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Published on H-Asia (January, 2017)

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This collection of essays is an important new addition to a nascent field, the history of the household and the family in premodern South Asia, and to the history of South Asia more broadly. In its engagement with the everyday, attentiveness to power and resistance, interest in the nonelite, and reflection on gender, all in the context of precolonial South Asia, it is a fitting tribute to Nandita Prasad Sahai, the historian to whose memory the volume is dedicated. Sahai was a historian of early modern South Asia, one who pushed the frontiers of the field. She passed away in 2013, leaving behind a body of scholarship that placed early modern artisans front and center in precolonial politics.

The body of work that Sahai has left behind is characterized most by the quest to write histories of, and from the perspective of, groups that many scholars of early modern South Asia before her had either considered unimportant or inaccessible. Sahai’s oeuvre centered on the artisanal communities of eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century western Rajasthan. In her book, *Politics of Patronage and Protest: The State, Society, and Artisans in Early Modern Rajasthan* (2006) and through her many articles, Sahai built a case for the exercise of agency and resistance in the political and economic arenas by artisanal communities, as well as by women within them, in the face of overarching structures of oppression. She also wrote about premodern caste in practice, exploring its civic and political aspects. Sahai was sensitive to the intersection of caste and economic status by gender, and her work has helped elucidate the role of nonelite women as legal, political, and social actors in early modern South Asia. Her work is multifaceted, traversing the fields of social, cultural, legal, and political histories, and she skillfully wove her emphasis on the local and the everyday with global historical processes. Through her scholarship and as a rigorous but also compassionate teacher at Hindu College in Delhi University and later Jawaharlal Nehru University, she inspired others to seek out new historiographical and archival terrain.
The history of the family in South Asia has only in recent years started to receive sustained scholarly attention. Edited by Kumkum Roy, *Looking Within, Looking Without* is an important contribution to this field, adding momentum and richness to the conversation. The volume is focused on the precocolonial history of the household in South Asia, noting the paucity of research in this field. While the premodern household and family in South Asia have received some scholarly attention, much of it has remained focused on royal or aristocratic households. Stephen P. Blake’s *Shahjahanabad*, Ruby Lal’s *Domesticity and Power in the Early Mughal World*, Rosalind O’Hanlon’s article “Kingdom, Household and Body,” and Munis D. Faruqui’s *The Princes of the Mughal Empire* are centered on the Mughal imperial household, while Daud Ali’s *Courtly Culture and Political Life in Early Medieval India* examines courtship in early medieval aristocratic households.[1] Some studies, such as Dilbagh Singh’s article “Regulating the Domestic,” Indrani Chatterjee’s introduction to *Unfamiliar Relations*, and Sumit Guha’s work (“Household Size and Household Structure in Western India,” “The Family Feud as a Political Resource,” and *Beyond Caste*), as well as Sahai’s *Politics of Patronage and Protest* examine the domestic and familial in a nonelite setting.[2] Taken as a whole, scholarship on the premodern household in South Asia has challenged the idea that “traditional” families inhabited a private domain protected from the vicissitudes of politics and statecraft. The essays in *Looking Within, Looking Without* are very much in dialogue with the larger questions and arguments that these prior interventions into the history of the family and the household in premodern times have raised.

By subjecting the category “household” to historical scrutiny and by reading it against a wide range of historical contexts, the essays in this volume, along with Roy’s introduction, strongly drive home the constructed nature of both “household” and “family” as categories (Roy, pp. 2-4; Supriya Varma and Jaya Menon, p. 20; and Rajat Datta, p. 348). This strengthens existing arguments about the inextricability of the two categories and underscores Chatterjee’s suggestion in *Unfamiliar Relations* that the history of their separation into discrete domains is in itself worthy of scholarly interrogation.

The essays also complicate ideas about what constitutes family and kinship. Monica Juneja and Uma Chakravarti discuss the role of affect, as opposed to biological ties alone, in soldering together a household and in creating kinship. Chakravarti also cites an instance of the converse, that is, biological relationships being cast aside in the absence of accompanying emotional sustenance for the relationship. These insights fit into scholarly work emphasizing the centrality of discourses surrounding kinship and family and evoking an ethic of familial care in political practice in early modern South Asia.

Going a step further, some essays in the volume show the existence of types of households and kinship relations that may appear to us moderns as alternatives to normative conceptions of households and even negations of “ideal” types. Vijaya Ramaswamy’s exploration of the inner life of medieval devotional poets excavates in the process an inner household, a metaphysical one centered on the divine. Roy writes about the “alternative household” of the Buddhist sangha (monastic community) as reflected in the *Ekani-pata, a Jataka* text compiled around 500 CE. Ranjeeta Dutta treats Tamil Shri Vaishnav mathas (religious foundations) too as alternative households and reflects on their relationship with ordinary households, while Umesh Ashok Kadam explores the construct of a “bhakti household” that united devotees otherwise separated by different social, economic, or spatial locations (p. 224). These essays demonstrate the promise of exploring these liminally situated alternative households—many of them born of a renunciation of worldly existence (and of the more traditional household ties...
in it) and yet inextricably enmeshed in worldli-
ness, including the domain of ordinary house-
holds.

Ramaswamy’s study of medieval devotional poetry is fascinating in its demonstration of the fluidity not only of “household” and “family” as categories but also of “wife” and “woman” as well as of the relationship between wifehood and womanhood. Working with Tamil epigraphic in-
scriptions from the eighth to the early thirteenth centuries on Hindu and Jain temples in today’s Tamil Nadu, Leslie C. Orr’s engaging study of women she terms “non-wives” offers a glimpse of households that were not based in marriage but that were also not treated as deviant, defective, or “abnormal” in contemporary sources. These households, even if just a handful, were neither patrilineal, patrilocal, nor patriarchal, and yet they coexisted without any explicit tension with those that adhered to these norms. Orr’s study shows that marriage was not a necessary attribute of a household and also that a marriage need not necessarily result in a household.

These essays on alternative households, coex-
isting with metaphysical and worldly households, non-households, male wives, and non-wives are significant in bringing to light the sheer variety in premodern South Asia of conceptions of family and household. They show that “household” and “family” not just as practices but even as ideas were far from uniform in premodern South Asia. They offer an important counter-perspective to the possibilities that a reliance on prescriptive texts alone can offer and also demonstrate that a simple or static idea of “traditional” family or so-
ciety is unsustainable.

Historians have challenged the idea of the household as always having been an “inner,” “pri-

date” domain, discrete from and in a binary relation-
ship with an outer, “public” world. Looking
Within, Looking Without also addresses this ques-

tion and offers up a range of perspectives. In keep-
ing with research over the past few decades,
she suggests that the text does not place an undue burden on women alone for the preservation of the honor and integrity of the family. That said, Mahalakshmi too acknowledges the ubiquity of the idea of the fickle nature of women and the need to control their otherwise unrestrained sexuality in ancient and early medieval Tamil literature. Taken together, the essays that touch upon women, sexuality, and gender complicate existing scholarly understandings about women in premodern South Asia by demonstrating the interplay between norms and practice in these spheres.

As Sumit Guha and Ramya Sreenivasan have shown, household formation was interlinked with the formation of larger social and political structures, such as the state and caste.[3] Studies of the household then cannot remain impervious to processes that affected and upheld social hierarchy nor efforts to manipulate them. O’Hanlon’s essay successfully demonstrates this point by reflecting on the interface between state and household. She focuses on the efforts of the Maratha state under the leadership of the Peshwas, brahmans themselves, to impose greater uniformity in social and gender norms among all brahmans in their domain. O’Hanlon also makes available with her essay a full translation of the 1751 yadi (or memorandum of instruction) from the Peshwa’s court that she relies on for this essay. This is a fascinating document, rich in detail and remarkable in the minutiae that it is concerned with. The volume also includes an essay by Sahai herself. Like O’Hanlon, Sahai studies the efforts of a caste group to solidify its improved social standing in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. Sahai’s essay is notable for its reading of judicial procedures as a means of social messaging, one whose public nature could be used by an individual or a community to broadcast a desired message to the wider audience. O’Hanlon and Sahai show how claims to upholding an ideal social order more broadly came to justify efforts to regulate the household both internally and in its relationship with other groupings. Further, O’Hanlon’s and Dutta’s essays point to the deployment of a rhetoric of morality in the justification of the regulation of households.

Taken as a whole, Looking Within, Looking Without is an important step forward in writing the history of the premodern family, and of the histories of ancient, medieval, and early modern South Asia more generally. It offers an empirically rich and analytically sophisticated set of insights and juxtaposes histories of the everyday with studies of prescriptive texts, leaving the reader with much to chew on. Most significant, it troubles the categories of household, family, and kinship, strengthening the foundation for critical histories of the family in South Asia.

Notes


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