

**WOMEN'S QUESTION IN COLONIAL INDIA :
A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS.**

Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University
in partial fulfilment of the requirements
for the award of the Degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
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1996**



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28th December, 1995.

CERTIFICATE

Certified that the dissertation entitled, "WOMEN'S QUESTION IN COLONIAL INDIA : A SOCIOLOGICAL ANALYSIS" , submitted by ANUPAMA KUMAR has not been submitted previously for an award of any degree in this or any other University. We recommend that this work may be placed before the examiners for the consideration of the award of the degree of Master of Philosophy.

Avijit Pathak
Supervisor

Chairperson

***To Dinu,
Without Whom
NOT***

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

Well, 'thankyous' may sound oh-so-trite, but I do not think that the English language has a better alternative to express the gratitude and appreciation that I feel for various people who have made this project a hard material reality. I would like first and foremost, to thank Dr. Avijit Pathak, to whose unrelenting, unquestioning help and support I owe the completion of this work. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank Dr. Anand Kumar and Prof. K.L. Sharma for their support, which enabled me to stay on in the M.Phil. programme, at all.

I am eternally grateful to mom and 'Reshum' who unhesitatingly extending all their possible help and to 'Papa' who constantly provided, the-always-much-needed-sometimes-trans continental moral support (I know the worst was putting up with all the tantrums-those, however, were not the last, of that, I assure you). I am especially to grateful to mom for looking after my various 'batchchas' (a curious assortment of pet and stray dogs and cats) while I worked. (probably even more so, for her falling in love with them).

I am also thankful to my various friends who more than generously lent me their library cards, so that, I could sometimes read at home instead of traversing twenty kilometers, one side, to the campus. Last, but certainly not the least, I wish to thank Jose, for patiently typing, retyping and re-retyping of my numerous rough drafts.

I alone take responsibility for all errors (of omission and commission) in this project.


ANUPAMA KUMAR.

The Woman

*For ages,
She has stood alone
under the vast naked sky
nameless, faceless
waiting for redemption.
She is the daughter
traded for a handful of rice
a wife stripped by gambling men
the mother
disgraced by her sons.
Times have changed
man has reached the moon
Yet nothing, absolutely nothing
has changed for her.
She is still the earth
defiled by her own.*

Renu Gurnani
Journal of Book Review, July 95.

INTRODUCTION

".....the social and political developments of the last two decades have shattered the post colonial complacency about the improving status of women and with it has gone the legitimacy of nationalist model of reform and development"

--Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari.

'In 1987 we witnessed the revival of widow immolation by "modern", "educated" Maruti-driving Rajput men and women. Earlier in 1985-86, the Shah Bano case led to intense controversies and debates on religion-based personal laws, culminating in the passage of the Muslim Women's (Protection of Rights in Divorce) Bill, which violated all constitutional guarantees regarding equality and fundamental rights (of women)'.¹ Communal conflicts arising out of the exegesis of the Hindu fundamentalism, and its political nexus, today threaten to wipe out the work done by various organization for empowering women. These shocking developments along with a many-fold increase in the violence against women and the girl child and their marginalization in the economic sphere have led to a lot of rethinking on the 'improving' status of Indian women and forms also, the starting point of my project.

In the colonial India, women gained many rights and fortunately lost many disadvantages. Infact women were central in the social reform agenda of the nineteenth century. In the post colonial, Independent India with women's right to equality, education, employment, property, enshrined in the constitution itself everyone felt

¹ Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon (eds.), Against all Odds- Essays on Women, Religion and Development from India and Pakistan, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1994. p.iii.

In the colonial India, women gained many rights and fortunately lost many disadvantages. Infact women were central in the social reform agenda of the nineteenth century. In the post colonial, Independent India with women's right to equality, education, employment, property, enshrined in the constitution itself everyone felt confident that the Indian women's status would rapidly improve. More so, since the concern for betterment of the female lot in India championed by the men themselves, doing away with the need for a militant feminist movement here. Indian women had gone on record differentiating the women's struggle in India from the Western 'sex-war', and hoping that, together with the support of their men, they would soon achieve equality. It was a hope that seemed to be coming true as, more and more women came forward and achieved excellence in hithertofore male dominated fields. India could even boast of the first woman head-of-state to evince the progressive character of the nation. Yes, social attitudes, gender roles and did not quite keep pace, but they were dismissed as a symptom of the 'cultural lag' that would in time catch up. It didn't.

The development of the last two decades on the contrary proved, and laid bare the fact that the 'women's question' in post colonial India was explicitly and inextricably linked to what Amrita Chachchii calls 'Identity Politics'. Women represent the community which, inturn, determines their identity. Thus, women both constitute and are constituted through community and vice versa. This has been clearly evidenced in the revival of religious fundamentalism which is *based* on the *such* communal identities usurping and replacing the National Identity. So great is the preoccupation with forging and maintaining a distinct

'identity' in the 'religious' politics of today that the contemporary discourse has even co-opted the secular concepts of democracy, rights and secularism itself.

How can we explain this? It *does* need explaining and it *must* have an explanation; probably in the past, for, there can be no developments without their antecedents. To understand these recent phenomena better and to comprehend the dialectic at work behind their emergence it becomes necessary to look at India's colonial past, since it was in colonial India that the 'Women's question' became an issue of debate.

In this project, then, I wish to look at India's colonial past, to delve once again in an-already-much-delved-into-past, in the hope of locating a vital connection between *that* past and *this* present. In doing this I shall dwell on two major themes:

(i) How 'Liberal' were the discourses on women in colonial India? i.e., were motivations behind them only rationalist/humanist? Or were these tempered adequately with considerations of 'identity', of 'proper' Indian Womanhood and femininity? (ii) What is the kind of 'New Woman' that emerged from these discourses? Was she 'recast' or only certain changes incorporated in her keeping in mind her over arching Indian/Hindu/Ideal identity? (I would be using the words Indian and Hindu interchangeably).

Women have always been the carriers of tradition and cultural identity of its people in any society. This was especially true of the Hindus whose systematically hierarchized society, closed completely to the prospect of social mobility, depended almost entirely upon

the control of its women's sexuality. This control, while ritually it ensured *Moksha* by ensuring the authenticity of progeny for, only a legitimate, male natural heir was capable of mediating his parents salvation; temporally it ensured a stable society where Brahmanical superiority remained unchallenged as each was assigned to his rightful place in the larger system according to his *Karma* and it was his *Dharma* to abide by it. Fanatical preoccupation with control of women's sexuality and, by proxy the Hindu identity had led to devising of all kinds of perverse practices that made the lot of the Hindu female one of absolute degradation and oppression.

The ideas of Enlightenment, made widely available through the printing press, questioned the very rationale of practices that discriminated between individuals by the virtue of circumstances, which were mostly beyond their control. These ideas had caused a stir even in the west, increasingly the universal subordination of women was being debated and challenged. The nineteenth century could well be called the age of women for all over the world their rights and wrongs, their nature, capacities and potential were subject to heated discussion. In Europe feminist consciousness began spreading during and after the French Revolution, and by the end of the century feminist ideas were being espoused by Radicals in England, France and Germany. By the mid nineteenth century the women's question had become a central issue for Russian reformers and anarchists.² In India the wrongs of women began to be deplored by the social reformers especially in Bengal and Maharashtra

² Radha Kumar, The History of Doing, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993. p.7.

which, predictably enough were the first to experience the colonial presence.

Beginning with the abolition of Sati, the movement spearheaded by the Father of Modern India, Raja Rammon Roy and culminating into the political mass participation of women in the Indian National Movement of the twentieth century, it appeared that the women's question had been, once and for all, solved in the colonial India. In Free India Women could look ahead to a bright tomorrow-for the new women 'in new circumstances' nothing was unachievable, much was in store and there was no looking back. This has proved easier hoped than realized.

Some of the recent historical research regards this as a natural outcome of what it considers to be 'the failure of the social reform movement of the last century and a half'--a failure to match up to the liberal ideal of equality and reason. It states categorically, that concerns of the social conditions of women was due to the "acute problems of interpersonal adjustment within the family". The early generation of western education males faced with social ostracism and isolation attempted a 'limited and controlled emancipation of wives' which became 'a personal necessity for survival in the hostile social world'.³ Any concrete changes in the situation of women are then considered to be, a direct outcome of objective socio-economic pressures and some post independence legislation.

³ Sumit Sarkar in Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994. p.117.

Perhaps, this is not entirely true. Perhaps, there *were* elements of 'true modernity'-a rationalist, equalitarianist modernity-in the new cultural and intellectual movement of the nineteenth century. Perhaps, 'these cannot become meaningful unless they are located in their relation, on the one hand, to the changing socio-economic structure of the country, and on the other hand to the reality of colonial subjection'⁴.

I shall argue, if I may anticipate my argument, that the social reform movement that started in the nineteenth century did make concrete changes to the lives of women and their social situation so that a 'new women' did emerge at the end of the nationalist struggle. However, I maintain though many of her circumstances had altered and she had changed in significant ways what had remained unaltered were two fundamentals that marked essence of continuity despite the significant break. The 'new woman' also functioned under patriarchy albeit a 'new patriarchy' and she still embodied the 'ideals of Hindu Womanhood' that had been shaped quite early in her descent and were in fact symptomatic of her degraded condition. Thus all, the reformist, the revivalists and the Nationalist, hailed the self-sacrificing nature of the Hindu woman, (though in different contexts) who was pure and chaste and capable of endless suffering to defend her purity and whose primary duty was towards her husband and her children. Significantly, whereas on the one hand, this ideological settling of the issue provided enough space for a secular reform, it also, on the other hand left the Hindu women vulnerable to appropriation of not-so-secular and

⁴ Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p.24.

benevolent patriarchies especially the perverse patriarchal practices of a fundamentalist religion.

Chapter One tries to look at the pre-colonial past and locate the origins of women's subordination in India. The chapter traces the gradual decline from the early Vedic to the Post Vedic period, by which time the Hindu woman had traversed most of the distance to her downfall and *Manusmriti* had already taken its present shape. *Manusmriti*, it is contended is not a work of a single person and draws heavily on the Later Vedic *Grihya Sutras* and *Brahmanas*. In this chapter I also look at the two religious-protest movements-- Buddhism and Bhakti -- that arose to challenge the hegemony of an increasingly constraining Brahmanical Hinduism and by virtue had the potential to alter the condition of women. However, their impact was somewhat limited because, firstly, they did not concern themselves directly with the question of women's subordination and secondly, did not seek to attack the patriarchy inherent in the existing system. The freedom the buddhism-bakhti made available to women was mainly by virtue of challenging the pollution/purity notions and making available to women the *Marga* of devotion to attain *Moksha*. The Muslim invasion, similarly, held a potential for betterment of women, since Islam is built on egalitarian ideas. But Hindu orthodoxy instead of democratizing its practices made them more stringent to firmly close its ranks against the Muslim onslaught. Thus, none of the 'influences' could provide effective resistance to the Hindu ideology which saw women as dangerous, to be controlled and constructed the ideal of '*Pativrata*' to do so.

Chapter Two tries to explore the beginnings of concern with the degenerate social system and social condition of women within it, as the impact of modern civilization began slowly to be felt by the Indian intelligentsia. The response it is argued, was not fully in keeping with the liberal rational thought and is not therefore 'full-bloodedly' modern even in the beginning of the social reform movement which is generally considered to be a radical precedent to the later revivalist 'backlash'. This, however, does not detract from the fact that it did make an improvement in the lives of women who were now mostly free from practices like Sati, Kulin Polygamy, enforced illiteracy and seclusion widowhood. The selective absorption of modern ideals had taken place and an alternative 'woman', in opposition to both tradition and modernity had been erected. It is significant that this alternative still maintained vital links with tradition and the 'new woman' could not really break away from her ideal self. And though many women were now participants in the public sphere majority remained private and passive.

Gandhian intervention was instrumental in making possible the remarkable phenomena of women's mass participation in the Indian National Movement . Chapter Three seeks to bisociate in Gandhian thought the connection between Masculinity, violence and modernity to the colonialization of both Nature and humans. Gandhi saw women's subordination as the continuum of the same modern liberal thought that placed a man's material life at the centre of all human effect and which inevitably entailed use of violence or brute force to satisfy these ever increasing wants. In juxtaposing non-violence, soul force and moral courage which he believed were the innate capacities of hegemony and sought

in the process to redefine 'femininity' and woman as active social agent instead of passive recipient of social reform.

The concluding chapter charts the early developments and the beginning of woman-organized women's movement in India. It looks at the concerns, achievements and aspiration of the early feminists. But have these aspiration been fulfilled? Even partly? How have the recent developments both in the economic and politico-cultural sphere affected the prospects of women in India? These are the major questions that need to be answered today. I briefly touch upon these developments and tentatively explore the connection between them, and what these mean vis-a-vis women. A thorough understanding of the 'women's question' in post colonial India would require a Ph.D research thesis in working towards which, I hope, my present work will prove valuable.

CHAPTER I

CULTURAL IDEALS OF INDIAN WOMANHOOD:

A LOOK AT PRE-COLONIAL INDIA.

".....the present awareness of the constricted role of women in Indian society and in public affairs is part of an ongoing process of civilizational change and must be so analysed. This demands that we identify the structure of defences, individual as well as cultural, which has given meaning to the role of women in Indian society, defences which have been challenged in recent times by new waves of social consciousness. Only then can we hope to isolate and control the long-term processes of social and psychological changes in this sphere."

--Ashis Nandy.

Introduction:

To be able to understand the dynamic of the 'Women's question' in colonial India, the dialectic of the issues involved and the change that occurred in the nineteenth century India it is necessary to first address the broad question of how and why the Hindu women came to be subordinated in the first place. This chapter wishes to analyse the social and cultural process through which this subjugation was achieved and perpetuated.

The chapter begins with a short review of the Early Vedic period when the Hindu Women was a free social agent, more or less, in keeping with, the tradition of the earlier Indus Civilization which the Aryans had conquered. Though these Aryans were essentially a patriarchal community and the status of women was not as high as in the urban Harrappan culture (remanents of which can still be evidenced in the matrilineal tribes of the South India) the woman in early vedic culture, did not also suffer the severe disadvantages

of her counterpart in the later and post Vedic eras.

It is generally believed to be the growing influence of the '*Athrvā Veda*' and the contingent notions of survival of soul, an after life and purity/impurity which impacted directly on the woman's ritual status, and through it her temporal status, in society.

The chapter traces the gradual descent of the Hindu woman, down the social ladder, up to the point it became a rapid downfall and landed her in the depths of oppression. Stripped of all her religious, legal and economic rights. She was equated with the *Shudras* and the animals in the '*Manu Samhita*'. Eventhough the '*Arthashastra*' shows a little more generosity towards women, it is probably reflects of the secular nature of the document and the politico-economic astuteness of its author.

The next sections analyse the impact of the two indogenous, religious protest movements of Buddhism and Bhakti both of which challenged the basic tenets of the increasingly ritualizing brahmanical Hinduism. Since the subjection of the Hindu female was directly related to this ritualization, it was inevitable that modification in its character would mean a profound impact on their lives. Likewise, Islam and its egalitarian agenda also posed a great threat to Brahminism and held out a potential for change in the Hindu woman's life. But the promise that all these influences held out for women were at best, only fulfilled partly.

The last section discusses the Hindu norms and expectation for women's behaviour. The ideal of womanhood in the Hindu tradition.

I. Pre-Aryan India:

It is difficult to give a definite date as the beginning of this period given the fact that the Indus Valley script has never been deciphered and the invading Aryans did not develop a script of their own for a long time. What we do know comes from archeological sources or the oral epic tradition that gives us not only the epics '*Ramayana*' and '*Mahabharata*', but also the four *Vedas*. Although much is hazy and uncertain, we are sure that the Aryans, a nomadic and warrior like people swept through the Indian peninsula, coming in from the north-west and finally settling down around the fertile Gangetic plains. It is also certain that they defeated and subsequently drove away the Dravidans settled in the northern part of India and who, we know, were much highly civilized than the Aryans were. The discoveries made during the excavations of the ancient cities of Mohenjodaro and Harappa give proof of the sophisticated urban civilization with a developed economy and systematic trade that existed there. It is surmised that the people of the Indus Valley lived in an organized and peaceable way and therefore were unable to offer any effective resistance against the conquering Aryans who had brought horses from central Asia. Their civilization was wiped out by the Aryans and with it, were destroyed their knowledge and understanding of many things. We still do not have any evidence of their social organization or how different classes (for a developed urban civilization entails a complicated division of labour) lived in harmony with each other. But by the grander artifacts for women and the higher number

of female deities suggests, a definite ascendancy of women over men.

Social life and condition of the Aryan people can be better gleaned from the epics than from the Vedas since the latter are more or less religious in content. The Ramayana and the Mahabharata as well as some puranas were compiled in their present form during the formative period of Hinduism. Most of stories, legends and traditions narrated in the epics are as old as the race itself and present a record of the history and geography disguised as myths. These contain repeated references to confrontations between the Aryan heroes, or Gods and the Dravidans, or Asuras as they are more commonly referred to. These Asuras are generally portrayed as dark skinned, hostile to the religious and sexual mores of the Aryans and very often possessing special powers and intellectual skills. All of these descriptions closely relate to what we know about the autochthonous people of the land. Many historians agree on this point:

"There is some evidence that the Indus Civilization was still in action in the first half of the second millennium B.C. and it is widely accepted that somewhat about the middle of that millennium, occurred the Aryan invasion which is reflected in the earliest literature the hymns of the Rigveda. In these hymns the Aryan invasion constantly assumes the form of an onslaught upon the walled cities of aborigines and the only fortifications of approximate date known to us are those of the citadels of Harappa and Mohenjodaro. It is tempting to relate the two circumstances to one another and to recognize the destroyers of Mohenjodaro, indifferent to the city they had sacked, as some of these heroic but barbaric nomads to

whom city life was alien".¹ It is not indeed impossible that the name Harappa is itself concealed in the Hari-yupia which is mentioned in the Rigveda as the scene of the battle.

Going by the references in Vedic literature, we come to the conclusion that Asura women enjoyed a greater degree of freedom than even their early Aryan counterparts. This becomes apparent from the fact that even while living in patriarchal societies, they did not have to live under constant subjection to their men. This is borne out by the fact that Asura marriage was a secular instead of a sacramental affair. Women of the vanquished regularly took the victor as their husband and thus remarriage was allowed and the later Hindu practices like *Sati* were unknown. As a rule marriage for them was an alliance with some certain legal, economic and biological privileges and responsibilities only. Nowhere do we find any parallels to the excessively mystified notions about marriage of the Aryan culture. Asura women were also free to choose their husbands--Mahabharata mentions one such marriage between Bhima and Hidimba the Asura maiden. It is said that Hidimba came across Bhima while he was wandering in the forest and took fancy on him and married him. Bhima stayed on with her for a year and continued his wanderings only after his son was born. This also suggests some sort of matriarchal customs practiced in some particular Rakshasa tribes. Prerogative to propose, pursue and persuade the man for marriage or sexual liaison lay with the woman. A story in point is that of king Yayati who was

¹ Sir Mortimer Wheeler in P. Thomas, Indian Women through the Ages, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1964. p.5.

convinced by the asura princess Shramishtha to marry her. Such *pratiloma*² marriages were not taboo amongst the rakshsas. It is said that Ravana's wives were mostly daughters of Rajrishis, Brahmins, Daityas and Gandharvas.

II. The Early Vedic Period:

The notions of marriage amongst the early Aryans evolved from similar to those of the asuras, to the rigidly patriarchal. This change can be connected to the recognition of property rights in women and not merely to sexual jealousy. The wife and her offspring were the property of the man who could not however, restrict the sexual freedom of his wife as long as her other alliances did not threaten his property rights. Infact a man who takes another man's wife and impregnates her is considered foolish and 'squandering' his seed since the off-spring he helps beget will not belong to him but to the lawful husband of the woman³. It seems, then, that while sexual relationships were a private matter, the property right in women and offspring were a public, judicial and communal concern. This aspect of the Indo-Aryan mores is manifest in the Mahabharata; King Pandu, who had been rendered impotent through a curse that prohibited him from consorting with his wife, requests his wife to consort with other men in order to beget heirs, thus-

² According to the Hindu system out of the two kind of marriages, *Anuloma* and *Pratiloma* which mean hypergamous and hypogamous only *Anuloma* or the hypergamous marriage is desirable and socially approved.

³ See W. Doniger, and B.K. Smith, (Trs.) Laws of Manu, Penguin Books India Ltd., New Delhi, 1991.

'I shall now tell thee the practice of old indicated by sages fully acquainted with every rules of morality. Women in the olden days were not immured within the houses nor were they dependant on their husbands and male relatives. They did not confine themselves to their husbands and yet they were not considered sinful; for that was the sanctioned custom of the age. This practice sanctioned by the precedent is applauded by the great Rishis. The custom is even now regarded with respect among the northern Kurus. Indeed the custom...has the sanction of antiquity. The present practice (that of a woman being confined to one man for life) has been established lately'.⁴

The Rigvedic Aryans were not overly concerned with religious matters either, as is generally the case with warrior like people engaged in territorial expansion. For them the material needs were all important. Their Gods were the full-blooded martial dieties who took care of the immediate, temporal matters. The conception of life after death was not developed and except for the wicked, the Aryan heroes after death were thought to *transcend* to the vague regions of bliss where they drank their favourite soma liquor with the Gods. Thus the spiritual was the superficial; the natural and the physical being of primary concern. The institutions of marriage and family being based on these temporal concerns of people who found life on earth good and hoped for a 'good earthly life and ten sturdy sons', were likewise free from excessive mystique. The sexual mores of this early period were also, predictably enough, relaxed and the women had as much freedom in this respect as men. Child marriage was unknown and nor were the widows expected to die with their husbands or even remain single forever, the custom of levirate had full sanction in the face of high mortality and the need of building the numerical strength of the clan which

⁴ P. Thomas, Indian Women through the Ages, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1964. p.45.

would entail a corresponding increase in political influence. The Rigvedic hymn bears clear testimony to this fact of marriage of a widow to the brother of her dead husband. The brother (-in-law) while leading the weeping woman away from the grave says,:

"Rise, come into the world of the living, O woman, come, he is life less by whose side thou liest, wifedom with husband was thy portion. Who took thee and wooed thee as a lover."⁵

in the absence of the brother (-in-law), a woman could even marry a near relative. Women also participated in the religious and intellectual life of the community. In fact the intellectually inclined were not even forced to marry and were allowed to continue with their career of learning and remain single forever. Though these *Brahmavadinis* continued the education through out life there were others whose intellectual career came to a halt when they married. Thus unlike later times when women were treated 'more like furniture' than humans, in this age (although a slight decline from the Indus Valley culture before it) women were learned individuals with higher pursuits. Many of the hymns of the Rigveda have been composed by women and Visvavara, Apala, Lopamudra, Shashiyasi, Ghosa and Indrani were celebrated women who are referred to in the ancient texts. Because of this marriage was not a universal way of life, and spinsters were treated with respect. Only illegitimacy was condemned as it weakened the rights of the father over his progeny. In addition it may be pointed out that in ancient India Literature we come across many celebrities and class who take their names from their mothers and not their fathers. For

⁵ Ibid. p. 50.

instance Saripura was the son of Lady Sari and Daityas were sons of Diti.⁶

Thus, though the Rigvedic people were strictly patriarchal and the man had almost absolute power over his wife and children. The position of woman was high. One *Sloka* of the Rigvedic marriage ceremony, from which the fire and the *Satapadi* ritual are conspicuously absent, says, 'go to the dwelling of thy husband as *thou art the mistress* of his house; *submissive to thy husband*, give orders to his household.'⁷

III. The Later Vedic Period:

The later Vedic period however, marks the rise of rigid patriarchal notions which held male offspring as more desirable than a female one. Such discrimination can be traced back to the development of certain eschatological beliefs according to which only sons, could redeem their parents in the after life and therefore daughters were of value only insofar they were capable of bearing sons. Thus a hymn in the '*Atharva Veda*' says: "O Prjapati, Anumati... give a daughter elsewhere but here a son." Female infants were viewed to be distortions of the universally male embryos, caused by the perverse acts of malignant spirits. "O Pinga", plead hymns from the *Atharva Veda*, "defend thou the child in the process of Birth. Let not the Evil ones turn the male into female. 'Elaborate rituals' were undertaken to prevent this calamity which predictably enough, were not quite effective.

⁶ Ibid. p. 47.

⁷ Ibid. p. 51

Significantly, the *Pumasavana* ceremony is even now performed in the third month of gestation.

The later Vedic period, probably predictably, marks the beginning of settled life for the nomadic Aryans. They had successfully wrested territory from the natives; now they were engaged in consolidating what they had won. Agriculture as a systematic means of food production had already been established; although this was a significant factor in the growth of the Aryan civilization, the agriculturists/workers did not possess any special privileges—all the power rested mainly with either the warriors from amongst whom the King would be chosen or the priests, who had come to enjoy more and more powers over the general populace as life grew more settled and religious and spiritual questions, that had in more insecure times been ignored now, attained primacy. The primitive and simple religion that had previously only involved offering prayers to the nature Gods in order to propitiate them, now grew much more complicated and in its new form came to occupy and control a large part of the people's lives. Significantly also, it is during this period that a simple division of labour was transformed into a hierarchy with the two upper most groups mutually consolidating each other's position. So while the priests strengthened the King's position by making him lead the communal prayers and, bestowing on him an unquestioned and divinely sanctioned temporal authority, the king declared the priests to be the religious heads and teachers.

In this period, then, quite understandably, issues connected to religion and afterlife

became urgent. Atharva Veda-the Veda that mostly deals with the 'right' way of conducting various Hindu rites and rituals was a product of this period. As prescribed by this Veda the notions of purity and impurity became the guiding principles in all religious concerns and fire-that eternal purifier-acquired central importance in the now-highly-ritualized life of the Aryans. The sacramental, mystified notion of marriage and the marriage ceremony built around the fire and '*Satapadi*' are also constructions of this period. The deep impact that the Athrva Veda had on the lives of the Aryans can be gleaned from the fact that they even changed their death ritual. Whereas the Rigvedic Aryans buried their dead, they now burnt them in keeping with the present dictums of purity and pollution. It is these reasons of purity and pollution that led to the decline in the status of woman who was considered 'eternally impure below the navel' and thereby incompetent to offer the ritual oblations and sacrifices to the 'souls of the manes'. In keeping with the idea of survival of personality after death, we are told that the soul departed to the regions of the manes; since these souls were new born, albeit in another world, they needed like all infants feeding by others as they were unable to feed themselves. Thus it was necessary for the living to offer oblations of food and drink in the way prescribed by the priests in order to nourish their dead ancestors in the absence of which they (the ancestors) would be relegated to hell 'the abode of *female* goblins, sorceresses and place of blind and black darkness. Women were considered incompetent to offer this nourishment for two reasons: firstly because their ties with their parents were severed when they were given to another family in marriage; and secondly, and perhaps, much more importantly, because they were considered impure. So it was established that no man or woman could attain heaven without the help of their son.

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The decline in the ritual status of women initiated the decline in the temporal status. This, then, seems to be the point of initiation of arguments for a rigid patriarchy that categorically expelled women from the hallowed precincts of power and prestige. A detailed account of the changed social, political and legal status of women in Post Vedic period can be derived from '*Manusmriti*', the canon of law regarding legal, religious and social matters laid down by the sage Manu.

If the attitude towards women in any society 'reveals the state of evolution at which it has arrived' and 'furnishes the truest test for its civilization and culture', then, by the post Vedic period in keeping with the injunctions of the '*Grihya Sutras*' the Indian civilization had probably sunk to abysmal depths. Though widow burning, child marriage etc. were still unknown, Manusmriti bears testimony to the fact that the framework of this eventual and complete degradation was ready. Henry Maine writes:

"The degree, in which the personal immunity and proprietary capacity of women are recognized in a particular state or community, is the test of the stage of advance of its civilization; for in as much as no class of similar importance and extent was, in the infancy of society, placed in a position of such absolute dependence, as the other sex..... Of all the chapters of (a) law of the person, the most important is that which is concerned with the status of the female".

Manu declared:⁸

⁸ See W. Doniger and B.K. Smith, (Trs.) Laws of Manu, Penguin Books India Ltd., New Delhi, 1991.

'In her childhood a girl should be under the will of her father; in her youth of her husband; her husband being dead, of her sons. A woman should never enjoy her own will.'

'No act is to be done according to her own will by a young girl, a young woman or even by an old woman though in their own houses'.

'..... him to whom her father gives her (in marriage), she must obey alive and dead must not disregard'.

'Though of bad conduct and debauched or even devoid of (any) good qualities, a husband must always be worshipped like a god by a good wife.'

'She may not, when her husband is dead, mention the name of another man and must till death remain subdued, intent and chaste even if childless (and young) and desirous of an offspring'.

'By violating her duty towards her husband, a wife is disgraced in this world; (after death) she enters the womb of a jackal, and is tormented by diseases (the punishment) of her sin'.

'If however, a wife dies before the husband, he having used the fires for the last rites, he may marry again (and yet again) and again establish the sacred fires also'.

'When there is lack of offspring, the progeny may be procured by the wife being regularly commissioned to bear children by the brother in law or some blood relation of the husband.

'Even after marrying a girl according to rule, the husband may abandon her if he finds her blameworthy, sickly, very corrupt or married to him by fraud'.

'Women are not guarded by being confined at home by men, however cleverly they attempt it'.

'Women do not care for beauty, nor is their attention fixed on age: (thinking) '(it is enough that) he is a man', they give themselves to the handsome and the ugly'.

In the post vedic period therefor,lost is the independence and individuality, the freedom to remain unmarried out of will, respect as a being capable of rational thought who could contribute to the intellectual and political activities of her community. The female was defined exclusively in terms of a (male) child bearing being who had to be continually subjugated and rigidly controlled in order to maintain the 'purity' of the clan but who could be secretly forced to have children with other men chosen by her husband in order to conceal the fact of his own impotence. The personal and the sexual, in the case of only women though, became the concern of the law makers. Also a settled way of life must have stabilized the population therefore instead of the custom of levirate which encouraged the widows to be reassimilated into the household, now arose the practice of forever alienating

the woman whose husband had died. She was expected to eternally mourn his death and unlike the men, could never remarry.

IV. The Maurayan Period: Women in the Arthashastra

Ancient Indian literature, voluminous as it is, is mainly religious in character and we have but a few words extant which are of purely a secular nature, of these the most important is the '*Arthshastra*'. Written by Kautilya who is likened to Machiavelli in both cunning and loyalty towards his king. Unlike 'The Prince' however, *Arthashastra* contains not only strategy but also detailed principles of administration and economics, rightly identifying economic factors as crucial to politics. Kautilya is well aware of the instability resulting from any deficiencies in the exchequer. But though the basic motivation of the book is politico-economic, we can derive some knowledge of the life of the people of that period. It also, probably, gives us the last glimpse of the Hindu woman with some vestige of individuality, freedom and status. Though the *Grihya Sutras* and the *Brahmanas* were highly restrictive towards the duties, responsibilities and rights of woman, and Manu Samhita drawing on these sources had razed her almost to the ground, the *Arthashastra* was neither so didactic nor equally oppressive towards woman. The reasons for this might lay in Kautilya's motivations, which were mainly directed towards maintenance of the King's supreme temporal authority and liquidity of the state administration and thus viewed women only as a means towards these ends.

Kingship during the Mauryan period had come to entail untold privileges-the empire

was secure from any external threats and if anything, grew increasingly prosperous and extensive through new territorial conquests. This however meant the increase in domestic intrigues to overthrow the King. Such threats to the life of the king, according to Kautilya emanated basically from the harem which contained the numerous wives and ladies of the king since it was here that the king was the most defenseless, unsuspecting and hence vulnerable. "Hidden in the queen's chamber, his own brother slew Bhadradev; hiding under the bed of his brother his sons killed Karusha and with a weapon hidden under the tuft of her hair his own queen killed Viduratha". Thus in consonance with the later Hindu tradition, woman is of an eternally suspect nature ; an untrustworthy ally, even in the *Arthashastra*.

Life for the women in the harem was restricted and the activities in the harem took place according to the detailed instructions of Kautilya himself. Every person in the harem was to strictly keep the place assigned to them and never permitted to wander out of bounds. Nor could they gain interview with any outside person. However an efficient system of spies - those trusted servants who were vital in maintaining the Kings sovereign power - employed mendicants and female guards of the harem. Megasthenes says "amazons that guarded the emperor's harem and formed the main body guard of the king when he moved out, and the people went in fear of them. Any food to be eaten by him, any flowers, garments, ornaments to be worn... had to be tested by his trusted women"⁹. This may well

⁹ P. Thomas, Indian Women through the Ages, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1964. p. 71.

be a unique reference of Amazon like elite security force in the history of ancient India.

Another important woman employee of the court was the *Ganika* or the super courtesan who was an accomplished artist, famous in her trade. She drew a high salary and appointed other girls to be trained in this profession. Not all women in the court were treated with such fear and respect however. While some of them were kept to adorn the court, some were only prostitutes whose progeny largely constituted the extensive intelligence network employed by the court. In short, the king led a polygamous existence and enjoyed the company of various ladies of the court. None of these possessed any independence and were constantly watched by numerous spies. Although their lives as the consort of king must have been reasonably luxurious, their repeated connivance in regicide indicates some dissatisfaction with their lives.

Neither was polygamy as a practice restricted to the royalty. Prosperous courtiers and tradesmen could all have and had more than one wife. But a certain amount had to be paid to the superceded wife and to the exchequer. Polyandry, on the other hand, was obliterated at least in the mainstreams of the Brahmanical culture. Though the Varna distinctions became increasingly ossified, we find that the Arthashastra does not always reflect suspicion and tyranny that the tenets of the later, Manusmriti advocated. All the eight types of marriages were approved although divorce was possible only in the four inferior

(Rakshasa, Gandharva, Paishachya and Asura) types.¹⁰ The remarriage of widows was possible as long as unaccompanied by any economic claims on the deceased husband's property. Remarriage was also permitted if the husband was absent for a period of time that varied according to the caste of the woman. If the husband had renounced the world however, remarriage could take place only with his brother or a near relative.

Child marriages were also unknown. The age of consent for both boys and girls being twelve years. The wife could also rightfully abandon her husband if either he was of questionable character; or is long gone abroad; or has turned traitor to his king; or is likely to endanger her life; or had fallen from his caste; or had lost his virility. Such benevolence for women on the part of the state however was not exceptionless-the right of physical correction of their wives was conceded to men. 'Refractory' women could be brought to serve their marital duties by administering three strikes with a bamboo bark, rope or palm of the hand on her posterior; anything more than that fell under the law of assault and was punishable. Women who had attained a divorce could, like the widows could remarry but again did not have any rights on the property of their previous husbands.

¹⁰ *Grihya Sutras* gave a definite classification of different forms of marriage prevalent among the Aryans. These eight forms of marriages were : (i) Brahma (ii) Daiva (iii) Prajapatya (iv) Arsha (v) Gandharva (vi) Asura (vii) Paishacha (viii) Rakshasa. Only the first four were considered righteous. The other forms were reckoned blameable and unworthy of the pious.

The laws concerning property clearly favour the men. Daughters could inherit family property only in the lack of any direct male descendants and the dower or any property that the wife brought with her at the time of marriage remained with the husband's family in case she remarried.

V. **The Bhuddhist Period:**

Brahmanical Hinduism was well established in northern India at the time Buddhism arose 'to protest against the steadily regidifying varna stratification'. The religion of Hindus at that point in time had ossified around performance of elaborate rites and fantastic ritual with numerous taboos, practice of sacrifice achievable only through mediation by the Brahmin-the fountainhead of all esoteric Vedic knowledge. Brahmanical intervention which began even before the birth of a person and which continued much after his death was the only means of attaining salvation-the final goal to be achieved by every devout Hindu through both Dharma and Karma. For all practical purposes however, devoutness was measured in terms of being successful in finding adequate cash needed to pay the priest.

Disillusioned with such an oppressive and mercenary religion, sprang forth a protest, understandably from the Kshtriyas 'who had held out longest against Brahmanical impositions', aiming to throw the priestly rule and to escape from the 'maze of dead and meaningless formalism into a life of direct and independent thought.'

Inevitably, then, reform of religion, which was the main instrument of women's

subjection, meant amelioration in the conditions of the lot of women even though Buddhism was not directly addressed to such concerns. Buddhism admitted the women's claim to religious freedom as Hinduism did, by laying the portals of the sacred open to all human beings without distinction of caste, class or, most importantly, gender. Buddhism, in its essence "a religion of self culture and restraint" thus led to legitimizing the women's quest for *Nirvana*. By creating a *Bhikshunisangha*¹¹ or the order of nuns, Buddhism opened the avenues of culture and social service for women, providing them with ample opportunities of public life. However, an important fact to be noted here is that women could enjoy more freedom only after renouncing their lay lives and adopting an ascetic one. The demands and drudgery of domestic and married life remained almost completely untouched, unchanged. The freedom to renounce the world though cannot be underestimated since many took up this option and rejoiced in the liberty it entailed. Sumangla's song in one of the *theris*¹²,

¹¹ It was only after six years of establishment of the Buddhist order were women admitted to it. Infact Buddha was not prepared to found an order for nuns. When Mahaprajapati, Buddha's mother, begged to be admitted to the *Sangha* he refused. It was only at the insistence of Ananda - Buddha's favourite disciple - who, moved by Mahaprajapati's conditions and her determination, questioned his master's wisdom of denying the highest benefit of religion to the one who had suckled him; that, after declaring that women were capable of attaining Nirvana. Being defeated at an argument Buddha grudgingly conceded, though not before he professed that "pure religion would have lasted long, the good law would have stood a 1000 years. But since women have received the permission (to enter religious precincts) it will now stand fast only for 500 years".

See P. Thomas, Indian Women through the Ages, Asia Publishing House, Bombay., 1964, pp. 82-88.

¹² Buddhist Theris or Lady elders compiled religious songs. A collection known as Theri Gatha forms part of the buddhist Cannon and consists of composition by as many as 73 nuns. Theris came from all walks of life and it is refreshing to read their world view, since most Hindu sacred literature is the work of men reflecting their prejudices about the women.

celebrates this new found freedom thus:

"O woman! Well set free! How free am I
How thoroughly free from kitchen drudgery
stained and squalid among my cooking pots
My brutal husband ranked even less
than the sunshades he sits and weaves always
purged now from my former lust and hate
I dwell musing at ease beneath the shade
Of spreading boughs - O, but it is all well with me."
(Emphasis added.)

An alternative to a married life of drudgery and squalor was well appreciated by women and many became nuns without entering matrimony though many more joined the sangha after being disillusioned by the marital 'bliss'.

New opportunities of education opened up for Buddhist women and many a learned bikhunis became teachers to others in turn. Thirteen such women are mentioned by Buddha himself in the commentary called '*Manorathapurani*', the most distinguished among them being Dhammnadina who attained such spiritual wisdom that her instruction was sought by even her husband.

The freedom accorded to Buddhist women increased greatly and their status was enhanced considerably, especially in comparison to their Hindu and lay counterparts. However reflecting a patriarchal conception of society, men were still far more superior. It is deemed commentable that a monk of three years standing was considered more venerate than a nun of thirty years standing, and expected obeisance from her.

Though women were allowed to choose between matrimony and nunnery, they were not allowed to choose their mates and Buddha's advice to the young girls in '*Angulāra Nikāya*' begins thus: "To whatever husbands your parents should give you in marriage....". The advice carries in to instruct girls on how to become ideal wives for their men and says- "For them you will rise up early, be the last to retire, be willing workers, order all things sweetly and speak affectionately. Train yourself thus girls..."¹³

Nonetheless, widows were not disallowed remarriage, and divorce with mutual consent was possible, marriage being considered contractual as opposed to the sacramental notion of marriage in 'pativrāṭism'. It was only natural then that child marriage and sati compulsions did not have any place in the Buddhist scheme. Buddha's own marriage had been swayamvara. Also understandably, Buddhism did not have a moralizing attitude towards courtesans and the concept of 'fallen woman' was alien to it. Courtesans were prominent, often very wealthy, citizens who were lured to the city to enhance its prestige by the city chiefs. In fact, Buddha declined the invitation from the chieftains of Vaisali to accept the hospitality of Ambapali. Anyone at all, he maintained, could attain perfection through the right path. Attainment of grace was only a question of progressing from the lower stages to the higher one. None could be blamed if they were at the lower level of development and understanding. What was important was the fact that they had taken the first step in the right direction.

¹³ P. Thomas, *Indian Women through the Ages*, Asia Publishign House, Bombay, 1964, p.88.

Buddhism then has not completely unmixed reactions towards women. It is indeed true that new religion arise out of dissatisfaction at the flaws in the existing ones but what are perceived as the important failures of the old order might not vary from age to age and, from culture to culture. Hinduism was, in that epoch, an exclusive religion in that it did not treat all humans as equal and as having the same intellectual, social, legal and religious status. The varna system that had begun as a flexible classification of people according to their occupation, and was very open to shifts in and out of categories as the offsprings of a person belonging to a certain category chose another profession, developed into a rigid hierarchy that firstly considered some 'castes' as almost divine and some as almost beastlike and secondly, did not allow any shifts in the successive generations i.e., was binding and restrictive. Buddhism seems more to react to this aspect of Hinduism rather than to its patriarchal assumptions inherent in the ritualistic Hinduism of the day. Thus we find that equality amongst the genders is lesser of Buddhism's concerns, it is rather the extension of its general egalitarian motivations. As a result, most of the patriarchal notions of Hinduism against women are retained in Buddhism also and, women are often spoken of disparagingly even in Buddhist texts; generally considered untrustworthy and threatening. It is only as *mothers* that women have a place of special regard.

VI. Women and Islam: The Muslim Invasions and the Hindu Women.

In the Eleventh century AD, began the Muslim invasion of India. These invasions brought Islam to the shores of the Hindu nation. Out of all the great world religions, Islam is the most recent. It is based on the teachings of the prophet Muhammad who received the

word of God through the angel Gabriel. According to the teachings of Islam, there is only one God *Al-lah* and all other deities are false and illusory and so are the religions that worship these false gods. Those who were the 'Believers' of the divine word had to live according to its laws and were enjoined to spread the word to the Kafirs (or the non-believers) who lived in ignorance of the 'True God' and his laws. The spread and gradual acceptance of the tenets of Islam served to unite the numerous small tribes in Arabia that had been long since hostile to each other. It was a young and powerful religion and had a tremendous binding force that led it's followers to risk even death in order to spread it's ideals to alien cultures and faraway lands. The believers waged religious wars with immense ferocity and determination - it was accepted that a soldier that died fighting a *jihad* would attain paradise. With such wars not only the spread of Islam was achieved, but extensive territory was also annexed and what had been a cluster of ragged people trying their best to survive in the cruel desert, grew into a prosperous and vast empire.

India had had trade links with Arabia since time immemorial - archaeological discoveries at the Indus Valley sites indicate the presence of docks and quays at Lothal that suggests trade with the coeval Mesopotamian civilization in the Middle- East. Trade between the two regions again resumed in the Gupta period. Since then India (Hind) had been the fabled land of riches. The expanding Muslim empire soon reached the area around Afghanistan and it now seemed inevitable that the Muslim raiders would soon focus on India as a target of their attacks. These attacks initially took the form of occasional forays into the Indian territory in order to plunder-there was, at this point absolutely no desire on the

part of the invaders to settle in or to govern, only to carry back loot that would replenish the exchequer of an empire constantly at war. This however changed soon enough and the invading Muslims fought wars for territory and established their political sovereignty in kingdoms that they defeated. Here begins the close interaction between the two religions and cultures that would have a profound impact on every aspect of life in that period.

The advent of the Muslims is of special significance in the context of the life of the Hindu women. Islam is egalitarian in nature and does not have a class or caste hierarchy even remotely resembling the varna system. However, as in the case of all peoples engaged in continuous battles, the mortality rate of men was exceptionally high, a single man could have four wives at a time, possibly a lot more if he chose to divorce the earlier ones. This was a measure of keeping the population constant and of providing women the protection of a husband in very insecure times. This protection often translated in conservatism and most women were not free to go about as they pleased, in any case not without covering themselves with veils first.

Islam, then posed danger to the Hindu society and Hindu identity, both of which relied on the repression and control of the Hindu women sexuality on at least two accounts. On the one hand the egalitarian promise of Islam to women and lower caste and on the other the onslaught of Muslim power, short of and hungry for women was a threat of the patriarchy guarded chastity of the Hindu women.

There are two alternatives available to any religion to counteract the allure or the threat of another one. One is by liberalizing one's own religion fearless of the competitive threat and the second is to shut off these threats completely. The first is the method of the democrat the second that of the dictator. The patriarchal hindu society jealous of their own identity put their women under stricter vigilance confining them within four walls and behind the ubiquitous, Purdah which only exacerbated the plight of the Hindu female. Sen argues 'that the law of Koran gave an unusual degree of property, protection and social privilege to Mohemmedan women--widow remarriage, divorce, remarriage of divorcees were common; if they were accepted even in a modified form, they could work for the emancipation of Hindu women. But Hindu men adopted the worst and rejected the best among the customs affecting women' ... 'This was to a large extent convertible and inherent in the tendencies already existing in Hindu society, where Hindu men and priests had cojointly laid down and brought about the universal acceptance of among high castes, the law that marriage for women was an indissoluble sacrament, while reserving for themselves the right to marry even before the death of the first wife'.¹⁴ What however is most remarkable all through, is the internalization of these Patriarchal valued by women themselves; who instead of resenting the increased seclusion, came to regard it with jealous pride. It became an envied boast of a Hindu woman that 'not even the eye of the sun had beheld her face'. Hindu women on the contorary, were quite content to shut away in crowded, airless and isolated rooms at the back of the home, screened in by shutters and

¹⁴ S. Das, Purdah: The Status of Indian Women, Ess.Ess. Publications, New Delhi 1979. pp. 63-65. (First Published 1929).

trellised devices through which they could obtain only faint glimpses of the life outside.¹⁵

VII. Women and the Bhakti Movement.

To attain *moksha* is the ultimate aim of a devout Hindu. The '*Bhagwat Geeta*' preaches that there are three different ways to attain this enviable state - that *Karma marga*, the *Jnaana marga* and the *Bhakti marga*. Around the 10th century there arose in the southern part of India an indigenous protest movement to oppose the excessive ritualization of the religious practices which had been brought about by the rigid brahmanical model that emphasized rigid taboos, elaborate ceremonies mediated by the priest as a way to reach God or Moksha. This new movement advocated the *Bhakti marga* as the simplest and the most straight forward route to communion with the godhead.

Bhakti which came to mean "the intense personal love, devotion and dedication to god" and Bhasavershvara - a Vaira saivaism saint-likened the relationship between the God and his bhakta to that between a husband and a wife. He questioned the legitimacy of third person in the interaction between a man and wife.¹⁶ The brahmin who had become self appointed deputy in the matters of the sacred was reduced by the bhakti saints as an unwanted third between the bhakta and bhagwan.

¹⁵ Ibid. p. 66.

¹⁶ Leela Mullatti, The Bhakti Movement and the Status of Women, Abhinav, Delhi, 1989, p. 4.

The bhakti sects while adhering to the basic tenets of Hinduism departed radically regarding some feature of the religion. Mainly they tried to do away with the priestly intervention and the manifold taboos, pollution and rituals which the Hindu religion was cluttered with by them. This attitude of the Bhakti movement towards religion in general also translated itself in a profound effect on the status and condition of women.

Many anthropologists consider concepts of female susceptibility to pollution to be central to the structure of Hindu society and women's low status within it, sanctioned as it is by religion. Thus Leela Mullatti says that the idea which is fundamental tool in the subjection of women and the renouncing of which led inevitably to the improvement in the position of women in the bhakti period was that of purity and pollution. A notable reform introduced by the Virasaivism sect is the total rejection of the practice of '*Panchasutakas*' (the five pollution or taboos).¹⁷ All of which except caste and death pollution pertain to pollution experienced only by women. This according to Mullatti had helped women 'to transform and uplift their status greatly' since now they could participate freely in religion activities. Some women thus emerged as unquestionable Bhakti leaders. Thus we read about Akkamahadi - a Virasaivism lady of exceptional philosophical insight, and Bahinabai of Maharashtra and Meerabai of Rajasthan both of whom were renowned Bhakti saints commanding great following.

¹⁷ Ibid, p.9.

The use of Prakrit and an oral tradition also helped women, not learned in Sanskrit, emerge as religious leaders. Since religion is an all-pervading influence in the life of an Indian, and spiritual authority is the authority of the highest kind, women leadership in religion matters was highly meaningful. Women could now come out from the seclusion of the home and Purdah.

However, the impact of this movement on women's life though important, was neither widespread nor lasting due to various reasons. Chiefly because it was a spontaneous movement; and if this spontaneity added to its popularity and acceptance, it was also responsible for a lack of organization. The movement had no programme of social and economic re-organization of the Hindu society. On the other hand Hindu way of life and the Hindu philosophy of Karma Dharma and Moksha was all-pervading and the entire Hindu existence in all possible senses -social, economic, political cultural was systematically arranged around it. This protest, then, like all others before it was also engulfed by this all-encompassing weltanschauung and developed a caste character of its own.

VIII. Hindu Ideology and the Ideal Hindu Woman: Of a Wife, Mother and Motherhood in Hinduism.

"If a priest has to bless a woman he says 'Be Sita'. If he blesses a child he says 'Be Sita'. They are all children of Sita and are struggling to be Sita, the patient, the all-suffering, the ever faithful and the ever-pure wife. Through all (the) suffering the experiences there is not one harshword against Ram.... That is the Indian Ideal.... "

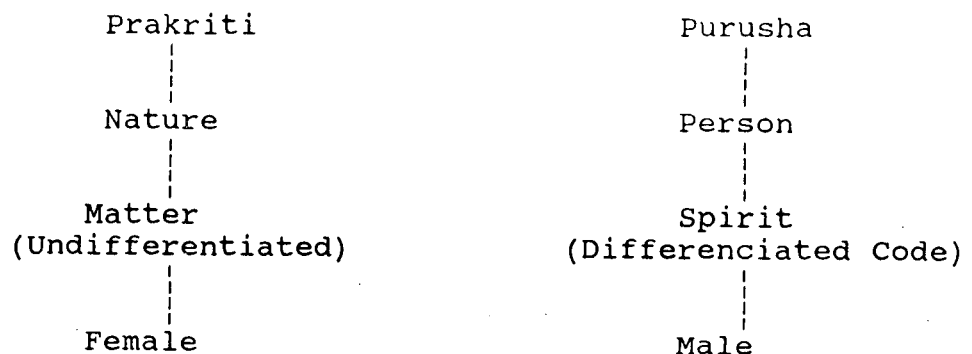
--Swami Vivekananda.

In discussing women in Hinduism, it is important to consider how the nature of

femaleness is portrayed in Hindu ideology. Beliefs about what a female, underlie both, the role models religious figures, present and advocate for women, and the place of women in Hindu religious practice. These beliefs as we shall see, also affect the potential for change in the roles of women in Hindu India.

The concept of the female in Hinduism presents an important duality: on the one hand, the woman is fertile, benevolent--the bestower, on the other hand, she is aggressive and malevolent--the destroyer. Two faces of femaleness which relate to this duality and possible provide the cultural logic for the same are - the female as *Skati*-the energizing, creative principle of the universe and *Prakriti*-nature, undifferentiated-Matter of the universe.¹⁸

The conception of the Universe in Hindu thought can be depicted diagrammatically thus:¹⁹



Shakti

UNIVERSE
UNION = BEING

¹⁸ Susan Wadley, 'Women and the Hindu Tradition' in Rehana Ghadially (ed.), Women in Indian Society: A Reader, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p. 25.

¹⁹ Ibid, p. 26.

In women, then, the two facets of femaleness unite. Thus, a woman represents both Nature/Prakriti and Power/Shakti. However, Nature + Power = Uncultured Power = Danger. This remains the equation and the essence of femaleness in the Hindu belief.

That women are inherently dangerous, untrustworthy, capricious, overtly sensuous and capable of leading men astray has been adequately evidenced in Kautilya, Manu and even buddhist thought. There is a supreme need to control this danger, the untethered sexuality of the female. "Good females are (those) controlled by males; that is, culture controls nature".²⁰

It is only under control of the male that the 'natural' power to create is rendered positive and benevolent, capable of social good for in the Hindu cosmology, if a female controls her own sexuality she is changeable; She represents both death and fertility; she is both malevolent and benevolent. Only in *transferring* this control to a man can she be portrayed as consistently benevolent. Thus, the over arching paradigm for women in Hindu tradition is that of a good *wife*, Sita or Savitri- the eternal *Pativrata* - who saves her husband even from death, follows him anywhere and proves her virtue, remains under his control and gives him power. She, though constantly under the control of men does not strive to break these bonds. Her salvation and happiness revolve around her virtue and chastity and she finds salvation in motherhood.

²⁰ Ibid, p. 27.

Motherhood within matrimony, especially motherhood conferring upon the patriarch a male heir, remains for the ideal wife 'both a certification and a redemption'.²¹ Infact it is this centrality of motherhood in the Hindu culture that produces, certain kinds of *sons* and *men*, and a dynamic that keeps women in this constricting place. Motherhood becomes both, the means and the metaphor for women subjection.

In direct contrast to Hindu woman - both wife and mother - is the image of the female as *the Mother*. This mother is the mother Goddess, the cosmic mother. This mother image though venerated is *not* the ideal of Hindu womanhood for, although she gives, *she must also be obeyed*; although she loves, *she may also reject*. As a wife she is completely subordinated but as mother she is atleast *potentially dangerous* - a danger that is accepted because she (as a mother) is necessary. Interestingly, motherhood is *not* the defining characteristic of the cosmic *mother*. Infact Goddesses who are wives (and may therefore be mothers) are never included in the '*Mother*' category and never addressed so.

This alternate paradigm, however, may represent two, diagrammatically opposite things at the same time. The mother image may represent a potential for change, so that feminine authority may be much readily acceptable (as faces of Kali or Durga). On the other hand it might (also) render cases of exeptional female authority exactly that - exceptions, so that the continuum of ideal womanhood remains unbroken. We shall see how this paradigm has worked for, or against, the Indian woman in the subsequent chapters.

²¹ Sudhir Kakar, 'Feminine Identity in India', in Rehana Ghadially, Women in Indian Society: A Reader, Sage Publications, New Delhi, 1988, p. 44.

CHAPTER II.

COLONIALISM, ENCOUNTER OF CULTURES AND DEBATES ON WOMEN.

".... colonialism, colonizes minds in addition to bodies and it releases forces within the colonized societies to alter their cultural priorities once for all. In this process, it helps generalize the concept of the modern West from a geographical and temporal entity to a psychological category. The West is now everywhere; within the West and outside; in structures and in minds.

--Ashis Nandy.

Introduction:

The condition of the Hindu woman at the beginning of the colonial rule was that of absolute degradation. Her birth was lamented and all kind of possible ritual precautions were taken to prevent it. During childhood, which was a relatively better period of her life, she was kept denied of any education, and was instructed only in the practical matters of keeping the house, bearing and rearing children and making her husband and in-laws happy. She was given away in marriage at puberty if not before since child marriages were very common at the time. In her in-laws home she was to constantly defer to the wished of her inlaws and husband and bear him sons.

Marriage and Motherhood had generally become the *raison d'etre* of her existence; to bear sons who as we have seen had assumed central importance to the parents' and ancestors' happiness in life after death was the goal equalled in importance by none other . This one development can be perhaps categorized as the most instrumental in the downfall of women from her earlier vedic glory. The authentication of, the legitimacy of the son, required that the woman's chastity and sexuality be constantly guarded. The conception of woman's treacherous and overtly sexual nature

made her an object of constant suspicion, the corrective for which was total seclusion within the private sphere coupled with the guarding shield of the Purdah. Motherhood also was acceptable only within the lawful precincts of 'holy' matrimony and only to strengthen and redeem the patriarchal society. Thus, a woman was fulfilled in motherhood and motherhood was fulfilled in the birth of the son. Marriage was essential, since untamed female sexuality was not to be trusted. Though all precautions were taken to control this sexuality, by marrying off a girl early and keeping her under constant rigid control; this control became problematic after the death of the husband. The remedy for which was found in the practice of 'Sati'. The fear of unattached sexuality was so great, and the concern with maintaining purity of lineage so strong, that widows were forced to self-immolation which even they probably found much more acceptable to the other alternative of ascetic and penitent widowhood.

A woman's life in pre-colonial India was reduced to that of an appendage whose existence was necessary only for production of offspring (son) and justifiable only through it. In this chapter we shall trace the developments that took place in the nineteenth century regarding the status and conditions of Indian women. The nineteenth century is considered the century in which the ideas of Enlightenment and the subsequent French Revolution had popularized the notion of liberty and equality. In Britain Mary Wollstonecraft had applied these ideas to women and questioned the legitimacy of the oppression of her sex by virtue of this biological difference.

We shall see how these ideas were at first, instrumental in fostering a questioning, modern, attitude towards the oppressive customs prevalent in India

especially, vis-a-vis women and how subsequently, led to a significant change in the circumstances of women. We shall also view the point made by recent historiography of women that even the early discourse on 'Women's question' was not a unadulterated product of modernity; that the colonists attitude towards native traditions and their pre-occupation with political astuteness in carrying out reform, set the tone of this discourse which was essentially colonial in nature; and that woman was not after all 'recast', at least not a new.

I. **Colonialism and the Modern Worldview:**

"..... it has become obvious that the drive for mastery over men is not merely a by-product of a faulty political economy but also of a worldview which believes in absolute superiority of human over the nonhuman and the subhuman, the masculine over the feminine, the adult over the child, the historical over the ahistorical and the modern (or progressive?) over the traditional (or the savage?)"

Colonialism brought 'modernity' to the Indian shores and before discussing how 'modern' this modernity was and what effect it has on the Indian psyche and the Indian society, it would be worthwhile to understand what the Modern worldview was.

In a sentence, it was a total break with the past which entailed a massive upheaval in all the spheres of human existence - the political, the economic, the social and the cultural speaking of the Modern age in Europe Lord Acton said "Unheralded, it founded a new order of things, under a law of innovation, sapping the ancient reign of continuity. In those days Columbus subverted the notions of the world, and reversed the conditions of production, wealth and power; in those days Machiavelli released the government from the restraint of law; Erasmus diverted the current of ancient learning

from profane into Christian channels; Luther broke the chain of authority and tradition at the strongest link; and Copernicus erected an invincible power that set forever the mark of progress upon the time that was to come..... It was the awakening of new life; the world revolved in a different orbit, determined by influences unknown before"¹

The roots of the distinctively 'modern' form of thought about society are evident as early as the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, especially in the works of Bacon, Locke and Hobbes. These '*Philosophes*' discarded aesthetic reverence of the ancients towards the 'cosmos'; who had a organismic view of the world; they, donning the analytic garb, now looked at the world or an individual not as a work of art or even as a complete whole but as a clockwork of sorts to be taken apart in order to be understood. They did not seek the aesthetic or the beautiful but only the naked truth².

The hallmark of modern thought was its relentless search for 'Truth' which did not consider anything beyond limit; anything too sacred to be questioned or analysed. Moreover the ultimate objective of, and the way to, this 'Truth' was largely defined in Baconian terms of 'unbiased and methodical investigation of nature in order to mastery over nature'³. This was the key to power; for knowledge was power and nature (was

¹ Anthony Giddens, Capitalism and Modern Social Theory - An Analysis of Writings of Marx, Durkhiem and Max Weber, Cambridge University Press, 1971, p.1

² See Robert Falckenberg, History of Modern Philosophy Khosla Publishing House, Delhi. p. 8.

³ Ibid. p.66.

to be) conquered by obedience. '*Sapare aude*' - dare to know⁴ sums up the essential secular, intellectual nature of the Enlightenment thought which drew sustenance from the Renaissance ideas and underlay the modern outlook. It signified the replacement of established forms of knowledge dependent on religious authority with rational-quintessentially, scientific knowledge.

Thus Enlightenment and its project of Modernity were essentially a combination of a number of ideas bound together in a tight cluster which redefined the traditional basis of knowledge, created a new frame of ideas about man (to some extent, about woman), society and nature which challenged the existing conceptions rooted in a traditional world view, dominated by Christianity and brought about profound changes in the technical, economic, political, social and cultural spheres in the late eighteenth century Europe especially after the French Revolution which firmly established the ideals of Equality, Liberty and Humanity.

These were the ideas then, which formed the core of feminist challenge to the traditional conservatism in Europe and which also played a central part in the 'Bengal Renaissance' imported, as they were to India along with Colonialism, disseminated widely through the English education, the printing press and the railways. The social reform movement that started in Bengal in the first quarter of the nineteenth century is mainly considered to be in response to these same ideas; which had brought about the Revolution in France. The whole notion of the 'nation' which formed the basis of the

⁴ See Stuart Hall, and Brian Gieben, (ed.) Formations of Modernity, Polity Press, Cambridge, 1992. pp. 1-35.

subsequent Nationalism and the Nationalist movement was a modern concern, brought along by the colonizers.

More importantly however the indigeneous social reform movement was *not* a mass scale adoption of these ideas without questioning. 'It is true that English textbooks, literature and in some cases visit abroad brought awareness of a different world and Mill's '*Subjection of Women*' found many eager leaders in Bengal, but here as in other things what was important was, the selection process, at work even among the most west-ward-looking of the colonial intelligencia'⁵. Concern with the problems of women formed after all only a minor element in the thought currents and the activity of the nineteenth century Europe, with its essentially male dominated movements of Nationalism, Liberal reform, democracy and Socialism. Christian missionary propaganda concentrated its fire equally on 'polytheism', 'idolatory' and caste. 'Far from blindly imitating the West the intelligencia in Bengal in the early and mid-nineteenth century in many respects presented an interesting contrast.... From Rammohan till atleast 1870's the fundamental acceptance of foreign political and economic domination over India, tempered by occasional pleas for mildly liberal administrative reform which *nevertheless* remained a minor concern, had compared to central thrust for social and religious change⁶', and mostly revolving around the position and condition of women in the Indian society. Even '*Stri Swadhinta*' in the nineteenth century was usually combined with the a tremendous emphasis on puritanical norms and restraint especially

⁵ See Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial India, Papyrus, Calcutta, 1985. p. 74.

⁶ Ibid. p. 73.

during the the later phase of the reform movement, as we shall see during the course of the chapter. Women emancipation in the Indian context became an essential but nevertheless only a subtext of the concerns of nationalism and independence.

II. Raja Rammohan Roy and Debates on Sati:

" Raja Rammohan Roy's break with the tradition was 'deeply contradictory', accomodating within the same corpus of thinking, numerous compromises with orthodox, Hindu elitist and, by his own enlightened standards, clearly irrational ways of thought -- and in any case it was a break only on 'the intellectual plane' and not on the level of basic social transformation".

-- Partha Chatterjee.

Raja Ram Mohan Roy's tenacious struggle for the abolition of the practice of Sati, marks the beginning of the movement for reform on behalf of the women. Even though the British along with the U.S missionaries remained the first to draw wide attention to the custom of what they called 'Suttee' citing it as an example of Hindu barbarism, it remained for Raja Rammohan Roy to channel this opinion in a way that culminated in the passing of the Sati Abolition Act of 1829.

Though belonging to the Vaishnava Kulin Brahman family and an orthodox background the Raja did not subscribe to orthodoxy. A learned man well versed in several of the world religions, he sought to achieve a synthesis of the great traditions of

Hinduism, Islam and Christianity⁷. Born towards the end of eighteenth century, 100 miles from Calcutta, in the family of urban bureaucrats and equipped with a modern English education Roy easily belonged to the class of intelligentsia who were the major receptors of the Enlightenment ideas of Rationalism and Liberalism and the harbingers of social change⁸. Endorsing this view Heismath writes about Roy: 'Another cornerstone of the Liberal thought was Humanism ignited by man's spiritual perceptions and fuelled by reasoned awareness of social utility. Roy's belief in individual worth was doubtless kindled by his religious studies which included Islam and Christianity. He modernized the universal human claim to dignity and happiness. Roy's castigation of inhuman treatment of women and lower castes and his plea for higher ethical standards among Hindoos formed the basic text of reformers programme in Modern era⁹'. So that 'Social reform in Modern India has meant the transformation of individual life in the direction of rational and human standards of belief and behaviour, as opposed to community attachment to customs and rules whose moral content derived from transcendental sanction'.

Whereas Roy's membership of the 'bourgeois society'¹⁰, that emerged under

⁷ Charles H. Heimsath, 'Rammohan Roy and Social Reform' in V.C. Joshi (ed.), Rammohan Roy and the Process of Modernization in India, Vikas, Delhi, 1975. p. 151.

⁸ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Indian Women's Battle for Freedom, Abhinav, Delhi, 1983, pp. 38-43.

⁹ Charles H. Heimasath, 'Rammohan Roy and Social Reform' in V.C. Joshi (ed.), Rammohan Roy and Process of Modernization in India, op.cit. p. 153.

¹⁰ Radha Kumar, The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Movement for Women's Rights and Femininism in India 1800-1990, Kali for Women, New Delhi,

Western domination and sought to purge itself free from the elements of what it considered elements of 'pre-modern', 'primitive' identity,¹¹ is undeniable, another reason behind his attempts to reformulate Hinduism, that he had actually witnessed 'Sati', may also not be discounted. Writing in the second 'Conference Between the Advocate for and an Opponent to the Burning of Widows' Roy says: "so far have pandits been infatuated in attempting to give the appearance of propriety to improper actions, that they have even attempted to make people believe that a rope may remain unconsumed amidst a flaming fire and prevent the members of the body from being dispersed from the pile. Men of sense may now judge the truth of the reason to which you ascribe the practice of tying down the widow. All people in the world are not blind, and those who will go and behold the mode in which you tie down women to the pile will readily perceive the truth and falsehood....."¹².

The Sati he witnessed was probably that of his sister-in-law who despite Roys exhortations to the contrary mounted the pyre of his dead brother but was forcibly kept

1993. p.7.(Henceforth, The History of Doing)

¹¹ Caste, polytheism idolatory, animism, purdah, child marriage, sati, ect. were considered elements of a pre-modern, primitive identity which the newly emergent bourgeois or middle class wanted to reform, in keeping with the new definition of the self. The middle class emerged from a colonial economy and its new agrarian and industrial relations, accompanied by a vast and expanding administrative structure. As such was it was influenced by the modern colonial world view. Accordingly the campaigns for social reform were engaged in re-definition of the spheres of the public and private and the 'world' and the 'home'. Thus the social reform movement can be charectrized as playing an important role in the formation of a new set of patriarchal gender-based relations, essential in the constitution of the bourgeois society.

¹² J.C. Ghose (ed.) English Works of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Cosmo, Delhi, 1982. pp. 122-123.

there, as was the practice, with the help of bamboo poles when, she wanted to flee later. The regulation of 1813 had banned 'coerced' Satis while it allowed 'voluntary' Sati a similar attitude is witnessed in the 'Advocate for.....' when Roy marshalling *Shastric* evidence made a distinction between a voluntary and a forced Sati though maintaining that Sati while certainly not obligatory was the 'least virtuous act' a widow could perform, which had meaning only if it was voluntary¹³. Apparently he did not question the element of suicide that a voluntary Sati entailed, more in keeping with the Hindu tradition than the Western Liberal thought.

Moreover, arguing that women should not become Sati in order to acquire virtuous knowledge of which, maintained orthodox Hindu opinion, they were devoid of, he said that, they already possessed it (virtuous knowledge) because they were 'infinitely more self-sacrificing than men. Thus even Roy who is generally seen as categorically 'modernist' defined the Hindu woman as essentially and continuously self-sacrificing. This distinction between the 'Indian' and the 'Western' Woman was to later become a constant refrain in all subsequent movements and arguments on the nature and rights of women. So that if 'Sati was cited as exemplifying the primitive barbarism of the orient, it was also cited as exemplifying the wifely devotion and spiritual strength (including physical courage) of the Oriental Woman'¹⁴.

¹³ Ibid. p. 363.

¹⁴ Uma Chakravaty, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi? Orientalism, Nationalism and a Script for the Past' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, Kali for Women, Delhi, 1989, p.79.(Henceforth, 'Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?').

However in contrast to the view that colonization and the resultant encounter of the two disparate cultures was responsible for routing of the evil of Sati both directly through passing of legislation and indirectly through its influence on the intelligensia there has recently emerged a belief that both the practice of and the specific discourse of Sati was itself the outcome of colonialism.

Taking up the issue of wide spread practice of Sati first; recent historical research suggest that the nineteenth century Sati abolition movement might have created the myth of an existing practice where none existed.¹⁵ Another important study of Sati notes that the rite had been prevalent among upper caste Indians for atleast two thousand years without ever becoming standard practice. In fact the studies maintains that all the early law givers Manu and Yajnavalka had adjudicated a chaste life for widows Kautilya even allowed widow remarriage if only under special circumstances. The practice had however, gained wide currency in Medieval India but had subsequently gradually declined till the seventeenth century whence it was practiced only during wars to protect women and by the beginning of eighteenth century had become a rare occurrence.¹⁶

The only incidence of widespread practice of Sati is in the early decades of the nineteenth century Bengal where it had assumed 'epidemic' proportion and had suddenly

¹⁵ Radha Kumar, The History of Doing: Op.cit., p. 9.

¹⁶ Ashis Nandy, 'Sati: A Nineteenth Century Tale of Women, Violence and Protest' in At the Edge of Psychology, Oxford University Press, Delhi, p.3. (Henceforth, 'Sati'.)

come to acquire the popularity of a legitimate orgy.¹⁷ Significantly 57% of all Satis in the early nineteenth century were in Bengal concentrated mostly around Calcutta.¹⁸ Not at this point going into the debate about the accuracy of these figures that are believed to have accounted for more than one such incidence per day even after Bentinck had out-lawed it in the province, it needs to be pointed out that these figures did not make a distinction between suicide by widows sometimes *years after* the death of their husbands and Sati.¹⁹ (Evidence has been cited to prove that a lot of 'Satis' were actually not 'Saharmarana' but 'annoomarana' in most case several years after the husbands death by not-so-very-young-widows who were mostly in not very good circumstances). However, there is a firm belief that the widespread incidence of Sati was an 'assertive-defensive reaction' to colonial rule. In fact Hastings himself suggested a association between prevalence of Sati and the 'fanatic spirit roused by the divided state of feeling among the Hindus.'²⁰ Nandy writes 'I contend..... that the epidemic of Sati in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was mainly a product of colonial intrusion into Indian society; that the popularity of the rite and its abolition in response to a reform movement were two phases in the Indian society's attempt to cope with large scale environmental and cultural changesThe rite became popular in groups made psychologically marginal by their exposure to the Western impact. These

¹⁷ Ibid. p.4.

¹⁸ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Indian Women's Battle for Freedom, op.cit., p. 42.

¹⁹ Anand Yang, 'The Many Faces of Sati in the Early Nineteenth Century'; in Manushi, Nos. 42-43, 1987.

²⁰ Ashis Nandy, 'Sati', in At the Edge of Psychology, op.cit., p.7.

groups felt the pressure to demonstrate, to others as well as to themselves, their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture. To many sati became an important proof of conformity to older norms at a time when these norms had become shaky within'. Nevertheless he does not altogether discount the 'material' reasons behind the phenomenon. And, 'scarcity' created directly and indirectly by the British economic and political policies were almost as important as 'anomia'.

The discourse on Sati and the particular form it took, it is argued, was also a product of colonization and was colonial in nature.²¹ It was not a full fledgedly 'modern' concern with the barbarity/cruelty of the pre-modern people but only a partially modern discourse of colonial state which was concerned mainly with its own stability and perpetuation. It was not exhorted mainly by the 'desirability' of abolishing an 'inhuman' custom but, by political prudence in and 'feasibility' of doing so. Thus, while wanting to do away with the practice and fulfilling the white man's missionary duty, the British were *also* at pains to demonstrate that this change would be in keeping with the 'real' Hindu tradition which the Hindus themselves were unfamiliar with. Since their 'Shaster' was 'little read and less understood'. This led to the marginalization of the women's question in favour of a more important concern with 'authentic' tradition. The discourse on Sati assumed various facets about tradition, women and Indian society, whether the version was conservative or progressive, and these assumptions were essentially colonial assumptions. More importantly, these assumptions shaped the debate

²¹ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: Debates on Sati in Colonial India' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (ed.), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, op.cit., pp. 88-126. (Henceforth, 'Contentious Traditions').

in a way that, although the rhetoric remained that of barbarity against women, in actuality the issue was debated mainly in terms of religious texts. Thus given that the debate on Sati was premised in its scriptural and consequently, its 'traditional' and 'legal' status' it is little wonder that the widow herself (became) marginal to its central concerns.

The colonial discourse on Sati in India assumed three chief features²² -

- (i) The centrality of Brahmanic scriptures
- (ii) Unreflective indigenous obedience
- (iii) The religious nature of Sati-and was mainly prompted by the deliberation on whether it could be safely prohibited through legislation.

Political prudence dictated neutrality and non interference with the social and religious practices of indigenous people and though the British expressed sympathy for the sufferers, were reluctant to legislate. Official British opinion with some exception opposed legislation. It was generally assumed that public opinion must first develop before government could intervene.²³ This position however clashed with their self-defined role as the bringers of enlightenment. This problem was sought to be overcome through consultation with the pandits who were an authority on religious matters so that they could legislate without antagonizing their subjects and jeopardizing their prospects. The pundits were instructed to respond with 'a reply in conformity with the

²² Ibid. p. 115.

²³ Vijay Agnew, Elite Women in Indian Politics, Vikas, Delhi, 1979. p. 21.

scripture'.²⁴ This sort of loaded the die and at one stroke equated scriptures with both tradition and law. It is to be noted here that unlike Christianity and Islam, Hinduism does not have any such prescriptive texts regulating social behaviour but official institutionalization made these texts basis of personal law.²⁵ The official claims that Sati had scriptural basis made the abolition of Sati more difficult, with factions, both for and against Sati marshalling 'authentic' evidence accordingly.

That the 1813 regulation made a provision for 'coerced' and 'voluntary' Sati along with its stand of scriptural basis for the custom not only endorsed the act,²⁶ but also averred clearly the vacuity of the claim that abolitionists were mainly concerned about the barbarous and cruel nature of the custom. The only real concern of the official policy was the fear of political repercussion. Thus Calcutta gazette in 1827 described

²⁴ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions' in Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid, (eds.) Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, op.cit., p.9.

²⁵ Hinduism is a classical religion, with ancient and established textual and authoritative traditions. But it differs from Christianity, Judaism and Islam in that it lacks a *single* authoritative text: rather it has thousands, produced over a 3,000 year period. In general, the Vedas, written over a period of a thousand years, are the ultimate sources to which Hindus refer. However, most Hindus are themselves unfamiliar (sic) with the contents of the Vedas, and Hinduism as it is practiced today is more non-Vedic than Vedic. In addition, within a geographic space, Hinduism assumes varied forms and often appears more diversified than unified. Thus any particular practice or belief found among a group of Hindus may, in fact, be contradicted elsewhere or denied by Hindus of other groups or regions. Clearly not even the textually-based but varied 'great traditions' of Hinduism could be fully explored; further the 'little traditions' or local practices that are not based on written text, provide endless complications of interpretation and acknowledgement of belief and practice. British practice however did not take this into account.

²⁶ That presence of British officials to make sure that Sati in question for 'Legal' added to a lot of excitement and commotion and was generally taken to be an act of approval.

widows in willing immolations as "having abandoned with cheerfulness and her own free will, this perishable frame", or "having burnt herself with him in their presence with swelling heart and smiling countenance".²⁷ Moreover, it denied women any subjectivity. Eventhough 'will' was conceded to women, it was maintained that in actuality widows were incapable of consenting and must therefore be protected from pundits and crowds alike. In this, even women who resisted any attempt to save them from the gory fate were not taken into consideration. Thus, women were viewed as eternal victims whether pathetic or heroic. The discourse on Sati was modern only in so far as it was concerned with individual will.

Even Raja Rammohan Roy's modernity is 'deeply contradictory' and as such reflects the objective conditions of colonial subjugation which produced not a 'full-blooded bourgeois modernity' but 'only a distorted caricature'.²⁸ It is argued that the colonial impact did not lead to Bengal Renaissance as is generally believed but to 'retreat and decline'. Ram Mohan's Tufahtul Muwahiddin which is developed strictly in terms of reason and comes "perilously close to the vanishing point of religion' was written before he came in contact with the occidental ideas through his service in East India Company, under John Digby. However sati was argued about in primarily if not totally religious terms and in a framework determined by the colonial discourse. Thus in marshalling evidence from Manusmriti and the Vedas not only did Rammohan give other

²⁷ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (eds.) Recasting Women : Essays in Colonial History, op.cit., p. 94.

²⁸ Sumit Sarkar in Lala Mani, 'Contentious Traditions', in Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, op.cit., p. 89.

pernicious dictats therein unqualified legitimacy, he also propagated ascetic Widowhood as an *inevitable* alternative without questioning *its* premises. Why ascetic widowhood? Why widowhood at all? Significantly this emphasis on ascetic widowhood posed many problem for Vidyasagar when he advocated widow remarriage later, as we shall see. Though not belittling the Father of Modern India's contribution to the emancipation of women it needs to be mentioned that the matrix of the above discourse did not break earlier notions about the woman and womanhood. The reconstitution of tradition and close recognition of women with it led to a debate where the women question was atleast, somewhat side tracked. 'Infact *this* remained a major ideological anamoly in all the nineteenth century attempts to modernize religion and social practice - a spurious concialiation of Indian idealism and imported liberal sanction - which led to a major 'backlash' after the 1880's in the form of movements to revive tradition, movements that were openly hostile to earlier decades of reason and enlightenment'.²⁹ And *it* possibly also is the reason behind, the 'Fundamentalists' recent, co-optation of the liberal discourses on secularism, freedom and rights. The social reform movement instead of breaking ne nexus between community/tradition/religion and gender sought in a 'peculiarly' modern fashion to redefine gender by redefining tradition while leaving the subversive connection between them untouched. This remained zietgist of the social reform movement throughout the nineteenth century.

III. Post Ram Mohan Era Widow Remarriage and Women's Education:

"She must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated "
 -- Koylashchandra Bose.

²⁹ Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p. 25.

Sati was outlawed in Bengal in 1818 and from all over India in 1829, when the Governor of Bengal, William Bentinck, assumed Governor-Generalship. This ban on Sati was comprehensive³⁰, not making any provision even for a 'voluntary' Sati and came into being after Mrityungaya Vidyalamkara³¹, the chief Pundit of the Supreme Court, declared unambiguously in his Vyavastha³² that Sati had no *shastric* sanction. This outlawing of Sati especially in keeping with the 'Shaster' and since it led to a simultaneous advocacy of ascetic widowhood did not come as a great relief to the Indian woman as the life of a widow was indeed a hard life. It was the harshness of a widow's life that was, probably, behind many a suicide or 'annoomarana' that many widows committed, sometimes, more than a decade after their husbands death. These suicides also probably inflated, the statistics on Sati, which did not make a distinction between 'sahamarana' and 'annoomarana', as mentioned earlier. That 'this could have been because their lives had become intolerable rather than *Sat* having entered them is quite possible'.³³

³⁰ The outlawing of the practice of Sati was absolute; the 'right' to voluntary Sati was not conceded. However the 1813 regulation before it and the later regulation, because of the orthodox lobby pressure allowed voluntary Sati.

³¹ Vidyalamkara later became a pro-Sati advocate.

³² Vyavasthas were the written responses of pundits to questions put to them by colonial officials on various aspects of Sati. Since the arguments of officials in favour of abolition were developed within the ambit of religion it became necessary to systematically debate the pros and cons as considerations of brahmanic doctrines. In employing the scriptures to support their views the officials were dependent on these 'Vyavasthas' of the court pundits whose exegesis of the texts made them accessible to the colonial officials.

³³ See Anand Yang, 'The many faces of Sati in Early Nineteenth Century', in Manushi Nos. 42-43, 1987.

Yes, the life of the widow *was* harsh. She was generally held responsible for her husband's death and for the rest of her life was to atone for that 'Sin'. Deemed an unfortunate and inauspicious woman she ended up a household drudge, if not altogether ousted to seek livelihood in prostitution.³⁴ That this plight in no small part helped by British policies,³⁵ was widespread indeed is evidenced in the census report of 1881 which puts the number of widows at 22,657,429 in a total population of 140,196,135³⁶ which calculates to about a 30% of all women and, would naturally be much higher as a percentage of married women. 10,000 widows were below the age of four as 90% of the widows were prostitutes many of them Brahmins.³⁷

Writing about Subalakshmi Subramaniam, a child widow and (later) a woman reformer from the south, Monica Felton in '*A Child Widow's Story*' says: 'A high caste widow was denied the simplest pleasures of life..... allowed to eat only once a day and never anything but the plainest food.... her hair was shorn and she was to wear a simple coarse cotton garment.....She could seldom go out of the house except occasionally to visit a temple The Sight of the widow was inauspicious and unlucky..... therefore

³⁴ This has been sometimes cited as the reason Vidyasagar took up this cause. Majority of women prostitutes were from the Kulin Brahmin Caste. Vidyasagar himself a Brahmin it is stated, could not bear the degradation of these high caste widows.

³⁵ In conceding hegemony to the 'Brahmanic model' and declaring widow remarriage illegal colonial rule in fact made it impossible, even among caste and tribes who earlier on practised such remarriages. Moreover widow's rights were curtailed because of widespread 'scarcity' and 'anomia' in Bengal. Permanent settlement added further to the widow's misery.

³⁶ Vijay Angew, Elite Women in Indian Politics, op.cit., pp. 24-25.

³⁷ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, Indian Women's Battle for Freedom, op.cit., p. 53.

she could never attend a wedding or any festivity. It was a widows duty to keep out of peoples way'³⁸. Hence abolition of Sati made little sense if widow remarriage was not advocated simultaneously to ameliorate the condition of women. However the fact that women could not lead a fruitful life except when accompanied by a man was an inherent assumption in this view. The ascetism in widowhood was not questioned simultaneously which was seen as a part and parcel of this human condition to be dispelled only by the means of nuptials. This in my view denied any agency to women who wished to remain widows like Pandita Ramabai, who even after her conversion to Christianity and despite her disregard for orthodox Hinduism chose to remain a widow. Or Subalakshmi Subramanian who despite her involvement with widow's education and upliftment did not remarry herself.

Anyhow, the question of widow remarriage remained a polemical one in Bengal, especially among its large brahmin population. The young intelligensia there organized small societies such as the Bethune society, the Tattwabodhini sabha to discuss social reform, particularly the right of widows to remarry. The Derozians also agitated for reform in an through English periodicals. Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar provided leadership and direction to the debate and discussion taking place on the issue throughout Calcutta. In the year 1855 he launched a campaign against the ban of remarriage of widows. Since the precedent of identifying scriptures with tradition had already been set, Vidyasagar also tried to evince *shastric* sanction for remarriage of widows based on the

³⁸ Vijay Agnew, Elite Women in Indian Politics, op.cit., p. 26.

bengali interpretation of a *Sloka* in the *Parsar Samhita*.³⁹ Needless to say, it proved quite difficult in the face of Rammohan's assertion, championing ascetic widowhood to oppose Sati, drawing on the same sources.

Vidyasagar, however, debated the issue in Sanskrit with the pandits and compiling a petition of 987 signatures of pious and orthodox Hindus on October 4, 1855 requested legislation in favour of widow remarriage. Similar petitions numbering 23 with 5,191 signatures led to the passing of Widow Remarriage Act of 1956.

The act remained a dead letter, more-or-less, in keeping with its prophesied fate. One of the petitions against the remarriage of widows had pointed out that legislative intervention has never yet been able to effect a change in public opinion, while the more such interference is exercised the more it assumes an objectionable character.⁴⁰ The *lag* in social consciousness persisted and by the 1890's, some forty odd years since the

³⁹ Parsar Samhita is one of the ancient Hindu Smritis. Vidyasagar published his famous tract on Widow remarriage based on the interpretation of a popular *Sloka* from the Samhita which according to him read thus '*On receiving no tidings of a husband, on his demise, on his turning as ascetic, on his being found impotent, or on his degradation--under any of these calamities it is canonical for women to take another husband*'.

Vidyasagar's interpretation gave widows three choice: Sati, Brahmacharya and Remarriage. While the practice of Sati was illegal under existing laws, Brahmacharya was impossible, though commendable, in this Kaliyuga. Thus remarriage was a only legitamate option that he requested should be allowed, so that, 'depravation of morals' of these widows can be avoided. Moreover, he pointed out that it was only because of the comprehensive ban on such remarriage by British law courts, that established the hegemony of the 'Great Traditions' vis-a-vis more popular and diverse 'little traditions', that remarriage had become problematic.

⁴⁰ Subal Chandra Mitra, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar*, New Bengal Press, Calcutta, 1902, pp. 282-289.

act had been passed, only about 500 such marriages had taken place, majority of which, moreover, were virgin widow remarriages and not widow remarriages in the true sense of the word. It was becoming increasingly evident that, little social reform would translate itself into actual social change and contribute towards the emergence of a 'New Woman' without a simultaneous commitment to women's education.

The very first schools for the education of girls were started by English missionaries around the beginning of the nineteenth century; and in 1819 the first text on women education in an Indian language, (Bengali) by an Indian Gaurmohan Vidyalankara was published.⁴¹ By the third decade there were 12 girls' school run by missionaries in Hoogly district, the Ladies' Society for Native Female Education opened schools in and around Calcutta which were run by a Miss Cook. Missionaries were also the first to make forays into the 'Zenana' on the 'andarmahals' to initiate adult education.⁴²

By the mid-nineteenth century women's education had become an issue which was campaigned for, by unorthodox Hindus, Brahmans and radical students in Bengal. Fears of evangelical intentions of missionary schools were aired at the same time as the starting of these schools and were, atleast partly, responsible for their opening.

⁴¹ N.K. Sinha in Radha Kumar, The History of Doing, op.cit, p. 14.

⁴² Ibid.

The movement for women education and especially, its subsequent 'Indianization' is generally believed to have been initiated basically by the need of a rising middle class to adapt its women to a western milieu, evidenced in the declaration of a Bombay Parsi Framji Bomanji. "We want English Education, English manners and English behavior for our wives and daughters and until these are supplied, it is but just that the present gulf between the Englishman and the Indian should remain as wide as ever⁴³.

With the growth of British education and new employment opportunities for men, the public/private dichotomy grew into an opposition between 'the world' and 'the home'. The home instead of being complementary to the world outside started, in the new environment to represent the dead weight of tradition which was scorned by this new class as barbaric. Education of women was a way to bring back the complementarity of the two worlds. The zeal to get rid of the 'barbaric' element was so great that all forms of traditional entertainment were scrutinized and forbidden to the bengali *bhadramahila*, which curtailed the traditional space for expression of the 'woman's voice' further⁴⁴.

It was the influence of colonial culture that had led to viewing of these traditional forms of entertainment as low and 'obscene'. The natives did nevertheless, not accept

⁴³ C.H. Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, Princeton University Press, 1964. p.14.

⁴⁴ Sumanta Banerjee, 'Marginilization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.) Recasting Women, op.cit. pp. 147-168.

the colonial culture *en masse* and the agenda for women's education in Indian was suitably altered from its anglicized self to meet the needs of the native 'bhadramahila'. This was a result of the revival of the glory of ancient culture and a lost 'Golden Age'. Although the golden age theory had been put forward by Cole Brooke in 1805 and was later agreed to by many indologists, especially Max Muller, it gathered strength only towards the latter half of the nineteenth century.

Thus K.C. Sen felt that even though the 'encounter with Christianity' was one of the best moments in Indian history, Bengali literature and Brahma religions instruction was essential in the curricula of his girls' school. Moreover most schools had home economics and needlework as compulsory subjects for girl students. Implicit in this was a new definition of Indian womanhood which was simultaneously different both from the 'Western' and the 'traditional' one.

The 'new woman' was to be educated not to attain the highest virtue, which Dayanand Saraswati claimed was the goal of true education both for men and women, but keeping more functionalist goals, of good motherhood and wifehood, in mind. Brahma schools for girls taught cooking, sewing, nursing and such like.....(Which were) deserving of quite as much encouragement and reward, as purely literary proficiency. Thus a woman who played a crucial role in forming the child's consciousness was to be educated, so that she could educate her children. This ideology was apparently also internalized by the women themselves and Kundamala Debi writing in 1870 expressed this well and advised other women thus; 'If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to men-sahib like behavior. That is not

becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do house work thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant uneducated woman. And see how if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place the would be⁴⁵.

IV. Religiosity, Motherhood and the 'New Woman':

"It is only in the homes of educated and pious mothers that great men are born"

--Swami Vivekananda.

The earlier effort at reform of the Indian society and betterment of the condition of women therein had been inspired by the Enlightenment ideas and sought to make available to all human beings the right to a good and a happy life. These reforms, in keeping with their engendering ideology, questioned the subordination or oppression of one group of human beings by another on a rationalist/humanit basis (eventhough 'the rational' on such reform was mostly appropriated by 'the colonial' discourse that debated the issue mainly in terms of tradition and scriptures.) The later effort at reform was mostly directed towards re-establishment of the lost glory of the 'Aryan Golden Age' where the women (had) enjoyed freedom of will and high status. The Revivalist taking their que from the Orientalists constructed a most enduring and successful image of Indian womanhood of the lost past as opposed to the real existence of women in the humiliating present. This nevertheless, was to prove to be 'almost a burden' for the Indian woman.

⁴⁵ Kundamala Debi in Partha Chatterjee, 'Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question, in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.) Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, op.cit. p. 247.

Both the Utilitarian and the Evangelical attack on the contemporary Indian society, which in its present degenerate condition helped legitimize the British Enlightening presence, centered around the visibly low status of women and the barbarous customs build around an ideal of chaste and pure Hindu femininity. Indological research, on the other hand, evinced that this had not always been so and engaged themselves in reintroducing the Hindu elite to the mystery of its ancient lore by "giving back to the natives the truth of their little read and less understood Shaster". Speier for instance writes "A thousand year BC Hindu women appear to have been as free as Trojan dames or daughters of Judaea. Hymns in the Rig Veda mention them with respect and affection..... Even in the succeeding phase when Brahmans contemplated the soul beneath the Himavat women attended their discourse..... We find in one of the Upanishads, a King holding a solemn sacrifice and inviting his chief guests to state their opinions on theology. Among these guests a learned female, Garga, is conspicuous. A more pleasing instance of women's interests in holy themes is afforded by conversation between Yajnavalka and Maitreyi"⁴⁶. However, it seems that, the women's a strong womanhood was only one a part of the identity that revivalist were asserting as legitimate Indian/Hindu identity; another and, *possibly more important*, aspect of the same identity was the Aryan element which connoted vigour, conquest and expansion. The particular form in which the question of women's betterment was addressed was intimately linked this aspect. The Hindus in their present condition were portrayed as has having become effete, unmanly slothful and slack -- an outcome of the degeneration of

⁴⁶ Speier in Uma Chakravarty, 'Whatever happened to the Vedic Dasi?' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (eds.) Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, op.cit. p. 43.

the 'regenerators' of the race; they were nevertheless, inheritors of the glorious Hindu-Aryan heritage, the glory of which could only be reasserted by invigorating the race -- a project in which a strong womanhood was indispensable.

The new Indian/Hindu woman was thus visualized as the Mother of the nation, whose betterment was the essential-first step in, restoring the traditional glory and building a strong nation. This understanding of the role of women in the maintenance of race was central to Dayanand's thinking who considered Motherhood the sole rationale of a woman's existence. In the context of a nation that had fallen from its earlier glory, due to the decadence of its race, women's condition was crucial to the procreation and rearing of the special breed of men who could reclaim the past. Interestingly, fundamental in this formulation to the woman's sexuality which for the first time in Dayanand is not swept under the carpet. Since it is this sexuality that has to be channelized and transformed into a force to regenerate the 'Aryans'.

Thus in the '*Satyarth Prakash*' he lays down a variety of rules and regulations for the ideal conception. He advises that diet of the couple about to be married should help them grow strong and healthy, so that they are adequately prepared for the 'purpose of generating a new life'. The marriage ceremony should finish early so that the couple can retire to fulfill the summum bonum of the wife's existence. It is very important that these reproductive elements should not be wasted since they are preserved and perfected by the practice of Brahmacharya and the children born out of this union are of a very superior order⁴⁷.

⁴⁷ Ibid. pp. 52-59.

The problem of the remarriage of widows which had at its base the implicit negation of Hindu female's sexuality becomes easier to handle with this accosting of the female sexuality squarely. Dayanand proposed 'Niyoga' and reiterated that a remarriage of both men and women was equally essential in this venture of regeneration. This placement of women in 'National life' as mothers would henceforth be the general rhetoric to advocate the emancipation and education of women. The symbolic use of the 'mother' would be made variously. In the terrorist invocation it would become the protective and ravaging mother goddess, in the feminist assertion of Madame Cama and Sarojini Naidu 'remember the hand that rocks the cradle rules the world' it would become a darkling threat, and in the Gandhian discourse it would become all the ennobling qualities of endurance and suffering.

V. **Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question:**

"Any attempt to modernize on women if it takes away from (that) ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure..... The women of India must grow in the foot prints of Sita, and that is the only way"

-- Swami Vivekananda.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century the women's issue almost disappeared from the agenda of public debate and its place was taken by other issues of Nationalist politics. In response to the western criticism on the ill-treatment of Indian women, especially widows, Vivekananda asserted that having travelled all over India he had failed to see even a single case of ill-treatment. Turning the tables on western society he said that while the western woman was disinherited from all her deceased husband's property in India the whole estate of the husband must go to the wife. Contrasting the

Eastern spirituality with the Western materialist ethos his ideal of spiritual womanhood remained motherhood, for it was 'motherhood that fulfilled a woman'. Ideologically now embodied in the Hindu woman was the 'Savatmini'- the religious and secular equal of her husband.

The appropriation of the native mind by the more pressing issues of nationalist politics has been generally attributed to a hardening of attitudes towards 'modernization', which was increasingly seen as giving in to the now-almost-contemptuous, Western manner and life style. The process of modernization and its subtext, the women's question was seen to be stalled by Nationalist Ideology. Sumit Sarkar however, shows that this line of reasoning assumes that the earlier reformist phase was pushing forward a campaign for liberal and egalitarian social change-a modernizing process cut short only by the nationalist's, revivalist's fervour. The 'renaissance' reformers, he argues, were highly selective in their acceptance of the liberal ideas from Europe. Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family, acceptance of sanctity of the shastra, preference for symbolic rather than substantive social change were all a part of the early reform movements. Thus the problem is not that of radical liberalism followed by conservationist backlash, but of the very inception of our modernity that led to the early nineteenth century ideologies being highly selective in their adoption of liberal slogans.⁴⁸

⁴⁸ Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial India, op.cit., p. 72.

Partha Chatterjee argues that, although the above contention is true, yet one may not be able to deny that nationalism did, in fact, face to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in modern society . It also, provide an answer to the problems albiet in terms of its own ideological paradigm.⁴⁹

The nationalist ideology in its struggle against the dominance of colonialism resolved its dilemma of differing to the power and superiority of western science and methods in the material sphere by maintaining its own moral superiority through a framework of a spiritual/material dichotomy in the cultural sphere. While the material achievements of the West were superior, and needed to learnt, East could rely on the superiority of its spiritual resources, which needed to be strenghtened to fight Western dominance. In corollary to this division emerged an analogous division of inner/outer which translated by the day-to-day living became the distinction of social space into 'ghar' and 'bahir'. The 'true' identity became that of the inner spiritual self which must remain unaffected by the outer material reality. Since woman is it's representation, identification of social roles by gender was inevitable. The Hindu woman was redefined but was still within the framework of patriarchy, albiet a 'new' patriarchy, a social order that was contrasted both with the modern western society and distinguished from the traditional patriarchy. Thus the *Bhadramahila* was not only distinguished from her earlier counterpart in dress, food, language, manners etc. she was also expected to have had formal education, her role in organization of home life was redefined and she now also had a role outside the home. Beginning in 1850's when Indians themselves began

⁴⁹ See Partha Chatterjee, The Nation and its Fragments, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1994. pp. 116-134.

to open schools for girls the number of schools and students grew from 95 and 2500 in 1863 to 2238 and 80,000 in 1890 i.e., in less than thirty years.⁵⁰

The new woman despite now being educated still embodied self sacrifice, benevolence, devotion and religiosity all the spiritual characteristics that defined her innate femininity. The education despite emphasizing the new bourgeois virtues of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibly, the practical sense of accounting and hygiene and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world, which would also require her to move out of the confines of her 'home', did not threaten this femininity. This was mainly because femininity was now defined in terms of socially approved differences of male and female conduct instead of being defined by physical confines of 'home' and 'purdah'. This emphasis on spirituality did not, thus, impede the chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines on the contrary they facilitated it. Moreover since the essence of Nationalist agenda was to assert and maintain its subjectivity in the spiritual domain, reform, though legislative action would be in direct contradiction to this objective. Thus the disappearance of women's question from the public agenda of nationalist agitation was not due to its losing out of priority but rather due to the refusal of nationalism to make the women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 128.

CHAPTER III

GANDHIAN INTERVENTION: FEMININITY AS A CHALLENGE TO COLONIALISM:

"Ultimately, this rests on.... the acceptance of suffering..... under certain Indian conditions this 'passivity' is probably more effective."
--Lannoy.

"India was now free - Technically, legally, nothing had changed."
-- Louis Fischer.

Introduction:

During the nineteenth century then what had happened was that a 'tradition was invented'.

The colonial discourse on the women question was modern not in the sense of modernity defined in liberal, rational, humane terms. For we have seen that by arguing for and against 'Sati and widow remarriage' within the framework of scripture the issue of 'barbarity' and 'cruelty' of such heinous custom was more or less side stepped. Though it could be said to be modern in the sense that it took into account the individuals will in allowing for 'voluntary' sati. The nineteenth century colonial discourse simultaneously produced new notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' by elaborating the latter against their own conception of the former¹. This was also responsible for the 'modernization' in India not being a full-blooded one even at the beginning of the social reform movement.²

¹ Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: Debates on Sati in Colonial India', in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989, pp. 127-186. (Henceforth, 'Contentious Traditions').

² Sumit Sarkar, 'Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past' in V.C. Joshi (ed.), Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India, Vikas, Delhi, 1975, pp. 46-68.

The revivalist later pursued the 'modern' goal of women's education and her, somewhat limited, participation in the public sphere to reestablish the 'golden-age' of the Aryan past. However what is important here is that it was the construction of a particular past which supplied the context for the construction of a particular kind of womanhood. The Indian/Hindu woman in this context was 'almost built up as a superwoman' a combination of the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri and the heroic Lakshmbai³ opposed all at once to the Western model as well as the traditional model but in a significant way still attached to the past. She was a new woman; perhaps only in the sense that she was free from many of the earlier handicaps and mostly because she was now educated. In her essence she nevertheless, remained unaltered. She now was perhaps only a 'new' *mother* and a 'new' and more efficient *housewife*, still very much under the patriarchal rule though subject now to a 'new', somewhat more, benevolent patriarchy, which because of its Nationalist imperative defined Femininity solely in spiritual terms. This equating of femininity with spirituality as we have seen helped her move out of the physical confines imposed by the older patriarchy. It would not be wrong to say that the new patriarchy in fact essentially *required* the break down of physical barriers and a redefinition of the boundaries of 'home'.

By the end of the century then we hear of a many women moving out into the

³ Uma Charkvarti, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi: Orientalism, Nationalism and the Script for the Past' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), Recasting Women: Essay in Colonial History, Kali for Women, New Dehi, 1987, p. 86.

public sphere, though instances of personal revolt such as Ramabai⁴ were rare. We hear of celebrated women novelists such as Nirupama Devi and Anurupa Devi who were members of literacy clubs even though their work was scorned at and considered lowly and merely entertaining. In Maharashtra we hear of its first women novelist-Kashibai Kanitkar and the first woman doctor of India-Anandibai Joshi. However larger social consciousness had lagged far behind and when Kashibai Kanitkar and Anandibai Joshi, first ventured out wearing shoes and carrying umbrellas they were stoned in streets for daring to usurp such symbols of male authority⁵. Similarly Tarabai Shinde's '*Stree Purush Tulana*' which pointed out that the faults which women were accused of were found more commonly in men, elicited fierce opposition and a blistering attack from Bhalekar of Satyashodhak Samaj. Moreover the reform had not affected the common woman and woman's participation in the national project was only in the capacity of a 'mother' and a 'wife' of the 'Aryan hero'. Moreover, the limited focus from the days of Rammohan onwards, on a particular section of women excluded various other sections from its ambit. Gandhian intervention and his politics is fundamental in altering this one dimension, probably the most crucial dimension of women's emancipation in India.

⁴ Ramabai was a fearless woman and the probably the first woman social reformer that nineteenth century India produced. Ramabai, at a very young age, after the death of her father-who was 'something of a social reformer' and who wandered from place to place to lecture on the need for female education - decided to follow his foot steps. Ramabai's fame as a lecturer reached the pundits of Calcutta, who on hearing her were so impressed that they publically conferred on her the highest title--that of *Saraswati*. She later married a *Shudra* and turned a Christian in defiance of all possible Hindu injunctions. She founded the 'Arya Mahila Samaj' and later started the 'Sharda Sadan' - a home-cum-school for widows.

⁵ Radha Kumar, The History of Doing: An Illustrated Account of Women's Movement and Feminism in India, 1800-1990, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993, p. 32.

Gandhi not only challenged the supremacy of the West in material sphere which he equated with the essence of masculinity, brute force and destruction he simultaneously asserted that the 'Femininity' and its innate 'soul force', - the force of truth and non violence - were crucial for and central to India's independence both material and spiritual. This brought the women's question to the centerstage of the Nationalist agenda and there was no fighting for Swaraj from the foreign rule until Swaraj or self rule/self control was first won inside. Thus Gandhi envisioned, a twofold project where Swaraj 'without' could only be attained together with Swaraj 'within'. In his critique of Modernity and the colonial worldview just as in his critique of Brahmanism he constantly questioned the legitimacy of center and periphery. And in pitting soul force against brute force both in personal action and politics he tried to redefine the masculinity/femininity and superior/inferior paradigm.

I. Gandhian Worldview: A Critique of Modernity:

'A man whilst he is dreaming, believes in his dream, he is undecieved only when he is awakened from his sleep. A man labouring under the bane of civilization is like dreaming'.

-- Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

To be able to understand Gandhi on women it is imperative to acquaint oneself with the Gandhian worldview and philosophy which form the basis of and are an ubiquitous undercurrent to all of Gandhian practice. The Gandhian philosophy revolves around two key words 'Satya' and 'Ahimsa' or truth and non-violence. 'They are the *Mantra* of his life and philosophy'⁶.

⁶ R.R. Diwakar, 'Truth and Non-violence: New Dimensions' in S Radha Krishnan, (ed.), Mahatma Gandhi - 100 Years Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1968. p. 77.

Although there is nothing new about the doctrine of Non-violence and truth which are considered legacies of Gautam Buddha and Mahavira and, Gandhi himself admitted they are 'as old as the hills'; it was in the hands of Gandhi that they acquired a special significance as tools of defiance and political action. 'The meanings he read into them and the interpretation he put on them constitute the new dimension of this dyad of words⁷.

'Truth' for Gandhi is 'God' and he writes 'Truth is God' revising his earlier opinion 'God is Truth'. To be attuned to God is to rise above self interest and to renounce the fruit of action, dedicating all activities to God in keeping with the teachings of the Gita. 'By surrendering to God, man frees himself from moral conflicts and succeeds in attaining the virtue of *Samatva* (Sameness)'. The search for Truth is the other name of self realization. However, truth can be viewed from different perspectives and as such one should not impose one's own vision of truth on the others which in Gandhian terminology would amount to violence. Ahimsa for Gandhi is not congruent with the category of only 'non-injury' it is a far more elaborate principle which not only includes abstaining from physical violence but also abstaining from every evil thought, from undue haste, from lying and hatred and from wishing anybody ill. Ahimsa therefore for him is not only signified by manifest violence but includes even the *potential* for it. Ahimsa to be complete must penetrate each and every 'thought' and 'deed'.

⁷ Ibid.

Truth and Ahimsa are intertwined in the Gandhian thought and providing the philosophical underpinning to each of his ideas that they are like the 'two sides of a coin' Gandhi writes: "who can say which is the obverse and which is the reverse Nevertheless, ahimsa is the means and Truth is the end..... If we take care of the means, we are bound to reach the end sooner or later"⁸. For Gandhi the uniqueness of human being lies in his ethico-religious quest for self transformation which is the unique human destiny. The knowledge of the highest truth is the aim of self development. However, this search for the highest truth can be pursued only through non-violence which is the means par excellence for the attunement of the soul to the divine. Thus Gandhi's is an organismic vision emphasizing inseparable unity, harmony and non-injury. The paradigm of 'modern' which colonialism entails and brings forth signifies the other extreme of this view -- that of *broken totality*⁹. Modernity which stands firmly on the pillars of the rational, the scientific and the efficient, guided by the 'invisible hand' of self-interest by definition requires 'brute force', for it of necessity entails that 'everyman finds his profit in the misfortune of his neighbour'. It is rather paradoxical that Enlightenment and the ensuing modern *weltanschauung* which claims to be the most appropriate one to facilitate, sustain and deepen the transition to minimalization of

⁸ M.K. Gandhi, Collected Works, Vol. VIII, Navjivan, Ahmedabad, p. 59

⁹ This was the new view of the world that severed all its previous connections with the 'Conceptual World' which should have had, for a truly rational person, provided the criteria for judging the purity and perfection of the real world, for it is the larger order of things that provides the locus of norms and values that shape man's ideas, his customs and his institutions. Once the existence of this larger world was denied the relationship of man with the outer world underwent profound changes. The larger world now became, instead of the 'work of art' it was previously considered to be, a clockwork to be taken apart, analysed and conquered for it imposed restrictions on the pursuit of material well-being that became, guided by 'rational' self-interest, the central goal of human existence.

violence should in fact be the *raison d'être* for its perpetuation and escalation. The key, however, probably remains in the observation Durkhiem once made about 'self-interest' which is the guiding force behind men's actions in modern times - 'there is nothing more transcendent than self interest if today it binds me to you tomorrow it makes me your enemy'. This, then, requires certain kind of power relations which depend entirely on what Gandhi called 'brute force'. Weapons and fear become instrumental in keeping peace¹⁰.

Modernity essentially articulates itself and through the economic sphere in the first instance, in keeping with the Marxian postulate of Historical Materialism . The 'modern' seeks to minimize, if not completely to obliterate, man's dependence on Nature and thus transcend the realm of necessity -- the symbol of man's servitude to nature¹¹. The liberation promised by modernity from want, ignorance and moral degradation is sought to be achieved through technologically induced and sustained economic growth which becomes a pre-condition for man's development. As the satisfaction of material needs assume central importance in the 'modern' definition of good life, unlike, the traditional definition which considered them to be either unimportant or degrading, the relationship between Man and Nature alters in a fundamental way. Nature from now on must be dominated, exploited, manipulated and transformed ruthlessly and relentlessly in order to ensure greater access to material resources which are necessary to satisfy the ever increasing desires, needs and wants.

¹⁰ Ramashray Roy, 'Modernity Violence and Gandhi', in Gandhi Marg, Gandhi Peace Foundation, Vol. 14, No. 1, April-June 1992, p. 69.

¹¹ Ibid. pp. 65-75.

Colonialism is thus a direct outcome of the project of modernity which is unable, however to judge its own self-interest either rationally or morally uses violence both against man and nature spurred on by its desire for more material possession which become their own ends, and by greater profit. The relationship between modernity and violence, desire and colonial exploitation is ubiquitous as well as undeniable and the reason also for Gandhi considering modern civilization a 'bane' and a 'disease'.

Gandhi's critique of the colonial rule was not confined to a critique of the political domination of the British but of the whole colonial worldview and the paraphrenalia of the modern civilization. The 'retirement' of Englishmen and resurrection of native rule without the corresponding change in the 'ethics' of governance is unacceptable to Gandhi, for it is not 'true' Swaraj. He write "in effect it means this : that we want English rule without the Englishman. You want the tigers nature, but not the tiger; that is to say, you want to make India English. And when it becomes English, it will be called not Hindustan but Englishstan. This is not the swaraj that I want" Debunking the myth of modern civilization he says, that those who are 'intoxicated' 'hypnotised' by it will obviously not argue against it which is why the evils of civilizations are not known in general. The mechanization, speed and making of the bodily welfare the object of life are true tests of this civilization which is 'irreligious' implying immoral ¹².

The true civilization is the one that is built on what he calls soul-force and not

¹² M.K. Gandhi, Hind Swaraj, Navjivan, Ahemdabad, 1938, pp. 26-34.

fear or 'brute force'¹³. Civilization is that mode of conduct which points out to the man the path of duty. Performance of duty and observance of morality are convertible terms. To observe morality is to attain mastery over our mind and our passions. So doing we know ourselves. The Gujarati equivalent or civilization means 'good conduct'. Recounting the glory of Indian civilization Gandhi maintains that the inertia that the West cites as an example of India's ignorance and is actually 'her beauty' and 'the sheet anchor of our hope'¹⁴.

Mind is restless and prone to want and wander. Giving in to these desires do not make us more civilized but on the contrary makes us the slave of this want, and lose our moral fiber. Our ancestors, being aware of the fact, sought to teach us self control and character building instead of indulgence and competition. A return to these ethics where they have been corroded will help return to the glorious civilization of past. Implying the consent and participation of the 'victim' in the project of victimization, Gandhi demystifies the 'civilizing' affect of the railways and English education which according to him are actually instruments of acquiring this consent and of perpetuating the foreign rule by modelling the native environment in an alien fashion¹⁵.

Violence, however, is not the way to dispel the foreign occupation even though

¹³ Ibid p. 55.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid. pp. 63-77.

the achievement of this end is eminently desirable. The end and means in Gandhis philosophy as mentioned above, are inextricably linked and the means used will accordingly enhance or distort the end that is sought. Therefore 'Ahimsa' can only breed more 'himsa' and can turn the victory to merely a pyrrhic one. The true means to a true end will only involve the use of non-violent resistance¹⁶. Gandhi observes that while it is true 'that a petition without the backing of the force is useless' however there are two kinds of force (which) can back petitions; one is the force of arms..... The second kind of force can thus be stated "if you do not concede our demands, we shall no longer be your petitioners. You can govern not only so long as we remain the governed; we shall no longer have any dealing with you". The force implied in this may be described as love-force, soul-force, or, more popularly but less accurately passive resistance. This force is indestructible. The force of arms is powerless when matched against the force of love or the soul'¹⁷.

Social order or social chaos are the external manifestations of the 'disorder of the soul itself' which react and reinforce their effect on it constantly. The constant altering of social institutions to suit the needs of society at a particular time is therefore futile because the cause does not lie there in. The search for order must begin at the level of the soul for the ordering of the soul is the basis of general social order¹⁸. Social

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid. pp. 67-68.

¹⁸ See R.R. Diwakar, 'Truth and Non-violence: New Dimensions', in S. Radhakrishnan (ed.), Mahatma Gandhi-100 Years, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1968, pp. 77-78.

control to maintain social order in this schemes, thus got translated into an emphasis on self-control which became central to importance as a regulator of man's relationship viz-a-viz both nature and woman.

Gandhi emphasized political ethics, soul force and the moral supremacy of the oppressed over the oppressor. Women who represented the eternally oppressed and womanhood that was eternally marginalized were thus re-discovered and were sought to be recognized as a civilizing force in human society. Modernity and its concomitant rational/scientific ethic tends to marginalize Nature which needs to be dominated in order to fulfil wants. The relationship between Man and Nature that thus obtains is one of exploitation. Colonial culture based on this ethic also derives its psychological strength from identification of rulership with male dominance and subjecthood would with feminine submissiveness. In attacking the structure of sexual dominance, Gandhi rejected the colonial equation between manhood and dominance, between masculinity and legitimate violence and between femininity and passive submissiveness¹⁹. 'He wanted to extend to the male identity --in both the rulers and the ruled -- the revalued, partly non-Brahmanic, equation between womanhood and non intrusive, nurturant, non-manipulative, non-violent, self-deemphasizing 'merger' with natural and social environments. That is Gandhi was trying to fight 'colonialism' by fighting the psychological equation which a patriarchy makes between masculinity and aggressive social dominance and between femininity and subjugation²⁰.

¹⁹ Ashis Nandy, 'Final Encouter: The Politics of the Assassination of Gandhi', in At the Edge of Psychology, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980. pp. 71-75.

²⁰ Ibid. p. 74.

II. Gandhi, Tradition and Reform:

"It is good to swim in the waters of tradition, but to sink in them is suicide"

".... Morals, ethics and religion are convertible terms. A moral life without reference to religion is like a house built in sand. And religion derived from morality is like 'sounding brass' good may for king a noise and breaking heads"

--Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi.

Even as we consider Gandhi's antipathy or rather a deep aversion to the 'modern' world view and 'civilization', relied as they were on increasing mechanization of the labour process goaded on by the pursuit of personal profit and material well being, rapacious in its plunder of Nature, it should not be assumed that he extended wholesale support of tradition and religion. A very religious man himself and a devout Hindu brought up in a traditional Hindu Vaishnava family²¹ steeped in hindu tradition he did not conceive of 'religion as *one* of the *many* activities' of man kind. Religion, for him was all-pervading. The same activity may be governed by the spirit of religion or of irreligion. He maintained that 'There is no such thing for me, therefore, as leaving politics for religion. For me every, the tiniest, activity is governed by what I consider to be my religion'²².

Religion for Gandhi, then, meant a morality; an ethic that had to govern each of *his* actions and should likewise govern each of the people who considered themselves

²¹ J.B. Kripalani, 'Gandhiji's Spiritual Ideas', in S. Radhakrishnan (ed.), Mahatma Gandhi-100 Years, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi 1968, p. 201

²² Ibid. p. 205.

religious. Making a clear distinction between what Hinduism in essence was and what it had become because of the later 'intra- polations', he observed that, Hinduism was a 'search after truth through non-violent means'²³. The evils of Sati, Purdah, child marriage, child widowhood, Kulinism, temple prostitution and untouchability were evils indeed and had to be fought tooth and nail, there was however no mistaking them for the true Hindu religion of the 'glorious ancient civilization' - India's Aryan heritage. These evils remained in society 'inspite of it'.

Significantly then, on the one hand the Mahatma glorified the Hindu religion and the Hindu way of life, which were designed to 'elevate the moral being'. And declared himself a staunch advocate of Varnashramadhharma, which keeps at bay 'life-corroding competition so that each as follows his own occupation or trade. On the other hand, however, he produced stringent criticism against the *practice* of this Hindu tradition.

Caste with its attendant ideas of purity and pollution were at the cost of the pitiable condition of both the Shudras and women who Manu had clubbed together with a drum and had thought fit only for regular beating²⁴. Whereas Varna the division into four horizontal groups became 'a valuable fiction' caste and a vertically hierarchical society became the reality upheld by the notions of karma, dharma, and moksha. Attacking caste, Gandhi wrote: 'The most effective, quickest and the most unobtrusive

²³ Indira Rothermund, 'Mahatma Gandhi and Hindu Tradition', in Gandhi Marg, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, Vol. 3, No. 6, Sept. 1981.

²⁴ Manusmriti opines unambiguously '*Shudra, Pashu, Dhol, Auru Naari, Sab hain tadan ke adhikaari*'

way to destroy caste if for reformers to begin the practice themselves, and when necessary take the consequences..... It is desirable that caste-Hindu girls should marry Harijan husbands. That is better than Harijan girls marrying caste-Hindu husband. If I had my way, I would persuade all caste-Hindu girls coming under my influence to marry Harijan husbands²⁵. Thus reading a new meaning into the hindu social stratification system which for Gandhi remained at its essentials a system of efficient division of labour devoid of all competition and consequent social tensions but not a means of propagating the superior/inferior, purity/pollution hierarchy. Similarly Karma which in the earlier notion was instrumental in maintaining the status now became a *mantra* for action.

Religious traditions are based on the construction of ideal types which lead to the wide acceptance of what a "good" man or a "good" woman should aspire to be Political thinkers and social reformers have been quick to seize upon these images in their search for legitimacy and influence²⁶. Gandhi however in radical departure from this norm sought to question the very basis of these 'ideals' of a 'good' woman in Hinduism and was engaged in 'activity confronting and redefining the contours of' the religion and challenging the Hindu orthodoxy'.²⁷

²⁵ Jagjivan Ram, 'Mahatma Gandhi and Social Change', in S. Radhakrishnan (ed.), Mahatma Gandhi-100 Years, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1968. p.158.

²⁶ Malavika Karlekar, 'The Relevance of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: A Contemporary Perspective', in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Sage Publication, New Delhi, Vol.2. No.1., 1995. p. 45.

²⁷ Ibid.

The practice of 'Sati' for example which takes its name from the Sanskrit noun 'Sat' meaning truth does not in itself suggest self-immolation. However, by implication, any woman who chooses to die with her husband cannot be anything but true, pure and chaste, devout and virtuous. Though the ideal of sacrifice that Sati seeks to uphold and glorify is in no way unique to the construction of Femininity in Hindu tradition it is here that through a peculiar mix of religiosity and *real politik*²⁸ it acquires both great intensity and legitimacy which are used to ratiocinize, validate and condone this extreme act of violence.

Gandhi's ability to reach out to women by using the idea of sacrifice brings into focus his ability to read creative meanings into tradition so that his ideas in actuality constitute a critique of 'traditionalism' without altogether debunking tradition which now represents something new. Gandhi criticized the practice of Sati questioning the rationale of a custom through which society demands alligenece and devotion from a wife when it cannot do so from the husband. Attributing such a demand to the 'blind egotism of man' he said that wife who is called 'ardhangini' by the Hindu, deserves an equal place along with her husband as companion and a comrade. Despite this, the notion of sacrifice was retained by him as a central construct of femininity as we shall see later.

²⁸ Burning of the widows was, in the final count, not just a matter of staking one's claim in the cultural/religious identity but also had concrete material reasons behind it. The missionaries had noted the *class* background of Sati. It was felt that the increasing luxury of the high and middling classes and their expensive imitation of European habits' made them eager to avoid the cost of maintaining widows. Moreover, Satis' high incidence in Bengal had probably also got a lot to do with the *Dayabhaga* system operating there, which gave women a legitimate right to property as wives as well as mothers. Even Rammohan Roy considered economic gain to be a crucial explanation of the rite.

But significantly sacrifice in Gandhis terminology underwent a fundamental change and signified a powerful instrument a political action that required at particular state of mind. The non-violent protest or the 'satyagraha' that remained the hallmark of Gandhian politics emphasized self denial and sacrifice as an active force to counter social injustice. Whereas sacrifice was earlier articulated as the paradigm of victimization and passivity it now became an active force to counter such victimization both at the social and the individual level. Satyagraha thus could be practiced by individuals especially women to 'revolt' against the injustices heaped on their lot.

The notion of purity is yet another construct central to Hinduism. In fact the edifice of the Hindu caste system is erected upon elaborate mechanisms of purity and pollution and maintained by guarding the chastity of women. In the caste-based Hindu system where endogamy and exogamy determine marriage and commercial relations, the entire in group has a stake in feminine chastity. While a woman is a protective mother, the submissive wife and an obedient daughter, she is *also* at the same time a fertile female who mediates which the kin group. The kshetra/beej imagery that has been handed down from Manu's times is a dominant paradigm for social control of women²⁹.

Gandhi's preoccupation with purity is well documented. However he emphasized the purity of mind and soul and a purity that emanated from within. The Hindu

²⁹ Leela Dube, 'Seed and Earth: The Symbolism of Biological and Sexual Relations of Production', in Leela Dube et al., (eds.), Visibility and Power-Essays on Women in Society and Development, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1986, pp. 22-53.

preoccupation with maintaining temporal purity which is sought to be preserved through use of Purdah, practice of child marriage or banning of widow remarriage is lamented by Gandhi who calls these customs 'barbarous'. These customs are unable to guard the chastity of women for, to be worth anything, chastity should come from within and must be capable of withstanding every onslaught of temptation. It must be as defiant as Sita's who had the power to say 'no' even to her husband for Sita was 'no slave of Rama'. Thus Gandhi though drawing on traditional resources was making a break with traditionalism. In particular his strategy was based on the questioning of the Male/dominant/aggressive and Female/subjected/passive dichotomies as the basis of women's domination by men and India's domination by Britain. This process thus involved the reconciling of the common essence of the old and new in forging the image of a 'new woman'.

III. Gandhi and the Ideals of Femininity:

"Gandhi saw new contradiction in the transitions from Sita who was 'gentleness incarnate a delicate flower', to Draupadi, 'a great oak' in her strength and resoluteness, to Olive Doke (a young girl who had worked among tribes in Africa), a symbol of absolute fearlessness, courage and the will to serve a cause".

-- Madhu Kishwar.

An essential element of Gandhian political philosophy was his negation of the concepts of masculinity and femininity implicit in Indian tradition and in the colonial situation. Attributing this to a psychological reason Ashis Nandy states, 'All his life Gandhi had wanted to live down, within himself, his identification with his own outwardly powerful but essentially weak, hedonistic and semi-modernized father and to build his self-image upon his identification with his apparently weak, deeply religious, traditional but self-

confidant and powerful mother.....who used fasting and other forms of self-penalization to acquire and weild womanly power within the constraints of patriarchal family.³⁰

That his mother was instrumental in forming his early and favourable view of women is undeniable. He wrote, "The outstanding impression my mother has left on may memory is that of saintliness. She was deeply religious. She would not think on taking her meals without her daily prayers she would take the hardest of vows and keep them without flinching"³¹. His mother was probably the very first satygrahi he knew who evinced to him that suffering and pain could be very potent instruments of protest. That denial and self inflicted suffering could not possibly leave the others untouched was impressed on the young Gandhi who probably felt guilty and perhaps, helpless, when his mother went without food for days and end³².

Another and probably equally important influence on Gandhian worldview regarding women, his respect for them, and his belief in their ability and tenacity was that of his willful wife Kasturbai, who made it a point to go out whenever and wherever she like³³.

³⁰ Ashis Nandy, 'Final Encouter: Politics of the Assasination of Gandhi', in At The Edge of Psychology, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980, p.73.

³¹ M.K. Gandhi : The Story Of My Experiments With Truth. Navjivan, Ahamedbad, 1966, p.2.

³² See Malvika Karlekar, 'The Relevance of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: A Contemporary Perspective', in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Sage Publications, New Delhi, Vol.2. No. 1, 1995, p.50.

³³ Ibid. p. 51.

Gandhi considered the feminine principle as the superior to the masculine one since, it relied on the innate moral strength and not on the aggressive brute force. He considered the conception of women as weaker sex a 'libel' and a man's injustice to woman. He wrote, "if by strength is meant brute strength then indeed is woman less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior. Has she not greater intuition, is she not more self sacrificing, has she not got greater power of endurance, has she not greater courage. Without her man could not be. If non-violence is the law of our being, the future is with woman".

Thus Gandhi's ideal of feminine virtue and courage were Sita and Draupadi with whom the common women could identify. In fact women in India have always been bred on these symbols of eternal femininity. However these symbols incorporated under Gandhi's guidance the defiance and resistance to challenge and counter the physical might of man. Thus, the choice of these symbols whereas on the one hand, epitomized the cultural ideal of Hindu womanhood on the other hand, debunked the culturally imposed helplessness and fear and embodied absolute fearlessness. Women were pure and chaste and that was their feminine strength which could pitted effectively against any violent force. Femininity for Gandhi was moral courage the strength of which had been based by constant suffering and self sacrifice. Thus femininity in Gandhian perspective changed from being defined in terms of 'abalaness' to being defined in term of 'robust independence' like that of Draupadi who could bend even the 'mighty Bhima to her will' or that of Sita who was 'no slave of Rama',

IV. Gandhian Politics: The 'Feminine Principle' and Women's Participation:

"Of all the factors contributing to the awakening of women in India none has been so potent as the field of non-violent action which Gandhiji offered to women in his "war" against British domination of India".

-- Rajkumari Amrit Kaur.

It was during the agitation in Africa against the Black Act of 1913 in which the Supreme Court declared all Hindu, Muslim and Parsee marriages invalid and Gandhi found himself 'suddenly heading or rather swept along by a cohort of furious maenads' that he realized the extent and scope of women power. He realized that women could become unquestionable leaders in a struggle that did not require conventional learning of books but depended upon a 'strong heart that comes from suffering and faith'³⁴. It involved careful training of disciplined cadres, non-violent satyagraha involving peaceful violation of specific laws, mass courting of arrests occasional hartals and spectacular marches³⁵.

The struggles' success was in no small measure attributable to the long delayed entry of women into satyagraha who suffered prison life, hard labour and occasionally loss of their children willingly and with great courage and fortitude; their passionate appeals were highly instrumental in involving thousands of miners in the protest strike. Gandhi, Kishwar points out was quick to learn the lesson and would make it pay rich dividends in his struggle against the colonial rule in India. Gandhi wrote, "many of an

³⁴ Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi and Women, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986, p. 13.

³⁵ Poonam Saxena, 'Women's Participation in the National Movement in the United Provinces 1937-47', in Manushi, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, No. 46, 1988.

movements stop half way because the condition of our women. Much of our work does not yield appropriate results'; our lot is like a penny wise provide foolish trader who does not employ enough capital in his business".³⁶

This however is not to say that women were merely an instrument to achieve the 'higher' political goal of Swaraj, a mere cog in the Nationalist wheel of struggle against the colonial rule; the goal of freedom and emancipation only inadvertant consequence of and incidental to gaining of self rule. Gandhi confessed "My contribution to the great problem (of women's disadvantage in society) lies in my presenting for acceptance of truth and Ahimsa in every walk of life ... I have hugged the hope that in this woman will be unquestionable leader and having found place in the human evolution will shed her inferiority complex".³⁷

On the other hand it can very well, and legitimately, be argued that the Nationalist struggle was used by Gandhi's insight and ingenuity to promote the cause of women's freedom. Since 'the freedom struggle was the struggle to build self reliance from the individual level right up to the nation it became means also of liberation of women'³⁸. Although it was not inevitable it was made possible by Gandhi who, Jain

³⁶ Gandhi in Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi and Women, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986, p. 13.

³⁷ M.K. Gandhi, Collected Works, Navjeevan, Ahmedabad, Vol. LXXI, 1940. p. 208 and Sucheta Kripalani, 'Leader and Teacher of Women', in S. Radhakrishnan (ed.), Mahatma Gandhi-100 Years, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1968, p. 216.

³⁸ Devaki Jain, 'Gandhian Contribution Towards a Theory of Feminist Ethic', in Devaki Jain and Diana Eck (eds.), Speaking of Faith: Cross Cultural Perspectives in Women, Religion and Social Change, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1986, p.p 267-268.

argues, 'made a stringent criticism of those roles that cloistered women into ignorance. He propagated self reliance of women by postulating their economic independence, advocating social practices that emphasized simplicity and identification with the poor³⁹.

Thus for Gandhiji attaining freedom for women was equally, if not more, important to attaining freedom for nation. It can be argued that attaining freedom for women and other downtrodden classes and social change it entailed was integral to his definition of Swaraj which did not merely mean self governance. That his strategy was formulated to achieve both targets simultaneously was then neither a coincidence nor a compromise but an ingenious act of an alert mind.

'In the Non-cooperation movement of 1921, Gandhi consciously involved women in an attempt to link their struggle with the struggle for National Independence.'⁴⁰ As the non-cooperation movement involved Boycott of foreign goods especially the foreign cloth, to be successful it required a simultaneous and constructive programme of Swadeshi. Instituting women's support and activity in the Movement thus ensured its success, on the one hand by raising consciousness among women through their involvement in concrete and meaningful work without suddenly asking them to challenge their life

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi and Women, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986, p. 13.

style or to defy authority and on the other hand by razing male opposition by not challenging their traditional position in society. In fact Gandhian ideology with its deeply religious underpinnings (must have) allayed any fears on the part of the patriarchs that women's participation in the political struggle/public sphere might have entailed⁴¹.

Gandhi's programme for women in the 'early phase' was confined to spinning and weaving of Khadi, for, both these were eminently suited to the limitations imposed upon their contribution by their roles in the household. Later he saw women's participation as of central importance to the success of picketing of liquor and foreign cloth shops for 'who could make a more effective appeal to the heart than a woman'. Whereas the earlier programmes of spinning and weaving because of its unobtrusive nature helped make women an important social base for a counter-revolutionist agenda; awakening a new confidence in the women, caged and confined in their houses and little courtyards for centuries, so that they no longer felt 'dwarfed in the presence of men', picketing provided ample opportunity to build on this confidence to eventually evolve into independent leadership. Finally, the programme was to be both 'initiated and controlled by women', who may take 'as much assistance as they needed from men' so long as men remained in strict subordination to them'.⁴²

Gandhi has been criticized by many Feminists, as we shall see, who have accused

⁴¹ Sucheta Kripalani, 'Leader and Teacher of Women', in S. Radhakrishnan (ed.) Mahatma Gandhi-100 Years, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, 1968, p. 218.

⁴² Geoffrey Ashe, Gandhi: A Study in Revolution, Asia Publishing House, Bombay, 1968 p. 90.

him of maintaining a separate sphere ideology in his politics. These studies seem to ignore the importance of the synthesis that Gandhi achieved between the old and the new which though it was very radical in content was apparently un-threatening⁴³ and herein lay its beauty and the possibly the secret of its success. Significantly, as Nandy point out, 'Gandhi was neither a conservative nor a progressive. And through he had internal contradictions, he was not a fragmented, self-alienated man driven by the need to compulsively conserve the past or protect the new'.⁴⁴ It is probably by keeping this in mind that one should judge Gandhi. A more appropriate test however, would be judging him by the final impact, of this small step that he initially helped women take towards mass activism.

The 'Salt Satyagraha' and mass mobilization of women was as 'a new high water mark' of their participation in the political/public arena. The choice of salt and breaking of salt laws to symbolize the end of British rule, and to initiate a nation's independence had amused as many as it had confused. But it was an astute choice, for, salt not only cut across religious, class and caste differences to provide an economic platform for joint struggle, it also symbolized all that is vital to human life and exalted in human relationships besides being a vital substance of day-to-day existence⁴⁵.

⁴³ Ashis Nandy, 'Final Encounter: The Politics of The Assasination of Gandhi', in At The Edge of Psychology, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1980, p. 71.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Suchitra, 'What Moves Masses: Dandi March As Communicating Strategy', in Economic and Political Weekly, vol. 30, No. 14, 1995, pp. 743-744.

Focusing on salt, however, was in no way an original idea⁴⁶. What was novel was the way Gandhi was able to transform it into a powerful tool for communicating with the Indian masses especially the women. Women who are incharge of the private sphere, the hearth are affected directly since salt, an inexpensive, indispensable commodity in the kitchen, is used by them as a matter of course, almost unthinkingly. A tax on salt thus affects all women; irrespective of caste class or religion. A tax on salt does not spare even the poorest in its quest for increased revenue for the exchequer.

Gandhi thus appealed to women, through his writings and his speeches during the Dandi March, using familiar examples of mythology as was his hall mark, referring to the courage of Sita and Draupadi. More effectively, he lauded their contribution to the cause: ... 'in the non-violent struggle for swaraj, womens share is larger and in the future our children will say that in this struggle, my sister, my mother made a bigger contribution'.⁴⁷ Thousands of women joined the salt satyagraha, manufacturing and selling salt all over the country, willingly courting arrest and happily going to jail especially in the villages Gandhi passed on his way to Dandi. To fathom the great impact the movement had on women of India, Kamaladevi Chattapadhyay needs to be quoted at length.

⁴⁶ Unjustness of Salt Laws as a political issue was not a new one. The first riots in protest against this tax had happened in 1844 in Surat district, were almost a hundred years later Salt Satyagraha took place. The tax was earlier criticized at the inaugural session of congress in 1885 and over the years was severely condemned by Dadabhai Naoroji and Gokhale. Even the idea of using salt in a mass mobilization campaign had been explored before. In fact there existed a long tradition of breaking salt laws going back to the days of French Revolution.

⁴⁷ Iswarlal Desai, quoted in Suchitra 'What Moves Masses: Dandi March as Communicating Strategy', in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XXX, No. 14, 1995.

'Even though only a few women were chosen officially to take part in the Salt Satyagraha with which the Indian revolution opened on the morning of April 6, 1930, by sunset of that first day it had turned into a mass movement, and swept the country.'

'On that memorable thousands of women strode down to the sea like proud warriors. But instead of weapons, they bore pitchers of clay, brass and copper; and instead of uniforms the simple cotton saris of village India.'

'..... Women young and old, rich and poor came tumbling down in hundreds and thousands, shaking of the traditional shackles that held them for so long'

'Valiantly they went forwards without a trace of fear or embarrassment. They stood at street corners with little packets of salt crying out: "we have broken the salt law and we are free! who will buy the salt of freedom"? Their cries never went unheeded. Every passerby stopped, slipped a coin into their hands, and held out proudly a tiny pinch of salt'⁴⁸. The feminine power that Gandhi had helped unleash was later to prove not without significance in the shaping of a nation's destiny.

V. Contemporary Feminists and Their Evaluation of Gandhi:

"There are many kinds of failure, some of which succeed"

Feminist studies today, are a little more gaurded in their appreciation about Gandhi's role in changing the social construction of Femininity. That Gandhi in general was able to affect a significant break from the worldview of the social reformers is the idea widely discounted. It is argued that Gandhian ideas on women and those formulated

⁴⁸ Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in Radha Kumār, The History of Doing, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993, p.78.

by the reformers of the later nineteenth century shared in a significant way a sense of continuity⁴⁹.

Patel argues that although 'Gandhi did introduce a dynamic concept, that of politics, in his model of social role of women, he did not revolutionize the basic assumption on which the reformers perceived the women. In Gandhi the politics was redefined to find its space in the "home"⁵⁰. In effect the basic tenet of separate spheres based on the private/public dichotomy was not questioned. On the other hand biological difference between the sexes upon which is constructed edifice of gender relations was deemed as a 'natural' difference and used to legitimize the relegation of woman to different social roles; in effect to a subordinate position in society. That 'Biology' for him remained 'destiny'. Thus she maintains that 'the nineteenth century ideas relating to the home were reintegrated into the Indian situation by the Modern Indian, who traumatized by the modern world, yet fascinated by it, erected his own ideal women in the sanctuary of his inner sanctum 'the home'. Patriarchy in this formulation recreated itself through the formulation of morally superior 'ideal woman', who was the embodiment of all the best and goodness of life.

A parallel view is aired by Madhu Kishwar when she states that Gandhi did not question the basic paradigm of private/public in relation to women, nor did he question the sanctity of the family and women's role within it; he maintained that 'rabid

⁴⁹ See Sujata Patel, Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi, Paper presented at the Nehru Memorial Library, 1987, pp. 11-13.

⁵⁰ Ibid. p. 13

condemnation of marriage and family' were based on 'hysterical generalization'. Moreover points out Kishwar that 'The silent suffering which Gandhi idealized was in fact one of the key symptoms of her (womans) subordination. But Gandhi made some of these symptoms of subordination a gifted cult of eternal womanhood'⁵¹. She is also critical of Gandhis failure to evolve a concrete programme materially to alter the socio-economic condition of the mass of women. Thus not altering in any concrete way one of the basic causes of their powerlessness⁵².

However 'for a correct understanding of Gandhi, one needs a sufficiently good grasp on his whole approach which obtained in the constant evolution of his ideas and a combination of idealism and realism in him'⁵³. Moreover as Madhu Kishwar herself points out Gandhian practice was far more revolutionary than his words could ever be⁵⁴. In fact words and symbols were often used to camouflage the radical content of Gandhian practice. This is quite apparent in Gandhis stand vis-a-vis Hinduism. While convinced and convincing of his status as a 'Sanatani Hindu' a genuine orthodox full-blooded Indian, not a social reformer but a committed traditionalist he tried to redefine Hinduism itself as a life style and an open ended system of universal ethics which could continuously integrate new inputs. He wanted to organize the Hindus as a part of a geographically defined larger political community and not just as a religious group and

⁵¹ Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi and Women, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986, p. 34.

⁵² Vishwanath Tandon, 'An Indian Feminst Looks at Gandhi', in Gandhi Marg, Gandhi Peace Foundation, New Delhi, Dec. 1987, p.559.

⁵³ Ibid. p.555.

⁵⁴ Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi and Women, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986, p. 12.

thus was engaged in constantly trying to pass off many aspects of the low status, non-brahmanic, commercial and peasant cultures in India as genuine Hinduism. Similarly, Sita or Draupadi of Gandhi were not the commonly accepted lifeless stereotypes of subservience but were symbols versatile enough to incorporate the qualities which he chose to endow them with⁵⁵. Moreover religious imagery facilitated communication with the common masses which were his main audience.

In upholding the separate sphere ideology also it is possible, that Gandhi was doing a far more radical thing which however might have been mistaken for an essentially 'patriarchal' stand. That Gandhi in advocating different social roles and social spheres for women was not in any way diluting their claim to equality. Equality as postmodern feminism has discovered does not have to entail 'sameness'. Thus accepting women's fundamental difference as the basis for considering her an equal is in fact a far more radical concept. That Gandhi demanded equality for woman on 'moral' grounds and not commensurate with her socio-economic achievement goes, in my view, to his credit. An equal status with men and a confidence in oneself Gandhi was sure would make her man's equal in all other spheres of life, the contrary of which has proved quite impossible to achieve. Even with equal opportunities ensured, equalities of status assured Indian women are finding it hard to change larger societal attitudes which refuse to acknowledge her as equal to man. Veena Mazundar points out that Gandhis ideas are remarkably similar to those vouched by the womens liberation movement all over the world. Both of them propagate equality in the family, dignity of the woman's

⁵⁵ Ibid. p.2.

personality, the opening up of wider opportunities for women for self development and a refusal to be regarded as sex symbols⁵⁶.

Thus, the new paradigm of 'male', 'selfish', 'possessive' and 'lacking in institution and strength and 'female' 'selfless', 'patient', 'full of courage and humility' as only a *reassertion* of the male/dominant/superior and female/submissive/inferior ideology only with the *slight variation*,⁵⁷ in my opinion also stands negated, by the Gandhian practice. Gandhi did, in fact, consider the act of denial, self-sacrifice and non-violence as superior and valued women innate capacity to be naturally so inclined thus is evidenced in the conscious 'feminization' of his own personality⁵⁸. In many senses it is the feminine personality which who the archetypical Gandhian personality. That he nursed his father in ill health and was guilt ridden because he could not nurse devotedly enough; that he mothered the orphaned Manu who appropriately titled her book *Bapu-My Mother*; that he was constantly involved with the kitchen experimenting with different food stuffs and was preoccupied with the cullinary ways to attain good health, all indicate that he had internalized the feminine personality. Despite the fact that he did diligently adhere to '... and if my life does not carry that message to you, the word of my mouth will never succeed' there have been widespread doubts as to Gandhi's 'Patriarchal' intentions.

⁵⁶ Veena Masumdar, 'The Social Reform Movement in India From Ranade to Nehru' in B.R. Nanda (ed.), Indian Women: From Purdah to Modernity, Radiant Publishers, Delhi, 1976. p. 58.

⁵⁷ Sujata Patel, Construction and Reconstruction of Women in Gandhi, Paper Presented at the Nehru Memorial Library, 1987, p.13.

⁵⁸ Malavika Karlekar, 'The Relevance of Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi: A Contemporary Perspective', in the Indian Journal of Gender Studies, Vol.2, No. 1, Jan. - June 1995, p.53.

Another point that I think needs to be mentioned here that women have, probably, never had the opportunity to chart out their own subjectivity. Patriarchy defined her in opposition to man and Feminism without probably intending to do so defined as his equal which has frequently, if not always, been translated to mean 'the same'. While earlier she was slave to one boss now she has become slave to two, since attitudes have not kept pace with larger socio-economic change. At the risk of wholesale endorsement of Gandhian philosophy I dare say that Gandhi while helped open new avenues for women and built in them a new confidence by demanding for them equal rights in deference to their difference on the one hand, he also made available to them their right to subjectivity by not endorsing woman's confinement to the household on the other.

Eco-feminism the new kind of feminism that is based on womens perception of themselves analogous to nature which patriarchy and capitalism have exploited ruthlessly for their profit and gain is the reiteration of the same subjectivity and is remarkably in consonance with the Gandhian ideology and politics. Ecofeminism also sees the exploitation of Nature and Women sculpted within the text of Modernity and its ethos of maternalism and masculine control. This is evidenced quite clearly in the statement of a woman in Sicily protesting against the stationing of nuclear missiles in her country, 'Our "no" to war coincides with our struggle for liberation. Never have we seen so clearly the connection between nuclear escalation and the culture of musclemen; between the violence of war and the violence of rape. Such in fact to the historical memory that women have of war... But it is also our daily experience in "peacetime" and in this respect women are perpetually at war. It is no coincidence that the gruesome

game of war- in which the greater part of the male sex seems to delight passes through the same stages as the traditional sexual relationship aggression, conquest, possession control. Of a woman or a land, it makes little difference⁵⁹.

Shiva and Mies state that capitalist patriarchal system engendered by the Enlightenment ideas is a product of modern civilization is built upon and maintains itself through colonization of women of 'foreign' peoples and their lands, and of nature. It structurally dichotomizes reality and opposes the two parts to each other; the one always considered superior, always striving and progressing at the expense of the other. Feminist have long criticized this dichotomy particularly the structural division of man and nature, which is seen or analogous to that of man and woman. However to overcome this dichotomy feminists have simply up-ended it leaving antagonist relationship of any two hierarchically ordered parts, intact. An Eco-feminist perspective thus propound the needs of a new cosmology which recognized that life in nature is maintained by means of co-operation and mutual care and love. This reweaving of the world, healing of the wounds and reconnecting and interconnecting the 'web' would require effort to create a holistic all-life embracing cosmology which must reject the notion of freedom which enlightenment has defined as conquering nature and her bounds.

⁵⁹ Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, Ecofeminism, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993. p. 15.

POST INDEPENDENCE INDIA: A BREAK WITH THE PAST?

The Gandhian intervention the consequent mass participation of women in the public sphere marked at the advent of a new era for the Indian women. The new sense of power that women acquired in the process meant that 'from this point on there was no going back.

The Mahatma chose to speak to and write at length about the women of his country. He listened to the hitherto voiceless and reached out to them in their own idiom. Most of all he was able to give to them a confidence which was possible only by the 'revolutionary praxis' of involving all kind of women into the struggle for Swaraj. The new woman who had been carved out by earlier discourse freed from many a shack only now ventured out of the house and pardah to face the barefacedness of walking unveiled in public processions and all that was afterwards involved in the prison life. Only now was she able to give up religious taboos and caste prejudices. Only now was she able to come into her own; what was remarkable was that this woman could now as easily be a poor peasant woman, she need not necessarily belong to the middle class. She was the common woman and only one among very many like her.

This face of the Hindu woman surprized Mary Campbell, like it suprised many others who witnessed this tremendous change in such a short period of time. She wrote, describing a picketing incidence in Delhi, struck by the Satyagrahis tenacity as they quietly salaamed each customer who approached the liquor shop. Finally 'the hefty

policeman arrived with police vans and wanted the women to go away. I thought these delicate sheltered women will give in man; they would never endure being touched by a policeman. But they did, and as fast as one relay was arrested another took its place. Altogether about 1600 women ever imprisoned in Delhi alone. But they had done their work. Though the shops opened no one went in¹. From passive objects women had become active subjects².

Thus the change in the Hindu Woman and her situation that began to unfold beginning with Rammohan Roy and almost exclusively male reformist effort had come a full circle in the Gandhian intervention and women's mass participation in the Nationalist movement when, renewed struggle was initiated to institute legislative reform, this time by women. It was women now who were organizing themselves and agitating this time for the right to be equal. The decade 1910-1920 was one in which first attempts at setting up of an all-India women organization were made. Women had earlier organized themselves in a variety of ways in an effort to improve their position in the society. Most of these organization however, emphasized social reforms and education-such as Poona Seva Sadan, the Servants of India Society, Maharishi Karve's University for Hindu women. There were a few organization outside the realm of social reform such as Bombay Graduate Women's Union or the Women's branch of the Home

¹ Campwell in Ketu H. Katrak, 'Indian Nationalism, Gandhian "Satyagraha" and Representations of Female Sexuality' in Andrew Parker et al.(eds.), Nationalism and Sexualities, Routledge, New York, p. 401.

² Madhu Kishwar, Gandhi and Women, Manushi Prakashan, New Delhi, 1986. pp. 10-21.

Rule League³. However none of them were successful in mobilizing a large number of women or in providing unified leadership to them on a national level.

One of the first attempts at coming together on a larger scale, was made in 1908, when there was a Mahila Parishad or Ladies Congress at Madras attended by women from all over South India. Two years later Sarala Debi founded the Bharat Stree Mahamandal intending to form an all-India women's organization, with 'the object of bringing together women of all castes and creeds on the basis of their common interests in the moral, material progress of women in India'⁴. However the organization and its activities remained largely confined to its three branches in Lahore, Allahabad and Calcutta. The time and probably the women's consciousness was not ripe enough for it.

It was in 1917 that the first all-India women's organization was founded by Annie Besant along with Jinarajadasa, Malati Patwardhan, Mrs Dadabhoy, Margret Cousins and Ammu Swaminathan -- Women Indian Association which represented a new development in women's consciousness, 'the emergence of a consciously fostered unity of Indian woman hood'⁵. Among the first to join were Sarojini Naidu, Dr. Muthu Lakshmi Reddy, Kamaladevi Chattopadaya and Lady Sadshive Aiyer. By 1921 the organization had established 48 branches and a membership of 2700. The women's Indian Association

³ Vijay Agnew, Elite Women in Indian Politics, Vikas, Delhi, 1979. p. 104.

⁴ Radha Kumar, The History of Doing : An Illustrated Account of Movements for Women's Rights and Feminism in India, 1800-1900, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1993, p.54.

⁵ Ibid.

was conceived of and organized by British women. The Association itself was largely in response to similar movements in the West, that were pressing for political personhood for women, therefore despite its avowed goals of educational opportunities for women and improvement of their position by social reforms, it became increasingly involved in the question of women's rights to vote and was in the main responsible for organizing the Indian suffragette movement.

It was Sarojini Naidu who was the main spokesperson in the deputation that was organized to meet Montague in 1917 to demand enfranchisement and better educational opportunities. Though the delegation was received sympathetically no mention was made of it in the subsequent reform package . A committee was later instituted to make a detailed study of the question, which mostly in keeping with the precedent, held that Women's Indian Association was not the representative of the masses. Sarojini Naidu appeared as witness before the joint committee of Lords and Commons hearing evidence for the Government of India Bill of 1919. Though it did not secure women's enfranchisement, it did empower provincial legislature to remove sex barrier at their discretion. Many of the provinces immediately issued resolution, showing faith in the new Indian women. The Congress in fact passed a resolution on Adult suffrage in 1918. The growing political and social awareness among women led to an increase in number and popularity of womens organization. Of these the two most important were National Council for women founded in 1925 an All Indian Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. In 1928 the AIWC founded an All India Women's Education Fund to finance a collage for women. The Lady Irvin College in Delhi. The primary purpose of the AIWC was educational reform but they interested themselves in all aspects of a women's life.

For social reform such as the Sharda Bill for prevention of child marriage, the removal of legal disabilities in the law of inheritance and marriage, and the right of women to vote. The National Council for women on the other had tried to provide a link among the various organizations working for advancement and welfare of women in India and abroad.

It was due to the protracted struggle by the AIWC what had taken over from WIA the work of gaining recognition for women political rights that the Government of India Act of 1935 incorporated right to vote by women. This right was available to women over 21 years of age provided they fulfilled one of the following requirements. They were literate, were property owners or were wives or widows of men having property. This enfranchised 6 million women against 29 million men. A ratio of 1:5 but nevertheless encompassing a significant absolute number. Women could also be elected to the legislature and 41 seats were kept reserved for them though they could also contest general seats. It speaks volumes for the confidence that the last century fostered in women that the AIWC opposed reservation of seats for women and wanted to contest from general constituencies. The 'new woman' had finally emerged successful, enlightened and an equal participant in social and political sphere. Signifying a break with the past; A new woman who was expected to get stronger with time as she realized her full potential that had been locked up and locked away for centuries. The constitution was framed keeping in mind this new assertive force which demanded subjecthood and equality and would not settle for less. Indeed there was no turning back, or was there?

The development in the socio-political spheres in the last two decades have however, made us rethink. Whether the break with the past was actually made or is there still a continuity underlying this apparent significant change? Was the equality that women fought for an achieved only symbolic real equality being a yet far off dream dependent not only on change in women and the constitutional attitude towards them but also on change in the larger societal attitudes especially patriarchal attitudes which as we have seen were never really challenged. Anyway, it was quite an explicitly stated fact that the women's question in India was not a question asked vis-a-vis men, and therefore did not entail sex war. The right to equality and vote were not for the aggrandizement of women but so that women could fulfill their larger public responsibilities.

In conclusion, I would like to briefly touch upon two emergent trends in the Indian society that have had, and if they continue, will also in future have, profound effect on the Indian women. The first is the resurgence of religious fundamentalism and revoking of communal identities and the second is the 'consumerist ethos' that has taken hold of the Indians' imagination in the post 'Liberalization' and 'structural adjustment' India.

I. **Religious Fundamentalism: The Shah Bano Case, The Hindutva Agenda and the Deorala Sati.**

*"In a context where everyman is a soldier,
every woman becomes occupied territory."*

The issue of religious fundamentalism especially Hindu fundamentalism which in essential connivance with the political motives, in the 1980's has been of profound

consequence for the Indian/Hindu women since the ideology behind the fundamentalist strategy remains that of constituting women in and through communal identity and conversely constitution community in and through women's gender identity.

Interestingly, and ironically, the fundamentalist discourse has taken recourse to the 'modern' concepts of democracy, fundamental rights and secularism (especially taking advantage of the ambivalent concept of the Indian secularism)⁶ to assert their

⁶ Secularism is widely accepted as a cornerstone of Indian democracy. There is however no similar consensus on the meaning of this concept. Indeed, secularism has come to mean many things to many people. At least two different conceptualizations of secularism can be identified in the Indian legal and political discourse. In the first approach, secularism is understood as the separation of religion and politics. Within this formal approach there can be no state involvement in religion and no law based religion. The state must maintain a position of strict neutrality and impartiality towards religion. Freedom of religion based on a liberal understanding that asserts that each individual is free to follow the religion of his or her choice without state interference. This formal approach has by and large been rejected as western, and anti-religious and inappropriate in the Indian context. In the second approach, secularism is based on the Gandhian notion of '*Sarvadharmā Samābhava*' the equal respect for all religions. This approach is not based on the separation of religion from politics, but rather on equality of all religions within political and private life. This vision of secularism implies not the distancing of religion from state but a continuum of all religions with politics or this state. In this secular vision is also emphasized the equality of all religions, and impartiality of the state. The impartiality of state vis-à-vis all religions is stressed, as the state itself is supposed to be the representative body of all religious communities. *Sarvadharmā Samābhava* has been widely accepted as the meaning of secularism in India and it is this approach that has dominated legal and political thoughts since independence. It has similarly been widely accepted as the concept of freedom of religion in Indian constitutional Law and has thus allowed state intervention in religion.

See Radha Kapur and Brenda Cossman,

'Communalizing Gender/ Engendering Community: Women, Legal Discourse and Saffron Agenda', in Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. XVIII. No. 17, April 24, 1993. pp. W.S. 37.

communal 'identity' and further their communalist agenda. In effect their concepts of equality and secularism have become the site of a contest for meaning, as these fundamentalist forces seek to redefine these concepts in accordance with their narrow vision of what the relationship between religion and politics and the role of women in Indian society should be. In the fundamentalist eyes community and gender or more specifically, religion and equality are often seen as conflicting and oppositional.⁷ Indeed the conflict between right to freedom of religion and women's right to equality as proved explosive, often resulting in communal disturbances, as witnessed by both the Shah Bano and the Roop Kanwar case.

A woman's right to maintenance on divorce became controversial in 1985 in what is referred to as the Shah Bano Case. Shah Bano, a 75 year old divorcee of Mohammad Ahmed Khan had filed a petition under section 125 of the Cr.P.C (Criminal Procedure Code) which deems criminal the denial of maintenance to destitute, deserted or divorced women, when her monthly allowance was abruptly stopped. While the petition was still pending Khan, divorcing Shah Bano this time by the triple *talaq* method, deposited the amount of *Mehr* in the court which however, held that Bano was entitled to maintenance apart from the *Mehr*. When the highcourt upheld the judgement Khan appealed to the Supreme Court saying that the High Court had violated the Muslim

⁷ Since the precise meaning of equality vis-a-vis religion is not clear in the Indian-style secularism, the equal respect for all religion could mean that religions must be treated equally that is treated the *same* in law. Alternatively it could mean that religions could be equal in result-that is the law may have to treat them *differently* to ensure that they are treated equally. Translated in terms of gender the fundamentalist view endorses and espouses the concept of *harmony* in diversity and not *substantive equality* as the organizing principle.

personal law as treated by *Shariat* which was the one according to which he should be judged. He also produced written evidence from the Muslim Personal Law Board saying that under the Shariat the husband was not obliged to pay maintenance for more than three months after divorce; with this and with giving his ex-wife her 'mehr' his duties towards her ended.

The Supreme Court ruled in favour of Shah Bano. However this verdict did not rule that maintenance should be provided on any secular grounds and to prevent vagrancy; neither that not doing so would be infringing on the rights of a woman. But ruled so in keeping with the verses of Koran⁸ that deemed obligatory such maintenance. Even the Bill to exclude Muslim women from the purview of section 125 Cr.P.C. was argued against by Arif. Muhammad Khan *not* on the grounds that section 125 was intended to prevent vagrancy and uphold womens rights and as such was not interfering with the personal laws of any community *but* as an impassioned plea for humane reading of the Shariat.

⁸ The same verses were also cited by Arif Mohammad Khan in his plea for a humane reading of the *Shariat*. They are:

Ayat 241	English Version
Wali'l motallaqatay	For divorced women
Mata un	Maintenance (should be provided)
Bil maroofay	On a reasonable (Scale)
Haqqan	This is a duty
Alal muttaaqeena	On the righteous
Ayat 242	
Kazaleka yuba	Thus doth God
iyyanullaho	
Lakum ayatehee la	Make clear His Signs
Allakum	
Taqaloon	To you: in order that you may understand.

Thus the distinction between maintenance on destitution (section 125 Cr.P.C), and maintenance on divorce (which falls under personal law) was largely blurred. By the virtue of this the distinction between Criminal and Civil Law was also blurred: at the same time criminal law was banished from the territory of maintenance. Finally, the entire problem of female destitution was itself placed outside the purview of the court, on the ground that, the text of the personal law did not deal with it. In effect it brought the issues of religion and personal law into what was essentially a question of *secular* criminal law on the one hand and women's right on the other. Further instead dealing with the the general issue of personal laws and how they affected women's right, the judgement focussed on Muslim Personal Law alone.

An analogous case was that of the Sati of Roop Kanwar, which roiled a great controversy and once again found as many (if not more) 'advocates for' as 'opponents against' itself. However both arguments for and against the 'burning of widows' once again side stepped the question of women's rights and justice, much to the feminists chagrin. While the arguments for, saw, the whole polemic as threatening to the Rajput, and later, to Hindu identity and unity besides being essentially unsecular, the lobby against, attributed the Deorala episode to ignorance and illiteracy of the rural masses who were prone to blind superstition and excessive religiosity mainly owing to their neglect by the mainstream polity and economy. Both the proponents and opponents once again embarked on a renewed examination of ancient text to establish whether or not these sanctioned Sati, reminiscent of the colonial past.

However, this 'modern day Sati' was conducted with approval and applause of the social community, which signified an unqualified and open endorsement of the devaluation of women in Indian society. Roop Kanwar's past, after her murder, was recreated to mythologize her as an embodiment of all womanly and wifely virtues, quite in contrast to the general, cultural evaluation of women in India. 'No wonder, then, that so many women are awe inspired by the new Sati cult'. In fact Vijayaraje Scindia went on record saying that Sati is a part of 'our' cultural heritage, and that, it is the fundamental right of every Hindu woman to commit Sati, if they want to. The statement, interestingly, is a careful intermingling of two discourses; traditionalist and a modernist appeal to the liberal rights discourse. Thus today the Hindu fundamentalist discourse of tradition and modernity, religion and liberalism are carefully and insidiously manipulate to justify-even celebrate-the oppression of women in Hindu communities. Women are, first reconstituted through the religious discourse in which the good wife performs the ultimate act of self-sacrifice. This image is reinforced by the modern discourse of women choosing to exercise their rights. Both the discourse are used to legitimize this extremely violent act against women.

II. Globalization, Consumerism and Women.

'..... (W)omanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity'.

--Kumkum Sangari & Sudesh Vaid

'It is not coincidental that the breakdown of Nehruvian secularism in post-independence India has been simultaneously with the dismantling of the "Socialist" paraphrenalia in the economic realm. There is (perhaps) a close connection between the

New economic policy and the rise of communalism"⁹. Thus the other trend that the feminists/women in India (as in all of South East Asia) have to reckon with is the 'greater competition as a result of a more aggressive penetration of the world capitalism' and the resulting 'technocratic, individualistic, Western consumer culture', since these are the main participants in the 'politics of representation' of women especially through the advertising media. It is significant that in a nation where women form the poorest segment of society and where a majority of them face repression in all kinds of ways, the symbol of the 'new Indian womanhood' and the representation of the 'new Indian culture' is the winner of the world beauty pageant. An image far removed from the truth, which is arguably, both constructed, maintained and exploited by these very capitalist/consumerist forces for their own narrow interests.¹⁰

'The emergence of (this) "new Indian Woman" (mainly through and) in the media and the official discourse in India today (is a) construction which serves not only to deny the actual conflicts that women essentially register as an aspect of their lives but works also to reconcile in her subjectivity, the conflict between tradition and modernity in the Indian society'¹¹.

⁹ This connection is evident even superficially, as it is a worldwide trend. In all the former socialist countries, identity politics and communal strife have flared up, often taking the form of a civil war. See Gabriele Dietrich, 'Women and Religious Identities in India after Ayodhya', in Kamla Bhasin and Ritu Menon (eds.), Against All Odds, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1994. p. 47.

¹⁰ Sushmita Sen is generally seen to be the symbol of this 'new' Indian womanhood-the appropriate representation of 'Indian culture' in the new world order. However, her position as the 'cultural ambassador' is a position she could attain only in a capitalist/consumerist order and through 'accomplishments' that can connote newness, that is liberatedness, modernity only in such an order.

¹¹ Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan, Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Post Colonialism, Routledge, 1993. p.

Thus, the glossy image of the new Indian women who is liberated modern (Ipshita Chanda has pointed out that new/liberated/modern are taken to be metonymous)¹² and a mother, a wife all at once, on the one hand maintains a continuity of the Indian 'tradition', for, even as an ace consumer, a contributor to, in charge, in control of the families financial resources she spends in the interest of her family thus paying due respect to her cultural ideal. Even if she is portrayed as a young, rebellious, sexual being, juxtaposed to her is always the older married woman who is the logical culmination of the former, not letting the former stray too far from her social/cultural moorings. On the other hand this 'fantastic' portrayal glamorizes the symptoms of female oppression and women are almost always portrayed in 'their rightful place'-the 'home'- doing all chores, even the meanest, with gay abandon and least disdain. Thus offering the desired image of a liberated woman similar to the feminist one but 'arrived at by a different trajectory'. Advertising's co-optation of precisely those areas of women's liberation that the women's liberation movement has marked out for itself -- sexuality, work, marriage and family -- therefore marginalizes the women's question. Women's 'objectification' in more ways than one, makes them merely a power to 'cash in on'. Women are redefined, yet again, but the only thing new about this redefinition is the purpose for which it is done that, adds or subtracts a few elements here and there while leaving the essential core (of eternal wifehood and motherhood) the same. Moreover, the glamourizing of this (oppressive) core reinforces the patriarchal values and expectations anew. These 'ideological manoeuvres, more subtle and coercive' use this image, it must be remembered, to sell the products and 'to obliterate the

¹² Ibid. p.

political project of feminisms and appropriate certain aspects of women's movements agenda into the construction of a new sign system'.

The project of studying the connection between these two post-colonial developments and their implications for women can be explored and examined in detail at the Doctoral level, the reason for which have been provided by this project undertaken at the level of Master of Philosophy.

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