

# **Unveiling Women**

**Kiran Datar**

**Kunda Datar Memorial Lectures, 1998**

**Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics  
(Deemed to be a University)  
Pune 411 004**

### **About the Author**

**Dr. Mrs. Kiran Datar holds Master's degrees in history from University of Delhi and University of Washington and the Ph.D. degree in history from Jawaharlal Nehru University. An active participant at conferences and seminars on history, Dr. Datar earlier taught history at Janaki Devi Mahavidyalaya, University of Delhi and is currently the Principal of Miranda House, University College for Women, University of Delhi. She is a specialist of American History and International Relations. She is the author of two books, 'Malaysia: Quest for Politics of Consensus' and 'United States of America – Two Centuries of Growth and Change' and a number of articles in professional and popular journals.**

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## Foreword

Shri B.N. Datar, a well-known labour economist in India and former Senior Adviser in the Ministry of Labour and the Planning Commission, gave a generous endowment to the Institute some years ago to arrange lectures, provide fellowships and promote research studies and bring out publications in the fields of labour, employment, manpower planning, migration, wage differentials and income levels and problems of women in society. The lectures under this endowment are delivered and subsequently published under the Kunda Datar Memorial Lectures Series of the Institute.

Dr. Mrs. Kiran Datar, Principal of Miranda House University College for Women, University of Delhi, and a historian, delivered three lectures on May 4 - 6, 1998, at the Institute on the subject, "Through other Lenses: Women and / in History", under the Kunda Datar Memorial Lectures. In her lectures, Dr. Kiran Datar observed that there are very few references in the traditional texts and records of history to women as actors of history. Neither the dramatic personae of history include any prominent women nor are there found any portrayals of women as a group. Attributing this to the fact that almost no records of history written by women are available, she pleaded for taking a new look at history to unveil the role played by women in history. For this, she took upon the task of re-reading available historical and literary accounts written by women writers - from the early Mughal period in India; from the abolitionist movement and the Women's Rights Movement in the nineteenth century America and from the nationalist movement in India. A fresh perspective emerges from this reading about the difficult and halting process through which women have gained entry into newer and newer 'permitted' spaces in performing an active role in the society.

The lectures also included a discussion of the Eighty First Amendment Bill, 1996, which proposes that not less than one-third of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha and in the Legislative Assemblies shall be reserved for women. Dr. Kiran Datar emphasized the importance of the new political awareness and political education which such reservation would produce.

We are happy to take this opportunity to publish these lectures in the hope that it will not only encourage taking a fresh look at history through 'other lenses' as envisaged

by Dr. Kiran Datar, but also underline the importance of the new political awareness gained with every further development of women's consciousness and the need to protect it from slipping back.

Gokhale Institute of  
Politics and Economics, Pune 411 004  
September 1999

V.S. Chitre  
Director

## **Preface**

I am indeed grateful to Shri B. N. Datar and the Director, Gokhale Institute of Politics and Economics for inviting me to deliver the Kunda Datar Memorial Lecture Series. In this set of lectures I attempted to focus on some aspects of women and/in history. To give women their place in history is a difficult task for sources are few and inadequate. Women were often treated as “heroines” and larger than life or ignored by historians who have not even questioned their non-portrayal. It is a tentative effort, therefore, to restore agency to them, to bring some forgotten women who shaped history in their own differing ways back into focus. The presentation, therefore, is tentative and speculative and more in the nature of opening up some questions for debate and reflection. They hopefully, reflect a concern for women and/in their past in order to focus on their agency for the present.

**Kiran Datar**



## Lecture I

### RE-READING HISTORY: WOMEN AND/IN HISTORY

As an introduction to the set of three lectures that will be presented, it seems necessary to place my own view of history within an analytical framework. The past in the hands of those who craft it, takes on many hues. It is like a kaleidoscope of myriad, brilliant colours, changing shape and form, depending on the viewer and his time. The concept of a history, definitive and unchanging, shatters with differing perceptions and interpretations. New facts, data and evidence alter our understanding new methodologies present a challenge, new times and concerns widen the horizons of knowledge. Few historians would accept as axiomatic today what one of their colleagues, H.B. Adams had inscribed on the wall of his seminar room. "History is Past Politics and Politics are Past History." The historians of today have moved far beyond political and chronological history and are taking up themes like the nature of power and leadership and relations of political institutions to underlying social and economic patterns and systems. The dramatic personae have changed, but through it all, the principal actors and movers are still the people shaping 'Clio'. 'People' however, have hardly included women. Jane Austen's heroine in *Northanger Abbey* complains of history presenting the "quarrels of popes and kings but it has hardly any women at all." Gerda Lerner's commentary on the treatment of women in the *History of the United States* would just as well apply to *Indian History*, "The striking fact about the historiography of women is the general neglect of the subject by historians. As long as historians held to the traditional view that only the transmission and exercise of power were worthy of their interest, women were of necessity ignored. There was little room in political, diplomatic and military history for American women, who were, longer than any other single group in the population, outside the power structure. At best their relationship to power was implicit and peripheral and could easily be passed on as insignificant"<sup>1</sup>. The number of women mentioned in textbooks of history, American or Indian remain astonishingly small to this day, as does the number of biographies and monographs by professional historians dealing with women.

Since, the time of Lerner's eloquent plea for restoring women to their rightful place in history, there are many significant developments. What has been of importance here is the shift in perspective, an altered approach to the study of historical change and processes. Women at various times and places were a majority of the population yet their status was that of an oppressed minority deprived of the rights men enjoyed. Women have for centuries been excluded from positions of power, both political and economic, yet as members of families, as daughters and wives, they were closer to actual power than many a man. If women were exploited, they were also exploiters. Their 'placing' in history (the choice of the word is deliberate since they seem to have been super-imposed as cut-out figures) as Sati, Savitri, Sita, Mira, a Queen Mother, a Queen, a Princess is not of real people but more like 'reliefs' of the 'real' history. Women, where projected, are the larger than life individual figures; there is no portrayal of women as a

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<sup>1</sup> Gerda, Lerner (1979), *The Majority finds its Past: Placing Women in History*, Oxford University Press, p. 3.

group since they are dispersed and there is little record of group activity. Their representation only as 'oppressed groups' does not take us any closer to an understanding of their negotiation, compromise and survival. Women in history have to be seen with different lenses not because they were weaker, unequal, oppressed but because they were and are different. Their roles are different but equal. They have vanished from history texts because their roles and contribution were never recorded. It is necessary, therefore, to re-read the texts to restore them to history. A different perspective yields different results - sometimes it may not yield results but tentative conclusions and assumptions can be formed.

In the memory of the past, there is the recurrent myth of the golden age of Indian womanhood, with women being valorised as partners in religious duties and as heroic resisters to alien rulers. This is particularly emphasized during the Vedic period. Their status is seen as declining in subsequent periods till they are viewed as powerless and invisible in the dark ages of the period of Muslim rule. In the Brahmanas and in the Smritis and Puranas there are many references to women and sudras being lumped together in the same category. The Brahmana Purana, a work of the Gupta period declared that members of the first three varnas could perform ceremonies but women and sudras could not perform them. Again in the epics and puranas there are joint references to women and property - with the necessity of protecting both. Women are themselves regarded as a form of private property. The Dharamsastras, the ancient legal treatises are a major source of textual information on inheritance laws. Even though often they are theoretical expositions rather than descriptions of actual practice, they provide a reference point. Dated between 200 B.C. and 300 A.D. the formal commentaries that gained influence around the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. (referred to as School of Law by the British) were the Dayabhaga and the Mitakshara systems. Without going into many details and complexities, generally Hindu women could inherit immovable property, such as, land only under highly restrictive circumstances and could enjoy only a limited interest in it, whereas men enjoyed an intrinsic right to inherit and control property. However, there was some recognition of female property rights in the concept of stridhan<sup>2</sup>. With inheritance and rights in property passing mainly through the male line, a situation was being created in which the chastity of women come to be far more important than that of men. The practice of Sati in militant communities like the Rajputs, Sikhs, Marathas reflected the property-based nature of patriarchal societies. In time it became sanctified as a sacrifice that would confer great religious merit on widows, and gained social approbation as a result.

Even though many features of patriarchal bias predate the coming of the Turkish invaders, but in popular perception and in many history texts their advent marked the ending of the Golden age and the beginning of the dark age when women had to be kept in purdah. Historians once believed that the post-Gupta period brought greater rigidity in the caste structure. However, recent research indicates that this was a period of great social mobility. Large numbers of people migrated from Central Asia just after the establishment of Turkish rule - Khaljis, Afghans and Mongols. Contemporary texts like

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<sup>2</sup> Agarwal, Bina (1994), *A Field of One's Own : Gender and Land Rights in South Asia*, Cambridge University Press, pp. 84-99.

Futuh-us-Salatin record that many genuine descendants of the Prophet arrived from Khurasan, many painters from China, many Ulama born in Bukhara, many saints and devotees from every quarter of the world, and craftsmen of every kind and every country. Demographic mobility and urbanisation - expansion of old towns and construction of new metropolitan centres in regional kingdoms led artisans, artists, craftsmen and merchants to move there in hope of better prospects. The 15<sup>th</sup> Century account of Gujarat, *Tarikh-Salatin-i-Gujarat* mentions the arrival of masons, craftsmen, and Baggals (Banyas) in large numbers who took permanent abode in the new capital. The royal Karkhanas, Madrasas, Khanqahs of Sufi saints and royal slave households helped the emergence of important new social groups in the urban centres during pre-Mughal times. In this fluid social and political climate, it is significant though perhaps not surprising that there is hardly any record of women, in contemporary accounts or in modern texts. Texts, contemporary accounts and modern histories for this period have more or less erased women as a category from historical accounts<sup>3</sup>. The representation of women particularly in the pre-Mughal period is both symbolic and constructed. Women in the 'golden age' like Maitreyi and Gargi who articulated and thought have now perforce to be protected behind purdah. Purdah is generally attributed to be an 'import' from the Muslim world, which secluded women in harems, and came to be institutionalized during the period of social ferment. Representation of women in the period under study emphasises 'purdah'. At this point, it is not relevant to debate whether it preceded the Turkish conquest or was brought by the Turks and institutionalised as a result of constant invasions. There is no agreement amongst commentators as to whether the veiling of women in the Quran refers only to the female relatives of the Prophet Muhammad or it is an absolute requirement for all pious women. According to Patricia Jeffery, "...the texts of Islam are themselves open to debate among Muslims and it seems impossible for them to provide a completely satisfactory explanation for the existence of purdah"<sup>4</sup>. In the manner in which it came to be applied it meant a veil, a curtain, a seclusion of women in separate apartments or harems. Purdah was primarily for the women of the nobility and aristocratic families who went about in *dolis*, or in *burqah*. Women of the lower classes moved the lapel of their sari or other head-gear when they passed a stranger. The Hindu nobility was not slow in adopting the ways of the Muslim rulers for instance in contemporary accounts such as that of Malik Muhammad Jaisi there are many references to *ghungat*. The veiled women behind purdah were romantic figures, hidden from the public eye. They were not real figures of

<sup>3</sup> A critical look at the texts for this period reveal an almost total blanking out of women. If at all they are mentioned they are lifted out of the historical context and a few articles are devoted to their activities and leisure. This kind of an approach takes us nowhere near to an understanding of the social history of the time. Habib, Irfan (1995), *Essays in Indian History*, Tulika.

Habib, M. and K.A. Nizami (1970), *A Comprehensive History of India*, Vol.V, The Delhi Sultanat (IHC). Chattopadhyaya, D. (1994), *The Making of Early Medieval India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi.

Chandra, Satish (1982), *Medieval India: Society, The Jagirdari crisis and the Village*. Macmillan India Ltd.. UN Day (1971), *Some Aspects of Medieval Indian History*, Kumar Bros, New Delhi.

Kosambi, D.D. (1975), *An Introduction to the Study of Indian History*, Popular Prakashan, Delhi.

<sup>4</sup> Jeffery, Patricia (1979), *Frogs in a Well, Indian Women in Purdah*, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd..

the real world - it is easy, therefore, to remove them from history, to see them as an existing only as they have been constructed.

The 'dark ages' following the so-called 'Golden age' are often portrayed as a period when invading armies/foreigners swept across the northern plains, defeating the Hindu rulers to bring in the rule of alien groups. If there are references to women, these are to Regents (mothers, consorts, wives who wielded surrogate power), or to women as victims, who fought to save honour - who committed Jauhar or died fighting, or women who seemingly moved away from the 'real' world to speak in the voice of religion. For anyone wanting to place women in history during this period it is a daunting task. The only representation is of women behind purdah, moving through palaces or walking bedecked in the Meena Bazar, women dying as sati or committing jauhar. Representations in painting show them as stiff and stylised not engaged in any activity of relevance to their daily lives. They are seen hazily flitting across the stage sometimes holding center stage for brief periods, before vanishing like ghosts in a Shakespeare play.

Most texts obliterate women and those few that place them in history do so in stereotyped cubby holes. Any attempt to correct this picture would have to shift focus and perspective. It would be necessary to focus on the area and the manner in which they exercised agency and power. If the focus shifts, from women as 'victims' and sees them as exercising agency, albeit in a manner different to that of men, the kaleidoscope yields a different picture. Since historical change is no longer seen against the background of wars, conquests and dynastic change there is the possibility of rich unfolding. Women then would emerge from behind the veil of traditional history to take their rightful place not only as aberrant individuals but as part of collectivities who survived, manipulated, exercised agency and political power.

In this context, a new perspective on Razia seems necessary. Razia, daughter of Iltutmish was the only woman to sit on the throne during the rule of the Turks and Mughals in India. She was well versed in the Quran and helped in administration while Iltutmish was busy with military excursions in Gwalior. According to the contemporary historian, Minhaj-us-siraj, she discharged her responsibilities so efficiently that immediately on his return from Gwalior (1232 A.D.) Iltutmish had a decree prepared naming her as heir apparent. Some of his nobles remonstrated that since he had grown up sons why nominate a daughter. Iltutmish is said to have replied, "My sons are engrossed in the pleasures of youth and none of them possess the capability of managing the affairs of the country. After my death it will be seen that no one of them will be found worthy of the heir apparentship than she my daughter"<sup>5</sup>. Despite this, on his death Firoz came to the throne in April 1236 A.D. Razia appealed to the people of Delhi and with the support of the army came to the throne in November 1236. She successfully faced a major rebellion led by Nizamul Mulk Junaidi, the famous wazir of Iltutmish, and as recorded by Minhaj, "from Lakhnaut to Debal, all the maliks and armies submitted to her authority"<sup>6</sup>. However, Razia was to face the pressures of contending groups jostling for power and in her moves to build up support from non-Turks she evoked the

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<sup>5</sup> Minhaj-us-Siraj, *Tabaqat-in-Nasir*, English Translation H.G. Raverty. Bib. India 1897, p. 185-186.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid p. 187

resentment of the Turkish group. Her so-called favours to the Abyssinian, Jamaluddin Yaqut became the focal point of unrest and she was dethroned in 1240 A.D. Chroniclers point to her great qualities, clearly recognised by her father. "After my death it will be found that none but my daughter is fit to succeed me". Yet all her failures are interpreted as arising out of the limitation of gender. In the turbulent pulls and pressures of contending racial groups and vested interests, Razia's attempt to create a group of nobility around her, loyal and supportive in the face of hostile groups supporting her brother are interpreted as granting favours to the foreigner Yaqut. Minhaj comments, "What good were all these qualities into her when she was born of a woman." Razia's period of rule was brief and turbulent but so was the reign of many in those times beset by the same kind of problems and difficulties. Razia's gender and the boundaries prescribed for her thereof have always been seen as responsible for her failure. Her short reign and inability to consolidate her rule are seen as the problem of her gender. Even modern historians have not broken out of this bound to examine her reign by seeing her 'agency'. She has been treated as a somewhat tragic romantic figure doomed to failure by the constraints of her sex. Let us restore her agency - battling for her right to the throne, and negotiating with the turbulent succession problems of the thirteenth century in North India. In history, women's agency has more often than not been pejoratively slotted as manipulative. Men have been seen as having both rights and duties; women as having only duties. Within the context of her world, Razia has not been accorded the 'space' other rulers have to be judged by the compulsions of those times. Much is made of her short reign, the rebellions of her nobility etc. But was she the only ruler to face all this? Ruknuddin Firoz ruled only for a few months in 1236, Razia from 1236-1240, Sultan Alauddin Masud Shah from 1242-1246. The political uncertainty of the early thirteenth century saw the rise and fall of many rulers and Razia has to be placed within this context.

Razia's brief reign has been studied as an aberration of the times - much is made of the fact that she was the only woman who ruled in her own right in the Turkish and Mughal dynasties. She came to the throne against the background of incompetent male heirs. However, her reign continues to be judged by the standards of patriarchal society and by their mores. The posing of women as models of fortitude, sacrifice, self-abnegation has placed them in neatly labeled categories and when evidence has been startling that this is not borne out by empirical evidence, this is explained away as an aberration without an attempt to place them within the historical context and times. Rekha Misra's account of *Women in Mughal India 1526-1748* (Munshiram Manoharlal, 1965) talks of "ambitious ladies of royalty attracted to politics". Women's intervention in whatever capacity is seen as manipulative and not within the framework of the contemporary power politics. The history of the Turkish Sultanate is replete with examples of wars of succession, conspiracies, vested interests, and scramble for power. Women's intervention in this process is seen as "instigating" sons or husbands even though even traditional accounts give so many examples of women using this as a strategy to protect their interests equally as men did. However, in the case of women it is always seen as overstepping their boundaries and coming out of their purdah of genteel and accepted activities. The examples are many - Shah Turkan, wife of Ilutmish and mother of Ruknuddin Firoz aspiring to place him on the throne, Malika Jahan, mother of Ruknuddin Ibrahim trying to capture political power for her son after the death of her

husband in 1296; the wife of Sultan Mahmud Sharqi, who 'instigated' her husband to march against Bahlul Lodi, Bibi Amba, the Hindu wife of Sultan Bahlul and mother of Sikander Lodi who secured the support of the Afghan nobles for her son against Isa Khan. These representations are invariably seen as women who interfered and transgressed by moving out of harems and purdah to participate in male activity, when their sons/husbands were too effete to protect their own interests. Yet any reading of the history of these times, of the power politics of contending pulls and pressures, makes it quite obvious that this was a part of the historical and social process.

Razia was the only woman to sit on the throne in her own right, but the Mughal period records many women in a variety of roles military, political and administrative. Rekha Misra states, "The family of Babar which inherited the traditions of Chengiz and Timur allowed their families sufficient political rights and thus enabled them to take active part in politics"<sup>7</sup>. Rani Karmavati, wife of Rana Sangha entered into a secret alliance with Babar to establish the claims of her sons, Bikram and Udai. Rani Durgawati ruled among the Gonds in Madhya Pradesh as the regent for her son Bir Narayan and when the Mughal forces attached her kingdom she put up a valiant fight. In Ahmednagar when Ali Adil Shah died, his widow Chandbibbi succeeded and ruled as regent for his nephew. Ahalyabai Holkar was married at the age of eight to Khanduji, son of Malhar Rao Holkar. She was trained by her father-in-law in many areas of administration, collection of revenue, writing of dispatches and management of the army. After the death of her husband and son she took charge of the administration and ruled till 1795. The case of Lakshmi Bai of Jhansi is so well-known that it does not bear repetition. Within this context, the grouping of these women as viranganas, manifesting qualities of 'virya' or heroism has rescued them from the earlier typologies of women limited to epic heroines and mother goddesses. Kathryn Hansen's analysis moves these women "beyond the roles for women prescribed by patriarchal society ... transcends and subverts the categories which ordinarily divorce power, strength and independence in women from goodness, charity and nurturance"<sup>8</sup>. It asserts female potential for power, as well as, virtue. A shift in the perspective, therefore, rescues the history of these women from a representation as puppets "allowed" and "enabled" to step out in permitted spaces and then relegated to obscurity and shadows. There is much evidence of their agency if only a shift in the re-reading of history is attempted.

The Mughal ladies of the harem exercised power in many ways and in many spheres. Nur Jahan was a visible centre of power. She issued farmans, disbursed patronage, coins carried her name. She created centres of power. Jahanara, the daughter of Shah Jahan exerted influence in matters of appointment, settlement of disputes and other affairs of the court. An important area in which the women of the veil exercised agency was in the control and disbursement of resources. They were given jagirs and allowances (Burgah). Nur Jahan had the right of collecting octroi at Sikandarabad and on merchandise coming from Bengal. Jahanara had custom rights in Surat. Many of them maintained 'junks' and carried on commercial activities. They had control over

<sup>7</sup> Misra, Rekha (1965), *Women in Mughal India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, p.6.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen, Kathryn (1988), *The Virangana in North Indian History, Myth and Popular Culture*, *Economics and Political Weekly*, April.

disbursement and patronage - gave alms and charity, supervised buildings and gardens, and patronised creative and fine arts. Women in Mughal India exercised significant social activity through distribution of largesse. Wives, daughters and women of the royal family through their own seals and under their own decrees gave in charity, supported religious shrines, tombs of saints, imambarahs, distributed money for weddings, for digging wells and for construction of caravanserais. One striking example is the tomb of Humayun (1556) in Delhi. His widow known to posterity as Hajji directed the building of the tomb and paid for it with her own funds. Legend has it that the tomb served as a school for women. Women from wealthy families maintained with their own funds or with money their husbands gave as household expenses, a floating population of widows and spinsters who were called rishahdars. Women were also recipient of grants and assignments, often after the death of male relatives. George C. Kizhowski concludes "That some women of upper and middling status controlled wealth is certain"<sup>9</sup>.

To place women in the history of this period is not easy as they have seldom had a Clio to record their history. In this context the account of Gul Badan, *The Humayun-Namah* is of special importance. The traditional history of this period records wars, successions and little mention of women. However, if new sources such as this account of Gul Badan were studied it would yield a fresh approach to an understanding of those times. Gul Badan was the daughter of Zahrudin Muhammad Babar. Born somewhere in the 1520s she spent her childhood under her father's rule in Kabul and Hindustan, her girl-hood and young wife-hood during the exile of Humayun, and maturity and failing years under Akbar. In 1528 Babar issued an order that the royal ladies should migrate from Kabul to Hindustan taking note of the unsettled state of Kabul<sup>10</sup>. Gul Badan's account *The Humayun Namah* records the history of women during long marches, expeditions and campaigns. Traditional histories record the stages in the expansion of early Mughal empire, the battles for supremacy, the wars between the Mughals and the Afghans - but what about the women? Those who were left behind and those who accompanied the armies? Humayun's travels and wanderings are often mentioned, but little mention is made of Dil dar Begum, the wife of Babar and Hamida Banu Begum, mother of Akbar, who was married at the age of fourteen to Humayun and travelled with him through the desert from Sind to Amarkot where Akbar was born, in October 1542. She accompanied her husband to Qandahar and Persia not seeing her son for long periods. Gul Badan was one of several women who spent long years travelling in camps.

Some researches indicate that Mughal Emperors spent almost 40 per cent of their time in camps. These were very elaborate, housing women and children of the harem. The early years of the establishment of the Mughal Empire witnessed long period of armies on the march, wars, campaigns, and expansion. In this context, the camps became like homes away from homes where women and children accompanied the armies and also spent long periods on the move. Battles had little place for women yet women were there in large numbers. The camps were like little settlements with an

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<sup>9</sup> Kizhowski, George C. (1985), *Muslim Endowments and Society in British India*, Cambridge University Press, p.12.

<sup>10</sup> Gul Badan, *Humayun-Nama*, Translated by Annettee B. Beveridge (*Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delhi*), Delhi, 1972, p.16.

infrastructure of cooks, attendants and support services. The camps of the longer expeditions were called urd-i-Humayun (royal or imperial camps). There were urd-i-Mu'alla (exalted or sublime camps), mu'ashar-i-iqbal (camp of good fortune) or urd-in-zafar gargin (victorious camp) which were carefully organised. A wall of cloth, 6-7 feet high surrounded the inner area, that was entered through a gate called Naqqar-Khanah. There were halls of ordinary and special enclosure and living quarters for the women and children of the imperial harem. The tents of the other members of the imperial army were pitched outside this inner area<sup>11</sup>. The housing arrangements for women and children are indicative of the fact that it was not men alone who spent many months away from their homes. A further exploration of this yields fresh insights into the social history of this period in looking at the lives of families. Gul Badan records through the four years when Babar was in Agra he used to go on Fridays to see his paternal aunts even in inclement weather. To the architect Khwaja Qasim, he gave the following order "whatever work, even if it be on a great scale, our paternal aunts may order done in their palace, give it precedence, and carry it out with might and main"<sup>12</sup>. Babar paid great respect to his aunts travelling out to receive them with great ceremony. Gul Badan's account gives interesting anecdotes of these. When Humayun was collecting troops for Gujarat he camped for a month and would spend time in the tents of the different ladies. There seems to have been a definite hierarchy involved in this. Gul Badan records Humayun replying to complaints of many ladies that he had not visited them. "You all know that I have been to the quarters of the older relations of you all. It is a necessity laid on me to make them happy"<sup>13</sup>. The text points to the great deference shown to women of an older generation. Comings and goings of elder aunts is recorded, house and monies are provided, advice is sought, often they were used as informal ambassadors of peace. Gul Badan's account talks of Kamran's ambitions (brother of Humayun) to declare himself independent in Kabul and his efforts to obtain sanction from the elder ladies of the family to have the Khutba read in his name. (Having the Khutba read was seen as an attribute of sovereignty.) All these examples clearly indicate the influence that the 'elder ladies' of the household exerted. It would follow that women were an important component of the traditional structure of authority,<sup>14</sup> wielding influence as advisors and being instrumental in according social acceptance.

Gul Badan's account makes many reference and pointers to women in public spheres and arena, which have not been explored by historians of the period. The story of Haram is very illustrative. Haram Begum (Princess of the Harem) was the sister of Mah Began, a wife of Kamran. She was married to Sulaiman Mirza Miran Shah. She had one son, Ibrahim and several daughters. In the fluctuating political scenario and problems of the reign of Humayun, she was approached by Humayun for help. Gul Badan's account records that in a very short time she had given shelter and arms to some

<sup>11</sup> Blake, Stephen (1993), *Shahjahanabad, the Sovereign City in Mughal India 1639-1739*, Cambridge University Press, p.97.

<sup>12</sup> Humayun Nama, p.7.

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, p.98.

<sup>14</sup> Minault, Gail (1981), *The Extended Family : Women and Political Participation in India and Pakistan*, Chanakya Publication, Delhi .



thousands of men, herself supervising the task and leading the troops upto the pass<sup>15</sup>. Haram had several daughters who were sought after in marriage as cementing alliances. One of these was asked for by Humayun but Haram, offended at the manner in which the proposal had been sent, demanded that Humayun should come in person. Haram emerges as an adroit diplomat who negotiated with Mirim Khan, Governor of Kabul, but also sent her army against him when needed. Her husband Sulaiman held Badakshan as long as she was alive and lost it after her death. It is a woman's recording of history, which places Haram Begum in history. There may have been several such women whose place in history has never been recorded by traditional texts. A shift in the perspective sees a rich unfolding in a more holistic approach, so that women emerge from behind the veil to take their rightful place in history not only as heroic example of valour, chastity, sacrifice but exercising agency in private and public arenas.

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<sup>15</sup> *Humayun Nama*, p.195.

## Lecture II

### PATERNALISM AND RESPONSE: WOMEN /SLAVERY/ EMANCIPATION

In the early history of the settlement of the United States, women played a very significant role. The circumstances of life, especially in the early pioneer days on the frontier, produced a very different framework for female existence. A new land and harsh conditions of the New World placed many demands on women and the early state constitutions gave women rights, which were quite exceptional for the times. In the eighteenth century, these rights were certainly unheard of in the lands from where the early immigrants came - England, Germany, France. In the early settlements, women worked along with men to clear the land, handle guns and shoot games and enemies in the frontier<sup>16</sup>. Most materials of daily need were produced at home by women. The housewife cooked, cleaned, laundered, tended the children, made family clothing from cotton, linen, wool which she had spun or woven herself, baked bread, preserved food, prepared simple machines and taught and helped husband at his trade. There were women butchers, shoemakers, barbers, printers and blacksmiths. In the south, women managed plantations, for e.g. Eliza Lucas Pinckney while still in her teens ran her father's South Carolina plantation while he was governor of Antigua. She experimented with indigo seeds and built up an industry. Margaret Brent and her sister acquired land in Maryland in 1638 and brought over settlers. In some colonies, women did have the right to vote since this was generally based not on sex but on ownership of property. Ironically, it was the arrival of independence and the spread of democracy that curtailed this right for women. As states adopted their constitutions or revised their laws under the new political conditions, voting qualifications were more clearly defined usually spelling out the voter as a free, white, male citizen. New York took away the vote from women in 1777, Massachusetts in 1780, New Hampshire in 1784 and New Jersey in 1807. Women were now guided by the English Common Law tradition of "femine couverte" that held married women to be 'dead-in-law' and forbade them to sue or be sued, to have guardianship of their children, to own property, retain their own or their husbands' wages, or to make contracts. Women could not sit in juries. In Massachusetts before 1840 it was illegal for a woman to serve as Treasurer of her serving society unless a man assumed responsibility for her.

The industrialisation of America had a profound impact upon women. Much of the work previously done at home was now moved to factories. The home was no longer the economic nucleus of life nor the housewife the linchpin of society. The housewife became isolated. Women working in factories were paid far less than men. In the early textile industry in New England women had been employed in large numbers. But by the late 1830's male immigrants were replacing women since they were willing to work for subsistence wages. By virtue of marriage and the constraints of raising children, women could not invest in apprenticeship, training, and remained untrained casual labour relegated to the lowest paid and least skilled jobs. When some activities, such as, carding, spinning

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<sup>16</sup> In England from 1574 - 1821, there were 913 men to every 1000 women. In the U.S. colonies by mid-seventeenth century the figures were approximately 75 per cent men and 25 per cent women

and weaving were transferred from home to factory, the poorer women became industrial workers and women of the middle and upper classes turned to leisure activities or professional advancement by education. It is this group which was to become the most vocal. Distanced and isolated from the centres of power, they stood in deep contrast to the ever-increasing number of white males being benefited by the removal of property restrictions and entering the political arena by the mid-nineteenth century. In the west, women fared a little better. Because of the uneven sex ratio, men were more accepting of women in non-traditional roles. The 'Frontier' was inherently more democratic. In keeping with the Spanish Legacy, and the concept of 'community property', it provided women equal access to all the accumulated real and moveable property of the marital community<sup>17</sup>.

For the majority of women in the early nineteenth century in most communities, there were no women's clubs, study groups or parent associations. It is not surprising, therefore, that the social movements of the ante-bellum period, Temperance and Abolitionism attracted women who were to go on to become spokeswomen for early feminism. Temperance and Abolitionism provided the space for the entry of women into men's world. These were seen as safe, noble causes for women's energy - as a little later, the nationalist movement in India was to provide the space for women's entry into the public arena. During the early nineteenth century, per capita consumption of hard liquor in the U.S. was exceedingly high. Various groups - women's groups, urban artisans, free blacks took up the cause of total abstinence. Radical abolitionism focussing on the abolition of slavery became part of a much broader protest against forms of oppression and inequality. In the 1830's abolitionism became intertwined with attacks against the traditional subordination of women. Abolitionism provided female reformers with an egalitarian ethic and with a public forum for attacking entrenched injustice. It attracted a group of exceptionally talented writer and lecturers-Maria Weston Chapman, Lydia Maria Child, Abby Kelley, Lucretia Mott, Lucy Stone and Sarah and Angelina Grimke.

The lives of some of the women in the early women's movement are illustrative of the manner in which the background of these reform movements provided the context for their 'coming out'. Lucy Stone went briefly to Mt. Holyoke Seminary, the first school to educate women to be more than wives and teachers. She then went to Oberlin College in Ohio, the first college in America to admit blacks and women. Oberlin believed in education for women but certainly not equality. It regarded it as its mission to show that a liberal education does not rob a woman of her nature, divert her of the softer graces and give her a masculine character. With Lucy at Oberlin was Antoinette Brown - they formed a clandestine female debating society since they could not debate publicly. Lucy Stone could not read her essay publicly as a member of the graduating class (even though her essay was selected as the best). She went on to become a major speaker at the Massachusetts Anti-Slavery Society which hired Lucy Stone as a speaker. She was supposed to speak on the evils of slavery and the plight of women. The Society objected as they were paying her six dollars a week to speak about the slaves and not women. Lucy Stone retorted, "I was a

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<sup>17</sup> Rothschild, M.L. and P.C. Hronek (1992), *Doing What the Day Brought*, The University of Arizona Press.

woman before I was an abolitionist. I must speak for the Women"<sup>18</sup>. The society compromised by letting her talk on women during the week and for the slave on week-ends. In 1850 she attended an anti-slavery convention in Boston - the first National Women's Rights Convention grew out of this. The New York Herald called the convention, "that motley mingling of abolitionists, socialists and infidel....This hybrid, mongrel, piebald, cracklebrained, pitiful, disgusting and ridiculous assemblage ... May God have mercy on their miserable souls"<sup>19</sup>. This is just an example of the ridicule women faced in their attempts to focus attention in their position.

In 1849 Lucretia Mott replying to the ridicules of journalist Richard Henry Dana replied: "What does woman want more than she enjoys? What is she seeking to obtain? Of what rights is she deprived? What privileges are withheld from her? I answer... She wants to be acknowledged a moral responsible being. She is seeking not to be governed by laws in the making of which she has no voice ... Her exclusion .... Her duties marked out for her by her equal brother man, subject to creeds, rules and discipline made for her by him is unworthy of her true being"<sup>20</sup>.

Within the context of the abolitionist movement and women's consciousness, the biography of Harriet A. Jacobs' *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* shows the exercise of agency in a totally different and hostile environment. Harriet Jacobs was born a slave in Edenton, North Carolina, around 1813. Her father was a carpenter, slave of Dr. Andrew Knox, and her mother Delilah was the slave of an Edenton tavern-keeper. She was orphaned as a child. Her first mistress Margaret Hornblow willed her to Mary Matilda (Miss Emily Flint) whose father proved to be a difficult master making sexual advances towards her. She rejected his advances but in her teens became sexually involved with a neighbour, the young white lawyer, Samuel Tradwell Sawyer and gave birth to two children.

She was sent off to work in a plantation from where she ran away and for about seven years hid in a tiny space above a store-room in her grandmother's house. She escaped to the north in 1842 and moved to Rochester to join her brother, John S. Jacobs, working for the abolitionist movement. With her brother often away lecturing she lived for a month in the house of the Quaker reformers, Isaac and Amy Post (a participant in the first Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls in July 1848). Harriet Jacobs was finally emancipated in 1852.

The important thing about 'Incidents' - is that it is not a 'slave' narrative in the classic sense (as a reviewer commented in 1861 in the *Weekly Anglo-African*). The emphasis was on not how she was scourged and maimed, "but that far more terrible sufferings were endured by and inflicted upon women by a system which legalised concubinage, and offers a premium to licentiousness". The narrative of Harriet Jacobs describes an amazing life - she looked on it as her second childhood "... I never dreamed I was a piece of merchandise - trusted to them for safe-keeping". It was a momentous exercise of agency. As she put it, "It seems less degrading to give one's self than to submit to compulsion. There is something akin to freedom in having a lover who has no control over you except

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<sup>18</sup> Gurko, Miriam (1974). *The Ladies of Seneca Falls. The Birth of the Women's Rights Movement*. Macmillan Publishing House. p.136.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.139.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.6.

that which he gains by kindness and attachment"<sup>21</sup>. She does not characterise herself as a female passive victim but takes full responsibility for her actions, asserting that she was an effective moral agent - "It was something to triumph over my tyrant even in that small way".

She sees herself as a responsible moral agent not as a passive female victim. She takes responsibility as an autonomous agent, "I will not try to screen myself behind the plea of compulsion from a master, for it was not so. Neither can I plead ignorance or thoughtlessness ... I knew what I did and I did it with deliberate calculation"<sup>22</sup>. Harriet Jacobs urges her audience not to engage in reformist activity within the private sphere but to enter the public sphere and work to end chattel slavery and white racism. 'Incidents' is therefore an attempt to move women to political action.

Harriet Jacobs 'Incidents' breaks away from the "slave narrative" mode. In her writing and portrayal she moves the protagonist from the secluded "tragic slave" of white people into a woman making difficult choices in her struggle for autonomy; she is not the 'Mammy' of *Gone with the Wind* caring for the white children of her master but the protector and liberator of her own children. She learns not only to survive, but to fight the system, to engage in political action, to seek to live a life not mapped for her. In 1849 when Harriet was in Rochester, the women in her circle were developing a critique of sexism patterned on the Garrisonian analysis of chattel slavery. A sense of their powerlessness spurred them to identify with black fugitive slave women. Their powerlessness within a paternalistic system seemed to them akin to that of slavery. In their efforts to exercise agency the lives of some of these women show the sharpening of the consciousness of women's oppression as it was through their work in the abolitionist movement that they started to analyse their structures of oppression and the realisation came to many of them sharply that the condition of women was similar to the slave denied political rights and autonomy.

Harriet Jacobs broke out of the bonds of slavery to claim an agency and autonomy while Elizabeth Cady Stanton broke out of the paternalism of her upbringing to become the foremost spokeswoman of the Women's Rights Movement. The lives of these two women set within the context of slavery and the abolitionist movement show the exercise of agency with these women moving out of the bounds of 'victimhood'. Elizabeth was born in 1815 in Johnstown, New York State. Her father Judge Daniel Cady was a distinguished lawyer and a member of the New York Legislature. She was one of six children, five daughters and one son, Eleazer, who died soon after graduating from college. Elizabeth, it seems, worked hard to compensate the loss - mastered horses, Greek, Latin and Mathematics and worked in her father's law office. She graduated at fifteen from Johnstown Academy and went on to Troy Female Seminary, which had been founded in 1821 by Emma Willard, one of the pioneers in Women's education. In 1840 she married Henry Stanton, an eloquent spokesman for the Abolitionist Movement. She omitted 'obey' from her marriage vows and did not give up her own name. "The custom of calling women Mrs. John This ... is founded on the principle that white men are lords of all"<sup>23</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> Jacobs, Harriet A. (1967), *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl, Written by Herself*. (H.Jacobs uses the name Linda Brent as narrator in the incidents), Harvard University Press, p. 55.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p.54.

<sup>23</sup> Gurko, p.69.

In the history of the Women's Rights Movement, it is significant that whatever may have been the route or method or motivation, once women moved out into the public arena, the Abolitionist Movement or the Temperance Movement, it was not long before they asserted a consciousness of their rights. Elizabeth Cady Stanton was involved in both the issues of the mid-nineteenth century in U.S.A. which 'sanctioned' an entry for women - abolitionism and the temperance movement. She became the President of the Women's State Temperance Society, and like Lucy Stone, used this platform to open up the debate on far wider issues. As Stanton stated at the first Annual Convention in June 1853 at Rochester, "It has been objected that we do not confine ourselves to the subject of temperance, but talk too much about women's rights, divorce and the Church"<sup>24</sup>.

It was through the struggle for the rights of black people that many northern white women became aware of their own oppression. The anti-slavery women showed great courage in organising and holding inter-racial public meetings. In 1838 the newly built Pennsylvania Hall was attacked by a mob where the women were meeting and the Hall was later burnt. In 1840 Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott met in London for the first time at the World Anti-Slavery Convention. Eight years later they met again at Waterloo to crystallise their long simmering feelings of discontent at their inequality. They called for a Women's Rights Convention at Seneca Falls. It is here that The Declaration of Sentiments and Resolutions was adopted. Using the same phraseology as the original Declaration of Independence, it emphasised that all rights demanded in the Declaration should be extended to women as well.

Harriet Jacobs worked her way through slavery to assert her own autonomy. Elizabeth Cady worked her way through the anti-slavery movement to focus attention on the lack of autonomy for women as for slaves thereby drawing attention to the condition of women. In an address to the New York Legislature in 1860, she stated, "The Negro has no name. He is Cuffy Douglas or Cuffy Brooks, just whose Cuffy he may chance to be. The women has no name. She is Mrs. Richard Roe or Mrs. John Doe just whose Mrs. she may chance to be. Cuffy has no right to his earnings; he cannot buy or sell or lay up anything that he can call his own. Mrs. Roe has no right to her earning; she can neither buy nor sell, make contracts nor lay up anything that she can call her own. Cuffy has no right to his children; they can be sold from him at any time. Mrs. Roe has no right to her children; they may be bound out to cancel a father's debt of honour. The unborn child even by the last will of the father may be placed under the guardianship of a stranger and or a foreigner. Cuffy has no legal existence, he is subject to restraint and moderate chastisement. Mrs. Roe has no legal existence; she has not the best rights to her own perons"<sup>25</sup>. Harriet Jacobs resisted the patronage offered to her by her master on the excuse of her own condition. Elizabeth Cady in her vivid and forceful manner emphasized. "There has been a great deal said and written about protection. We as a class, are tired of any kind of protection, that which leaves us everything to do, to dare and to suffer and strips us of all means for its accomplishment"<sup>26</sup>.

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., p.163.

<sup>25</sup> Gilbert, Sandra M. and Susan Fubar (Ed.) (1991), *The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women*, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition, New York, p.466.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., p. 468.

The Slaves' World and the Women's world meshed together in many ways. Women's entry into the Abolitionist Movement was initially supported and encouraged by men. However, it became increasingly clear that with this exposure, women started to perceive the similarity of their experience with chattel slavery and to assert that the denial of autonomy whether by domestic bondage or chattel were issues that needed to be addressed in the public arena. They were scoffed by sympathisers and critics equally. Theodore Weld tried to soft-pedal the women's issue for fear it would down-play the slavery issue; Samuel Johnson poked fun at their public entry. "Sir, a women's preaching is, like a dog's walking on its hind legs. It is not done well but you are surprised to find it done at all"<sup>27</sup>.

The platform of abolitionism provided the spring board for feminist consciousness. It was the accepted sphere for entry into the public arena. In the words of Elizabeth Cady Stanton "I suffered with mental hunger, which like an empty stomach, is very depressing. I had ... no stimulating companionship ... I now fully understand the practical difficulties most women had to counter with in the isolated household and the impossibility of women's best development if in contrast, the chief part of her lives with servants and children".

The narrative of Stanton, *Eighty Years and More* and Jacobs' *Incidents* highlight the movement from patriarchal control to autonomy, in a search for choices, and political action. Within the context of the major social and economic changes in the United States in the post-bellum period, the militant consciousness of a group of women who struggled to define and shape their lives has earned for them their place in history. Harriet Jacobs' remarkable journey from slavery to emancipation to an assertion of choice is remarkable for highlighting a woman's struggle against her oppression in slavery; Stanton's life and work is remarkable for the struggle against slavery and in highlighting awareness of the oppression of the women fighting the process against slavery and bounded by the constraints of gender. It highlights the dynamic process of the campaign by which large groups of women entered into political activity for the first time. Within the larger movement for political and social emancipation and equality in the history of democratisation, the vision of these women in focussing attention on women within the democratic process is a trail blazer.

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<sup>27</sup> Gurko, p. 10.

Hersh, Blanche Glassmen (1978), *The Slavery of Sex, Feminist Abolitionists in America*, Chicago.

For detailed reading of Slave narratives see, Francis Smith Foster, *Witnessing Slavery, The Development of Ante-Bellum Slave Narratives* (Westport, Greenwood Press, 1979).

Stephens, Robert (1979), *From Behind the Veil: A study of Afro-American Narratives*, Urbana: University of Illinois Press.

Yellow, Jean Fagon (1972), *Intricate Knot*, New York University Press, New York.

## Lecture III

### WOMEN: PUBLIC SPACE AND AGENCY

The matrix of the abolitionist movement provided the springboard for political action in the United States; the national movement provided the context within India. The abolitionist movement provided the legitimate space for entry of women on to the public arena. The national movement legitimized women's participation in public activity. Women's entry in large numbers in the 1920's and 1930's in India received social sanction and approbation quite exceptional within the background of the domestic sphere that they had been restricted to earlier. In the nineteenth century, women's status, and position had often been 'highlighted by the colonial power to justify its own presence. Starting with James Mills' two volume study of History of British India (1826) to Katherine Mayo's Mother India, there was the current theme of 'degraded status', as the *raison d'être* for British rule. The early Indian intellectuals saw the answer in female education and emancipation. As husbands and sons of the middle class adapted to colonial structures, women were increasingly isolated. The resolution served to be in the 'schooling' of women so that the emerging 'face' of the new middle class would be more in keeping with the demands of the colonial state. This was, however, largely male directed reform with the early leaders of the social reform movement taking charge - Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Dayanand Saraswati, Mahadev Govind Ranade, Dhondo Keshav Karve, R.Venkata Ratnam Naidu and V. Pantalu. A theme running through this, however, was reform and not transformation. The 'reform' of women drew on the myth of the golden age; of the resurrection of the Sati-savitiri image though modernized in her visage so as to better take her place within the model of the new middle class household. However, the boundaries between the private and public sphere were kept distinct. As pointed out by Partha Chatterjee, Indians pursued science, technology, national economics and western political forms while regarding the home as the source of true identity that needed protection and not transformation<sup>28</sup>.

For nineteenth century liberal reform movements, the education of women became the central issue for a variety of reasons. It sought to counter the colonial onslaught on the 'condition' of women. It defined and moderated the entry of women in public arenas, it could shape and control it and it met the social need of the 'compassionate wife' so necessary for the new social discourse. It met the personal and class interests of the new emergent middle class<sup>29</sup>. Annie Besant advocated the launching of a national movement of girls' education on national lines. Education was to socialise and spiritualise girls so that Gargis and Maitreyis of yore could be reborn. The natural function of women was to be wives and mothers and, therefore, the distinction between the public and private domain and a sexual division of labour was to be continued<sup>30</sup>.

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<sup>28</sup> Chatterjee, Partha (1993), The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question, *Recasting Women* (K. Sangari and S. Vaid Ed.), Kali, pp. 233-253.

<sup>29</sup> Bannerjee, Himani, Mother and Teacher Gender and Class in Education Proposals for and by Women in Colonial Bengal, *Journal of Historical sociology*, Vol.V, No.1.

<sup>30</sup> Chakravathi, Uma (1998), Re-writing History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai, *Kali*, pp 12-13.



The 'schooling' of women was imperative both to draw large number of women into the national movement, as well as, to imbue it with its ideological strength as a mass movement. In the words of Sister Nivedita, talking of the vision of the new woman "until we have made ready a place for her, until we throw wide the portals of our life and go out and take her by the hand to bring her in, the Motherland herself stands veiled and ineffective... It is essential for the joyous revealing of that great Mother that she be first surrounded by the mighty of those her daughters, the Indian women of the days to come. It is they who must consecrate themselves before Her, touching Her feet with their proud heads and vowing to Her their own, their husbands' and their children's lives. Then and then only will she stand crowned before the world ... when the womanhood of India can perform the great act of nationality that temple shall be all light, nay, the dawn verily shall be near at hand"<sup>31</sup>. Despite the limitations of this kind of education which had a prescriptive agenda the process had un-anticipated consequences. Education for girls was not meant to equip them for Government service or for profession as it was meant to do for men. Madhu Kishwar's study of the Arya Samaj shows that a variety of reasons were behind female education - female education was considered an effective way of countering missionary activity; there was the need to educate women as primary teachers because of the feeling that only girls should teach girls; there was the social agenda of producing good Arya wives and mothers; the Gurukuls needed upadeshikas who could deal with women's reform. Kishwar concluded, however, that the Samaj women were not merely passive recipients of reform. Right from the beginning they took the initiative themselves and the women's organisations and institutions that sprang up in the period were a reflection of a certain activity and unrest amongst women. "But all this did not result in the development of an independent self view. This was a dynamic process in which boundaries and limits were being explored and negotiated"<sup>32</sup>. The constraints of the early education should not blur the process that through education women were finding a voice and stepping out in the public arena, albeit in permitted spaces and under patriarchal supervision. Take the examples of Anandibai Joshi. Anandibai, born in 1865, was married to Gopalrao Joshi, many years her senior. She went at the age of seventeen to study medicine in Philadelphia and when she did, the press extolled her virtues as an ideal 'Hindu wife'. Ramabai Ranade (11 year old second wife of Ranade) educated by Ranade became the model of the new Indian womanhood - modern without losing the traditional Indian wifely virtues<sup>33</sup>. It is interesting that even though she continued with Ranade's agenda of social reform after his death she did not participate in public political activity as he did not approve of women in politics. Around the same time and in the same milieu of Brahmanical patriarchy, the life of Pandita Ramabai makes for extraordinary reading. Ramabai was born to Anant Shastri Dongre who had studied Sanskrit under a teacher attached to the Peshwa's court. He set up an ashram in the forest when Ramabai was born. When Ramabai was six months old, the family travelled around as pauranikas, public narrators of the Puranas at temples or other such spots. Ramabai was taught by her mother when men like Ranade, Telang and even Tilak went to school to avail of the new opportunities provided by English education. The

<sup>31</sup> Sister Nivedita, *Hints on National Education in India*, Udbodhan Office, Calcutta, pp. 55-56.

<sup>32</sup> Kishwar, Madhu (1989), *The Daughters of Aryavarta*. J.Krishnamurthy (Ed.), *Women in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, pp. 78-113.

<sup>33</sup> Chakravarthi, Uma, *Ibid*.

family led a life of great poverty. Eventually the father decided to end his life by performing jal samadhi like Jnaneshwar and died of exhaustion even before the ritual could be formally undertaken. Her mother died of starvation. She travelled with her brother till they arrived in Calcutta and later married Bipin Behari Medhavi, a shudra, under the civil marriage act. Widowed, she went to England in early 1883 and converted to Christianity. She was largely instrumental in setting up Sharada Sadan. Ramabai rejected the whole set of oppressive practices which she saw as integral to Hinduism and rejected the culture of the dominant class of her time<sup>34</sup>.

By the turn of the century, Ramabai's alienation from her erstwhile middle class compatriots, the Hindu Nationalists, the colonial state, as well as, Anglican Missionaries was complete. It is no wonder then that she became one of the most controversial women of her time. By the late nineteenth century, the new 'educated' woman was moving beyond domestic boundaries to the permitted areas which especially for upper caste women had been restricted to participation in pujas, religious festivals and social gatherings like marriage, birth and death ceremonies. The national movement now provided the 'permitted' space for women's entry. From small local clubs were formed Women's auxiliaries of the Indian National Congress and the National Social Conferences (formed in 1887 as a forum for the discussion of social issues), Arya Mahila Samaj, Prarthana Samaj, Bharata and Mahila Parishad. After the First World War, between 1917 and 1927 three major women's organisations were born - the Women's India Association (WIA), the National Council of Women in India (NCWI) and the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC).

Demand for civil and political rights for women was activated on December 15, 1917 when Sarojini Naidu led an All-India Delegation of prominent women to meet with Montegu and Chelmsford asking that women have the status of people. The ambivalence of women asking for the vote reflects the contradictions both within the women's movement, as well as, within the leadership of the national movement. In August 1918 Sarojini Naidu speaking at the special session of the Congress at Bombay said, "We ask for the vote, not that we might interfere with you in your official functions, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the soul of the children that we hold upon our laps, and instill into them the ideals of national life"<sup>35</sup>. For the national leadership, women's political rights were relegated to the needs of the national movement. Women, however, were encouraged to join the civil disobedience movement in large numbers. The nature of the movement, the personality of Gandhi, the emphasis on non-violence, all sanctified women's participation as legitimate and desirable even by orthodox conservative standards. The National Movement was replacing religion as the permitted space for women. Women's self-sacrifice, patience, was now being utilised as strengths for the movement. They were lauded and left a distinct imprint-women like Sarojini Naidu, Sarladevi Chaudharain,

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<sup>34</sup> Pandita Ramabai. *A Testimony of our Inexhaustible Treasure*. Kedgaon (Poona), Ramabai Mukti Mission, 1907 (1992 reprint), Sengupta, Padmini (1970), *Pandita Ramabai, Saraswati: Her life and work*, Asia Publishing House, Bombay.

<sup>35</sup> Report of the special session of the Indian National Congress, Bombay, August 19-31 and September 1, 1918 (Bombay 1981), pp. 109-110. Quoted in Geraldine F. Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge University Press, 1996), p.94.

Muthulakshmi Reddy, Amrit Kaur, Lilavati Munshi, Lotika Ghosh, S. Ambigammal, Swarup Rani, Lado Rani Zutshi and her daughter Manmohini.

The National Movement like the Abolitionist Movement in the United States provided the legitimate, sanctified space for women's entry into public space. It gave women a voice so that issues pertaining to women could be articulated. Demand for equal political rights, however, were seen as an overstepping of permitted boundaries. The glorification of women as seen in Anand Math was to undergo a change as women sought an extension of space. Sarat Chandra's Bipradas (1935) ridiculed the political woman and the educated, emancipated woman outside her home. In *Char Adhyaya* (1934), Tagore speaks of the heroine Ela confessing her mistakes in associating with politics and the hero Atin declares triumphantly, "At last I see the real girl ... you reign at the heart of home with a fan in your hand and preside over the serving of milk, rice and fish; when you appear with wild hair and angry eye on the arena where politics has the whip hand, you are not your normal self but are unbalanced, unnatural"<sup>36</sup>.

Women's entry into the public arena, supported and encouraged in 'legitimate' space, was nevertheless limited to that space. Geraldine Forbes comments on the prevalence of male guardianship, "Women could come out" because the house was on fire. The expectation was that once the fire was out women could go back inside the house"<sup>37</sup>. This was borne out by the decreasing importance given to women in other areas and in the period after independence. The women who had come to prominence in the civil disobedience movement came into the limelight and gained acceptance. But efforts to enlarge this base and move into areas of equality beyond permitted areas has been an uphill task.

There is often a replaying of the theme that women's rights have been constitutionally guaranteed, and that women in India have not had to fight to get their civil and political rights. As compared to Women's Rights Movement in U.K. or USA political rights for women in India had an easier passage. The newly created legislatures of India conferred equal citizenship rights on women and men. Margaret Cousins, the Irish feminist who played a major role in women's organisations in Britain and India observed, "Perhaps only women like myself who had suffered the cruelties and injustices of the men politicians, the men controlled Press, the men in the street in England and Ireland, while we waged our militant campaign for eight years, thereafter all peaceful and constitutional means had been tried for fifty previous years could fully appreciate the wisdom, the nobility and the passing of fundamental tests in self government of these Indian legislatures"<sup>38</sup>.

There is a strong body of opinion articulated by women like Madhu Kishwar who point out that the struggle for women's rights has never been polarised on gender lines in India and hence has never taken on the shape of a gender war<sup>39</sup>. The constitution of India guaranteed rights of women and concluded that legal disabilities for women did not exist. Why then was there the need to set up the Committee on the Status of Women in 1974. The parallels are clear and interesting - the 13th, 14th and 15th amendments in the U.S. were passed after the Civil War and guaranteed civil and political rights for the blacks but a

<sup>36</sup> Sarkar, Janki (1989), *Politics and Women in Bengal*, J. Krishnamurthy (Ed.), *Women in Colonial India*, pp. 231-241.

<sup>37</sup> Forbes, Geraldine, *Ibid*, p. 156.

<sup>38</sup> *Indian Womanhood Today*, Kitabstan, 1937.

<sup>39</sup> *Hindustan Times*, 3 June, 1997.

century later, the Civil Rights Movement in the 1960s was showing up the lacunae in the letter and the reality of their existence<sup>40</sup>. The need for setting up such a committee pointed to the wide chasm that existed/exists between the guarantee of rights and the actual reality. The limitation for women in terms of their access to resources, both personal and political, needed to be addressed. The need to empower women politically was articulated in the demand for the provision of special opportunities for representation in local government and the establishment of statutory provisions for women in Panchayats. This has been done through the 73rd and 74th Amendment, which has ensured reservation of not less than one-third seats in the Panchayats and Zilla Parishads. In the exercise of agency, the participation of women in the political process is imperative. The entry of women in large numbers in the non-cooperation movement made it a historical process, the clock of which cannot be turned back. Their continued presence and voice in the post-independence period re-affirms this. There are many examples-the Samyukta Maharashtra Movement 1956-60, the Nav Nirman Agitation in Gujarat in the 70's, the anti-corruption movement in Bihar under the leadership of Jayaprakash Narayan, the Telangana Movement, the Chipko Movement in Tehri Garhwal, the Assam Agitation, the pressure of rural women in the 1970's to push for Employment Guarantee Schemes, and the Anti-Price Rise Movement. It is a truism that women's participation and entry in large numbers have changed the character of movements - the new co-operative movement as also the many movements post-independence. Individual women in high places of which we have many examples are significant as 'role' models but they cannot provide the quantum leap forward which is why the movement toward reservation for women has to be addressed seriously. Fixed quotas for women in legislatures exist in only a few countries like Nepal, Philippines and the erstwhile Soviet Union. Sweden, Denmark, Germany, New Zealand, Finland and a few other countries, which have achieved high level of female representation, did so without reserving seats through legislative reservation. In those countries women voters organised themselves and successfully pressurized all major political parties into committing themselves to a voluntary quota system within their parties. In Sweden, the Social Democratic Party, the Left Party and the Green Party have voluntarily committed themselves to a 50 per cent quota for women while the Liberal Party has a 40 per cent quota.

The Eighty-First Amendment Bill, 1996, proposes that not less than 1/3rd seats of the total number of seats in the Lok Sabha and in the Legislative Assemblies (to be filled by direct selection and allotted by rotation to the different constituencies in the States and Union Territories) shall be reserved. The move to reserve 33 per cent of seats for women has the formal endorsement of virtually every major political party in the country - BJP, Congress, JD, CPI(M) all supported it in their election manifestos of 1996. Yet the Bill has been stalled twice in the Lok Sabha.

For a country which has a good track record to the support of women in public life there has been an almost unreal manner in which the articulation of the position has evoked little protest and equally the side-lining of the Bill has evoked little protest except for some articulate women's group.

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<sup>40</sup> In the U.S., Women's groups fought to get the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment passed to get political rights for the slaves. They collected funds and signatures through the National Women's Loyal League established in May 1863. The 15<sup>th</sup> Amendment (1870) gave slaves political rights. It was not till 1920 that women were given political rights (19<sup>th</sup> Amendment).

If one moves away from the articulation of the women who are political activists one finds surprisingly little debate on the Bill. Why is this? A few women (primarily elite) articulate the position that all reservations are to be eschewed and women must fight an equal fight, must achieve things 'on merit'. On the other hand, are of course, those who believe that this is only a 'balancing of position', a corrective to years of deprivation. Why is that more women do not publicly support the Bill? The moves to scuttle the bill have aroused surprisingly little protest. Is this a continuing link with self-imposed limitations, the absorption and institutionalisation of an acceptable role and voice, self limiting and self-restraining.' But why have surprisingly few women seized the opportunity of public space. Are women too not playing a game-public support but no real push which would achieve results? Women's movement into public space, tied to 'causes' and reform provided an arena in which they could operate and justify their position as working towards social betterment. Are they not comfortable then in a public position where political power is being talked about and power has to be confronted frontally?

Demands for full political participation have always been marginalised and trivialised. In 1867, Horace Greeley when faced with a rising demand for vote for women stated that what a woman really needed was "a wicker-work cradle and a dimple checked baby". In the 1990's the outrage of many who while publicly supporting rights for women is in the same line of thinking. Publicly the move to reserve has had the 'formal sanction of practically all the major political parties, the Congress, BJP, Janata Dal, CPI (M) which endorsed it in their election manifesto of 1996. However, this has not ensured an easy passage for the bill. It was sent to a select committee and defeated on many counts. It was side-lined in Parliament with a senior Janata Dal leader stating that women would be more profitably employed "making rotis" instead of fighting for reservation, which ensured a lack of quorum, enabling the bill to be pushed to a Select Committee. Political parties continue to mouth support for the Bill while stalling it through lack of quorum or technicality. The official stand of the government that the Bill should not be defeated and hence problems should be worked out has further 'frozen' it and put the bill into cold storage. Many of the arguments that have been put forward against the Bill do need to be examined.

The factual position of women in Indian society is too well known to be debated - the female/male sex ratio has steadily declined to 927 females per 1000 males; female illiteracy, work participation ratio in the work force are more than double for men in comparison to women. If we go to decision making bodies, only 36 members in Lok Sabha are women, the average in the state legislatures is five-seven per cent<sup>41</sup>. The need for improvement of women, therefore, is clear. Pioneering work in the Panchayat and Zilla Parishads in Karnataka have since been extended vide the 73rd and 74th constitutional amendments. Studies of the impact of these, done by agencies such as Utsahi Mahila Abhyudaya (UMA) of Bangalore show that problems do exist and point to the slow pace of change. The entrenched power of dominant castes has only been strengthened by the reservation system. Women's domestic responsibilities, lack of literacy and political training all have been serious impediments within the context of patriarchal resistance and backlash. Janaki Nair documents that the new sarpanch of Erangoan in Amravati,

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<sup>41</sup> Global Statistic are as follows : Per cent of women in National legislatures - three per cent in Japan, six per cent in France, six-seven per cent in U.K. and 11 per cent in U.S.A.. Only in Sweden did women occupy 40 per cent of the elected parliamentary seats in 1994.

Maharashtra was presented with a pot of dung, and the sarpanch of Misalawadi, Maharashtra was beaten up by relatives of her rival male candidate and she lost her teaching job; many all women Panchayats hailed by the media exist in Madhya Pradesh (Pidgara) and (Maharashtra) Shrirampur only because no man wishes to serve under a female Panchayat head<sup>42</sup>. The patriarchal back-lash exists in the same manner within the political parties and their double-speak on the women's reservation issue. They mouth convenient support for women while relegating participation to the 'biwi brigade'. Nair sees in this "the political equivalent of Marx's industrial reserve army; political actors who are summoned to action only to be pushed back into oblivion when the political contingency has passed". It is here, therefore, that one can link conceptually the continuum with the history of women's participation in earlier movements, such as, the abolitionist movement and the National movement. Sanctioned entry into public space for women was welcomed within the expectation that they would all go back to their hearth and home once the movement or the exigency passed. However, this did not happen in the U.S.A., in the mid-nineteenth century, as it did not happen in India a century later. Political awareness and political education was a necessary fall out. It is within this context, therefore, that political intervention in terms of the Reservation Bill has to be seen within the history of women's entry into public space which shows up that though the fears of the 'biwi brigade' of wives, sisters and daughters being inducted into politics and placed by proxy may be well founded for some time to come, but it will also produce a new political awareness so that it is highly unlikely that women will continue to take a back seat or be operated on by proxy. Other forms of social and political awareness, though desirable are proceeding so slowly that for national interests the intervention has to be there. Within our constitution, Article 14, which forbids discrimination or arbitrary action, permits classification into different groups and classes. Article 15(2) is vital in declaring "nothing in this article shall prevent the state from making any special provision for women and children". Reservations and special provisions have been recognised by specific constitutional provision and hence the debate on that score need not be opened up again. The 81st Amendment Bill is a constitutional bill and it precludes all arguments of constitutional invalidity.

As Margeret Alva states "If women do not have an entry point, how will they ever get in"? The dilution of the Bill is sought by those that have taken up the issue of the representation of the OBC women and attacked the move for usurpation of power by non-dalit women of the majority community. The anti-Bill lobby is led by politicians of the Janata Dal, the Bahujan Samaj Party, the Samajawadi Party, a faction of the Bharatiya Janta Party lead by Uma Bharati, the Shetkari Sanghatana Women's front, the Shetkari Mahila Aghadi and some independent intellectuals. There are arguments galore about the "biwi brigade" but the state of national politics is such that an injection of vitality is desperately needed. History shows that a qualitative difference has come about as a result of the larger participation of women in movements and in the social and political process. And that is why the arguments which emphasize women's power in terms of only an Indira Gandhi cannot hold water. Madhu Kishwar's objections that 'Parliament ought to be a forum for the most seasoned, thoughtful, and well informed individuals. It is no place for political novices to learn their first lessons in Parliamentary democracy'<sup>43</sup>, holds water but the thrust

<sup>42</sup> Nair, Janaki (1997), An Important Springboard, *Seminar*, September 1997.

<sup>43</sup> Manushi, No.96, September-October, 1996.

should be - make changes in electoral procedures, and electoral qualifications for men and women alike. This argument cannot be used against women alone. Many radicals have posed questions of a different order - what is the relationship between representation in Parliament and the struggle for justice, in this case, gender justice? The link is tenuous keeping in mind the mechanisms by which party politics operate in Parliament. Some feel that "over the last few years there has been a growing sense within the women's movement that constant recourse to the law only creates a series of new legislation which often means an increase of state control, while offering no real challenge to the social and systematic basis of the oppression of women. ... the link between reservation in Parliament and 'empowerment' of women is at best tenuous and may even be a way of closing off possibilities of further radicalization of Indian Politics"<sup>44</sup>.

The freedom struggle was a critical juncture for feminist consciousness. Bharati Ray sees the significance in the blurring of domestic/public division - the crossing of the Lakshman Rekha<sup>45</sup>. The entry of women in large numbers into the public arena was in the Khadi movement, picketing of liquor shops, women's education, etc. The methods used were those familiar to women - non-violence and non-co-operation. Women worked through parliamentary methods to achieve legislation like the Hindu Code Bill and the Indian Women's Property Act. But the post-independence years have been somewhat grey years - at one level there are the 'role-models' - larger than life like Indira Gandhi but at another level there has been the continuance of an emphasis on the whole sphere of women's social activities delimited to so-called welfare activities. Patriarchal systems, which give only "permitted" space to women in sanctioned areas, need to be challenged. In an interview Margaret Alva stated "Unless we are guaranteed an entry point by law we will never be allowed to participate. I really believe what some women say that we must come into decision-making positions on our own steam, but how many have come so far? To all those who say that they will do it on their own - I want to ask why is the number of seats occupied by women in the legislatures declining?"<sup>46</sup> Women's participation in the political process is critical for social and democratic transformation.

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<sup>44</sup> Menon, Nivedita (1997), Reservations and Representation, *Seminar*, September.

<sup>45</sup> Ray, Bharati (1995) *The Freedom Movement and Feminist Consciousness in Bengal, 1905-1929*, Bharati Ray (Ed.), *From the Seams of History*, Oxford University Press.

<sup>46</sup> Manushi, September-October, 1996.