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Mapping Change: Society, Gender, and Reform Debates in Modern Indian Historiography

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Introduction:

The historiography of modern India has undergone a significant transformation in the way historians understand society, gender, reform, and historical change. Earlier historical narratives frequently concentrated on political institutions, colonial administration, nationalism, major male leaders, and constitutional developments. Social reform was often presented as a progressive movement led by educated male elites, while women appeared primarily as beneficiaries of reform rather than as historical actors. Over the last several decades, however, feminist, subaltern, Dalit, social, cultural, and intersectional approaches have challenged these assumptions. Contemporary historiography increasingly asks not simply what reforms occurred, but who defined reform, whose interests reforms served, how communities responded, and how women themselves negotiated changing social conditions. The study of gender has been especially important in this transformation. Historians now understand gender not merely as the history of women but as a system of social relationships involving femininity, masculinity, sexuality, family, caste, labour, religion, and political authority. Gupta *et al.* (2020) demonstrate that the category of “woman” cannot be treated as homogeneous because gender identities were shaped by caste, class, community, sexuality, region, and historical circumstances. Consequently, modern Indian historiography has moved from describing women's “status” toward examining their agency, subjectivity, labour, resistance, and participation in constructing modernity. This review examines the changing historiographical approaches to society, gender, and reform in modern India, with particular attention to colonial social reform, women's education, caste and gender, nationalist discourse, marginalized women's histories, and contemporary intersectional approaches.

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From Political History to Social History:

One of the most important changes in modern Indian historiography was the movement away from political and administrative narratives toward social history. Colonial historiography often represented Indian society as static, traditional, hierarchical, and resistant to change. Reform was consequently interpreted as an outcome of Western education and colonial intervention. Nationalist historians challenged this interpretation but sometimes replaced colonial narratives with a counter-narrative emphasizing Indian civilization, indigenous reformers, and national regeneration. Later social historians questioned both approaches. They demonstrated that Indian society was neither static nor simply transformed by colonial rule. Family structures, caste relations, religious practices, occupational systems, and gender norms were continuously negotiated. Reform therefore became a contested social process rather than a straightforward transition from “tradition” to “modernity.” The emergence of women's history contributed significantly to this methodological shift. Feminist historiography encouraged scholars to investigate domestic spaces, marriage, widowhood, education, sexuality, reproductive practices, labour, and everyday life. Singh and Sinha *et al.* (2024), for example, emphasize that gender history must be studied through multiple geographical, social, caste, religious, and occupational contexts rather than through a single generalized category of Indian women. This approach has made historiography more sensitive to diversity. A reform that appeared progressive for one social group could have

very different consequences for another. Similarly, colonial laws intended to regulate social practices could simultaneously challenge certain patriarchal practices and strengthen state control over Indian communities.

The “Woman Question” and Colonial Reform:

The nineteenth-century “woman question” became one of the central themes through which Indian society was represented by both colonial administrators and Indian reformers. Issues such as sati, widow remarriage, child marriage, women's education, and age of consent were presented as evidence of the moral condition of Indian society. Early historiography often celebrated reformers and legislative interventions as milestones in women's emancipation. More recent scholarship has complicated this interpretation. Reform was not simply about liberating women; it was also connected with debates about community identity, colonial authority, religious tradition, masculinity, and national respectability. Gupta *et al.* (2020) argues that gender-sensitive historiography reveals how colonial modernity simultaneously questioned and reconstructed patriarchal structures. Women's education provides an important example. Education could provide women with new intellectual opportunities, literacy, public visibility, and forms of agency. Yet educational programmes were frequently designed around ideals of domesticity and respectable femininity. Recent research on women's education further demonstrates that curriculum and educational content were closely connected with competing colonial and indigenous ideas about

the appropriate role of women. Kumari *et al.* (2025) shows that the expansion of women's formal education in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century India resulted from interactions between colonial educational initiatives and Indian social reform movements. Thus, education should not be understood simply as a linear instrument of liberation. It was also a mechanism through which new gender ideals were constructed.

Reform, Agency and the Problem of Representation:

A major historiographical problem has been the tendency to portray women as passive recipients of reform. In older narratives, reformers “gave” women education, legal rights, or social protection. Contemporary scholarship instead asks how women themselves responded to these reforms. Women negotiated reform in diverse ways. Some accepted new educational opportunities, others used literacy to produce autobiographical and literary texts, and many challenged restrictions imposed by family and community. Women's agency could also operate within apparently conservative spaces. Domesticity itself could become a field in which women negotiated authority, education, economic responsibilities, and family relationships. This approach has transformed the meaning of reform. Reform is now increasingly understood as a process involving opening and regulation simultaneously. New opportunities could emerge alongside new expectations. The “modern woman” was often expected to be educated but domestically responsible, socially visible but sexually respectable, and politically aware but loyal to

family and community. Narayan *et al.* (2025) provides an illuminating example through the study of Mughal women under colonial rule. Colonial narratives frequently represented the Mughal household as backward and contrasted it with supposedly progressive colonial modernity. Yet Mughal women actively participated in maintaining family identities, educating subsequent generations, and negotiating colonial governance. Their activities demonstrate that modernity was not simply imposed from outside; historical actors created their own forms of modernity within changing political circumstances.

Caste, Gender and the Limits of Elite Reform:

Perhaps the most important development in recent historiography is the recognition that gender cannot be separated from caste. Earlier histories of reform often focused on upper-caste, urban, educated women. Such narratives risked presenting the experiences of a relatively privileged minority as representative of Indian women as a whole. Dalit feminist historiography has fundamentally challenged this tendency. Paik *et al.* (2018) demonstrates the importance of studying Dalit women as historical subjects rather than simply as members of either the categories “Dalit” or “women.” Dalit women experienced intersecting forms of caste and gender oppression, while simultaneously developing strategies of education, political participation, community formation, and resistance. The emergence of Dalit women's historiography has also questioned the assumption that social reform was primarily an upper-caste project. Anti-caste movements

generated alternative ideas about education, marriage, family, labour, dignity, and women's rights. The writings and activism associated with figures such as Savitribai Phule and later anti-caste intellectual traditions demonstrate that reform could be rooted in critiques of Brahmanical patriarchy rather than merely in religious or colonial reform. Velayudhan *et al.* (2018) similarly emphasizes that Dalit women's movements need to be understood through longer historical traditions of anti-caste resistance and self-definition. The historiographical significance of this approach lies in its ability to move marginalized communities from the margins of historical narratives to the center of historical interpretation.

Gender and Nationalism:

Nationalism introduced another important dimension to the history of gender. The nationalist movement frequently constructed women as symbolic representatives of Indian culture and national honour. The home was imagined as a culturally authentic space that needed protection from colonial influence, while the public sphere became associated with political and economic competition. This division produced a complicated relationship between nationalism and women's emancipation. Women entered political movements, participated in protests, organized associations, wrote in newspapers, and contributed to nationalist campaigns. At the same time, nationalist discourse could reinforce ideals of feminine sacrifice, purity, motherhood, and cultural authenticity.

Contemporary historiography therefore avoids treating nationalism simply as

liberating or oppressive. Instead, historians examine the contradictions within nationalist gender politics. Women could gain new public roles while simultaneously being expected to embody traditional cultural values. Singh and Sinha *et al.* (2024) show the importance of examining these issues through diverse social locations, including caste, religion, region, labour, and sexuality. Their edited volume demonstrates that gender was simultaneously connected to social reform, caste contestation, political economy, migration, culture, and identity.

Labour, Family, and Everyday Life:

Another important historiographical development has been the increased attention to women's labour. Earlier accounts often associated women primarily with household activities, thereby overlooking their substantial contributions to agriculture, handicrafts, domestic service, factories, informal economies, and family enterprises. The history of labour demonstrates that economic transformation was also gendered. Colonial commercialization, industrialization, migration, and changing agricultural relations altered women's work and household responsibilities. Women were not simply affected by economic change; they actively contributed to household survival and negotiated changing economic conditions. Contemporary gender history therefore treats the household as an economic and political institution rather than merely a private space. Marriage, inheritance, domestic labour, dowry, property, and employment are interconnected historical questions. The interdisciplinary approach represented by Singh and Sinha *et al.*

(2024) is particularly significant because it places labour alongside caste, sexuality, migration, health, political economy, and culture. This broader perspective prevents gender history from becoming isolated from wider social and economic transformations.

Sexuality, Masculinity and New Historiographical Directions:

The historiography of modern India has also expanded beyond women's history toward the study of sexuality and masculinity. Gender historians increasingly argue that understanding women's experiences requires examining the production of masculinity, sexual norms, family ideals, and systems of respectability. Gupta *et al.* (2020) emphasizes that sexuality itself is historically constructed and regulated rather than simply a biological category. This perspective encourages historians to examine how colonial law, religious discourse, medical knowledge, print culture, and nationalist politics produced ideas about legitimate and illegitimate sexuality.

This development has opened new research areas, including male reformers and masculinities, sexual minorities, domesticity, prostitution, reproductive politics, and the relationship between sexuality and caste. Such studies demonstrate that gender is fundamentally relational: women's historical experiences cannot be fully understood without examining the institutions and cultural practices that construct masculinity and femininity together.

Intersectionality and Contemporary Historiography:

The most influential direction in current historiography is intersectionality. Rather than treating caste, gender, class, religion, sexuality, ethnicity, and region as separate categories, intersectional history examines how these identities interact. Singh and Sinha *et al.* (2024) explicitly organize gender history around these overlapping dimensions. Their work demonstrates the diversity of gendered experiences across Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Dalit, Adivasi, regional, and occupational communities. Intersectionality also changes the historian's question. Instead of asking, "What was the position of Indian women?" scholars ask: Which women? In which region? Belonging to which caste or community? Under what economic conditions? In what historical period? And how did they understand their own experiences? Such questions make historical analysis more complicated but also more accurate. They prevent the creation of a universal "Indian woman" and recognize historical difference as a central feature of Indian society.

Methodological Transformation:

The changing historiography of society and gender has also produced changes in sources and methodology. Historians increasingly use autobiographies, letters, oral histories, newspapers, vernacular literature, petitions, court records, educational documents, organizational records, photographs, and material culture. The use of vernacular sources is particularly important because elite English-language archives often

reproduce the perspectives of colonial officials and educated elites. Marginalized communities frequently appear more clearly in local newspapers, autobiographical writings, songs, pamphlets, oral traditions, and community records. The contemporary historian therefore treats archives critically. Official documents are not neutral records; they were produced by institutions with particular political objectives. Reading against the archive can reveal voices that official records attempted to marginalize or exclude.

Continuing Debates and Research Gaps:

Despite major developments, several challenges remain. First, there is still an imbalance in geographical coverage, with some regions receiving considerably greater historiographical attention than others. Second, the experiences of rural women, Adivasi women, working-class women, and women outside organized reform movements remain underrepresented. Third, queer histories and non-normative sexualities require greater integration into mainstream histories of modern India. The 2024 volume edited by Singh and Sinha substantially expands the field through discussions of sexuality and marginality, but the broader historiography still has considerable space for further research. Fourth, historians must continue examining the relationship between reform and power. Reform should not automatically be equated with progress. A reform project can expand rights for one group while strengthening surveillance or control over another. Consequently, the historical meaning of reform must always be examined within its specific social and political context.

Conclusion:

The historiography of modern India has moved from relatively linear narratives of political development and social reform toward a much more complex understanding of historical change. Society is no longer treated as a passive background to political events, and women are no longer represented merely as objects of reform. Gender, caste, class, sexuality, labour, religion, region, and community are increasingly understood as interconnected structures through which modern Indian society was produced and contested. The shift from women's history to gender history, and subsequently toward intersectional and marginalized histories, has fundamentally changed the interpretation of modern India. Reform is now understood not simply as a progressive movement from tradition to modernity but as a contested process in which colonial authorities, reformers, communities, women, Dalits, workers, and other marginalized groups negotiated competing visions of society. The future of modern Indian historiography therefore lies in continuing to recover diverse historical voices and examining how ordinary people participated in creating social change. As recent scholarship demonstrates, gender history is not a specialized addition to Indian history; it is central to understanding colonialism, nationalism, caste, modernity, reform, labour, family, and social transformation. The history of modern India becomes richer when reform is viewed from multiple social locations and when historical actors are recognized not merely as recipients of change but as active producers of it.

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