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Female Participation in the Women's Reform Movement in Colonial India

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In 1972, Miriam Schnier, author of *Feminism: The Essential Historical Writings*, averred, "No feminist works emerged from behind the Hindu Purdah or out of Moslem harems; centuries of slavery do not provide a fertile soil for intellectual development or expression."[1] This is the dominant perception of Indian women found in historical accounts: she is stultified and secluded by a patriarchal culture, which eased its restraints only reluctantly after the bold efforts of male social reformers such Ram Mohan Roy, Pandit Vidyasagar, and Mahadev Govind Ranade. By framing social reform as an indigenous movement – a return to the "Golden Age" of Indian culture – these reformers reconciled the desire for tradition with the demand for modernity. Social reformers strove first for the amelioration of women, whose low status seemed at once the cause and confirmation of India's decline. Nevertheless, women – while "both the focus and principal beneficiaries of these changes" – were rarely the active proponents.[2] Geraldine Forbes unequivocally affirms,

> These [nineteenth century male] reformers viewed women as their subjects – to be changed as a consequence of persuasive arguments, social action, education, and legislation…Women themselves were not partners in the schemes created for their regeneration…[3]

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[1] Miriam Schnier as cited in Forbes, Geraldine. *The New Cambridge History of India: IV.2 Women in Modern India*. (Cambridge 1996), p. 4
[2] Tharu, Susie & Lalita K. (ed). *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*. (Oxford 1995), p. 150
[3] Forbes, Geraldine. *The New Cambridge History of India*, p. 27

Forbes, however, is not alone in her incredulity. Increasingly, historians have proffered evidence of female agency and activism during the social reform movement. Indeed, Padma Anagol dates "women's popular protests back into the nineteenth century…[when] the realization that the age of consent was a 'female sex' issue united them on common ground."[4] Indian women, to be sure, were not as reticent as some historians have assumed. Rather, they sought with varying degrees of success to improve their role and status in India during nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their efforts are evidenced by women's participation – including the publication of short stories, novels, autobiographies, and essays; the founding of women's journals, organizations, committees, meetings, and schools; private correspondence; personal diaries; propaganda; speeches; and other "hidden, subversive ways in which women exercised their agency even while outwardly part of the repressive normative order" – in the debate over age of consent, purdah, and education.[5]

Age of Consent

In the debate over age of consent – both during the Age of Consent Act (1891) and the Child Marriage Restraint Act (1929) – women made their presence felt in markedly different ways than male reformers despite seemingly similar goals. To be sure, the efforts of Pandit Vidyasagar, Keshub Clander Sen, Mahadev Govind Ranade, and most notably Behramji M. Malabari should not be discounted. However, as Anagol

[4] Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act (1891) Reconsidered: Women's Perspectives and Participation in the Child-Marriage Controversy in India', *South Asia Research* 12, 2 (1992), p. 117
[5] Kumar, Nita (ed). *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*. (Virginia 1994), p. 4

demonstrates, male reformers were concerned more with the regeneration of Indian civilization than with the amelioration of Indian women.[6]

Male reformers claimed child marriage had yielded a servile and stultified Indian population, both physically and mentally inferior. The National Social Conference, an institution established to support child marriage reform, declared premature births had left India an "easy victim under every blessed tyrant that ever chose to trample upon them….[7] Behramji M. Malabari similarly attributed ignorance, disease, weakness, and even over-population to child marriage:

> [Child Marriage has precipitated] the breaking down of constitutions and the ushering in of disease. The giving up of studies on the part of the boy husband, the birth of sickly children, the necessity of feeding too many mouths, poverty and dependence….[8]

Male reformers, however, never conceived of child marriage as gender issue and only rarely considered the complaints of child-wives. Indeed, they often framed women as the cuprites of the custom, as ebullient brides, who "for the sake of enjoying the fun and pleasure of going through the ceremonies" awaited marriage with alacrity.[9] "Indian authorities", Forbes tersely concludes, "have been committed to modernity, but not necessarily committed to women's advancement"[10]

But women, perhaps not surprisingly, were committed to their own advancement. In the debate over the 1891 Age of Consent Act, a Bombay Women's Committee sent a memorial to the Queen with two thousand signatures of Maharashtrian women.[11] Similarly, Anagol cites "a great deal of activity…among women", including at least nine

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[6] Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 100-118
[7] Forbes, Geraldine. 'Women and Modernity: The Issue of Child Marriage in India', *Women's Studies International Quarterly* 2 (1979), p. 409
[8] Behramji M. Malabari as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 105
[9] *Selection from Records* as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 106
[10] Forbes, Geraldine. 'Women and Modernity', p. 418
[11] Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 113

women's meetings with attendance ranging between 75 and 250.[12] Later, in the debate over the 1929 Child Marriage Restraint Act, women organized more forcibly. The Women's Indian Association, the National Council of Women in India, the All-India Women's Conference, and the Muslim women's organization Anjuman-i-Khavatin-i-Islam all supported the Sarda Act.

These women's organizations, however, articulated very different reasons for reform than did male organizations. First, child marriage, by denying girls time for schooling, inhibited education. Krupabai Satthianadhan, for example, contended child marriage left women vapid and obsessed with their own frivolity:

> [A situation pervades where] a majority of our women resort to the most pernicious habit of gossiping…and quarrelling among themselves. Poor souls! They are not to be blamed; they know of no higher mode of existence: there is nothing to occupy their minds, no interest is taken in them: they are treated as toys and humored…[13]

Second, women asserted child marriage almost guaranteed strife and acrimony in a situation where "only around four or five couples out of a hundred live in a state of mutual love and harmony."[14] Rakhmabai, outspoken opponent of child marriage and child wife herself, concurred, "the custom of early marriage…has destroyed the happiness of my life."[15] Finally, some women even decried child marriage as the machination of a male conspiracy to stifle and relegate Indian women, leaving them "mere appendices" to their husbands.[16]

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[12] Ibid, p.113
[13] Krupabai Satthianadhan as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 107
[14] Sevatibai as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 112
[15] Rakhmabai as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 103
[16] Krupabai Satthianadhan as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 106

Despite the assiduous efforts of women (and men), Forbes flatly wonders "whether or not raising the age of marriage can really improve the status of women…"[17] and suggests the 1891 Age of Consent Act "cannot be considered significant" due to nugatory enforcement.[18] Even Anagol, who presents the debate over child marriage as a galvanizing stage in the women's movement, suggests women had trouble translating their public debates into their personal lives where they encountered "insuperable obstacles."[19] While the efficacy of age of consent reform is uncertain, women united on "on a gender-specific basis" and articulated their demands and desires in markedly different ways than contemporary male reformers.[20]

Purdah

Purdah, the veiling or seclusion of both Hindu and Muslim women, proved a different and more difficult dilemma for Indian women than did child marriage. Although observed by approximately one-third of Indian women, the degree of strictness varied with region and with religion. Indeed, one woman might herself observe purdah while another harangued for its abolition. This lack of unanimity – even among notable social reformers – restricted the scope and scale of opposition, as women's organizations, publications, and meetings could make only tentative stands or risk alienating supporters. Furthermore, male social reformers never opposed purdah as vociferously as they did other customs, such as child marriage, widow remarriage, and sati. Nevertheless, purdah

[17] Forbes, Geraldine. 'Women and Modernity', p. 417
[18] Ibid, p. 411
[19] Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 117
[20] Ibid, p. 118

limited the liberty and mobility of Indian women, denying them opportunities for education and access to public forums.

Although women's organizations were divided, they were not debilitated. Both the Women's Indian Association and the All-India Women's Conference identified purdah as an egregious obstacle to women's education and mobility. The AIWC enumerated four strategies – protest meetings, legislation, vigilance committees, and most effectively propaganda – to "treat" purdah.[21] In addition, women delivered speeches, coordinated "anti-purdah days," and held an Anti-Purdah Conference which by 1940 attracted 5,000 women.[22] Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddi, however, went farthest:

> The existence of purdah is still kept up by a wrong feeling of sex superiority and tolerated on the assumption that women cannot take care of themselves, cannot resist temptation and women have no imagination to be fed and no mind to be trained…[23]

For Reddi, purdah was a weak rationalization – without foundation in mores or scripture – for the subjugation of Indian women.

Nevertheless, most Indian women were not so radical. Cornelia Sorabji, a female lawyer representing secluded women, expressed more pity than contempt for her ignorant clients, "influenced by blind superstition or uninformed religion."[24] Secluded women themselves, Gail Minault suggests, rarely broke from purdah without the approbation of their husbands:

> First, they had to have the assent of their husbands or fathers – indeed, frequently the men initiated the break from purdah. Then women could use that assent as a

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[21] AIWC as cited in Forbes, Geraldine. 'The Indian Women's Movement: A Struggle for Women's Rights or National Liberation?', in Minault, Gail (ed). *The Extended Family: Women and Political Participation in Indian Pakistan*. (Delhi 1981), p. 67

[22] Forbes, Geraldine. 'The Indian Women's Movement', p. 67

[23] Muthulakshmi Reddi as cited in Forbes, Geraldine. 'The Indian Women's Movement', p. 69

[24] Leslie Cornelia Sorabji as cited in Flemming, Leslie A. 'Between Two Worlds: Self-Construction and Self-Identity in the Writings of Three Nineteenth-Century Indian Christian Women', in Nita Kumar (ed). *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories*. (Virginia 1994), p. 92

> way of winning over the opinion of others in the family and the immediate social circle. Once these intimates approved, one could brave public opinion.[25]

Indeed, Begam Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah broke from purdah with timid reluctance, remembering, "I did not enjoy my first experience of being out of purdah at all. I felt embarrassed…."[26] Other women, however, discarded purdah in defiance of their family. Minault, for example, recounts the life of Ismat Chughtai, who took off her burqa on the train to school even after her uncle reprimanded her behavior.[27] Nevertheless, the majority of women coming out of purdah were not social rebels but "dutiful daughters who left purdah only with the sanction of their families."[28]

Moderate opposition seemed the platform adopted by most women and women's organizations. The AIWC urged women to leave purdah but preferred inculcation to castigation and never endorsed legal abolition. Likewise, the Anjuman-i-Khavatin-i-Islam opposed the current, "entirely too strict" practice of purdah but not the custom of purdah itself, which was sanctioned in the shari'at.[29] While purdah impeded education and interaction among women, not all women opposed purdah with equal fervor.

Education

While the abolition of purdah was contentious, the need for education was clear. British rule shook and shifted the pillars of traditional Indian womanhood, "combining the self-sacrificing virtues of the ideal Hindu woman with the Victorian women's ability

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[25] Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India*. (Oxford 1998), p. 273
[26] Begam Shaista Suhrawardy Ikramullah as cited in Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars*', p. 281
[27] Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars*', p. 278
[28] Ibid, p. 280
[29] Ibid, p. 295

to cooperate in the furtherance of her husband's career."[30] And while the main pillars remained intact, new space was created for education. In addition, male social reformers – such as Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, Kandukuri Virasalingam Pantulun, and Justice Mahadev Govind Ranade – campaigned effectively for women's education. Women, however, were not absent in their own reform movement. Female reformers promoted women's education through organizations, girls' schools, publications, personal correspondence, and the arduous task of self-education. These women – while certainly benefiting from male reform efforts – articulated different reasons for educational reform than men.

Male social reformers, both conservative and progressive, restricted the curriculum of women's education. Women's curriculum included only skills to make them better wives and mothers. Tharu and Lalita describe the limited scope of female education:

> They proposed a little writing, a smattering of history and arithmetic, but wanted the emphasis to be on hygiene, moral education, and needlework…Music and sport were controversial…And as for English there was no useful purpose for teaching women *that* language, since it was only spoken outside the household.[31]

Even progressive men who advocated a "common curriculum" agreed fundamentally "the ultimate purpose of female education was to make women more efficient homemakers."[32] Women were entitled to education only as the "mother of the Indian race" and never as equal members of Indian society.[33]

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[30] Borthwick as cited in Southard, Barbara. 'Colonial Politics and Women's Rights: Woman Suffrage Campaigns in Bengal, British India in the 1920s', *Modern Asian Studies* 27, 2 (1993), p. 401
[31] Tharu, Susie & Lalita K. (ed). *Women Writing in India*, p. 163
[32] Ibid, p. 164
[33] Dr K. R. Kirtikar as cited in Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 106

Nevertheless, women promoted their own education, sometimes within and other times beyond the constraints of a patriarchal curriculum. Women's organizations deliberately and delicately avoided the feminist label, with its connotations of sexual antagonism. The All-India Women's Conference, for example, asserted women's education "should specifically stress mothercraft and housecraft to develop better housekeepers."[34] Similarly, Cornelia Sorabji defended women's rights without "challenging traditional structures outright… achieving incremental change…rather than urging a rending of the entire social fabric."[35] While wary of alienating male supporters, these women were not sycophants, fawning and flattering male reformers. Rather, they furthered women's education by operating nimbly within the constraints of an oppressive, patriarchal society.

Other women, however, were bolder and more brazen. Women read, wrote, edited, and published their own journals, such as *Bharati*, *Indian Ladies Magazines*, *Savithri*, *Stree Darpan*, *Karnataka Nandini*, *Bamabodini Patrika*, *Sundari Subodh*, *Hindu Sundari*, *Zenana*, *Stree Bodh*, *Khatoon*, *Tehzib Niswan*, and *Ismat*.[36] Also, attendance at girls' schools increased from 2,238 to over 80,000 in Bengal – with similar trends in other regions.[37] Many women struggled to educate themselves, despite the scorn and ridicule of their families. Forbes recounts, for example, Rassundari Devi's tormented pursuit of education: "Obsessed with a desire to read, she stole a page from a book and a sheet of paper from her son and kept them hidden in the kitchen where she furtively

[34] Forbes, Geraldine. 'Women and Modernity', p. 415
[35] Flemming, Leslie A. 'Between Two Worlds', p. 91
[36] Tharu, Susie & Lalita K. (ed). *Women Writing in* India, pp.167-168
[37] Ibid, pp. 174-5

pursued her education."[38] Other women remembered the pursuit of education with glowing exuberance. Krupabai Satthainadhan recalled,

> What a world of untried possibilities seemed to open out for me. I would throw aside the fetters that bound me and be independent. I had chafed under the restraints and the ties which formed the common lot of women, and I longed for an opportunity to show that a woman is in no way inferior to a man.[39]

But, as Anagol concludes, "only a very few courageous young women" pursed education "in the face of such formidable circumstances."[40]

Men and women agreed ignorance precluded progress and precipitated India's decline. But men were reluctant reformers, endorsing education but never equality. Women who advocated a curriculum directed toward equality – toward an elevation in the fundamental status and role of Indian women – risked censure from both progressives and conservatives. Women were crushed between a regressive orthodoxy and "the terrible contradictions in the promises of freedom and equality that were held out by the liberal reformers…."[41] They had little recourse or reprisal and instead operated primarily within the agenda of male educational reform, which "had little to do with the deepest needs of the society."[42] Still, male educational reform – despite all its misguided, if not misogynistic, rationalizations – did provide new opportunities for women. As Forbes judiciously acknowledges, "education was one of the items on the [male] reform agenda that contributed to the emancipation of women."[43]

These same "terrible contradictions" racked every aspect the women's movement in India. In the hope of adopting western ideas without aping western society, men

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[38] Forbes, Geraldine. *The New Cambridge History of India*, p. 11
[39] Krupabai Satthainadhan as cited in Flemming, Leslie A. 'Between Two Worlds', p. 86
[40] Anagol-McGinn, Padma. 'The Age of Consent Act', p. 108
[41] Tharu, Susie & Lalita K. (ed). *Women Writing in* India, p. 176
[42] Forbes, Geraldine. *The New Cambridge History of India*, p. 6
[43] Ibid, p. 6

paradoxically tried to change India without changing India. As a result, Forbes suggests, reform was often tentative, facile, or nugatory:

> [men] were unwilling to relinquish the power of the patriarchy or redistribute wealth. They dreamed of a world where women would be educated and free from some of the worst customs of the society – child marriage, sati, polygyny. But at the same time, these new women would be devoted to home and family.[44]

The delineation of Indian women was equally befuddled, as women "embodied all that was wrong with their culture as well as all that was worth preserving."[45]

Amid so much contradiction, it is difficult to assess the women's movement and the efficacy of women's participation. Certainly, women were more than mere spectators, and to deny female agency is to ignore clear historical evidence. However, to flatly and fully discount the contribution of male social reformers is equally absurd. To be sure, men never intended to offer women equal status, and women demanded equality only to the extent feasible within a patriarchal society. While men demanded modernity and women demanded equality, both agreed customs such as child marriage, purdah, sati, child widowhood, and inadequate education impeded their goals. Men and women thus acted together, serendipitously pursuing the same goals but often for very different reasons.

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[44] Ibid, p. 27-28
[45] Minault, Gail. *Secluded Scholars*', p. 306

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