‘Early Indian Women’: Perception of Nationalist Historians

From the late nineteenth century onwards Indian society had gone through major socio-political changes. The colonial writers, especially James Mill, were extremely critical about various customs of the Indian society. With the introduction of western education, a new generation emerged in the Indian society who enlightened themselves with the values of democracy, individualism and human rights. They were influenced by the writings of Francis Bacon, John Locke, David Hume, Voltaire, Jeremy Bentham, James Stewart Mill, Robert Owen and other contemporary European writers and philosophers. They became aware of the fact that Indian society needed large scale reforms in the social sphere. They tried to restore their national identity in two ways- (i) They advocated rectifications of some social customs for reforming the decadent Indian society. The Indians identified these fallacies mainly from the western perception developed by some of the British administrators and missionary activists. (ii) They were also engaged in making a critique of the colonial interpretation of India’s past. They generated an alternative theory which rested upon the particular ideologies nurtured by the early ‘Orientalists’ like Max Müller who focused on the common Aryan origin of Indians and Europeans, sharing a common glorious past. Romila Thapar argues that they identified a linguistic connection between Sanskrit and some Europeans languages and this connection was perceived by them as a bond of racial kinship between the early Indian and European civilizations. The Aryans were described to be a branch of Indo-European race who had started settling down in India around the second
millennium B.C.E. and had developed a religious culture centering on their sacred text -Veda. The Orientalist scholars considered it as a bench mark as well as the beginning of Indian history and they emphasized on the studies of the Vedic sources for reconstructing a glorious and ancient cultural past for both the Indians and the Europeans. Such an interpretation of Indian history was obviously loaded with an idealistic imagery of the Aryan past, projecting the prevalence of laudable social morality and refined cultural elements in that past. The Indian scholars associated with the anti-colonial movements at the beginning of the twentieth century picked up this romantic version of history to confront the charge of ‘Oriental Despotism’ mainly coming from some of the British administrators and reformers. The Indian writers also chose to project the Vedic culture as ideal of all civilizations, in which they were still following the early Orientalists. They pointed at the significance of religion and spirituality in Vedic people’s life as the mark of their superior culture as opposed to the materialistic concerns of the West. Like their western Orientalist counterparts the Indian scholars also selected the religious texts, mainly Brāhmanical as authentic sources for understanding various aspects of early Indian social life.¹

Encountering ‘West’ and the dilemma of social reform

A major issue in the nineteenth century social reform movement in India was the ‘women’s question’. Rammohun Roy pioneered in the field by launching his protest against the custom of ‘Satī’. Vidyasagar and others started campaigning against kulīn polygamy, child marriage and for widow-remarriage and women’s education. The Brahma Samaj also pleaded strongly for the
issue and had repeatedly been divided over disputes closely related to the women’s question. The manifestations of these ideological debates in the form of short writings were probably the first mediums transmitting the indigenous ideas about the women in pre-colonial Indian society. From the late nineteenth century onwards there was a proliferation of vernacular periodicals and newspapers which began to deal with different social issues along with the discussions over the position of women in the Indian society. Debates went on from both the perspectives of the reformists and the conservatives. The conservatives considered these reform programs as violation of Indian tradition and śāstra and they defended the age old customs and institutions prescribed in Dharmaśāstras. Partha Chatterjee mentions, the traditionalists like Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay also talked about the moral development of the society, but they wanted to achieve it by perpetuating women’s enduring dedication towards the family. People like Mukhopadhyay valued the traditionally upheld patriarchal model of wifehood which according to them had raised women into the height of goddesses in the ancient society. On the other hand, the progressive reformists also placed their arguments by referring to the Brāhmanical texts. Chatterjee explains that the nineteenth century educated middle class reformists composed many essays to foster women’s education by showing evidences from the ancient texts to substantiate their claim. Vidyasagar wrote many pamphlets, like ‘Balyabibaher dosh’, ‘Bidhaba bibaha’ to generate social consciousness among the masses and referred to the ancient Brāhmanical texts for dwelling upon the social issues affecting women’s condition in India. Eventually an academic approach gradually evolved corollary to the reformist movements, which centered round the
question of ‘what the Brāhmanical society did or what they did not’ for contextualizing their arguments over Indian society and past.

At the same time, history became a recognized field of knowledge to use as a tool for combating the political and cultural domination of the British rule and organizing the Indians into a ‘Nation’ overarching the existence of multiple cultural and religious layers of early Indian society. In doing this Brāhmanical heritage was accepted as the dominant phenomenon. The overwhelming acceptance of the dominant Brāhmanical culture as representative of the ‘Indian’ stalled the deeper investigations into the non-brāhmanical sources. Thus a format for evaluating the early Indian society and the position of women within it was developed by the nationalist historians and the ideologues what has later been termed as the ‘Nationalist Paradigm’. We can refer to Tanika Sarkar’s argument here when she points out that both the liberal reformists and the Nationalists contextualized ‘women’s question’ in terms of their roles and services within the family structure. The ‘home’ became central issue in their perception which was conceived as the lowest though foremost unit of rendering the spiritual essence of the social life and the national culture of India. They perceived women as the symbols of purity and chastity and they were given the responsibility to protect the society and the national culture from the penetration of western culture. Both the reformists and the nationalists favored women’s education, but the ideas converged where an especial “feminine curriculum” was introduced by them to reiterate the ideas that even the educated women would only be valued in their domestic roles. They had
heightened women as Supreme Mother to combat the nation’s political subjugation to the British rule. The ‘myth’ of Indian womanhood was reinvented and the whole idea was transcended to foster a cultural struggle for encountering the western modernism while the women’s cause was lost sight of.

Jasodhara Bagchi suggests that the early women of India were represented in various myths, but a kind of homogeneity was given to these interpretations to situate women only in their structured roles. Thus they became the emblems of a tradition which was exclusively defined as “Indian” and their position was negotiated to achieve some socio-political goals. At this juncture, such ideas had deeply penetrated the middle class Indians’ psychology and the historians also started conceptualizing things within certain parameters. They either contributed to develop some icons of Indian womanhood through highlighting certain themes in history (by focusing on the Gārgī-Yājñavalkya episode) or accepted the existing icons (by upholding the sacrificing images of Sītā and Sāvitrī). In the most dominant discourse women appeared as role models in Indian society.

The historical readings of early Indian past mainly concentrated on the upper caste women who carried the rhetoric of an ideology. The experiences of their marginalized counterparts remained insignificant outside the pale. Uma Chakravarti asserts that the process of reinventing India’s ancient past and development of a historical perspective on the position of women in ‘Hindu civilization’ were ideologically interconnected. Both focused on presenting women, ancient and modern, as role models on the frame of patriarchal discourse. In the whole process, women and
their voices almost remain absent or passive and they were not considered to be conscious beings, enjoying an active part in the social change. They were not addressed on their own rights.

The study of history had become ancillary to the projects of social reform in the eyes of nationalists. The writings of James Mill and repeated criticisms by the missionary activists referring to the degenerated position of women made a deep impact on the western educated Indian middle class. Rammohun Roy had been firm in his conviction that modernization could not be achieved by the Indians without providing social justice to the women. His agitation against the custom of ‘Satī’ received huge support from the British government. Most significantly, he framed his arguments based on the śāstric traditions of Manu in order to thwart the orthodox criticisms, pointing out the provision available for ascetic widowhood in the śṛṭi and suggested it as a much better option than dying on the husband’s funeral pyre. He salved the ego of the śāstric guardians by providing further references from Upaṇiṣad which emphasized on asceticism rather than rituals. In a reply to the advocators of the custom of widow-burning, Rammohun Roy mentioned that Gāndhārī, the wife of Dhrṛtarāṣṭra and the wives of Vāsudeva, Balarāma and Pradyumna voluntarily entered into their husbands’ funeral pyre, without having any religious compulsion. He showed that there were numerous instances of women, like the widows of the Kurus who had chosen ascetic lives instead of throwing them into the pyres of their husbands at the time of cremation. But in present situation, he argued, the misinterpretation of this ancient practice led to commemorate the killing of countless innocent women in Indian society. In his words “...widow in the present time does not enter the fire,
but is burnt to death by others tying her down to the pile, has not performed the ceremony according to the ancient practice…..; and those who tie her down, and, pressing on her with bamboos, kill her, must, according to all shastras, be considered guilty of the heinous crime of woman-murder”.14 Roy praised the ‘Hindu’ śāstra for ensuring equal share of a widow in the property of her deceased husband along with her sons15, but he also held the view that later the authors of Dāyabhāga and Dāyatatwa denied women’s right over the property which had been taken as the standard code of ‘Hindu’ social law by the modern judicial system.16 Roy thought that being deprived of the material comfort and the social respect, the widows chose to burn themselves – “It is not from religious prejudices and early impressions only, that Hindoo widows burn themselves on the piles of their deceased husbands, but also from their witnessing the distress in which widows of the same rank in life are involved, and the insults and the slights to which they are daily subjected, that they become in a great measure regardless of their existence after the death of their husbands: …. “.17 Roy’s attempts mark the commencement of a new phase of re-examination of the Indian tradition and an initiation of translating the śāstras into vernacular languages took place. This was meant to broaden the scope of educating the masses about various layers of ‘Hindu śāstra’. ‘Satī’ was abolished in 1829 by the Regulation XVII which declared it as a penal offence. Passing of the regulation confirmed the centrality of the ‘Hindu śāstra in these early days of formalization of the modern Hindu legal code to determine the status of women. This was another result of adopting the trope that had evolved out of the colonial perception of the dominance of Vedic Brāhmanism to determine the national identity.
Vidyasagar’s ideological struggle against conservatism was expressed through his opposition to the practice of child marriage and *kulinism* and consent in favour of widow-remarriage. He referred from a passage in the *Parāśara Samhitā* which allowed re-marriage of a woman under five circumstances, one of which was after the husband’s death. Rammohun’s consideration of ascetic widowhood was indirectly questioned by his interpretation of a particular portion mentioned in *Parāśara Samhitā* which according to him proposed for an alternative life for the widows through remarriage. Thus re-examination of social customs and various institutions were initiated from many perspectives, though these theories and counter theories surfaced into the same orbit of Brāhmanical system. The random selection of Brāhmanical texts without referring to their historical background, by both the reformist and the conservative schools dismantled the historicity of the functioning and evolution of certain social customs. Instead of scrutinizing their roles properly in determining women’s position in early Indian society, the moral values and social practices of a small section of people in Indian society were idealized and epitomized as ‘Indian culture’ and this was reinforced by both the conservatives and reformists in the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. Thus the waves of the reformist movements led to further Brāhmanization of India’s ancient past. A large number of religious texts were translated and published for general masses who did not have the access to the original texts and had to depend on the interpretations by the local Brahmans. The vernacular texts, which were more and more available, imparted a uniform pattern to the knowledge of India’s historical past. The interest in Vedic studies increased with the establishment of commercial printing presses in Calcutta, Madras, Bombay, Lucknow, Banaras, Pondicherry and other cities. These
publication houses reintroduced the Vedic culture to the urban masses by multiplying the numbers of pamphlets and books on related subjects. They did even more by promoting these writings in vernacular languages. Educational institutions, libraries, literary societies and socio-political groups played active roles in circulating this large body of printed materials. The above cities became the epicenters of cultural nationalism by promoting Vedic researches. The North Indian perception was heavily colored by Arya Samajists’ interpretations. In fact their initiative in restoring the śāstric literature was overwhelming and spread over to an all-India scenario. The Arya Samaj was founded in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswati who launched a number of reformist programs against the practice of child marriage. He established many schools for educating both the boys and the girls. He believed in the eternal value of the Veda and initiated the restoration of Vedic literature and śāstra, proposing the revival of India’s traditional values in their pure forms. In 1886 he founded the Dayananda Anglo-Vedic College at Lahore which became a centre of Sanskrit and Vedic studies. Subsequently branches of Vedic studies were set up by the Arya Samaj in the Punjab, the United Province and Bombay. During the late nineteenth century the Theosophical Society of Madras, and Mrs. Annie Besant in particular, extended their support for promoting Vedic studies. Under the influence of Madame Blavatsky Annie Besant decided to dedicate her entire life to the service of India and took ‘Hindu’ attire by adopting particular dress code, practicing Yoga and changing her food habits. She launched the Home Rule Movement in India and took the leading role in fostering nationalist values by publishing a number of books on Veda and Hinduism from Banaras. In 1916 she founded the Banaras Hindu University with the support of Pandit Madan Mohan Malviya. During the 1860s the Prarthana Samaj also launched
reformist movements in Bombay and Poona pledging women’s emancipation through education. They tried to eradicate the corruption of Hindu society, but unlike Brahmo Samaj they did not disassociate from it. They asserted their beliefs in monotheism as a pure form of religion and blended it with the message of 17th century bhakti devotional movement. But they did not depart from what was established on the palimpsest of the dominant nationalist-reformist conscience as the basic principles of Hinduism. Thus there was an overwhelming emphasis on the dominant “Hindu” fabric of society with a select paradigm of morality which assumed stupendous proportions in the public mind.

Towards the formation of a Nationalist Paradigm

The colonial state had brought in large scale changes in the traditional social structure. If we look at the long trajectory of history the preponderance of Hindu male authority appears to be clearly embedded in the institutions of land – holding. This formed a basic socio-economic criterion imparting identities and leading to semblances of class formation in traditional societies, which actually covered much of India. A class of Indians had emerged through this system which had always enjoyed power over the rest of the society. But the British East India Company’s land policies curtailed their rights to a great extent and they became victims of the hazards of the Permanent Settlement. An acute identity crisis was felt within the Indian society due to the emergence of a new political structure in which the erstwhile social leaders found themselves rendered subordinate and passive. The caste question was also important and both the high caste as well as the low caste male felt the pressure of the changes in the economic structure in
different ways. Western education provided a window to both the ends of the society and the new
generation of western educated Indian middle class tried to renegotiate their positions and to
revive and to reconstruct their self identity, at least in the social sphere. Both tried to identify
terrains of history where they located their lost glory. They started evaluating certain customs
from what they considered a modern, rationalist point of view, but the Brāhmanical tradition still
remained the main counter-force against the colonial criticism. The Indians were critical about the
evil customs practiced in the Indian society from the ancient period, but never questioned the
ideological foundation of such customs lying particularly in the patriarchal structure and caste
discrimination. The reformists emphasized the necessity of elevating women’s material condition
simultaneously with their moral emancipation. They had accepted the women none other than in
their structured roles of wives and mothers as recommended in the Dharmashastras and other
Brāhmanical texts. What they emphasized above all, was the creation of an ideal image of the
Indian women, depicting them as docile and pure and self-sacrificing. Many ancient texts were
rewritten in the form of stories and some appeared in the pages of the multiple popular periodicals
which had a reader community in the Indian middle classes. The old legends of Sītā, Damayantī
and Sāvitrī were highlighted in the textual narrations to channelize the idea of sacrifice and
devotion among the contemporary women. Vidyasagar recreated the portrayal of two important
female characters of the epics- Śakuntalā and Sītā. The first edition of Śakuntalā was published in
1854 where he admitted the influence of Kālidāsa’s drama ‘Abhijñāna Śakuntalam’. In 1871 he
further edited the text and it was incorporated into the syllabus offered by the University of
Calcutta. In order to make it suitable for the contemporary Bengali readers, many components of
Bengali culture were included into the texts. It is not surprising that Vidyasagar’s moral tone was guided by the contemporary ideological design and like the other contemporary writers, he also valued sexual restrain in the Indian women. The story of Śakuntalā was delineated by him to promote the magnificent image of early Indian women who restrained themselves from enjoying free and uncontrolled sexual roles. They were conceived in Indian culture as the dutiful wives and great mothers without having any complaint against their often deplorable conditions and ever peripheral status.

Another text, ‘Sitar Bonobas’ by Vidyasagar was published in 1860 which was a partial adoption from Bhavabhūti’s drama ‘Uttararāmacharita’ and partially influenced by ‘Uttarakhaṇḍa’ of Rāmāyaṇa. The extreme suffering of Sītā was glorified in the original story. Vidyasagar’s message was more that sometimes even the innocents were victimized in order to maintain the social norms. To him the plight of the women in the contemporary society revealed how women became the most vulnerable victims of the social customs though they could be as pure as Sītā.

He sincerely represented and empathized with the victim in this severely misjudged situation but keeping to the storyline did not render any criticism to the authority (here Rama as husband or Rama as king).

What purports from the situation in which the early Indian reformists found themselves was a duality where culturally the nationalist trajectory influenced them to revert to the established Brāhmanical customs, while their social goals led them to challenge them. The reformists often
turned to a middle path and tried to reconcile one with the other. Romila Thapar’s criticism of Rabindranath may be considered in this light. She argues that although Rabindranath was inspired by Goethe’s romantic reception of the drama, he did not cease at idealizing the romantic image of the maiden in Kālidāsa, but rather, in his own writing, he had turned the passionate Śakuntalā of the epic into the role model of a devoted wife. In his portrayal he depicted a Śakuntalā who had lost her moral position when she gave in to physical desire, but she restored it through tapasyā or penance, which finally cleansed her of all impurity and led her to eternal union. Thapar proposed that Rabindranath’s delineation reflects the same concern for woman’s morality which was reiterated time and again as the fundamental issue in the nationalist reconstruction of the ideal society. It had formed a chief criterion in the contemporary ideological discourse of Nationalism as well as its precursor - Orientalism.

The late nineteenth century paradigm of nationalist ideology was moreover, quite distanced from those of Rammohun and Vidyasagar. The religious reformers’ zeal of radical social change was not as strong in the late nineteenth century where the women’s issue was concerned. When the nationalist movement was launched in the late nineteenth century the sense of patriotism was gradually transmitted into a strong feeling of nationalism among the Indians which primarily emanated from the politics of rejection of the western paradigm. The roots of these sentiments could be traced far earlier. In July, 1842, the Derozians had supported Vidyasagar for advocating widow-remarriage, but they disliked the government’s interference in this matter. The Indians found British connection in such reform programs to be abhorrent. There was a parallel upsurge
in glorifying Indian tradition and criticism of the ‘Western’ ideas and values, which partly modulated their vision of the new nation. In 1859 the Queen’s Proclamation was issued by the British Parliament by which the government withdrew their active participation in reform programs and ensured absolute non-interference in India’s religious matters. Though various acts were passed after 1859, in practice these acts were not made obligatory for the Indians. On the other hand, the Indians started recasting the historical past to draw a self-perception which considered ‘Nation’ more than a political construct. The constellation of nationalist dialogues aimed to fulfill spiritual development of the Nation and purity and chastity, especially for women became a non-negotiable factor in the process of ‘Nation’ building. The nationalist ideology not only defended but also eulogized the traditional values and moral ethos preached by the Brāhmanical authority.

In the ambience of colonial rule and their critic of Indian society and culture, the Indian middle class intellectuals started developing own notion about India’s past. It gained momentum when Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Swami Dayananda made mention of India’s glorious past in their writings. Like the early ‘Orientalists’ the Indian scholars tried to theorize the concept that India enjoyed considerable prosperity and cultural superiority in the ancient period, but repeated invasion and foreign rules led to her degeneration in social and economic realms which also caused decline in the women’s status. However, there were various shades in the representation of Indian women, some of which were successfully channelized to motivate the popular spirit during the extremist movements in British India.
From the second half of the nineteenth century, the *Hindu Woman* became the cultural icon of the desired Nation. Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay contributed to the development of a new image of womanhood in which she was iconized as the mother. The image of the motherland was portrayed in the song *Vande Mataram* and the idea was soon accepted and incorporated into the nationalist discourse. The mother figure of India was enriched with both the virtues of Indian women, i.e., bearing the tenderness of a mother and her empowerment in the cult of *Śakti*. Once again the *Sati* cult gained much importance in Indian society, especially in certain regional cultures and the strength of sacrifice and self-immolation of women for the cause of society were highlighted in various literary expressions. Since early days of the rise of nationalism during the 1860s, the Indian writers had been describing the medieval age as a ‘dark’ period of history and they located the starting point in the decline of the position of women in this phase. They blamed the Muslim rulers and invaders for destroying Hindu temples and maligning their women. At the same time, they highlighted stories of Rajput queens and princesses focusing on how these brave women resisted such attacks by taking revenge or escaping from the prisons. Among them, the story of Padmini, queen of Chittor, became very popular. The legend went that Ala-ud-din Khalji, the Sultan of Delhi, had desired the beautiful queen and had attacked and defeated Chitor with the intention of abducting her. But rather than giving in to her fate and spending her life in the Sultan’s harem, she acted on her own decision, choosing death along with her attendants by performing the *jowhar* ceremony. Padmini’s story made several retellings in prints and became popular. Padmini became the ideal of Indian wifehood, the *pativrātā* who sacrificed her life to protect her chastity and an ideal medium for projecting the nationalist image. The example was
more apt especially as it also contained the germ of the idea where the woman protagonist was observed to defy the fate dealt at the hands of a foreign power with such vehemence. Such examples appealed to both the educated middle class and the general masses and Padmini’s legend, in a more discursive way, strongly reinforced the image of the Satī.

The growing intensity of the Nationalist Movement and the influence of Hindu revivalists further articulated the idea of ‘Hindu’ womanhood which imparted many pivotal mythological events and was gradually attached to the idea of the ‘spiritual development’ of the nation. The women were supposed to uphold the traditional values and protect the spiritual domain from the encroachments by Western norms of progress and Enlightenment. Partha Chatterjee mentions the binaries of ‘ghar’ and ‘bāhir’ which he interprets as the ‘home’ and the ‘world’. He describes, “The world is external, the domain of the material; the home represents one’s inner spiritual self, one’s true identity”31. To the ‘new’ intellectuals ideology became a medium with which to combat the foreign impositions as also to unite the whole nation. The Indian middle class proposed a counter approach to the influence of western values by enhancing the implications of traditional values in their inner domains. Thus, ironically enough, for all the attempts taken by the early reformers, as the custodians of this inner domain, it fell on the lot of the women to uphold, follow and preserve these customs. In so doing the ancient Brāhmanical tradition of India, as understood in their late medieval and even early modern guise, was reinvented and overvalued by the Indian thinkers to constitute a national culture.
The western notions of ‘modernism’ and ‘individualism’ were thus counteracted with the heritage of self sacrifice and spiritualism. There was a somewhat fluid boundary between the positions taken by the social activists and thinkers and the religious reformers like Dayananda and Swami Vivekananda. Although the process of restoring the ‘glorious’ past was to some extent stipulated from the political need in the perception of the purely social reformers and social reform was only at the base of the conceptions of a new and invigorated religious life in the perception of the religious reformers, yet they came together in envisioning a new society and in thinking to discard a lot of contemporary practices and select a few more justifiable ones. However, among them Vivekananda had created a novel platform by choosing the path of asceticism and renunciation, where the issue of the woman was relegated to the back of the agenda. Taken in all the religious reformers started recapitulating and cultivating the ‘liberal’ ideas of Vedanta as counter-doctrines against the rigid rules of the Dharmaśāstras to focus on an alternative aspect of the Indian culture. Swami Vivekananda’s ideological contemplation made up the gap between the social consciousness of the early reformists and the political deliberation of the Indians for a ‘Nation’. His observations on Indian society and Hindu religion were congregated in his conceptualization of ‘India’ as a ‘Great Nation’ which he believed could be achieved by the empowerment of the marginalized section of society including women. During his attachment with the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj he had been made aware of the miserable condition of the Indian women and, although there would be notable shift in his overall perception later on, the issue of women’s education in particular remained important. It was later propagated through the initiative of Sister Nivedita.
During his tour to England, Vivekananda’s conviction in the value of ancient Indian tradition was even more strengthened, especially through his meetings with Max Möller and Paul Deussen. The fantasy of a glorious past was now historicized and conveyed by him while constructing an image of Indian women which he denoted as “Our Women”. By this term he actually set an archetype of Indian women which he delineated as ‘purer than purity’\(^{32}\) - in contrast to their western counterparts. While comparing with the western women he described that education enabled the western women to make their own decisions for themselves – a power which most of the Indian women lacked. But according to him the freedom enjoyed by the western women most often than not led to unhappiness and misery for all around\(^{33}\). On the contrary, the Indian women, though they lacked in intellectual capacity, were uncompromising where their mental and bodily purity were concerned. He glorified the idea that the Indian women practiced extreme sufferings which, in his eyes, raised them to the height of the divine mother\(^{34}\). He held a view that Sītā representing the purity and chastity of Indian women occupied a higher place in the Indian society and she became the identity of the whole nation. According to him because of Sītā’s spirit of self-immolation she was perceived as the great mother\(^{35}\) by the Indians. When Vivekananda applauded how in spite of her exile in forest, Sītā complied with all her duties towards Rāma without holding any bitterness\(^{36}\), his sentiments were revealed to be much more traditionally ingrained, even further than the kind of idealization we find in Vidyasagar or the aesthetically and poetically garnered moral vindication by Rabindranath. Vivekananda even went to the extent of remarking - “There may have been several Ramas, perhaps, but never more than one Sita!”\(^{37}\) This
the iconized form of the woman and the mother, which was reinforced in the imagination of the religious reformers of the new India.

Vivekananda was extremely critical about the *Smṛti* texts for placing women into an inferior position. He believed instead of celebrating the spirit of spiritual motherhood, the *Smritis* turned them into mere reproductive machines. In contrast to the śāstric regimen, he observed Vedānta as the highest form of knowledge, which, as he perceived it, offered equal status to all human beings. Under this new focus, he envisaged a historical background for the Indian women where they had the scope for obtaining enlightenment with Vedic knowledge which made them capable of challenging Yājñavalkya in a discussion on ‘Brahma’. Thus the proposition of wise women in Vedic society was reconciled in the nationalist argument which Vivekananda probably borrowed from the early ‘Orientalists’ in general and particularly from Max Müller. He initiated five women into brahmachārya for celebrating the tradition of brahmavādinīs. He essentialized the role of women in making a Nation progressive by mentoring the children with all ethical values. So, instead of modern western knowledge he proposed for ethical and spiritual training for the women to ensure moral awakening of the whole nation.

The discussion on the role of social and religious reformers in redefining Indian womanhood would not be complete without reference to Nivedita, who deserves acknowledgment on her own ground as a woman on the early scene of reforms and one who was born and brought up in the west for that matter. The dedication and perception of this revered disciple of Swami
Vivekananda to the cause of India in general and women in particular was stupendous. Like Annie Besant she also adopted Indian culture but she took a more meaningful and major part in the movement for social reform including women’s empowerment in India. She was herself a scholar and worked for the cause of women’s education. She was responsible for establishing among the first of the girls’ schools in Calcutta. She held a scientific outlook towards society that motivated her to render services for enhancing the living conditions of Indians including the women. She guided the young Indians like Nandalal Bose and Jagadish Chandra Bose to promote changes in the worlds of thought and culture. She foresaw these activities as vital means to develop self-strengthening movement and also to generate pan Indian feelings among the Indians. Though initially optimistic about the British rule in India, she gradually became conscious about the deprivations of Indians under it. Scottish – Irish by birth, Nivedita had spent her childhood in a political background which went through series of resistance movements against the political and cultural domination of England. So she shared a sympathetic view towards the Indians and joined the Nationalist Movement. Her involvement in political activism led to complications in her relations with the Ramkrishna Mission and she formally separated from it. She nurtured a secular mind and a wider vision that informed her recognition of the importance of women’s empowerment.

Nivedita wrote a book: *Kali the Mother*, which was published in 1900, where she argued that India had a great heritage of Vedic civilization in which women occupied supreme position in the family. She conceptualized it in the form of *Śakti*, or supreme power as it was thought in the old
days, observing it as an example of the tradition of women’s glorification that was prevalent in ancient Indian society. Mother Goddess in her perception took a malevolent form, where she was a cosmic force of nature retaining her destructive power to protect her children, as a supreme example of women’s power. Here the embedded idea was that the Divine Goddess’ supreme rank was actually conferred through her Motherhood. In Vivekananda’s words the Mother is the inspiration for all Indians. This mother was visualized by Vivekananda as an incarnation of Nature symbolizing the development of independent mind and speech. Nivedita took the image further, investing it with a self force which was both creative and destructive, in fact taking the female power to its height where even the benevolence towards offsprings was not taken for granted but was determined by the supreme Mother. In the backdrop of nineteenth century, however, the main frame of reference to the Mother was that rendered by the dominant male version, which was installed on a divine status by the spiritual leaders but which actually subverted the real issue of the women’s empowerment. There was a more general desire amongst the aspirants to political freedom to see the ancient traditions of the Indian society in the light of Upaniṣadic doctrines. In this context they highlighted some of the women figures mentioned in the Vedic sources who were chosen to depict a positive status conferred upon women in ancient days. The reformist - revivalist view projected that “We should not think that we are men and women, but only that we are human beings, born to cherish and to help one another.” But in most examples, such care and sacrifices were rendered by women. There was strong projection of ideals from ancient legends of Sītā and Sāvitrī highlighting women’s sufferings for the cause of the society, for their spouses, and enhancing their role as powerful and protective models. It was
projected that the women’s sufferings actually revealed their inner strength as they chose to suffer and through sufferings conquered injustice and even death. Thus ancient legends and examples from the Vedic sources were offered as an alternate paradigm of the powerful and self-negating womanhood, protecting their sons as mothers, dutiful to their spouses, suffering for social justice, which became useful models for the new Indian society. In many instances the stronger narratives on women were construed to represent the patriarchal model. Even Nivedita’s powerful portrayal was transformed in the perception of Sri Aurobindo, who was apparently immensely influenced by the text of Nivedita’s *Kali the Mother*. He started composing ‘*Sāvitrī*’ in 1910 when he retired to Pondicherry. The popular *Mahābhārata* legend of Sāvitrī and Satyavān assumed great significance in poetic elegance when he finished it in the 1950s. Sāvitrī was represented as the supreme one by Aurobindo who confronted even with ‘Time’ and the ‘Fate’ to save the world from destruction. She was depicted as the goddess of wisdom and ‘true speech’ who descended on the earth to awaken the whole race from the dark sleep of ignorance. His anti-colonial perception thus drew inspiration from the epic legend of Sāvitrī where he ardently looked for a new beginning by bridging the ‘past’ and the ‘unborn’ days. He considered ‘her’ as ideal woman of India who encountered death by her knowledge and fearlessness – “Her life was a dawn’s victorious opening”.

During the Non-Cooperation movement and Civil Disobedience movement when the nationalist ideology came to be applied in mass politics under Mahatma Gandhi the ancient examples from the legends of Sītā, Sāvitrī and Damayantī were used repeatedly to inspire the women
Satyagrahis. Gandhi was convinced of the idea of the women’s virtuous roles and their capacity for sacrifice in the national interest. Thus there was an emergence of a nationalist paradigm of the women’s position which overarched the early reformist and the socially informed movements of Rammohun and Vidyasagar, who were more inspired by the western notions of rationalism and social justice. This new emergent paradigm had influenced much of the early professional history writing by the Indian historians.

Nationalist Discourse on the Early Indian Women

The new generation of indigenous historians who accepted James Mill’s periodization of Indian history and described the ancient age as the nurturing ground of Hindu tradition, eagerly followed the key concepts of Indian womanhood as laid out in the nationalist framework. Their association with the nationalist movements both politically and culturally motivated them to assert a collective identity for the Indians through reconstructing positive ideas about India’s past. The reinterpretation of history became an effluent through which flowed the whole procedure of identity formation for the newly awakened nation. The nationalist historians however, cited three major indicators for pointing high social status of ancient women -

I) active participation in religious activities

II) considerable freedom before marriage

III) rights over education

Ramesh Chandra Dutt the moderate nationalist had translated many Vedic texts in Bengali to popularize the ancient mythological and historical traditions of India. The three volumes by R.C.
Dutt on ‘A History of Civilization in Ancient India: Based on Sanscrit literature’ were published in 1890. In this work he pronounced that the ancient Indian women had enjoyed high social status which was in correspondence with the Orientalist – Nationalist idea of the ‘glorious ancient past’. He believed that women in ancient India were neither secluded from social life, nor were any unhealthy restrictions imposed upon them. Marriage was not obligatory for women in ancient India according to Dutt and they were given equal chance to educate themselves. Thus Ramesh Chandra Dutt stated that the women enjoyed respectable position in social and domestic lives. Such theories formed the foundations for the nationalist history writing as well as more general investigations into various traditional social and political institutions of Indian society. The historians even highlighted on the scope for ancient women’s participation in those institutions. Later on we find the historians like A.S. Altekar, R.C. Majumar, R.K. Mookerji, V.P. Apte and Shakuntala Rao Shastri opting for the same framework for their works. However, Altekar’s observation was exceptional. And here we are indebted to Uma Chkravarti and Kumkum Roy’s wonderful analyses and Chakrvavarti’s critique of the “Altekarian Paradigm”. In 1988 Uma Ckakravarti and Kumkum Roy offered a critical observation on the development of historical works on the issue of women’s status in early India in their article entitled: “In Search of Our Past: A Review of the Limitations and Possibilities of the Historiography of Women in Early India”. In 1999 Chakravarti extended the scope of this subject by reviewing it from a ‘Marxist-feminist’ approach in her article: “Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History”. According to Chakravarti the nationalist writers a felt a strong need to address the issues concerning the status of women for
the development of the future of India. She pointed out that this need stemmed from their cultural encounter with the criticism of Indian society by the missionary activists and colonial administrators. In response, the nationalist scholars needed history on their side in order to draw the picture of a glorified Indian womanhood. The frame of reference to this glory of womanhood was created within the acceptable paradigm – a paradigm recreated through the workings of some of the traditional socio-political institutions setting down parameters of gender relations and women’s sexuality in India. According to her even in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the same patriarchal structure was operating and provided a convenient frame of reference for the Indian scholars who followed the ‘Sanskritic model’. This frame was employed for assessing the women’s status and roles within the peripheries of both the early historic and contemporary social necessities. At the same time they wanted to revive and restore the ‘lost glory’ of Indian womanhood within the traditions. Therefore they resorted to highlighting some of the evidence from the early Indian texts to indicate that Indian women had held respectable position in the society. This was actually part of their assumption of a glorious past which they conveyed to counter the challenges posed by the modern Western values and principles.

Kumkum Roy explains that it generated a Veda-centric history writing for understanding the culture and civilization of ancient India which also influenced the subsequent scholars. Chakravarti cited that the nationalist history of early Indian women directly or indirectly contributed to neutralize the question of women’s subjugation to the forces of the patriarchal
hierarchy. Moreover, she observed that instead of focusing on the development of a complex and ritualistic system under Brahmanism, most of the Nationalist scholars including Altekar blamed the gradual assimilation of various castes (varṇasamkara) and Muslim invasion for the declining condition of the women in the successive periods.

To come to the specific assessment of Altekar’s historiography on ancient Indian women, we find that Chakravarti asserts that the gender perception is absent in Altekar’s conceptualization of early Indian women. She points out that he hardly used the term ‘patriarchy’ in his delineations and reflected the Brāhmanical values rather than the real practices of common people. She presents a critique of Altekar’s notion that such historical perception resulted from a sense of ‘inferiority’ generally floating among the nationalist thinkers at the time in relation to their cultural masters. Chakravarti mentions that the scholars like Altekar thought that the declining position of women in the Indian society was only a temporary deviation which could be removed by adopting reformist measures. He had in fact blamed the Muslim invasions were responsible for such declining conditions of women in Indian society which resulted in the development of some evil customs like Purdah, Sati and female infanticide. Thus nationalists like Altekar totally negated the culpability of ancient practices and at the same time kept the pristine ancient tradition ready as a means to resort to for reforming the position in the modern and new India.
To go into a fresh analysis of Altekar’s historiography, we must begin by noting the most significant fact that he was the first Indian scholar to perceive the whole issue of women in history in a different way. Instead of considering women’s history as a trivial part of understanding the whole society he focused entirely on the position of women throughout all the phases of Indian civilization which he denoted as the ‘Hindu Civilization’. Though women’s perspective was not attached in his interpretations and history was viewed as an active agency to transmit the dominant Hindu cultural values, but it was connected with a new scholarship centered on women and various institutions affecting their status in the society. He considered the issue of degenerated position of women as a historical process and not a mere proposition as interpreted by the colonial writers like James Mill. Gradually, it became a well accepted ‘model’ for the contemporary Indian scholars who often projected their distinctive ideological and moral standpoints towards their ‘own’ past through such works.

“*The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*”\(^5\) by A.S. Altekar was published in 1938. Altekar discussed various social practices, customs and institutions to determine the status of women in Indian society and also noted their historical evolution through the ages. He argued that some of them were obsolete and some still functioned in contemporary society. He divided the vast ancient period into many phases. Such periodization was based on the development of different categories of Sanskrit literature which the nationalists probably derived from Max Müller’s cognitive paradigm. Altekar had followed the same for estimating the highlights and limitations
of the Indian society concerning the women’s question and used the Brāhmaṇical texts as sources of history to trace the origin of such customs.

Altekar and other contemporary scholars gave special emphasis on the institution of marriage and various ‘saṃskāras’ or rituals which were designated to dot the phases of an individual’s life in the Brāhmaṇical śāstras. Participation of women in those rituals was claimed by the historians of this era as indicator for evaluating the dominant social attitude towards women. They considered the Brāhmaṇical ritualistic practices as a determining factor for understanding history. They failed to realize that, in reality, these practices were restricted within a particular social community even within the expanding varṇa society and were emphasized particularly by the adult male population who were empowered with some privileges to administer the whole society. Quite significantly, it was this particular genre of history writing which accepted and valued these practices as authentic and generic to the whole society, which had influenced the era of nationalist historiography. Thus there was almost a negation of the other cultural forces prevalent in early Indian society in this perspective of ancient India.

Quite typically, Altekar believed that the position of the women was better in the Rg Vedic age than in the later period. He mentioned that because of their physical strength, men established their dominance over the women. He explained that during this later period incessant tribal warfare led to a hard struggle and there were requirements for male progeny for military purpose thus leading to a preference for boy against the girl child. But he thought the girls were not
treated as the causes of distress for their families and equal importance was given for their education. Radhakumud Mookerji had drawn the premise from Altekar’s view when he wrote on the girl child’s education in his famous work on *Ancient Indian Education: Brahmical and Buddhist*[^58]. He asserted a view that *brahmachārya* was also followed by women and they were eligible for *Upanayana*[^59], the custom of initiation which was considered by the society as the doorway to Vedic knowledge. Altekar mentioned that as ‘*Upanayana*’ was obligatory also for the girls, the *Brāhmaṇas, Kṣatriyas* and *Vaiśyas* took initiative for educating their daughters[^60]. The nationalist scholars glorified the women figures like, Lopāmudra, Sikatā, Viśvavārā, Ghoṣā and Apālā for composing Vedic hymns. Altekar clearly mentioned that education was compulsory for Vedic women. He referred to Atharva Veda in pointing out that marriage was considered the most important ritual in the life of the Vedic people, so only those maidens were allowed to get married who had proper training in reciting the Vedic hymns. Even in the later Vedic period, education formed the basic part of their lives. Both Altekar and Radhakumud Mookerji held a view that during the Upaniṣadic era, the women scholars started taking interest in the philosophical discussions. Instances of intellectual queries on the part of Maitreyī[^61] and the courageous argument of Gārgī with Yājñavalkya were taken into consideration by them in order to highlight the situation provided in the Vedic society for the development of women’s intellectual capacity. Radhakumud Mookerji referred to a ritual, mentioned in *Upaniṣad* for conceiving learned daughters or ‘*Paṇḍitā*[^62]. The journey of an Aryan lady *Pathyasvasti*[^63] towards north for attaining the title of ‘*Vāc*’ or Saraswatī was also referred by him. These instances mentioned in brief in the Vedic sources had provided Mookerji and Altekar with the evidence that they required in order to
prove that glory of the Vedic society and the positive characteristics of ancient Indian tradition to validate the nationalist claims.

Altekar believed that after the establishment of the Buddhist Order, women had begun to exhibit great enthusiasm for channelizing their knowledge towards spirituality and had thus started aspiring for ascetic lives. Celibacy was idealized in these Orders and a large number of women entered into the monastic life which resulted in increase of intellectual achievements as well as growth of literacy among the women. But Altekar had avoided looking deeper into the causes of choosing such an alternative life by a large number of women under Buddhism which was available in the Therīgāthās. Here it becomes clear that most of them opted out of performing the domestic duties and rituals as idealized by Vedic Brāhmanism.

According to Altekar women in early historic society had received proper education and, following this, he had drawn the equation that they had also enjoyed equal rights over Vedic rituals and sacrifices. He emphasized that they were allowed to perform sacrifices, like the ‘Sītā Sacrifice’, ‘Rudrāvalī’, ‘Rudrayāga’ independently. Marriage was recommended as a religious duty for both men and women and husband and wife jointly participated in various sacrifices. He believed that marriage was the general rule of the ancient Indian society, but the unmarried women enjoyed considerably good position in family and society. Some of the customs and practices related to the institution of marriage were categorically mentioned by him, which he thought developed through the constant process of cultural amalgamations. He believed that these
customs evolved through the structural changes in the Vedic society, from early to the later. According to him the social rules had not yet been standardized during the Rg Vedic age which could be effectively implied in the society. But as he saw it, different cultural practices prevailed amongst different classes and social groups and with time these were getting crystallized. Altekar opined that the Vedic Aryans were also encountering and experiencing some practices of the neighboring non-Aryan society which they gradually incorporated into their patriarchal structure in the course of time. However, he mentioned that the custom of Sati was neither referred in the Rg Veda, nor in the later Brāhmaṇical texts, Buddhist sources and the accounts of Megasthenes and Kautilya. But the social attitudes towards women had changed to a great extent between 500 B.C.E and 500 CE. A time phase which Altekar categorized as the Age of the Sūtras, Epics and early Smṛtis. He noted that it was during this period that there was a marked decline in the status and position of the Indian women. Altekar observed a general deterioration in the status of women from 500 B.C.E. due to some changes in marriage rules. He mentioned that the marriageable age was reduced for the girls and it became a substitute for Upanayana as they were no more eligible for receiving the Vedic knowledge. According to him it affected their status in the family and the society and without education and respect they lost their control over their own lives. He believed that the subjugation of Indian women was a gradual historical process which went through phases marked by the emergence of new institutions and reemergence of the old customs in new forms.
Altekar held the view that the Rg Vedic people had possessed ‘a finer cultural outlook’ and looked down upon the customs like ‘Satī’, which he thought actually prevailed in the contemporary non–Vedic society. Altekar admitted that the rejection of Satī stemmed from the contemporary material need in order to establish physical domination over the vast land they were on the verge of expanding into. There was the need felt for female population because the women were procreators and necessary for growing population. Even widows were required to give birth, either by following levirate system in conjugation with a person belonging to the same clan or by remarrying after the husband’s death.

Like Clarisse Bader, Altekar also believed that in the early phase the Vedic society came in close contact with the non–Vedic. The concept at the time was running on the lines of a pristine Vedic ‘Aryan’ society and thus there were also the notions of social acceptance - rejection. Following from this, Bader and Altekar both opined that the process of amalgamation with the non-Vedic people made the Vedic people zealous about their women. Altekar’s understanding stemmed from a simplistic reading of a social phenomenon viewed as a binary of social conditions existing in the northern part of South Asia at the time the Vedic literature was being composed. Perhaps the time was not ripe for a critical perception of the social history of the Vedic past. The early deeper readings into the Vedic literature, combined with archaeological clues, whatever was available at the time, would be Kosambi’s to follow a little later. However, Altekar followed the given rhetoric about the Vedic Age, one generated under Max Müller and reiterated by nationalist thinkers and historians alike. Altekar subscribed to the sentiment which at the time was engaged
in valorizing the past and upholding Motherhood to be the supreme contribution of women. He rationalized what he thought was the true attitude of the Vedic people towards their women when it came to rejecting Sātī as an alternative for widowhood. He commented- “It is no doubt true that women have potential military value: by giving birth to sons they contribute indirectly to the fighting strength and efficiency of their community”\textsuperscript{68}. The Nationalist ideology thus went a further step towards putting the stamp of approval on women’s role in motherhood. It went from their previous idealization of the spiritual motherhood to glorifying the physicality of women’s reproductive power as procreators of future citizens.

Exhibiting another aspect of the nationalist perception, Altekar staunchly believed that the incorporation of different non-‘Aryan’ groups into ‘Aryan’ society especially the entry of non-Aryan women into the Vedic marriage system was one of the causes behind gradual degeneration of the women’s position in general. The term “Aryan” carried a subtext not only for Altekar but all nationalist scholars of these times, barring the dalit leaders like Jyotiba Phule. It was thought to represent a superior race and culture. Suniti chatterjee’s\textsuperscript{69} discourse was based on the linguistic superiority of a language and it also bordered on a support for the existence of a race. His agenda was to trace the spread of Aryan race and language to the corners of India even in Bengal. He thought that the ‘Aryan’ speech developed in three distinct stages Old Indo-Aryan, Middle Indo Aryan and New Indo Aryan. The last wave of Indo-Aryan speech had been developed by including the language of non-Aryan people and spread to Eastern part of India as well as into the lands of Yava, Sumatra, Malay, Champa. Thus the history of South East Asia was also brought
into the fold of Aryan debate. This was an example of the zeal of the nationalists to ride the bandwagon of the idea of Aryan superiority.

Altekar also put forth that the Vedic male society accepted non-Aryan women in their household as conjugal partners, but denied them the right of Vedic performing sacrifices and rites due to their ignorance of Sanskrit language and Vedic knowledge and generally began to place them in a lower rank in the society. He argued that the inclusion of non-Aryan women into Vedic social structure was a major cause of denying education to all women, irrespective of their caste, origin and their right to participation in the more important religious activities was also forbidden. Actually Altekar and others like him bore a negative perception of the Non-Vedic society and culture, which they regarded as representing the unified half of the binary social complex of the Vedic period. The whole idea was to blame the process of social expansion for what Altekar and others believed to be the loss of the ancient privileges and respect accorded and preserved for the women in the early Vedic society. Such notions actually reflect, on the one hand, the Orientalist understanding of an ideal Vedic society which the nationalists sought to imbue with modern notions of social justice too, and, on the other hand, it projects the bias of the early Nationalist thinkers in favour of a lost ‘Aryan’ superiority, expressed often in the caste hierarchy of Indian society.

But a deep reading into Altekar’s history writing reveals a rather complex kaleidoscope of sentiments, which is also true about reformist nationalists, in that their appreciation of the ideal
Vedic society did not blind them to observing some evils of age old Brāhmanical traditions. In fact, among the contemporary historians, Altekar was the first who took a reformist review of the normative regulations laid down in the Smṛtis. While discussing the functions of various institutions and seeking to understand their origins along the line of historical development for evaluating women’s status in the present society, he suggested that these customs should be eradicated from the Indian society in order to restore the old glory. By this old glory he referred to what he thought belonged to the Vedic age. He criticized the Smṛti writers for encouraging customs like polygamy. He explained that while the Smṛtis are not explicit about advising the Sati, they advocated second marriage for a widower considering it a religious duty, revealing a patriarchal bias. Surprisingly, Altekar showed this liberal standpoint while dealing with the issue of widow remarriage. He argued that though it was banned in Brāhmaṇa community the practice was very common among the other castes and he picked out instances from ancient history to substantiate his point. For example he made mention of the case of Kumaragupta, the Gupta ruler who got married to his elder brother’s widow.

But even while moving down the path of history, He located external factors to blame for the sad conditions of the society. According to him all of the customs which adversely affected the conditions of women in India had begun from the medieval period. This was a Hindu nationalist perspective bred early in the writings of thinkers like Bankim Chandra and Bhudev Mukherjee. By blaming the Muslim invasion Altekar indirectly defended the early Indian patriarchal society. What Altekar did not address was the emerging dominant cultural ideology from circa 400 C. E.
which emphasized on a highly controlled sexual life for the women. Altekar’s criticism against
the dicta of the *Smṛtis* was partial, constricted only to exploring those issues which had come
under the reformist focus of his contemporary social leaders. Thus while widow-widower
remarriage was an issue, the more general issues of women’s status, material, psychological and
social, remained untouched. Her sexuality restricted within her child bearing role, preferably a
boy child at that, her bodily chastity and function as a wife with sexual loyalty towards the
husband, extreme celibacy and austerity for widows - were the norms commonly accepted
whether it was the ancient society or the modern, lived – in one. This model was not questioned
by Altekar or any other contemporary scholars. The materialist motives working behind
restricting women’s social roles in the *Smṛtis* and their repetitive commentaries - forever
enlarging upon the existing restrictions through the phases of history, were not tossed and turned
around for investigations. Issue of women’s sexuality is a comparatively contemporary one and
one cannot assume Altekar’s responsibility in bringing it to notice. However, neither did he
explore the issues of female inheritance nor did he question the norms of wifely behavior laid out
in diverse ancient literary genres. The lower caste women were no doubt excluded to some extent
from the classic social patterns, but their material condition, which were rooted in utmost
oppression and infinite exploitation, was never addressed by the Nationalists including Altekar.
Moreover, the questionability of caste – orientation in norms of social morality never bothered
the historian of the nationalist order.
A counter approach to the broad spectrum nationalist perspective was however developed by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, who questioned the validity of nationalists’ interpretation which was entirely based on the Brāhmanical sources. He believed that this historical perspective refused to acknowledge the other trends of early Indian society and therefore conveyed a particular cultural outlook which perhaps was the dominating factor in early Indian society but needed to be critically addressed. Ambedkar’s principle of national identity was partly a reaction to the higher - caste undertone of the nationalist movement. He attempted to connect it with the germinating idea of the Indian ‘Nation’ – which, he felt, corroborated with this elitist and Brāhmanical projection of the Indian past. He challenged the ‘Aryan Myth’ and interrogated its validity for glorifying the Vedic society, thus dismissing the basic ideological foundation of the nationalist version of early Indian history, and with it, the claim of a respectable position of Indian women within it.

Ambedkar’s idea of ‘Nation’ was not immersed within the frame of the dominant socio-political outlook. He believed that the process of ‘Nation-building’ itself had been obstructed by the discriminatory practices of the Brāhmanical system, imbibed to a great extent by the dominant political enclave in India and which in reality, affected the mobility of lower castes and women in the Indian society. He was inspired by the ideology of Satya Shodhak Samaj, a non-Brāhmanical movement initially started by Jyotiba Phule in 1873 to launch a protest against higher caste oppression. Phule held a view that the suppression and alienation of lower castes and women became a prerogative instrument in the Brāhmanical culture for procuring the
Phule refused to accept the Vedas as sacrosanct and stated that by denying education to the women and the śūdras, the upper caste men reduced them in a state of utter ignorance. He advocated education for the women and the lower castes in his books namely Tritya Ratna (1855), Brahmanache Kasab (1869), Gulamgiri (1873), Ishara (1885) and challenged the varṇa system prevailed in the Brāhmanical society. Like Jyotiba Phule, Pandita Ramabai also found a connection between the gradual degeneration of the Indian society and the deplorable condition of women in it. She was well versed in the śāstric tradition and was honored with the titles of ‘Pandita’ and ‘Saraswati’. While delivering lectures on the position of women in Indian society in different parts of the country, she drew references from the ancient Sanskrit texts and pleaded for their emancipation from the social injustice. She came into contact with the prominent leaders of Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj and dedicated her to the cause of women education. She criticized the custom of child marriage and considered widowhood as the “worst and most dreaded period of a high-caste woman’s life”. In 1889, she established Sharada Sadan in Bombay for the rehabilitation of the widows. She mentioned that “the Dharma Shastras, the sacred epics, the Puranas and modern poets, the popular preachers of the present day and orthodox high caste men, were agreed that women of high and low caste, as a class were bad, very bad, worse than demons, as unholy as untruth and that they could not get Moksha as men”. She pointed out that according to these śāstric traditions, a woman must receive the Vedic knowledge and perform the religious rites to reborn as higher caste men for attaining Mokṣa or liberation – “Therefore no
woman as woman can get liberation that is Moksha”75. She believed that Christianity offered equal status to all human beings. So, along with her daughter, she converted into Christianity.

Ambedkar had reacted in a similar manner when he criticized the practices of Sati, child marriage and enforced widowhood for women. But where he differed from the reformers of the nineteenth century was that he held the view that the agitations against such customs were only pursued by the ‘enlightened’ social leaders to reform the higher caste ‘Hindu family’ instead of reforming the whole society76. He accused the social and religious reformers for not questioning the discriminatory cultural politics of caste and gender under the Brāhmanical social order. He felt that the real empowerment of the Indians could only be achieved by abolishing the caste system and healing the wretched conditions of the women.

In 1951, Ambedkar wrote an article in the Mahābodhi “Rise and Fall of Hindu Women: Who was responsible for it?”77 in response to Altekar’s notion of position of women under ‘Hindu civilization’. It was a reply on his part to a staunch Hindu writer, who published an article in a women’s journal named “Eve’s Weekly” in which the Buddha was accused of being responsible for the down trodden condition of women. Ambedkar nullified such inferences and argued that rather the Buddha recognized women’s spiritual potentiality and offered a space for them to acquire knowledge equally with the men78. According to Ambedkar the revolutionary acts of Buddhism79 was stalled and cut short by the Brāhmanical reaction which he described as the ‘Counter-Revolution’80. He believed that it was launched to crush the growing popularity of
Buddhism among the women. He felt that the later law givers, particularly the Smṛti writers, opposed the liberal approach towards women articulated within the Indian society during age of the Buddha. He not only rejected the Smṛti texts as authentic sources of history, but also expressed his adverse feelings by burning Manu Smṛti publicly during the Mahar Satyagraha and declared ‘Mahasamgharsha’, war against Brāhmanism.

We have observed in the earlier chapter how I.B. Horner’s study of the condition of women in ancient India was conducted within the specific frame of Buddhism and had thus provided an alternate perspective to the Brāhmanical so far as gender relations were concerned. Although minimal, she did hint at the hierarchical situation within the Buddhist Saṅgha prioritizing the Bhikkhus. Ambedkar’s review was broader and yet polemic as he sought to highlight the social theory of Buddhism against a critique of Brāhmanism, and the women’s issue was tagged along the more important issue of caste differentiation. Moreover, his entire argument was based on the ‘Karishma’ of the Buddha. His idealization of the role of Buddha as the prime mover of social reform in the early Indian context seems to border on the impressions generated by the readings of Oldenberg and Rhys Davids. The review of the specific matter of gender mechanisms in the context of early India was secondary to his objective.
Following the footsteps

After independence, it would seem that the social consciousness of the western educated Indians for adopting reformist measures in favor of women should develop into a political concern of the state. The official focus partly shifted away from the society to the individual as women achieved the voting rights in independent India. Politically they were considered as conscious beings under new circumstances in independent India, but intellectually they were still regarded as passive components of the demography. Their guided participation into the intellectual domain was inscribed within the periphery of identity politics of the nationalist elites and the women’s activism was largely vented through the mentoring of the socio-political organizations founded by the major institutions like the Brahma Samaj, Arya Samaj, Prarthana Samaj etc. These organizations motivated the women to participate in social welfare programs, under the strict guidelines of social activism delineated in mainstream politics. There was the Bharat Mahila Parishad which was the women’s wing of the Indian National Congress founded in 1905. In 1927 a nation-wide women’s organization was founded by Margaret Cousins named “All India Women’s Conference”. The other founder members were Maharani Chinnabai Gaekwad, Rani Sahiba of Sangli, Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, Mrs. Kamla Devi Chattopadhyaya and Lady Dorab Tata. They started focusing on various social problems affecting higher caste Hindu women and gradually extended their hands to their rural counterparts, but they still remained confined within the purview of male politics and social discourses. However, these organizations represented a more liberal vision of women’s active role in social sphere.
At the same time a section of the social and political leaders felt the need to channelize women’s organization towards more tradition – oriented activism, perceived in the light of age – old patriarchal discourses. *Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan*, an educational institution was founded by Kanaiyalal Maneklal Munshi who took an initiative of publishing a series on the history of India under the name of “History and Culture of Indian People” for promoting the ‘national culture’. The organization was oriented towards generating a new discourse on the age-old traditional values for the younger generations and tried to inspire them by the teachings of “Sri Ramachandra, Sri Krishna, Vyasa, the Buddha and Mahavira”. It should be noted that the last two ancient reformers were also brought into the fold of the Brāhmanical traditions as the result of a cultural process leading to the assimilation of heterogeneous cults under the dominant discourse initiated even in the medieval times within the cult of the Daśavatāra. The attempt was to lend a cultural homogeneity to India’s past as was done since the early days of colonization. As we have observed earlier in this chapter, during the nationalist movement these traditions packaged, into a homogenized Hinduisim and what was held to be the spiritual essence of the ‘Indian culture’, were expected to be upheld by the women. The latter were identified as task – bearers in protecting the moral values and spiritual life of India. Chatterjee thinks that “nationalism resolved the women’s question in terms of its own historical project”. The same social – psychological approach continued to be harboured by the patriarchal Indian potentates even after independence, as the nation was gradually emerging as a state. When the Indian women started working on Indian history in this cultural environment, they primarily followed the same pattern of glorifying
the Vedic past. Shakuntala Rao Shastri’s *Women in the Vedic Age* was written from under these circumstances and bears the marks of close adherence to the dominant discourse.

*Women in the Vedic Age* by Shakuntala Rao Shastri was published in 1952 by the Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan. She mainly looked into the Brāhmanical sources and her work was oriented to a great extent to deal with the women’s role in the early Indian society. She highlighted major portions from the *Ṛg* and *Atharva* Vedas, the Vedic *Brāhmaṇas, Upaniṣad* and *Sūtra* literature for discussing women’s participation in the social life. She followed the nationalist argument that the early Vedic women enjoyed ‘enough’ freedom, the measure of which was observed against the critiques of the Indian tradition made by the western notions of social justice. The issue of inheritance was a prime one and Shastri pointed out that both socially and legally women in the Vedic society were considered as the heir of their paternal property in the absence of any male heir. Shastri thought they could even perform the funeral rites in such situations, which was in fact only laid down in the *Manusmṛti* much later. While dealing with the Sutra texts she focused on the issue of property right of the early Indian women and connected it with their legitimate position of performing śrauta rites. But she explained that the society must be divided into different shades of opinion over the issue of women’s property right. As opposed to Altekar, she believed that monogamy was the general rule for the *Ṛg* Vedic society and polygamy as a social practice was a later development. She also projected the picture of the independent status of early women in the religious life and stated that it was their pious duty to accompany their husbands in the religious activities. According to Shastri the concept of widowhood had not flourished in
those days and the widows were not made to follow hard and fast regulations for observing extreme austerity. Thus, as she saw it, life for the widows had not been totally paralyzed after their husband’s death. These social systems were considered by Shastri as ‘civilized customs’ of the Ṛg Vedic society which she believed existed parallel with the ‘primitive practices’ of the non-Aryan people.

As marks of primitive behavioral patterns, Shastri talks about instances of abduction of women, winning women as chattels etc., which she pointed out as not very rare phenomena among the non-Aryans. Quite surprisingly, we find Shastri dealing probably for the first time since Johann Jakob Meyer, on the question of women’s sexuality pointing to the conditions of uncensored sexual lives for the women in these primitive societies. But at the same time she also mentioned that the Ṛg Vedic Aryans too were often found guilty of violating the established moral codes, but they were not severely punished for such immoral acts. Illegitimate love relations and children from those unions were not condemned in the Ṛg Vedic society. Interestingly enough Shastri did not accept the unrestricted sexual behavior of the Ṛg Vedic women as typical to the Indian tradition and held the view that the Ṛg Vedic hymns depicted a cultural background that should not be considered as part of Indian heritage. She rather explained away these cultural and social practices as a foreign element, - as the “Indo-European one transplanted by the Aryans”.

We note that she was actually true to her findings from the reading of the early Vedic literature which often represent pictures incompatible with the established model discourse of the “truly Indian”. But she was also duty bound to provide explanations and finally uphold a history to be
framed within the dominant discourse of Indian heritage. Thus she strongly emphasized that the Rg Vedic socio-cultural institutions were closer to the Iranian pseudo-religious cultural practices which were similar to those referred in Avesta. Actually, the nationalists’ claim of a cohesive, uniform, homogenized ‘Indian tradition’ was constituted with many social markers which assigned particular sexual and moral behaviors for men and women. These moral codes were attached with a sense of pride contributing to the growth of a complex national identity. History had to provide confirmation for such a national rhetoric. Shastri therefore highlighted those aspects as providing roots to the “national” culture which conformed with the model which she termed as ‘the cultural heritage of India’, while rejected the other paradigm as distant, foreign and aberrant. Thus finally we end with the picture of a Rig Vedic society which was glorified in terms of women’s freedom and related factors as had already been framed by the European and Indian historians.

Shakuntala Rao Shastri’s evaluation rested upon the conventional approach initiated by Altekar. She had totally imbibed the political and ideological parameters of the rising national identity which proposed for unequal and different social and economic peripheries for Indian men and women. But being a woman scholar Shastri had indeed highlighted on some of the more important questions related to the women’s condition in early India, but the functioning of gender relation in determining their status in society remained unaddressed. Uma Chakravarti has rightly pointed out that she could not go beyond the ‘Altekarian’ model and blamed the Muslim invasions for the decline in women’s status in Indian society. Thus actually she failed to identify
the inner forces operating in the ancient Indian society which were steadily deployed to curtail the women’s rights. Instead, the tensions within the society which she rightly found in her research were finally dispatched out and located as an outer phenomenon. Just like Altekar, contemporary scholars including Shastri limited their works within the periphery of the dominant Brähmanical morality. Whether they were conscious or unconscious of their participation in such a strategy, they were mostly involved in the task of idealizing a common past and assimilated those ideas to reconstruct the present. Whatever critical in their observations of this history of the women’s position which came out in their sincere, however biased, researches, those were gradually bypassed by the new scholars who began to portray a more glorified image of the Brähmanical ritualistic life with full vengeance to defy the multi-layered Indian culture and sought to understand women’s role within this frame.


5 Ibid, pp.40-41.

Ibid, p.128.


Ibid, 2

Chakravarti, Uma, “Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a new Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History” in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, Roy, Kumkum ed., op.cit, p.73.


Ibid.


Ibid, p.177.


Ibid, pp.197-198.


Ibid, pp. 16.

Here small section of people means the Brahmanical authority who usually codified the social norms.


Ibid,p.63.


Ibid, p. 31.

Thapar, Romila, *Narratives and the Making of History: Two Lectures*, op.cit, p.21

29 Anandamatya was translated into English and many regional languages, like- Marathi, Telegu etc.

30 Altekar, A.S., The position of women in Hindu civilization, op.cit, pp.310-311

31 Chatterjee, Partha, The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories, op.cit, p.112.

32 Swami Vivekananda, Our Women, Almora, Advaita Ashrama, 1946,p.3


34 Ibid, pp.20.

35 Ibid, pp.3

36 Ibid, pp.2

37 Ibid.

38 Ibid.pp.27.

39 Ibid,pp.28.


41 Noble, Margarate Elizabeth, Kali the Mother, California, Forgotten Books. 2008, pp.45.

42 Swami Vivekananda, Our Women, op.cit. p.53.

43 Ibid, p.15.


49 Chakravarti, Uma “Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History” in Women in Early Indian Societies, Roy, Kumkum ed., op.cit.
50 Ibid, p.76.

51 Ibid, pp. 74-76

52 Ibid, p.75.


54 Roy, Kumkum, “Recent Writings on Gender Relations in Early India” in History and Gender: Some Explorations, Shah, Kirit K. ed., Jaipur and New Delhi, Rawat Publications, 2005, p.71

55 Chakravarti, Uma “Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a New Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History” in Women in Early Indian Societies, Roy, Kumkum ed., op.cit., p75.

56 Ibid, p. 79.


61 Ibid, pp.11.

62 Mookerji, Radhakumud, Ancient Indian Education: Brahmanical and Buddhist, op.cit, p.105.

63 Ibid.


65 Ibid, p.198.

66 Ibid, p.47.


68 Ibid, p.3.


75 Ibid.


78 Ibid, pp. 427.


80 Ibid.


82 Majumdar, R.C. ed., *The Vedic Age*, op.cit.


85 Chatterjee, Partha, *Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, op.cit, p. 126


87 Ibid, p. 22.


89 Ibid, p. 35.

90 Ibid, p. 38.

91 Chakravarti, Uma, “Beyond the Altekarian Paradigm: Towards a new Understanding of Gender Relations in Early Indian History” in *Women in Early Indian Societies*, Roy, Kumkum ed., op.cit, p. 74.