



# Women and Social Reform in Modern India

*Sumit Sarkar*

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The subject of social reforms has routinely formed a part of Indian history texts. The word reforms conjures up the names of a few great individuals: always Hindu, always upper-caste and educated, always from cities, and always--apart from one or two memorable exceptions--men. These are the icons around whom the story of social change is written. The editors of the present work argue the need to understand the history of social reforms from a much wider array of perspectives: for example, the connections between specific social abuses on the one hand, and, on the other, systems or traditions of gender practices across times, classes, castes, and regions. For instance, when we look at widow immolation or widow remarriage practices, we need to look also at the larger domain of gender relations which sanctified immolation or which outlawed widow remarriage. What arguments were used? What aspects of these practices did the reformers ignore? How did the orthodox practitioners defend such traditions? There are also, say Sumit and Tanika Sarkar, other curious omissions in the existing literature: Most reforms passed through the grid of state legislation. Yet, there is little engagement even with the law-making machinery ... and far less with the judicial courts that enforced the laws and dealt with disputes around the new laws. Such omissions are addressed, and many interesting questions raised and discussed, in this impressive collection of writings.

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