

# **5<sup>TH</sup> SOUTH ASIAN HISTORY CONFERENCE, 2017**

**on**

## **Women in South Asia: History, Challenges and Potentialities**

The Department of History, Punjabi University, Patiala, Punjab (India) will hold its 5<sup>th</sup> South Asian History Conference on 10-12 November, 2017 at Punjabi University Campus. This three day conference aims to bring together historians, academicians, research scholars working on the countries of South Asia viz. India, Pakistan, Nepal, Maldives, Bhutan, Sri Lanka, Afghanistan and Myanmar to cover the gap in South Asian Historical Studies.

The study of a fragment of human past i.e. doing of men in power alone does not yield a balanced picture of society, polity and economy whether at regional, national or international level. Study of women is also required as 'women have history, women are in history'. The study and research on woman's life, status and role in the history of South Asia has thus become a subject of wide interest. Social scientists have started giving increased attention to this subject as they have rightly stated that their study of socio-cultural history of a country is not possible and will not be complete without understanding the position and role of women constituting half the population. However the study of women at times is perceived, often unconsciously as a threat to the established social order and often raises fundamental but uncomfortable and inconvenient questions.

Women are indispensable to society, but from time immemorial they have been discriminated against in all spheres-at birth, marriage, education, employment and even in death. In history, reference to women appears only as a part of description of upper/royal class and symbolizes more often a mystified image or a self-denying or suffering type. Recorded texts have generally essentialized women as devoted and self-sacrificing yet occasionally rebellious and dangerous. Texts on religion, law, politics and education have carried different pronouncements for men depending on caste, class, age and religion. By contrast, women's differences were overshadowed by their biological characteristics and the subordinate, supportive roles that they were destined to play. Occasionally Indian texts and historical narratives singled out one woman for special attention but

usually this was because her accomplishments were significant by male standards. Topics that were interwoven with women's lives-household and agricultural technology, religious rituals and sentiments, fertility and family size, furnishing, jewellery and clothing, inheritance and property rights were largely overlooked. Thus women have long been pushed to the seams of history. The neglect of women as conscious acting subjects, tends to distort a proper understanding of historical processes and social reality.

The early Vedic period was free from many of the social evils that later entered into the Indian society. At that time women were assigned a high status in the society. But during the later Vedic period, women lost that status and became a subject of protection. Thereafter a succession of invasions and influx of foreigners added to the political misfortunes followed by long spells of anarchy and lawlessness that had disastrous effects on the society including women. It became imperative to protect women from abductors thus necessitating a curtailment in the movements and freedom of women. The Muslim invasions in the medieval period added to the woes of women in terms of purdah system, polygamy, child marriage, sati and enforced widowhood. Other social evils further degraded their position in society. The Bhakti and Sufi saints as well as the Sikhs Gurus raised a banner of protest against the exploitation of the womenfolk.

It is in the nineteenth century that women in the Indian subcontinent started attracting historians' attention as objects of history and getting acknowledged in the historical accounts. While colonial histories primarily focused on the civilizing mission of the British as rescuing women from their own oppressive society and culture, the social reformers' accounts treat women as the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. Women were treated as integral to the class and not a separate category by the Marxist historians. The new challenges to this existing historical understanding began to make appearance in India in the 1980's in the form of subaltern and feminist historiography. However, women's subaltern status did not constitute the main forte of subaltern studies in South Asia for a long time. This lacuna was filled in by feminist historiography.

Rural women's role which makes an invaluable contribution to societal development has never really received the kind of recognition it merits. It becomes imperative to examine whether the process of modernisation initiated through modern agricultural technology, social reforms and legislations led to

marginalisation or liberalisation of rural-urban women alike. Education made the women enlightened and they joined new profession and some of them also use print media to voice their opinions. The vernacular print media tried to raise the public consciousness about women's appropriate behaviour, attitude and position in society and the role education was to play in the sculpting of that role.

The educated men and women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century established their new organisations and associations for women emancipation. These later became a platform for the women to participate in public life and the freedom struggle in the Indian subcontinent. The number of women participants in the politics of the day might have been small, but was of profound significance. Politics completely altered the goals and activities of the organised women. Women were amazed to find political participation approved of by men who wanted wives to behave in homes like the perfect wives in religious texts. The independence of India came with the partition of Punjab and Bengal. The latter was a traumatic experience especially for the women being the more vulnerable gender. A closer look at the predicament of women at that time raises the curtain to the scene of bizarre male violence on the one hand, and a nerve-wrecking dismembering of the woman on the other.

For the women of South Asia, the post colonial period has been a mixed theory of hope and despair. The approach of the state to women and development has undergone a dramatic change. It has moved from a perspective where it took a predominantly welfare approach and looked at women as mothers and home makers, to an efficiency approach recognising the need for empowerment for women. However though we have a plethora of legislation on a wide range of issues- dowry, child marriage, female foeticide but laws are generally not implemented. Though we have travelled a long way and gender has entered the domain of public consciousness, yet the imperatives for creating awareness about issues and their implications becomes all the more important. The objective of the conference is not merely to locate woman protagonists but to raise the question of gender within the discipline of history and other social sciences.

The problems of the present have their roots in the past. To understand adverse sex ratios, dowry, exclusion of women from land rights, we have to turn to history. Gender relations cannot be studied in isolation but have to be looked at in the context of structures and processes in which they are embedded. It is pertinent

to point out that the larger issues on the recent discourse on triple *talaq* is the struggle for gender rights in a diversely patriarchal society and safeguarding religious and cultural identities that in large part stand out as different in their rituals, traditions and practices of marriage, divorce, inheritance, dress and reproductive life. Patriarchy as a structure of power has sustained oppressive gender relations through control of women's labour, reproductive powers and women's sexuality. Oppressive practices such as the denial of property rights to women emphasis on virginity at marriage, restrictions on remarriage of widows are still prevalent.

The aim of the conference is to understand the changes and continuities in the lives of women in South Asia from historical perspective. Using gender as lens of examining the past we will examine how politics of race, class, caste and religion affected and continue to impact women in South Asian countries. We will reflect upon current debates within South Asian women's history in order to examine some of the issues and problems that arise in rewriting the past from a gendered perspective. The people of South Asia share a unique and civilisational heritage which is its core strength. It has enormous growth potential which cannot be fully tapped without involving women and ensuring their empowerment as an intrinsic and integral part of the process of development.

**Themes might include the following:**

- Women in the ancient period
- Women in the medieval period
- Women, Bhakti movement and Sufism
- Women and Customary Law
- Women and Social Reform Movements
- Women's Rights and Legislations regarding Women
- Women and Education
- Women, Politics and Activism
- Women and Freedom Struggle
- Women and Partition
- Women, Caste and Religion
- Rural and Urban Women
- Women, Family and Domesticity
- Women, Culture and Society

- Women and Economic Development
- Women Empowerment in the Post Colonial Period
- Women, Modernisation and Liberalization
- Women and Resistance in South Asia
- Women's Writings, Literature, Art and Media
- Gender Identity in Transition and Changing Gender Relations
- Gender Development and Globalization
- Gender History and Cultural Memory
- Emerging Trends in Women and Gender Studies.

➤ **Call for Abstracts**

The soft copy of the abstract with a maximum of **500 words**, double spaced (**in Times New Roman font size 12**) written in English should be sent for acceptance at [sahcptaabstracts@gmail.com](mailto:sahcptaabstracts@gmail.com) on or before **5 September, 2017**. After scrutiny of the abstracts the authors will be notified regarding the acceptance of papers on **20 September, 2017**.

➤ **Final Submission of Papers**

The soft copy of the full paper, double spaced (**in Times Roman on size 12**), within **15-20 pages** written in English should be sent at [sahcptapaper@gmail.com](mailto:sahcptapaper@gmail.com) . The deadline for paper submission is **25<sup>th</sup> October, 2017**.

➤ **Registration**

All participants are required to register. The scholars are required to register before or on 25 October, 2017. The registration fees (which includes accommodation and food for three days) for Indian Scholars is rupees 1250/-, for scholars of other countries is 50 USD. The registration fees for Indian research students are rupees 1000/-, for research student of other countries is 30 USD.

➤ **Mode of Payment**

The details regarding mode of payment will be conveyed shortly.

➤ **Accommodation**

The organisers will provide accommodation to the paper presenters only.

➤ **Publication**

The proceedings of the conference will be duly published by Publication Bureau, Punjabi University, Patiala.

➤ **Other Information**

Further details about the programme and sessions of the conference will be duly intimated.

➤ **Contact Information**

Send in your queries at [sahcptaqueries@gmail.com](mailto:sahcptaqueries@gmail.com)

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