

**WRITING WOMEN INTO HISTORY OF WESTERN  
INDIA: NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES**

**ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS**

**SUBMITTED TO**

**THE MAHARAJA SAYAJIRAO UNIVERSITY OF BARODA, VADODARA**

**FOR THE DEGREE OF  
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY**

**IN**

**HISTORY**

**BY**

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BARODA, VADODARA  
2023**

# **WRITING WOMEN INTO HISTORY OF WESTERN INDIA: NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURIES**

## **ABSTRACT**

The thesis titled “Writing Women into History of Western India: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries” has multiple objectives. It is an attempt to bridge the gap to find what women were doing in the mainstream historical discourse of Western India in the aforementioned time period. Secondly, to kickstart a dialogue on women’s historical experiences in western India. It is established that narratives of women or ‘on’ women so far have been written mostly by men. They wrote about those issues which they felt were important. Issues such as female infanticide, *Sati Pratha*, and female infanticide have been a centre of discussion amongst the English officials. This was the beginning. This snowballed into more and more Indian men reviewing the then society and writing about matters which they felt were a problem. What began as a reform gave voice to the issues that women in the nineteenth century were facing. For instance, while discussing widow remarriage, the issues of prostitution, abortion and adultery were written about. Through the agency of men, one could glance into the world of upper- and middle-class women. It showcased the kind of struggle women faced and how they negotiated with patriarchal norms.

By the end of the nineteenth century, women found a voice. Through writing, and fighting cases in the court, women learnt to read and write. Their problems or issues somehow were not the same as the ones that the males were writing about. The discussion was rallied around myriad issues which included offering challenges to the patriarchal pressures to the expression of the gnawing consciousness of economic dependence upon the men. This was a stage of realization. Women not only taught themselves but motivated each other to undertake formal education. This was a passive phase where a very small circle of women found voices through the agency of other women.

The situation began to alter in the twentieth century when a larger number of women were seen in public spaces. This resulted in a large shift of women from private to public spaces in both the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Initially, they organized clubs and wrote articles in magazines

but later as activists, they participated in two kinds of movements. One, Indian freedom struggle, where through their sheer numbers added volume to the mass movement both non-Gandhian as well as Gandhian. Second, the women organized themselves and started what later came to be called the women's movement. The focus shifted from the freedom of the nation to the freedom of self. However, the number of women involved in both the types of movement was still not enough to garner universal support.

Ordinary women living in rural or semi-urban areas, which formed a larger chunk of the population, were subsisting since the beginning of the civilization. Their voice has been recorded in the form of folklore. The study of the folklore of western India suggested a level of continuity in the traditions to this day. As symbols of women's lives, the folklore revealed that the lives that women were leading were complex and full of negotiations between inter and intra gender. Besides folklore women's voices were located in the writings by women on different non-extraordinary subjects. They wrote about their concerns regarding health and hygiene; kitchen and food; and upkeep and maintenance of cultural traditions such as *vrat* (fasting) etc.

In conclusion, the thesis attempted to provide answers to the central research questions through the use of both traditional as well as alternative sources.

## **OBJECTIVES**

1. Work towards a better understanding of the past and revise the way we see women and history.
2. Understand the experience of women.
3. Restore women to history and history to women.

This research work on "Writing Women into History of Western India: Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries" is divided into five chapters:

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

The chapter includes an introductory description of the current research containing the meaning and concept of terms, and various sources used in the research work. It further includes hypothesis, major objectives of the current research, and a review of the literature.

## **CHAPTER 2: EXAMINING THE ABSENCE AND PRESENCE OF WOMEN AND THEIR ISSUES THROUGH THE AGENCY OF ‘REFORMER MEN’ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

This chapter deals with the reformer men in Western India during the nineteenth century. These men acted as an agent in asserting the voices of elite women by taking up women’s issues. Both English men, as well as Indian Reformer men, played a role in improving the condition of elite women by initiating a dialogue with the major issues related to women such as female infanticide, *Sati Pratha*, and widow remarriage. An analysis is made of the wives and women in the lives of select Indian reformer men to ascertain the level of control that was exercised on them, and how women negotiated spaces and worked their way around such pressures.

## **CHAPTER 3: MAKING WOMEN VISIBLE BY AGENCY OF ‘WOMEN’ IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY**

This chapter deals with ‘women’ as an ‘agency’ who displayed a different level of understanding of the change that was taking place in nineteenth-century Western India. They were more than ready to embrace the change and also were aware of the mutilated transactions taking place around them. They themselves did not become a cause of the change in the nineteenth century but they did understand the need to adapt and prepare themselves and those around them. This was partly because of the influence of other communities such as Parsi women, Anglo-Indian women, and Englishwomen. Women from the Nagar Brahman community were the first ones to adapt. This did not mean that women from all sections of the experienced the change or accepted it. It only meant that a consciousness was created among few middle-class and fewer elite women to change with the changing times.

## **CHAPTER 4: WOMEN IN PUBLIC AND PRIVATE SPACES IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY**

This chapter discusses the transition for a larger number of women from private spaces to public spaces in the twentieth century in Western India. The transition spelled creation of new overt roles for middle-class women. While it takes into account the changing situation of women within the household, it also focuses on the role many women played in the establishment of women's organizations in Western India. The chapter also focuses on the involvement of women of Western India in the Gandhian mass movements or constructive programs of Mahatma Gandhi.

## **CHAPTER 5: HISTORICIZING THE EVERYDAY LIFE AND ISSUE OF 'ORDINARY' WOMEN**

Hence in this chapter, the lives of ordinary women are brought to light by using both the archival sources as well as folk traditions. The issues related with common women i.e. the struggle they faced; their achievements; their daily lives and routine are discussed to prove that women's history has to be different from those of men, as their experiences are also equally different.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION**

This chapter discusses the findings and conclusions of the present study.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**