

Chellammal Vaidyanathan
University of Miami, Coral Gables
USA

Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia

Edited by Anindita Ghosh, England/ New York: Palgrave Macmillan, September 2008, x + 233 pages. £50.00/ \$74.95 (hb) ISBN: 978-0230553446.

Behind the Veil: Resistance, Women and Everyday in Colonial South Asia is a compilation of essays edited by Anindita Ghosh. In her introduction, she argues that the main aim of this book is to claim that “women often imaginatively scrutinize and critique the social world that they experience and give voice to it in subversive traditions or actions” (p. 2), rather than merely epitomizing the colonial and nationalist discourses. Ghosh argues that, on the one hand, the colonial rulers portrayed Indian women as weak and helpless thereby justifying their domination over India because their rule offered them protection. On the other hand, she points out that, the nationalist discourse created by Indian men helped them to construct Indian women as repositories of Indian culture and tradition, pure and untainted by the West. This discourse was helpful to Indian men in recreating their own identities.

Ghosh states that the idea for this particular book stemmed from her previous work which focused on the “print and popular culture in nineteenth-century Bengal” (p. vii) where she had to deal with the issue of contextualizing women within her study of subaltern groups. Hence, she organised a conference in Manchester, England in 2004. The participants agreed on the necessity of a project that would research the “writings, rituals, and symbols of deviance and subversion in women’s lives” (p. vii) and thereby concentrate on the everyday lives of South Asian women. Thus, this book is a collective effort of seven historians to bring to light the “consistent gendered resistance against which to map the more well-known outbursts of the organized radical feminist movement or of outstanding female public figures” (p. 4).

This volume comprises eight chapters. The contributors are Anindita Ghosh, Padma Anagol, Geraldine Forbes, Tanika Sarkar, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, Clare Anderson, and Nita Verma Prasad. Issues that they focus on range from minor covert acts of dissent to open rebellion in their everyday lives to assert and claim their rights. Using a wide variety of historical sources such as memoirs, legal records, songs, photographs, etc. these historians demonstrate how women were not passive but rather active in resisting both the colonial and Indian patriarchal power structures. By doing so, they also present the complexities inherent in analyzing the various forms of resistance strategies adopted by women in their daily lives.

Padma Anagol’s chapter on women’s resistance in colonial Maharashtra is a good illustration of the different kinds of oppositions. She discusses three methods espoused by women. The first one is more symbolic in nature which is evident in her description of the play on gender reversal roles by Girijabai Kelkar that was popular among the people. The performance of the play led to many debates about women’s rights and the concept of gender roles. The second kind of resistance was more in the nature of “assertion” by women resorting to seek government’s help through petitions to claim their property, inheritance rights, divorce, etc. The third mode fell in the category of “open resistance” as in the case of women who killed their husbands with the goal of complete eradication of the male domination.

Apart from the kinds of oppositions highlighted by Anagol, there are also other ways to decipher defiance against the society. In her analysis, Geraldine Forbes uses photographs from three different family collections to extract the hidden stories from narrators that often reveal the

subjects' (women's) refusal to accept both male domination and traditional practices and customs. She uses these pictures as important historical sources to show covert forms of resistance against in-laws, joint family, conventional customs, etc. Forbes contends that photo "invite 'telling,' a process that allows for continual renewal of the act of rebellion" (p. 82).

Similarly, singing and reading prohibited literature also serve as acts of resistance. Anindita Ghosh shows how middle-class Bengali women, in the privacy of their homes, secretly read "disturbing literature" including novels and romances that was forbidden by the male members of their families. They also enjoyed singing *basar*/ wedding songs which, according to social reformers, encouraged them to behave in a disorderly and belligerent manner. These are just a few examples of the narratives that do not fall under the category of meta-narrative.

Other authors have also highlighted several cases of such hidden narratives. While Nita Verma Prasad shows how widows in North India tactfully used the legal system to hold on to their properties, Tanika Sarkar demonstrates how nineteenth century widows skillfully used the predominant discourses on marriage to improve their daily lives, thus recreating their won identities in the process. In addition, Clare Anderson illustrates how women convicts in Southeast Asia, Burma, and Mauritius penal settlements refused to comply with orders by not performing certain types of work assigned to them by their prison authorities. Further, Siobhan Lambert-Hurley's chapter describes the efforts of Sultana Jahan Begam of Bhopal in implementing health care reforms for the women in her state, a unique example of the crucial role that Muslim women played.

While the authors have done an excellent work of unearthing the unknown narratives of South Asian women, for the most part, the analysis deals with the South Asian women in the eastern, western, and northern areas of the sub-continent. There is a gap in the book as far as the women from southern part of the continent are concerned. It is not clear whether women from the southern region posed similar or different kinds of opposition against patriarchal authority. As this part of the country was more deeply entrenched in social and religious customs, it would be interesting to see how women in this area challenged the male dominance. If this is an area that has not yet been researched, then it is crucial to address the lacuna in the scholarship. Perhaps, this can be a subject for future research.

This book is an excellent addition to the field of South Asian women's history which proves that women were not merely passive victims but active players in colonial South Asia who both collaborated and resisted against the established social conventions in numerous ways and, in the process, played an important role in shaping their history. It is a must read for both scholars and graduate students specializing in South Asian history in particular, and women's history, in general.