When Madan Mohan Malaviya, an early ideologue of Hindu nationalism, articulated his opposition to raising the age of consent for marriage in 1928 by citing the sanctions of the sastras (Hindu scriptures), some women of the All India Women’s Conference demanded ‘new sastras’.¹ This signified a recognition by the Indian middle-class women’s movement of the need to enter the world of knowledge production, and anticipated by several decades the demand of feminist historians not just for new histories but for a reinvention of the historical archive.² Feminist historiography, after all, aims to produce not just a ‘new historical subject’ but a critique of the supposedly gender-neutral, but in fact gender-blind, methodologies of the discipline itself.

In the past two decades, feminist political activity in India has won vital recognition within the academy. It is therefore particularly appropriate to emphasize at the outset the intensely political nature of the feminist historical challenge that I discuss in this article. A reconceptualization of history that argues ‘that every aspect of reality is gendered’³ is necessarily a contestatory act, a political struggle whose retreats and advances must be charted as such. The material conditions of feminist historical production in India are not even remotely comparable to the expanding institutional privileges of women’s studies in Euro-America, yet Indian feminist studies are in large part sustained and nourished by political work outside the academy. In turn, a feminist interpretation of history forms a critical first step in the movement towards feminist social transformation. The feminist critique of the historiography of colonial India has been strongest, especially since epochal changes were telescoped into less than two centuries of colonial rule in India and British domination has had enduring material and ideological consequences.

The uses of history for the contemporary women’s movement are clear, but how, in turn, have the insights of contemporary feminism informed the
practice of history? How do the political imperatives of the feminist call to collective transformatory action today shape the questions asked of history and its methodological assumptions? This article will consider some of the ways in which the practice and production of an ‘interested’ critique of the discipline of history has been undertaken in feminist historical research on colonial India. The focus on theoretical challenges here is necessarily schematic: therefore the article is not intended to be a survey of the field so much as to mark the political consequences of certain strategies for reading questions of power and agency in feminist history.

The woman-as-victim paradigm has been an empowering one for feminist historians, but, as Linda Gordon has pointed out, ‘it is false and impossible to see the history of female experience as powerless’.

Being less powerful, after all, ‘is not to be powerless, or even to lose all the time’. Still, the point is not to put a canny subaltern in place of ‘the victim’, for the paradigm of rebellious heroine could become just a compensation for reductive conceptions of female agency. Developing a complex and dynamic conception of female agency which does not pose these paradigms as contradictory or exclusive is essential for feminist historical knowledge, especially as it confronts the figure of woman as ‘always already victim’.

At the same time, the rethinking of female agency that has been prompted by post-structuralism cannot easily be transposed to the Indian context, since the emphasis on the subjectivity of victims of oppression could, and does, pave the way for liberal assertions of the freedom of the individual to act against or despite oppressive conditions. This article confronts the contradictions of such a move with reference to a series of critical contributions to Indian historiography. It argues that the question of female agency in history, whether that agency takes the form of consent, transgression or subversion, can neither be wholly contained within a delineation of structures of oppression nor exhausted by accounts of female presence in history, but must be posed within specific contexts and placed along a continuum where various forms of agency may coexist. Feminist historiography must elaborate the parameters within which specific historical instances offer potential for and limits to women’s power, in order that feminist political practice may develop the strategies and visions appropriate to the thoroughgoing social reconstruction that it envisages.

Before addressing the question of agency in Indian feminist historiography, we must acknowledge the significance of the earliest efforts that made women visible in history. Challenges to the historiography of colonial India which has systematically excluded women from its purview have been mounted at a variety of levels. In this connection, Sandra Harding’s discussion of feminist challenges to science posits an important analytical distinction which may be of value to historians. She distinguishes between those who see sexist assumptions in the scientific enterprise as a result of simply practising ‘bad science’ and those who see the problems emerging from the very nature of the scientific enterprise or ‘science-as-usual’. In
history, as in science, the former may more easily be reformed through a feminist empiricism that adheres to the notion of the historical enterprise as value-free and objective.

This early and still far from insignificant strand has aspired to a richer, better, account of the world, i.e. correcting the imbalances of ‘bad history’ by fresh empirical research. The first feminist historical efforts served to redress the imbalances of conventional history by locating and placing in the foreground the activities of women nationalists, reformers, revolutionaries and missionaries in colonial India. Some historians have extended the discussion to include the lives of Muslim women; others have moved away from the public glare of political participation to the no less important domestic sphere.

The project of redressing the biases of ‘bad history’ by discovering women in history, however, soon runs aground on the categories of ‘history-as-usual’ that are clearly insufficient to analyze gender. These categories are inextricably linked with the hierarchies and privileges of patriarchy; no amount of methodological rigour can redress a problem which calls for a reconceptualization of the categories of the historical enterprise itself. It is in this sense that feminist historiography cannot be just additive, for if such historiography is already hampered by the nature of the archive, which disproportionately reflects the interests and concerns of the dominant classes, then the search for fresh ‘evidence’ could obscure the need for a critique of the techniques, and even disciplines, by which patriarchies remain resilient.

The burden of feminist historiography, therefore, lies not merely in contesting conventional historical practices but acknowledging that correcting certain biases in history or questioning some categories of historical analysis does not necessarily challenge gender-neutral categories. Even one of the most acclaimed recent strands of Indian historiography, the ‘subaltern studies’ project, remains singularly inattentive to questions of gender in historical analysis. While the project has laid bare the unmistakably elitist biases of most Indian historiography, and claims to recover the history of the historyless by imaginative readings of conventional sources, there are but few signs that the questions raised by feminist historiography have genuinely been taken on board by these historians.

Indeed, feminist historiography has, more successfully than other interpretations, challenged existing categories of historical analysis. For instance, many scholars have found inadequate, even misleading, the binary opposition of ‘tradition’ to ‘modernity’ and have attempted to dislodge these categories. Nor is this merely a transposition of contemporary intellectual discomfort: the recovery of women’s writings of the colonial period clearly indicates the incipient stages of a critique of modernity. Similarly, studies of the differential impact on Indian social groups of the technologies of ‘modernization’ (a process that was necessarily incomplete under colonialism) call into question the various registers, not the least of which is gender,
on which modernization's transforatory agenda must be measured. The chronology of modernization may therefore be seriously ruptured when gender becomes an analytical category: technological advances of the nineteenth century, such as mechanized rice milling, translated into distinct economic setbacks for rural Bengali women.

The challenge to gender-neutral methodologies has been made most forcefully in the field of economic history, where the limits of modernization have been clearly exposed. As a consequence, the theme of marginalization has had extraordinary appeal in studies of the colonial economy. Nirmala Banerji plots the systematic disruption of the traditional economy of nineteenth-century India as it affected both men and women, although men were somewhat better compensated by the emergence of a technologically modern industrial sector. Mukul Mukherji's study of a single industry, rice husking, shows how a traditionally female occupation was transformed into a male occupation with the introduction of machinery. Radha Kumar's discussion of women in the Bombay textile industry between 1919 and 1939 goes further, showing that 'rationalization' in the sphere of production frequently encompassed 'rationalization' in the field of reproduction as well. The emerging definition of the concept of a 'family wage', which excluded female-headed households, combined with the reorganization of the textile industry to reduce the substantial presence of women in the work force.

Tracking the marginalization of women in the colonial economy, not only vis-à-vis men but also vis-à-vis their own pasts, clearly cannot be accommodated within the conventional gender-neutral categories of economic history. Official sources neglect the gender segmentation of the labour market, which disadvantages women at the point of entry itself, and refuse to acknowledge the complex negotiations made by women of their work and family responsibilities. Gender-neutral methodologies are therefore sustained by the structure of the conventional archive, which privileges the public sphere of production rather than, say, reproduction. Even when reproduction is spoken of, as in the census, the sources reflect the demographic concerns of the state rather than a concern for the lives of women. Yet economic historians have disrupted the easy equation of archival silence with historical absence by interrogating conventional sources such as the censuses with fruitful results. The distinction between public and private domains, so strictly drawn and observed by the archive itself, becomes a crucial starting point for feminist history.

Even so, the existing archive has certainly not yielded an embarrassment of riches for all aspects of historical work on India, although more recently cultural historians have found a rich vein to mine in vernacular literatures. Yet is the study of women's history to be only as good as its sources? Continued handwringing over the paucity of historical sources yields few insights. Indeed, the frustrations expressed with the fragmentary and incomplete nature of the sources could become a basis for the dismissal of women's history by the custodians of the discipline. In such a context,
we cannot overemphasize the triumph of the women's movement and women's studies in India in insisting on a revision of the categories of 'work' in the latest Indian census (1991) to better reflect the complexities of female labour.17

The dilemmas of mounting a critique of an 'historical objectivity' that has systematically excluded women while simultaneously fashioning a strategic notion of 'feminist objectivity' have been the concern of many theorists. Donna Haraway makes a persuasive argument for a conception of feminist knowledges as 'situated knowledges', which by their very partiality reveal the 'politics and epistemologies of location, positioning and situating' and thereby create 'the condition of being heard to make rational knowledge claims'.18 There is thus a role for fresh empirical work, but always alongside an acknowledgement of its limits, namely alongside the development of a feminist standpoint.19 If feminist historiography is not to lapse into a ceaseless notation of female presence in history, it should vigorously continue the negative-critical task of unmasking gender-neutral methodologies. In some cases, this has been inaugurated by questioning the sovereignty of the source, looking less at the ways different kinds of historical data may corroborate a single truth and more at the ways in which truth claims are constructed. This insight, no monopoly of feminist historians, derives much of its force from the formulations of post-structuralist philosophers such as Michel Foucault and from advances in other disciplines, notably anthropological and literary theory.

Strategies such as discourse analysis have often met with unconcealed hostility rather than critical engagement within the discipline.20 Nevertheless, Lata Mani's use of such analysis has advanced not only our understanding of sati (widow immolation) but also of nineteenth-century nationalist-modernist impulses by mapping the overlapping discursive fields within which a knowledge of sati was produced. She argues that the extraordinary amount of attention paid to women's issues during the nineteenth century—in both prescriptive and punitive legislation, whether regarding the age of consent, sati, or widow remarriage—was indicative of the debate over Indian tradition: 'tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of women was being contested. Rather the reverse was true. . . . What was at stake was not women but tradition.'21 Thus, even a source which purports to speak about women remains silent about them: how then may the feminist historian read such material?

In the context of interpreting ideology, Pierre Macherey says, 'What is important in a work is what it does not say.' This, he continues, is no simple equation with what it refuses to say 'but rather this: what the work cannot say is important, because there the elaboration of the utterance is carried out, in a sort of journey to silence.'22 This project is indeed what historians such as Lata Mani and Uma Chakravarti hope to undertake. The discourse on sati, constructed as it is on the basis of 'reforming Indian tradition', cannot speak of female agency, whether of complicity or resistance. Similarly, the
recuperation of ideal Vedic womanhood that took place in the nineteenth century, Chakravarti suggests, was predicated on Orientalist knowledges of the Indian past. The partiality of that perspective, which cannot speak of lower castes, reverberates through successive interpretations of Indian history which continue to use such constructions as if they were gender and class neutral.

Questioning conventional sources for their absences cannot be an adequate substitute for the historian’s search for the positive content of historical identities. Despite its power in questioning the methodologies of history-as-usual, an immanent critique such as discourse analysis remains insufficient. The problem seems less intractable for the more recent period of Indian history, where oral traditions and cultural practices have enabled the reconstruction of female subjectivities. The search for the pure, unmediated utterances of women in history continues to hold considerable appeal, especially in order to redress the biases of the archive. The most recent recovery of women’s historical voices is the set of interviews, conducted by a women’s collective in Hyderabad, with sixteen women who participated in the Telengana Armed People’s struggle between 1946 and 1951. ‘We Were Making History . . .’ not only compiles a painstaking record of women’s heroism within the peasant guerilla war, but recalls a period rich with ambiguities, when the Telengana women were both empowered by and inadequately accommodated within the program of the Communist Party.

The members of the collective claim that ‘in this history, women are not spoken about but speak for themselves.’ History becomes a two-step process, first a collection of data and then an analysis. According to the collective, ‘an analysis could follow at any time, but . . . their voices had to be heard.’ Gayatri Spivak has drawn attention to the impossibility of such a move: the attempt to efface the interlocutor, and thus her own agency in locating and recording these histories, may easily be mistaken for a shirking of responsibility on the part of the members of the collective. The historian’s aspiration to transparency could return, unwittingly perhaps, to the very notion of objectivity that feminists set out to contest.

Women’s participation in the Telengana armed struggle has never been in doubt and had been amply acknowledged in leftist narratives. The uniqueness of the insights of the women interviewed lies in their assessment of what the movement did for them as women, especially in arousing expectations that remained unfulfilled. The interviews have demonstrated that the scrupulous notation of female presence in such struggles remains incomplete if it is not accompanied by a recognition of the ways in which gender structured the possibilities for social and cultural liberation.

Oral histories and autobiographies cannot be the only legitimate source for feminist historiography, but they form the basis for the history of women finding a voice or developing a notion of selfhood. Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to Present, a selection of women’s writings in several Indian languages, is accompanied by a history of the circumstances under which
'illegitimate' acts, such as writing autobiographies, were made possible in the colonial period. Thus Rassundari Debi's autobiography testifies to the painful efforts of scratching letters on the blackened kitchen walls. Shanta Nag's literacy was a process of appropriating knowledge intended for another: since she learned to read Bengali from watching her brother being instructed, for some years she could only read texts upside down. Countless others learned by night, in secrecy, and against all odds. Even the achievements of privileged women, then, were the result of opportunities wrested from those hostile to their intellectual development.

Has the recovery of women's own voices shattered the unities of Indian history and led to the emergence of two distinct histories rather than one? As in economic history, the narrative of 'historical progress' has been strenuously denied in discussions of women's legal status, but the concept of a 'lost female world' has received its clearest articulation in the field of cultural history. Sumanta Banerjee recovers the robust, separate world of female popular culture in nineteenth-century Bengal. The cultural productions of lower-caste female Vaishnav performers and their upper-caste patrons were in 'derisive defiance of patriarchal norms, irreverent drollery, at the expense of the divinities, and bold assertion of their own desires although often under the somewhat transparent veil of allegory'. This culture, he claims, vanished in the face of Western-style education and the censorious nationalist culture that was taking shape among the Bengali bhadramahila (middle-class women). Amrit Srinivasan traces a similar moment of decline in the Bharatanatyam, a classical dance tradition of the Devadasis (literally, slaves of god), under the onslaught of colonial reformers, even as the dance was gradually regulated within the new 'nationalist culture' as a Sanskritised and 'purer' performance by upper-caste Hindu women. As these examples illustrate, if some, usually middle-class, women gained a place in the emerging national public culture, it was frequently at the expense of large numbers of other, usually lower-class, women.

The attention paid in these works to the appropriation of popular/lower-caste cultural practices by an increasingly hegemonic nationalist culture is noteworthy. Yet such an approach also displays a marked nostalgia similar to the conservative longing for an idealized pre-capitalist/pre-colonial social order. The 'autonomous' cultural domain itself was an expression of a sexual division of labour appropriate to the socially, economically and politically dominant groups in these societies. The refusal to engage with the ways in which material inequalities were masked by cultural compensations is problematic. The construction of a separate domain for women on the basis of the distinct set of rituals and values which was rooted in the specific labouring experiences and the shared emotional and physical resources of a particular group is fraught with difficulties even when it is done by feminist historians.

Furthermore, it might be asked whether or not the 'bawdy, erotic' tradition in verse, dance or song was completely sanitized or sterilized by the new
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Although the spheres of the retreating and emerging cultures were far from equivalent, women's writings of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries from various parts of India 'broadened the scope of the women's question as it had been posed in the reform movement, infused it with new feminist strains, and even subverted its original commitments.'

This development occurred within a predominantly middle-class/upper-caste public sphere, but whether it did so 'in a desired version of Indian culture, and in desired versions of ideal women' is less certain. Certainly the writings of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Indira Sahasrabuddhe and Lalitambika Anterjanam embody frequent and significant transgressions of 'desirable' codes. Women negotiated and contested the terms of the newly emergent nationalist patriarchy of the early twentieth century as much as they consented to its hegemonic aspirations. But nationalist ideology empowered women of the middle class in a very limited way, engaging them in the task of building a consensus for the incipient nation-state while rendering 'natural' the privileges they enjoyed vis-à-vis the vast masses of men and women whose aspirations they hoped to represent.

Despite the increased availability of materials which enable a reconstruction of the fractured subjectivities of women in history, the insights of Indian feminist historiography have been diluted precisely because certain relational aspects of gender ideology are rarely discussed. There are few studies, for example, of changes and transformations within families or of masculinity in colonial India. Yet feminist history need not necessarily be women's history, and a study of the formation of masculinities need not display complicity with patriarchal discourses. Concentrating on female worlds of love and ritual can come dangerously close to proposing their complete self-sufficiency. The notion of 'difference' in the relationship between the sexes can, and often does, function to obscure patriarchal domination and imply neutral symmetry.

Narratives of marginalization, lost cultural worlds, resounding archival absences and subjugated knowledges—in short, the contracting opportunities for the exercise of female power—by no means exhaust the historical possibilities for women in the Indian subcontinent. 'Celebrating a lineage of resistance' has long been particularly attractive to left historians of India. Although such historiography has fiercely combated the seamless unities of colonial and nationalist Indian history by pointing to the marked divisions expressed in class conflicts, it has often subsumed questions of gender to those of class and sometimes collapsed the two in analysis. Witness, for example, Renu Chakravarty's detailed memoir of women activists in the communist movement appearing under the title Communists in the Indian Women's Movement. More recent work has negotiated the multiple axes of class, caste and gender, especially in revealing the failure of a revolutionary movement (such as the Telengana Movement of 1946–51) to deal with the specificities of patriarchal oppression. Peter Custers emphasizes the critical role played by women in the Tebhaga movement in Bengal in 1946,
despite little or no party support; Indira Munshi Saldhana charts the widespread involvement of Warli women in the western Indian movement of 1945–47 alongside their confrontations with tribal patriarchy; and V. Meera catalogues the struggles of coir workers in Alappuy between 1938 and 1950. These monographs point repeatedly to the ways in which broader political imperatives often dictated both the form and the parameters of women’s resistance. Unmistakable advances were all too often accompanied by checks and limits. The unevenness of advances made by women within wider, ‘successful’ movements must therefore always be noted: enabled by Gandhian strategies to enter the public sphere of politics, but only as spiritualized, traditional essences; enlightened by the educational opportunities offered by societies such as the Arya Samaj, but under the strict tutelage of men; empowered by the Communist Party to stand shoulder to shoulder against class enemies, but also shouldering the burden of sexual morality. Not all instances of collective action in which large numbers of women participated necessarily empowered them. Nor were all forms of empowerment necessarily replicable across caste and class divisions. Indeed, some forms of empowerment were only enabled by the disempowerment of others, and in this sense women were no exception.

The gloomy balance sheet of retreats and advances that feminist historiography has found difficult to avoid, coupled with the widespread dismay and disillusion with revolutionary social transformations in the concluding decades of the twentieth century, has created the space within which some historians have forged alternative notions of power and agency. Michel Foucault’s notion of power has been central to this theoretical tendency. Foucault’s location of power in the capillaries that traverse a unitary framework runs counter to conventional perceptions of power as emanating from a central authority or underlying foundation which then becomes the focus of politics. This new formulation asserts that there is ‘neither a centralized source of power nor a location devoid of power’. While it allows for a great deal of analytic complexity and is therefore attractive to feminists, it could well become politically paralyzing. For scholars—even historical materialists—seized by a fear of replicating universal or hegemonic structures of power/knowledge, only ‘practices that are irreducibly local, regional and individual are admitted as defensible strategies’.

The recoil from such concepts as class struggle, organized protest or seizure of state power has produced the space within which James Scott’s formulations have had enduring influence. In *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, he makes a powerful argument for identifying ‘between abject unquestioning deference and violent outrage . . . the massive middle ground in which conformity is often a self-conscious strategy and resistance is a carefully hedged affair that avoids all or nothing confrontations’. This runs parallel to Foucault’s location of power in the capillaries, for if power is everywhere, then resistance may similarly be constructed as a web, ‘always already present’.

The result is the dilution of power/resistance to a relatively weakened concept, far removed from an emancipatory agenda. This is evident in Veena Talwar Oldenburg's study of the courtesans of Lucknow, whose very ‘lifestyle is resistance’. According to Oldenburg, these dancing and singing women were among the richest and the most powerful of colonial Lucknow society, and their lifestyles continue to articulate a critique of patriarchy.

Their way of life is not complicitous with male authority: on the contrary, in their own self-perceptions, definitions and descriptions, they are engaged in ceaseless and chiefly non-confrontational resistance to the new regulations and the resultant loss of prestige they have suffered since colonial rule began.49

‘Ceaseless’ functions opposite ‘episodic’ to suggest ever-present critique, while ‘non-confrontational’ stands opposite James Scott’s representation of ‘violent outrage’ as one end of the victim-to-rebellious-heroine scale. Oldenburg suggests that the kotha (courtesan’s quarters) constitutes a sanctuary for both men and women, representing for women an escape from the ‘hell’ of a society governed by patriarchal values. In addition, she finds a strong tradition of performative critique, or ‘a private consciousness’. When Oldenburg extols the virtues of the burga (long overcloak worn by these women with net for the eyes) and the ‘freedoms’ it offers women (quoting Gulbadan, she says ‘they [men] are deprived because we blinkered them’), however, she reveals not only the limits of relativism but also its consequences. According to her, ‘these women had appropriated the power of the gaze while eluding the leer of sexually frustrated men’, a formulation which sounds remarkably similar to the original Islamic injunction. As final proof that this world of women is powerful, autonomous and a challenge to patriarchy, Oldenburg produces their strategically split sexuality: coupling with men for money, while deriving their sexual pleasures from each other.50

The valorization of the ‘self-sufficiency’ of the women’s world in this account is problematic because it fails to come to terms with wider patriarchal structures as they are aligned with or disjunct from modes of social and economic domination, and ignores the ways in which complicity and resistance are organic constituents in relations of subordination. For patriarchies can, and do, operate by empowering some women vis-à-vis others, so the ‘power and freedom’ of the kothas cannot be understood as distinct from the ‘captivity’ of the faithful housewife. Oldenburg cites with approval Gulbadan’s confession of the way the materiality of her interests overrides concerns for the housewife, and denies any complicity between the two spheres by the trick of ‘voluntarism’, i.e. transforming the oppressions faced by non-courtesanal married women into a question of ‘consent’. Anyone who traces complicity, she suggests, can only be ‘insisting on the ideal instead of the possible in the struggle for power’. 
Emphasizing the 'possible' over the 'ideal' speaks of a pragmatism that undercuts the possibility of a specifically feminist struggle. Feminist historiography must insist, despite Foucault, on a 'differential access to power, on the basis of which we identify oppressors and not merely a privileged group'. The distinction between a female and feminist consciousness, which is dissolved in Oldenburg's account, must be rigorously maintained 'for the female is the basis of the feminist, yet the feminist arises out of a desire to escape the female' (in a social, not biological sense) and does not spring fully formed from these 'transgressions' which by their very systematicity serve to uphold rather than undermine patriarchy. While the concerns of feminism today structure the kinds of questions we may raise about the past, the past can neither be written as the pre-history of the feminist movement nor be used to demonstrate the redundancy of feminist ideology.

In 'Chandra's Death', Ranajit Guha offers us another optic on the female world: a female world whose operations result in failure but nevertheless reveal the interstices where power resides and subjugated knowledges reign. He provides extraordinarily rich detail about the caste, class and kinship structures against which we may understand this instance of a failed abortion resulting in the death of a Bagdi peasant woman. Chandra's natal family and their kin became involved in terminating her pregnancy, which resulted from an illicit relationship with her sister-in-law's husband, Magaram.

Throughout his careful delineation of the context of a fragmentary document (the statements of defendants arrested for the death of Chandra), Guha does not minimize the effects of patriarchy as it operates among the subaltern communities of mid-nineteenth-century Bengal. Magaram's power within the family structure is amply evident from the rather narrow choices which he presented to Chandra's family: if they did not undertake to perform the abortion, he would arrange 'to put her into bhhek', i.e. force her to don the Vaishnav's habit which signified her withdrawal from society. Yet between the pronouncement of the threat by Magaram and the execution of the abortion, Guha detects the 'middle ground' of solidarity and resistance:

> The solidarity born out of fear contained within it another solidarity activated by a different, indeed, contradictory principle—namely empathy. If it was the power of patriarchy which brought about the first, it was the understanding of women which inspired the second.

'The destruction of the foetus', he says, 'was a desperate but consciously adopted strategy to prevent the social destruction of another woman, to fight for a right to a life with honour within her own society.' Guha rules out the donning of the Vaishnav's habit as a viable choice, for it was no more than a 'living death'. This account of Vaishnav life runs counter to others. Indeed, Guha himself suggests that Vaishnavism offered an equal chance of relatively liberal conditions as of living death for its adherents. Even if that were not the case, however, highlighting this
moment as an instance of ‘the solidarity of women’ surprisingly undoes the careful delineation of patriarchy that he undertakes in the rest of the text by ignoring that the choices were at the outset provided by Magaram. Natalie Davis has given us an instance of the shadowy margins inhabited by nineteenth-century French peasant women, embodying a destructive power that at once had to be curbed (lest it turned the wine sour) and yet deployed to advantage (in destroying the pests). Yet it was a power that was in both instances defined by the needs of a patriarchal political economy.

A strategy of reading ‘choice’ in such historical instances has regressive consequences for feminist politics. The ‘self-sufficiency’ of women in both the instances cited above and their emergent ‘solidarity’ make a specifically feminist politics redundant. Such a critique is not meant to suggest that ‘seizure of state power’ is the only legitimate form of resistance: indeed, such seizures have not always altered women’s lives significantly. Yet the disillusion among the ranks of post-modern academics with the metanarratives of Marxism, leading to the ‘war on totality’ that precludes other totalizing narratives such as feminism, may not be universally shared. Indeed, the very attractions of such critiques of oppressive and reductive theories can be politically nullified if the distinction is not made between the continued existence of social totalities (such as class, global capitalism, patriarchies) and the metanarratives used to make sense of them. Relativism as an alternative to the legitimacy of purportedly universal beliefs may often only be a solution ‘from the perspective of the dominating groups’ and threatens to become a master narrative in its own right.

We must ask, therefore, what particular political purpose is served, or deferred, in posing the question of female agency. It would be difficult to contest the fact that the technologies of patriarchal power are continually forged and deployed because women refuse to take their place as dominated bodies, and feminist historiography must track this process. However, if it does not simultaneously suggest how this strategy advances the potential for an emancipatory agenda, such historiography evades its promise of contesting hegemonic structures. Posing the question of female agency—consent, choice or solidarity—within patriarchal structures defers the question of advancing the possibility of an escape from patriarchal oppressions altogether. Tracking instances of female social power within ghettoized female spaces may produce only ‘the illusion of conquest where there is in fact docility’. Everyday resistance or transgression could and did become an important expression of the challenge to patriarchy, especially when allied with an ideology of liberation.

By way of illustration, consider the women who were involved in the Telengana movement. Manikonda Suryavathi recalls that traditional cradle and wedding songs were infused with ‘new ideas’ and Mallu Swarajyam remembers singing cradle songs in the fields to challenge the landlord who forbade labouring women from feeding their babies while at work. A shift in either the content of the cradle song or the context of its performance

became an act of rebellion within the wider framework of an overall challenge to the social order. As long as these transgressions or survival strategies do not prefigure larger systemic transformations they remain cultural and historical curiosities, doing little to address the more persistent continuities of patriarchy and its ability to recast itself along with evolving forms of social and economic power.

Such continuities are most evident in the recent recrudescence in the subcontinent of cultural practices that aggressively challenge the increased visibility of women in economic and political life. As the Indian ruling classes attempt to secure a place within emerging global configurations of power and organizations of production, relieved in the post-Soviet Communist world of even the mask of concern for the rights of subaltern classes, attacks on the bodies, livelihoods and lives of women are likely to increase. Feminist historical analyses cannot afford to ignore this trend, especially since history itself has become the ground on which fresh claims and justifications for the oppression of women are being made. Two recent discussions of contemporary events serve as valuable sign-posts for conceptualizing power and agency at a multiplicity of levels and within specific contexts.

Perhaps no other subject in Indian feminist historiography has been so thoroughly saturated with the question of women’s ‘volition’ as the ideology of ‘sati’. In a recent article, Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari have offered a dynamic understanding of the operations of this ideology without either seeing ‘solidarity’ in certain kinds of female action or minimizing the grotesquely uneven ways in which power is distributed through Indian society. Their detailed investigations of two recent instances of widow immolation, that of Om Kanwar in 1980 and Roop Kanwar in 1987, reveal the institutions, beliefs and ideologies by which these instances are constituted as ‘sati’ and the centrality to this process of the question of female volition. Thus, they say, ‘once proclaimed, sati only creates a space for the woman’s consent, not for her resistance—for not only does the declaration of sati itself depend on others who can attest to the miracles but it opens the way for community participation’. Further, this attestation itself appears to be mediated by class/caste positions: Harijan (lower caste/class) women repeatedly produce less idealized versions of the efforts of the widow to free herself from her fiery fate. The article analyzes the variety of strategies by which contradictions between an absolute female volition and obvious community participation are displaced, but not resolved, in the ideology of sati. While the internalization of the beliefs and ideologies of sati testify to a popular consent to patriarchal subjugation of women, thoroughly modernized apparatuses commercially exploit an extremely local event. Together, these processes reveal the ramifications of ‘sati’ in much wider ideological formations and material structures.

The authors painstakingly expose the variety of determinations—of caste, class and ethnicity, and not just gender— which produce a tolerance of such
brutal manifestations of patriarchal power within the social, economic, political domains. These instances become the means to combat the growing visibility of the ‘dangerous non-mother’ in contemporary Indian life and to compensate the Rajput community for its declining fortunes. The feminist historian can only begin by challenging the insistence on female agency that undergirds the discourse on ‘sati’. Indeed, by unpacking the various forces which made not only the practice but its celebration possible, Vaid and Sangari clearly point to the impossibility of fashioning a counter-hegemonic agenda that isolates or focuses solely on the question of gender hierarchies.

If this discussion points to a forceful reassertion of patriarchal domination which attempts to construct afresh woman as spiritualized essence, other contemporary events involving the Hindu right-wing movement (led by the Bharatiya Janata Party) have offered unique possibilities for women in public life. As Tanika Sarkar has shown, one of the most paradoxical aspects of the growing strength of the right wing has been its increasing reliance on the participation of women. Thus some sections of Indian middle-class women have found a new political voice within the growing Hindu fundamentalist movement in contemporary India, to the extent of aggressively inciting violence among men.65

May we then demarcate this new sphere of female empowerment as ‘feminist’? Is such empowerment desirable for all sections of Indian women? This mobilization occurs within precisely defined limits which are set by the male leadership and within an aggressively communal (i.e. far from democratic) sphere of politics. As such, it is quite distinct from the mobilization of women under Gandhian nationalism or in left-wing movements, with their respective modernizing and democratic features. ‘It prepares the woman’, says Sarkar, ‘to be a citizen of an authoritarian Hindurashtra, to wreck secular democratic politics.’ Such a programme bears little or no resemblance to feminist aspirations. Indeed, the programmatic assertions of the totalizing ideology of Hindutva are those that subcontinental feminist politics must imaginatively challenge or counter on equal terms to reduce the risk of being completely marginalized.

By pointing to the renewed vigor with which the ideology of ‘sati’ has gained currency in contemporary Indian society and to the ways in which female political participation is being massively redefined, repudiating the emancipatory legacies of a nationalist, left or feminist politics, these authors suggest the outlines of a feminist praxis that cannot afford the luxury of ‘pragmatism’ or of a politics ‘irreducibly local in scale’. The responsibility of feminist historiography, in the face of anti-feminist, indeed anti-democratic, forces that are rapidly regrouping, is to contextualize the question of female agency in a way that does not conceal how consent for broader patriarchal structures has been historically obtained. Only then can feminist historiography register its refusal to be complicit with the agenda of history-as-usual, which may admit new historical subjects and even admit feminism as
one of several possible historical interpretations but does little to question its own gender-neutral methods.

It is no coincidence that the two instances cited above, where the distinction is finely drawn between women's transformatory capacities for a feminist agenda and the agency of women within patriarchal structures, both relate to contemporary history. Clarifying the boundaries between the 'female' and 'feminist' worlds becomes a far more demanding and complicated task the further back one goes in history. After all, the political possibilities offered by feminism are more recent than the dispersed, episodic or discontinuous struggles of the past. The task of feminist historiography is to understand the complex ways in which women are, and have been, subjected to systematic subordination within a framework that simultaneously acknowledges new political possibilities for women, drawing on traditions of dissent or resistance while infusing them with new meanings.

Notes

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2. Throughout the nineteenth century, male social reformers and their opponents framed their arguments with reference to what was sanctioned in the Hindu scriptural texts. The valorization of the texts as authority was a result of Orientalist efforts to produce stable and usable interpretations of Indian society.


14. Critiques of modernization are by no means unique to feminist historiography, and have been raised in several discussions of economic and social history. For a more recent cultural critique of modernity, see Tejaswini Niranjana, Vivek Dhareshwar and P. Sudhir (eds) *Interrogating Modernity* (Seagull Books, Calcutta, 1993).


24. Prem Choudhry reveals that patriarchal Jat customs in Haryana which culturally devalued women were systematized and reinforced by the colonial legal-juridical structure even though women were key agents in the agrarian economy. Choudhry, 'Customs in a Peasant Economy: Women in Colonial Haryana', in Recasting Women, ed. Sangari and Vaid, pp. 302-36. This made patriarchal control over women's productive capacities more secure, and later legitimized the gradual erosion of those capacities. See Michelle Maskiell, 'Gender, Kinship and Rural Work in Colonial Punjab', Journal of Women's History, 2 (1990), pp. 35-72.


27. 'We Were Making History', p. 281.


40. As for example in Lindsay Beth Harlan, 'The Ethic of Protection Among Rajput Women: Religious Mediations of Caste and Gender Duties' (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1987).
41. 'We Were Making History', p. 19.
47. See, for example, Arun Patnaik's critique of intellectual trends within Indian academic Marxism, 'Reification of the Intellect', EPW, 25 (27 January 1990), pp. PE12–29.
52. Gordon, 'What's New in Women's History?', p. 82.
53. Guha, 'Chandra's Death'.
55. See, for example, the description of Vaishnav women in Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture'.
61. For an example of an effort to produce 'docile bodies' in the late nineteenth century, see Barbara Metcalf, *Perfecting Women: Maulana Ashraf Thanawi's "Bhishti Zewar"* (University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990).


63. 'We Were Making History', pp. 149, 237.
