Peering into hidden worlds

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Visible Histories: disappearing women
Mahua Sarkar, Zubaan, 2009, pp 280, Rs 595

Muslim women of late colonial Bengal have been denied their presence by conventional history, contends Mahua Sarkar. How did these women become more marginalised than their Hindu contemporaries? Scholars have pointed out the often unintentional Hindu majority bias of conventional written history. The intellectual politics of mainstream feminist scholarship has unwittingly relegated these women to the sidelines.

The author contends that history is not simply “an incomplete record of the past’ in need of correction but an active participant in the ... ‘exclusion and subordination’” of such groups. Between the pages rife with footnotes, quotations and references to extensive archival research and oral histories, the author reveals glimpses of unsung but vibrant women who contributed to the social fabric of their times.

Mahua Sarkar brings to light little known facts and raises questions. Much has been made of the famous Bethune School, which was opened in Calcutta in 1849 to educate native women. Contemporary records show that in 1822 a Muslim woman had started a school for girls in the Shyambazar area of Calcutta, a fact sidelined by mainstream history.

The author discusses how “a significant number of Muslim intellectuals opposed political separation,” even as they insisted on their cultural distinctions and criticised the implied majority feeling of many Hindus. These men were interested in a gamut of social reforms, some of which could significantly impact the lives of women. Women intellectuals and reformers not only participated, but were at times in the forefront of critical public exchanges. Muslim women of late colonial Bengal are conventionally portrayed as the “oppressed, mute, backward, and eventually invisible ‘other’ of modern history” even when some of them actually engaged in progressive and proactive activities.

By the first decade of the twentieth century, many Muslim women not just in Bengal, and even in cities like Lahore and Bombay, were writing in periodicals and expressing their views. In 1903, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, a Muslim woman, wrote a “severe indictment of gender inequality in which she compares the gift of jewellery from a husband to his wife with chains of bondage.” Interestingly, this provoked her educated Hindu sisters to retort with reactions such as “A woman must always be subordinated to her husband; there is nothing wrong with that.”

This is not a light-hearted and entertaining book to help kill time in the airport lounge. It isn’t meant to be. This scholarly study unveils hidden layers of history and is not simply a dry account. This book attempts to peer into the hidden world of marginalised women including nautch girls and concubines of British men stationed in the subcontinent.

Contemporary travelogues and memoirs speak of an ‘erotic East’, with seraglos teeming with dusky ‘sirens’ who understood “in perfection all the arts and wiles of love...” Other writers dwell upon hapless widows, devdasis and satis, in dire need of rescue by self-proclaimed English saviours.

The untold stories of these hidden women who appeared briefly in formal records only to disappear again, brings to life unknown aspects of our past. This original and compelling study concludes by tracing the complex links between past constructions of Muslim women, current
representations and the violence against them in contemporary India.