Women in Colonial India

Lecture Course 2018 Monsoon: 4 Credit MA ; 2 Credits MPhil

Atwal, CHS, SSS, JNU

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This course is based on the assumption that as a social category ‘woman’ has been and is being constituted in time and space. Through a survey of over a hundred years of British rule, this course looks how ‘modernity’ was engendered in a society with already well woven matrix of caste hierarchies and religious distinctions. The 19th century debates on social reform shaped the trajectory of the women’s question in India. While this offered possibilities of social change; by the early 20th century the nationalist question either ‘incorporated’ or ‘diverted’ fragments of the women’s question. However, in the past four decades, changes in the nature of women’s struggle the world over have transformed the way in which nation itself has been perceived. Scholars have increasingly become interested in women as ‘citizens’. Questions of inheritance, property and civil rights have acquired precedence. Recently the scholars of history have been looking at the changing forms of patriarchy by uncovering its structural and functional aspects which rendered Indian women as ‘unequal’ citizens. Recent scholarship also takes into account- women’s autobiographies and writings. A section has been added on methods of reading autobiographies and memoirs of women to primarily foreground the ‘personal’ as ‘political’.

Theme 1

Historiographical Review

This section looks at the diversity of academic writing on Indian women since the early twentieth century. It will look at how the Status of Women Report since the 1970s, ushered in a new phase in scholarship on women’s history. The 1990s witnessed a keen interest in reconstituting the archives for women’s history. Scholars have sought to uncover the ambiguities of land rights, property and inheritance for women. New forms of writing on labour history; dalit women and eco-feminism appeared by the end of the last century. The theme will also cover the debate on Women’s History versus Gender History.

Historiographical Review

Gedge, C Evelyn and Choksi, Mithan, Women in Modern India, Bombay, 1929.


Roy, Kumkum (ed), Women in Early Indian Societies, Manohar, Delhi, 1999.


Padma Anagol, The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920, Ashgate, London, 2006


Chaudhuri, Maitreyi, (ed), Feminism in India, Kali for Women, Delhi, 2004.


Atwal, Jyoti. 2016. Real and Imagined Widows: Gender relations in North India, Delhi : Primus.

**Methodology and Research on Women’s History**

Millett, Kate, Sexual Politics, New York: Doubleday, 1970


Theme 2  The Colonial State; the Public Sphere and the Women’s Question

a) Formulation of the ‘women’s question’ through law making:

This theme is an introduction to historical scholarship on 19th century legislation on Hindu women, particularly the Anti Sati Act of 1829; Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. It discusses the various ways in which the Hindu male intelligentsia articulated reforms for the Hindu women and why this project acquired primacy. As a force for ‘modernizing’ tradition, these legislative debates within the elite Hindu arena made possible the regeneration of textual *shastric* position on women. For the colonial administration, this ‘women’s question’ translated into a cautious cultural interface and intervention. The Acts once passed, were left to be made workable only by those who proposed them. More than the Acts, these debates on women’s ‘duties’, sexuality and marriage were in themselves, crucial in defining gender relation within the family and of family with the Nation. By the end of the 19th century, these debates infused a new sensibility and direction to women’s concerns.


Clare Midgley, ‘Female emancipation in an imperial frame: English women and the campaign Against Sati (widow-burning) in India, 1813-30’, *Women's History Review*, 9: 1, 2000, pp95-121.


Theme 3  Women, Household and idea of the ‘Domestic’

This theme looks at the remaking of the household and shifts in power relations within it. It also reviews how the idea of ‘private’ and ‘public’ emerges in the colonial context and in the subsequent debates on it. This section also examines the debates on the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, Hindu Women’s Rights to Property Act of 1937 and the Marriage and Succession Acts of 1956.

**Educational Reforms**

This theme reviews the emergence of new 19th century educational structures for women modeled either on Western or the indigenous system. Women’s
Education was aimed at producing a modern ‘companion’ for the ‘modern’ Indian, yet some women were able to conceptualize their own curriculum. Pandita Ramabai Saraswati; D K Karve; Rokeya Sakhawat Hussain; Rashsundari Debi; Sister Subbalakksmi; Arya Samajist Kanya Mahavidyalayas will be discussed.


**Theme 4   Gender, Empire and India  (September-October)**
a) Empire's Prostitutes


b) Empire, War and Widowhood


Atwal, Jyoti, ‘Cultural Trauma and Welfare for the War Widows in India’ *Politička Misao (Croatian Political Science Review)* in a special issue titled *Faces of Cultural Trauma*, No. 1 (2017), 54. (available free online)

**Theme 5 Politics of Participation in the National Movement (September-October)**
This theme explores how patriotism for the Indian women was filtered through colonial consciousness and multiple layers of cultural defence. Participation in the Gandhian method for political liberation, created a unique space for the Indian women to realign gender relations. This tension between the subjected ‘self’ and the ‘nation’ persisted throughout the National Movement. This section surveys this ‘struggle’ through primary evidence in the form of autobiographies and memoirs of the participants. This section includes the debate in the National Social Conference and Ranade’s position on women.

Atwal, Jyoti, ‘Women in Indian National Movement’ (Special segment on Independence day), Yojana, Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, Government of India, New Delhi, September 2016, pp31-34.

Mayo, Katherine, Mother India, New York, 1927.

Heimsath, Charles, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, Princeton, 1964 (Chapters on Ranade and National Social Conference and Social Reform versus Political Reform).


Cousins, James and Margaret, We Two Together, Ganesh, Madras, 1950 (chapter on Jail experience)


Thakurta, Tapati Guha, ‘Women as ‘Calendar Art’ Icons: Emergence of Pictorial Stereotype in Colonial India’, Economic and Political Weekly, October 26, 1991

Erwin Neumayer and Christine Schelberger, Bharat Mata : India’s Freedom Movement in Popular Art, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 2008

**Theme 6  Caste Oppression and Women (November)**


Rege, Sharmila, Writing Caste, Writing Gender: Narrting Dalit Women’s Testimonios, Zubaan, Delhi, 2013.


Reading material from Black Atlantic Studies