INTRODUCTION

Way back in 1818 Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the father of modern Indian Renaissance published his first tract on Sati, aiming to establish that burning of widows was not a custom hallowed by antiquity and sanctioned by the Ṛgveda but a later development in areas where a widow had right to inherit property. The publication of the tract could be termed as the beginning of women's studies in India. Apart from a number of articles and papers, the colonial period witnessed the publication of full monographs also such as C. Fader's Women in Ancient India (1867); A.S. Altekar's Position of Women in Hindu civilization (1938); B.S. Upadhyaya's Women in Rigveda (1933); and I.B. Honer's Women under Primitive Buddhism (1936). Such scholars being Indologists or Sanskritists contributed significantly in so far as they collected and chronologically presented a wealth of information. However, their work lacked analytical rigour required to reach historical reality. Nevertheless, these works are in many ways crucial as they have directly or indirectly served to provide a paradigm for post-Independence studies as well. The influence of Altekar in particular may be recognised both explicitly and implicitly in later works. In much the same way as earlier authors their work is marked by interpretation rather than innovation. On the one hand they had no other choice but to rely and depend on the written evidence in the Sanskrit literature and on the other, their interest in the question of the position of women sprang from the need to counteract the
criticism of Victorian Englishmen against the degradation of women in India. Their perspective is coloured by the tendency to prove that at the beginning of the Hindu civilization this degradation was not to be found or not in the same measure. This revivalistic reinterpretation of the old literary sources served to shield the social reform laws concerning women in pre as well as post colonial days, against the criticism of Brahmanical orthodoxy. At the same time it legitimised them with strength from tradition.

As regards western scholars, some of them like Bader and Meyer were deeply touched by the ideal of self-sacrificing Indian womanhood owing to their sense of disillusionment with the gross materialism of the industrial society which had weakened the family ties in the west. Their approach, therefore, remained wholly uncritical with an almost unquestioning dependence on the textual sources. The fact that women, the subject of their study had very little to do with the composition of such texts, with the notable exception of Therigatha, and the problems this might pose in terms of an understanding of women's situations, are unfortunately nowhere recognised.

Apart from general studies on Indian woman such as those of Bader and Altekar, some micro-level studies have also been undertaken in recent times. Among these J.B. Choudhari's Position of Women in the Vedic Ritual (1956); R.N. Das' Women in Manu and his Seven Commentators (1962); S.Jayal's The status of Women in the Epics (1966) and Shakuntala Rao Shastri's Women in the Vedic Age (1969) may be noted. However, it is little realised
even in these works that the references gathered can not help
us reaching actual historical conditions. Not only are the
statements on women found in the classical writings, from which
modern authors quote, often very contradictory but the big
question remains whether the social reality corresponded to the
norms fixed in these writings. The classical texts reflect what
a particular literary elite, the Brāhmaṇas, thought in various
epochs on the position of woman in the society, but not necessarily
what the social practice was in these epochs.

With the rise of women's Liberation Movement in the
West, an altogether new perspective has developed to view and
work around the concept of Women's history which seriously
questions the validity and acceptability of the colonial model
of historiography on Indian women. A contemporary woman historian
of America has thus defined the need and rationale behind the
concept: "There is an ironic significance in the fact that the
very term used to describe the new field 'Women's History' is
a misnomer. The unavailability of proper terminology is of itself
a mark of the difficulties we have in conceptualizing the novel
and somewhat daring enterprise in which we are engaged. There are
women in history and there are men in history, and one would hope
that no historical account of a given period could be written
that would not deal with the actions and ideas of both men and
women. Were this the case, there would indeed be no need for
women's history". R. Thapar has rightly pointed out that women's
Lib does not have immediate relevance to the Indian social
situation. It is the product of an urbanised middle-class with a large number of women trained in professions as a result of expanding educational opportunities whose professional skills are wasted by their having to limit themselves to domestic work. It relates to the crisis in the concept of domestic work being somehow inferior both in terms of human intelligence and the use of labour and energy. The movement at no time has become a mass movement in India, yet it has touched off a new trend in research on Indian women. The literature written under its influence throws a welcome light on women's history and searches intelligent and convincing explanations of women's condition in a given epoch. Prathati Mukherjee's *Hindu Women: Normative Models* (1978) and Maria Mies' *Indian Women and Patriarchy* (1980) have offered new point of view, and consequently a new model, to interpret the references from classical literature. Even a materialist model is also being sought to explain the subordination of Indian women though we can not cite full monographs adopting that line. In the works of D.D. Kosambi and R.C. Sharma one may find the materialist approach to the subject but as part of the general history of the period. A paper by Suvira Jaiswal also attempts the materialist explanation to establish that kinship structure and family organization are closely linked to the mode of production and are subject to change with the changing socio-economic needs.

Barring an exception or two most of the studies mentioned above, whether colonial or post-colonial and idealist
or materialist tend to overlook the fact that valid generalizations are well-nigh impossible for the society of a vast sub-continent like India. From times immemorial the Brahmanical patriarchal social structure has coexisted in certain areas with matrilineal or matriarchal pattern and, as we shall see in our chapter on women in Brahmanical inscriptions, sometimes the two have intermingled as well. The views of R. Thapar are well worth quoting in the context of infinite variations characterising the Indian social scene: "within the Indian sub-continent there have been infinite variations on the status of women diverging according to cultural milieu, family structure, class, caste, property rights and morals.........In common belief it is the sexual and biological difference which is stressed as the basis for social differences. But often it is a rationalisation for quite other factors such as inheritance and property-rights and family structure, which are the fundamental concern". we will see in course of our analysis of the available epigraphic records that the views of Thapar are supported in respect of caste and religion.

Maria Mies has viewed the problem in a different perspective. In her opinion all great works of classical Hindu literature belong to the line of tradition which McKim Marriot has called the "great tradition". The "great tradition" was sustained by the small class of literates which possessed the monopoly of education and literacy and lived mainly at the courts and in the cities. The "great tradition is well-documented in
the Vedic hymns, the Brahmanas, the Upanisads, the epics, and in the Post-Buddhist Puranas and Tantras, that assimilated a lot many elements of the "Little Tradition". The "great tradition" is essentially identical with the Brahmanic Sanskrit culture characterised among other features by the generally low position of women. Face to face with this "great tradition" held together by a written language stands the particularistic "Little tradition". It is the tradition of the illiterate masses in the villages and in the cities it reflects the religious, social and cultural life of certain regions and often moves around a local god or a mythical hero. If literary education is considered as a criterion for belonging to the "great tradition", and that is obvious, then the women of all castes and not only of the non-Sanskritized castes are excluded from this "great tradition". However, in all humility we beg to differ from Ms. Mies in respect of this generalization since education was not altogether closed to women of Buddhist and Jain society. Again in respect of inheritance pattern and property rights also we will find that women of the heterodox faiths fared better than their Brahmanical counterparts. Thus it is necessary to give up the approach of generalizing about Indian women and on the other hand, it has become inevitable to discuss their position within the parameters of region, class, caste and religion to which they belong locating variations on their basis.

This is precisely what we have in mind while collecting and analysing the data for the present thesis. As we have seen above, almost every work in the field from the 19th century up to now is largely based on literary evidence, referring to epigraphic
records only occasionally. We are unaware if any scholar has utilised inscriptions as the major source for his monograph on women of early India. This is all the more surprising since the dates of ancient Indian literary texts are far from certain. The epics can not be assigned to any particular period or region. The Gāthā of Kau cannot be placed in any single century. The situation is hardly better in respect of the Vedas. On the other hand, the early Indian inscription even when undated or dated in the regnal years of contemporary kings can be dated fairly certainly. Their geographical origin being known in almost all the cases helps in differentiating the data of one region from the other. The classical literature normally contains the idealistic picture as visualised by its creators whereas the epigraphic records are close to the actual picture of society. In spite of all these advantages, inscriptions as source of women's history have been ignored by the scholars working in the field. The reasons are not far to seek. Early epigraphists and Indologists were more concerned with reconstructing dynastic and political history rather than social and cultural. Even when question of women cropped up, the pleas for their uplift and emancipation could be easily sustained by quoting Sastras rather than inscriptional records. Finally, it was believed, and rightly to some extent, that women hardly figure in early Indian records. As we shall see in our chapter on Brahmanical inscriptions, there is very little data available from epigraphic records. Save for some women of royalty and
and nobility, none appears anywhere in our inscriptions. The number of women figuring in Buddhist and Jaina records is, no doubt far larger in comparison and statistically impressive but their nature and purpose being donation or dedication in almost every case the source acquires an air of monotony and the scope for interpretation becomes extremely narrow. In record after record the contents given are the same save for variations in proper names. This is so much the case with stupa records of central India that we have not cited some for want of variation in information. It is possible that these factors may have weighed with historians in neglecting inscriptions as major source of women's history.

As a matter of fact there are many more limitations and problems in using the data from inscriptive records. A lot many of them are badly mutilated in their text or suffer from gaps which have to be bridged to make them speak sense. Their fragmentary character in many cases, as we shall see, poses problems of interpretation. Wherever, the editors have attempted to restore the missing portion, we have cited it without using brackets as is the practice to separate the original from the restored. In the second place, many inscriptions are too brief to allow us any room to say anything about the women figuring in them. The Bhiksuni records fall in this category. Except for the name and place of the nun-donor we are told absolutely nothing. When some such records suffer from lacunae, no sense whatever can be made out. In the third place, the caste and class position
of lady-donor is not clear in all the cases. In fact, we have had to create a section of casteless women in our chapters dealing with Buddhist and Jaina records. No doubt, each of those donors must have belonged to some caste, but no clue to that effect can be located in the inscription itself. In the fourth place women from heterodox faith figure in large numbers as donors but how much financial freedom they actually enjoyed cannot be easily made out from inscriptions. The question has to be related to the pattern of inheritance and property rights of women for which one has to turn to literature and there are no counterparts of Brahmanical law-givers in heterodox faiths. Finally, just as classical literature was created by the elite and reflects their lives, the epigraphic records also belong to the upper classes of society. Barring an inscription or two, nowhere we find lower class women being the donors. Thus even the lop-sided picture we are able to draw, there has no place in it for a large section of women.

Notwithstanding the disadvantages, mentioned above, we have found our study extremely rewarding. In many respects, inscriptions serve as corrective to the conclusions based on literary texts. Again, in literary works women have been glorified at places and condemned at others. No such contradiction or dichotomy one meets with in inscriptions. The literature approximates to the ideal and the inscriptions represent the actual.
The numerous and large-scale gifts by women as recorded in inscriptions show that even if their status in society and family was subordinate to men theoretically, they did enjoy a measure of freedom in real life. A section of records clearly demonstrates that some royal families practised cross-cousin marriages and yet were staunch supporters of orthodox faith in which such marriages had no sastric sanction. Thus like all other sources of early Indian history, epigraphic records have also their merits as well as demerits.

Our study terminates with the inauguration of the Gupta rule and we need hardly mention that no inscriptions of pre-Mauryan period have come to light. Thus the inscriptions we have analysed belong roughly to the period B.C. 300 to A.D. 300. It is significant that most of them are drafted in Prakrt though from Śaka Mahāksatrapa Rudradaman onwards Sanskrit was officially adopted. The Śātavāhanas were the staunch supporters of Brahmanism but drafted their records in Prakṛt. Geographically our inscriptions come from Western India, Mathura, Central India, Orissa and the Deccan. Most of them are associated with the religious monuments reared at the places they belong to, Extreme north and south as also east and north-west remain unrepresented or little represented. As remarked above, the gifts came from ladies of royal, aristocratic and trading class mainly and information about other sections of women cannot be extracted.

As it was found easy to classify the records on the basis of religion, the scheme of chapterisation has also been
conceived accordingly thus II, III and IV chapters deal respectively with women in Jaina, Buddhist and Brahmanical inscriptions respectively. Within the chapter the material has been organised and analysed on the basis of caste or class from which the women came. The cases in which no clue to caste was located have been kept in a section appropriately termed 'casteless'. The text of inscriptions has been quoted in full wherever it was short and manageable. Customary data like the date and reigning King have been left being not useful in our analysis. Each record has been analysed individually if it had little in common with others of its class but records with identical contents have been grouped together at places, also if it was so warranted. After individual analysis, a general picture emerging from all together has been attempted at the end of each chapter. The V and final chapter devoted to comparisons and conclusions in name as well as purpose. Since the period has nothing to do with position of women in vedic period, no reference has been made to them and no interpretation of vedic hymns has been done to clarify the position of women of our records.

One technical problem we have had to tackle was in regard to transcribing the original texts and placing of diacritical marks. We have mentioned that in many cases only the relevant portion has been cited. The missing parts have been indicated by a line of dots but the restored portion has
not been separated from the original. The spellings have been retained as in the original and since they happen to be faulty in many cases, they have not been corrected. Full care has been taken to place diacritical marks for correct reading, yet some errors may have surely crept in for which we crave indulgence.

Some records created a sort of controversy among scholars in regard to interpretation. Wherever necessary, their views have been briefly reported and the latest interpretation, if convincing, has been adopted. The translation has been given in very few cases as the analysis of the contents was considered to be more important.

Some technical terms figuring in the inscriptions posed problems of correct sense in the context in which they occurred. Normally our study has been guided and governed by D.C. Sircar's Indian Epigraphical Glossary in interpreting such terms but wherever he has given more than one senses, we have taken the meaning fitting the context.

Buddhist and Jaina texts, canonical as well as non-canonical, have been consulted to ascertain the inheritance pattern and property rights of women. This became necessary in view of the fact that largest number of women-donors belonged to heterodox faiths. Since Jaina canon was finally compiled after the close of our period, the propriety of relying on it may be questioned. However, we believe that much of it is based on earlier traditions and to that extent allows us of valid deductions.
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