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Selective Amnesia and South Asian Histories: An Interview with Indrani Chatterjee

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Indrani Chatterjee is a Professor of History at the University of Texas, Austin. In her pioneering work over the past twenty-five years, Chatterjee has illuminated new dimensions of a variety of underexplored themes in South Asia's past—including slavery, the household, and monasticism—and has critically reappraised gender and sexuality as frameworks in South Asian history. Her first book, *Gender, Slavery, and Law in Colonial India*, demonstrated the intersections between kinship, dependence, and enslavement, complexities that necessitate a more nuanced appreciation of slave agency and subalternity.[1] Chatterjee showed that the historical experience of slavery in South Asia did not conform to the Atlantic model. The authors interviewed Chatterjee on 21 January 2020 in Leiden. This edited excerpt focuses on several strands of Chatterjee's more recent research—including religion, governance, "connected histories," gender, and sexuality—and highlights how the power dynamics of academia have shaped these literatures. In her 2013 book *Forgotten Friends,* Chatterjee studied the monastic lineages that have historically linked and governed the diverse populations and ecologies of the eastern Himalayas and the Brahmaputra valley.[2] From the late eighteenth century, colonial and postcolonial governments partitioned these interconnected geographies into discrete administrative units and categorised their populations as distinct "aboriginal tribes" (*adivasis*). Even though the old teacher-disciple bonds were disrupted and forgotten by generations of administrators and scholars, these ties have endured. Chatterjee highlights the urgency of excavating these historical connections, without which a full understanding of community in South Asia will remain elusive.

Jessica: *So Indrani, why did you become a historian?*

Indrani: That's a really hard question to answer because it was such a long time ago. Perhaps because I was fascinated by a lot of the architecture of old sites around me in Delhi. When I was a schoolgirl, our teachers would take us out to various sites of Mughal architecture on school trips. I remember a particular visit to

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Humayun's Tomb, which was so riveting for me that I never wanted to do anything else after that. I wanted to know, who lived here? Who were the Mughals? I never fully understood the answers the textbooks gave. Eventually, I began to understand that the textbooks were incomplete, and that I would have other answers in time. By the time I left school, it was very clear that I wanted to pursue history, though my family had other plans.

Girija: [*laughs*]

Indrani: You laugh, but it's very recognisable.

Girija: *I laugh* because *it's recognisable*.

Indrani: They wanted for me either to become a doctor, or a civil servant at the very least. They could predict poverty and social ruin in my future as a historian, but nobody actually stopped me. I was also very fortunate in having a feminist movement happening in my youth, which fed me my questions. And an elder friend, Papiya Ghosh, who was herself a historian. She guided and tutored me in a way that nobody else in my family could. After I got to Jawaharlal Nehru University, an aunt and uncle also actively supported my research in the archives.

Girija: *We wondered whose writing influenced you, as a scholar?*

Indrani: Lots of people have influenced me, enormously. Of course, Edward Said, but I was also very swayed by the Annales school. I remember reading Fernand Braudel and being so lost in wonder, and I remember reading others, like Georges Duby, Christopher Hill, E. P. Thompson. The worlds that they could conjure up! I thought, all of us must have the same archives, right? So of course, we will be able to tell the same kinds of stories! It's only once you begin to go to the archives that you realise they're nothing like that. But those were very attractive historical models, nonetheless. I also remember being very influenced by the exciting and challenging American feminist writing which came out at the same time. The combination of the two was very heady. It shaped the questions that I was asking: Why don't we have a history of marriage and family? Why is ours so flat? Why is it all about the *Rig Veda*?

Jessica: *When I recently taught Braudel, I confess I struggled with his generalisations. But reading it in the present also shifts your perspective*.

Indrani: I agree. Today, now that we have learned so much about the history of North Africa, and we've learned to do the *whole* Mediterranean, not just one part of the Mediterranean, that book [*The Mediterranean*] can seem limited.[3] But think thirty years ago. We were being exposed to these different layers of time, learning that oceanic time has a different scale and rhythm to event-time. This is similar to what Dipesh Chakrabarty would later call "heterotemporality." Braudel began to shape the way we thought of time-space. Before we

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read that book, we had a simple notion of chronology—time in the Gregorian calendar. Things were ancient, medieval, or modern, and of course, since modernity was identified with everything that was wonderful and scientific, we were all historians of modern India. All this was only slowly undone during my MA and MPhil years when I encountered great books, philosophers, and very good teachers in Delhi University and JNU. I realised that, actually, my own family surroundings provided perfect examples of hetero-temporal orders; that my grandmother's code existed in the same plane, in the same time, alongside my own, even though each spoke to very different registers and to different aspirations for a good human life. Being able to recognise both as equally legitimate—that the earlier codes had not all been stamped out—was something I realised after reading Braudel. So, the distance between what I was reading and my own life began to disappear. And once that happens, the learning becomes much more synthetic. You're not just thinking, "this is work, and so-and-so said this, and it's got nothing to do with who I am."

Girija: *We wanted to talk about your most recent book,* Forgotten Friends. *How did you come to write this history of monastic communities in northeastern India? And could you say something about monastic governmentality as a concept?*

Indrani: I began to inch my way towards monastic communities because of my own records. I had struggled with writing about some local histories of a region called Tripura: after 1947, the plains became part of East Pakistan and then Bangladesh and the more hilly parts remained in India. I had visited sites on the Indian side. And I slowly pieced together that all the inscriptions that had been embedded in various temple walls had been torn away and deposited in a museum, around which a history had then been written, which was commissioned by a certain powerful family in the region. Once I began to realise that the temple structures and the little sacred sites were historically important, I had to expand my own reading of the narrative. I began to understand that the stories included a mix of Shakta, Tantra, Mahayana ideas. When I began the project in 2000, I had not wanted to read in religion, because religion was overdone, especially for South Asia. And all the records of religion appeared to be shaped by Orientalism. Who wanted to repeat that? But in thinking like that, I had developed a fierce resistance to reading my own records correctly. Then one day, I went to an archaeological site called Pilak. As I was looking around, one of the local youths hanging around came up and said, "You want to see a tribal?" So I said, "yes." He drove me on his mo-bike to a poor Buddhist sharecroppers' settlement. It had mud houses, and its own tin-roofed temple, where the Buddha statues were made of mud. And here was this very confident local young man telling me that I was witnessing the working of a "tribal" village. That's when everything flipped for me. I began to undo what I thought was "tribal." I began to realise that there were parallel

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worlds that I was reading in and looking at. What was "tribal" from one point of view was a deliberate way of living collectively around the commons, in a very poor, marginal landscape of sharecroppers who worked on tenants' land, received some grain, and lived on that. They had collectivised their labour and resources. There was one elder male, with younger men under him, but many different kinds of households and women, old and young, all working together and sustaining a certain kind of life. That's when I began to rethink the categories that we had inherited. That's when I began to think about monastic communities and the role of the lay household that supports the monks. Where are the monks coming from? They're coming from mothers in such humble communities that have birthed them. They're coming from lay households that have made a "gift" of a son or daughter to the *sangha* [Buddhist monastic community] and accepted that the earnings of the child will never be available to the household again. My own paper sources were pushing me in one way. But only after I had roamed around Agartala, Pilak, Baxanagar, and its lived communities did I recognise what my paper records were trying to say.

So, why "monastic governmentality"? Of course, I was playing with Foucault's "pastoral governmentality" at that point. Greg Schopen, Jonathan Silk, and others had examined themes of Buddhist monks and nuns embroiled with management of property.[4] Their work inspired me to rethink how we could repurpose "governmentality" for South Asian pasts. In the texts I was looking at, there were two senses of governmentality. One was that of a monastic lineage with a head teacher/patriarch and a line of initiated and lay disciples committed to notions and practices of mind-body exercises. A second sense was the issue of livelihood resources that this lineage and its followers lived off, or managed. *Governmentality* incorporated both levels: one, the (Foucauldian) training of conduct of the individual lay and initiated members within each lineage; two, the Schopen-Silk evidence of governing the resources and managing the households entwined with those lineages in an economy, an *oikos*. People who think of governmentality as secular administration or associate the term with surveillance by a state machinery get only one part of the whole. But if they look at the multiple Saiva, Vaisnava and Sakta monastic lineages whose lay followers and supporters vote for the Bharatiya Janata Party [currently India's premier Hindu nationalist ruling party], then they can see "monastic governmentality" at work within the domain of secular electoral politics and constitutional governments in India.

Jessica: That raises the question, how do you think about the relationship between the household and governmentality or the state?

Indrani: By positioning our evidence against the simple conceptual binaries that we have inherited. For instance, "state" vs. "people," or "subjects." The historical

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material—which is lyric poetry, archaeological material, epigraphic material, and the landscape itself—tells a different story, one of hierarchical relationships between layers of households. To elaborate, consider the heteronormative households of extended kin on the ground, which relate to homosocial households and lineages, the *sanghas*, the brotherhoods of *sadhus* [ascetics]. Historians of modern India had not identified the homosocial monastic lodges as particular kinds of households. But these too had "patriarchs." They too had to be fed and managed in exactly the same ways as the households based on marriages. Furthermore, many of the monastic orders of Vaisnavas and Saivas allowed married monks as well. All of these produced the same kinds of affects and were dependent on identical kinds of labours, and division of work, and resources. These multiple homosocial and heterosexual monastic lodges then mediated cultivators' relationships with other ruling households, such as the *rajas* [kings], and the *zamindars* [landowners]; and *they* in turn act as intermediaries with higher households and groups. So what we are looking at is a hierarchy of multiple kinds of households. The hierarchy itself was volatile because the households constantly negotiated between each other and within themselves, moving, shifting, cultivating, taking their animals out to graze. Perhaps from Orientalists we had inherited an understanding that the marriage-based household was unchanging; the historical evidence indicated that this was not true at any point. Furthermore, since Dumont, we had all understood hierarchy, but we had not put the multiple households in that hierarchy into motion at the same time.[5]

Jessica: *Of course, it depends on the categories that appear in your sources, right?*

Indrani: Absolutely! However, if you juxtapose one source against another, you are also likely to ask why one term does *not* appear in one of your sources. Look at both sources from the ground up, rather than from above. Reverse your own reading relationship to a text or an object. Go outside of your own body, circumstance, location. Much more can be made out of each set of archives.

Jessica: *In* Forgotten Friends *you argue that "non-sectarianism" characterised the Mahayana Buddhist, Bon Tantric, Vaishnava, Shaiva, and Sufi monastic communities you examined. Could you explain how "monastic governmentality" brings a new perspective to the history of religion in South Asia?*

Indrani: I don't think that my work speaks to the older-style religious studies people. Because they study "canonical" texts, philosophies, beliefs. My records are historical narratives constructed in the nineteenth century by men steeped in particular traditions. Perhaps people in religious studies might be confounded by the absence of a canon. My project was to show why people who may be Mahayana Buddhist, Saiva, and Muslim might actually coexist in the same

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terrain. I did not want to answer questions of origins implied in "aboriginality." I wanted to tell the story of how different units got along and why ideas could cross boundaries and sometimes flare up as conflicts. That's against the grain of older-style religious studies scholarship. It's also against the grain of monograph writing. Monographs focus on one thing and they go deep down and they write all about that thing. Whereas *Forgotten Friends* is a kind of multi-graph: many lineage formations, household formations—intersecting, cross-cutting, overlapping—and then sometimes competing, falling out, quite violently. So, it's the full complexity of life, perhaps not the older religious studies as our generation inherited it.

Reading Talal Asad and Sabah Mahmood allowed me to move away from the older field-formation. There was a great deal of churn in the field and there seemed to be a new phenomenology of religion. Many scholars—including Arvind Mandair, Purushottama Bilimoria, Rosalind O'Hanlon, and Vasudha Dalmia—were simultaneously historicising and redefining religion itself, so that we didn't have a single understanding of religion, we had multiple perspectives on it.[6] That gave me the impetus to reread my records. We will have to wait and see whether my effort at rethinking religiosity in the concrete domain of power will take or not. But there are some great young scholars in the field now, who have all the languages necessary and are open minded enough to take on these questions. I am thinking of Katherine Schofield, Audrey Truschke, Elaine Fisher, Valerie Stoker. But I also hear from many younger scholars in the field of South Asian Religious Studies (in the US and Canada) who have communicated their engagement with the book. Just recently, I came across Brian Hatcher's 2020 book *Hinduism before Reform*, which took on my argument of the "political" at the heart of the religious.

Girija: *It feels like everything is being redefined in terms of relationships for you, in terms of care, proximity, obligation—including religion.*

Indrani: Yes, absolutely. What do you think religion is? It's just another level of obligation to a certain set of practices. In my youth, I was very taken with Marx's line about religion being the hope in a hopeless world. The poor who are defeated, they still have available that expectation of care. Except, of course, in the history of the West, there was the solution of *the* church and its local branch, which provided some kind of pastoral care. I was looking for that in the historic landscape of South Asia. But there was no single church, but many lineages of teachers with dispersed followers and spread-out localised settlements.

Jessica: *But also interconnected?*

Indrani: Very interconnected. And, of course, when ruptures happen those connections also break. People leave one community and go off to another. They migrate, they run away. So, then relationships are the core from where I am beginning

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to piece things together. And the relationships—that was well spotted—they are not just between men and women. They are between mothers and children, teachers and disciples, tax collectors and subjects—they are all crisscrossing.

Jessica: *The next set of questions we want to ask you is related to gender and sexuality—categories you have problematised in various ways. What has your research revealed about women's location within political and economic networks?*

Indrani: I'm challenging the old understanding of gender as an agonistic relationship between men and women. In the South Asian context, we have different kinds of groups and generations of women acting alongside men, as well as in spheres distinctly marked as female. Sometimes gender is used to simply stand in for "women." It is actually the different layers of relationships in which men and women interact and are then understood to be such-and-such a man, such-and-such woman. So a poor Brahman man and rich Kayastha woman interacting with each other would experience different aspects of gender as a relational and shifting part of their lives. I'm trying to extend this understanding of gender and sexuality in South Asia as relational at all times, to take account of monastic initiations and affinities. The singularity of womanhood may not be a very productive way to think through a new history of gender for South Asia. It's men *and* women who may be caregivers. We can have women as market women or governors in different ways. My aim is to open up the possibilities for gender history in a more capacious vein, that doesn't collapse the conception of women as actors into binaries—as agents or victims, as heroines or slaves—the binaries that we have all inherited. And therefore, I want to make all of women's history part of public history, part of political history.

Jessica: *So it makes no sense to say, "what was women's role in X?" Is that why the household is a productive starting point?*

Indrani: The household is a site of labour for the domestic servant, perhaps a male cook, a female cook or nurse. So, what is *private* to the merchant-bourgeois imagination is the site of "public" labour for the servant, at the same time as it is the site of comfort production, leisure production for certain groups. To see the household as a productive site—in terms of histories of work and emotion, in terms of the networks of power that connect one household to another—we see complexity at all points, rather than simplicity or binaries. I think that's been my ambition all my life.

Jessica: [*laughs*] *Making things more complicated?*

Indrani: I know! Sorry, sorry! But it also decolonises our imaginations, right?

Girija: *In* Gender, Slavery and Law, *you mentioned that there's an inherent ageism and sexism to colonial categories, which renders invisible the labour of*

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women, infants, and diverse people who don't conform to a binary gender norm. I wonder, do you think that those blind spots have shrunk significantly since when you started?

Indrani: Yes, now that all of you are on the scene—Jessica, Nick Abbott, and many more in the pipeline will continue to complicate and nuance scholarship. But it's not going to be possible if we don't constantly stay on guard against the old binaries and the old moral certitudes of the nineteenth century. None of the challenging, fine-tuning, complicating theory will survive our complacency. Even so, people are still very resistant, especially the older generations of white and brown men, who hold all the levers of power and profit, of promotions, of prestige and of publications. I used to think that eventually they will see the light of day. But no, they won't. You will just have to organise better resistance—like you are doing right here.

Girija: Why is that attitude so resilient?

Indrani: People who have invested all their lives in thinking about the world in a particular way feel extremely threatened if asked to think differently. Because it means giving up their own power.

Jessica: I think there is more openness to critiquing colonial gender and sexuality structures, at least, if the implications for the present aren't seriously considered, or it helps white academic culture superficially appear *progressive*.

Indrani: Perhaps. But critique has not sold books in the same way books that romanced the colonial past did and continue to do. Till white men and women join the African Americans, African scholars in Africa, and South Asianist critical scholars writing from and within the South Asian academe in disidentifying from the racism, sexism, and classism on which colonial rule succeeded everywhere, the critiques will never take. Moreover, they will not change the structures of publication, awards, fellowships, and so on. And the structure of power and privilege is at the heart of why certain notions and theories have persisted. It will be naïve on our parts if we don't understand how fundamental the racism-classism-sexism of Old Colonialism is to the structure and function of the academe, in who and what is "talked up" and what is "talked down."

Jessica: In "When 'Sexuality' Floated Free of Histories in South Asia" you argued that the process of naming something "sexual" is part of the history of colonialism, and also intersects with the development of "Indian secularism."[7] In particular, relationships within monastic communities were labelled as forms of "sexuality." Could you explain that process? How should historians of sexual desire or the body think about how they use this analytical category of sexuality?

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Indrani: It is a huge historical project. I wrote that after having finished my research on *Forgotten Friends* when I realised that I was working with Foucault's understanding of sexuality. You call something sexuality and it's a discursive phenomenon. It struck me that it is a particularly colonial phenomenon when you *can't* allow yourself to see the whole monastic lineage within which a *Khwajasarai* [literally "lord of the house," a polite form of describing an enslaved inter-sexed person] is also a Sufi, is also a manager of the estate, and has relationships with *gurus* and the cadets. Collapsing all of those relationships as "sexuality" evades having to handle the complexity of *all* these intersectional relationships. Sexuality then becomes a reductive mode of discoursing about a very complex set of relationships, affiliations, obligations, actions, and property relations. And that's borne out by research, rather than theories mechanically applied to my data. I was asking my friends in sexuality studies to recover the complexity of all the other relationships that had been eroded by this colonial labelling of "this is sex and we're going to prosecute it." Because the prosecutorial mode of relating to a certain group or its lifeways is born in an evangelical, missionising, political context where there is a right and a wrong to sex—and how it's to be had or not had—which is very different from, say, non-missionary conversations on pleasure, status, or dignities. So, there are plural and simultaneous discursive registers. They function to create their objects in different ways. To assume that by calling something sex or sexuality we can recover all those other registers is simply not viable; it's incomplete as a method. See Anshu Malhotra's study of a Muslim former prostitute in a Sikh sect for that complex sense I am trying to get at.[8] I had come to this position after having looked at various Buddhist and Shaiva Tantra traditions, in which sexual discipline is part of a broader ascetic practice. Tantric exercises are meant to enable the ascetic to go beyond their sense of self, to go beyond their sense of disgust, to rise above it, to transcend it. All of those ascetic exercises involve acts that you or I might call "sex," say, the taking of menstrual blood onto your tongue, having genital intercourse without ejaculation. They're not about sexuality per se. I was trying to say that calling something sexuality is actually a cop out, for South Asia at least. It's following the colonial masters' gaze.

Jessica: *In* Forgotten Friends, *"amnesia" is a key concept. You write that your aim is to identify the "causes and costs" of "amnesia" within historical texts, but also within postcolonial scholarship, which has not* seen *monastic forms of governmentality. How have you thought about the historical process of remembering and forgetting?*

Indrani: I had begun by acknowledging that memory is shaped by the community around you, which wants you to remember something, or wants you to forget. So, I had used the term agnosia, which was from Londa Schiebinger and

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Richard Proctor's work. In researching cigarette smoking and addiction, Proctor had established that advertisers knew of the death rates, but they consistently invested in creating ignorance about it in the populace. He termed that deliberate creating of ignorance "agnosia." Schiebinger, a historian of science, had worked with that concept in the context of colonial botany and medicine. She had shown that seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Caribbean women knew of certain plants that were abortifacients and had shared that with European women botanists. But that knowledge was never used in eighteenth-century Europe, simply because the need for demographic plenty made that knowledge of abortifacients pointless. Caribbean medical knowledge didn't transfer to Europe, and it was both historical and deliberate. Knowledge about something was suppressed. I think that gives a better understanding of why people forgot certain things—because they were trained to forget. Certain political structures or communities had invested in this unknowing. When I submitted my draft for *Forgotten Friends* with agnosia in it, everybody who read it said, "no, this is too strong." So, I took out agnosia and went with amnesia. But people also have to be educated into amnesia. Training in remembering and training in forgetting is part of social training. Schools, home, lineages, affiliates—they can all shape your memory and your forgetting. For me, therefore, it's not some sort of natural process; it's a very well-considered, active, social, political, and invested process.

I see this now around me, in the evidence that is on the ground of cross-Himalayan networks between, say, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh, and Nepal and Himachal Pradesh. That evidence is there, people just consistently refuse to engage with it. So it's not just happenstance that they don't know it. That's where nationalism has succeeded, that's where xenophobia in the modern day will continue to succeed, because people have invested in not recognising their connected pasts, in order to deliberately wipe those pasts out. Textbooks, educational funding, our leadership, our political parties are all part of that investment structure to keep people from recognising their very complex pasts.

Girija: *You have recently suggested that "connected histories" are a limited aspiration for South Asian history because some connections appear to us more readily than others.*

Indrani: Absolutely, and connections with Europeans are much more readily embraced, and are made much of, perhaps because of globalisation and market-related European funding for it. Whereas trans-Asian relationships are much harder to establish and recognise, partly because there is less funding, less training in the languages, less prestige, less glamour involved.

Jessica: *Is it also because of the borders of the nation-state?*

Indrani: Sure, that is part of the problem. But within the Indian nation-state itself, there is more of a market for histories about the Dutch, French, and English in

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South Asia in the seventeenth century than for the history of the relationships between, say, Tibetan nomadic herders and Pithoragarh. It's a fact that they are happening at the same time, but the modern readers living in a postcolonial nation-state look for only one kind of prestigious connection, guided by the present political order and the flows of the remittance-based economy. There is an active investment in not recovering some connected histories, deliberately pushing those into the background. We need to recover *all* of those inconvenient relationships simultaneously and try to see how and why they worked and were sustained in different ways. Yes, we've all always been connected to Europe—what's new about that?

Girija: *You said that this decolonial connected history is difficult because there's resistance to it. But what would you say to people who suggest that the archives, sources, practicalities, and logistics are difficult?*

Indrani: Those difficulties are real. Let's grant that learning multiple languages is difficult. It's time consuming. Then access to archives both within nation-states and across international boundaries is getting harder with every passing day. [The recent pandemic has only worsened the situation.] So, I don't want to downplay any of the actual financial, physical, and logistical difficulties, in addition to the political difficulties of nation-state boundaries. There are also certain emotional and cultural constraints—the fear of being the solitary figure doing something against the consensus can be terrifying for a young person. And the difficulties and constraints are magnified by gender, caste, class, and regional locations, especially in the subcontinent, where hostility towards critical research and higher education is rife in the public sector. But there are also countervailing possibilities and courageous individuals. Depending on where you live, there are centres which encourage critical research and find funds for students. Belonging to a group that is doing similar kinds of work might dissipate some of the fear of standing out, but one has to be very fortunate to find this kind of study-group.

Girija: *Since we are talking about the difficulties of terrain and geography, your work is rooted in specific ecologies. Could you talk about why ecologies are important?*

Indrani: How people survive has to matter to every materialist historian. How and what people eat, how they get their food, how their animals are fed, has to matter. And because I had begun life as a feminist historian, I realised that the labour of sustaining life—either of humans or of animals—has always been part of domestic labour in the subcontinent. Therefore, it mattered to me as a feminist that the terrain in which a household is located is part of how we think of the relationships within marriage.

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I began to understand some of this because of the new environmental history which was coming up in South Asia in my time. But also because I lived in the desert in Rajasthan as a child, where water was very hard to come by. Once a day, every household would be supplied one jerry can—the jerry can used to hold biscuits during the Second World War—of water from the local village well, and you had to survive on that. Your bathing, cleaning, utensils, cooking, and everything had to be done on that. I saw my mother cleaning utensils with sand once. Then I saw her cleaning other vessels with lemons and tamarind instead of water. So I learned existentially about the significance of sand, plants, and ecology in general. I remembered this knowledge when I visited the mountains and saw women walking huge distances carrying *matka*s [large pots] strapped to their heads. The women were responsible for gathering water. How could I be a feminist and not take the ecological context seriously? It's at the core of how much time a woman or a girl will be assigned to fetch the water, to fetch the wood for the fuel to burn in the *chulha* [stove] at home. It dictates gendered labour time according to the kind of household we are studying. Both environmental history as well as feminist scholarship made me understand the significance of ecology, as feminist labour time issues.

But also, when men have to walk with the animals to graze, they have to choose paths where water is available for their animals. The one thing that you cannot take for granted is the right to water in the landscape. And walking with a shepherd outside Pilak taught me that the human-animal relations were also central to understanding how labour time might be gendered differently, according to the particular ecology in question. I left one animal in each of the chapters of *Forgotten Friends* for that reason. It was not just a history of humans, it's also a reminder of non-humans in the same ecologies.

Girija: *The availability of a watering hole and pasture, the right to that pasture—those also have implications for work, wealth, and power. But when you take that as your point of departure, I've been told that it is environmentally deterministic. That I'm giving too much importance to the impact that ecology has on social relations. What is your take on that? I have a feeling that it has something to do with Eurocentricism and an unfamiliarity with other environments?*

Indrani: It could very well be. In your particular terrain—northern India—it was a very dry terrain until canal irrigation opened it up. Managing scrubland dependent on monsoons for irrigation did impact relationships across households, villages, and regimes of cooperation, competition, affiliation, and alliance-building. It is not deterministic to take environmental factors into account. To say that people are trying to make the best of this dry land by arranging assured markets for their animals' milk, or arriving at agreed-

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upon resources for pasturing in winter or summer—those are perfectly legitimate, historically recognisable, and archived facts. You're not saying that environment dictates everything, but that people take this environment into account. *Sukha para he* [It's all dry]. My sons are not going to be able to inherit this, or make a living off this; I can sell this land. Even now, these are absolute calculations in Jat villages where they are selling lands to ensure the preservation of the life of their sons, who are working in gyms, hotels, and so on. It is a factor in the calculations of parents and grandparents. Why should it not be a factor in the assessment that historians make of similar choices in the past?

Girija: *I think that people find it hard to appreciate that certain polities evolve as a way to manage resources and their distribution in certain ecologies.*

Indrani: People who have lived on flat land and had their grains supplied to them on a regular basis have no idea what it's like to live on top of a mountain where you can't actually grow your grain and have to either come down or have it transported. So, it depends on how empathetic and willing they are to extend their imagination to learn about other ecologies and constraints.

Jessica: *What are you working on at the moment?*

Indrani: I have been working on caste for my current project, precisely because I haven't yet taken it on centrally. I've had to do a lot of disentangling between caste and slavery, which came as a package from nineteenth-century colonial discourse and has been embraced by most twentieth-century Indian politicians, and by postcolonial scholars of all disciplines. For a long while, I didn't want to take it on, because I did not want to offend any more people in postcolonial India, especially given that critical Indian Dalit scholars are being imprisoned by the current central government.[9] So, I'm not working on the Dalit end of the story, but on the Brahmin end of the story. Like everyone else, I inherited this notion that Brahmins are responsible for social hierarchies. But the evidence I have stumbled over from the seventeenth century, right *into* the nineteenth century, is that there is no *one* Brahmin. From the thirteenth, fourteenth centuries, there were Brahmins who worked for the sultans, who are exact analogues of the skilled "slaves of the sultan."[10] Then historically, there were the *purohit*s in the temples, the priests, who may have been in a range of *jajmani* relations [service obligations] themselves, having to perform various tasks for their employers and patrons. The early historical records speak of *agrahar* [gifts of land or produce to Brahmins], which has suggested that the Brahmins preceded every other group and were supposed to be immune from execution for crimes. However, by the early nineteenth century in eastern and southeastern India, Brahmanical privileges were much more attenuated than we understand, as a consequence of colonial

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legal interventions. Many Brahmins had to work as *gumashta*s [agents] of European indigo planters. How can one retell the history of those regions keeping the diversity of Brahmins in mind?

Jessica: *In Susan Bayly's book* Caste, Society and Politics, *she argues that the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries see Brahmins' power increase, because emerging "warrior states" depend on Brahmanical patronage to make their claims to kingship.*[11] *Do you think your research goes against the grain of that?*

Indrani: Perhaps. I have not finished the research. Bayly looked at the western and southern parts, whereas eastern India from Magadh on eastward may have had a slightly different trajectory. In that terrain, Buddhist kings (the Palas) also employed Brahmins and gave them lands, but by the eighteenth century, there are very few major Brahmin *zamindars* in Mughal Bengal. There's a blip in the 1770s–1790s when Hastings and then Cornwallis recruited *pandit*s [Brahmin scholars] for the judiciary, but even that began to disappear by the 1820s. By then, even the Brahmin *pandits* were not, in fact, a unified collective. Given this historical diversity, I'm baffled by the singular genealogy of "Brahmanical patriarchy." For the eighteenth century, there is the evidence for the Chitpavans and the Deshasthas in Marathawada, but we don't have anything like that for Bengal. I think Susan Bayly's work might be revised a little bit with attention to the regional variations, as well as the religious lineages involved everywhere.

Jessica: *Could you tell us about your new book project?*

Indrani: I am trying again to begin with a model of government that does not begin and end with tax collection and policing. The historic models from the subcontinent included a broader set of activities required of a king—like "protecting" subjects from harm. Women of those governing households thus "governed" when they preserved life or enabled agriculture by building tanks, hospitals, and care institutions. Middle Bangla poetry talks of women in such households as sponsors, as infrastructure builders. I'm plotting the story of how marriages to such women would be a source of prestige to other rising households and incoming immigrant households. But if those women were part of households that butted heads with the Company's supporters on the ground, then those women (especially if they were elderly and at the helm of various estates, whether Muslim or Hindu) would suffer. Because the Company administration cooperated with junior men on those estates in realising their notions of coverture and fitting it neatly into an available logic of seclusion.[12] This was the beginning of the unbecoming of women's authority, political spaces, networks, investments, and acts for preservation of life. Moreover, this goes against the much vaunted "reform of women's position" associated with Rammohun Roy, the Brahmo Samaj,[13] and the 1829

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sati prohibition.[14] I need to re-examine *sati*, given Lata Mani and Gayatri Spivak's work—especially the latter, because she had suggested that the women committing suicide were likely protesting something.[15] Spivak was criticised fiercely then. But those who criticised her had not done the research for the century or even the decades prior, when there was a great economic and political fight on the ground.[16] Women were not just dying because of their "primitive" Brahmanic culture. There was something more happening on the ground that might have caused many women to protest, complain, and demand other things that we have not connected together yet. Perhaps Arik Moran's work might provide a good model for this.[17] But certainly, this is the right moment to also learn from the Shaheen Bagh women.[18] Being householder women doesn't mean that they are not politically very savvy and very courageous. When I see them, I feel that this has happened before. I am trying to ask myself where and when.

Notes

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1 Indrani Chatterjee, *Gender, Slavery, and Law in Colonial India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002. See also, Indrani Chatterjee, "The Locked Box in 'Slavery and Social Death,'" in *On Human Bondage: After Slavery and Social Death*, ed. John Bodel and Walter Scheidel, Chichester, West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons, 2016.

2 Indrani Chatterjee, *Forgotten Friends: Monks, Marriages, and Memories of Northeast India,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2013.

3 Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age Of Philip II*, 9th ed. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995.

4 Jonathan A. Silk, *Managing Monks: Administrators and Administrative Roles in Indian Buddhist Monasticism,* New York: Oxford University Press, 2011, http://dx.doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780195326840.001.0001.

5 Louis Dumont, *Homo Hierarchicus: The Caste System and Its Implications,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

6 E.g., Rosalind O'Hanlon and David Washbrook, eds., *Religious Cultures in Modern India: New Perspectives,* New Delhi: Routledge, 2011; Vasudha Dalmia and Mounis Faruqui, *Religious Interactions in Mughal India,* New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014.

7 Indrani Chatterjee, "When 'Sexuality' Floated Free of Histories in South Asia," *Journal of Asian Studies* 71:4 (November 2012): 945–62.

8 Anshu Malhotra, *Piro and the Gulabdasis: Gender, Sect and Society in Punjab*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2017.

9 The term "Dalit" (literally "trodden upon") is an identification used in contemporary India by communities who have historically been treated as "untouchable" and

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stereotypically associated with work considered "unclean." https://www.telegraphindia.com/india/scholars-cry-for-bail-to-anand-teltumbde/cid/1762745.

10 See Sunil Kumar, "When Slaves Were Nobles: The Shamsî Bandagân in the Early Delhi Sultanate," *Studies in History* 10:1 (1994): 23–52, https://doi.org/10.1177/025764309401000102.

11 Susan Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age,* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999, 64–96.

12 Indrani Chatterjee, "Women, Monastic Commerce and Coverture in Eastern India 1600–1800," *Modern Asian Studies* 50:1 (2016): 175–216.

13 A reformist movement which propounded monistic/Upanisadic Hinduism.

14 *Sati* involved the immolation of widows, female relatives, and/or female household members upon a man's death.

15 Gayatri C. Spivak, "The Rani of Sirmur: An Essay in Reading the Archives," *History and Theory* 24:3 (1985): 247–72.

16 Indrani Chatterjee, "Monastic Governmentality, Colonial Misogyny and Postcolonial Amnesia," *History of the Present* 3:1 (2013): 57–96.

17 Arik Moran, *Kingship and Polity on the Himalayan Borderland: Rajput Identity during the Early Colonial Encounter*, Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2019.

18 Peaceful protest by Muslim women in Delhi against the passing of the Citizenship Amendment Act on 11 December 2019.

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