

## Women and Their Identity in Early Indian Society

*The Problem of Identity: Women in Early  
Indian Inscriptions*  
by Kirit K. Shah  
Oxford University Press, New Delhi,  
2001, pp. xvi + 194, Rs. 495.

*The Problem of Identity* deals with the question of identity and women's role in early India, roughly from 300 BC to AD 300. Setting the agenda of his research in the 'Prologue', K. K. Shah wanted to provide an alternative paradigm to the existing historiography on early Indian women. The book is based on an analysis of about 230 inscriptions from different parts of India. Inscriptional data have been arranged into six chapters including the 'prologue' and 'epilogue'. This handy volume is full of interesting details about women and their varied identities within familial, professional, religious and royal contexts.

Making a brief review of recent studies on gender relations, Shah has studied women as a 'category'. This approach is clearly reflected in his chapter-plan, beginning with 'Women with Royal Attributes of Identity', etc. Adopting a consistent method of citing the relevant text and its translation from the published inscriptions, he has analysed each term used for women with great precision, and thereafter making an analysis with a view to construct the self-perception of each woman. He has generally made use of only those inscriptions which are published in the *Epigraphia Indica* and *Corpus Inscriptionum Indicarum*. Many significant inscriptions both in Brahmi and Kharoshti scripts published in the *Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal*, *Indian Historical Quarterly*, *Indian Antiquary*, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bombay*, *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland* and some other Indological journals are not taken into consideration.

Shah has arranged his epigraphic material into three categories: Buddhist inscriptions, Jaina inscriptions and Brahmanical inscriptions. Chapter II provides an analysis of 33 inscriptions in

which women appeared with identity of royal attributes. This chapter begins with an extract culled from the Allahabad inscription in which the queen Karuvaki, the second wife of Asoka is mentioned. From the analysis of about 26 Buddhist inscriptions, Shah concluded that the parental families figured prominently in the self-perception of the queens while constructing their identities. The only Jaina record included in this chapter comes from Svargapuri cave of Udayagiri in Orissa. In this inscription, the chief queen of Kharavela constructs her identity through her ancestor (i.e., Hastisaha) and the lineage originating from him. Majority of the Brahmanical inscriptions cited by Shah are from Nagarjunikonda, a site of immense archaeological interest. One such record provides the names of as many as 31 women — 13 sisters, 11 mothers, 5 wives and possibly 2 concubines—all collectively mourning the death of the founder of the Ikshvaku dynasty, king Camtamula I. What seems fascinating is the use of the feminine forms of royal and feudatory titles by the women. Some of the titles include such as *devi*, *mahadevi*, *maharajamata pitamahi*, *mahasenapatni*, *mahatalavari*, *maharathini* and *maharajabalika*.

That most of the women with royal credentials figured from the Deccan may possibly be explained in terms of the 'survival of matriarchal elements' (pp. 85-6) in those areas. Two factors seemed to have played an important role in the construction of the royal female-identity: convention and power relationship irrespective of religious affiliations of the queens.

The next chapter details the identity of women with non-familial and familial attributes. There are a few inscriptions from places such as Sanchi, Bharhut and

Jamalgarhi in which some women appear outside the familial framework, constructing their identity by mentioning their names, native places and native land. Buddhist inscriptions from Sanchi, Bharhut, Bodhgaya, Andhau, south India and the Deccan indicate that women have revealed their identity by using many kinship terms: *pajavati*, *bhaya*, *bharya*, *gharini*, *kutumbini*, *bitiyika* and *halikajaya* for wife; *matu* for mother; *husa* for daughter-in-law; *dahatu* for daughter and *bhagini* for sister respectively. The Jaina inscriptions provide a fourfold familial status of women chronologically as daughter, daughter-in law, wife and mother. Some of the terms used for familial status of women differ from the Buddhist inscriptions. The Jaina inscriptions also provide some information on the non-familial status of women. Out of four Brahmanical records studied by Shah, three emphasize on the *gotra* identity of women. On the basis of multiple patterns of identity-construction, especially in terms of familial status, it may be construed that women did enjoy some freedom in the inscriptional records of early India as the pattern of self-identity was not uniform.

Surprisingly, no woman in the Brahmanical inscriptions has figured with religious attributes of identity. However, both Buddhist and Jaina inscriptions provide very interesting information. Many of the religious attributes, like those of the royal ones, are the feminine forms of male attributes, but one can clearly see that women were self-conscious in articulating their identities. As many as seven religious terms are used in the Buddhist inscriptions: *upasika*, *antevasini*, *pavayitika*, *bhiksuni*, *arya*, *bhadanti* and *sananika*. The Jaina inscriptions too provide three such terms: *sravika*, *sradhacari* and *sisini-arya*. What

can be concluded from this chapter is that the Buddhist nuns frequently figured in a familial framework while constructing their identity whereas the Jaina nuns avoided the use of the familial status, rather they retained a close connection with the monastic order.

The number of inscriptions revealing the professional attribute of identity is very small. However, it seems plausible that many women worked with great proficiency, like their men counterparts, in numerous artisanal and other professions. Again, we find the feminine forms of professional attributes to constitute their identity. Shah has cited as many as 11 such professions referred to in the epigraphic records. Majority of these records are from places such as Amravati, Mathura, Ram Nagar (U.P.), Nagarjunikonda, Nasik, Guntur, Wandha (Gujarat) and Ramgarh (Madhya Pradesh). Considering the paucity of information available on the women workers in the Buddhist, Jaina and Brahmanical literature the data supplied by the inscriptions provide new insights on women professionals in ancient India. They seemed to have engaged in diversified professions, including domestic servants (*sevikas*).

From this handy volume one can comprehend that women carved out a niche for themselves in the patriarchal society of early historic India, nevertheless, the hold of patriarchy was so strong that irrespective of religious or regional affiliations they, to a large extent, favoured their identity with an attribute of familial framework. Secondly, *varna* and *jati* have totally been ignored as attributes of identity. K. K. Shah has brought to light numerous women who to a large extent determined their identity through non-familial and familial attributes. What seems to be missing in the book is a glossary of technical terms, and the inscriptional data could have been meaningfully tabulated either at the end of each chapter or included in the appendix.

Laxman S. Thakur  
Professor of History  
Himachal Pradesh University  
Shimla.

## *Latest from the Institute*

### **Narrative Modes in Punjabi Novel**

by N.S. Tasneem

2002 pp. 118 Rs. 175 ISBN: 81-7986-024-8.

Narratologists treat the narrative not in the traditional way, as a fictional representative of life, but as a systematic formal construction. The Punjabi novelists have shifted their stance from telling a tale to delineation of character to the depiction of the atmosphere of the mind since the appearance of *Sundari* (1898) by Bhai Vir Singh. In Section One of the monograph, two chapters deal with modern literary theories and the art-form of the novel. In Section Two the narrative modes employed by the Punjabi novelist, during the last one hundred years or so, have been highlighted. At present the Punjabi novel is caught in the crosscurrents of thematic concerns and stylistic approaches.

### **Feminism, Tradition and Modernity**

ed. by Chandrakala Padia

2002 pp. xv+410 Rs. 600 ISBN: 81-7986-023-X

Two major excellencies make this volume significant: its relevance and richness. A lot of women in India today is by no means satisfactory. Our own writers on feminism have made it very clear, with the help of both argument and well-researched evidence. But the mere diagnosis is hardly enough. We have to find ways to remedy the ills.

Would it be proper to quietly acquiesce in, and follow the measures suggested by feminist writers in the West? Or do we have to look at what still saves the Indian family from utter dissolution, and turn anew to our ancient text, often misconstrued, for some sage counsel that may help us in the present? Does modernity call for a wholesale rejection of our time-honoured values? And does it make sense to impose alien modes of thought and conduct on any society without paying due heed to what has kept it up so long?

It is such questions of the moment, which the present work addresses and analyses and suggestions are provided by eminent scholars from diverse fields. Political scientists, sociologists, historians, creative writers, and philosophers—all have contributed to make this work a potential academic stimulus. It may even prove to be an influence.

### **Signification in Language and Culture**

ed. by Harjeet Singh Gill

2002 pp. xiii+675 Rs. 950 ISBN: 81-7986-015-9

*Signification in Language and Culture* includes papers presented during the International Symposium on Signification in Buddhist and French Traditions (with its impact on later developments in India and Europe) held at the Indian Institute of Advanced, Shimla, in September 2001. The first set of papers deals with the philosophy of language, the second set concentrates on signification in medieval India and the third set investigates the articulations of signification in image, space and time.

Please send your orders to

The Public Relations Officer  
Indian Institute of Advanced Study  
Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla-171005