

Search

HOME THE BOOK REVIEW ABOUT US PUBLICATIONS



BROWSE SUBSCRIBE ADVERTISE CONTACT US MY ACCOUNT

DONATE

PREVIOUS

Islam and Reproductive Behaviour

NEXT

‘Doing’ the History of Social Reform

### Free Review of the Week

SEPTEMBER 2023, VOLUME 47, NO 9



# ‘Women have History, Women are in History’

**Kalpana Kannabiran**

TOWARDS GENDER HISTORY: IMAGES, IDENTITIES AND ROLES OF NORTH INDIAN WOMEN by Kamlesh Mohan

*Aakar Books, 2008, 272 pp., 595*

OCTOBER 2008, VOLUME 32, NO 10

Using historical sources, including official and nonofficial, published and unpublished in combination with oral tradition and other sources, Kamlesh Mohan attempts an exploration of the varied



Depicting the Times

More free reviews

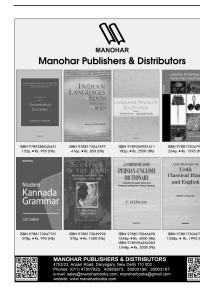
ADVERTISEMENT

formulations of culture and their interplay with economic forces from the colonial period to contemporary India. Through three sections, we journey through colonial Punjab, Sikh society, Jallianwala Bagh, Nehruvian utopias and globalization. The opening question in the first section, 'Reforming Women', 'what shall we do with religion?' (p. 21) sets the tone for an examination of the ways in which Sikh tradition conceptualizes women. Arguing that even while Sikh religious tradition presented some departures from Hinduism, its rootedness in brahmanical patriarchy on the one side, and the hegemony of the extremely patriarchal Jats within Sikhism on the other served to freeze and stereotype gender formations. This was further accentuated by the cultivation of a martial culture as a defining trait of the faith. At its originary moment, though, Sikhism launched a valiant drive to remove prejudice against women.

Protesting against exploitation, political abuse, social degradation, cultural anomie and the immiseration of the people, Guru Nanak was utterly conscious of the way in which all of this was linked to the exploitation of women and their vulnerability: (pp. 24–25) Babur has descended upon India, with the wedding party of lust and forcibly demands surrender of the bride. Decency and law have hidden themselves. The evil is strutting about in triumph. Mohammedan and Hindu priests are discarded; and Satan is solemnising the marriages. (Babarvani, cf. 25)

However, Kamlesh Mohan argues that while women's emancipation was articulated by the Sikh gurus, there was an equivocation that is reflected in the misogynist images of mother and bride, and the unabashed joy in bringing forth sons. This translates into practice with Sikh women subjected to a curious mix of brahmanical and Jat patriarchal norms and values systems, especially in matters of entitlements to property, marriage practices, parenting, fertility patterns, and work participation. The second chapter, 'Clamping Shutters and Valorising Women', discusses the transitions in agriculture in colonial Punjab and its implications for women. The adverse female sex ratio and qualities of passivity and docility which begins to get entrenched during this period coexisted with the image of the ever working, sturdy Punjabi wife, especially Jatti: domestic chores, training and scrubbing, nursing children, animal husbandry, agricultural labour—all of this and more. Colonial stereotypes were then pasted on to a society already interrogating its foundations through resistance and social reform, this critique being appropriated to justify colonial rule.

Against all of this, women like Laxmi Arya rejected the status of widows and forged a life in struggle and Gandhian satyagraha (pp. 89–90). Women poured in large numbers to oppose the Rowlatt Act. They fasted, held separate protest meetings and refused to light kitchen hearths (pp. 159–161). The Jallianwala Bagh massacre forced women to step out and cope with heightened trauma and abuse at the hands of colonial officers (p. 165). But we know through countless histories of women involved in struggle that eventually vision and mobility comes to rest in the kitchen, in the home, as Savitri, wife of a



DONATE

## ADVERTISEMENT



former Chief Minister of Punjab, Comrade Ramkishan said: 'We were useful for raising slogans as volunteers in nationalist agitations. When the time came to share political power, husbands, who were active in politics, told us, 'you the Queen of the domestic realm. Why do you soil your hands in dirty politics!' (p. 95)

The second section, 'New Images, Identities And Roles,' opens with an analysis of the popular Hindi magazine Stree Darpan. The image of women projected in its columns was complex and multilayered. While it provided a space to reconstruct middle-class womanhood, it did not lead to a dismantling of hegemonic structures or a radical transformation of worldviews, and failed to analyse the heterogeneity of women's oppression (p. 140).

The final section, 'Between Democracy and Globalisation,' moves completely out of Punjab and looks at Jawaharlal Nehru's vision of a democratic polity and the nature of women's oppression. An assessment of Nehru's contribution to women's emancipation, Kamlesh Mohan argues, must essentially focus on two aspects: the redefinition of the place of women and their liberation from the tyranny of patriarchal customs and conjugal relations; and the belief that equal rights for women, was the only road to their emancipation (pp. 218–219).

The narrative races breathlessly back and forth between historical periods, and between diverse sources and diverse movements, making it a trifle difficult to hold on to the thread of the arguments being posited. The last chapter on globalization is journalistic and out of place in this volume. But it could be argued that therein lies its merit, because it defies a linear reading, forcing the reader to look simultaneously at the multiple layers through which gender formation traverses in a society that is particularly rich in its historical and cultural artefacts.

Kalpana Kannabiran is Professor of Sociology at NALSAR University of Law and founding member of Asmita Collective, Secunderabad.

## The Book Review India

[Home](#)

[About Us](#)

[Advertise](#)

[Donate](#)

## The Book Review

[Current Issue](#)

[Archives](#)

[Subscribe](#)

[Refund and  
Cancellation](#)

## Usage Policy

[Terms and  
Conditions](#)

[Shipping Policy](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Disclaimer](#)

## Connect with us

[Contact us](#)

Subscribe to our website

All Right Reserved with The Book Review Literary Trust | Powered by Digital Empowerment  
Foundation  
ISSN No. 0970-4175 (Print)