

The Household as History

Kumkum Roy (ed.) *Looking Within Looking Without: Exploring Households in the Subcontinent Through Time* (Essays in Memory of Nandita Prasad Sahai) (Delhi: Primus, 2015), Hardcover, Rs.1595

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The book under review raises many questions and queries about how much we know, and do not know, about the history of households as a social phenomenon in the subcontinent. Histories of households are indeed an unexplored terrain. The essays in this volume – covering a range of experiences from the ancient to the early modern period – are located within different intersecting disciplinary and sub-disciplinary spaces. The focus is on issues and concerns of relevance to readers interested in understanding the ‘household’ as an analytical category for history in particular, and questions of the marginalized in general.

Divided into six sections, the work covers a wide variety of themes woven around the historical experience of the household. In the first section, *Household Matters*, the archaeological excavations carried out jointly by Supriya Verma and Jaya Menon in the village of Indor Khera have provided evidence to explore the household as a site of economic production. Their article ‘*Mapping Histories and Practices of Potters’: Households in Ancient Indor Khera (200 BC-500 CE)*’ discusses this theme explicitly. A similar perspective, through economic history, is available in the essay by Rajat Dutta, though the essay figures later in the book. Dutta’s article, titled ‘*Towards an Economic History of Rural Households in Early Modern India: Some Evidence from Bengal in the Eighteenth Century*’, is able to show how rural households and markets were deeply connected.

In the second section, *The Meanings of Motherhood*, Martha Selby, Sally Goldman and Monica Juneja have employed textual strategies to read historical representations of motherhood. Drawing on early Ayurvedic literature, Martha Selby highlights the position of ‘*Women as Patients and Practitioners in Early Sanskrit Medical Literature*’. Selby has worked on two medical texts composed in Sanskrit (dated c. 1st-2nd CE). Through a close reading of the texts, Selby deals in great detail with the realms of gynecology,

maladies, gestational processes, anatomical difference, edema and abscess. She asserts that women played an active role in the production of medical knowledge in matters that were of special and direct concern to them. Sally Goldman on the other hand, has grappled with issues of conception, pregnancy and childbirth by looking at the last section of the *Ramayana*, the *Uttarakanda*. Throughout the epic, Sita is located within a patriarchal framework, her pregnancy erased from view. Several episodes clearly show that though she is pregnant, she can still be suspected of sexual infidelity. Goldman, in her essay ‘*Blessed Events: The Uttarakanda’s Construction of Sita’s Pregnancy*’, argues that Sita’s journey of exclusion from Ayodhya to the liminal space of Valmiki’s *ashrama* tells us about the inner tensions and silences that a woman has to go through. She is constantly reminded that a woman abandoned by her husband has no voice and identity.

The contributions made by Jaya Tyagi, Uma Chakravarti and R. Mahalakshmi in the third section, *Regulations and Representations*, bring out the dynamics of the household from varied references to it in texts like the *Manavadharmashastra*, *Matsya Mahapurana*, *Mahabharata* and *Tirukkural*. Tyagi, in her essay ‘*The Dynamics of the Early Indian Household: Domesticity, Patronage and Propriety in Textual Traditions*’, discusses the patterns of continuity and change in the experience of women as depicted in the *Manavadharmashastra* and *Matsya Mahapurana*. She contends that while the *Manusmriti* forbade women from undertaking any religious activity, the *Puranas* gave them an inclusive space, as reflected in the *vrata-katha* tradition. In this way, women were able to negotiate spaces for themselves and were able to come out of the confines of the household. Though the *Puranas* upheld traditional hierarchy and divisions in the social structure like the *Manusmriti*, they simultaneously allowed women to undertake ritual observances and extended

their agency. Tyagi goes on to show that *Grhyasutras*, *Puranas* and *Buddhist* texts espouse the *pativrata* ideology. They reiterate the idea that in elite households, women competed with each other, and not men, for conjugal rights, share in household resources and progenies.

Mahalakshmi's essay, titled 'Woman and Home in the Tirukkal: The Normative Construction of the Family in the Tamil Region in the Middle of First Millenium CE' (the Tamil Veda), posits that the issue of women's sexuality is a theme common to all classical texts, be it the *Manusmriti* or popular prescriptive literature. Such ideas, she argues, are depicted within a universalist frame.

Uma Chakravarti's article, 'A Sutaputra in a Royal Household: The Kshatriya World of Power and its Margins', explores the story of a *sutaputra* (Karna) in the *Mahabharata*, through themes of genealogy, lineage building and patrilineal descent. This story should leave an abiding mark on the minds of the readers. The very fact that Kunti conceals the real identity of Karna as a Kshatriya leaves Karna condemned as a *sutaputra* and has far-reaching consequences for him in the public realm.

The essays related to religion deal with the inner and outer spaces of the household within medieval devotional traditions. Section four – *The Sacred and the Profane* – opens up different genres of sources. In 'Households Profane and Divine: Perceptions of Sainly Wives', Vijaya Ramaswamy incisively argues that the idea of bridal mysticism cuts across gender and religion. She gives us vivid descriptions of Lal Ded, Meera and Akka Mahadevi, who crossed the threshold of the profane in their households. In marked contrast to these women renouncers, Ramaswamy talks about Bahina Bai, who continued to live in a patriarchal household but found freedom in its spiritual spaces.

This idea aligns well with the views presented by Pius Malekandathil in his article 'Women, Church and the Syrian Christian Households in Pre-Modern Kerala' on how spaces for Syrian Christian women were created in pre-modern Kerala. Pius contends that the Church gave considerable latitude to Syrian Christian women to carve a niche for themselves by participating in the multiple activities it organized. Though these women were given the right to assert their freedom, it was acceptable only within the parameters set by men. The spaces of men, Pius says, were about brightness, laughter and visibility, but that for women were designed in such a way that they were dark, dull and grim. The churches of Ramapuram, Kolencherry and Karakunnam were not merely religious institutions but institutional mechanisms to assert the position and pride of the family which ultimately led to the submission of women.

Kumkum Roy's essay 'Worlds Within and Worlds Without: Representations of the Sangha in 'Popular' Tradition' is a welcome reminder that the *sangha* represented a

distinctive framework vis-à-vis the domestic world. Roy also explores how the *sangha's* residential space would have had similarities with the worldly household. Like Roy's essay, Ranjeeta Dutta's work 'Consensus and Control: The Mathas, Household and Religious Devotion in Medieval South India', in a section of the book titled *Cross Currents*, and through a study of Tamil texts, focuses on the institution of the *matha* within the Shrivaisnava tradition in the second millennium CE. While the *matha* functions within the institution of the household, she demonstrates how the *matha* used the household as a space to regulate kinship and caste relations. Rosalind O'Hanlon highlights a different set of issues in the context of the household in 18th century Maharashtra. Focusing on western India, where society was shaped by the state of the Maratha Peshwas, this essay ('Disciplining the Brahman Household; The Moral Mission of Empire in the Eighteenth-Century') gives details of the disciplining of the Brahmin household by the Brahmin rulers of the Maratha state themselves. The attempt to enforce these norms, says O'Hanlon, offers us a series of insights into the state's agenda to carry out a cultural and social mission within an expanding imperial framework.

In her essay 'Crossing the Golden Gate? Sunars, Social Mobility and Disciplining the Household in Early Modern Rajasthan', in the section *Wider Webs*, Nandita Sahai acknowledges that the growth of the *Sunar* community over the eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries was a pan-Indian phenomenon. Although the status of the *Sunars* was very fluid, she maps out the way in which this community used the court and other public arenas for advertising their customs and traditions. The most intriguing dimension of the essay is when Sahai shows us how realignment in household practices was contested yet harmonized during these phases.

In terms of methodology, the book exhibits an array of approaches. This enables us to explore different dimensions of the household, embedded as it has historically been in wider social, political and economic networks. However, the essays in the book operate at so many levels and around such disparate themes that it often becomes difficult for the reader to get a comprehensive perspective on the household. The contributors have engaged with concerns about caste, the intersections between kingship and household, archaeology and public architecture. Some of the essays raise concerns about religious beliefs and practices, and the reading of colonial records, but the challenge to integrate these varied themes remains. The book will however interest students of History, Sociology, Gender and Women.

Chronologically, the book spans a period from the mid-first millennium BCE to the eighteenth-century CE. The regions explored include the Gangetic valley, Tamil

country, Kerala, Maharashtra, Bengal, and Rajasthan. Yet the conjunction of time and terrain is episodic, so that the diverse specificity of time-space cases impedes the exercise of tracing change and continuity.

It is to be noted that the volume has looked through varied sources like archaeology, visual representations, the epics, varieties of texts in regional languages, technical medical treatises, inscriptions and official documents like court records. The book reconstructs, and deconstructs,

the dynamics of the household in a very perceptive way. However, a comparison of the various sources, located within different genres and chronologies, makes the themes, ideas and conclusions rather dispersed. Also, the myriad approaches adopted by the authors, with their different perspectives, specificities and debates, undermine the possibility of making any profound philosophical point about the household as a historical and social phenomenon.