

Professor Mytheli Sreenivas As...y Economic or Emotional Units_

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SPEAKERS

David Staley, Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Eva Dale, Mytheli Sreenivas

- E** Eva Dale 00:00
From the heart of the Ohio State University on the Oval, this is Voices of Excellence from the College of Arts and Sciences with your host, David Staley. Voices focuses on the innovative work being done by faculty and staff in the College of Arts and Sciences at The Ohio State University. From departments as wide ranging as art, astronomy, chemistry and biochemistry, physics, emergent materials, mathematics and languages, among many others, the college always has something great happening. Join us to find out what's new now.
- D** David Staley 00:32
Mytheli Sreenivas is an Associate Professor in the Departments of History and Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies at The Ohio State University College of the Arts and Sciences. She has research interests in women's history, the history of sexuality in the family, colonialism and nationalism, and the cultural and political economy of reproduction. Her work has been supported by several grants including from the Fulbright Foundation and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Her book, *Wives, Widows and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India*, was awarded the Joseph Elder Prize from the American Institute of Indian Studies. Welcome to Voices, Dr. Sreenivas.
- M** Mytheli Sreenivas 01:09
Thanks so much, David. It's good to be here.
- D** David Staley 01:12
So please begin by telling us about the thesis and main findings of your award winning book, *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*.

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 01:20

So I started that project with an interest in how families changed over time, we tend to think of families or "the family" as a sort of really stable, ahistorical meaning outside of history, institution.

D

David Staley 01:37

Families have always been the way families are.

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 01:39

Exactly right? That's tradition, it's the sort of essential part of tradition, is the family. But I work on early 20th century India, or I was working on that time period, and I was really interested in how a lot of people, from sort of ordinary folks to politicians to people writing in magazines, had a lot of things to say about the family. Like, this is what it should look like, and this is what it shouldn't, here's how we should change it, maybe we should change some laws around the family, maybe we should change how people inherit what their relationships are to their husbands and wives or to their children. And so I started to wonder why this was the case, like, why were there so many people in early 20th century South India, sort of anxious about family life? And part of that is the broader context of this time period, the early 20th century in India, and in Southern India was a period of tremendous social and economic change, this was the period of anti-colonial nationalist struggle against the British Empire. So I was sort of thinking about some of those changes and thinking about why so much of those anxieties seemed sort of addressed in and through the family. So, what I started to realize was that people were anxious about the family as a way to redefine what it might mean to be modern in 20th century India. That sort of making reforms in family life, sort of changing the structures of families, but also feelings within families, emotions, and relationships, and who was included and who wasn't within a family was a part of kind of making a claim about what it meant to be a modern Indian person or a modern Indian citizen. So different parts of the book look at ways in which the family was sort of redefined in these ways. And the subtitle of the book is called "The Conjugal Family Ideal", and that's because I was thinking about how there was this broader movement from thinking about the family as a sort of really diffuse entity that included multiple relations and different people within the household.

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David Staley 03:51

Aunts and uncles and cousins, but also...?

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 03:54

Servants, potentially, other relatives. Two words, sort of really kind of centering the relationship between husbands and wives. So this is very much a kind of heterosexual nuclear family that sort of became the center for reimagining sort of how to be a citizen, how to be a parent, how

to be a worker, how to be a property owner, all of that kind of got tangled up with how people were thinking about families.

D

David Staley 04:23

How would this have been... I mean, it sounds like you're talking about legislative acts. How would these changes have been legislated, especially, I'm really intrigued by efforts to rethink emotional bonds within families?

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 04:37

So a lot of it couldn't be directly legislated, right, as you might imagine, and the period that I'm talking about in the 1920s and 1930s, was, of course, the time when India was a colony of the British Empire. So the British government was very reluctant to pass legislation about families. One piece of legislation that I look at in the book has to do with the age of marriage; this was a really controversial issue. And there was a big attempt in 1929, to raise the age of marriage for girls or young women to age twelve.

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David Staley 05:14

From?

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 05:14

From ten.

D

David Staley 05:15

Oh, my goodness.

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 05:16

And so, this was a massively controversial project in which the colonial regime tended to be sort of not really wanting to intervene and not wanting to take the political consequences of making such a change, but there were a lot of feminists and nationalists and others who were sort of arguing for this change as sort of really important to making families a little bit more egalitarian on gender lines. So that was one place, another place was around the laws of property. So a big question that came up, and it's different from what we see in our world today, but a big question that came up was, you know, if you die, and you are the owner of a lot of property, should it go to just your children, should it go to your spouse, or should it go to a much wider network of kin? And there were a number of attempts to change the law in the direction, as you might imagine, of sort of making it more narrow towards your own children and your own spouse. And that was another place where there were a lot of debates around,

you know, what were the responsibilities of being a member of a family, did it extend beyond your immediate kin network or not? So that was another place where there were legislative debates, though not laws passed.

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David Staley 06:31

And I suspect that part of the changes as well were the ideas of a family as sort of an economic unit, versus, you talked about a conjugal family, that sounds like more like an emotional unit. Do I have that correct, or?

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 06:45

Yes. So I think that one of my arguments in the book is to think about how something like the economy, or sets of property relations that we tend to think of as really separate from emotional life, are actually really deeply connected. So for example, one of the arguments that people made in debates about property to say, hey, you know, if you pass on, your property should go to your children or to your spouse. They said, well, that's because that's who you love the most, that's who you're supposed to care about the most. And so property should move in the lines of emotion or affect, right, of affective or emotional relationships. And so one of the parts of my book is looking at how people made these arguments in terms of emotion, and it's very hard for historians to figure out how people actually felt emotionally, but they often made these arguments in terms of emotion. But it also aligned with kind of capitalist relationships, and capitalist modes of property. So I'm really kind of curious about that intersection, where things that seem really separate, like how much you love your spouse, gets connected up with how you're going to distribute your property, gets connected with who lives in your household.

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David Staley 08:03

So you say that historians have found it difficult to determine how people felt, does that prevent historians from trying to determine that?

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 08:11

That's a great question, and one that I've spent a lot of time thinking about. In the *Wives, Widows, and Concubines* book, I tried to address that a little bit by looking at writing, and particularly women's writing, and I was really interested in how writers began to talk about or write about people's emotional lives. But I think there's a, I have to acknowledge that there's a gap between that, how people write about emotional lives and to what extent historians can actually get at, you know, when somebody says, they feel love towards someone, in 2018, is that the same thing as if somebody said that in 1918? I'm not one of those folks who can maybe really answer that question fully, but I think we always have to keep the space for both similarity and difference. You know, I don't want to go in with the assumption that now in the modern era we're full of emotions, and in the past, people only operated along economic or property lines. You know, there's an old argument in European history, for example, that people

started to love their children more with modernity, or in the modern era. There's a case to be made for this, but I also think what we're really looking at is did people express those forms of love differently? And maybe that's something that historians can kind of help us to understand.

J Janet Box-Steffensmeier 09:36

I'm Janet Box-Steffensmeier, Interim Executive Dean and Vice Provost for The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences. Did you know that 23 of our programs are nationally ranked as top 25 programs, with more than ten of them in the top ten? That's why we say the College of Arts and Sciences is the intellectual and academic core of The Ohio State University. Learn more about the college at artsandsciences.osu.edu.

D David Staley 10:00

So your current project is a book manuscript, which you have tentatively titled "Reproducing Modern India: Sexuality, Economy and the Politics of Population". What are your preliminary findings here, I assume you're talking about the politics of reproduction?

M Mytheli Sreenivas 10:17

Yes, I am. So this project also started from a set of questions that I have about how population and ideas of overpopulation have been sort of assumed to explain a lot of things about Indian history. And it is true that India has a large population, and it's one that grew rapidly in parts of the 20th century, but as I suspected, and sort of one of my preliminary findings in this book, is that actually, people started worrying about India being an overpopulated place way back in the late 19th century in the 1870s. But Indian population didn't actually start growing until the 1920s, and 1930s. So there's like this 50 year gap when there's a lot of anxiety about the size of India's population, but there's not a lot of demographic change. So that was my starting point for this research project, to think about how fears about overpopulation, which are often linked to fears that people, especially women, are having too many children - that's where the reproduction part comes in - but how those anxieties are actually connected with a whole bunch of other changes in economy and ideas about sexuality in the family, going back to my earlier work, so I really want to give a kind of long history. So my earlier work looked at just the 1920s and 1930s. So the different parts of this project look at historical moments of anxiety about population and overpopulation, and I've identified, sort of preliminarily, three such moments. The first one is in the late 19th century, when a series of major famines and colonial India provoked a lot of conversation about India being overpopulated and also provoked the first set of public debates about reforming reproduction through changing marriage in particular. The second part of the book looks at how population got connected with ideas about nationalism and eugenics, as part...

D David Staley 12:26

Eugenics, meaning?

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 12:28

So, the idea that the human species can sort of improve its genetic pool, through selective breeding at the most extreme, but eugenics also means all kinds of other things around healthier family lives, or more interventions in public health, or more planning around marriage. A lot of this gets connected up with ideas about race, and in India about caste, so the second part of the book kind of looks at ways in which population and reproduction got caught up with these eugenic ideas in a in the period of anti-colonial nationalism. And the third part of the book talks about population control. The Indian government was the first one anywhere in the world in 1952 to sort of launch a state-sponsored program to curb population growth, and so the last section of the book looks at a number of campaigns as part of that process.

D

David Staley 13:23

You say that at the end of the 19th century, or the period that begins your study, that there was a lot of anxiety about population. Who was anxious?

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Mytheli Sreenivas 13:31

Colonial officials for one, but also what you might call a kind of emergent intelligencia in India, of people who, many of whom would later go on to become important nationalist figures. There was a different set of anxieties among ordinary people, who tended not to talk about population and overpopulation, but to be thinking about survival in periods of scarcity and crisis. So that's another area that I've been sort of thinking about. For example, people who are affected by famine, and the kind of struggles that they face in terms of creating a living for themselves in a moment of crisis. For whom ideas about reproduction are connected up much more with survival than with ideas about population or overpopulation.

D

David Staley 14:26

You said one difference between the first book and this project is the first book covered a period of, I think you said 20 years or so, this one is a long 20th century, it's 100 years or so. What are the challenges that you've encountered in moving the scale of your inquiry from a couple of decades to an entire century?

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Mytheli Sreenivas 14:45

Maybe I'll first talk about some of the benefits.

D

David Staley 14:48

Please do.

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 14:49

I think what has been really, really important for me is to be able to think about change over a longer period of time, makes visible certain trends or patterns that I think we wouldn't see with a more limited chronological view. So the way I started this whole project, many historians tend to, or many scholars tend to just look at population control in the mid 20th century as the whole story of the history of population. But if we look at this longer period, we actually see a lot of trends continuing over time, then that helps us to understand that social anxieties or public debates are not always only linked to a particular empirical reality, people were worried about population before population was even growing, right? So that makes you ask new kinds of questions if you look at this longer period, I think the challenge has, or there's been many challenges, it sounds pretty basic, but being able to decide what's of significance in 100 year time span is not always the same thing as what's significant in a ten or twenty year time span. So it sort of forced me to pull out broader themes, to think about trends over longer periods of time, to try to do archival research on topics that maybe don't unfold just in the span of a couple of years, the eugenics is a good example, but to be able to sort of think through multiple decades and trace themes across them.

D

David Staley 16:31

So India's population today - 1.3 billion, I think I have that number, right? So your study, and I understand this is still preliminary, you're still working on the book, but I wonder if there are any observations or insights that your work can give you or give us today to think about Indian population today in 2018.

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 16:54

So I think what's most important for me is to be able to understand that what we think of as a problem in population is not just a question of numbers, but has to do with how resources are distributed, and also sort of the human element of population, right? So demographic data is tremendously useful, but sort of one of the potential pitfalls, and demographers talk about this too, is that we tend to see people just as numbers. And when historians look at people's lives, they see that all of us, just like our historical subjects, are living real human lives and have many motivations that are not just about numbers. So, when we look at the past, and we see the kinds of anxieties around population, and we see the ways in which they lead to sort of changes in policies, some of which were pretty draconian around controlling other people's reproduction, and those policies tended to fail, I think that gives us a pretty good insight into how we might think about population questions in the present, right, sort of foregrounding human elements, thinking about distribution and redistribution, thinking about hierarchies, right, often women's bodies are the battlegrounds of these debates about population, often with very little attention to how women, especially poor and impoverished, or otherwise marginalized, women are actually experiencing these interventions, on their bodies and in their lives. So the book is, in a way, at very much sort of speaking to the present as I want to be able to sort of suggest that a historical perspective on these questions can make visible trends that are still going on today. And the last part of the book, and you know, I'm still working on it, but I'm hoping the last part is built around oral histories with a group of women who rely on public health care, in other words, government provided health care in parts of rural India, and it's around a set of conversations that they had about how they understand their own reproduction and their reproductive histories and lives, that I'm hoping we'll be able to help us to do some of this work, to give this other side or this other perspective to what's going on.

D

David Staley 19:20

You are at work on a Digital Humanities project, interestingly, with student collaborators, with some of your undergraduate students, and it's called Reclaiming Our Histories: A Digital Collection of Feminist Thought and Activism at the Ohio State University, a project that you say builds from several courses you've taught. First of all, tell us a little bit about this project.

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Mytheli Sreenivas 19:38

Well, it got started kind of spontaneously out of student interest in a Women's Gender and Sexuality Studies class that I taught a couple of years ago. So that class was the history of feminist thought, and my students in that class, many of whom were themselves activists on the campus, and after a series of campus protests and a sit in at Bricker Hall, the administration building, a number of my students who were involved in organizing that, sort of came into class the next day and said, so have students been able to make a difference on campus? I mean, it was a big question, it's a fundamental one, they were really thinking about this based on their own lives as activists. And so I said, well, we're historians, so let's figure it out. And so it was the end of the semester, but we started this project of looking through university archives, and looking at The Lantern and other primary sources, to try to sort of dig out a little bit of some history of student activism. It was a new topic to me as well, as you know, I'm not a U.S. historian, and I'm not a historian of universities, per se, but I got sort of really sucked in through the students. And that was a couple years ago, so since then, I've been working with other classes, both in the history of feminist thought and in the sort of introductory course that we have for undergraduate history majors, to teach students or work with students on how to find primary sources about student activism. And this includes archival materials, but also interviews that students have done and recorded, newspapers, photographs and images, we look at all kinds of sources. So we learn how to find the sources, and then we work together on sort of good ways to document that. So right now, that's the beginning of this digital project, and we're building it with the support of some university support.

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David Staley 21:35

So what makes it digital?

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Mytheli Sreenivas 21:37

The digital part is that we're curating these digital exhibits on a site, not yet live, but we're building the site. So the idea is, like our first exhibit that will be ready pretty soon, is about LGBT student activism in the 1970s and 1980s. So what the students have done, who built that site, it was two undergrads, is they have pulled out a couple of key moments in university history around LGBTQ activism, and they have written up a series of blog posts about it that we'll display. But in addition, they have created or curated all these links to those, to the original primary sources. So if you want to read about the Gay Activist Alliance, which is a student group, you can read what the students have written about it, but you can also then link

to articles in the lantern about it, and you can link to interviews the students did with the first faculty advisor of the group who's still on our campus. And so the idea is to both be able to write historically, but also to make visible the primary documents around which history is built.

D

David Staley 22:44

That's fascinating. And one of the things that really struck me about that project, and I think some of the other projects you talk about, is the kind of questions that emerge, you said your students came to you with this question about activism or the effectiveness of student activism on campus. As I ask a number of the people who have sat in this chair during interviews, I'm interested to know where your ideas come from, in other words, as a historian, you're driven by questions. How do you know which questions to ask?

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Mytheli Sreenivas 23:14

That itself is a great question, so maybe I can ask you that. But, I guess it really varies. What I feel is my job as a historian and as a feminist historian is to kind of denaturalize what we tend to think of as normal. And so every project that I've done, including the Reclaiming our Histories, has been around sort of encountering moments where I see that something I've long assumed to be normal isn't. And now of course, that can mean any number of things, you know, so of course, part of that comes from my own training as a historian of gender and sexuality, one of my key questions has always been, you know, how do we sort of take a set of relationships that we take is sort of commonly accepted and pose new questions about them? So that's sort of really been kind of my driving force, I think.

D

David Staley 24:13

Mytheli Sreenivas. Thank you.

M

Mytheli Sreenivas 24:15

Thank you so much.

E

Eva Dale 24:17

Voices is produced and recorded at The Ohio State University College of Arts and Sciences Technology Services Studio. Sound engineering by Paul Kotheimer, produced by Doug Dangler.