

MODULE-3
GENDER STUDIES IN INDIAN SCENARIO
TOPIC- ALTEKARIAN PARADIGM



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- A.S.Altekar's work, ***The Position of Women in Hindu Civilization*** published in 1956 influenced the Indian writing on women for decades.
- His formulation on women was inspired by nationalism and to a great extent the work was an answer to the criticisms raised by James Mill against Indian culture.
- Uma Chakravarti, who for the first time made a critique of the paradigm propounded by Altekar said that the Altekarian paradigm, though limiting and biased, continued to influence and even dominated historical writing.
- He constructed a picture of the idyllic condition of women in the Vedic age.



- It is a picture which pervaded the collective consciousness of the upper castes in India and has virtually crippled the emergence of a more analytically rigorous study of gender relations in ancient India.
- Uma Chakravarti raised the need to move forward and rewrite history, a history that does justice to women by examining social processes, and the structures thus crucially shaping and conditioning the relations between women.



- The best known and most internally coherent nationalist woman is Altekar's study on the position of women civilization.
- His work is based primarily on Brahmanical sources outlines the position of women from earliest times right up to the 20th century when the Hindu Code Bill was in consideration.
- Altekar's work represented the best by way of women's studies in history but it also showed sharply the limitations of the traditional approach.
- Although work unravels in detail the entire body of opinion of the law such areas as the education of women, marriage and divorce, position of the widow, women in public life, proprietary women, and the general position of women in society, it is the nationalist understanding of the women's question.



- Further overwhelming concern is with women in the context of the one almost gets the feeling that the status of women needs to in order to ensure the healthy development of the future race.
- In this he was reflecting the opinion of nationalist writers' of second half of the nineteenth century who placed tremendous importance on the physical regeneration of the Hindus.
- A survey of Altekar's work indicates the limitations inherent in his approach



- According to him: One of the best ways to understand the spirit of a civilization to appreciate its excellence and realize its limitations is the history of the position and status of women in it . . marriage laws and customs enable us to realize whether regarded women as market commodities or war prizes or whether they realized that the wife is after all her husband's valued partner whose co-operation was indispensable for happiness success in family life.



- Altekar's own genuine commitment to reforming women's status sometimes made him making quaint statements which he intended positive and progressive.
- Thus he suggested that although Women have low fighting value they have potential military value.
- By giving birth to sons they contribute indirectly to fighting strength and efficiency of their community.
- Further, Altekar's programme for women, despite his apparent liberality and sympathy for them, was to view women primarily stock-breeders of a strong race.
- This view is particularly noticeable his suggestions about women's education.



- In Altekar's programme reform women were to be educated enough but in doing so one had ensure that no undue strain was placed upon them.
- He expressed fears thus: As things stand today girls have to pass the same examinations as boys and to learn house-keeping at home as well, all the while having less physical strength than their brothers.
- This certainly puts too much strain upon them and is injurious to the future well-being of the race.
- Establishing the high status of women was the means by which 'Hindu' civilization could be vindicated.



- This was the finished version of the nationalist answer to James Mill's denigration of civilization published a century ago; the locus of the barbarity Hindu civilization in James Mill's work (*A History of British India*) had lain in the abject condition of Hindu women.
- But easier to provide a general picture than to deal with a variety customs oppressing women that still obtained in the early twentieth century.
- Altekar was thus forced to provide explanations for biases against women.
- For example he attempts to explain the preference for a son over a daughter by advancing a psychological argument as in the passage below: If a cruel fate inflicted widowhood upon the daughter, calamity would break the parent's heart.



- Remarriage being longer possible parents had to see the heart-rending pain of their daughter wasting herself in interminable widowhood.
- Parents had often to pass through the terrible ordeal their daughters burning themselves alive on the funeral their husbands.
- To become a daughter's parent thus became of endless worry and misery. ... As a natural consequence... passages about the undesirability of the birth of daughter more numerous.
- Altekār is particularly weak in his attempts at relating the women at a given point of time with social organization
- Thus early Vedic society which did not as yet have concentration of power, or a well developed institution of the context for Altekār's unnecessary explanation for the queens.



- Since Altekar is convinced about the high status the Vedic period he feels he has to account for why we do women as queens.
- Thus he is constrained to suggest that, Aryans were gradually establishing their rule in a foreign surrounded on all sides by an indigenous hostile population considerably outnumbered them.
- Under such circumstances ruling in their own rights or as regents were naturally to defend the rivals .
- Similarly Altekar has a facile explanation for why women own property.



- According to him, Landed property could be owned only by one who had the. were obviously unable to do this and so could hold no property.
- In his inability to see women within a specific social and recognizing patriarchal subordination of women Altekar unique.
- Like others he was reflecting a deeply internalized biological determinism and therefore in the physical inferiority women.
- Very occasionally however Altekar shows flashes of insight into socio-economic context within which women's subordination was achieved.



- For example in his analysis of the causes for the 'fall' of the status of the Aryan women Altekar suggests a connection with subjugation of the Sudras as a whole.
- He argues that the Aryan conquest of the indigenous population and its loose incorporation members of a separate varna had given rise to a huge population semi-servile status.
- In such a situation Aryan women ceased to producing members of society and thus lost the esteem of society.
- Even as he made this broadly contextual explanation, Altekar was insensitive to the crucial distinction between the participation women as producers and participation in terms of controlling production.



- Thereafter, in the opinion of Uma Chakravarti, Altekar's semi- historical insight is unfortunately lost and popular prejudice takes over.
- Like the ancient Brahmanical law givers he appears to have a horror of Sudra women, as in this passage: The introduction of the non-Aryan wife into the Aryan household is the key to the gradual deterioration of the position of women. ..
- The non-Aryan wife with her ignorance of Sanskrit language and Hindu religion could obviously not enjoy the religious privileges as the Aryan consort. Association with her must have tended to affect the purity of speech Aryan co-wife as well.



- Very often the non-Aryan wife may have been the favourite one of her husband, who may have attempted to associate her with his religious sacrifices preference to her better educated but less loved Aryan consort
- This must have naturally led to grave mistakes and anomalies in the performance of the ritual which must have shocked orthodox priests.... Eventually it was felt that the object could be gained by declaring the whole class of women to be ineligible for Vedic studies and religious duties. This facile argument was, in Altekhar's view, the key factor in the decline of the status of women.



- Altekar is completely obtuse to historical explanations.
- The possibility that the Sudra woman, he regards as a threat, could have contributed to a more dynamic active kind of womanhood for Hindu society would not even occur Altekar because his focus is on Aryan women (regarded then progenitors of the upper caste women of Hindu society) and in his view Sudra women counted for nothing.
- The most important consequence of Altekar's limited repertoire of biological and psychological explanations was that the logic of the distorted social relations between men and women is completely obscured.



- The kind explanations offered by Altekar might appear to be astoundingly trivial to us today but it is important to remember that, by and nationalist historians were content to restrict historical explanations to cultural factors while writing about ancient India
- This was contrast to their focus on economic and social factors while discussing British rule in India.