



Devika Rangachari. *Invisible Women, Visible Histories: Gender, Society and Polity in North India, 7-12th Century AD.* New Delhi: Manohar Publishers & Distributors, 2009. 531 pp. \$70.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-81-7304-808-1.

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Women in Medieval Indian History: The Problem of Finding Them

This is an ambitious book, whose aim is to bring a gendered perspective to the social and political history of North India in the early medieval period, not merely to locate important women figures in Indian history but to acknowledge the agency of women in any context (p. 10). Sharply critical of other historical studies which have the effect of invisibilizing the identities of women (p. 459), Rangachari seeks to challenge the apparent irrelevance of women to the political and social order of medieval times (p. 497). She divides the book into three major sections, each treating a different region of North India—Kashmir, Kanauj, and Bengal-Bihar. Over five hundred pages in length, with extensive notes and bibliography, this volume provides a virtually encyclopedic survey of the secondary literature, not only that pertaining to the history of these three regions, but, more interestingly, that concerned with the problem of women's history—going back to the classics of the 1980s produced by American and Indian scholars and coming up to very recent works treating women in India's history.

Each of the three sections is structured similarly, with an introductory chapter providing a political framework for the region in the period of the seventh to twelfth centuries, followed by one or two longer chapters devoted to a treatment of the presence of women in the available primary sources, and a short summary of the findings for each region. These three

lengthy sections are bracketed by a general introduction and a brief conclusion, which emphasizes the variations in the roles and influence of women among the three regions, and across the period surveyed. Although there is some overlap among the three sections in terms of the themes explored or the types of women considered—e.g., queens, female attendants in the court, non-royal women, prostitutes, and courtesans—each of the sections is quite different with respect to the kinds of primary materials that are used. In the section on Kashmir, Rangachari relies almost exclusively on Kalhan's *Rājataranginī*, with some reference to *Nalapati*, the *Kuttikanmatam*, and the *Samayamtrikā*. For Kanauj, there is some attention paid to inscriptional evidence, but literature provides the bulk of the primary-source material employed, especially *Harsacarita* and *Kādambarā*, the plays of Harsa, and Bhavabhuti's *Mālatīmādhava* and *Uttara-Rāmacarita*. In the case of Bengal and Bihar, literary material being relatively sparse, more use is made of epigraphical sources.

It is surprising that this book has so little space dedicated to the analysis of inscriptions relevant to the author's aims; even though these sources are the foundation for the treatment of Bengal-Bihar from a gendered perspective, the number of pages in the entire book which are concerned with the presentation and discussion of epigraphical evidence adds up to just over fifty

in total. (A further problem lies with the incomplete citation of the published texts of the inscriptions, so that it is in a number of cases impossible for the reader to have a look at the evidence for herself.) With reference to Kanauj, Rangachari tells us in the introduction to her book that the inscriptions provide information [which] can be integrated very usefully with the literary evidence (p. 12). Yet on the first page of chapter 7 (a gendered perspective on Kanauj in the time of HarsĪṭa), inscriptions are disqualified from having any contribution to make—apparently because of their total silence on RĀjyaĀrĀ, HarsĪṭa's sister and a crucially important figure at the time, or perhaps because the inscriptions' accounts of HarsĪṭa ancestry is at complete variance with BĀnĪṭa's genealogical account in *HarsĪṭacarita*, an account which in an important sense ... seems more relevant for a gendered reconstruction (pp. 230-31). Chapter 8 (on Kanauj in the reign of YaĀovarman, the PratihĀras, and the GĀhadĪṭavĀlas) shows somewhat more appreciation for what the inscriptions have to offer—although when the epigraphic sources for YaĀovarman's reign can, at no point, be corroborated by the literary evidence (p. 300), these sources are rapidly passed over. But Rangachari's discussion of the inscriptions produced in Kanauj under the GĀhadĪṭavĀlas (where there is no literary evidence) demonstrates the potential for these sources—these particular inscriptions, recording the grants made by royal women, perhaps having more to offer than some of the others surveyed in this volume. It is clear, for example, that the PĀla inscriptions, discussed in the section on Bengal-Bihar, are a source of frustration for their failure to provide information about queens, while those of other dynasties, like the Senas, are richer in this regard—but may fail to give us any insight into the activities of non-royal women.

Rangachari is very explicit in her intention to subject the work of earlier historians to scrutiny, with a focus on their deficiencies with respect to the portrayal of women's actual presence and power. She mentions several times the way in which certain historical works relegate this topic to a brief section on the "Position of Women" sandwiched between considerations of "Varna," "Food and Drink," "Dress and Ornament," etc.—and I am absolutely sympathetic to her impatience with this mode of presentation, removing women from "real" history. At the same time, it seems to me that this kind of approach has in the last twenty years become increasingly less fashionable, and at too many points in the book, I felt that Rangachari was squandering her energies by devoting herself to extended and detailed critiques of other

scholars—whom, in fact, I am very unlikely to read. What I wanted instead was a less critical and more constructive history, one of Rangachari's own making.

This author does indeed provide a great deal in the way of information gleaned from her sources and thought-provoking explorations of this material. And she expresses her findings most confidently in the section of the book devoted to Kashmir, where she builds on her extensive earlier research on the *RĀjataranĪginĪĀ*, a source that she regards as a "largely objective" historical account (pp. 46-47), concluding that medieval Kashmir provided a political and social context that enabled Kashmiri women to subvert the patriarchal edifice time and again (p. 193). But elsewhere in this volume, the result of Rangachari's analysis is quite inconclusive, her findings expressed tentatively or as possibilities. Frequently a subsection will end with a series of unanswered questions, which contain certain suggestions, but leave us guessing how Rangachari herself would like to answer them. This is especially the case in the section on Kanauj, where the attitudes of BĀnĪṭa, HarsĪṭa, and BhavabhĀti as suggested in their literary compositions give rise to speculations about the relation of their characterizations and plots to their life experiences and social contexts. Thus, for example: "Did BĀnĪṭa, then, approve of women taking independent decisions regarding their lives? Was his awareness of an ascetic's life gleaned from his friend, the ascetic widow, CakravĀkikĀ? Was his awareness of the social predicament of an independent woman based on her situation?" (p. 278). The implication often seems to be that these authors' "unconventional" views about women challenged current norms or provided a sympathetic commentary on the way in which the "Brahmanical patriarchal milieu" (p. 321; also pp. 274, 310) shaped the circumstances of women of this time and place. Yet what and how do we know about the actual salience of such Brahmanical norms in the lives of medieval women?

In undertaking a historical reconstruction on the basis of sparse and scattered primary-source material, as Rangachari attempts in this volume, one encounters serious methodological problems. As Gabrielle Spiegel has described one such problem with reference to her own research on medieval Europe, it is an "epistemological cheat" to use a text both as a document describing a historical situation and as a self-reflective commentary on that situation; historical contexts must be defined and constructed before one can engage in an interpretation of the past through, for example, the reading of literary texts.[1] But I believe that there is really no way to escape this trap. One encounters the identical problem

with the corpus of inscriptions for a particular place and period—how does one decide that part of the information provided is evidence for an historical background and another part useful for constructing a narrative that plays out against this background, for example an account of the changing roles and activities of medieval Indian women? The hope that using inscriptions and literary texts together might provide a resolution, complementing one another as background and foreground sources, cannot, unfortunately, be sustained. The optimism that Rangachari expresses in the introduction to her book, that in the case of Kanauj “there is a largely fruitful conjunction of literary and epigraphic evidence” (p. 10) turns out in chapters 7 and 8 to be unjustified. Yet even if they cannot be *coordinated*, it is of the utmost importance to bring these various kinds of historical materials into relation with one another, and, as Romila Thapar

suggests, the manner in which we do this is most realistically and effectively a *juxtaposition*, where we attempt to discern both the links among and the distinctiveness of our sources. From this point of view, Devika Rangachari surely deserves our admiration. The scope of her inquiry, the willingness to engage with source materials of such disparate types, and the courage to accept the challenges that her project involves are all praiseworthy. So Devika Rangachari is to be congratulated, not criticized, both for her caution and for her ambition in this book.

Notes

[1]. Spiegel, *The Past as Text: The Theory and Practice of Medieval Historiography* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997), xix, 51-52.

[2]. Thapar, *Somanatha: The Many Voices of a History* (New Delhi: Penguin/Viking, 2004), 8.

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