Women in Modern India

In a compelling study of Indian women, Geraldine Forbes considers their recent history from the nineteenth century under colonial rule to the twentieth century after Independence. She begins with the reform movement, established by men to educate women, and demonstrates how education changed women's lives enabling them to take part in public life. Through their own accounts of their lives and activities, she documents the formation of their organizations, their participation in the struggle for freedom, their role in the colonial economy and the development of the women's movement in India since 1947.

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GERALDINE FORBES is Distinguished Teaching Professor of History and Director of Women's Studies at the State University of New York Oswego. Her publications include *An Historian's Perspective: Indian Women and the Freedom Movement* (1997) and *Positivism in Bengal* (1975) for which she was awarded the Rabindranath Tagore Prize in 1979 for the best book on Bengali culture. She has also edited and introduced *An Indian Freedom Fighter Recalls her Life* by Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal (1994) and *Memoirs of an Indian Woman* by Shudha Mazumdar (1989).

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF INDIA

Women in modern India

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF INDIA

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Although the original *Cambridge History of India*, published between 1922 and 1937, did much to formulate a chronology for Indian history and describe the administrative structures of government in India, it has inevitably been overtaken by the mass of new research published over the last fifty years.

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I The Mughals and Their Contemporaries

II Indian States and the Transition to Colonialism

III The Indian Empire and the Beginnings of Modern Society

IV The Evolution of Contemporary South Asia

A list of individual titles in preparation will be found at the end of the volume.

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THE NEW CAMBRIDGE HISTORY OF INDIA

IV.2

Women in Modern India

GERALDINE FORBES

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I dedicate this book to those Indian women who have enriched my life by making my research in India an experience with history lived and living history:

"CAPTAIN" LAKSHMI SAHGAL

"COLONEL" LATIKA GHOSH

KALYANI BHATTACHARYYA

KAMALADEVI CHATTOPADHYAY

KRISHNABAI RAU NIMBKAR

KULSUM SAYANI

MANIBEN KARA

MANMOHINI ZUTSHI SAHGAL

RENUKA RAY

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SHUDHA MAZUMDAR

SMT. AMBUJAMMAL

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GENERAL EDITOR'S PREFACE

The New Cambridge History of India covers the period from the beginning of the sixteenth century. In some respects it marks a radical change in the style of Cambridge Histories, but in others the editors feel that they are working firmly within an established academic tradition.

During the summer of 1896, F. W. Maitland and Lord Acton between them evolved the idea for a comprehensive modern history. By the end of the year the Syndics of the University Press had committed themselves to the *Cambridge Modern History*, and Lord Acton had been put in charge of it. It was hoped that publication would begin in 1899 and be completed by 1904, but the first volume in fact came out in 1902 and the last in 1910, with additional volumes of tables and maps in 1911 and 1912.

The *History* was a great success, and it was followed by a whole series of distinctive Cambridge Histories covering English Literature, the Ancient World, India, British Foreign Policy, Economic History, Medieval History, the British Empire, Africa, China and Latin America, and even now other new series are being prepared. Indeed, the various Histories have given the Press notable strength in the publication of general reference books in the arts and social sciences.

What has made the Cambridge Histories so distinctive is that they have never been simply dictionaries or encyclopedias. The Histories have, in H. A. L. Fisher's words, always been "written by an army of specialists concentrating the latest results of special study". Yet as Acton agreed with the Syndics in 1896, they have not been mere compilations of existing material but original works. Undoubtedly many of the Histories are uneven in quality, some have become out of date very rapidly, but their virtue has been that they have consistently done more than simply record an existing state of knowledge: they have tended to focus interest on research and they have provided a massive stimulus to further work. This has made their publication doubly worthwhile and has distinguished them intellectually from other sorts of reference book. The editors of *The New Cambridge History of India* have acknowledged this in their work.

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The original *Cambridge History of India* was published between 1922 and 1937. It was planned in six volumes, but of these, volume 2 dealing with the period between the first century A.D. and the Muslim invasion of India never appeared. Some of the material is still of value, but in many respects it is now out of date. The last fifty years have seen a great deal of new research on India, and a striking feature of recent work has been to cast doubt on the validity of the quite arbitrary chronological and categorical way in which Indian history has been conventionally divided.

The editors decided that it would not be academically desirable to prepare a new *History of India* using the traditional format. The selective nature of research on Indian history over the past half-century would doom such a project from the start and the whole of Indian history could not be covered in an even or comprehensive manner. They concluded that the best scheme would be to have a *History* divided into four overlapping chronological volumes, each containing about eight short books on individual themes or subjects. Although in extent the work will therefore be equivalent to a dozen massive tomes of the traditional sort, in form *The New Cambridge History of India* will appear as a shelf full of separate but complementary parts. Accordingly, the main divisions are between I. *The Mughals and their contemporaries*, II. *Indian states and the transition to colonialism*, III. *The Indian Empire and the beginnings of modern society*, and IV. *The evolution of contemporary South Asia*.

Just as the books within these volumes are complementary so too do they intersect with each other, both thematically and chronologically. As the books appear they are intended to give a view of the subject as it now stands and to act as a stimulus to further research. We do not expect *The New Cambridge History of India* to be the last word on the subject but an essential voice in the continuing discussion about it.

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I am grateful to the editors of the Cambridge series: Gordon Johnson, Chris Bayly, and John Richards for having faith in my ability to write this volume and for their patience when I asked for extensions of my deadline. Marigold Akland has been a wonderful editor, encouraging and helpful throughout the process, while I am very grateful to Frances Nugent for her diligent copyediting. Gail Minault and Barbara Ramusack both gave this manuscript a careful reading and their comments have been extremely helpful in my revisions. I have asked the advice of a number of colleagues while writing this book and have valued their opinions. I would especially like to thank C. S. Lakshmi, Neera Desai, Joya Chaliha, Sylvia Vatuk, Veena Talwar Oldenburg, Mrinalini Sinha, and Dagmar Engels. I have drawn extensively on their work and ideas as well as the writings of many other fine scholars and I have been helped immensely by colleagues who have read parts of this work and given me copies of their unpublished articles and manuscripts.

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and suggestions. In the USA my friends at SUNY Oswego and Syracuse University have lent me books and articles, listened to my complaining, and told me to get on with it.

The photographs used in this book have been collected from many sources, especially private collections. I have made a good faith effort to trace the photographers who took these pictures but often without success. I am grateful to Smith College and the British Library and to the many individuals who made their collections available to me: Dr. P. C. Mahtab, Shudha Mazumdar, Krishnabai Nimbkar, Mithan Lam, Sevati Mitra, and Renuka Ray. I have also been given permission to include a photo by Pablo Bartholomew.

Throughout the writing of this book, my husband, Sidney ("Skip") Greenblatt, has been by my side: encouraging me, listening to me read out drafts of chapters, making suggestions, and always urging me to get it finished! Perhaps we will now be able to take a vacation without carrying a few chapters of the "Cambridge volume."

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ABBREVIATIONS

ABP	*Amrita Bazar Patrika*
AIWC	All-India Women's Conference
BC	*Bombay Chronicle*
BPWC	Bombay Presidency Women's Council
BVA	Bombay Vigilance Association
CPI	Communist Party of India
CS Papers	Cornelia Sorabji Papers (IOOLC, London)
CWMG	*Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*
DNB	*Dictionary of National Biography*
DRP	Dr. Reddy Papers (NMML, New Delhi)
DSS	Desh Sevika Sangha (Women Serving the Country)
EPW	*Economic and Political Weekly*
FC	Fawcett Collection (Fawcett Library, London)
GOI	Government of India
IAR	*Indian Annual Register*
IESHR	*Indian Economic and Social History Review*
ILM	*Indian Ladies' Magazine*
INC	Indian National Congress
IOOLC	Indian Office and Oriental Library Collection (London)
ISR	*Indian Social Reformer*
JBC	Josephine Butler Collection (Fawcett Library, London)
JN	Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (NMML, New Delhi)
JWH	*Journal of Women's History*
MR	*Modern Review*
MRS	Mahila Rashtriya Sangha (Women's National Organization)
NCWI	National Council of Women in India
NFIW	National Federation of Indian Women
NI	*New India*
NMML	Nehru Museum and Memorial Library (New Delhi)
NSS	Nari Satyagraha Samiti (Women's *Satyagraha* [truth-force] Organization)
RP	Rathbone Papers (Fawcett Library, London)

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RSS	Rashtriya Stree Sangha (National Women's Organization)
RWC	Ruth Woodsmall Collection (Smith College, Northampton, Mass.)
SPL	Social Purity League
WBA	West Bengal Archives (Calcutta)
WIA	Women's Indian Conference
WSIQ	*Women's Studies International Forum* (formerly *Women's Studies International Quarterly*)

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A NOTE ON SPELLING

Many Indian names have alternative spellings. In the text I have tried to use the most common or most accepted forms but I have used the original spellings in references in the footnotes.

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INTRODUCTION

The first historical accounts of Indian women date from the nineteenth century and are a product of the colonial experience. These accounts tell of an ancient time when women were held in high esteem followed by a long period when their status declined. Then Europeans came on the scene. The foreign rulers, according to these narratives, introduced new ideas about women's roles and capabilities and these ideas were adopted by enlightened Indians. Until recently the history of women in British India has been recounted in this way, that is, as a slow but progressive march towards "modernity" following a long period of stagnation and decline. Both British missionaries and those Indian reformers who welcomed the opportunity to put forth a critique of their own society hypothesized a "golden age" followed by centuries of corruption and betrayal. Salvation came in the guise of European forms of governing, technology, and values. This way of writing about the past, particularly as linear movement through time toward a specific goal, was a hallmark of European history.

Both European-inspired histories and the Indian texts they cited shared a belief in a unique female nature. Indian texts essentialized women as devoted and self-sacrificing, yet occasionally rebellious and dangerous. Texts on religion, law, politics, and education carried different pronouncements for men depending on caste, class, age, and religious sect. In contrast, women's differences were overshadowed by their biological characteristics and the subordinate, supportive roles they were destined to play. Historians were equally essentialist in their portrayal of Indian women. Occasionally Indian texts and historical narratives singled out one woman for special attention but usually this was because her accomplishments were significant by male standards. Topics that were intimately interwoven with women's lives – household and agricultural technology; religious rituals and sentiments; fertility and family size; furnishings, jewelry and clothing; inheritance and property rights; and marriage and divorce – were largely overlooked.

In the 1970s the United Nations focused world attention on the

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status of women. Member countries were asked to appoint committees that could gather statistics and produce reports on this topic. As India and other countries set up commissions to study the status of women, the UN declared 1975 International Women's Year and 1975–85 Women's Decade.

In India, as in the West, the international mandate was welcomed by a small but determined group of academics already examining questions related to women's status. Historians among this group first turned their attention to the glaring omissions in accounts of politically significant events and only later to studying issues of greatest salience to specific groups of women.

Soon after the systematic study of women's past began, students of history recognized they were witnessing a revolution. Gerda Lerner, an American pioneer in the field of women's history and the first person to hold a chair in women's history, said: "Women have a history; women are in history." Her words became a manifesto. What emerged was a new way of thinking about gender. Instead of accepting feminine identity as natural and essential, historians and other social scientists treated it as constructed. This liberating hypothesis stimulated questions about women's unequal position.

In the West there have been three general approaches to women's history. The earliest of these was additive history, that is, history written after a re-examination of the sources to discover the contributions and role of women. The second approach, genderized history, draws on a feminist perspective to rethink historiography and make gender difference a key to the analysis of social relations. A third approach, contributory history, privileges female agency while recognizing how patriarchy impedes women's actions.

Writing the history of women in a colonial setting presents additional challenges. Colonial histories have narrated the civilizing mission of the British as rescuing Indian women from their own culture and society. Nationalist discourse, according to Partha Chatterjee, resolved the "woman question" by the end of the nineteenth century.[1] If Gandhi revived the "woman question," as I would argue, nationalist historians have concluded that Gandhi brought women into public life and gave them the tools to solve their own problems. But this is too

[1] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History,* ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 238–9.

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simplistic and ignores the history of women before Gandhi came on the scene. The newer challenges to the task of writing women's history come from the subaltern school, originating in Calcutta, and from historians interested in resistance in everyday life.

The first volume of *Subaltern Studies* appeared in 1982, heralding a new school of history focusing on all non-elite colonial subjects. Borrowing the term "subaltern" from Antonio Gramsci, these historians have explicated the interplay of coercion and consent during 200 years of British rule. In their attempts to explain hegemonic processes, subaltern historians have uncovered and articulated the stories of suppressed peoples. Although they have paid some attention to women, the uncovering of women's subalternity has not been their forte.

It was the subaltern project that led Gayatri Spivak to write her challenging article: "Can the Subaltern Speak?"[2] In this article she states the problem of writing the history of colonial women:

> as object of colonial historiography and as subject of insurgency, the ideological construction of gender keeps the male dominant. If, in the context of colonial production, the subaltern has no history and cannot speak, the subaltern as female is even more deeply in shadow.[3]

Spivak warns the uncritical historian to beware of the pitfalls of valorizing "the concrete experience of the oppressed."[4] This way of writing history often constitutes an autonomous subject without due recognition of the dual oppression of colonialism and patriarchy, and the further oppression of Western scholarship.[5] She concludes this essay with a charge to the feminist intellectual to take her work very seriously.[6]

Challenged by the work of James Scott in uncovering the everyday forms of resistance in Southeast Asia,[7] Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash have extended this idea to South Asia and to issues of gender. Their aim is to shift the focus away from "extraordinary moments of collective protest" to a "variety of non-confrontational resistances and contestatory behavior."[8] For women's history, this can lead to a way of

[2] Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture,* ed. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Urbana and Chicago, University of Illinois Press, 1988), pp. 271–313. [3] Ibid., p. 287. [4] *Ibid.*, p. 275.
[5] *Ibid.*, p. 295. [6] *Ibid.*, p. 308.
[7] James Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1985).
[8] Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, *Contesting Power* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991), pp. 1–2.

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examining women's agency even while they belong to and participate in an oppressive patriarchal society.[9]

Historians of British India are now producing serious monographs on how women experienced colonial rule and how it affected their lives as well how women and the "woman question" affected colonial politics.

There are other ways of writing about gender, especially focusing on the colonial structures that controlled women's lives and analyzing the documents that determined the construction of women in the dominant discourse. These have furthered our understanding of how hegemonic processes work. These studies take as their subject matter not the lives and actions of women but the way women were imagined and represented which in turn influenced how women saw themselves and what they did. New theoretical frameworks, questioning power relationships, language, the observer's gaze, and the dominance of positivist notions, have found gender a compelling subject. This scholarship, when informed by a feminist perspective, contributes significantly to the production of women's history.

This volume belongs to women's history and strives to be contributory in the best sense of the term. I have drawn on women's materials to the greatest extent possible to demonstrate that Indian women have not been as silent as some accounts would have us believe.

At the dawn of women's history as it is now written, Miriam Schneir, in a book entitled *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (1972), stated: "No feminist works emerged from behind the Hindu purdah or out of Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development or expression."[10] Historically this construction of the veiled and enslaved woman has fired the colonial imagination and allowed it to cloak outright exploitation as a "civilizing mission." In the 1930s and 1940s British feminists were eager to help their "little sisters" but remained convinced that imperial rule was benevolent. Post-colonial, cold-war feminists such as Mary Daly have condemned their own patriarchal systems but saved their most vitriolic attacks for third-world men in a form of literary "Paki-bashing."[11] In

[9] Nita Kumar, ed., *Women as Subjects, South Asian Histories* (Charlottesville and London, University Press of Virginia, 1994), p. 4.

[10] Miriam Schneir, ed., *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings* (New York, Vintage, 1972), p. xiv.

[11] Mary Daly, *Gyn/ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism* (Boston, Beacon Press, 1990).

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the first place, not all Indian women were behind veils, although certain ideas about modesty and respectability were widely shared. It is equally false to define women's world as one which totally suppresses female agency. To go one step further and declare that Indian women, secluded and not secluded, had no voice is the third act of silencing.

Recent scholarship on women, whether it be women's history or a new questioning of the documents of history, is fueled by the work of archivists and historians locating and saving women's writings and material objects. When I first became interested in women's history in India I was warned about the difficulty of finding sources. That was 1970. Now, a quarter of a century later, I am able to see both how far we have come and how much is left to do. In the early 1970s women's records were not in libraries or archives but in the homes and memories of individuals. Those of us then engaged in research on women's lives uncovered records, documents, journals, magazines, literature, memoirs, letters, photographs, pamphlets, all authored by women. Most important, we met women who were willing to record their oral histories. Researchers collected songs, folk tales, and artistic works, and reread phallocentric documents with a new sensitivity to gender. Research units and documentation centers undertook the task of preserving papers and books that might otherwise have disappeared. The Nehru Memorial Library devoted its attention to acquiring the personal papers of women who had previously been overlooked by libraries and worked to enlarge its significant collection of oral histories. Unfortunately some of the smaller libraries and provincial archives have not preserved valuable collections of women's records and some important private collections have disappeared. SPARROW (Sound and Picture Archives for Research on Women) in Bombay is a recent and heroic attempts to preserve women's documents, especially photographs, films, and recordings.[12] As yet there is no archive or museum devoted to preserving items of women's material culture.

In writing this book I have used a wide range of material produced by feminist scholars, as well as my own notes from years of researching women's history in India. I have been an active participant in the discovery and preservation of women's records and I have read through some private collections which I fear no longer exist. What I think makes this book unique is the extent to which I have been able to draw

[12] Founded in Bombay by C. S. Lakshmi, Neera Desai, and Maitreyi Krishnaraj.

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on women's own accounts about the activities they participated in and witnessed. In privileging women's own words, I understand the danger of making them agents of their own destinies. While I have tried to make the reader aware of the constraints which surrounded them, I am influenced by women's perceptions of themselves as agents. The historian has a duty to set personal narratives within a context, but it is also important to recognize that these women constituted themselves as subjects acting in the world.

My object is to privilege women's own accounts so I am focusing, throughout most of this book, on women who were literate. That makes them, by their small numbers, an elite. Unfortunately the term "elite" has been employed to categorize, and then dismiss, women who struggled to become literate. Anandibai Joshi is a case in point. Married at age nine, she endured a difficult life, often filled with privation, abuse, and social ostracism, before she finally came to America, studied at Philadelphia Women's Medical College, and became India's first foreign-trained woman doctor. Haimabati Sen was a child widow who was thrown out of both her brother's home and her brother-in-law's home. That she finally became a medical doctor, trained in the vernacular system, and then wrote a detailed memoir makes her part of an elite in the sense of having obtained higher education and a profession, and writing about her life. But it was not elite status that gave her or Anandibai Joshi this chance. They achieved what they did by sheer force of will. Many of the women who found a voice and left records did not lead privileged lives. They lived and worked within patriarchal societies but were not crippled in the process. I have also utilized non-traditional sources: oral history, women's diaries and letters, songs, pamphlets, literature, and photographs to move beyond the elite and convey the complexity and diversity of India.

I begin this work with male reformers in nineteenth-century India. I have chosen to proceed in this way because patriarchal systems offer women few opportunities until men decide it is time for change. I acknowledge the British as sparking this change. Many of the reforms they proposed had little to do with the deepest needs of the society. However, education was one of the items on the reform agenda that contributed to the emancipation of women. It was not an unmixed blessing since some educational schemes were designed to socialize women to be even more dependent and obedient than previously. Moreover, education often isolated women from their traditional allies

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within the household. But there is an element of serendipity in education.

Many educated women began to define their own problems. As women's organizations developed, men focused their attention on power politics. If the nationalists solved the woman question it was in terms of their own discourse; the women's discourse about women's problems was alive and well.

I have discussed the women's movement before the nationalist movement because women began asking for their rights before they were brought into the nationalist agitation. The women involved in the women's movement justified their new roles with the ideology of social feminism, that is, they tied their arguments about women's rights to women's obligation to perform traditional roles and serve the needs of the family. Although conventional wisdom credits Gandhi with bringing women into public life, I would argue that they were already there. Gandhi gave them a blueprint for action. Equally important, Gandhi assured their husbands and fathers that these politically active women would not rebel against the family. Feminist demands for equality with men were never fully integrated into the nationalist program even though nationalism was feminized.

I have devoted one chapter to assessing what the new colonial economic scene meant for women. The lack of sources available for this discussion has limited my analysis. There is a crying need for more work in this area. These are difficult topics for researchers, but it is essential historians take steps to uncover more about the lives of the many women employed on plantations, in domestic work and the agricultural sector, as well as in mining, transportation, and the new professions.

Chapter 7 looks at the activities of women from the late 1930s until the early 1950s. The focus is women's activism. By the 1940s women were part of all movements, conservative and radical, and began to view themselves differently. Increasingly they found social feminism wanting and began to borrow from more radical ideological frameworks, especially Marxism and its offshoots. By Independence in 1947 the hegemony of the women's organizations, who claimed to speak for all women, had been destroyed.

The last chapter discusses certain themes in post-Independence India: political involvement, economic participation, and the contemporary women's movement. I argue that the momentous report,

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Toward Equality, a report commissioned by the government to examine the status of women since Independence, has had a crucial impact on the contemporary women's movement. The authors of this report have made us aware that the promises of the freedom movement were honored only in laws, regulations, and policy documents. Yet this in itself is no small matter, although it falls far short of Gandhi's promise and what women want. As a historian, I would draw attention to the fact that *Toward Equality* appeared in 1974 – twenty-seven years after Independence. That it appeared at all is a tribute to what had gone before. Other nations that have experienced colonial rule, and many that have not, have not done nearly so well by their women. Not all Indian women benefited from the promises contained in the Constitution but the fact that women are continuing the fight for women's rights is a significant point to make.

The contemporary feminist movement in India is alive and well but divided by a variety of forces that threaten the consensus of the 1980s. The rise of right-wing movements with their women's units is reminiscent of the mobilization of women for the nationalist struggle. The legacy is in the mobilization of women for activities outside the home and confirms that Indian women are no longer excluded from politics or political activities. But this is not a movement for equality for women. Women's involvement in these activities serves a fascist agenda and only empowers those who would scream for the enemy's blood.

I have used the term "feminist" throughout this book knowing full well that Sarojini Naidu and more recently Madhu Kishwar have declared "I am not a feminist."[13] Each of us defines feminist in her own way – I prefer an inclusive definition that would allow me to see feminism in the speeches of Saraladevi Chaudhurani and Sarojini Naidu and in the writings of Dr. Haimabati Sen and Madhu Kishwar. Feminism supports equal rights for women and sees patriarchal society as responsible for their oppression. I would like to quote Veena Oldenburg's comment on her decision to use the word feminist:

> Feminism has a long history and is no longer monolithic; multiple feminisms abound, and *feminism is* capable of the same kinds of distinctions one would expect in any analysis of the word *patriarchy*. I define the word *feminist* in its simplest political sense, as a person (and not necessarily a woman) whose analytical perspective is informed by an understanding of the relationship between power and

[13] AIWC, Fourth Session, Bombay, 1930, p. 21; Madhu Kishwar, "Why I Do Not Call Myself a Feminist, *Manushi*, no. 61 (November–December, 1990), pp. 2–8.

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gender in any historical, social, or cultural context. To me, the argument against using the word *feminist* is weakened by the fact that terms and theories of equally Western provenance – Marxist, socialist, Freudian, or post-structuralist – do not arouse similar indignation and are in fact (over)used as standard frameworks for analyses of Indian society by Indian scholars.[14]

This book is being written in a period of rapid political and social change. The end of the cold war and the breakup of the Soviet Union have contributed to a new climate where nationalism and the liberal ideals of democracy, progress, protest, and dissent are frequently under attack. There are challenges to conventional accounts and at the same time people are looking to history for both explanations of what is happening and validation of their own claims. Within the field of "women's history" other debates are taking place. As conflicting "schools" and new materials become part of our milieu, the charge to the serious historian seems formidable. One might be tempted to abandon history completely but there are those who, like Dipesh Chakrabarty, challenge us "to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it."[15] In this book I am not so much writing new history as emulating the best historians who were aware of their sources, self-conscious about what they were doing, concerned about evidence that did not always "fit," and tentative in their conclusions. It has been a great pleasure to work on this book and my hope is that it will stimulate others to become engaged in writing history, to include gender in their own conceptual frameworks, or perhaps just admire and enjoy what women have done.

[14] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "The Roop Kanwar Case: Feminist Responses," *Sati, the Blessing and the Curse,* ed. John S. Hawley (New York, Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 102–3.

[15] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Postcoloniality and the Artifices of History: Who Speaks for 'Indian' Pasts?" *Representations,* 3 (winter, 1993), p. 21.

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CHAPTER 1

REFORM IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY: EFFORTS TO MODERNIZE WOMEN'S ROLES

Rammohun Roy's (1772–1833) name is usually listed first among those of nineteenth-century reformers concerned with improving women's status. Historians have called him the "father of modern India," a "champion of women's rights," and a feminist. But his personal relationships with women were far from ideal. He was married three times, at age nine, ten, and twenty-one years. His first wife died soon after the marriage, another died in 1826 and one outlived him. There is no evidence that he looked to his wives for companionship; in fact, there were rumors that his adopted son, Rajaram, was the child of his Muslim mistress.[1] After Rammohun's father's death he argued with his mother, Tarini Devi, and in anger left the family home with his wives and children. The relationship deteriorated even further when Tarini Devi encouraged a nephew to challenge Rammohun's right to ancestral property. The suit began in 1817. Among the court records is an unused document showing that Rammohun was prepared to argue, in front of a judge, that his mother hated him, desired his worldly ruin, and would have even "welcomed his death." Rammohun had developed a set of questions to be asked of his mother if she were called as a witness. He planned to ask if she was so angry at him for refusing to worship her idols that she would lie under oath to destroy him.[2] Rammohun admitted he admired his mother's strength and independence yet he was willing to publicly humiliate her.[3] Examined from this perspective Rammohun seems less than an ideal champion of women's rights. Where were women's voices?

Unfortunately, Tarini Devi left no record of her side of the story. Was her quarrel with her son over religion? Or property? Or was she simply

[1] S. N. Mukherjee, "Raja Rammohun Roy and the Status of Women in Bengal in the Nineteenth Century," *Women in India and Nepal*, ed. Michael Allen and S. N. Mukherjee (Canberra, Australian National University, 1982), p. 165.

[2] "On the Part and Behalf of the Defendant Above Named," *Raja Rammohun Roy Letters and Documents*, ed. Rama Prasad Chanda and Jatindra Kumar Majumdar (Delhi, Anmol Publications, 1987), p. 234. [3] S. N. Mukherjee, "Raja Rammohun Roy," pp. 164–5.

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a cantankerous old woman who would not tolerate her son's disobedience? She died in 1822 and like so many of the women of her time what we know about her comes from her son's writings.

Rashsundari Devi (*c.* 1809–?), a Bengali woman, wrote a story of her life, *Amar Jiban* ("My Life"), that was published in 1868.[4] This detailed memoir revolves around her day-to-day experiences as a housewife and mother. Obsessed with a desire to read, she stole a page from a book and a sheet of paper from her son and kept them hidden in the kitchen where she furtively pursued her education. This is the first autobiography written in Bengali and it is rich in its details of the period when reformers were attempting to change the lives of women. When Rassundari Devi was finally able to write about her own struggle to master simple reading, she commented: "These days parents of a single girl take so much care to educate her. But we had to struggle so much just for that."[5]

Dr. Vina Mazumdar, one of contemporary India's well-known feminist scholars, recalls that one of her great-great-grandmothers performed sati (cremated herself on her husband's funeral pyre) after this custom had been prohibited. Family history records this as a voluntary decision opposed by the woman's sons and grandsons. One granddaughter-in-law refused to accept the blessing of the woman about to become sati. It is this woman – the rebel – who has been remembered by Vina Mazumdar's family as having a strong and vibrant personality.[6]

What we know of the lives of these early nineteenth-century women we know either from memoirs written later, remembered lore, or the accounts of others. The accounts that exist are misleading. We know about Tarini Devi and Vina Mazumdar's ancestresses because of our interest in nineteenth-century social reform. Rammohun Roy was considered one of the greatest reformers, so all details of his life have been recorded. Sati, a custom that pronounced a woman virtuous if she agreed to be burned with her husband's corpse, was strongly opposed by Rammohun Roy. Vina Mazumdar is only one of many Indians whose family history includes a sati story. Because social change – in British terms "social reform" – became such an important issue, our

[4] Tanika Sarkar, "A Book of Her Own. A Life of Her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-Century Woman," *History Workshop Journal*, 36, (autumn, 1993), pp. 35–65.

[5] "Rassundari Devi," *Women Writing in India 600 BC to the Present*, 2 vols., vol. 1, *600 BC to the Early Twentieth Century*, ed. Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (New York, The Feminist Press, 1991), pp. 190–202, quote from pp. 201–2.

[6] Vina Mazumdar, "Comment on Suttee," *Signs*, 4, no. 2 (winter, 1978), pp. 270–1.

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accounts of Indian women in the early part of the nineteenth-century are often imbedded within discussions of sati, child marriage, widowhood, polygyny, and prohibitions on education. These issues dominate the narrative, leaving us uninformed about women's work and occupations, values and emotional lives, and health and physical well-being. As Lata Mani has so rightly pointed out, the debates over social issues construed women as victims or heroines, denying them complex personalities and agency. Mani writes: "Tradition was thus not the ground on which the status of woman was being contested. Rather the reverse was true: women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated."[7]

THE WOMAN QUESTION IN COLONIAL INDIA

In the nineteenth century, the "woman question" loomed large. This was not a question of "what do women want?" but rather "how can they be modernized?" It became the central question in nineteenth-century British India because the foreign rulers had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society. Enamored with their "civilizing mission," influential British writers condemned Indian religions, culture, and society for their rules and customs regarding women.

The British were not the first outsiders with a radically different cultural tradition to conquer India. Centuries earlier Muslim dynasties had entered the sub-continent from the northwest and brought to India a new religion and a new way of organizing power relations. But significant changes that affected the lives of ordinary people first came with British rule. Traditional Hindu society was "decentered" and previous challenges from foreign invaders had allowed it to remain so. The traditional state collected the rents and demanded obeisance but did not interfere with the social order. Muslim rule did not significantly alter this structure. But the British, pursuing commercial aims, introduced new relationships and explained their actions within a view of the world that was "clear, precise, instrumentalist, technical, scientific, effective, true, and above all beneficial to all who came into contact with it."[8]

[7] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India," *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Delhi, Kali for Women, 1989), pp. 117–18.

[8] Sudipta Kaviraj, "On the Construction of Colonial Power: Structure, Discourse, Hegemony," *Contesting Colonial Hegemony*, ed. Dagmar Engels and Shula Marks (London, German Historical Institute London, 1994), p. 31.

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The nineteenth century was a time of political, social, and scientific upheaval in Europe. The British regarded their domination of the subcontinent as proof of their moral superiority. In arguments over how to best rule their colonial subjects in India, they were led to discussions of the ideal relationship between men and women.[9] James Mill, in his influential *History of British India* (first published in 1826), argued that women's position could be used as an indicator of society's advancement. The formula was simple: "Among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted." Mill explained that as societies advanced, "the condition of the weaker sex is gradually improved, till they associate on equal terms with the men, and occupy the place of voluntary and useful coadjutors." Having learned about Hindu society through reading Halhed's *Code of Gentoo Laws*, a translation of the Code of Manu, some religious works, and accounts written by travelers and missionaries, Mill concluded: "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women . . . They are held, accordingly, in extreme degradation."[10]

Missionaries concurred. Reverend E. Storrow came to India in 1848 and pronounced Indian disunity a consequence of the low status of women. Storrow's list of strong countries – Israel, Rome, and Western Europe – all derived their courage and virtue from the high position accorded women.[11] Having linked military strength with the status of women, the British concluded that domination of India was natural and inevitable.[12]

Later in the century, as part of the continuous process of legitimating British rule, Sir Herbert Hope Risley characterized the Indian intelligentsia as interested in intellectual and political ideas, but unconcerned with reforming society. Risley was pessimistic about the general progress of India without reform. He concluded his comments:

[9] See Mrinalini Sinha, "'Manliness': A Victorian Ideal and Colonial Policy in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal," Ph.D. dissertation, SUNY Stonybrook (1988). Published title: *Colonial Masculinity: the "manly Englishman" and the "effeminate Bengali", in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1995).

[10] James Mill, *The History of British India,* 2 vols. (New York, Chelsea House, 1968), pp. 309–10.

[11] Revd. E. Storrow, *Our Indian Sisters* (London, The Religious Tract Society, n.d.), pp. 154–67.

[12] See Francis G. Hutchins, *The Illusion of Permanence: British Imperialism in India* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1967).

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History affords no warrant for the belief that the enthusiasm of nationality can be kindled in sordid and degenerate surroundings. A society which accepts intellectual inanition and moral stagnation as the natural condition of its womankind cannot hope to develop the high qualities of courage, devotion and self-sacrifice which go to the making of nations.[13]

The ideas which gained currency among the British rulers of India included humanitarianism, utilitarianism, social Darwinism, and nationalism.[14] Positivist and social Darwinian theory developed rankings of religions and cultures showing India lower on the evolutionary scale than countries of the Middle East or Western Europe. If there were any hope for India, it would follow from the introduction of Western ideas and institutions. Yet few Western critics of Indian society really believed total regeneration was possible. At any rate, a new gender ideology and modification of the actual treatment of women would be the necessary prelude to any positive change.

THE INDIAN RESPONSE

Colonial domination set the change in motion; Indians reshaped the imported ideas and institutions to fit the social and cultural milieu. The historian, Rajat K. Ray, described the impact of imported ideas on the Bengal Renaissance, when intellectuals in eastern India were rediscovering their past and engaging in new intellectual activity, in these terms: "[they] digested and borrowed and inherited elements in such a way that the new culture could not be said to be a pale imitation but was a genuinely indigenous product."[15] The ideology that emerged to redefine gender relations was an amalgam of new foreign ideas, indigenous concepts, and the response of Indian men and women to the foreign presence in their midst.

Not all agreed that gender relations needed modification. A number of Indian intellectuals praised their own culture's treatment of women[16] or compared the conditions of Indian women with those of European

[13] Sir Herbert Hope Risley, *The People of India,* 2nd edn., ed. W. Crooke (Delhi, Oriental Books Reprint Corp., 1969), p. 171.

[14] Vina Mazumdar, "The Social Reform Movement in India – From Ranade to Nehru," *Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity,* ed. B. R. Nanda (New Delhi, Vikas Publishing, 1976), p. 46.

[15] Rajat K. Ray, "Man, Woman and the Novel: The Rise of a New Consciousness in Bengal (1858–1947)," *IESHR*, 16, no. 1 (March, 1979), p. 3.

[16] Tanika Sarkar, "The Hindu Wife and Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal," *Studies in History*, 8, no. 2 (1992), pp. 213–35.

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women and concluded that females in both countries suffered hardships.[17] Those who accepted the idea that society's ills could be traced to the oppressed condition of women saw female education and female emancipation as the first steps towards progress.[18] But both groups – those who extolled gender relations and those convinced of the need for reform – shared an ideology, later linked to the nationalist project, that separated the home from the world. According to Partha Chatterjee, Indians pursued science, technology, rational economics, and Western political forms while regarding the home as the source of "true identity" that needed protection and strengthening, not transformation.[19]

By the last decade of the nineteenth century there was a recognizable reformist ideology. The shape of this ideology – particularly in its view of women – was retained throughout much of the twentieth century. First and foremost, Indian women were to be pitied. In 1839 Mahesh Chundra Deb spoke to the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge about the daily life of young married women:

> Suffice it to say that every man who has carefully examined the condition of Hindoo women cannot help pitying the benighted and miserable situation in which they are placed. Not withstanding all their kind attention, their pious and dutiful conduct, their submissive behavior towards their husbands, they frequently meet with severe scoldings and are even sometimes cruelly punished from ungrounded jealousy or a tyrannical whim.[20]

The theme of Deb's speech – the misery of Indian women – echoed the Western critics of Indian society and was repeated in speeches and essays throughout the century. But humanitarianism was only one of the arguments used to urge reform. Inspired and influenced by Western ideas, these reformers were also conversant with their own traditions. Rammohun Roy, Pandit Vidyasagar, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, and many others were trained in Hindu classics and saw India as recovering from a dark age. There had been a "golden age," they argued, when women were valued and occupied positions of high status. This view of the Vedic past had been adopted from the Indologists and was useful to

[17] Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1988), p. 336.
[18] David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1979).
[19] Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," pp. 238–9.
[20] Mahesh Chundra Deb, "A Sketch of the Conditions of the Hindoo Women" [1839], *Awakening in the Early Nineteenth Century*, ed. Goutam Chattopadhyay (Calcutta, Progressive Publishers, 1965). pp. 89–105.

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refute Mill's version of India.[21] During this "golden age" women were educated, married only after they had reached maturity, moved about freely, and participated in the social and political life of the time. The power of such an idea may well have stifled serious historical research on women's lives until recently. Uma Chakravarti has argued that for contemporary women this perception of the past "has led to a narrow and limiting circle in which the image of Indian womanhood has become both a shackle and a rhetorical device that nevertheless functions as a historical truth."[22]

Acceptance of a golden age was widespread but explanations of "the fall" differed widely. Some reformers simply commented on wars and invasions, claiming that political disorder inevitably led to restrictions on women's education and mobility. A number of reformers located the decline during the time of the *smritis*, that is, to a period when the vast body of law codes such as the *Manusmriti*, commentaries, epics – most prominently the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana* – and *puranas* or stories of the gods were written. These theorists argued that the decline in women's status could be traced to these writings.[23] But most of the reformers blamed Muslim rule. Ignoring the fact that rulers such as Akbar attempted to abolish sati and that Muslim law accorded women a higher status than Hindu law, these writers claimed child marriage, prohibitions on widow marriage, seclusion, and restrictions on female education were responses to the Muslim threat to women's safety.[24]

Both the "golden age" and "dark age" are problematic for historians but these concepts proved useful in the development of an ideology legitimating social reform. In order to persuade his audience that the woman question needed immediate attention, Mahesh Chundra Deb said: "in whatever light, then, we view the situation of the Hindoo women – whether we look to their physical or mental condition – we shall find to our great mortification that it is truly deplorable."[25] It was the postulation of a "dark age" that made this self-criticism palatable.

The past had been squandered and change and reform were neces-

[21] "Literature of the Ancient and Medieval Periods: Reading against the Oriental Grain," *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, p. 49.
[22] Uma Chakravarti, "Whatever Happened to the Vedic *Dasi*?" *Recasting Women*, p. 28.
[23] Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1964), pp. 114–15.
[24] "Ideals of Indian Womanhood," *ISR*, 38 (September 24, 1927), p. 56.
[25] Deb, "A Sketch," p. 91.

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sary to regain for society its lost vigor. These reformers were not revivalists, they were speaking to the colonial administrators in the language that had gained currency in the contest for moral authority. Colonial officials agreed that religion was central to Indian life, Indian people were slaves to religion, and sati (and many other customs) were religious practices. That the discourse on Indian military weakness versus British success focused on the topic of gender relations to the exclusion of a range of other issues such as trade patterns, technological innovation, the technology and methods of warfare, and dynastic failure is nothing short of amazing. Yet this is what happened.[26]

The discovery of the golden age and of the errors that had led to the fall made it possible for Indians to prescribe change. Once people understood the misery of women and the means of improving the situation, it was simply a matter of will. Pandit Vidyasagar harangued his audience:

> Countrymen! how long will you suffer yourselves to be led away by illusions! Open your eyes for once and see, that India, once the land of virtue, is being over flooded [by] the stream of adultery and foeticide. The degradation to which you have sunk is sadly low. Dip into the spirit of your Sastras, follow its dictates, and you shall be able to remove the foul blot from the face of your country.[27]

Reform, actually a return to the past according to most social reformers, was in harmony with both natural law and the dictates of reason. "Evil customs," such as child marriage and polygyny, were not in harmony with nature. Rammohun Roy wrote of women who were "forced upon the pyre," "bound" with ropes so they would perish with their husbands. Vidyasagar wrote of customs which had "hampered the evolution of her [woman's] faculties," and D. K. Karve wrote of a caste widow who "fell victim to the passion of some brute."[28] According to reformers these customs were perverted, twisted, distorted practices born of ignorance and fear and followed without recourse to common sense. The first generation of Western-educated young men had evoked reason as the touchstone for both ideas and action. These later advocates of social reform combined rationalism with their appeal to revive the golden age. According to Vivekananda, there should be no

[26] Lata Mani, "Contentious Traditions," *Recasting Women.*

[27] Isvarachandra Vidyasagar, *Marriage of Hindu Widows* (Calcutta, K. P. Bagchi and Co., 1976), pp. 108–9.

[28] Neera Desai, *Woman in Modern India,* 2nd edn. (Bombay, Vora and Co., 1967), p. 65; Vidyasagar, *Marriage of Hindu Widows*, p. 123; Dhondo Keshav Karve, *Looking Back* (Poona, Hingne Stree-Shikshan Samstha, 1936), p. 45.

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hesitation in applying the full panoply of Western analytical methods to the "science of religion." Similarly, Swami Dayananda made it clear that he would not defend "the falsehoods" of the Hindu religion but would unveil them just as he had exposed the errors of other religions.[29] The tests of reason, of course, supported the social system these reformers claimed had existed during the golden age.

CHANGING THE LIVES OF WOMEN

What do we know about women's lives on the eve of this transformation? There are, of course, the records of the reformers (mentioned earlier) but these are tainted by polemics. Constructing a clear picture of the lives of women before colonial rule is difficult, although recent feminist scholarship has added a great deal to our view of the past. The pre-British records include an abundance of prescriptive texts but fewer documents that shed light on the actual lives of women. Tryambakayajvan's *Stridharmapaddhati* ("Guide to the Religious Status and Duties of Women"), translated by Julia Leslie, is the only extant work totally devoted to women's duties. Written in the eighteenth century, before the reformist programs, this text describes the lives of women from the highest ranking, land-holding groups. Unfortunately, "there are no references to women agricultural laborers, market women, or any of the vast army of women who must have been living and working outside the context of the court."[30]

Among the higher castes, the female child spent her youth preparing for marriage. Her marriage to a man of the same caste and ideally higher status was arranged by her parents. Following the marriage ceremony she was sent to her husband's home and required to adjust to their customs. Her husband was to be regarded as "the supreme god among all gods" and served accordingly. The fortunate woman gave birth to sons while issueless women or those who gave birth only to daughters were treated with disdain. The aging woman watched her children mature and marry and accepted the new roles of mother-in-law and grandmother. If her husband died before her, she became a widow with abstemious habits. After his death she was to

[29] M. K. Halder, *Renaissance and Reaction in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee* (Columbia, Mo., South Asia Books, 1977), p. 188.

[30] I. Julia Leslie, *The Perfect Wife: The Orthodox Hindu Woman according to the Stridharmapaddhati of Tryambakayajvan* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 3–20.

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devote her life to his memory, her impurity could never be removed, and she was to live out her life as the most inauspicious of all creatures.[31] By faithfully performing her duties, a woman helped to maintain an ordered universe.

Historically, women experienced these rules and prescriptions differently depending on religion, caste, class, age, place in the family hierarchy, and an element of serendipity. There were women who lived up to the ideal, but there were also women who rebelled against these prescriptions. The historical record confirms that women found an escape from conventional roles in religion and scholarship, and occasionally through political action.[32] Some women were able to live outside patriarchal households and gain status as courtesans.[33] But the options open to women of extraordinary talent or those unhappy with their lives were limited. Surviving records inform us that a few women became educated, attained fame, and commanded armies but most were denied men's opportunities to acquire knowledge, property, and social status.

By the second half of the nineteenth century there were reform groups in all parts of British India. They focused attention on sati, female infanticide, polygyny, child marriage, purdah, prohibitions on female education, *devadasis* (temple dancers wedded to the gods), and the patrilocal joint family. Their activity acted as a stimulus and encouragement to reform-minded individuals in other areas, and gradually reformist organizations with an all-India identity began to emerge.

MALE REFORMERS

Across India, there is a long list of reformers who undertook major efforts on women's behalf. In Bengal, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar championed female education and led the campaign to legalize widow remarriage, and Keshub Chandra Sen, a leader of the Brahmo Samaj,[34]

[31] *Ibid.*, pp. 273–304. [32] Tharu and Lalita, *Women Writing in India*, introduction.

[33] For an interesting discussion of this theme, see Veena Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesan of Lucknow, India," *Feminist Studies*, 16, no. 2 (summer, 1990), pp. 259–87.

[34] The Brahmo Samaj began with a group of Bengali Hindus who wanted to rethink their religious heritage. In 1815 Rammohun Roy assembled his friends for religious discussions and by 1828 they were meeting for weekly services and sermons as the Brahmo Sabha. Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905), author of the Brahma Covenant and a volume of scriptures and the designer of revised rituals, founded the Brahmo religion. When his followers wanted more dramatic action in the areas of caste equality, temperance, and equality for women, the Samaj split and then split again. By the 1870s it was considered a separate religion.

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sought to bring women into new roles through schools, prayer meetings, and experiments in living. By the turn of the century, Swami Vivekananda, the leader of an activist order of Hindu monasticism, was arguing that women could become a powerful regenerative force. In North India, Swami Dayananda Saraswati, the founder of the Arya Samaj,[35] encouraged female education and condemned customs he regarded as degrading to women: marriages between partners of unequal ages, dowry, and polygyny. At the same time, Rai Salig Ram (also known as Huzur Maharaj), a follower of the Radhasoami faith, advocated female emancipation in his volumes of prose, *Prem Patra*. Among Muslims, Khwaja Altaf Husain Hali and Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah introduced education for girls. In western India, Mahadev Govind Ranade founded the National Social Conference to focus attention on social reforms. At the same time, the Parsee journalist Behramji Malabari captured the attention of the British reading public with his articles in *The Times* on the evils of child marriage and the tragedy of enforced widowhood for young women. Dhondo Keshav Karve offered a practical solution with his institutions in Poona to educate young widows to become teachers in girls' schools. In South India, R. Venkata Ratnam Naidu opposed the *devadasi* system while Virasalingam Pantulu worked for marriage reform. Both sought to increase opportunities for female education. Reformers were found throughout India and among all communities. They addressed a number of issues, most of them relating to marriage and the importance of female education.

What is especially interesting about these nineteenth-century reformers is their activism. Their ideas on gender were rooted in personal experience; during their lives they attempted to change those with whom they lived and worked. They were not simply reacting to British pressure – these issues were very real and they responded to them with passion.

To illustrate the efforts of these male reformers, I will sketch the life work of Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, from Bengal; Virasalingam Pantulu, a Telugu speaker from Madras Presidency; and Justice

[35] In northern India, Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83) launched a vigorous campaign against popular Hinduism including the brahmin priesthood, rituals, and pilgrimages, and customary prohibitions on widow remarriage and female education. Holding the Vedas infallible, he established the first Arya Samaj (Noble Society) in Bombay in 1875. Within a few years, reformers in Delhi, Lahore, and other North Indian cities had set up independent Arya Samajes.

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Mahadev Govind Ranade, from Bombay. These three men were born in the first half of the nineteenth century, were well educated, and had personal experiences which caused them to reflect on the plight of women in Hindu society.

In 1828 eight-year-old Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–91) walked, with his father, from the village of Birsingha in Midnapur District to Calcutta to seek admission in an English-language institution. The fees at Hindu College were too high for his father to pay so Iswar Chandra was enrolled in Sanskrit College. While studying in Calcutta he lived at the home of a friend whose sister was a child widow. This was Iswar Chandra's first experience of the hardships this custom imposed on women. Sometime later his old guru decided to marry a young girl. Iswar Chandra was enraged and demonstrated his anger by refusing his guru's hospitality. Before a year had passed the guru died and left behind a girl widow with nowhere to go and no means of support.[36] Iswar Chandra vowed then to devote his life to improving the status of Hindu widows and encouraging remarriage.[37]

Iswar Chandra also became an impassioned supporter of female education and an opponent of polygyny. He wrote lengthy tracts substantiating his positions with scriptural citations and historical data. A decline in religion created the environment that allowed contemporary customs to thrive, he wrote. When his opponents protested, he insisted they were misinterpreting scripture and employed a masterful command of Sanskrit to point out their ignorance.

In his first tract on widow remarriage (1855) Iswar Chandra claimed that this practice was permissible in *Kali Yuga* ("The Dark Age"), the age in which he and his contemporaries lived. Two thousand copies of this book were sold in the first week, a reprint of 3,000 soon sold out, and the third reprint was of 10,000 copies.[38] But not everyone was convinced. On the streets of Calcutta Vidyasagar found himself insulted, abused, and even threatened with death.[39] But he pressed on and urged the British to pass legislation that would enable Hindu widows to remarry. To support his request Iswar Chandra collected almost 1,000 signatures and sent this petition to the Indian Legislative Council. The Council received thousands of signatures for and against this measure

[36] Desai, *Woman in Modern India*, p. 69; S. K. Bose, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar* (New Delhi, National Book Trust, 1969), pp. 5, 32.

[37] Asok Sen, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and his Elusive Milestones* (Calcutta, Riddlu-India, 1977), p. 60. [38] Bose, *Iswar Chandra*, p. 35. [39] Sen, *Iswar Chandra*, p. 59.

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but the members finally decided to support the "enlightened minority." The Hindu Widow Remarriage Act was passed in 1856. Although the value of this Act for improving the lives of women has been questioned, one cannot doubt Iswar Chandra's desire to create a more humane society.

The Remarriage Act did not change the status of widows. Frequently blamed for the husband's death, the high-caste widow was required to relinquish her jewelry and subsist on simple food. Young widows were preyed upon by men who would make them their mistresses or carry them away to urban brothels. But woe to the widow who succumbed to a suitor and became pregnant. In 1881 the court at Surat in western India tried Vijayalakshmi, a young brahmin widow, for killing her illegitimate child. At the first trial she was sentenced to hang but on appeal this was changed to transportation for life and later reduced to five years. This case so angered Tarabai Shinde (*c.* 1850–1910), a young Marathi housewife, that she wrote *Stri-purusha-tulana* ("A Comparison Between Women and Men"). Vijayalakshmi's case had triggered an intense public discussion about the misfortune of widows and the issue of widow remarriage. For Tarabai, it was clear that this issue was simply a metaphor for the general mistreatment of women. She wrote: "So is it true that only women's bodies are home to all the different kinds of recklessness and vice? Or have men got just the same faults as we find in women?" As for widows: "Once a woman's husband has died, not even a dog would swallow what she's got to."[40] Tarabai Shinde's cry for equality went unheeded in a world where reformers wanted to help women, not accord them equal status.

Vidyasagar lived in a world where the males among *kulin* brahmins, an aristocratic caste with rigid marriage rules, were highly sought after as bridegrooms and able to marry as many women as they wished. As Vidyasagar collected data on this custom, he became horrified by the magnitude of the problem. Using as a sample 133 *kulin* brahmins of Hooghly District, Iswar Chandra revealed the abuses inherent in polygyny. One fifty-year-old man had married 107 times; Bholanath Bandopadhyaya (age fifty-five) had eighty wives; Bhagaban Chattopadhyaya (age sixty-four) had seventy-two wives, and so the

[40] Rosalind O'Hanlon, "Issues of Widowhood: Gender and Resistance in Colonial Western India," *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia,* ed. Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991) pp. 62–108, quotes from p. 93 and p. 96.

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documentation continued. Arguing that the practice of *kulinism* was inhuman, Iswar Chandra presented the government with a petition signed by 2,500 persons requesting the legislative prohibition of polygyny. No action was taken and ten years later he presented another petition, this time signed by 21,000 persons. The government, overly cautious about social reform in the wake of the rebellion of 1857, declined to act. Vidyasagar continued his campaign and although he produced anti-polygyny tracts in 1871 and 1873, the issue was dead.[41]

Vidyasagar's third campaign focused on mass education for girls and boys. He had been appointed Special Inspector of Schools for the Districts of Hooghly, Midnapur, Burdwan, and Nadia and was able to use his influence to establish a system of vernacular education in Bengal, including forty schools for girls. J. E. D. Bethune, legal member of the Governor-General's Council, had set up a girls' school in 1849 and it became Vidyasagar's responsibility to guide it through its difficult years. He remained associated with it until 1869.[42]

Despite this great man's efforts, widow remarriage never received the approval of his society, polygyny was not abolished, and the battle for female education had only begun. From the perspective of women's rights, the new law often proved harmful. Remarried women from castes that had traditionally practiced remarriage, were often deprived of their rightful inheritance[43] and those castes were denigrated as inferior.[44] Widow celibacy was lauded by the elite as a hallmark of respectability.[45] Vidyasagar's biographer has written about the elusive nature of Vidyasagar's goals: he strove to introduce fundamental reforms within the colonial context. His proposals proved too radical for many of his contemporaries and although the colonial government criticized Indian customs, they were unwilling to back his efforts for change. Vidyasagar personified the best of the nineteenth-century social reformers; arguing for social change he demonstrated an "untiring will for positive social action."[46]

Kandukuri Virasalingam Pantulu (1848–1919) was born in

[41] Bose, *Iswar Chandra,* pp. 43–7. [42] *Ibid.*, pp. 23–5.

[43] Lucy Carroll, "Law, Custom and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widow's Remarriage Act of 1856," *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work, and the State*, ed. J. Krishnamurthy (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1989), pp. 23–5.

[44] Prem Chowdhry, "Popular Perceptions of Widow-remarriage in Haryana: Past and Present," *From the Seams of History*, ed. Bharati Roy (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 39–40.

[45] Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "Caste, Widow-remarriage and the Reform of Popular Culture in Colonial Bengal, " *From the Seams of History,* p. 34. [46] Sen, *Iswar Chandra,* p. 165.

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Rajahmundry, the capital of Godavari District, in a Telugu-speaking district of Madras Presidency. Virasalingam, a brahmin trained in classical Telugu, spent his life involved in movements to promote this language for modern education and communication. After he had passed his matriculation, he was appointed a teacher in a government school. Later he became headmaster of the Anglo-Vernacular School at Dhavaleswaram. A member of the Brahmo Samaj and Prarthana Samaj,[47] he published his own journal, *Vikeka Vardhani* ("Journal to Promote Enlightenment") to encourage social reform. Above all, he believed in the necessity of purifying religion by opposing wrong customs and attempting to stop wrong conduct. Purified religion, social reform, and vernacular education would be the three pillars of a regenerated society purged of its evil ways.[48]

Virasalingam made widow remarriage and female education the key points of his program for social change. He opened his first girls' school in 1874 and in 1878 organized a Society for Social Reform. At their first meetings members of the society discussed the importance of the anti-*nautch* movement to wean people from hiring *nautch* (dancing) girls for celebrations, but by 1879 Virasalingam had made widow remarriage the key issue. Rajahmundry celebrated its first widow remarriage in 1881 with Virasalingam performing the ceremony. The town was hostile towards this practice but Virasalingam persisted and before long there was a small community of remarried couples. Virasalingam continued to look for prospective candidates while writing numerous articles about the need for a change in public opinion. In 1891 a Widow Remarriage Association was formed, and thirty brahmin households signed a pledge promising to participate in the ceremonies and marriage feast whenever a remarriage occurred.[49] Eventually the majority of the

[47] The Prarthana Samaj (Prayer Society) of Bombay began after the Brahmo Samaj missionary, Keshub Chandra Sen, had visited that city in 1864. Members of this organization believed in an all-powerful God and salvation through worship, and rejected idolatry and the authority of brahmin priests. Religious devotion mandated concern with the world and Prarthana Samajists dedicated themselves to gradual social reform. Even though they rejected conventional Hinduism as a religion, they did not want a break with Hindu society.

[48] *Autobiography of Kandukuri Veeresalingam Pantulu*, trans. Dr. V. Ramakrishna Rao and Dr. T. Rama Rao, 2 parts (Rajamundry, Addepally and Co., n.d.), p. 173.

[49] On Virasalingam see *Autobiography*; Neera Desai, *Woman in Modern India*; Pratima Asthana, *Women's Movement in India* (Delhi, Vikas, 1974); Karen I. Leonard and John Leonard, "Social Reform and Women's Participation in Political Culture: Andhra and Madras," *The Extended Family*, ed. Gail Minault (Columbus, Mo., South Asia Books, 1981), pp. 19–45; "Rao Bahadur Mr. K. Virasalingam Pantulu and His Wife," *ILM*, 2 (September, 1902), pp. 84–5.

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prominent citizens of Rajahmundry joined Virasalingam's association.

Virasalingam had a significant impact on female education. When reformers and conservatives debated female education in Rajahmundry the argument took a different form than it had in Calcutta and Bombay where colonial power was evident. Here the language of debate was Telugu and the controversy was conducted without reference to the colonial critique of Indian society. In this context reforms for women were not equated with westernization. The consequences of this movement were far-reaching:

> The widow marriage campaign was the catalyst which initiated . . . the first generation of Western-educated Andhras into social, religious and political reform activities. A symbolic effort to change the status of women, it posed a fundamental challenge to orthodox concepts of women and their role in family and society. The campaign had a major ideological impact upon the development of modern Telugu literature and the nationalist movement in Andhra.[50]

In Bombay, Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade (1842–1901) graduated from Elphinstone College in Bombay and became a teacher and journalist. Like so many other young men of his generation, he questioned the customs and beliefs of his society. In 1869 Ranade joined the Widow Marriage Association, and in 1870 the Prarthana Samaj. At first, he and his colleagues were engaged in "intellectual protest against superficial dogmas untenable for a rational mind," but later they became more interested in social action.[51]

In 1871 Ranade was made a judge in Poona where he joined a group of committed social reformers intent on achieving real change. Soon after he had received this appointment his wife of almost twenty years died. Social reform colleagues expected he would marry a widow. But Ranade's father, anticipating this disaster, moved quickly to arrange a marriage between his thirty-one-year-old son and an eleven-year-old girl. Ranade protested but did not refuse the match. Married to Ramabai, Mahadev became both husband and teacher, mentoring the girl who became one of India's most important social reformers.[52]

In the following years Ranade tried to mediate between a reformist agenda and traditional society. He wanted to encourage widow remar-

[50] Leonard and Leonard, "Social Reform," p. 36.
[51] Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism*, p. 179.
[52] Ramabai Ranade, *Himself, The Autobiography of a Hindu Lady* (New York, Longman, Green and Co., 1938).

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riage and female education and oppose child marriage, but his personal world, located between tradition and modernity, was fraught with moral ambiguity. Other reformers voiced their disapproval but they were unable to push him towards a more radical stand.

Ranade's reputation as a social reformer rests on his role in building one of the most important institutions for social reform – the National Social Conference (begun in 1887) – and in his philosophy of social change. Firmly believing India had enjoyed a golden age, when women enjoyed a higher status than in his time, he blamed the *smriti* ("remembered" religious literature including law books, epics, and *puranas*) writers for the fall. Only gradual reform, accomplished without radical or wrenching change, could bring about the restoration of the golden age. Ranade argued that evolutionary change was inherently Indian; outside forces could act as a stimulant but the true impetus for change came from "the inner resources of the society itself."[53]

Ranade described the society he hoped to see as changing "from constraint to freedom, from credulity to faith, from unorganized to organized life, from bigotry to toleration, from blind fatalism to a sense of human destiny."[54] He warned his critics that to stand still or work against change would result in decay and possibly the extinction of Indian society.

Every year reformers, working alone or with local organizations, attended the National Social Conference where they learned about initiatives all over the sub-continent. In his role as founder-leader, Ranade recommended four methods of accomplishing social change. His favorite method was using argumentation, especially citing examples of past tradition, to convince opponents that many customs were accretions rather than part of true Indian culture. If the appeal of history was ineffective, he suggested the reformer use a moral argument. It was only after trying to persuade people that reformers should focus on legislation. When all else failed, social rebellion was in order. At the second annual meeting of the National Social Conference in 1889 over five hundred people took a solemn vow that they would support widow marriage and female education, and cease practicing child marriage and the exchange of dowry. This was a significant step, in Ranade's view, towards the identification of reforms for women with an all-India agenda.

[53] Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism*, p. 181. [54] *Ibid.*, p. 187.

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After her husband's death, Ramabai wrote a memoir describing her childhood, her marriage to Justice Ranade, her early education at his hands, and their life together until his death in 1901. This memoir, published in the early years of the twentieth century, includes Ramabai's account of her childhood and marriage at age eleven in 1873. The childhood she recalled was not one of terror and anxiety. Raised to regard early marriage as inevitable, Ramabai wrote of how she and other little girls looked forward to the celebrations associated with marriage. When taunted by the women in her husband's household, she kept her peace and admitted that her interest in reading was unseemly in the presence of women with very little education.[55] At least in the way she recalled her life, Ramabai was a dutiful wife even if her "duties" were a departure from the normal tasks of women.

These reformers viewed women as their subjects – to be changed as a consequence of persuasive arguments, social action, education, and legislation. The historian Sumit Sarkar has argued that these reformers were concerned primarily with modifying relationships within their own families and sought only "limited and controlled emancipation" of their womenfolk.[56] Women themselves were not partners in the schemes created for their regeneration; more often they were portrayed as opposed to their own liberation. Without first-hand accounts by these women, their reluctance to change in the ways prescribed by their husbands and fathers could be read as nascent feminist resistance, an intelligent reading of their true interests, or plain and simple opposition to any change. Shudha Mazumdar has related her mother's opposition to Shudha becoming a "boarder" at St. Theresa's School for Girls:

> She felt that my being a boarder would result in many complications, and make it difficult, if not impossible to give me in marriage when the time came . . . To prevent me from becoming a permanent liability on the family, dependent on my brothers in old age, she recommended that to ensure my economic independence it was of paramount importance to execute a deed beforehand in my favor, granting me the rights of a substantial portion of my Father's estate.[57]

But these reformers, like Shudha's father, were unwilling to relinquish the power of the patriarchy or redistribute wealth. They dreamed of a

[55] Ramabai Ranade, *Himself*, chapter 5.

[56] Sumit Sarkar, "The 'Women's Question' in Nineteenth Century Bengal," *Women and Culture*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Bombay, Research Center for Women's Studies, 1994), p. 106.

[57] Shudha Mazumdar, *Memoirs of an Indian Woman*, ed. Geraldine Forbes (New York, M. E. Sharpe, 1989), pp. 43–4.

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world where women would be educated and free from some of the worst customs of the society – child marriage, sati, polygyny. But at the same time, these new women would be devoted to home and family.

THE "NEW WOMAN" OF THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY

During the course of the nineteenth century, the pattern of women's lives began to change. In reality the concept of the "perfect wife" was being redefined. First, there were modifications in the appropriate activities for a female at different stages of her life. Second, the appropriate arena for female action was expanded. And third, there was a new and growing approval of individualism.

As a consequence of changes set in motion by the British conquest of India, by the end of the nineteenth century there were a number of women who were educated, articulate, mobile, and increasingly involved in public activities. In the rural setting life was dominated by the household – for both men and women. With increased urbanization and the growth of new professions associated with colonial domination, work was increasingly separated from the home. Paralleling this change was the establishment of new educational, religious and social institutions. As families moved from their village homes to the cities, they increased their contact with "foreigners" and witnessed the erosion of traditional household activity. Like boys of an earlier generation, some of these girls attended educational institutions, social gatherings unrelated to family affairs, and new religious ceremonies. These "new women," as they were called, were part of a modernizing movement which sought to modify gender relations in the direction of greater equality between men and women.[58]

A number of Indian men have written about their lives emphasizing the differences between themselves and their fathers and grandfathers. For example, Brajendra Nath De (1852–1932) was first educated at home, then sent to one of the new schools that taught English. He obtained a scholarship to study in England where he passed the civil service examination, returned home in glory, and began a career which made it necessary to live outside his traditional family home.[59] As one

[58] Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante* (Rajshahi, Bangladesh, Rajshahi University, 1983), introduction.

[59] Brajendra Nath De, "Reminiscences of an Indian Member of the Indian Civil Service," *The Calcutta Review*, 127 (1953); 128 (1953); 129 (1953); 130 (1954); 131 (1954); 132 (1954); 136 (1955).

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of the first eight Indians appointed to the Indian Civil Service (ICS), Brajendra Nath was considered an excellent example of the "modern" professional class, but his wife had been a child bride and he remained attached to his large joint family with its numerous dependants and obligations. He insisted on educating his daughters and one of them, Saroj Nalini Dutt, led the way in organizing rural women's organizations in the years immediately following World War I.

Many of the "new women" were also educated in their homes and then sent to a girls' school. Parents who cared about female education waited until their daughters were older before arranging their marriages or occasionally allowed young married women to continue their education. Older brides became mothers at a later age and often played a greater role in child-rearing.[60] Often there were opportunities to exercise some choices of their own and consequently their status was far less derivative than had been true for a previous generation.

There were also significant changes in what women could do – often characterized as a movement from the private to the public sphere. But this both overly simplifies the Indian context and overly dramatizes what actually happened. The shift was neither abrupt nor permanent and many women, who briefly attended a school or emerged from purdah to attend a "mixed" function, returned to the household where they continued to live in the more traditional fashion.

Women also experienced increased opportunities for the expression of their individuality. Although women in earlier times were certainly not an undifferentiated group, we do not have sufficient records to go beyond generalizations about their lives. Formal education and particularly the development of publications intended for and written by women gave women a voice. It is impossible to enumerate, let alone locate, all the literature from this period (*c.* 1850–World War I) but we know that in Bengal women produced almost 400 literary works, ranging from poetry to novels and autobiographies, and twenty-one journals.[61] Through their writings they were able to communicate with each other and develop new social networks.

Saraladevi Chaudhurani (1872–1954), a Bengali woman from the famous Tagore family, is an excellent example of the "new woman."

[60] Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849–1905* (Princeton, N.J., Princeton University Press, 1985), chapter 5.

[61] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 11.

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Her mother, Swarnakumari Devi, was a novelist and editor of a women's journal. Saraladevi was born into an extraordinary family in terms of wealth, prestige, and involvement in the major cultural activities of the day. Saraladevi's education began at home with a tutor, she then attended Bethune College, graduating with honors in English in 1890. She continued studying – French, Persian, and then Sanskrit – in preparation for her MA examination. Remaining at home, she studied music, wrote songs, and wrote for her mother's journal. Her boldest step was to leave home and become a teacher in Maharani's School in Mysore. Saraladevi agreed to marry at age thirty-two and only then because her dying mother asked her to. In 1905 she married Rambhuj Dutt from Lahore, a Punjabi nationalist and member of the Arya Samaj. She had one son and continued her work as an educationalist, a patriot, and a feminist.[62]

Saraladevi was an unusual woman for her time but there were many others, less famous with less freedom, who also took advantage of opportunities to obtain an education and take the first steps towards controlling their own lives.

CONCLUSIONS

The goal of the male reformers was progress. Without social reform to substantially improve women's status, regeneration seemed doomed to failure. Humiliated by their colonial status, Indians of the late nineteenth century were obsessed with the issues of strength and power. They needed an explanation for the weakness that had led to their defeat and an answer to the question of how to build up their strength. If they accepted the nineteenth-century European theory that the status of women was integral to the level and strength of civilization and the European conclusion that Indian customs were degrading to women's status, they gained an explanation for their defeat and a prescription for reform. In Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyaya's patriotic novel *Anandamath* (1882), nationalists were born when they came face to face with a battered and neglected image of the Mother Goddess. Dedicating their lives to the regeneration of the Mother, they took up the slogan, "Bande Mataram" (Hail to the Motherland). In the hands of the great reformer Vivekananda, worship of the Goddess, reverence for

[62] Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women*, pp. 131–3; "Saraladevi Chaudhurani," *DNB*, vol. 1, ed. S. P. Sen (Calcutta, Institute of Historical Studies, 1972), pp. 289–91.

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the Motherland, and a commitment to female education and improving the status of women became the triple vow of the modern man.[63] But Vivekananda regarded most of the social reform programs of his contemporaries as inadequate to the great task of "national reconstruction." Change was essential but not through reliance on Western guidance, continuous breast-beating about the evils of Hinduism, or leadership by English-educated intellectuals. It must come from the people, guided and educated by the intelligentsia.[64]

The debate over the Age of Consent Act in 1891, an Act to raise the age of consent from ten to twelve, degenerated into a battle for control of Indian women's sexuality. By this time many of the best-educated and influential men were involved with nationalist politics and the "woman question" was no longer a subject on which educated Indians and British rulers could agree.[65] But these issues were not discarded as the "new women" moved forward to set up their own organizations and reorganize social reform priorities. The changes these male reformers proposed could not resolve the "woman question." They had little understanding of women's lives beyond those of women in their own families. Moreover, many of them doubted the efficacy of legal measures even as these changes were enacted. In her review of three recent books published on the history of women in India, Janaki Nair comments on the "limited operation of the 'modernization' paradigm." She writes: "The agenda of 'modernization,' to which both colonialist and nationalist discourse laid claim, did not, indeed could not, include the wider transformation of Indian society."[66] Nevertheless, the steps taken by these respectable and well-educated Indian men linked improving women's status with the modernization agenda. Their campaign set in motion further attempts to establish institutions that would be supportive of a new generation of women leaders.

[63] M. K. Haldar, *Renaissance and Reaction in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Bankim Chandra Chatterjee* (Columbia, Mo., South Asia Books, 1977), p. 188.
[64] Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered,* p. 338.
[65] Partha Chatterjee argues that the nationalists dispensed with the "woman question" by relegating it to the realm of the spiritual. *Recasting Women,* pp. 233–53.
[66] Janaki Nair, "Reconstructing and Reinterpreting the History of Women in India," *JWH*, 3, no. 1 (spring, 1991), p. 132.

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CHAPTER 2

EDUCATION FOR WOMEN

Among the earliest women's memoirs from the nineteenth century are stories of a passionate desire to learn to read. Rassundari Devi, born *c.* 1809, taught herself to read by stealing precious moments from her housework and the responsibilities of caring for twelve children. Later, she described her craving for knowledge:

> I was so immersed in the sea of housework that I was not conscious of what I was going through day and night. After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read books. Girls did not read . . . That was one of the bad aspects of the old system. The other aspects were not so bad. People used to despise women of learning . . . In fact, older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hands of a woman. But somehow I could not accept this.[1]

Rashsundari's progress was slow but she learned to read, to write, and finally wrote about her own experiences.

Haimabati Sen (*c.* 1866–1932), born a half-century later, recalled her childhood in Khulna District of East Bengal:

> The outer quarters were my resort, that is where I spent all my time; during the office hours I stayed in the school room. The teacher was very fond of me. I greatly enjoyed listening to the lessons. But I had no right to education. Though I lived like a boy in every respect, in matters of education I remained a woman. It is a popular superstition in our country that women, if educated, have to suffer widowhood; hence that path was entirely closed for me. But I was inspired by an eager wish God had planted in my heart.[2]

Fortunately, a sub-inspector visited the school and heard Haimabati answer the questions her brothers missed. The sub-inspector spoke to her father and Haimabati became a regular pupil.

Pandita Ramabai (1858–1922) was awarded the title "Pandita" in recognition of her great learning. Ramabai's first teacher was her mother. Anant Padmanabha Dongre, Ramabai's father, was a great Vedic scholar who decided to educate his wife over the objections of

[1] *Women Writing in India*, vol. 1, ed. Tharu and Lalita, p. 199.
[2] *From Child Widow to Lady Doctor: The Intimate Memoir of Dr. Haimabati Sen*, trans. Tapan Raychaudhuri, ed. Geraldine Forbes and Tapan Raychaudhuri, in press.

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the community. Ramabai's rigorous education began at age eight and continued until she was fourteen. She memorized the *Bhagavata Purana* and the *Bhagavad Gita*; then studied Sanskrit grammar and vocabulary. At this time her family was traveling from one pilgrimage site to another and Ramabai learned first-hand how various sects practiced Hinduism.[3]

One cannot generalize from these three cases about women's desire to learn. But given conventional notions about the impropriety, even danger, of women's education we can be certain these headstrong women were a minority. In his Report on the State of Education in Bengal (1836) William Adam wrote: "A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to read and write will soon after marriage become a widow." Adam also commented on the fear, shared by Hindus and Muslims, that a "knowledge of letters" might facilitate female intrigue.[4] Because Hindu women were totally dependent on fathers, then husbands, and finally sons for support, they said prayers and performed rituals to insure longevity for these men. If learning to read would lead to a husband's death, then pursuing knowledge was tantamount to suicide. This was a sex-segregated world; men and women did different work and occupied separate spaces. Women interacted primarily with women and it was women who enforced the prohibition against female education. Many of the women who learned to read before the 1870s have reported hiding their accomplishments from other women. Even if mothers were lenient with daughters, mothers-in-law and the other women in the father-in-law's home were seldom as kind. It is difficult to impute motives to the women who vehemently opposed education. Subjects of a harsh patrilineal, patriarchal system, they were not in a position to oppose prevailing codes. Their survival depended on upholding the status quo and an educated stranger in their midst posed an obvious threat. Those women and girls who were eager to learn had no recourse but to look to the men who controlled their lives.

Missionaries began the first girls' schools but their efforts were soon rivaled by Indian reformers. Despite their valiant efforts, there were no

[3] Nicol Macnicol, *Pandita Ramabai* (Calcutta, Association Press, 1926) pp. 11–13; "Ramabai Pandita", *DNB*, vol. III, pp. 457–9.

[4] Syed Nurullah and J. P. Naik, *History of Education in India: During the British Period* (Bombay, Macmillan, 1943), p. 21; Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women*, pp. 60–1.

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1 Satire on women's changing roles: "Wife assaulting her husband" by Nibaran Chandra Ghosh, Kaligat, *c.* 1900

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real advances in female education until the second half of the nineteenth century when the government offered financial support. Even then, efforts to organize girls' schools languished until the urban professional elite joined reformers in supporting formal education for girls. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, institutions proliferated and the number of educated women grew steadily. The debate then turned to what was the most suitable type of education for women. Before the century was over a few women came forward to articulate their ideas about female education. By the twentieth century women were ready to design a curriculum and set up schools for girls.

TRADITIONAL EDUCATION

Traditionally education meant learning to read sacred literature. Among Hindus, members of the priestly caste, brahmins, were learned in all branches of sacred knowledge, while the other twice-born castes (kshatriyas and vaishyas) were given a less rigorous program but also learned practical skills. Shudras and most women were not taught the sacred books but some women were taught to read. Some women from upper-class Vaisnavite families learned to read puranic literature.[5] Muslim girls were expected to learn the Quran and some accounting skills but the strict seclusion observed by upper-class families prohibited their daughters from attending schools. Consequently, what they learned about their religion they learned at home, either from their families or through tutors.[6] At the turn of the century there were only eleven Quran schools for girls in Bengal with 142 pupils.[7]

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, female literacy was extremely low in relation to male literacy. Male literacy, ranging from approximately 6 percent in Bengal to 20 percent in the Deccan, was also low in comparison with Western nations or Japan. Moreover, indigenous schools for boys were on the decline.[8] Boys attended three kinds

[5] Aparna Basu, "Mary Ann Cooke to Mother Theresa: Christian Missionary Women and the Indian Response," *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions*, ed. Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood, and Shirley Ardener (Providence, R.I./Oxford, BERG, 1993), p. 190.

[6] Sonia Nishat Amin, "The Early Muslim Bhadramahila: The Growth of Learning and Creativity, 1876–1939," *From the Seams of History*, p. 112.

[7] Usha Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women Around the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta, Usha Chakraborty, 1963), p. 52.

[8] Aparna Basu, *Essays in the History of Indian Education* (New Delhi, Concept Publishing Co., 1982), pp. 31–2; Nurullah and Naik, *History of Education in India*, pp. 12–13.

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of schools: small village schools which taught elementary reading and accounting; higher schools for Hindus, primarily brahmins, which taught Sanskrit grammar, lexicography and literature; and Persian and Arabic schools for Muslims. We do not know how many of these schools there were throughout India, but in Bengal there were approximately 100 traditional institutions per district with a total of 10,800 students. There were 164 Hindu schools in Poona in the 1820s. Aparna Basu, contends that "the state of higher learning among Hindus and Muslims resembled that which existed in Europe before the invention of printing."[9]

Female education was informal and largely limited to practical matters. Women from respectable families often studied classical or vernacular literature as "a pious recreation," and girls from propertied families received some education in keeping accounts.[10] But most females learned only the household arts.

ENGLISH EDUCATION IN INDIA

English education was introduced into India because the East India Company needed clerks and translators. From 1813 the Company set aside some money for education, and after the Charter of 1833 English became the official language. In 1844 Lord Hardinge announced that English-educated Indians would be given preference for government appointments. Free-traders voiced their support for this policy believing it would help develop an Indian population loyal to the British. The missionaries joined the chorus of approval. Eager to convert Indians from influential families, missionaries recognized how much easier it would be with English as the language of professional advancement. Liberals believed in the civilizing influence of Western philosophy and literature. It was only at the end of the century that these men saw the dangerous side of education, that is, its tendency to promote nationalism and political unrest. Then, the government made attempts to control and even curtail education.[11]

Long before the government decided to sponsor English education, Indian gentlemen set up Hindu College in Calcutta. Opened in 1816,

[9] Basu, *Essays*, p. 33.
[10] Kalikinkar Datta, *Survey of India's Social Life and Economic Condition in the Eighteenth Century, (1707–1813)* (Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1961), pp. 23–4.
[11] Basu, *Essays*, pp. 7–9.

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Hindu College was designed to prepare young Indian men for lucrative positions with the East India Company. In the first three decades of the twentieth century Hindu College and similar schools throughout British India depended on the patronage of wealthy Indians and were in direct competition with traditional schools teaching Sanskrit, Persian, and Arabic. As economic patterns changed, patronage for traditional schools disappeared. At about the same time, bright young men decided to study English.[12]

In contrast to support for boys' schools, there was little interest in the education of girls. The colonial government, despite pressure exerted by missionaries and liberals, was unconcerned with female education. The missionaries were interested in female education and schools for girls because, they argued, women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent. But since men made the decisions, female education was ancillary.[13]

Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in the 1840s and were assigned to work with women and children. These missionary women, educated and eager to prove their worth, concentrated on converting adult married Indian women to Christianity.[14] They gained entry to households as teachers where they read stories, taught needlework, and attempted to bring their charges to Christ. Rarely were they successful in gaining converts. When it became apparent that these zenana projects were unproductive, the mission authorities substituted girls' schools. Missionary women continued to teach and it was their students, Indian women from Christian families, who became teachers in a number of the new girls' schools.[15]

EARLY SCHOOLS FOR GIRLS

The opening of Hindu College in 1816 was closely followed by the founding of the Calcutta School Society to promote female education. Radha Kanta Deb, the secretary of this society, became a patron of female education and assisted in the formation of the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society (founded in 1819 by Baptists). In 1821, the School

[12] *Ibid.*, p. 14.
[13] Harihar Das, *Life and Letters of Toru Dutt* (London, Humphrey Milford, 1921), p. 8.
[14] Geraldine Forbes, "In Search of the 'Pure Heathen': Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India," *EPW*, 21, no. 17 (April 26, 1986), pp. ws2–ws8.
[15] Glendora B. Paul, "Emancipation and Education of Indian Women Since 1829," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Pittsburgh (1970).

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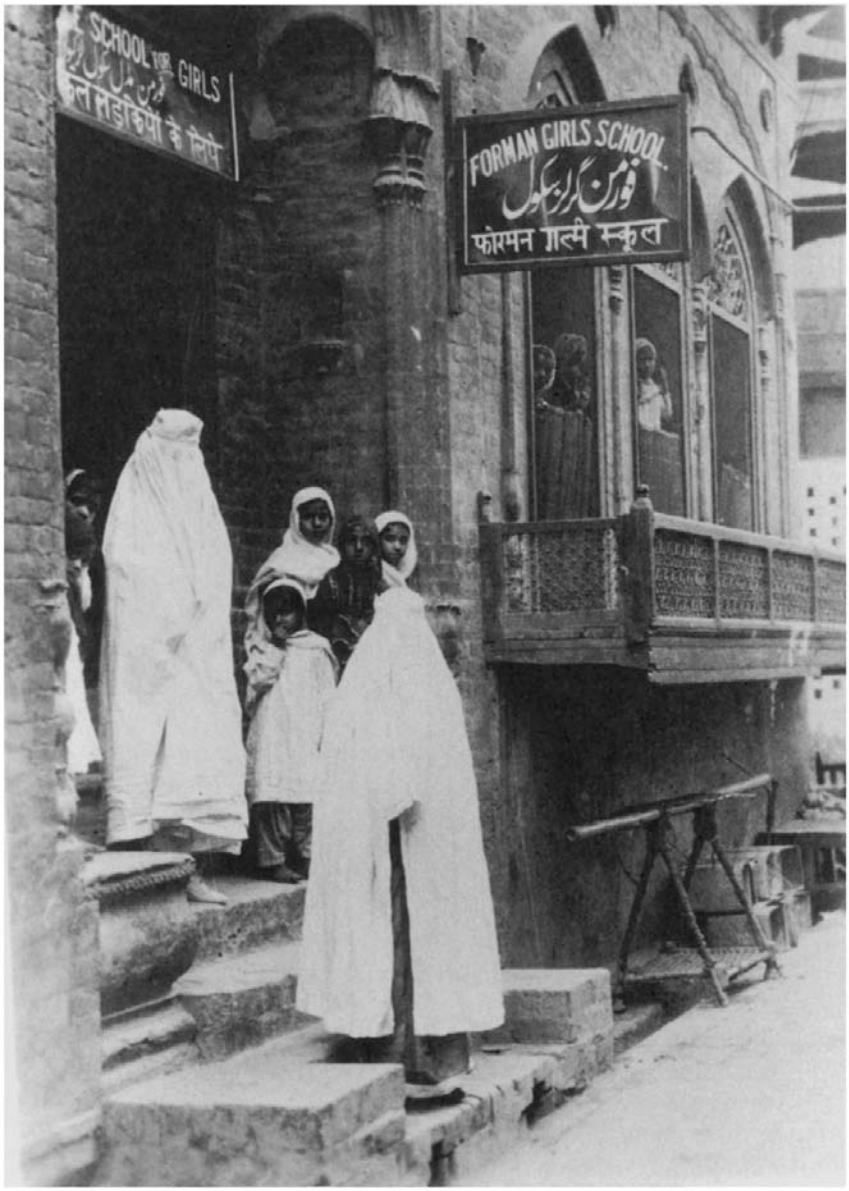

2 Entrance to Forman Girls' School, Lahore, 1936

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Society brought Miss Mary Anne Cooke to Calcutta but could not raise the money to open schools. The Church Missionary Society stepped in, employed Miss Cooke, and opened thirty schools for "respectable" Hindu girls. These schools enjoyed the patronage of Hindu gentlemen and were staffed by brahmin pundits, but they failed to attract girls from the higher castes. The religious instruction deterred prestigious families while pupils from the lower classes or Christian families were lured to the school by gifts of clothing and other items.

The Church Missionary Society was more successful in South India where it opened its first boarding school for girls in Tirunelveli in 1821. By 1840 the Scottish Church Society could claim six schools with a clientele of 200 Hindu girls. By mid-century the missionaries in Madras were instructing nearly 8,000 girls, the majority of whom were Christians, in day schools and boarding schools.[16]

One of the most important schools for girls was the Hindu Balika Vidyalaya opened in 1849 in Calcutta by J. E. Drinkwater Bethune, legal member of the Governor-General's Council and president of the Council of Education. The school was secular, instruction was in Bengali, and the girls were transported in a carriage emblazoned with a Sanskrit verse declaring that a daughter's education was a father's religious duty. Pandit Vidyasagar was appointed school secretary. Bethune persuaded several prominent families to endorse this experiment and by 1850 there were eighty pupils. When Bethune died in 1851, support for the school declined. In 1863 the school had ninety-three girls aged five to seven, three-quarters of whom were from the "lowest class," a clear indication of continuing upper-caste prejudice against female education.[17]

GOVERNMENT SUPPORT OF FEMALE EDUCATION

Lord Dalhousie, Governor-General of India from 1848 to 1856, declared that no single change was likely to produce more important

[16] Dr. (Mrs.) R. Vishalakshmi Nedunchezhiar, "Education of Girls and Women in Tamilnadu," *Status of Women Souvenir 1973* (Madras, Task Force Sub-Committee on Education, Tamilnadu, 1975), no page numbers.

[17] J. C. Bagal, *Women's Education in Eastern India: The First Phase* (Calcutta, The World Press Private Ltd., 1956), pp. 77–95; N. S. Bose, *The Indian Awakening and Bengal* (Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969), pp. 188–9; "Hindoo Women," *Calcutta Review*, 40 (1864), pp. 80–101; "The Bethune Female School," *The Bengalee* (January 13, 1863), p. 13; Borthwick, *Changing Role*, pp. 73–7.

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and beneficial consequences than female education.[18] Sir Charles Wood, president of the Board of Control from 1853 to 1855, issued an education despatch in 1854 that detailed a shift in government policy, from providing higher education for the elites to support for mass education in the vernacular. This new focus on a total system of education was to include both sexes. The despatch read:

> The importance of female education in India cannot be over-rated; and we have observed with pleasure the evidence which is now afforded of an increased desire on the part of many of the natives to give a good education to their daughters. By this means a far greater proportional impulse is imparted to the educational and moral tone of the people than by the education of men.[19]

The moral and financial support of the colonial authorities was essential to the spread of female education, but did not guarantee schools for girls. Unlike education for males, education for females did not automatically enhance the prestige and financial standing of the family. In fact, the opposite may have been true.

Indian norms and social customs made the British model of schooling difficult, if not impossible. Deeply ingrained notions of sex segregation and, in some areas, of complete seclusion, meant girls had to have female teachers and study in separate institutions. The widely accepted ideal of youthful marriage limited a girl's school-going years. Moreover, the demands on women for food production and nurturing left little time for lessons and studying.

There was a third set of problems associated with the institutions for female education. Indians were unaccustomed to sending their daughters to "schools" yet this was the only practical method of accomplishing the task. Zenana education – education given in the home – was expensive, cumbersome, and largely ineffectual. Schools were the answer but what kind of schools? Who would teach? What would be taught? Which families would choose to send their daughters to school and for how long? If girls were married prior to puberty, could they continue their education as married women? The leaders of Indian society had to respond to these questions – a far more difficult task than providing moral and material support.

[18] Y. B. Mathur, *Women's Education in India, 1813–1966* (Bombay, Asia Publishing, 1973), p. 25. [19] *Ibid.*, p. 29.

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REFORMED HINDUISM AND FEMALE EDUCATION

The breakthrough came with the establishment of government schools, such as Bethune's, and schools sponsored by reformist religious institutions. First the Brahmo Samaj, and later the Prarthana Samaj, Arya Samaj, and Theosophical Society all supported female education.

In 1854 there were approximately 626 girls' schools (Bengal: 288, Madras: 256, Bombay: 65, and NWFP and Oudh: 17) with a total of 21,755 students.[20] Obviously these schools were very small and the total number of girls receiving this education was minuscule in relation to the total population. Yet, a shift in attitudes towards female education had taken place.

Indians supported female education because they wanted social and religious reform, or social and financial mobility, or both. The founders of Hindu College and other early schools for boys wanted to advance the opportunities of their own class. In the case of female education, early supporters saw opportunities for social mobility as the demand for educated brides increased. They were also motivated by a desire for social reform, possible only if women as well as men were educated. Many Western-educated Bengali gentlemen undoubtedly wanted to "wean away their own wives and daughters" from various forms of popular culture regarded as licentious and vulgar. This increased the social distance between the "new women" and their less educated sisters and deprived educated middle-class women of an avenue of protest offered by street performers and popular songs.[21] The concern here was not with women as individuals, but with their development as companions to men, as "scientific" nurturers, and as members of civil society.

Members of the Brahmo Samaj, the Bengal-based reform society, led the movement for female education and equality between the sexes. Keshub Chandra Sen, a Brahmo leader, lectured on the importance of female education in 1861 and the following year organized a society for males who supported reforms for women. In 1865, the Brahmo Samaj sponsored the first organization where women met for religious instruction, sewing lessons, and discussions of social issues.[22]

[20] *Ibid.*, p. 26.
[21] Sumantha Banerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal," *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, pp. 130–1.
[22] Borthwick, *Changing Role*, p. 291.

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3 Girls from the Brahmo Samaj by N. B. Pujary, *c.* 1904

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The topic of women's education led to a split in the Brahmo Samaj in 1866. That year, Navabidhan (Keshub Sen's breakaway group) welcomed Miss Mary Carpenter to Calcutta. Carpenter's mission was to encourage female education and she was quick to notice the shortage of suitable teachers.[23] She spoke publicly about the problem, presented her proposals to the Governor-General, and helped establish the National Indian Association to promote mutual understanding between Indian and English people. In 1872 Carpenter, Keshub Sen, and another English woman, Annette Akroyd, set up a normal school.[24] Later Akroyd broke with Keshub and worked with another group of Brahmos to established the Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya (Hindu Girls' School). By 1878 this school had merged with the older Bethune School to become Bethune College, an affiliate of Calcutta University. In 1883 Kadambini Basu and Chandramukhi Basu received their BAs from Bethune, becoming the first women graduates in the British Empire.[25]

In Madras it was the Theosophical Society that encouraged female education. Speaking as a leader of the society, Annie Besant (1847–1933) asserted that in ancient times Hindu women were educated and moved freely in society. She urged a return to this "golden age." In England Besant had been identified with women's emancipation since her public lecture on women's suffrage in 1874.[26] Besant had been associated with a number of other movements in England before she read Madame Blavatsky's *Secret Doctrine* in 1889. She then decided to join the theosophists and make India her home. Madame Blavatsky, a founder of the Theosophical Society, viewed child marriage, child widowhood, and sati as perversions of the original Hindu doctrine.[27] When Besant first spoke in India in 1893, she spoke of the greatness of the Indian past and the need to regain that past. Later she focused on specific problems and by 1901 had written an article for the *Indian Ladies Magazine* on the "Education of Women." Besant warned that

[23] Mary Carpenter, *Six Months in India*, 2 vols. (London, Longman, Green and Co., 1868), vol. II, pp. 142–5.

[24] Lord Beveridge, *India Called Them* (London, George Allen and Unwin, 1947), p. 83.

[25] David Kopf, "The Brahmo Idea of Social Reform and the Problem of Female Emancipation in Bengal," *Bengal in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Century*, ed. J. R. McLane (East Lansing, Mich., Asian Studies Center, 1975), pp. 47–50.

[26] Annie Besant, *The Political Status of Women*, 2nd edn. (London, C. Watts, 1885), pp. 1–11 (pamphlet).

[27] H. P. Blavatsky, "Hindu Widow-Marriage," *A Modern Panarion: A Collection of Fugitive Fragments* (London, T. S. Publishing Society, 1895), vol. I, p. 243.

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India's fate would be sealed if women were not educated. But Western education was not the answer; it would "unsex" women. Indians should look to their own ideal of womanhood – the Goddess Durga.[28] Besant pledged her efforts to this reform and founded a women's college based on these principles.[29]

In North India female education was encouraged by the Arya Samaj, a reformist Hindu sect which followed the teachings of Swami Dayanand Saraswati. By the end of the nineteenth century, progressive Arya Samajists recognized the importance of involving women in their reform efforts. The Jullundar Samaj opened the Arya Kanya Pathshala (Girls' School) in 1890 with a lady principal in charge.[30]

The Kanya Mahavidyalaya (Girls' Higher School) of Jullundar was opened somewhat later. Both this high school and the elementary girls' school, firmly established by 1892, owed their existence to the efforts of Lala Devraj. He opened his first school for girls in the family home, supported it through the sale of "waste paper," and staffed it with teachers who were partially compensated with food from his mother's kitchen. As public acceptance for the idea of female education grew so did the school's enrollment. Before long a cadre of experienced women teachers and school administrators had designed special instructional materials. This institution occupied a special place in the community and "became a catalyst for various kinds of change relating to women in [the] Punjab."[31]

THE PROGRESS OF WOMEN'S EDUCATION

Between 1849, when Bethune School opened, and 1882, when the Indian Education (Hunter) Commission reviewed the progress of education in India, serious efforts had been made to develop primary schools for girls and teacher-training institutions. Higher education for women and co-education were still contentious issues.[32] Faced with the

[28] "Mrs. Besant on Indian Womanhood," *ILM*, 1, no. 7 (January, 1902), pp. 195–7; "Indian Women," *MR*, 25 (1919), pp. 271–2.

[29] Arthur H. Nethercot, *The Last Four Lives of Annie Besant* (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1963), pp. 17, 55, 73; "Annie Besant," *DNB*, vol. 1, pp. 51–3.

[30] Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharma: Hindu Consciousness in Nineteenth Century Punjab* (Delhi, Manohar, 1976), pp. 104–5.

[31] Madhu Kishwar, "Arya Samaj and Women's Education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya," *EPW*, 21, no. 17 (April 16, 1986), pp. ws9–ws24; Kumari Lajjavati, "A Pioneer in Women's Education," *ISR*, 45 (June 1, 1945), pp. 134–5.

[32] Premila Thackersey, *Education of Women: A Key to Progress* (New Delhi, Ministry of Education and Youth Services, 1970), p. 6.

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4 Indian girls at school in Madras, by R. Venkiah Bros, *c.* 1930

fact that 98 percent of school-age girls were not in school, authors of the Hunter Commission Report recommended more liberal grants-in-aid for girls' schools than for boys' and special scholarships and prizes for girls. In the next two decades higher education expanded rapidly; whereas there were only six women in Indian universities in 1881–82, by the turn of the century there were 264. During the same time period secondary school enrollment rose from 2,054 to 41,582.[33]

The story of women's education in the period following the Hunter Commission and the end of the century can be told through the work of three pioneer educationalists – Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, founder of the Sharada Sadan in Bombay and Poona (1889), Mataji Tapaswini who began the Mahakali Pathshala of Calcutta (1893), and D. K. Karve who began a school for widows in Poona (1896). These three examples are particularly significant because they represent efforts to build female schools distinct from those of the religious reform organizations. These were not secular public schools in the contemporary sense; in fact, they were all narrowly caste-, class-, and community-based.

[33] Thackersey, *Education of Women,* pp. 1–11; Mathur, pp. 40–4.

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These three examples are especially worthy of attention because they highlight the involvement of women in structuring and defining female education.

PANDITA RAMABAI

Pandita Ramabai was truly remarkable as a pioneer in women's education and rebel champion of women's rights. Her father supervised her education and allowed her to remain unmarried. When her father and mother died, Ramabai was sixteen years old, unmarried, and able to read Sanskrit. She and her brother traveled throughout India lecturing on female education and social reform. The Calcutta elite were enchanted and bestowed on her the name "Saraswati" – the Goddess of Learning – and called her "Pandita" because she seemed as learned as other brahmin pandits. Other audiences were outraged and they jeered and booed when she attempted to speak.[34]

Ramabai's brother died in Calcutta and she married his close friend, Bipen Behari Das Medhavi (a shudra by caste). The next year, at age twenty-three, Ramabai gave birth to a daughter. Unfortunately her husband died the following year.

Returning to Poona, Ramabai began to work with reformers to educate women through the Arya Mahila Samaj (Aryan's Women's Society).[35] While in Poona she gave evidence before the Hunter Commission and stressed the urgent need for women doctors and teachers. Determined to learn English and study medicine, Ramabai sought help from members of the Anglo-Catholic Community of St. Mary the Virgin whose mother house was at Wantage in Oxfordshire, England. They were able to give her some assistance while the balance of her expenses were met through the sale of *Stri Dharma Neeti* ("Morals for Women"), her book urging women to take charge of their

[34] Jyotsna Kapur, "Women and the Social Reform Movement in Maharashtra," M.Phil thesis, Delhi University (1989), p. 79.

[35] *The Letters and Correspondence of Pandita Ramabai,* compiled by Sister Geraldine, ed. A. B. Shah (Bombay, Maharashtra State Board of Literature and Culture, 1977), pp. 15–18; Rajas Krishnarao Dongre and Josephine F. Patterson, *Pandita Ramabai: A Life of Faith and Prayer* (Madras, Christian Literature Society, 1969), pp. 6–10; Muriel Clark, *Pandita Ramabai* (London, Paternoster Bldg., 1920), pp. 24–5; "Pandita Ramabai," *Men and Women of India,* 1, no. 6 (June, 1905), pp. 316–19. Meera Kosambi, "Women, Emancipation and Equality: Pandita Ramabai's Contribution to Women's Cause," *EPW,* 23, no. 44 (October 29, 1988), pp. ws38– ws49; Meera Kosambi, *At the Intersection of Gender Reform and Religious Belief* (Bombay, SNDT, Research Center for Women's Studies, Gender Series, 1993).

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own lives. Ramabai, her young daughter, and a traveling companion, Anandibai Bhagat, left for England in 1883. Soon after the three of them had settled at Wantage, Ramabai declared she was unwilling to convert to Christianity. Some months later Anandibai committed suicide (the records here become very elusive) leaving Ramabai extremely shaken.

Ramabai was only twenty-five years of age and had already watched her parents, her brother, her husband, and her closest friend die. It was at this time, alone with her small daughter in a strange country, that Ramabai decided to accept baptism.[36] She continued her studies until 1886 when she decided to sail for America to attend the graduation ceremonies of her cousin Anandibai Joshi.

To finance this trip and popularize her cause Ramabai wrote *The High Caste Hindu Woman*. Ten thousand copies of this book were sold before Ramabai had left America. In 1887 Boston admirers set up a Ramabai Association to support her work in India. She traveled throughout the United States and Canada studying educational, philanthropic, and charitable institutions and lecturing to various groups. By May of 1888, she had collected over $30,000 in the name of her association.[37]

In India Pandita Ramabai established Sharada Sadan (Home of Wisdom), a school for widows, in Bombay. This was to be a non-sectarian school where all the caste rules of brahmins were scrupulously observed. It attracted some high-caste Hindu widows, among them Godubai (renamed Anandibai after her marriage to D. K. Karve) but generally the Hindu community remained suspicious of Ramabai's motives.

Ramabai attempted to forestall criticism by forming an Executive Committee composed of reformers who were known as staunch Hindus. This plan did not work and less than one year later Bombay newspapers carried articles critical of Ramabai and her school. When financial problems forced her to move the school to Poona, the newspaper *Kesari* charged her with converting widows to Christianity. Ramabai's admitted crime was allowing widows to attend her personal prayer meetings. By 1893 twenty-five girls were withdrawn. But there was no dearth of widows in need of shelter and before long Ramabai had other students. By 1900 the Sharada Sadan had trained eighty women who were able to earn their own living through teaching or nursing.[38]

[36] *Letters and Correspondence*, p. 14. [37] *Ibid.*, pp. xx–xxi. [38] *Ibid.*, pp. 257–362.

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Ramabai's second school, Mukti, was established thirty miles outside of Poona at Kedgaon following the famine that began in 1897. She began taking women and children who were victims of famine into Sharada Sadan where she fed and clothed them, and enrolled them in her school. Attempting to control the plague, the government placed restrictions on the movement of people; in Poona the city magistrate placed a limit on the number of inmates in Sharada Sadan. Since she could not keep famine victims in Poona, Ramabai took her charges to Kedgaon where she had purchased 100 acres of land. By 1900 this venture had grown into a major institution housing 2,000 women and children attending school and involved in industrial training and production. Financing for Mukti came from an American committee which willingly approved all her schemes.[39]

Given a free hand, Ramabai urged the inmates of her home to become Christians and developed a unique educational program to suit their needs. Her own version of Christianity was doctrinally eclectic, combining ideas she had learned from the sisters at Wantage, and from Roman Catholic, Jewish, and Indian Christian friends. Ramabai saw caste as the great flaw in Hindu society. It led to false valuing of the intellect and denigration of physical work. Caste associations promoted narrow self-interest and inhibited the development of a democratic spirit.

Ramabai designed a remedial curriculum. Literature selected for its emphasis on moral models would engender a spirit of caring; classes in physiology and botany were included to teach students about their own bodies and the physical world in which they lived. Industrial training was included – in printing, carpentry, tailoring, masonry, wood-cutting, weaving and needlework – as well as training in farming and gardening. All students were required to join "unions" or societies such as the Temperance Union or the Christian Endeavor Society in an effort to break down caste barriers and develop new loyalties based on interest. As members of these societies, the children learned simple parliamentary rules and were encouraged to take charge of their own affairs.[40]

Ramabai's educational work impressed contemporaries, but her connection with Christianity has obfuscated her contribution to women's education. An acknowledged Christian when hatred of the

[39] *Ibid.*, pp. 342–416. [40] *Ibid.*, p. 412.

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ruling power was growing daily, her work angered some of the most powerful men in western India. Ramabai believed the intensity of their anger was related to the fact that many of her pupils came from the higher castes. She argued that these men would have remained unconcerned if her work were confined to low-caste women.[41]

There were many issues that provoked Ramabai's sharp and unpopular comments. When she heard about the Rukhmabai case, she exploded in angry denunciations of both the British and Indian men. Rukhmabai, married as a child, had been tried and sentenced to prison (but was never imprisoned) because she refused to have a conjugal relationship with her husband (see chapter 3). Ramabai wrote:

> Our only wonder is that a defenseless woman like Rukhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of the powerful Hindu law, the mighty British Government, the 129,000,000 men, the 330,000,000 gods of the Hindus; all these have conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English Government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India.[42]

Ramabai's greatest legacy was her effort, the first in India, to educate widows and the pupils she left behind to carry on her work.

MATAJI MAHARANI TAPASWINI

The Mahakali Pathshala (Great Mother Kali School) of Bengal stands in sharp contrast to Pandita Ramabai's schools, with their missionary connection and foreign support. Founded in Calcutta in 1893 by Her Holiness Mataji Maharani Tapaswini, this school and its many branches has been styled a "genuine Indian attempt" at developing female education.[43] This school received no financial assistance from foreigners and employed no foreign teachers. Founders of the institution accepted the "school" model for female education, but opposed co-education and the use of one syllabus for both sexes. Their aim was to educate "girls on strictly national lines in the hope that they might regenerate Hindu society." This was a project consistent with those of nationalist "revivalists," who, in the historian Tanika Sarkar's view, did not automatically oppose reform "in the name of resisting colonial

[41] *Ibid.*, p. 257.
[42] *Ibid.*, p. 257; Kosambi, "Women, Emancipation and Equality," pp. ws44–ws45.
[43] Minna S. Cowan, *The Education of the Women of India* (Edinburgh, Oliphant, Anderson and Ferrier, 1912), p. 113.

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knowledge."[44] Despite their differences with the liberal reformers, they too believed in the relationship between progress and female education and looked to a future where Indian women would play a larger role in the affairs of the country.

Gangabai (Mataji Maharani Tapaswini), a brahmin woman of the Deccan who had learned Sanskrit and studied sacred literature, opened her first school with thirty pupils.[45] She had come to Calcutta with a mission: to promote female education in harmony with Hindu religious and moral principles. Unlike Pandita Ramabai, Gangabai believed that Hindu society could be regenerated from within. Her notion of an ideal education for women was translated into a syllabus which included: knowledge of sacred literature and history; an understanding of the myths and legends that spoke of the duties of the daughter, wife, daughter-in-law, and mother; and practical skills such as cooking and sewing.[46] This syllabus was praised by "Hindoo gentlemen of the middle-class" who believed that much of the female education then in existence "demoralized and denationalized" young Hindu women.[47] Cooking lessons were especially popular in light of the prevalent belief that educated girls avoided the kitchen. Financial support for this institution grew rapidly and within ten years there were twenty-three branches with 450 students. As the school expanded it published its own Bengali and Sanskrit textbooks. Gangabai turned more and more to supervision while the actual administration of the school was left in the hands of an illustrious board of trustees presided over by the Maharaja of Darbhanga, Bengal's largest landlord.

This school proved immensely popular. Patrons approved of the emphasis on religious injunctions, domestic skills, and strict purdah. Although the original curriculum included very little formal reading and writing, this gradually changed. In 1948 the Mahakali Pathshala was affiliated to Calcutta University and by that time all that remained of the original curriculum was the performance of a few *pujas* (religious rituals).[48] In

[44] Tanika Sarkar, "Rhetoric Against the Age of Consent," *EPW*, 28, no. 36 (September 4, 1993), pp. 1869–78.

[45] M. M. Kaur, *The Role of Women in the Freedom Movement (1857–1947)* (New Delhi, Sterling, 1968), p. 85. Kaur claims that Maharani Tapaswini was a niece of the Rani of Jhansi.

[46] Kaur, *The Role of Women*, p. 145.

[47] "The Mahakali Pathshala," *The Statesman* (February 3, 1985), p. 7.

[48] Latika Ghose, "Social and Educational Movements for Women and by Women, 1820–1950," *Bethune School and College Centenary Volume, 1849–1949*, ed. Dr. Kalidas Nag (Calcutta, S. N. Guha Ray, 1950), p. 146; Cowan, *The Education of Women in India*, p. 113; "The Mahakali Pathshala," p. 7.

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the early years of the twentieth century the existence of this school and its popularity were regarded as indicators that the conservative elements of society, at least in Bengal, had given their approval to the concept of female education.[49]

DHONDO KESHAV KARVE

In the 1890s Dhondo Keshav Karve established a number of female schools in Poona. In his autobiography, *Looking Back*, Karve reconstructs his personal history to explain how his experiences led him to build a school for widows in 1896. Other accounts tell the story of Godubai Joshi (later Anandibai), a child widow who became Karve's second wife. She dreamed of setting up a widow's home soon after she became Pandita Ramabai's first pupil. What may well have been the culmination of the life-long dream of two people has been known as "Karve's Home." Anandibai joked about this when she was very old:

> Sometimes in fun I tell him that although people call him Maharshi, some of the credit is due to me. For if I had not managed the family affairs and set him free to carry out his public activities, he could not have achieved so much.[50]

Karve's association with reform movements dated back to his college years. After graduation from Elphinstone College he taught mathematics in three different high schools in Bombay before accepting a position at Fergusson College in Poona. There he was elected a life member of the Deccan Educational Society.[51] When his wife died, he decided he would marry a widow and chose Godubai, the twenty-two-year-old sister of his college friend. People in his home town excommunicated him and persecuted his mother. These actions shocked Karve and caused him to question remarriage as a way of helping child widows. At the same time he became increasingly interested in education as a way of assisting widows to become financially independent. In 1896 he opened a shelter for widows that became a school.

The curriculum in this school was designed to make young widows employable and self-sufficient. Because schools for girls were scarce, Karve was asked to admit unmarried girls as well. To accommodate this new clientele, Karve set up the Mahilya Vidyalaya (Girls' School) to

[49] *ILM*, 3, no. 1 (July, 1903), p. 16; *ILM*, 3, no. 6 (December, 1903), pp. 194–5.
[50] D. D. Karve, ed. and trans. *The New Brahmins: Five Maharashtrian Families*, ed. assistance, Ellen E. McDonald (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1963), p. 79.
[51] "(Maharshi) Dhondo Keshav Karve," *DNB*, vol. 1, pp. 299–301.

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develop "good wives, good mothers, good neighbors." He believed that widows needed an education "that would make them economically independent and would enable them to think for themselves"[52] but unmarried girls needed an education that would reinforce their dependence.

Parvatibai Athavali, Anandibai's widowed sister, played an important role in the growth and expansion of Karve's schools. Married at age eleven, Parvatibai became a widow at age twenty, the third widowed daughter in her father's home. Rejecting all discussion of remarriage, Parvatibai declared her wish to study and "do some work of importance."[53] After receiving her education in Karve's school, she became a teacher and then the superintendent. Parvatibai, a voluntarily tonsured widow, orthodox in her food habits, spoke publicly against widow remarriage.[54] Through her, Karve gained credibility with conservatives who previously characterized him as a radical because of his own remarriage. In her public lectures, Parvatibai insisted a woman's true mission in life was to marry. She supported the curriculum of Karve's school with instruction in the vernacular languages and emphasis on childcare and homecraft. Traditionally, these subjects had been taught by the older women in the households, but the increased complexity of women's work made formal education necessary.[55] Parvatibai warned women against rejecting their "natural roles" to enter the tyrannical market place. Yet she had entered the market place and from her own account not unwillingly. She explained her own life as follows:

> I felt that a widow who had one or two children and who had had some actual experience of the happiness of domestic life, if she were able to do some work of importance would not be tempted to enter again into the duties of a married life. In accordance with this idea, I settled on my ideal of life.[56]

In her description of the ideal education for a woman and the ideal life-course, Parvatibai seemed to ignore the lesson of her own life. Like Karve, she regarded public roles for women as an aberration rather than the norm.

Karve spent much of his money on his institutions and even cashed in his life insurance policy of Rs 5,000 to raise funds for the home.

[52] Quoted in D. D. Karve, *The New Brahmins*, p. 51.
[53] Parvati Athavale, *My Story, The Autobiography of a Hindu Widow*, trans. Revd. Justin E. Abbott (New York, G. P. Putnam, 1930), p. 30.
[54] Dhondo Keshav Karve, *Looking Back* (Poona, Hinge Stree-Shikshan Samastha, 1936), p. 75. [55] Athavale, *My Story*, p. 133. [56] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

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Anandibai, now the mother of his child, was alarmed because she knew that if Karve died she would be refused even domestic employment. Many brahmin widows found employment as cooks or maidservants but if they married a second time they were considered unclean. By her own account Anandibai, "cried, quarreled with him, abused him" but could not get him to budge. Karve was similarly neglectful of their day-to-day needs. Finally Anandibai realized that for survival she would have to seek employment. She completed a course in midwifery and earned enough to provide for the family's needs.[57]

Karve's third institution for women was the Women's University founded in 1916. He had heard of the Women's University in Japan and concluded that this model would be more suitable for India than the Western co-educational university. As president of the National Social Conference in 1915 he said: "we must recognize that both national and social economy require that women should occupy a station of their own distinct from that of men . . . but that the office they have to fill is different, though equal – perhaps greater in importance."[58] All courses at the women's university were conducted in the vernacular, special subjects like home science were included, and it was "possible for women to avoid difficult subjects like mathematics and physical science."[59] This institution limped along for the first few years until it was adopted by Sir Vithaldas Thackersey who contributed Rs 1,500,000 in 1920 with the stipulation that the university be named after his mother (thereby becoming Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey Indian Women's University or SNDT) and relocated in Bombay.[60]

THE EARLY TWENTIETH CENTURY

By the turn of the century the number of schools for girls and school enrollment had risen dramatically. By the end of World War I, there were educational institutions for women in all parts of the country, and enrollments tripled at the school level and quintupled in universities.[61] Parents now had more options: they could choose the type of institution, the curriculum, even the language of instruction. These alterna-

[57] Karve, *Looking Back*, pp. 77–82. [58] *Ibid.*, p. 104.
[59] *Ibid.*, pp. 95–106; D. D. Karve, *The New Brahmins*, p. 56.
[60] G. L. Chakravarkar, *Dhondo Keshav Karve* (New Delhi, Publications Division, Government of India, 1970), pp. 169–87. [61] Basu, *Essays*, p. 14.

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tives assuaged the fears of conservatives and liberals, the religious and the non-religious, those who desired radical change and traditionalists, anglophiles and anglophobes. Institution-builders like Karve had effectively argued that female education was the ideal method of smoothing over the rough spots in the transition from tradition to modernity and his successors continued to echo his reasoning:

> In the eyes of men of forethought and ambition, a woman trained on these lines to the profession of wifehood, is a far more desirable companion than an amateur wife. The training which a girl gets in her own home and under her own mother in India is admirable as far as it goes, but modern life has introduced many complexities to deal with for which a regular and systematic training is necessary.[62]

Maharani Tapaswini and K. D. Karve were educating young women from conservative homes to become, as they argued, better wives and mothers in a modern world. To gain the support of conservative communities, they developed curricula dominated by home science and religious lore. And their rhetoric matched their curricula. Karve may have educated young widows to be self-supporting but he was clear that unmarried girls needed to be taught how to become good wives and mothers. Maharani Tapaswini was not at all interested in education for employment.

Pandita Ramabai stands in direct contrast to these two educators. She was critical of her own society and renounced Hinduism to become a Christian. She built a successful school in terms of numbers but she relied for both material and psychological support on foreign missionaries. They sent her money and praised her while her own community ostracized her. Ramabai wanted to make women capable of supporting themselves. It was an appealing idea as long as her focus was lower-class women; upper class/caste families were unwilling to contemplate economic independence for their wives and daughters.

Between 1900 and 1920 "new women," that is, women who were the beneficiaries of the social reforms and educational efforts of the nineteenth century, stepped forward to begin their own schools. They too were aware of conservative attitudes towards female education, but the picture had changed considerably. The demand for female education was growing steadily and what parents wanted, it seemed, was reassurance that these new schools observed "traditional" customs. To illus-

[62] "Thackesay (*sic*) Women's University Convocation," Sir Visvesvaraya's convocation address, June 29, 1940, *IAR*, 1 (January–June, 1940), (Calcutta, Annual Register, n.d.), p. 438.

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trate the change I will sketch the educational efforts of two women: Begum Rokeya and Sister Subbalakshmi.

BEGUM ROKEYA SAKHAWAT HOSSAIN

In 1909 Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880–1932) began an institution for Muslim girls in the district town of Bhagalpur, Bihar. She set up this school soon after her husband's death but his relations were offended. Driven out of her home by her step-daughter, Begum Rokeya closed the school and moved to Calcutta where she opened another school, Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School, in 1911. Although this was not the first school set up by a Muslim woman for Muslim girls, Begum Rokeya's systematic and undaunted devotion to this project has earned her the title of pioneer. This school, with Urdu as its language of instruction, was designed and organized for students who observed purdah even though Begum Rokeya wrote and spoke publicly about the evils of this custom.[63]

Begum Rokeya was fortunate, by her own account, in having an elder brother and a husband who encouraged her interest in education. Her elder sister Karimunnessa had not been so lucky. When it was discovered that Karimunnessa had learned to read English, she was sent to live under the watchful eye of her grandmother until her marriage could be arranged. To be on the safe side, Rokeya's elder brother taught her to read English in the dead of night. Syed Sakhawat Hossain, her husband, was a widower who had been educated in the West. He looked to his young wife for companionship and soon after their wedding gave her lessons in English and encouraged her to write essays. At age twenty-one, only three years after their marriage, Rokeya was publishing articles about women's condition. Over the years she wrote a number of articles, short stories, and novels in which

[63] Sources on Begum Rokeya include *Inside Seclusion: The Avarodhbasini of Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain,* ed. and trans. Roshan Jahan (Dhaka, Bangladesh, BRAC Printers, 1981); Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante* (Rajshahi, Bangladesh, Rajshahi University, 1983); Amin, "The Early Muslim Bhadramahila," pp. 107–48; Sonia Nishat Amin, "The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal: 1876–1939," Ph.D. dissertation, University of Dhaka (1993); Sonia Nishat Amin, "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Legacy of the 'Bengal' Renaissance," *Journal of Asiatic Society*, Bangladesh, 34, no. 2 (December, 1989), pp. 185–92; Sonia Nishat Amin, "The New Woman in Literature and the Novels of Nojibur Rahman and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain," *Infinite Variety: Women in Society and Literature*, ed. Firdous Azim and Niaz Zaman (Dhaka, University Press Limited, 1994), pp. 119–41.

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she developed her ideas on the need to awaken women to their oppression and the role of education in this process.

In three of her essays, "Ardhangi" ("The Female Half"), "Griha" ("The House"), and "Borka" (or *burqah* – "The Veil"), Rokeya commented on women's asymmetrical development, lack of economic means, and confinement for the sake of male honor. In "Sugrihini" ("The Ideal Housewife") she pointed out that education would help women fulfill their traditional roles knowledgeably and professionally and hence contribute to the progress of the nation. Additionally, education would make it possible for women to grow and develop in step with their menfolk.

Begum Rokeya's school conformed, in curriculum and purdah restrictions, to the schools for Muslim girls in the Punjab and United Provinces.[64] Emphasis was placed on literacy and practical subjects such as handicrafts, home science, and gardening. The curriculum in Begum Rokeya's school also included physical fitness training. But this was the only deviation from an educational program designed to produce good wives and mothers: companions and help-mates to their husbands and teachers for their children.

The strictest rules of female seclusion were observed in transporting the girls to and from the school and there was only slight modification (curtains replacing closed shutters) when the young pupils vomited and fainted in the hot, airless carriage.[65] Inside the school the girls covered their heads. This was a new form of modest attire, suitable for the modernizing women now entering new spaces where neither the *burqah*, designed as outdoor wear, nor the clothes worn inside the home were suitable. The new head coverings signified concern with both modesty and modernity.

While Begum Rokeya's school conformed to rules of female seclusion, she wrote stinging criticisms of the practice. In addition to her essay on the *burqah*, she wrote *Sultana's Dream* (1905), a short story in which women ran the world and men hid indoors, and *Avarodhbasini* ("The Secluded Ones") (1929), forty-seven serialized reports documenting the custom of purdah. Her satirical writings on female seclusion were meant to inform an audience ignorant of the real tragedy of purdah (her own aunt was killed by a train because she

[64] Gail Minault, "Purdah's Progress: The Beginnings of School Education for Indian Muslim Women," *Individuals and Ideals in Modern India*, ed. J. P. Sharma (Calcutta, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyaya, 1982), pp. 76–97. [65] Jahan, *Inside Seclusion*, pp. 33–5.

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would not cry out for help). Seclusion, Begum Rokeya wrote, "is not a gaping wound, hurting people. It is rather a silent killer like carbon monoxide gas."[66] She denied this custom had any basis in the Quran or Shari'ah (the Muslim religious law).

Rokeya's campaign was unpopular. Accused of being both pro-Christian and a Europhile, Rokeya attracted more hostility when she endorsed Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*. But her school remained open, attended by Muslim girls from good families. Apparently her central argument, that neglect of female education would ultimately threaten Islamic culture, struck a responsive chord.

SISTER SUBBALAKSHMI

At about the same time that Begum Rokeya opened her school for Muslim girls in Calcutta, Sister Subbalakshmi (1886–1969) established a school for young high-caste widows in Madras. Sister Subbalakshmi's concern was society's discarded child widows. Her plan was to transform these unfortunate and inauspicious women into useful and valued members of society.[67]

Prior to her own marriage at age eleven, Subbalakshmi had received four and a half years of formal schooling. Her husband died shortly after their wedding and she returned to her parents' home in Rishyiyur, Tanjore District. Her parents decided not to burden her with all the restrictions normally placed on widows and instead arranged to send her to school. Their community reacted so violently that Subramania Iyer, Subbalakshmi's father, decided to move. In Madras, Subramania Iyer taught his daughter English at home and then sent her to a convent school. The nuns' dedication so impressed the young Subbalakshmi that she resolved to devote her life to educating widows. Although she never became a Christian, she was affectionately known as "Sister Subbalakshmi" in recognition of her dedication to her chosen work.

Subbalakshmi completed her matriculation and enrolled in Presidency College, Madras University. As the first Hindu widow in

[66] *Ibid.*, p. 20.

[67] Monica Felton, *A Child Widow's Story* (London, Victor Gollancz, 1966); *Women Pioneers in Education (Tamilnadu)* (Madras, Society for the Promotion of Education in India, 1975); interview with Mrs. Soundarain, Madras (January 22, 1976); letter from Rabindranath Tagore to Miss M. F. Prager, Eur. Mss., B 183, IOOLC; interview with Sister Sublakshami (*sic*) (December 10, 1930), RWC, box 28; Malathi Ramanathan, *Sister R. Subbalakshmi: Social Reformer and Educationalist* (Bombay, Lok Vangmaya Griha, 1989).

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Madras to study for a BA, she was threatened with excommunication, harassed in the streets, and ostracized in the classroom. By 1911 she had completed her BA degree and was ready to begin her life's work. She set up her first school in her father's home in a Madras suburb and began with a class of four brahmin widows.

Subbalakshmi's interest in helping widows coincided with that of Miss Christina Lynch (later Mrs. Drysdale), the Irish feminist who was appointed inspectress of female education in Coimbatore. Miss Lynch was deeply troubled by the difficulty of finding "suitable" (high-caste) teachers for the schools. At the same time she was aware that Madras had over 22,000 widows between the ages of five and fifteen, many of them brahmins. Meeting with Subbalakshmi's father, Miss Lynch explained that she had worked out a plan whereby the government would support a home for young brahmin widows willing to be trained as teachers. Meanwhile, Sister Subbalakshmi was pursuing the same scheme with her friends and relations. In 1912 the Sarada Ladies Union was formed as a women's club to provide its members with an opportunity to hear lectures, discuss new ideas, and collect money for a brahmin girls' school.

In 1912 the government agreed to support a boarding school for training teachers. The government would pay the rent and give scholarships to three girls; the remainder of the operating expenses had to be met through donations and fees. In order to make this plan more acceptable to critics of education for Hindu widows, Miss Lynch proposed shifting the school from a liberal section of the city to the more orthodox Triplicane. This meant Subbalakshmi had to locate a "home" for the widows. After an extensive search she finally settled on the Ice House, the old warehouse along the beach once used to store ice from Boston. The Ice House was slowly made habitable for the thirty-five girls who by this time had joined Subbalakshmi. As Sister Subbalakshmi commented, "There was a lot of gossip and ill-talk" about the large number of girl widows and female staff who occupied the Ice House without male protection. The presence of so many inauspicious women walking about forced local people to modify their schedules. Subbalakshmi wrote:

> I remember how the orthodox elders in a well-to-do family wanted the bridegroom's procession either before 9 a.m. or after 10 a.m. so that there would be no contact (seeing) the widows on their way to school.[68]

[68] By Sister Subbalakshmi, n.d. enclosed in a letter from R. Tagore, Eur. Mss., B 183, IOOLC.

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The school's curriculum was set by the government. The aim was to train these women as teachers: first, they were prepared for regular classes, then they completed the syllabus for matriculation, and finally, they entered Queen Mary's College (begun in 1914 as the first college for women in Madras). In 1922 the Lady Willingdon Training College and Practice School, an institution for teacher training, opened with Sister Subbalakshmi as principal. At this institution Sister Subbalakshmi was able to implement some of her ideas on education. The college offered three programs: post-graduate training for potential high school teachers, secondary training for teaching through the eighth grade, and training for elementary teachers. English was emphasized (because teachers who knew English were in demand), some vocational subjects were required to instill the value of working with the hands, a training course in physical education was available and popular, and Hindu and Christian priests offered moral and religious instruction. Before long Sister Subbalakshmi was compelled to open Sarada Vidyalaya, a high school and boarding school for adult widows. This facility was necessary because the Ice House did not accept widows over age eighteen even though the age of marriage was gradually shifting upward and the concept of widows working as teachers was gaining acceptance.

The boarding school was run in strict conformity with orthodox Hindu customs. In the early days of the school, Sister Subbalakshmi denounced remarriage. Her widowed aunt, V. S. Valambal Ammal, was described by a visitor to the home as a woman in "disfigured [shorn hair] condition" wearing a white sari and performing a traditional *puja* (act of worship). Mrs. Drysdale utilized her inspection tours to locate high-caste widows and would often pay the train fare of reluctant fathers who wanted to see for themselves how the institution was run.[69]

Sister Subbalakshmi understood the importance of running the boarding school for widows in accordance with orthodox customs and caste rules. At the same time her own life was one of rebellion against the accepted role for a widow. She defied caste rules by opening a school for the fisherfolk in the area of the Ice House. When she was warned that as a government servant she could not join the Women's Indian Association, Sister Subbalakshmi continued to attend branch meetings while scrupulously avoiding the more public annual confer-

[69] *Ibid.*

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ences. When the Women's Indian Association and the All-India Women's Conference began their campaigns in support of the Child Marriage Restraint Bill, Sister Subbalakshmi lectured against the custom and gave evidence before the Joshi Committee about the harmful effects of youthful marriage. Her activities suggest that she was idealistic yet shrewd. She was willing to compromise as long as it served her long-range goals.

Spiritually, Sister Subbalakshmi was deeply attracted to Swami Vivekananda and the Ramakrishna Mission. She regarded Ramakrishna and his disciple Vivekananda as the first religious reformers to be deeply concerned with the woman question. Although the model of the Catholic nun attracted her in her childhood, as an adult Sister Subbalakshmi drew her spiritual sustenance and philosophy of action from reformed Hinduism.

CONCLUSIONS

What these examples accentuate is the extent to which successful experiments in female education were a product of the labor of educated Indian women. Many of the schools were geographically limited, communally bound, and caste-sensitive. They were schools for females only, the teachers were females, and curricula were geared to gender-specific socialization.

Looking at female education and its products in the second decade of the twentieth century one can begin to answer the question of how far female education had achieved the results desired by the three groups who had promoted it: the British rulers, Indian male reformers, and educated Indian women.

The British wanted their civil servants to have educated wives to further ensure their loyalty. Uneducated wives (or wives who were educated only in the vernacular and traditional subjects) would split the household into two worlds. Just as the British were certain that rebellious plots were hatched and nurtured in inaccessible zenanas, they believed English-educated Indian women would raise their children to be anglophiles. Despite this dream, education did not promote loyalty among women except those married to civil servants. They became help-mates to their husbands but there were some renegades even among this group. Many women became critics of British policy in India.

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Reform-minded Indian men were interested in developing a progressive society. If women were educated, Indian society could no longer be characterized as decadent and backward. On a personal level, these men yearned for companionship and the support an educated woman could give them as they advanced professionally. They wanted women to take responsibility for helping the less fortunate members of their communities. On the national level, they envisioned women in charge of social reform while men pursued politics.

Educated women accompanied their husbands to their civil service postings, joined husbands who had left their ancestral homes, opened schools, and entertained district magistrates. The two-person career was finally possible with the appearance of the carefully groomed, English-speaking wife. Women took over the task of social reform at a time when men were becoming obsessed with political action and worried that social reform might complicate the task of arousing the masses. While men feared education might cause women to "go too far," female educators promised to graduate "professionalized housewives." The educational system was overwhelmingly conservative, but the education of women had unexpected and unanticipated consequences.

The first generation of educated women found a voice: they wrote about their lives and about the conditions of women. The second generation acted. They articulated the needs of women, critiqued their society and the foreign rulers, and developed their own institutions. That these institutions were often as conservative as those designed by men should not be taken as a sign that these women wished to preserve the status quo. Rather it should be taken as evidence that they understood their subordinate position very well.

Through their efforts to develop institutions women learned the limits of their power. Deviant behavior was severely punished. Within households girls who wanted to learn were teased and ostracized. Those who attended schools were stoned in the street and marginalized in the classroom if they attended boys' schools. They were harassed when they sought to practice their professions. By straining for new lives, these "new women" learned where the boundaries were and just how far they could go. But this was a dynamic process; women were becoming educated and then becoming the educators. The boundaries of the early nineteenth century had been stretched considerably by the

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5 The companionate wife, Shudha Mazumdar in riding breeches, Darjeeling, *c.* 1933

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early twentieth century. What was deviant behavior for one generation was acceptable behavior for the next. What is more important, by the early years of the twentieth century Indian women were full participants in the redefinition of their futures.

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