

**INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF LAW
MANAGEMENT & HUMANITIES**

[ISSN 2581-5369]

Volume 4 | Issue 4

2021

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Articulating the Major Issues of Gender History in the Context of Ancient India: A Review of the Limitations and Scope of Further Research

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ABSTRACT

This paper tries to examine the complex relationship of gender with women's agency, labour, familial institutions, property relations, violence and religion . It also tries to accentuate issues pertaining to the gendered notion of technology and colonial constructs, formation of gender differences through ideologies and lastly, the intersection of gender and caste. Recent researches have tried to trace both positive and negative connotations of women's agency and women's competence to 'bargain with patriarchy' within an authoritarian patriarchal regime. There is an undercurrent of violence against women and instances of forced compliance which reflect the patriarchal anxieties of the normative traditions that in turn occupy an uneasy boundary between the respective logics of women's consent and resistance, thus calling paternalistic patriarchy to account. The aim is to locate women's voices or the lack of these therein in patriarchal elitist textuality by being wary of the objectives of these compositions, implied audience and modes of transmission. The major aim of this paper is to trace the limitations of early scholarship on gender by interlacing it with newer, modified arguments as correctives in the study of gender history, the major argument being that the working of patriarchies in the daily lives of women point to the need to explore plurality and to strive towards finding a fresh perspective on women and gender issues in Ancient India. How modern constructs of ancient womanhood affect our thought process needs to be explored with an inter-connectedness that needs to be substantiated, qualified, refined and contested for a meaningful understanding of gender relation themes, some of which remain relatively unexplored to this day.

Keywords- Gender history, Historiography, Women studies, Gender ideology of British Colonialism, Altekhar, The Woman Question, Vedic period, Women's agency, Violence, Religion, Technology, Reproduction, Production, Caste, stridharma.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The issue of gender in Ancient India is a contentious one as in history, no age is a golden age for everyone. *Joan W. Scott* defines gender as being not only “a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between sexes, but also a primary way of signifying relations of power”² which is not always cohesive, but diffused and embodied in various sections. He talks of the politics of representation involved in the making of the cultural construct of gender. Apart from gender, we need to be conscious of categories such as class, caste, region, language, ethnicity, cults and the intersection of such stratification that cut society into many divisions. Decision making roles, access to education, wealth and privilege, property etc. are markers that keep the societal divisions intact.

There are unresolved issues that stem from the category of ‘woman’. In the 19th century, while man was the subject of historical processes, questions related to women were framed by their unchanging nature. Such ahistorical statements about the ‘undifferentiated’ category of women were determined by concerns of reproduction or religiosity. The question for origins tend to divert attention from the specific features of gender relations in different historical situations. Initial hindrances to the study of gender included the attempt to locate society’s socio-economic processes either implicitly or explicitly along an evolutionary axis in unilinear continuum and the ambivalence related to the alliance between deconstructionism and gender. There arose two attempts at historical analyses—situating women vis-à-vis autonomous historical processes that had an affect on them and secondly, envisaging a certain degree of agency for women vis-à-vis historical processes. Both of these feed into a range of problems related to women’s position in history which I shall try to trace. My goal is to examine the relationship of gender with women’s agency, technology, labour and production, familial institutions, property relations, violence, religion etc. and also issues pertaining to gendered colonial constructs, construction of gender differences through ideologies & behaviours and lastly, the intersection of gender and caste.

II. WOMEN’S AGENCY

One of the main concerns addressed by gender historians is that of the agency of women, especially when there is absence of voices from the past. ‘Agency implies instrumentality’³. Women are not passive victims of an oppressive ideology, but active agents of their own positive constructs, according to *Julia Leslie* in ‘*Roles and Rituals for Hindu Women*’. They were ‘social actors’

² Joan W. Scott, “Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis,” *The American Historical Review*, 1986, pp. 1067-69.

³ Jaya Tyagi, “Introduction: Representations, Re-presentations, and Retrieval”. *Contestation and Compliance, Retrieving Women’s ‘Agency’ from Puranic Traditions* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014),1.

instrumental in shaping their own lives and kept resisting and renegotiating, sometimes also complying with the circumstances as they internalize patriarchal issues. But, these go undocumented in the normative texts. *Stephanie W. Jamison* focussing on the Vedic culture and Śrauta rituals emphasizes on the role of women which may be silent and restricted, but very critical to the Vedic yajña.⁴ But, it has to be understood that ritual spaces are gendered as the wife can be very easily substituted by another, procreation being an important aspect of Brahmanical life. Feminist historians believe that least resistance is adopted by women as a survival tactic and changes in patterns of domination can also be the result. Agency can have negative connotations as well and it does not compulsorily have to lead to empowerment.

III. GENDERED NOTION OF TECHNOLOGY: PRODUCTION VERSUS REPRODUCTION

Recently, historians have felt the need to demystify technology from its current ‘dehumanized’ status and to rethink how historians have downplayed society’s relations to technology and have not given cognizance to evidence one gets of women’s labour especially in the context of contribution in production, reproductivity, fertility, etc. *Elise M. Boulding* in her work “*The Underside of History*” talks about how the findings from anthropological studies of hunting-gathering groups which show the role of women in food collection, distribution and small-game hunting in early ‘matristic societies’ displace the unspoken assumptions about biological biases for division of labour between the sexes and the myth of ‘Man: the hunter’ versus ‘woman: the childbearer and nurturer’ perpetuated about primitive societies. Toolmaking also wasn’t just a masculine innovation⁵. Technology is labelled as feminine or masculine and we need to be conscious of the gendered notion of technology⁶, converging it with existing divisions of labour, systems of production and the social relations that revolve around access to resources and technical knowledge. In pre-Industrial agricultural societies, women contributed to 60% of the total labour, yet, control and veneration of women go hand in hand as older men came to dominate women and other men for group cohesion and increased labour force, thus forming the basis of patriarchal society with social stratifications. By Harappan times, society was socially stratified with gender divisions. Social aspects of myths, rituals and symbols displaying an explicit relationship of women with sexuality in Rigvedic times studied by scholars like *Wendy Doniger* show how patriarchy’s control over women was

⁴ Stephanie Jamison, *Sacrificed Wife, Sacrificer's Wife: Women, Ritual, and Hospitality in Ancient India*. (Oxford University Press, 1996), Introduction.

⁵ Joan M. Gero and Margaret Wright Conkey, *Engendering Archaeology: Women and Prehistory* (Oxford, UK: B. Blackwell, 2002).

⁶ Rita P. Wright, “Introduction: Gendered ways of Knowing in Archaeology”. *Gender and Archaeology* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1996), 6.

institutionalized .

IV. READING INTO THE SILENCE OF PATRIARCHAL ELITIST TEXTUALITY

The problem of authorship, patronage, regional variations, chronology, periodization (due to lack of temporal and spatial fixity) and scarcity of textual sources further complicate ancient Indian gender studies. Also, gender historians feel the need to reinforce that the ‘religious’ normative texts of ancient India are also socio-economic and political treatises and we need to cull out aspects of attitudes towards women from it. Normative texts reflect and regulate social practices. A crucial historiographical issue concerning students of gender history is to deal with two smokescreens: an inbuilt gender bias and elite bias favoring the educated elite male predominated these texts whose composition, compilation, preservation and transmission did not involve women. Secondly, a certain degree of gender-blindness colours the works of early gender historians corroborated by the socio-political biases involved in the reflexive process of studying archaeological evidence.

V. THE WOMAN QUESTION

While the interest in history and the woman question in the Indian context derived from the colonial encounter, they were also refracted as the colonizers denigrated the past of the entire colonized population to rationalize the colonial enterprise⁷ by terming it “feminine”, the position of women being the index of civilization. The ‘gender ideology of British Colonialism’ compels the Indian male reformers to identify the colonial domestic as being feminine, spiritual and private which is in sharp contrast with the imperial public which was masculine, secular and materialistic.⁸ According to *Deniz Kandiyoti*, “Women made an irreversible entry into political discourse as symbolic pawns in a complex, ideological background.”⁹ Victorian propriety mixed with local, varied traditions created a double-constraint for the new woman of colonial times, who is a product of a new patriarchy formed along class lines. Sangari and Vaid consider the formation of the public and private spheres as “a differential process which takes place on several levels, the discursive, the linguistic, the political and the economic, and usually in relation to other classes”¹⁰, thus establishing a series of oppositions between female vs male, inner vs outer, private vs public,

⁷ Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), 2.

⁸ Antoinette M. Burton, “Ch-1: Memory Becomes Her: Women, Feminist History, and the Archive”. *Dwelling in the Archive: Women Writing House, Home, and History in Late Colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁹ Deniz Kandiyoti, “From Empire to Nation state: Transformations of the women’s question in Turkey” in S.J Kleinberg (ed.) *Retrieving Women’s History: Changing Perceptions of the Role of Women in Politics and Society* (Oxford, Berg Publishers Ltd., 1988), 220.

¹⁰ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989),10.

material vs spiritual as a part of the National discourse according to *Partha Chatterjee*.

This resulted in new issues, such as *Nationalist historians like R.C Dutt* resurrecting the examples of the lost glory of Indian womanhood, thus leading to a selective focus and sanitized interpretation of events. As *Uma Chakravarti* points out, the ideal woman's sacrificial virtue and spirituality was focussed on, rather than what was wrong with their condition. Historians now understand that idealization of the women of the Vedas and their previous golden age vis-à-vis the evils of modern society means a complete obliteration of non-Vedic traditions. This absolves Hindu society of any inherently oppressive characteristics as patriarchal institution's presence is instantly explained away as being a response to external threats to Hindu women. Now, the nationalist models of reform have been broken and the increasing marginalization of women and the "preoccupation of democratizing and modernizing movements with the regulation of sexuality by different modes of control in the face of increasing political participation of women in the new public sphere with new labour processes and the consequent changes in the family structure" have been identified.

Though issues like sati and widow remarriage were included, the entire social reforms movement was limited in scope and ended up reinforcing the role women had to play in society by emulating the approach of Western scholars towards the study of the Indian subcontinent. According to *Sumit Sarkar*, there was an absence of any autonomous struggle by women in the social reform movements. The Western educated Indian male reformers being highly selective of liberal ideas from Europe, due to some degree of social ostracism, allowed a very limited and controlled emancipation of their wives. Due to the organic nature of prescriptive texts like the *Manusmṛiti* which reflect not just the epistemological and knowledge traditions of the time, but anxieties related to women's position in society as well, social reform movements derived from it. *Ram Mohan Roy* quotes Manu's notion of how a widow should live her life to push his argument against the practice of sati. This again reaffirms the validity of the scriptures by 'reinforcing the notion of how a widow should live'¹¹. Even the staunchest advocates against sati portrayed women at extremes, either as very strong or very weak, thus alienating the politics and involvement of 'family' as well as women's agency.

Colonial laws transformed matrilineal systems into patrilineal forms of succession. Colonial land settlements resulted in marginalization of women from the public sphere due to loss of their land rights, thus increasing their dependence on men. What is problematic is that notions of property also have a history with non-uniform inheritance practices and 'access to property would have

¹¹ Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India" in Sangari and Vaid (ed.) *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 88-126.

varied across regions/subregions/castes/ classes/ families'¹²/ kinship categories/ occupations and so. In colonial times this happened in such a manner that “the lives of women exist at the interface of class and caste inequalities.”¹³

VI. BIASES OF EARLY WOMEN WRITERS

Uma Chakravarti writes about women writers in the 19th-20th centuries and the early trend of creating an imagery of epic heroism of the Vedic women as seen in *Mrs. Speir's work "Life in Ancient India"* which valorized the ultimate power sati gave women. Sarala Devi also confined herself to writing about the role women can play in militant nationalism. *Clarisse Bader's work 'Women in Ancient India'* discussing the part Goddesses in the Hindu pantheon played in the conceptualization of the image of Indian women, scoffed at Western materialism in favour of Eastern spirituality. But, she did not pay heed to the intentionality, anxieties and preoccupations behind the sources and the silences which need to be read into to indicate the absence or presence of women's agencies and ends up idealizing the notion of the Aryan which Uma Chakravarti called “the second round of Orientalism”. Her orientation of considering only upper class, royal or heroic women in the context of religion, widowhood and marriage can be seen in the chapterization of her book. Though *Pandita Ramabai's work "The High-Caste Hindu woman"* appreciates sati as a means of avoiding social ostracism prescribed for widows, her work marks a different approach of disenchantment from the idea of the golden age for women. She also blamed Christian British rule for giving more power to men over women. The revivalism that *Swami Dayanand's Arya Samaj* witnessed had negative connotations such as the concept of women being procreation-tools to continue the Aryan race, resulting in a failure to take into account women's agency and providing women-centric solutions to women's questions.

An alternate basis of looking at women rather than from the point of view of Brahmanical texts was found in the examination of Buddhist texts by *I.B Horner* in the 1930s to examine lives of women workers (not necessarily located in the domestic spheres), women holding property and bhikkhunīs who got considerably more equality, though not the same status as bhikkhus in the Buddhist fold as the patriarchal setup of Buddhist and Jain texts holds convergence with Brahmanical literature. Isidāsīs and women transgressing the social norms regarding marriage in the Jātakās show that reality must have been quite different from what was being preached. But, Horner's methodology did not include examining gendered hierarchies in Buddhist texts. Horner does attribute a degree of agency to women by saying that women redefined Buddhism to a certain

¹² Kanakalatha Mukund, “Turmeric Land: Women's Property Rights in Tamil Society since Early Medieval Times” in Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, 123.

¹³ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*,5.

extent. But, her examination of the dress code of bhikkhunīs as a means of controlling women's sexuality (even though not as a superficial preoccupation with the decorative) is a step back¹⁴. Starting from the emergence of the three-sex model in India and mention of the napumsaka, klība and paṇḍaka in the later Vedic period to same-sex object choice becoming a crucial determinant of the third-sex in the Kāmasūtra, the propensity towards androgynous thinking is traced by gender historians to analyze how third-sex people were regarded by elite contemporaries. Analysis shows that an attempt to offer a rational account of the third-sex and the social reality of such people lacking in the Brahmanical traditions was overcome in the Jaina traditions¹⁵.

VII. LIMITATIONS OF THE ALTEKARIAN PARADIGM

Penned under the stimulus of Ram Mohan Roy's work emerged B.S Upadhyaya's "*Women in Rigveda*" and A.S Altekar's "*The position of Women in Hindu Civilization*" (1938) which considered Vedic age as a Golden Age for women and their status only declines progressively from then on. By the time of the Sūtras, the introduction of Non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household and introduction of the śūdrās to carry out economic activities led to women's status being reduced to that of the śūdrās.¹⁶ Altekar's belief that it was in the barbaric period that polygamy among kings led to the tradition of pardāh, sati and non-acknowledgement of wife's sacrifice for the race is considered by Kumkum Roy as a notion too simple. Women getting education similar to that of men is also a false notion. By starting off with the wrong assumption that the institution of family was ideal for women in Vedic times [with good education, joint right of house along with husband, age of marriage being relatively high, monogamous relationships, widow remarriage rights and no practice of sati] and by overlooking the inbuilt gender biases in compositions which did not reflect the voice of women, Kumkum Roy feels that Altekar and his followers do not treat the sources as problematic. Though Altekar's attempt to connect gender and varṇa identities is applaudable, "that Śūdra women, whom he regards as a threat could have contributed to a more dynamic and active kind of womanhood for Hindu society would not even occur to him"¹⁷. Also, no attempt to study improvement in women's individual property rights in early medieval feudal times took place¹⁸. The Altekarian paradigm though limiting and biased,

¹⁴ I.B Horner, "Women Under Primitive Buddhism: Laywomen and Almswomen" in Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), 105.

¹⁵ Zwiling, Leonard and Sweet, Michael J. "The evolution of third sex constructs in ancient India: a study in ambiguity", in Julia Leslie and Mary Me Gee ed. *Invented Identities*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.99-112.

¹⁶ Uma Chakravarty, "Beyond The Altekarian Paradigm" in Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), 79.

¹⁷ Ibid., 80.

¹⁸ Suvira Jaiswal, "Women in Early India: Problems and Perspectives." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*. (Bodhgaya: PIHC, 1981), 58.

continues to nevertheless influence and even dominate historiographical writings.

S. Jayal's attempt at a sociological study of society in the epics considers the mention of *kānīna* in epics as the evidence of the repugnant but free-choice custom of virgin girls being married to *ṛṣīs*, unmarried girls getting mother's dowry (Mahabharata 7.12) and girls getting education following which they had a rite similar to the *samāvartana* ceremony for boys¹⁹. Critiquing the limitations with which Jayal addressed the issues related to women in ancient India, *Jaya S. Tyagi* points out that the relationship of power between the sages and the objectified girls and the double standards behind the fertility rite for girls which is indicative of the initiation of their life as progenitors are being overlooked. A complex relationship exists between gender and religion, including the construction of gender identities through rites of passage and developing the image of goddesses as gendered symbols of reproduction. Women's desire for soteriological goals and welfare of family explains why 'religious thought promotes patriarchal society'. Another problem while studying Gender was the preoccupation of the followers of Altekar like *R.N Das* with the spirituality of women in ancient times rather than her societal and economic role. Physiological processes including ovulation, copulation, child birth, gestation and child rearing are thus gendered phenomena. Post-Vedic literature reflects a two-fold development of ideology- marginalization of Aryan women from their original roles in sacrifices and their labour being restricted to the household²⁰.

Strīdharmā or the ideal womanhood is now increasingly being understood as a historical construct in the patriarchal *varṇa*-based Indian social order emerging out of patriarchy's necessity to subordinate women through the social and ideological control of sexuality²¹ and creation of certain perceptions related to women's inherent nature i.e *strī-svabhāva*. *Pativrata* traditions came into being to control the fickle, promiscuous and untrustworthy nature of women depicted in *Brāhmaṇa*, Buddhist and Jaina texts²². This is done for the maintenance and reproduction of social inequalities and caste identities. Negating the crux of explanations based on women's biologically determined dependence on males, *Julia Mitchell* gives four levels of control in society i.e production, reproduction, socialization and sexuality²³. *René Girard* in "*Violence and the Sacred*" shows how unappeased violence finds a surrogate victim and gets transferred onto women as a last

¹⁹ Shakambari Jayal, Ch. "Marriage Part-I" in *The Status of Women in the Epics* (Delhi etc.: Motilal Banarsidass, 1966), 55-57

²⁰ Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." in *Class, Caste, Gender*. (Sage Publications, 2004), 278.

²¹ B.D Chattopadhyaya, "General Editor's preface" in Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), x.

²² Uma Chakravarti, "Conceptualizing Brahmanical Patriarchy in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State." in *Class, Caste, Gender*. (Sage Publications, 2004), 281.

²³ V.Geetha, *Gender*. (Calcutta: Theorizing Feminism Series, Stree, 2002), 66.

means of controlling their sexuality. Thus, the relation between violence and gender becomes integral to our study.

Kumkum Roy in her work *'The Emergence of Monarchy in North India'* identifies the relevance of patriarchal authoritative systems in giving legitimacy to the *rājya* and how social differentiations percolate to individual households. Such a gendered reading reveals the male centredness prevalent in the *pativrata* norms for women which indicate that the prime duty of women is to take care of husband and household, while the husband has multiple roles other than the *gṛhastha* one. There was an earlier attempt at homogenized understanding of the unitary type of family and to marginalize those that appear to deviate from the strictly patrilineal models²⁴ [though vivid forms of families must have existed]. The household revolving around the *gṛhapati* becomes a unit for stability and a centre for production and reproduction activities and get spatially demarcated as a sacred space²⁵. Though women are related to both reproduction and production, anxieties related to her reproduction is what gets reiterated in normative texts like the *Gṛhyasūtras*. The beeja-kṣetra concept used as a metaphor for explaining procreation as involving the woman who is construed as a field and man as possessor of the seed, get reiterated in the *Granthas* and 'are accorded justificatory value and become a mechanism for appropriating the offspring by or for the father and his lineage'²⁶.

VIII. POST- INDEPENDENCE CULTURAL HISTORY

In the post-Independence period, the shift in paradigms from centrality provided to political to a more cultural and socio-economic understanding of history brings a shift in women's history's methodology as well to revisit sources with archaeological corroboration of data and more careful chronological fixation and periodization. Cultural history seems to be the richest, most integrated and most different form available for feminist historiography²⁷. There occurred a shift of tension from looking at the status of women to questions of patriarchal social formations when historians like *Uma Chakravarti* and *Kumkum Roy*, as a response to *Suvira Jaiswal's* call for women's history to come of age in the *Indian History Congress(1981)*²⁸, highlighted the role of state, family and religious institutions in the perpetuation of ideological structures and deep rooted collective

²⁴ Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), 4.

²⁵ Jaya Tyagi, "Ch. 4 -The *Grha* as a Viable Unit for Production, Redistribution, and transmission of Resources" in *Engendering the Early Household: Brahmanical Precepts in the Early *grhyasūtras*, Middle of the First Millenium B.C.E* (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008), 240.

²⁶ Kumkum Roy ed. *Women in Early Indian Societies*, (New Delhi: Manohar Publishers, 1999), 21.

²⁷ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women, Essays in Colonial History*. (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989),3.

²⁸ Suvira Jaiswal, "Women in Early India: Problems and Perspectives." *Proceedings of Indian History Congress*. (Bodhgaya: PIHC, 1981), 54-60.

conscience in the creation of patriarchy and showed that gender relations are parallel to and constitutive of class and caste relations. Patriarchal system does not predate class and caste, but is intrinsic to the formation and changes within these social categorizations. Jaiswal talks about how norms related to varṇa endogamy, gotra exogamy and strict refrainment from pratiloma marriages maintains the varṇa system. This can be understood only by interrelating varṇa and jāti, kinship systems and gender relations. The impurity that got attached to household labour and the ‘five slaughter houses within the gr̥ha’ adds on to the upper class’s contempt for manual labour and occupations of the ‘antyajas’. For her, the twin pillars that support the exploitative caste system is the increasing subordination of women and other social groups, and also its capacity to reinvent itself with respect to changing social formations in service of the dominant, hegemonic, pervasive, exclusionary and conservative section within patriarchal society.²⁹

IX. CONCLUSION

In recent years, the emergence of Post-processual critiques in the realm of archaeology and a combination of cultural-anthropological methodologies have helped social scientists become more conscious of their role in the creation of histories. An increasing need is being felt among the scholarly community to explore reproductive ecology, palaeodemography, lactation and nutrition practices to study cultural and ethnographic histories of communities. Though certain spheres of institutions are isolated as being particularly relevant to women, study of institutions like family, kinship groups, household, production, labour, reproductive rights, intervention of the state with women and multiplicity of practices (related to marriage, reproduction, inheritance etc.) are studied as a part of gender history. The historical experience of India in its socio-cultural processes which determined the working of patriarchies in the daily lives of women in relation to contemporary ethno-sociological realities, point to the need to explore plurality and to strive towards finding a fresh perspective on women and gender issues in ancient India. How modern constructs of ancient womanhood affect our thought process needs to be explored with an interconnectedness that needs to be substantiated, qualified, refined and contested for a meaningful understanding of gender relations in the context of early India, some of which remain relatively unexplored to this day.

²⁹ Suvira Jaiswal, *Caste: Origin, Function, and Dimensions of Change*. (New Delhi: Manohar. 2000), Intro.

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