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Tahira Khan on Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India by Mytheli Sreenivas. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. 169pp.

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Abstract

A review of:

Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India by Mytheli Sreenivas. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. 169pp.

Keywords

India, Colonialism, History, Politics, Economics, Gender

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Wives, Widows, Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India by Mytheli Sreenivas. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2008. 169pp.

The book under review is a valuable piece of historical research that combines issues of gender, politics, economy and colonialism in India. It attempts to explain the impact of colonialism on gender relations and family institution at micro (family) and macro (community and state) levels. Although the book has been written purely with academic and archival research resources, it would attract general readers especially from southern India who have interest in their local history. Further, despite its focus on the family and state politics of Tamil Nadu, the book can be called an academic window through which historians and researchers can get a glimpse of crucial issues such as individual identity, family, community and nation in India. This academic glimpse has been given through a detailed historical explanation of the conjugal family ideals in colonial India.

To elaborate the interaction and mutual impact of the colonial and the local, the author begins the introductory chapter with an explanation of the nineteenth century's situation of the institution of family, its nature and history, as well as the status of women in family parameter; i.e. wives, widows and concubines. The introduction of the book skillfully sets the parameters of the forthcoming chapters by putting women in the center of the community and nation-state politics during the colonial past. Chapter One sheds light on the family institution and politics in early-modern south India, the changing status of women as wives and concubines during the colonial rule, and colonizers' legislative responses to the local family institution.

Chapter Two historicizes the late-nineteenth century when Western-educated professionals started to delineate new models of family and economy. The impact of modern educated colonial and local patriarchal models of politics put more burdens on family women who were projected as the representatives of "tradition." The main focus of Chapter Two is on the issues of gender and property. The colonial rulers were faced with the challenge of legislation on women's property rights within the parameters of the Tamil family. In Chapter Three the author attempts to explain the indigenous responses to colonial domination and legislation by documenting Indian and Dravidian politics of conjugality. Child marriage has always existed in southern India and was practiced and accepted by the local communities. The colonial government's attempt to legislate the issue of marital age and consent met with opposition from the militant nationalistic groups, who again put women in the center of Indian tradition and sanctity of the private sphere. An interesting part of Chapter Three explains women's political resistance to the reinforced continuance of the patriarchal conjugal ideals.

Chapter Four explains that, in the beginning of the twentieth century, the leadership of women activists emerged as a strong political force. The author argues that women's political activism was an obvious result of the print culture through which women challenged existing male-dominated norms of family. Women writers politicized emotions, love, affection and pleasure, and criticized boundaries of caste, class and gender. Through print culture, women writers and readers created their own space where their voices could be heard. Regarding the impact of women's print culture, Chapter Four is not limited to southern Indian women's issues but it also depicts an overall picture of Indian women's struggle in the national context of colonial India.

Women's magazines in various languages started discussing so called "personal" issues, such as love, emotions, intimacy and pleasure, as well as their relationship with marital decisions. Consequently, there emerged a strong movement related to the issue of remarriage of widows and especially child widows. The point was made that young widows were human beings too with emotions, feelings of love and desires for pleasure. The author has included valuable pieces of women's narratives and writings on the issue of widow's marriage in Chapter Four. For example, a brave piece by S. Nilavati, in which she addressed women directly, shows strong feminist passion and commitment of women activists of the time, "Push out the betrayals of womanhood that have spread in this world! However many tasks you have accomplished, however many tasks you will accomplish in the future—in the matter of widow remarriage you must not be slow and cautious, sisters! You yourselves have the power to break your chains" (112). By discussing the historical debates about the family, property, politics and women's responses, the author comes up with a term "Tamil family imaginary." The conclusion of her book draws from the tensions in the familial imaginary debate during the colonial era. In the final section, she argues that these tensions extended into the post-colonial era too and the debate about family and legislative politics has continued in post-independence India.

Overall, this book is a valuable addition in the list of historical research works on the issues of women, community politics and colonial legislative ventures in southern India. The research related strength of the book is that it draws information from a variety of primary sources, ranging from archives of court cases, women's narratives and women's writings in the magazines. The author, in a very articulate manner, simplifies the complex history of family, politics, caste, class and economic pressures in Tamil Nadu. Although her research is focused on one specific part of southern India, her critique and analysis may still guide prospective researchers to conduct similar research studies in other states of colonial and post-colonial India. However, if the author had added one more chapter about the feminist political discourses and current political tensions between state and family in the post-colonial India, it would have added more value to this research.

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