

Selecting Identities from the Past

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It is a privilege for me to be addressing the Centre for Women's Development Studies, an organization that has been at the forefront of work on studies relating to women. To be giving the J.P. Naik Memorial Lecture adds further honour to the occasion. And my most personal connections lie in remembering animated conversations in the early days with Vina Mazumdar, Lotika Sarkar, Zarina Bhatta, to name just a few, conversations that I have cherished over many years.

The seminar organised by the CWDS being on the subject of identity formation, nationhood and women, I thought I would speak about something that hovers in the background – the notion of the Indian woman's identity as constructed from what are described as the cultural traditions of the early past. In constricting myself to the early past I am not denying the major contribution of societies and cultures of later times. I am only using the early past, with which I am reasonably familiar, to illustrate my basic concern about how an identity has been constructed. We need to look more analytically at the early past since it is frequently quoted by members of Indian society as the source of legitimacy for some of the inequalities and restrictions faced by women. My concern is also relevant for the immediate future. It seems to me that the choice before us is whether we will give priority to exclusive identities of religious communities with all their consequences of

limited rights, or whether we will opt for an Indian identity that incorporates religious communities but transcends these, moving towards a more inclusive and expansive identity of citizenship based on equal gender rights.

What is sometimes constructed as community, tradition and identity, with the claim of historical legitimacy, is often invalidated by history. So when we look at the past for an identity, and we do this regularly in many walks of life, the search has to be realistic. I would like to argue that it is not feasible for us to maintain that there was in the early historical past a single identity for the Indian woman, as is frequently maintained, and that this became what we call the traditional identity. Indian women had diverse identities as they do to this day. The point is to understand why there were social differences and how these were treated.

Investigating early history is important because of the popular belief that culture, tradition and identities were given a definitive form in the remote past and have remained substantially unchanged. This view is contradicted by the many alternate identities that emerge from the texts. There are also so many claims to legitimacy from the past for the more restricting current conventions and the refusal to question these. I would like to refer to just a few instances to underline the complexity of the subject. Although I shall be speaking of the early past, what I touch on has relevance for later periods as well. Much of what I have to say has been said more effectively by other historians, but even a re-iteration becomes a useful reminder. Women were not, and are not, a homogenous category without a historical context or location or differentiations. Their multiple identities grew out of differentiations in their access to power, resources, belief systems, and out of their perceptions of the world around them. The denial of such access can even be resisted and this can take an overt or a symbolic form. Symbolic forms therefore need to be prised apart.

Communities are rooted in the interface of their environments, occupations, rules of kinship and inheritance, and belief systems. No single one of these by itself can create an identity. Because these are all malleable factors that alter repeatedly, the communities and the identities that are claimed do not remain unchanged. They too mutate and consequently can best be understood by analysing the process through which an identity is created.

Identity is formed in various ways. It can be the consequence of a dominant group differentiating itself from subordinate groups, where the dominant is accepted as the norm. It remains so until it is superseded or has to make substantial concessions to other upcoming groups. Alternatively, identity can take shape as a response or a resistance to a dominant group, where a subordinated group sees itself as the counter to the dominant. Groups in opposition often begin this way. Identities change through the questioning of the conventional and the dominant. Although this may not always be visible, it is an on-going process, however slow-moving.

Unbroken traditions and unchanging identities are claimed by social conservatism and the orthodox. The challenge to this has invariably come from heterodoxies of various kinds anxious to reformulate traditions and identities. The history of India is replete with dialogues and debates representing this process. A critical investigation reveals frequent contradictions in the same tradition, suggesting that many of these questions were debated and that there were contending views.

Unbroken traditions and unchanging identities were also claimed in the modern reconstruction of what was called 'the traditional Indian woman in history'. A popular view was, and is, that women had an exalted status in the ancient past, even if they were in the main dedicated wives and mothers observing the social mores. This was a

firmly determined pattern from which there might have been only an occasional deviation. A rarity was the one who was intellectual enough to debate with a respected philosopher, a reference to Gargi mentioned in an *Upanishad*. As has been pointed out, references to women who worked as slaves in the same society to which Gargi belonged and whose status was far from elevated are not mentioned. The hint of discomfort at the philosopher being questioned by a woman is not commented upon. Women participating in Vedic discourse were in any case something of an aberration, for soon these texts were closed to women. Speech was said to be the preserve of a goddess, later integrated with the goddess of learning Sarasvati, but nevertheless it is noticeable that no significant work of knowledge is associated with a woman.

The exalted status, it was said, declined when Indian society suffered adversely from foreign invasions. Women had to be secluded and discouraged from anything but familial concerns. Nationalisms seeking a particular Hindu identity from the past maintain that throughout the ancient period of Indian history women observed the norms of the orthodox tradition. The stereotype of the woman was that as a girl she was made ready for marriage; that she was gifted by her father to a person of the appropriate caste whom she served with devotion; that she became the mother of heroic sons; and that if required she was willing to become a *sati* on her husband's death. The image is singular and universal to the point where it has little historical validity.

Attitudes to the history of women were in part related to the social concerns of historians, many of whom early on were uninterested in seeing women's history as an appropriate subject of study. It is substantially women historians who are presenting another view deriving from serious social history and sociology.

Texts as sources of history are specific to author, time, place and audience, but these are not interpreted in an identical way each time they are read. The point in time, the location and the intended audience contribute to differences in the contents of texts, and sometimes even result in variant versions. We are familiar with the Sita of the Valmiki Ramayana who requires protection and tends to withdraw into the confines of her imprisonment in Lanka; whereas the Sita of one oral folk tradition goes into battle herself against Ravana, rather than leave it to Rama, and eventually kills the villain. The two depictions of Sita come from different social contexts and the flavour of this difference is reflected in how the two conduct themselves. We have chosen the first of the two Sitas and few of us are aware of the second. The reason for the choice is obvious.

Not only do texts have varied functions, but they also relate to different kinds of societies. Can we then generalize about all women from a reference to a few selected sources and from this go on to construct an identity for what is labelled as ‘the traditional Indian woman’? The more easily accessible sources of early Indian history tend to be those referring to royalty and to elite groups. Therefore, a century ago, it was easier to construct the image from these sources and ignore other women.

A narrative also has a historical context where the depiction changes in accordance with historical and social change. I have attempted to show this difference in the varying forms in which the story of Shakuntala was presented in the *Mahabharata*, and subsequently in the famous play by Kalidasa, and still later in the eighteenth-century *braj-bhasha* version of Nawaz Kavesvara. In the epic version she is a feisty young woman. Her marriage to the raja is conditional to his fulfilling her demands. In the Kalidasa play she is the gentle, romantic heroine and both she and the king get entangled in a mesh involving a

ring of remembrance. She makes no conditions and explains her rejection by the king as resulting from her own bad karma. The eighteenth-century version echoes the *nayika* of medieval poetry enveloped in love and separation. German Romantic poets read the Kalidasa play and made her into a symbol of nature's child personifying free love. Later opinion then maintained that she had to undergo chastisement for daring to love in this free manner. The chastisement took the form of an enforced separation from her lover. Finally, the imprint of the woman as moulded by Kalidasa has been selected in modern times as a stereotypical woman of Indian tradition.

Gender history becomes an essential category of historical analysis when history moves from being the narrative of personalities and the historian starts analysing the institutions and structures that go into the making of society. Gender history need not neutralize patriarchy. It can enhance the potential of viewing women as agencies or as instruments in the hierarchies of power and exclusion. Attempts have been made by fundamentalist groups of various religions to reformulate what they call tradition and enforce conformity to it. This is provoked in part by the current fears that new social attitudes undermining patriarchy are gaining support.

Since traditions are said to be linked to the past as are most claims to identities, understanding the history of these becomes crucial. It is now a cliché among historians to say that a tradition is invented. Even where they are not invented, traditions are reconfigured, mostly according to contemporary requirements. Traditions and the identities they invoke are never permanent.

This is evident in the history of caste, with which a major aspect of the history of women is entwined. Crucial to the status of women is their function in the structure of caste, since control over women is

essential to the continuation of caste. This was done through, among other things, kinship regulations and forms of marriage as channels for the exchange of women. Even religions supporting an egalitarian society subscribed to caste, especially in arranging marriages and in discriminating against those of lower status. The constituents of caste, however, were neither uniform nor unchanging. Recruitment to caste was, in theory, only through birth. This required that women be subordinated so that they would observe the social parameters of marriage regulations. These regulations were also related to property and inheritance among the elites and to variations in family patterns. It had earlier been argued that the race had to be kept pure, and therefore women were not allowed to marry as they wished. Racial purity is a myth. And who can prove it for the entire history of a caste, especially as men were known to marry wherever they chose to, irrespective of the rules?

The legally acceptable forms of marriage that ranged from the predictable to the bizarre were also related to caste. These forms are discussed in the normative social codes – the *dharma-shastras* and other texts. Whereas the codes are very particular about the actions of each caste at every stage of life, there are nevertheless contradictions within these texts or between texts. Eight forms of marriage are regarded as legal. The range is from the much-lauded *kanya-dana* where the father with full patriarchal rights gifts his daughter. As the recipient of a gift that does not call for a return gift, the groom's family asserts superiority and can make further demands. The worst of the eight forms is the *paishacha*, which is virtually the rape of a woman who is unaware of what is happening. Although it is listed, it is not recommended. Nor is the *asura* marriage that involves a bride price, presumably because it gives a higher status to the woman. Each form is appropriate to particular castes in accordance with which the wife can be obtained. The common factor is the subservience of the woman. Pragmatism is

conceded to the man who can act in a manner not necessarily consistent with the rules.

Among the forms of marriage legal for the *ksbatriya* are the *gandharva* and the *rakshasa*. The *gandharva* is marriage by mutual consent and motivated primarily by sexual desire, doubtless appropriate to the roving eye of the *ksbatriya* male. This is about the only occasion when the woman has a choice. The context is frequently that of a king who finds himself face-to-face with a desirable woman, as for instance Dushyanta and Shakuntala. The woman's caste is not of central concern. She is often depicted as a woman of the forest or a semi-celestial being, an *apsara*. Such marriages become a device to initiate a new lineage or to plaster over a break in succession.

The *apsara* was a liberated woman coming and going as she pleased and not as ordered by the hero. The prototype is the famous Urvashi who jettisoned the distraught Pururvas and agreed to visit him only once a year, and after each visit she bore him a son. He was himself the son from the female form of Manu's child, Ila, who is described as a hermaphrodite. He and his sons were nevertheless the ancestors of all the major clans of the Chandravamsha lineage and, therefore, the main participants in the events of the *Mahabharata*. Centuries later a number of Rajput clans and royal dynasties linked themselves to the same Chandravamsha lineage with the same myths of origin.

Myths are of interest to historians, not because they narrate events that have actually happened, but because they encapsulate the hidden assumptions of a society. They provide clues, for instance, as to how a community disguises the breaking of normative rules. One wonders therefore why the freedom of the *apsara* occurs repeatedly in the narratives. Was the *apsara* a sublimation? Was she a concession to a similar wish among the women who heard the epic tales? Or was it a

demarcation between the freedom of the semi-celestial woman and the limitations on the earthly woman? The *apsara* was semi-mythical, but she was also claimed as an ancestress. Even when the *pativrata*/the devoted wife became the icon of the upper-caste woman, the activities of the *apsara* were not condemned.

The *rakshasa* form of marriage is also appropriate to the *kshatriya*. He is required to forcibly abduct the woman he wishes to marry, accompanied by violence against her kinsmen and, if need be, the shedding of their blood. This is surely not the kind of behaviour that should be normal to the *kshatriya* aristocracy? It legalizes the kidnapping of a woman and converts her into an item that can be treated in this manner. Arjuna, encouraged by Krishna, abducted Subhadra amidst violence, and this marriage ensured the succession of the Pandavas through the birth of Abhimanyu. Ravana incidentally justifies his abduction of Sita by referring to the *rakshasa-dharma*. From time to time it also occurs in epics of the medieval period. It is curious that the *rakshasa* marriage was included and resorted to as a legal form of marriage. It is sometimes said that the concession to abduction was born out of the fear of the non-Aryan who was believed to abduct women, even if this was more imagined than real. But in that case it would not have happened within the so-called 'aryan' society.

The *Mahabharata* is a fund of contradictory stories relating to the exchange of women through forms of marriage. For example, in the Pandava family itself, three consecutive generations observe three entirely incompatible forms of marriage: endogamy – marriage within defined circles but excluding blood relations; fraternal polyandry – where one woman is married to all the brothers; and cross-cousin marriage – marrying the mother's brother's daughter as in the case of Arjuna and Subhadra. Polyandry and cross-cousin marriage are not included among the eight recognized forms. They are legitimate because

they reflect the variations among the societies portrayed in the epic. This was a codification outside the normative texts.

The *Mahabharata* is in any case an epic in which the women are the truly heroic figures and the motivators of events. The ‘tigers among men’, as the heroes are repeatedly called, claim prowess and leadership. But at every crucial point in the narrative it is the initiative of a woman that is pivotal, although each in a different way. For example, the fisher-girl Satyawati gives birth to Vyasa, born of a brahmana father, who authors the text in which the protagonists are his own progeny; Kunti is the effective patriarch of the Pandavas with her sons obeying her unquestioningly; Gandhari mothers a hundred sons providing the counter-point of evil essential to epic events; and Draupadi questions the legality of her being staked in the dicing match, and instigates revenge and war. It is not surprising that religious nationalism has picked on the *Ramayana*, where the women don’t call the shots.

Caste codes, even where they might be undergoing adjustment, had to maintain the outward form of continuing the norms. These codes were put together between about 500 BC and AD 300 with later versions as well. Major social adjustments were necessary when new castes emerged through the conversion of clans, occupational groups and religious sects into castes. Attempts were also sometimes made at upward mobility by some well-placed lower castes. These ‘migrations of identity’ introduced new social mores, some of which contradicted existing norms but had to be accommodated. The differences were more evident in the diverse activities of women. Newly emerging castes imbibed something of the marginalization of women from the upper-caste codes, but also retained some of their own practices. This would be one explanation for why commentaries on existing texts, such as that of Medatithi on Manu, had to be written and treated as

authoritative. This in some ways paralleled new rituals and belief systems shaping and altering Puranic Hinduism.

The world projected in the *dharmashastras* was a contrast to that which emerges from the widespread evidence of inscriptions, particularly those from the sites of Buddhist *stupas* and from Jaina donors. Votive inscriptions record gifts to the Buddhist Sangha and the donors include numbers of women. The ability to make donations and recite the texts gave them status, the kind of status not permitted to them in the *dharmashastras*. Their identity was inscribed in the record of their donation. Some refer to themselves as lay-women - *upasikas*, and some as nuns - *bhikkhunis*. Some make donations on behalf of their families, others make individual donations. They are identified sometimes by name, especially the nuns, or the occupation of the husband, or their kinsfolk, or where they come from, or a combination of these. They are more frequently from the middle castes – from families of small-scale land-owners, merchants, well-to-do artisans and such like, although caste identities are rarely mentioned. Women from royalty are less frequent donors. Buddhism had a strong presence, initially more so in the urban settlements, and the freedom to become a Buddhist nun was a choice open to women, even if it was unacceptable to the *dharmashastras*. This would have provided some degree of independence. The visibility of the heterodox would have put the orthodox on the defensive. Nevertheless, even as nuns their self-expression was circumscribed by the patriarchy of the Sangha, which endorsed the superiority of the monk.

These women seem to have a more personal control over the property which allows them to make votive gifts. The question that has been asked is whether these gifts were made from their *stri-dhana*, the personal wealth gifted to them by the family they were born into. Or did the wealth come to them from an inheritance? Or, like the monks, did

they also invest in trade? That nuns and monks had property has been the basis of much recent discussion on the role of the Buddhist monastery as an institution with links to commerce and land-ownership, and therefore a rather far cry from social isolation. Nuns as managers of property and administrators of convents managing property would have involved their holding office, wielding power and having a special status.

Individual donations by Jaina women to their preceptors, some of whom were monks, are also recorded at this time. These were often to small personalized shrines, whereas the donations recorded at the Buddhist *stupa* were declarations in public space.

Queens and women of royal families were of course expected to record their *dana*/gifts and donations, and thereby state their patronage of religious sects. This also involved the politics of their patronage since these donations were more often linked to the resources of the state. The earliest inscriptional record is that issued by the Mauryan emperor Ashoka, ordering his officers to record the grants made by his queen Karuvaki. Interestingly many more records of royal women as donors have survived from the period after the fifth-sixth centuries AD. These were often to the Buddhist and Jaina Sanghas. Was this in part the influence of the extensive donations by women to the Sanghas in the earlier period? A number of such women directed their patronage to the Sanghas even when their husbands conducted Vedic sacrifices or built temples to Puranic deities. This is somewhat surprising given the acrimony recorded in other sources between the Shramanic sects – Buddhist and Jaina in the main – and the Shaiva sects. Association with the Sanghas might have given the women a stronger sense of identity as well as membership of a community over which the Sangha presided. This would have been different from belonging to a caste. Temples to Hindu deities built through the patronage of royal women

were, as symbols of power, finance, religion and authority, not as assertive as those patronized by kings. Nevertheless the patronage of women would have helped in strengthening these sects. Queens are also occasionally mentioned as regents, a position they acquired through an accident of marriage and motherhood. Even more occasional are references to women of royal families acting in an administrative capacity where presumably their political effectiveness was being recognized.

It has often been said that the subordination of women is also indicated in Sanskrit drama reflecting courtly and upper-caste urban cultures. Men of high status speak Sanskrit whereas the women, the lower castes and curiously the *vidushaka*/the brahmana companion to the king, speak various Prakrits. The Prakrit languages were used by the populace at large and are therefore associated with those of lesser status. But Prakrits had also been used in the imperial Mauryan court and continued to be used in royal courts until the early centuries AD when they were replaced by Sanskrit. It may then have become a poetic or a courtly convention for women to speak Prakrit in the performance of plays. In the *Mahabharata*, Shakuntala's refutation of the king's sexist abuse of her parents is in chaste Sanskrit.

But the significance of women speaking Prakrit is more complex. It is not merely an indicator of powerlessness or low status. The Buddhist Canon current at the time was composed in Pali and various Prakrits. The Jaina Canon was also written in Prakrit. A retelling of the *Ramayana* narrative from a Jaina perspective, the *Paumachariyam*, by Vimalasuri, in which he questions the veracity of the existing versions of the Rama story, was also in Prakrit. The literary importance of Prakrit continued to evolve in later centuries. If it was seen as the language of lower status, it was also the language of those of high status and who were by no means marginal, but were opposed to

brahmanical orthodoxy. Did those who used Sanskrit view Prakrit as the language of the Other? Did it place women in the category of the Other, with hints of heterodox connections? This would be an interesting comment on the cultural dimension of gender in Indian society. Languages too are not merely markers of social identity, since they also encapsulate layers of social history.

At the other end of the spectrum of women's identities were women who were without a name and consigned to servitude. Peasant women laboured with their kinsmen. When the military camps packed up and moved on, it was the peasant women who garnered the grain from what was left behind. There were also the women of the forest clans, such as the Shabara, who took on the burden of shifting cultivation and horticulture and who are described as bringing forest produce to peasant villages. Their work involved slave-like hard labour, but technically they were not slaves. Those that were *dasis*/domestic slaves, were unfree labour, unable to claim either wages or rights. They were owned by others. They were computed as items of wealth together with cattle and horses, as is stated in the *Vedas*, the *Mahabharata* and Buddhist texts. Large numbers of women domestic slaves are included in the list of wealth which the Pandavas gambled and lost. Some were captured in raids and given as gifts, and subsequently they were also bought and sold as slaves. The premium on women domestic slaves seems to have been high.

As with men, so too with women was the acquiring of wealth a factor in differentiating status. Forms of access to wealth varied across different periods of time. There is, for example, considerable discussion on what constitutes *stri-dhana* in those societies where it was a practice. This was not dowry. It was the wealth given to a woman generally by her kinsfolk. Its inheritance became a subject of discussion, particularly the question of whether a husband had rights over it. Significantly,

what was given to the woman did not include land or immovable property. This in itself reduced the importance of *stri-dhana*. Property rights were central to status and these were generally denied to women.

Apart from gifts and inheritance of moveable wealth, the possibilities for a woman to acquire or earn an income were extremely restricted. Women had little access to independent professions and those that worked outside the home generally assisted the family's occupation as artisans and peasants. The more commonly referred to independent income was that earned by sex-workers/prostitutes, courtesans and *devadasis*. The three categories are frequently treated as one but have to be kept distinct. Their social roles were different and changed over time. As usual, the poorer among them – generally the sex-workers – were treated with contempt and suspicion but not so the men who were their clients. The women broke the norms of subordination; nevertheless, they were an accepted part of the urban landscape. This has been seen as an aspect of urban alienation. Ambivalent attitudes towards them are evident in their sometimes being called thieves and cheats, yet at the same time referred to as employable by the state for purposes of espionage. The *Arthashastra*, regarded as the pre-eminent work on ideal governance, provides rules for their protection against violence, the fees they could charge, as well as the regular taxes they had to pay to the state. There were few alternative independent occupations for women who were less well-off. They could join groups of performers, actors, dancers and musicians. Needless to say, such groups were viewed as socially inferior and their itinerant life made them suspect in the eyes of the elite.

Courtesans, depicted in literature as well-established urbanites, had earnings of a different order. They were often wealthy women who received lavish gifts for their accomplishments. Some donated equally lavishly, as for instance Ambapali's donations to the Buddhist Sangha;

others had a status because of their wealth, such as Vasantasena in Shudraka's drama, *Mrichchhakatika*. That they were accomplished in the arts, charged exorbitantly high fees and associated with royalty and the rich ensured that they were not treated with contempt and their donations were gratefully accepted. To that extent courtesans had greater freedom, but only within the boundaries of a male world. As in many wealthy urban societies, the 'cultured' male was incomplete without the courtesan – an interesting reflection on the concept of the cultured male.

Donations also came from well-off *devadasis* attached to Hindu temples. According to some customary laws, even though they were not expected to marry, their personal property could be inherited by a female child. The institution of *devadasis* was said to have been associated with worship that used rituals of fertility. *Devadasis* were attached to temples and put through a rigorous training in music and dance, occasionally making major contributions to formal structures in both. But gradually and in many cases, the sacral faded out. No attempt was made to disguise the exploitation of the *devadasi*'s sexuality and caste observances were thrown to the winds when upper-caste 'worshippers' used the services of Dalit *devadasis*.

Sexuality associated with fertility rituals occurs in the Vedic *ashvamedha*, and could well go back earlier. Nevertheless, control over what was said to be a woman's chastity was thought to be essential to subordinating women, as were also marriage regulations. Chastity was an euphemism for sexuality. It was said to be the touchstone of a woman's power. Making it into a fetish led to variant movements of a different kind.

From the latter part of the first millennium AD the ritualizing of sexuality becomes increasingly apparent. Sects, cults and rituals linked

to Tantric and Kaula practices attain considerable visibility, as does the worship of Yoginis as well as new manifestations of the widely worshipped goddess, Devi. The rituals frequently transgress caste and marriage boundaries. Even though the activities and concepts were formally confined to ritual, it would be worth investigating the degree to which they were an intervention in patriarchal regulations. At different locations they involved royalty, the court, upper-caste householders, worshippers who belonged to the lower castes, as well as some outside caste: in effect a cross-section of society. The rituals and their symbolism were discussed extensively and these discussions entered the languages of cultures. However, despite women being central to the ritual, the texts were not composed by them. Temples to the Yoginis, scattered in various parts of the sub-continent, were a deliberate departure from the architecture of the temple linked to Puranic Hinduism. They were circular in plan, lined with niches containing sculptures of the various Yoginis, and entirely open to the sky. A small main shrine was placed off-centre within the circle. Some of the ritual practices depicted on the walls of other Hindu temples, point to the manifestation of these ideas across a wide range of societies.

As a form of social articulation during a historical time, it has not been explored sufficiently. The involvement of other groups of women in the rather different but parallel socio-religious context of Tamil devotionalism and the later Bhakti movements have received greater attention. Some have described the Yogini cult as the ruralisation of the aristocracy, and some as the further subordination of women. Other questions can also be asked. Was the acquiescence of women a form of symbolic resistance against 'female chastity' becoming a mechanism of control? Since the centrality of the woman is evident in the concept and the practice, which groups of women played a role in its empowerment, in what manner and with what social consequences?

We need to understand how a seemingly esoteric system became the voice of the many. But by the mid-second millennium AD it had changed. The centrality of women receded somewhat into the secrecy with which the rituals came to be associated.

Sexuality outside marriage is generally by-passed in studies of the history of women in early India, yet it was clearly an important articulation. In some situations sexuality was denied, as among those who became nuns, who as renouncers are said to preclude it. In other situations, as with sex workers, it is a source of income for some women and for the state that taxes them on this activity. It can also be elevated to a ritual act, which opens it up to another dimension. These are attitudes to sexuality in defiance of the accepted boundaries of marriage and caste. The range from occupation to worship, from which these attitudes draw, needs to be juxtaposed with the conventional. The notion of sexuality as it pertains to Indian cultural norms requires investigation.

From the few examples I have touched on, it is evident that in the delineation of Indian societies through the centuries, the presence of women with varying identities still needs to be recognized. Where texts insist on a subaltern status for women we have to consider that this can also sometimes reflect a fear lurking behind this insistence. Historians have to be sensitive to the manner in which social defiance or acquiescence is expressed. Symbolic expressions have often to be pared down to what they actually represent. A number of questions begin to surface, some of which are being answered in the histories that are now being written. To what degree did women sustain a particular social order, or modify it or replace it, and what was the reasoning behind each change? The answers will enable us to question anachronistic social laws said to be sanctioned by sacrosanct tradition or by supernatural power. When placed in a historical context, such laws can be seen as time bound and consequently now open to question.

Women in the past have had multiple identities as indeed they have today. Identities can co-exist, but the question is whether women have the right to determine their own priorities, or even to create new ones. There is an attempt in present times by various groups with varying agendas to reformulate identities according to particular current projections about Indian society, and to claim historical legitimacy for these. The reformulations that come from religious nationalisms are often the loudest, although they are not the only ones. Some identities can, and are intended, to curb the independence of women. Others can extend beyond these boundaries so that the choices made by women are across the spectrum and relate to the broader identities of citizenship and its rights.

If we are to endorse the foundations of the Indian state of half a century ago, then we have to ensure human rights equally to men and women. This process will inevitably involve confrontations and controversial decisions, a process not unfamiliar to historical change in India since early times. Identities from the past are often evoked to support traditions that are said to have greater validity than the new ethic embedded in equal rights. I have tried to suggest that the conventional image of the Indian woman is narrowly selective and not historically representative. Nor is its claim to being the single identity acceptable. The current confrontation is often projected as that of the state threatening the woman's loyalty to the community, as defined by religion, caste or whatever. But I would like to argue that this is not what these confrontations are about. When the right to equality is denied by claiming that it contradicts a sacrosanct tradition, then the confrontation is not merely between religion and the state. It is between the enforcement of codes that do not support equal human rights on the one hand, and on the other, the legal codes of a state that draws its legitimacy from incorporating and upholding equal rights. The state, one hopes, will have the courage to stand by this legitimacy.

Let me conclude by returning to what I said at the beginning. Identities are not inherent or innate. They are selected and reformulated over time and through experience. Their succession is projected as continuity, but in fact it is a process governed by historical change. Some strand from the past may weave its way into the present if it is still required. Formulating an identity is a selective process. If the legitimacy of the selection is claimed through recourse to tradition, and therefore to the past, then it has to be open to historical analysis. As historians we know that some traditions can be, and some clearly are, invented. This means that when we speak of identities we necessarily and constantly have to ask two questions: who is doing the selecting and what is the purpose of the selection?