past*, pointed out the limitations of some earlier approaches to women's history.¹⁵ In what she called compensatory history, the achievements of women worthies and even deviant women were highlighted, leaving aside the history and experience of the vast mass of ordinary women. Another approach, which Lerner labelled contribution history, focused on the contributions of women to grand historical events, processes and movements, their status in, and their oppression by, male-defined society. Women were seen as 'also there' and their contribution was judged by standards appropriate to men. The ways in which women were aided and affected by the work of 'great women', and the ways in which they themselves grew into feminist awareness were ignored. Lerner bemoaned that women's 'essential role on behalf of themselves and of other women was seldom considered a central theme in writing their history'.¹⁶ A further approach was to focus on women's oppression and its opposite, the struggle for women's rights. A limitation of this approach was that it tended to project women as passive victims of a patriarchal order, and failed to elicit the positive and essential way in which women have lived in history. Treating women as primarily victims of patriarchal oppression placed them within a male-defined conceptual framework. Alternatively, some historians focused on women's struggles for rights, especially the winning of suffrage. In this context, Lerner warned against the tendency of some historians to conflate patriarchal norms and prescriptions, and actual behaviour and experiences of women. Lerner argued that ideology was nothing but the manifestation of a shifting value system and of tensions within patriarchal society. The true history of women, Lerner, pointed out, was the 'history of their ongoing functioning in the male-defined world on their own terms'¹⁷ and their actual experiences in the past on the basis of sources such as women's letters, diaries, autobiographies and oral history sources. Lerner cautioned that women's history should not be subsumed under the larger and already respectable field of social history. She pointed out that women differed from other categories of marginalised people because they constituted the majority or at least half of humankind, and they pervaded all categories. Their subjection to patriarchal institutions antedated all other oppression and has outlasted all economic

¹⁴ Sheila Rowbotham, *Hidden from History*.

¹⁵ Gerda Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past*. See Chapter 10: 'Placing Women in History: Definition and Challenges', pp. 115-126.

¹⁶ Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past*, p. 118.

¹⁷ Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past*, p. 120.

and social changes in recorded history, and hence they needed to be dealt with separately. Lerner further emphasised that no single conceptual framework or methodology could fit the complexities of the historical experience of all women.¹⁸

Women's history also challenged established schema of the periodisation of history based on happenings in the domains of politics, diplomacy and warfare. Men were the prime movers of these domains and women mostly had nothing to do with them. Lerner and Joan Kelly inter alia, questioned existing attempts at classifying history into eras. Kelly, for instance, questioned whether women had a renaissance in Europe along with men.¹⁹ She set out an alternative schema of periodising history based on changes in women's lives especially with regard to women's sexuality, reproduction, the link between child bearing and child rearing roles, etc.

The contours of women's history have been increasingly radicalised by theoretical perspectives and insights such as post-colonialism, intersectionality and post-modernism. Post-colonialism draws attention to the persistence of colonial conceptual and attitudinal frames in the way western scholars write about Third World women even after the formal end of colonial subjection. The idea of intersectionality, developed by Kimberle` Crenshaw in the context of black feminism in 1989, foregrounds the intersection of gender with other axes of oppression and inequality such as race, class and community, and fosters a more nuanced understanding of women's lived existence in history. Post-modernism challenges feminist truisms about lived experience, the nature of women's subordination and a simplistic use of the category 'woman'. There has been a shift away from an interest in the material conditions of women's lives towards a concern with representation, symbolism, discourse and the text.

In 1984, Gayle Rubin formulated the concept of the sex-gender system. Sex, she argued, was biological, and gender was the socially and culturally created division of the sexes imposed on the biological sex. The sex-gender system, she argued, was the primary locus of women's oppression.²⁰ Post-modernist feminists have drawn attention to the shifting, multiple and often conflicting ways in which women develop gendered identities. Joan Wallach Scott, for instance, has foregrounded gender as an indispensable category of historical analysis and emphasised the context-specificity and historicity of the processes of social construction of gender, unveiling the power play latent in such processes.²¹ Judith Butler has argued that sex as well as gender is socially constructed and historically contingent. Sex, she argues, is not stable and fixed but fluid. Butler further argues that gender is

¹⁸ Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past*, p. 126.

¹⁹ Joan Kelly, *Women, History and Theory: The Essays of Joan Kelly* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984). Chapter Two: 'Did Women Have a Renaissance?', pp. 19-50.

²⁰ Gayle Rubin, 'The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex', in R. Reiter (ed.), *Toward an Anthropology of Women* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975), pp. 157-210.

²¹ Joan Wallach Scott, 'Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis' in *Gender and the Politics of History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), pp. 82-100.

performative, and that no identity actually exists behind the acts that are supposedly expressing gender.²²

The centrality attributed to gender by feminist scholars has also triggered a tendency to replace the term ‘women’s history’ by ‘gender history’. The latter term it is argued, is more inclusive and politically correct. The term ‘women’s history’, however, has not become passé and continues to be popular in feminist academic circles. Despite the slightly divergent conceptual frames underpinning the two, functionally, gender history and women’s history have converged, with gender – an analytical category that encompasses relationality, power politics, social constructedness of identity, questioning of man-woman binary, acknowledging the existence of alternative gender identities and a zeal for social transformation inspired by feminism – a key tool deployed by practitioners of women’s history to understand the past. Women’s history moves beyond to take into account the intersections of gender with other vectors of inequality such as race, class, community, etc, such that an intersectional understanding of gender underpins the political-intellectual project of women’s history.

Women’s History in India

In late colonial India, several women, equipped by education to express themselves in writing, and by a print culture to publish their work, began to critique patriarchy and put forward an alternative social order premised on equality between men and women. Pandita Ramabai²³ and Tarabai Shinde²⁴ in Maharashtra, and Kailashbasini Devi²⁵ and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain²⁶ in Bengal penned vociferous critiques of prevailing patriarchal norms and customs. Rokeya was one of the pioneering women thinkers in India to attempt a historical analysis of women’s subjection. She conceived of women as a *jati*, a collective category, recurrently alluding to them as *streejati*. She attempted to analyse the causes of the degradation of *streejati*, and suggested remedies for their emancipation. She noted the specificities of women’s lived experiences in various contexts, thus anticipating the intersectional perspective, and at the same time she highlighted the common ground they all shared. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, a popular male Bengali novelist in the early twentieth century, attempted a similar historical analysis of women’s subordination across spatial and temporal contexts and the diversity of women’s lived experiences across cultures in his essay, ‘Narir Mulya’.²⁷

²² Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge, 1990); Judith Butler, ‘Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory’, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 40, No. 4 (Dec., 1988), pp. 519-531.

²³ Pandita Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman* (Bombay: Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture, 1981 [1887]).

²⁴ Tarabai Shinde, *Stree Purush Tulana* (1882). In English translation, see Rosalind O’ Hanlon, *A Comparison between Men and Women: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India* (Madras: Oxford University Press, 1994).

²⁵ Kailashbasini Devi, *Hindu Mahilaganer Heenabastha* [The Woeful Plight of Hindu Women] (Calcutta: Durgacharan Gupta, 1863).

²⁶ See Anil Ghosh (ed.), *Rokeya Rachanabali* (Kolkata: Katha, 2014).

²⁷ Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, ‘Narir Mulya’ [Value of Woman] in Sukumar Sen (ed.), *Saratsabityasamagra* [Collected Works of Saratchandra Chattopadhyay] (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers, 2009 [1913]).

An early academic foray into women's past in the Indian context was by A. S. Altekar, the author of *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (1956), a history that uncritically glorified women's position in the ancient past.²⁸ Twenty years later, Neera Desai, a feminist sociologist, wrote *Woman in Modern India* (1957),²⁹ the first scholarly and feminist history of Indian women according to Geraldine Forbes.³⁰ Neera Desai's book was followed by several adulatory histories that lacked the feminist critical edge. Women's history in India had to wait till the 1970s to make a new and bold beginning. As in the west, the women's movement provided the impetus. For the women's movement, 'history itself became a primary resource'. The writing of 'Her-story' was a crucial agenda of the movement. The women's movement and the journey of women's history (and women's studies more broadly) were triggered by the publication of the Towards Equality report in 1974, which presented the findings of the Committee of the Status of Women in India, a body appointed by the Government of India on the directive of the United Nations. The report revealed that the status of Indian women had barely improved since 1947. In fact, women lagged behind on all yardsticks of progress, busting the myth of equality engendered by the Indian constitution. The Indian nation, as Raka Ray aptly put it, had clearly failed its women.³¹ The report triggered an intellectual movement that led to the emergence of an autonomous women's movement on one hand, and the birth of women's studies and women's history on the other.

In India, women's history, at least in the initial stages, gave priority to the task of bringing women in from the seams of history, rendering women visible, unravelling their hitherto obscured roles in the public domain and throwing unprecedented light on life within the household. Women's history historicised and fractured the homogeneity of the Indian woman. The outcome has been an impressive corpus of empirical research on the lived past of different categories of Indian women, in all periods of Indian history, whether ancient, medieval and modern, post-colonial and contemporary. While such empirical forays have largely produced what Gerda Lerner would describe as 'compensatory' and 'contribution' history,³² feminist historians located in India have also tried in their own ways to assail the conceptual base of male (stream) history and write a new history that not only adds or inserts women to existing historical narratives, but also engages with the supposedly gender-neutral facets of the past through a feminist looking glass.

Historians of the Subaltern School were initially insensitive to issues of women and gender. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, in her essay, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?'³³ first designated women as subaltern, bringing them within the purview of Subaltern Studies. At the same time, she argued that women had little or no voice within colonial texts and, in a broader sense, within the hegemonic Western accounts of South Asian history.³⁴ Rosalind O'Hanlon similarly pointed to the absence of

²⁸ A. S. Altekar, *The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization* (Delhi: Motilal Banarassidas, 1956).

²⁹ Neera Desai, *Women in Modern India* (Vora: 1957).

³⁰ Geraldine Forbes, 'Reflections on South Asian Women's/Gender History: Past and Future', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* 4:1, 2003, p. 2.

³¹ Raka Ray, 'Introduction' in Raka Ray (ed.), *Handbook of Gender* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p.2.

³² Lerner, *The Majority Finds its Past*, pp. 115-120.

³³ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (eds.), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Hampshire: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 271-313.

³⁴ See also Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *Subaltern Studies IV* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1985).

gender questions in Subaltern Studies.³⁵ Spivak's muted subaltern subject began to figure in the subsequent volumes of Subaltern Studies, and appeared to be not as silent and voiceless as she had assumed. Historians in India have also engaged in writing women's life stories and biographies. Biographies have made significant interventions in transforming historical scholarship on women by investing women with agency and making them the subject in historical narratives, not necessarily in terms of men or in relation to men.³⁶

Historians writing women's history questioned grand narratives such as renaissance, social reform, colonialism, nationalism, partition, etc, from a feminist perspective, highlighting, the silences, exclusions and the male-centredness of these projects, their differential impact on men and women as well as on different groups of women. In *Recasting Women*, Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid offered a new paradigm for viewing history through a gender lens in India.³⁷ The book laid bare the processes of reconstitution of patriarchy in colonial India, a process premised on women's passivity and lack of agency. The overarching tendency in the initial phase of Indian feminist historiography was to see women as passive objects of social reform and legal interventions, and perceive them as muted victims of colonial exploitation and nationalist betrayal. Gradually, feminist historians moved forward to highlight women's subjectivity, agency, their everyday acts of resistance, the interplay of the deeply entangled processes of victimisation and resistance, and also to foreground how women recast themselves instead of being passively recast by hegemonic structures like colonialism and patriarchy, how they reshaped the terms of dominant discourses and carved out their own modalities of protest.³⁸

Western feminist theories have provided Indian feminist historians important analytical tools, but these have been adapted to the Indian context. The interplay of gender with caste, community and class has been examined through an intersectional lens. The problem of writing the history of colonised women who suffered the oppression of colonialism and patriarchy in their own time and also the subsequent epistemic violence implicit in western scholarship has been addressed by several scholars. Indian feminist scholars have tried to 're-render' dalit women's 'testimonios', and re-script history by taking into account their lived experiences of oppression and resistance.³⁹ Thanks to women's history, the gender versus class debate has entered Indian historical scholarship even if in a modest way. If mainstream history was relatively silent about women, Samita Sen points out, the silence was deafening in the case of poor women.⁴⁰ While the role of peasant and labouring women in mainstream nationalist and class politics have begun to be investigated by historians, there has also been significant attempt to examine independently the lives and struggles of women workers,

³⁵ Rosalind O' Hanlon, 'Recovering the Subject: *Subaltern Studies* and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia' in David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning, and the Globalisation of South Asia* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2002). First published in *Modern Asian Studies*, 1988.

³⁶ See for instance, Suparna Gooptu, Cornelia Sorabji: *India's Pioneer Woman Lawyer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006).

³⁷ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1990).

³⁸ Padma Anagol Ginn, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920* (London and New York: Routledge, 2020(2005)).

³⁹ Sharmila Rege, *Writing Caste/Writing Gender: Narrating Dalit Women's Testimonios* (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2006).

⁴⁰ Samita Sen, 'Histories of Betrayal: Patriarchy, Class and Nation' in Sekhar Bandyopadhyay (ed.), *Bengal: Rethinking History: Essays in Historiography* (Delhi: Manohar, 2001), p. 274.

including domestic workers alongside women labouring in the textile and jute industries and in the tea plantations.

Apart from intersectionalist forays into dalit and labouring women, Muslim women have also been the subject of extensive research. There has been a series of historical investigations into the conditions of Muslim women in the colonial times, with scholars seeking to retrieve the voices and agency of Muslim women who suffered the dual oppressions of patriarchy and community. Researchers have also thrown the spotlight on socially outcast women such as courtesans and prostitutes, popular performers, actresses, vaishnavis, devdasis, et al. These categories of women, hitherto relegated to obscurity, have emerged as subjects of historical enquiry, given the feminist intervention in history.

The history of women's everyday lives and their invisible acts of resistance has commanded the attention of many historians.⁴¹ These historians were inspired by James C. Scott's theorisation of the everyday forms of resistance enacted by the subordinate and the hidden transcripts underlying an apparent conformity,⁴² and also by Haynes and Prakash's understanding of the entanglements of power and resistance, and the everydayness of resistance in the South Asian context.⁴³

Historians have examined the everyday experience of patriarchal oppression and also the small acts of resistance to such oppression that occurred silently and clandestinely in the inner domain of the household, far removed from the public domain.⁴⁴ Long before professional historians critically engaged in the everyday, Ashapura Devi, a popular novelist in twentieth century Bengal, professed to write the history of quotidian life and the small acts of resistance by women within the *antahpur*, i.e. the inner domain of the household, a domain that she rightly pointed out, had been systematically overlooked by historians. In her preface to *Pratham Pratisbruti*,⁴⁵ she wrote:

The history of times is made up of stories about the rise and fall of the public world. And that restless, clamorous history writ against a backdrop of light and darkness holds out inspiration, ardour and excitement for the future. But is not the mute, domestic space similarly broken and built? From which flows forth the changing colours of a community, an age and people's mentalities? But history has invariably overlooked the dynamics of the domestic world. That domain has always been neglected...⁴⁶

Ashapura Devi professed to write a history of the inner quarters of the home, the trivialities of everyday life within it and the nameless women who tried to change the prevailing order of things. The author thus anticipated the 'everyday' turn in Indian feminist historiography. The idea of the everydayness of women's resistance has been taken forward by historians who began to see women

⁴¹ See for instance, Anindita Ghosh (ed.), *Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2011).

⁴² James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Delhi: OUP, 1988); James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance: Hidden Transcripts* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1990).

⁴³ Douglas Hyanes and Gyan Prakash (eds.), *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia* (Berkeley and LA: University of California Press, 1992).

⁴⁴ Anindita Ghosh (ed.), *Behind the Veil*.

⁴⁵ Ashapura Devi, *Pratham Pratisbruti* [The First Promise] (Calcutta: Mitra o Ghosh, 1995[1965]).

⁴⁶ Ashapura Devi, *The First Promise*, trans Indira Chowdhury (Hyderabad: Orient BlackSwan, 2009).

as 'subjects', inspired by Foucauldian notions of power and subjectivity. These notions entail that woman is a subject in history and is located within historically constituted relationships of power and knowledge. She is discontinuous and apparently contradictory, not consistent, unified or freely choosing, but a palimpsest of identities, constituted and reconstituted, constantly in flux. She both colludes and collides with the power structures within which she is located.⁴⁷

Alongside investigations into different aspects of women's lived lives, post-structuralist discourse analysis and studies of representation of women in literature and other cultural artefacts have become important strands of women's history in India. Social history, however, remains a well-trodden field. One of the biggest achievements of women's history in India has been the recovery of women's lost voices and retrieval of their creative and personal/ autobiographical writings, and also engagement in recording their live voices through oral history projects.

Present scenario

Hundreds of researchers across India are now engaged in research on different aspects of women's history. However, have things changed much? Thirty-two years ago, when I was an undergraduate student in history in a college affiliated to Calcutta University, there was not a single topic on women in any of the papers taught. The undergraduate curriculum of history honours has been revised several times over the decades. In 2020, the history curriculum at the undergraduate level remains as androcentric as ever. Let me focus on the content of the 'Modern Europe', a compulsory paper in history major in almost every university in West Bengal. This paper begins with the French Revolution of 1789 and continues till the First World War, and in some universities till the Second World War, and focuses on revolutions, nation building processes, imperialism, industrialisation, wars, alliances and treaties. Women figure only marginally in this paper. The work of feminist historians in the history of modern Europe has revealed that women participated in a major way in the French Revolution. Moreover, women ideologues such as Mary Wollstonecraft and Olympe De Gouges were sceptical about the revolutionary claims of equality, arguing that such equality did not encompass equality between men and women. Mary Wollstonecraft argued tirelessly that women were no less human beings than men and, as such, deserved the same rights as men. She was caught in torrid debates with Rousseau, Talleyrand, Edmund Burke, and others regarding the character of the French revolution and the course it eventually took, making the ideological matrix of the French revolution more complicated than it seems. Shortly after the Constituent Assembly published the *Declaration of Rights of the Man and the Citizen*, Olympe de Gouges came up with her rejoinder, the *Declaration of Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, demanding that women be given equal rights with men.⁴⁸ The curriculum of modern Europe as taught in colleges and universities of West Bengal, does not spare even a small module on Mary Wollstonecraft or Olympe de Gouges. The content of the paper on modern Europe, similarly, does not say a word about the women's long struggle for the right to vote in different countries of Europe. The much celebrated Revolution of 1848 in France

⁴⁷ Zakia Pathak and Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, 'Shahbano', *Signs* 14, No 3 (Spring 1989): 558-582, Nita Kumar (ed.), *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* (Stree, Calcutta, 1994), pp. 1-25.

⁴⁸ Olympe de Gouges, *Declaration of the Rights of Woman and of the Female Citizen*, 1791.

and other parts of Europe coincided with the first women's convention in the world, the Seneca Falls Convention, held in New York, USA. This convention marked the beginning of the suffrage movement in the USA. The feminist movement in Russia, active since the late nineteenth century, gathered momentum in the years prior to the revolution. Immediately after the revolution in 1917, Russia granted women the right to vote. In contrast, France, which was one of the earliest countries to witness women's activism, denied franchise to its women till 1944. While the revolutions, alliances, wars, treaties and other political happenings in Europe in the 1789-1947 period are analysed threadbare by historians, and students are asked to do the same in their examinations, the movement for women's right to vote occurring in tandem with these events remains unnoticed.

Histories of the first and second world wars similarly exclude women. Women had participated in the war, they had come out of their homes to support their families, and finally a large number of women were against war. However, war continues to be represented as an exclusively male preoccupation and concern. While feminist historians have brought women's doings to light, their findings have not been integrated within mainstream history. The history of modern Europe as packaged and presented within our institutional framework does not reflect women's part in it.

The history of India in the ancient, medieval and modern periods remains 'His Story' with equal stubbornness. Women are still a marginalised presence in the standard textbooks of Indian history. Myths about the exalted position of women in the ancient era, and their degradation in the medieval period continue to prevail. In the medieval context, the few women who carved a niche in the realms of politics and diplomacy are seen as deviant and defiant (for example, Sultan Raziya) or conspirators and power-mongers (like Akbar's wet nurse and regent, Maham Anga; Jahangir's wife, Nur Jahan). The deprivation and denial they suffered within a rigidly patriarchal value system, the agency and active political roles of royal women such as Gulbadan Begum (Babur's daughter), Jahanara Begum (ShahJahan's daughter) and Zeb-un-Nisa (Aurangzeb's daughter), their literary and other creative ventures, the exploitation suffered by slaves and nautch girls within the harem— these aspects of women's lives do not find a place in the history curriculum at any level. The mass of ordinary women are swept out of the purview of medieval history.

The curriculum of modern Indian history similarly deals with women perfunctorily, content with inserting a module or two on women and social reform or women in the nationalist movement. Paradoxically, the changing condition and role of women in British India has triggered an enormous corpus of research. Much of such research highlights women's own perspective on issues of social reform, foregrounds their voices resonating through print, and their far from passive participation in various strands of the nationalist movement, in peasant and labour movements. However, such research is not incorporated into the curriculum or in the texts books catering to students at college and university levels.

History within the institutional framework remains heavily tilted in favour of men and mired in gender bias. The efforts of feminist historians to rewrite history have not significantly changed the way history is being read, written and taught at the institutional level, at least in our own milieu. And in order to rectify this scenario, it is important to sensitise curriculum-builders, teachers and all those

engaged in the pedagogic aspects of this discipline, and also ensure that those who write text books give women their due. It is only through such efforts that we can rebuild the discipline of history on the pillars of gender equality.