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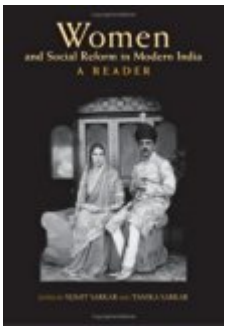

Sumit Sarkar, Tanika Sarkar, eds.. *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008. vii + 550 pp. $75.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-253-35269-9.

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Commissioned by Sumit Guha (The University of Texas at Austin)

Women and Social Reform in Modern India is a two-part book that contains twenty-eight essays. The first part presents research in the field of social reform with twenty-three essays; the second part allows five texts from the period to speak. The introduction discusses the common lopsided textbook view of social reform and questions this view while pointing to work that shows another approach. Reform in the textbook view, the editors write, has always been about upper castes, women, and customs but never about lower castes, Muslims, or the limitations law places on reform.

The introduction raises many questions and emphasizes the need for more research. Some of its questions are made possible by the work that is to be found in the book while others are proposed by the editors. The introduction's open-endedness allows readers to access the essays on their own terms. Its balanced view comes across in the following statement: "The vast majority of girls--like their male counterparts--were deprived of literacy because of dire poverty" (p. 4). I see this statement as balanced because much of the social sciences in India invariably carry an assumption that precolonial India was necessarily patriarchal, both intentionally and effectually; and ironically almost exactly patriarchal in the way the British deemed us to be, nothing more, nothing less.

The introduction, however, is not fully informative or facilitative and carries assumptions. For instance, the editors write: "We need to know ... what exactly was written about reforms in the newspapers, novels, and tracts, how the matter was performed in public theatre, how public opinion was formed, pluralized, made contradictory and fractured, swerving people away, finally, from the rule of prescriptive texts and commands that may have been diverse but which, certainly, were authoritative and compelling" (p. 2). There is a loose notion of "performance" involved here that is unexplained, and a student of social reform will be puzzled at the hinting of an idea of reality and representation that is not fully spelled out. The above sentence also subscribes to a ver-

sion of social constructionism that sees the "social" as though it were an agent separate from the phenomenon talked about, but also as simply unidentifiable or too intricately connected to the phenomena. Then again, the role of prescriptive texts and commands is seen as authoritative and compelling while this role is actually seriously contested by an increasing number of scholars who wonder what exact effects and roles texts played in precolonial India. But instead of presenting this as a debate, and as a problem for history, wherein competing theories are placed alongside each other for comparison and discussion, the book simply avoids the debate. What one finds here is simply many interesting questions and then a quick resolution of what is still an ongoing debate. There is an evident apathy toward identifying scholars with different views and theories and setting up a conversation among them.

This glossing over historical debates occurs when the authors discuss women's writing of the period. While current debates have struggled to find out if women's writings of the social reform period can be considered agentic at all, the book simply presents them as agentic. Our debates have considered possibilities of submissiveness or coercion in these writings and have asked if the subaltern can speak, but here they are simply agentic without the struggle to know "how we can tell." It quotes Tarabai Shinde and sees the job as done. How do we know Tarabai Shinde's questions were not an integral part of indigenous culture? Do we know enough to say that her ideas cannot be a part of indigenous ways of thinking and being?

Unfortunately, the difference in the characterization of the nineteenth century between Tanika Sarkar's and Partha Chatterjee's work is not set up adequately for the student/reader to see, think, and discuss, despite the fact that the difference is acknowledged in some parts of the book. Furthermore, the authors never make clear what "debate" meant, what the larger domain of gender relations was that allowed the sanctification of immolation, or what regional differences existed in privileging custom over scripture and vice versa. And it is not still clear why we distinguish revivalist from liberal reformers; or what effect the colonial context had on the acceptance of social reforms.

The book's approach as noted in the introduction is that it does not seek explanations to pointed questions but simply asks for a history of a period or a theme to be written. In some cases, this focus leads to individual essays on regional histories that lend nothing to the larger picture of social reform. Or at times, an overarching idea explains away regional differences. Most individual essays try to set out the concepts they work with, the theories they agree with, and so on, and so it is important that the reader read each essay independently and carefully to understand its basis. It is useful to see the book as a corpus that brings together many different researchers under one roof, so to speak.

This book is precious no doubt, because the social reform period is still hazy in our imagination and is rift with gaps in knowledge. But, although not underresearched, the book is not systematically researched and lacks a problem-oriented approach. This, I suppose, is common in books that aim to serve as "readers" on a certain theme or field of study, and bring together the work of many scholars. The essays are each useful but few of them, in the changes they try to capture, explain "change from what." New patriarchy, yes, but what did the "old" patriarchy look like and why was it the way it was? It is not clear what discussions actually got distorted by the use of the category of women in the social reform period. Can these discussions be restaged?

What marks out modernity from "tradition" is not clear either, so the reference to the "modern" in the title of the book must only be a chronological division that historians make, between ancient, medieval, and modern India. Al-

though many scholars point out that there were constraints on thinking in the social reform period, exactly what kinds of constraint and why does not become clear. Orientalism's influence on the discussions by social reformers is also not clearly considered by many essays in the book. Subscription to the idea of an "invented tradition" is seen in many essays but its problems are noted by few.

Essays by Lata Mani, Sumit Sarkar, Madhu Kishwar, Tanika Sarkar, and others, along with the original writings of Ram Mohan Roy, Tarabai Shinde, and others make this volume a rich one that students of cultural studies, women's studies, and history should possess.