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## Reflections on South Asian Women's/Gender History: Past and Future

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

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*Geraldine Forbes*

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At the first conference held on Women's History in Bangladesh,<sup>1</sup> a member of the audience commented that she and many others had pursued "women's history" long before it had a name. She joked about the term "gender" as another example of innovative renaming and asked what was really new. During the conference, I talked with students enrolled in Dhaka University's Women's Studies program and learned that they regarded women's studies, gender studies, and feminism as one and the same. In their view, focusing on women as a course of study was a political and social act, a statement about their priorities and life choices. In both cases, these individuals expressed a deep commitment to changing the reality of women's lives and saw women's history and women's or gender studies as a means to that end.

These experiences are a fitting introduction to this essay in which I reflect on the connection between politics and South Asian women's history, and urge feminist scholars living in the West to pay attention to the histories being written and the politics that inform them. As feminists and scholars we recognize that politics play a role in the topics we choose and the way we write, but living in the West affords us protections that our colleagues in India, or Bangladesh, or Pakistan, or Sri Lanka do not have. For us, calling oneself a feminist or deciding to write women's history are personal and professional decisions. They are not in themselves political acts with consequences beyond one's social circle and workplace. This essay is not a comprehensive review of women's history<sup>2</sup> but rather an attempt to survey the progress of women's history in India in relation to political events and scholarly trends.

The "woman question" emerged in nineteenth century India as colonial officials, progressives, and traditionalists debated women's relationship to modernity. While a great deal was written about women, there were no histories of women until the 1930s. These first histories, written by men, were based as much on fantasy as research, and usually glorified the ancient past.<sup>3</sup> Neera Desai's *Woman In Modern India* (1957)<sup>4</sup>, the first scholarly (and first feminist) history of Indian women, included a critique of Indian society. In contrast, most of the books about Indian women published in the 1950s and 1960s celebrated their political

achievements in the struggle for freedom from British rule.<sup>5</sup> *Towards Equality: the Report of the Committee on the Status of Women In India*, (1974) was the next major publication, after Desai, to candidly assess the position of women. This report not only influenced how historians would read the history of women from independence until the 1970s, it set the research agenda for the future. From the mid 1970s to the mid 1980s historians focused on locating and preserving women's records, making women visible, and documenting the lives of non-elite women

India's first Women's Studies programs, also begun in the 1970s, introduced women as a research subject. *Towards Equality's* argument, that the majority of women did not enjoy "the rights and opportunities guaranteed to them by the Constitution,"<sup>6</sup> injected a note of immediacy into the project. According to Vina Mazumdar, the outspoken Member-Secretary of the committee and author of a minority report, this document set the agenda for emerging Women's Studies programs: to work for policies that would benefit women, convince the social science community to include gender as a category of analysis, and revive the debate on women's issues.<sup>7</sup> By 1986 the University Grants Commission had approved the formation of Women's Studies centers throughout India devoted to research, teaching, documentation, and outreach.

Women's Studies in India has had different goals than Women's Studies in the West. While feminist scholars in American colleges and universities worked to develop undergraduate majors and graduate degrees in Women's Studies, research and activism have motivated programs in India. Because the structure of the undergraduate degree makes it difficult to introduce interdisciplinary majors, there are...



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