

Panel 14: Speaking of the Self? Women and Self-Representation in South Asia

Conveners: Anshu Malhotra (History, University of Delhi)
Siobhan Lambert-Hurley (History, Loughborough)
Shweta Sachdeva Jha (English, Miranda House, University of Delhi)

Abstract: South Asian societies are known to privilege the social and communal over the individual. Nevertheless, it is clear that self-representation, as a means of interlocution with the self and the society at large, was practiced in different ways and for varied purposes. Historians have used sometimes disparate and unpromising sources to construct life histories – for instance the use of ‘autobiographical’ verses of Kabir available in at least three different recension traditions to construct his biography/hagiography (Lorenzen, 1991; Vaudeville, 1993). Others have attempted to decode the specificities of a cultural milieu to understand why an ‘autobiography’ was thus constructed (Naim, 1999). Scholarship on the emergence of autobiography as a genre and its relevance to marginalized groups such as women, religious converts and dalits has further drawn attention to the history of autobiography and the politics of self-representation (Smith, Watson, 1998; Chakravarty, 2000). It has been more difficult to get to women’s ‘voices,’ especially as the South Asian culture gave premium to keeping women away from public gaze (Raheja and Gold 1994; Khare 1996; Vatak 2004). However, the difficulty of gaining access to women should not indicate a lack of voice (cf. Spivak 1985). If women negotiated their own cultures in order to speak, so must scholars uncover and understand the cultural context in which their speech was created.

This panel will bring together papers that reach out to women from different walks of life and from different times, but all explore dimensions of expressing the self through various modes of self-fashioning and representation. Our aim will be to theorize the relationship between gender, history and self by going beyond the use of life-histories to take a more complex approach to the history of women and their conceptualization of the ‘self’. Recuperating hitherto lesser known voices, the papers will examine a wide range of women such as a famous courtesan from Hyderabad, a Mughal princess, an ascetic woman from a minor sect in Punjab, a singer from Bombay’s Ismaili community and contemporary Islamic feminists. Through the study of particular genres, language and cultural codes we hope to unravel their attempts at engagement with, and fabrication of the self that lie embedded in their personal narratives. Some of these women wrote in contexts of performative traditions, others under the aegis of specific sectarian affiliations with particular audiences in mind. An analysis of these structures of institutional or familial support, private or public patronage will lead us to a new set of questions that are significant to the theory, methodology and practice of women’s history. Linking women’s history to the formation of new female subjectivities in contemporary India, we will also enquire into the historical

memory of women's movements and the relevance of narrative strategies for feminist actors.

Some of the questions that will be thrown up by the panel then are: Were there common motivations, lingual and stylistic choices, preferences of genres, issues that took centre-stage, among the women discussed? Or do their disparate cultural matrices desist such a reading? What genres of self-representation did women employ in pre-colonial contexts? How useful are French feminist theories of *écriture féminine* to understand women's writing in South Asian contexts?

Contact:

Anshu Malhotra: anshumalh@gmail.com

Siobhan Lambert-Hurley: siobhan.lambert.hurley@gmail.com

Shweta Sachdeva Jha: shwetasachdevajha@gmail.com