

Cultural Colloquium

Interrogating Gender in Early India - Notions of Feminine Identity

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This presentation is not about the status of women in ancient or early India. I traverse the past and attempt to look at the conceptual underpinnings of how the feminine was constituted in the ideological milieu of the times and that which continues to be part of the Indian ethos though it is less spoken about now ---

Using stories, myths and visual representations to illustrate the argument, I shall first present different images of the feminine as known to us through archaeological and art-historical material and locate them in relation to how patriarchal practices evolved over time. From folk beginnings to those enveloped by Brahmanic and Shramanic underpinnings, each of these tell us about particular notions of the feminine.

In the next part of the presentation I shall elaborate on one particular notion of feminine identity that inhabits a mythical space that has been dynamically illustrated in Indian art. This looks closely at a myth that describes the transformation of the male into female and the subsequent formation of an androgyny that emphasizes on a composite human unity. This conceptual underpinning, I argue, impacts the way this cultural point of view evolved over historical time on the Indian sub-continent and provides us with a nuanced understanding of feminine identity that is cherished rather than rejected or negated in the early Indian cultural and religious ethos- something that is being obliterated in modern times because of our attempts to make monolithic traditions that were by definition inherently dialogical and pluralistic.

About the Speaker:

Aloka Parasher-Sen completed her education with a Ph.D. in 1978 from the University of London. 1979-till-date she has been teaching History at the University of Hyderabad where, since 2018, she is Professor Emerita in the Department of Sanskrit Studies. Her major publications are in the main area of her interest in social history, namely, early Indian attitudes towards foreigners, tribes and excluded castes and different aspects of the social, economic, cultural and religious history and archaeology of the Deccan.

Friday, Nov 22nd 2019

4:00 PM (Tea/Coffee at 3:30 PM)

Auditorium, TIFR-H