

7<sup>th</sup> century and leading up to the 1990s, the chapters, while appearing to cover a wide breadth of knowledge, are selective and purposeful in their information: Formichi chooses to focus on the locales that intervene and serve her thematic purposes well. Thus, her disclaimer in the preface sets the tone for the book and invites readers not to take this work as an “encyclopedia.” Formichi distances herself, rightfully, from providing an all-inclusive book on histories too wide and long to be contained in a single piece of work: “Hence, whereas I have attempted a balanced coverage of Asia’s subregions – defined as Central, South, East, and Southeast – with relevant references to the Muslim Mediterranean, this book is by no means a complete survey of “Islam” in each and every polity/nation in “Asia” (xii). Formichi’s theoretical contribution is critical and vital, especially in the current era: she places at the forefront, the aim to bridge together two fields rarely put together: Islamic Studies and Asian Studies. Combined beautifully in this book, these two fields enrich one another and open up new pathways to consider the past, present, and future of both fields: as separate and combined.

Alongside riveting case studies, Formichi’s writing excels and shines most at the level of writing and engagement with readers. With further readings, contexts, and background information beautifully integrated into her text, Formichi speaks not only to the critic or researcher in the field but also to the new reader encountering the topics at hand for the first time. The opening pages indicate that the book is dedicated to her students, and up until the final pages, Formichi delivers a resource students from all fields can use. Furthermore, her explanations on the (problematics of) translation and concluding remarks at the end of each chapter equip her text with both the ease and comfort readers from all backgrounds can appreciate. This book is a great toolbox to further navigate the wide topic of Islam and Asia. Perhaps one of the strongest elements of her work is the detailed attention paid to the Arabic words, religious terms, and historical figures. By providing “box[es]” that interrupt the flow of the text, Formichi emphasizes the need to understand the context behind the discussion before proceeding any further: this accessibility strengthens Formichi’s text.

*Islam and Asia* illustrates the active nature of religion, cultures, borders, and society. It transforms once presumed fixed entities, into areas of networks, trade, change, and advancement in the dissemination of knowledge in every sphere, from social to political. Formichi, in her own words, brings us to “reflect on how 1,400 years after Muhammad received the first revelation in Mecca, the perceived “syncretic” and “peripheral” Southeast Asia can be regarded as breeding grounds for new interpretative paths” (262). From the Islamic call from 7<sup>th</sup> century Arabia to the development of a global religion in the 1990s, Formichi’s text traces the large magnitude of this spread, noting the changes in society and the impact of/on religion in Asia. Thus, although not an encyclopedic rendition of the spread of Islam, this book is great for those wanting to get a good understanding of the effect and role of religion in shaping histories, borders, and society with the vital and often disregarded discussion of the role of women in these exchanges.

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FROM OBSCURITY TO LIGHT: WOMEN IN EARLY MEDIEVAL ORISSA (SEVENTH TO TWELFTH CENTURIES AD). By Devika Rangachari. London and New York: Routledge, 2020. 272 p.

“I learnt history as unquestionably as I did geography, without ever dreaming that there could be more than one view of past events.”

– Simone de Beauvoir, *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*

Revisiting historical constructions and reexamining the past from a gendered perspective is a vital exercise in gender studies. It facilitates a questioning of accepted historical narratives that tend to ignore, diminish, trivialize and invisibilize women's role, existence, agency and contributions in shaping socio-political realities. While reevaluating women of early medieval Orissa, a time when patriarchy was the norm, one would find instances of transgression that the majority of historians have suppressed, overlooked or deemed irrelevant.

In the book, *From Obscurity to Light: Women in Early Medieval Orissa*, Devika Rangachari sets out to reintegrate women into the historical narratives of early medieval Orissa. She consistently shows the inadequacy of research done on the roles of women in the early medieval period and highlights women's agency, power, authority and public status, which have been intentionally or unintentionally dismissed by most of the secondary sources. The secondary research that does exist only describes women in their subordinate, secondary and passive roles as wives and mothers, who always operate within their confines. Her earlier works have also challenged the limited and inaccurate description of women in the histories of Kashmir, Kanauj, Bengal and Bihar. Hence, this work also draws interesting parallels and contrasts between women from different Indian and European regions in the same period, based on the commonality of experience.

The book relies on an extensive analysis of epigraphic evidence rather than literary sources. Rangachari studies one hundred and eighty-seven inscriptions issued by royal and non-royal sources written in Sanskrit and Telugu, delimited by the time period under consideration. The charters and inscriptions document the presence and contributions of royal and non-royal women, indicating their power, public status and the varied significant roles they played in their kingdoms. The book is divided into five sections, including a comprehensive introduction and conclusion.

The first two chapters elucidate the political history of the period from the seventh to the twelfth centuries AD. Orissa was earlier known by the names Kalinga, Utkala, Odra and Kosala. The rise and fall of different dynasties of this period and their power dynamics are explored. The different kingdoms within Orissa were built in the areas near the river valleys, which offered great agricultural potential. The varied conquests, contestations of power, alliances, integration of scattered or nuclear regions and the incorporation and unification of neighbouring areas into the 'political centres' gave rise to the "great medieval Orissan empire." The author takes into account the lineages of the Sailodbhavas, the Bhaumakaras, the Bhanjas, the Sarabhapuriyas, the Panduvamsis, the Somavamsis and the Imperial Gangas. These dynasties and their rulers are identified and catalogued using epigraphic records like copper plates, archaeological evidence, references from Puranas, stone, cave and temple inscriptions. The royal titles, conquests, wars, family branches, enmity, marital alliances and religious practices of each dynasty is discussed. The prevailing deities and religions in this period included Saivism (Shiva), Buddhism, Vaisnavism (Visnu), Saktism (Sakti) and the autochthonous deity Stambhesvari, the highly influential tribal mother goddess. The rulers utilised different origin myths, drawing from puranic and tribal elements, for legitimising their claims to rule and gain the support of the people. The inscriptions also reveal interesting conflicts and hostility through the mentioning or deliberate omission of members of the dynasty, thus, undermining their contributions to the kingdom.

The following two chapters carry out a critical gendered analysis of the different kingdoms of medieval Orissa. The third chapter, titled "a gendered perspective," examines the presence of royal and non-royal women in the Bhaumakara, Bhanja, Sailodbhava, Sarabhapuriya and Panduvamsi dynasties and the fourth chapter offers "a gendered perspective" on the Somavamsis, Early Gangas and Imperial Gangas. In the stereotypical mainstream narratives of the period, women are constantly marginalized by focusing only on the male rulers, diminishing women's contributions and not acknowledging them as powerful rulers in their own right.

Rangachari begins by highlighting the significance of several women rulers in the Bhaumakara dynasty. The queen Tribhuvanamahadevi I "reluctantly" ascended the throne, and her legitimacy

was justified by citing the example of an earlier woman ruler, Gosvamini Devi. A parallel is drawn here with the rulers Sugandha and Didda of Kashmir. The next queen Hiramahadevi only ruled as a regent till her sons came of age. Queen Prithivimahadevi assertively ruled in a hostile atmosphere knowing that there were other legitimate male contenders for the throne. Queen Gaurimahadevi is known as her husband's successor, and she is succeeded by her daughter Dandimahadevi, who is referred to as the "last great ruler of Bhaumakara dynasty." She is succeeded by Vakulamahadevi, who, in turn, is followed by the last Bhaumakara queen, Dharmamahadevi, both of whom were supported by the Bhanjas. Some of the titles assumed by these queens were that of *paramamahesvari*, *paramabhattacharika*, *maharajadhiraja*, *paramavaisnavi* and sometimes male appellations like *Srimad-tribhuvanamahadevyah* or *Srimad-dandimaha-devyah*. Many such queens' accession to the throne also foregrounds the centrality of preserving the dynasty by turning to immediate kindred, even if it is a woman ruler, instead of turning to patrilineage. This act of assuming gender-bending roles outside their prescribed gendered position or 'good womanhood' comes across as a form of circumventing patriarchal norms.

There were multiple kinds of matrimonial alliances that took place in this period. Some marriages were a means of gaining power, fortune and military prowess (Sivakaradeva I and Jayavalidevi). Some marital alliances had expansionist motives, which facilitated the growing power of the queen and her natal family over her spouse's dynasty. At times, the queen's natal family aided her accession to power after her spouse's death. Some marriages were motivated by diplomatic and territorial interests to neutralise enemies, win political allies, promote peace and cordial relations between the kingdoms (Prithivimahadevi and Subhakaradeva IV, and Lokaprakasa and Bharatavala). The author attempts to draw parallels here with women's participation in strategic matrimonial alliances in England. But it is difficult to determine the degree of agency exercised by women in the matter of their marriages in medieval Orissa. Sweeping statements such as a situation in England is "equally applicable" to a situation in Orissa may not be well-founded.

The Bhanja queens were responsible for permitting and affixing official seals on documents and executing royal grants, which also had to be issued in their presence. Likewise, the royal women of Early Gangas were also witnesses and signatories for grant charters. The fact that these queens were present during these events has been thoroughly noted in the inscriptions. Many rulers issued grants on behalf of their queens or on their suggestions. Many queens issued charters of their own, which were unmistakably seen as assertions of their space in the dynastic lineage and concretising their names in history. Women donors were also mentioned in their families' plates, charters and inscriptions. These grants were made on occasions like *sankranti*, marriages, lunar eclipse and solar eclipse. They included gifts of villages, lands, religious establishments, offerings to a deity, cows, goats, gold, sandal, incense, camphor, daily supply of flowers, perpetual lamps to be burned before a deity and a regular supply of clarified butter for the lamps, food and clothing for mendicants, Brahmanas and their families. Most grants were issued to accrue religious and spiritual merit for the king, queen and their parents.

Royal women often sanctioned the building of temples and shrines as well. One such Siva temple was made on behalf of queen Madhvidevi. The deity installed therein was named Madhavesvara after her, indicating her power and authority. Interestingly, her husband was a follower of Buddhism. Another such example is that of Tribhuvanamahadevi, who was a devotee of Visnu, while her husband was Buddhist. Such instances of exercising freedom in observing separate religions signify the woman's agency in choosing her form of worship.

The inscriptions of the Imperial Gangas distinctly mention the names of both royal and non-royal women who were the donors or the recipients of grants. Non-royal women included temple maids (*devadasis*), maids of the royal household and dancing women, whose donations were indicative of their access to financial resources and the desire to record their names for posterity. The mothers and wives of the donors and the donees are meticulously mentioned in

the records. Royal and non-royal women sometimes shared the same space by inscribing on the same temple walls, without any segregation, during the rule of Codaganga. These donations and building activities were often done in different capacities and were deliberate acts that signified the donor's public status, prestige and socio-political and economic power.

A meticulous study of all available sources by Indian and non-Indian scholars also shows that cultural contacts existed between medieval Orissa and other countries like China. In some parts of the book, the arguments seem to be based more on probability and interpretation, where the author finds strong reason to believe in particular possibilities, rather than the actual presence of evidence. This may be attributed to a lack of sources and the fragmentary remains of some inscriptions, as the author has acknowledged at the outset of chapter three. The uniqueness of this work stems from the fact that it touches upon many aspects that were, according to the author, insufficiently researched or incorrectly represented.

Rangachari's gendered analysis is an attempt to make historical narratives more accurate, inclusive and comprehensive by situating women as relevant historical figures. Instead of discussing women as a homogenous category, she considers their different classes and contextual variations. The author successfully demonstrates that various readings of the same historical evidence are possible, and it proves to be fruitful in reconstructing the historical period. As the epigraphic evidence shows, women exercised agency in various formal and informal modes and had considerable influence on socio-political, economic and religious spheres. Women didn't exist on the periphery as most biased secondary sources would have everyone believe. The author emphasises the need to construct new images of women as "authors and actors," whose actual contributions and positions in society are recognised by interrogating historical narratives and reinterpreting the original sources.

### Works Cited

<sup>1</sup> Beauvoir, Simone de. *Memoirs of a Dutiful Daughter*. Harper Perennial, 2005.

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MODERNISM AFTER POSTCOLONIALISM: TOWARD A NONTERRITORIAL COMPARATIVE LITERATURE. By Mara de Gennaro. Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 2020. 234 pp.

This book is a major commentary on the use of comparative methodology in understanding literary works. It tries to take up an interesting perception towards understanding of modernism. It focuses on the anxiety at the master's end regarding the performance that is demanded from the master to maintain the superior position. Gennaro takes up this issue of anxiety to a step ahead and considers it as one of the major aspects that creates and alters international boundaries. She also considers the same to be a key role player in the politics of state power. She comments on the multilayeredness of the term identity in relation to politics, power and so on.

In Gennaro's book it is really interesting to have a glimpse of a new perception that she is trying to develop on modernism and postcolonialism. It is a general tendency to take up Eurocentric or North American centric texts for such critical studies, whereas, here Gennaro was bold enough to break free from this general and archetypical tendency. She takes up Anglophone and Francophone texts for the critical evaluation of issues like colonialism, racism along with 'ethnic' and nationalist discourses. She speaks of Gayatri Spivak, Édouard Glissant, Françoise Vergès,