
GENDER STUDIES JOURNAL

Editorial

Amartya

The Gender Studies Group started in the month of August as a space to discuss issues around gender, to understand critically how gender and sexuality function in our lives, and to imagine more effective ways of intervening in such processes that shape us as subjects. Our effort was underscored by a conviction that in a gendered society, whatever subject positions we find ourselves in cannot be accepted as given, and whatever characteristics and roles that are attributed to us as bearers of a sexual identity cannot be simply understood as “natural”. We realize that “to be of a certain sex” acquires a social meaning, and the ways in which this meaning is acquired need to be understood historically and sociologically. Further, in a world where social relations are structurally fraught with exploitation and oppression, gender relations also embody a power structure that legitimizes patriarchal violence, exploitation and subjugation at one level, and renders normal and unquestionable the rigid assumptions that mould us into what we are and what we desire; the very experiences of being who we are.

The group functions primarily as a forum for discussing texts and ideas around issues of gender. We (try and) meet once every week for this purpose, and the discussions have been central in shaping our understanding. We started in August by discussing around the theme of Sex, Gender and Sexuality. The following months we discussed texts around the law and its relationship with gender. In all our discussions, the University has remained centrally important as a space that has to be understood as located within the context of the society that it is placed in, and shaped by it. That is, it cannot be simply seen as a site-in-transit where students study and then join the larger currents of society. For example, the relation between knowledge-production and capital determines how the University itself functions and administers education. Similarly, the dominant discourses on gender and sexuality in society as well as in legality get reflected within the University, whether in the form of regressive hostel or PG rules and timings, or an unsafe and insensitive work environment, or tacit assumptions of heterosexuality that each student is supposed to embody.

At the same time, the University is not just a place where the ideologies of a majoritarian civil society get inscribed on those who are located in it. The University has in it the potential for being a vibrant space where newer ideas emerge, and broader horizons of struggle are imagined. To understand the University as such a space then has two main political implications. Firstly, the University becomes a better place, in its most es-

sential sense. The implementation of Ordinance XV-d, that deals with sexual harassment at the workplace was a consequence of a long struggle within the University by students and teachers against discriminatory practices and sexual harassment. Secondly, understanding through a historicized approach the several levels and ways in which structural problems like patriarchy operate in contemporary society makes the struggle against them a living question for those located within the University. It is in this context of understanding how gender as a social relation operates and shapes us at the level of experience, and conceptualizing newer locations of struggle that it becomes important to comprehend history itself, and thence analyze gender as a relational notion that has historically been shaped by social, economic and political processes.

History cannot be understood as homogeneous, empty time; a sequence of events that happened in the past. On the contrary, history has to be seen as a constructed and contested domain, one that shapes the present and gets shaped by it in turn. The study of history, seen in its continuities and discontinuities across different societies gives rise to the construction of historical knowledge. This historical knowledge is connected intimately to historical practice, located temporally in the present. Any understanding of history has to be brushed against the grain of the present. It is in this context that it becomes important to understand gender as an analytic category in historical terms. There is no way to just add women’s ‘experience’ to historical narratives as though this experience was available in some direct, unmediated fashion. Nor can it be simply something that is directly and causally linked to other social or economic processes. A functionalist view of history that constructs separate spheres of family/nation, sex/politics or reproduction/production is not helpful in understanding or conceptualizing social transformation. Gender has to be seen as a central category to analyze history, a relation that has worked in human social relationships through history and given meaning to the organization and perception of historical knowledge.

In this issue, we carry an interview with historian and political activist Dr. Uma Chakravarti. She taught history in the University for a long period, and has written and researched extensively on gender, class and caste in history. The scope of her work has been extensive - Ancient India and early Buddhism, the 19th century where she looked at figures like Pandita Ramabai, and how the status of women in Ancient India was constructed in early nationalist history in the 19th century. She has been a very committed and inspiring activist, both in the democratic rights and women’s movements. This journal carries the first part of the interview, which revisits her work and concerns around it. The second part, which is a discussion

about her activist work and some of the general themes underlying her historical and political work, will be carried in the next journal. The issues raised in the interview become extremely important given the decision by the Academic Council of Delhi University to remove A.K. Ramanujan’s essay ‘The Three Hundred Ramayanas: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation’ We would like to express our gratitude to Uma for agreeing to do the interview with us, and also for the wonderful and enriching experience of engaging with her.

In the Classic Re-visited section, we have an article by Dr. Nandini Chandra of the Department of English on *Pakeezah*, the 1972 classic by Kamal Amrohi. The Poetry section has poems by Dr. Karen Gabriel and Tharini Vishwanath.

We would like to thank Tanushree Kher for helping us immensely in bringing out this journal. We would also like to thank all the contributors to this issue for taking time out of their commitments and writing for the journal. An online version of the journal can be found on the website. Contributions can be e-mailed to the address given below. The previous issues of the journal are available at the U-Special bookstore in Arts Faculty, Delhi University.

Editorial Team-

Adithyan
Akshi Singh
Amartya

Published by- Gender Studies Group, D.U.
Address- B/94, Grounf Floor, Derawal Nagar,
New delhi-09

genderstudiesdu@gmail.com

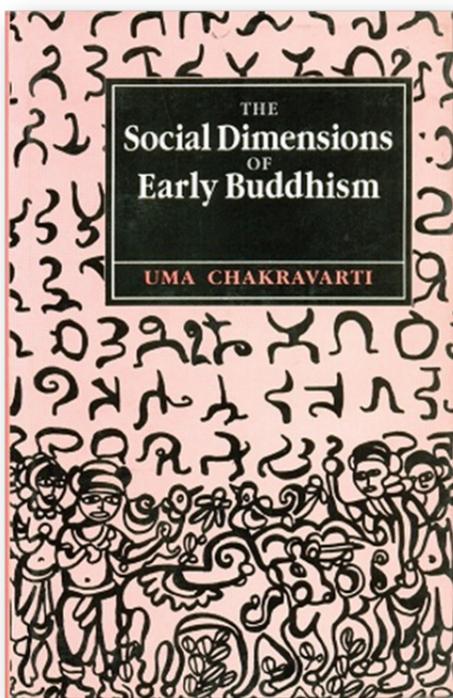
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9811475341, 9891715017, 9990042466

Interview : Dr. Uma Chakravarti

What drew you to study Buddhism as a student?

I was around fifteen when the major event in recent Buddhist history took place; it was 1956, and 2500 years of Buddhism was being celebrated across the country. It was also the time when Ambedkar carried out that huge conversion in that big open space now called the Diksha Bhoomi in Nagpur, where around 25000 Mahars became Buddhists. I was 6 when Independence happened. I was really one of 'midnight's children.' There was some of the euphoria and energy of the national movement, but also bits of disquiet puncturing that; I remember being struck by this event, and it had a tremendous reaction from people. You don't want to acknowledge the wrongs done to a community. Over the years that's a memory that has stayed with me. I was partly struck by what Ambedkar had done, and partly by the fact that there was this reaction. So I was somewhere feeling the need to understand Buddhism.



I specialized in Ancient Indian history, and many years down the line, after ten years of teaching, I was drawn to Buddhism more than any other area for research. It was interesting because I was already married to Anand, and sociology has been concerned with caste up until Mandal, when they forgot about it. I was also familiar with the kind of books that people were reading, like Weber's *Religions of India*. Also it was clear that I was not interested in political history, and I did not want to do cultural history or art history. But social history was attractive, and Buddhism had stayed in my head as something slightly more rational [than any other system of ideas in early India].

I was sociologically very interested, because my interest was in knowing who were the people who were attracted to the Buddha at the time he was living, what was he saying, how people were responding to him, what his constituency was, and who the people were who actually joined the Sangha. And that was a very interesting study, because I found many myths being fine-tuned, but also many myths being thrown out of the window. For instance, a large number of people who

joined the Sangha were from well to do families, but there were a substantial number from poorer backgrounds - there is record of these people joining. A large number of Brahmins also joined. The original interest had been stoked by the Ambedkar conversion, which in a sense takes us back to the political debate, in which you could re-write the national movement from a Dalit perspective, which changed the way in which you looked at history.

In your essay, 'The Social Philosophy of Buddhism and the Problem of Inequality', you make the point that Buddhism, in its most radical egalitarian moment in the space of Buddha's Sanghas, could not provide or even imagine any real parity or emancipation for women. What implications does that have for a contemporary political understanding of Buddhism?

That is actually the fundamental disappointment with Buddhism. I started with trying to look at Buddhism as a critique of Brahmanism, and then as an attempt to create an alternate paradigm. It actually does work in the context of caste and class to an extent because there was no hierarchy in the Sangha. The only area where the Buddha had full control over was the Sangha. So you can treat him as responsible for the arrangements within the Sangha. Once you join the Sangha, your origins are irrelevant. The story of Upali is quite interesting - Upali is the barber of the Shakyas, and there is a moment where a large number of the Shakyas decide to join the Sangha. Upali also joins the Sangha, as his community has joined the Sangha. That is how the story is told. He is then ordained first, before the Shakyans, because it's a way of humbling the pride of the Shakyans, who are so proud of their own lineage. So, ordaining Upali first means that he becomes senior to them. Ultimately, the entire dynamics of the Sangha is entirely determined not by social origins but by seniority within the Sangha, and by consensus building if possible. If consensus doesn't work then they have the vote.

But the real disappointment is in the context of gender. The Buddha or his immediate community is unable to rise above the existing patriarchal schooling and structures. So while they are re-defining the rest of the world, they can't re-define gender relations at all. There is only one decent guy, in my opinion, in Buddhist history and that is Ananda. It was Ananda who is the only one who argues against this, and I found it very interesting that he doesn't become an Arhant in the lifetime of the Buddha. An Arhant is a man who has transcended the world in his life. And up until the time that the Buddha dies, he does not become an Arhant. When the Sangha meets after the death of the Buddha, they hold a conclave, and one of the things that they charge Ananda with is that he had argued the case of women to enter the Sangha, that he allowed women to see the body of the Buddha after he died, and allowed them to drop tears on it. This extremely compassionate act is condemned by the Sangha. And Ananda has an interesting answer; he says, "I don't think I did any wrong. If

you feel I did any wrong, then you decide what the punishment is". So the Buddha as presented in the texts, whether it's the original voice of the Buddha or the patriarchal voice of the Sangha put upon the Buddha, is pretty disappointing in that it is unable to transcend this gender question.

Part of the reason of course, is that it's a community which is meant to renounce the world, so celibacy is very important, and they have to abstain from both production and reproduction. That is important because you can't reconstruct the world based on the existing social relations, and production and reproduction are so closely tied that there is a limitation that is imposed. Asking people to abstain from both production and reproduction means that you actually renounce the social world as it exists, and so the renouncing of sexuality is a fundamental requirement of the Buddhist monks. The male monk is then placed at the centre of the way you imagine things, and because women are seen as innately sexual, the limitation then is that they are held responsible for the desires that emerge in the male monk who is unable to give up on his sexuality. It's really a male viewpoint on their inability to handle their own sexuality, which then is transferred upon women, and they are treated as nothing but sexual in their essential beings. That is partly why there is such antagonism against women.

To be fair, when Ananda asks the Buddha, "If women strive, will they be able to achieve the Goal?", Buddha says, "No, they can't enter the Sangha". It is interesting that the foster mother of the Buddha who raises him in his childhood is the first person to push this. It is poignant in a fundamental way that she wants to join the Sangha and she is being denied entry. Ananda uses that when he says, "She's following you in the heat and dust, she is the one who brought you up, so let her join". But the Buddha is peevish about this question. Ananda then asks this question, 'If women strive, will they be able to achieve the Goal?', and Buddha cannot say no, so Ananda says 'You have to let them in, you are denying them the opportunity of being liberated'. The Buddha is really ill-tempered about it, and also does a terrible thing. There are ten rules that he imposes on the Bhikkhuni, one of them being that even the elder-most of the Bhikkhunis must revere the junior-most of the Bhikkhus. But the foster-mother is so eager to get into the Sangha that she accepts those conditions. Many years later she comes back to this condition, and wants it to end because this was a culture where you are supposed to revere older people. So it was a most offensive way of treating women who joined the Sangha. And the Buddha's answer is very interesting. He says, "Even the other sects do not permit this". So he is able to go beyond Brahmanism, but he is unable to go beyond the patriarchy of his times.

However, the women make great use of that space ultimately, and they have some very marvellous ways of recounting them - for instance, speaking about kitchen drudgery. Someone says, "I am not interested in this existence of the Sil bata, the grinding stone is not my life"; and defining this [liberating] space as Akasha. I interpret that as the.

their looking for the expanded self, the self that is not limited by the structures that surround them.

What led you to write the essay on the Altekarian paradigm?

I wrote the draft of 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi' in 1986, and it was published in 1988. I wrote the Altekarian paradigm because as feminists, we were struggling against this very powerful internalization of a popular history in which ancient India was constructed as a great non-patriarchal era. 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi' is actually demolishing that, and looking at the roots of why that happened. This popular history was a burden for feminists, because we were unable to look critically at culture as it needed to be, because it's always tied up to this idea of a pre-Islamic past which was this great fantastic moment. In the 19th century, a lot of people, especially the Bengali school were active in constructing this history. But it gets sedimented very effectively in the time of Altekar, that is in 1927-28, where he sees women entirely within the context of the family. It is a completely middle-class, upper-caste notion of the women's question. It has hardly anything on the working women, and it constructs this powerful rhetorical history which then is the one we have inherited. Altekar is a legatee of the 19th century, but he is a constructor of it in terms of history. Up until that time nobody had written a history, they wrote essays and things like that - but nobody had written a history. The book that he writes, *The Position and Status of Women in Ancient India*, is designed as a piece of history. It became very powerful, was taken up by Hindu nationalists in a big way, and it then became the common sense of everybody. That is why I wrote the Altekarian Paradigm. Finally when *Everyday Lives, Everyday Histories* came out, and that was just four or five years ago, I merged the Altekarian essay with 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi' because it was part of the same journey of engaging with the past by the upper caste Indian male intellectual.

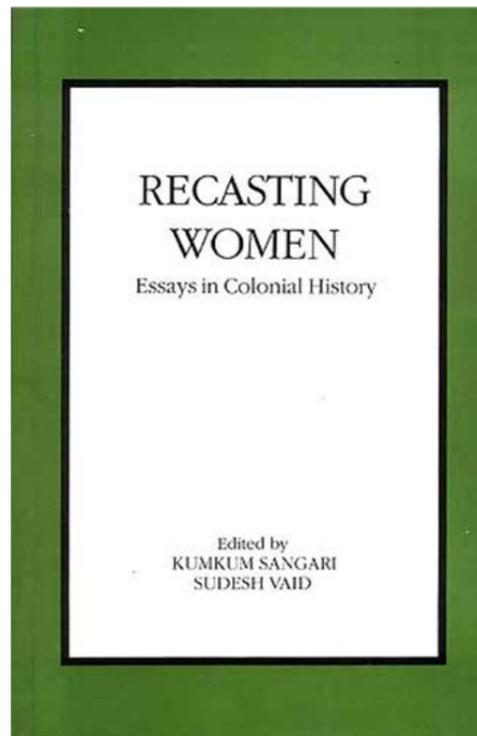
What was the reaction to this essay in the discipline?

Part of the reason why it was received well (only in certain circles though, that is left-democratic secular circles) was that by 1988, a space was emerging for thinking about the women's question in the context of nation. I had written an essay on the multiple versions of Sita. There are many versions; for instance, in the Pali version (of Sita), she and Ram are siblings. It was published in a journal which wouldn't have been read by the English audience. Even in my early works on Buddhism, there were only six pages on gender. I was working within the framework of social history, rather than gendered social history. But in 1981-83, there were the anti-dowry campaigns. The need to engage with culture was very strong from the feminist constituencies. It was all about culture; something like dowry was entirely within the realm of culture. What is it that made a woman feel that she could not speak about the oppressions in her husband's house? I remember, at the end of a very passionate demonstration in the Subzi Mandi area, some young friends asked me, "Tell us what is there in this culture that says that a woman cannot leave her husband's home?". We were already dealing with the power and passion of that question because culture was something that we were constantly engaging with. At that stage, I wrote the essay 'Women in Early Buddhism', which was published in *Manushi*. I en-

joyed writing that piece. I also wrote the essay on the way Sita appears in myth and literature, and I ended on a very depressing note. There were multiple versions circulating, including ones in which Sita does not give her children the patrilineal name, and she says that they are the grandsons of Janak and the nephews of Lakshman. But she blocks off Ram. And she makes statements like 'I will never go back to Rama's house' - she says this to Valmiki who is telling her to go back to her husband. The Jain version also has a very interesting take in which Sita leaves, and become a Jain Bhikkuni. She plucks off every single hair off her head, so for her even the pain of doing that is better than the humiliation of going back to Rama's house. I ended that essay by saying that all that is available to women is to choose to die with dignity since they can't claim the right to live with dignity. It was a very depressing note to say the least. I think I had done that essay in 1983. So then one was writing in a less 'feeling' kind of way, and there was more of deconstructing the ways in which hegemonic positions out there were circulating. As a consequence, some space was available for thinking about gender in different ways. 1988 is already six or seven years after that movement has taken root. Placing these issues on the map was quite important. The essay on Altekar was published in the *Social Scientist*, and then picked up by people and translated into various languages.

How did the Recasting Women moment happen?

The anti-dowry movement was very powerful in Delhi in 1981/ 82 - a series of very violent dowry related murders had taken place. The campaigns did not originate from those of us who were in the university.



They were originating from the women's groups which had taken root in south Delhi. Urvashi Butalia was part of a women's group which created a play called 'Om Swaha' on the dowry issue in which Anuradha Kapur and Maya Rao were also involved. Now as I said, culture was at the heart of looking at the question of gender, and demonstrations meant that women from Indraprastha College, Miranda House and other colleges across north campus would all congregate. I think the first big demonstration was in Model Town, and a number of these dowry killings had happened in North Delhi for some reason. Sudesh Vaid was very active - by this time we were all coming out of the Civil rights movement, and the Democrat-

ic rights movement. Sudesh and I were definitely coming from there, and so we go into dealing with gender very much from the post-emergency moment. When the dowry demonstrations happened, we were all in it at the same time. And so IP College takes on this discussion around culture - it was, interestingly, in the English department with Kumkum Sangari, Sudesh Vaid and Neeraj Malik as the central figures in this discussion. They also did a conference in IP College called 'Women and Culture', where I was a discussant and presented my essay on women and Buddhism. I wrote the piece on Sita after that. When *Women and Culture* came out, it included this earlier essay of mine on Sita which I had written in 1983. It was mimeographed. It was not published at that stage but now it has been published by the Research centre at SNDT Mumbai. That was the ground from which *Recasting Women* was born, because many people who had participated in that conference then stayed on to be part of this collection of essays. Sudesh and Kumkum must have decided at some point to float this collection. By then Kali for Women had been set up, and Urvashi and Kumkum were already friends as they were in University together and they were also part of the group that had created 'Om Swaha'. They were classmates at the MA level, and they had known each other for many years. In a sense, the women's movement in the University and the publishing house that had just come up, were happening simultaneously, the interaction between the two and the activism on the ground, were actually the connecting links. 'Om Swaha' was being performed on and off the campus, and the cast was a rolling one. Maya Rao played the bride in one play, but somebody else would play the bride if she was unavailable. So there was a lot of interaction, and the women's movement was in that sense the connecting force. Sudesh and Kumkum then started inviting essays for the proposed collection; they started with some of the people who had contributed to the earlier *Women and Culture* volume (unpublished at that time), and Sudesh was the one who brought in people like Sumanto Banerjee who was in the PUDR. Partha Chatterjee was brought in then too; in my view though his essay is celebrated and cited widely he reduced the women's question to a very Bhadrak view of it. But the introductory essay by Sudesh and Kumkum was fantastic: you can see that from the way it was framed - political economy is actually the base from which you need to look at gender.

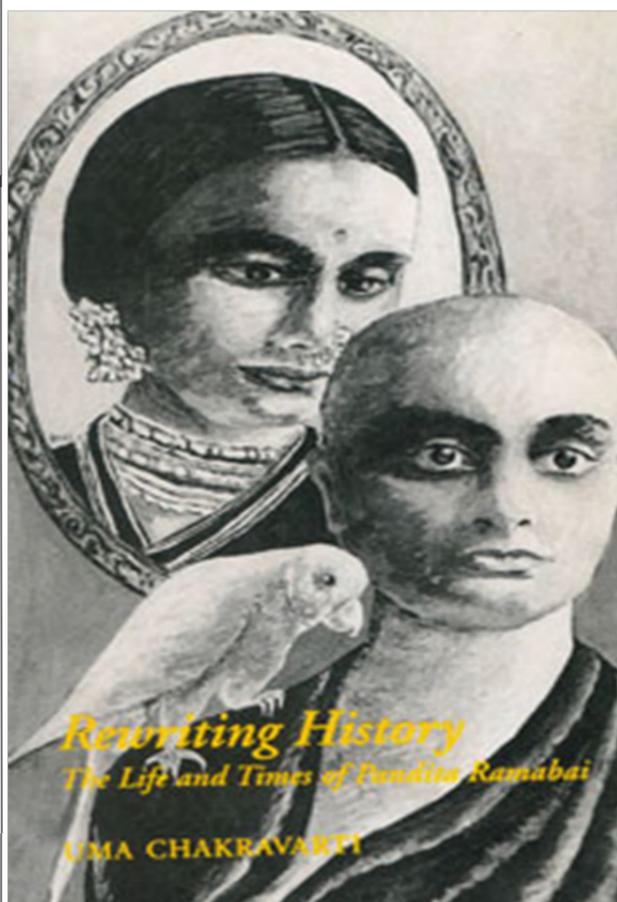
This introductory essay of *Recasting Women* was very well grounded in things like land relations. It was very much two literature persons engaging with culture but also putting history into it in the wider sense of the term. I was going through a very hard time at that stage, and I was supposed to write but I wasn't sort of getting off the ground. And then Partha Chatterjee's essay came in, and so did Lata Mani's. Both were part of the deconstruction stuff that became so popular at one time, that colonial power constructs everything. It's a position that the women's movement and feminist academicians have held for a long time - that history is played on the body of women, which beyond a point is not useful in my opinion. Anyway, Chatterjee had given in his essay but then I was told to also get on with writing a piece on the 19th century since I was also interested in the way the upper caste new elites were framing early Indian history and perhaps that would make for a different reading of what was happening in the 19th century.

'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi' comes from a completely different end, and because I can never write anything brief I wrote virtually a full fledged monograph. I could have done a book out of it. I had 230 pages of hand-written text that was originally produced, and Sudesh and Kumkum had a fit. They said, "We can't print this whole essay!" I said that I was going through a bad time and they could do what they liked, so they reduced it to the length that it is. If you read Partha Chatterjee's essay and mine, you might see some fairly strong dissonance. It depends on whether you can read it or not. Most people are so overwhelmed by Partha Chatterjee's position of the 'Inner' and the 'Outer', the 'Spiritual' and so on that they probably think we are saying the same thing since most people like 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi' but they also treat Chatterjee's piece as canonical so they think that the two pieces are part of the same line of thinking, which of course they are not. But the book was assembled very carefully. For instance, the peasant women question in Kapil Kumar's essay 'Rural Women in Awadh 1917-1947'. Sumanto's own piece is very fresh and nice because he actually criticizes the Bhadrakok investment in defining culture. It's about the way in which language and culture was constructed for the Bhadrakok women by excising those elements which could not be accommodated in the new genteel Bhadrakok culture, and so the popular had to be excised. The introductory essay was absolutely fantastic because it actually did the job of putting gender in its larger structural framework very powerfully. So that's how that book happened. When it was published in 1988, it was like a pioneer, and it has remained a classic. The larger framework and the canvas was not something that we had unfolded before, and that happened with this book. These two women sat together in the Kali for Women office for days together writing that introduction. It was quite amazing. The kind of grounding that the gender question has here is, I think, unparalleled in any collection.

You then move to the 19th century, and Pandita Ramabai. How did that happen and why?

By the late 1980s, I was actually struggling quite strongly with getting out of the middle-class woman as a framework. I had ended 'Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?' with the question of 'where is the dasi in that constructions of the 19th century men on women in early India?'. She does not exist there. I was trying to look at a history which went beyond the Bhadrakok and its formation. But at the same time, I was looking at my ancient India material along with my Buddhist texts. I remember writing an essay on the Dasa-karmakaras in the mid-eighties, which means that I had already gone into this question of looking at history from the bottom-end. Questions of social history were very important, and I was teaching the new University course that had come into existence in 1983. It was entirely shaped by a social formations framework, with questions of slavery, servitude and labour dominating many of the courses; all of that was very much circulating in our conversations. A group of about fifteen of us sat together, and put that new syllabus into place. I believe it's one of the best history syllabi in the world. I used to teach European history and Ancient Greece and Rome from the social formations course. There was a lot of really good history that I was reading, for instance all the stuff on the French revolution which were very interesting in terms of opening up issues of the mob, the peasantry, different segments of the underclass in relation to the revolution. There was a lot of writing on slavery by the finest European historians. In a sense, I was transposing some of that stuff and I wrote this essay on Dasas and Karmakaras, on bondage and servitude in ear-

ly India in the mid-eighties. So, questions of caste and class were beginning to figure. But it was still class and servitude, which meant that one did not actually look at the caste question in this framework. By the late eighties, the caste question was actually hitting us in a big way, and in 1990, Mandal happened. Mandal was the moment for dramatically looking at caste. But I had never actually lost the caste question in my work. The caste question was very much there in my Buddhism book, and I was looking at caste and class as they appear in the Buddhist texts. By the 90s, I could see that there were strong connections between caste and gender but I did not know how to explore this. So from roughly the late eighties onwards, I was trying to think of how I could bring caste and gender together. And it was not easy because the bulk of what has survived in the ancient India sources is Brahmanical; some of it is in the Buddhist texts. But Brahmanical texts are not sensitive to the mute classes, and one had to figure out questions of how these classes get represented in the Brahmanical texts, if at all they do. One had to constantly read texts against the grain.



Further Bhadrakok history was dominating the scene, and because of the interest in the caste question and irritation with the idea that Bengal had no caste, the natural move seemed to me that perhaps I would be able to formulate better if I dealt with a thick archive rather than a thin archive. Modern India gave me much better resources. I often say this - the question of gender forces you to be interdisciplinary, forces you to move from rigid periodization and even more rigid notions of specialization. There was no reason for me to be stuck in Ancient Indian history just because I was trained in Ancient Indian history. That cannot be my defining relation with history. I was damned if I was going to study Bengal at all, because of their virtuous claim about caste not existing there (Shekhar Bandhopadhyaya's fine work on caste which demolishes that position was not so well known then). In Maharashtra, there were already caste studies with the works of Gail Omvedt and Rosalind O-Hanlon and others. They had opened up the field of caste history in western India. And I had ended 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi' with the writing on Sarla Devi and Pandita Ramabai. I was also quite interested in Ramabai because of the tense relationship between us as secularists and people who are religious. I admired Ramabai, but I also wanted to know why

she needed to become Christian at all. That's how it started in my head. So in a sense, it was engaging with her as the figure through whom you could look at the 19th century to explore caste and gender together. She is the central anchor of that book, and also the tailpiece of the book that I wrote. It was an attempt to look at the relations between caste, class and gender all together. So that is what led me to write the book *Rewriting History*. That is where I make the slightly 'grander' claim of actually rewriting history. If you look at the introduction, I am making a dig at the Orientalists, and their constructions of history as beginning with the colonial period, which I was very irritated with as it erased a long history of contradictions, in fact it erased the long history of before we became a colony. It was as if history begins with colonization and is only 300 years old. *Rewriting History* therefore begins in the 18th century during the Peshwai and before the British got a foothold in the Poona region in western India

Your book *Gendering Caste* represents the new emphasis on caste in disciplines across the board. Some historians have argued that history has never looked at caste. Do you see your book as filling that gap?

I think, firstly, we need to knock out that claim. I don't think anyone can say that—that there was no work on caste. That seems to be too blunt a claim. Of course, I think historians have been confused about the relationship between caste and class. If you look at the history of ancient India, RS Sharma's book on the Shudras was published in 1956. He is among the first generation of post-independence scholars. It's the first time social history is being opened up, and the frame of nationalist history is being dumped. There are three books that came out between 1956 and 1960. There is this history of the Shudras and a classic, an essay by D.D. Kosambi's called 'Caste and Class'. Devraj Chanana also wrote a valuable little monograph on slavery. That was a very powerful moment in the writing of ancient Indian history. Kosambi understood caste and class distinctively and he also saw the relationship between the two. The problem with some historians is that they would explore caste, but they would also slip it into class. There was the distinction that you needed to maintain before you could bring them together in trying to understand them as systems. Perhaps you could say that they were simplifying. But the Marxist paradigm of putting everything under class was an issue. But there were a lot of people who were looking at caste. For instance, the work that Shekhar Bandhopadhyay has done on Bengal, the very same Bengal that claimed to have no caste. He has done so much work on caste in the eighties and nineties. Where will you place Rosalind O Hanlon's work? Is that not work on caste? Quite a lot of work done on south India has been on caste. I don't accept this claim at all. But substantively, I think this was the critical question. You have histories of caste, and you have histories of class. The attempt at trying to bring the two together, however, is probably weak. The Cambridge school would do the caste history type of things, and the Marxists would do class history. But Kosambi's 'Caste and Class' is a very good essay. It is there in B.D Chattopadhyay's collection of papers by Kosambi collected from different journals and put into a single volume. I have found Kosambi very important in thinking about caste. What is really missing, in my opinion, is the relationship between caste, class and gender being worked out in a systematic way.

That is what has been absent. Between 1990 and 1994, I had the Nehru fellowship, and I worked on Ramabai which did allow me to look at the relation between caste and class and gender. So finally writing *Gendering Caste* was a political imperative. It was written for women's studies students, but it was also written for the younger generation of Marxists - that you can't struggle on these three areas as discrete entities. You have to struggle against all three simultaneously. The expression that is often used is that caste is a 'Samanti Avshesh', which means that it's the residue of feudal thinking and when the revolution comes, feudalism, caste and gender will go and everything will be fine. My point is that it will not, because the link between them is so strong, that if you struggle only against class, you are not going to end anything at all. So it was meant for the activists as well as the women's studies students. It was because the 'interdisciplinarity' of the discipline of Women's Studies meant that one looked at the different axes of stratification also as something which needed to be looked at in an integrated way. So bringing all three together was very important for me.

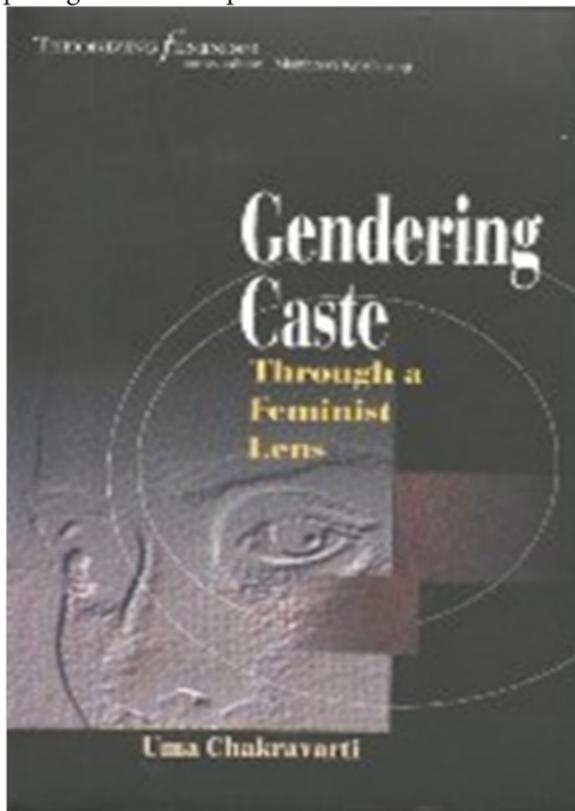
As an upper caste woman yourself, have you ever felt inhibited by a certain kind of identitarian politics?

You have to take it on frontally. The argument I am making is that you can't understand caste simply through its axis of just the experience of caste. Caste is, in a fundamental sense, there as part of the structure also. Identity can only come as a consequence of the stigmatization and hierarchisation that the structures of inequality create. The experience of caste identity is very powerful, there is no doubt about it. It is very significant when you experience caste as stigma and humiliation, but there is a structural dimension to it too. Those who are engaging in questions of identity are also going to question the structures that also under-gird the situation in which you experience history differently, according to where you are located. You aren't really going to get to the root of the complexity of the situation, and to that extent therefore, the

struggles against it are going to be that much more partial. My work on gendering caste has not been subjected to that kind of criticism, as far as I know

But some people were very critical of your film at a conference in Pune, where you showed A Quiet Little Entry.

That was very interesting because the film was on an upper caste Brahmin woman's failure to live a political life even as others were able to do so. It was a conference on caste and gender; there was a workshop for younger people, and there were a couple of people who were very unmoved by the protagonist's attempts to live life on her own terms.



One young woman took a very blunt position, which Anand of Navayana Press also did in a review, saying 'I don't relate to the oppression of this Brahmin woman.' So it was a good opening debate. I said, 'That's fine, you don't have to relate to her, as long as you are not going to say that her experience of oppression doesn't exist at all.' For political work, you may create a set of priorities of what

you will struggle against in terms of a sequence. But you can't turn around and say, 'This oppression alone is oppression, nothing else is oppressive' because subjectively experienced it is. So in that sense I think there was an interesting debate that took place. And maybe, a veiled statement was being made there - that I, as a Brahmin woman, had made that film. But in the two days of the discussion itself, I did not sense this kind of tension.

For me, the most interesting position on the caste question comes from Anand Teltumbde who never forgets the class dynamics in the way he handles the caste questions. He does not fall into the trap of saying "I occupy this unique place and nobody else can understand this position". It's also a phase which people may go through. They need to have space to be able to articulate their pain as their own pain. And oppressions happen at different levels. One Dalit intellectual had come up with a somewhat simplistic formulation. He used to say that the upper caste woman and the Dalit man have a natural alliance because they are both oppressed by Brahmanical patriarchy. But that is not true, they are certainly not oppressed in the same way. Upper caste women can themselves be strongly invested in maintaining the caste order—most often they are. The question that I should not write about caste has not been directly posed like that to me. I have had more questions directly posed from some Marxist young men who say, 'If you bring in gender you will break the class question.' I don't believe that any contradiction is primary or any is secondary. All contradictions are inter-connected. Once you identify the contradictions, you have to struggle against them all simultaneously. In a way what I am saying is that you must not separate the caste question from the gender question—if you do you will understand neither system.

The second part of the interview will be carried in the following journal. We are extremely grateful to Dr. Uma Chakravarti for making the time to do this interview. We'd also like to thank Dr. Ashley Tellis who was present during most of the interview, and who made the interjection about the Pune conference.

PROFILE

Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression

Women against Sexual Violence and State Repression (WSS) is a non-funded network of several women's rights, Dalit's rights, and civil liberties organizations across India. It was started in November 2009, as a platform of intervention, to seek ways of resisting the violence that is perpetrated on sections of society, especially, women by the State, non-state actors and in other structural forms that are experienced at the level of the everyday.

The WSS network has functioned as a strong, unified voice against the kind of arbitrary power that is vested in the Armed forces and the police, which is exercised with impunity against women, so-called extremists, and human lives on the margins. The network also challenges the complicity between the State and private-corporate interests which gets foregrounded specially in the repression of movements against land-acquisition. They have been strident in their protest against draconian laws like the AFSPA, and have focused on the kind of effect it has on the lives of women. Repealing the AFSPA has been one of their main demands, along with punitive legal action against the perpetrators of such violence.

They have been very active in organizing events and meetings around issues of state-inflicted violence, and the plight of women. In November 2009, they had a two day solidarity meeting in Imphal in support of the struggles of women in the North-east against state-violence. The meet coincided with the 10th anniversary of Irom Sharmila's fast. In December 2009, they held a two-day meeting in Raipur, Chhatisgarh in solidarity with the women of Chhatisgarh, against state-sponsored violence. They have also come out with fact finding reports, including a report on the gang-rape of a Kondh adivasi woman by police in Gajapathy, Orissa, and a report on the problems being faced by Adivasi and other women in Jharkhand. On 30th October 2010, they held a symposium in Delhi to enhance the legal understanding of medical and forensic evidence collection in sexual assault cases.

They can be contacted at againstsexualviolence@gmail.com.

Poetry

Memory

Memories that grapple bone
(first straddling desert-dry and prone
meat that lies
on greying streets)
infects the thinning marrow
of a halved and faltering self.

Memory's the sooty grime
That twists through grin-lined
slaves of imperial time;
the chipped encrusted claw that traces
weary cords that wire the soul
to shiftless, siteless prison holes.

Memory's the cruel friend
of wandering minds double bent
with half-knowledge of eternity
minutely spun from truth and lie,
from opened, unsexed limbs and minds
that flushed and flowed like wine.

Memory mist's an aging whore
infected beyond tender cure
with habits of indignant deaths.
So dog-eared smiles and carrion breath
Wreath life-infected eyes now deeply holed
in by time's festering mould.

But didn't we know that memory
is what makes history
a whore?
And didn't we know then as now,
that without memory's snuffing prow
we are naught?

So live in remembrance.

- Karen Gabriel

Dr. Karen Gabriel teaches English Literature at St. Stephens college.

Language

The new tongue feels
foreign in my mouth
It tastes strange –
Hot and flat and more bitter than sweet
And the more I masticate and try to swallow,
Unruly flavours rear their heads

However hard I try, the words slip and stumble
And I feel trapped in barbed crevices
I never knew existed.

-Tharini

Tharini recently completed her MA in English at the EFLU, Hyderabad

Review

DevD

-Sravanthi Kollu

Anurag Kashyap's Dev D (2009) is treated as a modern rendition of the Devdas story. However, its success lies not in its modernization, but in the film's ability to turn the Devdas narrative on its head, and central to this is the film's redefining of the relationships between the three protagonists: Devadas, Paro, and Chandramukhi. Dev D retains the idea of the Devdas story, but transforms its central premise: a love that is doomed because it is socially thwarted.

In the original narrative, Devdas is a weak-willed and self-destructive hero who lacks the courage to defy social norms and marry Paro, his childhood love. Unable to move on from the failure of the relationship, he spends his life pining for her. Paro is marked by her enduring love for Devdas, while the courtesan Chandramukhi falls in love with Devdas in spite of his hatred of her and his love for Paro.

Dev D's Dev is marked not by a weak will but by arrogance and jealousy. The blossoming of his relationship with childhood friend Paro is defined by their awakening desire for each other. Dev decides to return to Punjab after seeing a nude photo of Paro that he coaxes her to send and in a defining moment, asks Paro if she "touches herself". After Dev's arrival, their attempts to find space to have sexual intercourse are thwarted by the presence of relatives and in her quest to find that elusive space, Paro is confronted by a male servant at her house who jealously refuses to let her use his room for her relationship with another man. Later, the servant's remarks about her "uncontainable" sexuality provoke Dev's jealousy.

The first crucial turn in the narrative comes from the reason for Dev spurning Paro's desire to marry him. Jealous about Paro's sexual relationship with the servant, he tells Paro she is not beautiful or rich enough for his family. His father later chastises him for his decision and says he had hoped she would become his daughter-in-law. In thus locating the reason for the unsuccessful relationship between Dev and Paro in Dev's own arrogance and his inability to come to terms with Paro's sexuality, the movie marks a crucial departure from the Devdas narrative.

The second turn in the narrative comes from the depiction of Dev and Paro's relationship after her marriage. Dev continues to obsess about Paro, drinking and tripping on drugs. When they meet in his shabby room at a hotel in Delhi, Paro responds to his confession of love by saying that he never really loved her, and that he is too self-centred to be capable of love. She also claims to be happy in her marriage and to Dev's snide remark that she should have been at home "climbing" on her husband, she retorts that she doesn't really have to mount him. Such a construction of Paro is a radical departure from the emphasis placed on Paro's virginity after marriage in the Devdas narrative. Thus, in Dev D she is portrayed as someone who has allowed herself to move on from her relationship with Dev, perhaps because of her understanding that he is too self-centred to fulfil any promise of love. Also, the erstwhile lovers do not meet as individuals who are bound by social norms which they cannot transcend to claim their relationship.

Until the point Dev meets Chanda, he largely remains a person wasting away because of what he considers his love for Paro. Chanda in Dev D has a background story that contextualizes the underlying pathos in her life and this prevents her from becoming a re-creation of the courtesan whose pain can be romanticized and situated in her love for Devdas.

Unlike Chandramukhi, Chanda in Dev D is shown not singing about love, but offering phone sex to a client while Dev waits in her room for her to be free. Chanda's position as a sex worker is placed firmly within the economies of sex work. The relationships she shares with her pimp and the woman running the brothel indicate both the sense of community she feels with them and her lack of freedom as a sex worker when she has to confront their economic and personal problems with her relationship with Dev.

The real mark of transformation in Dev's character comes when he declares to Chanda that he never really loved Paro. That dialogue marks his ultimate departure from the Devdas figure; this is a Dev who has finally realized the reality of his relationship with Paro and is willing to build on the relationship that he and Chanda have come to share. He is no longer the pathos-filled lover who drives himself, and others, to illness and death in pursuit of a woman he did not have the courage to marry.

Sravanthi is a PhD candidate at the University of Minnesota.

Graffiti



You do not do, you do not do

Any more, black shoe

In which I have lived like a foot

For thirty years, poor and white,

Barely daring to breathe or Achoo.

- Sylvia Plath, 'Daddy'.

The Vice Chancellor and Academic Council in Delhi University recently took the decision to remove the A.K. Ramanujan essay 'Three Hundred Ramayanas- Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation; from the B.A syllabus. This decision disregards the stand that the Department of History has taken in favour of teaching the essay, and also overrules the opinion of the majority of the members of the expert committee formed to look into the matter.

This is not the first instance of right arm-twisting in matters of education. Earlier, in Mumbai University the Shiv Sena forced the administration to remove Rohinton Mistry's *Such a Long Journey* from their syllabus because it was deemed "offensive".

'Alternate' versions of epics are often the ones that centre the voices of female protagonists and others thought of as disempowered. These versions are key to dismantling the hegemonic power that certain mythological texts have. The administration's decision to remove the text indicates its spineless proximity to the Hindu right, which first made the demand for the removal of this text on the flimsy ground that it could hurt religious sentiments. When the Academic council removed this text, it is obvious that the only sentiment that it cares about are male, upper caste and Hindu.

There is a petition being circulated which demands the reinstatement on the essay- please sign at www.petitiononline.com/ramanuj/petition/.html

Classic Re-visited

Pakeezah

-Prof. Nandini Chandra

Pakeezah (1971) is the story of a courtesan Sahib Jan (Meena Kumari, hereafter MK) who finds love on a train. In fact, the encounter with the lover Saleem (a forest officer played by Raj Kumar) takes place while she is asleep. In the most famous scene from the film, Saleem, enthralled by her gently rocking feet that touch him as they rock, leaves a note tucked between her toes that advises her not to plant her feet on the ground as they are so beautiful.

Michael J Anderson has credited Kamal Amrohi, the director, writer and producer of Pakeezah (1971) with the creation of a commercial epic form with a capacity for interiority and disjuncture, distinct from the Hollywood classic with its overarching imperative of narrative comprehensibility. Already, the Hindi film with its playback singing pushes diegetic sound practices into a different aesthetic format, described by Altman as supra-diegetic. According to Altman's definition, in the supra-diegetic musical moments, the image becomes subordinate to the musical soundtrack to create "a 'place' of transcendence where time stands still, where contingent concerns are stripped away to reveal the essence of things". Even though the song seems to be emerging from the characters, the accompanying orchestra and the fact that professional playback singers have sung it produces an invisible source. It is this disjunctural format which Amrohi seizes and consolidates with little loss to commercial intelligibility. This means that Amrohi's mise-en-scene - with its use of symbols and the elaborate and ornate set designs, long shots, and an editing where the continuity is more spaced out and mediated - is oriented to reveal a deep structure, without necessarily producing alienation. In fact the spectacular set designs, colours, costumes, props, song and dance movements keep the audience mesmerized as they should. What makes Pakeezah so compelling for me is precisely this need to convey the disjunctive via a story telling format that is not yet alienated from alienation.



This might involve the conventional arsenal of affected speech and tragic affect especially through the extra-diegetic characterization of Sahib Jan aka Pakeezah by MK, the real life spouse/lover (of Kamal Amrohi), alcoholic, poet and femme fatale, but the affectation does not in any way interfere with the meaning of the film. Unlike Bhansali's Devdas where Shahrukh is bigger than Devdas, MK despite mobilizing all sorts of signifiers from her personal narrative is contained within the plot structure. The fact that the film was completed over a decade, and that when shooting resumed after ten years, MK is too ill to dance (Padma Khanna was used for the dancing shots) and is mostly lounging around, adds to the overall languor of the narrative. When her nawabi suitor asks her to sit comfortably on the bed, she obliges. Her "pak"-ness or purity is not due to her virginal status, but a different order of purity, something that is antithetical to naivety or innocence. When the nawab complains jokingly that he feels she is stolen property, she requests him to change the topic. The reach

of the erotic need not touch the soul. When the nouveau rich thekedar is sent to rape her, the point is not that the snake protects her chastity, but that he (the thekedar) reveals that he has been sent by her very own family to teach her a lesson. In every gesture, Sahib Jan is aware of the exchange relations she inhabits, and her allure emerges from wanting to resist that. Thus refusing to entertain, not responding to the orders from her female superiors, cultivating a personal style that is aloof and indifferent instead of warm and giggly, are modes of such resistance. For instance, when she visits her best friend to confide about the note that her anonymous lover has tucked in between her toes in the famous train scene from the film, there is anger, not despair at what the friend says about the note not being meant for Sahib Jan the courtesan. Unlike the more conventional narrative of the courtesan in Hindi films, where blackmail is the motive behind the final revelation, here the fear of rejection is overcome early in the film to reveal to her lover the truth of her status as tawaif. True to its deep structure, both lovers in the film are okay with this fact. Saleem, Saheb Jan's lover is in fact willing to take on his family, not simply the world. But as the plot unravels, we find that the ideal is not simply to find a heroic man who will stand up to society to save the tawaif. In fact, the film undermines what seems like its original and ostensible premise of rescue and rehabilitation of the fallen woman by taking it beyond individual lovers and their immediate kin.

This brings me to my favourite scene in the whole film, situated in the most marvellous long shot of a hilltop mosque where Saleem takes her for an impromptu marriage. According to the nikah ritual, the maulvi asks her name. When she does not reply, Saleem tells the maulvi that her name is Pakeezah. She is shocked by the contradiction between this naming and the voices in her head that are calling her all kinds of names. The maulvi then asks her if she will accept (kabool hai) Saleem. Saleem tries to prompt her but the maulvi shuts him up. When he asks for the last time, she gets up and screams, and runs like a mad banshee down the hill, hurtling down the steps, hurling away the burqa and wailing the dirge of nahin (NO). The power of the cinematic is deeply etched within the new womanly subjectivity elaborated through the film's spatio-temporal movement, one that refuses rehabilitation in such an emphatic manner. The point is not simply that she is concerned for the well-being of her potential husband, but that the non-diegetic voices in her head, drowning out the maulvi's voice, enable her to recognize that her reality is much larger than the discourse of love and aawargi (vagabondage or romance) to which the extreme plight of womanhood pushes her. The subsequent self-realization is articulated in terms of death in life, of being sick to death of the deception of the market which requires women to kill their souls in order to reproduce themselves endlessly.

Even as the film is about a traditional context, it resists the tag of a period film. The punctuating grammar of the train shrieking over the bridge situates it firmly within the dynamics of modernity. The fact that the residual structure of the kotha or brothel house is used repeatedly to invoke this modernity makes it even more deadly. The train might be the source of new possibilities of womanly freedom and romance as the most famous scene from the film attests, and the brothel, the daldal or swamp, yet the two together constitute a totality in the shrieking analogy of the train and the woman. *Daldal par kohre se bani hawali hai, yesh kisi ko panah nahin de sakti, badi khatarnak jagah hai.* (this is a mansion of fog made on swamp, it cannot offer refuge to anyone, it is a very dangerous place!) Even as the resolution is a happy one in that the baarat or groom's party comes to marry her in the brothel, it is also one that acknowledges patricide in various forms. The dying father and the pater familias escorted by the police moreover facilitate the marriage through their death.

Prof Nandini Chandra teaches in the Department of English, Delhi University.

<http://genderstudiesgroup.wordpress.com>