THE BENGALI BHADRAMAHILA

1930 - 34

INDRANI CHATTERJEE

CENTRE FOR HISTORICAL STUDIES
SCHOOL OF SOCIAL SCIENCES
JAWAHARLAL NEHRU UNIVERSITY
NEW DELHI
1 9 8 6

Centre for Historical Studies
School of Social Sciences
Jawaharlal Nehru University
New Delhi - 110 067

Certified that the dissertation entitled **The Bengali Bhadramahila: 1930-34**, submitted by Indrani Chatterjee, is in fulfillment of eight credits out of the twenty-four credits for the degree of Master of Philosophy of this University. This dissertation has not been previously submitted for any other degree of this or other University and is her own work.

We recommend that this dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

Chairperson

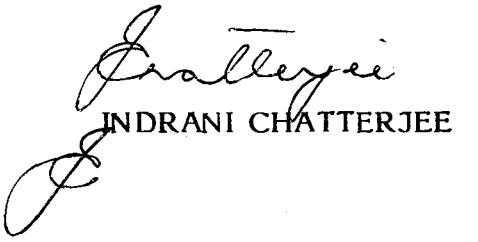
Supervisor

(S. Bhattacharya)

THE BENGALI BHADRAMAHILA

1930 - 1934

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of **MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**



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CONTENTS

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INTRODUCTION

"... I write, or try to, between actions
(which hardly leaves much time but that's okay)
things about women, my sisters and myself
in the hope that some small ticking insight
from the page which is the one place I don't lie
ignites a fuse of righteous bitterness
in a woman (my sister or myself)
that can flash into an action no one - least of all me -
could have foreseen erupting
one thing I know :
there is no atom that is not political, ...
... it doesn't mean one damn disguise
which woman I address this to, or how I sign it,
since all of us are underground ...
thousands of years in hiding, and only now
beginning to surface. Ready. ..."[1]

The attempts to make women surface from the underside of Indian history have been, by their very nature, limited - limited in content and by their methodology. Much early women's history began with what Natalie Zemon - Davis called the study of 'women worthies': chronicles of famous or exceptional women were written by Padmini Sengupta, H.N. and Amrit Verma. In works like 'The Story of Women of India' (1974) and 'Eminent Indian Women' (n.d.), which began with Maitreyi and Gargi and included Indira Gandhi and the Mother of Pondicherry, a few centuries

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1. Quoted in Robin Morgan (ed.): Sisterhood is Powerful, (London, 1982) Introduction

were condensed into pages and the specificities of 'time' and 'place' were blurred. Another group of works in modern Indian history took movements or events already established as important and examined the role women played in them : what Gerda Lerner termed 'women's contribution' history. This approach accepted what was defined as important to men's past as its subject matter and required no new conceptualisation of history. Neera Desai's 'Woman in Modern India' (1957) and Pratima Asthana's 'Women's Movement in India' (1974) were characteristic of this genre. Though significant contributions were later made by Vijay Agnew[2], Jana M. Everett[3], Ghulam Murshid[4] and Meredith Borthswick[5], it became increasingly apparent that not all historical writing about women is necessarily feminist history. Feminism is a way of living and a means of analysis. Its central concern is with the social distinction between men and women, the causes and consequences of this distinction, and its meanings, manifestations and mediations.

Feminism thus empowers and requires us to think about the purposes and methods of social science. A woman - centred history becomes possible only when we re-think what is 'important' in the past and how we analyse it. Many of the sign-posts marking the path of the researcher collapse as a result of this re-thinking. One such is the conception of objectivity. It implies a separation of the observer and observed, the knower and the known. By negating this polarity, feminist scholarship withdraws consent from given constructions of what is to be known and

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2. V.Agnew : Elite women in Indian Politics. (New Delhi,1977)
3. J M Everett: Women and Social change in India (New Delhi,1979)
4. G.Murshid : Reluctant Debutante (Raj Shahi, 1983)
5. M.Borthswick : Changing Role of women in Bengal 1849-1905 (Princeton, 1984)

how. Linearity, the other significant marker, is also negated : to quote Du Bois,[6] these are not properties of 'nature, nor of human life and experiencing...(but) of a learned mode of thought, a way of seeing and knowing that casts reality into rigid, oppositional and hierarchical categories.' 'Linearity furthermore, is based on a certain conception of temporality which, as Kristeva[7] points out, needs to be re-examined. Linearity also makes imperative the adoption of dichotomies and dualities like progress/regress, - a binary opposition which inheres in titles like 'Indian Women : From Purdah to Modernity' (1976) edited by B.R. Nanda, - a duality which reduces the possibility of studying women 'on their own terms'. Another duality to fall by the wayside is the particular/general or whole. Where traditional history inserts events into explanatory systems and linear processes, feminist history would seek to consider events in their sigularity, focusing on a whole range of phenomena denied a history. This is where Foucault's conception of history and historical analysis could prove very useful: his 'genealogy' incorporates within itself an awareness of the complexity, contingency and fragility of historical events.

Yet, as a number of writers have stressed, women cannot be treated as an undifferentiated group. Women's biological characteristics present a deceptively natural set of criteria around which social distinctions are marked, but even these are culturally specific. 'Women' as a term should be subject to analytical scrutiny : the intersection of gender with

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6. Barbara Du Bois : 'Passionate Scholarship' in Gloria Bowles and Renate D. Klein (ed.), Theories of Women's Studies, 1983, pp.105-113.

7. Julia Kristeva : 'Women's Time' in Keohane, Rosaldo and Gelpi(ed.), Feminist Theory : A Critique of Ideology, 1982, pp.31-55.

class and caste is particularly significant. However, for the purpose of this work, we will concentrate on the 'bhadramahila in Bengal, accepting Borthswick's definition as 'the mothers, wives and daughters of the many school masters, lawyers, doctors and government servants who made up the English - educated professional Bengali "middle class" or bhadralok.'[8].

The circumscription that this entails is clear in Chaper I, which seeks to locate women's work and access to, and control of resources like education and property. 'Work' is all activity or expenditure of energy that produces services and products of value to other people - thus it includes both work for a wage and housework. Women's access to waged work was itself limited to the three main industries in Bengal - jute mills, coal-mines and tea plantations, to the professions of leather-care and education. Yet, women in the latter professions need not have been uniform ly more privileged than women engaging in industrial or agricultural work. This can be validated by a quick glance at their access to decision - making, more specifically, the vote. Though the British Parliament, in 1919, left the question of women's vote to the various elected legislatives of India, in Bengal, women got the vote only in 1925. Till 1931, the qualification for this vote was (a) being the wife of a man who held property and was over 25 or (b) a holder of property on her own right. This left the women's electorate in the proportion of one woman to every twenty-six men in Bengal. In 1931, the Franchise Sub-Committee of

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8. M. Borthswick : Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905, (Princeton 1984) Introduction

the Round Table Conference broadened the qualifications to include literacy. By this scheme, it was estimated that 377,000 more women above the age of 21 would get the vote : the total number of women voters would be 1,500,000.[9] But as the figures for the 1937 elections showed, there were only 896,588 women enrolled as voters, of whom only 46,758 actually voted.[10] Even when the right was granted to women to contest the Calcutta Corporation elections in 1933, the actuality of their experience contrasted with the notion of their empowerment. As Jyotirmoyee Ganguli, one of the two successful women in these elections, recounted, one elderly gentleman even wanted to know "...will that woman sweep the roads and clean the drains that you have come brandishing the fact before me?".[11] This, she was sure, had never been asked of the male candidates, nor had they complied with such demands. Manikuntala Sen, too, recalled the allocation of a ticket to her by the Communist Party of India on the ground that they had no suitable male candidate for that region.[12] It is evident, then, that women's access to power is itself constrained - and one of the sites where this constraint operates is ideology.

Chapter II will seek to delve into the dominant way of conceptualising women, specially in literature. It is not hard to find out what men thought of women - their ideas about women are accessible through the laws they passed and maintained, through the novels, essays, poems

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9. V. Agnew : Elite Women in Indian Politics, (New Delhi 1977) p.120
10. Ibid, p.127.
11. J. Ganguli : "I Choose Thee My Representative" in Modern Review, May 1933, pp.547-49.
12. M. Sen : Shediner Katha. (Calcutta, 1988)

and articles they wrote and publicised. It is women's ideas of themselves that are difficult to locate - since their literacy production could never 'equal' their male counterparts' or gain the approval of their predominantly male critics. When Radharani Debi's 'Lilakamal' was published in the late twenties, a young progressive writer, a member of the I.C.S., was reported to have said - "Since poems of such intense emotional passion written by a child widow from a respectable Hindu family could not be addressed to any real person, therefore, these empty words of imaginary passion, though technically superb, could possess no ultimate value."[13] Sharatchandra Chatterjee, a famous contemporary of Radharani's, too, posited that 'true' art must come out of 'true' experience and love poems by a child widow who had not tasted love could not be true art. In this chapter, therefore, we will seek not only to decode woman - as - sign but also to note the achievements of women - as - authors, recognising that women's attempts to create images are as 'political' as their voting, marching in processions, joining associations etc.

Symbols do not have meaning inherent in them : it must be invested in and interpreted from symbols by acting social beings. Chapter III will address itself to this problematic in delineating the various ways in which women acted, all of which constituted what we understand as 'political'.

The context for their various forms of acting was Bengal during

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13. Quoted in N. Deb Sen : 'Attitude towards Women Writers and Women's Self-Image' in The Role and Status of Women in India, (Calcutta, 1978)

1930-34. The belligerent tone of the anti-Simon demonstrations of 1928 was heightened by the depression of late 1929. Prices of agricultural commodities, which had been declining from 1926, catapultted downwards, causing a major crisis in the export - oriented colonial economy. In Bengal, the price of winter rice (1929 = 100) went down to 45.9 in 1932, while that of jute slumped to 43.5 by 1934.[14] The structures of colonial exploitation turned to meet this challenge by (a) accommodating Indian capital in some spheres and (b) by 'rationalisation' drives and wage-cuts in areas where british capital investment remained intensive - i.e. in mining, tea and jute. Where Indian business interests grew more trenchant, labour upsurge manifested itself in a spate of industrial protests, in the jute mills in Chengail and Bauria, in the carters' strike in Calcutta. Communalism, which the Bengal Pact of 1923 had sought to control, flared up with the failure of the Bengal Tenancy Amendment Bill of 1928, by which some tenancy rights could have been given to the bargadars (share croppers) and which could have reduced jotedar domination. Hindu jotedars and Muslim bargadars had clashed in the mid twenties; with the formation of the Praja Party in 1929, the tone was set for this period.

These were also the years of increased student unrest - as education became a 'transferred' subject and opportunities increased, the avenues of employment failed to keep pace. L arge sections of these youth reverted to the traditions of revolutionary terrorism, even involving 'direct

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14. B.B. Chaudhuri : 'Process of Depeasantisation in Bengal and Bihar 1885-1947' in Indian Historical Review, July 1975, p.117.

action' by women. However, the traditional rivalry of the two principal revolutionary terrorist groups, the 'Yugantar' and the 'Anushilan' was also revived. It was echoed in the rivalry between Subhash Bose and J.M. Sengupta in the Bengal Congress. The Gandhian call for Civil Disobedience found each of them setting up rival organisations to conduct the movement in Bengal, and wasting much energy in Calcutta Corporation electioneering even at the height of the movement.

Yet, Gandhi's choice of salt brought the struggle into the home : his attack on liquor, foreign cloth and avowal of 'khadi' proved very important for women. Though initially reluctant to allow women to join the movement, he soon realised the strength of numbers. If jail-going is any indication, many more women went to jail in this movement than they had during the Non-Cooperation in 1921-22.[15] The premium on visibility, that this movement re-inforced, had gathered its own momentum from the turn of the century, through the spread of western education and associational activity, we have to consider the significance of this in terms of women's expectations for themselves, their notions of 'public' and 'private', their attempts to practise their beliefs and their possible failures. 1934 was the year when the movement was formally withdrawn; it represents only a cut-off point and is as arbitary as any other.

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15. Sumit Sarkar : Modern India 1885-1947, (Delhi, 1983) p. 290

This attempt to bring them from 'cause' to 'subjecthood' has been incomplete, partly due to the constraints of time and data, and partly, also due to an awareness that the areas not addressed need a maturity of theory we hoep to arrive at as work progresses. The neglect of the Muslim 'bhadramahila' will be redressed subsequently. So will the over-looking of 'religion- the importance of it for women's lives is evidenced as well by their birth, menstrual, marriage and mouring rituals. These are a unified whole- not only enacting and expressing reality but also representing reality itself, as women perceive it and as society relates to it. As Urquhart noted in Bengal in 1925, the bhadramahila were excluded from the worship of every god, except Shiva, the 'Ishta Devata' and 'Shashthi', the protectress of women. In her words, 'woman is, ... a spectator. She prepares the materials of worship, she blows the conch-shell, bows her head but she may not touch the image after it has been consecrated. Brahmin women and non-Brahmin ~~because~~ were equal in this.[16] This makes it vital for us to separate and understand the domain of rituals on its own terms.

Nowhere overtly discussed is also the notion of sexuality. We have only prescriptions (of eminent men, specially Gandhi) of sexual behaviour pertaining to widows : they were to remain absolutely 'pure' and utterly self sacrificing for all who needed them. The only certainty we arrive at is that sexuality was proscribed outside of marriage. The nature of celibacy, both within and outside of marriage, would be a very interesting area of study, especially for women's experiencing.

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16. M.M. Urquhart : Woman of Bengal, (1924), p.107.

LOCATING WOMEN

The search for the 'bhadramahila' should begin with examining the nature of their work, education, preprietory and civil rights- all the various hallmarks that would formally distinguish them from 'other' women. But it is also obvious that very few of them had access to waged, economic activity; nor-was their control over the pittances they earned absolute, given the lack of autonomy over their own bodies and their time; and the absence of legal protection.

Yet we also know that women did work for wages- in mining, jute and tea,-where there numbers were substantial. It is worth speculating whether thus working for a wage was considered to be characterising only the women of the 'chhotolok'. In this chapter, therefore, the work and situation of women in industry is a necessary context, within which the work and situation of the bhadramahila will be identified. One common denominator for both of them was that official sources uniformly denied, or reduced, the facts of their economic agency.

Before attempting to identify women's access to, and control of, resources like work, education and property, on the basis of official records, we should keep in mind Newell's comment:

" ...Historical or longitudinal use of Indian census data is almost inevitably constrained by problems of comparability between the censuses. Inconsistency in the data has taken two primary forms : changes in the definition of the criteria and categories used and the lack of common operational standards and results not only between different censuses, but also between different localities and communities in the same census... "[1]

The most critical problems involve determining the participation of women in the labour force, and distinguishing breadwinners from economic dependents in each occupational category, especially in a comparison between the definitions of 1921 and 1931. In the 1921 census, workers were "actual workers having productive occupations." In 1931, workers had to be 'earners with productive occupations 'supporting, or principally supporting,' them and 'working dependents in productive occupations.[2] 'Dependents' and 'actual workers in non-productive occupations' in 1921 were

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1. Richard Newell "The Census as a Tool in The Study of Modern Urban Labour Forces in INdia : A Case Study from Thamilnad" in The Census in British India, ed. N.G. Barrier, (Manohar, Delhi, 1981).
2. Indian Census in Perspective - Census Centenary Monograph No. 1, 1971.

considered persons who do not work. This included both in 1921 and 1931, people who did not work but had income, like the non-cultivating proprietor taking rent in money or kind etc. The distinction that did not exist in 1921, but appeared in 1931, was that between 'primary' occupation and 'subsidiary' occupation: in the latter were included working dependents; who assisted in the work of the family but did not earn a wage. This affected the enumeration of women in the occupations because they were viewed as dependents, and their work in the field and the house thus became subsidiary. It was "felt that it would be at variance with general sentiment and actual fact"[3] to return all women as earners who had any income whatever from land or investments or shares in property or business in the direction of which they took no active part; and in the case of females, insistence was laid upon the provision that such income must contribute at least the main part of their support. It is possible that, for the above reasons, in 1931, women were under-enumerated in some occupations and over-enumerated in others.

This is one of the obstacles in the way of formulating a valid hypothesis in this chapter. For example, it has been argued by social scientists, that, in the period 1901 - 1961, the female work-force moved increasingly away from industry towards agriculture. Yet, substantiating this for Bengal proved impossible,

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3. Census of India, Vol. V, Part I, 1931.

as the figures reveal. In the agricultural sector in 1921, there were supposed to have been 547,429 females, and in 1931, 342,076 females. The absolute decrease in the number of females in agriculture is perhaps the function of the 1931 definitions, since women would rarely be returned as 'earners' therein. A more general qualification to tracing women's participation in agricultural work from Census reports, is that, since the respondents are mainly men who are the 'heads' of 'households', all production attributable to the members of the household can be seen as pertaining to the 'head' alone. Galbraith[4] suggests that this is responsible for grouping working-age women with children, old people, sick and handicapped, thus obscuring the fact that women may bear heavy responsibility for supporting genuinely dependent people.

There is also some connection to be made between classifications of women as 'dependents' and the official concern for the 'family'. Women were perhaps thought to have no 'need' to work - or to be paid for it, hence differential wages for same categories of work - because they were supposed to have fathers or husbands supporting them. This was tied up to the official idea that the 'family' should thrive : as part of the lament on the disproportionate sex ratios in the industrial towns, it was said:

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4. Quoted in Barbara Rogers 'Domestication of Women : Discrimination in Developing Societies.' (London 1980)

" ...the notorious instability of the city's civic peace is attributable to a certain measure to this disparity between males and females, the absence, encouraging recklessness, of family life which restrains moods of violence,... "[5]

Or, as the Report of the Royal Comission on Labour, 1930, recommended,

" ...The release of so many women of the miners' families from the industry should make possible the raising of the miners' standard of home life, with a consequent increase in their efficiency... "

The fundamental problem, as Kalpagam[6] points out, is that the concept of 'work' generally refers to that activity which generates cash income. So even when 'unpaid family labour' on farms and in household manufacturing was treated as work, activities crucial to household subsistence and generally performed by women like cooking, child-care and outdoor activities like free collection of fuel, water, small game, fruits, roots etc. as well as kitchen-gardening were not treated as work. Thus one has to redefine the concept of 'work' according to the visibility of it.

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5. Census of India, 1951, Vol. VI, Part III. p . viii. (Emphasis mine).

6. U. Kalpagam: 'Gender in Economics: The Indian Experience' in EPW, Vol. XXI, No. 43, October 25, 1986, WS 59-66).

Preceded, as it is, by these reservations, locating women can therefore only be a tentative exercise.

The female population in Bengal during 1921-41[7] rose:

T A B L E - I

Year	Total Population	Females	Growth
1921	47,592,462	22,530,814	
1931	50,114,002	24,529,478	2.04%
1941	61,460,377	29,099,976	2.4%

Yet this absolute increase did not seem to have improved the sex-ratio, which according to official sources, declined consistently to the disadvantage of the female. Thus these sources give the number of females per 1000 males as -

T A B L E - II

1921	1931	1941
932	924	899

The explanation offered by these sources is (a) the continuing immigration of males from outside the state in search of a livelihood. It was suggested that the immigrants rarely brought his

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7 Estimated from the Census of India 1921, 1931, 1941, Vols. V (Bengal)

wife and family with them, and this lead to the imbalance; (b) diminishing ratio of females in the natural population, implying that female mortality rate was higher then the male mortality rate. Yet the comparison between the sex-ratio figures of 1921 and 1931 do not stand upto the first explanation.

TABLE - III

	1921	1931
No. of females per 1000 males -		
in All Bengal	932	924
in Rural Areas	961	955
in All Cities	519	509
in Calcuta	470	469
in Industrial Towns	530	526
in Non-industrial Towns	816	787(8)

If immigration alone was responsible for the unfavourable sex-ratio then the ratio for Calcutta and the Industrial Towns in 1931 should have been much lesser (than the difference of 1 and 4 show respectively) than the ratios for 1921. However it is possible that internal migration, say from non-industrial towns, to Calcutta, of the female population could give the kind of figures quoted above.[8A] To substantiate this, it would be

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(8) Census of India, 1931, Vol. V, Part I, pp. 79-83.

8A Ranajit Das Gupta 'Factory Labour in Eastern India : Sources of Supply, 1855-1946 - Some Preliminary Findings' in IESHR, Vol. 8 No. 3, 1976 does establish that women were migrating to work in the industrial towns.

necessary to examine also whether in industrial towns, women were being inducted in any sizeable numbers during the period - our information on this is inadequate.

The other explanation of a higher mortality rate for females involves an examination of the effect of famines from mid-(19th century on mortality by sex, the effects of epidemics and of disease as a whole. The assumption of greater female mortality is not borne out by the following:[9]

T A B L E - IV

Causes	1921		1931	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Cholera	0.17%	0.17%	0.11%	0.11%
Fever	2.27%	2.32%	1.35%	1.41%
Smallpox	0.017%	0.016%	0.022%	0.022%
Dysentry & Diarrhoea	0.054%	0.051%	0.078%	0.075%
Respiratory Diseases	0.08%	0.06%	0.13%	0.09%
Suicide	0.0052%	0.008%	0.0046%	0.0066%
Childbirth	*	0.02%	*	0.04%

9 Compiled from Census of India, 1931, Vol. V, Part I, Subsidiary Table XI, p . 157.

Even the total number of female deaths due to all causes amounted to 2.6% of the female population in 1921, where the total number of male deaths amounted to 2.5% of the male population. In 1931, both declined to 1.8% for female, and 1.7% for male rates.

But we have to keep in mind that omissions in the case of female deaths were in the region of 2% more than in the case of males (i.e. 26 - 29% of male deaths went unreported according to the Census of 1921) and that birth-rates omission was even greater than in omission of deaths. Varying emphasis has been placed on the possible causes in terms of cultural practice : (a) the institutions of purdah and of possible female infanticide (b) the greater neglect of females at the earlier ages (c) general adverse conditions of nutrition, ventilation etc.[10] It would be interesting to make an assessment of notional food availalability per female. However, it is difficult to substantiate neglect of female babies, or their premeditated killing : what is more obvious is that women between the ages 15 - 40 had a higher death -rate than men in the corresponding age group.[11] This would have corresponded with the child-bearing age in females, where the lack of birth-control, the burden of excessive child-bearing and unskilled midwifery would have raised the maternal mortality rates.

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10 Ashok Mitra: "Implications of Declining Sex-Ratio in India's Population" (Allied Publishers, ICSSR, 1979)

11 Census of India, 1931, Vol. V, Part I, Statement No. IV - 17., Pp. 137.

A brief overview of women in the three principal industries of Bengal - jute mills, mines and tea plantations - could perhaps indicate their position in the economy.

The number of jute mills was 62 in 1921, and 86 in 1929.[12] Total number employed in both years was :

TABLE - V

Year	Male	Female	Total	Females as % of Total
1921	237,668	47,090	284,758	(16.6%)
1929	260,342	53,678	314,020	(16.9%)

This is in consonance with the obsrvation made to the Royal Commission in 1930, that of the approximate total of 242,500 women and 68,700 children employed in the whole of India, 23% of the women and 38% of the children were employed in the Bengal jute mills.

In actual terms, males predominated in the workforce: this was partially reflected in the wage-figures, however incomplete. The 1921 Census admits that among the 'skilled workers' in jute mills, a total of 124,221, there were only 8901 women (7%), half

12 Most of the evidence on jute mills is taken from the Royal Commission on Labour, Volumes., 1930.

of whom worked in 'finishing', the rest in 'winding' and 'preparing'. One official, observing the nature of women's work in the jute mills, commented that women who work in the 'preparation department or the drawings or roving, have, in the course of their work to move about fairly heavy receivers filled with jute. Otherwise the work done by women in a jute mill does not involve the lifting of heavy weights; but in many cases entails long hours of continuous standing. Only in the hand-sewing department do women sit at their work.'[13] However, this report also indicated that within the 'preparing' department, women were frequently not employed as feeders of the jute-softening machine because in former times when this machine was not guarded many accidents occurred.[14] Among the unskilled labourers, there were 35,670 women. Thus of the total female workers in the jute mills, 18% were 'skilled' and 76% were 'unskilled' workers, whereas 47% of the male workers were 'skilled'. This was reflected in the wages:[15] Spinners and Winders were paid an average weekly wage between Rs. 7 and Rs. 9.

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13. Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour, No. 31, 1923, p. 8. I am indebted to Partho Dutta, M.Phil Scholar, D.U. for this document, for sharing the tribulations of archival work & much else besides.

14. Ibid, p. 20.

15. Prices and Wages, NAI, 1923, for wages of 1922. But for 1929, figs. have been derived from the Evidences of Tulsi, his wife Tilasari, Habib, Babunia & Gauri, the Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Oral Evidence.

T A B L E - VI

	Carding	Roving	Shifting	Mistries	Coolies
1922	Rs. 2.9	Rs. 5.75	Rs. 2.2	Rs. 1.4	Rs. 0.65
	per week			per day	

	SKILLED					UNSKILLED			
1929	Sewers		Weaver (Male)	Winders		Preparing		Taking Delivery (Finishing)	
	M	F		M	F	M	F	M	F
	Rs4/5	Rs3-8a	Rs.5-7-6	Rs.7/9	Rs.3	3-2 for 4 days 5-12 for 5 days for jute-cutting	Rs.2-8a.	*	Rs.2-6a. 4 days Rs. 3-2a. 5 days
	Probably paid per Week					Probably paid Daily			

* Indicates lack of data.

The differntial in wages was defended by the mill authorities on the ground that 'if a woman did get higher wages, she should probably benefit but little, since her earnings were given to the man with whom she was living'.[16] The lowest wages for women may have been Rs. 10 a month (Rs. 2-8 annas a week) while the lowest wages for men were Rs. 12-10-6 a month (Rs. 3-2 annas per week approximately), according to the evidence of Mr R.B. Lavid, Chairman of the Indian Jute Mills Association for mills

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16 Ibid,

T A B L E - VI

	Carding	Roving	Shifting	Mistries	Coolies
1922	Rs. 2.9	Rs. 5.75	Rs. 2.2	Rs. 1.4	Rs. 0.65
	p e r w e e k			p e r d a y	

	SKILLED				UNSKILLED			
1929	Sewers		Weaver (Male)	Winders	Preparing		Taking Delivery (Finishing)	
	M	F		M F	M	F	M	F
	Rs4/5	Rs3-8a	Rs.5-7-6	Rs.7/9 Rs.3	3-2 for 4 days 5-12 for 5 days for jute-cutting	Rs.2-8a.	*	Rs.2-6a. 4 days Rs. 3-2a. 5 days
	Probably paid per Week				Probably paid Daily			

* Indicates lack of data.

The differntial in wages was defended by the mill authorities on the ground that 'if a woman did get higher wages, she should probably benefit but little, since her earnings were given to the man with whom she was living'.[16] The lowest wages for women may have been Rs. 10 a month (Rs. 2-8 annas a week) while the lowest wages for men were Rs. 12-10-6 a month (Rs. 3-2 annas per week approximately), according to the evidence of Mr R.B. Lavid, Chairman of the Indian Jute Mills Association for mills

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16 Ibid,

in Titaghur and Samnuggur.[17] But it was also 'customary' for the mill authorities to keep at least one week's wages in arrears. Thus a woman by her own earning could barely have made a living wage, as the estimate of 1923 observed. It therefore made it necessary to pool resources with some man or take to prostitution, which one out of every four female workers 'owned' to practising.

The Curjel Report, for example, posited, 'As it is scarcely possible for a woman to live for any length of time alone in a mill compound, women workers, if deserted by one man, usually seek other male protection. This protection may consist of not only living with the man, but in working near to him in the mill, in a position where he can keep an eye on the woman and prevent the attentions of other male workers; in return the woman gives over her earnings to the man.'[18]

The numerical preponderance of men over women workers aided this. The problem was enhanced by the prevailing housing conditions. Jute mills in and around Calcutta seem to have provided rooms in the neighbourhood of the mills at rents varying from 8 annas to Re. 1 per month per room. The sizes of the rooms varied between 8x8 ft. to 10x10 ft. : each room was usually occupied by 3 - 4 workers so that, on an average, an area of 25 sq.feet was available to each. Privacy was impossible. The houses were made back to back, with no electricity, no ventilation, and totally inadequate water and sanitation facilities.

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17 RCL, Oral Evidence, 1930.

18 Bulletin of Indian Industries and Labour, No. 31, 1923, p. 7.

Were women replaced by men over time also ? The only figures we have on the numerical strength of women workers in the jute mills shows that:[19]

1929	1939	1937	1938	1939
53,678	38,050	37,564	36,537	37,534

There seems to have been a decrease after the Depression, picking up only with the onset of the Second World War. There are two possible explanations which suggest themselves here - (a) that this decrease indicated a shift from specialised or 'skilled' labour into 'unskilled' groups of employment. This is suggested by the memorandum of the Kankinarrah Labour Union, representing twelve mills in Bhatpara Municipality:

> " ...there is a certain class of work most suitable to women who are content with low wages. Consequently their number which stood at 53,000 in 1927 is on the increase... "[20]

(b) this decrease may have been part of the rationalisation drive in the jute mills which began after the First World War, a drive that has been shown by Amal Das to have been responsible perhaps for the jute-mill strikes of 1928-29.[21] This was intimately caught up with the hours of work and the shift-system which was operative in the jute mills.

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19 Compiled from the Annual Report on the Administration of the Factories Act in Bengal 1936, 1937, 1938, 1939.

20 Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Vol. 5, Part I. (Written Evidence) Pp 266.

21 Amal Das: "Jute Mill Strike of 1928: A Case Study" in EPW, Jan. 26, 1985, pp. PE-27 - PE-33.

In the post-World War I years, jute exports stagnated. To maintain profits, The Indian Jute Mill Association managed to restrict working hours to 54 in a week, and an increasing tendency of multiple-shift mills to transform themselves into single-shift ones. But it was found that these high dividends led to the establishment of new mills outside the IJMA.[22] So working-hours were extended to 60 per week: however, by June 1930, a return to the 54-hour week became essential to stop falling prices. In 1931-32, the IJMA mills agreed to work a 40-hour week, while non-IJMA mills bound themselves to a 54-hour week. Profits flowed in till 1937, by which date all looms were released from restriction, production increased and prices fell. Thus in 1938, the Govt. of Bengal promulgated an ordinance restricting the working of all mills to 45 hours a week.

Limiting working hours was as much a part of rationalisation as the changing of shifts. The hours of work in a typical multiple-shift mill were, for time-workers:[23]

A: 5.30 to 8.30 a.m., 9.30 to 3.30 p.m.

B: 5.30 to 9.30 a.m., 2.00 to 7.00 p.m.

C: 8.30 to 2.00 p.m., 3.30 to 7.00 p.m.

and for piece-workers:

A: 5.30 to 7.00 a.m., 8.00 to 12 noon, 1.30 to 7.00 p.m.

B: 5.30 to 8.00 a.m., 9.00 to 1.30 p.m., 3.00 to 7.00 p.m

C: 5.30 to 9.00 a.m., 10.30 to 3.00 p.m., 4.00 to 7.00 p.m

D: 5.30 to10.30 a.m.,12.00 Noon to 4 p.m. 5.00 to 7.00 p.m

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22 Amiya Kumar Bagchi "Private Investment in India 1900-1939" London 1971), pp. 279-283.

23 From the Memorandum of R.P. Adams, Chief Inspector of Factories to Royal Commission on Labour, 1930. Vol. 5, Part I.

Going on the single shift affected work-load and wages. According to Das, under the old shift a worker earned Rs. 2-10 annas, or a daily income of 10 annes 3 paise. Under the single shift, the worker earned Rs. 2-13 annas, but daily income dropped to 9 annas. Moreover, stopping the machines during noon completely meant doing away with the third (C) shift completely. By 1929, this had happened in 50% of the mills in Bengal, as a result, retrenching 60,000 workers by that time. If we look minutely at all the official sources,[24] which concentrate all force on the desirability of fixing the maximum for women's hours at levels lower than those prescribed for men, it could be inferred that this retrenchment might have affected the 'unskilled' workers more than the skilled; in that case it would have affected more women than men, since women formed a larger proportion of the 'unskilled' workers.

There does not however seem to have been any consensus among the women workers about the desirability of the single shift. Muniya, the Titaghar No. II Jute Mill, found the single-shift system better because -

> " ...we get enough time to go home and prepare our meals. The time that I get under the double-shift system is sufficient but it is irregular... "[25]

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24 Evidence of Mr J Sime, Managing Director, Andrew Yule and Co., RCL, Vol. 5, Part II, and Letter from Govt. of Bengal, 16 Dec. 1929, Vol. 5, Part I.

25 This and folowing evidences from R.C.L., 1930, Vol. 5, Part II (Oral Evidence).

Gauri, who, however, worked on the more endangered C-shift, liked working on the multiple-shift system: her adjustment of domestic work with mill-work followed a pattern, seen in Babuniya's and Muthialu's instances also. They cooked before leaving for the mill, ate this at mid-morning, again cooking the evening-meal during the supposed rest hour. Even if we cannot accept that this arrangement was 'in the best interests of the health of the women concerned,' - as the Bengal Chamber of Commerce contended - there is no evidence to prove that women workers could not cope with the hours of work, or that they preferred to devote more hours to home and 'family life' as the industrial interests felt they should. It is obvious that behind the latter's concern was a covert bid to justify the rationalisation that was imposed on the jute-mills. Whether this really affected women's employment in factories cannot be categorically asserted due to insufficient data: the only data we have seems to show a steadiness of trend. Thus the number of women workers in factories was[26]

1935	1936	1937	1938
57,733	59,271	60,601	59,859

We only know that women participated quite visibly in the strikes in 1928-29,[27] which were centred around the single-shift system.

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26 From the Annual Reports on the Administration of the Factories Act, Bengal.

27 Govt. of India, Home Poll. 1-2/28/1928, Fortnightly Report on the Situation in Bengal, 2nd half of June, 1928, and Annual Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1927-1928, Calcutta, 1929, p. 23.

Another industry from which women seem to have been pushed out, specially from the organised to the unorganised sector, was that of mines. Asansol was the primary mining area for both coal and iron-ore. In 1925 it had 265 collieries, of which only 165 were working in 1930. The proportion of men and women employed in collieries varied from 2 : 1 or 3 : 2, mostly belonging to the Sonthal or Bauri Caste. This favourable sex-ratio in the collieries was perhaps due to nature of the work itself, where the family was the unit of labour. The percentage of labour working in families was 80 for local labour and 55 for outside labour. Of course, the 'families' working underground consisted of many unattached women who worked along with the men. The percentage of unattached women working underground in the whole Raniganj Coalfield may have been 25, the corresponding percentage of women working with their husbands 65. The remaining 10% represented women who were related in other ways to the men with whom they worked. Another pointer to this 'family' system of labour can be seen in a story[28] about the manager of one colliery who induced a miner to bring down a large quantity of coal by undercutting, side-cutting and firing a few shots. The miner was pleased to see the quantity of coal but found that it was impossible for his wife, who was working with him, to remove all that coal herself. The Manager advised him to get others

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28 Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Vol. 5, Part I, Pp. 183 & 177.

to assist in removing the coal. But the miner's contention was that no one besides his wife and himself should get any benefit from the coal which he had brought down. Thereafter, forsaking the new method, he went back to his old method, bringing down just enough coal for his wife to remove. Women, thus, seemed to have worked as loaders or carried the tubs loaded by the men. Work underground was in 8-hour shifts without rest, but on the surface, there was 10-hour shifts with 2 hours of rest. The average daily earnings of women in the coalmines stayed well below those of unskilled labour, as the following figures show:[29]

T A B L E - VII

	Miners	Loaders	Skilled	Unskilled	Women
	a -p	a - p	a - p	a - p	a -p
1922-5	Re. 1	*	*	7/8 - 0	5 - 0
1929 Underground	13 - 0	10 - 0	12 - 3	9 - 0	7 - 6
Open Workings	9 - 0	7 - 0	11 - 6	8 - 0	6 - 3
Surface	*	*	11 - 6	8 - 6	6 - 0
1931 Surface	*	*	*	7 - 9	5 - 3
1941 Surface	*	*	*	6 - 6	4 - 3

(*) Data not available

29 Compiled from the Prices and Wages figures, the Report of the Royal Commission on Labour, 1930 and the Census of India, 1951, for Raniganj.

An interesting tussle seems to have occurred between the Govt. of Bengal and the Govt. of India over the question of gradual abolition of female labour underground. In 1924, the former had memorialised

> " ...the weight of opinion is undoubtedly against the prohibition ... As things are at present, two factors stand out prominently, one is that female labour underground in the coal mines forms a big percentage of the total labour force. In Bengal it amounts to 34.5... considerably over one third... "[30]

The reason the local govt. gave for not desiring abolition was that the coal industry suffered from a perennial shortage of labour. Abolishing female labour would diminish male labour supply also since the system of family work was "deeply ingrained in the aboriginal colliery labourer." The Govt. of Bengal feared that there would follow a large-scale migration to tea-gardens, where the women would find work readily. As for replacing this labour with machinery, the govt. realised that the necessary investment of capital could be done only by the big concerns; smaller concerns would have to close down, thus depriving the govt. of substantial source of income. But when the Govt. of

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30 Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Vol. 5, Part I, pp. 106.

India called for a definite prohibition from 1 July, 1929, the Govt. of Bengal gave in, putting in only one last plea that mines of all types give up female labour, otherwise it would flow to the inclines and state quarries, giving the latter an undue advantage in costs.

The number of women employed underground in the coalmines of Bengal declined, as expected: in 1929, there had been 6827 women underground, by 1939 there were none.[31] An indication towards what was really happening at the larger level was the fact that the number of men working underground doubled by 1940, while their number in open and surface workings increased only slightly. The real increase was seen in the number of women in surface workings - by 90.6% of 1929 levels and secondarily in open workings (15.1%). The problem of devising 'suitable' kinds of employment for women on the surface was resolved, at least in the instance of the Kustore Colliery belonging to Raniganj Coal Association, by opening a Welfare Centre which concentrated on forms of employment with which women were "already familiar and which form part of their normal village life",[32] like paddy husking, wheat grinding, basket making, cotton weaving on handlooms, etc. This kind of work, according to the organisers, had the 'added' advantage of the produce having a "ready sale amongst the employees of the colliery who are also assured of fresh and wholesome

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31 Annual Reports of the Chief Inspector of Mines, 1930-40

32 Ibid.

foodstuff and good cloth at reasonable prices."[33]

Whatever the ideas were of women's "frailty", "domestic duties" and "home-life" for which they were held to have been the guardians, they quickly evaporated in times of crisis. In August 1943, the Govt. of India lifted the ban to relieve the shortage arisen from war - immediately the number of women employed in mines increased by 220%. But this proved to be temporary, since women had to retire again in 1946.

In 1921, an overall 340 tea-gardens in Bengal employed 87,413 males and 101,136 females, of whom 83,313 were 'unskilled'[34] As in the collieries, here too, there was no great disturbance of the sex-ratio. Figures for 3 'typical' gardens for 1927-28 reveal this:

	Male	Female
Gopalpur Tea Estate	614	609
Dalgaon Tea Estate	1043	1118
Karballa Tea Estate	982	976

This was, again, probably because a kind of 'family' system was at work in the tea plantations, and family recruitment became the general practice by 1932.[35] We have no exact reference to the number of female workers after 1921. But if we presume on

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33 Ibid. Thus it is not difficult to realise that women, who had formed 29.96% of total underground labour in 1926 were increasingly pushed into the unorganised sector.

34 The Census of India, 1921. Vol. IV, Part I.

35 Annual Report on the Working of the Tea Districts Emigrant Labour Act of 1932.

on a rough equality of numbers between the sexes, then we can perhaps calculate the growth in numbers of female labourers. The figures for gardens of Jalpaiguri and Darjeeling can be divided to show that:[36]

1931 - 90,259 female workers

1941 - 105,543 female workers

1951 - 122,893 female workers

The preponderance of women over male workers in the estates was sought to be explained in terms of women being 'handier' than men in certain processes like plucking. Yet, the average wage of a woman lay between Rs. 4 to Rs. 9 a month while the average wage of a man ranged between Rs. 9 and Rs. 12 per month, according to the estimate of 1923.[37]

In all industries, the two most clearly identified problems women workers had in common were (a) the absence of maternity benefits and (b) the lack of creches. Excuses for the absence of these were many: for creches, it was believed that segregating mother and child forcibly would destroy the unity of 'family labour' and lead to an exodus of the female workers, that, even if established, creches would not work because of deep-rooted 'caste prejudices' and personal animosities. The first was a

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36 The Census of India, 1951, Vol. V, Part I.

37 Bulletins of Indian Industries and Labour, No. 31, 1923, p. 24.

misconception, the second might have had some root in reality since caste was a vital aspect of labour behaviour even in the 1940's. The lack of maternity benefits was justified by all - the Govt., private enterprise and labour union leaders - on the ground that women in all cases returned to their villages during confinement. This could not have been so in practice: evidence from the jute-mills suggests that women had their children at their places of work, while women on the tea-estates too might have done the same considering that the harsh indenture system prevented mobility to a great extent.[38]

In November 1929, when a Maternity Benefit Act had already been instituted in Bombay, the Govt. of Bengal felt[39] that legislation was not necessary in the main industries but if some measure of co-ordination could be adopted between the various provinces, it would be accepted. The local industrial interests felt that such a measure should not be a levy upon employers alone.[40] They blithely adopted as their own Marie Curjel's distinction between the 'regular domestic state' of women workers in tea gardens and the 'non-domestic character' of women employed in jute mills. From this, it could be argued that all was well in the coal-mining and tea-plantation industries where women lived in 'families', in jute no benefits were necessary since women were not 'domestic' there.

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38 Rana Pratap Behal: "Forms of Labour Protest in Assam Valley Tea Plantations, 1900-1930", in EPW, Vol. XX, No.4, Jan.26, 1985, PE-19.

39 Letter of 26 Nov., 1929 to Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Vol. 5, Part I, P .20.

40 Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Vol. 5, Part I, P .100.

"I worked in the mill for a year before the child's birth but did not get anything after the child was born",[41] was an obvious refrain among the women working in the jute mills. Besides, absence from work on account of pregnancy meant that the sirdar would have to be paid his 'bakshish' again before the woman could return to work, over and above the regular 'bakshish' that she paid of 2-4 annas every week.

One account narrates:[42] " ...I once went to a lady doctor in the other mill with my daughter. She was expecting a baby and was in the seventh month of her pregnancy. The lady doctor wrote something and told us to go to the Sahib at the mill. He read this paper and tore it. We did not know what to do. We had to work.... The sardar told me that my daughter would get money for the time she was absent on account of child-birth. We went to the doctor. He wrote something on a piece of paper and said that my daughter would get money for five weeks. She got money for 2 weeks only.... ..."

Going to the doctor was itself a terrifying experience for the women. That is probably why they preferred somebody from their own caste or sex, even though these were not qualified medical practitioneers. In what seemed a damning indictment of the medical facilities available to working women, one of them said:

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41 Habib, Royal Commission on Labour, 1930, Vol. 5. Part II.

42 Muthialu, Ibid.

> " ...Some people go to the doctor and they may get well. If they do not get well, they get very much worse... "[43]

Despite this, local industrial interests believed that if benefits had to be given they should not be monetary; the methods adopted should be educative in character since a "leading defect of existing conditions being the absence in the women concerned of a sufficient desire for the welfare aimed at." Thus what was thought to be necessary was a woman who could both doctor and educate, a woman "not hampered in this direction by any official status". Her parallel in the factories would be the woman Inspector to "oversee the human side of the situation."

Three experiments in maternity welfare schemes in jute-mills had been instituted by 1930 - one in the Kelvin mills, another in Baranagore mills and the third in the Titagarh mills. Those in the first two were experiments in the granting of monetary benefits to women during absence before and after childbirth. These were deemed to have failed because the workers violated the condition that a woman should not work during the receipt of the benefit. The Titagarh scheme substituted benefits in kind for cash : these included a clinic on the mill premises, classes for indigenous dais, general classes for women and girls

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43 Ibid

to teach them 'mother craft' and sewing.[44] In the Angus Jute Works a maternity clinic with an outpatients' department had started working since 1926: 2 'dais' were trained and were offered a fee of 8 annas for each case of theirs they brought to the maternity ward, turning them into allies instead of 'unhygienic competitors'!

The strikes in the jute-mills in 1928-29 might have improved matters slightly. Though the government and the jute-mill owners understood the participation of women in it and its leadership by Provabhoti Das-gupta as motivated by the desire for maternity benefits, in reality this demand came at the bottom of the Charter. We have already shown the economic rationale behind women's participation in the strikes. However, some kind of benefit arrangement was agreed to by the IJMA. The process was longwinded : the woman worker had to report her condition to the departmental time-keeper, who then advised the assistant in-charge. A form was completed and signed by the latter, after which it was attested by the mill-manager. The woman's name was then removed from the ordinary wages book and the completed form handed over to her. This form had to be presented weekly by the woman or a relative and the payment recorded therein. There was yet no standardised form of remuneration; however, average rates were Rs. 2 to Rs. 3 per week for 5 weeks, the last payment being specially sanctioned by the mill-manager. This

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44 Experiments of this kind were enthusicastically lauded by other employers.

perhaps was an attempt at assessing the viability of continued payments for two more weeks, which were to be paid if the woman was seriously ill.[45]

In the tea-gardens, though there was no formal scheme in existence either, the competition between gardens to attract and keep labour made expectant mothers liable to full pay for some time before delivery: perhaps this payment continued till full recovery. In some instances, the mother received a small allowance weekly until the child was one year old; in other instances, an attendant would be employed by the manager to look after the mother and child or to foster-mother the child if the mother died. All this was done in the declared hope that "the child will in time be a recruit to the labour force of the garden."

This kind of thinking characterised the official desire to establish creches in industrial concerns. As the very questions posed by the members of the Royal Commission on Labour in 1930 reveal, creches were though to diminish the risks to which a potential working class was put due to the 'habit' of working class mothers osing their babies with opium at the time of going to work. Similarly, the Commission's insistence on a 'living wage' was for the sake of the babies of "these poor working-class people (who do not get a sufficient quantity of milk because the wages paid to the work-people are not at all sufficient to meet this expense." A living wage, it was argued, would lead

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45 Royal Commission on Labour, Vol. 5, Part I, p.42.

to a "decided improvement in the condition of health of the babies and the next generation among the working-class will be much healthier and efficient." Given this, it is slightly puzzling to realise that a Maternity Benefit Act came to Bengal only in 1940, whereas it came to Bombay in 1929.

Perhaps a part of the explanation for this differential speed in introducing benefits lay in the nature of management of the two predominant industries in the two provinces. In Bombay, the cotton-industry had a largely Indian management and capital, whereas in Bengal, in both jute and coal-mining, capital and management were mainly European. From the figures of 1921, we see that the mills controlled by companies with European directors numbered 54, and by companies with mixed boards numbered 6. The number of coal mines controlled by companies with European directors stood at 65, while those controlled by mixed boards numbered 18. This would account for a stronger and more succussful resistance against any kind of government levy.

One of the main professions open to the bhadramahila was that of teaching. According to an estimate of 1934-35,[46] the number of women teaching at the various schools were :

	Total number	Number trained
Primary Schools	5775	605
Middle Schools	459	257
High Schools	597	178

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46 Report of Public Instruction, 1934-35.

The training of women teachers of Secondary Schools was undertaken in Loreto House, Calcutta and Diocesan College, also in Calcutta. But the latter wound up its training department in 1934, when Scottish Church College took it up. For women teachers of primary schools, there were 10 institutions in 1932 - 3 managed by Government and the rest managed by Brahmo & Christian missions. Such trained women, however, preferred, more often, to work in towns rather than go out to villages in the interior of the districts, unless they had relatives there. One woman who did, and left a record of her stint behind complained of the isolation: '... specially in the mofussils and villages .... the women teacher's profession is still not sufficiently respected ... even now the teacher is referred to as "Christian", "mteccha" or "labourer". Nobody socialises with them. The villagers are peculiarly contemptuous also. The wary attitute of the older village women is not conducive to any kind of interaction. And the friendship of the men, in many instances, proves harmful. Therefore, as teachers, our lives gradually become empty, dull and very narrow.'[47] An organiser of the Nari Shiksha Samiti too, wrote that, 'being quite unknown to any influential person or persons of the locality and having no relation with her (the teacher), her life becomes a burden to her and is not unoften made miserable by the uncongenial atmosphere created by curious and inquisitive eyes of the illiterate or backward people of the place.'[48]

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47 Nirajbasini Shom: 'Shikhoyitrir Shamajik Jibon' in Bangalakshmi, Magh 1336, (1929) pp. 684-686

48 ABP, November 16, 1929.

The emoluments varied from school to school, depending upon its management, its grade and the qualifications of the teacher. Though the Bengal (Rural) Primary Education Act of 1930 stipulated that the minimum monthly salaries for primary school teachers was to be the following:[49]

Head Teacher :

Matriculate/trained	Rs.16 p.m.
Untrained matric/trained non-matric	Rs.14 p.m.

Assistant Teach :

Trained	Rs.12 p.m.
Untrained	Rs.10 p.m.

It was reported that even in 1932, 'the average salary in a primary school under public management was about Rs. 15 and in private schools only a little over Rs. 6.'[50] As for middle and high schools, we have only a rough estimate gleaned from advertisements in newspapers[51] - even from this, it is evident that there was little standardisation in pay.

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49 BPEA, p. 19.

50 Report on School Education in Bengal, 1935, p. 9.

51 ABP, 1929-31.

	Type of School	Post - Requisite Qualifications	Emoluments
1.	Kurigram Girls' Middle English School	Headmistress - I.A.	Rs.60 p.m. + free quarters + provident fund.
2.	"	Asst. Mistress - Junior Training	Rs.30 p.m. + free quarters + provident fund
3.	Tamluk Girls' Middle English School	Headmistress - Elderly, Hindu/Bramo	Rs.60 + Rs.10 for quarters
4.	"	Asst. Mistress - Knowledge of sewing	Rs.35 + Rs.5 for quarters
5.	Chetla Girls' Middle English School,Calcutta	Mistress for lower classes	Rs.20 p.m. or more according to qualification.
6.	Berhampur Girls' High English School	Headmistress - B.T.	Rs.100-25 p.m. + free quarters.
7.	Sadar Girls' High English School, Barisal	Headmistress - B.A., preferably B.T.	Rs.125 - 150 p.m.
8.	"	Mistress - IA/Junior training/B.A.	Rs.60 p.m. + provident fund.
9.	"	Mistress - Matric/IA, knowledge of drill	Rs.35 - 45 p.m. + provident fund
10.	P.N. Girls' High English School,Rajshahi	Mistress - Knowledge of English & History	Rs.90 p.m. + free quarters
11.	"	Mistress - Matric	Rs.40 - 45 p.m. + free quarters + provident fund.
12.	Morgan Girls' High English School, Narayanganj	Headmistress - B.A./ B.T.	Rs.125 - 150 p.m. + free quarters
13.	"	Mistress - I.A./I.Sc.	Rs.40 - 90 + free quarters.
14.	"	Mistress - Matric and Senior trained	Rs.50 p.m. + free quarters.
15.	Rangpur Girls' High English School	Mistress - B.A.	Rs.100 p.m. + free quarters.

Another indication of this absence of standardisation was the short tenure of many of these teachers. Shova Ghosh, who completed her graduation in 1924, took up teaching only in 1932, when her youngest son was old enough to be left at home. She taught in the Brahmo Girls' School in Calcutta and the Victoria Institution from time to time, her tenure ranging from two to six months. The spasmodic nature of her work was possibly due to the opposition of her husband - as she put it, ' ...our head of the family did not especially support my going to work. In those days if a wife went out for work, the husband used to think of it as loss of prestige. I had to insist quite vehemently on taking up these jobs... '[52] It was also no mere coincidence that many women active in the national movement in Bengal were, or had been, teachers. For example, Jyotirmoyee Ganguli, the daughter of the first woman graduate in Bengal, Dr. Kadambini Ganguli, passed her M.A. and taught at many schools, including Bethune School and the Calcutta Brahmo Girls' School, giving up her profession in 1931 to work full-time for the Congress. In Midnapore, Charushila Devi taught at the Aliganj Hindu Girls' School from where she was dismissed for her political activities in 1930. Labanyalata Chanda, headmistress of the Government Faizunessa High English Girls' School resigned in August 1930, as a protest against the 'Government's educational policy' - subsequently, she set up a

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52 S. Ghosh: Aaj O Tara Picchu Dake, (Calcutta, 1981), p. 187

girls' school in Comilla under the aegis of the nationalistic Abhoy Ashram. Nabanita Kamala Sinha, a teacher in the same Faizunessa Girls' School, had resigned in July that year and taken to working for the Congress. Preetilata Waddedar who passed her B.A. in 1932 in English, became the headmistress of the Nandan Kanan Girls' School in Chittagong but gave it up and went into hiding with revolutionary terrorists the same year. Suhasini Ganguli, another revolutionary terrorist, taught at the Chandannagar Girls' School while sheltering the Chittagong Armoury raiders for a short while.[53]

Another area in which women had participated traditionally was that of health - as nurse and midwife more often than as doctor. A superficial estimate, again based on advertisements for vacancies in the newspapers, of wages offered is given below:

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53 Compiled from Kamala Dasgupta: 'Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari' (Calcutta, 1963) and ABP, 1930-31

	Type of Institution	Post	Emoluments
1.	Malda District Board Hospital	Lady Doctor	Rs.110 - 5 - 140 free quarters + private practice
2.	Sadar District Hospital, Kamarhati	"	Rs.100 - 5 - 150 + free quarters
3.	Birbhum Lady Curzon Zenana Hospital	"	Rs.100 + Rs.15 for servant + free quarters
4.	Bogra Hospital	"	Rs.80 - 100.
5.	Alipore Hospital, for troops' families	"	Rs.150 + private practice allowed.
6.	Purnea Sadar Hospital	Midwife & Nurse	Rs. 50 - 5 - 2 - 75 + free quarters + private practice allowed.
7.	Rampurhat Charitable Dispensary	Midwife	Rs. 35 + free quarters + private practice allowed.

Though there was a growing demand for 'lady doctors', there were very few Bengali women qualified to take up these appointments. In fact, in 1924-25, there was only one successful graduate in medicine amongst women in Bengal, and in 1926-27 too, there was only one. Even if there had been an increase in their numbers in the later years, it still could not have been enough to meet the demand. This dearth of women doctors was characteristic of the whole of British India at the time - according to one estmate,[54] there was one female doctor to every 30 million of the female population.

54 Dr. Kumud Shankar Ray in Bengal Legislative Council, Proceedings, 28 March, 1929, p. 559.

A similar lament of scarcity was made about female vaccinators and nurses. In 1926, with the onslaught of cholera and small-pox epidemics, more attention seemed to be called for a primary vaccination. The 'opposition to vaccination on the part of women' was noted as a major obstacle.[55] Thus the Government of Bengal accepted a proposal that one of the conditions of the provincial contributions to the district boards for providing free vaccination in rural areas should be the employment of an adequate number of female vaccinators for localities requiring their services. During 1928-29, the district boards of Birbhum, Midnapore, Nadia, Rajshahi, Malda, Pabna, Dacca, Mymensingh, Faridpur, Chittagong, Murshidabad and Jalpaiguri employed female vaccinators.[56] Next year, only the last two boards employed them. By 1931, this experiment ended because it was found that 'wherever female vaccinators have been employed, even the non-purdah females, who used formerly to take vaccination from male vaccinators, are refusing it from the latter'[57] and no district board could afford a separate staff of female vaccinators. It seems that their wages were, at the least, Rs. 40 per month.

Nursing remained mainly the work of European or Anglo-Indian women. The Calcutta Hospital Nurses' Institute founded in 1859 provided nurses for hospitals in Calcutta and the Lady Minto's Nursing

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55 Report on Administration of Bengal, 1926-27, p. 53.

56 B L C, Proceedings, 3 February 1932, pp. 102-3.

57 Ibid, p.103.

Association provided nurses for private nursing. The former was, however, charged with -- deliberately neglecting the training of Indian nurses; in turn, it pleaded dearth of Indian women of the requisite standard of education.[58] The issue seemed to revolve around language: the Government insisting that instruction could be given only in English and the nationalists asserting that 'unless the nurses can talk in the vernacular it is impossible to nurse a patient.'[59] It was also indicated that no 'bhadramahila' would take up this profession, because her guardians would object to the 'large number of male patients in the Medical College Hospitals who are uneducated and uncultured and ... not very distinguished for good breeding.'[60] However small, a beginning was made by Dr Bidhan Chandra Ray, when he began a training institute for nursing - by 1929, he could claim to have '18 nurses under training all belong to the bhadralog class.'[61]

But hospitals in Calcutta were fortunate to have nurses, of whatever nationality. In most of the mufassal sadar hospitals, there were practically no arrangements for nursing. In some places, 'untrained male nurses undertook the work in the absence of patients' relatives.'[62]

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58 B L C, Proceedings, 28 March 1929, p. 553.

59 Ibid, Dr. K.S. Ray, p. 559.

60 Ibid, Letter of Major J.C. De , p. 563.

61 Ibid, p. 557.

62 Report on Administration of Bengal, 1930-31, p. 161.

The only department of health where there was no lament about scarcity - only of qualification - was in midwifery. The indigenous midwife or 'dai' traditionally presided over childbirth. A hereditary and part-time profession in most instances, its practioners were situated low on the class-caste hierarchies. Their rates of pay were extremely poor; they did all sorts of menial tasks, such as washing of clothes, burying the placenta, and so forth, for an inclusive fee. Efforts had been made from time to time to train the indigenous dai, but they had not been very successful, the establishment of the Victoria Memorial Scholarships Fund, in 1903, being the most significant of these. Another effort made by Miss K.M. Bose also proved to be of ultimate use : dais were encouraged to come for classes by small payments made to them, the exact amount of which is not known. After health became a 'transferred' subject in 1921, the Calcutta Corporation tried to tackle the problem also - it employed Lady Health Visitors and midwives, helped set up maternity homes and baby clinics. By 1930-31, it had 22 midwives on its staff and had trained 1,113 dais and distributed 919 medical kit-bags amongst them.[64]

A profession that official estimates classified as 'unproductive,' along with vagrancy and begging, was prostitution. Yet, it too had its own hierarchised organisation. There was a close nexus

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63. M.I. Balfour & R. Young: Medical women in India (London, 1929) pp. 127-39

64 Report on the Administration of Bengal, 1930-31.

between the upper echelons of this structure and the 'bhadra' society of Bengal. For example, in 1869 it had been estimated that 90% of the prostitutes in Bengal wer widows and, of these, a very large number came from Kulin Brahmin families, where polygamy was widespread. By 1911, one-tenth of the prostitutes of Calcutta were of the 'Kayastha' caste - one of the three high castes.[65] And, even later, Manada Devi, in her autobiography, talked of her own Brahmin father, a lawyer in the Calcutta High Court, of Rajbala, daughter of a successful gold-trader and of the widow of a Kayastha family who took to prostitution.[66] Their clients too were those men who 'are praised as poets and literateurs, reputed to be political leaders and patriots, esteemed for their wealth and power. Even many rishis and pandits... Neither in the Court, the Council nor the Corporation has there ever been any impediment to them.'[67]

Though exact numbers are difficult to come by, official estimates indicated that prostitution was on the wane. In 1921, there were 10,814 prostitutes but in 1931, they numbered 7,970, of whom 7,440 women practised it as a 'principal' occupation. Their monetary gains are also difficult to calculate - what we do have is a gradation of prostitutes according to the types of tenements they lived in, and the kind of customers they dealt with. According to the author of 'Rater Kolkata',[68] within Calcutta itself, the different classes of prostitutes were:

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65 B.Joardar : Prostitution in 19th and early 20th Century (New Delhi 1985) p.40

66 M. Devi: Shikhita Patitar Atmakatha;(Calcutta, 1929)

67 Ibid, p. 57.

68 Meghnad Gupta: Rater Kolkata,(Calcutta, n.d.) p. 32

- those who lived in dark, filthy one-storeyed houses with roof made of indigenous tiles, whose clients were mainly porters and men of the lowest social and economic status (chhotolok)

- those who lived in two-storeyed, mud-built houses, who dealt with small businessmen, shopkeepers and artisans

- those who lived in one/two-storeyed brick-built houses, and had clerks, and the lesser men in service as their clients

- the highest-paid lived in permanent structures and had both permanent (bandha babu) and temporary clients. The latter paid between Rs.8 and Rs.25, while the former paid between Rs.150 to Rs.300 per month, besides valuable gifts of varying amounts. Since big merchants, zamindars or landholders and successful professionals alone were entertained by this group of prostitutes, it was possible for some of them to acquire a house and set up on her own, to become 'bariwalis' themselves.

The 'bariwalis' were those who had retired with enough capital to either own or lease a house, and sublet rooms to the others at a high rate. For a new recruit, a 'bariwali' was essential, as the latter made all the arrangements of board, lodging, dress, cosmetics and medical examination in return for a share of her

income. A 'bariwali' also arbitrated all disputes between the inmates as well as between a prostitute and her customer.[69]

It seems that till 1929 there was a system of registering prostitutes issuing licences and medically examining them.[70] The Commissioner of Police had the authority to register a woman either on her own request, or at the instance of a registered brothel keeper or on the report of the local police. The Calcutta Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1923 tried to determine, for the first time, the age at which a girl was considered too young to register - accordingly, the police were empowered to rescue from a brothel any girl below the age of 16. Though the police was also empowered to order the discontinuance of a house as a brothel, it was conceded in 1932 that 'action in the old tolerated area has apparently led to an increase of prostitution in other parts of the city.'[71]

A particular kind of work no woman could evade was housework, a systematic history of which is still to be undertaken. Some accounts of it in contemporary women's journals are included here. In one such account of a joint-family in Calcutta, comprising two employed brothers and their wives and a third unmarried brother, the younger wife Kanchanmalika Debi described her routine

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69. B.Joardar : Prostitution in 19th and early 20th Century (New Delhi, 1985) pp. 30-32

70 Ibid, p. 65.

71 Bengal Legislative Council, Proceedings, 22 February, 1932, pp. 40-41.

on a holiday: she could get up later than on other days, 'when ... by seven in the morning, the 'dal' is already cooked.'[72] The elder sister-in-law supervised the shopping, which was done by the youngest 'devar', after which she entered the kitchen. The author herself made the beds, put the mattresses out in the sun, swept and dusted the three rooms in the house and then went to the kitchen. There she began the preparation of the afternoon meal - like grinding the necessary condiments and spices for flavouring the food. Shudha Majumdar too remembered that one of her earliest lessons in cooking had been to choose the correct spices - 'the housewife who was ignorant of the correct use of spices was jeered at.' Vegetables for the many dishes had to be cut and pared in very precise and different ways as well : as she learnt 'Potatoes cut lengthwise went into the fish curry with the thin gravy, rounded ones to richer curries, small pieces to the bitter shuktani that is served at the beginning of the meal and those coarsely chopped unpeeled potatoes went into the caccari, made with mustard paste and chillis... Before I was allowed to cut potatoes, I was first taught how to handle the many varieties of spinach. I learned to pick out the tender leaves for frying and select the spices for flavouring.' The routine work of the kitchen was interrupted on holidays by 'frequent requests for snacks' in Kanchanmalika's household.

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72 Kanchanmalika Debi : 'Banga Sansarer Ekti Din' in Bangasree, Chaitra 1341 (1934) pp. 349-52.

73 S Mazumdar : A Pattern of Life, (New Delhi, 1977) pp. 45-46

The afternoons were spent usually in sewing. In Kanchanmalika's words, ' ...I was quite skilled in needlework and embroidery. But my sister-in-law and my husband commented that this was of little use to the household... that is why I learnt tailoring. I take orders from the neighbours for small children's clothes.' By this account, only in the evenings did the women get the time to read or go to the 'bioscope' or arrange their hair artistically. When the household was larger and included school-going children, servants and a widowed mother-in-law,[74] the demands on women's energies and time seemed even greater, if things were to run smoothly.

Housework was not limited to married women alone: it was part of the socialisation of unmarried girls as well. Another important aspect of socialisation of the bhadramahila were the rituals observed in daily life, specially the 'brata'.[75] In Shudha's words, it constituted a 'system of education... to prepare her for her future life from her earliest days.' What seemed interesting was the fact that these were not characterised by Sanskrit 'mantras' or priests; they were connected with familiar objects and conducted in simple Bengali, verse easy to learn and recite. The 'tulsi brata' taught the young unmarried girl to care for the bush of sweet basil cherished in a Hindu household. The 'cow brata' familiarised her with the animal which represented

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74 Kanchanmalika Debi : 'Curriculum' in Bangasree, poush, 1342, (1935) pp. 786-90

75 See L. Fruzzetti : The Gift of a Maiden. (Rutgers, 1982)

76 S. Mazumdar : The Pattern of Life, (New Delhi, 1977) pp. 29-36

the core of purity and nourishment in Hinduism. The 'punyi-pukur brata' required the girl to dig a diminutive lake and seating herself before it, pray to Mother Earth for the 'gift of tolerance and the fortitude to endure all things in life lightly,' as does the Earth herself. One particular 'brata' was aimed at acquiring

> 'Cows in the cowshed, and
> Corn in the storehouse
> Vermilion between the parting of my hair
> Every year a son, and
> May not a single one die, and
> Never may a teardrop fall from my eye.'[77]

One of the most popular 'bratas' in Bengal for the unmarried girl was the Shiva Puja - based on the belief that Shiva could bring his devotee a husband as great-hearted and loving as himself. Another 'brata' dedicated to the same god was the 'nil brata', by which one hoped to become unselfish, like Shiva who had offered to take the bitter poison churned out of the ocean by the demons in their search for the nectar of immortality. The 'Madhu-Sankranti brata', undertaken on the last day of each month, involved the giving of a new bell-metal bowl full of honey and a silver coin to a holy man, by whose blessings the girl would gain a 'honeyed togue', and a sweet temperament.

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77 Ibid.

These were all indicators of the kind of roles girls would slip into as women. The family, and marriage, of the 'bhadralok' in Bengal needs to be studied for this : the family 'educated' its girls so that they could then become 'corner-stones' of the institution.

A more formal kind of education was at the same time becoming more and more accessible for the Bengal bhadramahila, as the increased numbers of girls in Secondary English Schools and in Colleges show. An official report commented, ' .... A curious development in the social usage, especially amongst the educated middle class Hindus, is that the possession of a University degree seems now to increase the eligibility of a girl for marriage. The bridegroom's party, it is said, now demand to know what University education the bride to be has had.'[78] The drive for female education resulted in a virtual outcrop of schools - but the direction of this change was evident from the fact that the rate of increase was greater for Secondary English schools and Colleges than the rate of increase in primary schools.

By 1936-37, there were 17,396 girls' primary schools in Bengal, with 692,682 students. The average enrolment of girls in a primary school was 39.8 in 1936-37, as against 24.5 in 1931-32. Yet,

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78 Ninth Quinquennial Review on the Progress of Education in Bengal, 1932-37, p. 97. (Henceforth QRPE.)

one must keep in mind two salient features that qualified this growth - (1) that of all these schools, only about 18% taught the full primary course, and (2) the proportion of students in the highest primary class to the number of the lowest classes was 1 : 45.3 i.e. many more girls entered primary school than completed it.

The majority of the girls' primary schools were under private management; the majority being aided by local bodies or by the Government through the system of grants. Though the amount given as a governmental grant averaged at Rs. 25 a month, it was more effective as an instrument of controlling 'undesirable' political activity, many schools during this period found out. For example, the Kamarunnessa Girls' School which had enjoyed a grant of Rs.250 per month from its inception in 1925 (and from 1926 onwards, a grant of Rs.500 per month) was demined it from March 1930, because a member of the teaching staff had 'indulged' in political activity.[79]

The spread of higher education amongst women can be ascertained by the following:

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79 B L C, Proceedings, 30 July 1931, p. 404.

Level of Exam.	NUMBER OF WOMEN SUCCESSFUL IN							
	1924-25	1925-26	1926-27	1030-31	1931-32	1932-33	1933-34	1936-37
1. Matriculation	143	131	157	332	394	547	669	1049
2. Intermediate (I.A. & I.S.C)	58	75	89	78	183	197	279	382
3. Graduation (B.A. & B.Sc.)	42	55	44	36	88	106	119	208
4. Post-graduation (M.A. & M.Sc.)	0	3	4	*	10	10	*	14

(*) Figures not available

Compiled from Annual Report of Public Instruction. GOB, for these years.

There was such a strong demand for facilities for high school education for girls that the authorities of some boys' high schools,—for example, at Faridpur and Serajgunj,— had to open separate sections for girls in their schools. Yet, this kind of expedient was not just a function of demand; it also indicated that funds for a separate building for a girls' high school were not forthcoming as well. Thus it was that, despite the Calcutta

University's disapproval of co-education, the number of girls' in boys' secondary schools kept increasing. In 1931-32, there wee 1,524 girls in such schools; by 1936-37, their numbers had increased to 4,083.[80] This can be corroborated by a glance at the differing costs of girls' and boys' schools. 'Unlike in the case of girls' primary schools, where the cost of a school was considerably below the cost of a boys' primary school, the cost of the average middle and high schools for girls was considerably more than for the average boys's schools.'[81] In 1936-37, a girls' middle school cost Rs. 3,618 a year, as against Rs.1,480, for a boys' school and a girls' high school cost Rs.17,540 as against Rs.9,192 for a boys' school, according to the official estimates.

Where there were 4 women's colleges in 1931-32, there were 7 by 1936-37 : of these, the Bethune College, Calcutta and the Eden Intermediate College, Dacca were managed by the Government. The Diocesan College was partially aided and the rest, i.e. Loreto House, Calcutta, Victoria Institution, Calcutta, the Kamarunessa Intermediate College, Dacca, and the Women's Department of the Vidyasagar College, Calcutta were privately managed. In 1931-32, there were 366 girls studying in the women's colleges. In 1934-35, there were 657. By 1936-37, their numbers had risen to 1,054.[82] The Lady Brabourne College came up in July 1939 to satisfy the Muslim girls' demand for higher education.[83]

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80 QRPE., p. 95

81 Ibid, p. 96

82 See Annual Report of Public Instruction, 1934-35, p.19, and QRPE, p. 97.

83 Bethune College and School Centenary Volume 1849-1949, p. 90.

Besides these colleges, Krishnagar College began to admit women by 1932, and the Ashutosh College, Calcutta and the Brojo Mohon College, Barisal opened separate sections for women in 1932-33. By 1936-37, there were 511 girls studying in men's colleges.

This marked interest in women's education was contemporaneous with a heated debate over the curriculum for girls' education. All those who felt that girls should be compulsorily taught cooking, needlework and housewifery to bring their education 'closer to life' found in the Government their champions. The Inspectress of Schools, Dacca Circle, for example heartily approved of a school at Ananda Ashram, Dacca, where all girls spent a portion of their time in handwork, 'alpana, kantha stitching'[84] etc. This entailed a heavier emphasis on humanities, arts and crafts than on the sciences. That is why, even in 1936-37, there was 'no well-equipped laboratory in any Indian girls' school in Bengal.'[85] As for science in higher education, Bethune College seems to have been one of the few which did offer classes in Physics and Chemistry, though not Biology. This too had come quite late: when Sarala Devi Chaudhurani[86] and Shanta Devi (Nag) [87] had studied there in the last years of the 19th century, and had found no opportunity to study physics or mathematics in college. But by 1931-32, there were 15 girls in the first year of the Chemistry Class and 5 in the Second year. By 1936-37, there were not only

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84 QRPE, p. 97

85 Ibid, p. 96.

86 S Devi Chaudhurani: 'Jiboner Jharapata' (Calcutta, 1975) p.104

87 S. Nag in Srabashi Ghosh: 'Birds in a Cage' in EPW, Vol. XXI, No. 43, Oct. 25 1986, WS 88-96.

22 girls in the First year and 14 in the Second, but also 29 girls reading Physics. However, this meant only that the college offered science at the intermediate level, but not for graduation as was evidenced also from the Principal's note to the Department of Education.[88]

Despite its limitations, women's education did take a significant step forward. That its importance was realised by women themselves was evident in the founding of some women's educational associations. The Nari Shiksha Samiti started in 1919 with the object of imparting such education to girls and women as would make them 'helpful wives and mothers and useful members of society and enable them to earn an honest living in case of need.' Under the supervision of Abala Bose, it founded some 40 girls' schools in Calcutta by 1929, started a Hindu Widows' home in 1922 called the Vidyasagar Bani Bhavan and opened an industrial school for women in 1926 called the Mahila Shilpa Bhandar. In the Vidyasagar Bani Bhavan, widowed women were trained as teachers or nurses. In September 1928, students of the two highest classes (V and VI) were put through a short intensive course of lessons in teaching by the Principal of the Brahmo Training School. Then three of them were put in charge of three separate schools situated in the interior. This experiment was well spoken of by the Assistant Inspectress of Schools, Dacca Circle, after inspecting the schools concerned.[89]

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88 QRPE, p. 98

89 ABP, November 16, 1929.

One of these students, Shantilata Das, while assessing her work in a predominantly Muslim village of Manickgunj district of Dacca, said,[90] 'The condition of those girls is very saddening. There is considerable enthusiasm to learn but... (the parents) constantly burden their daughters with housework and pay no heed to their education..... Their only thought is to equip their daughters for marriage..... as if that is the sole aim of a woman's life. If the girls sit down to study or mention the school, they are reprimanded with questions like "are you going to become a memsahib ? Will you earn money by it ?" and sometimes they are beaten as well. The girls live in constant fear, very often, they run away to school without even eating.... '
Her colleague in the venture, Charubala Sarkar, did not find any substantial difference in attitude in a predominantly Baidya-Kayastha Hindu populated village. Nor, for that matter, did the third colleague, Indubala Gupta in another Brahmin-dominated village.

It would seem that whatever the growth in education for women, it retained its urban bias. The hostility to female education was not entirely absent from lives of women in towns. Shova Ghosh was studying in Class IX of Eden School, Dacca when she was married off. Fortunately, her in-laws allowed her to complete her matriculation. Her husband, a lecturer in Mathematics at Ripon College,

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90 S. Das: 'Shikkhoyitrir Abhigyata' in Bangalakshmi, Magh 1336 (1929) pp. 181-84.

Calcutta, was enthusiastic enough to secure her admission to Bethune College. But Shova recounted her embarrassment in studying at home, in case people thought that 'this housewife only sits with books in her hand, and does not do any housework... When the school coach used to come to the corner of the street and the coachman used to call "Gari aya baba" - and I used to cover my head with the end of my sari and board the bus - the windows of houses on both sides of the street would open and the neighbouring women would stare curiously at a housewife going to college... I realised that this society thought better if married women worked at home rather than study.'[91]

Besides the ideology of 'housewife-isation' that attacked girls from an early age, the invisibility and lack of mobility - implied by the keeping of 'purdah' was a major hurdle in the acquisition of an education by women. Manikuntala Sen studied at Brojo Mohon College, Barisal but sat behind a wooden partition in the class room, made of wood and smoked glass with a small hole in the glass to see the professor.[92] Even when she was in high school, she realised that girls could not walk around publicly, not even back home from school which was just half-a-mile away. In fact, it was only when she came to Calcutta for higher studies did she see women travelling around unescorted in public transport. Yet

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91 S. Ghosh: Aaj O Tara Picchu Dake, (Calcutta, 1981) pp. 158-9

92 M. Sen: Sediner Katha, (Calcutta, 1982) pp 30 and 38

Shova, who travelled by tram to Bhowanipur with her husband, was warned by one of her relatives that this was 'unseemly' behaviour for a bhadra, married woman. And though she had a harmonium and loved singing along with it, she remembered that she had to close the windows before doing so, as it was considered 'shameless'.[93] She also recounted an incident where she was made to feel ashamed and guilty for praising a friend who had taken up the theatre for a profession.

Thus there were quite well-formed conventions governing 'bhadra' behaviour. Yet these were themselves in flux during this time, as is portrayed by comments in newspapers. An 'old observer' remarked that 'while advocating for the abolition of the Purdah system our ways with the ladies are never commendable,' and criticised young men making 'silly and objectionable remarks about girls and ladies who travel with them in the same cars.'[94] To this indictment, S.K. Dutt replied ' ...the number of ladies and young girls travelling by tram cars and other public conveyances and joining meetings and other public functions are rather increasing... inspite of evil looks of men around them and returning home unmolested and repeating the same thing again.'[95] These interactional problems were vividly described by Manikuntala Sen as well - of men muttering obscenities in the ears of women walking past, of being followed by strange cars at night, and

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93 S. Ghosh: Aaj O Tara Picchu Dake, p. 160-62.

94 ABP, November 2, 1929.

95 ABP, November 6, 1929.

and of even being physically confronted by strangers in College Square[96] - experiences which live with us half a century later.

Much more work needs to be done on women's access to, and control of, property. The general understanding of women's proprietory rights seemed to link it to the system of dowry. For example, Jyotirmoyee Ganguli, while presiding over a meeting of a mahila samiti at Thakurgaon, demanded that daughters ' ...must claim a part of the paternal property. She may not have a portion of the immovable property but she must have the value of her share in money then and this will do away with the pernicious system of dowry and demands... '[97] Another letter to the editor by Khagendra Nath Basu, too, made this connection: by characterising dowry as some form of compensation for women's lack of proprietory rights, it was also easy to uphold it.[98] However, there were some voices raised against dowry - Kamala Bose and Giribala Ray being the most vociferous of these. To arguments like the above, Kamala retorted that 'the majority of Bengalee fathers have no property or money at all to part with... Moreover, the money that is given as dowry does not go to the bride at all, in majority of cases it fills the pocket of her father-in-law.' She further claimed that dowry had no connection with inheritance and asked young bachelors in Bengal to form an anti-dowry association, to resolve not to demand dowry at the

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96 M. Sen: Sediner Katha, pp. 87-38.

97 ABP, May 12, 1929.

98 ABP, June 21, 1929.

time of marriage and not to allow themselves to be sold like 'merchandise'.[99]

The association of dowry with property rights occurred because of the concept of 'stridhana'. There was no one definition of it: broadly speaking, it was constituted of gifts obtained by a woman from her relations, and her ornaments and apparel. The only sorts of gifts that came under that denomination were presents before the nuptial fire and, according to some, presents made at the bridal procession. Subsequently, nothing acquired by a woman's labour or skill constituted 'stridhana' except her earnings as a widow. Nor did property inherited by a woman from a male or female relative become 'stridhana'.[100] Theoretically, a woman could inherit property only as a widow or as a daughter. There was no uniformity on the issue - the Mitakshara school recognised the widow's right only when her husband was separated from his kinsmen, saying nothing as to the extent of her interest in the estate or the order of succession to it after her death. The Dayabhaga school, which dominated in Bengal, allowed her to succeed to her husband's estate in all cases on failure of sons, grandsons, and great-grandsons, but it limited her interest to mere enjoyment with moderation, and declares that on her death, the estate should devolve not on the heirs who inherit her stridhana, but on the next heirs of her husband.

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99 ABP, October 17 - November 5, 1930.

100 G. Banerjee : The Hindu Law of Marriage and Stridhana (Calcutta 1927) pp. 297

In any case, the rights of a woman over her 'stridhana' were not absolute : her husband could use it in cases of 'distress' and repayment was optional with him. There is evidence also to show that women's attempts to claim any kind of property was very nearly always unsuccessful, as the case brought by Mrs. U.N. Roy against her three brothers for maintenance shows.[101] Daughter of a millionaire zamindar of Nadia, she alleged that the brothers had agreed to pay her a monthly allowance of Rs.500 and so she had not contested the case for the construction of her father's will. The brothers stopped her maintenance on the ground that the said case was contested by the plaintiff. The Judge disbelieved the plaintiff, dismissed the suit with costs. Equally important decisions were given in cases of Tarangini Dass vs. her son Nakul Chandra Sarkar[102] and Sarojbala vs. her brother Susen Behari Roy.[103] These need to be more thoroughly examined to accurately portray the nature of women's property-holding rights. The Hindu Women's Right to Property Act in 1937 could redress the situation only slightly; - studied in conjunction with traditional proprietory rights, it however can be enlightening.

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101 ABP, April 25, 1930.

102 ABP, May 20, 1930.

103 ABP, December 3, 1930.

WAYS OF SEEING

It is through literature that the dominant images of women and their experience have been most easily and widely elaborated. The use of the word 'image' assumes that there will follow the reflection of 'reality'. This is only half the truth. It is now equally important to stress that images also create the world for us, they shape our conciousness. This is especially significant where women are concerned since 'traditional images focus on their domestic and sexual roles. This has the effect of continually limiting women's notions of themselves and their possibilities; it undermines from within."[1]

An attempt has been made here to study the works of authors writing between 1920 and 1935, namely Anurupa Debi, Nirupama Debi, Sita Debi, Shanta Debi, Radharani Debi and Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay. However, it should be noted that this is not a comprehensive analysis of all their literary production; evidence cited from other authors, journals & newspapers is used only for lending support to a tentatively delineated argument.

One of the major dilemmas facing feminist historians has been the portrayal of women as 'victims' or as 'martyrs'. To put it simply, the first denies 'subjecthood' and volition to women, the second negates the very many serious constraints operating on them. The attempt to

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1. Partricia Stubbs : Women and Fiction (London, 1979), Introduction.

come to terms with this tension has meant not only a study of the 'image' of women but also of 'self-images'. The effort is problematic- if the 'image' posits purity and self-sacrifice as the source of strength, the self-image seems to indicate alternative sources of education and knowledge of the world. Thus I have incorporated not only fiction produced by women, but also their notions of things they considered important.

Representativity is a theme recurrent in the structure of domination and subordination. To represent, one must first label, - one self and then the other. The connection between labelling by others and by self is an intimate and mutually reinforcing one. The modus operandi of a dominant group is the assignment of preferred values, roles, activities and personal qualities to itself: the repository of inferior or opposed versions become the subordinates or the other. If we accept the proposition that the opposition between feminity and masculinity is the manifestation of the primary conflict between superordinate and subordinate[2]- as Miller argues- then we can also appreciate how the subordinates (women) become the 'carriers' of certain crucial aspects of human existence: those concerned with "emotional connectedness to others rather than with the enhancement of self-autonomy, with helping others to grow rather than oneself, with serving others' needs rather than establishing and satisfying one's own"[3]

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2. Quoted in Anne Oakley : 'Women Confined : Towards a Sociology of Childbirth'. (London, 1975).

3. Ibid, p. 264.

In this assigning of values to women, therefore, sexual chastity or 'satitva' retained its primary place in the hierarchy of female virtues, so that Nirupama Debi's Sati had to defend her purity from being defiled by the zamindar' son. Though in Sharat's work, physical chastity did not seem to be of fundamental importance - as he himself declared in an essay[4] - women did remain the moral centre of his fictional structure. The ideal of continence seems to have impinged on women more than on men : where the latter could resort to prostitutes, mistresses or the ' second family' women seem to have been obliged to live out the requirements of the established ideology without protest - for the most part, believing themselves to be without sexuality or desire and morally superior to men because of it. Yet spinsterhood was regarded as a misfortune

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4. 'Swaraj Sadhonai Nari', 1922 in Sharat Granthabali, (alcutta, 1967)

and marriage the norm. In fact, the word 'kanyaday,' which, loosely translated, would mean 'the obligation towards, and the burden of, a daughter,' crops up repeatedly in connection with marriage.

This is vividly illustrated in Nirupama Debi's novel 'Annapurnar Mandir.' It revolves around the system of 'pan,'[5] (money taken from the bride's father by the groom's family, to consent to the match), the system of child-marriage, (which is hinted at by the adverse comments of the neighbouring villagers about an unmarried fourteen-year-old, Sabitri) and the asceticism expected of a widow . The author's awareness of the inequality of such practices is embodied in :

> " ...first the parents will go mad, the house and its belongings will be sold, everybody will take to begging - then alone can a girl get married... "[6]

and

> " ...Those girls who feel shy to talk about marriage do not bear the responsibility of curdling the blood of their relatives and friends with worry, nor are they burdens and the source of all anxieties... "[7]

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5 It was prevalent enough for the Census of 1931 to remark upon: ".....apparently not known 40-60 years ago and the rather indefinite explanations of its origins in 'economic conditions' does not seem either to be clear or to account for the ascendancy it has established over the higher castes. ...." Vol V, Part I, p 899.

6 P. 31. This, and all subsequent translations are my own.

7 P. 127.

Yet the institution of marriage is upheld, as seen in the establishment of Annapurna's temple and fund (the word 'mandir' ties and sanctifies both), which will go towards redeeming destitute fathers from 'kanyadaya'. According to the benefactress, " ...if even one girl's tears can be wiped away, my wealth would have been meaningfully used... "[8] The solution, therefore, seemed to be to help men fulfill the 'duties' of patriarchy, not women to break away from it.

The author's characterisation of the widowed Sati, who is hounded by the zamindar's son, Naren, with promises of money is an extension of this. She accepts the money to save her family from the bailiff's hold, but before submitting to Naren, commits suicide. It is the ultimate sacrifice : what began as saving the last bit of milk for her younger brother and mother ends with the final sacrifice of her life. That this sacrifice has a reward if seen from the fact that after this, the family fortunes revive, Bishu develops a conscience, Hari starts looking after his family.

The concept of sacrifice was incorporated into the word 'seva' or worshiful service in the language as a whole. Its emphatic reiteration vis-a-vis women surfaced in most of the literature surveyed. Here I am tempted to use two short stories to bring

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8 P 143

out the point. The first, by Rabindranath Tagore[9] is about a devotee meditating in the jungle. A wood-gathering girl, who lives nearby, brings fruit for him in the 'pallav' of her sari, water in a cup made of leaves, flowers which she leaves at his feet; she holds the end of her sari over his head to protect him from the sun and guards over him at night. Her reward is a look or a word from him. As his meditation deepens, even that is not forthcoming. In fact the devotee once opens his eyes, realises the beauty of the girld and banishes her from sight. Meditation completed, he is granted Heaven by Indra, which he rejects in favour of the girl. We infer that a man can thus forego Heaven for such 'seva', or, conversely, that 'seva' always has its reward. Oakley's comment, at this juncture, might be useful to keep in mind:[10]

" ... The value of loss of self in others' welfare is supposed to be rewarding enough for whatever accompanying deprivations there may be... "

A better example of this 'loss of self' is contained in a short story by Suresh Chandra Chakraborty:[11] herein a blind man and an ugly woman begged together. When the man protested that he was only a burden, the woman replied, "Life had become unbearable because there was no burden of this kind." She fears that if he gains his sight, he will discover her ugliness

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9 'Bijoli' Magazine, 2 June, 1922.

10 Women Confined: p 5.

11 'Bijoli', 7 July, 1922. In the Indian context, perhaps it would be better to call it the non-assertion of the self as a cultural tendency, rather than a definite loss.

and leave her. When he does regain his eyesight, he sees a beautiful woman before him - "the exact likeness of the devi, in her voice the sweetness of the lotus-perfume, in her eyes, the shining clarity of dawn." Comments the writer:

" ...within the ugliness had awakened an element of divinity" and - we may add in parethesis - This had awakened due to her total and absorbed 'seva' of the beggar.

This kind of service is an essential characteristic of Nirupama Debi's women as well. They spend a major part of their lives in service to the men - Jahnavi her husband, Sati her father and elder brother, Sabitri her younger brother. Says Sati to Hari, "If all of you leave us behind like this, what will happen to us?"[12] After her father has articulated his wish that the two daughters die, Sabitri defends him as worried by the imminent threat of the sale of the house. When she does protest against Hari's neglect of the family, she retracts immediately with pleas for forgiveness and self-abnegation.

Sati's suicide-note to Bishu, the learned, rich, young hero, protests: " ...if you had wanted to, you could have given me everything... I was not entirely unqualified to be your wife. Yet you did not accept me." But the next instant she

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12 p. 14.

warns: " ... Do not think that despite being somebody else's wife, despite being a widow, I thought only of other men. We Bengali, Hindu daughters can bear pain and immerse ourselves in our situation very quickly."[13] Kamala Pishi sounds the only unmitigated protest against the male shopkeepers in the hat: " ...they are dacoits, who sell the thala to us for three rupees, but when it comes to buying it back from us, give us only one rupee for it."[14] But, significantly enough, Kamala is a Bagdi woman, one of the lowest castes in the Bengali social hierarchy, and a dependent on the Brahmin household she serves. Her social superiors, Sati and Sabitri, cannot protest as vehemently: their dependence seems total.

This dependence is linked up with a negative self-image. There is constant reference to this 'lowly jat' of women; comments like ' ...women and a garland of flowers were in the same position of being discarded when stale'[15] and 'A woman was created only for pain and suffering. Happiness is not for them. They should not even hope for such a thing.' The language of self-depreciation is deeply ironical as well. What is disturbing, in this context, is the author's solution - suffer or commit suicide. The surviving Sabitri becomes the focus of glorification : it is in her description that

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13 P 101-02.

14 P. 79.

15 P. 85.

that the couplet from 'Mahabharata' is recited. She accepts Bishu as her 'devata' (lord), her 'thakur' (God). She is more than grateful because he has given her some "place at his feet". And she is, in the end, described as the Goddess-image, holding an infant son in her arms in the temple of Annapurna, the Goddess of plenty. The end then becomes a choice between suicide and motherhood and proclaims only the pessimism of the author's vision, obscured, as it seems to be, by the image of woman as either a victim or a martyr. Of course, Nirupama Debi's use of names with tremendous traditional sanction was itself an indicator of the content of the images.

A similar characterisation informed Anurupa Debi's novel 'Ma'. Her 'traditional' views on women are perhaps connected with her opposition to the Hindu Code Bill in the 1950's. The novel here examined is a celebration of motherhood: what exactly it entails is evident in the following excerpts:

'The mother caressed his (her son's) tired-looking face and forehead lovingly many times and then kissed those fingers gently... During the meal she transferred some of the thickened milk and fruit from her bowl on to her son's plate.'[16]

As a young boy, when Ajit returns from a cousin's wedding, Manorama 'clasped him to her breast, pressed almost a thousand

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16 'Ma', P 11.

kisses on his head and, crying tears of happiness, asked him, "You must have missed me ?"[17]

Furthermore, the mother's description by the son is significant: 'the very personification of the mother goddess - the exquisite beauty of the graven image was actually that of his mother. In her eyes (is) the gaze of the goddess, on her lips the fount of loving affection, in her voice the life-inducing nectar dripping with mercy and compassion - as if she can quench the hunger and the thirst of the world.'

The vital association of nurture or nourishment with women is perhaps most tellingly depicted in Sharat Chandra's short story 'Anuradha'. Here, the woman begins as eight-year-old 'mashima' or mother's sister, quenching his thirst with coconut water, feeding him 'roti' and 'nadhu' (a small sweetmeat) and papering his demands for other delicacies like 'chandrapuli'.[18] Till, at the end, she cannot bear to think of Kumar falling asleep hungry, and so cooks and packs 'kitchdi' for the train. It is evident that with this constant association with nurture, the author was grooming the character for motherhood: she is shown nurturing the boy as he falls ill, and, finally, evoking the concept of endurance-cum-absorption of all trouble[19] and danger into herself as she says:

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17 Ibid. P. 164. There is no exact translation of 'mon kemon kara': the nearest in meaning is 'to miss'.

18 Consists of balls of flour, with sweetened coconut kernels, and soaked in milk.

19 Borrowed from Veena Das: Faminity and the Orientation to the Body, read at the Seminar on Socialisation, Education and Women, April 1985.

" ... If he does harrass and create a disturbance, it is only me he is doing it to, nobody else."

Perhaps an absorption with nurture is meant to divert attention from the pain and difficulty of being a mother. As Kitzenstein warns:

"We tend... to intellectualise childbirth... as if we could not ourselves come face to face with the intensity of the experience... We talk hopefully and deceptively about 'dicomfort' when we really mean pain: we say 'hard work' when we mean that a woman feels as if she is using her last source of strength and is at the limit of endurance; and we talk about maternal feelings as if they involved just a gentle sweetness and not the whole range of human passions... "[20]

Anurupa Debi's anaesthetizing out of existence this very pain and her glorification of this 'gentle sweetness' alone gives a view of motherhood that is ideal, not actual. It is this ideal that Brojorani has ultimately to accept and internalise. In her portrayal of Brojo, the author is quite unsympathetic. Brojo is supposedly educated at Bethune School, is familiar with the theater, with parties and concerts at Eden Garden, with the bioscope and fasion-trends, is well-read enough to discuss Bankim Chandra's heroines, and is intelligent enough to defend Draupadi's hostility to Arjun's second wife, Shubhadra

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20 Quoted in Oakley: Women Confined, p. 277.

She is independent and takes the coach to her father's house whenever she wishes to. She does not cover her head with the end of her sari because she considers it 'uncivilised'. She talks to her superiors as openly as she talks to her subordinates. She is not considered a 'good' daughter-in-law because she does not do much 'seva' of her mother-in-law. She does not at all fear the criticism of those around her as she violates the exclusiveness of the male-dominated 'outer-room'.

But her inability to bear children becomes a thorn in her side. It is implied, by others in the story, that Brojo's desire for a child is motivated by greed for her husband's wealth: according to law, Ajit, the son of the first wife, would inherit everything and the second wife would get nothing at all. Ritual status too is denied to her: she is not allowed to touch anything of a bride-to-be, and she rightly resents this as an insult to her humanity. Her yearning for a child thus initially excludes Ajit: she adopts Sharatshashi's infant daughter, enamoured by 'Khuki's beauty, Khuki's talent, Khuki's speech, Khuki's laughter - and most of all by Khuki's semi-articulate call "Ma".'[21] On Khuki's death, she takes another baby girl, Bela, to nurture : now she is increasingly protrayed as a devoted mother, sitting by Bela's bedside through the wintry night as the girl lies ill with fever. It is obvious

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21 'Ma', p 177.

that the author is grooming her for the ultimate achievement - becoming mother to Ajit. Entranced by the good looks of the young boy, she slowly progresses towards asking her husband to send him new clothes for Dussehra; the next step is her pride in Ajit's success in the entrance examination, requesting Arabindo to congratulate his son, calling him a 'stepfather' when he refuses to do so and thus establishing her identification with the child. But it is only after she tears up her husband's will (which leaves everything to her) and accepts totally her own pettiness, that she has transcended herself sufficiently to be invested with Manorama's mantle of motherhood.

It is evident that the author begins with two opposed stereotypes - the Western educated, selfish, suspicious second wife Brojo, and the uneducated, simple, exquisitely beautiful and devoted first wife Manorama - with the first merging with the second ultimately. As wives too, this phenomenon is repeated. Mano, the obvious focus of the author's sympathy, is grateful to her husband for rescuing her poor father from his 'kanyaday.' She is not greedy: she refuses Sharat's offer of jewellery because her father-in-law has ordered it to be so. She accepts his banishment of her from his house, and she accepts without demur her husband's consent to his father's machinations. She even glorifies this: " ...if Arabindo had disobeyed his father and come for her, would she have worshipped him

like a God? ... If today she has nothing else, she has complete pride in her husband.'[22] The author's glorification seems to have merged with Mano's, as she says, ' ....: She has only memories of one year of wedded bliss with which she can spend this life; if possible, even the next one.'[23] The author then carries on to liken her to Padmini, meditating for her lover, to Sati, whose devotion to her husband was exemplary, and to the mother-goddess, who in 'the midst of hundreds of thousands of difficulties remains upright.' Tellingly enough, there is some approval behind the comment: "Sita[24] devi too had some self-pride, but she (Mano) does not even have that !"[25]

Mano blames nobody but her 'karma' - not Arabindo and not even Brojo whom she blesses as she dies: "May you be like Sabitri!" Brojo, on the other hand protests quite vehemently:

> " ... You have bought me heaps of books, essence, jewellery, saris... but is that everything ? ... I do not want all those things, they are symbols of your dried up affection and attention ... When you will never really be able to love me, why did you knowingly marry me ? .... Is this not an immense deceit too ? ... What right do you all have to do such a thing ?.... "[26]

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22 'Ma', p 168.

23 Ibid. p 58.

24 It has been suggested by Prof. Das that Sita is not so much a role ideal as an option not exercisable by Indian women.

25 Ibid., p 137.

26 Ibid., p 52.

She even questions Arabindo's love for Mano: " ... If I love a person and cause that person only immense pain and suffering, what kind of love is that ?... "

Yet, for all her questioning, she never really 'disrespects' her husband. When her accusations turn out to be false, ' ... in deep shame and repentance, she wanted to fall at the feet of her husband and plead with him .... '[27] When he falls ill, she realises that his happiness is more important than her pride, and caps it all by admitting to him in the end:

> " .... In getting you I have got a lot; in this world how many queens have got as much ? I am a 'Rakshasi', blinded by my false pride and burnt alive by my own jealousy - the blame for that is not yours... "[28]

The real key to the understanding of such a contradiction lies in the author's intended admission by Brojo of Mano's superiority. As, with her last breath, Mano refuses to condemn Arabindo and expresses in turn her faith in his impartiality, Brojo is made to say: " .... at last I have understood where the difference between us lies."

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27 Ibid., p. 162.

28 Ibid, p. 300.

This kind of idealising of an unblaming and accepting wifehood was best symbolised by the legend of Sati. In a short story with the same title,[29] Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay employed the same criteria for Sati-like wifehood but turned the focus of his sympathy onto the husband. Nirmala, the wife of a lawyer, Harish, brings back her husband from the jaws of a choleraic death, vowing, "If I am the sati-kanya of a sati-mother, nobody dare distroy my iron-bangle or my sindoor."[30] But her devotion, so the author tells us, stems from her belief that 'if you do not constantly keep an eye on a man, he will stray.' This leads to much pettiness and suspicion, - unjustified, according to the author; when Harish returns late after listening to a 'kirtan-wali', he is locked out of the conjugal bedroom and thereafter never stays out in the evening. This turning of sympathy on to the male protagonist is evident in the author's description of Harish's plight: to his sister's suggestion of a remarriage for himself, his reply is, " ... If this path had been open for your sister-in-law also I would have agreed... I can neither hide nor show my face anywhere." This, we are told, is because Nirmala is a wife 'on whom not even his severest enemy can lay the charge of impurity, a wife who knows and sees nothing but her husband. How could he desert her ? Hindu society would not accept such a thing.'[31]

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29 Published in 1934. Granthabali Vol.9

30 Sharat Chandrer Granthabali, p . 225. Vol. 9.

31 Ibid., p. 235.

A similar phraseology is available in Anurupa Debi's glorification of Arabindo. The passage I am about to quote in substantiation of this is significant for another aspect of the author's thinking as well - a kind of demand-and-supply law which seems to have pertained to women -

> " ... Man is tempted only by things which are unobtainable, or obtainable only through a great deal of effort and difficulty... Arabindo's second wife was not the fruit, to pluck which he would have had to strain himself. He had brought her home, really, as a readily available burden on his shoulders. After that, he had been able to make this burden more bearable solely by his extraordinary patience and edurance... "[32]

It is clear from the words 'things', 'fruit', 'burden' that 'woman' is interchangeable with 'commodity'. To this commodity, therefore, the notion of value according to supply was attached. Anurupa Debi was not alone in her subscription to this notion. Sharat Chandra Chattopadhyay in his work 'Narir Mulya' had used almost identical terminology:

> "Precious stones are precious because they are unavailable. The value of woman is not high because the supply is unlimited... "

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32 'Ma', p.

The focus of his attack here was the practice of sati and the non-practice of widow remarriage, for which he held the men responsible. In fairness to him, however, it should be noted that Sharat made one point emphatically: speaking on women who burned themselves on their husbands' pyres, he said, " ... One who is dependent on another will always try to please the other.... Men preach whatever they like and call it 'dharma'; women believe them, mistaking the wishes of the men as their own, and in this mistake find happiness."[33]

Yet what he was advocating was not the lessening of the dependence so much as the improving of the conditions of bondage. Thus he could quote with some approval C.L. Wragge's 'The Romantic and the South Seas' wherein it was said:

> " ... And what are the duties of women ? To look after the house and mind the children; to be good wives, good mothers, to leave politics alone and darn the clothes. Tahitian women, in woman's sphere, are superior by far, in my opinion, to their sisters in the Bois... "[34]

The inference was that there are separate spheres for men and women and each shoud be allowed to excel within their confined spheres.

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33 Sarat Chandrer Granthabali, Vol. 9., p 571.

34 Ibid., p 591.

Unfortunately, at that stage in Sharat's writing,[35] he associated 'bahir' meaning 'outside' (which could also be understood to broadly embody the concept of 'public') with prostitution. So when he denied woman's 'natural' inclination towards prostitution, his logic could be stretched to deny women's desire to become 'public.' His criteria for prostitution too might have been confused: he had not yet evolved the idea of woman's physical autonomy and therefore cited examples of women in Tahiti and Tibet practising polyandry and respected by their men 'despite this'. Talking of Burma in another essay,[36] he misrepresented the freedom of the Burmese woman as wantonness, which he held responsible for the decline of their civilisation.

This limitation, combined with his fear of radical change, resulted in a sufficiently conservative discourse on women:

> " ... If you want to extract some worthwhile work from prisoners in jail, you must lighten the heavy chains that bind them. Of course, I am not advocating a total breaking of the chains - from that, only a condition similar to that of American women will result."[37] (emphasis mine)

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35 This was around 1920-21.

36 'Swaraj Sadhonai Nari'.

37 'Narir Mulya', Sharat Chandrer Granthabali, Vol. 9, p. 595.

It followed from this that 'the value of a woman depends on the affection, sympathy and justness of men. God has created her as weak; the absence of physical strength can be compensated by progressive men.'[38] Sharat's identification of himself with the dominating gender was apparent in a comment on the national movement:

> " ... In the endeavour ... in which women have no contribution, no sympathy, to perceive which truth we have given them no knowledge, no education and no encouragement, whom we have confined to the harem, commanding them only to spin the charkha, so great a thing can never be obtained. We have kept 'meyemanush' as 'meye' alone, we have not allowed them to become 'manush'... "[39] (emphasis mine)

The last sentence highlights a vital fact - woman's exclusion from language. 'Manush' literally means man, and also pertains to the qualities of a human being. I point this out because Bengali as a language provides for a neutral gender : for an author to overlook that in favour of a gender-oriented language can perhaps be seen as another point of an author's identification with a gender role.[40]

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38 Ibid., p . 598.

39 'Swaraj Sadhonai Nari', Granthabali, p . 325.

40 It may not have been a conscious effort, because we know that consciously Sharat tried to speak in a woman's voice quite often: he had two pseudonyms under which many of his stories were first published - 'Anila Debi' and 'Anupama Debi'. This only strengthens my contention that speaking on behalf of woman does not mean necessrily speaking in her voice.

This limitation of language was evident even in Sharat's most 'radical' novel 'Shesh Proshno', written in 1931. The beloved was still the 'patro' or receptacle. Kamal's reference to herself as 'barhi' (house) and as a 'bhar' (burden) is perhaps significant for the identification of woman with commodities or institutions. This kind of identification persists today in the conductor's warning to the driver to halt the bus: 'Aste ! Zenana Hai !" wherein zenana, the institution, and the women within it have become the one and the same thing.

Yet, 'Shesh Proshno' is remarkable for a quite trenchant attack on traditional notions of marriage, especially monogamy. Kamal, who seems to be the mouthpiece of the author, is a widow, the daughter of a labour woman's misalliance with an Englishman. But her exquisite beauty and her tremendous personality attracts Shibnath, who deserts his ill wife for her. Shibnath and Kamal marry according to Shaivite rites, which are considered a fraud by others around them. But for Kamal it is enough: as she says,

> " ... It is good then that the man I have accepted as a husband, I have not tied up completely. If the bolt on his freedom stays slightly open, then let it be. If the heart becomes bankrupt, then by making the purohit's mantra the mahajan, the interest might be extracted, but the real capital will have vanished."[41]

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41 'Shesh Proshno', p . 132.

There is perhaps something to be said about the use of such a clearly commercial language to describe a human relationship.

So when Shibnath does leave her for Manorama, Kamal has only this to say:

> " ... Perhaps the numb limb would have stayed attached to the body, and just like what happens to the majority of women, all my life I would have had to bear the burden and its pain .... If the force of the ceremony performed one day out of a whole lifetime becomes a barrier to human deliverance from it, then that arrangement is unacceptable as a healthy one.... "[42]

Furthermore, she categorically denounces marriage for the sake of sons to ensure the continuance of property, and can thus challenge the whole idea of motherhood being the ultimate meaning of woman's life as a pack of lies and deceit. Since, for her, marriage is one more incident in a life full of incidents, and considering it the be-all of a woman's life the beginning of tragedy, she rejects Ajit's proposal at the end, rejecting even his offer to change his will in her favour. For monogamy, which is supposed to be the sole sanction behind the strict observance of widowhood, Kamal has only contempt:

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42 Ibid., p . 148.

> " ... The person you once loved is no more ... The receptacle of your love has been wiped out without a trace, leaving behind only a memory. To constantly preserve that memory, to consider the past, rather than the present as the only certainty, the only truth, is no great ideal";[43] it is only the "unhealthy ugly sign of a stagnant and numb mind."[44]

Abstinence too is just an empty word, for her, which has been greatly inflated by the respect it has received over the years. Self-sacrifice, another hallmark of traditional womanhood, too, is a concept which, according to her, originates from emptiness, not completeness, of character: " ...it has a very wide, ancient, spiritual kind of attraction; it intoxicates by its fervour,... "[45] Thus she warns Nilima, the widowed sister-in-law of Abinash, not to indulge in this kind of make-believe spirituality, sacrificing herself by working '<u>begar</u>' as his housekeeper.

Sharat's Kamal has also evolved the idea of physical autonomy: she is free to ask Ajit to take her for a drive in his fast car at night, even asking him to stay with her. She initiates the relationship with Rajen, she goes to live with one previous neighbour to help him after his wife's death and in the end,

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43 Ibid., p. 37.

44 Ibid., p. 34.

45 Ibid., p. 207.

she leaves for Amritsar with Ajit to live together there. She is emphatic in her assertion that she is nobody's property,[46] refuses to be called Mrs., preferring to be addressed by her own name. In fact she shows a particularly striking awareness about the use of addressive terms: she objects to calling Ashubabu 'kaka' or uncle, because " ...it is meaningless to use a word to decieve oneself into thinking that a relationship existed where none did."[47]

Yet, and here possibly the limitations of language and author again become evident, Kamal never questions elderly Ashubabu's addressing her as 'Ma'.[48] She does not have a religion, but her rejection of it is never adequately explained. In fact, time and again we come across evidence of this incomplete rejection in her use of the words 'Deshlakshmi,' 'God's merciful arrangement,' etc. This is perhaps because her definition of religion - and the author's too by implication - is 'the analysis of and meditation upon the self in the midst of solitude.'[49]

Furthermore, Kamal, too, cannot be dissociated from the 'seva' concept. As she admits to Ajit in one episode, she has been cooking the whole day long for him in the belief that "Feeding you is greater than myself."[50] When Shibnath falls ill with

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46 Ibid., p 14.
47 Ibid., p 74.
48 Ibid., p 77.
49 Ibid., p 258.
50 Ibid., p 66.

influenza, she feels she can 'serve him with heart and soul' because she is accustomed to doing 'seva' from her childhood on a tea-estate. She sweeps his room, changes the linen, spends a sleepless night waiting upon her husband, even fanning Rajen to sleep and receives the ultimate compliment from the latter: "You are not like other girls as I had thought. One can depend on you." [51] It is in this light that her remark about the self-embroidered bed-linen should be considered: " ...nobody prepares these things for oneself, but for somebody else."[52]

There is yet another 'backward pull' in Kamal's life: not only does she insist on wearing white, she also insists on eating boiled vegetarian food once a day only. This is called 'hobishanna', and is a definite prescription for mourning in general, and widows in particular. Sharat seems to have taken great pains to justify this as a corollary of poverty. (Thus, time and again, he refers to Kamal's dietary habits but is silent about Nilima's.) That Sharat does not completely succeed is evident in Kamal's acceptance of 'the moral values of vegetarianism' - as one critic has called it[53] - which is reflected in her remark: "Why should I defile myself by eating other things ?"[54]

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51 Ibid., pp. 135 - 142.

52 Ibid., P. 180.

53 Humayun Kabir : 'Sharat Chandra Chatterjee - The Man and his Writings.' (Calcutta, 1945)

54 'Shesh Proshno', P. 89.

It is possible that Sharat's uneasiness about the 'radical' Kamal he had created resulted in the very glorification Kamal had rejected. How else can one explain the contrasting protrayal of the highly-educated, rich divorcee Bela and Kamal that is articulated in Nilima's words ? -

> "... Whatever else Kamal might do, she will never accept the wherewithal for her food and clothing from the husband she has forsaken in humiliation and disgust. She would take her own life rather than lower herself to that extent..." [55]

Sharat's views of the rights of women to maintenance after separation are thus ambiguous. From this ambiguity there follows an insistence throughout the story, on Kamal's not blaming Shibnath for leaving her. She does not support Haren, Akhoy, Abinash and Ashubabu's proposal to punish Shibnath because :

> "... I feel ashamed to nag and scold him, demanding more from him than he could give... Please do not involve him any more in what is solely my misforture ..." [56] (emphasis mine)

Perhaps, that is why the reader is not too surprised when Kamal argues that :

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55 Ibid., p 193.

56 Ibid., p 157.

> " ... Even today, no matter how much the women wrangle over emancipation, the real givers of this are the men - not ourselves. ... The independence of the slaves of the world was given by their masters and overlords, fighting on their behalf ... The weak can be freed from bondage only by the strong. Similarly, women's freedom can only be given by men. The responsibility is theirs... "[57] (empahsis mine)

Thus, I don't think it would be an exaggeration to argue that Sharat was reiterating what he had already proclaimed earlier: customs, like chains did not need to be broken or discarded, they need only to be improved. It would seem therefore that the notoriety he earned was itself an indicator of the social climate of Bengal in the 1930's, where even a basically conservative discourse could - and did - arouse so much of a controversy.[58]

The response of some of his women readers on the occasion of his fifty-third birthday in 1932 is particularly significant. It went like this:

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57 Ibid., p. 225. Obviously, Sharat's Kamal speaks on his behalf, just as he speaks on behalf of women - and neither speak in a woman's voice.

58 Humayun Kabir : Introduction by Yusuf Meherally.

> " ...you have given expression to the silent emotions in the hearts of the helpless women of a degraded society. By sympathetically representing all the experiences of joy and sorrow of their lives, you have made them come alive in literature. Your compassionate outlook, your refined penetration, deep perception, strength and your special, deeply moving experience of human character has located the innermost recesses of the nature of all womanhood. O supreme knower of womankind's secret, we salute you !... You have revealed the real form of woman's strength in the face of degradation. You have realised her true character. O knower of woman's heart, we salute you!... "[59]

The preoccupation with the sanctioned relational roles of women was not without a context. The nationalist discourse invited women to consider the 'whole country as her home and serve her country people as she would serve her own home people.'[60] This domestic metaphor was particularly well-articulated by Gandhi, as his appeal for prohibition, his choice of salt as an issue and his plea for khaddar showed :

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59 Quoted in Vishnu Prabhakar : 'Awara Masiha', p. 297. The use of the word 'masiha' itself is significant: Sharat then becomes the 'saviour' of womankind.

60 Speech of Kumarkrishna Datta at Vidyasagar Bani Bhavan, ABP, April 19, 1929.

> ' ... During pregnancy, women cheerfully carry their load for nine months and suffer the severe pains of child-birth with joy. This is the time for the birth of new India. Will you not be ready at least to carry the weight of heavy clothes at this hour ? ... If you wish to give birth to a new India, every woman must bear this burden not merely for nine months but for nine years.'[61]

Along with this injunction went two differing representations of the mother[62] - the one in need of avenging and the other the vengeful one, the mother-as-warrior. Priyambada Debi's poetry gave glimpses of both - the first was the 'motherland' and the second the 'goddess-woman'. Called 'Maa'er Apaman', (Mother Insulted) one went,

> ' ... O brave, how are you tolerating this insult?...,
> (to her) who took you into her womb
> and moulded your soul,
> giving up her own,
> at whose breast you suckled
> the gift of life,
> who forgets all her sorrow
> in giving you joy,
> and forsakes shame and pride.
> The same mother weeps inconsolably
> now by the wayside

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61 Collected Works, Vol. XVIII, p. 393. See also Madhu Kishwar on 'Gandhi and Women' in EPW, Oct.85, Nos.30&31

62 I am indebted to Ms Tanika Sarkar for this idea, and for allowing me to use it.

Shall her children tolerate
disrespect to their mother ? ... [63]

However it was also evident that in speaking of themselves as the 'race of mothers' or as the 'mother-goddess' (debi), it was with the second representation that they identified. Priyambada herself asserted:

'I am woman born of divinity
In the form of the universe
The companion of the lord
of the three worlds ...
I am not barren soil
bearing only its burdens,
I am strong of body and mind
Believing the shastric sayings
'Woman is the embodiment of shakti
The language of 'cannot' is not a woman's
Our lives are the observance of this shakti.... [64]

Shoroshibala Ghosh, too, invoked this image when she wrote,

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63 'Bijoli', August 25, 1922

64 'Bangalakshmi', Baisakh 1337 (1930)

' ... in our ancient texts we find that whenever the demons oppressed the gods, the latter have taken refuge with 'shakti-rupini nari-mahadevi' and under her leadership, defeated the demons and recovered their lost rights. Therefore, leave alone the human being, even the omnipotent gods have been forced to acknowledge the superiority of the female principle.'[65]

Their appeal to 'history' was always made in an effort to reappropriate a lost and active past - specially a lost world of letters - as again is evident in this:

'In the past ... she who has proved her expertise in analysing the language and injunctions of the vedas, who has shown her incomparable skill in fearlessly destroying the most difficult of arguments forwarded by knowledgeable rishis in the ashrams of the woods - ... her children are now satisfied with just the memory of that past glory - ... have burdened her with the empty title of Lakshmi - debi, have abdicated all responsibility towards her ! .... '[65]

Thus most of them insisted on education, as a means of empowerment, of learning about one's own strength. As Labonnobala Ghosh told the editor of a magazine, ' .... What all of you did not want to let her know, she has learnt now - that is why you are so angry. She knows that she is no way lesser than you - ... '[66]. Others too realised

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65 'Naritter Adarsha' in Bangalakshmi, Baisakh 1337, (1930) pp. 475-478.

66 Ibid.

67 Letter to the Editor, 'Bijoli', November 25, 1921.

that knowledge was a weapon for re-ordering gender-relations. Ayesha Ahmad, for example, squarely condemned men for keeping women ignorant and illterate - 'because an educated woman will be a man's equal, they call it impertinence .... because they hold to a baseless fear of education destroying women's feminity and inducing wilfulness and sensualism in them ....'[68] There was however, no unanimity about the contents of this education so desired - during the debate, a convergence occurred between 'western' and 'bookish' as opposed to 'Indian' and 'practical'. Yet, the ideal was roughly the same - a synthesis of 'the `Eastern' qualities of seva, tolerance, dedication, love, self-sacrifice and tenderness with the `Western' thirst for knowlege, enthusiasm, fearlessness, efficiency, orderliness and the ability to move with the times.'[69] Furthermore, there was some agreement too on the issue of equal education for boys and girls till the primary stages. Indira Devi Choudhurani, for example, specified that 'till the age of 11 or 12, there should be equal education for boys and girls alike, because it is essential to have some knowledge of everything in all circumstances. After that let girls study some special subjects according to their ability, wish and inclination, but amongst these there should be at least one subject which can be a source of income in the future. After the age of 16 too, if her parents

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68 'Nari Shiksha' in `Bangalakshmi', Jaishtha 1336 (1929), pp 512-513.

69 Kamala Sen : `Naritter Adarsha' in `Bangalakshmi', Chaitra, 1336 (1929) pp. 395-397.

keep her in college, she can acquire hither education on an equal basis with boys...'[70] Similarly, Shanta Devi asserted, '.... from infancy, a daughter must be educated in such a manner that she can assume full responsibility for her future herself. Just like it is necessary to educate a son despite his father's wealth, it is essential to give a daughter a professional education..... after a certain age, just as a son becomes responsible for his own income and expenditure, a daughter too must become so.....'[71]

Though many seriously belief that education would make them better wives and mothers, there were some who viewed them as opposed forces. 'That compulsory primary education was as essential for girls as for boys has been discussed before, but quite fruitlessly; for in a country where the attraction of 'gouridan'[72] has defeated the Sarda Bill too, what sense of responsibility can be expected from these fathers and guardians ?' demanded Hashirashi Debi. Giribala Ray, the author, too, while protesting against the heinous system of dowry or 'bar-pana', adocated equal education for girls and boys to redress the shameful 'picture of a hundred girls pleading for marriage with the one and the same groom - it is deeply destructive of women's dignity.'[73] And Shanta Debi emphatically denied that women were to be educated to give them 'a polished

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70 'Bangalakshmi', Chaitra, 1336, (1929) pp. 333-37

71 'Bangalakshmi', Falgun, 1335. (1928)

72 'Gouridan' is the giving away of a daughter in marriage. 'Amra Ki Chai ar Keno Chai?' in Jayashree, Bhadra, 1342. (1935) pp. 333-336

73 'Bangalakshmi', Jaishtha, 1336. (1929)

veneer and pass them off successfully in the marriage-mart.' Asserting, instead, that women were to be educated to take full responsibility for themselves, she decried the notion that 'with marriage, all the problems of her (the girl's) life have been solved, that there would be no further need for the use of her mental faculties if only she could stay devoted to her husband ...this has to be forgotten. A daughter may not marry at all; even if she does, she should be able to look after herself, choose her own profession and have mental and economic independence.... '74

Education thus came to be viewed as a gateway to freedom, or 'swadhinata'. 'What we mean by equal freedom (samya-swadhinata) is that just like men enjoy the right of developing themselves in their own fashion, we too want the opportunity to grow along our chosen paths,' wrote Usha Mitra.[75] Their understanding of 'swadhinata' was crucial to the debate as it immediately brought into focus gender-relations. As Amiya Debi viewed it, ' ... swadhinata cannot be given, it has to be taken by force. If women really want it, they have to agitate and fight for it themselves - it is only natural that men will want to obstruct them.' She compared the reforms carried out by the British government to the measures taken by Indian men for Indian women. 'The givers of swadhinata do so only because

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74 Bangalakshmi, Falgun 1335 (1928)

75 Bangalakshmi, Ashwin 1338 (1931) pp. 913-916.

they want slightly more refined and well-mannered women ... The responsibility for this swadhinata cannot be with well-wishing men ... if it does, then adhinata alone is strengthened.'[76] Amiyabala Bandhopadhyay delineated further ' ... And no more do we want to be directed and controlled by some one else ..... After revolting against her husband too, a women's life can be meaningfull, rejection of a tyrannical father's dictates on marriage can still leave a daughter some respect, and a mother's disregard of her son's control still leaves her venerable. We will be swadhin, we will amass strength, stand on our own feet and in physical bravery and mental strength we will be equal to men .... We want to tear away this 'mayajal' of 'pativratya' and be fully human...'[77]

As Urmila Debi, one of the first woman activists in Bengal, put it, 'Swaraj' meant self-rule and 'Swadhinata' the 'strength and power to fulfill all our needs ourselves.' It is not too difficult, therefore, to understand the intimate connection they made between women's rights and the national movement.[78] Shantisudha Ghosh, in an article remarkable for its succinctness, ridiculed those who called themselves freedom-loving patriots but castigated the women's efforts at emancipating themselves as anarchic and unnatural. 'When the call is given to the Indian

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76 'Bijoli,' August 4, 1922.

77 'Bijoli,' August 11, 1922.

78 'Banglar Katha', October 28, 1921.

people to oppose the injustice and insults meted out by the alien, then will the women's attention not fall on the daily injustices and insults within the narrow confines of her personal life ? To hope that it will not is to deceive oneself....

Those who resist this agitation for engendering conflict between men and women and thus boding immense ill for society - to them we can only reply that that can well be said of the national movement also ... The conflict between the Englishman and the Indian is proving harmful to both; two races of the world, instead of living peacably, are immersed in severe fraternal strife, - to be free from this, it would be best to ungrudgingly accept dependence upon the English ! But, in the sphere of national politics, everyone clearly realises the invalidity of this logic.'[79] Asserting that for the destruction of 'unjust, oppressive inequality and dependence,' conflict was necessary at all levels, Shantisudha went on to argue that when it was suggested that instead of erecting the 'flag of battle' against men, women should acquire their rights after debate and discussion, it would be only politic to think of how ridiculous this 'moderate style' had been in national politics. ' ..... Sovereignty is such a thing that nobody will voluntarily surrender it. Swadhinata is such a thing that it cannot be attained by begging. It has to be grasped on the basis of one's own strength. This rule cannot be waived for

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79 'Rashtra Andolan O Nari Andolan' in Anandabazar Patrika, Sharadiya, 1929.

men.... Wishing to do good to woman, man has enclosed her within a small place and is ruling there as her 'protector' -

...we heard just such assurances from the British Government. It is meaningless, and because it has no meaning, conflict has arisen both in the nation and within the home.

... Many knowledgeable and seriously well-wishing men (feel) ... that the path women are treading today will take them far beyond the limits of their natural feminity to harm. They will dutifully oppose this wrong path - for in intellect and experience, men are superior to women, therefore they alone should determine the road which women should take. Here, we have only one question : When the English rulers continually repeat this on the issue of India's sovereignty, can any patriotic Indian believe or accept them ?'

At the core of this argument was the consciousness of the contradictions implicit in applying different rules for the 'public' and the 'private' worlds. Others had addressed themselves to this issue as well. Perceiving the contradiction in making the 'public' sphere progressive by coeducation and the consequent 'free mixing' without corresponding changes in matters of marriage, Kanchanmalika Debi questioned, 'In Bengali society, co-education and free mixing exist alright, but due to this if young people fall in love and want to marry and are not of the same caste or class, then does that society have

the courage to get them married ? In that matter, the chains of caste, class, family-status have not loosened even slightly ... Either stop this free mixing, arrange to get your daughter married off before she reaches puberty and if that is not acceptable ..... then destroy all those caste and family restrictions and along with other freedoms, give women the freedom to choose their own partners. Do one thing or the other. Keeping your feet on two boats at the same time can only lead to disaster.'[80]

The issues of 'shiksha' and 'swadhinata' were very centrally linked to the issue of 'woman's sphere', aptly expressed in the term 'ghare - baire'. The domestic metaphor of the nationalist discourse has already been mentioned: when it touched upon Sati - Sabitri images, it sought to limit women to being companions of men, not their leaders. Thus Gandhi's diatribe against calling women the 'weaker' sex went hand in hand with his emphasis on their non-violence, a separation of spheres and division of labour according to 'natural' or 'essential' differences between men and women. 'She is passive, he is active. She is essentially mistress of the house. He is the bread winner, she is the keeper and distributor of the bread... .'[81] That these were intended as controls, as safeguards against women's energy acquiring aggressive or threatening

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80 Bangashree, Bhadra 1342, (1935) pp. 274-76

81 'Harijan', February 24, 1940.

proportions can be glimpsed from his anger when they were challenged, as by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay in 1929. On that occasion, Gandhi re-iterated, 'They would have done better to remain outside the venue of men's fight ... I have suggested to them an exclusive field in which they are at liberty and in which they are expected to show their qualities.'[82] Yet, there were some women who, even while accepting their roles as companions of men, understood this to mean they would walk alongside the men, not behind them. Thus the word 'samakaksha' came to inform even the most conservative of positions. There were those who even challenged this allocation of spheres like Tomalolata Bose who wrote, 'Do men consult women in any matter that is not domestic ? If a woman does ask her husband, she is told "you will not understand" or "what is the use?" The woman is reduced to participating only in domestic festivals - if it is successful, some praise, if not, insult and blame is her lot... Women will sit silent in a corner, men out of kindness and pity, decide their destiny and these decisions have to be accepted with bowed head !...'[83] Leela Ray, active from the mid-twenties in Bengal, took up cudgels with the 'separate spheres' delineated by Gandhi when she wrote, ' ... Modern psychology and sociology too prove that in matters of intellect, there is no difference between men and women... thus an artificial allocation of spheres of work

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82 ABP, Indistinct date, August, 1929. Emphasis mine.

83 Bijoli, July 28, 1922.

between them has no logical foundation. In fact, the similarity in their mental composition makes it necessary that their spheres of work be the same.' She attacked the notion that a child's health was impaired by the physical labour of its mother and demanded that 'for both men and women all spheres of work should stay free and each will choose according to wish and necessity, regardless of sex !'[84]

The echoes of this dissonance could be found in women's fiction as well, especially in short stories produced by some women in the late twenties and early thirties. Though wifehood and motherhood remained central issues in these, it was not the 'worshipper and worshipped' content of the early twenties. Besides, the fact that most of the stories revolved around these issues indicated not only that these were 'experience' which could be related with conviction, but also that these were problem-areas which women were seeking to grapple with. The seriousness of this last aspect was highlighted well in a short story written by Amiyaa Datta wherein all radical living arrangements between husband and wife (like separate bedrooms for each, equal division of housework) came to an end with motherhood, and the wife's discontentment with this.[85] It is also in this light that the conclusions of these stories prove to be significant - they pointed in a direction going beyond the confines of the home. This was particularly true of Sita Devi's work.

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84 Baisakh, 1347, in Jayashree Golden Jubilee Volume, (Calcutta 1983) pp. 102-104

85 'Bidroha' in Bangalakshmi, Kartick, 1338.(1931)

Younger daughter of Ramananda Chatterjee, the editor of 'Probashi' and 'Modern Review' and sister of Shanta Devi, Sita was perhaps more fortunate than others in getting her work published. In fact, this small and select group of women who managed to get their work published were unlikely to have been representative of ordinary women. However, as Spender insists, 'it cannot be assumed that the women who were literate and who left the written records of their lives and ideas, were necessarily a privileged group well supplied by men's financial resources.'[86] Furthermore, there are very few records testifying to women making a living by writing, or of keeping their earnings, in the absence of a Married Women's Property Act.

The awareness that woman's worth was measured in terms of their physical attributes, the value of which declined with time became the focal point of Sita Devi's two stories discussed here. In 'Roopahina',[87] she exposed the whole world of a negotiated marriage, complete with ghataki, haggling over dowry, and its effect on the 17-18 year-old girl Lotika. Educated upto the matriculation level purely at the insistence of a progressive and wealthy uncle, she finds herself bereft of support on his sudden death. ' ... She had a fierce desire to study well and highly. If Jethamoshai had lived no one could

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86 Dale Spender : Women of Ideas and What Men have Done to Them, (ARK 1983), pp. 29

87 Probashi, Ashwin 1336 (1929)

have forced her to get married like this... What was a Bengali girl's life save that of abuse and insult ? She hated that with all her heart ... She knew she had neither beauty nor wealth. Therefore no in-laws would welcome her with open arms...'[88] Four days after her marriage, Lotika returns to her parental home because she finds the insults unbearable. As she says, ' ... ever since I have entered that house, I have been hearing that I am dark, ugly, like a she-demon... ' To her parents' efforts at persuading her to return, she is firm: 'If you cannot feed me, drive me out, I will find a job and feed myself.' It is at this that her elder brother, Nirad, declares his support - 'I will bring her up in such a way that she can take care of ten others. So many women in other countries stay unmarried all their lives and work for the welfare of their societies. A Bengali girl is not that exceptional that she cannot do the same.'

In 'Meyer Man', again, the argument is reiterated, when the plain-looking Maitreyee asserts : 'I might be dark and snub-nosed, but dark hands too have strength and ugly girls too have self-respect.'[89] Ananga, the only son and youngest child of his parents, is portrayed as an exceptionally good-looking boy, who is virtually worshipped for this attribute. He grows up to believe 'that the world was particularly created for his

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88 Ibid, p. 850.

89 Probashi, Falgun, 1337, (1931) p. 676

pleasure... that here women were created solely to be of service to men. At home they were two men and four women: in a day, apart from five or six hours of sleep, the women had only one meditation, one work - how to best keep these two gods happy....'[90] While in college, he goes on holiday to Darjeeling where he meets Maitreyee Ray, a final year student in a college in Calcutta, and the same age as Ananga. Despite Ananga's notions of beauty in women, and Maitreyee's lack of it, they are attracted to each other. But Ananga's doubts surface in a letter written to his friend, Amrita, but sent to Maitreyee by mistake. Her reply is to hit out at Ananga with a stick and these words ' ... The beauty that you have such great pride in has been slightly marred. In the future, when you look at the mirror, you will be slightly cautious...'[91]

It is necessary to note here that Sita Devi did not portray women in kin-devoid terms either, but what was being attempted was a re-definition of these terms. For example, in a story called 'Bhaiphota' she etches the character of Shashimukhi as one who 'labours the whole day long, nurses her ailing son, listens to the scoldings of an ill-tempered husband, sometimes answering him back, but for the most part, keeping quiet in order to maintain domestic peace.'[92] Her husband is Atal who

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90 Ibid, p. 673

91 Ibid, p. 676.

92 Probashi, Baisakh, 1337, (1931) p. 36

is a clerk earning Rs.100/- in a foreign-owned concern , and who badgers his wife to ask her wealthy elder brother for money. She resists because 'they never even ask about us, why should I beg from them ?' Meanwhile, another young man, a 'bhadralog', comes selling sweets from door to door every day. But one day, finding Shashimukhi sitting on the staircase, looking particularly ill and forlorn, he stops to offer help. Learning of the disaster imminent upon the loss of Atal's job for non-repayment of loans, the youth , Keshab Ray, leaves behind some raw materials necessary for making sweets. Shashimukhi utilises these to the best of her ability and these sweets are then sold by Keshab who deducts the expenses of the ingredients and his commission from the earnings and hands over the rest of the money to her at the end of a day. Gradually, Shashimukhi starts saving some money. When Bhaiphota - the festival dedicated to brothers - arrives, Atal, who is ignorant of Shashimukhi's activities, insists that Shashi's elder brother be invited. On the awaited day, Atal returns home only to find a strange young man in place of the familiar elder brother. It is Keshab, whom Shashimukhi has decided to make her brother, saying ' ... The person who has really been a brother to me, I have invited home. He who reinforces my helplessness is no brother of mine.'[93] The noteworthy aspect of this is not the ritual celebration of a brother's protection, but the criterion Shashimukhi uses to

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93 Ibid, p. 44.

call an unrelated man a brother, and the conclusion in which the reader is left in no doubt that Shashimukhi's ability to pay off Atal's debts gives her a new strength vis-a-vis her husband.

Another attempt at redefining gender-relations also occurred in Sita Debi's 'The New Method'. Herein, Torubala, twenty-years old, educated upto the matriculation level, married for three years to Ramapati, who is 38, 'not even a graduate' and earning about Rs.200/-, is obviously unhappy with her life which is 'full of unceasing toil and abuse... no time to read or sew. Singing was entirely prohibited...'[94] Her husband believes that 'A modern girl was impatient of control by nature, she must be taught that too much independence did not suit her' and constantly shouts and sniggers at her. In the midst of this daily strife, Toru's brother appears at her doorstep to sell 'Khaddar' and ridicules her for spending 'all your time in the kitchen while so many of your fellow countrywomen are courting jails for the sake of their motherland.' When she refuses to accept Ramapati's gift of a coloured silk because it is foreign cloth, a bitter fight ensues, with Toru asserting her right to her own opinion and Ramapati insisting that 'You are dependent on another for your food and clothing and so must bow down to his authority.' As a result, Toru goes to her parents' house nearby where she leans that everybody has gone

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94 Modern Review, May 1931, p 538-544.

to a ladies' meeting at Shraddhananda Park where foreign cloth is to be burnt. Toru borrows her mother's 'khaddar' sari and gives up her own artificial one for the bonfire and goes to the meeting. Ramapati returns from office, finds his wife missing and finally traces her to the Park, where the police-van is waiting to take the women to Lalbazar. He finds a group of women approaching, looking cheerful. At the head of this group is his wife. All his pleas are in vain as Toru says, 'In order to escape a petty tyrant, I have courted the attention of a great tyrant' and refuses his offer of bail on the ground that 'I like this prison better than the old one!'

This was unusual principally because of its comment on the national movement - if not Sita's own expectations of the movement for women's lives. A similar sense of the movement affecting women differently from men, was evident in a story called 'Praner Dabi' written by Santana Devi. In this, the main focus is the inequality between husband and wife which is hidden from view because of the dichotomy between 'public' and 'private'. When Anath returns late at night and explains that he has been working with a group of volunteers making arrangements to receive the martyred Jatin Das's body at Howrah for the final rites, Mamata is silent. Says the author, 'What did she have to say anyway ? What could Mamata say to a man who had left his wife and two very small children alone and helpless in this city, in a house empty of servants or relatives ?[95] The injustice

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95 Probashi, Shrabon 1337, (1931) p. 492

is clearly articulated in a sharp resentment against Anath - 'So much poverty and misery - yet his clothes have to be kept clean with soap as he feels ashamed to wear soiled clothes in public. His children cry in hunger which can be silenced by just a paisa, but he must have on his feet shoes worth at least five rupees. The children's clothes can be made wearable by darned patches but since he has to roam around in genteel society, his shirt must be shining and new.'[96]

So when Anath launches off into high praise of Jatin Das's fast unto death, we are told, 'Mamata had a great desire to laugh. She had no doubt about the greatness, the self-sacrifice of the hero. But did nobody realise that she too was killing herself slowly inch by inch on a fast which differed from the great man's only in that hers was not in a prison of the State but in a prison of the purdah ? She was not alone in this. There were many like her. So many women were daily killing all their wishes, desires, peace and happiness in similar, desperate conditions. Giving up their lives on a fast: but who bothers with them ? Whoever takes the corpses of these unfortunate creatures in a ceremonial procession to the ghats ?'[97]

The author's awareness of the fact that 'society has bound women hand and foot, to cripple them forever; it has destroyed their ability to earn independently... And when one woman does,

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96 Ibid, p. 494

97 Ibid, p. 492.

the world breaks out into a cacophony of criticism.... '[98]

is perhaps the reason why she makes Mamata leave home to find work on the stage, which we are told, is a sure passage to prostitution. And accompanying Mamata is the zamindar's son.

The notion implicit is that marriage is a contract with mutuality of responsibility: thus the comment 'were the duties of motherhood and wifehood created for her alone ? Did no one else have any duty or responsibility in this?' That is why, also, Mamata before leaving her husband, writes down the debts resolved, the debts pending, the rent and household expenses in a copy, ties up the money the zamindar's son has advanced her for repaying other loans and on top of this, leaves the ring of keys, which the writer symbolises as 'the letter of resignation from her housewifeliness after having balanced and cleared the accounts.'[99]

It is clear that Mamata is sacrificing her 'modesty' for the survival of her children. Yet, at the same time, there is a protest against her husband and against social norms of 'respectability'. A similar fusion of sacrifice and protest occurs in a story written by Santa Devi, called 'The Mother'. Madhabi, daughter of a wealthy father, has been brought up liberally with her brother. We are told that ' ... both studied under

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98 Ibid, pp. 495-6.

99 Ibid, p. 497.

the same private tutor, went out for evening drives in the same carriage, and always went together to cinemas, theatres and circuses. Madhabi must never be left behind because she was a girl, this was the unwritten law of the house. Her brother's friends were her friends too, and no one tried to restrain her from mixing with them.... '[100] Thus she meets the poor Mahim and they fall in love. Her parents and brother are angered by this but Madhabi resolves to marry Mahim and leave her father's house, never to return. 'They had put their love above everything, this was their pride and they looked down on all who had subordinated love to ambition and greed.' Very soon, however, Mahim begins to feel ashamed of his poverty and even to blame Madhabi for not getting a dowry. Their situation worsens with the arrival of children. Suddenly, Madhabi's father falls ill and wants to see his daughter. On his deathbed, he forgives her and wants to make over to her the dowry she never got. But before this can be implemented, he dies. Mahim however, begins to visit his in-laws regularly and schemes to keep his infant son with Madhabi's heirless brother. On learning of this, Madhabi protests to her husband, 'are you not ashamed to scheme for selling your own ? But he is my son too, and I won't let him go.[101] In return she is accused of acting out of selfishness and not 'mother-love': if she loves her child, she should sacrifice her own happiness to see that the child

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100 Modern Review, January 1931, p. 51

101 Ibid, p 53

lived like a prince. Defeated by this, Madhabi leaves the baby and her hushand: says the author, ' ... she could not bear the thought that her husband had not been able to justify her pride. He had failed to shield her from shame and sorrow, he had accepted insult to escape struggle.... '[102] In the note she leaves behind for Mahim, she advises him, ' ... Since you say you are giving him away for his good, do not tell him you are his father... You took me out of my father's house with erect, proud head, but don't enter that house again with bowed head to enjoy the wealth which you get by selling your child. Tell the older children that their mother is dead... '[103]

Thus though the ideal of sacrifice stays, it is not the unalloyed, forgiving, blameless kind of virtue: it has acquired a new dimension. Into the virtue of suffering comes a glimmer of resistance; sacrifice remains but its silence is shattered. It is as if a little bit of the 'self' creeps into the image. This was true of poetry too, specially in the work of Radharani Datta. Her writing was especially remarkable in the light of the difficulties experienced by women in speaking authoritatively with the first person pronoun in verse. As Adrienne Rich, in tracing her development as a writer, said,

'I had been taught that poetry should be 'universal', which meant of course, non-female... I had not found the courage yet to do without authorities, or even the use of the pronound "I" - the woman in the poem ("Snapshots of a Daughter-in-Law")

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102 Ibid, p. 54

103 Ibid, p. 55.

is always "she." [104]

Radharani experienced no such difficulty when she wrote as Aparajita, (The Invincible One). Her adoption of this pseudonym was a response to Pramatha Choudhuri's indictment that women had no language of their own, no distinctive style of expression; they merely copied male writers. For seven years, Aparajita kept her identity undisclosed to even her acknowledged mentor, Rabindranath Tagore. In fact, Aparajita more than ably took up the challenge in Tagore's poem 'Nari Pragati', which revolved round an incident involving a friend of Radharani.[105] Rani Mahalanobis was travelling in a car belonging to Tagore to board a train. The car stalled. Rani took off her sandals, caught them up and ran to the station. On hearing of this, Tagore composed 'Nari Pragati', the sense of which was that poets like Kalidas and Bhababhuti had been captivated by the sweet docile women of yore, who walked with the slow undulating gait of elephants. But in the days of the rail and motor, the noise of footwear heralded an earthquake which would have reached even the poets in another world. The challenge that Tagore threw out was this : leaving the cool shade of the past for the seat of the modern woman, could she create a language as strong as that of the creator of 'Meghdoot'.

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104 Quoted in Muriel Schulz : Minority Writers: Struggle for Authenticity and Authority in Kramarae, Schulz, O'Barr (eds.): Language and Power, (New York, 1980) pp. 208

105 Aparajita Rachanabali, p. 161. This incident took place sometime in 1934.

On publication, Rani was mortified by this poem. She pleaded with Radharani to persuade her friend 'Aparajita' to compose a fitting reply. Aparajita's reply matched Tagore's in rhyme and meter, and outdid him by saying:

'In ancient times, I had heard
Woman had held the reins of the chariot
While fleeing with her lover.
Is not that mentioned in poetry as well ?
The princesses of Manipur
When bow in hand and quiver of arrows on back
Roamed disguised as a man
Stay gajagamini even then ? . . .

I have seen them in the gardens
Walking alone and with quickened step
On dark and stormy nights
So many brave women have gone to meet their
loved ones in secret
Moving with the grace of swans - but when in need
Have they not been as fleet of foot as the deer ? . . .

In these eagerly-waited days of women's progress
When a young woman
Runs to catch a train
Why is it a matter of amazement, pray ? . . .

If the tinkle of anklets has recently
Been replaced by the clatter of shoes -
what is the harm in it ?... [106]

Tagore had to concede in a poem called 'Adhunika' (published in 1935) that

' ...In my enthusiasm to display my skill
I have done injustice to the woman of the times... '

Radharani's personal history bore the stamp of unconventionality. She had been a child-widow, before she married Narendra Deb, a poet. The censure she faced on her remarriage was the possible inspiration for her poem 'Kaifiyat' (The Explanation), published in the first collection of Aparajita's verse.[107] Written as Runu's monologue to an elder sister who has come to reprimand her, it goes:

' ...Having married, I have become an offender in your eyes
But if, instead, I had become a prostitute, this
society would have given me shelter
... In my mind, I was ever his companion through
life and death
So I put the garland around his neck, openly as well.
Let all petty suspicions and doubts cease,
Let those who will, still speak -
the fear of Censure has faded.
.. Do you know that she, whom you had imprisoned
in your cage of gold
Spent every night weeping for the beloved ?

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106 Ibid, pp. 163-65.

107 'Buker Bina', 1931.

Those who gave me love out of pity
I stayed by their side for oh! so long on this earth
Given them my infancy, my childhood and youth
Snuffed out my flame in service to them
Are they still not satisfied ?
Has their debt not been, even now, repaid ?
Have I to give the last bit of my life in their worship?
They, however, did not even look in my direction
Nor understand my want
"Destiny has written for her the futility of woman-birth"
Saying this, they built up their happy homes
My life? - who knew the depth of pain, it stayed within?...

Another extra-ordinary aspect of Aparajita's work was not its preoccupation with domesticity but the 'inside view' of it. Half of the thirteen poems published in her first book of verse, portrayed the every-day conflict within marriage; - 'Nishitho Kalaha' of a wife reprimanding a husband 'for whom eleven p.m. is merely twilight', and who has not had to spend an entire evening 'waiting by the window, gazing anxiously at the road.'[109] 'Shandhir Shutro' is the voice of a woman recounting to her maid the previous night's fight with her husband, whose insistence on the helplessness of women had made her retaliate - not only by stopping all communication with him, but also the other

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108 Ibid., p. 37-39.

109 Ibid., p. 11.

mundane but vitally necessary things she did for his convenience. Thus she is certain that ' ... he will come to make peace

before the end of day
Victory has to be clinched then
Else shame on this name.'[110]

'Andhare Alo' is the voice of a wife of some years whose request for wool is forgotten by her husband every day: says she,

'I understand well this neglect,...
I will endure no more
This insult
And walk away in any direction my soul desires
Why should I paper him so ? he keeps no promise of his
Why slave in vain in his home,
As if I am no-one and he the lord ?... [111]

While Aparajita could quite categorically opine that 'if you put the chains of marriage around your neck, your drems will surely shatter' in 'Shokhi Shangame',[112] she could quite as explictly describe the passion in it as in 'Shesh Ratri' -

' ....Beloved, come close, closer still
draw me nearer to you
Tie this body with the fearless bonds of your arms
Leave not the smallest distance between us
...kiss me.'[113]

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110 Ibid., p 15-16.

111 Ibid, p 22-3.

112 Ibid, p. 18.

113 Ibid, p. 35-36.

Preliminary as this survey has been, it has attempted to both decode woman - as - sign as well as outline the achievements of woman - as - author. The need for the former is no longer in question, fortunately; the need for the latter has, however, to be reiterated since women writers are still thought not to have contributed 'literature' worthy of comparison to the male authors. There is much to examine here, not least the aesthetic and critical criteria by which women's writing has been accorded diminished status. One of the ways of doing this is by using unhestitatingly words like 'originality', 'innovativeness', 'quality', 'excellence' - amorphous and subjective concepts which defy explicit measurement - to test the 'worthiness' of women's intellectual and creative contribution. When a woman writes of 'motherhood' or 'wifehood', her work becomes 'unoriginal', 'monotonous' etc., because she does not talk of 'politics' or the 'world at large'. Thus terms like 'original', 'innovative' become political terms in that they seek to deny the significance of the 'private'. They permit, as Spender[114] puts it, the 'superior' sex, to be the producers of 'superior' work. But what happens when a woman also writes of 'politics' - like Anurupa Debi did in 'Path-hara'. Written well before Sharat's 'Pather Dabi' on the same theme, she was advised to desist from publishing it by well-wishers. Even after its publication, no critic gave it the status given to Sharat's work. Recording her own experience of these ways of 'silencing', Nirupama Debi recounted instances of how an essay of hers was

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114 D. Spender : Women of Ideas. (1983)

neither published nor returned to her, how she did not protest at an inaccurate portrayal of her work because the writer of the article was a friend of her elder brother's and she did not want to hurt the latter's feelings, of the standards set for her work by Sharat 'dada' (Chatterjee) and significantly enough, of how her first novel was written principally due to the encouragement of her women friends, Anurupa Devi and Appodidi.[115]

Since much feminist work has already highlighted the necessity of women speaking for themselves, there need be no apology for the fact that predominantly women writers have been studied here. Yet it has not been the intention to construct a 'feminine' voice distinct from a 'masculine' voice, for it is recognised that 'muted groups, in any context, if they wish to communicate must express themselves in terms of the (dominant) mode, rather than in ones they might have generated independently.'[116] Thus, males as the dominant group can impede the free expression of alternative models of the world which women, as the muted group, may express, thereby inhibiting even the generation of alternative models. Thus women very often, are required to express themselves through an idiom not of their own making.

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115 N. Devi : 'Puraton Kathar Alochana' in Jayashree Golden Jubilee Volume, (Calcutta, 1983) pp. 21-26

116 S. Ardener (ed.): Defining Females, (London, 1978) p. 20

This brings us to two further problems encountered in this study. The first is that of 'women's voice' - if they speak in an idiom they have not created, is the feminist critic to hear this as the echoes of internalised oppression or as the clever indictment of patriarchy itself ? In writing, this becomes part of the problem of detecting authorial intention. The general tendency for feminist criticism has been to approach male and female authors very differently. As Barrett points out, female authors are 'credited' with trying to pose the question of gender or women's oppression in their work, and male authors are 'discredited' by means of an assumption that any sexism they portray is necessarily their own.'[117] This comes from identifying the text too closely with the author's personal opinions, and thereby ignoring the fictional nature of the work. The second problem has been my own involvement in the discourse during translation from the vernacular into English. The pitfalls are too many to enumerate; the only defence is that these texts need to be brought into the mainstream of literary criticism. This work would have been enriched if each text itself had not been our only basis for analysis, knowing that to restrict our analysis solely to the text itself is to turn the 'object' of our analysis into its own means of explanation. To consider the whole range of women's cultural creation is necessary :

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117 Michele Barrett : Women's Oppression Today, (London, 1980) p. 106

but even bringing together their literary productions is constrained by archival methods and by time. In the absence, furthermore, of a substantial account of the rception of these texts from the point of view of the ideology of gender, one is left with a text, and nothing but a text. What is needed is an immense project which involves coordinating work done already in case-studies of individual writers or topics, redoing work improperly done and doing work not done before - in the words of one critic, 'going from dismantling androcentric assumptions to a full range of gynocriticism'[118] This chapter stands on the ground that a beginning has been made, however hesistantly.

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118 K.K. Ruthven : Feminist Literary Studies. (London, 1981)

WAYS OF ACTING

It is now almost axiomatic to assert that the symbol of 'women' unified the notions of 'caste' and 'class' and proved particularly powerful in arousing the passions of most nationalistic people. Yet a symbol has to be mediated through the agency of an actor to become meaningful. In attempt has been made here to study the various ways of acting by which women in Bengal found or made meaning of the world around them. The first section will study the interfacing of 'women' with 'community' and the second, the interfacing of 'women' with 'purity' and 'sacrifice', the attributes vested in the symbol itself. In the process of making meaning, what emerged was a sense of solidarity among the actors themselves, a solidarity and sisterhood that helped them to fashion the world around them in a manner that only aided their own survival.

From about the mid-1920's, there was a spurt in the reporting of cases of abduction of women in Bengal. A typical form of this was a column entitled 'Outrage on Women in Bengal' which compiled a list of incidents in which Mohammedans had abducted or asaulted Hindu women three times, a Hindu had kidnapped a married Hindu girl of fourteen and another of an unspecified religion. On June 12, 1929, Krishna Kumar Mitter, Jatindra Nath Basu and Mahesh Chandra Atorthy issued an appeal for the formation of a 'Women's Protection League', to protect the honour and dignity of women 'irrespective of caste and creed'.[1] But other appeals were not so secular. Babu Hemchandra Chakravarty of Kishoreganj roundly condemned the 'tyranny of Muhammedan ruffians ... News of frequent kidnapping of Hindu women of different ages are daily pouring in. Within a few months lost, about eighteen such cases of relative gravity are said to have happened, though mostly unreported. Unreported because the poor and unprotected Hindus cannot venture for fear of life to stand against the barbarous assailants...'[2] On August 22, at a meeting at Albert Hall, Krishna Kumar Mitter too proclaimed that the way in which Hindu women were being abducted in Bengal was

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1 Amrita Bazaar Patrika, 12 June 1929. Henceforth 'ABP'.

2 ABP, 17 August 1929.

was never to be seen anywhere else in the world and that it was becoming 'impossible to live in villages with family.'[3] The meeting itself was noteworthy for both its proceedings and the resolutions it passed. Its president, Ramananda Chatterjee, editor of two monthly journals, justified the absence of Muslims from the meeting on the ground that the 'prevention of abduction of Hindu women was the social dharma of Hindu men and Mussalmans had no right to be invited to such; moreover, they had shown no great enthusiasm in the matter which would have required them to be invited.'[4] Despite this, one Ahmed Ali had the temerity to attend the meeting and also to object to Sarala Dasi's statement that 'there was a verse in the Koran which was to the effect that if Muslims could outrage non-Muslim women, they would win religious merit.'[5] This protest drew forth loud cries of 'Sit Down' from all sides, members of the audience rushed towards him, 'his ears were pulled and he was subjected to various insults'.[6]

The resolutions were equally hostile. The first, which began by addressing all communities, then called on the Hindu community all over Bengal and Assam 'specially where they were isolated, to form themselves into well-

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3 ABP, 23 August 1929

4 'Probashi', Ashwin 1336, p. 956. Translation mine.

5. GOB, Home Pol. File No. 535/29 Report of Commissioner of Police to Chief Secretary

6 Ibid

organised bands.'[7] This was the first call to organise collectively and publicly: earlier such calls had remained individual, and sometimes even anonymous - like the unnamed zamindar who declared his readiness to pay the interest of one lakh of rupees for three years to a 'duly incorporated, well-organised and influential public body,' which would 'protect helpless women from abduction.'[8] The first resolution alleged that the abductions were the result of an organised effort on the part of a section of the people - referred to as 'influential and wealthy Muhammadans' in another resolution - and called on the Government to take such steps as would lead not only to the detection and conviction of the miscreants, their abettors and instigators but also to the 'permanent eradication of evil by suppressing the organisation'[9] presumably the Muslim League.

The second resolution suggested that a committee of enquiry consisting of five representatives from the Hindu Mahasabha, three from the Women's Protection League and five others nominated by the Government from among the members of the Bengal Legislative Council should be appointed to go into the cases of abduction and suggest remedies for its eradication.

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7 Ibid

8 ABP, 6 April, 1929

9 GOB, Home Political, 535/29

On 25 August, another meeting was held at Albert Hall in Calcutta, comprising mostly young Muhammadans and presided over by Maulvi Akram Khan. According to the latter, the Islamic religious texts, far from prescribing outrages on women, commended eighty lashes of the whip be given to the perpetrator of such acts. His speech was significant for pointing that the 'agitation about women was only raised for the purpose of picking up quarrels with Muslims in the same manner as attempts were made in the name of cow-protection.'[10] However, he made two further claims which need to be examined more closely - the one being that in all the cases of abduction, the women concerned were 'offenders of the first degree', and the second was (which was tied up to the first) that it was a matter of proportion according to population since 'Hindu prostitutes and Hindu convicts were far greater in proportion (to Muslims).'

The last claim found its resonance in Government circles; in the opinion of Hon'ble Sir A K Ghuzhavi, Law Member in the Govt. of Bengal, 'the number of Muhammadan offenders in cases where the victims are Hindu women would be found to be not unduly high... if proportions were worked out as between the total number of Muhammadan and Hindu population in these districts.. .. ..'[11] Therefore, he advised against the setting up of any special committee of enquiry as 'Politically, it would also be a mistake at this stage ... ...'

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10 Op. cit.

11 Op. Cit.

However, the issue remained important enough to raise in the Bengal Legislative Council time and again. On 10 January, 1930 Sarat Kumar Roy Chaudhuri asked the Member in charge of Police for details on the number of cases reported, the number acquitted or convicted, whether this form of crime was increasing in certain districts of East Bengal and whether this was due to 'propaganda' or organised gangs.[12] A similar question raised in 1932 by Rai Keshab Chandra Banerjee Bahadur also provided a list of figures for each district of the number of cases of abduction where victims were Hindu women. (See Table I.) This list seems exaggerated when compared to a similar district-wise list compiled from the Annual Police Report of 1930. However, another report submitted in 1932 to the Bengal Legislative Council revealed that 'more Muslim than Hindu women were victimised.'[13] At an estimate, the conservative nature of which was only hinted at in official reports commenting on the unwillingness of complainants to be exposed to 'public scandal,' the incidents of violence against women were quite frequent. (See Table II.)[14]

12 ABP, 11 Jan. 1930

13 Modern Review, 1932 Sept., P.859.

14 Both Table I & II compiled from GOB, Home (Police) Proceedings P.15 P-2/1933.

TABLE - I

Districts	No. of Cases of Abduction where Victims were Hindu Women			No. of Convictions		
	1929	1930	1931	1929	1930	1931
Burdwan	6	7	6	x	1	1
Birbhum	5	9	2	x	x	2
Bankura	x	5	5	x	1	2
Midnapore	20	17	11	2	2	2
Hooghly	31	19	14	2	4	x
Howrah	8	23	14	3	5	1
24-Parganas	46	43	38	10	10	6
Nadia	8	8	7	1	4	4
Murshidabad	x	6	8	x	5	5
Jessore	4	11	9	2	2	4
Khulna	10	9	13	1	3	3
Dacca	4	4	1	3	1	1
Mymensingh	43	28	44	16	8	15
Faridpur	13	9	7	x	1	1
Bakarganj	19	25	15	6	5	2
Rajshahi	1	2	2	x	x	1
Dinajpur	8	9	13	1	5	3
Jalpaiguri	14	12	14	1	3	2
Darjeeling	3	9	4	3	9	4
Rangpur	23	23	28	8	3	2
Bogra	3	8	5	x	1	x
Pabna	9	5	6	4	2	4
Malda	16	6	6	4	3	x
Chittagong	10	8	4	1	x	x
Noakhali	x	x	x	x	x	x
Tippera	4	4	6	1	3	x
Chittagong Hill Tracts	x	x	1	x	x	x
Calcutta (Commissioner of Police)	14	10	9	6	6	4
+ (Presidency Magistrate)	45 } 59	43 } 53	46 } 55	x } 9	x } 8	x } 5

T A B L E - II

RETURN OF CASES UNDER CR.P.C., SECTION 366 (ABDUCTION)

Year	No. Reported	Total Mag. Cases ending in Conviction
1929	307	17
1930	280	10
1931	279	11
1932	260	10

Postulating on the reasons for this high rate of crime against women is difficult. Police sources implied that it was mostly due to factional fights in the localities. For example, referring to a case in village Nischintapur, Mymensingh district, the Superintendent of Police said, " ....there are two rival parties in the village... the one head by Ramdayal Sarkar and the other by Manoranjan Sarkar. Ramdayal is suspected to have engaged some bad characters to put to shame Manoranjan's womenfolk in retaliation for a previous scandalous incident connected with Ramdayal's wife for which Manoranjan had outcasted Ramdayal."[15] From quite a different source too, there was evidence of a case in Mymensingh where some 'Hindu bad characters lured away a thirteen-year old Muslim girl Fuljan and assaulted her. There arose some talk of a settlement among Fuljan's family and these bad characters. For this reason, they freed Fuljan. But not having reached a settlement, they kidnapped her again and took her to Nabadwip... '[16] Thus women could be seen to be, and often did become, pawns in the games of men. This was possible because women were the repositories of the prestige of men.

However, it is also probable that women were actors in their own right, not victims alone. The magazine quoted above had compiled a set of figures on the basis of reports it had received on the age, marital status and religion-wise distribution of women abducted during 1922-27. Amongst a total of 101 unmarried girls abducted during these years, the highest incidence of abduction had occurred

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15 GOB, Home (Political) F.No.535/29, Serial Nos. 1-2. Distt. Commissioner to Commissioner of Police, Calcutta

16 Sanjivani, 23 Shrabon, 1336. Quoted n Probashi Bhadra, 1336 (1929) p. 773.

between the ages 8 - 10 years; of a total of 131 widows, the peak was between the ages 14 - 16 years. Quoting this, another magazine commented, '....the notion is current among us that widows were most vulnerable to this form of crime. But the above list shows that the married women are the most oppressed by this.'[17] In fact, it was only among this group that the numbers of both Hindu and Muslim women reached three figures (331 and 122 respectively). This in itself was a significant comment on the state of women in marriage. Recognising this, the editor of 'Probashi' noted that 'In many antapurs in Bengal, hard and in some places even cruel behaviour has been meted out to little girls and young wives for a very long time.....the oppression of women in the antahpur remains serious in form and great in amount, that is undoubted.' (Emphasis mine) Condemning the part played in this inhuman oppression by the husband's relatives, the magazine went on to say '....to kill the wife by starving her, burning her, beating her - the varieties of torture are indescribable. People do not have the courage to even slightly ill-treat a maid-servant, let alone torture her in this way; this is because a maid-servant cannot be tied down and in a household which ill-treats its maid-servants, no other maid will work. But a wife is even more lowly than a female slave. To buy her no money is needed; in fact, very often, while bringing

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17 Probashi, Ashwin, 1336, pp. 948-50

a wife home one receives a lot of money ... Perhaps that is why there is a saying - the unlucky man's horse dies and the lucky man's wife.'[18] The newspapers corroborate this : we hear of Parul Bala Dassi, 15 years old, who died of severe burns in Medical College Hospital, Calcutta, but gave a statement to the doctor saying she had burnt herself because "I was put to worries at my father-in-law's house. The mother-in-law abuses me and says 'Burn yourself, go to Nimtolla' "[19] as the girl's father had not been able to provide her with a gold chain. Then there was Bidyut Bala Dassi, a child-bride of twelve, who died in strange circumstances : her father, Babu Jogendra Nath Das, testified in court that his daughter's face was forcibly put in the oven since it was completely charred whereas her 'churis' and 'sari' were not much burnt. He admitted that though his daughter had complained of maltreatment by in-laws, he thought the matter would be amicably settled and thus did not think it proper to inform the police. (Emphasis mine) The collusion of patriarchal forces was complete when the jury gave a verdict of 'suicide' against the girl in this case.[20] And, more pertinently, there were instances of women leaving their husbands' homes as a protest against the treatment received there. For example, there was Rambala Dasi, who was tortured for her lack of domestic skills. When she delayed

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18 'Probashi', Shrabon, 1336 (1929) p.629

19 ABP, 20 November, 1929

20 ABP, Jan. 20, 1930

in cooking the food, her husband assaulted her with a plank of wood. Cross-examined, she said the husband could come to her father's house but she would not go to him.[21] No less a personage than Professor Aditya Kumar Bhattacharjea of Bethune College, Calcutta, was asked to show cause why one-third of his salary should not be paid for the maintenance of his girl wife, who refused to return to her husband's house for fear of assault.[22] Thus, as alleged by police reports, if sometimes women were 'willing parties to the crime' of abduction, they had good reason to be so.

There are very few methods of determining the actuality of this; one possible indication could be a comparison between the number of cases reported and the number found true and the number convicted for both communities for the years 1927 to mid-1929. (See Table III.) The discrepancy between the number reported and the number of total true and convicted cases is the greatest for the crime of abduction (259). This leads us to conjecture that in many cases, the question, of 'force' and therefore 'abduction' could not be proved. Perhaps, some women did therefore walk out, quite literally, of their homes. In fact, one magazine complained that 'in many places, wicked servants

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21 ABP, Jan. 8, 1929

22 ABP, July 12, 1929

T A B L E - III

PROVINCE	CASES REPORTED IN WHICH ACCUSED WERE		CONVICTED		TRUE CASES, OTHER THAN THOSE CONVICTED, FOR		RATIO OF CASES CONVICTED AND TRUE TO POPULATION	
	HINDUS	MUSLIMS	HINDUS	MUSLIMS	HINDUS	MUSLIMS	COLUMN 4 & 6 TO HINDU POPULATION	COLUMN 5 & 7 TO MUSLIM POPULATION
				A B D U C T I O N				
BENGAL	203	429	56	84	72	161	1 in 312,285	1 in 204,045
CENTRAL PROV.	198	50	82	20	117	26	1 in 709,967	1 in 414,041
BOMBAY	247	62	113	24	54	15	1 in 38,886	1 in 53,114
NWFD	3	193	2	114	1	49	1 in 29,600	1 in 661,136
BIHAR/ORISSA	194	68	65	24	74	26	1 in 639,944	1 in 291,715
UNITED PROV.	1,164	317	551	180	519	135	1 in 110,549	1 in 67,218
				INDECENT ASSAULT				
BENGAL	291	343	103	118	131	145	1 in 335,818	1 in 173,740
CENTRAL PROV.	571	80	181	30	373	40	1 in2365,602	1 in 258,666
BOMBAY	354	87	187	56	41	11	1 in 30,305	1 in 25,117
NWFP	7	104	7	65	0	28	1 in 100,748	1 in 491,776
BIHAR/ORISSA	386	84	130	38	178	40	1 in 302,625	1 in 197,688
UNITED PROV.	1,076	233	112	34	805	163	1 in 138,842	1 in 106,016
				R A P E				
BENGAL	104	157	33	42	49	68	1 in 452,450	1 in 335,331
CENTRAL PROV.	347	46	122	25	202	15	1 in 857,176	1 in 684,339
BOMBAY	159	39	65	15	35	8	1 in 86,709	1 in 43,960
NWFP	3	58	3	34	0	11	1 in 5,970	1 in 617,327
BIHAR/ORISSA	128	29	50	18	55	9	1 in 919,183	1 in 453,388
UNITED PROV.	462	125	201	51	245	67	1 in 254,856	1 in 195,763

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or neighbours get widowed or married women to agree to come away from their homes by lying to them that their father, mother, brother or any other relative was ill and had desired to see them.....'[23] It went on to point out that illiteracy made the women refrain from asking for written proof. In doing so, it completely ignored the fact that permission to daughters-in-law to visit their natal families was very hard to come by. It must have been a very convincingly-planned argument to be given such permission or, alternatively, no permission had been asked for at all. Evidence can be found in the Giribala Abduction Case, wherein it was stated that a complaint had been lodged by Giribala's uncle that she 'eloped' on 27.2.'31.[24] However, the fact that the Muslim thana-officer, and a Muslim pleader appealed for the withdrawal of the case was conveyed by the newspapers to be an act of communal collaboration quite overlooking the fact that the Distt. Sessions Judge and the Assistant Sessions Judge, both Hindus, permitted the withdrawal and directed the accused be acquitted and set at liberty.

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23 Probashi, Ashwin 1338 (1931), P. 895.

24 Home (Police) Confidential Jan.. 1932, 1-3. The number of this file, and all other Confidential files, have been deleted acc. to the rules of the WBSA.

In another instance, Mankhushi Pal, a widow of seventeen, lived with her brother in Rangalila village, Dacca. Yabali, a Muslim man of the same village, was reported to have 'abducted' her twice and was arrested. The case against him was compromised when the man executed a deed of 'Nadabi,' disclaiming all rights to the girl. The criminal case was allowed to be withdrawn by the trying magistrate as it increased communal tension in the area. Shortly afterwards, however, the man instituted a civil suit in the court of the Munsiff claiming the girl as his wife, her conversion to his faith and 'nikah' with him. He prayed for the restitution of conjugal rights and alleged that the Nadabi deed he had signed had been the result of coercion and undue influence. The Muslim pleaders of Dacca in a body appeared for the plaintiff and the president of the local Hindu Sabha appeared for the defendant. The court gave a decision in the man's favour.[25]

We need also to remember that 'abducted' women could not be traced for days, weeks and even months. It was generally believed that the 'victim' was taken from one village to another and was harboured in the

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25 ABP, Nov. 28, 1929

families of relatives of the criminals. This should be understood not in the light of police apathy but of the unwillingness of the women themselves to return. Why else should Golapia, the seventeen-year old wife of Constable Rambaran Singh of Canning Police Station, who had been 'snatched away' by a big merchant of the town, on meeting an other Constable from the same police station, return not to her husband but to her father's house ?[26] Of course, the social circumstances then prevalent were not conducive to such a return. There were many cases like Kalidasi's - she was 'abducted' from her husband's house in a village in Burdwan. After a year, when she was traced and the court-case ended, her busband refused to take her back.[27]

Women's willingness to leave home and their unwillingness to return would have threatened the sanctity of the 'family' and especially, male control over female sexuality. It is possible that the reaction of a threatened patriarchal order created its own 'Muslim rapacious stereotype.' The obviously unequal access to and control of resources in Bengal, coupled with the logic of participation in the post-1919 political structure made this feasible. The Montford

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27 Shikkhita Patitar Atmakatha, p.63. For an elaboration of the social pressures against the 'returning' of such women, see a short-story by Alka Devi: 'Narir Mulya' in Probashi, Phalgun, 1336 (1929), pp 669-678.

reforms had broadened the franchise but it had also extended separate electorates. The spread of education in the twenties had seen no corresponding growth of employment opportunities. A number of Namasudra and Muslim bargadar movements had occured in the mid-twenties in districts like Mymensingh, Dacca, Pabna, Khulna & Nadia - these are also the districts which witnessed the riots of 1925-26. These signalled the end of the Bengal Pct of 1923 which had established the 60-40 proportion of representation, (60 to the community in majority) and 55% appointments to Govt. posts to be from among Muslims. Furthermore, the Non-Cooperation movement in 1921 had been in Bengal a major event for both women and Muslims : 'Volunteers going to jail now included for the first time both upper-class women ... and large number of (mainly Muslim) mill-workers...[28] A device which tied both up effectively might have been found in Bengal.

The momentum of the twenties gathered speed as the debate on the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Bill of 1928 saw a clear polarisation between Hindu Zamindar and Muslim bargadar- the passing of this pro-zamindar bill became the occasion for a complete break away of important Muslims like Maulana Akram Khan, one-time president of BPCC. A.K.Fazlul-ul-Huq and others from the Congress.

And the Macdonald Award of 1932 loomed closer : it would stipulate that in Bengal, Muslims would get 48.4% of seats in the Legislative Assembly and Hindus would get 39.2% : the game of numbers that it was to embdoy cast its approaching shadow on the body politic. It enhanced the concern over the sexuality of the women of a community increasingly perceiving itself as threatened.

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28. S.Sarkar: Modern India, (Delhi, 1981) p. 219, Emphasis mine.
29. probashi, Agrahayan, 1337 (1930), pp. 281-282 and Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council, August 1930, pp. 154 & 676.

The representative newspapers of both the communities, however, agreed that protection of women should be given top priority by the Government :

> '... the protection of helpless Indian women against ruffians is not so much a matter of concern to theGuardian of Law and Order in this country as the hunting out of sedition-mongers and so-called anarchists.'[30] (implying that the government had its priorities all wrong). As the 'Mussalman' pointed out, '... the duty of stamping out crimes, particularly those against the honour of the women,primarily rests on the government. It is of no less importance than the stamping out of Congress activity and offers a better field for fighting the battles of the future governments...[31]

A similar logic was inherent in MLC Jogesh Chandra Sen Bahadur's comment :

> '... Such a state of things should never be tolerated by any government, not to speak of the British Government, which stands for justice and under whose care our life and property are safe.'[32]

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30. ABP, March 26, 1939

31. Quoted in ABP, April 21, 1932

32. GOB, Home (Pol.) Proceedings P. 15 P-2/1933

This kind of appeal tied in with the British attempts to liberalise women's subordination in India, as exemplified by the 1929 Sarda Act (which restrained marriage of girls below 14), if only to confirm Britain's superiority in relations between the sexes.[33] Yet, as Ghuznavi's warning makes clear, there were obvius obstacles to doing too much, not the least of them being the espoused policy of non-interference in Indian culture and religion. As Eleanor Rathbone suggested in 1934, 'the general tendency of the all-male administration... has been to keep off the woman question as delicate ground likely to cause trouble and bring odium on the government.'[34] This served further to enhance the 'holiness' of the mission - of protecting the 'honour' of the women of the country, as was obvious from the Hindu Provincial Sabha's declarations.

The protection of women's honour had reached such immense proportions that only another incident that occurred at the same time can fully illustrate this. Kharag Bahadur Singh, a young Nepali, had been sentenced on March 23, 1927 to 8 years' rigorous imprisonment for causing the murder of Hiralal Agarwala for his alleged cruel treatment to Raj Kumari, another Nepali girl. He was released, much before

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33 See Joanna Riddle and Rama Joshi: 'Gender and Imperialism' in EPW, Oct., 1985, WS 72-78.

34 Ibid

the expiry of his term, in April 1929.[35] The euphoria that greeted his release was significant - luminaries like J.M. Sengupta, Subhash Chandra Bose, Bhupendra Nath Dutt and the representatives of the Nari Raksha Samiti, Deepali Sangha, Nari Siksha Samiti, Chhatri Sangha and Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association applauded him at a specially arranged reception at the Calcutta Town Hall on 8 April. He was garlanded amidst loud cries of 'Bande Mataram' and presented with a silver tray, a khaddar cap and a gold medal. Subhas Bose spoke of 'emulating this hero and protecting the motherhood of our country.'[36] All the above were witness to the marriage of Raj Kumari to Narayan Pradhan, the final rehabilitation of a destitute a Gurkha from Kurseong, later - woman and the act of reassertion of patriarchal order.[37] (Subsequently, Kharag Bahadur Singh joined Gandhi on his Dandi March at Mahar Camp in March 1930. Though, of course, he then himself renounced his 'chivalrous instinct' for faith in non-violence).

At another meeting in Calcutta on April 19, 1929, Jyotirmoyee Ganguli eulogised Kharag Bahadur thus, ' ... While we know that the fulfillment of what you considered your sacred obligation was to you its own reward and satisfaction, we cannot but express our deep appreciation ... of this courageous and spontaneous stand for the protection of women.' But she also made an appeal that had not been made before - an appeal to women to be

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35 ABP, April 7, 1929

36 ABP, April 9, 1929.

37 ABP, April 25, 1929.

capable of 'defending their own honour and person even without the intervention and assistance of men.'[38] It was representative of some female voices which called for self-reliance instead of paternalism. Similarly, at a meeting convened by the Deepali Sangha in September, the same year, a strong protest was entered against the ever-increasing number of abductions, but it also stated that the only remedy for this was the establishing of 'physical culture' centres with every girl trained in self-defence. The Dowager Maharani Sucharu Devi of Mayurbhanj, too, at another meeting in Albert Hall, Calcutta, thanked those 'generous' men who were fighting for the protection of the honour of women; yet, she maintained, it was necessary to form, in every village of Bengal, associations with women volunteers for their own protection.

The tragedy lay in the fact that the call to 'physical culture' and self-defence itself reinforced the perception of aggression as 'masculinity'.[39] It was evident in the communal riots in Dacca in May 1930. Anindyabala and Amiyabala Nandy had resisted an attack upon

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38 ABP, April 20, 1929. Emphasis mine.

39 See A.Nandy : The Intimate Enemy (London, 1982).

their house and the former had been injured in the process. Letters to the editor of 'Amrita Bazaar Patrika' poured in lauding the 'bravery of Hindu girls in repulsing the Moslem hooligans ... we are sick of hearing the tales of abduction and kidnapping ... the remedy lies at the hands of the girls who can save their honour by following the example (of these girls).' The connection between 'physical culture' and masculinity was made in the general mode of thought that pointed that crimes against women occurred because '... The Bengalee as a race does not devote himself to physical culture. He is accustomed to look up to the sarcar for the protection of his hearth and home. Secondly, the woman of Bengal knows nothing of self-defence or that it may be necessary. She considers it to be the part of a good wife to rely on her husband's feeble arm.....[40] This clarion call to arm on the issue of women's honour proved potent for the spread of communalism. This it is not surprising that the Bengal Provincial Hindu Sabha started a purse of Rs.50 for the Bandy sisters and asked for further contributions[41] and two silver daggers were presented to them by Sharajubala Ghosh at a packed meeting of the local Bar Association in August.

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40 Letter of Hemendra Narayan Bhattacharya, advocate, ABP, September 21, 1930.

41 ABP, July 2, 1930.

And it was no mere oversight that letters insisted that ' ... every Hindu lady should follow in the wake of those two girls to train herself as to be able to defend her honour.....' Yet a similar example of resistance by 24-yer-old Labanyaprova Roy to dacoits in her father's house in ManikGanj aroused no similar response.[42]

The paternalism that reflected itself in the agitation over 'abduction' was underlined by the need for 'purity' of one's women. This demand for purity was literally translated into action as part of the protest against prostitution at temples, bathing-ghats & fairs in places as diverse as Kalighat, Gaibanda Rajshahi & Tangail. However the issue of women's 'purity' could also become a focal point of an anti-imperialist struggle. In a culture where certain types of touch can pollute, the avoidance of it by women, seemed to become an important rule to be adhered to by both contending sides. Thus, when police publicly assaulted women processionists in Calcutta, it is understandable that the enthusiasm and fervour of already aware masses would reach a new high. Or when, as in Kushtia, disobeying Sec. 144 Cr.P.C. promulgated there in May 1930, a procession of 500 people came out on the streets, it was charged by the police; some of the 70 women in it were assaulted and a complete hartal was observed in the town as a protest against this. Or again, as in Khulna in June

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42 ABP, July 15, 1930.

1930, during a police charge at a procession of Congress volunteers on the road close to the jail gate, the injuries to Saibalini Debi, wife of the local Congress President, Babu Nagendra Nath Sen, caused a hartal to be observed in protest the next day. In fact, the issue was serious enough to emerge time and again in the debates of the Bengal Legislative Council. This was, of course, because the line between 'touching' and 'violence' was blurred in police behaviour, as well as in the perceptions of the spectators. That police behaviour towards women was a serious matter was indicated by the Bengal Council of Civil Disobedience's appointing Jyotirmoyee Ganguli and Dr Maitreyee Bose to hold an enquiry into an incident at Kholakhali village, in which some women were alleged to have been assaulted by the police. They reported that 'Padmabati, the milk-woman aged 40, who had led the batch of women in protecting the National Flag during salt-manufacturing had a big blue mark on the right side of her breast ... ... two small bruise-marks on her back and complained still of a pain in her back and chest. She stated that she was given a kick on her head and was rather roughly handled ... ... Durgadasi, aged 30, ... has bruise mark just below the right clavicle and... ... wrist is still very painful. Kurani Dasi, aged 50, had marks on various parts of her body. She said that she was forcibly dragged away and thus received scatches all over. On her hip ... mark of a whip and her left thumb was still very painful, while the left toe

was raw probably through being trampled by a booted policeman. She was also insulted .... Biraj Dasi, aged 30, whose both thighs bore the marks of severe whipping .... Rajeswari, aged 25, ... bore the wound of a pointed instrument like a 'dao' just over her forehead and whose hips were still very painful because of a lathi blow there. Padma devi Das, and old woman over 60, who had been kicked ... was tender over her arms, hips and back. They had torn her hair and she became senseless. An even older woman of about 80 years, had a tender right thumb as a result of a lathi blow. One very old women in her dotage had not got over the kick she was said to have received and remained doubled up and could not see anyone since then.'[43]

The newspaper in which this report was published, proceeded, in its editorial, to lay out the rules by which both the colonial state and its opponents had to play. Referring to the assault upon Ms. Sherwood by a mob in Amritsar in 1919 and General Dyer's reprisals for this insult, and to a similar incident in Bhowanipur in May, 1930 where one Annie Dench was assaulted by a crowd of Sikhs, which then aroused the ire of the Anglo-Indian community and its press, the paper commented, "... In every civilised country, members of the fair sex are treated with respect and consideration ... What we ... insist on is that what

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43 ABP, May 10, 1930.

is sauce for the gander is also the sauce for the goose. Indians are no doubt a subject race but their womenfolk are also as sacred to them as the British women to the British people. Nay, justice, fairness and chivalry demand that they should also be looked upon in the same way by the Britisher and the government run by him .... '[44]

This kind of reasoning had as its first premise, the sacredness of women - " reminiscent of Dyer's justification of the crawling order : ' " .... I felt the street in which Miss Sherwood was assaulted ought to be looked upon as sacred and I therefore erected a triangle or whipping post at the place where Miss Sherwood fell and ordered that no Indian would be allowed to pass that street except being on all fours, and that those who were guilty of the assault should be publicly flogged at this triangle.... "'[45]

The point at issue was not the 'sanctity' of womanhood but the methods adopted by each side to maintain it. Possibly the colonial state understood this rule well and played by it - otherwise, it would not have issued a communique denying such assault at Contai.[46] This becomes even clearer in the Bengal Government's admission that women active in public demonstrations created a 'problem' as they had to be dealt with in such a manner that

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44 ABP, May 17, 1930. Emphasis mine.

45 Ibid

46 D.O.1223, Government House, Darjeeling, in ABP, June 3 1930

state assaulted her, it became a direct 'challenge to manhood.' This gradation of violence towards women was also mediated by class - one must remember that assaults on the 'bhadramahila' were less severe than on women of the lower castes and classes. Nor were these 'hartals' observed on account of Contai and Ghatal. In fact, police presence was reported on the scene of the 'ladies' meetings etc. but the fact of their non-interference was equally clearly emphasised, at least, in the beginning of the Civil Disobediance.

For example, students of Bethune College, in response to the Gandhian call to women to begin Civil Disobedience on 10 April, 1930, wanted to close the college but were refused permission by the Principal. On April 15, 1930, they shut the gates, stopped the college-buses from entering and effectively staged a 'hartal.' The Principal called the police in but the sergeant was heard advising her to take recourse to other means. The Principal then backed down and arranged to send the girls home.[50] In fact, the very next day, the students held a meeting to demand reparation for the insult offered to them by the Principal in resorting to police help.

On April 23, after the promulgation of the Bengal Ordinances, some twentyfive women met at the Simla Byayam Samity, Calcutta,

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50 ABP, April 16, 1930

to draft a plan for picketing work in Calcutta and its suburbs; they decided to go in procession to the Sraddhananda Park, as announced beforehand. On arriving there, they found the gates barricaded by the police who asked them to leave the place. The processionists told the police that if they were not allowed inside the Park, they would squat on the street, which they proceeded to do. Since this attracted many a curious spectator, the police allowed the women to meet inside the Park for five minutes. The meeting however continued for fiteen minutes, during which Jyotirmoyee Ganguli and Nistarini Devi appealed for the boycott of foreign cloth and announced their intention of starting picketing from the next day.[51] The speakers, and some of the others, were members of the Nari Satyagraha Samiti or the Bengal Women's Civil Disobedience Committee set up on 13 March, 1930, much before Gandhi gave the call to women to join the movement. By 24 April, 1930, the members of the NSS had started hawking 'contraband' salt and picketing in front of the shops in College Street Market; the police, led by the Assistant Commissioner, North District, were reported to have actually 'regulated' the crowd. The same officer and his force appeared even helpless when on May 22, they tried to prevent a group of 200 women from entering Sraddhananda Park and protesting against the incarceration of Sarojini Naidu. The women, on finding the gates closed,

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51 ABP, April 24, 1930.

entered the Park by scaling the railings. When fire was set to a bundle of foreign cloth inside, the police again attempted to ward it off but were foiled by a cordon of women. It was only when rain had extinguished the fire and the women had left, that the police got together the half-burnt clothes.[52]

This picture of a 'pathetic' police-force at the mercy of a group of women comes across very clearly in the letter written by District-Magistrate of Bakarganj to the Commissioner of Dacca Division, recounting the former's cordoning off a women's procession of 18 May, 1930, and cutting off their water supplies. But when the police went to disperse the crowd that had collected around, they returned to find the women out of the cordon and across the road. ' .. We had to leave them there. They kept shouting and screaming and demanding arrest ... There were not more than a dozen women and a dozen little girls, but they did make a nuisance of themselves. Bad as was the time they gave us, ...(we) had the consolation that we were not husbands of any them. If they could perform like this in public, they must be dreadful in their own homes ... On the whole, this was probably a victory for the women.'[53] Till mid-July, women picketters at Burrabazar, Calcutta, were left 'untouched' by the police.

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52 ABP, May 23, 1930

53 GOB, Home Political (Confidential) No.599, serial nos. 1 - 13. of 1930. Emphasis in original.

In fact, predominantly 'bhadramahila' activists had probably presumed upon such avoidance: it would be used against their own as well as against the enemy. For example, during the picketing of shops in Burrabazar, women sometimes sat on hand-carts carrying foreign cloth. The coolies, instead of pushing them off, left their carts as soon as this happend.[54] The District-Magistrate of Tippera reported to the Chief Secretary of the Govt. of Bengal that, because he (the D.M.) had followed instructions on 'not touching' women, the work of the 'kutcherrry' came to a standstill when about 400 women pickets lay down in front of the courts on 24 May, 1930 in a line 'three-deep, picketing in three relays and staying till 5 p.m. ... No clerk or government officer would cross them.[55] The same D.M. also cautioned the Commissioner of Chittagong Division that 'It is risky to charge a mixed picket, for women place themselves in front.'[56] Evidence for this is numberous: from Midnapore, H. Sanyal gives an interesting account of how women surrounded a wounded volunteer on the march to make salt, so that

> the police would have to assault the women before they could get to the volunteers again.[57] Similarly, 17-year-old Sudhir Ghose, escaped being arrested with ammunition on his person by hiding it inside a pile of bedding, against which his sister sat and nursed her seven-month-old baby. The police searched the whole house but not that pile of bedding.[58]

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54 ABP, Jan. 30, 1931

55 Home Pol. (Confidential) No. 599, serial Nos. 1-13, of 1930.

56 Ibid

57 Private Interview: March, 1985 and H. Sanyal: 'Shediner Katha' in Baromash, Sharadiya, 1985

58 Kamala Dasgupta: Rakter Akhare, (Calcutta, 1977) pp. 33-35

Furthermore, it should also be remembered that one of the reasons for Gandhi's exclusion of women from the Dandi march was his belief that the British Government would hesitate to attack women and this would defeat the very purpose of Satyagraha. In his words, 'Just as Hindus do not harm a cow, the British do not attack women as far as possible. For Hindus it would be cowardice to take a cow to the battlefield. In the same way it would be cowardice for us to have women accompany us.'[59]

Similarly, there were certain groups of women whose 'touch' was also considered to be defiling, like the sweepresses[60] and specially prostitutes. Their participation in picketing could thus prove very effective sometimes. As a govt. official reported to the Commission of Rajshahi Division on 18 August, 1930, the Hili Ramnath High English School was picketed by 'One brahmin widow (named Shashimukhi Debya) together with a number of other women, mostly common bazaar prostitutues .... It appeared from the reports received that many of the guardians and the teachers were against the picketing and closing of the school .... But since Sashi Mukhi took the lead, both the teachers and pupils felt it difficult to enter the school house.'[61] It was equally clear that the Hili Congress Committee, which might have coopted these prostitutes in picketing, received no support for its efforts

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59 Collected Works, Vol. XLIII, p. 12.

60 See Tanika Sarkar's art.: 'Politics and Women in Bengal - the conditions & meaning of participation.' in IESHR, 21, 1 (1984).

61 GOB, Home (Police) Confidential, 1930. Number deleted according to the rules of the WBSA.

from the provincial Bogra Congress Committee. This was generally true of most of the bhadralok/mahila following of the Bengal Congress,[62] partly due to Gandhi's insistence that only those who were 'pure' in body and mind could undertake 'satyagraha'. Though the insistence of 'purity' remained, Gandhi's message was also sometimes subverted. For example, Giribala Ray, a poet and an author, told some 'women of the town' attending a meeting at Diamond Harbour on 16 May 1930, that they 'could perform "prayaschitta" by throwing themselves heart and soul into this struggle for self perification ..... it came as a great relief to them when they came to know that such an innocent and simple thing like 'charkha' could give them back their lost souls.'[63] This meeting may perhaps be linked with picketing and closing down of the country spirit shop at Diamond Harbour on 22 May, 1930[64] by prostitutes.

At the same time the picketing of liquor and drugs shops was left more to men in Bengal than elsewhere. (In Delhi, women picketed the liquor shops at Nahar Saadar Khan, Queen's Road etc.) In fact, there are innumerable mentions of male volunteers picketing liquor or 'ganja' shops in Dighirpur, Balurghat, Taki, Barisal, Bankura, Faridpur etc., whereas women are not thus specified. The only exceptions initially seem to have been at Bagherhat - where a group of prostitutes led by Bindubasini Dasi

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62 Interview of Santosh Kumari by Mita Mukherjee, Dec. 1985. I am indebted to Ms. Mukherjee, M.Phil. Scholar, Delhi, University, for allowing me to consult her collection of private interviews and other significant information.

63 ABP, May 17, 1930.

64 Home (Political) Confidential, No. 599 (serial Nos. 1 - 13) of 1930. L.S. Bingermann to F.W. Robertson.

or Binde Jhi were most active[65]- and Natore, where a Ladies' Volunteer Corps led by the wife of Babu Kedarnath Majumdar 'picketed 'ganja' shops.[66] In fact, a participant's memories of boycotting a distillery in Barisal only confirm this impression. Sadhana Ghosh, the 15-16 year-old daughter of Manorama Bose, was kept on guard outside it; the moment she saw that bottles were being taken out she ran around informing her other friends. News reached the town hall where the male volunteers were gathered, who then converged on the distilery and obstructed the activities of the manufacturers.[67] Perhaps, then, some kind of a division of labour along lines of gender occurred over the task of picketing-women picketing cloth, men liquor, and both educational and government institutions. In fact, a govt. report admitted that 'cloth shop picketing was more troublesome than interference with excise shops, chiefly owning to the activity of women picketers.'[68]

'Purity' was, on the whole, such an overwhelming concern of both the rulers and their opponents that the latter could also case the former in the role of 'rapist'. This was clear when in the legislative Council or in the newspapers, the police- and thereby the government- were charged with having 'abducted' women pickets to places far away from the city. The charge was repeated over the issue of women's attire in prison, - forcing them to wear jail-attire was portrayed directly as ravishing their decency and modesty.[69] Of course, it was also important to prove the Government's ignorance-

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65. ABP, January 27, 1931
66. ABP, August 8, 1930
67. Interview with Mita Mukherjee, December, 1985
68. GOI, Fortnightly Report for second half of July, 1930.
69. Proceedings, Bengal Legislative Council, 23 February, 1932, pp 55 - 56.

and therefore its unworthiness- of such delicate matters as that the removal of the 'sankha' and 'loha' was a sure sign of widowhood and asking a married Hindu women to do so in jail was completely demonic.[70] The connection between 'purity' and 'attire' proved useful for the nationalists to insist that '... like women had the right to resist if someone tried to disrobe them, they had the right to resist when the national flag, the adornment of their hands, was being snatched away.'[71]

Even though the maintenance of 'purity' was so valuable that, by extension, the most serious charge that could be made against a bhadramahila was one that implied impurity, a process of redefining the virtue seemed afoot. Indumati Goenka, member of the NSS, printed a leaflet appealing to the Indian members of the constabulary to resign from service and she was prosecuted for 'seducing' the police and given nine months' simple imprisonment.[72] A similar attempt was made by the members of the NSS procession in Calcutta of June 25, 1930, from which Urmila Devi, Bimal Protiva Devi, Jyotirmoyee Ganguli & Mohini Devi were put on trial. Their offence was that they had flung themselves at the Assistant Commissioner of Police, North Distt., Khan Bahadur Shamsuddar so that he could not proceed. 'One took away his helmet and stick. Some of the ladies caught hold of the reins of the horses... The police were abused like anything and their life was made miserable.'[73] This attempt to rob the police of its 'masculinity', as symbolised by the stick, the helmet and the horse, was punished with six months' simple imprisonment.

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70. Proceedings, BLC, 1 April, 1932, pp 828-31
71. Probashi, Agrahayan, 1337 (1930), p. 283.
72. ABP, June 25, 1930
73. ABP, June 27, 1930

The maintenance of masculinity presupposed a clear distinction between male and female. This was sought to be enacted in terms of physical space by the state, just as its opponents had enacted it in spheres of work. Thus men were not to be allowed by the police to join in women&s meetings and processions, as the aforementioned ACP admitted in his evidence before the Presidency Magistrate. This segregation was itself based on a certain notion of 'Indian Womanhood', perhaps best put forward in Katherine Mayo's 'Mother India' : To circumvent this separation was, therefore, of fundamental importance to women - they ' dragged the men from the footpaths, caught hold of their hands and brought them inside the procession.'[74] Or as at Deshbandu Park, 'The police circled around the meeting (ladies') and asked the men to leave the place. The men refused to do so and were dispersed by the police. Some of the men again went there and seated on the ground and the police again dispersed them. The ladies at this stage asked the men not to leave the place.'[75]

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74. ABP, June 27, 1930

75. ABP, June 26, 1930

A step further in the process of breaking down the separate spheres occurred in Calcutta in May 1930. For the first time in the annals of Calcutta League Football, the games had to be abandoned when about fifty members of the NSS entered the Indian teams' tents, blocked the entrances to the club enclosures and appealed to club officials and players to abandon the essentially European games, as part of the general picketing and satyagraha.[76] The presence of the women in a traditionally masculine sphere was not insignificant - it heralded a breakdown of a kind that only strengthened the movement itself.

For, by the beginning of 1931, it was more and more apparent that the state needed a new set of rules, as the case of Jogeswari Devi illustrates. While she was picketing at Burrabazar sometime in January 1931, she was asked to move to the police-van. The Commissioner of Police reported that she started '... ranting and shouting at the top of her voice and attracted a crowd by her behavious.... There is an idea prevalent among women like Jogeswari Devi who commit offences like her that their persons are sacrosanct, their first cry when ordered to the police van is "Hat mat lagao". The law defining arrest requires the touching of the body of the persons so arrested. The protest made therefore is absurd. On the question of modesty, women shed all their natural modesty in sitting publicly side by side with the male shop-keepers and interfering with every male who passes by them with a packet or a bundle. It is therefore illo-

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76 ABP, May 25 & June 1, 1930.

gical for them to urge what has no force in law - that they should be treated in any special manner... '[77]

This signalled a break-down of rules, and was possibly hailed by Gandhi for this reason. In a letter written to Gangabehn Vaidya on 2nd February, 1931 he enthused over police brutality on women:

> ' ...How shall I compliment you ? You have shown that you are what I had always thought you were ... I got excited when I knew about this atrocity, but was not pained in the last. On the contrary, I felt happy. I would have certainly felt unhappy if none of you were among the victims of that assault. . . '[78]

Yet even though police brutality towards women could be seen as a possible indicator of collapse, it still did not free women from the 'mould' into which nationalist thought sought to confine them. Thus women's experience of police brutality endorsed the 'sacificing' nature of the image. Gandhi articulated this best, and with the greatest effect, by stressing the superiority of women's suffering and their 'inherent' capacity for self-sacrifice and non-violence. The glorification of this 'eternal cult of womanhood'[79] was an integral part of the attempt to mediate between 'private' and 'public' life in order to bring women into the nationalist struggle. What happened, however, was the

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77 ABP, January 1931

78 Collected Works, Vol. XVV, Appendix III

79 See Madhu Kishwar: 'Gandhi and Women' in EPW, Vol. XX, Nos. 40 and 41, Oct. 1985.

extension of the 'private' into the 'public' - since the country was 'home', its people the 'children', all social and political work could be made to seem an extension of household work. And the metaphor of the extended family provided the guideline along which women were meant to act.[80]

Yet, even so, very little systematic analysis has been attempted in Indian historiography of women's 'personal' experience in coming to terms with 'public' action. It has been almost taken as self-evident that this did not constitute 'political' participation. But it is precisely in women's privatised experience that the search for political meaning should be undertaken.

The organisation of the 'mahila samitis' in Bengal provides a good case in point. Shudha Mazumdar, a close associate of Saroj Nalini Dutt, the initiator of the movement, and wife of a civil servant, gave a personalised account of the beginning of this 'social' interaction amongst the 'wives of the leading men of the town.' Its aim, according to her, was to 'help foster a better understanding between them and break the monotony of their secluded lives. As women in those days rarely visited each other except on formal aoccasion such as births, deaths, marriages or when invited to religious ceremonies, social life was confined to these events mainly amongst one's own relations. Women of gentle birth rarely stirred out of their homes for any other

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80. See V. Agnew : Elite Women in Indian Politics (Delhi, 1977); G.Forbes in V. Majumdar (ed) : Symbols of Power (Bombay 1979); H.Papanek and G. Minault (ed) : Seperate Worlds (Delhi, 1983); G.Minault (ed) : The Extended Family (Delhi, 1981)

purpose, and no matter how near their destination, they travelled in closed vehicles.'[81] Thus the early 'mahila samitis' were believed by the members to have established a certain kind of 'sisterhood' among the bhadramahila, especially in the mofussil towns. The importance of this cannot be minimised since any attempt to break their isolation from each other was a deeply political act. Even though women, whose early socialisation in joint-faimily households, would have traditions of female solidarity available, the interactions within the mahila samitis would possibly have given them the first taste of kin-devoid identity.

This would have constituted a threat to the given order : the obstacles put up by the latter were thus equally formidable. As Shudha was to recount later, 'Most of the local gentlemen ... felt this new movement would be the death-knell of family life and that it foretold nothing but discord and disruption in their home. They were firmly convinced that the women would abandon their household duties, neglect husband and children, break away from the seclusion of their homes and eventually compete with them in their spheres of work.'[82] Shudha was not alone : Indira Ghosh, member of the Malda 'mahila samiti' reported ' ...some (men) remarked that new fashions, new dresses and new names would be ushered into society by these women's organisation and that the poor fathers and husbands would be at their

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81 S. Mazumdar: A Pattern of Life, Delhi ;1977) p. 140. See also Renuka Ray : My Reminiscences (Delhi 1978) p. 72

82 S. Mazumdar: p. 140-1

wits' end to provide for the new luxuries demanded by the women.'[83] For a woman dependant upon such a hostile environment, the minimum wherewithal necessary for organisation too was difficult to come by. If the meeting happend to fall at the end of the month, which by all accounts it did, it proved to be a deterrent - since housewives could not afford the cost of hiring hackney carriages then. Nor could they provide a plentiful fare when their turns came to be hostess. Moreover, there existed the whole ideological apparatus to reinforce the fragmentation of women and their isolation from each other - maintaining the purity of their husbands' and father's caste, the reality of 'purdah', and such like.

At each level of constraints, women's action made of ritual and tradition a resource, and, in so doing, impelled themselves along. For example, at Suri, the inauguration meeting of the mahila samiti saw the presece of many 'orthodox ladies' despite the stout opposition of their menfolk. When they declined refreshments (presumably prepared by the non-twice-born) Saroj Nalini led them to a tent in a corner of the spacious ground, where her husband's head-clerk, an orthodox Brahmin, had arranged sliced fruit, sweets and sherbet all served in terracotta dishes. When they were convinced that the food had not been touched and thus contaminated either by Saroj Nalini or her servants

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83 Quoted in G.S. Dutt : A Woman of India, (London, 1941) p. 137

and that the Brahmin clerk had observed all orthodox rules of cleanliness, they no longer hesitated to accept the hospitality provided; it was a 'victory scored over the orthodox section of the town.'[84]

Similarly, in a confrontation between an old gentleman of Birbhum and Saroj Nalini, the latter is reported to have said, ' "... is it not a fact that even at the present time in Bengal, a housewife in referring to her work always speaks of her 'ghar-sansar' " (ghar = home; sansar = world). The answer was ... in the affirmative. "This conclusively proves," asserted Saroj Nalini, "that in the old times the woman's legitimate sphere of work in our country was considered to be not the home alone but the world as well as the home... In the course of time the men of our country in their blind and short-sighted selfishness persuaded the women to believe that their world was synonymous with ... the four walls of their homes and to confine their activities and outlook ... The men have made a hopeless mess of everything. It is the women alone who can set things right now."[85]

This appeal to tradition contrasted effectively with the content of the message. An elderly Hindu lady who had several daughters-in-law under her care was reported to have said to Saroj, " ... I prefer to remain within the sphere of my hoe and cannot go about the world leaving these things."

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84 S. Mazumdar : A Pattern of Life, p. 142

85 G.S. Dutta : A Woman of India, p.98

"A woman can learn a great deal even while remaining within the sphere of home. That is exactly why a mahila Samiti is needed. It will bring the knowledge of the sciences to the very doors of the women. It will also be a meeting-place of women and home-makers... a woman cannot shut herself off within the home... ,"[86] was Saroj's reply.

Originally characterised by the display and discussion of saris and ornaments, exchange of cooking recipes and designs for needle-work, and indulgence in 'feminine gossip', these meetings became slowly more organised. By 1920, a set of rules had been drafted in Bengali by the Birbhum Samiti, a minute-book was organised to jot down proceedings, and the members had gone from 'display and discussion' to looking outwards together. Thus they began to make patch-work squares for Indian soldiers in the war to play 'pachisi', bundles of nim twigs to be used as tooth-brushes by them, raising money for a female bed in the local hospital, then pressing for a 'lady doctor' and getting one - these established the credibility of such organisations and they began to be looked upon with respect.

The idea of founding a central organisation to coordinate the work of the small organisations already existing in the districts had taken shape in Saroj Nalini's mind by 1921. As she said, ' "In Calcutta men and women get so absorbed with the city life that they forget the real country outside. The thought...

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86 Ibid, p 101.

of the miseries and pains of the thousands of villagers, of the suffering of the millions of women caused by social, economic and physical wrongs, does not touch their hearts... a central mahila samiti to unite the whole womanhood of Bengal into a corporate life." [87] As she envisaged, this central organisation was to give information on how to organise a mahila samiti, it was to provide speakers, supply model rules and helpful literature, to assist in securing expert demonstrators and lecturers with magic-lantern slides etc. But this central body was to leave the local mahila samiti entirely free to manage their own funds and undertake whatever work seemed best suited to the locality.

Saroj, who was also a member of the Bengal Presidency Council of Women (BCW), discussed her scheme with the Vice-President of the BCW, proposing that the latter take up the work of the central mahila samiti federation. The President of the BCW, Countess of Lytton, however, vetoed it. Saroj's husband, G.S. Dutt, too has recorded his attempts at dissuading her from the task as he felt it was 'too ambitious to put into effect without the support of some existing and influential organisation.' Saroj then proposed to Lady Abala Bose, the President of the Nari Siksha Samiti that the latter take up the work. In turn, Abala Bose suggested that the Nari Siksha Samiti would have a whole new section for this task, which would be supervised by

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87 Ibid, p. 112.

Saroj herself. Saroj consented - but before this scheme could become functional, she died in Jan., 1925. Her husband announced a donation amounting to five thousand rupees for the founding of the central organisation. On 23 February, 1925, the Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association was formally constituted. According to its constitution, the SNDMA charged a yearly fee of Rs. 3/- for affiliation of the local mahila samiti. Generally speaking, each mahila samiti, in turn, charged a subscription fee ranging from 4 annas to a rupee a year from its members.

The SNDMA grew rapidly - in 1925 there were only 7 - 8 mahila samitis affiliated to it, but by 1929, there were 240 such samitis with a membership of 4640. It had also acquired a staff of 13 instructresses, who coordinated between it and the samitis. And it had established the 'Bangalakshmi' as its monthly organ, besides the Industrial Training School at Calcutta which had 200 pupils by 1930, and the school of general nursing which had 30 pupils by 1930. The SNDMA's methods of raising finances were rather ingenious - besides the Rs.450 p.m. conferred by the Government of Bengal towards its rural programme and Rs. 650 p.m. for its Industrial School, and the Rs. 500 p.m. it received from the Calcutta Corporation, it also took to selling lotuses on a chosen day.[88] By 1931, this practise was formalised to coincide with the death anniversary of Saroj Nalini - Jan. 19; in that year, earnings from lotus-sales were calculated to be Rs.900/-. The Industrial School taught sewing, cutting, embroidery

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88 ABP, January 20, 1929.

lace-making, carpet-weaving, cane-work, drawing and music. Both these 'schools' were explictly aimed at 'finding a new avenue of employment for widows and distressed women of the Bhadralok Class.'[89] What needs to be highlighted here is not the class limitations of the association, but the emphasis it repeatedly gave to increasing women's self-reliance through employment. It has been argued by scholars of women's organisations in India that women trained by them in such skills have neither the capital equipment to start up on their own, nor the marketing techniques to determine the future of a finished product.[90] By this yardstick, the Industrial School fared well - it concentrated its equipment under one roof and also arranged to sell the finished goods on the market through the annual Exhibitions organised by it. In fact, the annual exhibition in January 1929 was noteworthy for the vow taken by all the attending women 'not to buy their dresses from the market during marriage and other ceremonies in their respective houses but to have these things made from the respective mahila samitis.'[91] It is true that the concept of a wage-earning woman as an independent entity in her own right was not formulated; but it did bring some gains to a woman of the 'bhadralok class' who previously had not engaged in any commercial transaction: the lady from Salkia, Howrah, who under the auspices of the local mahila samiti managed to earn Rs.115.56 during 1928-29, despite her heavy domestic work,

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89 ABP, January 22, 1930.

90 See P. Caplan: Class and Gender in India, (London, 1985) pp. 134-141

91 ABP, January 17, 1929.

is a case in point.[92]

On March 7, 1930, the SNDMA also took over the Basantakumari Bidhabasram in Puri, which the wife of Sir P.C. Chatterjee had established with a building and a moderate financial endowment. Widows between the ages of 20 and 30 years, and without 'encumbrances' alone could apply for a 3-year course in general education. No fee was charged except from residential women, who paid Rs.10 p.m.[93]

By 1930, many mahila samitis associated with the SNDMA had started using magic-lantern shows for propaganda against diseases, for child and maternity welfare and introduced 'zenana' schools and study circles. While the discussions at meetings of some of these samitis centred around 'home sanitation, better understanding of the economic and hygienic value of food, more scientific care of children'[94] - that is, making better wives and mothers of women - they also sometimes managed to make them better citizens. In fact, the Secretaries of the samitis at Bantra, Bally, Talla, Hooghly, Madaripur and Satsang reported in 1929 that their members were inducing the men to take up, in their spare hours, the work of village reconstruction by establishing cooperative societies.[95] An awareness of immediate environs was aroused gradually - an awareness that could, potentially, embrace remoter

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92 ABP, July 17, 1929.

93 ABP, March 8, 1930 and Probashi, (faded), 1337 (1930), p.812.

94 ABP, January 20, 1929.

95 G.S. Dutt: A Woman of India, Appendix.

issues. Thus it is not surprising to find members of these samitis exhorting each other to spin at home, wear Khadi and give up foreign clothes, at the same time that they started training in sword, lathi and dagger-play. The badges, flowers etc. for the volunteers for the Rangpur session of the Bengal Provincial Conference were supplied by the Mulatola mahila samiti.[96] That the larger current in the country had not left them untouched was evident - the frequency with which samitis were estabilished in regions so far without them, was itself an indicator of heightened awareness in the post - 1928 period.

Furthermore, activists like Jyotirmoyee Ganguli were invited to address meetings of the Thakurgaon and Balurghat mahila samitis: the members of the latter were the first and few to organise funds for the defence of the under-trial Meerut prisoners,[97] at a time when the BPCC itself was not doing much to this effect and only Nripen Banerjee and Hemanta Sarkar were going house to house in Noakhali for this. In May 1930, this particular samiti handed over Rs. 35 - 5 annas as part of the funds for the Civil Disobedience.[98] The samiti at Boalia, Rajshahi, resolved to raise funds for a memorial to Jatin Das, an undertrial in the Bengal Ordinance arrests, who died after 63 days of fasting in jail.[99]

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96 ABP, June 25, 1929.

97 ABP, May 12, 1929.

98 ABP, May 1, 1930.

99 ABP, Sept. 7, 1929.

Despite the fact that the annual meetings of the SNDMA were glittering, aristocracy-bureaucracy studded events (in 1930, eg. Lady Jackson was the guest of honour and the Raja of Santosh the chairman of the committee of mangement), one of its secretaries, Labanyalekha Chakravarty addressed a mahila samiti at Jhenidah, Jessore, urging the members to 'not only spend their whole energies in the discharge of their domestic duties but to grow in mind and body as to build up a perfect womanhood for the physical, moral and economic emancipation of the country'.[100]

This politicisation had begun from the 'personal' - from 'gossip', social interaction. In a very real sense, therefore, a mahila samiti established a sisterhood that became powerful. As a report from the Secretary of the Talla mahila simiti said:

'Previous to the formation of a mahila samiti at Talla, the women of this locality were entire strangers to one another, but as a result of the influence exerted by the samiti, they have now become fast friends and they visit one another at frequent intervals. It is almost as if all of them have been joined into one great family. Members now help one another in times of danger and difficulties in their respective families... Previously, it was an impossible thing for a lady to go outside the precincts of her home without a conveyance but such has been the influence of our samiti in breaking down the old timidity and false sense of dignity

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100 ABP, June 25, 1929. Emphasis mine.

that now most of us go to one another's house by walking on foot.'[101]

Shudha too recounted an incident which occurred at a meeting of women in a village in Dacca in 1926 - a very young widow approached Shudha and asked to retouch her vermilion. A world of sentiment enfolds the vermilion - and the act of retouching it is a ritual blessing between married women alone. For a widow therefore to have retouched another woman's vermilion was an unusual example of bonding.[102]

The feeling of solidarity that this coming together imparted to the women found expression in a song composed by Hemlata Tagore, a poet and editor of the 'Bangalakshmi':

> 'Saroj Nalini, pure and good !
> ..... In new array the women march
> Holding thy banner proudly high !
> ... They have learned that <u>they are not separate</u>,
> But <u>full partners all</u> in joy and grief alike,
> Through thy Samitis has union come
> To fulfill the purpose high in woman's life
> The closed chamber of Bengal's hidden home
> Stands open now under thy freedom's flag.'[103]

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101 G.S. Dutt : <u>A Woman of India</u>, p. 129.

102 S. Mazumdar : <u>A Pattern of Life</u>.p 148

103 G.S. Dutt : <u>A Woman of India</u>, p. 140. Emphasis mine.

This wove two themes into itself - one, that of 'the home and the world' and the other 'of coming together.' The mahila samitis were the expressions also of these interwoven themes. Each mahila samiti might well have been a place for women to befriend each other and exchange personal stories. The support structures that these mahila samitis acted as should not be dismissed either as 'apolitical' or as 'social work'. For example, at Talla and Jessore,[104] when the daughters of poor widows were married, members combined in presenting her with useful articles for starting her in married life. Visits to the sick, and helping poor nursing mothers by supplying babies' clothes and other necessities were a feature of many mahila samitis such as at Khulna, Hooghly and Barisal. Sometimes, too, the women of the mahila samitis acted in a manner which cut across class and community. At Barasat, the mahila samiti gave shelter to a 'fallen woman of the untouchable class,' the members not only nursed her but also arranged for her last rites at her death. Similarly, at Malda, when a fire burnt down many huts in the Muhammadan quarters of the town, the members of the mahila samiti, who were mostly Hindu, gave refuge to the women and children till other shelters could be provided. The secretary of the Jaduboyra mahila samiti, herself a 'high-caste Brahmin lady of orthodox family,' set apart a well-ventilated room in her house for poor mothers-to-be in the village, arranged for the delivery

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104 Ibid

in it of several women of inferior castes and herself acted as mid-wife.[105] One also realises the importance of such a support-structure from an autobiographical article on women school-teachers in Bengal. Complaining about the isolation that was inherent in living in areas remote from Calcutta, the writer concluded that every such teacher should be a member of a mahila samiti for companionship and mutual aid.[106]

It is interesting to speculate, therefore, that, given the collective nature of the Gandhian movement, the 'bhadramahila' who did join it had some experience of collective action prior to it - through the mahila samitis. The links between local Congress Committees and the mahila samitis in Bengal have not been studied at all. But the evidence of such links is irrefutable. The president of the mahila samiti at Rajbari, Faridpur, Charuprava Sen, was a prominent Congress worker as well, when she was served with summons for allegedly inciting the police to give up service[107] in July 1930. At Feni, the mahila samiti members met to bless the convicted young Congressmen with the traditional 'khai', 'chandan', 'dhan' and 'durba', before sending them off to jail : the members had also taken a solemn vow not to use forein cloth from that day.[108] Suniti Bala Das, Secretary of the mahila samiti at Chhotolekha, Karimganj was invited by the Barlika Central Congress Committee to speak

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105 Ibid

106 Bangalakshmi, Shrabon, 1337, (1930) pp. 684-86.

107 ABP, July 25, 1930

108 ABP, September 14, 1930.

at one of its meetings. One of the most prominent examples of the mahila samiti-Congress connection was Ashalata Sen.[109] Widowed at 22, she was inspired by her relatives to train in the khadi programme. In 1922, she started, in cooperation with Sushila Sen, Giribala Devi, Sarama Gupta and Saraju Gupta, the 'Gandharia Mahila Samiti.' In 1929, these friends opened a school for the education of Harijan children at a neighbouring village. When the salt satyagraha began, they organised the Satyagrahi Sevika Dal to mobilise women in support of the movement in Dacca. The Gandharia Mahila Samiti was successful enough to have required banning in 1932, along with other organisations connected with the Civil Disobedience. Ashalata knew she could not have come this far alone : while in prison in 1932-33, she wrote on her 'prison-mates':

> "Darkness piles upon darkness at dead of night
> My fellow prisoners are all asleep
> On hard beds, in soiled clothes, lie rows of them,
> The Lakshmis of so many families in this prison today...
> I look at my prison mates this dark night
> And my heart fills with swelling pride,
> With a strange sorrowful happiness."

Compare this with the isolation of women in revolutionary terrorist groups. As Bina Das, the student who shot at Governor Jackson

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109 A. Sen: 'One Woman's Saga' in Manjari, Puja No., 1981, pp 24-49. I am indebted to her grand-niece, Anuradha Deshmukh, for this reference. See also A. Sen: Bikrampure Nari Andolan in 'Jayashree', 1338, Nos. 2 and 3.

at the Senate Hall in Calcutta in 1932 said, " ...I did not even know whether the group (I was associated with) was big or small. Everything was covered over with deep secrecy and mystry; no questioning was allowed, personal questions were completely prohibited. The people Suhasini (Ganguli) took us to meet, their names too I was not permitted to know. One day, while Suhasini and I were travelling in a bus, my eyes fell on an envelope in her hand. Immediately, she put the envelope away. At first, I felt insulted - then I realised that this was the way I had to make myself strong ..."[110] Kamala Dasgupta, member of the Jugantar group responsible for the Dalhousie Square shooting and an associate of Bina's, too, had to struggle to come to terms with the loneliness of being part of a secret organisation.[111] Their emotional struggles with their families and their subsequent separation compounded this. Both Bina and Kamala recorded instances of very painful struggles with their parents after joining the revolutionary organisations, which made it imperative for them to move to hostels in Calcutta. The one surviving letter from Preetilata Waddedar to her mother, written the night before the raid on Pahartali European Club in September 1932 also evokes the struggle this 21-year-old woman had with herself and her family: ' ...Ma, please forgive me - I have pained you very deeply...

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110 B. Das: Srinkhal Jhankare. (Calcutta, 1953) pp. 29-30

111 K. Dasgupta: Rakter Akkhare. (Calcutta, 1977), pp. 17-18

'...You have wanted to reach out with love and gather me to your breast - I have snatched myself away - you have pleaded with me holding the food-laden plate in your hand - I have turned my back on you and left.

...For two days, I have made you weep - your pitiful laments have not moved me from my chosen path. How could your Rani have been so heartless ? Forgive me, mother ! Please forgive me !'[112]

This solitariness in 'action' was perhaps more severe because of the collectivity that had preceded it. Most of the women had been members either of the Deepali Sangha or the Chhatri Sangha before joining the revolutionary terrorist groups. The first was begun by Leela Nag and twelve others in 1928 with the aim of spreading female education in Dacca. It soon claimed 12 primary schools, 3 high schools for girls, classes to prepare girls for matriculation examinations, physical fitness classes, industrial training centres, a female students' association and in 1930, a women's hostel in Calcutta. This organisation was originally closer to the Gandhian movement: in 1930, in fact, Leela along with Renu Sen, Shakuntala Chowdhury and Bina Ray organised the Dacca Mahila Satyagraha Samiti to manufacture salt and spread the Gandhian message through magic-lantern shows. It also began 'Jayashree' a journal managed and produced by women for women. But this organisation's contact with the revolutionary Shree Sangha began in 1924 when Leela Nag asked a former classmate

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112 Quoted in K. Dasgupta: Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari, (Calcutta, 1963) pp. 129-130

for assistance with an industrial exhibition. When Anil Ray, one of the more prominent members of the Shree Sangha was arrested in 1930, Leela took over the direction of the Sangha's activities until she too was arrested in 1931.[113]

The Chhatri Sangha was formed in Calcutta in 1928 by Kalyani Das, Surama Mitra and Kamala Dasgupta. It organised study circles, literary clubs, cooperative stores, libraries and a youth hostel. This too was associated with the Gandhian movement : in 1930, Kalyani led the Chhatri Sangha in a demonstration outside Bethune College and in picketing outside Presidency College. Kalyani, in fact, was also one of the founding members of the Nari Satyagraha Samiti, which organised the boycott of foreign clothes in Burrabazar.

The almost concurrent contact of these associations with both the Gandhian movement and the revolutionary terrorist groups is interesting and is reflected in the lives of women like Bimal Protiva Banerjee. While acting as joint-secretary of the NSS in 1930-31, she also sold pictures of those killed in the Jalalabad shoot-out, in order to raise money for the defence of the Chittagong Armoury Raiders. She was arrested in 1931 for her involvement in the Manicktola Dacoity case. Though freed for lack of evidence, she was immediately re-arrested as a detenue and imprisoned for 6 years.

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113 Geraldine Forbes: 'Godd esses or Rebels: Women Revolutionaries of Bengal' in Clinton B. Seely ed. Women, Literature and Politics in Bengal.(Michigan, 1981)

It is therefore significant that the revolutionary terrorist women wrote extensively about their experience in jails - a time of companionship, a place of collective resistance to an order which sought to strangle and crush their very impulse to life. Shanti Das in a chapter titled 'Making a nest in prison'[114] talked feelingly of some particular friendships formed in each jail - of Kalyani Das in the Presidency jail, of Charushila Devi at Midnapore and other satyagrahi women in Dacca. In each instance, she had felt that 'no differences of opinion had come in the way of a meeting of hearts in prison.'[115] It is also important that she saw this as the reason for being shunted from jail to jail. Talking of her experience in Dacca jail, where many satyagrahi women had been imprisoned, she said '..... Among them there were three or four of my age. In no time I became friends with them. The authorities grew suspicious, fearing that amongst them too I would sow the seed of bloody revolution ... That is why I could not stay at Dacca but was transferred to Rajshahi... '[116] Kamala too gave evidence of the authorities' attempts to segregate the Gandhian women from the terrorist women,[117] of the ban on their interaction and the women's secret resistance to this in Presidency jail. Inmates of this latter, in fact, told Bina that their being together had stopped the authorities from inhumanly torturing any one of them.[118] The

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114 S. Das: Arun Bonhi. In August, 1930, the total number of women convicted for 'offences connected with the civil disobedience movt. was 28 but by Feb. 1932, the number was 173 - See Proceedings of the Bengal Legislative Council 18 Aug. 1930 and 14 March, 1932.

115 Ibid., p.36

116 Ibid., p 38

117 K. Das: Rakter Akhare, p. 47.

118 B. Das: Srinkhal Jhankare, p.39

defence of this togetherness surfaced clearly in Midnapore jail, where Shanti's friend, 15-year-old Suniti Chowdhury was lodged as a Division III prisoner. When the Division II prisoners - among whom Shanti and Bina figured - were given their morning meal, the Matron insisted on separating the three friends. A heated exchange followed. The three friends began a hunger-strike, which was also joined by all the ordinary female convicts for one day. The strike, which aimed at removing the Jailer and the Matron, lasted for 8 days. It ended only when the three friends were separated and sent to different jails.[119]

Hijli jail in 1932 saw the meeting of many revolutionary women - Suhasini Ganguli, Prafullamoyee Brahmo who had introduced Shanti and Suniti to the Jugantar group in Comilla, Bina Das, Shanti Das, Kamala Dasgupta, Banalata Dasgupta, who had been arrested for owning a revolver while a resident of the Diocesan College hostel, and Kalpana Datta amongst others. As Shanti saw it, "through discussions with each other, meeting, exchange of news and affections, we were building ourselves up for the next chapter of our freedom-struggle. But our discussions were not solely political, the creation daily of new sources of merriment was a special characteristic of our lives in Hijli. Song and poetry was never-ending. Whatever the confines of our lives, we would make it beautiful. Then alone would we take leave. That leave-taking too would be just as beautiful, just as sweet.'[120]

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119 Ibid., p. 45

120 S.Das : Arun Bonhi (Calcutta, 1967) p. 48

Some of these sources of collective merriment were the acting out of plays and dance-dramas, activating the planchette board, cooking-competitions, gardening, playing cards, making toys out of flour and paint, especially on All-Fools' Day, and ultimately collaborating in fooling the authorities in various ways. 'It was a battle of wits with the jail authorities. Their well-organised guard system had to be beaten - that was the real fun.[121] Once Bonolota, Bina and Shanti planned to interchange places in each other's cells after lock-up - Bonolota would take Shanti's place in the Division II cell and Shanti would escape to Bonolata's Grade I cell. Shanti feigned illness - the doctor was summoned and advised to sedate the patient. As soon as he left, Shanti went and hid herself in the common bathing-room, where Bina, Bonolata, Bimal and others took it in turns to come and shield her from the eyes of the wardens and sweepers. Under cover of darkness, Shanti then ran to Banalata's room, lay down and covered herself up leaving only her feet visible. When the Deputy Jailer and his assistants came to check at the usual hour, they failed to discover the trick since Kalyani, who was also in on the ruse, told them that the supposed Bonolata was ill and it was enough that her feet were visible. 'All told, Hijli became a small-scale Shantiniketan for us,' felt Bina.[122]

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121 Ibid., p.77.

122 B. Das: Srinkhal Jankare, p.55.

There were also some ritualistic ways in which this togetherness found expression. Bina remembered many years later that the day she was taken to court from Presidency jail, all her 'female-ward' companions had dressed her up. 'The khaddar sari that my family had given, they draped around me. Some of the Gujarati girls put kum-kum on my forehead, some of them took off their multi-coloured bangles and covered my forearms. Whosoever had some choice tidbits fed me that... '[123] Another significant evidence of togetherness was in the ritual satisfaction of pregnancy cravings, called 'shad', while in jail.[124] This particular ritual is the domain of married women with children - and is a clear expression of sisterhood whereby the mother-to-be is comforted by those who have already experienced the pain of child-birth. To have achieved this in jail, on whatever scale, was no mean feat : it spelt a connectedness that made for the survival of women in terribly harsh conditions.

It also made for the extension of the domestic space to prison and converted prison-mates into members of a family. In the words of Bina, 'During the first few months, jail did not seem like a jail. Some of our companions we addressed as 'didi' (elder sister) some 'boudi' (elder brother's wife), some 'mashima' (mother's sister), some 'thakurma' (grandmother). Their affection

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123 Ibid., p.40.

124 Interview of women satyagrahis at CWDS, Calcutta, 1984. I am indebted to Ms. Arati Ganguli for permission to consult these records.

and caring covered the three of us like a shield. The most delicious food they kept for us, the best place in the room was kept for us to sleep in. Even a glass of water they did not permit us to pour for ourselves.'[125] A family is not just an instrument of oppression: it is also a source of genuine affection and nurture. Thus this recreation of the traditions of female solidarity within an extended family was an attempt to resist the fragmentation and isolation that the punitive system was based on.

The extension of this domestic space thus also saw accompanying assertions of 'feminity'. At Midnapore when Suniti Chowdhury was made a Division III prisoner and was given jail dress to wear, Bina remembered that she had taken the scissors allotted to her for 'sewing labour' and cut the coarse kurta given to Suniti into a more shapely blouse. It was, of course, confiscated by the Jail Superintendent for being 'too fashionable.'[127] Similarly, Charushila's hunger-strike in prison[128] and Labanyaprova Datta's 14-day strike in 1932 in Presidency jail[129] for the right to cook their widow's food separately, while reinforcing sterotypes of women, also expressed a desire to live on their own terms. This assertion of traditionally feminine roles thus also became a strongly political act.

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125 B. Das: Srinkhal Jankare, p.42.
127 Ibid, p. 44-5.
128 See A. Sen: 'One Woman's Saga'.
129 See K. Dasgupta: 'Swadhinata Sangrame Banglar Nari,' p.65.

This was enhanced by the advent of children, unlike men's quarters in jail. The four-year-old Narayan, whose mother was in the jail hospital and father convicted to one month's imprisonment in Presidency jail, left on Bina and her prison-mates a lasting impact: 'In the beginning, if Narayan touched us, we used to change our clothes, wash our hands with soap. But gradually, all that changed... He did not fear us a jot. One day, when I scolded him very loudly for some naughtiness, he suddenly turned around and scolded me for shouting... Everyday he would sit besides us at mealtimes to eat with us... On the day of his leaving, we tried to feed him whatever we had, brought a newly-stitched shirt for him to wear, combed his hair, powdered his face. Each one of us had some little gift for him... ' Then there was the six-month-old Bablu who spent a year in jail with his mother. 'For that little child, there was so much love - for him there would be new toys everyday; for him too there were so many endearments - some called him Babli, some Habla, some Sonar Bablu.[130]

The presence of children might also partially at least, have negated the division between 'political' and 'ordinary' women in prison. It was from amongst the latter that 'political prisoners' were sometimes provided with personal attendants. This resulted, in some instances, in strong bonds being forged. Thus Bina protested against the 'jamadarni' kicking 20-year-old 'Meher's Ma', who was being forced to work at the grinding-stone

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130 B. Das: Srinkhal Jhankare, pp. 113-115.

despite high fever.[131] Kamala Dasgupta too resisted the 'jamadarni' beating up a very ill Phoolmani, who had to clear the toilets in prison.[132] 'We have mixed intimately with these murder convicts. Seen with our own eyes how perfectly ordinary they were. Just like us, they had their share of good and evil - affection, sympathy, caring, everything they had as well ... They all go in a procession in front of my eyes. Shoharjan, ... Zohra... Sadiman, Naiman... Thapusher Ma... '[133] Kamala's own interaction with these women left her unconvinced of their criminality: in fact, both Bina & she dreamt of a new world where 'social oppression and proverty' would not force women to come to jail.[134]

Without positing some essentialist capability of women to bond with each other, it is, nevertheless, possible to speculate on the power of friendship in women's lives. Feminist theory has analysed women's oppression: but it has failed to analyse why women survive. Perhaps, their affection for each other helped them to do so. For example, there are very moving instances of women who stayed behind in prison, despite opportunities to leave. Mohini Devi, the oldest woman to be convicted in Bengal, was reported to have resisted release because she thought her presence would bring some relief to other female prisoners.[135] One of the hardest things to bear in Bina's life was the loss

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131 Ibid.

132 K. Dasgupta: Rakter Akhare, (Calcutta, 1977) p. 148

133 B. Das: Srinkhal Jhankare (Calcutta 1953)

134 Private Interview with Kamala Dasgupta, Jan. 1986.

135 ABP, December 4, 1930.

the loss of her friend, Bonolata, in prison. Beautiful, enthusiastic Bonolata, with an 'extraordinary capacity to be happy', fell ill. She was a detenu and could have been placed under house-arrest, but she objured all her privileges for the companionship of her friend. ' "If I leave once, God alone knows when I will see you again" ' - she told Bina. By the time she was persuaded to leave, it was too late.[136] But she left behind a letter for Bina, a manifesto of friendship, which went:

'... Dearest friend, bid me farewell today... What I have received from you has filled my life completely. I have received everything - just how much cannot be measured. For you I leave behind the deepest heartfelt love. Now that the time has come to take leave, my eyes are filling with tears. But you my friend, know the reason... '[137]

By seeking to highlight women's ways of surviving amidst bitterly harsh surroundings, I am not playing down the oppressive nature of these surroundings and forces. For their bitterness and harshness, living conditions in prison were perhaps unmatched. Besides the many humiliations and hurts inflicted on them - Shovarani Datta for example, was continuously hit on the head with heavy locks and reportedly went made[138] - the most galling characteristic of life in prison was its monotony '(We) Do not like getting up in the morning, despite that we do.....take the mound of cloth and with complete unwillingness

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136 B. Das: Srinkhal Jhankare, (Calcutta 1953) p. 67

137 Quoted in S. Das: Arun Bonhi, (Calcutta 1967) p. 87

138 See K. Dasgupta: Rakter Akhare. (Calcutta 1977)

threw ourselves in front of the sewing-machine. Then the whole day long would be spent in cutting, folding, stitching the cloth. Even then it was not enough; if there were a few less than the required number, the babus in the office would demand to know why. Then would come the evening. We would hurriedly wash our hands and faces and sit down to eat from our thalis. After washing the utensils, we would just about start to stroll when the jamadarni's loud call would be heard: "Come everybody, come for your lock-up."

This was our daytime, our evening and our night![139] This long stretch of time saw not only the loss of their health - 'the girls who had gone into jail had unbounded health, burning with enthusiasm and intelligence - one by one they emerged from prison, some moving towards death's door on a stretcher, some clutching at the jamadarni's hands for support... '[140] - the loss of near and dear ones, but also the end of many 'unfulfilled hopes, dreams and desires.'

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139 B. Das: Srinkhal Jhankare, p.45.

140 Ibid, p.61.

CONCLUSION

From the nineteenth century, women had been a 'cause' in history - a cause espoused by liberal reformers; their condition an index of civilisation and the final arbiter of the supremacy of the East over the West. In the twentieth century, this continued with only very slight modifications - their status now became the test of a nation's ability to govern itself. This eliminated the necessity of an overt conflict between genders. 'To break the rules of purdah and caste, in the service of non-cooperation and boycott, was now no longer the reprehensible and severely punished act it formerly had been, it was suddenly seen in the glorified light of service to the Great Mother, a means of acquiring merit!... all the blame was on the head of a foreign raj!'. 'This was particularly true of Bengal, where the worship of Shakti and Kali had been deeply ingrained in the psyche of its people and had found its upholders in Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda and Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay.

For the bhadramahila, access to literacy was no longer an issue - they were more concerned now with the spread of it to other women, specially in the villages. This, and the concerns of their various orgaisations, indicated a faint but growing feminist consciousness, primarily identifying themselves with and as women, rather than as 'bhadra'.

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1. F. Hauswirth : Purdah : The Status of Indian Women,(1932,) pp. 241-2.

The bhadramahila in Bengal, though gaining in education, did not gain substantially in proprietory and civil rights or access to waged work. Though the Sarda Bill of 1929 forbade the marriage of a girl below the age of 14, most contemporary commentators remarked on the futility of it: the fact that the marriage itself was not legally invalid once the ceremony was performed, the ludicrously small nature of the fine imposed on those found guilty all aided the breaching of the law. The age of marriage rose for the bhadramahila as a result of other forces-education was one of them. Though the bastions of professional employment were breached, it was not by a majority. Besides, the kinds of employment, that was available was of a 'lesser' sort- for example, in medicine, more were nurses than doctors. (Chapter I). This was in keeping with the dominant ways of seeing 'woman'. To the traditional virtues of sacrifice and devotion, however were added the new values of cleanliness, orderliness, thrift, responsibility and knowledge of the public world. The skills they sought to inculcate were ability to rear children well, efficient management of the household, adroitness in social interaction and organisational skills for 'charitable' or 'self-improving' purposes. As self-consciousness enhanced the importance of their traditional work and image, the expectations of the bhadramahila too rose, sometimes ahead of social practice(Chapter II)

This self- awareness was evident in not only. Their thinking, but in many of their actions, like their many associations, for self-improvement or for 'charity' showed. There was however another form of action for which women did not leave any manifesto behind- that was in the realm of the family. The injustices and oppressions within it made some women throw off the patriarchal yoke. This in turn fed the growing communal tension in Bengal, (Chapter III).

What I have finally learned, however, has been the impossibility of fragmenting the unity of women's lives. Though the existence of chapters itself indicates otherwise, ways of seeing women are not separate from their ways of acting. I hope that with this awareness, a history will be written of women integrating subjectivity with objectivity, substance with process, passion with responsibility and knower with known. In retrospect, if I have imposed 'order' on the chaos of everyday experience of the past, I take responsibility for the fact that the meaning is mine and I am still constructing it. This work constitutes an evaluatory stop along the way and is by no means a destination.

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