

Book Review-1

Anil Kumar Sarkar (Ed.), *Women in Indian Society: Essays on Historiography and Politics*, New Delhi, Anvi Books and Publishers, 2020, PP.-184, Price 895 rupees

The edited volume titled "Women in Indian Society: Essays on Historiography and Politics" is an excellent collection of well research articles on several aspects of gender history and historiography by renowned researchers and scholars. John Wallach Scott in her article "Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis" in *American Historical Review* categorized the development of women's history into three phases. These three phases are the history of inclusion, contribution, and oppression. This volume efficiently dealt with all these three phases and attempted to explore women's history from different perspectives like challenges to women's history writing, condition of tribal women in the 21st century, the role of organizations and individual role over women empowerment, women in Indian freedom movement and policymaking.

In chapter one, Geraldine Forbes in 'Women's History for the Twenty-first Century' explains the complexities associated with women's history writing with existing archival resources. As she argued, all the data available in the libraries and archives are mostly dominated by the patriarchal notion and only prioritize upper class and politically active women or who played the role of men in the society. As a result of this, historical documentation of a large section of lower class and caste women was left unexplored. As she suggested, existing documentation can only recover the history of upper-class women but failed to unearth the role of the poorer section of rural women.

To solve these problems, she suggests the reformation of women's archives by devices new methodologies (women's embroidery, quilt making, or uses of photographs as historical documents), using oral history, re-reading the archives, and emphasizing upon women's writings to shape the idea of women's history.

Chapter two discusses the article named 'Contribution of 'Dr. B.R.Ambedkar on Women Empowerment by Badal Sarkar. Interestingly, the author explains women's empowerment by adjoining it to B.R.Ambedkar's notion of women empowerment. The author revealed, as the first law minister, Dr. B. R. Ambedkar introduced the 'Hindu Code Bill' to provide safeguard to women's right to property, right to freedom. Ambedkar

attempted to free women from various customs and evil practices like the eviction of the dowry system, reformation of widow marriage, removal of caste disabilities, etc. But strong opposition came from various political leaders and sections of society. As the author showed, Ambedkar delivered a strong fight with the opposition in the constituent assembly and passed four important acts like Hindu Marriage Act of 1955, Hindu Succession Act, 1956 and made several constitutional provisions, such as Article 14 – 17, Article 24, etc. for the improvement of women. The author rightly argues that Ambedkar frees Indian society from the adversities of conservatism that existed in law-making and broadens enough the way of women empowerment.

Chapter three deals with Sadak Ali's article "Status-oriented Feminist Approaches to Ethics: A Philosophical Discussion", which talks about feminist campaigns and movements that led to several changes for the betterment of women like voting rights, right to education, equal pay, or property right. By citing Allison Jaggar Faults, the author talks about traditional ethics to understand the development of the history of feminism. He showed, how some of the feminists have developed gender-centered approaches and some other feminist ethicists focused upon the impact of political, legal, or ideological causes to understand the 'second sex' status of women and its effects on women. To do this, the author attempted to explore different viewpoints that contributed to the journey of the history of feminism. On one hand, he dealt with the different ideas of the 19th century constructed by Mary Woolstonecraft, John. Stuart Mill and Catherine Beecher there on the other he showed the further progress of the idea of feminism that was constructed by the radical feminist or cultural feminist. The author also dealt with Marxist, multicultural and global views of feminism. The prime focus of his article is to establish the idea of gender equality through the notion of status-oriented feminist ethics.

Chapter Four titled '*Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha and Its Role for Progress of Women Education of Colonial Bengal*' dealt with the development of women's education under western influence. Author Supriya Biswas talks about the contribution of Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha in the progress of women's education in colonial Bengal. She depicted a complete picture of how a conservative rural ambiance of Uttarpara transformed into a centre of women's education under the influence of Hitakari sabha with the efforts of Jaykrishna Mukherjee and his brother Rajkrishna Mukherjee.

Chapter Five deals with the article '*Women and the Burden of Postcoloniality: The Courtesan Film Genre, 1960-1990*' by Nandita Banerjee. The author attempts to understand the position of courtesan within the post-colonial cultural consciousness that is dominated by patriarchal society. She explained her idea through some Indian films like Pakeezah, Umrao Jaan, and Utsav. The author addressed several issues like the politics behind the glamorization of courtesan through art and entertainment, the idea of harem/brothel as a

space, the way of filming the courtesan's world of emotions, and sense of possession or loss. She successfully displayed the male projections of power and vulnerability of women within the context of films.

Chapter Six contained the article named '*Women Witch - Hunt Existing in 21st Century Tribal Society of West Bengal*' was written by Professor Anil Kumar Sarkar. He emphasized the problem of witch-hunting in the tribal society that existed even in the twenty-first century in West Bengal. Through the lenses of modernization, the author closely observes the superstitious activities of various tribal groups that included the worship of several deities, denial of modern agricultural and medical facilities, embracement of traditional beliefs and customs. According to him, this set of superstitions gave birth to the idea of witch and witch doctors or *gunin, ojha*, etc who have control over supernatural powers. Provided a case study between the periods of 2005-2012, he also points out the politics behind the witch-hunting that took place in the tribal world and discloses an important area of women's oppression. The author also talks about multiple laws enacted by the government to provide safeguard the oppressed and identifies several remedial measures to prevent these heinous activities of witch-hunting.

Chapter Seven included an article named '*Family Planning: Implications of Women Empowerment – A Case Study*'. The article focused upon the role of panchayat under the guidance of constitutional amendments and state regulations. The article contained a survey on the performance of women panchayat members of Nadia and Cooch Behar who have more children. The survey established the correlation between family planning and the performance of women in the workplace.

Chapter Eight explore the role of Sunity Devi of Cooch Behar as an activist for women's right in the 19th century that developed under the European idea of renaissance and reformation. The author describes how Sunity Devi, the daughter of Keshab Chandra Sen and wife of Maharaja Nripendra Narayan of Cooch Behar made her own distinctive identity by removing the social inequality between men of women. This article also talks about her contribution to women's education and as an organizer of fairs like *magha utsav* or societies like 'Sisterhood of the East' to address women's problems. Through the depiction of the journey of Sunity Devi, this article excellently provides an idea about the role of upper-class Bengalis in the reformation of Bengali society and women empowerment.

Chapter Nine highlighted the role of women in the freedom movement with a special reference to north Bengal. The author depicts how women participated in various emancipatory movements of Congress and under the influence of Gandhian principles. The article disclosed the identities of several women from various districts of Bengal like Dinajpur, Malda, Jalpaiguri, Rajshahi, Darjeeling; who joined the freedom movement. Irrespective of their religious identity and class; how women from north Bengal districts founded several organizations and joined major agitations like the swadeshi

movement, Non- Cooperation, Civil Disobedience, Quit India Movement, etc is a prime theme of this article.

Chapter Ten discusses the evolutionary journey of women's participation in political decision-making by focusing upon the Indian experience. The article documented the journey that began with the deputation to Montague –Chelmsford mission in 1917 under the leadership of few educated women demanding security of women rights which ends up with the 73rd Amendment to the Constitution in 1992 that caused political empowerment of rural women that secured one-third reservation for women. The fight against social constraints like male domination in political and socio-cultural institutions was depicted in this article.

Chapter Eleven shows how Mahatma Gandhi's ideas of non-violence received their influence from the women around him like his mother, wife. At the same time, the article also shows the influence of Mahatma Gandhi over various sections of Indian women. Despite his high respect for Indian tradition, he condemned all kinds of superstitious elements like female infanticide, dowry system, child marriage, oppression against lower class and caste women. How this approach of Gandhian philosophy inspired thousands of women to join the freedom movement (like non-cooperation and Dandi march) irrespective of their social position is a unique area of this study. The article also explores the motherly qualities of care and concern of Mahatma Gandhi towards his fellow acquaintances.

Chapter Twelve scrutinized the history of women's education in the princely state of Cooch Behar between the periods of 1850 to 1947. According to the article, the journey of women's education in Cooch Behar was mainly started in 1864 by British Commissioner Colonel Haughton. After that how this journey of women's education constantly received its support from local elites like Sunity Devi, and her husband Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's resulting in the foundation of Sunity college is included in this writing. The author also substantiates his arguments by providing statistical data on Hindu and Muslim women's participation in the educational program of Cooch Behar.

The edited volume is competent enough to rediscover the commonness in women's oppression, their fighting against the patriarchy, and their achievements. This volume includes socio-political experiences of women from various sections and regions of India. Scholarly encounters of this volume simultaneously addressed the contribution of both men and women who deals with various adversities of women and played a significant role in the journey of women's empowerment. The volume not only encouraged the scholars for their further interest in women's historiography but also set an example of compassion and solidarity between different sexes that could be beneficial for the further development of women's empowerment.

Lab Mahato

*Research Scholar of History
University of Kalyani, Nadia, West Bengal*