

# SAGAR

South Asia Graduate Research Journal

Volume 20, 2011

# SAGAR is produced by graduate students at The University of Texas at Austin

## Co-Editors in Chief

Matthew D. Milligan  
Dan Rudmann

## Senior Editors

Amber Abbas  
Emilia Bachrach  
Suzanne Schulz

## Editors

Eben Graves  
Mike Jones  
Hillary Langberg  
Nishtha Mehta  
Jayita Sinha  
Jackie Zahn

# SAGAR

## A SOUTH ASIA GRADUATE RESEARCH JOURNAL

Sponsored by  
South Asia Institute  
Kamran Ali, Director  
The University of Texas at Austin

Volume 20, Fall 2011

Articles presented in the journal do not represent the views of either the South Asia Institute at the University of Texas at Austin or SAGAR editors. Responsibility for the opinions expressed and the accuracy of the facts published in articles and reviews rests solely with the individual authors.

Requests for permission to reprint articles should be directed to the individual authors. All correspondence regarding subscriptions, advertising, and business should be addressed to:

SAGAR  
South Asia Institute  
The University of Texas at Austin  
1 University Station G9300  
Austin, TX 78712-0587  
USA

SAGAR is not printed with state funds.

SAGAR does not discriminate on any basis prohibited by applicable law including but not limited to caste, creed, disability, ethnicity, gender, national origin, race, religion, or sexual orientation.

Dear Readers,

Our 20th issue of SAGAR constitutes a shift in presentation. We have elected to forgo print in favor of online publication to accommodate a wider spectrum of both academic scholarship and audience. An understanding of South Asia often involves image, sound, and interactivity, in addition to text. In coming issues, we hope to utilize tools afforded by our new format to become a more comprehensive resource for scholars interested in South Asia.

The works found in this issue deal with transitions as well. Sutapa Ghosh's essay illustrates responses to a changing modern landscape. Michael Brattus Jones calls upon us to shift our presuppositions regarding written language in ancient South Asia. Finally, the transformation of gender roles is given new light in studies by Hafsa Kanjwal, Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji, and Yogita Sharma.

We wish to thank the South Asia Institute, our editors, and writers, for their assistance during our own transition.

Sincerely,

Matthew D. Milligan and Dan Rudmann  
Co-editors in Chief

Email: [sagarjournal@gmail.com](mailto:sagarjournal@gmail.com)

Web: <http://sagarjournal.wordpress.com>

Volume 20, Fall 2011

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ARTICLES

Role of Communities in Shaping the Urban Built Environment.....6 by Sutapa Ghosh, India Institute of Technology, Bombay	6
Sealing the Script, Concealing the Image.....34 by Michael Brattus Jones, The University of Texas at Austin	34
Women in Kashmir.....51 by Hafsa Kanjwal, University of Michigan	51
Redefining Muslim Women.....69 by Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji, Columbia University	69
Rise and Sublimation of the Woman Proletariat's Politics in the Indian's Women's Movement.....95 by Yogita Sharma, The University of Texas at San Antonio	95

REVIEWS

Interpreting the Sindhi World.....118 edited by Michel Boivin and Matthew Cook reviewed by Natasha Raheja, New York University	118
--	-----

# Role of Communities in Shaping the Urban Built Environment: A Case Study of Bandra-Kurla Complex and Dharavi in Mumbai

by Sutapa Ghosh

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

This paper looks at urban planning and land-use changes in the city through an empirical study of the Bandra-Kurla Complex and Dharavi areas of Mumbai.<sup>2</sup> Bandra-Kurla is being developed as a Central Business District (CBD) with part of it housing the International Finance and Business Centre. In a bid to develop this into a global financial centre, urban planning and policy making processes implemented by the government are pushing people to the margins as, for example, a part of the area now housing the poor is becoming gentrified due to market-led forces.<sup>3</sup> This study looks at the change in urban governance processes as multiple players, including corporate, NGOs and the private sector emerge in a race to reconstruct the image of Mumbai into a “global-city” through their visionary ideas resulting in the gentrification of poor neighborhoods. However, the poor do not give up their struggle with the state over issues of housing and land rights. They come together on issues of common concern

---

<sup>1</sup> Paper presented as part of the Texas Asia Conference at the University of Texas, Austin. 11<sup>th</sup> & 12<sup>th</sup> February, 2011. Ph.D. Research support in the form of Teaching Assistantship received from the Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, IIT Bombay for the period July 2006- 2010. I extend my gratitude to Professor D. Parthasarathy, my supervisor and Prof. P.L. Trivedi (co-supervisor) for guiding me through this process. Additional support received from SARAI, CSDS, Student Fellowship for the period March-December, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Bandra-Kurla Complex is located in the H/E ward and Dharavi located in the G/N ward, is a slum concentration close to it, within the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai or the Brihan Mumbai Municipal Corporation

<sup>3</sup> Gentrification connotes ‘urban regeneration’ leading to the displacement of working class residents from urban centres due to high real estate prices in central place locations. It is a market-led socio-spatial transformation which, evolved in 1990s into a crucial urban strategy for city governments in consort with private capital in cities around the world. (Neil Smith 2002), 438-440.

for their cause and are evolving a participatory model of development to affect public decisions and the urban built form.

### Objective of the Study

This study will try to illustrate how different actors along with the state (i.e. politicians, corporate, NGOs and communities affected) play a role in shaping and reshaping urban space and the built environment in Mumbai.<sup>4</sup> It will investigate how networks and alliances built by the poor and their social capital affect urban planning and political decision making of the state, thereby shaping space and the built environment.<sup>5</sup>

### Research Methodology

In order to study the urban process and the built environment in Mumbai, a field study was undertaken in the Bandra-Kurla Complex and Dharavi areas from 2007 to 2009. Personal interviews and group discussions were carried out to understand the peoples' collective struggle and resistances and the strategies they adopt in order to have a voice in urban planning, politics and policy making of the state. Apart from this, government documents and records as well as state legislative assembly debates also provided valuable information pertaining to the planning and spatial management strategy of the state.

---

<sup>4</sup> First coined by Harvey, David (1981) "built environment" refers to the urban form which is shaped by capitalist processes. In his paper on 'the Urban process under Capitalism' he says that we need to understand the dialects involved in the urbanization process- which is that urban process affects urban form and this form puts a constraint on further development of capitalism. He says that the built environment of production (factories) and consumption (housing) gets built as accumulation goes on for the sake of accumulation through the exploitation of labour and this results in a crisis in built environment and when this happens there is there is a 'sectoral' switching crisis where capital flows from one sector to the other and a 'geographical' switching crisis where capital flows from one place to the other.

<sup>5</sup> According to Sudha Mohan (2005) development becomes meaningful as a process of change only when the poor and the marginalized can enhance their own lives through the interaction among themselves in order to solve problems of common interest. This form of civic solidarity which is based on partnerships and participation helps in gaining social trust which spills over trust in government.

### Methodology Adopted for Looking at Cities

In order to explain and understand the socio-spatial transformations it was necessary to draw upon several theoretical discussions. Firstly the theories of urban governance given by David Harvey were relevant because this study situates itself in the era of globalization which saw the transformations of urban governance from the welfarist model to the neoliberal model.<sup>6</sup> Secondly the critique of neoliberal theories given by Neil Smith (2002), Neil Brenner (2002), and Nik Theodore (2005) were important for an understanding of the gentrification process resulting from market-led forces. The paper also looks at the concept of 'political society' considered by Partha Chatterjee (2002), to be a democratic form of modern institution and different from the "civil" society. Hence urban planning in capitalism is studied here "from the entire realm of class relations wherein labor has its own social character by virtue of its function as a social mediating activity and not merely in terms of exploitative class relations."<sup>7</sup> In short, the study focuses on the people's protest movement, people-centered decision making processes, and how marginalized communities forge links and collaborate with the civil society and the state through an analysis of urban planning and policy making.

### Opening up Bandra-Kurla Lands for Development

The study will first explain the history of planning, and the spatial management strategy of the state with respect to Bandra-Kurla Complex (BKC), for an understanding of the

---

<sup>6</sup> See Harvey's discussion (1989), 3-17 on the change in urban governance from 'Managerialism' of the 60s to 'Entrepreneurialism' of the 80s

<sup>7</sup> Moishe Postone (1996) quoted in Noel Castree, "Envisioning capitalism geography and the renewal of Marxian Political Economy" *Trans Institutional British Geography NS 24* (Royal Geographical Society, 1999), 150. Here Postone (1996) refers to all elements of social life and social relations, beyond the workplace and not only exploitative class relations and extraction of surplus value. Castree (1999) draws our attention to post-structuralism and post-colonialism by saying that identity politics, gender and environmental studies are now emerging fields of study, and that this is a dramatic shift from the core Marxist approach of class and capital..



urban planning process of the state. The history of development and planning of BKC can be traced back to the early planning documents prepared by the municipal engineer N.V. Modak and a New York planning consultant Albert Mayer. Modak and Mayer created a city-centric plan to decongest the island city and relocate heavy industries beyond suburban Thane Creek and light industries to the Salsette. (Figure 1). This was the time when the concept of zoning as a spatial management tool was introduced as a solution to the congestion problem (CIDCO 1979).<sup>8</sup> Subsequent government reports echoed the same notion. In 1971, Ben King headed the World Bank Mission to Bombay and his report stressed the need to decongest the island city by shifting offices to the Salsette in Bandra-Kurla Complex and to the mainland in Navi Mumbai.<sup>9</sup> This was the first time that Bandra-Kurla lands were considered for development. The report also suggested relaxation of FSI in the suburbs and restrictions in the city where the FSI was as high as 4 and 5 so as to make it more livable for the upper classes in the elite neighborhoods of the island city (King 1971).<sup>10</sup> The World Bank is known for rolling out neoliberal ideas of planning (Kennedy and Zerah 2008), and this guided city planning from the 1970s onwards. In Smith's description of neoliberal urbanism, the centralization of capital in central areas of the city makes it unaffordable for the working classes and forces them to commute from peripheral areas where rents and real estate values are lower (Smith 2002) and this is precisely what was happening in Mumbai. Wholesale establishments and state government offices were also slated to be shifted

---

<sup>8</sup> According to Lefebvre (1994) zoning is an abstract space created by planners and practitioners based on mathematical modeling and rationality and has a frightening capacity for violence.

<sup>9</sup> London and New York and other developed countries had already tried out this policy of deindustrialization and de-proletarianisation of city-centres (Smith 2002).

<sup>10</sup> Floor Space Index or Floor Area Ratio is a certain permissible land to construction ratio. It is also the development right as it prescribes how much construction is permitted on a piece of land (Nainan 2008). For e.g. a FSI of four (4) on a 500 sq. ft plot would mean the builder is permitted construction for a maximum of 500\*4 sq. ft area or 2000 sq. ft. which can be done through the addition of floors.

to Bandra-Kurla Complex on the recommendations of subsequent government planning committee reports (Figure 2).<sup>11</sup>

In 1993 however, the landuse policy began to be structured around the theme of economic liberalization and the government decided to set up the International Finance and Business Centre (IFBC) in the 'G' Block of Bandra-Kurla Complex (MMRDA, Tender Booklet 2008 & Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Debates 1997).<sup>12</sup> In accordance with this, a technical report for setting up an IFBC was prepared by Cooper and Lybrand Pvt. Ltd. in 1993. Tendering in this block became limited to the financial sector, including banks, the stock exchange and other financial services. In regard to this, the back office operations of major banks were shifted BKC to save on high rents, while the headquarters continued at Nariman Point at the southern tip of the island city (Nijman 2007). Leading corporate houses were also given land here (figs. 3 & 4) (MMRDA, Tender Booklet 2008).

### Vision Mumbai Report & Transformation in Urban Governance

After liberalization, the government along with several corporate organizations and corporate NGOs, started strategizing the development of Mumbai into an International Finance Centre. During this time several consultancy reports were churned out: the most significant one titled the "Vision Mumbai" report was prepared by McKinsey consultants in 2003, while another being the Export-Import Bank of India report prepared in 2000, and the third one was the High Powered Expert Committee Report of the Indian Government's Ministry of Finance brought out in 2007. The focus of all these reports was to strategize the development of Mumbai into an International Financial Centre.

---

<sup>11</sup> A Central Government Committee -Banerjee Committee in 1974 recommended shift of wholesale markets to BKC which ultimately did not materialize.

<sup>12</sup> "Economic liberalization" refers to market oriented reforms which saw the opening up of various sectors like agriculture, manufacturing and services to domestic and foreign private investment.

Mumbai's global status was reinforced by the creation of Bombay-First in 1995, an NGO think-tank directly modeled after U.K.'s London-First. It was the first Mumbai think-tank to formulate initiatives to improve the city's receptivity to inward investment. Bombay First commissioned the "Vision Mumbai" report from the American management consultants McKinsey in 2003. It discussed the ways in which Mumbai could become more like Shanghai (Harris 2008). This document provided the blueprint for Mumbai's overall development for the next ten years (Mohan 2005), and it also called for economic growth and a rapid improvement in city life (Bombay First-McKinsey 2003). According to the report an investment of 40 billion rupees will be required to convert the megacity into world-class cities. For this to be achieved, the report benchmarked other global cities like New York, Singapore and Hongkong and stated that Mumbai ought to convert into a "world-class city" by 2013.<sup>13</sup> It outlined an abundance of measures to do it. It also stated that, like the development of BKC, Nariman Point, Andheri-Kurla and Vashi, a poly-nucleated CBD development would be required (Bombay First-McKinsey 2003). It repeatedly made mention of BKC as the site of a Regional Finance Centre first and an offshore Banking Unit subsequently. The report also mentioned that the commercial sector BKC must extend to Dharavi.

Therefore through the commission of the "Vision Mumbai" and other corporate reports we see a change in urban governance with the deployment of an increased number of players outside the sphere of the state. This translated into a multiplicity of modes of interaction with the state (Ruet 2009). There is now a growing role of corporate actors and multilateral agencies in policy making, particularly through their intervention as an assertive interest group or even as consultants. Corporate NGOs now work closely with the government in solving urban problems and setting the urban agenda. This constitutes an alliance of the state and central governments with

---

<sup>13</sup> See Sudha Mohan, 'The Megacity of Multiple Humanscape' in *Urban development and New Localism- Urban Politics in Mumbai*. Rawat Publications, (2005), 104.

business-class elite and experts, resulting in the reshaping of policies concerning the city of Mumbai and its suburbs (Ghosh et al. 2009). In this sense, there is now a corporatization of planning and a simultaneous withdrawal of the state. World-wide market-oriented reforms are promoted in areas of urban service delivery and housing along with an analysis of policy failures of the public sector programmes (NCAER, 1996 quoted in Kennedy and Zerah 2008).

In this regard, Harvey (1989) points out the nature of change in urban governance in late capitalism from “Managerialism” of the 60s to the present decade. He describes a shift from managerialism to entrepreneurialism in urban governance. The managerial approach of the 1960s had given way to the entrepreneurial forms of action of the 1970s and 80s. He contends that the capitalist development has now moved from a “Fordist” regime to one of “Flexible Accumulations.”<sup>14</sup> In the “fordist regime,” the goal of the state was welfare and the scale and economy “national.”<sup>15</sup> In entrepreneurialism, by contrast, the centerpiece notion is public-private partnership with the destabilization of past hierarchies of scale (Brenner and Theodore 2002). There is an increasing focus on building the image of the city into an entrepreneurial one with speculative projects being granted. The upgrading of the image of a particular place is accomplished through the construction of office centers and entertainment centers which can cast a beneficial shadow over the whole metropolitan region.

### Field Studies Carried Out Among the Marginalized Communities at BKC

I undertook a field study in BKC and Dharavi to understand the consequences of this corporatization of planning and its impact on the communities staying there. Close to the International Finance and Business Centre at BKC is Bharatnagar, a transit camp

---

<sup>14</sup>David Harvey, “Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism,” *Geografiska Annaler*, 71 B (1), (1989): 3-17.

<sup>15</sup> See Bob Jessop, 1999 and Swyngedouw, 1997 in Brenner and Theodore, (2002): 364-66

built by the state agency MHADA in 1975 on the banks of the Vakola Nala (Figure 5).<sup>16</sup> Slum dwellers who were occupying lands at the time of construction of a highway project in west Bandra were shifted to this land in Bharatnagar as part of the Slum Clearance Redevelopment and Rehabilitation Scheme. Furthermore, the state government (Maharashtra Housing Board) has denoted this area as the transit camp land. This transit camp has twelve plots in the locality. People here are supposed to be in 'transit' or in temporary dwellings, but they have resided in this area for more than 35 years. Therefore, by Government Regulation, if a person or possessor of the property has stayed on a plot owned by the government for more than 30 years and the owner, or in this case the government, has not taken legal steps to recover the possession, the property by default goes to the possessor by the Law of adverse Possession (Patel 2010). In other words, the community has become the legal owners of the property. However, the Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority (MMRDA), in charge of overall development of this area, has decided to relocate four thousand slum-dwelling families out of BKC in an ambitious Rs.3000 crore (\$680 million) plan to relocate the slum elsewhere so as to make BKC home to upscale international standard office complexes, five-star hotels, hospitals, a convention centre, mini golf course and a drive-in-theatre with entertainment complex. Talks are underway to develop this area into a commercial and retail hub spread over forty-eight acres. Gujarat-based Adani Exports Ltd. with its partners, the Housing Development Infrastructure Limited (HDIL), has entered into a Rs.2250 crore deal with the state to set up commercial complexes, retail areas, multiplexes, hotels and service apartments over the next couple of years. Hence, builders have set their eyes in this area and are coaxing communities to give up their lands in lieu of huge sums of money (Figure 6). Following Smith (2002), then, we

---

<sup>16</sup> Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority which is the government agency involved with Slum Rehabilitation and Redevelopment in the city. It is the agency which also constructs free-housing for the slum dwellers in the city.

can say that “a new amalgam of corporate and state powers have been forged in more ambitious efforts to gentrify cities, and it is greater than the scale of urban renewal done with public financing. It is a class-inflected urban remake, taking the city from the poor to the middle classes.”<sup>17</sup> Smith argues that “the new authoritarianism of the state quashes opposition and makes the streets safe for gentrification resulting in a “revanchist” city.”<sup>18</sup> Hence, the corporatization of planning with the backing of the state is today resulting in large scale gentrification.

### People’s Protest and Legal Intervention – A Case Study of Valmiki Nagar in Bharat Nagar, BKC

Though faced with evictions, the poor people have not given up their rights and some are even fighting a legal battle, as in the case of the Dalits in the BKC area. These lower caste people who work as cleaners and sweepers in the city have laid claim to their rights over the land and say that the government cannot erase their existence by profiteering through development. Empowered by the 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, community leaders (who are residents of the area and participate actively in decision making concerning their own neighborhood issues), have come to the forefront in their struggle for the rights over their property and homes.<sup>19</sup> As one-third of the hutments were razed to the ground in November 2008, people approached the police, sent letters to politicians, and then appealed to the High Court that their dwellings were made as part of the Valmiki Ambedgar Yojna – a central government programme for the poor and the marginalized. This proved that their dwellings were legal. Subsequently, a high powered committee consisting of the state government heads of department was

---

<sup>17</sup> Neil Smith, “New Globalism, New Urbanism: Gentrifying as Global Strategy,” *Antipode*, 34, (2002), 443

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 442.

<sup>19</sup> The 74<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act was introduced in 1992. It is a system of local urban governance where municipal service delivery decisions are taken by constituting ward committees whose members may comprise of civil society groups, community leaders of the locality, state and corporate representatives.

appointed to check their legal status. The High Court then gave a stay order towards any further demolitions, deciding to construct a platform over the river and rehabilitate them on site. Yet the situation here is still very volatile as builders are coaxing the poor to vacate their land and houses so that they can start redeveloping the plot and cash in on the free-sale component of slum redevelopment projects.<sup>20</sup> The builders are also creating fractions among the communities as the poorest of the lot, who are in need of money vacate their plots thinking that it is the best deal meted out to them by builders, while others are trying to retain the land and house, as confusion reigns in the neighborhood.

#### Formation of Cooperative Society and Self Development Solutions to Housing Problems

In yet another neighborhood of the same locality, the residents have banded together for self-development by designing their own housing solutions without waiting for builders and developers to encroach upon their homes. About 160 families here have resisted the builders and have come together to form a cooperative society (Figure 7). They obtained ownership rights to the land through the Transfer of Ownership Law of the state housing department (Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority). This law allows tenants to claim ownership from the original owners if the tenants, form a cooperative society that pays back the original owners a sum equivalent to 100 times the rent as compensation to the authority (BMRDA, 1995).<sup>21</sup> In official parlance, this is referred to as the “conveyance of the plot,” that is, the legal transfer of property from the

---

<sup>20</sup> Under the Slum Redevelopment Project a builder is supposed to provide free apartment blocks to original slum dwellers and is rewarded with an equal amount or more FSI for sale at market rates to new buyers who cross-subsidize free apartments for slum dwellers. The additional FSI for cross-subsidization was to the tune of 1:0.75 in the island city, 1:1 in the suburbs and 1:1.33 in Dharavi. For e.g. if the builder or developer undertakes slum construction of 10,000 sq.ft he would be able to sell an additional 10,000 at market rates in the suburbs or 7,500 sq.ft in the island city or 13,300 sq. ft. in Dharavi.

<sup>21</sup> BMRDA (1995): Draft Regional Plan for Bombay Metropolitan Region, 1996-2011

original owner (which in this case is Maharashtra Housing Board) to the members of the tenants' cooperative society.<sup>22</sup>

The residents then approached Federation for Tenants Association, a Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), in search of housing solutions. This NGO, comprised of architects, planners and lawyers, drafted design plans and offered consultancy services free of cost to them. Hence the community has become the builder by forming a cooperative society. The lawyers associated with the NGO handle legal issues; the architects provide the building plan and prepare the layout; and residents pool their money for construction. The community has the housing designed and constructed, getting benefitted themselves from taking the free-sale component which would have otherwise gone to the builder.<sup>23</sup> They also decide how much FSI to sell in the open market in order to cover the costs of construction, create a corpus for maintenance, and make a small profit. Therefore the profit goes to the community, and in this way the NGO not only creates building designs and layout or floor plans according to their choice but also receives an FSI not limited to 225 square feet as they themselves then decide how much profits they want to make in the free-sale component and can therefore sell a lower FSI in the market.

### Dharavi Redevelopment Plan: People's Network Building and Activism Against State Gentrification Plans

The second field study was carried out at Dharavi which lies at the periphery of BKC and has come under the threat of another urban regeneration plan of the state. Dharavi-Asia's biggest slum with a population anywhere between 700,000 and 1.2 million, has

---

<sup>22</sup> Letter addressed to the Estate Manager, Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Board from the people of the Paradise Cooperative Housing Society details this issue.

<sup>23</sup> Refer to Slum Redevelopment Project above.



become prime property as it is situated very close to BKC.<sup>24</sup> Originally developed on a marshland it is situated today in the midst of two major railway lines (Patel and Arputham 2007). The real estate prices at BKC have skyrocketed in the last decade from Rs. 1,10,000/sq m in 1995 to Rs. 3,00,000/sq.m in the present times. Hence the state government has decided to take up the Dharavi lands for redevelopment and free up space for commercial development. Mukhija (2002) argues that the slum redevelopment strategy in Mumbai has evolved in response to extremely high property values in the city. Today, the entire area of Dharavi is threatened by the 15,000 crore (\$ 3.3 billion) Slum Redevelopment Scheme of the government. This project was designed by the developer Mukesh Mehta of MM Consultants and presented to the government in 2003.<sup>25</sup> The metropolitan government had plans to redevelop Dharavi by offering building rights to private developers in exchange for the construction of housing for slum dwellers who have resided there prior to the cut-off date January 2000, (a policy for legalizing slum dwellers), as per the provisions of the Slum Redevelopment Scheme. The project is officially known as the 'Dharavi Redevelopment Project' (DRP). The Dharavi Redevelopment Project aims at rehabilitating eligible households and establishments and creating additional residential or commercial space for sale in the open market by allowing a FSI of 4 on the site itself. The Slum Redevelopment Scheme involves the demolition of existing slums and their subsequent redevelopment at a higher density. This provides market rate housing to new buyers which cross-subsidizes free apartment blocks for original slum dwellers. This involves a change in the land redevelopment regulations in order to allow for the increased intensity and density of redevelopment in the city's slums (Mukhija 2002).

---

<sup>24</sup> For Dharavi's population see Roma Chatterjee, "Plans, habitation and slum redevelopment: The production of community in Dharavi, Mumbai," *Contributions to Indian Sociology*; (2005), 199. <http://cis.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/39/2/197>

<sup>25</sup> [http://www.dharavi.org/F.\\_Press/A.2009/Reprievefor\\_Dharavi](http://www.dharavi.org/F._Press/A.2009/Reprievefor_Dharavi)

The Dharavi Slum Redevelopment Project tells the story of how common people forge national and international alliances with civil society groups, academics, and the media to resist development which is being thrust upon them by the state. Dharavi is a 223 hectare informal settlement situated very close to Bandra-Kurla Complex in the heart of Greater Mumbai. Over the years it has seen a regular flow of migrants from all parts of India, including Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, Tamil Nadu, West Bengal etc. For the purpose of redevelopment, the Slum Rehabilitation Authority appointed the Pune-based NGO Mashal (Maharashtra Social Housing and Action League) to carry out a survey of Dharavi. The survey noted that about 25,000 families live in the upper floors in two or three storey structures, but since the civic authorities consider only ground floor structures as eligible for redevelopment, these families will remain out of the redevelopment process (Bharucha Nauzer, 2009). The Dharavi Redevelopment Project has been loudly decried as undemocratic by academics, civil society groups, and the residents themselves, as it leaves the locals completely outside the decision-making process. A committee of experts comprised of academics, independent researchers and representatives of the NGO, SPARC, have raised objections to the draft DRP and have sent a letter to the Chief Minister of Maharashtra saying that it is a primarily a land-grab project for profit making.<sup>26</sup> The letter says that the residents from different parts of the city and country have been made to settle there by the Government, without granting them proper legal rights of occupancy. Although they were lawfully entitled to a lease for the period of ninety-nine years, land rights have been denied to them. In Dharavi, they have established not just their homes but thriving businesses (e.g. leather tanning, pottery, papad making, and tailoring). It is the proximity of their residences to these workplaces that has made their businesses efficient and competitive. Dharavi consists of small informal workshops which typically comprise 5-6 workers living and working

---

<sup>26</sup> SPARC: Society for the Promotion of Area Resources Centre a Mumbai-based grassroots NGO working with the slum and pavement dwellers of the city.

together under one tin roof. The present plan for redeveloping Dharavi makes no provision to factor in this residence-workplace typology. They contend that the residents of Dharavi are being offered free reconstruction and the legalization of their status, but this is in exchange for shifting into 47% of their original land area and the destruction of their livelihoods. They have appealed to the government to focus on the interests of the residents rather than profits. Therefore the residents should be encouraged to redevelop their own neighborhood, locality by locality as they feel it is necessary to do so. ([http://www.dharavi.org/Dharavi\\_Advocacy/I.\\_Government\\_Documents/DRP\\_Letter\\_by\\_Committee\\_of\\_Experts](http://www.dharavi.org/Dharavi_Advocacy/I._Government_Documents/DRP_Letter_by_Committee_of_Experts)). The residents of Dharavi have in fact formed alliances with various Mumbai-based NGOs like Concerned Citizens for Dharavi (chaired by Mr. Sukhtankar, a retired Chief Secretary to the Government of Maharashtra), the Dharavi Vikas Samitee (a federation of cooperatives and business leaders) as well as other NGOs like the Society for the Promotion of Area Resources Centre, Mahila Milan, and National Slum Dwellers Federation. The Dharavi Bachao Andolan or Save Dharavi Movement is a coalition of different sets of associations, cooperatives and networks who came together to protest against the government plan to redevelop Dharavi. Moreover, people have demonstrated their opposition from the beginning of the redevelopment plan, but in June 2007 the people's protest reached the streets when the government failed to act. Citizens held a black flag march from Dharavi to the MHADA office, the authority responsible for Dharavi Redevelopment, as a mark of protest and solidarity. (<http://uk.youtube.com/watch?v=5tE1gF4eZ5M>) (Figure 8). The Dharavi Vikas Samitee alleged that the government did not perform any proper survey of the population which had a manifold increase from the date of the last survey carried out during the launch of Prime Ministers Grant Programme. The earlier survey enumerated that there were around fifty-thousand structures. Even though slum redevelopment programs require that 70% of the community participate in reaching a decision the government has not met this basic requirement. The draft plan has also

gone unpublished and objections and suggestions have not been invited by the government. With these objections, the Samitee along with renowned academic Arjun Appadurai, ex-Chief Secretary to the Government of Maharashtra D.M Sukthankar, along with other distinguished urban planners including Shirish Patel, sent a letter to the Prime Minister on the May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2007 requesting that he review and reconsider the development plan. After a series of letters and protest movements, the government started acting and reassessment of the plan was undertaken by the Chief of MHADA wherein he convened a meeting with the residents of Dharavi and heard their pleas (Patel & Arputham 2008). However, the journalist, Kalpana Sharma, writes that “the October 2009 elections provided relief for the Dharavi residents as the project came to a grinding halt on account of the fact that no political party wanted to lose its vote bank by going ahead with a plan which would go against resident interests.”<sup>27</sup> She made a statement that “Dharavi was a thriving and functioning urban settlement and not a slum that needs to be flattened and rebuilt.”<sup>28</sup> She remarked that the plan had been developed without the solid study of Dharavi’s physical, demographic, economic, and social character.<sup>29</sup>

A workshop was held in one of the oldest neighborhoods of Dharavi, the Koliwada, in March 2008 wherein a few personal interviews were carried out with the residents in order to understand the nature of the protest they were launching and their negotiation process with the government.<sup>30</sup> Today Koliwada, a gaothan (meaning a village settlement) in Dharavi comprising of about 2500 families, is at the forefront of the battle for claiming the right to develop their neighborhood on their own terms. The residents of Koliwada have sought help from architects, planners, activists, sociologists, academics and students from all over the world who can offer solutions for the future of

---

<sup>27</sup> <http://www.dharavi.org>

<sup>28</sup> <http://www.dharavi.org>

<sup>29</sup> <http://www.dharavi.org>

<sup>30</sup> Urban Typhoon Workshop held in Dharavi from 16<sup>th</sup> to 22<sup>nd</sup> March 2008

their neighborhood and community by organizing a workshop in their area.<sup>31</sup> The purpose of this workshop was to detail the problems of the slum redevelopment scheme and to offer solutions for redeveloping the neighborhood through people's participation. The Urban Typhoon Workshop had several teams working under one platform to map the gaathan, including public and social spaces, while some became involved in rediscovering Koliwada through the spaces used by children. (<http://www.urbantypphoon.com/context.htm>). The academics and students who came from all over the world from reputed institutions were engaged in designing an alternative redevelopment plan. After an intensive study of the area and the neighborhood they were able to come up with a redevelopment plan that would incorporate the live-work typology for the people of Dharavi. Additionally, community leaders in Koliwada are fighting to save their neighborhood from the government redevelopment scheme. They confer that the tamrapatra (land titles) of Koliwada given to the Kolis by the British show that the land originally belonged jointly to the fisher folk community and that the government had no right to take it away from them in lieu of a 225 sq. ft. of free housing. Koliwada is approximately 40,000 sq.m area with a population of about 15,000. The Kolis first settled in Dharavi when the fish population of Mahim creek was abundant. The British government gave a lease to the Kolis for fishing in the 1940s, according to Ravi Keny, a resident and a community leader. Those times are now gone and since the 1950s a busy road replaces the shore ([www.dharavi.org/koliwada](http://www.dharavi.org/koliwada)).

The first reclamation of the marshlands for the construction of Dharavi took place in 1812. (Kamla Raheja Vidyanidhi Institute of Architecture, 2007). The second reclamation of part of the creek occurred around 1966.<sup>32</sup> Since then, fishing activity has ceased. In the later part of 1960s, illegal liquor businesses started, requiring a great

---

<sup>31</sup> Urban Typhoon Workshop was organized from the 16<sup>th</sup>-22<sup>nd</sup> March 2008, by PUKAR (Partners for Knowledge Urban Action and Research), an NGO based in Mumbai and working on urban issues.

<sup>32</sup> Personal Communication with community leader Ravi Keny at the Urban Typhoon Workshop, 16<sup>th</sup> March 2008.

deal of water for production.<sup>33</sup> However, the cessation of fishing activity was mainly due to pollution of the river with the discharge of effluents from informal industries located in Kurla and elsewhere. The construction of the airport and blockage of the flow of water were additional factors. After the government labeled the liquor trade as an illegal activity, people slowly began looking for alternative sources of income. They devised a strategy wherein they made additions over their earlier dwelling structures and sought income through renting out their houses. While a small proportion of the people work for the government,, a majority earn their livelihood by renting out their spaces (Figure 9). The average monthly rents range between Rs.3000-4000 per tenement. Therefore the residents say that it is important to have a thorough understanding of the livelihood patterns before any redevelopment is carried out. They regret the fact that the plight of Koliwada in Dharavi has been strongly affected by the civic administration's inability to understand its village-like structure. The Dharavi redevelopment scheme is a sectoral scheme which attempts to give tracts of land to real estate agents and disregards the fact that Dharavi is comprised of 'nagars' and not sectors (Patel & Arputham, 2008). Hence, the people of Dharavi have not let the state decide their fate and have not allowed the state to move forward with the SRA free-housing scheme of 225 square feet. Ravi Keny and Bhau Korde, residents and community leaders of Koliwada say that the government redevelopment project will stack them up into high rises and will destroy the community feeling and sharing of common spaces including religious places playgrounds, and porches where people sit to relax after a day's work. Bhau Korde says: "it is important to see each other and hence I insist on keeping doors open and would prefer a chawl set up with long corridors where people can regularly interact."<sup>34</sup> He says that "activities like papad making require the women folk to work collectively in

---

<sup>33</sup> Talk by Jokin Arputtam, head of the NGO National Slum dwellers Federation at the Urban Typhoon Workshop, 16<sup>th</sup> March, 2008

<sup>34</sup> Personal Communication with Bhau Korde on 21<sup>st</sup> March 2008

courtyards.” (Figure 10). Thus the government should treat Dharavi not only as places of residence but as places which have livelihoods attached to them. However, the people’s continued protest brought themselves and the government’s plan to the notice of the national and international community. Furthermore, the support from NGOs have helped the Kolis to get Koliwada excluded from the Dharavi Redevelopment Plan as of April 2008 after a series of protests, media reports, court cases and hearings. Koliwada today has a legal status – it has become a property of the Jamat Trust comprising of the Kolis of Koliwada.

### Conclusion

From the illustrations above we can say that the people’s resistance and people-centred decision-making play a role in shaping and reshaping the urban built environment as communities resisted class cleansing over space. Following Partha Chatterjee’s (2002) concept of “political society,” we can say that it is not only the civil society but the entire community representing the “political society” who actively engage in the decision-making process to usher in or resist changes to the built environment.<sup>35</sup> We can also say that the state is withdrawing from the consumption or housing sphere as it seeks private-public partnerships in housing the poor as the Dharavi Redevelopment Plan demonstrates. This is also evident in Bharatnagar where builders are approaching people to vacate their plots. Communities are becoming divided as the state gentrifies neighborhoods, but there is also a fierce struggle from the communities themselves in Dharavi and Bharatnagar as they remain united in their resistance of gentrification while claiming the rights to their living and work space. This is where social capital and the people's ability to build networks to strengthen their fight against class cleansing in

---

<sup>35</sup> See Chatterjee (1997) where he considers it as a ‘democratic form of modern institution’ and different from the ‘civil’ society. It is supposed to represent the entire population and is meant to be inclusive of the entire community-their political movements, the power structures etc. based on the notion of the welfare state.

space in observed. Therefore, urban planning calls for an understanding of not only the state and its relation to capital but also of how communities affect public decisions and the urban built form.

Figures



Source: Pacione, M. Cities, Elsevier Ltd. vol 23, (3) (2005): 229-238

Figure 1: Location map of Mumbai showing Bombay City and Salsette Islands as well as the entire Mumbai Metropolitan Region



Role of Communities in Shaping the Urban Built Environment



Figure 2: Location of Bandra Kurla Complex and the wholesale market which is located in the island city of Mumbai



Figure 3: Banks and other financial sector offices at BKC



Figure 4: Hotels and Convention Centre at BKC



Figure 5: Bharatnagar Transit Tenements at BKC

## Role of Communities in Shaping the Urban Built Environment



Figure 6: Bharatnagar slum at BKC to be cleared to make way for a commercial and retail hub: Builders coax residents to vacate homes for money



Figure 7: Self Development : People signing papers to form a cooperative society in one of the localities at Bharatnagar, BKC



Figure 8: People taking out black flag marches in protest of the state plan to redevelop Dharavi



Figure 9: Fish market at Koliwada. Kolis have made additions to their structures and are now renting out their top floor rooms.



Figure 10: Papad-making required women to work collectively in common-open spaces or courtyards: Dharavi's typical live-work typology.

## Bibliography

BMRDA. Report on Model Studies on the effect of Proposed Reclamation in Mahim Creek (Bandra- Kurla Complex). Central Water and Power Research Studies, 1978.

BMRDA. Bandra- Kurla Complex Planning Proposals. 1979.

BMRDA. Bandra- Kurla Complex Planning Proposals (Modified). 1980.

BMRDA. Report of the Task Force on Decongestion of Bombay Island. 1992.

BMRDA. Draft Regional Plan for Bombay Metropolitan Region, 1996-2011. 1995.

Bombay First-McKinsey Report. Vision Mumbai: Transforming Mumbai into a World Class City. 2003.

Brenner, N. and N. Theodore. "Neoliberalism and the urban condition." *City*, vol. 9. (2005): 101-107, in "From London to Mumbai and back Again: Gentrification and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective," by Harris Urban Studies, vol. 45 (12), (2008): 2407-2428. Sage Publications. <http://usj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/45/12/2407>.

Brenner, Neil and Nik Theodore. 'Cities and the Geographies of "Actually Existing Neoliberalism"' *Antipode*. Blackwell Publishers, USA, (2002): 349-379.

Castree, Noel. 'Envisioning capitalism geography and the renewal of Marxian Political Economy' *Trans Institutional British Geography NS 24* (1999): 137-158. Royal Geographical Society.

Chatterjee Partha. "Beyond the Nation? or Within?" *EPW*, vol. 32. No.1/2 (Jan 4-11) (1997): 30-34

Chatterji Roma. "Plans, habitation and slum redevelopment: The production of community in Dharavi, Mumbai." *Contributions to Indian Sociology*; 39;197(2005): 197-218. <http://cis.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/39/2/197>

CIDCO. A Resume of Important Reports relating to Bombay Metropolitan Region. 1979.

Coopers and Lybrand Pvt. Ltd. Consultancy Proposal for Planning and Designing of International Finance and Business Centre in Bandra- Kurla Complex in Bombay. 1993.

Deb, Kushal. 'Role of the State in City Growth: The Case of Hyderabad City' in *Urban Studies*, Oxford in India Readings in Sociology and Social Anthropology, edited by Patel, Sujata and Kushal Deb. Oxford University Press, 2006.

EXIM Bank of India. *Mumbai as an International Financial Centre- A Roadmap*, Quest Publications, Occasional Paper No. 80, 2000.

Government of Maharashtra. *Maharashtra State Gazetteers, the Greater Bombay District*, vol. 1, e-book edition, Gazetteers Department.

Ghosh, Archana, Loraine Kennedy, Joel Ruet, Stephanie Tawa Lama Rewal and Marie-Helene Zerah. 'A Comparative Overview of Urban Governance in Delhi, Hyderabad, Kolkata and Mumbai' *Governing India's Metropolis*, edited by Ruet, J and Stephanie Tawa Lama Rewal. Routledge, Taylor and Francis Group, 2009: 24-54.

Ghosh, Sutapa. 'Problems of Housing with Special Reference to Mumbai- A Policy Review.' M.Phil dissertation-unpublished, IIT Bombay, 2000.

Government of Maharashtra: *Resettlement and Rehabilitation Policy for Mumbai Urban Transport Project (MUTP)*, GOM Housing and Special Assistance Department. Mantralaya. 1997, Amended in 2000.

Grant, Richard and Jan Nijman. *Globalization and the Corporate Geography of Cities in the Less-Developed World*, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, Blackwell Publishing vol. 92(2), (2002): 320-340.

Harris A. 'From London to Mumbai and back Again: Gentrification and Public Policy in Comparative Perspective,' *Urban Studies*, Sage Publications, vol. 45 (12), (2008): 2407-2428. <http://usj.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/45/12/2407>

Harvey, David. *The Urban Process under Capitalism: A Framework for Analysis in Urbanization and Urban Planning in Capitalist Societies*, edited by Dear M. and A. Scott. Methuen & Co. Ltd, (1981): 91-119.

Harvey, D. 'Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism,' *Geografiska Annaler*, 71 B (1), (1989): 3-17.

High Powered Expert Committee (HPEC), Ministry of Finance, GOI. *Mumbai- An International Financial Centre*. Sage Publications, 2007

Kamla Raheja Vidyani Institute for Architecture (KRVI). 'Creating a new master plan for Dharavi.' 2007.

Kennedy, Loraine and Marie-Helene Zerah. "The Shift to City-Centric Growth Strategies: Perspectives from Hyderabad and Mumbai." *Economic & Political Weekly*, September, 27<sup>th</sup> (2008): 110-117.

King, Ben. B. et.al. The World Bank Development Economic Department Urban and Regional Economics Division, Urban and Regional Report No. 73-6 Report on Bombay, (1971) [http://www.wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/12/20/000178830\\_98101903533484/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf](http://www.wds.worldbank.org/servlet/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2003/12/20/000178830_98101903533484/Rendered/PDF/multi0page.pdf)

Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Blackwell Publishers, 1994.

Maharashtra Legislative Assembly Debates, April 1<sup>st</sup>, 1997 & March 24<sup>th</sup> 1998.  
MCGM. <http://www.mcgm.gov.in/irj/portal/anonymous/qlwardgn>, <http://www.mcgm.gov.in/irj/portal/anonymous/qlwardhe>, <http://www.mcgm.gov.in/irj/portal/anonymous?NavigationTarget=navurl://745be63a8c86ec6b74ccad4690ad4100>, (accessed May 24 2011)

MMRDA. 'The Mumbai Metropolitan Region Development Authority (Disposal of Land) Regulations,' 1977.

MMRDA. *Population and Employment Profile of Mumbai Metropolitan Region*. 2003.

MMRDA. "Planning Tasks," 2008 [http://www.mmrda.mumbai.org/planning\\_tasks.htm](http://www.mmrda.mumbai.org/planning_tasks.htm) & [http://www.mmrda.mumbai.org/planning\\_oshiwara.htm](http://www.mmrda.mumbai.org/planning_oshiwara.htm)

MMRDA Tender Booklets. "Request For Proposal for Grant of Lease of Land for developing and operating a Convention and exhibition centre, Commercial Complex at BKC, Mumbai, India," 2008

MMRDA. *Regional Plan for Mumbai Metropolitan Region 1996-2011*. 1999. <http://www.regionalplan-mmrda.org/>

Mohan Sudha. "The Megacity of Multiple Humanscape" in *Urban development and New Localism, Urban Politics in Mumbai*. Rawat Publications, (2005): 81-107.

Mohan, Sudha. 'New Localism: Civic Coalition and Alliance Politics' in Urban development and New Localism, Urban Politics in Mumbai. Rawat Publications, (2005): 141-193.

Mukhija, Vinit. "New Houses for old in Mumbai, An attractive but problematic strategy," IDPR 24 (2) (2002): 161-176.

Nijman Jan. 'Mumbai since liberalization: the space economy of India's gateway city' in Indian Cities in Transition, edited by Shaw, Annapurna. Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd, (2007): 238-259.

Nijman, Jan. 'Mumbai's Real Estate market in 1990s De-regulation, Global Money and Casino Capitalism. Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 35, (7), February, 12-18<sup>th</sup>. (2000).

Pacione, Michael. "City Profile Mumbai." Cities. Elsevier Ltd. vol. 23, (3) (2006): 229-238.

Parthasarathy D. "Urban Commons and Exclusion in the Indian City: Economic Liberalization and the Ghosts of Planning" Paper presented in Session 1: Future of Mega City: State versus Globalization Inter Congress of the International Union of Ethnological and Anthropological Sciences, University of Calcutta, 12-15, December, 2004.

Patel, S and Jockin Arputham. "An offer of partnership or a promise of conflict in Dharavi, Mumbai," Environment and Urbanisation, Sage Publications 19;501 (2007): 501-508. <http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/19/2/501>

Patel, S and Jockin Arputham. "Plans for Dharavi: Negotiating a reconciliation between a state-driven market redevelopment and residents' aspirations," Environment and Urbanization; 20,243 (2008): 243-253. <http://eau.sagepub.com/cgi/content/abstract/20/1/243>

Patel, Shirish B. "Dharavi Makeover or Takeover?" Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 55 No. 24, (2010): 47-54

Patel, Sujata. "Bombay and Mumbai: Identities, Politics and Populism." Bombay and Mumbai: The City in Transition. edited by Patel and J.Masselos. Oxford University Press, (2003): 3-30.



Smith Neil. "New Globalism, New Urbanism: gentrifying as Global Strategy." *Antipode*, 34, (2002): 428-450.

Tawa Lama-Rewal, S. "Engaging with the Concept of Governance in the Study of Indian Metropolises" in *Governing India's Metropolises*, edited by Ruet, Joel and Stephanie Tawa lama Rewal. Routledge Taylor and Francis Group, London New York and New Delhi, (2009): 3-23.

### List of Abbreviations

BKC : Bandra-Kurla Complex

BMRDA: Bombay Metropolitan Regional Development Authority

CBD: Central Business District

CIDCO: City and Industrial Development Corporation

FSI: Floor Space Index

MHADA: Maharashtra Housing and Area Development Authority

MMRDA: Mumbai Metropolitan Regional Development Authority

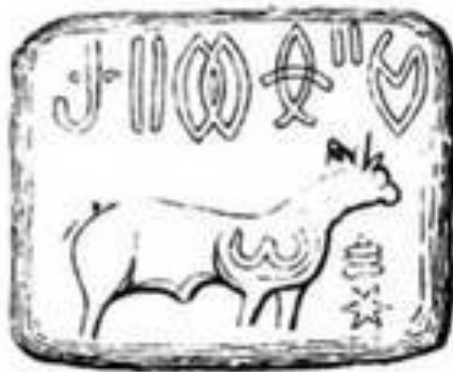
NGO: Non-Governmental Organization

# Sealing the Script, Concealing the Image: The Ramifications of Representation in the Indus Civilization

by Michael Brattus Jones

“The most curious object discovered at Harapâ is a seal, belonging to Major Clark, which was found along with two small objects like chess pawns, made of dark brown jasper. All these are shewn in the accompanying plate. The seal is smooth black stone without polish. On it is engraved very deeply a bull, without hump, looking to the right, with two stars under the neck. Above the bull there is an inscription in six characters, which are quite unknown to me. They are certainly not Indian letters; and as the bull which accompanies them is without a hump, I conclude that the seal is foreign to India.”

- Alexander Cunningham’s mention and representation of the first seal discovered in 1872 (Cunningham 1875, 108, Plate 33 A.)



The attribution of the status of “script” has recently been challenged for what is otherwise known as the “Indus script.” For over a century, since before even the archaeological discovery of the associated Indus Valley or Harappan Civilization, the signs or symbols they produced, most often on tiny steatite seals, have been interpreted as “script.” This “script” has become renowned as one of the most mysterious,

challenging, and important undeciphered scripts of the ancient world. The article “The Collapse of the Indus Script Thesis” (Farmer, Sproat and Witzel 2004), has effectively called into question such an attribution of script as an unexamined assumption, although the article’s further claim to have disproved such an attribution has several crippling flaws. This paper seeks to examine how the presumption of script and the preference for text has conditioned the use and manipulation of image in studying the Indus Civilization, as well as to explicate how certain ideological and methodological biases have pervaded and contextualized the study of the “script” and the civilization of the ancient Indus.

The first discovery of a seal containing the “script” actually predated the discovery of its context, the Indus Civilization. Alexander Cunningham, widely known as the “father of Indian archaeology” though practicing a rudimentary, even crude, sort of proto-archaeology, found a seal<sup>1</sup> as he was exploring Buddhist stupas in the Northwest India in the 1870s (Cunningham 1875). The initial interpretation of the signs or symbols on the seal as a hitherto unknown “script” indeed traces back to its first impression upon modern times. The culture productive of the seal, the Indus, or Harappan, Civilization was not likewise discovered by archaeology until the 1920s, leaving the seal and its “script” uncontextualized for a significant period of time (Possehl 1996, 16). With the excavations of the first and primary sites of the civilization, Harappa and Mohenjo-daro, coinciding with the excavations of the roughly contemporaneous civilizations of Egypt and Mesopotamia, which were both literate, the presumption of script status for the Indus signs went unchallenged as fitting the emerging pattern of early (even initial) urbanization that was riverine, agricultural, and literate.

The various use of image in the analysis of these signs or symbols takes on distinct qualities in association with methodologies that seek to recognize and interpret

---

<sup>1</sup> Cunningham’s report ambiguously describes the find as “belonging to Major Clark”; it was Cunningham’s report and site.

script. This usage of image includes photographs, certain manipulations of photographs, as well as hand-drawn and computer-drawn representations of images and of photographs, yielding a spectrum of staggering representation of representation. Each step of representation entails potentials for manipulation that are susceptible to preference, selection, and bias, according to the often overlapping factors of ideology, methodology, and supposition.

The history of the study of this “script” bears this out explicitly; the most extreme case, a fraudulent and intentionally constructed image of a “horse seal,” is inextricably linked with a revisionist history corresponding to nationalist and fundamentalist ideology (Witzel and Farmer 2000). Less egregious but still disturbing are the cases of comparative sleight-of-hand wherein constructed representation of a source-image is compared with another constructed representation, rather than source-image directly with source-image. Presupposing an unproblematic, “pure,” objectivity for photography is untenable considering its inherent conditioning and subsequent interpretation by human agency; however, a “relative objectivity” of photography would seem to suggest itself in comparison to the selection, abstraction, constructed uniformity, and contrived presentation of drawing abstract symbols that, for analysis and therefore in reality, are the ideal forms of an apparently similar character in both the Indus script and Egyptian hieroglyphics, or Brahmi, or Rapanui. A great deal of this is attributable to the modality of “script” as opposed to “image.”

The extent to which this distinction between script and image is apparent has continuously been presumed and selected, even in the Farmer, Sproat, and Witzel (2004) article that challenges the attribution of “script” to the signs composing the image. The methodological stakes are high; script and image entail quite distinct modalities of analysis and interpretation. Scripts are analyzed by epigraphy and paleography, and compose texts, which are analyzed by textual scholarship, and which are (overwhelming) composed of language, analyzed linguistically. The analysis of

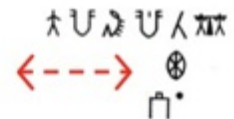
image, on the hand, overlaps archaeology in cases such as this, but is the special purview of art history.

The question of the differentiation of script and image is perhaps more crucial for the Indus script than for other undeciphered scripts because the most common occurrence of the Indus script is in isolated juxtaposition to a (most frequently) larger, more detailed, less abstract, figure of an animal. The “unicorn seal” is the by far most frequent. The second register of images, which is typically smaller, arranged equitably, and contains “abstract” figures, is analyzed as “the script” (Wheeler 1966, 38-40).

The article “The collapse of the Indus-script thesis: The myth of a literate Harappan civilization.” (Farmer, Sproat and Witzel 2004) depicts critically Iravatham Mahadevan’s abstraction and standardization of script from image in *The Indus script: texts, concordance, and tables* (1977), despite following the same process for a quantitative analysis of the signs.



C-23 a



The pervasive ubiquity of the distinction is betrayed by the failure to account for the juxtaposition of the “script” to the animal figure even in the Farmer, Sproat and Witzel article (2004). It likewise takes for granted an inherent differentiation of the two registers, which is problematic in that case because the non-linguistic functionality ascribed to the “non-script” as narrative and mythological would seem to apply equally to the more concrete animal figures. It fails to account for the two levels of abstraction in

the register, despite its use of representation in selecting only the “script” level for quantitative analysis.

The differentiation seems justified on the basis of the abstract quality of the “script” as opposed to the figure. The script contains signs that appear completely abstract along with signs that seem pictographic. It is according to the understanding of what a script is, or what types of script are known, that necessitates taking the spectrum of signs from the abstract to the pictographic together under the umbrella of “script” (or “non-script”) signs. Yet, when the spectrum is explicitly recognized, and when the modality of script is challenged, the assumed obvious distinction between the two registers recedes and placing a dividing line between the more pictographic signs of the script and the detailed figures of the animals becomes problematic.

The extrication of script from image, and the constructed re-representation of the signs of the script trace back to the earliest decipherment attempts in the 1920s and 1930s. It is also at this time that there coalesces interpretation and ideology. Indeed, many of the intellectual currents of those times were mired in imperialistic ideology that entailed notions of race, language and identity which were yet uninformed by the rational inquiries of disciplines still looming on the horizon, such as genetics, anthropology and cultural studies. The conflation of the notions of language, ethnicity and nation in the construction of race specifically qualified assumptions about prehistory. The work of V. Gordon Childe, an influential prehistorian of the time, explicitly connected the Indo-European languages and inherent dominance of social hierarchy into the concept of the white “Aryan” master-race (Possehl, 1996 17). L. E. Waddell applied this framework to the study of the Indus script. He referred to the script as “the Indo-Sumerian script” (Waddell 1926, 115) and, working back and forth between the Sumerian language, the Sanskrit language, and similarities between the ancient scripts used to write these languages, constructed a prehistory that grounded European

imperialism in the dominance of two of the three significant early urbanizations, Sumer (Mesopotamia) and the Indus Civilization, by the (white) Aryan race.

While throughout the early period of decipherment attempts, that the “script” be selected, abstracted, constructed and represented was not questioned, how precisely these steps (mostly implicitly) were to be carried out was problematic and marked the multiplicitous divergence of approaches to the analysis of the script. The result is apparent today with over a thousand publications devoted to the Indus script, over a hundred of which are decipherment attempts (Possehl 1996, 1-2). According to the Farmer, Sproat and Witzel article, the various sign counts for the script range between 20 and 600 distinct signs. Yet it goes unrecognized that this significantly undermines the results of the quantitative analysis of that article itself, as well as similar attempts; it only represents the results of one possible method of selecting distinct units. Furthermore, such selection and construction of abstract signs is a priori absurd if the “more abstract of the two registers” does not constitute a script.

The catch of how exactly to parse the script from image prevailed throughout early decipherment attempts. Waddell’s putative connection between Mesopotamia and the Indus Valley would prompt a response from George Barton, a prominent Assyrologist of the time. His article “On the So-Called Sumero-Indian Seals” (1926) utilized a comparative methodology to refute Waddell’s conclusions. This entailed the process of abstraction and construction of the script in comparison with other ancient languages and scripts: “The comparison was then made naturally enlarged to include also Elamitic, Egyptian, Cretan, and Cypriote, as well as Sumerian, Hittite and Chinese. ... Up to the present time the writer [Barton] has studied seventy-two inscriptions, and has from them prepared a sign list of 124 different signs not counting 51, which are some of them certainly, and others probably, mere variant forms.” (Barton 1926, 82). Despite recognizing some problematics with the construction of the “sign list,” Barton did not hesitate in using his “signs” as any scholar might utilize ancient scripts or special

graphemes – with the direct insertion into lines of scholarly English prose, such as ❁, π, æ, ©, ∞.

There are two of these: 𑀓 and 𑀔

Insertion of Conventionalized “Signs” into Text. (Barton 1926, 84)

While such practice is eminently rational and desirable for scripts of known quantity, it is more problematic for undeciphered scripts, but for “signs,” images, to which the ascription of “script” is itself challenged, the potential of the implications to mislead must give serious pause. The same must be said for the corollary practice of inserting the constructed sign list into charts demonstrating variation or comparison, which, for the sake of convenience, continues to be a format of presentation for the signs and inscriptions in standard works of scholarly reference, such as Iravatham Mahadevan’s highly praised volume *The Indus Script: Texts, Concordance and Tables*, published by the Archaeological Survey of India in 1977. It is in this format that all the inscriptions (texts) known at that time were published, using a sign list entirely bereft of the possibly relevant image context, such as the extremely frequent juxtaposition to the larger and more detailed animal figures on the seals.

Aside from (constructed) sign insertion into text and into chart, another common form of representation of the script is line drawing representing the entire “inscribed” seal or artifact. This can be envisioned as one step removed from the “relative objectivity” of photographs in that the representation does not select and abstract the script signs out from among the image context. This format of representation coincides with the archaeological practice of representing artifacts with line drawing. Photography is also used to represent the image upon the seals and inscribed artifacts. The most



prevalent dissonance between the source image and its photographic representation concerns scale; in contrast to the frequent effect of photography in making large small, photos of Indus seals typically enlarge the image. The vast majority of the inscribed seals are remarkably tiny, a couple of centimeters square. While indeed much clearer to view and interpret, the enlarged photographs unfortunately minimize the feats of prodigious skill entailed in detailing the minutely miniscule. The trade-off required for the transaction of communicative representation may be worthwhile, but is still a trade-off. Both photography and script decipherment are special instances in the epistemology of representation. As such, the selection of what is to be represented, or to be constructed in representation, is an epistemological sticking point, a detraction from objectivity, that seems to leave the status of representation theoretically groundless.



Seal Representation (Barton 1926, 90)



Photographic Representation of Seal Impression (Barton 1925, 95)

The danger of the manipulation and distortion of photographic representation is most clear in the case of a fraudulent depiction of a horse image on a seal. The aspect of horse is especially significant in marking the case as an ideologically motivated act of revisionist history in accordance with fundamentalist and nationalist concerns; the horse is considered one of the critical markers of Indo-European presence and its complete absence from the archaeological record of the Indus Civilization is one of the primary incompatibilities of associating the Indus Civilization with the Vedic peoples. This was precisely the agenda of N.S. Rajaram and Dr. Natwar Jha in their decipherment attempt *The Deciphered Indus Script* (1999), in which they claim that the Indus script represents nothing less than Late Vedic Sanskrit. The principle debunking occurred in a mainstream Indian news magazine, *Frontline*, in an article entitled “Horseplay in Harappa” by Michael Witzel and Steve Farmer (2000), two of the authors of “Collapse of the Indus Script thesis” (2004). Indicating the ideological motivation, they quote Rajaram, a former engineering professor and Hindutva propagandist: “All Indian history, Rajaram writes, can be pictured as a struggle between nationalistic and imperialistic forces” (Witzel 2000, 5). This makes awkward the notion of an inward migration of Indo-European speaking people from outside of India, especially the very Vedic tribes recognized as the forefathers of Hinduism and therefore Indian cultural identity. The solution of “indigenous Aryans” preempts a significant portion of Hindu identity from association with “outsiders” and at the same time secures the birthright of venerable antiquity through the continuity of Indian identity throughout millennia.



Figure 7.1a: The 'Horse Seal' (Mackay 453)



Figure 7.1b: The 'Horse Seal' (Artist's reproduction)

---

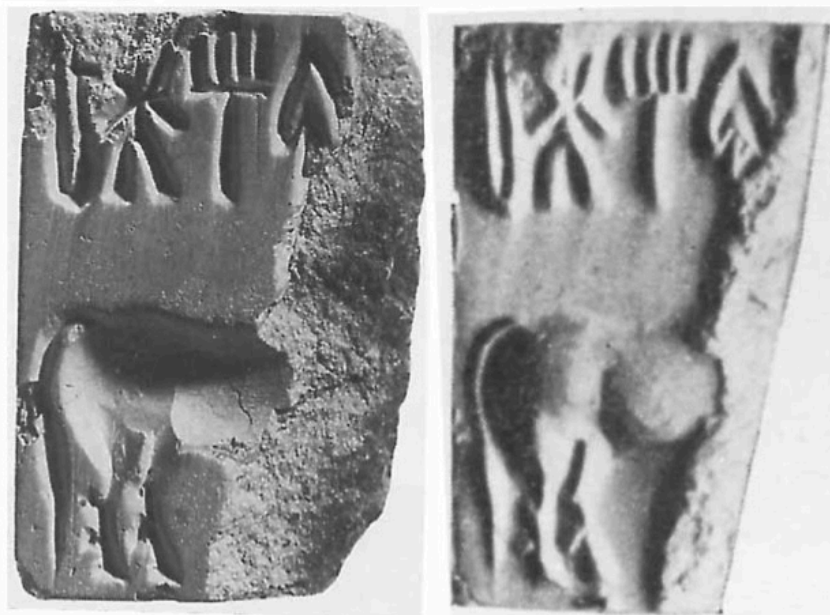
#### Rajaram and Jha's Presentation of the Horse Seal (after Witzel and Farmer 2000)

The image of the horse was the result of the computer manipulation of a unicorn sealing that was broken and missing half, the half with the head of the animal. The misrepresentation of a sealing, a seal-impression, as the seal itself, indicated the pervasiveness of the distortion, although it also eventually allowed the sealing that was source of the distorted image to be matched to the seal that produced it, thereby confirming the identity of the animal as the common unicorn figure. The distorted image was published in the decipherment attempt alongside an artist's line-drawing representation of the seal complete with a clearly drawn horse, bringing the situation to a state of utter absurdity. Rajaram both failed to mention the break and failed to properly cite the source of the image (Witzel and Farmer 2000).

Witzel and Farmer reported that only through seemingly endless research in multiple libraries were they able to locate the source of the image. But worse still is the fact that an image of a trough, a vaguely telephone-like shape that is commonly set in front and below the animal figures on the seals, was added to the image in order to give

the impression that it was not broken, ultimately clinching the case that the manipulated image was intentionally fabricated. In this way, disingenuous approaches and a faux academic air are often sufficient to persuade non-specialist, non-academic audiences and for that reason often characterize revisionist history (Witzel and Farmer 2000).

**As shown by their identical archaeological field numbers (DK-6664), M-772A (published in Vol. II of *Corpus of Indus Seals and Inscriptions*, 1991) is the original seal that seven decades ago created the seal impression (Mackay 453) that Rajaram claims is a 'horse seal.'**



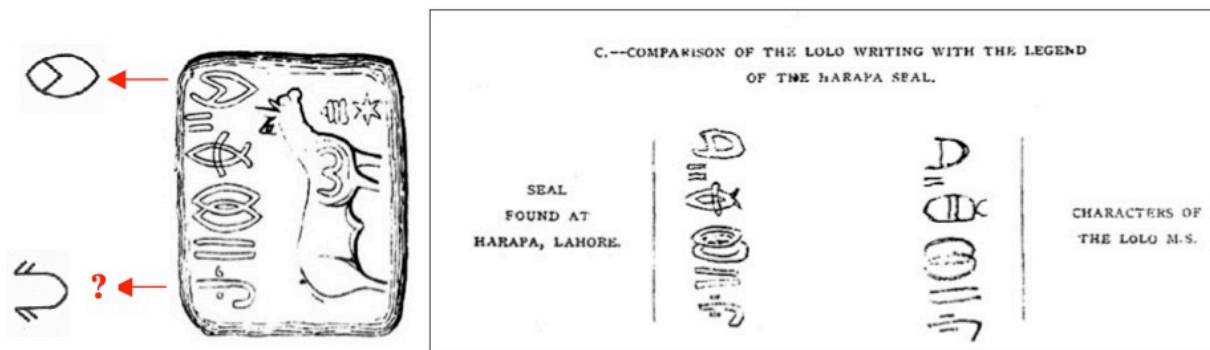
**M-772A (flipped horizontally)**

**Mackay 453**

Witzel and Farmer demonstrate using photographs that the horse image was an intentional manipulation (Witzel and Farmer 2000).

Another disturbing angle appears from within representational chaos; another article by Steve Farmer makes the serious accusation of fraud (Farmer 2003), but makes a similar misuse of representation to the accused. The issue is the handling of a comparative approach to the (assumed) script by a “comparative linguist and Sinologist” of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, Terrien de Lacouperie. Lacouperie compares representations of the script portion of the first seal published with a representation of the Chinese Yolo, or

Yi, script. According to Farmer: “Lacouperie backed his claims by faking a little evidence, N.S. Rajaram style. ... The aim of the forgery, which went undetected for 120 years, was not political but academic” (Farmer 2003, 2). Farmer rightly draws attention to the problematic selection, decontextualization and re-representation of the “legend,” or script portion, but Farmer’s own use of representation proves equally problematic while his indictment of Lacouperie is overstated and unfair.

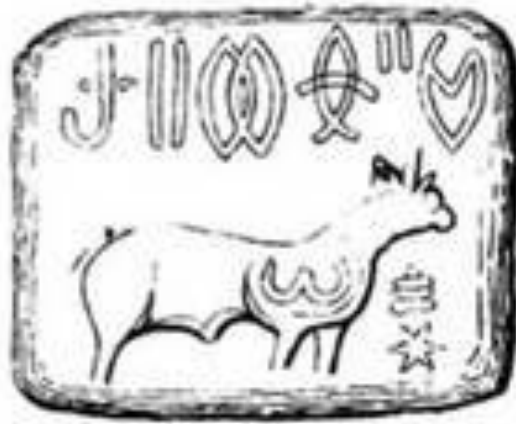


On the left: The first Indus inscription found, shown in the reproduction printed by Cunningham in 1875. On the right, Plate C from Terrien de Lacouperie’s 1882 article. Note the close match between what Lacouperie claimed were the Harappan and Lolo signs, despite the fact that the right-most and left-most signs on the Indus inscription were clearly mutilated. (Also note that Lacouperie’s drawings don’t quite match Cunningham’s.) The arrows on the left show what comparison with closely related inscriptions suggest may have been the original form of the two symbols. (Cf. Mahadevan 1369, 1629, 2863, 5084, which differ only in the exact fish symbol used.) The identification of the left-most (lower-most) Indus symbol is not certain, but the fact that it is mutilated is beyond dispute.

Farmer presents Lacouperie’s transliteration of Cunningham’s representation as fraudulent by anachronistically faulting him for not perceiving the constructed and standardized abstract signs that only Farmer himself supplies (on the far left) (Farmer 2003).

Lacouperie re-represents only the script portion of Cunningham’s line-representation. Cunningham’s line-representation was the first published and only available image; Cunningham did not include a photograph along with his drawing of seal, nor did he select, abstract, or standardize the “script” portion of the image, although he did judge that “there is an inscription in six characters, which are quite unknown to me. They are certainly not Indian letters ...” (Cunningham/ASI 1875, 108). Cunningham’s only culpability in this case is the lack of an accompanying photograph to

support his representation. His supposedly disastrous and unshakeable verdict of “script” is actually not so emphatically stated but tentative and somewhat ambiguous: an “inscription” of “unknown” “characters” and “not Indian letters.” But the omission of a photo left Lacouperie only Cunningham’s representation. Lacouperie showed too much license in not providing Cunningham’s full seal representation and only redrawing the “script” portion sideways and out of context; this is epistemologically problematic methodology but hardly fraud. Lacouperie’s representation of the signs corresponds quite closely to Cunningham’s representation; some of the signs do appear to be more rounded in Lacouperie’s signs than in Cunningham’s, and this modification does serve his comparative agenda. Farmer, however, disproportionally exaggerates the discrepancy between the two transcriptions by presenting a third column with the fully abstracted and regularized script signs that makes Lacouperie guilty of fraud for not seeing in Cunningham’s representation. However, it would have been impossible for Lacouperie to have seen those images because they are the most fully constructed signs or characters of all three representations in question; they are the standardized transcriptions that have been abstracted through the comparison of the images of myriad seals and artifacts examined firsthand, through photography, and through manual and mechanical selections and reproductions over a wide range of abstraction and standardization. Farmer indicts Lacouperie: “Note the close match between what Lacouperie claimed were the Harppan and Lolo signs, despite the fact that the right-most and left-most signs on the Indus inscription were clearly mutilated” (ibid.). But Farmer only establishes the “clear mutilation” of the Cunningham signs in comparison to the more conventionalized signs that he himself supplies; it is not evident from Cunningham’s sole image representation that the seal is damaged, nor from Cunningham’s two line drawings of the shape of the seal in profile. Farmer, like both Cunningham and Lacouperie, does not include a photograph of the seal, or of an impression.



Cunningham's representation of the first discovered seal (Cunningham 1875).



Photograph of its sealing (left) and the first discovered seal (right) (BBC and The British Library).

The seal and sealing shown here in photograph represent the seal I believe may be the source-image in question, although the orientation of Cunningham's representation corresponds to a sealing rather than the seal. The "inscription" portion appears identical to Cunningham's, and does not appear to my untrained eye to be mutilated. The end characters or signs correspond well with Cunningham's reproduction and not with Farmer's standardized versions that he indicts Lacouperie with fraud for

not seeing. Cunningham's representation differs most drastically from the photograph regarding the two small images in front and below of the head of the animal figure; Cunningham reproduces a star shape for the nucleus-like mass of ovals and a stack of oblong ovals for an equitably crosshatched box. Also, the orientation of Cunningham's representation is reversed, as if produced from a sealing or a photograph of a sealing rather than the seal itself, unless Cunningham's representation was itself reversed.

The questionable claim of the effective refutation of the "Indus script hypothesis" has challenged the presupposition that the status of "script" can be immediately visually determined and differentiated from "image." This has exposed certain problematic aspects in the methodology and epistemology of representation, such as selection, abstraction, decontextualization, construction, standardization, presentation, and the re-representation of constructed representational images. Each such progressive aspect is susceptible to presupposition, preference, convenient omission, and ideological influence. Apparently the most methodologically problematic representation is of the unknown; there is a distinct preference for the omission of the admission that we do not actually know whether or not the images from the ancient Indus Valley contain a script.

## Bibliography

Barton, George A. 1926. "On the So-called Sumero-Indian Seals." *The Annual of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, Vol. 8 (1926-1927), 79-95.

The British Museum. 2010. "Early Excavations at Mohenjo-daro." Copyright the British Museum. <http://www.ancientindia.co.uk/indus/explore/his03.html> [accessed 12/10/2010]

The British Museum and BBC. 2010. "The First Cities and States (4000 - 2000 BC)." *A History of the World in 100 Objects*. Webpage and Podcast: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b00qb5xx> [accessed 12/10/2010]



Coomaraswamy, Ananda. 1929. "A Very Ancient Indian Seal." *Bulletin of the Museum of Fine Arts*, Vol. 27, No. 160 (Apr. 1929, 28-29.)

Cunningham, Alexander. 1875. *Report for the year 1872-1873*. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Printing.

Fairservice, Walter A. 1992. *The Harappan Civilization and its Writing: A Model for the Decipherment of the Indus Script*. New York: E.J. Brill.

Farmer, Steve. 2003. *The First Harappan Forgery: Indus Inscriptions in the Nineteenth Century*. <http://www.safarmer.com/firstforgery.pdf> (2003).

Farmer, Steve, R. Sproat, and M. Witzel. 2004. "The collapse of the Indus-script thesis: The myth of a literate Harappan civilization." *Electronic Journal of Vedic Studies* 11-2 (13 Dec. 2004).

Hunter, G.R. 1993 (1934). *The Script of Harappa and Mohenjodaro and its connection with Other Scripts*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers. 1993 Reprint of 1934, London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trubner & Co. Ltd.

Lacouperie, Terrence de. 2003 (1882). "A Lolo MS. Written on Satin", *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. Vol. 14. London: Trubner and Co. 1882, 118-123. Reprinted in its entirety in: Farmer, Steve. 2003. *The First Harappan Forgery: Indus Inscriptions in the Nineteenth Century*. <http://www.safarmer.com/firstforgery.pdf> (2003).

Mahadevan, Iravatham. 1977. *The Indus script: texts, concordance, and tables*. Issue 77 of *Memoirs of the Archaeological Survey of India*. Archaeological Survey of India.

Nāṭh, Prāṇ. 1931. "The Script of the Indus Valley Seals" *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. No. 3 (1931). 671-674.

Parpola, Asko. 1994. *Deciphering the Indus Script*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Possehl, Gregory. 2002. *The Indus Civilization: A contemporary perspective*. Walnut Creek: Altamira Press.

Possehl, Gregory. 1999. *Indus Age: The beginnings*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. 1999.

Possehl, Gregory. 1996. *Indus Age: The writing system*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Ray, Himanshu. 2008. *Colonial Archaeology in South Asia: The Legacy of Sir Mortimer Wheeler*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Waddell, L.A. 1926. "Indo-Sumerian Seals." *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 115-116.

Wheeler, Sir Mortimer. 1966. *Civilizations of the Indus Valley and Beyond*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Wheeler, Sir Mortimer. 1976. *My Archaeological Mission to Indian and Pakistan*. London: Thames and Hudson.

Witzel, Michael and Steve Farmer. 2000. "Horseplay in Harappa: The Indus Valley decipherment hoax", *Frontline* 17 (19) (13 Oct. 2000): 4-11.

# Women in Kashmir: A Feminist Autoethnography

by Hafsa Kanjwal

## Introduction

During the summer of 2010, the Valley of Kashmir, where I was born and where most of my extended family resides, witnessed a mass-uprising after the killings of civilians, mainly youth, by the Indian security forces. Although the past three summers in Kashmir have been fraught with protests and deaths, this summer was especially violent in terms of the number of people killed, injured and taken into custody.<sup>1</sup> I was in Srinagar, the capital of Kashmir, for two months during this volatile time period. Every day, there were protests and calls for strikes, and there were often government-imposed curfews during points of extreme tension and violence. The protesters demanded an end to the Indian military occupation of Kashmir, as well as independence, or *azaadi*, from the Indian state. Schools, offices, shops, and restaurants remained closed for the majority of the summer and well into the Fall. Most people, including my family and myself, remained indoors, effectively under house arrest. I was only able to leave home a few times during the entire summer, and one time in particular, came across a women's protest a few kilometers from my home. I was with a friend who was a journalist from the States. She was writing a story for Al-Jazeera English on the role of women in the resistance movement in Kashmir.

My interest in writing this essay was sparked by my experience that day at the women's protest, where I served as an impromptu translator for my journalist friend. This experience, and the summer as a whole, challenged my personal assumptions

---

<sup>1</sup> For more information on the events of this past summer, please see the coverage of the crisis by the New York Times section on Kashmir: <http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/kashmir/index.html>. Of note, is Arundhati Roy's article, "Kashmir's Fruits of Discord", published on November 8, 2010.

about the role of women in the resistance movement in Kashmir. It also challenged me to think about my own role as a Kashmiri-American in relation to these women. This paper seeks to combine a self-reflexive ethnographic narrative and analytical approach to discuss the changing role of women's resistance in the Kashmir Valley.

I am inspired to combine these two methodological approaches as a result of the enactment of hybridity that Kirin Narayan argues for in her article "How Native is a 'Native' Anthropologist?" She argues for a removal of the wall that divides "narrative (associated with subjective knowledges) and analysis (associated with objective truths)" and proposes that by "situating ourselves as subjects simultaneously touched by life-experience and swayed by professional concerns, we can acknowledge the hybrid and positioned nature of our identities. Writing texts that mix lively narrative and rigorous analysis involves enacting hybridity regardless of our origin" (Narayan 1993, 300). Using memory, reports, newspaper articles, photography, and transnational feminist theory on women and resistance, I argue against essentialist explanations of Kashmiri women's experience through the dominant Orientalist and imperialist frameworks. Historically situated in the earliest encounters between Islam and the West, these frameworks highlight the victimhood of Muslim women, seeing them primarily as objects and not subjects of their destinies. I suggest that the role of Kashmiri women in the resistance is constantly changing in light of historical, social and political circumstances. At the end of the paper, I will offer a combined methodological approach for studying these women's lives, comprised of historically situated methodologies, decolonizing methodologies, and activist methodologies.

### Diasporic Tensions

During one of the days when traffic was allowed on the streets, I accompanied my journalist friend to serve as a translator for some of her interviews. She was working on

a feature story about women's participation in the mass agitation. We had planned to interview several women who were involved with the separatist groups. On our way, we unexpectedly came across a women's protest. A group of around thirty women, dressed in bright flowered tunics and pants had formed in the middle of the street, blocking the traffic, and chanting pro-freedom slogans. A line of Indian security forces stood on the side, about 100 feet away, watching the protest without interfering.

We went over to the women, with a camera in my hand. In my Kashmiri, I asked the women why they were protesting—had they faced any acts of violence? Did they have any relatives or friends who had been killed? How had the turmoil affected their day-to-day lives? Although a few women answered my questions, a number of them became agitated. One went on to say, “if you had seen what we have seen, you would not be carrying that camera and pen and paper. You would drop everything and join our protests.” Shocked, I could only respond, “I will try to share your stories with people outside Kashmir.”

This incident highlights some of the tensions that I, possessing the hybridity of being both Kashmiri and American, confront during my visits to the region. Although born in Kashmir, I have spent a majority of my life in the United States, educated in elite institutions. At the protest, I had the visible markers of “difference”—a foreign Kashmiri accent, a conspicuous style of dress, and the possession of technology that marked me as belonging to a higher class. Unintentionally, I further perpetuated this sense of “difference” by showcasing the privilege that I had to “share their stories” with people outside of Kashmir.

This diasporic tension I faced inevitably relates to notions of my own cultural identity. In “Cultural Identity and Diaspora,” Stuart Hall discusses a divergent view of cultural identity. While a dominant view foregrounds the similarities within a cultural formation (Kashmir, American), the divergent view points to deep and significant difference, “which constitutes what we really are...or rather since history has intervened,

what we have become” (Hall 1993, 394). He further states, “Cultural identities come from somewhere, have histories. But, like everything which is historical, they undergo constant transformation....they are subject to the continuous ‘play’ of history, culture and power” (Hall 1993, 394). In my case, the history was my leaving Kashmir with my family during the height of the militancy in the early 1990s and settling into a new life in the United States. In my encounter with these women, I felt a sense of privilege that made me uncomfortable. There were differences in power—language, class, education. I remember thinking that it was a strange fortune that gave me the opportunity to live an alternate reality, and it didn’t seem fair that these women did not have that same chance.

In some ways, I was forced to recognize my entrenchment in the ideology of U.S. Empire as a member of the Kashmiri diaspora. As Engseng Ho describes of diasporas in “Empire Through Diasporic Eyes”, “the subversives who peopled such movements [diasporas] were mobile cosmopolitans whose agendas were presumably extra-territorial....their geographical mobility often meant crossing imperial and departmental jurisdictions, stretching the capacity of empire for political intelligence....an inferior, subaltern entity which was nevertheless diasporic, cosmopolitan, and sophisticated like empire itself, and enough so to represent a potential threat” (Ho 2004, 240). In the case of my entry into the women’s protest, one may ask what the “potential threat” that I instigated would entail. I was evidently trying to craft a narrative of these women’s lives that would be most compelling for the American audience. By asking sensational questions, it was clear what I, as an interviewer, wanted something specific out of these women—their sense of injustice, their anger, their tragic renderings. Why was it my agenda to situate these women firmly in the context of victimhood? Although the injustices committed by the Indian state apparatus against these women were many, why did I, as a Muslim Kashmiri woman, want to continue to depict these women in the usual Orientalist and imperialist tropes of oppression and victimization?

My personal desire to interview these women as victims was meant to shed light on the broader context of suffering of the Kashmiri people under the Indian occupation. However, in framing my questions, I fell into the same dangers of the “politics of representation” that post- colonial and transnational feminist theorists critique. They urge the researcher to be careful about how she represents a group of people, especially one that has been historically marginalized, as any act of (mis)representation has the potential of enacting violence on the researched. Kamala Visweswaran, in *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*, admits that in the process of research, there will especially be complications for those with hyphenated identities. It is easy to fall into and add to the dominant representations of a group. Yet, she argues, those who fall into these identities are situated in a place “to be moved by different sets of questions concerning power, domination and representation...how we may ourselves be positioned (and not always by choice in opposition to dominant discourses and structures of power)” (Visweswaran 1994, 140). This oppositional ethnography will situate my own role in relation to these women by enacting hybridity and will also challenge dominant concepts of Kashmiri womanhood. My goal is not to downplay the violence and suffering experienced by Kashmiri women, but rather, to offer an alternative set of methodologies from which to view these representations.

### Dominant Representations of Kashmiri Women

At this point, I would like to examine these dominant representations of Kashmiri women —representations that I had in many ways internalized. After discussing these dominant understandings, I will address some of the current manifestations of resistance by Kashmiri women, including the phenomenon of the “stone-throwing housewives” and how these challenge the traditionally-held assumptions about the role of women in the

conflict. I will then relate these manifestations to transnational themes of women and resistance, especially in the Muslim world.<sup>2</sup>

To begin my discussion of the dominant representations of Kashmiri women, I would like to share a photograph that best expresses the sense of “passive victimhood” that is prevalent in all of these representations. Although the use of photography in essays such as this can be problematic, I seek to employ two particular pictures to show how they mark a stark contrast to each other, and how they characterize the themes I explore in this paper.<sup>3</sup> Thus, it is in relation to the broader discourses surrounding the changing role of women in Kashmir that I am including these pictures—not to have them serve as actual representations of the roles of women.



This first picture shows a group of women watching a funeral procession from their window.<sup>4</sup> The women are crying, mourning, and beating their chests. This is one of

---

<sup>2</sup> I use the term “Muslim world” to describe Muslim-majority nations around the world.

<sup>3</sup> The use of photography in writing these anthropological essays has been looked down upon given the use of photography by anthropologists during the colonial period to situate and represent the “native other.” There are oftentimes concerns about sensationalizing a particular representation, and thus this issue remains contested within anthropology today. However, a variety of anthropologists do make use of photography, including *Vita* by Joao Biehl and *Righteous Dopefiend* by Philippe Bourgois and Jeff Schonberg.

<sup>4</sup> This photo was taken by Dar Yasin of Associated Press.



the many images of Kashmiri female passive victimhood—these women remain emotional bystanders to the violence enacted upon them and their communities. They watch the protests from afar, not taking part. They find expression in mourning the deaths of their husbands, fathers, sons, and brothers. What is important to note in most of these dominant representations is that the women’s expression is situated in their role in relation to the men in their lives—as mothers, wives, and daughters. One of the more public examples of this expression is the organization Association of Parents of Disappeared Persons (APDP), run by Parvina Ahangar. APDP’s activities are regularly featured in the local newspapers. Ahangar’s 16-year old son was abducted by Indian forces. She would routinely visit and wait outside of the doors of police buildings, demanding a right to know about her son’s whereabouts. In time, other mothers and wives of the disappeared men joined her. Ahangar has brought together hundreds of families of missing persons and forced the Indian government to admit that around 4,000 people are in custody as a result of the conflict.<sup>5</sup> Moments of intensified nationalisms, resistance, or war position women as “mothers of the nation.” I want to make it clear that I do not view this as solely a sign of oppression; in fact, I believe that this representation can be liberating for the women, as evidenced with Ahangar’s activism as a mother and how she has mobilized this marginalized group in Kashmiri society. However, this positioning is “traditional” as it is situated in the context of the woman’s role in relation to the men around her.<sup>6</sup>

Of course, these women are often the recipients of violence themselves, most prominently sexual violence. A 2005 report by Doctors without Borders noted that Kashmir has some of the highest rates of sexual violence in any conflict region (Batrawy 2010). During the summer of 2009, similar protests rocked Kashmir as a result of the

---

<sup>5</sup> Human rights groups say the figure is closer to 9,000. These numbers were taken from Aya Batrawy’s article in Al-Jazeera English.

<sup>6</sup> A comparative case-study can be made in reference to Palestine. Please see Rhoda Ann Kanaaneh’s “Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel.”

alleged rape and death of two women by security forces in the town of Shopian.<sup>7</sup> Kashmiri women's bodies, as with the bodies of women in other conflict areas, remain the vehicle through which the violence of occupation and resistance is enacted.<sup>8</sup> One of the most gripping incidents of this violence was in the early years of the Kashmiri militancy. In February 1991, Indian security forces launched a search and interrogation operation in the village of Kunan Poshpora, in Kashmir's remote Kupwara district. Upwards of 100 women were gang-raped by the security forces, although the Indian government denied these allegations.<sup>9</sup> A report conducted in 1994 by the Women's Initiative featured the testimony of several of the alleged victims. They complained of ostracism from their families and communities because of the "shame" associated with having been raped. Some victims committed suicide after the incident and not a single marriage proposal had been received for any woman, raped or not, in the village years for after the incident (Dewan 1994, 2654).

These abuses against women occur not only by the Indian security forces and paramilitary forces, but also by the members of the various militant groups operating in Kashmir.<sup>10</sup> Ironically, both the militant groups and the Indian security forces posit themselves as the protectors of women against the other. The stories of these abuses provide fodder for the nationalist resistance—it is in the language of protecting the women's chastity and izzat (honor, respect) that the movement gains its legitimacy.

---

<sup>7</sup> For more information on the Shopian deaths and the aftermath, please read the New York Times article: <http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/25/world/asia/25kashmir.html>.

<sup>8</sup> To read about the use of rape during times of war, please read *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*, edited by Alexandra Stiglmyer and Iris Chang's *The Rape of Nanking*.

<sup>9</sup> For more information on the Kunan Poshpora gang-rapes, please see *Human Rights in India: Kashmir Under Siege, An Asia Watch Report and Abdication of Responsibility: The Commonwealth and Human Rights*, a report by Human Rights Watch.

<sup>10</sup> These militant groups are either pro-independence or pro-Pakistan. Accusations of rape have mainly been leveraged against the pro-Pakistan militant groups as well as militant groups set up by the Indian government for counter-insurgency purposes. For more information on rape in Kashmir, please see the report by Physicians for Human Rights.

The final representation, and one that is often deployed by the Indian security forces, is of the Kashmiri woman who is forced to hide or assist a militant. Again, she does not enact any agency in her decision to do so—she has no ideological sympathies with the militancy. She only does it because of fear of retribution or violence. Oftentimes, media representations on the internet, TV, and newspapers, claim that she is “duped” into doing so. This representation was scaled to Bollywood proportions in a film entitled *Mission Kashmir*, which came out in 2000. In the movie, a naïve, innocent Kashmiri girl falls in love with her childhood friend, who ends up being a militant on a murder mission to avenge the death of his family. He uses her to put his plan into action, and she is eventually led to work with the local police to reveal his plans. The representation, once again, is of the Kashmiri woman in between conflicting ideologies, a victim of the forces around her.

It is through these representations of passive victimhood that the Kashmiri woman has been represented in dominant discourses on the role of women in the Kashmir conflict and in the resistance. As a mourning mother, a rape victim, and an innocent bystander, the Kashmiri woman is a recipient of action, and only expresses her agency in relation to the men in her life and the “traditional” roles she plays in society. These roles fit neatly into existing Orientalist and imperialist tropes of Muslim women.

In my own encounter with the protesting women, I internalized these roles in how I approached my questions during the interview. How had the women suffered? Was anyone in her family killed or taken into custody? In seeking these stories of victimization, I wanted to place direct blame on the Indian occupation for subjugating these women. Yet, in doing so, I denied these women the right to be seen as agents and enactors of resistance to the Indian occupation in ways that did not fit neatly into hegemonic discourses. Only when I saw the images of the “stone-throwing housewives” did I begin to question my own assumptions of the role women have played in the Kashmir conflict.

### The New Kashmiri Women



This second photograph from the protests this past summer, reflects the changing role of Kashmiri women in the conflict.<sup>11</sup> This image stands in direct contrast to the dominant representations—here, a middle-aged Kashmiri woman takes part in the stone-throwing against the Indian army. Usually, this activity is reserved for the youth—primarily, teenage-aged boys. As Sanjay Kak, a filmmaker who created *Jashn-e-Azaadi*, a film about how India’s Independence Day is celebrated in Kashmir, describes in an article for *The Times of India*:

But now an unfamiliar new photograph of the Kashmiri woman has begun to take its place on newspaper front pages. She's dressed in ordinary salwar-kameez, pastel pink, baby blue, purple and yellow. Her head is casually covered with a

---

<sup>11</sup> This photo, taken by Tauseef Mustafa of AFP/Getty Images, was displayed on a number of social media sites such as Facebook and local Kashmiri blogs.

dupatta and she seems unconcerned about being recognized. She is often middle aged, and could even be middle-class. And she is carrying a stone. A weapon directed at the security forces. Last week, in a vastly under-reported story, a massive crowd stopped two Indian Air Force vehicles on the highway near Srinagar [the summer capital of Kashmir]. At the forefront were hundreds of women. The airmen and their families were asked to dismount, and move to the safety of a nearby building. Then the buses were torched. This is not a rare incident: women are everywhere in these troubled times in Kashmir, and not in the places traditionally assigned to them. They are collecting stones and throwing them, and assisting the young men in the front ranks of the protestors to disguise themselves, even helping them escape when the situation gets tough (Kak 2010).

Kak argues that it is “no ordinary anger, but an old, bottled-up rage, gathered over so many years that it has settled, and turned rock hard. That accumulated fury is the stone in her hand” (Kak). The increasing fury, frustration, and sense of marginalization felt by the Kashmiri masses as a whole has changed the manifestations of resistance expressed by these women. No longer are they recipients of action, but actors themselves, and oftentimes in ways that could be considered “non-traditional” within a sphere of gendered norms. Notions of victimhood are not overlooked, but rather transformed into a desire to dramatically alter their circumstances. Of course, this is not to say that Kashmiri women have not enacted their agency through active resistance in the past, but rather, that the “terms of engagement” of these expressions are dramatically changing and do not neatly fit into traditional modes of women’s involvement.

Undoubtedly, the modes of resistance by women have changed because their roles in society itself have transformed due to the recent turmoil. Women are becoming the primary breadwinners in many families because of the number of men killed or

disappeared over the years. Yet, there is still a view of the “ideal, traditional” role women would have played if it were not for the occupation. I was struck by a comment made by a close relative who exclaimed, “Look at how bad it has gotten. These women should be at home, taking care of their families, not on the streets throwing rocks.” At the protest I observed, I noticed that the Indian security forces did not seem too concerned about the women protestors and were watching them with amusement. Although they are now well aware that women have thrown rocks too, they also seem to be at odds with this new reality—as it challenges their own experiences with enforcing a sense of victimization upon these women. Despite how these new roles continue to play out in society and how they are perceived by the security forces, the past two decades have undoubtedly left a mark that has reshaped gender relations and representations.

In addition to the number of local and regional factors that contribute to this shift, including the ongoing occupation, it is important to take note of the transnational issues that also impact the changing role of women and resistance in Kashmir. These issues relate to increasing U.S. imperialism and quasi-imperialism throughout the Muslim world, especially in light of the War on Terror. The focus is not merely on how the Muslim man is becoming radicalized, but also how the Muslim woman is becoming radicalized. No longer is the Muslim woman a mere victim, but she is a necessary component of the Islamist threat. Because the Muslim man has faced such scrutiny, it is now the responsibility of the Muslim woman to follow in his footsteps. The newfound fixation with the Muslim-woman-as-threat is manifested through the obsession with the nikab in a number of European countries (as a marker of extremism) as well as the female suicide bomber in places such as Palestine and Iraq.

The stone-throwing Kashmiri woman demands a translation, because the traditional view holds that only non-violent activities can be accepted as genuine expressions of women’s will— since women are essentially non-violent. This traditional view would see the enactment through a “male mode of resistance”—such as stone-

throwing—as one in which the woman is again being duped. Indian security forces repeatedly narrate that the separatist groups force women to be in protests so that these women can serve as a shield to protect the militants and restrain the forces from firing into the crowds.

The Muslim-woman-as-threat trope is also reflected through understandings of Islamist political mobilizations that cater primarily to women. An organization that gains much coverage in Kashmir is the Duktaran-i-Millat, (Daughters of the Faithful) an Islamist separatist female-led group in Kashmir. What initially began as a reformist organization to inculcate Islamic values in what they considered an increasingly decadent society in the late 1980s became one of the first organizations to lend its moral support to the militancy. The organization has gained notoriety for tearing down obscene pictures, patrolling neighborhoods for acts of indecency, and throwing acid on women who were not dressed modestly. Although the organization does not have much popular support, its activities are widely reported in the Indian and international media as a warning of “what would happen to Kashmir if we left and the Islamist militants took over.”<sup>12</sup>

In a post-9/11 context, the Muslim woman emerges as a threat. This past year, Bollywood came out with another film on Kashmir, entitled *Lamhaa*. In contrast to the other film mentioned, in this film the Kashmiri woman is in the role of a terrorist herself by abetting militant-terrorist activity. This film sheds light on how the Kashmiri nationalist struggle has been usurped by India under the framework of “terrorism,” undoubtedly inspired by the U.S. War on Terror. In doing so, India aims to obtain sympathy with the international community and delegitimize the aspirations of the Kashmiri people.

These examples showcase a new Kashmiri woman—one who is defined by her action, and not by her passivity. This woman has suffered greatly since the rise of the

---

<sup>12</sup> For more on the Duktaran-i-Millat, please see the following article on BBC News by Geeta Pandey: [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5028844.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5028844.stm)

militancy, and has decided to take matters—or stones—into her own hands. By aiding and taking part in protests, stone-throwing, and hiding the youth who face arrest, this new Kashmiri woman has altered the dynamics of the resistance. Her community is not sure what to make of her, and neither are the Indian security forces. The international community is able to see her in a light shared by women in other parts of occupied Muslim lands—the Muslim-woman-as-threat. They are worried about the ideological influence of Islamist thought in her reinvention. She defies traditional stereotypes and creates new ones.

In my attempts to relate to the new Kashmiri woman, I am faced with a tension felt by many other feminists in diasporas. The new woman provides an alternative narrative than the one of victimization. I can relate to her subjectivity and the ways in which she renders herself visible and vocally resists against occupation and oppression. Nonetheless, I am still reminded of her predecessor—the one who has been victimized, raped, and made invisible. In the back of my mind, the question remains: How do we talk about the struggles, marginalization, and sense of victimization of Kashmiri women without falling into Orientalist tropes?

### Conclusions

I would like to conclude by offering a methodological argument for researchers in studying these women's lives in Kashmir. In addition to the enactment of hybridity, an approach to writing that mixes narrative and rigorous analysis, I also propose a historically situated methodology, a decolonizing methodology, and an activist methodology. A historically situated methodology is one that recognizes all forms of knowledge production as being situated in its particular time and place. Much of this entails a deconstruction of previously held essentialist assumptions about a given culture, nation, people, or religion and a desire to understand a given context on its own



terms.<sup>13</sup> In the case of Kashmir, this would entail taking into account the political history of the region, which has undoubtedly impacted women's lives, especially in recent decades. I would also argue that a historically situated methodology would not only take into account local factors, but also be able to link it to broader, global, transnational historical forces, thus dismantling the local/global dichotomy. When studying the ongoing Kashmiri resistance, this would entail a reflection on empire and the War on Terror.

A decolonizing methodology works against colonialist and Orientalist frameworks.<sup>14</sup> It does not see all knowledge as objective, but rather subjective and situated. It is cognizant of the politics of knowledge production, especially of the role of the researcher in relation to the researched. The researcher is in a position of power and must think carefully about how he/she would represent the community with responsibility and accountability especially because "representational practices [photography and ethnography] are torn between objectifying and humanizing; exploiting and giving voice; propagandizing and documenting injustice; stigmatizing and revealing; fomenting voyeurism and promoting empathy; stereotyping and analyzing" (Bourgeois 2009, 15). For the researcher, this entails a strong understanding of his/her role—a self-reflexive approach that must be inherent to any form of knowledge production.

Finally, a decolonizing methodology also corresponds with an activist research methodology.<sup>15</sup> This methodology situates the researcher as not only studying the community, but also working alongside the community in efforts to improve their condition—whether it be their political, economic, or social condition. The researcher

---

<sup>13</sup> Please see Visweswaran's *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography* for more on historically situated methodologies (pg 48-49 and 68-72).

<sup>14</sup> For more on decolonizing methodologies, please see Linda Tuhiwai Smith's book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*.

<sup>15</sup> Smith's book also discusses activism and research and how one can be accountable to a community.

must have a personal commitment to social justice and an awareness of the political circumstances in the area. Given the continuing presence of over 500,000 Indian security forces in Kashmir and the regular occurrences of human rights violations, it becomes hard to remain a “neutral observer.” A researcher will inevitably be asked how he/she views the conflict, no matter how “apolitical” ones projects aims to be. Although this role may bring up ethical concerns for a researcher, especially at his/her home institution, it is one that must be negotiated.

Throughout this paper, I have attempted to make use of these diverse methodologies in exploring the changing role of women and resistance in Kashmir. By incorporating an enactment of hybridity as well as a historically situated, decolonizing activist methodology, I have showcased the ways in which Kashmir women are challenging traditional assumptions of female victimhood by creating new representations. In doing this essay, I realize that many other issues remain unexplored in understanding Kashmiri women’s lives through these methodologies. Further studies could examine the changing role of religion in these women’s lives in addition to issues of health, family, education and economics.

I often think about what questions I would now ask those same women at the protest I witnessed last summer. I wouldn’t start with a question, but simply ask them to speak. My role as translator would remain—this is the best way I can express my academic intervention.

## Bibliography

Asia Watch. 1991. “Human Rights in India: Kashmir Under Siege.” pg. 88.

Batrawy, Aya. 2010. “Kashmiri Women United by Loss.” Al-Jazeera English. <<http://english.aljazeera.net/focus/2010/07/2010717104528693707.html>>.

Biehl, Joao. 2005. *Vita*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Bourgois, Philippe and Schonberg, Jeff. 2009. *Righteous Dopefiend*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Chang, Iris. 1997. *The Rape of Nanking: The Forgotten Holocaust of World War II*. New York: Basic Books.

Dewan, Ritu. 1994. "Humsheera', 'Humsaya': Sisters, Neighbours: Women's Testimonies from Kashmir." *Economic and Political Weekly*. Vol. 29, No. 41, pp. 2654-2658.

Hall, Stuart. 1993. "Cultural Identity and Diaspora." In Williams, Patrick & Laura Chrisman eds. *Colonial Discourse & Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*. Harvester Wheatsheaf.

Ho, Enseng. 2004. "Empire Through Diasporic Eyes: A View from the Other Boat." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 46, Issue 2, pp. 210-246.

Human Rights Watch. 1991. "Abdication of Responsibility: The Commonwealth and Human Rights."

Kak, Sanjay. 2010. "The Last Option: A Stone in Her Hand." *The Times of India*. <<http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/home/sunday-toi/special-report/The-last-option-A-stone-in-her-hand/articleshow/6272689.cms>>.

Kanaaneh, Rhoda Ann. 2002. *Birthing the Nation: Strategies of Palestinian Women in Israel*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

"Kashmir." *The New York Times*. Web. 16 Dec. 2010. <<http://topics.nytimes.com/top/news/international/countriesandterritories/kashmir/index.html>>.

*Lamhaa: The Untold Story of Kashmir*. 2010. Dir. Rahul Dholakia. Perf. Sanjay Dutt and Bipasha Basu. Film. G.S. Entertainment.

*Mission Kashmir*. 2000. Dir. Vidhu Vinod Chopra. Perf. Hrithik Roshan and Preity Zinta. Film. Destination Films.

Narayan, Kirin. 1993. "How Native is the Native Anthropologist." *American Anthropologist*, Vol. 95, No. 3, pp. 671-686.

Pandey, Geeta. 2006. "Taking the 'jijad' to Kashmir's Women." *BBC News*. <[http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south\\_asia/5028844.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/south_asia/5028844.stm)>.

Physicians for Human Rights. 1994. "Rape in Kashmir: A Crime of War." Web access: <<http://physiciansforhumanrights.org/library/documents/reports/rape-in-kashmir.pdf>>.

Polgreen, Lydia. 2009. "Women's Deaths, and Inquiry's Findings, Enrage Kashmir." *The New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/12/25/world/asia/25kashmir.html>>.

Roy, Arundhati. 2010. "Kashmir's Fruits of Discord." *The New York Times*. <<http://www.nytimes.com/2010/11/09/opinion/09roy.html?ref=kashmir>>.

Smith, Linda Tuhiwai. 1999. *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. New York, NY: Palgrave.

Stiglmayer, Alexandra. 1994. *Mass Rape: The War Against Women in Bosnia-Herzegovina*. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press.

Visweswaran, Kamala. 1994. *Fictions of Feminist Ethnography*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

# Redefining Muslim Women: Aga Khan III's Reforms for Women's Education

by Shenila S. Khoja-Moolji

**Abstract:** In the history of Muslim India, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century formed a period that witnessed intense public contestation over the role of women in society. Against that background, this article explores the writings and institutional initiatives of the forty-eighth Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III, with reference to women's education. It compares and contrasts his thinking with the foundational texts on women's education written by four other prominent Muslim leaders of that time period: Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nazir Ahmed, Mumtaz Ali and Ashraf Ali Thanawi. An analysis of the writings demonstrates that the Aga Khan's approach was markedly different; while other leaders saw women's roles primarily in the domestic sphere, as dependent daughters, wives or mothers, the Aga Khan recognized the dignity of women as individuals worthy in and of themselves and not merely due to the function that they performed in society. He, thus, not only advocated for women's education to promote their socioeconomic well-being but also argued for it as a basic right that could promote inner happiness through intellectual growth. The article discusses a variety of factors that may have influenced the Aga Khan's thoughts, including exposure to first-wave feminism, and concludes with the implications of his reforms for Ismaili women today.

**A Note on Sources:** The Aga Khan gave much of his guidance to the Ismaili Muslim community in the form of farmans (directives). These farmans are private documents, and as such, I have limited myself to materials that are readily available through other publications or library holdings.

**Acknowledgements:** The author thanks Professor Ali Asani at Harvard University for his guidance in developing this article.

## Introduction

Over the last century, the landscape of economic, educational and social opportunities available to women has changed significantly. In Muslim India, the late nineteenth and early twentieth century witnessed intense public contestation over the role of women in

society. This was also the time when Indian Muslims were engaged in the balancing act of participating in a rapidly modernizing environment under the British colonial government while attempting to retain their cultural heritage, traditions and religion. Discussions regarding women and their role in the uplift of the Muslim community became symbolic of the many contradictions they faced; debates about women's education, suffrage, legal status, rights in Islam etc. were commonplace and demonstrated the deep anxieties of Muslims in colonial India. In this context, the article explores the writings and institutional initiatives of the forty-eighth Imam (spiritual leader) of the Shia Ismaili Muslims, Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III (d. 1957). Specifically, it compares his thoughts on women's education with a number of foundational texts on the topic written by four other prominent Muslim leaders of that time period: Sir Syed Ahmed Khan (d. 1898), Nazir Ahmed (d. 1912), Mumtaz Ali (d. 1935) and Ashraf Ali Thanawi (d. 1943). After a brief consideration of the Aga Khan's background and his context in colonial India, the article delves into a deeper discussion of his writings on women's education. An analysis of the Aga Khan's writings demonstrates that his approach towards women's education was markedly different than that of his contemporaries. He recognized that women had the same potential as men, which informed his conceptualization of the wide-ranging roles they could perform in society. He not only advocated for women's education to promote their socioeconomic well-being but also argued for it as a basic right that could promote inner happiness through intellectual growth. This recognition of the emancipatory potential of education prompted him to institute a range of reforms for his female followers, which have had far-reaching impact on their educational, economic and social progress. The article discusses a variety of factors that may have influenced the Aga Khan's views on these issues, including exposure to first-wave feminism. It concludes with an assessment of the implications of his reforms for Ismaili women today.

## The Institution of Ismaili Imam

The institution of the Ismaili Imam is represented by the Imam of the time. The Ismaili Imams are direct descendants of the final Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. They trace their lineage to the Prophet through his daughter, Fatima, and his cousin and son-in-law, Ali, who was also the first Imam. With respect to their followers, it is the mandate of the Imams to “safeguard the individual’s right to personal intellectual search and to give practical expression to the ethical vision of society that the Islamic message inspires.”<sup>1</sup> This mandate has translated into wide-ranging efforts by the Imams towards improving the quality of life of their followers and the communities in which they live.

Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan III was born in Karachi, in today’s Pakistan, on November 2, 1877. He became the forty-eighth Imam of the Ismaili Muslims at the age of eight on the passing away of his father, Aga Ali Shah Aga Khan II. He went on to establish himself as an influential political leader, not only in colonial India but also on the international scene. Due to his responsibilities as the Imam of Ismaili Muslims and as a leader of Indian Muslims, he operated within a variety of socio-political and religious contexts that undoubtedly influenced his thoughts and provided him with opportunities to further his goals. In his Memoirs he notes his dual responsibilities to serve “first, in India, as the leader of an influential group within the wide Muslim community at an epoch when political aspirations were stirring and second, as the head of a far-ranging international community [of Ismaili Muslims].”<sup>2</sup> He worked with the British colonial government on a variety of social and political issues aimed at improving the quality of life of Indian Muslims. For instance, he helped with the establishment of the Muhammadan Anglo-Oriental College at Aligarh, and worked closely with the leaders of the Aligarh movement to secure the recognition of Muslims as an

---

<sup>1</sup> “His Highness the Aga Khan,” Theismaili.org, accessed October 2, 2011, <http://www.theismaili.org/?id=14>

<sup>2</sup> Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan, World Enough and Time* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954a), 58.

independent political entity. In 1902, he was appointed to the Legislative Council set up by Lord Curzon, and in 1906, he was elected as the first President of the Muslim political organization, the All-India Muslim League.<sup>3</sup> He remained active on the Indian political front throughout his life but over time increasingly took on international policy-orientated tasks, including serving as the President of the League of Nations for a brief period.<sup>4</sup>

While the Aga Khan advocated comprehensive reforms for Muslims both as a leader of Indian Muslims and as the Imam of Ismaili Muslims, he adopted a more hands-on approach when it came to the latter. It was his religious authority as the Imam that allowed him to pioneer a system of social service agencies for the well-being of his followers, particularly the women. Before considering his efforts to develop women's education, it is critical to understand the political, religious and social trends in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century that influenced and informed his work.

### Context: Colonial India

During the second half of the nineteenth century, India saw the ascendancy of the British and the decline of the Muslim rule and influence. It was a time of increasing anxiety for the Muslims of India, who were concerned about the future of the Muslim *quam* (nation) under foreign rule.<sup>5</sup> Muslims underwent a political and social dislocation;<sup>6</sup> the Muslim service gentry such as the court-sponsored *ulama* (religious scholars), poets, *qazis* (judges), aristocrats etc., who had a claim to authority in the prior

---

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 103 and 125.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

<sup>5</sup> Muhammad Qasim Zaman, *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi: Islam in modern South Asia, Makers of the Muslim world* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> Barbara Metcalf, "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women: Maulana Thanawi's Jewelry of Paradise," in *Moral Conduct and Authority*, ed. Barbara Metcalf (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 184.



arrangements under the Mughul rulers, were increasingly marginalized by colonialism, particularly after the 1857 mutiny which cast suspicions on Muslim loyalty to the British establishment. The British also articulated their cherished ideal of the separation of religion and state, and clearly demarcated the arenas for religion, education, politics, and the market. These structural changes motivated a reinterpretation of Islam in order to make the religion relevant to the new realities of the Indian Muslims. It was hoped that this exercise of reinterpretation and self-reflection would lead to a revival of the Muslim *quam*, and allow them to regain the lost political space and social status. The effort of reinterpretation, however, was no longer the exclusive domain of the traditional religious scholars or *ulama*; another group of Muslims – the modernists – emerged and participated actively in this endeavor of reviving the Indian Muslims.<sup>7</sup>

Broadly, traditionalists – such as the ‘*ulama* of Dar-al-Ulum at Deoband – sought to revive the Muslim community by appealing to textual Islam. They believed that if the Muslims of India followed Islam as presented in the foundational texts and eschewed the heterodox practices prevalent in India, they would be able to rejuvenate themselves socially and politically. Thus, the group aimed to reform the beliefs and practices of ordinary believers to bring them in-line with ‘proper’ Islam. The extent of conformity of Indian Muslims to these prescriptions of Islam was to be measured by women’s religious practices. Women were to reform their superstitious customs and rituals, and comply with textual Islam; they were to become the symbols of Islamic morality. Traditionalists, therefore, advocated religious education for Muslim women in so far as it brought women’s religious practices in-line with their understanding of Islam. This form of religious education did not prioritize women’s intellectual engagement with the faith. Instead, it focused on elaborating the correct performance of religion for women. In addition, most articulations for women’s education by this group excluded the need for

---

<sup>7</sup> Barbara Metcalf, “Madrasas and Minorities in Secular India,” in *Schooling Islam. The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, ed. Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007), 94-95.

secular, scientific education, which was becoming increasingly relevant but was only offered outside the domestic sphere.

The modernists – such as Mumtaz Ali and the Aga Khan – on the other hand, believed that a combination of religious and secular education was essential for the revival of Muslims in India. To them, Muslims needed to take advantage of western education and familiarize themselves with the social tools necessary to function and compete in the colonial environment. Still, theirs was not an aggressively westernizing and secularizing view. The language and directives of Islam deeply influenced them as well, as they grounded, articulated and legitimized their programs for social reform within the context of Islam. Women featured in their narrative primarily as nurturers of civilizations and guardians of domestic happiness, though these reformers made some moves towards acknowledging women's individuality as well.

Thus, while the leaders from both the traditionalist and the modernist camps worked towards addressing the status of Muslims in India on a variety of fronts, reforming the religious and social practices of Muslim women remained a key objective for them and a barometer for the success of their efforts. It was against this background that education for women featured prominently as a primary means to halt the decline of the Muslims of India.

### Women's Education in Colonial India

Muslim reformers were by no means alone in their efforts to reform the status of women in India. Hindu reformers had begun focusing on this issue since the early nineteenth century as is evidenced by the reforms against the customs of Sati (burning of widows) and the campaigns in South India to suppress the devdasi system (marrying women to

a deity or temple).<sup>8</sup> There was a general agreement among Muslim leaders, including Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nazir Ahmed, Mumtaz Ali, Ashraf Ali Thanawi and the Aga Khan, on the need for educating women. While they agreed in principle, they differed on the extent to which women should be educated and what that education would look like. The cause of their differences seems to be rooted in their divergent views of women and gender roles.<sup>9</sup>

The Aga Khan opposed the social, religious, political and cultural structures and institutions that excluded women from the public sphere, deprived them of opportunities to make a living, or limited their rights. Realizing the interconnectedness of women's issues and the 'intersectionality'<sup>10</sup> of their lives, he urged comprehensive reforms to all aspects of women's experience. His efforts for women's educational advancement, hence, were not undertaken in isolation, but impacted, and were impacted by, his efforts to reform women's legal, political and religious status. Therefore, even as we focus on the Aga Khan's reforms in the realm of education, it is crucial to take into account the comprehensive nature of his approach to women's emancipation. For instance, in arguing for the provision of primary education for girls on the grounds of gender equality, he remained aware of the important role that local philanthropists and reformers could play in promoting education, and therefore, demanded appropriate and favorable legislation for their operational efforts as well.<sup>11</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> Rehana Ghadially, "The Campaign for Women's Emancipation in an Ismaili Shia (Daudi Bohra) Sect of Indian Muslims: 1929-1945," *Women Living under Muslim Laws* (1996): 1.

<sup>9</sup> Gail Minault (1998) has categorized the thoughts of these intellectuals into separate generations with Sir Syed and Altaf Hussain Hali (d.1914) belonging to the first generation and the rest of the intellectuals belonging to the second generation. This article will avoid using the same categories as these intellectuals were deeply influenced by each others' work and sometimes even presented their thoughts in conversation with earlier scholars. For instance, at several points in his text, Mumtaz Ali quotes Sir Syed's ideas and presents his own thoughts to counter them.

<sup>10</sup> The concept of intersectionality was first introduced by Kimberle Crenshaw (1991) in the context of African American women's history. She notes that the experience of a specific group of women will differ from another due to the multiplicity of identities that they embody. Factors such as gender, class, race, culture, political and legal status interact to influence the opportunities available to women, and the challenges that they must overcome.

<sup>11</sup> Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, *India in Transition, A Study in Political Evolution*. (New York: G. Putnam: 1918), 260.

The Aga Khan placed extraordinary emphasis on the education for women so as to enable them to direct their own lives and obtain personal happiness. He sought to provide women with the tools with which they could better their own situations, as well as improve the welfare of their families. He said, "I am trying to guide our young women's lives into entirely new channels. I want to see them able to earn their living in trades and professions, so that they are not economically dependent on marriage, nor a burden on their fathers and brother."<sup>12</sup> In contrast, most other articulations for the necessity of women's education were based on the impact of such an education on women's abilities to manage their households, educate their children and practice proper Islam; women were the guardians of Islamic morality and their education was to help further communal goals. It was believed that if women could get an education in the religious sciences, they would be able to contribute to the proper upbringing of their children and maintain peaceful homes for their husbands.

This was the line of thought adopted by intellectuals such as Nazir Ahmed and Ashraf Ali Thanawi. Nazir Ahmed in his novel *Mirat ul-Aroos* (The Bride's Mirror), published in 1869, employs the character of Asghari to exemplify the model Muslim woman – a woman who has elementary education of religious sciences, is an expert at household management, and abides by Muslim practices. Due to her education and intelligence, she is able to create a happy and harmonious home for her husband and in-laws. Asghari is educated at home in a zenana-based school system, similar to those attended by the upper class ashraf (elite) Muslim women of the time. Since upper class Muslim women practiced seclusion, they were educated at home by visiting *ustanis* (female teachers), who were usually the wives and daughters of the *maulvis* (religious functionaries) and had limited literary skills.<sup>13</sup> The content of education at the zenanas

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoted in Qayyum Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan: Guide, Philosopher and Friend of the Islamic World* (Karachi: Ismailia Association for Pakistan, 1969), 211.

<sup>13</sup> Gail Minault, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 23.

typically consisted of memorizing passages of the Quran and reading some Arabic, Persian and Urdu script.<sup>14</sup> By focusing on the education of females in a zenana-style school system, Nazir Ahmed avoids commenting on the access to education for working-class Muslim women. Despite having written this novel with the intention of providing some literature for Muslim women to study,<sup>15</sup> he seems to be more concerned about the future of the ashraf Muslims than the welfare of the Indian Muslim women at large.

Similarly, Ashraf Ali Thanawi in his text *Bahishti Zewar* (Heavenly Ornaments), published in 1905, provides detailed guidance to women on religious rituals, duties, laws and etiquette, in the hopes to cure their corrupt beliefs and practices.<sup>16</sup> The text is a discursive effort in constructing women as the guardian of Islamic morality in an environment where the authority of Muslims, especially the ulama, was being threatened. Thanawi details the proper etiquette for religious practices, acceptable relations between men and women, nuances of public transactions such as loans, contracts, and property ownership, and the rights of men and women according to Islamic law, among other things. He also employs the text to impart basic literacy skills to his female readers, which could potentially have enhanced their authority within their families.<sup>17</sup> Recognizing that his text is of an introductory nature, Thanawi encourages women to study advanced religious sciences.<sup>18</sup> However, he does not propose a plan for women to accomplish this. As noted earlier, the zenana-school system was limited in what it could offer women in terms of educational enhancement. Women, therefore, would have had to leave the domestic sphere in order to obtain the advanced knowledge that Thanawi proposes. By showing a strong preference for seclusion,

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>15</sup> Nazir Ahmed, *Mirat-ul-Uroos* (Lucknow: 1869), 10-27.

<sup>16</sup> Ashraf A. Thanawi, *Bahishti Zewar* (New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 1905, Reprint 2007-2008).

<sup>17</sup> Metcalf, "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women," 194.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 194.

Thanawi thus limits his own proposal. Indeed, as Metcalf notes, one of the aims for increasing women's basic literacy skills was to enable them to communicate with the outside world without compromising the practices of seclusion.<sup>19</sup> Clearly, while Thanawi writes about the importance of women's contributions to society and their elevated status, the purpose of his work is not focused on increasing women's socioeconomic well-being through education, but on addressing larger social, economic, and political issues. As Zaman notes, while the book deals with women's issues, its broader function seems to be to establish the ulama's authority to guide Muslims in a time of extensive religious contestation.<sup>20</sup> Thus, women's educational advancement appears to be important only insofar as it aids religious and communal objectives of the Muslim *quam*.

We observe a similar viewpoint in the policies adopted by Sir Syed Ahmed Khan. While of the opinion that Muslims needed to study the English language and western sciences in order to recover their status in India, Sir Syed emphasized the education of boys over girls. He did not think that education beyond the religious sciences was necessary for girls, or that separate schools had to be established for them. Gail Minault notes that Sir Syed subscribed to the "trickle-down theory"<sup>21</sup> whereby educated men would be able to educate their wives, sisters and daughters at home, who in turn might educate their sons. According to Sir Syed, "the present state of education among Muhammadan females is, in my opinion, enough for domestic happiness, considering the present social and economic condition of the life of the Muhammadans of India."<sup>22</sup> Although a pragmatic stance, Sir Syed's views were representative of the societal views on women's roles and status: women were to live through their male relations. Note that much of the elevation of women's status granted through this narrative is functional – it

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 192.

<sup>20</sup> Zaman, Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi, 70.

<sup>21</sup> Minault, *Secluded Scholars*, 18.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 19.

is so that they can guard the domestic sphere and instill the proper values in their children (especially sons), who will then perform the important tasks of Islam in society.

In contrast, both Aga Khan III and Mumtaz Ali advocated a broad education for women. The Aga Khan believed that education for girls should not stop with basic literary or elementary religious knowledge, but that “all knowledge in the world should be open to girls.”<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Mumtaz Ali, in his work *Huquq un-Niswaan* (Women’s Rights) published in 1898, argues that since God has given women equal intellectual faculties as men, they deserve access to the same education.<sup>24</sup> He counters his critics, who believed that too much education would lead to vulgarity in women, by noting that any education that did so could lead to the same vulgarity in men as well.<sup>25</sup> He then goes on to present a strategy for expanding women’s education through establishing a women’s newspaper, *Tahzib un-Niswan* (Women’s Culture), and publishing a list of novels suitable for study by women.<sup>26</sup> Mumtaz Ali, however, is unable to escape the then prevalent worldview. To him, the rationale for providing women an education is to enable them to develop the skills that could make them better, more interesting companions for their husbands.<sup>27</sup> His articulation for the need for companionship within marriages seems to be premised on the complementarity between the male provider and female housewife,<sup>28</sup> which leads him to prioritize women’s roles as wives. He, therefore, stresses the significance of a well-rounded education for women so that they could fulfill their domestic responsibilities.

---

<sup>23</sup> A.K. Adatia and Noel King, “Some East African Firmans of H. H. Aga Khan III,” *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 2, (1969): 187.

<sup>24</sup> Mumtaz Ali, *Huquq un-Niswaan* (Lahore: Punjab Publishers, 1898), 43.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 48.

<sup>28</sup> See Benjamin Lindsey, *The Companionate Marriage*, 1927 for additional information on the early twentieth century concept of companionate marriage

We observe that all four Muslim leaders - Ashraf Ali Thanawi, Sir Syed, Nazir Ahmed and Mumtaz Ali – focused on women’s education as a means to creating a harmonious home and ensuring domestic happiness, and not for women’s own emancipation. The idea of the home or private sphere as a source of meaning and identity for men is a nineteenth century construction. As noted earlier, with the onset of British colonialism, Muslim ashraf men increasingly lost their economic and social privileges. They no longer controlled critical public positions and were instead employed in non-entrepreneurial and clerical government work. This threatened aspects of their masculine identity that were derived from the authority and control they had exercised in the public sphere. Even as Muslim masculinity retained its power vis-à-vis Muslim femininity, it was increasingly losing its place in the masculine hierarchy to non-Muslim, western-educated, British masculinities, as well as rapidly secularizing, Hindu masculinities. In some ways, this nineteenth century “crisis” of Muslim masculinity is similar to the twentieth century “crisis” of American masculinity. Whereas in the latter, American men were seeking to locate “internal efficacy and sense of power”<sup>29</sup> in response to the gains made by the women’s liberation movements, in the former the threat arose from the ascendancy of British political, social and economic structures in India, as well as the rise of the Hindu working class. New forms of power, thus, had to be located and included in the definition of Muslim manhood. It is against this background that the domestic sphere was transformed to take on new significance as Muslim men sought to draw meaning and identity from it.

---

<sup>29</sup> Michael Kimmel, “Has a Man’s World become a Woman’s Nation?” The Shriver Report (2009), accessed January 10, 2010, <http://shriverreport.com/awn/men.php>.



## The Aga Khan's Reformist Ideas

The Aga Khan, like his contemporaries, also wrote about women's responsibilities in the domestic sphere as bearers of the civilization.<sup>30</sup> However, he did not define women solely through domestic roles. To him, women were not to get an education simply so that they were able to educate their children, or become better companions to their husbands - he considered education essential for women's own happiness and welfare. By adopting this view, the Aga Khan affirmed the dignity of women as human beings, and as individuals worthy in and of themselves and not merely due to the function that they performed in society. In his text, *India in Transition*, the Aga Khan notes that one of the reasons why reforms for women's progress in the realm of education had been slow was because they had been motivated by the end purpose of service to the other gender and not for women themselves. He suggests that "the constant argument has been that of the necessity for providing educated and intelligent wives and daughters, sisters and mothers, for the men... the time has come for a full recognition that the happiness and welfare of the women themselves, must be the end and purpose of all efforts towards improvement."<sup>31</sup> Clearly, his stance on the purpose of women's education is dramatically different when compared to his Muslim contemporaries.

The Aga Khan's views on women's capabilities and roles also impacted the way he implemented his strategies for women's education. He argued for universal and compulsory access to education for the masses, and worked with the British government to instate legislation that would make primary education compulsory, for both boys and girls.<sup>32</sup> He deplored the disproportionate distribution of literacy between the two sexes – "only ten female per mille [sic] as compared with 106 men."<sup>33</sup> In his

---

<sup>30</sup> Aga Khan, *India in Transition*, 254.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 258.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 220-221.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

view, there were a variety of cultural and social constructs that impeded women's access to schools. For instance, he opposed the strict practices of seclusion and exaggerated purdah (veiling), which relegated women to the domestic sphere. He noted that the exaggerated practices of purdah condemned "...half the population to slavery or retirement from an active and gainful life"<sup>34</sup> and that "the free social and intellectual part played in the life of Arabia by Imam Hussain's daughter, Sakina, and by the daughter of Talha and the great grand daughters of Khalifa Abu Bakar can be contrasted with the position of women in the 19th century."<sup>35</sup> The Aga Khan considered such practices to be misogynistic cultural traditions that had become codified in Islam and resulted in a marked decline in the status of women.<sup>36</sup> He, therefore, ensured that his female followers were free of this restriction; in his Memoirs he notes, "In my grandfather's and my father's time the Ismailis were far ahead of any other Muslim sect in the matter of the abolition of the strict veil, even in extremely conservative countries. I have absolutely abolished it; nowadays you will never find an Ismaili woman wearing the veil."<sup>37</sup> The release from cultural practices of seclusion enabled his followers to take advantage of economic and educational opportunities wherever they found them. In contrast, Muslim leaders such as Sir Syed, Ashraf Ali Thanawi and Nazir Ahmed, were staunch proponents of strict forms of purdah and preferred educating women at home or in zenana-based schools. Even Mumtaz Ali, while advocating the toning down of the strict purdah observed by Indian women,<sup>38</sup> was neither in favor of its abandonment nor for the integration of women in the public school system. The zenana-based schools,

---

<sup>34</sup> Quoted in Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan*, 217.

<sup>35</sup> Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, *Message to the World of Islam* (Pakistan: Ismailia Association of Pakistan, 1977).

<sup>36</sup> Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan, "Presidential Address to the All Indian Muhammadan Educational Conference," 1902: 5-6, <http://www.iis.ac.uk/SiteAssets/pdf/1902.pdf>

<sup>37</sup> Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 27.

<sup>38</sup> Ali, *Huqooq-e-Niswaan*, 60-70.

however, often translated into schools for the ashraf families and provided limited access to educational opportunities for the Indian Muslim women at large.

In this context, it is also significant to bear in mind that the majority of the Aga Khan's followers were likely not a part of these elite, ashraf Muslim classes. Thus, while he advocated for reforms aimed at the advancement of Muslim women in general, he remained focused on improving the lives of his female followers. He not only focused on eliminating the cultural and social hindrances to women's education but also instituted legal reforms that maximized the chances for his female followers to access education.<sup>39</sup> He emphasized that a girl should not be married off too young, and instead be given a chance to develop and study.<sup>40</sup> To ensure that Ismaili girls had this opportunity, he outlawed child marriages, and set the minimum age at which Ismaili girls and boys could get married.<sup>41</sup> He is also noted to have said, "personally, if I had two children, and one was a boy and the other a girl, and if I could afford to educate only one, I would have no hesitation in giving the higher education to the girl."<sup>42</sup> In doing so, he reconstituted the priorities of the Ismaili community. In addition, he supplemented his guidance by contributing material resources to advance women's education. He established over 200 schools in India and East Africa during the first half of the twentieth century, the first of them in 1905 in Gwadar (in today's Pakistan) and Mundra (in India).<sup>43</sup>

At the same time, the Aga Khan realized that lasting change in women's lives could not be implemented without a legitimizing environment at the community level that

---

<sup>39</sup> Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 187.

<sup>40</sup> Adatia and King, "Some East African Firmans," 187.

<sup>41</sup> Ali Asani, "Improving the Status of women through reform in marriage contract law: The experience of the Nizari Ismaili Community," in *The Islamic Marriage Contract: Case Studies in Islamic Marriage Law*, eds. Quraishi and Vogel (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Quoted in "Aga Khan: A study in Humanism," Institute of Ismaili Studies, accessed January, 26, 2010, [http://www.iis.ac.uk/view\\_article.asp?ContentID=101066#anchor2](http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=101066#anchor2)

<sup>43</sup> "Aga Khan Schools in South Asia," Aga Khan Schools, accessed January, 26, 2010, [http://www.agakhanschools.org/about\\_asia.asp](http://www.agakhanschools.org/about_asia.asp)

valued women's education and contributions to society. He, therefore, used his authority as the Imam to initiate changes in the social organization of the Ismaili community. He appointed women to influential Ismaili social governance bodies and encouraged them to serve in leadership positions. Through these appointments, he not only provided women the opportunity to lead and build social capital, but also bring their agendas to the table. Women were encouraged to organize at the community level and participate fully in religious life. As early as the 1920s, Ismaili women had formed volunteer organizations in India. The Aga Khan's wife, Begum Um Habibeh, guided Ismaili women through her own example and took on a public role in the leadership of many community affairs. The Aga Khan, thus, put in practice an ideal leadership model for his community – one that included both men and women.

### Influences on the Aga Khan

The analysis above demonstrates that the Aga Khan was markedly different in his approach to women's education when compared to his contemporaries. Muslim leaders, such as Ashraf Ali Thanawi, Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, Nazir Ahmed and Mumtaz Ali, saw women's roles primarily in the domestic sphere. While they recognized women's capabilities and contributions, they did so by prioritizing women's identities as dependent daughters, wives or mothers. Therefore, their articulations for the need, impact and usefulness of women's education were limited. The Aga Khan, however, held a different view of women's capacities and roles, which seems to have been influenced by a variety of factors.

From a young age, the Aga Khan's travels took him across the world, where he met and established relationships with leading aristocrats and government officials. His participation in high-level meetings provided him exposure to global trends and ideas in all aspects of life, including developments in the educational, social and economic

arenas. Indeed, he could not have afforded anything less than a global view since his followers resided in many different parts of the world.<sup>44</sup> Given the ascendancy of women's liberation movements in the United States, Britain and some Muslim nations during this time, it would not be incorrect to assume that he was exposed to feminist ideas as well.

The years leading to Egypt's nationalist revolution in 1919 saw the emergence of an organized women's movement, which was the first of its kind in the Muslim world.<sup>45</sup> Led by Huda Sharawi (d. 1947), the movement argued for women's suffrage, education and changes in personal laws. It, however, had "westernizing, secularizing tendencies" and "promoted a feminism that assumed the desirability of progress toward Western-type societies."<sup>46</sup> An alternate viewpoint was presented under the leadership of Malak Hifni Nassef (d. 1918) that was distrustful of Western feminism, and searched for a way to articulate emancipation for women within a native, Muslim discourse.<sup>47</sup> Similar movements for women's rights emerged in other Muslim regions, such as Palestine, as well.<sup>48</sup> In the West, American women were agitating for their political rights and, by the time the nineteenth amendment for women's enfranchisement was ratified in 1920, large segments of women had been mobilized in the United States. Analogous developments were taking place in Britain as well, where women were contesting Victorian ideals of femininity, actively obtaining education and working outside the home. Many English women chose to work as missionaries and travelled to India and

---

<sup>44</sup> Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 58.

<sup>45</sup> Mohja Kahft, "Huda Sha'rawi's 'Mudhakkirati: The Memoirs of the First Lady of Arab Modernity,'" *Arab Studies Quarterly* Vol. 20 (1998): 1.

<sup>46</sup> Leila Ahmed, *Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate*, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), 174.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 174.

<sup>48</sup> Ellen Fleischmann, "The Emergence of the Palestinian Women's Movement, 1929-39." *Journal of Palestine Studies* vol. 29. no. 3 (2000): 16-32.

Africa to further bolster their claims for independence.<sup>49</sup> In this era of contestation over women's roles and capacities, the Aga Khan might not only have been aware of these discourses about women's rights, but also influenced by them.

For instance, in his text, *India in Transition*, in a chapter entitled, *Status of Women*, the Aga Khan brings to bear similar arguments for Indian women's enfranchisement as those put forward by American and English suffragists. He appears to be acutely aware of the gendered concept of full citizenship – one that is based on the ability to bear arms – and highlights Indian women's participation in the army during the Great War as a case for women's enfranchisement.<sup>50</sup> He notes that, "the natural material for feminist progress in India is good, but it is artificially kept in swaddling clothes."<sup>51</sup> Separately, in a letter to *The Times* on August 8, 1919, he disagrees with Lord Southborough's denial of suffrage for Indian women on the grounds that Muslim women in purdah would not be willing to go to the polling booths; he argues that "purdah ladies go into the law and registration courts all over the country, and give evidence in relation to the transfer of property,"<sup>52</sup> and that women's electoral franchise is an issue of justice. Clearly, the Aga Khan was familiar with feminist arguments for women's equality and through his reforms encouraged the use of this "natural material for feminist progress" to produce social change in India.

In addition to exposure to feminist ideas, the Aga Khan's interaction with highly accomplished women in India and elsewhere, presented him with alternate models of women's role in society. In his *Memoirs* he discusses being impressed with the intellectual prowess and character of women such as Queen Victoria, Florence

---

<sup>49</sup> See Antoinette Burton's following articles for more information: "Thinking Beyond the Boundaries: Empire, Feminism and the Domains of History," *Social History* Vol. 26, No.1 (2001): 60-71; and "Contesting the Zenana: The Mission to Make Lady Doctors for India," *Journal of British Studies* Vol. 35, No. 3 (1996): 368-397.

<sup>50</sup> Aga Khan, *India in Transition*, 255.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

<sup>52</sup> Quoted in K.K. Aziz, *Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah*. 2 vols. (London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1997), 646.

Nightingale, Lady Randolph (Winston Churchill's mother) and Fatima Jinnah<sup>53</sup>. Women with whom he had relations reflected high degrees of independence: his second wife, Teresa Magliano, was a professional ballerina and later attained international acclaim as a sculptor,<sup>54</sup> and his third wife, Andr e Carron, had a dressmaking shop in Paris.<sup>55</sup> These women represented to him what women could achieve when provided with adequate opportunities. In that vein, it is also essential to investigate the role that the Aga Khan's own mother, Nawab Aaliya Shams-ul-Muluk (d.1937), played in influencing his understanding of gender roles.

Nawab Aaliya was related to the royal family of Persia through her mother. In 1867, she married His Highness Aga Ali Shah and after his death assumed the primary responsibility for the education and upbringing of her son. She provided the Aga Khan with a well-rounded education, which he later acknowledged by noting "the inestimable advantage of receiving the fostering care of a gifted and far-seeing mother."<sup>56</sup> While women of Nawab Aaliya's social class commanded sufficient material resources and even managed their properties and investments, it was the premature death of her husband - when the Aga Khan was only eight years old - that required her to take on an even more active role in the public affairs of the Ismaili community. She consciously presented herself as a model for Ismaili women and encouraged Ismaili girls to get an education. Malick notes that, "it was through her influence that social reforms were introduced in the community."<sup>57</sup> In addition, she took "unflagging interest"<sup>58</sup> in the Aga Khan's later international political endeavors and seems to have been his advisor and confidant. As the Aga Khan notes in his memoirs, "Each year that I went to India we

---

<sup>53</sup> Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 50, 72-73, 79-80, 239, 341, 115-116.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 219.

<sup>56</sup> Quoted in Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan*, 54.

<sup>57</sup> Malick, *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan*, 55.

<sup>58</sup> Aga Khan, *The Memoirs of Aga Khan*, 283.

talked together as fully and as frankly about this [his work as the President of the League of Nations] as we had throughout my life shared our interests, our joys and our sorrows.”<sup>59</sup> The model of leadership and independence that Nawab Aaliya presented must have undoubtedly impacted the Aga Khan’s conception of gender roles. The Aga Khan’s later efforts for improving the status of his female followers were thus likely informed by the examples put forth by his own mother and the many accomplished women with whom he was acquainted.

### Conclusion: Implications for Ismaili Muslim Women Today

Aga Khan III’s recognition of women’s humanity informed his conceptualization of the wide-ranging roles they could perform in society. This influenced his thoughts on women’s education and distinguished him from fellow Muslim reformers. His reforms have had far-reaching impact on improving the quality of life of Ismaili Muslim women globally, and his work continues to be strengthened and expanded upon by his grandson, the present Imam of Ismaili Muslims, His Highness the Aga Khan. Today, a majority of Ismaili women are well educated and participate actively in the public life of the religious community.<sup>60</sup> In the West, in common with other Muslim immigrants, they work outside their homes and such work is not stigmatized at the communal level. While hindrances to economic and social progress still exist for Ismaili women, the cultural barriers to obtaining education and employment have been significantly lowered.

That said, since most of the reforms were initiated and sustained by the religious authority of Aga Khan III himself, Ismaili women did not feel the need to organize themselves on a large scale to demand their rights. For some time, this resulted in a lack of ownership and complacency in Ismaili women with regards to their own

---

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 283.

<sup>60</sup> Asani, “Improving the Status of women,” 6.



development. This lack of ownership also meant that on occasion women's development was taken for granted or even marginalized. Asani demonstrates that there have been times when the patriarchal culture reasserted itself and some of the Aga Khan's reforms had to be toned down.<sup>61</sup> This is in contrast to other groups of women who themselves have had to, and continue to, struggle to achieve an equal social and religious footing with men. Consider the case of the Daudi Bohra Ismailis in India at the turn of the century. Ghadijally notes that the campaign for women's education and emancipation was undertaken by a group of reforming Bohras themselves instead of the Dai (Bohra spiritual leader), Dr. Tahir Saifuddin.<sup>62</sup> Bohra reformers agitated against the clergy's control and wanted to bring an Anglo-vernacular education to the Bohra girls. As part of these efforts, they formed activist organizations, such as the Daudi Bohra Women's Association, and published their thoughts in a magazine entitled *Aage-Kadam* (March Forward).<sup>63</sup> Unlike the Nizari Ismailis who had the progressive leadership of their Imam, Daudi Ismailis had to struggle to obtain women's emancipation. The situation, however, is changing for Nizari Ismailis under the guidance of the current Imam, who has encouraged leadership and organization of women at the grassroots level.

Like his grandfather, His Highness the Aga Khan has emphasized gender equality and women's development as areas of focus. His strategy includes a combination of gender-specific and general socioeconomic reforms. For instance, during the last couple of decades of his Imamate, the inclusion of women in the Ismaili social governance institutions has gained more force, with the goal to appoint at least 40 to 50 percent women in countries where qualified and educated women are available.<sup>64</sup> In various countries, such as Afghanistan, Kenya, Portugal and United

---

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>62</sup> Ghadijally, "The Campaign for Women's Emancipation," 6.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>64</sup> Asani, "Improving the Status of Women," 6.

Kingdom, women are appointed to the highest governance bodies to lead Women's Activities portfolios. These portfolios spearhead social, economic and educational programming for Ismaili girls and women.<sup>65</sup> In addition, the creation of women's groups at the level of the congregation is also encouraged.<sup>66</sup> Such faith-based organizing within and across congregations can be a powerful way for Ismaili women to construct a politics that addresses their needs.<sup>67</sup> These groups have immense potential for raising consciousness among Ismaili girls and women by providing them with a platform for engaging in critical reflections about their identity. Thus, contemporary Ismaili women's organization and leadership is positioning them to supplement and sustain the efforts of the institution of the Ismaili Imam.<sup>68</sup> It would be fair to credit Sultan Mohamed Shah Aga Khan III for pioneering much of this reform, and His Highness the Aga Khan for taking these reforms to a new level.

## Bibliography

Adatia, A.K. and Noel King. "Some East African Firmans of H. H. Aga Khan III." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 2, (1969): 179-191.

---

<sup>65</sup> See Huma Kamjo, Salima Naikbeen and Karim Paulo, "In Lisbon, Kabul and around the world, Ismailis gather for International Women's Day," April 1, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/969/In-Lisbon-Kabul-and-around-the-world-Ismaillis-gather-for-International-Womens-Day>; Jazzmin Jiwa, "International Women's Day brings women from around the world to the Ismaili Centre, London," March 10, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/957/International-Womens-Day-brings-women-from-around-the-world-to-the-Ismaili-Centre-London>; Karishma Makhani, "Entrepreneurial women transform home-cooked meals into a source of income," August 21, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/1066/Entrepreneurial-women-transform-homecooked-meals-into-a-source-of-income>; Faheen Allibhoy and Nazim Karim, "Ismaili Council for USA sponsors 2009 Women's Conference in California," January 12, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/927/Ismaili-Council-for-USA-sponsors-2009-Womens-Conference-in-California>

<sup>66</sup> Several Ismaili congregations in Canada, the United Kingdom and the United States now have Women's Reading Circles or Book Clubs. See Areebah Ajani, "Books, bonding, and new beginnings," April 16, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/984/Books-bonding-and-new-beginnings>

<sup>67</sup> See Mark R. Warren, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001), 195.

<sup>68</sup> See Sameera Gokal, "Empowered women work to improve the lives of other women and their communities around the world," February 9, 2011, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/1155/Empowered-women-work-to-improve-the-lives-of-other-women-and-their-communities-around-the-world>

Aga Khan, Sultan M. "Presidential Address to the All Indian Muhammadan Educational Conference" (1902). Accessed: January 26, 2010. <http://www.iis.ac.uk/SiteAssets/pdf/1902.pdf>

----- . India in Transition, A Study in Political Evolution. New York: G. Putnam, 1918.

----- . The Memoirs of Aga Khan, World Enough and Time. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1954a.

----- . "Speech at All Pakistan Women's Association in Karachi." (1954b) Accessed: January 26, 2010. <http://www.amaana.org/ISWEB/sultansp.htm>

----- . Message to the World of Islam. Pakistan: Ismailia Association of Pakistan, 1977.

Aga Khan, Sultan M. and Khursheed Kamal Aziz. Aga Khan III: Selected Speeches and Writings of Sir Sultan Muhammad Shah. 2 vols. London and New York: Kegan Paul International, 1997.

Aga Khan, Karim. "Speech by His Highness the Aga Khan at the Graduation Ceremony of the University of Alberta." (2009) Accessed: December 2010. [http://www.akdn.org/speeches\\_detail.asp?ID=767](http://www.akdn.org/speeches_detail.asp?ID=767)

Aga Khan, Zahra. "Speech by Princess Zahra Aga Khan at the International Ismaili Women's Forum, Toronto, May 9, 1997." (1997) Accessed: December 2010. <http://www.amaana.org/akf/zahraspeech.htm>

Ahmed, Leila. Women and gender in Islam: historical roots of a modern debate. New Haven and London: Yale University press, 1992.

Ahmed, Nazir. Mirat-ul-Uroos. Lucknow, 1869. Accessed: January 9, 2010. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/nazirahmad/index.html>

Ajani, Areebah. "Books, bonding, and new beginnings," April 16, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/984/Books-bonding-and-new-beginnings>

Ali, Mumtaz. Huqooq-e-Niswaan. Lahore: Punjab Publishers, 1898.

Allibhoy, Faheen and Nazim Karim, "Ismaili Council for USA sponsors 2009 Women's Conference in California," January 12, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/927/Ismaili-Council-for-USA-sponsors-2009-Womens-Conference-in-California>

Asani, Ali. "Improving the Status of Women Through Reform in Marriage Contract Law: The experience of the Nizari Ismaili Community." In *The Islamic Marriage Contract: Case Studies in Islamic Marriage Law Harvard Series in Islamic Law*, edited by Asifa Quraishi and Frank Vogel. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Carey, Henry. "This TwoHeaded MonsterThe Family," *Harpers Magazine*, Vol. 156, 1928, 162-171.

Chaves, Mark. *Ordaining women. Culture and Conflict in Religious Organizations*. Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1999.

Crenshaw, Kimberle. "Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics, and Violence against Women of Color," *Stanford Law Review*, Vol. 43, No. 6 (1991): 1241-1299.

DuBois, Ellen Carol. and Lynn Dumenil. *Through Women's Eyes: An American History*. Boston and New York: Bedford St. Martin's, 2009.

De Souza, Eunice, ed. *Purdah: An Anthology*. New Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 2004.

Dewji, Faisal. "Gender and the Politics of Space: The Movement for Women's Reform in Muslim India, 1857-1900," *South Asia*, vol. xiv, no. 1, 1991, 141-153.

Engineer, Asghar A. *The Bohras*. New Delhi: Vikas, 1980.

Fleischmann, Ellen. "The Emergence of the Palestinian Women's Movement, 1929-39." *Journal of Palestine Studies*, vol. 29. no. 3, 2000, 16-32.

Forbes, Beatrice and Hale Robertson. "Women in Transition." In *Sex in Civilization*, edited by V.F. Calverton and S. D. Schmalhausen. New York: The Macaulay Company, 1929.

Ghadially, Rehana. "The Campaign for Women's Emancipation in an Ismaili Shia (Daudi Bohra) Sect of Indian Muslims: 1929-1945." *Women Living under Muslim Laws*. (1996). Accessed: April 19, 2010. <http://www.wluml.org/node/274>

Gokal, Sameera. "Empowered women work to improve the lives of other women and their communities around the world," February 9, 2011, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/>

1155/Empowered-women-work-to-improve-the-lives-of-other-women-and-their-communities-around-the-world

Hali, Altaf H. *Chup ki Daad*. Aligarh, 1905. Accessed: January 7, 2010. <http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00urdu/hali/chupkidad/index.html>

Institute of Ismaili Studies. "Speeches of Sir Sultan Mahomed Shah Aga Khan II." Accessed: January 26, 2010. [http://www.iis.ac.uk/view\\_article.asp?ContentID=104393](http://www.iis.ac.uk/view_article.asp?ContentID=104393)

Jiwa, Jazzmin. "International Women's Day brings women from around the world to the Ismaili Centre, London," March 10, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/957/International-Womens-Day-brings-women-from-around-the-world-to-the-Ismaili-Centre-London;>

Kahft, Mohja. Huda Sha'rawi's 'Mudhakkirati: The Memoirs of the First Lady of Arab Modernity. *Arab Studies Quarterly*, Vol. 20 (1998): 53-82.

Kamjo, Huma, Salima Naikbeen and Karim Paulo, "In Lisbon, Kabul and around the world, Ismailis gather for International Women's Day," April 1, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/969/In-Lisbon-Kabul-and-around-the-world-Ismailis-gather-for-International-Womens-Day>

Kimmel, Michael. "Has a Man's World Become a Woman's Nation?" *The Shriver Report* (2009). Accessed: February 8, 2010. <http://www.shriverreport.com/awn/men.php>

Makhani, Karishma. "Entrepreneurial women transform home-cooked meals into a source of income," August 21, 2010, <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/1066/Entrepreneurial-women-transform-homecooked-meals-into-a-source-of-income;>

Malick, Qayyum A. *His Royal Highness Prince Aga Khan: Guide, Philosopher and Friend of the Islamic World*. Karachi: Ismailia Association for Pakistan, 1969.

Metcalf, Barbara. "Islamic Reform and Islamic Women: Maulana Thanawi's Jewelry of Paradise." In *Moral Conduct and Authority*, edited by Barbara Metcalf, 184-195. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Metcalf, Barbara. "Madrasas and Minorities in Secular India." In *Schooling Islam. The Culture and Politics of Modern Muslim Education*, edited by Robert Hefner and Muhammad Qasim Zaman, 87-106. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2007.

Midgley, Clare. *Feminism and empire: women activists in imperial Britain, 1790-1865*. London; New York: Routledge, 2007.

Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*. Delhi and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998.

Nanji, Azim. "Modernization and Change in the Nizari Ismaili Community in East Africa: A Perspective." *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 6, Fasc. 2, (1974): 123-139.

Papanek, Hanna. "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter." *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, Vol. 15, No. 3, (1973): 289-32.

Rizvi, Seyyid S. A. and Noel King. "Some East African Ithna-Asheri Jamaats (1840-1967)" *Journal of Religion in Africa*, Vol. 5, Fasc. 1, (1973): 12-22.

Thanawi, Ashraf A. *Bahishti Zewar*. New Delhi: Islamic Book Service, 1905. Reprint 2007-2008.

The Ismaili.org. "His Highness the Aga Khan," Accessed October 2, 2011. <http://www.theismaili.org/?id=14>

----- . "In Lisbon, Kabul and around the world, Ismailis gather for International Women's Day," Accessed October 1, 2011. <http://www.theismaili.org/cms/969/In-Lisbon-Kabul-and-around-the-world-Ismailis-gather-for-International-Womens-Day>

Warren, Mark R. *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2001.

Zaman, Muhammad Qasim. *Ashraf 'Ali Thanawi: Islam in modern South Asia, Makers of the Muslim world*. Oxford: Oneworld, 2008.

Zaman Muhammad Qasim. *The Ulama in Contemporary Islam. Custodians of Change*. Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2002.

# The Rise and Sublimation of the Woman Proletariat's Politics in the Indian Women's Movement

by Yogita Sharma

**Abstract:** The history of the Indian women's movement can be characterized as the history of its woman proletariat. At least since the 1920s, the constituents of this subaltern social group have been mostly agrarian or industrial working-class women. Yet, none of the widely read accounts of the Indian women's movement have been written from the perspective of its working-class constituents. This paper traces the trajectory of the woman proletariat of India by providing a focalized reading of the accounts written by the historians of the Indian women's movement. The questions that have guided this inquiry are: How do histories of the Indian women's movement describe the rise of and the direction taken by the Indian woman proletariat in terms of producing a change in the social structures of religion and caste? What reasons do the histories of the Indian women's movement provide for the success or failure of the Indian woman proletariat in achieving their goals as part of the Indian women's movement?

The reconstitution of Indian society during the British Raj<sup>1</sup> gave birth to the Indian women's movement. This reconstitution spanned over two centuries beginning with the defeat of the Mughal Empire at the hands of the British East India Company in the late eighteenth century and ending with the birth of the modern Indian State in 1947. This period saw a questioning of religion during the Social Reform Movement of the Eighteenth century as well as the politicization of the masses during the Freedom Struggle of the early twentieth century. The processes that led to a breakdown of the feudal structure of Indian society also contributed towards the emergence of women as

---

<sup>1</sup> The British ruled India from early eighteenth century till 1947. The British East India Company established a strong hold over various feudal kingdoms of the Indian subcontinent and ruled over India till 1857. After 1857, the British monarchy took control of the administration of India.

a “subaltern social group”<sup>2</sup> and marked the beginning of the Indian women's movement. At least since the 1920s, the constituents of this subaltern social group have been mostly agrarian or industrial working-class women; therefore, the history of the Indian women's movement can be characterized as the history of its woman proletariat.<sup>3</sup> Yet, none of the widely read accounts of the Indian women's movement have been written from the perspective of its working-class constituents. What one does find in these written histories are vignettes of this subaltern social group.

This paper traces the trajectory of the woman proletariat of India by providing a focalized reading of the accounts written by the historians of the Indian women's movement. The questions that have guided this inquiry are: How do histories of the Indian women's movement describe the rise of and the direction taken by the Indian woman proletariat in terms of producing a change in the social structures of religion and caste? What reasons do the histories of the Indian women's movement provide for the success or failure of the Indian woman proletariat in achieving their goals as part of the Indian women's movement?

The following section reconstructs a narrative of the agrarian and industrial working-class women of India from significant histories of the Indian women's movement.<sup>4</sup> The four-part division of this narrative is organized around three events that

---

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Gramsci, “History of the subaltern classes: Methodological criteria” in *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, trans. and ed. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971).

<sup>3</sup> Gail Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution* (New York: East Gate, 1993); and Gail Omvedt, “Women and rural revolt,” *Social Scientist* 6, no. 1 (1977): 3-18.

<sup>4</sup> This narrative was constructed using the following histories of the Indian women's movement: Amrita Basu, *Two Faces of Protest: Contrasting Modes of Women's Activism in India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993); Gail Omvedt, “The Women's Movement” in *Reinventing Revolution* (New York: East Gate, 1993), 76-99; Indu Agnihotri and Rajni Paliwala, “Tradition, the Family, and the State: Politics of the Women's Movement in the Eighties,” in *Gender and Nation* (New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2001), 167-211; Kanak Mukherjee, *Women's Emancipation Movement in India: A Marxist View* (New Delhi: National Book Center, 1989); Nandita Gandhi and Nandita Shah, *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in Contemporary Women's Movement in India* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992); Partha Chatterjee, “The Nation and Its Women” in *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993), 116-134; and Radha Kumar, *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Women's Movement for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004).



could be considered watersheds in the trajectory of this subaltern social group. The first social reform period (early eighteenth century-1919) was a precursor to the mass involvement of working-class women. It still addressed issues that impacted them. It ended in 1919 with the onset of the Noncooperation movement that drew women of middle and lower classes into politics and saw the mobilization of the industrialized woman proletariat. The second period (1919-1947) ended with the Partition of 1947. In the aftermath of communal violence that surrounded Partition, working-class women's issues were subordinated to placating communal identities and the project of nation building. In the second period there was a rise of women peasants and laborers through Communist and Maoist organizations. The third period (1947-1975) ended with the Emergency of 1975 after which numerous working-class women's organizations reemerged with a challenge to the authority of the Indian State. This period saw a dissipation in the momentum of working-class women's movement as its leadership splintered into those affiliated with left parties and those who chose to remain "autonomous" (or, non-politically affiliated).

### Reconstructing the history of the woman proletariat of India

Early Nineteenth Century-1919. According to the written historical accounts of the Indian women's movement, the first period was characterized by: (1) the social reform fervor of the nineteenth century, (2) the revivalism of the Freedom Struggle, and (3) the establishment of regional women's organizations.<sup>5</sup> At this stage, no mention is made of the woman proletariat's involvement in the movement, which mostly involved educated, upper-class, and upper-caste men and women who saw religion and caste rather than economic exploitation as the root cause of women's oppression in India.

---

<sup>5</sup> The narrative of this period has been constructed using Kumar, *The History of Doing*; Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*; and Chatterjee, "The Nation and Its Women."

The first public effort to speak about women's situation or gender relations in India began with the social reform movement in the nineteenth century. This movement was characterized by the disintegration of feudalism during the Mughal rule, the influence of Sufis, and the spread of education during the British Raj. The social reformers underscored the ways in which religion and caste legitimized distinctions between men and women, especially in terms of property and inheritance rights. Some of the social issues addressed by them were 'sati' (burning of a widow on her husband's pyre), widow remarriage, marriage of the girl child, prostitution, and women's literacy.

In the early 1900s, women of upper- and middle-class families founded regional women's organizations. These women were educated and taught to imitate the ways of their British counterparts. Sarala Debi was one such woman who founded the Bharat Stri Mahamandal in 1910 with the hope of creating a nationwide platform for women of different castes and regions in India. However, the geographical reach of this organization remained limited. Another such organization, called the Women's India Association (WIA), was founded in 1917 by Annie Besant. The WIA gradually grew to acquire a national character, but since the organization was born in the heat of the Home Rule movement and closely aligned with the Freedom Struggle, it remained fundamentally revivalist in nature. No nationwide women's organizations were established in this period.

Thus, the histories of the Indian women's movement argue that in the first period a successful questioning of religion went alongside the religious revivalism of the Freedom Struggle, which used notions of 'Hindu tradition' to mobilize men and women.<sup>6</sup> Partha Chatterjee argues that the 'Hindu tradition' constituted a distinction between the home and the world. The woman was situated at the heart of the domestic sphere and nurturing, self sacrifice, and domesticity were upheld as the essential feminine qualities. Furthermore, the Freedom Struggle's discourse of a pure Hindu tradition had little room

---

<sup>6</sup> Chatterjee, "The Nation and Its Women," 131.

for the identity of the Muslim community.<sup>7</sup> This rhetoric had a severe impact on the construction of gender which was used as a site through which communal and anti colonial sentiment was constituted to legitimize the emergence of a supposedly secular Indian nation State. Thus, even though the question of social and religious reform was raised, it was subsumed under the religious revivalism that characterized the struggle against colonial rule. The issues raised among the regional women's organizations founded in this period laid the groundwork for the conversations between future leaders of the Indian women's movement.

1919-Independence from the British Raj in 1947. According to the histories of the Indian women's movement, the second period of the Indian women's movement was characterized by: (1) the large mobilization of women in the Freedom Struggle, (2) the mobilization of women working in factories and mills, and (3) the resurgence of communal tensions and violence.<sup>8</sup> This stage is credited with the politicization and organization of working-class women and a rise in the awareness of women's class-based exploitation along with their social and cultural oppression.

Indian women began getting directly involved in the Freedom Struggle through the Swadeshi and Noncooperation movements. The Swadeshi movement began in 1910 in opposition to the nonconsensual partition of the state of Bengal by the British and grew into a movement for self-reliance and self-sufficiency. The Noncooperation movement of 1919 arose in the wake of protests against the Rowlett Act (1919), which suspended the civil liberties of Indians. During this movement, women took to the streets in large numbers, stepping outside the norms of domesticity and modesty.

After 1919, women participated alongside men in the Civil Disobedience movement of the 1930s opposing the repressive laws of the British. Mahatma Gandhi, the leader of the Indian National Congress Party (or, Congress Party), initially opposed

---

<sup>7</sup> Chatterjee, "The Nation and Its Women," 131.

<sup>8</sup> Mukherjee, *Women's Emancipation Movement in India*; and Kumar, *The History of Doing*.

the participation of women in the Dandi March (1930) - the highlight of the Civil Disobedience movement - but he later agreed to it. In the Dandi March, thousands of Indian men and women marched along with Gandhi for twenty-three days to the shores of Arabian Sea to the village of Dandi. Upon reaching the sea, they made their own salt to protest the British ban on Indians' production of salt. In this event, women were arrested along with men for breaking the salt laws of the British and often beaten. Furthermore, during the boycott of foreign goods during the Civil Disobedience movement, women's organizations such as the Ladies Picketing Board coordinated women's processions and pickets, trained women in spinning the 'charkha' (portable yarn), selling 'khadi' (homespun cloth), and educating people on social evils like untouchability. These women enlisted masses in the movement. Women used shaming as a protest tactic to get back the goods that had been confiscated and sold by the British. They would boycott government auctions and wait outside to shame those who bought their goods into returning them to their rightful owners.

The alignment of the women's movement with the Freedom Struggle gave birth to nationwide women's organizations, such as the All India Women's Conference (AIWC), founded in 1927, which drew middle-class women out of their homes. This involvement with the Freedom Struggle wrested the Indian women's movement out of the hands of the upper-class, upper-caste, educated men and women, and drew new constituents. While the earliest presidents of women's organizations like the AIWC were upper-class or aristocratic women, by the 1930s the organization started electing activist presidents from within the movement cadre, which comprised of women from middle and lower classes. This expansion of constituents brought women of different classes, castes, religions, and ethnicities closer, to a certain extent. Imprisoned women 'satyagrahis' "experienced solidarity with women from diverse class, linguistic and class backgrounds [but].... this same solidarity was felt but not extended to non-political

prisoners such as prostitutes.”<sup>9</sup> Women prisoners refused to stay in their company for health reasons.

The new constituents of the women’s movement included both women leaders, who were mostly daughters of the first generation of feminists or women who had risen from within the movement, as well as the industrial and agrarian female proletariat. The influx of these new constituents brought a fresh perspective to Indian women leaders’ understanding of the oppression of women, which enabled them to mobilize working-class women through the mass organizations of the left. This change in the understanding of women’s oppression by the second generation of feminists was a direct result of their involvement in the workers’ and peasants’ mobilizations that were taking place alongside the Freedom Struggle, even though the Congress Party had strategically left the peasant question out of its agenda of nation building, as evident in the Bardoli Resolution of 1928.<sup>10</sup> The INC, however, did not fail to utilize the image of the self-sacrificing widow or female peasant for the consolidation of communal and anticolonial sentiment.

Another reason for the formalization of the industrialized woman proletariat was the effort made by the women’s organizations to articulate their demands alongside trade unionists. The WIA was one such organization with a membership of 3,000 spread between 65 branches that held regular meetings. It was the first women’s organization to raise the issue of maternity leave and benefits for women workers with the support some nationalists even before it was addressed at the founding meeting of the All India

---

<sup>9</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 81.

<sup>10</sup> For example, during the Civil Disobedience movement, farmers of Bardoli in Gurjat, who had been supporters of the Congress, decided to agitate and not pay taxes after undergoing a year of failed crop. The Congress Working Committee, under the leadership of Gandhi, initially supported the decision to peacefully protest by not paying taxes. However, the violent shooting of police officials in another city led Gandhi to suspend his support of the farmers who were then made to pay their taxes. This incident known as the Bardoli Resolution is interpreted differently by historians. Some characterize it as a consolidation of Satyagraha while others see it as a shunning of the real peasant question in Freedom Struggle. See Sumit Sarkar, “The Communists and 1942,” *Social Scientist* 12, no. 9 (1984): 45-53.

Trade Union Congress (1920). The WIA's repeated attempts led to the passing of the Bombay Maternity Leave Act in 1929, which was subsequently adopted by various other Indian provinces over the next ten years. Similarly, in 1920, the Madras Women's Indian Association took up the cause of a female mill worker who was dismissed without compensation in a mill employing the largest number of female laborers.

Another organization that took up the cause of women was the aforementioned All India Women's Conference, established in 1927 by Margaret Cousins. In 1930, this organization held a special session on female labor and in the following year passed a resolution demanding that the Government of India pass a central maternity benefit act and that there be at least one women inspector in every factory. This resolution also demanded that all factories with a sizable number of female laborers provide a female doctor for ante- and post-natal care, a crèche, nursery school, and a maternity home. In subsequent years, they also asked for an inquiry into the conditions of women mine workers following a memorandum submitted to the Bombay Conference on Lahore, called by the National Council of Women (NCW) in India. However, the memorandum ended by saying that "the place for women is in the home in this day of building new India."<sup>11</sup> The communists who had entered Indian politics by the 1930s also organized women in Indian villages. Specifically, during the Bengal famine of 1943 they organized Mahila Amtaraksha Samitis (women's self-defense committees), which eventually led to the growth of women Communists in West Bengal.

By the 1920s, female trade unionists had started gaining visibility in the industrial worker's mobilizations. During the 1928-29 Bombay textile strike - a pivotal moment in the organization of female industrial labor in India - women were strategically placed at the front of the picket lines with the hope that the police would spare them the physical violence. In other strikes, women guarded picket lines with brooms in their hands and used humiliation as a protest tactic. Unfortunately, this interest in women workers came

---

<sup>11</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 71.

too late. By this time, women were being retrenched from textiles and mines, the largest industries that employed them.

Between 1919 and 1947, there was a rise in communal tensions and violence between Hindus and Muslims that culminated in the partition of India and Pakistan and their independence from the British Raj on August 15<sup>th</sup> 1947. In the months before the scheduled date of the partition of India and Pakistan, women suffered massive emotional and physical brutalities, including displacement and homelessness in the wake of riots between Hindus and Muslims. Both Hindu as well as Muslim women were raped, their body parts mutilated as they traveled in trains or by foot to cross the newly drawn India-Pakistan border.

Women's organizations were not immune to these communal tensions and riots. In the 1930s, the AIWC had addressed the issue of communalism in the context of national identity but for the next ten years the organization stood divided on whether it should limit discussions to non-contentious issues only or to continue to discuss all women's issues. One such contentious issue, which drew protest from Hindu as well as Muslim factions, was a bill against child marriage, which the AIWC had already supported. Even though the organization managed to create a compromise within its warring factions on the bill in question, it split into two religious groups by 1945. After Partition, the Muslim women's group formed the Pakistan Women's Conference.

Thus, the histories of the Indian women's movement argue that in the second period (191-1947) there was a rise of the industrial female proletariat. This subaltern group won maternity and compensation rights by aligning itself to trade unions as well as other women's organizations. But this expansion of the constituents of the movement was quickly overshadowed by the communal events surrounding the birth of two nation states. The predominance of Hindu and Muslim religious identities, as an organizing force, left little room for the consolidation of the woman proletariat around Partition.

1947-Declaration of the National State of Emergency in 1975. According to the histories of the Indian women's movement, the third period of the Indian women's movement was characterized by: (1) the failure of the newly independent Indian State to reform Personal Laws (laws pertaining to property and inheritance, marriage and divorce, and child custody) in the wake of communal tensions, (2) the rise of Communism and Maoism following the State's laxity on land reforms, and (3) the rise of Gandhian socialism.<sup>12</sup> It is argued that at this stage there was a concerted effort to organize the politicized female peasant for sharecropping and land rights, as well as against landlordism, whereas collective bargaining rights became the focal point for the struggle of industrial female worker. The movement expanded to include a narrow section of middle-class women concerned with issues of rising prices and wife-beating.

After Independence, the Indian government did not reform Personal Laws even though it had promised this to the feminists who had drafted a uniform and all-encompassing code in the 1930s. Separate Personal Laws continued to exist for women of different religious communities in India and do so till the present day. The Hindu law, codified by the British in 1772 and based on ancient texts, had never been reformed. When the reformed Hindu Code Bill – that gave women the rights to divorce, maintenance, inheritance, and treated 'dowry' (bride price) as 'stridhan' (wealth of the woman) – was presented to the Constituent Assembly in 1948, it faced strong opposition. After being delayed successfully, certain sections of this bill were passed as four separate acts between the years 1955 and 1956 after the first general elections that were held in independent India. These were the Hindu Marriage Act, the Hindu Succession Act, the Hindu Minority and Guardianship Act, and the Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act. Amidst protests from women's groups, who wanted the reform in Personal Laws to include some kind of equality for women of all religion, the matter was

---

<sup>12</sup> Basu, Two Faces of Protest; Kumar, The History of Doing; Gandhi and Shah, The Issues at Stake; and Omvedt, Reinventing Revolution.



shut down by the Indian government and would only become the bone of contention between the Indian State and the women's groups after the 1970s.

Even though there was no consolidation of the Indian women's movement after 1947, it continued to develop under the direction provided by the Maoists, Communists, and Gandhian Socialists.

The CPI (Communist Party of India) had been mobilizing factory workers since its inception in the 1930s. This trend continued after Independence. First, because the Indian peasants felt betrayed by the newly formed government on the question of land reform. Second, because India's neighbor China was undergoing a revolution that enthused the Communist party workers. The newly independent Indian government's tiptoeing around the issue of land distribution created a sense of disillusionment amongst 'Kisan Sabhas' (farmers' assemblies) and provided an impetus to Maoists and numerous rallies, strikes, and demonstrations by share croppers. One such militant and historic struggle between the peasants and landlords in the Telangana district of Andhra Pradesh went on to liberate 2,500 villages, cancelled sharecroppers debts, suspended rent payments, and redistributed land between 1948 and 1950. A significant number of women peasants participated and were killed along with men in this movement. Another such militant struggle, called Tebhaga, was organized among sharecroppers and landlords of Bengal with the help of the CPI. In this struggle, women participated in large numbers once again leading to the politicization of women peasants in rural Bengal.

The Telagana and the Tebhaga movements were put down by the government of India, and the CPI was outlawed in 1948; however, CPI members continued to organize working-class agitations in different sections of the population. In 1954 women members of the CPI formed India's second largest women's organization called the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW). While the AIWC had always been connected to the Congress, the NFIW attracted broader sections of women workers and

peasants. In 1964, some members of the CPI split to form a new party the Communist Party of India (Marxist), or the CPI (M). Through these two parties of the Communists, left-leaning women's organizations were formed in various states including Tripura, Andhra Pradesh, Kerala, Tamil Nadu, and Maharashtra. Many of these regional organizations that were affiliated to the CPI (M) coalesced into one organization, the All India Democratic Women's Association, in 1982.

The other group that organized the woman proletariat along with a section of the middle-class Indian women comprised the Indian socialists, all of whom emphasized Gandhian principles in some way. Some examples of the movements organized by the Gandhian socialists were the Sarvodaya, Shahda, SEWA, and Nav Nirman. Sarvodaya, a movement organized to address untouchability, aimed to establish peoples politics rather than State politics through its leader Jaiprakash Narayan's idea of total revolution through land redistribution in the 1950s. In one of the Indian states, this movement took a turn towards protesting against the production and consumption of liquor, which directly impacted and involved women. During the 1973 Shahda movement, tribal, landless female laborers were organized to protest against the extortionate practices of the landlords. The movement turned militant after the rape of two tribal women as the women of Shahda not only led demonstrations but also vocalized their protest through militant slogans and revolutionary songs. In negotiations with landlords, they were more adamant than men. Women who participated in Shahda also questioned gender oppression and raised issues such as wife beating by linking it with alcoholism. In 1972, SEWA, initially constituted as the women's wing of the Textile Labour Association, made its first successful attempt at organizing a women's trade union. SEWA focused on women's working conditions, provided technical and collective bargaining training to women, and inculcated Gandhian ideals of work amongst them. The Nav Nirman movement, also influenced by the idea of the total revolution, began as a student-led agitation against rising prices, corruption, and black marketing in 1974. In a rare turn of

events, it soon gained massive support from the Indian middle classes in thousands. It turned into an all out protest against the Indian State. In the wake of Nav Nirman, many middle-class women became aware of their oppression.

Thus, the histories of the Indian women's movement argue that in the third period the agricultural female proletariat made some gains in local struggles by being involved with Maoist or Socialist groups, but there was no consolidated national momentum to pressure the Indian government to reformulate laws pertaining to women's land and property rights. In fact, the regional struggles were brutally crushed by the newly minted Indian government that stayed away from reforming Personal Laws based in religious codifications for fear of inciting communal sentiments.

1975-The Demolition of Babri Mosque in 1992. According to the histories of the Indian women's movement, the fourth period of the Indian women's movement was characterized by: (1) revitalization of activity in women's organizations due to the declaration of Emergency leading to a crisis in the legitimacy of the State, (2) a polarization between women's organizations based on their desire to remain affiliated to a political party or remain "autonomous," (3) a turn towards focusing on social issues such as violence, domestic violence, rape, dowry<sup>13</sup>, environmentalism, and (4) the rise of communal identity politics.<sup>14</sup> Accounts of this period argue that there was a sublimation of the working-class women's politics due to a polarization in the organizational strategies of its leadership.

Along with the declaration of a twenty-one month long state of Emergency in 1975, during which Indians' civil liberties as well as elections were suspended, two other

---

<sup>13</sup> Dowry constitutes a social practice in north India where during a matrimonial alliance an exchange of money or certain commodities takes place. While some families may choose to spend a lot at their daughter's marriage others might not be able to do so. Over time, this practice grew into a social evil to the point that newspapers were filled with reports of brides being burned – through an alleged "accident" involving the leakage of liquefied petroleum cooking gas in the kitchen—or committing "suicide" because they had failed to fulfill the demands of their in-laws. Once a bride was burned, the families married their son to another woman whose father was willing to pay a good bride price.

<sup>14</sup> Agnihotri and Palriwala, "Tradition, the Family, and the State: Politics of the Women's Movement in the Eighties"; Kumar, *The History of Doing*; Gandhi and Shah, *The Issues at Stake*; and Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution*.

events led to the revitalization of the Indian women's movement. These included the United Nations' declaration of 1975 as the International Year of Women and the compilation and release of *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India (1974)* by the Indian Government's Department of Social Welfare in its wake.

In the previous period, the women's movement had developed in close proximity with the working-class movement, be it the struggles of the rural peasant or the industrial worker of the city. By now, there were Indian feminists whose experiences came from mobilizing women in Socialist or Communist groups. Along with these there were women whose feminism had developed in the universities and educational centers of India. Regardless of their experience of participation in the women's movement, these groups were in agreement over the fact that the oppression of women needed to be examined through a materialist framework.

In this milieu, two conferences were organized in the cities of Pune and Trivandrum in 1975. One of these conferences was organized by a coalition of women in Pune (in the state of Maharashtra), and the other was organized by the left-leaning School of Social Sciences in Trivandrum (Kerala). These conferences were to become indicative of the tendencies of the contemporary Indian women's movement as well as set its future pace. In these conferences, "the focus on rural women was defracted through particular interpretations."<sup>15</sup> In Pune, the focus was on organizing agricultural laborers, whereas in Trivandrum it was on abolishing landlordism. At both conferences, even though women's oppression was examined in a materialist framework, no attention was given to "the fact that demands of work or wages were within the framework of capitalism, nor that peasant women had no claim to land, nor that agricultural laborers had no rights even to the huts they lived in-that is, ownership of the means of production (property rights of women) and political power were issues beyond

---

<sup>15</sup> Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution*, 78.

their frame of reference.”<sup>16</sup> Instead, both conferences ended by focusing on narrow definitions of women’s wages and work rather than forging a strategy to acquire access to land and means of production for the woman proletariat of India. The materialist understanding of woman proletariat’s oppression did convince the members of the Pune and Trivandrum conferences to continue organizing rural women, to focus on the revolutionary centrality of the female factory worker, to prepare women students as cadres for future mass organizing. However, they disagreed on whether to organize the woman proletariat by remaining affiliated to the parties of the left or working in “autonomous” groups. This gave rise to a schism in the movement on the question of organization. Specifically in Trivandrum, the dissenters rejected the control of the party and defined autonomy as:

“...against bureaucracy and hierarchy they began to proclaim non-structured, democratically functioning small group collectives as the ideal form of organization. They argued that the problem of the relationship of family/society and domestic labor/wage labor found its organizational parallel in the relationship between political struggle and social relations. Many feminists began to assert the meaning of autonomy as autonomy from the state, autonomy from the party, and autonomy from the class.”<sup>17</sup>

In the future, both groups would have to bear the burden of the organizational strategy they had chosen. For the autonomous groups, it would mean losing access to a mass base of working class women. For the Left affiliated groups, having access to a mass base came at a cost of it struggling to build consensus among women of different

---

<sup>16</sup> Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution*, 82.

<sup>17</sup> Omvedt, *Reinventing Revolution*, 87.

classes and they had to bear the additional burden of fighting women's oppression in trade unions and the party.

The autonomous organizations had a sporadic existence, aligned themselves with feminists in university and academic circles, and also took advantage of foreign funding and non-government organizations. All this "provided resources for organizing and exchange of ideas, but in a way that institutionalized a different kind of hierarchy between those at top of such organizations and the people" and eventually, they developed a "deep alienation from politics" and "failed to mobilize mass activities."<sup>18</sup> Their counterparts aligned with Communist organizations continued to organize women peasants in Mahila Samitis (women's groups) through the party or through trade unions. Within trade unions, the women of the CPI (M) constituted the Women's Working Committee through which they raised the specificity of women worker's demands. The schism between the autonomous and the Left affiliated women's organizations diluted the momentum of the Indian women's movement. It shifted the focus from fundamentally speaking of land, property, or religious reforms to social issues of dowry and violence (domestic abuse, rape). The relationship between economic and social causes of women's oppression began to be defined through a narrow definition of women's work. As this rift was taking shape, a majority of India's peasants moved from being sharecroppers to wage laborers, an issue which led to a decline in the female peasant population in India but was not highlighted at the time.

Numerous women's organizations continued to be established in the late 1970s and early 1980s. For example, the 'dalit' (lower caste) women formed the Mahila Samta Sainik Dal, which rallied against religion as the cause of oppression of dalits; women from earlier Maoist movements formed the Progressive Organization of Women; and the Working Women's Committee of CPI (M) constituted itself into a nationwide

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

organization called the All India Democratic Women's Association in 1982 with support from CPI (M)'s regional women's organizations.

Despite the cleavages in the question of organization, groups of the Indian women's movement continued to form issue based alliances with one another. For example, in the 1980s, seven women's organizations led an intensive and coordinated campaign against dowry that led to a change in laws. After a prolonged campaign by women's organizations (in which AIDWA took the lead), a criminal law was passed introducing Section 498-A to the Indian Penal Code under which "cruelty to a wife was made a cognizable, non-bailable offence, punishable by up to three years' imprisonment and a fine."<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, "Section 113-A of the Evidence Act was amended to lessen the burden of proof on the complainant." Another amendment to Section 174 made it compulsory to have a post-mortem of a women's body who died within seven years of marriage. At the height of this movement, numerous families that had taken dowry were put to shame through neighborhood campaigns. The passage of laws did create the legal framework to punish the culprits even though dowry still plagues Indian society in open as well as insidious ways.

Rape was another issue on which Indian women's organizations formed alliances. At the center of this campaign was the case of an eighteen-year-old girl called Mathura who was taken to a local police station and raped by the policemen there.<sup>20</sup> Raising awareness about this case and other similar cases resulted in 1983 to an amendment to the Burden of Proof clause according to which a man was considered innocent until proven guilty. While feminist groups wanted this clause changed in all

---

<sup>19</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 124.

<sup>20</sup> The culprits of this case had been acquitted because it was established that Mathura had a boyfriend among the police officers and was therefore of a morally loose or lax character. The controversy grew as four lawyers challenged the court verdict in an open letter followed by a campaign by a women's group called Forum Against Rape, both asking for a retrial. Even though Mathura when contacted declined to be involved in the campaign, the campaign had received wide media coverage and soon reports of police rape started flowing from all parts of the country. The issue was debated in the Indian Parliament and a prominent politician went on hunger strike.

rape cases, the 1983 Bill only covered custodial rape. Even after this legal victory, the issue of rape met with numerous setbacks, as the Indian courts found ways to shift the burden of proof back to women victims by miring the case in tortuous definitions of the woman's conduct or behavior. The leaders of these campaigns soon realized that "there was no connection between enactment of laws and their implementation" which led them to follow single cases through the courts.<sup>21</sup> The feminists realized that "their earlier methods of agitation such as public campaigns, demonstrations, street theatre ... had limited meaning unless they were accompanied by attempts to develop their own structures to aid and support individual women."<sup>22</sup> This led to the formation of women's centers, which provided a mixture of legal aid, health care, and counseling, in several Indian cities in the 1980s.

Some other issues that were brought to the fore through the contemporary women's movement were environmentalism, women's health (especially with respect to forced contraception in the context of Indian State's focus on poverty reduction and population control), female feticide, 'sati,' reservation of seats for women in central and state assemblies, and, more recently, women's sexuality.

The issue that became the most controversial for feminists of this period was that of Personal Laws. This issue gained prominence in the contemporary women's movement through the case of Shah Bano in 1985. Shah Babo was a Muslim woman whose husband had divorced her using triple "talaq" and was subsequently granted maintenance of rupees 179.20 per month by the Madhya Pradesh High Court of India<sup>23</sup>. However, Shah Bano's husband, Mohammad Ahmed Khan, an advocate, appealed to the Supreme Court of India, arguing that no such maintenance was necessary for more than three months after divorce according to the Islamic law of Shariat. Shah Bano's

---

<sup>21</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 143.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>23</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 161.



counsel also used verses from the Koran to counter Mohammad Ahmed Khan's interpretation of "maintenance on divorce" (a part of Personal Laws in India), rather than arguing for "maintenance on destitution" under Section 125 of Indian Penal Code. The Supreme Court ruled in favor of Shah Bano and urged the Indian government to frame a common civil code but not before getting embroiled in a controversy around the lines of distinction between Personal Laws codified according to the religious laws of a community and civil laws. The verdict enraged the newly formed Muslim Personal Law Board who considered it as an assault on the identity of Indian Muslims. Since the Supreme Court judgment had targeted Muslim law specifically, it also came under criticism from other secular groups of the Indian civil society. Indian feminists were enraged that this judgment and the controversy surrounding it had hijacked the issue of women's Personal Laws (which included women of different religious communities, not just Muslim women) to belittle the Muslim community. In this controversy, and to immensely simplify the terms of the debate, the lines were drawn between those who wanted a Uniform Civil Code and do away with separate laws for separate religious communities and those who wanted to reform the Personal Laws of every religious community from within. The issue of women's Personal Laws became a communal issue because since the 1980s, there had been a steep rise in Hindu-Muslim and Hindu-Sikh communal violence. Since 1984, the Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), had "launched an agitation demanding that a shrine in the precincts of the Babri Masjid be declared the birthplace of Ram."<sup>24</sup> Given this communal atmosphere, the Congress government in power at the Centre retraced its commitment to push for a bill that would reform Muslim law for the women of its community in order to placate the sentiments of the Muslims.

During this controversy, the autonomous women's groups supported the creation of a uniform civil code for Indian women, whereas women's groups aligned with the

---

<sup>24</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 165.

Communist parties argued for “equal laws, equal rights” or the reform of Personal Laws from within the religious framework. The latter also argued for the creation of an equality of rights between men and women. The feminists of the autonomous group were shut out of discussions within communities to which they did not belong (for example, the Committee for the Protection of the Rights of Muslim Women was formed to oppose the Muslim women’s bill that would truly reform laws limited its membership to Muslims).<sup>25</sup> The dialogue between Muslim religious boards such as this and women’s organizations was kept alive by the women’s organizations affiliated with the Communist parties. The Shah Bano controversy gave credence to the idea that rights of women and religion were not separate and distinct.

Thus, the histories of the Indian women’s movement argue that in the fourth period there was sublimation of the politics of the woman proletariat in the wake of communal politics. However, the weight and continuity of the Indian women’s movement lay on the shoulders of its working class women. One of the widely cited reasons for this sublimation is the inability of the leaders of the movement to forge a unified movement, after having vocalized their differences on the question of organization. Along with the fracturing of the movement from within, religion and communal identities continued to stand in the way of overhauling the legal framework which denied women ownership of the means production to women.

### Conclusion

Gramsci provides the clearest conceptualization of the relationship between the dominant “historic bloc” and emergent social orders constituted by subaltern social groups. He argues that subalterns comprise those groups in civil society whose interests are not realized by, and who are in opposition to, the ruling groups that control the modern State. They are somewhat formalized by participating in the processes

---

<sup>25</sup> Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 168.

through which the ruling classes constitute themselves in the form of the modern State out of an older set of political relations, however, they are incapable of uniting on their own and need an organization (political party, trade union, or an organization of their own) to unify them and forge a struggle to realize their interests.<sup>26</sup> Gramsci uses the conceptual vocabulary of Classical Marxism to argue that the relationship between a social context and its subaltern social groups manifests through the organization and leadership both of which mediate between the older or dominant and the emergent social orders. The organizational form enables a rupture in the transformation of hegemony or the “cultural-social unity” that forms the basis of a “historic bloc” in which the leaders or ‘organic intellectuals’ mediate between the dominant and emergent social orders by bringing into existence “new formations which assert the autonomy of the subaltern groups, but within the old framework.”<sup>27</sup>

A reading of the significant histories of the Indian women’s movement produces a narrative that follows Classical Marxism’s account of the formation of a subaltern social group. To summarize the history of the women’s proletariat’s politics reconstructed above: there was a rise of a subaltern social group which searched for an organizational form and the “organic intellectuals” that would enable its organic/natural progression leading to a remaking of gender relations (and, consequently, civil life) in India; however, at every critical juncture this subaltern social group lost momentum as its leadership was unable to rupture the alignment between the State legitimizing processes and religion. The hegemony or the “cultural-social unity” on which an older historic bloc rested left no space for the articulation of the gender question in the light of the narrative of work and property. At one level, this narrative of the Indian woman proletariat’s politics seems reasonable by closely following Classical Marxism’s account of the trajectory of a subaltern social group. But, at another level, it also makes us

---

<sup>26</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 52.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*

wonder if we are reading the history of the Western proletariat into the Indian female proletariat's struggle.<sup>28</sup>

Once again, Gramsci comes to our assistance in this regard. He reminds us to pay attention to “the objective formation of the subaltern social groups, by the developments and transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production; their quantitative diffusion and their origins in pre-existing groups, whose mentality, ideology and aims they conserve for a time” in order to understand “[t]heir active or passive affiliation to the dominant political formations, their attempts to influence the programmes of these formations in order to press claims of their own, and the consequences of these attempts in determining processes of decomposition, renovation or neo-formation.”<sup>29</sup>

Paying heed to his argument we might want to inquire into questions which the histories of the Indian women's movement are yet to answer: How have the industrial and agrarian working-class women of India been impacted by transformations occurring in the sphere of economic production such as industrialization, urbanization, and migration? Is there a subaltern social group called the working-class Indian women outside of the trade unions, Maoist groups, and environmental activists? How has association with these and other groups enabled and constrained the momentum of the working-class women's movement?

---

<sup>28</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty, “A Small History of Subaltern Studies,” in *Habitations of Modernity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 19: “What distinguished the story of political modernity in India from the usual and comparable narratives of the West was the fact that the modern politics in India was not founded on the assumed death of the peasant. The peasant did not have to undergo a historical mutation into the industrial worker in order to become the citizen-subject of the nation. The peasant who participated in forms of mass-nationalist struggles against the British was not a prepolitical subject. The formal granting of the rights of citizenship to the Indian peasant after the achievement of independence from the British simply recognized his already political nature. But this fact also meant that the imagination that could properly be called political [sic] in the Indian context did not conform to the ideas of thinkers in the West, who theorized the political as a story of human sovereignty in a disenchanted world. If the peasant was not prepolitical and was not to be treated simply as an object of anthropology, then the very history of the politicization of the masses in India showed that political included actions that challenged the theorists usual and inherited separation between politics and religion. It can be seen in retrospect that Subaltern Studies [sic] was a democratic project meant to produce a genealogy of the peasant as citizen in contemporary political modernity. ”

<sup>29</sup> Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, 52.

## Bibliography

Basu, Amrita. *Two Faces of Protest: Contrasting Modes of Women's Activism in India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993.

Chakrabarty, Dipesh. "A Small History of Subaltern Studies." Chap. 1 in *Habitations of Modernity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.

Chatterjee, Partha. "The Nation and Its Women." Chap. 6 in *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993.

Kumar, Radha. *The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Women's Movement for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1990*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 2004.

Gandhi, Nandita, and Nandita Shah. *The Issues at Stake: Theory and Practice in Contemporary Women's Movement in India*. New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1992.

Gramsci, Antonio. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*. Translated and edited by Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell Smith. New York: International Publishers, 1971.

Mukherjee, Kanak. *Women's Emancipation Movement in India: A Marxist View*. New Delhi: National Book Center, 1989.

Nehru Memorial Museum and Library. *Gender and Nation*. New Delhi: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, 2001.

Omvedt, Gail. "The Women's Movement." Chap. 4 in *Reinventing Revolution*. New York: East Gate, 1993.

Omvedt, Gail. "Women and Rural Revolt." *Social Scientist* 6, no. 1 (1977): 3-18.

Sarkar, Sumit. "The Communists and 1942." *Social Scientist* 12, no. 9 (1984): 45-53.

## Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays on Society and History

edited by Michel Boivin and Matthew Cook

(Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2010)

reviewed by Natasha Raheja

In one praiseworthy sweep, *Interpreting the Sindhi World: Essays on Society and History* (2010) moves explorations of Sindhi histories and identities away from the periphery of humanities and social sciences scholarship and into a wider thematic context. The editors of this volume, Michel Boivin and Matthew A. Cook, view Sindhi identity as complex and integrally intertwined with larger social and historical conceptions of South Asia and its many diasporas. With this volume, Boivin and Cook successfully unite the field of “Sindh/i studies” across disciplinary lines. In their introduction to ten separate contributions which comprise the volume, the editors argue that Sindhi identity is not fixed and remains in constant negotiation. They propose a comparative approach for the nuanced reading of historical and socio-cultural influences that inform diverse Sindhi experiences and voices throughout history.

More specifically, Michel Boivin and Steven Ramey’s articles complicate the Hindu-Muslim binary through respective case studies that render this taxonomy oversimplistic and unable to aptly characterize the diversity within Sindhi religious and ritual practices. Isolating three Sindhi Hindu guru movements, Ramey shows how each group differs from the other, maintaining unique ideological beliefs. Further, Boivin’s examination of the complicated social structure amongst the followers of the fifteenth century saint Pithoro Pir, locates this cult in a hybrid Sufi space and outside of the Hindu and Muslim binary. In another essay, Lata Parwani examines the socio-historical influences that shape the many narratives of the Sindhi folk icon, Jhuley Lal and

unpacks his constructed prominence and deification in recent times.

In other contributions, Matthew A. Cook turns prevalent notions of Sindhi identity and contemporary migration history on their head as his analysis of eighteenth century migrations of Khatri from Punjab into Sindh convincingly contends for a notion of Sindhi identity that is long since mobile. Cook presents an alternative historical narrative in which movement related loss that is embedded within contemporary Sindhi imaginaries is now concomitant with gain and identity itself as forged by the very permeability of state formations. Oskar Verkaaik investigates the development of the Sindhi nationalist movement constructed on a premise in which Sindhihood is a natural phenomenon that is grounded in the perception of a shared Sufi mystical identity. His essay raises many provoking questions regarding the configuration of diasporic Sindhis and non ethnic-Sindhis into the socialist nationalist movement. Farhana Ibrahim uses nationalist writings and oral histories in her poignant questioning of the ability of master narratives of Gujarati regional identity and history to accommodate the significant Sindhi presence in its western most regions. In conversation with Ibrahim's article, Rita Kothari's essay examines the Gujarat based urban Sindhi community's internalization of a struggle for acceptance through insightful anecdotes from community members.

Maya-Khemlani David's transportation of the reader to Malaysia, Paulo Lemos Horta's re-visiting and concomitant re-reading of Richard Burton, and Vazira Fazila-Yacoobali Zamindar's insightful focus on the understudied efflux of immigrants from Karachi all complement the volume in its aims to facilitate the recognition of Sindhis in a complex global community and interconnected social web.

Despite the wide scope of these essays, there are, however, some significant omissions. The rich literary and musical traditions belonging to the Sindhi world which are integral to its social fabric are not the central focus of any of the ten component essays. Also, while the Introduction notably cites the burgeoning role of media technologies, particularly the Internet, in the imagination of Sindhi communities and

identities, the collection does not include an in-depth exploration of the utilization of media tools in contemporary cultural preservation and revival movements. Furthermore, the volume could have benefited from the inclusion of an essay concerned with the long history of water politics that continue to shape life in the Sindh province. Lastly, while the essays can be read stand-alone and in any order, some prescribed grouping or sectioning would have been helpful for the reader in navigating the various dimensions of the Sindhi world, as presented in this book.

Nevertheless, in their cross-disciplinary interpretations, these ten essays both sketch and blur the boundaries of Sindhi identities and illustrate to the reader that there are many Sindhi worlds with reach and resonance far beyond the territorial borders of the Sindh province. In my knowledge, no previous volume stitched with the thread of Sindhis, Sindhiness, or Sindh, in and of itself, covers the wide spectrum of chronologies, disciplines, geographies, and religions traversed in this book. Such a scope yields the rich presence of many, diverse Sindhi experiences and voices in this collection. In the editors' comparative approach, lies the celebration of a fused cultural Sindhi identity that is aware of both the overt and subtle fissions that simultaneously operate within Sindhi communities.

This book is useful for those interested in acquiring a broad introduction to Sindh/i studies as well as those readers interested in the intersections of diasporic culture, migration, nationalism, and religious practice for their roles in shaping historical memory and social practice at large. Out of this edited volume, Sindhi identities and the worlds they comprise emerge as profoundly dynamic and intricately complex, encouraging and inviting further critical study in new directions.



## SAGAR

### Call for Papers

SAGAR is a bi-annual research journal edited by graduate students working in the area of South Asia at the University of Texas at Austin. The journal provides a forum for scholars from various institutions and a range of disciplines to publish original research on South Asia (Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Bhutan, India, Nepal, Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and the Maldives) and its diaspora. All areas of study are invited: anthropology, art and art history, communication, ethnomusicology, folklore, history, literature, philology, political science, religion, sociology, women's studies, and other related fields.

Article submissions should be no more than 6,250 words (approximately 25 double-spaced pages).

Book reviews should not exceed 800 words. Annotated bibliographies on specific research topics will also be considered for publication. Please email the editor with suggested books and bibliographical topics.

Please include full footnotes and bibliographies as outlined in the Chicago Manual of Style.

Contributors should submit articles via email in DOC or RTF format. Illustrations, photographs, video, and audio should also be submitted via email attachment or link to a common hosting site (i.e. YouTube, Vimeo, Flickr, Soundcloud, etc). You must certify ownership to any materials submitted to SAGAR.

Please provide your name, phone number, email address, title, and university affiliation with your submission. Authors shall retain copyright of their articles if accepted for publication. By submitting material, SAGAR is given permission to publish said items by the author.

Redefining Muslim Women

For all inquiries, please email the editors at [sagarjournal@gmail.com](mailto:sagarjournal@gmail.com) or send mail to:

Editorial Board, SAGAR  
South Asia Institute  
The University of Texas at Austin  
1 University Station G9300  
Austin, TX 78712-0587  
USA

Sponsor:  
South Asia Institute at The University of Texas at Austin

<http://sagarjournal.wordpress.com>