

ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN INDIAN SOCIETY

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INTRODUCTION

The role and status of women in modern Indian society flows to a great extent from the cherished objective and ideals that inspired the renaissance in India and the awakening of women was an integral part of it. "The Forerunner of our times", whose bicentury we celebrated two years ago, Raja Rammohun Roy set the ball rolling. It was his activities and of those who followed in his wake, that brought into existence the women pioneers of the 19th century in India. It was again their attitude and approach and that of those who came after them, which even now distinguish the women's movement in India, from its counterparts in the Western world. This is particularly so in respect of the U.K. where women had to win a strenuous battle before they could establish their franchise rights. Apart from this, we must not forget, in India it was not so much a case of the establishment of women's right anew but the restoration of rights which women once enjoyed in the Vedic times. In the Asian continent the emancipation of women followed the pattern laid in India because the background was much the same. In the struggle for freedom, women worked shoulder to shoulder with men in India in the non-violent non-cooperation movement, and in other Asian countries in the liberation struggles before independence was won. Thus acknowledgemet of equal rights for women in Law and the Constitution was a foregone conclusion and their enfranchisement on an equal level was assured.

Circumstances made it unnecessary to have a narrow suffragist movement in this land. What was required in the early days of the pioneers continued to be the main hurdle even now, so far as the vast majority of women are concerned. The two facets on which the early pioneers had laid special emphasis were, firstly, the need to discard the customs which had grown up through the centuries and like weeds were choking up the life blood of the nation, so that women and other weaker sections

of the people may enjoy their full rights of equal opportunity and equal status. The other important facet was that, women must secure the rights of education and training on equal level with men. In both these matters, Raja Rammohun Roy and the Brahmo Samaj established by him and later the Arya Samaj, in many parts of the country, were the path finders. It was due to Rammohun's effort that not only the tragic custom of 'suttee' (the custom of the wife being burnt on the husband's funeral pyre) was abolished by law, but it was his vigilance and that of his friends—they used to visit the cremation grounds to see that the law was enforced—that the custom actually disappeared. It was Rammohun's effort again through which the degrading custom of dowry was totally given up (dowry money paid to the bridegroom's family by the family of the bride) once and for all by those who joined as his adherents. This still continues to be so amongst their progeny though there may be exception here and there. A distinction has to be made between dowry which is on the nature of a demand and the bride's trousseau and wedding gifts willingly endowed by parents and relatives.

In the present context after thirty years of freedom the custom of dowry is not only still rampant amongst the upper middle classes, but has grown in Hindu society to such an extent that even those sections of people who did not indulge in this pernicious custom in the past have now taken to it as it has become a prestige issue to follow for the so called Bhadrak (upper classes).

Rammohun had a magic touch in bringing social reforms which was again seen much later when Gandhiji operated, and brought about the disappearance of the custom of Purdah (seclusion of women). It was also the effort of Rammohun that had wrought the change through which education and training opportunities became gradually available to a larger number of women.

Since independence, all theoretical rights in regard to equal opportunity for women entering any profession or vocation have been ensured. What is more, equal rights in social laws have been guaranteed for the vast majority of women in India. Changes in the social laws took much longer because the movement which started in the early thirties, to remove the legal disabilities of women, came up against the formidable opposition of the orthodox elements particularly in regard to giving equal rights of property to both the son and the daughter.

Since the thirties of the century the All India Women's Conference played a vital role in the movement for the removal of the legal disabilities of women. When the Hindu law bills drawn up by the B. N. Rao Committee were introduced in the Central Assembly, the National Women's Organisations were asked to send their own representative to help with the passage of the bills. An understanding was reached with the Government that the representative would support them in all matters relating to social, labour, and educational reforms, but not in political matters. I was selected by the women's organisations to represent them, but I soon ran into trouble with the alien Government, because in the 1944 budget session, they wanted my vote for the budget but, according to the agreement made with them, I naturally refused their suggestion. By this time the Government also found that the loyalist element that supported them were the very persons who opposed the Hindu law reform bills on marriage and property etc. The result was that the Government dropped both the bills and the representative of the women organisations from the Central Assembly. During the tenure of the Constituent Assembly and provisional Parliament, the attempt made by the progressive elements to have the bills enacted met with dilatory tactics and opposition from some quarters amongst whom were also some prominent members of the Congress party. In spite of being a secular state, we have no common code of social laws in India although the nucleus of such a code has been laid and is one of the directive principles of state policy in the Constitution of the Republic of India.

But as Gandhiji pointed out to us long ago when we went to him for his blessings for our effort to remove the disabilities that women suffered in Law he told us, "I am entirely with you in your effort to bring in equal rights for women, but do not forget that this will only become a reality when you have been able to change the conscience of society for law is only a pointer and a guide." In the years after independence we have neglected to follow his advice in any widespread measure and hence the delay in achievement.

When the International Women's Year in 1975 came and we focussed attention on the weaker sections and rural areas there was the startling realisation that equality in law had not brought any measure of real equality for the large mass of Indian women.

Ignorance and the complete lack of education (over 80 per cent of both men and women are still illiterate) and the fact that social attitudes have not changed much except among a limited number has made the equality in law meaningless. It is, therefore, the very persons who need the assistance of law are unable to get legal redress. While we have awakened to the reality of this, as yet not much has been done to bring about the required changes. Some work has been done by voluntary organisations but it is not widespread enough. Of course, many declarations have been made by the Government and committees appointed, but it has not gone much further. From my own experience, I can say that the Women's Co-ordinating Council started a "Legal Aid Bureau" in 1975 and has taken steps through which some women have been able to secure remedies in law, through the help of eminent women lawyers who have given free service. But there are hundreds and thousands of cases which are pending and no concrete assistance has yet been given by Government through legal aid societies, at least in some of the states. There are hundreds and thousands of other women who are even unaware that they are entitled to redress in law. Justice Bhagwati's committee is trying to bring quicker and simpler legal assistance for the vulnerable elements, but for the large majority this is yet to come. In fact, even legislation intended to improve the position of women sometimes become counter productive. This is because complementary measures are not brought in. Take the case of the enforcement of monogamy in Hindu Law—the fact that there is no compulsory registration of marriages makes it possible to take advantage and deny a first marriage. This means that the wife and the children of the marriage are then deprived of their maintenance claim and property rights. Without registration the legal status becomes more difficult to prove and more particularly amongst ignorant women in rural areas and so great hardship follows. Thus we find that the work that was started over 200 years ago has still to be accomplished in great measure before we can expect that women *en masse* would be equipped to undertake their responsibilities and enjoy their rights.

I have dwelt so far on the position of the large mass of women in India. So far as those women are concerned who have facilities for education and training, opportunity has now opened up

for them in all spheres of activity. In Government service, of all ranks, women are finding their way and even in the defence forces they are now being taken. However, when it comes to promotion to higher posts and other special facilities, in most cases, the woman has to be far more able and efficient than her counterpart to get the same chances. However, the prejudices that operated against women being permitted to the Indian Administrative Service (I.A.S.) have now broken down in large measure. A few women of the I.A.S. who have been given chances to serve in challenging jobs and in inaccessible places have more than proved their worth. Yet this lessening of prejudice is not so evident in other administrative services. For instance, at the Writers' Buildings in Calcutta, for the first time in 1975, the International Women's Year, a woman was appointed as a Director in the education department. Hitherto the only post of equivalent rank to which women were entitled was that of director for women's education. This is so inspite of the fact that it is acknowledged that the record of women in the education service and other social welfare services has been distinguished for some time.

Turning to the professions, the women pioneers in medicine and law have helped women to gain a definite footing in this line. More recently in engineering and architecture, business, trade and commerce, we find women gradually coming forward and playing a notable part. Journalism, however, remains a closed preserve. Women in India have not yet been able to make much headway, however well they may be qualified to do so. There seems to be an inherent prejudice to give women opportunity although in Bengal, in the late 19th century, one of the first newspapers was started and edited by Swarnalata Devi and her daughter Priambada Devi belonging to the distinguished Tagore family. Speaking of women who earn their livelihood, there are a very large number of working class women in the plantations, mines and employed in agriculture. Since independence, labour legislation has brought some relief for them. However, the large majority who work in the unorganised sector where appalling condition of work exists need immediate attention, so that they can claim even the marginal benefits of the organised working class.

In public life, we find that the percentage of the representa-

tion of women in the Parliament, Assembly and the Municipalities and local Panchayets has not gone up during the last thirty years. In fact, the advance made in the first few years after independence has not been kept up although the number of qualified women compare well with that of the men who are qualified to enter these public bodies now. In the Parliamentary elections, being held recently, the number of women nominees put up by all the different political parties together is negligible and most disappointing and does not even come up to 15 per cent of the total nominations. This is a sad reflection on the position just after the International Women's Year and in the period that is known as the women's decade.

Let me stress again that the women's movement is not coloured by any narrow outlook. In fact, even in regard to "women's lib" which has become a fashionable word today, we are not quite sure what its connotation is in the Western world. While we in India, want complete equality for men and women to pursue any path to which their aptitude and inclination lead them and the opportunity of training through which this becomes possible, this for us does not mean that we want to be mere imitators of our menfolk. The enfranchisement of women in its widest sense does not and cannot mean the mere aping of men. We are convinced that women have some specific contribution to make towards human progress and it is to this end that we want that they be allowed to follow unfettered their own bent as long as this does not interfere with the social good. Public affairs are but an extension of domestic affairs. It is those who have an experience in running the individual home, be given an opportunity to run Municipalities and the administration of the State and the Nation as well as the International affairs.

Women must be able to play an important role in seeing that the discoveries of science are harnessed to the improvement and progress of mankind and act as a brake against the manufacture and use of deadly weapons meant for total destruction. As Gurudev Rabindranath Tagore said in his address in 1931 to the Annual session of the All India Women's Conference which met in Calcutta that year: "The cadence of human civilisation is disjointed and its harmony can only be restored, when men and women contribute in equal measure." Obviously this cannot happen by women becoming mere duplicates and imitators of

man. It is for them to strike a new line, a new note through which the mistakes and failures of today are minimised and overcome.

Thus we find that much remains to be done before a woman is able to attain that status in society, through which she is able to play an effective role so that her special contribution is of consequence. We must help to eliminate material want and reach forward to the establishment of a society which emphasizes ethical standards through which the deepest urges of the human conscience are satisfied. This may be a dream of perfection but whether it be men or women, the human soul strives for what is still unattainable—the secret of life itself.

I welcome the effort of the publishers of this volume. Their endeavour to select contributors who have knowledge of the various aspects of the problems that beset modern women should help in the production of interesting material. I hope that their effort meets with success and helps to find some of the answers for which we seek enlightenment. Focussing attention on the difficulties and challenges that have to be overcome before our aspirations can be fulfilled will no doubt help us. It is only through the projection of an attempt to crystallise and give shape to our cherished objectives that we can hope to go forward.

Roma Chaudhury

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**STATUS AND ROLE OF WOMEN : GREAT INDIAN
WOMEN THROUGH THE AGES**

PROLOGUE

This is, indeed, a most interesting, exhilarating and enchanting subject, also a very important and fundamental one—as, by common consent, the position of women in a society goes a long way in helping one to have a correct understanding of its innermost nature—its real ideas and ideals, feelings and desires, aims and objects, outlook and standpoint, vision and mission, values and vows and what not. In a word, it shows us, to no mean extent, what heights have been reached by that society, what ends reached, what treasures gained. For, women are generally regarded as the “weaker” sex, and human nature being what it is, the temptation to ignore them, oppress them, underrate them may be quite natural on the part of nations and societies—as often found. But still, if, inspite of this, a particular nation or society is wise, just and liberal enough to treat them as equals, and give them equal opportunities in all respects, then that, indeed, would be a great point in its favour, a grand step in its forward march, a glorious fulfilment in its purpose of life.

From this standpoint, India has always and with justice, stood before the whole world, as a great paradox, puzzle or mystery, very difficult to understand, explain or solve. For, in this vast and variegated land of ours, the domestic, social, political, legal, economic position of women manifest so many ups and downs, so many varieties and variations, so many vagaries and vacillations, so many differences and diversities, so many revisions and re-orientations that it may seem very difficult, at first sight, to assess the real position of Indian women in family, society, state, or to envisage the correct attitude of Indians towards their womenfolk.

Further, in India, unfortunately, a great gap between 'theory' and 'practice' is not uncommon. For, in theory, India has always been so high, so sky-scraping, so Heaven-conquering that to put the same into actual practice, or translate knowledge into live action has not always been possible. This has been proved so drastically and disastrously in the case of Indian women specially. Women are the Divine Mother Incarnate on earth in theory—so very inspiring, so very encouraging, and so very stimulating. But, alas, what about actual practice? Gauri-Dana, Ganga-Sagare-Kanya-Visarjan, Sati-Daha, Vidhava-Nirjatana, Kulin-Pratha—marrying girls at the age of eight, throwing girls in the river Ganga, burning widows with dead husbands on funeral pyres, oppression of widows, one man marrying hundreds of wives etc.—not always, perhaps not often—yet happening, yet prevalent, yet honoured. What a cruel irony of fate! What a calamitous vagary of Fortune! What an inexplicable topsy turvy!

Yet—there is still a 'yet'—the innermost heart of India has always been right, always, inspite of all appearances to the contrary. Why? Simply because that heart has always been throbbing in the very same rhyme, in the very same rhythm, with the very same melody, with the very same music, for the very same symphony, for the very same symmetry—always—viz., Reverence for Motherhood. India has always revered women as mothers—and from this ideal, from this standpoint, from this outlook, India has never budged, even an inch, in course of her long and chequered history, even during the worst period of women's degradation. Mother—the head of India has always bowed down at her lotus-feet—always! Mother—the lips of India have always sung her praise—always! Mother—the hands of India have always served her well—always! So, if this sweet, secret formula of India be once known and realised, her real attitude towards women will be at once clear, in the midst of all these numerous apparently self-contradictory happenings with regard to women's liberation and progress; and then, it can be said with firm faith that Indians have nothing to be ashamed of regarding the position of women—for, can any one ever dishonour a Mother? Not only that—India is the only country in this vast world of ours which has even gone to the length of worshipping her women as living images of the Divine Mother Herself on earth; and asserted gloriously, even during the worst days of

women's degradation, that "Gods reside where women are honoured ; but all religious ceremonies go in vain, where women are not so honoured." (Manu Smriti, 3. 56). What greater, stronger, clearer proof is necessary for India's eternally reverential, eternally worshipful, eternally honourable attitude towards women ?

THE VEDIC AGE

Vedic Age ! The Golden Age for Indian, nay, world culture and civilisation—the most beautiful, most blissful, most blessed age, heralding the rosy dawn of a New Era of Supreme Knowledge, Serene Devotion, Sublime Action, of Divine "Truth-Beauty-Goodness" (Satya-Siva-Sundara); of Eternal Light-Bliss-Nectar (Aloka-Ananda-Amrita). During this superb age of ever-bright Light, age of Bliss, age of Nectar—who took the lead as the very first scholars, thinkers, philosophers, theologicians, moralists of the world ? That may be stated by means of a single, simple, sweet, serene, sober word—Risi—a name, an exquisite, exhilarating, enchanting name, a heart-captivating, soul-stirring, life-inspiring name that never fails to touch the heart of every Indian to the core, fill his mind with deepest reverence and purest love and make his soul expand forth in a divine bliss—such is the magnificent 'Risi' of India—the most honoured person therein—million times more than a sovereign Emperor, an indomitable Army General, a shrewd politician, a cunning businessman and what not. Now what does the term, this small, yet vigorous term 'Risi' mean ? It means, in one word—'Satya-drasta', a seer of Truth, one who not only knows, but also directly realises Truth to the fullest. What Truth ? The Truth India has always believed in, and preached forth viz., the eternal and essential divinity of humanity—in accordance with the most astounding, most breath-taking, most horripilating maxim of the Upanisads—"Sarvam Khalvidam Brahma" (Chand. Up. 3. 141); "Brahmedam Sarvam" (Brh. Up. 2. 5. 1); "Ayamatma Brahman"; "Aham Brahmeti".

"All this, verily is Brahman"; "Brahman is verily all this"; "This soul is Brahman"; "I am Brahman Himself".

And a 'Risi' is also called a 'Brahmavadin', or one, who

speaks only about Brahman, as natural, as he sees everywhere nothing but Brahman.

And these benevolent seers of Truth expressed the same, for the benefit of all, in the form of another equally exhilarating, exulting, enchanting thing, viz., 'Mantra' another beloved and revered treasure of every Indian—'Mantra' or a "sacred formula", setting forth a great Truth in a short, crisp, clear, vivid, vigorous form. And Vedas and Upanisads contain such Mantras of inspired seers, saints, and sages. Indeed, India, the holy and blessed land of numerous seers, saints, and sages and incarnations of God Himself can justly be proud of being the most fortunate arena, sanctified by the sacred touch of the lotus-feet of so many seers.

But India has something more, much more to be still prouder, still more grateful, still more joyous, viz., her "Nari Risis", or women seers, saints, and sages. Thus, the Rg-Veda, the oldest and the most celebrated of all the Vedas and also the oldest literature of the whole world, contain a large number of 'Suktas' (inspired verses) of as many as twenty-seven Nari Risis or women seers. Thus, right at the golden dawn of human civilisation, when the rest of the world was plunged in the darkness of ignorance and slumbering soundly, so many Indian women valiantly and vigorously lit the Lamp of Knowledge, the ever-luminous rays of which are till today illuminating the world at large with undiminished glory and grandeur.

And their holy names : Ghosa, Godha, Visvabara, Apala, Juhu, Agastya-svaha (sister of Agastya), Aditi, Indrani, Sachi, Indra-Matarh (Mother of Indra), Sarama, Romosa, Urvasi, Lopamudra, Nadi, Yami, Sarparajni, Vac, Sraddha, Daksina, Ratri, Surya, Sikhandini, Vasukra-Patni (wife of Vasukra), Sri, Medha, Sikata, Nivabari.

These Suktas of Vedic women seers make, indeed, a very interesting study—for, here, we have, on the one hand, expressions of very common worldly, more specially, feminine sentiments ; and on the other, highest philosophical knowledge of most profound value.

GHOSA

As a very good example of the first, we may take the most touching Sukta (Rg-Veda, 10, 39-40) of Ghosa, an elderly prin-

cess, daughter of king Kaksavan, stricken with leprosy, praying piteously to two Asvini Kumaras, the heavenly doctors, for cure of her disease, as well as attainment of a husband and sons, and wealth and honour.

“O Asvinis ! Heavenly Doctors !
Stimulate our words of Truth.
Perfect our sacred rites,
Inspire our faculties, foresooth.

This is our desire great
Grant us glorious wealth
Put us in a prosperous society,
Bless us with vigour and wealth.” (Rg-Veda, 10. 34. 2)

I invoke you humbly, O Great Asvinis !
Give me wealth like parents kind.
I am a hapless, hopeless woman
With no relatives, kins-folk, friends to mind.

I am stricken down with a curse heinous
Save me from that, cruel killer.
Cure me of that fell disease
O Thou Heavenly Benign Healer !” (Rg-Veda, 10. 39. 6)

VAC

Then, again, we have the opposite kind of Sukta of Vac, daughter of the sage Ambrana. This is, indeed, a most superb, sublime and supreme Sukta where we find clear proofs as to how even a woman could rise to the highest top of Brahma-Jnana, Atma-Jnana, Brahmatmaikyajna which is Moksha-Jnana. That is, she realised the whole Universe of Souls and Matter as identical with Brahman, the Absolute ; and herself identical with Brahman, souls and the material world.

“I roam forth as Rudras and Vasus grand
I roam forth as Adityas and Gods benign.
I hold forth both Mitra and Baruna alike
I hold forth Indra, Agni, Asvinis fine.

I am the Goddess sovereign, the giver of riches great
 Supreme knower, fit to be worshipped first.
 Gods worship me, entered into the world,
 Entered into all beings, kind and just.

I create Heavens on Brahma's head,
 I spring forth from Brahman's consciousness fine.
 I enter into all beings, pervading them
 I touch the Heavens with my body benign.

Creating all, I flow forth like the wind
 I am greater than the sky limitless
 I am greater than the Universe vast
 Great is my glory, timeless, endless."

(Rig-Veda—10. 125. 1, 3, 7, 8.)

This was the precursor of the later world-famous Advaita-Vedanta School or Strict Monistic School, led by the great Samkaracarya of immortal fame.

Thus, these inspired poems of the women Vedic seers, really, present a most thrilling picture. What we feel here most is the throbbing of Life—"Life" that is divine in nature, yet never ignores or condemns the ordinary, every day, worldly affairs and transactions; 'Life' that is 'one', yet 'many'; self-dependent, yet most intimately, intrinsically, inextricably connected with all other; ever-full, yet being filled up anew every moment—an enchanting enigma, a magnificent mystery, a perfect paradox. And our beloved women Vedic seers or Nari-Risis were protagonists of such a 'Life'; and that is why, their 'Suktas' are so very living, so very throbbing, so very lovely, ever-loved and ever-revered by all, all over the world.

THE AGE OF THE UPANISADS

The Upanisads form the Jnana-Kanda or Uttara-Kanda, i. e., later philosophical part of the vast Vedic literature, and here we find two glorious names shining forth brightly in eternal glory, viz., those of Maitreyi and Gargi. Both these accounts are found in the ancient and celebrated Brhadaranyaka Upanisad.

MAITREYI

Just visualise the lovely scene—the first golden rays of the just-risen sun have just touched the holy hermitage of the great sage Yajnavalkya, the first sweet notes of the just-started Stotras or eulogistic songs have just rung forth from the green groves ; the first smoke of the just-lighted holy sacrificial fire has just soared forth up towards the Heavens—when the great sage Yajnavalkya lovingly calls forth his beloved wife Maitreyi and says, “O Maitreyi, I am leaving this place, and I want to divide my worldly possessions between you and your co-wife Katyayani.” But Maitreyi, calm and untempted, asks him straight, “But will all these make me ‘Amrita’ (Immortal) ?” “No”, comes the frank reply, “You will only lead the life of an ordinary rich person—but there is no hope for ‘Amritatva’ through wealth.” Then, Maitreyi asks the immortal question that has made herself immortal—“Yenaham Namrita Syam, Kimaham Tena Kuryat ?” “What shall I do with that which will not make me ‘Amrita’ (Immortal) ?” The world is yet groping for to answer this great, eternal, profound, difficult question, and if the answer be found, then, that would surely go a long way in making the world a better, a happier and a purer place to live in.

Such is our pride and glory—Maitreyi who boldly and blissfully defied the persistent persuasions and challenges of the lower, physical, animal side of her nature and showed the path to a higher, greater, fuller life of spiritual realisation and uplift.

This most beautiful incident with Maitreyi has been inserted in the Brihadaranyaka Upanisad verbatim twice (2.4 ; 4.5). This kind of exact repetition is never found in any of the Upanisads. Hence, its importance really knows no bound. For, the Truth-telling Upanisads are not treatises to indulge into useless repetitions. So, this kind of repetition has a deeper implication, viz., that this is meant for emphasising what is, by far, the most fundamental, most popular, most loved, most revered ideal of India, viz., that of ‘Amritatva’. As a matter of fact, the very first and the last desire of an Indian is not for name and fame, self and power, position and acquisition and what not—but for one and one thing alone, viz., Amritatva : Immortality, implying negatively, escape from mortality, from sins and sorrows,

pains and privations, impurities and imperfections of the present mortal, material world ; and positively realising one's immortal, eternal, essential, inherent, intrinsic Nature as Divine, or recognising one's own self as an embodiment of the Divine Being Brahman Himself on earth. And is it not to the eternal glory of womanhood in general that this magnificent melody of 'Amritatva' was sung so sweetly, so superbly, so superlatively by a woman, right at the golden dawn of human civilisation ?

And what was the reward ? Getting the great opportunity to be taught the highest Truth regarding Brahman and Atman from her Brahnavadi, Satya-drasta Risi, and thereby herself becoming a Nari Risi, Satya-drastri and Brahnavadini.

GARGI

A still greater woman was Gargi, who was not only taught, but herself preached the highest philosophical truths regarding Brahman and Atman, boldly and confidently in big learned gatherings and assemblies of scholars. Here, we find the indomitable Yajnavalkya, again, (whether same or not) claiming to be a 'Brahmistha' or best knower of Brahman. This happened in the learned Court of King Janaka, who, desiring to know as to who was the greatest of the scholars assembled there, made a magnificent offer thus. He brought in the Court a thousand well-nourished cows with gold fastened to each of their horns and said to the assembled scholars, "O Revered Sirs ! Let him, who is Brahmistha or best knower of Brahman take those cows away." No one dared do so, whereupon Yajnavalkya directed his disciple Samasrava to take these away for him. Enraged, other great scholars challenged Yajnavalkya to prove himself to be really the best knower of Brahman, by defeating them in Tarka-Yuddha, or wordy duel. Nothing perturbed, Yajnavalkya started arguing with and replying to the questions of five well-known scholars viz., Asvala, Artabhaga, Bhujya, Usasta, and Kohala and easily defeated each and every one of them. Then arose Gargi Vacaknavi (daughter of Vacaknu) and nothing daunted, started a bold, confident, and vehement argumentation, even with that unconquerable scholar Yajnavalkya, regarding the ultimate basis of the Universe. And strange to say, he could not reply to her very difficult questions and to save his honour,

he had to stop her by a threat, "O Gargi, do not indulge in 'Ati-Prasna', i.e., do not over-question, so that your head may not fall." (Brh. Up. 31—3.6). Later on, however, when Yajñavalkya satisfactorily replied to her two questions, Gargi was courageous and courteous enough to recognise him as a 'Brahmistha' or the best knower of Brahman. (Brh. Up. 3.8.).

Thus, Gargi, undoubtedly, is a living, loving symbol of the Unassailable Spirit that, according to India, is manifest everywhere in its own brightest colour, in its own sweetest fragrance, in its purest nectar.

STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE VEDIC AGE

The glorious position of women during the Vedic Age is fully and clearly manifest from the Suktas of the revered Nārī Rishis or women seers themselves, as well as numerous other unassailable proofs with which the entire Vedic literature abounds. Thus, as daughters, sisters, wives, and mothers, women had equally honoured places in Family, Society, and State alike.

We have to admit with great shame and regret that later on, most unfortunately, Indian Society came to such a pass that the very birth of a daughter in the family was not greeted as a blessed event, but treated as a great calamity; not welcomed with smiles, but condemned with tears. But during the Vedic Age, the well-known rite of Pumsavana, performed for averting any evil to the progeny before the birth of a child, was meant both for a male and a female one. There were other equally important rites also for those desiring daughters e.g., parents performed Kanya-Sraddhas on the second day of the moon, in the hope of having a daughter. That is why, the Rg-Veda praises the father of many daughters (6.75.5). Again, just as the Matrika-Puja is to take place in the beginning of all Vedic Rituals, so, the Kumari-Puja is recommended to be performed at the end of all.

Women had the fullest right also, then, to the very important rite of Initiation. That is, they, too, like their brothers, wore the sacred thread (Upavita-Dharana) triumphantly—a sacred thread that has brought so much trouble to Indian women later on—wearing it being a sure sign of sacrilege on her part.

Getting thus the passport of Upavita (sacred thread), the Vedic women then proceeded to the study of the Vedas, uttered

Vedic Mantras, performed Vedic rites and rituals, undertook Vedic vows and did whatever was necessary for a proper performance of Yaga-Yajna, just like a son. So, it is clear that Vedic women had absolutely equal rights with men, in all respects and, were their equal partners, friends, helpers, all throughout.

Nothing much is needed here to show that women as wives had the fullest rights to participate in all the religious ceremonies with their husbands. As a matter of fact, they being 'Sahadharminis' and 'Patnis', no religious rites and rituals could be performed by husbands alone—the etymological meaning of the sweet term 'Patni' being "one who takes part in Yajnas or religious sacrifices".

The Vedic widow, too, enjoyed equal rights to remarry and start a new life, Debara (etymologically Dvitiya-Vara : second husband) or the husband's younger brother being considered as the fittest person to remarry her, although this was by no means compulsory. The right of 'Niyoga', too, shows as to how a widow was very liberally treated in those days. 'Niyoga' was a social custom allowing a widow, or even women with husbands living, to have children by persons, other than their husbands. It has been known in India from the Rg-Vedic times.

It goes without saying that the most heinous custom of 'Sati-Daha' or Sahamarana or widow-burning was not at all in vogue during the Vedic Age, and widows were fully entitled to perform religious rites, as suitable and enjoined just like widowers, there being no distinction amongst them.

As mothers, Vedic women held a most glorious position. There is no doubt that mothers were regarded as far more reverable than fathers, and the Vedic ideal, in this respect, has been most touchingly expressed in Surya-Sukta or the verse of the Nari Risi Surya. When the bride leaves her parent's house, after marriage with her husband, she is blessed thus—"Svasure Samrajni Bhava" etc. "Be a queen to your father-in-law. Be a queen to your mother-in-law. Be a queen to your sister-in-law. Be a queen to your brother-in-law." (Rg-Veda, 10. 85. 46)

This, as a matter of fact, is the keynote to women's position during the Vedic Age.

Vedic women had equal rights to properties etc. too.

In short, Vedic women had the fullest freedom of thought and action, in every sphere, whatsoever. Child marriage was absolutely unknown and grown-up girls could freely choose their partners of life, as desired. There were no 'Parda-Pratha' and 'Pana-Pratha'—no veiling of women and banishment inside the dark dungeons of the Zenana. Women could easily and honourably lead the life of celibacy, if so desired, and choose whatever career they wanted. That is why, we find Vedic women shining like beacon-lights in every sphere, even military. This, too, we know from the Sukta of the Nari Risi Ghosa. Here we find the names of two celebrated women soldiers, viz., Vadhramati and Vispala. Both of them actually fought in battle fields. Vadhramati was a married lady and had also a son, named Hiranya-hasta. It had been said of her that when during a war, Vadhramati lost her hands, she prayed to the heavenly doctors, viz., Asvinis—so goes tradition. Vispala was a woman recruit in the military contingent of king Khela. There is another traditional tale regarding her, similar to the above. Thus, when Vispala lost her thighs during a fiery war, Asvinikumharas gave her golden thighs and thereby enabled her to walk again. In this respect, viz., skill in fighting etc. Vedic women surpassed even their very modern sisters.

Thus, Vedic women were not only first chronologically, but also educationally, socially, culturally; and they will, for ever, stand before the whole world as eternal emblems of Jnana-Bhakti-Karma (Supreme Knowledge-Devotion-Service), also Satya-Siva-Sundara (Truth-Beauty-Goodness) to the lasting benefit of all women, all over the world, all throughout the ages.

THE EPIC AGE

"Ramayana"! "Mahabharata"!—What beloved and revered names to every Indian; what treasure-troves of ancient Indian culture and civilisation; what beacon-lights to India, nay, to the world at large, regarding the path to superb salvation, the path to Divine Bliss and Beatitude; the path to Enchanted Expansion of the Heart-lotus! Needless to enter into controversies as to whether these are really historical or fictional, or both. The only wisest thing to note here is the numerous characters, found herein, to represent men and women in that valiant, vigorous,

and vivacious age, making a very interesting period in the chequered history of Mother India.

But pages will be needed even to name only those great women of our immortal Epics.

RAMAYANA

By common consent, the central character in the great work is "Sita"—a golden name that will, for ever, shine with undiminished brilliance, all over the world, all throughout the ages, as the ideal of Indian, nay, world womanhood at its best and the purest ; as the idol of millions without any distinction of country, race, religion, language and what not. One is astounded at the wonderful way this superb character has been drawn. For, Sita seems to be a very modern woman, a real New Woman, in the truest sense of the word. Like a very modern, new woman, Sita is represented as thoroughly self-dependent, self-poised, self-fulfilled. Soft as a flower, yet strong as a thunderbolt, devoted to her husband to the very core of her being, yet unflinching in her self-respect and dignity ; very motherly and forgiving, yet equally stern in her inherent sense of justice—such is Sita, peerless and unrivalled in the whole history of Indian thought. That is why, we find her boldly defying her revered elders and accompanying her husband to the most dangerous forest joyfully. That is why, we find her protecting herself from the clutches of Ravana, with dignity and decorum, though without anyone to help her or uphold her honour. That is why, we find her calmly leaving her beloved husband and entering into the soothing bosom of Mother Earth, when a reflection was cast on her character. How beautifully, how feelingly does Swami Vivekananda, who gloriously represented Indian culture and civilisation at its best and the brightest, assert with regard to Sita :

"I have seen both sides of the world and I know that the race which produced Sita—even if it only dreamt of her—has a reverence for women that is unmatched on earth." (Works—V)

"Sita is typical of India—the idealised India. The question is not whether she ever lived, whether the story is history or not, we know that the ideal is there. There is no other Pauranic

story that has so permeated the whole nation, so entered into its very life, and so tingled in every drop of blood of the race as the ideal of Sita. Sita is the name in India for everything that is good, pure, and holy ; everything that in woman we call womanly. Sita was a true Indian by nature—she never returned injury.” (IV, 71-72)

“You may exhaust the literature of the world that is past and I may assure you that you will have to exhaust the literature of the world of the future, before finding another Sita. She is unique, that character was depicted once and for all. There may have been several ‘Ramas, perhaps, but never more than one Sita. She is the very type of true Indian womanhood, and for all the Indian ideals of a perfect woman have grown out of that one life of Sita and here she stands these thousands of years, commanding the worship of every man and woman and child, throughout the length and breadth of the land, and there she will always be, the glorious Sita. Sita is purer than purity itself, all-patient, all-suffering, she who suffered that life of suffering without a murmur, she, the ever-chaste, ever-pure wife, she, the ideal of the people, the ideal of the Gods, the great Sita, our national God she will always remain. And every one of us knows her too well to require much delineation. All our mythology may vanish, even our Vedas may depart, and our Sanskrit language may vanish for ever, but so long as there will be five Hindus here, even if only speaking the most vulgar ‘patois’, there will be story of Sita present, mark my words. She has gone into the very vitals of our race. She is there in the blood of every Hindu men and women. We are all children of Sita. Any attempt to modernise our woman, if it tries to take our women away from that ideal of Sita, is immediately a failure, as we see every day. The woman of India must grow and develop in the footprints of Sita and that is the only way.” (III. 255-56, 4th Ed.)

We have quoted Swami Vivekananda at length, just to show what was the universal ideal of Indian womanhood in those luminous, enlightened days. For, Swamiji was a strict rationalist who tried to put even Sri Ramakrishna to severe tests, before finally accepting and bowing down to him as his Guru—and it was not for him to indulge into meaningless rapturous outpourings, all for nothing. On the contrary, he, with his

deep, penetrating, spiritual eyes, saw the very heart of India and what rejuvenates itself for ever.

Then regarding other magnificent women characters in the Ramayana—we do not know as to whom to name and whom not. Even Lanka, the land of Raksasas or demons, rebounded with the sweet melodies of not a few lovely, lively, and lovable ladies, led by the noble Queen Mandodari, the beloved chief queen of the indomitable King Ravana. Calm and majestic, endowed with all regal and other womanly qualities of benevolence, broad-mindedness, unselfish devotion, dedication etc. she, however, led a rather unhappy life of constant conflict with her terrifying husband of towering personality and even went to the length of boldly taking him to task for his unbecoming behaviour to Sita and did not hesitate to take the side of Sita, against her husband.

Another great lady of Lanka was Sarama, wife of Vibhisana. Virtuous to the core, she, too, supported Sita vigorously and tried to help and comfort her, as best as she could, during her terrible ordeal. Amongst saintly demonesses, mention must be made of Trijata, and aged lady of great virtues, who, too, never hesitated to give her fullest moral support to Sita in her most painful exile.

Great women of Ayodhya include the three queens of King Dasaratha : Kausalya, Kaikeyi, and Sumitra. Kausalya was an intensely devoted lady who spent most of her time in prayer, meditation, worship and the like, yet served her husband well and performed well all her queenly duties.

Kaikeyi was a strange, mixed personality, selfish and vigorous, yet great in her own right, possessing, as she did, not a few qualities of the head and heart, such as resourcefulness, strength of mind, quick wit, determination, boldness and the like, strong filial affection, loyalty, love etc.

Sumitra, a shy, retired lady, yet possessing the great virtue of unshaken loyalty and trustworthiness, devotion to husband and son who was wholly given to his great brother Rama, rather than to herself. But still unperturbed and unrepenting, she led her life in doing her duties towards all, bringing solace and peace to all around.

Amongst the ascetic women of Ramayana, mention may be made of Anasuya, Svayamprabha, Ahalya, and Sabari—who all

rose to a great spiritual height of self-realisation and God-realisation.

MAHABHARATA

A great epic, shining with so many characters of very high calibre and great worth, that one feels confused as to whom to name and whom not. Even in the case of female characters, the number is astounding. Still, as in Ramayana, Sita overshadows all the rest by far, and shines in her solitary, unparalleled brilliance above all, so in the Mahabharata, too, one single, supreme, superb character stands out boldly, beautifully, benignly, symbolising the eternal ideal of Indian Womanhood, as envisaged in this immortal epic of universal appeal and worth, viz., Queen Gandhari. Like Sita, she, too, was a unique lady of unmatched qualities of the head and the heart. Her every single act, as pictured in the Mahabharata, breathes of a divine originality or refreshing novelty—so very touching, yet surprising, e.g., her magnificent act of blind-folding herself all throughout her holy life because of the blindness of her husband King Dhritarastra. Who has ever heard of such an inimitable self-sacrifice and conjugal love? Again, all throughout, practically single-handed, she bitterly opposed the evil designs of her sons against the Pandavas and vehemently appealed to her husband to intervene and stop such unholy things. But weak and blinded by filial affection, he did not dare do so. When, after the foolish game of dice, Yudhisthira lost his all and there was great jubilation at the Court of Kurus, joined even by Dhritarastra, Gandhari alone was grief-stricken, and she repeatedly requested her husband to express his disapproval of the wicked conduct of his sons publicly and even banish Duryodhana away from the Royal Court. Again, before the Kuru-Pandava War, when Sri Krisna came to the Kuru Court as the plenipotentiary of the Pandavas with specific peace proposals which were contemptuously rejected by Duryodhana, Gandhari boldly appeared in the Kuru Court at Hastinapur personally and sternly rebuked Duryodhana for his vicious conduct, pointing out to him that the wages of sin was death and advised him to avoid war, which never solved any problem or brought good to anyone. Thus, Gandhari unlike Dhritarastra, never let her filial affection get

the better of her wisdom, judgment, sense of justice and fair-play ; on the contrary, all throughout stood staunchly for the cause of Truth and Righteousness, even at the cost of her own, as well as her family's perils. Thus, her most wonderful, astounding, thrilling and noble utterances : "Yatro Dharmastato Jayah" (Let victory pertain to Righteous alone".) has passed into classics. Thus, when the eighteen-day Kuru-Pandava war started at Kuruksetra, Duryodhana came to her mother every day, before starting, touched her feet and prayed for her blessings. But the ever-just Gandhari never for a single day wished his son good luck or bless him for victory. On the contrary, for eighteen days in succession, she, instead of blessing her dearest son—about to go to a dangerous, terrible war, from which he might not even return, suffering defeat, even death in the battle field—simply said, "Yato Dharmastato Jayah"—"Let Victory come to the Righteous". What more can a mother sacrifice at the altar of Truth and Justice, what more—than her beloved eldest son—the blood of her blood, the bone of her bones ?

Other two great women of Mahabharata were Kunti and Draupadi—repositories of countless highly laudable qualities of the head and the heart—strong, yet soft ; self-sacrificing, yet always standing for her own dignity and honour ; forgiving, yet strict upholders of the eternal canons of Truth and Justice. Thus, these two female characters, too, go a long way in proving that even after the golden Vedic Age, Women's progress and perfection remained unhampered and unsullied.

Next stands our very own Savitri—another golden name that has become a household one, like that of Sita. For, the almost unbelievable feat of snatching away her husband from the jaws of death, she has never failed to catch the imagination and inspire the heart of every Indian woman all throughout the ages. Also her indomitable courage, unshakable self-confidence, immeasurable firmness and the like will, for ever, stand as beacon lights even before the bewildered and bereaved world to-day.

Other well-known women mentioned in the great epic, with a most befitting name, are, to name just a few amongst a host—Sukanya, a Princess, yet married to the great and elderly sage Cyavana and living the simple unostentatious life of a

hermit in a forest, Jaratkaru, Pativrata, Sakuntala, Damayanti, Lopamudra, Vidura etc. Queen Vidura, a brave Ksatriya lady, severely rebuked her son Sanjaya for weeping like a child, after being defeated in a battle by the king of Sindhu. A supremely spirited lady, proud and poised, she hated weakness and cowardice, like anything, and so this kind of defeatist behaviour greatly enraged her and so she was determined to send her son back to the battle "to do or die". Her vehement admonition stands out as a classical example as to what a really courageous mother should do at the time of a grave crisis, involving even the great risk of the death of her own beloved son. One of her sayings, as contained in the above reproof, has obtained much celebrity due to its forceful imagery—"Muhurtam Jvalitam Sreyah, Na Tu Dhumayitam Ciram"—"It is far better to flare up for a moment, than go on smoking for ever."

Amongst religious women, first mention may be made of Yogini Sulabha, an extremely virtuous mendicant woman, who roamed about from place to place, all alone, in search of a real knowledge of Brahman or the Absolute and in course of her travels reached the court of Dharmadhvaja Janaka, king of Mithila, a renowned scholar and philosopher and defeated him in religious discourses. Other such hermit ladies were Tapasvini Sandilya-duhita, Siddha Siva, Brahmavadini Prabhasa-Bharya etc.

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE EPIC AGE

The Epic Age, too, like the Vedic Age was generally celebrated for its kind and just treatment of women—of course, not to that extent, as the deteriorating process regarding the position of women, so manifest in later ages, had unfortunately started even then. Still, in the Mahabharata, we find many liberal rules regarding women. Thus, here, too, sons and daughters were treated more or less alike, and all the religious ceremonies were performed gladly for them all together. Daughters were given full opportunities for education and training, and brought up with equal care and affection. Compare e.g., the loving passage in the Anusasana Parva (45.II)—"Yathaivatma Tatha Putrah Putrena Duhita Sama"—"A son is like one's own Atman or Soul itself, and a daughter is one and the same like a son". Marriage was not compulsory for

women and child-marriage was absolutely unknown. Women could, like men, embrace the life of Naisthika Brahmachari, or a religious mendicant. Women had the right to choose their own husbands, as proved by the well-known Svayamvara-Pratha. Here, the prospective bridegrooms eagerly assembled together in a big, decorated hall. Then, at the right auspicious moment, the priest performed Fire-oblations, other Brahmins chanted Mantras, and the girl appeared there with a garland in hand, accompanied by her brother, or sister or a near relative who introduced the suitors to her. Then, she put the garland on the neck of her chosen suitor and later she was given in marriage with him according to the usual rites. Further, it has been enjoined in the Mahabharata that a girl should wait for three years, after attaining puberty and then she could choose her own bridegroom, even without the permission of her parents. Pana-Pratha or Vara-Sulka, i.e., the customs of the bride's father paying money in cash or in kind to the bridegroom's father, as found even today, was practically unknown. On the contrary, what was known was Kanya-Sulka or just the opposite kind of custom, viz., bridegroom's father paying money in cash or kind, to the bride's father. But generally speaking Pana-Pratha or Sulka-grahana-pratha was condemned either from this side or that.

The 'Sahamarana-pratha' was known, but not at all widespread or compulsory—just the contrary. Widow-marriage has been enjoined in the Mahabharata, and Debara or the husband's brother was considered as very suitable for this purpose. Not only that, a married lady also could re-marry even with her husband living. A good example in this respect was Damayanti. She was then the mother of a boy and a girl. Still, she sent words to Ayodhya that she was calling a Svayamvara Sabha the next day, on the ground that her present husband Nala had not been heard of for long. As well-known, this was really only a device on her part to catch Nala. But still, the very fact, such a 'Svayamvara Sabha' could be called even by a married lady, with her husband living, definitely proves that in those days, that was fully permissible.

Further, amongst the different kinds of sons, mention is found in the Mahabharata of 'Paunarbhava' son, meaning the son by a lady, married before and now remarried to the present

person. A 'Paunarbhya Putra' like 'Svayamjata-Putra' or a son by an ordinary married wife was entitled to his father's properties like him. This definitely proves that in the Epic Age, under certain circumstances, a married woman could remarry, have children and live honourably like an ordinary wife. Not only that, though not in vogue at all, in the Mahabharata, the custom of a woman marrying more than one husband at a time (Bahu-Patikata) was allowed, though not at all encouraged and praised. Otherwise, Draupadi would have been socially boycotted. In the Mahabharata, two ancient cases of women marrying many persons at a time have been quoted, viz., Jatila marrying seven sages at a time and Varksi marrying ten brothers at a time. Further, in the 'Galavopakhyana', it has been said that Madhavi, the daughter of Yayati married four persons, one after another. Further, it has been said here that in the northern regions like Kuru etc., this custom was in vogue. 'Niyoga-Pratha' and 'Putrika-Pratha' as mentioned above, were also practised. Later on, even such a cruel custom came to be in vogue most unjustly, viz., that if a person died sonless, but leaving daughters, some other male relatives, like brother's sons, came to inherit his properties superseding the very just claims of daughters. But in the Mahabharata, it has been definitely enjoined that the daughters of a sonless person should be his legal heiresses and not other male relatives, on the ground—"The son is like the soul, and the daughter is equal to a son. So, when she is alive, why should others come and deprive her of her very just rights?" (Anusasana Parava—45. 12-15). A Putrika-Putra, of course, had the full rights, as a Putra or son.

Thus, taken all together, the Epic Age, too, was quite a glorious age for women. This is specially proved by the fact that even during that turbulent age, a large number of women excelled themselves in all spheres—as queens, housewives, and ascetics and their contributions to the various fields of education and culture were of a high order, and they enriched their homes, societies, states, countries to no mean extent. As a matter of fact, the heart of India feelingly, lovingly, reverentially spoke through the loving voice of the inspired author of the Mahabharata, when he gloriously asserted—

"Pujaniya Mahaghagah Punyasca Griha-diptayah.

Striyah Sriyo Grihasyoktasmatraksya Visesatah."

(Mahabharata Udyoga, 38.11.)

"Objects of great Veneration, abodes of supreme
auspiciousness ;
Virtue Incarnate, Lights of the Home straight—
Such are Women, called Fortunes of the House,
So are to be protected specially with care great".
(Mahabharata)

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE AGE OF JAINISM AND BUDDHISM

This age was, indeed, a wonderful, progressive, welfare age in the history of Indian culture and civilisation, resplendent with new lights, new lives, new beauties, new enterprises, new successes ; and will always remain a matter of great and justifiable pride and glory to us all. Specially, this was an age of immense inspiration for women, heralding the advent of another Golden Age and showing magnificently what heights women could reach and what treasures attain. Thus, the huge host of a very learned, very saintly, very benevolent, very courageous women of those days prove clearly the honourable place they had in society and the equal rights they enjoyed.

AGE OF JAINISM

Mention is here made only of a few of the famous Jaina women during this lively, lovely age. Amongst the celebrated Jaina women of those days, the holy name of Rapimati stands out in grandest glory, to be revered and loved by all for ever. A real 'Sahadharmini' or spiritual consort of the celebrated twenty-second Tirthankara Neminatha, she gladly and gratefully joined the ascetic order, like her husband, and through her own independent efforts and dedicated, devoted services, attained the great height of spiritual perfection and all-round progress, in a way at once exhilarating and exalting. Kannaki was another universally revered and adored lady saint of great purity and chastity, so much so as to be worshipped, even today, as the Goddess of Chastity Herself.

Ajja or Arya Chandanā was another Jaina lady saint of

immortal fame. She was the first lady disciple of the most revered Mahavira and headed the Order of Jaina nuns.

Amongst other well-known Jaina nuns, mention may be made of Jayanti, deserving sister of King Satānika of Kausambi ; Mrigāvatī, his beloved queen ; seven sisters of Sthūlabhadra, Yaskā and others, celebrated for their feats of memory and the like.

Amongst all the Jaina nuns, Yākinī Mahattarā (leader) deserves special mention. She was a highly learned lady, well-versed in all the lores of Jainism and eager to teach others the same. An invincible proof of the very great scholarship of this great lady was her initiation of the celebrated scholar Haribhadra Suri to the Jaina Faith. Proud and self-confident, he declared bombastically that he would accept only that person as his Guru or spiritual preceptor who could defeat him in argument and whose speech he would fail to understand and explain. It was to the eternal pride of all, that only the leader (Mahattarā) of Jaina nuns Yākinī could defeat him and convert him to the Jaina Faith. Haribhadra Suri was, indeed, a versatile scholar and scholastic commentator of old texts whose contributions to ethics, logic, yoga, and rituals were well-known, as well as his bold reforms for the Jaina church. It was, indeed, no easy task to defeat such a great logician and dialectician in argument, convert him to such an extent and command such a great respect from so as to be called mother by him, and he always took great pride in calling himself Yākinī-Mahattarāsūnu, a son of the great Jaina nun leader Yākinī.

Many Jaina nuns also composed or helped the composition of Jaina Works. Guna Sādhvī who prepared the first copy of the monumental allegorical work of Siddharsi, was most reverentially extolled as Goddess of Learning incarnate. Again, later on, two well-known lady nun-scholars Mahānādasarī Mahattara and Ganinī Veramati actively and fruitfully helped Maladhari Hemchandra in the composition of a lengthy commentary on the Visēsāvasyaka-Bhāsyā of Jina-Bhadra. Still later on, another scholarly Jaina saint Guna-Samriddhi, Mahattarā scholar herself comprised a Prakrit work called "Anjana-Sundari-Carita".

AGE OF BUDDHISM

Another great, grand, and glorious age for women's all-round progress and perfection—an age that will, for ever, remain an emblem of women's infinite powers, in all spheres, domestic, social, political, in home, society, state, and their multifarious and magnificent achievements, equalling, nay, even surpassing those of men, to no mean extent—an age, the ever-bright golden radiance of which is till today illuminating even the lives of very modern women to no mean extent—an age, to be remembered and revered with pride and gratitude, joy and hope, love and fraternity—is the age of Buddhism.

We all know the most enchanting account of as to how, due to the untiring, unceasing, unselfish attempts of the wonderful step-mother and wife of Sri Buddhadeva, viz., Mahapajapati Gotami and Visnupriya, women were allowed to enter the Buddhist Order and form a Nuns' Order parallel to the Monks' Order, on eight conditions. Gotami was the sister of Mahamaya, mother of Siddhartha and both were married to King Suddhodhana. Queen Mahamaya died seven days after the birth of Siddhartha; and Gotami left her own son Nanda and daughter Sunderinanda to the care of nurses and herself reared up Siddhartha with great mother's care. When Buddhadeva returned to Kapilavastu, she approached him with the earnest request to allow women too to form a Bhiksuni Sangha; but Buddhadeva turned it down. Then she, with her five hundred companions cut off their hair, put on yellow robes and again approached Buddhadeva humbly at Vaisali with the same request. This time, too, Buddhadeva was very unwilling to allow women to form the Order of nuns. But on Ananda's insistence, he at last agreed to the same on eight conditions for giving women the opportunities for attaining salvation. Mahapajapati Gotami after ordination, was fortunate enough to be trained under the direct supervision of the Master and soon attained perfection—Salvation (Arhathood). She lived upto the age of one hundred and twenty years and had the great honour of being declared the oldest and the most experienced of all ordained nuns by the Master himself.

Other well-known Nuns were Queen Ksema, Patācarā, Baddha Kundalakesha, Ambapali, Isidasi, to name only a few.

Among the lady devotees, Sāmāvatī, Khujjuttarā, Visākhā and others deserve special mention.

THE ROLE AND STATUS OF WOMEN IN THE PAURANIC AGE

Here the very same question may be asked, as in the case of Epics, viz., whether these Puranas are historical or traditional only. And the very same reply also may be given, viz., whatever be the case, at least from these honoured works, we can get a good picture of the then society in all its variations and vagaries. But alas, the deteriorating process had already started, after the golden Vedic Age, and its mark was first found, as often, in the sphere of women's rights and privileges. During the Vedic Age, as well-known, women had the fullest right to wear the sacred threads, read the Vedas, chant the Vedic Mantras, perform Vedic sacrifices, rites and rituals and what not. But later, Nari-Sudras, women and the pariahs, were debarred from all these holy rights and the Puranas and the Smritis were their only consolation, only sources of Vedic knowledge.

Hence, during this turbulent age, the position of women deteriorated much, and they were not allowed equal rights and full freedom as before.

Still, here too, examples of great and celebrated women are not lacking, nor is lacking due respect for women, specially for mothers.

Amongst Pauranic women, Queen Madalasa shines forth in eternal glory as a great scholar, philosopher, and saint. Another great woman of very high spirituality was Devahuti, mother of the great sage Kapila, the propounder of the Samkhya System of Indian Philosophy. She was well-versed in all the spiritual lores which she learnt well from her son and herself became a Brahma vadini or expounder of Brahman, practised meditation and attained salvation. Other great Pauranic women were Sati, Uma, Saivya, Suniti, Bhamini, Sarmistha etc.

STATUS OF WOMEN DURING THE SMRITI AGE

There is a very wise saying in our country—"Cakravat Parivartante Sukhani Ca Duhkhani Ca." ("Happiness and Sorrow rotate like a wheel.")

When a wheel rotates in this way, the spokes therein alternately come up and go down. In exactly the same manner, it is asserted here that, Life which is compared to a wheel in our country (*Samsara-Cakra*) has its ups and downs, rises and falls, progresses and regresses, successes and failures—after Day, Night ; after Autumn, Winter ; after Full-moon, New moon—such is the zig-zag, unpredictable, mysterious way of Life. And the same thing is found, in a most prominent and surprising manner, in the Cultural History of India, when we pass from the Golden Vedic Age to the Iron Smriti Age. What strikes us most here is the absolute change in the status and role of women then. Really, what a fall, what a regress, what a deterioration, wholly unthinkable, wholly surprising, wholly regrettable ! Causes might be there—reasons varied and many. Yet, what happened in India during these dark and depressing days of total injustice, intolerance, and inequality can never be justified on any count ; and will, for ever, remain the darkest spot in the otherwise bright history of India. Just imagine—women of India, who rose to the heights of knowledge and realisation, who vied with men in all spheres of life, and even surpassed them in many ; who enjoyed absolutely equal rights and privileges with men in every respect ; who were entitled to fullest freedom, as well as to untrammelled self-dependence and self-determination—such bold and blessed, self-confident and self-relying, eager and enthusiastic women of India were suddenly confined within the four walls of the dark and dreary, desolate and depressing Zenana, with almost all their fundamental birth-rights totally or almost cut off—rights to justice, freedom, education, equality—domestically, socially, legally, economically, politically and what not—and called ‘Abala’ (The Powerless) or ‘Griha-Pinjara-Kokila’ (Cuckoo of the cage of the house), and subject to the most derogatory maxim : “Putrārthe Kriyate bharya” (“A woman has to be taken in marriage for procreation only”). And the result ? A flood of absolute cruel, unjust, foolish social customs like ‘Gauri-dana’ or child Marriage, ‘Sati-daha’ or widow-burning, ‘Vidhava-Pirana’ or widow-baiting, ‘Kulin-pratha’ or a man marrying hundreds of wives together, reduction of women to the level of mere goods and chattels, etc. etc., and that horrible joint term ‘Nari-Sudra’—“Women and Pariah or the outcastes” came into vogue, and most important parts of society—women inside and toilers out-

side—were together detached from the main stream of society and scornfully and mercilessly thrown to the gutters—with what deep-rooted and long-standing, indelible and inexpressible harm to society itself, we know to our cost even today.

Just take a sample—the best known and most honoured of all Smritis—the ancient Manu-Smriti of immortal fame.

Now unsympathetically has it been asserted in the celebrated Manu Smriti (9.3)—the leading one amongst so many—

“The father protects a woman during childhood sweet
The husband during youth bright
The sons during the old age feeble
So a woman deserves not Freedom’s right.”

(Manu-Smriti, 9.3.)

As a matter of fact, in the regrettable ninth chapter of the Manu-Smriti, as many as twenty verses (9.1—9.20), have been openly and unashamedly devoted to this kind of absolutely wrong condemnation of women. Just a sample—

“A woman never thinks of beauty, never thinks of age. But as soon as she gets a man, whether he be handsome or ugly, whether he be young or old—she at once tries to seduce him, forgetting her own husband and committing adultery against him. A woman, further, is not entitled to any kind of Mantra for her own initiation. So, she is impure by nature and very inauspicious, fickle, worthless, and lowly.”

Just imagine, what kind of society was for women in those days, when this kind of vehement outpourings were not only negatively tolerated, but what is more, also positively extolled.

But even here, there is a big ‘but’. For, even here, some golden passages shine forth in all their brightness, in all their purity, in all their glory and grandeur even in the midst of the encircling gloom of ignorance and prejudices.

Compare the following :

“Where women are honoured, Gods reside fain.

Where they are not honoured, all religious ceremonies go in
vain.” (Manu-Smriti, 3. 56.)

“An Acarya (spiritual preceptor) equals ten Upadhyayas
(Teacher)

A father hundred Acaryas straight.

But a mother exceeds even thousand fathers,

In glory grand and great."

(Manu-Smriti, 2. 145.)

"A woman because of being a mother,
Is auspicious adorable, and a great boon.
She is the light, of the house and the family,
There's no distinction between a woman (Stri) and Fortune
(Sri)" (Manu-Smriti 9. 26.)

"A daughter is an object of great affection."

(Manu-Smriti, 4-135)

"A son is like one's own self,
And a son and a daughter are the same.
So, if a daughter be still alive,
How can another property claim ? "

(Manu-Smriti, 9. 130)

"An unmarried daughter is entitled to
Her mother's dowry in truth
A sonless man's property goes
To his daughter's sons forsooth."

(Manu-Smriti, 9. 131)

"There's no distinction between
Grandsons paternal and maternal
For their fathers and mothers have all sprung up all
From the same father eternal."

(Manu-Smriti, 9. 133)

Then, a very just and modern maxim :
"It is better for a girl to remain unmarried
Than to be given to a groom worthless.
Let her wait for three years full,
Then, choose her own husband, fearless."

"If a girl chooses her own groom
In the above way beautiful.
No sins pertain to her or her groom
Their lives will be absolutely peaceful, blissful."

(Manu-Smriti, 9. 133)

THE MODERN AGE

The same maxim again— After Day, Night ; but after
Night, Day again ! And that Golden Day has dawned once

more for us Indian women, bringing us new light, new strength, new hope, new joy in every sphere ; and the most glorious, most astounding, most thrilling achievements of Indian women during the present age, can be described appropriately only by one word—perhaps strong, yet not exaggerated—miracle ! For, who could have really thought that with the course of barely a century or half-a-century or quarter of a century only, such wonderful, unimaginable, exhilarating, exalting changes, reforms or improvements could have ever been brought in all spheres of women's lives and activities—and that, without any violent feminine movements of the suffragist type, as found in European countries. As a matter of fact, such a bitter antagonism between the sexes has never existed in India really. On the contrary, while one set of men unjustly and cruelly deprived their own womenfolk of fundamental rights—another set made ample amends for the same and most reverentially, most lovingly, most gladly extended their helping hands to pull those afflicted women out of the mud and instal them once again gloriously on their high throne of gold and diamond. From Raja Ram-mohun Roy, the indomitable pioneer, down to Mahatma Gandhi, the father of the Nation—down to all social workers and statesmen—everywhere the same inspiring cry, the same enchanting invocation : “Up with Nari-Sudra ! Down with Inequality, Injustice, Intolerance !” India has ever been a pure and peerless Temple of “Samya-Aikya, Priti-Maitri, Tyaga-Seva” (Unity and Equality, Love and Fraternity, Sacrifice and Service), and now again, she has regained her temporarily lost invaluable treasures—and taken her great and grand and glorious place in the conglomeration of Nations in the World-Assembly itself. Now, India is one, the world is one, with no barriers of any kind whatsoever between the so-called high and low, rich and poor, scholar and dullard, men and women, Brahmin and Sudra—but all are one—one as human beings, one as children of the same Divine Mother, one as living images of the same God.

So, now all ‘Nari-Sudras’ have again been brought back into the main stream of society—one with all, equal with all, honoured by all.

And how has this most magnificent result been achieved ? Not through laws, not through forcible super-impositions from outside—but only through one thing—one lovely, and lively

thing, one sure and invincible thing, viz., '*public conscience*'. If once that be roused, what fear can there ever be, what doubt, what hesitation?

And in free India, in our beloved mother country, a wide, open, common platform has now been firmly raised on the four strong pillars of Truth, Justice, Equality, Fraternity—where the heart can meet the heart, the soul can touch the soul, life can join life, in love and reverence, in beauty and bliss, in perfection and peace for ever and for ever. What more is needed?

* All English Translations of the verses included in this article are by the writer herself. For want of space, other periods have not been referred to here.

Krishna Basu

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MOVEMENT FOR EMANCIPATION OF WOMEN IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the history of Indian women's struggle for liberty from all social bondages and right of equality, perhaps the most eventful period was the nineteenth century that saw the dawn of new India with liberalism as her basic principle. Bipin Chandra Pal, in his "Memories of My Life and Times" wrote that "Our youthful intellectuals were not only anxious to acquire political freedom, but also equally, if not more, anxious to break through every shackle that interfered with their freedom of thought and action. Social reform was even more popular than political reform... in those early days consciousness of sacerdotal and social bondage was far keener than the consciousness of political bondage." Truly, this socio-political consciousness of the nineteenth century prepared the masses to think seriously and effectively about the emancipation of Indian women from her social degradations.

The eighteenth century, perhaps, was the darkest period so far as the women were concerned. Political decay following the disruption of the Mughal Empire and disorder due to the advent of various European powers. Combined with fossilised customs, tradition, superstition and irrational bigotry, while laid the nation to its death bed also crashed the former worship of "Mother Cult". Under the new condition, women lost their separate entity. They did not enjoy a separate world of their own. Until quite recently their very existence, was merely a bare necessity and indispensable appendage to the male population. They were totally and forcefully subjugated to male superiority, physically and intellectually.

If we compare the position of women in India in the past and in present times, we find that in Vedic Society women held a much revered position than their modern version had in later centuries. In early Vedic period, though society was in its formative stage only, women were never looked down upon as

a mere object of lust. The Rigveda testifies that the wife participated regularly in the sacrificial offerings of her husband. Intellectually also, women of early Vedic Age were quite advanced. Though female education was not compulsory, girls were allowed to acquire knowledge on literature and various fine arts. In this context names of such Vedic women like Apala, Viswabara, Maitri, Gargi etc. must be mentioned.

In Politics, however, women were not allowed to meddle in, yet their opinions often carried weight. There is no mention in the Vedas, of any women actively engaged in body politics. According to earlier texts politics was completely men's game because of its drastic consequences. The logic behind this conclusion was the unstable condition of the society which still retained its nomadic characteristics often resulting in serious clashes with different clans. Moreover, to think in the modern sense of politics, the early Vedic Age lacked a well-defined, organised "politics" of its own. Then it was the struggle for existence, not the struggle for power of the modern age, and it was often so hard, that the soft nature of women left them peacefully preoccupied with their domestic affairs.

In the social sphere, various texts though refer to the practice of Sati in Vedic Age, yet it was not zealously supported. In the later Vedic Age, since the Dharma-Sutras supported the widows' right in the property of her husband, the possibility of the general prevalence of Sati is ruled out. The Rigveda and the later Sutras clearly refer to the remarriage of widows. Even then the later texts generally enjoin that the males are the masters of women". And set the conclusion thus, "Their father protects them in childhood, their husbands protect them in youth, and their sons protect them in age ; a woman is never fit for independence".

It was this principle that has ever been zealously supported and carried to an extent that Indian women in the Muslim Age hardly faced the outside world separated from them by the custom of Parda. Under the Muslim rule both Hindu and Muslim women lost all their liberal activities and became a property of their male masters.

The eighteenth century with its "intellectual stagnation" manifested in decay of knowledge and learning coupled with social degeneration, worsened the conditions of Indian women.

Polygamy among the wealthier section and the "Kulins", early marriage, sati rites, killing of female children, throwing of the first child into the holy water, etc. became rampant. Indian women, though theoretically assigned to a dignified position in the joint family life, embodying all the feminine qualities, practically had to submit before all the inhuman restrictions imposed on them by their "lawful masters". In the name of "Kulinism" hundreds and thousands of girls' lives were totally blasted and their conditions could be compared to no better than household animals. Female education was regarded as total waste and luxury.

One worst aspect of the eighteenth century Indian society was the wide prevalence of the rite of widow burning. Though the rite had been prevalent amongst upper caste Indians for at least two thousand years, it is not known when and how the rite first gained a place in Indian culture. Some of the reasons for its gradual legitimisation are : deliberate mis-translation of the texts by Brahmans, the difficulty of protecting women in times of war particularly in middle ages, decline of Buddhism in India, contagion with some tribal and other cognate cultures which believed that comforts of the dead in his after life could be ensured by burning with him his wives, jewellery, slaves and other favourite possessions. Moreover, "Sati became a means of securing social status and renown for virtue."

Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the rite suddenly came to acquire the popularity of a legitimate orgy. In Bombay and Madras the practice of this rite was restricted. But, Calcutta and the regions around it—the districts of Burdwan, Hoogly, Nadia and 24-Paraganas provided 57 per cent of the "virtuous wives" or Satis who burned themselves on the funeral pyres of their husbands, between 1815 and 1826. It was the "babu culture which made a sadistic sport out of Sati", to demonstrate their ritual purity and allegiance to traditional high culture, "and to the extent this culture was itself a product of Western and modern encroachment upon the traditional life style, Sati was the weirdest response to new cultural inputs and institutional innovations".

Parkinson commenting on the characteristics of history wrote, that in every sphere "decay", "creates the vacuum into which another and more virile civilisation is drawn," The nineteenth

century social reform movement definitely shows the general applicability of the above principle. In the nineteenth century, the advent of Western liberalism and English education made the westernised Indians conscious about the deplorable condition of society and the utter necessity of reforms to eradicate these social evils. It was, at this crucial period, Raja Rammohan Roy appeared on the stage of Indian history, to provide able leadership to the educated elite and helped the formation of a definite popular opinion, to fight against those evils and to restore women to their rightful place in society.

On the question of amelioration of women's position, the new reformist zeal took two different lines—(1) social upliftment of Indian women through the abolition of useless customs of Sati, child marriage and enforcement of widow remarriage and (2) female education.

Many of the enlightened Muslim rulers tried their best to prohibit the practice of Sati, without any tangible result. The Sikhs and the Marathas prohibited the practice within their territories. The British Government, however, showed indifference in this matter due to their official policy of non-interference in the existing laws of both the Hindus and the Muslims. But in the nineteenth century, the Government could not remain aloof. And the person who triggered off the official reforms was Raja Rammohan Roy. He may or may not have been the central figure in that movement, however it must be admitted by all that but for his exertions that inhuman custom would not have been put down by law so soon as it was.

In 1823, the Government was considering the question of abolition of Sati. But the orthodox Hindus petitioned against the Government restrictions of the rite, Rammohan took the lead in organising counter propaganda through the utilisation of the press and submitted a counter petition which condemned the rite as "murders according to every shastra as well as the common sense of all nations". He even called upon his friends to organise a vigilance group for preventing Sati immolation in violation of Government restrictions.

In his crusade against the social evils, the most effective weapon was his intelligent use of the press and his power to argue and win his point against the most difficult of adversaries. On the Sati controversy, Rammohan wrote tracts in Bengali, com-

posed as a dialogue between "an advocate for, and an opponent of, the practice of burning widows alive". The English translation was published at the end of November 1818 in order to enlist the support of the Europeans. His journal *Sambad-Kaumudi*, became the main vehicle of his campaign against Sati. In this respect he was violently opposed by the orthodox Hindus led by Raja Radhakanta Deb, and according to reliable authority, that "for a time Rammohan's life was in danger".

The second tract of Rammohan was published in 1819 and significantly its English translation was dedicated to Lady Hastings. Here he refuted the arguments of Kasinath Tarkavagish who had attempted to justify the practice by raising the question of *desachar*.

It is true that this imaginary debate between the advocate and the opponent of Sati assumed the complexion of a somewhat uninspiring exercise in academic hair-splitting. To the extremists it was only a too timid way to reform and just a wastage of time. Even Lord Bentinck following an interview on this question wrote that Rammohan presented the weak suggestion "that the practice might be suppressed quietly and unobservedly by increasing the difficulties and by the indirect agency of the police". Some historians are inclined to minimise the part played by Rammohan in the movement for the abolition of the practice and magnify beyond proportion his suggestion to Bentinck. They further pointed that Government opinion had already been formed and the activities of Rammohan and his followers did not really matter much. But the question that arises is that, could Bentinck carry on his reform programme if he was not backed by a well-organised liberal Hindu public opinion?

Ramananda Chatterjee in his book wrote that Rammohan knew that the campaign against Sati was going to be a hard and long struggle and all "he hoped to achieve in these early polemic forays was to give the widest possible publicity to this terrible social evil; to focus attention by promoting open discussion and even controversy; and thus gradually mobilise public opinion in favour of practical measures against it. What disconcerted him was not the resistance he encountered but indifference". Rammohan's anti-Sati propaganda was undoubtedly aimed at the awakening of the conscience of his own community. It would

not be an exaggeration to claim that though he was not directly instrumental in the enactment of the Regulation XVII of 1829, Rammohan directly organised the public opinion against this barbaric Social custom and thus precipitated the ultimate Government decision for its abolition through regulations.

The campaign against the practice of Sati or the murder of widows created another problem, i.e., the amelioration of their condition. In his "Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on the Ancient Rights of Females According to the Hindu Law of inheritance", Rammohan criticised the practice, analysing its economic implications and also defended some other fundamental rights of women. He wrote that "Women in general are inferior to men in bodily strength and energy ; consequently the male parts of the community taking advantage of their corporal weakness, have denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature and afterwards they are apt to say that women are naturally incapable of acquiring those merits". But "as you keep women generally void of education and acquirements you cannot, therefore, in justice pronounce on their inferiority...."

As regards want of resolution among women, Rammohan pointed, "...in a country where the name of death makes the male shudder, the female from her firmness of mind offers to burn with the corpse of her deceased husband...."

Thirdly, with regard to their trustworthiness...if we enumerate such women in each village or town as have been deceived by men, and such men as have been betrayed by women, I presume that the number of the deceived women would be found ten times greater than that of the betrayed men.

In the fourth place, with respect to their subjection to the passions this may be judged by the custom of marriage as to the respective sexes : for one man may marry two or three... even more : while a woman, who married but one husband, desires at his death to follow him forsaking all worldly enjoyment or to remain leading the austere life of an ascetic."

Condemning the practice of polygamy of the Kulins Rammohan wrote, accusation of women's "want of virtuous knowledge is an injustice". Due to Kulinism most women were "dependent on their father or brother and suffering much distress continue preserve their virtue"; and those who were fortunate enough to live with their husband "are treated worse than inferior animals

...” what I lament is, that seeing the women thus dependent and exposed to every misery, you feel for them no compassion, that might exempt them from being tied down and burnt to death”.

Thus Rammohan Roy with his powerful writing and argumentation placed the question of women's liberation from all social injustice, in the forefront of all intellectuals and educated people. In his life long battle for the betterment of women's lot, Rammohan upheld the theory of glorified motherhood, instead of degraded womanhood, that culminated in Ramkrishna's "Universal Motherhood".

Increasing contact with the western liberalism, growing social consciousness among masses and numerous reform societies, discussion groups and literary activities of mid-century Bengal, heralded another crusade in social front i.e. of "widow-remarriage". The chief promoter of this reform movement was Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar and Pandit Vishnu Shastri.

The ancient Hindu Law permitted a widow, under certain contingencies, to marry again, and her issue by the second marriage was recognised as a legitimate heir. It is in the Medieval age, this practice was rigidly prohibited, at least among higher classes. The earliest attempt to reintroduce it in the local Hindu society was made by Raja Rajballabh of Dacca in 1756. As in any kind of reform, the opposition raised by Maharaja Krishna Chandra of Nadia and his Pandits crushed the hope of widow-remarriage.

The rational spirit emerging from the growth of western education, and the abolition of Sati in 1829 gave a fillip to this movement. Rammohan Roy though conscious about the "abject misery" of the Indian widows and longed for the improvement of their conditions, did not do anything concrete to influence public opinion in its favour.

In 1837 while the Calcutta Press took up the cause of the widow, in Bombay also an agitation started for this reform. In Calcutta, Nilkanta Bandopadhyaya and a few other gentlemen made futile attempts to introduce widow-remarriage. In 1845, British India Society supported the issue. But the two societies Dharma Sabha and the Tattavabodhini Sabha did not show any interest in the negotiations. It was due to the earnest efforts of Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, that the question became an historic and dynamic social issue.

Iswarchandra Vidyasagar devoted himself with indomitable courage and zeal to further the cause of widow remarriage in the teeth of violent opposition of the orthodox party under the leadership of Raja Radhakanta Deb. In 1851, he tried to prove through his writings and speeches that remarriage of widows was sanctioned by the shastras and advocated abolition of polygamy. His main supporter was the Maharaja of Burdwan. His campaign for this cause started in the early 1850's and culminated in the publication of his major work on the subject, 'Marriage of Hindu Widows' in 1856. To give his ideas moral weight, Vidyasagar drew his conclusions from shastras. He argued that "A total disregard of the shastras and a careful observance of mere usages and external forms is the source of the irresistible stream of vice which overflows the country."

The *Hindu Patriot*, commenting on the tremendous impact of this pamphlet wrote on July 17, 1856: "From the moment it issued from the press, it created a sensation which extended itself to the very corner of the country."

To remove the legal bar against the widow remarriage issue, Vidyasagar presented a petition bearing 984 signatures to the Government of India. J. P. Grant, a member of the Legislative Council, took great initiative in this matter and on July 26, the Act XV of 1856 was passed legalising marriage of widows. And following the Act, the first widow marriage took place on December 7, 1856 with great celebration between Srischandra Vidyaratna and Kalimati Devi, a widow who was only eleven. This was practically a personal triumph for Vidyasagar, who staked his own life for this cause. It also added a completely new chapter to nineteenth century's struggle for modernisation and liberalism.

To view it from practical usages, the widow remarriage movement produced the most meagre result. Though it inspired educated persons to think about the position of women in society nothing tangible resulted from it. Women led the life as it was before, only its standard was a bit higher. Commenting on the effect of Vidyasagar's widow remarriage movement, C. H. Heimsath wrote, "Agitation for it never was aimed at creating general adoption by Hindus of that practice." For majority of the participants, its real purpose was "to gain social acceptance or at least tolerance for an individual deviation of an extreme and socially significant kind, from the normal pattern of behaviour."

Deep-rooted social customs and caste system, staunch orthodox reaction and lack of proper reformist zeal after the death of Vidyasagar limited the scope of widow remarriage. As Tattva-bhushan concluded, only the lust of monetary gains prompted the so-called liberals to marry widows and due to this "fatal weakness" that the widow remarriage movements "practically died out, at least in Bengal, long before the death (in 1891) of the illustrious reformer who first set it on foot". *Indian Social Reformer* (Sept. 16, 1906) stated that the Widow Remarriage Association started in Calcutta "failed to achieve any tangible result because the public did not evince any active or practical interest in the matter". The only gain from this movement was the stirring up of social conscience.

In Western and Northern India this movement became quite popular due to the vigorous support of Vishnu Shastri Pundit (1827-76), the translator of Vidyasagar's book in Marathi, with the active backing of reformers like Ranade, K. T. Telang, and Gopal Hari Deshmukh. But this movement of Western India differed from that of Vidyasagar's. While he sought Government sanction for widow remarriage, Vishnu Shastri Pundit desired the sanction of the highest religious authority with jurisdiction in Western India, the Shankaracharya of Karver and Sankeshwar. In Ahmedabad Gujarati reformers formed a Remarriage Association; in Madras Presidency, Viresalingam Pantulu (1848-1919) launched his crusade against enforced widowhood. The Arya Samaj of Dayananda Saraswati also fought for this cause.

The next prey to the nineteenth century reformist's onslaught was the practice of polygamy and Kulinism which permitted the Kulin Brahmans to marry an indefinite number of wives in order to satisfy the desires of the bride's families to have daughters wedded to men of one of the highest Brahmin castes. The Hindu Patriot took the initiative and published some anti-polygamy tracts written by Shyamacharan Sarkar. Bengali satiric prose like Ramnarayan Tarkaratna's drama "Kulinkulasarvaswa" and "Alaler Gharer Dulal" of Tekchand Thakur ridiculed and pointed out the evils of such practices. Vidyasagar in his writing severely condemned polygamy. A number of petitions signed by Vidyasagar, the Maharajas of Burdwan, Nadia, Dinajpur, Rani Sarnamayee of Kassimbazar and other men were submitted to the Government in 1856. But the authorities unwilling to interfere

with local customs did not do anything in this matter. Vidyasagar, however, continued his efforts to expose the evils of polygamy. In 1871, his first tract on polygamy was published followed by the second in April 1873. His untiring energy was devoted against the evils of early marriage. In 1850 he wrote an article on this matter in the *Sarvasubhakari Patrika* edited by Motilal Chatterjee. He pointed that the age limit of sons should be 18. He strongly backed the view that infant marriage was the root of miseries of the Indian widows. If it could be checked and a limit on marriage age of Indian girls could be fixed through official enactments, then the condition of Indian women, would alter.

Apart from social uplift of Indian women, the other factor that attracted the reformers was the question of female education. Vidyasagar is perhaps best known for his earnest support to this cause. Female education is not a new invention of the nineteenth century reformers. Even in the past, women played an important part in the scholastic field and it has rightly been remarked that "practice of close seclusion, and of non-education are an innovation upon the proper Hindu system", (*Calcutta Review*, 1855, July-December, p. 64) and that there is nothing "inherent either in the Hindu or in the Muslim religion which militates against the education of women". In the eighteenth century and in the beginning of the nineteenth century also, there flourished female poets and writers. In the Muslim period we heard the name of a number of women like Rezia, Nur-jahan etc. who held important positions, actively shaping the politics of the day. Gradually, increasing rigidity of customs and misinterpretations of Shastras, led to a general reluctance, specially in rural areas, to send girls to educational institutions. As different reports of nineteenth century show, besides prejudice and ignorance, the practice of child marriage, 'Purdha' system, lack of girls' schools and women teacher, retarded the growth of female education.

In the nineteenth century, apart from the activities of the European missionaries the man who zealously supported the cause of female education was Raja Radhakanta Deb. Though he was the leader of the orthodox Hindus who strongly opposed Vidyasagar's crusade against widow remarriage, yet he personally believed that to make a nation progressive, women must have to be educated. As the Secretary of the School Society founded in 1817, Raja Radhakanta encouraged it in various ways and the

annual prize distribution ceremonies were held at his residence. Under his patronage a number of girls' schools were founded in Calcutta. On Female education he published a book written by Pandit Gourmohan Vidyalkar. Mr. Bethune once wrote to Radhakanta Deb, "I am anxious to give you the credit which justly belongs to you of having been the first native of India, who in modern times has pointed out the folly and wickedness of allowing women to grow up in utter ignorance and that this matter is neither enjoined nor countenanced by anything in the Hindu Sastras."

After much discussion, a girl's school was established under the name of the Hindu Valika Vidyalaya on 7 May, 1849, through the efforts of J. E. O. Bethune, Legal Member of the Governor General's Council and President of the Council of Education and of Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. Due to Vidyasagar's encouragement no less than thirty-five schools were opened in Bengal only between November 1857 and May 1858.

Towards the liberation of Indian women much had been done by the Brahma Samaj, founded on August 20, 1828, under the constant patronage of Dwarakanath Tagore and his son Debendranath Tagore. But the name that comes under the limelight, in this connection, is that of Keshabchandra Sen. Though basically a religious reformer, he actively supported the women's right for better position and earnestly fought for marriage reform. In his lecture delivered at St. James Hall, London, Keshabchandra said, "The people, both men and women, have fallen into a low state so much so that it is impossible to recognise in the modern India the noble soul of the Ancient Hindu. You see Brahmans who have more than seventy wives. There is another injurious custom which makes an old man of eighty marry a little girl of five years. Then there is the custom which prevents a Hindu widow from remarrying. The root of all this mischief is the want of enlightenment." He cited that the Hindu Scriptures said, "that the husband should always try to please his wife, with wealth, dress, love, respect, and sweet words".

On the question of early marriage Keshabchandra voted against the custom and pointed to the Hindu Scriptures which laid down, "So long as a girl does not know how to respect the husband, so long as she is not acquainted with true moral discipline, so long the father should not think of getting her married."

Further he wrote, "Our women have elements of character which are really noble and good, and these ought to constitute the basis upon which we should raise the superstructure of reformed female society."

On the question of female's urge for liberation, Keshabchandra Sen held that, "If women are fit, they must have their rights and privileges. I do not see why they should be excluded from positions which they are entitled to and which they are fitted to occupy. Practically women govern men all over the world. From early infancy to mature age, the influence of mother, sister, wife, and female society generally, has always continued to be felt and prized. . . . The true prosperity of society depends on the harmony of the sexes."

To encourage female education Keshabchandra Sen started the *Bamabodhini Patrika* and *Paricharika* and founded the Antopur Strisiksha Sabha for "family women". He also founded a rescue home for innocent girls and orphans and started a Workingman's Institution for mass education. His *Sulabh Samachar*, a cheap weekly newspaper, had a similar object.

Keshabchandra Sen's greatest achievement in the social sphere was the Marriage Act of 1872. In 1871, he obtained the opinion of medical men on the proper age for marriage of girls. He expressed, "no doubt that the custom of premature marriage, as it prevails in this country is injurious to the moral, social and physical interests of the people, and is one of the main obstacles in the way of their advancement." The Act of March 1872 was of a radical character with provisions like : a prohibition against polygamy, a legal allowance for divorce, no reference to the castes of the marriage partners and an age limit for marriage of fourteen for girls and eighteen for men.

From the practical point of view so far as the women were concerned Keshab Sen's individualistic approach to reforms "had no effect at all on the ideas and customs of the multitude who continued to look to priests and men of orthodox demeanour for their guidance".

Quite a break from the nineteenth century's strive for social upliftment of women was the preaching of Ramakrishna Paramahansa. While the reformers directed their energies to obtain legal sanction for their cause, it was Ramakrishna who with his simplicity, directly appealed to humanity to sanction a revered

position for women. His worship of the Goddess 'Kali' the mother of Sakti, attracted ordinary mass as well as the educated elite. In all women he recognised the Mother, even in the most degraded women. And his devotion for the mother cult led men to think and behave politely to women. As the worship of Goddess 'Kali' came to the forefront the position of women as the direct representative of that "Supreme Mother", became much better.

The ideals of Sree Ramakrishna were carried to its logical weight by his famous disciple Swami Vivekananda's liberalism, humanism and a refreshing boldness. At a time when nationalism demanded the priority of political agitation, Swamiji's reforming message inspired many others to advocate social progress for women. To him, to make India truly modern, Indian women should be emancipated from their artificial social bondage. Swamiji pointed out, as a bird with only one wing cannot fly, similarly, a nation with her women in shackles can make no progress. But unlike Vidyasagar, Vivekananda was not enthusiastic about the widow marriage movement. Sister Nivedita wrote, "Only let Women and the People achieve education ! All further questions of their fate, they would themselves be competent to settle. This was his view of freedom, and for this he lived." Yet, he wrote that women must not learn modern science, at the cost of the ancient spirituality. Ideal education should be one that "which should best enable every woman, in time to come, to resume into herself the greatness of all the women of the Indian past."

In Northern India another individualistic movement against society developed through the foundation of the Arya Samaj by Dayananda Saraswati. But his individualism was not that of a man seeking personal salvation by isolating himself from society. "He demanded that Indians participate more fully in social endeavours, the object of which was to liberate society from poverty and ignorance. The assertion of the soul's uniqueness coupled with the injunction to work for social amelioration and liberation were ideas and, more strikingly a conjunction of ideas—that were intended to revolutionize Hindu life." It was this belief that led Dayananda to think that "women were equal to men in their ability to achieve emancipation, and they should be educated and not allowed to marry before they reached eighteen—later revised

to sixteen". According to him, Hindus were the "Children of children" because of the customarily early age of their marriages. A staunch Vedantist, Dayananda held that the widows should be allowed to take other husbands and thus fulfil their role as mothers. The Arya Samaj tracts and newspapers frequently attacked idolatry, polytheism and various caste and sect rituals, especially marriage and funeral rites. Though nothing concrete had been achieved by Dayananda for the upliftment of female condition, yet in later years through the activities of the Arya Samaj, the literacy rates among Arya women were considerably above those of the general population, partly as a result of postponing marriages. "Release of women from the seclusion of purdah and their qualification for participation in religious and public life were other prescriptions which Dayananda had insisted upon and which Aryas tried to follow."

Until 1880's local efforts for social reforms were organised without much effect on the country as a whole. "Virtually the only effort for social reform well publicised throughout the country had been Vidyasagar's widow remarriage, which however was never nationally organised and which found local support only when a reformer felt inclined to press for it." In 1884 a united social front however was developed through the rigorous activities of Behramji Malabari who broached the problem of legislation controlling the age of marriage of Hindu girls to the forefront of Indian reformers.

Malabari seriously moved on the question of early marriage. As F. Max Muller wrote, Malabari believed, "though widows were no longer burnt as widows, their life was in many cases worse than death. Owing to the system of very early and what has been truly called child marriages, the number of child widows is, and has been for many years very large in India; and the only means of reducing their number was to prohibit early marriages altogether." Though he himself was not a Sanskrit scholar like Raja Rammohan or Vidyasagar and being not a Hindu, Malabari in his book "Niti Vinod" portrayed the sorrows of Hindu widows, with fervour, matching that of great social reform publicists of the West. His appeal was to the sentiments of all Indians, not merely to the minds of the educated class. As Prof. Heimsath wrote, "Malabari did not rely only on considered arguments to support his cases but allowed his pen to flow freely, sometimes

into exaggeration, painting a graphic picture of social evils which few could ignore. Some action had to follow."

Malabari's newspaper, *Indian Spectator* and the journal *East and West*, were the major literary vehicles for the All-India Social reform movement. In 1884, the publication of his "Notes" on "Infant Marriage in India", and "Enforced Widowhood", successfully drew attention of a wide section of the people and social reformers to glaring social evils prevalent in Hindu society. The ceaseless efforts of Malabari's publicity, culminated in the passing of the Act of 1891, popularly known as the Age of Consent Bill, that raised the Age of Consent from ten to twelve. The Bill raised a storm of controversy all over the country as it was viewed by many as a foreign Government's unwanted interference in the socio-religious custom of the Hindu community. Viewing it from the women's side, the passing of the Bill constituted a definite legal support towards their emancipation from age old bondage. The subsequent controversies on the Bill, prepared the mind of the masses to visualise the role of modern women of India, in the coming years.

It is true that various Acts passed by the Government, controversies on various social issues, influx of Western liberal ideas, spread of English education, revaluation of Vedic Shastras and Indian reformers' reverence for the glorious past, created an atmosphere that kindled high regards for women, among the masses. Specially, the educated elite inspired by the contemporary spirit of reform zealously supported the cause of women, and the commotion created by their activities raised Indian females from degradation to the height of Ramakrishna's glorious 'motherhood'.

Practically, the changes that followed in the nineteenth century were only moral gains, not material. Even in this age of "Women's lib.", apart from their activities in the educational sphere and in certain other spheres, women are lagging far behind their opposite sex in crucial fields like defence and scientific experiments. While the Jawans fought heroically in the fronts, women were left at home with their heart throbbing for sacrifice, yet submitting to social rules, and vigorously knitting for the army. In modern war, technique is the prime word not physique, yet men, forget this when the question of women's... participation comes to the fore. The majority of Indian women, still have to be satisfied

with their domestic affairs. Working women still are looked down upon, by their own sisters. In urban society, women breathe in much liberal atmosphere but in villages the situation is almost the same as it was before. Though a number of schools and colleges have been established for girls, yet no proper attention has been paid for their real education. They remain as ignorant about their rights as before.

The movement for social emancipation of Indian women that started in the nineteenth century still have a long way to travel before it reaches its desired goal. And the prime requirement for this achievement is the zeal and tenacity evinced by the nineteenth century reformers.

Chitra Ghosh

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CHANGING ROLE OF WOMEN TOWARDS EMANCIPATION—1947 TO THE PRESENT DAY

Women the world over constitute a vast potential of human resource. A conservative attitude prefers to draw a dividing line between the interests and occupation of the man and the woman—but what the women can effectively do at home, given the opportunity they can also suitably do for the community. This partnership in life in all its varied aspects so eloquently described by Sidney & Beatrice Webb in their monumental work —“Our Partnership”—was not new or unknown to Indian women. As early as the Vedic ages in India, women had shared, equally and consistently, the pleasures and burdens of life with men in all capacities. The wise and learned Maitrayee, when offered riches and worldly belongings by her husband Jagnabalkya, refused the same and asked him to share his knowledge and wisdom with her so that she may attain immortality. This is the ideal of Indian Womanhood, which they cherish and are ever to strive for.

In the modern age, practically all over the world, there is no legal obstacle placed in the path of women preventing them from assuming an equal role—but actually, in many spheres, there are handicaps which have yet to be removed. “Emancipation of Women”, the term may seem now somewhat anachronistic, but this emancipation has come only after long years of bitter struggle. As late as the nineteenth century, liberals like John Stuart Mill were still writing on “Subjection of Women”. When in 1792 Mary Wollstonecraft published the first primary on women’s lib — “A Vindication of the Rights of Women” — it was still a far cry. The establishment of the Soviet State in Russia in 1917 opened a new vista for equality of the sexes. Double standards for men and women in social and moral fields were abolished. Women workers increased in staggering numbers in all jobs—the

two world wars further aggravated the situation. More rights, better opportunities had to follow.

The spirit of the age has to triumph. This age is in favour of equality in all its aspects ; and the foremost is the equality of sexes. Equality does not signify that everybody has to be physically or intellectually or spiritually equal or can be made so. But it does justify that unnecessary and unequal restrictions have to be removed so that each one, within his or her own limitations can enjoy equally with others the benefits which may be derived from the society. This is emancipation—equal opportunities for all with the removal of political, social, economic, cultural barriers. Backwardness or degradation of a group does not arise out of any inherent failings in it but is principally due to the lack of facilities which they may be allowed to enjoy. In India the existence of the caste system, gradually changing its nature to a newly evolved class system, jeopardises the promise of an egalitarian social order. The relationship of an individual, be it male or female, to a state or society to which he/she belongs is determined by its essential social structure. The Indian society has its own socio-economic and political dimensions of social stratification. There is a constant and dynamic inter-action between traditional social structures and modern political, social, democratic outlook. Three aspects of growth stand out in the democratic development of modern India—the aspects of mobility, equality and secularity. The central theme of democracy is that one's social, economic and political life should not be determined by the circumstances of one's birth.

The predominant feature of the social structure in India was the existence of the caste system—both men and women either enjoyed or suffered from the rigours of this system, the fundamental aspect of which was to give one a status and a hierarchy.¹ It is therefore to be considered to be the extreme opposite of an egalitarian democratic order. The Constitution of India based on secular, egalitarian and democratic ideals de-legalized the caste system and abolished untouchability—thus providing the first step towards equal rights for all. If democracy stands for a more open and egalitarian society, then political participation should not only be legally accessible to all sections of the society, but should create such conditions in practice that would enable every one to participate fully in the political life of the nation.

The distribution of rates and types of participation is an important index of democracy.

India has been among the less literate societies of the world. The opportunities for education, upto pre-British India, were not open to all classes and sections of the society and certainly not to the middle and lower castes and classes. Andre Beteille in his "Caste, Class & Power" arrives at the conclusion, that even in British days, when education was formalized and relatively secularized it was mainly the higher castes and the affluent people who took advantage of the new opportunities. If the spirit of the age demands equality, the primary necessity is to provide education which, inter alia, can only lead to economic well-being. If the creative and regenerative forces of the half of the nation is suppressed, or not given its full outlet, it not only bottles up talent and capacity but discourages the spirit of responsibility as well. Those who suffer lose their sense of dignity and self reliance, thus sufferings have to be done away with. Freedom has a two winged concept ; negatively it means the removal of hurdles and positively the creation of opportunities which would enable the individuals to reach a desired goal.

Since independence, educational facilities have increased manifold and most villages have primary schools within reasonable distances. Special concessions and incentives are being provided to untouchables and other backward classes to take to higher education as well. Constitutional provisions safeguard both educational and job opportunities for them. But even then, the relation between caste and education can be clearly seen even today and the disparity is high. While 73% of Harijans are still illiterate, the percentage in the higher castes is only 4%. 10% of this class goes in for higher education than degree standard ; while for the Harijans the number is less than 1%.² The percentage of literate women among the low castes would present an even more pitiable picture.

The Constitution of India contemplates a social revolution brought about through the use of law as an instrument of direct change. The attainment of equality of status for women is implicit in the Preamble, the Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles of State Policy. The Preamble to the Constitution of India categorically lays down the principles on which the Constitution is framed. They are Justice, Liberty, Equality and

Fraternity to be established equally and uniformly for all. The Constitution being the Supreme Law of the land it commands respect from all members of the nation whose aspirations and ideals are embodied in it. The sanctity of the Supreme Law is vital for any progress of the community. Thus Constitutional provisions which enable the women of India to better their conditions and be fitting citizens of a free country must be dealt with first.

Law, in Free India, is to be accepted and regarded as the basic element to bring about social change and emancipation wherever necessary. Women have suffered enough from the heterogeneous nature of the Indian Society with its basic pattern of economic and social inequalities. These inequalities are inherent in the traditional social structure of the Indian Society. The role of the woman is categorically defined and the expectations are clearly marked out. The traditional attitude wants to restrict the women to the home ; the attitude of both men and women are channelled in this direction. The institutional infrastructure of our society is bent to keep up traditional norms and living patterns and it is strange to find that there are hidden but very strong centres of resistance to change this established pattern of life. The disabilities of the women themselves, in educational and economic spheres, have led to halting progress in the role and status of women. Legislation by itself cannot change society ; but it must be emphasized that law does serve some useful purpose in promoting an improvement in the social status. If legislation reflects the social and legal advance of the country, the degree of advance in the sphere of women's emancipation is not mean.

The Marriage and Divorce laws as present in India needed revision to set the new pattern of life. According to the age old concept and tradition of Hindu Law, women had never been given rights on their own merit. They were partners in life but unequal and secondary in the eyes of law. Since independence continuous revision and change is being done, elevating the women to an equal position. Hindu marriage and for that matter marriages in many other similar communities in India are not contractual in nature. No written document accords its stamp of legality ; the social system has created its own norms and principles. Toleration on the part of women was regarded as

sacred, desirability of reforms however, was emphasized at the same time. Only for Muslim women, polygamy has not yet been banned though according to current census³ there is an overall demand on the part of Muslim women for the removal of polygamy. Thus ignoring the interest of Muslim women is a denial of equality and social justice. Bigamy for all other communities is an offence and the second marriage is void in law. But the snag lies in the pitiable conditions of the uneducated and economically dependent women to take recourse to law. Marriage which in our country is looked upon in the nature of a sacrament, in the modern times, does require certain legal bindings. The Hindu Marriage Act of 1955 effected revolutionary changes in the laws of marriage. The Act brought about uniformity in the Hindu Law of marriage abrogating many age-old customs.⁴ The law allows marriage between different castes and between persons belonging to the same 'gotra'. The 'gotra' denotes an eponymous group which is reputed to descend in its entirety from a common ancestor, who should properly be a Rishi, a legendary priest or a saint. The rule of exogamy has been abolished, thus legalising 'sagotra' marriage. The Act has specifically defined the prohibitive degree of relationship for the purpose of marriage, prescribed the minimum age for the bride-groom to be 18 and bride 15, and has conferred on the parties the right of dissolution of marriage by divorce, which may be preceded by judicial separation; as well as, the Act accords rights for the restitution of marriages as well.⁵ Grounds for divorce were stretched out further by this Act and the following were suggested :—

- 1) cruelty, which endangered life,
- 2) disappearance of the husband for a period over 7 years.
- 3) the husband having become an ascetic.
- 4) adultery by husband or wife.
- 5) incompatibility of temperament between husband and wife.

But there was stiff opposition for making the grounds for divorce easier, since the overwhelming opinion was in favour of keeping marriage in our society in its sacramental character. But on the whole women were granted a lot more equality in the eyes of law and the restrictions on the remarriage of Hindu widows have been totally removed. This right should ultimately

bring to our women-folk a great relief though the evils of child-marriage and the life long humiliation of a child-widow, common in the 19th century, and in the early parts of the twentieth, has been mitigated largely due to the fixing of the minimum marriage age.

The year 1976 ushered in the Marriage Law (Amendment) Act which has improved the situation further.⁶ The Act has been published in the Gazette of India Extraordinary, dated the 27th May, in the 27th year of our Republic. Divorce by mutual consent has been permitted by this amendment and the period of waiting to obtain divorce has been reduced. According to the 1971 census, the ratio of divorced women was 1,630 per 1000 men ; the proportion being higher both in rural and urban areas. The time limit for presentation of petition has been reduced to one year only. Child born of any legitimate marriage would be acceptable as so, even if the marriage is subsequently dissolved.

Unfortunately the Muslim women have not been able to gain an equal position in regard to marriage and divorce, as divorce particularly is much easier in their community on the part of men. The only restriction being, that the dowry promised by the Muslim male at the time of marriage, has to be given to the wife in case of divorce ; which though may be somewhat restrictive in the case of ordinary people, is no consideration for the well-to-do classes. The wife again must be able to take the help of law in case of non-payment, which may be difficult in many cases. Other considerations, it is expected, would play their role in determining restraint. The Muslim law, however, grants the right to a girl to repudiate child marriage on attaining majority, if she had been married by the will of her parents or guardians before she was 15 and the marriage had not been consummated. The Dissolution of Muslim Marriages Act of 1939 does give the Muslim women a lot of opportunities to come out of an undesirable partnership. The neglect and failure to provide maintenance for a period of two years is a case in point but unless the women also are able to take care of themselves financially they would not be able to avail of this chance. The right of repudiation should be made available to girls of all communities as in rural India, child marriages have not totally been stopped yet. Compulsory registration of marriages—a UN programme—if

strictly enforced by all nations could function as an effective check against child marriage.

A great evil persisting in our country which has brought much hardship to women is the dowry system practised both openly and stealthily. The Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 has signally failed to remedy the situation. It is one of the major tasks of the community enumerated in the 20-point programme. The richer sections of the society shower gifts and jewellery, even though they may not part with cash, creating a competitive and challenging atmosphere. A bride failing to bring home such a fare is often made to suffer dire consequences.

The Adoption Laws, on the other hand, have given practically equal rights to women since independence. The Hindu Adoption and Maintenance Act, 1956,⁷ permits the adoption of both male and female children ; insists that the wife's consent has to be taken in case of adoption ; and further gives women the right to adopt a child if she is unmarried, widowed or divorced. The loneliness in the life of single woman, which is a social hazard in the Western world can thus be sufficiently ameliorated in our country. The prior right of the mother is ordinarily recognized in having the custody of children below five years of age in case of separation of the parents. The Supreme Court has observed in a recent decision that in special circumstances the mother is to be the 'natural' guardian of the child even when the father is alive. The Courts, however, would examine the capacity of the individual to take and hold adoption, where again, unless and until the financial position of the person is assured, the position though legally equal cannot be so in its true aspect. The Act of 1956 directs that, in deciding guardianship, courts must take the 'welfare of the child' as a 'paramount' consideration. These acts are in the nature of implementing the recommendations of the UN Commission of the Status of Women⁸ and are thus significant footsteps forward.

It is not enough to earn and enjoy but in a society like ours we are also very much concerned about the nature and position of the wealth and riches that one may leave back for one's heirs. So long the Indian society and the Indian legal system allows private property the question of inheritance would undoubtedly occupy the interest of all. In this regard the women of India have no reasons to feel sad as succession,

to all movable and immovable property, is equally enjoyed by both male and female. The Hindu Succession Act of 1956⁹ has abolished the life estate of female heirs. Property is taken in equal shares as absolute owners, with rights to sell, will and endow by the widow ; mother ; daughter ; widow of a predeceased son ; daughters of predeceased sons, as the case may be. The purpose of the law is to provide to women, in the absence of social security and adequate opportunities for employment, financial security and thus to prevent destitution. It is true that property rights would benefit only a very small section of our society but it would no doubt improve the status of our womenfolk and abolish the feeling that women are burdens of the family. It is not very long ago that the birth of a girl in an Indian family was regarded as bad luck and never were the boys and girls treated equally, irrespective of the social and economic position of the families concerned. In the socio-economic situation prevalent in the country, the contribution of the women of the family in running the household and assuming all domestic responsibilities has to be accepted. It frees men for the pursuit of their own business and vocation.

Rights to Equality is one of the inherent fundamental principles on which the new Indian society is being built up. Article 14 of the Indian Constitution guarantees "Equality before Law" in other words, right to equal treatment in similar circumstances, both in the privileges conferred and in the liabilities imposed by law. The development of a society requires full participation by all sections of the population, and opportunities for full development of the potentialities of women. This is the keynote of the UN Declaration on the Elimination of Discrimination of Women. The conservative view that women's role must be limited within the rigidly defined limits is outdated. The apprehension that women's entry into the labour market would lead to chronic unemployment no longer holds good. But a recent UN survey shows that women's role in the economic and social development of many countries is still severely limited.¹⁰ India reported that 28% of its entire female population of 212 million is employed. Restricted mobility of women affects competitiveness adversely. Illiteracy, ignorance regarding alternative job opportunities and absence of training facilities are other causes of low employment figures. Improvement of service

conditions, provision of child care service for working women ; supportive measures of adequate security of working women etc., in recent years have improved the situation in India positively. The Maternity Benefit Act of 1961 is an effort in the right direction. Act 39(d) of the Constitution ensures equal pay for equal work and Act 16, equality of opportunity in matters of public employment. Act 19 guarantees the "7 Freedoms" of speech and expression ; of assembly ; of association ; of movement ; of residence and settlement ; of property and of profession ; occupation ; trade or business.

The Constitutional directive is present to provide free and compulsory education for all children upto the age of 14. The development of women's education in India in the post-independence period has been quite encouraging. The National Committee on Women's Education reported that in 1971, 73% were in the primary schools. The rate growth in the enrolment of females in all stages of education from the pre-primary to the university ; inclusive of professional and special schools in the period between 1965-66 to 1970-71 has been 24.2%.¹¹ The number of literate females per 1000 males in 1971 is recorded to be 435.¹² There is thus still a positive imbalance in the educational field which needs improvement. Illiterate women, however, specially in rural areas, are not necessarily dependent members of the society—many of them are proficient in different types of handicrafts—quite a number efficiently controls and manages small-scale trade. A large number help actively in agriculture. The role of the woman and her status is an integral part of the prevailing socio-economic structure in India and has changed more or less in harmony with it. Distortion, prejudice or bias in official policy is non-existent, but the role that an Indian woman is expected to play is with strict conformity with the customary division of labour between the sexes. The traditional division of labour between the sexes tends to maximise benefit by regarding the aptitudes of man and woman as complementary.¹³ According to the 1961 census, the participation rate between male and female has been 58.1:31.4 in rural areas ; to 52.4:11.1 in urban areas. Though the participation of women in economic activity in urban areas is lower, a much larger proportion of them is educated and technically qualified. The Working age-group of Indian women is 15-59 years. One

woman in every five in this age group is primarily required to do house-work and so is not available for outside economic activity.

In Urban areas, teaching is the predominant profession and three-fourths of the entire educated women of our country belong to this group. 15% of employed women belong to the secretarial and clerical group; followed by nurses, who make up 7% of the total. Administration, arts, accounts, engineering, technology and journalism employ 2.5% of the employed women. The concentration of women in teaching profession is indicated by general preferences and inclination of women for this type of job; the suitability of time and opportunity for the same, and the comparative advantage that they have over men, especially in pre-primary and primary school teaching.

In India, rural women are receiving a particular type of education named as social education which is being given under the community development programme. Through various extension methods different subjects of home science are taught; arts and crafts are popularized and recreational and cultural activities encouraged. Social workers after a specialised training course¹⁴ work in the villages for the upliftment of village women which lead to effective participation of women in panchayats and co-operatives which help in the more rapid eradication of superstitions and taboos. Community development frequently affords an opportunity for women to develop political skills and interests. Flexibility in the organisational patterns in which women participate in community life seems to be a current need in view of the changing roles of men and women in contemporary society. Changes of attitude in women stimulate changes of attitude in men. One may recall the saying of Mahatma Gandhi—"Educate a man, you educate an individual; educate a woman, you educate a family." An important question which the policy makers of community development must face and answer is to what extent such development can make a lasting impact on institutional reforms. Encouraging progress has been recorded in some villages in India, where women are taking an active and effective part in the village panchayats. Election of an all women panchayat in the Deintikar village in Uttar Pradesh (1961) followed by a

very successful term led to the all round development of village life.

Political status can be defined as the degree of equality and freedom enjoyed by women in the sharing of power. In India the Reforms Act of 1921 enfranchised a small section of the Indian people which included women, who were either educated or owned property, following a deputation of Indian women led by Sarojini Naidu who had presented to the British Parliament a demand for enfranchisement of women on the basis of equality with men in 1917. Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the UN in 1948 states that every one "is entitled to the rights set in the Declaration irrespective of race, colour, sex, religion" etc. In the Indian Constitution the right of voting on the basis of adult suffrage has been given by Art 326.

The first indicator as to the political status of women is their participation in the political process as voters and candidates in election. According to a UNESCO survey the percentage of women voters in 1971 was 49.15%. The difference between male and female voter turnout has fallen to 11.85% in the year 1962-1971. The interest and zest of rural women was particularly noticeable to Mrs. Taya Zinkin who made a personal study, and rightly comments that "emancipation is filtering right down to the villages" in her recent book.¹⁵ 9.43% women hold elected offices in India—which is much higher than even countries like UK and USA. A sample survey showed that out of the total number of respondents, 82% were aware of their political rights. Active interest is generated by a large number of non-political, voluntary organisations which help to formulate ideas. The majority of women in India, who are involved in politics come from the relatively well-to-do families which have generally a fairly long tradition of political activity. Urbanised working women have greater awareness than their rural counter-parts; professional women than housewives. Nearly 250 women have served the Indian Parliament; they have chaired both the houses and taken active part in the house committees. Women have been and are Chief Ministers, Governors, Cabinet Ministers and of course, the Prime Minister, with commendable record of service, foresight, and courage.

They have played equally successful roles outside the country

—as Ambassadors to different foreign nations ; as well as at the United Nations. It was the privilege of India to be able to secure the Presidentship of the General Assembly for a woman for the first time in its history.

Independent India has accorded completely equal rights and privileges in all spheres—be it social, economic, and political—to the women of India. It is now left to the women themselves to make full use of them. Even the criminal code of the land is partial to women. Sec. 497 of the Indian Penal Code provides that though men are punishable for adultery, the women are not punishable as abettors. Kidnapping of minor girls, even if proved to have been done with the approval of the kidnapped person, is a punishable offence but the kidnapped girl cannot be prosecuted. If the mother of an illegitimate child approaches the Court for monetary allowance, in case it is proved, a maximum of Rs. 500/- monthly may be permitted by the Courts. The fixation of allowance would however take into consideration the income of the person concerned in the case. Protection of women is considered necessary for the upkeep of the society.

Social problems are the result of the failure of a society to adapt its social institutions and culture to its growing needs. Much of the problems are thus man-made. But there are some institutions, which though not healthy and progressive exist and continue in the society. An evil institution which particularly is harmful to women everywhere is the age-old institution of prostitution. In Indian Society also, it has had a long past, for mention of it can be found even in Kautilya's 'Arthashastra'. Kautilya had mentioned the 'ganikas' and suggested certain measures to keep them under control and restriction and had felt the need of legal control for such professional women. Shanti Kabir mentioned illiteracy, poverty, and ignorance to be the main causes which drive women to this occupation.¹⁶ The number of brothels is the highest in West Bengal, which is over 5,000, but the actual number of prostitutes is not available. The Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act of 1956 has provision to protect young girls from this fate but many are the loop-holes which may be found to lure ignorant young minds to this wayward life. The Advisory Committee on Social and Moral Hygiene, with Dhanwanti Rama Rao as its chairman, in 1954 made a few

recommendations which were later incorporated in the above act. Any person who keeps or manages such a place is punishable under this act ; a girl over the age of 18 knowingly practising such a profession is also equally punishable ; the magistrates have been authorised to remove such houses from public places if notified.¹⁷ A number of protective homes have been set up, but the number is not sufficient to shelter all such cases which deserve it. Prostitution has grown apace with industrialisation and urbanisation. Anonymity in urban life has been an additive force for the increase of prostitution. Economic necessity is also another factor with uncongenial environment, bad companionship, and a desire for easy life as its components.¹⁸

A social institution which still has an importance in the Indian society, is the family. The joint family system, widely prevalent in our country, contributes to the security and homogeneity of the individuals in our society.¹⁹ It is true, that the fast-growing urbanisation and opportunities for employment elsewhere than in one's own native habitat, is breaking the joint family system somewhat rapidly in modern times. Thus the role of the venerable Matriach, the mother or the grandmother, is at stake. The fearful prospect of a lonely, un-cared-for old age for the aged and the infirm looks menacingly into their faces. Will the emancipated, and freed Indian women turn their back on those institutions which have brought such blessings to their lives ?

The number of criminal cases in comparison with many other countries of the world are moderately low in India—the reason may be attributed to the traditional image of Indian womanhood which is still cherished and followed by the modern women. But there are certain problems which the emancipated women face, to which one cannot and should not be oblivious. As it has been suggested earlier in this paper, the basic criterion and requirement of emancipation and development is education. Education imparts on the one hand specialised training which is expected to improve the quality and efficiency of labour in a country, and on the other broadens one's outlook on life in general. Education of the first type is formal and a basic economic input is made before the return starts flowing and enriching the country. How much of this economic input the women would be able to command and utilise would depend

on the mobilisation of woman-power in the country, as well as on some socio-economic factors. If, for whatever may be the reason, the society fails to utilise the educated and trained personnel, it would amount to a great loss for the entire nation. The unemployment of educated persons is a waste as a social investment had already been made for them with no return obtained therefrom. It is difficult to find the unique level of employment in the state of economy persisting in India today ; for the country is going through a transition period from traditionalism to modernity. Education for women, in this transition period, is a must. Education should be regarded as the "process to fulfil aspirations and develop the potentialities of each individual human being to meet the evermore pressing demands of the world in transformation."²⁰ Here all must share the privilege to know and learn and education must not be kept in reserve for only a few chosen ones. For a large and populous country like India, the women pioneers are very few in number. They have great distinction backed by immense courage which has opened the way for the rest of the women-folk. Indian women entered the field of medicine only by the middle of the 20th century, but already the number is impressive. The women are more sensitive than men about the element of status in a profession, so some professions are favoured more than some others. According to Promilla Kapur,²¹ marriage still stands between a woman and her total commitment to a profession, at all levels, including the highest, in India.

The lesson that has been well learnt in all democratic societies, including ours, is that leadership is many faceted. At points and places it is numerous and varied. The leadership in such a society is not of political power but of expertise. The talent and aptitude for leadership has been found in the Indian women. The women have developed the qualities of constancy, persistence, endurance, and self-abnegation.²² To this if we can add training and education, courage and unorthodoxy, creativity and determination, the Indian woman of the future would move onwards towards disciplined excellence in the years to come. All movements in the world have been organised and built up to a large extent through the proper use of the communication media. The emergence of women in journalism in India is not more than four decades old. Most women prefer editorial work

and free-lance writing and, as such, there are very few women reporters and correspondents in the daily press. They prefer to run regular or occasional columns of domestic or feminine interests. There are about 75 women's magazines in India with a circulation of about 4 lakhs of which over 2 lakhs circulation is in the English language. The reasons responsible for the small number of women having active journalistic career (about 9,000 only in the whole of India), are perhaps the long hours, feminine inconveniences in places of work, and the lack of security and privacy in the job.

The radio and the television offer better facilities for women professionals. There are a large number of women on the regular staff of the AIR, as well as a substantial number participate as occasional free lance broadcasters. Nowadays television offers more varied opportunities to educated women.²³ In a democracy, access to channels of public opinion must be made readily available to any person or group seeking it. In India the role of the voluntary associations in arousing the consciousness of women as to their role and responsibilities is not negligible either. In 1900, there were not even 100 women's organisations, the number has increased to more than 4,000. The credit for varied social welfare legislation for women must go to a large extent to the social action programme of these voluntary associations. As more and more women become committed to a purpose, the progress becomes more and more swift.

The women in India, today, in comparison to many others in the different countries of the world have achieved new freedoms. Education has opened and is constantly opening new vistas for her; the support given by the law and the Constitution of free India has helped her to move boldly forward. The initial battle for 'emancipation' is over. She has now achieved the chance to prepare for herself a place in the world as a total individual with a human and courageous personality.

The spirit of freedom, the progressive laws, the enlightened mind, and the democratic environment are helping the Indian woman to go ever forward in a bold and defiant movement—so that, we can say, after Euripides—

“What else is Wisdom? What of Man's endeavour,
Or God's high grace, so lovely and so great?”

To stand from fear set free,
 to breathe and wait,
 To hold a hand uplifted over Hate,
 And shall not Loveliness be
 loved for ever?"

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NEW WOMEN IN OLD SOCIETY

Talking about women is necessarily vague and confusing unless it is specified what women the speaker has in mind. Are they young or are they old? Are they rich or are they poor? A casual reference to a particular country or culture to which they belong may not really help us in isolating all the factors that go into the making of women—be they old-styled or new. In traditional set-up of India where old age commands respect, old women feel more comfortable than younger ones. The way women react to the problems that generations of women face within a culture is tied up with the self-image of young and old women which are likely to be different. A social movement with the aim of changing the condition of women as a group is unlikely to gain in strength among young and old alike under such circumstances. Growing old is nonetheless a natural process which all women experience equally with men. A higher economic status is, however, never gained through maturation. A woman is not expected to become rich through her effort or merit. She may be born to a rich father but that does not necessarily make her rich. A rich woman is one who has a rich husband. In spite of feminist movements in the western world and the social reformers' bid to change the laws relating to women in many other countries, the economic position and social status of women have been by and large dependent on those of men they belong to either by birth or through marriage. Traditional women are not upset about this fact of dependence. Those who are rich among them find plenty of room to move about; those who are poor have hardly any time to brood over the fact that even today as in the times of Mahabharata "a woman's status depended entirely on the position of the man who was either her father or husband or son". (*YUGANTA* : Iravati Karve, Sangam Books, 1974. pp 43-44). I consider those women as new in their approach who refuse to accept this

state of affairs as final and irrevocable. Such refusal is rarely to be found in an explicit form except among a few middle class women having independent occupations. Why is it so? Is it because the middle class is marked by a certain inner tension and a special urge to climb? I am not sure. There must be many reasons why very few women who are not satisfied being merely daughters, wives, and mothers are found in this class. They seek new demanding roles to prove their worth as human beings.

In India, of course, varieties of roles have always been traditionally permitted to women. Earlier stable agricultural societies had always known "public women". Women for entertainment figure prominently in old tales of princely courts all over the world. They certainly had a well-defined place in old society, India being no exception. On the other hand, from times immemorial peasant women in India have toiled in the field alongside men. They were not debarred from the productive work because of their sex. Besides, women with scholarly reputation were held in high esteem.

Is it then meaningless to talk about new *women* in the Indian context?

"Yes" would be the ready answer of many. They would argue that Indian women have always had equal or greater share of human dignity and, therefore, there is no point in imitating western women and raising the cry for equal status and new opportunities. They naturally point to the varied social roles offered to women in traditional Indian society. They do not appear to worry over the fact that public women entertained under compulsion and not out of choice, and that a peasant woman never owned the piece of land she toiled upon nor did she ever possess the bullocks, ploughs, and other tools of agricultural production; she clearly played a secondary role in assisting the peasants who tilled the soil. Scarcity of women scholars does not raise questions in their minds either. Disregarding all such disconcerting evidence they would insist on that women with their varied roles and responsibilities were fully integrated in traditional Indian society and enjoyed a highly honourable status. In their opinion there is no point in talking of women's rights and liberties in the Indian context. I am afraid this is not a valid formulation of the problem.

There was a time when educated young men in India reacted

against *Purdah* and began bringing out their wives in mixed groups following the model of western social behaviour. There is, however, no going back on that. Urban life with its complications does not permit any more completely segregated world of men and women which we generally had in India before we had been exposed to western influence. We often hear that we were not true to our tradition at that time but that is not relevant. Modern urban life has much in common all over the world and no one can hope to preserve a pure form of life-style unaffected by others.

The question of women's independent status and relative dominance, however, is not identical with that of free-mixing or freedom of movement. Economic position has always been and still is a vital issue. No matter how bright it sounds when Caroline Bird argues in her article, entitled "The Androgynous life" * that young women no longer marry for money and that "the sex-for-support-bargain is a thing of the past", the remark is not true of the majority of young women of India. A large number of women in our country still expect shelter, security and support from husbands not merely because they are not trained for any other occupation and have very restricted job opportunities, but also for the reason that they have been taught to depend on menfolk. They are, of course, not new women but they affect new women in so far as they form a part of the women's world permeated with the old feminine social values of reliance-on-others and submission-to-authority. These social values have not changed. In return for living up to these virtues women are given protection and support within the family.

Some critics point out that in developing countries where the poverty-line keeps at a frightfully low level it is not easy to remember who is a man or who is a woman. Everyone, they argue, ought to stop worrying about non-existent issues and join the common battle against poverty—which is the real evil. They get hysterical over the fact that at a time when people are getting dehumanised through extreme poverty fashionable young and old ladies prefer to talk about women's rights.

* *VOICES OF THE FEMINISM* ed. Mary Lou Thompson, Beacon Press, Boston 1970,

When these two apparently opposite¹ strains of thought finally lead to the same conclusion one feels inclined to look a little deeper into the matter.

II

On the question of superiority of Indian women's position, any impartial observer can find out that women as a group enjoy no superiority. Traditionally women are considered so much to be "the shadow" of their husbands that their separate identity is hardly recognised. As a social group women have a minority status and are of secondary importance. A woman may be able to dominate when she is old because old people traditionally dominate the younger ones within specific limits. A young wife might, however, dominate her poor mother-in-law because she is a rich man's daughter and her father continues to support her even after marriage. Dominance and superior status thus depend on several factors. It is not a simple function of femininity. The theoretical appreciation of female power—the blind motivating force behind all creation—has not found any direct expression in Hindu social institutions. The oft cited role of the mother in Hindu Society is a highly complex one. The mother is respected. She is potentially dominant. Had she been actually so the social situation would have been different. The mother is eulogised not because she dominates but because she gives the succour as does the sacred cow.

At a time when poverty dehumanises people, the question of equitable distribution of resources should be uppermost. Why should we accept the idea that men must be saved first from misery and then only women should get their turn? This priority itself reveals a built-in old-fashioned thinking which emphasises men's role as that of the provider. It is the women who are provided for. The idea has been prevalent in all societies through the ages.

¹ Argument i runs: Roles of women are prestigious and more dominant in Indian Society. The call for equalisation is pointless.

Argument ii runs: The question of relative dominance is irrelevant under conditions of unbearable, agonising poverty. Indian society as such has no question of relative dominance to settle.

Conclusion: Talking about women's liberation and emergence of new women is pointless and irrelevant.

The belief that a woman's place is at home has nothing especially Indian about it. The belief has been as common in western countries as in the east. In fact, as late as the thirties, Adolf Hitler wanted all women to go back to their proper place in the kitchen and reproduce in the interest of the perpetuation of pure Aryan race. This is not to suggest that one should, therefore, no longer believe that there is anything to be proud of in a "feminine" role. But one should not be taken in by the eulogising statements when experience reveals something contrary.

Does economic independence bring glory to women? Not quite. Independence has its own stress and strain. We can think of many instances where women have to earn and on that very ground they are made to feel guilty. Satyajit Ray's film *Mahanagar* illustrates this point very effectively.

During mid-sixties, a leading Bengali Daily published an article by a renowned lady author blaming women for the increasing incidence of delinquency among students and youth. If mothers work outside their homes, she argued, boys would naturally be lost to families and, eventually to society. She has indeed been voicing the opinion of hundreds of thousands of Indians who believe that women are mothers first. The idea is so popular and supposedly noble that no one ever asks whether true 'mothering' could ever be done by women who were denied any access to the world their children were going to live in. It is taken for granted that a woman's career, no matter how bright and significant it might be, is of secondary importance, unless of course, a woman decides to remain single and committed to her career only. Indian society would not encourage a woman to divide her loyalty between family ties and occupational involvement.

In general the working women's profile in India does not look very bright. Women cannot possibly feel encouraged to work outside their homes if it brings extra pressure on them and creates inner tension. Therefore it is not surprising that even though the constitution of India guarantees equal rights to Indian women in all walks of life, they could not make substantial progress towards the goal of equality in the working world. Of course, much of the confusion about the social situation relating to problems of women persists because there are young middle-class women

who deny the existence of such problems and through their denial refuse to assume the responsibility for the minority group they belong to. (They behave almost like those individuals before independence who felt close to the British and refused to admit that there was any discrimination against native Indians.) This self deception does not help women to face the social situation and play their role effectively in society.

The fact that there has been a consistent fall in the proportion of women employed since 1951 is an eye-opener. The report of 1971 census shows that as against 29% in '51 and 31% in '61, only 17.3% of the total working population in 1971 were women. Evidently with technological improvement employment opportunities for women are shrinking. Is it only because women are not given the requisite training? Could it not also be due to the fact that with the improvement in the living conditions, which followed technological improvement, women belonging to the working class wanted to stay in their homes emulating the model of upper class women who opt for reproducing and staying in? We do not really know. The ambivalence of middle class women is, however, quite clear.

Since independence there has been reportedly several new openings for middle class women. Yet they found employment only in nineteen occupations. Some of these require them to stay single whereas in similar positions men are permitted to marry. Clerical assignments are free from such obvious discriminatory conditions and have drawn a large number of women so far. Working condition in most of the offices are, however, none too encouraging. The feeling of segregation is often pronounced. Women's conscience too call them back to their kitchen and household especially if they are married. "Women do not work voluntarily, they have to, you know, the expenses have gone up so high, that's why. . ." said a veteran working woman in course of an interview. I believe, truly new women would find this type of confession by their fellow workers either amusing or embarrassing depending on how far they have succeeded in understanding the social situation properly.

III

In recent years new women in India have received some appreciation for their ability to acquire an independent status

and hold their own against so many odds. This overt expression is a mark of slight change in the social climate but whether this change is an unmixed blessing is difficult to say. If words of encouragement reinforce the tendency to assume new, responsible roles among women, no active support actually comes forth from other members of society to back it up. The problem of face-saving and blame-avoidance becomes pretty acute for any married woman who wants to do justice to her career as well as to her home. There was a time when a middle-class girl, keen on working outside home, was considered to have lost interest in marriage. Actually, those who had problems about getting married either because of broken heart, or, because their parents could not collect enough money for dowry to marry them off were likely to look for outside jobs. Excepting having to face a strange world of fellow workers, no other conflicts awaited them. Even the world of work was more or less well defined because jobs open to women at that time were limited. Uneducated or half-educated women—usually widowed—worked for other households. The great majority of educated women went to teach in schools where their daily dealings were with women and children. The controlling authority in those institutions was usually vested in men. Anglo-Indian girls went in for nursing and secretarial jobs but, generally speaking, young Indian women from respectable families were not expected to go in for such vocations.

Working women during those days had to exercise a choice if in course of their career, there came a sudden offer of marriage. Many of us who had been in junior school from mid-thirties through mid-forties can recall farewell parties organised for our pretty, young, teachers who were going to leave school to get married. Some of them, of course, continued teaching even after marriage. Occasionally we would have a couple of classmates whose mothers were in the teaching staff of the school. Married teachers, and I presume, married women workers in general during those days came either from very well placed families, or, from families without a male earning member. Because in all families women were responsible for domestic duties. But in the case of well-to-do families the women had leisure time to be used in the service of the community. They came out if their menfolk considered it in keeping with their own position and prestige to

have 'their women' out for work. In the latter case the pressure evidently came from an excess of poverty following the death or desertion of the husband who must have been earning for the family. These women were variously forced by circumstances to come out of the four walls within which they would normally have preferred to live and, presumably, reign.

I remember from my early childhood how everyone around took it for granted that married women should always be as they had been held responsible for household duties and child-rearing in middle class families. Not only were they judged to be accountable to their elders on these scores but these were considered to be their major assignments given by the society in accordance with certain sacred code which was self-evident to most people. Thus only those women could eventually be permitted to work outside of home who could either afford to share the household chores with hired, wholtime servants, or, poor dependent relations (as ladies from well-placed families could) or, who simply could not stay at home tied down to household duties because without the support of their hard-earned income the household itself would collapse. Even when these preconditions were fulfilled a woman could not actually take up an independent employment until she got clearance from the master of the house. No matter whether the woman earned or not she could not have been her own master under any circumstances.

That female education spread well and early in some sections meant very little in terms of occupational freedom cannot be doubted. Training up a girl and letting her choose her vocation had rarely meant the same thing to fathers and "big" brothers. The amount of public money wasted on women's education was never considered a national loss. On the contrary, it has always been looked upon as proper and nearly obligatory that educated women should educate their children at home and remain a source of wholesome inspiration for menfolk in general and their husbands in particular. Some mild resistance continued against the spread of "higher education" among women in old-fashioned families not because "higher education" involved national spending but because women were presumably losing their feminine qualities as a result of too much schooling. Enlightened men paid no attention to this objection. It does mean, however, that enlightened men in general left their wives,

daughters and sisters work according to their own vocational interests. They were, on the other hand, encouraged to do honorary social work from home-based voluntary organisations, or, write, sing as amateurs and, as has already been mentioned, teach in girls' schools as long as these activities did not conflict with their household responsibilities.

The number of men permitting, or, even encouraging their wives to earn has gone up in recent years in post-independence India. But household continues to remain the responsibility of women. Women can manage to do it well if they know how to exploit other women. Married women, following a two-track² career often lean on their mothers much more than they ever did during their maiden days. Mothers are easily exploited for baby-sitting and, for occasional unscheduled dinners. Not only that mothers do it without grudge, very often they also take pride in their daughter's ability to combine so many roles and are happy to let them have the opportunity which mothers had never had.

No woman would usually think of exploiting her father in a similar manner. This subtle role-discrimination often goes unnoticed by those who argue that middle-class Indian women are fully free to work outside. Indeed they are so as long as they receive support from other women who do not and would not pursue their vocational interests. New women know very well that they cannot hope to receive similar support or service from men even if they are retired because men are not traditionally expected to look after the household or children. They might do it for fun just as women—as all traditionalists believe—work for fashion ; it is not a part of their life-style. This being the attitude married women who want to make occupation a part of their life naturally find the challenge rather stiff.

On the one hand, they do not want to give in. They want to prove their worth outside as well as within their homes once they have set up a home. But at the same time, new women find it self-defeating that they cannot help exploiting other women. If their liberty has to mean bondage for others they are clearly

² A two-track career is truly one in which housekeeping and occupation are equally important to the career-woman and when she is not merely trying to add a little more to the family income.

seeking advantage at the cost of group goals. That women as a group are yet to go a long way to reach the goal of an independent, bright future is bad enough, that new women are thriving on the backwardness of other women is worse.

Many married women of today, like their predecessors in our country, do not have such qualms when they work because they are rich enough to 'buy' wholetime ayahs to work as substitute mothers for their children, they feel no need to worry about their employees. The idea of starting working-women's co-operatives for goods and services has not gained ground among new women in India. The entire arrangement of combining household chores and professional work continues to be unstable because it is made absolutely individual terms. Our society at large is yet to come up with any effective social service scheme to put working women at ease about taking care of children and the infirm within each family. Indian society is still by and large family bound and the woman is the centre but not the head of the family.

IV

The ambiguity in a woman's role becomes apparent when a fully occupied and married woman in high office is on transfer. Will the husband and the household move with her?

In most cases an emphatic "no" would be the answer to both. In all cases the man in the house stays where he is and does not move with his wife. Often the Officer-wife pleads with the authorities concerned for a cancellation of the transfer order. If the order is not stayed the rest of the household and the child may or may not accompany her depending on pragmatic considerations. In any case the woman does not decide any more than the child decides whether they would move or stay on.

The human aspect of the situation, of course, is not to be ignored. It is universally agreed that a married couple should live together. However, in Indian extended families, wives had had occasions to stay away from their husbands for several reasons. Our traditional culture even encouraged those long spells of separation in the interest of the whole family. When the first phase of modern urbanisation took men away from their

village homes to unknown cities and mining areas, no one apparently had stopped to think about its effects on family life. Men stayed away for years together. The ancestral home was taken care of during the day and lamps were lit in the evenings by women who generally relied on village folks for their safety and welfare. This position of family care-takers has given them importance but no authority. Even today male members of innumerable village families live and work in big cities which their womenfolk have never seen but would have loved to see. In this way women have been used as the stabiliser who would wait on the householder—even in absentia—by looking after the immobile, even though meagre, bits of property and taking care of his dependents and guests.

We often hear eulogies about this aspect of the role of women as the centre of the family and household. Hindu writers invoked the glory of Goddesses such as Lakshmi—the Goddess of wealth and grace, and Annapurna—the divine consort of Shiva, to whom the husband comes with a begging bowl. These writers challenge the new women's desire to take up other roles rather foolishly like children trying to exchange real gold coins for tinsel. Whether women in India were cast in the images of Goddesses or whether the images of the Goddesses were conceived as a result of habitual human use of womenfolk in India is a tricky question.

It is relevant to note, however, that by throwing up a set of married Goddesses Hindu society has created an extra bit of psychological problem to women born to this tradition. New women have, after all, been exposed to the teachings of their mothers and foremothers who had deeply internalised those traditional ideas and relationships. Hence new women in India suffer from a strong sense of guilt if they have to deviate from the traditional course to meet occupational requirements. In their bid to satisfy this inner urge of keeping up the image of "Devi" (Goddess) in tact and combine it with new, demanding human roles, married women often take too much upon themselves. Overstretching, of course, is not peculiar to India. For different reasons married women in western societies also undergo extra physical and mental strains. The report to the UN in 1968 indicated that working married women in both western and eastern Europe surveyed till that time have less

leisure time than any other group in society. This cannot be considered desirable.

It is true that many individual instances of mutual understanding and sharing of responsibilities between husband and wife can be cited. New men free from old styled male vanity-cum-sluggishness about children and household are seen to work with new women both indoors and out of doors, but social set up generally has not helped the emergence of such new men nor has it helped promoting new institutions to make individual lives bearable and daily drudgery less dreadful. The society still believes in age-old stratification, rigid division of labour and, in the scheme of things, women as a group remain more deprived among deprived classes and fondly pampered among the privileged.

I cannot help observing that to become a wife in a privileged home is still a middle-class maiden's dream. This fondly cherished hope cuts them off from stream of responsible women who want to take a new, objective look, and react with courage and independence of thinking. Only a few move steadily with their new roles and shape their lives accordingly. This latter group also have their dreams of romance. They are not all angry young women out to deny feminine qualities in them. On the contrary, they are aware that femininity is given premium not only within homes. The exchange value of sex in the commercial market has been greatly enhanced in recent decades. New avenues of work have opened up to women which indirectly involve "the sex-for-support-bargain". Occupations of this kind offer short-lived positions with tempting salaries to young women thereby creating an overall imbalance within more enduring social groups and institutions. These few want to live with this imbalance and face society as such. The new women thus do not reject obviously sex-linked roles. They are not ashamed of their sex but they are against letting others use it to their disadvantage. They have no longer any use for the ideal of all enduring "mother earth".

The vestige of old tradition, however, can still be traced in their way of thinking about their partners. Many new women, like old romantics, look for superior, senior men while choosing their husbands. They consider it a personal defeat if their husbands fail in their respective careers. On the other hand, their husbands' success does not satisfy their own need for

achievement. This is why traditionalists find new women highly ambitious. Their ambition is perhaps nothing but a drive for self-expression. They want to pursue their own inclination and interests. They are dissatisfied with the idea of predetermined role assignments and the social arrangement which makes home-making impossible for a whole-time professional worker, and a housewife a passive, dependent follower of the man in the house.

Admittedly there are social roles which are so prestigiously defined that society prefers to provide for the consorts along with the holder of that position. Such is the role of the Prince Consort of England when a queen is on the throne. The Prince cannot possibly think of earning his own livelihood any more than the queen can. These institutional decorative heads fitted perfectly well into the old society's role-structure. Common run of men and women are, however, not kings and queens. Societies provide for them in return of hard work they put in. If the society dictates the type of work each individual was to perform the system becomes too restrictive. It had worked well with the old class-structure of India. There is little relevance for these dictates in modern, urban life. But the old social ideas are still pressing women in India rather hard and the ideals are creating ambivalence even in the minds of women.

Unmarried women have always had their own set of problems many of which are yet to be solved. If women's place is at home, the question "which home" cannot be avoided. Previously early marriage offered a solution of some kind. Early marriage is now a thing of the past in so far as middleclass people are concerned. Yet women are expected to treat their husbands' relations like their own people and look at the original family as "father's house". As long as they remain in that house they are, as it were, in transit, not yet in the families they are to serve. It creates a strange imbalance and uncertainty among unmarried women who are not even conscious about their plight. Excessive overt tension which often characterises feminine behaviour has its root in suppressed imbalance owing to the denial of a properly acknowledged social berth before marriage.

A considerable part of the stress which single women undergo originates in the employer's discrimination. Sometimes they have to barter marital status for job security. More often an individual employer considers the risk of women's leaving his firm

(or, institution as the case may be) on marriage too high to justify the investment in training and promoting them. The question of maternity-leave and associated benefits complicates the issue even more. In India where people are accustomed to think in terms of the needs of the extended family, single women has to face yet another challenge : would they support their parents' family like their brothers ? Many employers believe in the maxim :

“Employ a man and help a family.”

Apparently they believe that employing a woman would mean helping only one. It is clearly a figment of their own imagination. The real situation is quite different. Do we not come across instances of men neglecting their parents (and sometimes even their own) families to the point of starvation ? On the other hand, aren't there cases of single women supporting their siblings and helping them to come up in life ? Yet the general attitude to working women has not changed much over time. A man is still considered to be a potential help, a woman is not.

There is also a slight but persistent social stigma attached to parents having to depend on their daughter's earnings. It is not considered proper to try to live off single woman's income. First of all, there is the question of transitoriness. What will happen when she would marry and take her earning along with herself to her husband's home ? If this misgiving becomes too pronounced in the parents' behaviour she may find it nearly impossible to think of marriage. Would not that be improper ? On the other hand, if she never marries for reasons of her own should she not save for herself ? Who will, after all, look after her in her bad days ? As a matter of fact, single men are usually more of a burden in old age to any near relative's family than a single woman because women trained to make other people's home their own find it easier to accept and feel at home in new surroundings. Besides, they traditionally learn some work like cooking and attending to children to help any householder. However, facts matter little where old habits of thinking prevail. People habitually talk about the burden of supporting widows and spinsters.

It is often supposed that single women have a high need for

dominance. In the old, approved social order, women as women are not expected to play dominant roles. When wives dominate, it is usually supposed that they derive authority from their husbands. There is no such peg for the unmarried lot. If they are dominant in a particular situation, their dominance has no hidden or apparent male sanction. They are looked upon as wilful persons having no respect for any social code of conduct. Not that everyone around explicitly shows this unfavourable attitude but it often gets betrayed arousing undue anxiety among single women. Anxiety cuts down efficiency and ability to derive job satisfaction. It is no wonder that they are criticised for absent-mindedness.

Another major source of stress is the immediate family. Since arranged marriage is still in vogue in our country, single women remind parents of their failure to find suitable match for their daughters. The state of being unmarried is often looked upon as somewhat incomplete. How can women attain fulfilment, it is asked, without husband, homes and children? Some new women want to prove that they can only if everyone had agreed that loving does not necessarily involve marriage. Love and marriage are logically separable. A woman in love may not marry when it affects her career adversely. New men and women are prepared to accept such a situation. They are, however, in a minority.

The question of free love is yet a more or less tabooed topic in middle-class conversation in our country, but social acceptance of single women is more common today than ever before. A single woman moving around in man's world of work is not immediately a suspect. She has places to live in and people to visit. If she is a physicist or an explorer she can associate with the physicists and explorers irrespective of sex. Cases of single women adopting children can also be cited. This is, of course, a more or less typical upper class behaviour pattern. The foster mother goes through all the difficulties involved in homemaking and child-rearing without submitting to the will of any husband. Women who actually take up the challenge apparently enjoy it.

Would it be correct to assume that domineering women stay single? Perhaps not. There may be thousand and one reasons for staying single. Some may simply like to live differently. There is no reason why women should not be free to choose

between different styles of life. Such an inclination has no direct relation with the need for dominance.

On the other hand, one should not brush aside the question of dominance altogether. It would be thoughtless to believe that the question of relative dominance has no relevance under conditions of poverty. Any beggars' colony would offer evidence against such contention. Even among the beggars it is the men who dominate. Many women irrespective of their marital status resent male-dominance.

This is not to suggest that the challenge of new women and the problems faced by them are better understood in terms of dominance only. Nothing could be further from truth. All human beings, including new women, have a need to achieve as well as a need to affiliate which they keep on balancing.

Some people like to dominate. To them dominance is love. Some find submissiveness more satisfactory. Human society as a whole cannot possibly be reorganised in such a way as to suit varied attitudes to love and romance. These will have to be settled at the individual level. A great deal of psychological bargaining has always been and shall always be involved in it. There is no reason why society should dictate who among the two shall dominate, the husband or the wife? The brother or the sister? Society need not specify the sex of the dominant partner in romance. Individuals in each case shall be the best judge.

Society can, however, very well try to provide a base of fairness and justice for the development of balanced interpersonal relations. No matter how noble and pure love is, love cannot be a substitute for justice. By providing the new women with a rightful berth in Indian society a certain measure of justice can be assured.

Leena Nandi

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THE NEW WOMAN : PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

The concept of new woman, though a tantalising one, does not prove to be very appealing to me. Many a concept now-a-days goes as novel and new although they are pretty old in a historical and axiological background. The concept of woman's freedom in a patriarchal society has been undergoing a little change, no doubt, but when it is judged in the backdrop of a matriarchal society, the so-called change is turned into a 'naught'. Woman's freedom—what does it mean exactly? Is it freedom of sex, or of movement, or of spending one's fortune in the 'as you go like' fashion? The freedom of sex was denied to woman in a patriarchal society for very many reasons, the most potent of them being the question of succession to property. In a patriarchal society the 'he-man' earns and the woman balances his earnings and the domestic expenditure structure in the most frugal and economic manner.

An earning woman, a modern phenomenon, has been trying hard to extend the horizons of freedom of a woman in the most arduous way. The 'arduous' passes through the lanes and by-lanes of the under-world, mostly unnoticed by the guardians of sex-discipline in the society. In a patriarchal social set-up, the woman's lib. as you find it today, is conditioned by the men-folk. The extent of freedom to be enjoyed by the modern woman is to be wrested out of the hands of the menfolk. They gradually allow the woman's lib. to the boundaries of so-called decency and chastity as understood by men. We must remember that 'decency and chastity' for woman, as understood in a patriarchal society, are quite different from those in a matriarchal one. Having more than one man to live with at a time is not only a phenomenon of the Epic Age. It belongs to the Modern Age as well. The modern Draupadis of Nepal take to all the sons of a family as their husband at the same time. The polygamous woman, said to be the most challenging phenomenon of the modern world, is nothing new and novel to a student of history. Since times immemorial women had the liberty of sex and in

some parts of the world this liberal practice is continuing. So, on this score the new woman has been posing no new problem at all. Allow us to be a bit retrospective. Three thousand years have elapsed since the great Epic drama of Kurukshetra was enacted, but the Draupadi legend is not dead even today. In a matriarchal society the woman's freedom is proverbial. If we care to look at the social history of people inhabiting North-Western Nepal, it would be evident that for long there has been the polyandrous tradition as we find in the Mahabharata. Polyandry is a matter of social right there. The social sanction behind this polyandrous right of woman is so strong and stable that if a brother chooses to marry a second wife and live apart, he is constrained to forego his share of the family property or to pay compensation to his brothers living with the 'plural wife'. This social custom speaks of the inviolable sex rights of woman even in a society of today—comprising some twenty thousand people and living at heights between two thousand four hundred meters and four thousand and eight hundred meters in Mustang and Dolpa districts bordering Tibet.

The new woman, as supposed to be enjoying unfettered sex rights, and economic rights may be looked upon as posing no new problem. Their problems are as old as the Himalayas. It is presumed by the men-folk that woman's lib. begets social instability. That is true from their point of view. And that has been a truism all over the world and throughout the ages. It is thought that the economic freedom of woman has given us some social liberty. This needs our careful examination. An earning housewife has, it is presumed, a bigger say in family matters ; this presumption needs a thorough and careful analysis. Let us look back to the known chapters of our social history. In India, home was proverbially managed and governed by women irrespective of whether they had been earning or not. The woman's responsibility in framing the household budget and running the internal administration has been recognised all through. Her liberty in this sphere was hardly questioned. Capable women zamindars managing estates of their late lamented husbands are not few and far between in our history. In fact, in the agricultural society, that is predominantly India, women had not only indoor activities regarding household managements, but they shared the responsibilities of their hubbies working with plough

and heifer in the fields. They enjoyed active life out of doors and helped shaping the economic destiny of their children. This was the case and this is the case of the vast agricultural community living in India and elsewhere.

The middle-class woman, comprising a good population of the society has stepped out of her privacy and got into the fray of public competition for wage-earning. This indeed is a new phenomenon and the middle-class women have changed the social pattern of modern India. These jostling girls coming from the middle-class families and looking for jobs have affected the social structure enormously. Their enterprise, their frank and forward behaviour patterns entail free-mixing. That brings in its train so many problems. The patriarchs of modern society overlook the slips and accommodate them in the gestalt of a modern society which seems to be a permissive one. We do not consider the society to be 'permissive' in this regard as we think that the concessions given to the working girls or to the girls hunting for jobs are only marginal. Psychologically speaking, these so-called 'concessions' as attributed to a modern girl of this sort are not even liked and enjoyed by them. The puritanism in Indian womanhood is proverbial and this seems to be a universal phenomenon excepting in certain abnormal cases. Most women, modern, mediaeval or ancient, as the case may be, look for a comfortable home, a living, devoted husband and a few children tottering around the little snug nest that she builds for herself. A promiscuous woman is an aberration. Woman's lib. does not connote it. It means a little freedom for her to exhibit herself. She wants to be recognised as a full-being, intellectually, emotionally and culturally. If there is any challenge from the modern woman, from the woman of today, it is this, challenge for recognition. If the 'wife' is cognised as 'the wife' certainly there is no problem from the man's fair partner. If she is relegated to the status of a second-class citizen in the household, she revolts, she cries for legal separation and for a divorce. She asserts herself not for money, nor for fashionable living. Her challenge to the modern society has been that of her unique status in the household and her social status as a working partner in the social milieu. Where she works and when she works she works independently of her husband and she looks for the recognition of her status, as such, in her sphere of work in a bigger social

context. The middle-class woman must be given all the liberties that are involved in the concept of a working woman. She might be friendly with her male colleagues, at times she may be late in coming back to her home, but that should not interfere with her status of a housewife or of a mother at home. The menfolk must cognise this rising phenomenon and must learn to adjust themselves to this new dimension of female personality. Old taboos and the age-worn ideas of caged women should be abandoned. Women have been all the same throughout the ages and only the circumstances they have been living in have changed. The so-called new-woman is not a bit different from her old granny. Like her grandma, she pines for a decent hubby and some loving children. All the difference that is there between her and her older counterpart is that the granny could give undivided attention to the family whereas the modern woman has her attention divided between the home and the place of work, along with a different world attached to it. This new allegiance of the modern woman might have changed her outlook a bit, but essentially she is that chip of the old block looking for a loving husband and the safer home. That brings in all the hulla-bulla about legal separations and divorces. A better mate, a cosier home are all that they look for. So the problems surrounding a modern woman involve a feminine instinct universal and fundamentally inviolable.

The Indian women have some universal characteristics. In this context, we may be remembering here one Mrs. Scott as described by Tagore refusing her husband's hat to be used for planchet business. Love for Mr. Scott and her anxiety for his well-being are phenomena which would be gladly shared by all wives all over the world. These challenges involving womanhood, both modern and ancient, are there and they are perennial challenges to women all over the world and they will have to face them. The phenomenon of changing husbands in the mid-stream is not that important perhaps as they merely indicate the woman's perennial desire for better husband and a cosier home. If the society fails to cognise this divine hunger of womanhood it will have to pay dearly for it. There will be social instability and the new generation will be left on a waste land to cultivate the crops to be reaped by future generations of men and women.

Kalyani Karleker

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SEX-SOCIO-ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENTS

Does one have to ponder over the subjection of women in this avowedly unisex age? Or does the new wave stop at the pants, jeans, bottoms and tops and the long/short hair? The report of the Committee on the Status of Women (1975) exposes the skin-depth of this equality with pages of comparative statistics. It reveals the near-slavery of women in domestic and contract service and finds that, in case of organized labour where legal protection is available, employers are shy of engaging women because benefits of maternity leave and creches make them more expensive while their output of work is allegedly lower. Further, it is not possible to have them in night shifts.

This report finds that while cohorts of feminine job-seekers have increased in number over the last few decades, the proportion of employment of women has actually decreased. Career women at the upper levels are also discriminated against. Places at the top being extremely limited, men, who fight amongst themselves for these, gang up against women as the common sex enemy. Hence, women have a much harder time climbing the same set of stairs often to find the front seats already crowded by junior men. Women who remain slaves of tradition willingly accept handicaps of dishwashing, child-rearing and other household chores while doing equal work for equal pay with men. They often suffer wrongs in silence for fear of social obloquy. Dowry, driven underground by legislation, continues to thrive as there is none to protest against it and equal right to ancestral property is written off by devious means. One must, however, admit the existence of the other side of the medal, where, as real as tortured wives are wantons playing with the lives of their husbands, children and dependents, or feminine masochists who wallow in their grievances to get the upper hand. Then again, as true as white slavery, is the deliberate use of leather currency to achieve objectives. These cases may be few and far between,

but the tendencies are definitely not on the downgrade. The writing on the wall on this subject is that devious ways are adopted if and when straight routes are closed.

The history of the emancipation of women reveals that it was men who had started the first movements and continued to move till women could find their legs.

The first benefactors of women were kindhearted men such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar who had stepped forward to relieve the extreme cruelty of the suttee or the tortures of widowhood.

There was again the desire to grant full human dignity to women. Dwarakanath Ganguly whose protege became wife Kadambini Ganguly was one of the first graduates and lady doctors of India. Such examples had enabled Swami Vivekananda to say before a women's gathering in Chicago in 1900 that Calcutta University had opened its portals to women when the gates of Yale and Harvard, Oxford and Cambridge were still closed to them. Some had wanted accomplished wives as congenial companions and decorative embellishments in their houses. The poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt is said to have rejected the idea of marrying a Hindu girl because he could not think of being wedded to a bundle of rags. Later, a leading social reformer, Gurucharan Mahalanobis and some of his friends used to have their wives dressed in European clothes and sent them driving and walking round Calcutta Maidan. In those days women who passed the University Entrance examination were honoured by the Governors of provinces and a woman doctor or lawyer was an object of awe. Changes in sex-socio-economic relations had, however, started and, what were in the beginning, a few deliberate liberating advances, became a forcing drive on account of the economic stresses and the depression in early and mid-twentieth century.

Women had to come out to work because many men were unemployed. Their numbers increased with the deepening of the depression.

Political movements in the country also saw women fighting side by side with men. No lib, no processions or placards, only a silent taking up of equal share of the burdens and the braveries, a series of almost subconscious changes in the relationship.

The demand for equality is a product of this irrevocable

evolution and calls for adjustments on the part of both sexes both in family life and outside work.

The happy family in this context would be one with few children, one or two at the most, with man and wife working and sharing household chores. The question who should look after the children during working hours has not yet been clearly sorted out and remains a burning problem with all classes in the community. Creches, balwadis and day care centres are still too few and mostly too expensive for average income groups.

Adjustments in the relationship of men and women as co-workers have been surveyed in newspaper and magazine articles over the last two years. One found that some women preferred to work under male bosses who, they felt, were sympathetic to the employees and confident in handling office administration. Others, on the other hand, did not find men to be superior in any way and expressed admiration of women administrators. None found any difficulty in working with male colleagues who were helpful and accommodating. The one difficulty most women pointed out was in tackling the overcrowded public transport system in the peak hours.

Mothers-in-law generally welcomed earning daughters-in-law though police women, who had to keep odd hours, seemed to be an exception. Doctors were not subject to this prejudice, but nurses were. Women lawyers were happily competitive, but none would help a man with a case to divorce his wife.

Coming to the question of divorce, one may refer to a survey in the International Women's Year which found that, contrary to the general belief, economically independent earning women were not keen on it. Many even suffered all kinds of torture and indignity in unsuitable marriages in fear of social obloquy and of breaking up their homes, specially, if there were children. Another survey saw that working girls and career women were amongst the least interested in divorce. One of the reasons was unwillingness to disturb the established order at home which would interfere with the even tenor of their jobs. There was a broadminded tolerance of male escapades mainly because they had no time to bother about these things, but also because some of them had their own friends and company outside the orbit of the household. Extra-marital relations, though more common with men, were not altogether absent.

The conditions of the working classes living in urban slums reflect the coming forward of women up to a new relationship. As unemployment amongst unskilled rural labour drives many of them to cities to face further unemployment, their women become steady breadwinners by charring in the houses of the middle classes. In some cases, men remain in the villages while women come to towns chaperoned by elder female relatives to work to fill the gaps in the family budgets. The realization of the fact that the women have become the steady earners is emerging very—almost too—slowly.

Strangely as it would seem, this is tying the women down further instead of liberating them. Unlike their upper class sisters, women at this level are taking more and more responsibilities both at home and outside while men are degenerating into idlers. The only city work most of these men can do is of unskilled labour on construction sites, festival pandals or working as helpers to cooks and master builders. Seasonal at the best, much of these types of work is becoming outmoded. Such denigration of male status is eating into their morale and, while some accept this paralytical role with lethargy instead of helping in the house with the children, others come down with real or pretended illnesses. Some make a business of marriage—leaving a “wife” after cluttering her up with a brood to go to a distant part of the city and live with a more comely and unencumbered breadwinner.

Most of these women do not have any knowledge of law and would not even want to sue their “husbands” because they mostly feel relieved by the departure of the bothersome male and want to remake their own lives. Cases where mothers run away leaving children with father or elders are few, but not unknown.

In this background one should stop and rethink on the demands put forth on behalf of women in the International Women's Year on the ground of equality. One must claim equal terms of service and opportunities of promotion, but one must also consider the wishes of many women who do not want to work outside, but stay at home to look after it and the children. One should, therefore establish certain priorities.

Many women are being forced by a peculiar kind of economic natural selection to replace men as breadwinners in

families. This biologically unnatural development is depriving them of the peace and quiet required for childbearing and rearing. Given a choice, most of these women would demand more jobs for their menfolk instead of searching for work for themselves. The very real problem of unemployment in this country must not be solved in a way which forces men out and women in, putting the whole socio-economic structure out of balance.

Feminists of both sexes would probably take umbrage at this "anti-progressive" attitude, but the future of civilization with economic equality of the sexes must run on the well oiled wheels of wide-spread networks of creches, nurseries, day and night childcare centres, and community laundries and kitchens.

When women are working, the liabilities of maternity and other related benefits must be shared by the employers of both husband and wife : in cases where the man is unemployed, the state should contribute his share. No law may consider or cancel child birth benefits as special privileges of women. A mass exodus of women out of families would, otherwise, create tensions leading to increased numbers of mental cases.

Admitting the process of equalization to have started and progressing inexorably, and accepting the equality of women in all respects excepting the biological function of childbearing and the accessories thereof, one should work in a planned way towards a unisex work-a-day world.

The first requisite for such a community would be institutions for taking the bother off home life as mentioned above. These would not only liberate women in the true sense of the word, but create employment. Men will then rush for posts of cooks, cleaners, launderers and tailors for doing such work institutionally as they have shunned domestically.

The socio-economic roles of the sexes would be almost totally transposed.

Sipra Mookerjee

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**THE CRY OF LIBERATION—
IS IT VIABLE ?**

Of late a strong tendency is growing among a section of Indian Women to blast the age-old ideals of Indian womanhood and introduce western ideals. These ultras feel that back-dated and hackneyed ideals of womanhood are solely responsible for the present degraded condition of our women.

Time was when men and women freely mixed with each other in Indian Society, when celebrated ladies solved mathematical and philosophical problems and displayed keenest interest in Arts and Sciences generally; when Hindu ladies entered into interesting conversation with their husbands on religious and moral questions, and when ladies not only received high education but even came forward to select their own husbands.

In the Rig-Veda, believed to be the most ancient scripture, we read about many women sages who were seers of truth and teachers of the highest wisdom. The 126th hymn of the first book of the Rig-Veda was revealed by a woman Romasha by name. The 179th hymn of the same book was revealed by another woman named Lopamudra. Many more names of such women seers could be added. Not only were they great scholars and philosophers discussing the complicated metaphysical questions, but they also lived as they preached and became source of inspirations to others. The story of Gargi and Maitreyi, two women seers, is too well-known. Instances of women acting as umpires arbitrating philosophical debates can be multiplied. In later years and also in our time we have seen many who have made distinct contribution towards the enrichment of our society and culture. It can be said without any fear of contradiction that many among them grew up under traditional Hindu Society.

It is true that our women in general have fallen into a low state so much so that it is almost impossible to identify in the

modern Indian women the noble soul of the ancient counterparts. But this has happened not in the case of our women alone. Demoralization has been widespread and men have become the worst victims of degeneration which, for obvious reasons, has affected our women also.

There is no denying the fact that our women have suffered a lot and are even now being ill-treated and neglected. But it is not women who alone suffer from social injustice and oppression. Those who blame our age-old ideals for the present maladies and agitate for the total rejection of ancient ideals forget that life is not all words. Conditions of life and spheres of activity are largely determined by physical and mental make-up. These are further tailored by social and cultural traditions. Social ideals cannot continue to live through the ages unless a particular society finds them useful and workable. Utopian ideals live in the world of thought alone but the ideals of Indian womanhood have been tasted through the ages and that these live even today to influence our social life to go to prove their general utility and acceptance. Why and how? Let us see.

In India, as everywhere, man and woman are the obverse and reverse of the same coin. As to the question whether men are morally superior to women or women morally superior to men, much may be said on both accounts. Man is strength, woman is beauty. In all that is manly and vigorous man excels, but in all that is soft and tender woman must surpass man. He represents reason and force and she stands for wisdom and moderation. It is in the union of these qualities and appreciation of mutual qualities true happiness in life is to be found. Perhaps it will not be an exaggeration to say that hand that rocks the cradle rules the world. From infancy to mature age, the influence of mother, sister, wife and female society generally has always continued to be felt and valued. By their soft and tender care and sweet temper women exercise an irresistible charm over man.

It is on this account that women have been allotted as high a place as men in our society. Let us quote here a few relevant passages from some of our most ancient writings in support of what has been stated above :

“Before the creation of this phenomenal universe, the first born Lord of all creatures divided his own self into

two halves, so that one half should be male and the other half female."

"The wife and husband, being equal halves of one substance, are equal in every respect. Therefore, both should join and take equal parts in all works, religious and secular."

"Women must be honoured and adorned by their fathers, husbands, brothers, and brother-in-law who desire their own welfare."

"Where women are honoured there the gods are pleased. But where they are treated otherwise no sacred rite yields rewards."

"The tears of a woman call down the fire of heaven on those who make them flow."

The above passages clearly demonstrate that the concept of equality of sexes is not alien to us. Since man and woman are equal in the eyes of God it is but natural that both should have equal rights and privileges. The history of our ancient civilization proves that our women enjoyed freedom of thought and speech and the same opportunities for education and spiritual practice.

Our scriptures especially enjoin that in religious affairs, no ritual, ceremony or sacrifice would be regarded as complete without the cooperation of women. The Sanskrit word "Sahadharmini", meaning a "spiritual helpmate", establishes this idea.

Again following definition of a wife has been given in an ancient Sanskrit book :

"A wife is half the man, his best friend ;
A perpetual spring of virtue, pleasure, wealth ;
His best aid in seeking heavenly bliss ;
A companion in solitude and a father in advice ;
A mother in all seasons of distress and
A rest in passing through life's wilderness".

What a lofty conception of wifehood !

In matters secular also, women enjoyed with men same opportunities and privileges. We may quote instances of women holding high political positions, governing states, enacting legislations, administering justice and leading army.

Next comes the question of marriage. Love marriage or marriage by courtship is neither unknown nor uncommon to us.

None would deny that with the passage of time some undesirable social customs and usages crept in and caused immense sufferings to our women. Even now some barbaric customs are prevalent and we must wipe them out with firm determination. The necessity for reforms cannot be questioned but at the same time our zeal for reforms should not make us blind and fanatic. It will be a grave blunder if we allow ourselves to be carried away by the glammers of western way of life.

The status of women and the relation between man and woman throughout the ages has always been an interesting subject for social thinkers and reformers. There is no denying the fact that with the march of time man-woman relationship has become a source of mutual delight divorced from the biological purpose. While there is hardly any change in biological relations for obvious reasons, there have been vast and remarkable changes in the social relations of man and woman. They have not been uniform in all countries nor have they been similar in the same country. But facts remain that changes have taken place. Whether always for good or bad is of course a debatable issue.

In our country leaders of feminist movement are making great efforts to make our women perfectly equal to men in all respects. Their slogans, borrowed from their western counterparts, make one feel as if the very existence of women is threatened. Women, if necessary, must take up arms against men if they want to avoid total extinction. A cold war is going on and a show-down, they feel, may be necessary to ensure justice.

These moderns, in their zeal for establishing so-called equality, forget that a civilized and organised society cannot allow unlimited liberty of thought and action both for men and women. Both men and women must subordinate their wishes, desires and whims to the larger interest of society. For their mutual welfare men and women must agree to the division of labour suited to the society they live in. The western type of rights and privileges, if introduced without considering our traditions, customs and way of life, will cause more harm than good.

Men have done grave injustice to women in India. Who can deny this fact? But eye for an eye and tooth for a tooth attitude cannot undo the wrong done in the past. Especially when we

are to live in the same society and must work unitedly for mutual progress, such attitude of reprisal can never do any good to either of the parties involved.

The feminists must not forget that history of human society offers innumerable instances of man's sacrifice for woman's sake. Wars have been waged, kingdoms lost, life given away to protect woman, to save her honour and to make her happy. Similarly, in the real drama of life women have been playing the noble role of mother, sister, wife and daughter.

It is true that women in India have been neglected and deprived of legitimate claims in various fields of life. But that should not make us blind to our own failure. We have also often failed to play our dignified part and cases are not rare when women act as sworn enemy of women in our country. It is perhaps too much to blame men for all our indignities and sufferings. Women must first learn to honour women and once this lesson is learnt, men will be compelled to hold us in high esteem. Much of our present maladies and sorrows will be over.

Liberators of women—for God's sake do not embitter relations and create isolation by demanding perfect equality with men. Can we conceive of a society without revered father, affectionate brother, loving husband and beloved son? How can we think of equal rights with father, brother and son without jeopardising harmonious social relations? In the larger interest of society we must surrender some rights. Unregulated liberty cannot ensure social peace. Liberty to share bed, addiction to drugs and alcohol do not mean emancipation. Unisex look does not mean unity of souls and enjoyment of equal rights.

Liberty by itself has no meaning unless it aims at ameliorating the socio-economic conditions of life. The western concept of liberty and equality is not suited to our traditions and social ideas. It cannot ensure healthier and happier social life. In the West women have greatly liberated themselves by breaking the sanctity and peace of family life. Is it liberation or annihilation? Will the champions of Women's Lib answer?

Prof. (Miss) Aleyamma George

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STATUS OF WOMEN AND EDUCATION

Introduction

Women who constitute about half of the world's population have been demanding for equal wages, equal opportunities and equal status with men. The declaration of the International Women's Year 1975 was the culmination of their long drawn out struggle for achieving this. The year has passed ostentatiously with seminars and workshops, meetings, national and international conferences etc., organised by governmental and non-governmental institutions on a world-wide basis. No doubt, these activities have aroused world-wide interest in the problems and rights of women of all countries and have provided an opportunity to correct the prevailing imbalances in social structure. National governments have started enacting legislation aimed at remedying the situation to some extent. But the problems related to the improvement of women's status facing the developed and developing nations would be different.

The term 'status' signifies the sum total of the various culturally ascribed roles one has to play and the rights and duties inherent in a social position. Besides the ascribed status, there is also the 'achieved' status which results from one's efforts and personal achievements. The concept of status is used to indicate the ordering of individuals in terms of attributes such as, level of education, occupation, income, perception of one's status within the home and in the community, decision-making role, number of restrictions imposed on one's activities, freedom and so on. Considering 'status' in the light of these attributes, it is to be noted that the level of status of women varies from country to country, the widest difference in levels being between women in developed and developing countries. The level of status of women is low in developed countries and pitifully low in less developed countries. Even within a country the level of status of women differs from rural to urban areas.

When we turn the pages of history of nations we are confronted with the fact that in various stages of development of nations, women did assert their rights and played important roles to influence the society to better their status. Yet, the fact remains that even today women's basic rights are overlooked throughout the world. Even in developed nations, we come across cases of discrimination in wages for equal work, bias against appointment of women in senior executive positions and so on. In developing nations we witness the purdah, women are denied opportunities, they are treated as second grade citizens not worthy of acquiring education and knowledge, they are kept dependent and the woman is not allowed to take decisions either for herself or for the family. Times are changing and there is growing awareness that maximum participation of women and their total involvement in the development process of different nations would be essential.

The status of Indian women has never been at a par with that of women in developed countries. Low standard of living, low level of literacy, economic dependence, ignorance of their fundamental rights, low inter-spouse communication and stronghold of tradition are some of the factors which stand in the way of improving the status of Indian women. Of these factors, literacy and level of education play an important role.

India is the seventh largest country in the world and its population at the 1971 Census was 547.9 million of which 264.0 million were females. The population recorded a growth rate of 21.9. The estimated population in 1972 was 558.6 million including 269.1 million females. Of this 558.6 million, 75 million belonged to age group 6-11 years, 40 million to age group 11-14 years and 36 million to age group 14-17 years. It is estimated that on 1st January 1976 India's population crossed the 660 million mark and if the current growth rate continues unchecked, India will have 1 billion persons at the turn of the century.

Progress of literacy

The nation's primary concern is to provide universal, compulsory and free primary education to its millions of boys and girls. This important goal could be achieved only through progressive increase in enrolment. The progress in achieving this

aim is seen to be retarded or slow on account of the rapid increase of the population. The size of the population and its growth rate affect the developments in educational measures and vice-versa.

In examining the progress of female literacy in India, (see Table 1), we see that the progress achieved during the 70-year period from 1901 to 1971 has been only meagre. When the percentage of literate females to total female population in 1901 was 0.69, the percentage increased only to 18.72 in 1971. At the time of the 1951 Census, i.e., immediately after achieving independence there were 92 percent illiterate females in India. It is true that it is not an easy task for a nation which has emerged from the clutches of foreign rule to eradicate illiteracy of the teeming millions completely within a short period but it should be noted that the progress we have made in this direction during this 20-year period is only about 10 per cent increase. A comparison with male literacy shows that when the percentage of literate males was 9.83 in 1901, the percentage rose to 39.45 in 1971 which is more than double the percentage for women for the same year.

TABLE 1. PROGRESS OF LITERACY, INDIA, 1901-1971

Census Year	Percentage of literate population to total population	Percentage of literate males to total male population	Percentage of literate females to total female population
1901*	5.35	9.83	0.69
1911*	5.92	10.56	1.05
1921*	7.16	12.21	1.81
1931*	9.50	15.59	2.93
1951 **	16.67	24.59	7.93
1961	24.02	34.44	12.95
1971	29.46	39.45	18.72

* For undivided India.

** Excluding Jammu and Kashmir.

Source : Pocket Book of Population Statistics, Census Centenary 1972, Office of the Registrar-General, India.

School education

From table 2, it may be seen that there were 61.4 million pupils including 23.2 million girls in primary schools in India during 1972. Teachers in primary schools numbered 1.1 million giving a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:56. Of the 40 million pupils in the age group 11-14 years, 14.1 million were in middle schools which had 0.67 million teachers giving a teacher-pupil ratio of 1:21. In the High/Higher Secondary Schools the number of pupils were 7.1 million and the number of teachers were 0.62 million. For the whole of India, there were 83.0 million pupils in schools of which 36 per cent constituted girls and there were 23.9 million teachers in 1972. In other words, when 69.06 schools, the percentage of girls in the same age group, attending schools was only 40.20. That is, for every 17 boys there were only 10 girls attending schools in 1972.

TABLE 2. ENROLMENT IN SCHOOLS, INDIA, 1972

Class	Girls	Total
Pre-primary	204,432	431,047
I to V	23,229,845	61,426,032
VI to VIII	4,292,023	14,077,223
IX and above	1,899,607	7,082,886

Source : Educational Statistics at a glance. Government of India, Ministry of Education, New Delhi, 1972.

Throughout India the literacy rate is higher in urban areas than in rural areas and the difference between urban and rural literacy is nearly 29 per cent. The growth of literacy in rural areas is very slow which is lower still in the case of females.

Considering the stages of school education as primary, middle and high/higher secondary, the unit costs are higher for the last two levels of education than for the first. The educational budget of the country has increased more than three-fold during the period 1960-61 to 1972-73. The expenditure per pupil though shows an absolute increase recently, it represents no real gain due to increase in prices that has taken place. Even keeping the present

teacher-pupil ratio constant, the anticipated expenditure in appointing teachers required for all the children in the age group 6-17 years assuming that all of them would be attending school, and for equipments, furniture and buildings would be enormous. Those children who are to join the primary classes during the next five or six years are already born, and those for whom middle and secondary education are to be provided during the next ten years or so are already in primary schools now. This suggests that an immediate decline in fertility would not bring about a reduction in the number of school-going children for the next sixteen or seventeen years.

Higher education

In recent decades the number of females in India going in for higher education including technical and professional courses has been steadily increasing.

TABLE 3. UNIVERSITY ENROLMENT, INDIA, 1972

Type of education		Girls	Total	Percentage of girls
General education	..	660,871	2,530,094	26
Professional education				
(total)	61,046	633,479	10
Engineering, technology etc.		830	84,294	1
Medicine	18,283	87,620	21
Teacher training	21,211	55,710	38
Commerce	20,372	403,843	5

Source : Educational Statistics at a glance, 1972.

The percentage of females to total students studying in general education courses in India which was 11 in 1947-48, increased to 26 in 1971-72. The corresponding increase in the percentage of females studying for professional and technical education is from 5 in 1947-48 to 10 in 1971-72. When the number of female students for general education increased by 28 times from 1947 to 1972, the corresponding increase for professional

education was only 23. During 1971-72, the maximum percentage of girl students for professional education was for Teachers' Training course which constituted 38.07 per cent of the total student population for this course. (See table 3) For medicine, females constituted 20.87 per cent.

These facts reveal that there has been progress in female literacy and education in India, but at the same time the progress has been slow.

Conclusion

Theoretically and legally, women are recognised as the social equal to men. It is about 28 years since we achieved independence and yet the Indian women, especially the rural women have not freed themselves from the dominance of men. They are still in the grip of traditional roles assigned to them i.e., domestic duties including child-bearing and rearing. In order to free them from this situation, the women should understand their rights, should become economically independent and should improve their standard of living. The pre-requisite to achieve these is education. Various studies conducted in India reveal that the social status of women is significantly related to their aspirations, opportunities for education and employment and improvement of their standard of living. Education affects employment opportunities and the decision-making role is influenced by the education and employment of wife. These are the factors which are most often related to the status of women. It is of no doubt that the cultural progress of a country can be judged by the status accorded to women in society. And since status is related to the educational level, occupation, income etc., women should have the same opportunities as men for their education which alone will equip them to occupy positions of responsibility in social and public life. For developing countries like India where about 80 percent of the population live in rural areas, the strategy for bringing about a social transformation in this respect should be a large scale programme for improving literacy rate. Education and knowledge will give women the power to reason and will in turn help them much in their fight against social injustice. Also, this will accelerate social transformation.

Taking into account the large number of children involved,

the task of providing them education will be immense ; but any slackening of effort will only imperil both the present and the future, for there is mounting evidence to show that female education is a great moderator of fertility. Education of women may not influence fertility directly. But in combination with other factors such as occupation, income, social position etc., it acts as a most favourable and satisfactory inhibitor in bringing down fertility. Education influences women to raise their marriage age, provides them with opportunities for employment, and employment leads them to delay or postpone marriage. Many studies reveal that fertility will be higher for illiterate women and it decreases with increase in the level of education. The experience of Kerala State is that in the southern districts of the State where female literacy rate is higher, the birth rate is lower. On the other hand, the Malabar district area with a lower female literacy rate has a comparatively higher birth rate. This beneficial effect of education on fertility reduction is one of the factors for the justification of our increased efforts for the promotion of education. It is gratifying to note that India's new population policy envisages special measures to raise the educational levels of women. The age of marriage has also been raised to 18 for girls and 21 for boys. These measures will pave the way to some extent for raising the status of women in India.

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Gita Mukharji

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STATUS OF WOMEN AND EDUCATION

The status of women in any country depends upon their ability to earn the status. The first condition of acquiring this ability is attainment of a clear conception of the term "status". Adequate education and knowledge can only hold strong conception. Education not only awakens urge for a prestigious position, whether in home or society as a whole, but also supplies strength to retain that position against many hazards of life. Otherwise, even if status is conferred upon them, they will not take time to lose it, without realising what they are losing. Unfortunately this ill-luck has befallen the Indian women.

The Constitution of India and the legal codes bestowed upon women the privilege of equal rights with men, the same facilities of education, the same opportunities of profession and employment. But the bulk of Indian women are deprived of this boon of raised status, mainly because majority of them are devoid of education, even of the elements of literacy.

Perhaps such lack of education has its impact upon the whole social structure, including the educated also, and that is why we see around us more cases of suicides among women than among men, torture of the in-laws upon the daughter-in-law, lower facilities for girls or women within the household, inequality of wages between female and male labour, the burden of the domestic work resting upon women, unshared by male members, even when they are working outside all day long and so on. Does it not show that expansion of education is not proportionately reflected upon the status of women?

If we carefully study the rates and ratios of education among women, we shall also note a high degree of disparity there in stages and standards. Women's education in India may be said to have four aspects.

A. A tremendous increase in the number of enrolment of

girls at different stages as well as in their proportion of boys. By 1973-74, the figure stood at 24.4 million (62 per 100 boys) at the primary stages over 4.5 million (43 per hundred) at the middle level; over 2.3 million (36 per hundred) at the secondary stage and 0.9 million (31 per hundred) in colleges and universities.

B. At the same time, the quinquennial growth rate in enrolment of girls declined at the primary stage from 56.1% in 1961-66 to 30.7% in 1966-71 at the secondary stage, the decline was from 70.6% to 30.5%. At the university stage, however, the decline was relatively less, from 109.4% to 78.4%. In professional and special schools, the decline was from 74.6% to 34.6%. This is a matter of deep concern.

C. Side by side, the vast majority of Indian women have remained outside the reach of all education and are illiterate. While the female literacy rate has increased from 0.69% in 1901 to 18.4% in 1970-71, the number of illiterate women has also increased from 141.9 million in 1950-51 to 215.3 million in 1970-71.

D. Not only that, the national loss incurred through drop-outs and wastage is to be seriously considered. Of every 100 girls enrolled in Class I, only 30 reach Class V. There is a steep fall from 64% to 22% in the V-VIII group. At the secondary stage, the proportion of girls enrolled drops to only 12%. Besides, secondary education is largely confined to the upper and middle classes in urban areas. In professional education, women have good enrolments in teaching, medicine and fine arts but poor in commerce, law, agriculture and engineering. Higher education is more confined to women of the urban middle and upper classes.

This uneven distribution of education among women has resulted in a diverse approach of the society towards women and their relation to education. Some are adverse to it, some are indifferent, some support a minimum standard, say upto primary or middle school level, but some hold the most liberal views. Again, education can eliminate the effects of socio-economic imbalances but at the same time can introduce an inequality between the educated and uneducated. Besides, there are variation in degrees of women's education, from urban to rural, from State to State, from region to region. Thus a general estimate

of the status of women in relation to education is neither possible nor justified.

Moreover the impact of education upon socio-economic position is also not even everywhere. The women belonging to house work or organised and unorganised labour, though earn bread for the family seldom enjoy a position of prestige in home. This may be attributed to lack of education. But what about the position of unemployed educated girls or employed educated daughters-in-law in unsympathetic environment or educated and earning unmarried girls who some times have to bear the responsibility of maintaining the family? They cannot be said to be enjoying the status they owe. This is chiefly due to the traditional attitude of the society towards women.

Even from the young age, girls are taught to serve the male members, maybe her youngest brother. The boys' demands are to be met first, the boys' facilities and comforts are to be looked after first, education is to be first imparted to the boys and to the girls afterwards. The chance of employment must first come to the boys, as a result of which their position rises up in the eyes of the family. In educated families, where girls and boys, husband and wife both work outside and for almost the same hours, while the male ones relax and take rest after returning home, the female ones are expected to arrange for refreshment, to look after the children, to attend to urgent domestic duties, and what not, without any respite.

In the less educated or uneducated families belonging to the lowest income group, girls, even if enrolled in primary or pre-primary schools, are taken out before completion of the term to help in domestic work, or in the family trade or to earn for the family. On the contrary, a few groups of richer section of people, still oppose women's education because of traditional conservative reasons. Education is most widely accepted among the middle class because of their liberal and rational outlook and because it is considered as an accomplishment and a symbol of modernisation. The lower income group is being gradually found to be eager to go for girls' education, mainly because of economic reason and also for social demands like greater suitability for marriage, greater scope for mixing with the upper classes etc.

But these ideas often tell upon the socio-economic balance

from the opposite direction. In the marriage market, more qualified bridegrooms are naturally sought for educated girls, this on the one hand, means for heavier dowry, resulting in the family's economic hardship and, on the other, non-availability of suitable bridegrooms till later age from which point other social evils may creep in. Mixing with upper strata of society, often put girls of the lower sections running after costlier mode of living, which might create financial problems for the family. For such obvious reasons, parents in many cases have to withdraw their girls from schools after the primary stage.

The conclusion may be derived from all these reasonings that although education is regarded both as an end in itself and as a means of realising other desirable ends, education has always been emphasised as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in society. In reality, specially in a country like India, where social tradition has its root in the ancient past people's attitude, outlook and reaction to women's education and the social environment cannot be altered so easily. So long an overhauling of the social customs and refreshing of popular feelings to women's position in society be not possible, a total change in the status of women on a national basis, in all nooks and corners, in all sections of the people and regions of the country, cannot be expected to take place. Yet education is the finest weapon to pierce through, in the long run, the darkness of superstition, narrowness and wrong notions. Therefore, to gain the ultimate end, every effort to enhance women's education, must be geared up with all available resources and with the aid of most accurate planning. Women educated in the right way will contribute immensely to build up a strong nation by rearing up able and ideal citizens.

Dr. Nabaneeta Dev Sen

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ATTITUDE TOWARDS WOMEN WRITERS AND WOMAN'S SELF-IMAGE

Once upon a time, it was wonderful to be a woman writer in Bengal. Anything you wrote, found itself in print. Men who failed to see their own names in print, settled for a compromise—they saw their precious products in print under a more charming identity, that of a feminine pen-name. But these days life has changed so much, the paper-crisis has brought along a crisis in editorial chivalry as well.

The social psychology that gave the advantages to woman-writers, also created the shackles for them. Damsels should be distressed, and always in need of Knights. If all women took after Joan of Arc, life would become far less interesting for the male tribe. Men do not forgive self-sufficiency in women—whether she is a football player or a playwright. There is only one role fixed for the femalefolk—and that is to be tucked away in the warm corners of the male-heart and also in those of the male-dominated society. What need have we to exert our divine pens over mundane realities beyond shopping lists and love-letters? The words of womenfolk should also rest undisturbed in the placid corners of their tender hearts. In case you insist on jerking them out and presenting them in public, dress up your words in velvet and perfumes, make them socially presentable. Your words should be safe and soft, sweet and scented like rose-petals. They should be light and refreshing like a transparent sweet water spring.

A woman's writing better be decent and docile reflection of a sweet young thing. Do not dress it up in arms and for heaven's sake do not let it ride the wild horse of truth, for such unpleasant jobs are better suited to tougher creatures like men. Come now, confess, isn't that a better arrangement?

When a woman writer writes seriously, her works come out

into the public eye like the daily drill of the prisoners in front of the jail warden. She is examined hard and close—from head to foot, under strict personal observation of the readers. In the case of woman writers, the readers are not contented with the literary work alone, they are thirsty for glimpses of her personal life. A craving for extra-literary information spoils the artistic appreciation of a woman writer's work—in our unfortunate social condition. The very same personal scandal that hits the jackpot for a male writer, or for the autobiography of a film actress—will destroy the readership market for a serious middle-class woman writer. Unfortunately in our country the woman writer's domestic role as a woman dominates her public role as a writer. A male writer has the license to overlook all his domestic and social duties—because he is a public personality, an 'artist', and artists, as everyone knows, are self-confessed untamed animals. They are irrelevant, irresponsible, incoherent and incorrigible. Having dedicated all reverence, responsibility and coherence to their creative efforts, they have nothing left for personal use.

But women, although they may try their hands every now and then in the arts, can never really become an 'artist'. (Here, the inevitable question is gently thrown in—Has the world produced any first rate woman painter, sculptor, musician, playwright etc., etc.? Why not? Because..!! Take it gracefully, woman, you are an inferior lot. God gave you one kind of creative power, but He gave man another kind of creative energy. Look at us! Do we try to produce babies? We do not. Why not? Because we happen to have reason and sense. We keep within our limits. Then, my dear woman, why do you try to write? Be sensible and relax! Well, if you insist. write about the mysterious world of women—the ever-untold story of being a woman! Tell us all about yourself. Come on—we are listening This is the attitude only recently expressed in a very famous Bengali weekly, *Desh*, by an equally famous Bengali novelist, writing under the name is Abhinanda only in November 1976 in a piece criticizing women writers for crossing their boundary stones.

Let us imagine that you are a woman writer in Calcutta, belonging to a traditional Indian family, and you have just written a slightly unconventional piece in a major literary magazine.

This is what your life will be like ; if young and unmarried, your father will call you to his room and solemnly inquire—"What is this nonsense I hear? What have you been scribbling? I say tear it up, right away. I do not wish to hear one more word about you from my colleagues again." Your mother will come to your bed side at night and sadly whisper—"Look now, my child, be sensible! Do you think any good family will have you, if you publish such rotten stuff?" Your brother will come home screaming—"Ma! Will you please stop your darling daughter from carrying on this lousy business? I can't look into the eyes of my friends!" And what your friends will say, you will not like me to repeat in public.

If you are married, your husband will return from the office looking grim and gloomy and after clearing his throat a few times—softly but audibly utter over a cold cup of untouched tea—"It has become rather embarrassing, you know. How about a little careful screening before you publish next?" Your determined children will file into your room and hand you a strict directive—"No more of such nuisance, ma! We don't want our friends teasing us about our mother." Obviously, nuisance can be committed by fathers only, it is their special privilege. Mothers, in Mother India, must be prim and proper. Fathers do not matter—they never embarrass their families whatever their varied activities might be—it is upto the mothers, of course, to keep their families clean and respectable in the eyes of the world.

To take examples from real life, I can only speak of Bengal, which I know best. In the 'thirties, in her novel '*Sheikh Andu*' Shailabala Ghosh described the love affair between a rich, young Hindu maiden and her Muslim chauffeur (youth being the only common bond!), thus crossing three social moral taboos at once, those of class, religion, and maidenhood and became the butt of severe social criticism. If the same novel came out of the pen of any man, instead of coming from a young upper-class Hindu widow, it would have been hailed as a pathbreaking work of revolutionary spirit, instead of being booed as an immoral anti-social document. When Radharani Debi's '*Lila-kamal*' came out, in the late twenties, a famous young progressive writer (an I. C. S. officer) at once criticised its lyrics in the following way :—"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. True art must come out of true experience, mere homegrown fantasy can have no emotional richness." Even Saratchandra Chatterjee, the great vocalizer of women's wants, made exactly the same criticism saying 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. But, strangely enough, male writers have, from time immemorial, addressed poems to non-existent, or unaware, or uninvolved lady-loves. No one questioned their artistic relevance. No one ever correlated the artistic success of the poems with the poets' success or failure in their private lives. But the scale of judgment used for women is a different one. Nirupama Debi, a great Bengali novelist of the twenties and thirties, a child widow, and a friend of Saratchandra, was so scared of even the most distant possibility of any social scandal, that she is said to have requested Saratchandra to stop writing novels about child-widows. Saratchandra could not keep her request but did promise not to paint any 'embarrassing' picture of child widows in his novels. Hence child widows never get remarried in his novels, although he was a great supporter of widow-remarriage. Here we have an example of a woman writer not only stifling her own pen, but also putting a powerful male pen under lock and key.

Pramatha Nath Chowdhury, the famous Bengali wit and literary critic, a son-in-law of the Tagore family, once remarked to the poet Radharani Debi in the late twenties that Indian women do not speak in their own tongues, their writings do not reveal an unmistakably feminine sensibility. They merely emulate men. And therefore their art can never reach true excellence. Taking it as a challenge, young Radharani Debi appeared on the Bengali literary scene under the new name of Aparajita Debi writing in a completely new style. Instead of the elevated poetic diction then used by both men and women she used straight forward, simple conversational language, the domestic diction used in the kitchen with the maid-servant, or the private language used between couples behind the drawn curtains of a bedroom. The unmis-

takably feminine tongue came into print. P. N. Chowdhury was charmed. So was the great poet Tagore. But they never knew who the real poet was. The social milieu being what it was, Radharani Debi, a child-widow, dared not reveal her true identity for fear of a social scandal. People thought it was a pen-name used by some man—for, how can any decent woman write such unabashedly 'feminine' lines? How can any gentle woman talk about the bedroom? It was not until she was remarried that Radharani dared to disclose her identity as Aparajita to the Bengali reading public. And so, it boils down to this: if women write like men, it is plain synthetic stuff. And if women write like women it is aggressive shamelessness. How the hell are women supposed to write then in this oft-renovated yet crumbling social milieu? The answer is: like the cherubs. Cherubs are sexlessly beautiful. Women writers should be as pure and innocent in their hearts and pens, as unearthly, and as sexless as the cherubs. Women too are heavenly creatures, this rough and ready world of writing does not suit them. Men can live as they like, they can write as they like. Moreover, they can write as they cannot live, but as they would like to live. If a docile husband delights in writing about extra-marital affairs, neither the wife nor the family minds. But if a wife does it? Oh no! You do not have to enter into juicy pornographic details at all, just an interesting mention of an extra-marital affair will do the trick. Your relatives will chuck casual remarks into the air, no, not at you, but after the style of Draupadi's Swayamvara, i.e. looking at the reflection of the fish in the water, and aiming at the fish above. Indirect aiming, but well practised. Will hit. Your friends' husbands and your husband's friends will have revived interest in life and living and take discreet aims at you, carefully watching their steps. (If it works fine! If it doesn't, it still won't harm anyone?) And as for your husband, he will suffer restless days, friendless evenings, and sleepless nights.

Among the younger Bengali women prose writers, Bani Roy is the only one who had once shown the guts to throw to the winds the unwritten moral codes imposed upon the woman writer for the sake of decorum. She broke all the taboos about sex, in words as well as in subject matter. Among the younger poets Kabita Sinha and Debarati Mitra are unconventional in

their choice of topics and words. They are free and uninhibited. As for myself, I am afraid, I am much too conventional a female, and for ever inhibited like everybody else. I cannot forget while writing that my face is remembered by those readers who know it—and this realisation inhibits my pen. Those of us who teach, have an extra set of moral guardians over and above our family, friends and relatives—viz. our students. How, when, and where can we open up our hearts? I have thought about it deeply and for a long time, and have come to this conclusion: The only way to be a woman and a writer in Bengali language is to become furiously abstract. All that Virginia Woolf wanted was a room of her own and a voice of her own. For this humble demand, some people have called her an obscure writer. In Bengali literature as well, to have a room of our own and a voice of our own, we can either write under male pseudonyms or write obscurely. What, for men, is called courage, for women, is known as bravado. The labels are changed instantly. What is sane and simple honesty for men becomes insane and raving obscenity for women, just as a man's tending his garden only in a pair of shorts on a hot July afternoon is healthy and natural, but imagine a woman's doing the very same thing? It is not quite the same. But a piece of written paper does not possess the difference? Then? What brings about the change in attitude? Where does the sexual barrier stand? I would say, in the eyes of the gazer. The reader's own mental barriers, i.e. our attitude towards women, make the difference. As soon as the name of the writer is registered in the reader's mind, the mist of age-old social conventions and moral prejudices also appear in the readers' memory. Therefore when a male-writer pitifully wallows in perverse sexual details, the hard-boiled reader does not bat an eyelid. But if a female writer describes a love affair with care and intensity—the readers discover a matchless example of the writer's personal sexuality in it. This is true of both male and female readership. The attitude towards women is the same in both cases, women are often harder task-masters, in fact.

A woman writer in India is a female first and foremost, and a writer accidentally and in spite of it. All women have a single true profession i.e. womanhood. Whatever their other interests might be, main job is to run the house, to keep the world

going. 'Woman writer'—the very term itself smells of raw amateurish efforts. But if we stop to think for a moment, only a few decades ago the prestige of literary monthlies in Bengal, i.e. *Bharati*, *Bharatbarsha*, *Bichitra*, *Prabasi* etc. depended heavily on the regular contribution of women writers—in the form of serialized novels. Yet, we cannot think of women as professional writers. Any type of serious intellectual activity in woman still remain within the general area of extra-curricular activities, no matter how serious and how successful you might be in it. The curriculum is, of course, house keeping!

The fact that women's professional life is not respected in this society is due not only to the fact that women do not always have equal opportunity, but mainly, I think, because we women do not respect ourselves. We do not take our professional work seriously enough. Everything else comes before writing—from walking the nephew to the Kindergarten, to selecting wedding gifts for a neighbour's daughter. We suffer from a hidden sense of guilt and are for ever ready to sacrifice writing to any damn domestic duty. If this is how we look upon ourselves, is it surprising that the world will also look upon us the same way? The act of writing is a forbidden pleasure for a woman of 'other' responsibilities—it has the pungent taste of clandestine love. To prove our basic loyalties to domesticity, therefore, we bend over backwards, over-correcting our inner neglects. But a man only has to *think* of himself as writer to get the overlasting social license freeing him from all domestic responsibilities. He does not have to get published, nor even to start writing, for that matter, to be regarded thus. Depending on what he chooses to call himself, he solemnly gives the relevant line to his family and friends and they unquestioningly accept his chosen role. We, the women, on the other hand, have accepted the line that has been handed to us by men, and instead of rejecting it we are struggling to keep it intact, while trying to steal small freedoms which we do not dare think we deserve. No wonder, society, too, does not think we deserve it. We have borrowed our image of ourselves from men. We do not respect our artistic selves and do not care for our talents or creative careers seriously. We do not really think we are artists first and women later. The sex role is so deeply indented within our hearts that we can hardly ever struggle free out of it. Of course, there are

exceptions and they only prove the rule.

Taking my own experience for an example of accepting the role handed down to us, I can tell you how my own mother-tongue inhibits my artistic expressions.

In the year I spent in countries where English was the language of my ears and tongue, I happened to scribble some poems in English. They were published in the little magazines of San Francisco, Berkeley, and London. (I cannot, however, imagine a more absurd effort than my producing genuine poems in English, while living in Bengal. Articles? Yes. Those are indifferent. But poetry No. That is quite different!) Now, when I compare the Bengali poems I wrote during that period with the English ones, an interesting pattern emerges. My English poems carry the impress of a separate personality altogether. This is not due to the differences in the nature of the two languages alone—the reason goes deeper, into the social psychology behind the art of writing. In Bengali, I am bound by the social morality of my milieu, both in my words and in my ideas. In English I am free and faceless.

In these days of women's lib and permissive societies when in the western world the pen has become free from false inhibitions, the woman writer in Bengali is still struggling under various taboos. When I wrote poetry in English I achieved this freedom that does not exist in Bengali. In English I could express my real feelings, my anger, my longing—far more openly and powerfully, irrespective of the readership-sentiment—since I was addressing a faceless reading public in a foreign country which does not know my personal face as a social being. In English, only the poem exists. No extra-literary information is available about the poet's personal life. But in the Indian situation it is not possible. Here I am recognized and that inhibits me. For me, it is a small world where I write and I live. The literature-loving public is always a mere few in any country, and in India, that proportion would be relative to the proportion of our literacy rate. Here, the women writers who manage to write seriously inspite of one thousand and one domestic and social barriers, are so very few, that they cannot avoid the limelight. And as far I have seen, the foremost literary circles in Indian languages are usually a small, urban group centred round some magazine or other in the State capitals,

where all intellectual activities are centred. Somehow the readers manage to collect enough personal gossip about the female writers, to interpret (mostly misinterpret) their writings accordingly. This special privilege is not enjoyed by the male writer. He has his *work* to speak for *him*, and not his *life* to speak for his *work*.

Hence, when I write in Bengali, I never pick up the first word that comes to the tip of my tongue—not even the next or the next. Like a careful criminal determined to hide his identity—I keep on rejecting the words until the ideal camouflage appears at the tip of my pen. Hence, the line that could be a red rose, ends up in being a carved marble lotus motif. The Bengali woman writer who has never heard of Mallarmé, is, in fact, an ardent follower of his advice, viz: “always use the wrong word”—because she has the sacred and secret duty of expressing her non-self in art. It is universally known that in the *heart* of Indian women, code 144 is constantly enforced from time immemorial. In a female heart five persons cannot walk at once,—not even in the case of Draupadi—and in the case of lesser mortals, not more than one is allowed. Similarly, a permanent state of emergency continues in the heart of women writers of Bengal and a strict censorship has worked at all times. The censoring authority here is the writer herself and the guidelines are laid down by her own social moves. These are not formal rules laid down by law that can be ‘broken’ in exchange of martyrdom. These are unwritten codes that simply exist in a traditional society inspite of the uneven external modernization. Modernity has merely scratched the surface of our society, it has not penetrated into the heart of our value system.

It is sad and shameful, but there is no denying that sexism exists. We return to the confession that we can never consider ourselves as anything but females first. We are daughters, mothers, wives etc. before we are artists and willingly so. This order of social responsibility has been devised by men and we have gladly accepted it. Before being a Bengali writer, I am a Bengali woman. In English I can free myself from this social identity and become a writer in English, since I am not an English/American woman. But I do not know whether the bilingual Indian woman writers in English feel this difference as I do. We must chage this lopsided ranking, and get our values

right. Before being anything else, I must be a writer first of all—then a BENGALI writer and last of all, a woman writer. Instead, I am a Bengali Woman Writer, i.e. my social milieu comes first, then my sexual identity and last of all my professional identity. Not until I am able to turn the table on myself shall I achieve the freedom necessary for full-fledged artist's life. When a male writer is busy writing in his study, his visitors either wait or leave, his telephones come back later, his dinner is warmed up twenty times. But if a woman writer is busy in her study, even if she does not have to cook or clean she must direct the household. The cook will not wait as his time is precious, she must give him the menu, the maid will not wait as she needs directions for the day's work ; the child must get his homework checked by mother before school time ; or even the neighbour who has come to show her new sari cannot be offended, the relative who has come to borrow a story book must be attended as well as the husband who is getting ready for office but cannot find his handkerchief. They can hardly be neglected. No one will wait for the woman (writer) but she has to wait for everyone. But why be sad ? It is a coveted post to be the kingpin of Domestic Bliss !—To be the glorious Centre of the Family Circus—Her Highness the Housewife-cum-Family Tutor, the Lost-Things-Finder, the Public Relations Officer, and the Presiding Officer of the Kitchen, besides being a part-time writer.

No one can bring us our freedom except ourselves. We are *not* as ostracized by the selfishness of this society as by our own unliberated ideas about ourselves. Our true identities are not yet clear to us—we are *not human* beings, but sexual beings first—even to ourselves.

The problems of the woman writer is not a problem separate from that of the professional woman in India. It is only a specific aspect of it. But as every dark cloud supposedly has a silver lining, the external barriers should lead to an extra spurt of creative energy in us, as the hydro-electricity dams helps to produce water-power in rivers. Thus we can turn a handicap into an advantage and try for purer artistic creations. If we avoid direct statements and look out for distant shapes for our thoughts our artwork will be more carefully wrought, more refined and probably reach a higher stage of artistic excellence.

However, as things stand today, the chain is not only tied tightly around the woman's pen, but all over her total psychological existence, although in India, women are in many ways luckier than they are in the Western World. Do I contradict myself? I do and I do not. In spite of the social attitude to femininity, the evils of dowry, the shocking lack of female education, the problems of uncontrolled childbirth, the continued social tortures on daughter-in-law, in the all economic ranks of the Indian society—I still think women in the Indian society are in many ways better-poised, based on a better foundation. Unlike the western women, our basic identity does not consist in being a sexual consort. It is not in Indian tradition at all to be known by one's husband's name—as Mrs. So-and-so. As long as a woman is young, she is known by her own name—and as soon as she becomes a mother, she is known by the name of her child, as the mother of so and so. In some parts of India, one does not have to produce a child to be called a mother—the glorious term 'Amma' or 'Bai' is attached to the name of little girls because they belong to the glorious race of mothers. I honestly think we should take a hint from this and forget our colonial habit of identifying ourselves by the names of husbands and wiping out the inferiority complexes that came with it by returning to our own traditional role. The traditional role of Indian woman is not a male-dominated sex role, but the role of independent motherhood. This is a potential that can be exploited in changing the social condition of women in India.

The problem of the woman writer is a problem related to the general problem of woman in India and will be solved only when the society as a whole takes a total step forward. It cannot be expected that while the rest of the society remains in darkness, the woman-writers' problems will be solved. Unless we remember our rights, and make an all-out effort to unfasten the chain that hangs tightly round our own vision of ourselves, we shall not succeed in freeing our own pens. One step forward for women, is ten steps forward for the nation.

Sushila Singh

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FAMILY PLANNING AND WOMEN

Family Planning is fundamentally and vitally the women's cause. All their problems whether physical, moral, social or economic are directly or indirectly related to their function as child-bearers, and, therefore, unless "their basic human right to decide freely and responsibly on the number and spacing of children and to have the means to do so is recognised, they cannot exercise and enjoy real equality with men. Without achievement of this basic freedom within the sexual partnership women are and will continue to be disadvantaged in their attempt to benefit from other reforms". It was the realisation of this fact which made Margaret Sanger, aptly called "the Mother of Family Planning" to state as under more than sixty years back :

"I could now see clearly the various strata of our life ; all its mass problems seemed to be centered around uncontrolled breeding. There was only one thing to be done : Call out, start the alarm, set the heather on fire ! Awaken the womanhood of America to free the Motherhood of the world !"

The call was given, the alarm was beguiled and the advocacy for family planning became an integral part of the fight for women's suffrage all over the world. Women came forward as pioneers and architects of the family planning movement in all parts of the world—Margaret Sanger in America, Otteson-Jenson in Europe, Marie Stopes and Helena Wright in England, Shidzue Ishimoto in Japan and Lady Rama Rau in India. They were crusaders, caring not for what opposition and obstacles came their way. They were ridiculed and humiliated and some of them were even imprisoned. However, the victory was theirs. The womanhood of the world was awakened and family planning became the world movement. It became the call of the hour. Everywhere the people and their Governments took up the programme of family planning with varying degrees of importance and priority.

The Indian womanhood was also awakened and a regular movement started under the dynamic leadership of Lady Dhanwanthi Rama Rau. In 1936, the All India Women's Conference invited Margaret Sanger to hear her views on family planning and, under the inspiration given by her, it passed a resolution demanding that contraceptive information be given to all women by the municipal health departments. This resolution in the words of Margaret Sanger, was "a firm declaration of faith and vision on the part of women of India, which, I was convinced, would produce results as soon as the political situation was settled and India became independent". The prognostication came true.

When India became independent in 1947, family planning was given the pride of place in our national planning and it was a woman leader (Miss Raj Kumari Amrit Kaur) who was entrusted with this job as a Cabinet Minister in the Centre. Thus, Government's support was given to the movement. In fact, our country was the first to include family planning in the over-all national planning. Slow but steady progress was made on all fronts, educational, motivational, and technical, for spreading the message and means of family planning. Demographic studies undertaken at that time showed that while our birth-rate then was 40 per thousands, the death-rate was 27 only. The net growth-rate was 13 per thousand in 1951. All-out efforts were made throughout the country to arrest this growth, but the situation continued worsening. The unbridled growth of population during all these years has brought severe catastrophes and challenges, because uncontrolled child-birth has tended to nullify the gains of development which we have been striving for. We have fully achieved almost all the targets under our Five-Year Plans, but scarcity is still staring us at the face on all fronts of our national life. The progressive reduction in our death-rate while the birth-rate remaining more or less unabated, has led to galloping growth in our population and the resulting problems. If we want to come out of this catastrophe—and we must—then we have simultaneously to effect reduction in our birth-rate. Towards this end, women are the most effective agents and they have to play their role well. Women in the rural areas are very much ridden with social dogmas, superstitions and prejudices. Educated and enlightened women can help a good deal in breaking down these barriers.

It is clear from the above that women have to play their full role in making family planning successful, on which depends their status. The International Planned Parenthood Federation, the first and foremost world body of voluntary national family planning organisations, has very rightly pointed out that "Women's ability to understand the options available for fertility regulation and to make an informed choice of the services offered is fundamental to their full participation in any programme aimed at enhancing their status. There is inevitably a two way interaction between the importance of the right of women to regulate their fertility and the ability to exercise this and other human rights. The interdependence of the rights of women individually and as a group and the right to plan one's family is clearly recognised in the World Population Plan of Action. The problems faced by a world struggling to maintain and improve the quality of life for all, and the key role of women in population and development make the guarantee of the right and means to plan one's family and the guarantee of equal rights and opportunities for women of the greatest urgency".

Thus, to a woman, family planning does not only mean a solution of population problems for the nation, but also a much needed solution for the problems of her own status and rights. Unless she has the basic freedom to decide upon the number and spacing of children, she will remain incapable of availing herself of other freedoms. Though this idea has permeated in all societies all over the world, still a greater number of women are not free to exercise the right to plan their lives and their families because of their position within their respective societies. They have to fight against the outmoded social traditions for this basic freedom.

Indian women have been incessantly struggling for social change and reforms, but have not yet achieved full results. A greater crusade is needed ; a more drastic policy is required. In the success of family planning lies the solution of most of the problems women have to face. This has been realised by our dynamic Prime Minister, Smt. Indira Gandhi who has, in her recent speeches, impressed upon the women of India to make it a point to become a kind of crusaders to make other fellow women conscious of the problems of growing population. She has rightly advised all the women of India, who feel this a social

responsibility, to strive to enlist the help of every single woman who is literate to impart education to other women, to teach them about family planning and to impress upon them as to how essential it is for healthier women, healthier children, and happier homes. They should not confine this message to women alone but to take it to men also, especially in the rural areas. A great responsibility is thus cast upon the women, in so far as family planning is concerned. Greatest sufferers as they are, greatest crusaders they ought to be.

The success in family planning is the first condition, if women in our country have to attain full stature and status. It is in this context that the National Committee on the Status of Women in India has stressed the importance of family planning as a measure which would enable women to play their full and proper role in building up the nation. The Committee has suggested that attempts should be made to obtain the services of older and matured women for carrying out this work in the rural areas. In the area of family planning, women can help the women more effectively. This view was also supported by the World Food Conference in their Resolution II in 1974 which said that "recognising the important role of women in rural life, in the production, marketing and consumption of food, in family nutrition, in decision on family size and child spacing and in child care and education, it is necessary to involve them fully in the process of rural development". Similarly, the U. N. Economic and Social Council Commission on the status of women has very emphatically declared that "the best guarantees for a successful population policy recognise the need to promote equal rights and opportunities for women. Only then can the vicious circle of low status and lack of opportunities for women and high fertility be weakened".

The family planning movement is thus primarily for the women, of the women, and by the women. Greater involvement of women in this movement paves the way for greater and quicker success of the same. Women have to realise the urgency of the problem and the need to increase their participation in the programme of family planning. The Government would also do better if women are drawn in larger number on Councils and Commissions for implementation of the family planning programme.

Bharati Debi

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**TRIBAL WOMEN : A STUDY OF MODERN CONDITIONS'
AND FUTURE PROSPECTS.**

I

India is a paradise for those who have some interest in tribes. It is so because of the very simple fact that some 450 and odd Scheduled tribal groups including their subgroups inhabit the country. They are dispersed throughout the land, but could also be seen concentrated in some smaller but varied ecological zones suitably adapted for existences. The tribals are the autochthones of the country, represented by a little over 38 million souls. They thus constitute 6.93 per cent of the total population of India. The tribals are the backward class and weaker section of our populations because of widespread poverty, ignorance, and illiteracy that are prevailing at large in their societies. Remaining still as they were on the periphery of mainstream of the Indian civilization, they lead a very simplistic mode of life.

The tribals are indeed colourful, for they share different social, cultural and economic milieu. All the tribal societies can be classified and grouped into several distinct 'types' on the basis of their way of life, the *whole culture*. To illustrate the point we may casually take some cases ready at hand. For example, there are groups in the northeastern part of India with absolute matriliney. There are others in the central and southern belts who exhibit patriliney. And there are still others who are marginally located between matriliney and patriliney. There are tribes who believe in polyandry and some in polygamy. But, at the same time, very many practise monogamy being their prescribed norm.

The author wishes to record here her deep sense of gratitude to fellow colleagues in the Anthropological Survey of India, Calcutta, for giving access to their valuable field data as well as their unpublished manuscripts which form the core material of the present discourse.

The subsistence economy also ranges from mere hunting-gathering activities to a developed form of agriculture and a few draw their sustenance through participation in different spheres of essential services. From the point of view of religion again they are dissimilar. While the majority strictly adhere to the traditional tribal religion, many more have become Hinduised in addition to a host of tribals who have taken shelter under the shadow of the Cross. These, in brief, are some of the major dimensions or facets of life which highlight the pan-Indian tribal situation.

With this little back-drop, let us now indulge in abstracting the realm of tribal women in India. But it would be a real fallacy if we expect something very peculiar of their own other than what we see, feel, and encounter in the case of women of non-tribal origin. To make the point clearer, it is quite tempting to recall here the observation made by Verrier Elwin. To paraphrase him : "The most important thing about the tribal woman is that she is—a woman. I stress this because there is sometimes a tendency to regard the tribal people as though they were something altogether apart from ourselves, almost if they were of different species. It is important, therefore, to emphasise that the tribal woman in herself has the same devotion to the home, to husband and children, the same faults and the same virtues". (Elwin 1958).

An objective approach to the problems of tribal women necessarily requires an informed understanding of their population structure and of their basic social institutions as well.

To make an attempt towards this, we may begin with analysing empirically the population structure followed by evaluating how many have actually taken the benefit of education and by assessing their participation rate in industry.

At the very outset, we ought to know the pattern of population distribution and concentration of tribals in India. Table 1 sets out the situation following the territorial groupings. The groupings have been made keeping in view the historical, ethnic, and sociocultural realities of the tribal communities as spelt out by Roy Burman (1972). Central and East India immediately top the list, being the most concentrated tribal zone of India. This is followed in decreasing order by Western India and North-East India zones.

Demographically speaking, tribal women may be looked at

from various angles. Many questions call for attention. But the most vital and major problems that attract immediate attention are connected with (1) intercensus growth—that is how viably the tribal female population grew up from one census to another and at what pace, and (2) changes in sex-ratio—which means what has been its relation to male population through decades. These all relate to the important aspect of structuring of populations.

To answer the questions raised the material available in two decennial censuses, of 1961 and 1971, are useful. Examination reveals that the female population increased massively during the last 10 years to the tune of 26.91 per cent which means an annual growth of 2.7 per cent. This reveals that the growth of tribal female population maintains a slightly higher pace than the general females whose annual growth rate is 2.4 per cent. Unfortunately, however, somewhat inadequate data restrict us to have an overview of the growth rate of tribal female beyond this period. But if we confine our interest, at the present moment, centring round only seven larger tribal female groups, selected in order of numerical strength—namely the Bhil, Gond, Santal, Oraon, Munda, Khond and Ho—who together constitute nearly half of the total tribal population, a more or less clearer picture of the growth trend during the last seven decades comes in view. This is represented in Table 2 which helps us to feel the historical pulse of growth rate—a progressive increasing trend of growth over the last seventy years.

To come to the question of sex-ratio. A population group is composed of two distinct components—the male and the female. Therefore, to understand the structure of any population, we must necessarily pay due attention to both the components in terms of population strength. Since our concern here is with the female component only, we shall relate the sex-ratio with reference to females per 1000 males. If we now scan the material of the last two censuses it becomes clear that there has been a slight reduction in the number of females. The 1971 Census registers a figure of 982 females, while the 1961 Census bears 987 females. Significant in this respect is that the Indian tribals are posted at a vantage point in comparison to the general Indian population which has recorded a sex-ratio of 930 females per 1000 males in the 1971 Census. This is the overall sex

composition of the total tribal population. But if we consider the pooled composition of seven larger tribal groups as previously done, we obtain a picture of sex-ratio over the span of last 100 years as illustrated in Table 3. The figures indicate that over this period of time the number of females varied only between 99 and 102. This is important since it fulfils the biological expectation of natural population growth and speaks of a balance between fertility and mortality. Migration, in any case, does not affect the tribal situation. Besides this populational aspect, the 1971 Census also acquaints us with the current situations concerning education and occupation. Let us now bring into light the quantum of involvement and participation of the tribal women in these two aspects.

As has already been hinted upon, there is widespread illiteracy among the tribes (89%). Only a small fraction of 4.85 per cent tribal women has been returned as literate in the 1971 Census. The rate of literacy in 1971 has thus increased over that of 1961 which registers a rate of 3.16 per cent. And that the tribal women are progressing, of course slowly, can be evidenced from the facts gathered in Table 4. It appears that perhaps opportunities are more open to the urbanites. But that they have progressed during the last decade is alone significant and encouraging. If we contrast the situation with the condition of general Indian female population, which shows an overall literacy rate of 18.4 per cent in 1971, we cannot but help feel happy. What a gulf of difference indeed! As is evident the percentage of literacy is much higher among the tribal female urbanites (19.64) compared to their rural segments (4.36). Barring a few states in extreme northeastern region—namely Assam (17.16), Manipur (18.87), Meghalaya (22.79), Nagaland (17.68) and Kerala (10.40) in the extreme south and Laccadive and Minicoy Islands (28.94)—the condition of the tribal female literacy in other States is really very miserable. The situation can best be assessed if we follow again the territorial groupings as noted earlier. This has been done in Table 5 which is self explanatory. The point to be stressed here is that the high literacy rate (16%) in North-East India is solely due to the effect of Christianity which is also true for the South India zone (10%).

Coming to occupation one encounters a still brighter picture.

The tribal woman is found to participate actively in all the nine categories of industrial work ranging from cultivation to other services along with her male counterpart. The tribal urbanites are, as a matter of fact, slightly less involved in work, which is a point to ponder. This is simply because of the lack of opportunity of the urbanites. On the other hand, the rural tribals are land based, and therefore their economic activities are directly connected with agriculture. Although their participation rate is low (20.75%) in comparison with the tribal male (55.87%) still it is significantly high compared to the general Indian females (11.86%). Table 6 clarifies the general position. But the most significant thing which arrests our attention is, as revealed from a recent study made by Jyoti Sen (1974), that a considerable number of tribal women have already become teachers, doctors, nurses, air hostesses, and the like after attaining higher education.

III

Apart from what has just been outlined on the basis of current census material, it is necessary to gather further information available from sources other than the census to fill up the gaps in our knowledge. Specifically, our interest should focus on the study of such institutions and related components of the tribal societies that are supposed to be effective for a comprehensive understanding of the whole situation. These may, as I understand, consist in the prescribed structural roles, social sanctions, customary rights and other related behavioral components of the tribal women's way of life.

The social condition of tribal women, as explicitly expressed in many forms, is definitely not uniform among all the different tribal groups. It varies from tribe to tribe, zone to zone and even sometimes within the same group and same zone. But still, there is unity in diversity. Let us probe into how does it operate.

In tribal societies normally there is no marked preference for a boy or a girl. Both are equally liked. But there are exceptions, too. While the Gaddi and Toda couples prefer a boy, a girl is preferred by the Khasi or the Garo. She receives as much care and attention as a boy expects. As is usual, a girl is more attached to her mother from whom she receives early training in household duties and socializes herself.

During her adolescence she becomes a member of a dormitory which plays a predominant role in village social life and serves as a centre of education. It is for this reason that we find a wide distribution of spinster's dormitory in some form or other among the tribes throughout India. Notable among them are the Naga, Kuki, Abor, Sherdukpen, Tangsa, Rangte, Bhotia, Santal, Saoria, Mal Paharia, Oraon, Munda, Ho, Birhor, Asur, Juang, Bhutia, Khond, Kota, Gond, Gadaba, Bondo, Dhurwa, Dorla, Muthvan, Mannan, Puliyan, Kanikkar, and a host of others.

Being a girl and a woman she enjoys much freedom of movement. She has considerable voice in the selection of her partner, if she does not actually select him. She can, when events demand, divorce him at her will, except in a very few instances as among the Gallongs. Her attitude towards sex is almost like a free-lancer, but severe infidelity of married women is frowned upon.

A woman is an economic asset ; considerable value is imposed on a hard working, industrious, and dutiful woman. Also the custom of bride price in the tribal societies, in general, elevates them to an important position because of the economic linkage. And the prevalence of this custom, sometimes bride price being very high especially among the Gallong, Naga, Santal, Bhil, Gond, Gadulia Lohar, Toda, Kota, Yerava and Irula, attests their economic worth in society.

As a wife and a mother she is heavily loaded with dual responsibilities, one at home and the other in field. To manage the home is exclusively her own affair, and sometimes she controls the purse, too, as is the case with the Birhor as well as with many other tribes. This is the position of tribal women as far as the economic aspect is concerned. But we know a coin has two sides. Let us turn it over and have a look at the other side.

Despite her important economic role neither does she stand at par with man nor is she equated with her counterpart. Even in a matrilineal society, supposed to be dominated by the activities of woman because of the fact that she inherits property, her position is considered high only at the level of family. But if we cast our glance to the bigger canvas of the society, beyond the level of family, we are convinced that matriliney does not really accrue any direct benefit for the women. In the male dominated patriarchal society her position is that of subservience.

She cannot inherit property, nor she is eligible to take part in religious activities. Among the Toda and Kota the women are not even allowed to cross the boundaries of a temple, not to speak of entering into it. The Irula women have no right to perform any religious ceremony but they can however be diviners. She has no voice in the village council. Exceptions are the Bhotia where a woman can be a member of Gram Panchayet. All these reflect that womanhood is not a matter of glorification as is held ideal among the Hindu.

This emphasis on feminine role has a strong bearing on a girl's personality and identity. Since her early days she is oriented to be submissive and docile, which makes her hesitant in taking a decision more particularly outside the four walls of her home. If we consider this aspect of behaviour the tribal women are in no way better off than the general Indian women.

We are aware that, "There are a number of provisions in the constitution relating to the Status of Women in the country. They have been supplemented by various enactments and development programme aiming at enabling women to play their role in our national life in an effective manner.... These programmes have brought about considerable changes in urban areas, but the problems continue to remain virtually unchanged in most of the rural areas." This is more true in the case of tribal women. But why is it so? We must do some sort of heart searching in order to know the reason why they are lagging behind. In so doing, among others, the major lacuna that immediately bothers us is the lack of education among the tribal women. The movement for improving women's status all over the world has always emphasized education as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in society. Christianity is one of the major factors which has brought tremendous change among the tribals in the Indian scene. Of all the modern processes of change, it occupies the oldest position and its beginning can be traced back as early as the advent of British in India. Along with Christianity came education, urbanization or modernisation and exposure to mass media. Although these do not always exert equal pressure, nonetheless, their influences in bringing some awareness and changing the outlook cannot be denied.

Most significant change has been in the sphere of educa-

tion. According to an inquiry made by Jyoti Sen (1974), there has been a great demand for school education among the Gallong boys and girls. Even in village Middle English School often about 30 per cent students are girls. Most of these schools are residential with separate arrangement for girl students. Among the Naga, women are increasingly receiving education. All the schools are co-educational. Literacy rate among the Naga is 179 per 1,000. There is a Christian Women's Society among the Naga that conducts various welfare work such as literacy campaign, women's welfare, etc. Evangelical work is also shared by women. About 40 per cent of the Mizo women are literate. Most of the Christian Toda women are educated, and some unconverted Toda girls have started going to school. By this time we find a fair number of tribes including the Santal, Oraon, Ho, Munda, Khond, Bhil and others are increasingly availing themselves of the opportunity of education.

Although in most of the communities the tribals have not as yet a dim awareness of the nature and strategy of organized politics, there are communities where women have started becoming conscious of their political rights—their rights to universal adult suffrage. The Gallong or the Santal women were found to participate as voters in General Elections; while the Khasi, Mizo and Naga women actually contested the election to Legislature. The Naga women again have gone a long way up by ushering pioneering rebel activities during the fifties of this century. And in this context, many of us cannot just forget the kind of political pressures, and leadership that were generated and geared up by a Naga woman rebel, named Rani Guidalo, whose influence undeniably shook and rocked the political fervour of the entire northeastern India.

It follows from what has just been recounted that some definitive changes are gradually taking place in the world view of tribal women. But it cannot be denied also that basic conditions of most of the tribal women are still in a state as they were in the past. These changes that could be identified are of course minor in nature but the essence is certainly major in significance, if we take due cognizance of the contemporary Indian life. The spirit to switch over and amenability to adjustment to a new but a better situation are certainly there in the minds of tribal females; and therefore we cannot stop the process of

change and modernization. We must also realize, at the same time, that this change cannot be a radical one. Earlier the tribals participate in the social, economic and political life of our country, better it would be for them and for us also to understand and be woven into the common fabric—into the mainstream of Indian civilization—our desired goal. And to gear a good push to accelerate this process of articulation our exact role will be to motivate them—to make them feel and realise their own betterment. Elements of time and opportunity are important. The question remains then how long can we afford to sustain in terms of time and what could be the kind of opportunity. We must set some limits and try to reconcile sensibly what should be the remedy. The hourly need, I believe most, is precisely education. The challenge of this widening illiteracy gap will have to be borne in mind in formulating educational policies and determining their priorities in the years to come. The planners and social scientists, together, must try to realise this and should try to make a headway to place the education available at their doorstep. There is ample evidence to feel confident that by imparting education and opening up due opportunity, the tribal women can be fruitfully involved in the process of our national development. We are only to have a little patience—but doubtless that will prove to be rewarding.

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TABLE 1
PATTERN OF POPULATION DISTRIBUTION OF SCHEDULED TRIBES
IN TERMS OF TRIBAL ZONES, CENSUS 1971

Tribal zones	Total population	Total female population	Per cent female population
1. <i>North-East India</i> —comprising Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya and Tripura	4,346,197	2,150,639	11.42
2. <i>Sub-Himalayan region</i> —comprising Himachal Pradesh and Uttar Pradesh	340,175	163,757	0.87
3. <i>Central and East India</i> —comprising Andhra Pradesh, Bihar, Madhya Pradesh, Orissa and West Bengal	22,582,733	11,259,814	59.78
4. <i>South India</i> —Comprising Kerala, Mysore, and Tamil Nadu	812,139	399,234	2.12
5. <i>Western India</i> —comprising Gujarat, Maharashtra and Rajasthan	9,814,177	4,800,282	25.49
6. <i>Union Territories</i> —Other than Arunachal Pradesh comprising Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Dadra and Nagar Haveli, Goa, Daman and Diu, and Laccadive and Minicoy Islands	119,741	59,986	0.32

TABLE 2

GROWTH OF TRIBAL FEMALE OVER THE LAST 70 YEARS*

Census year	No. of females (in million)	Decennial growth rate
1901	3.4	—
1911	4.3	25.9
1921	4.8	12.3
1931	5.4	11.6
1941	5.8	6.9
1961	7.4	—
1971	9.0	21.0

* Seven tribal female populations considered ; no classified population figures available in 1951 census.

TABLE 3

STRUCTURE OF TRIBAL FEMALES OVER THE LAST 100 YEARS*

Census year	Females per 100 males
1881	9.88
1891	9.99
1901	10.18
1911	10.22
1921	10.14
1931	10.08
1941	10.10
1961	9.99
1971	9.93

* Seven tribal female populations considered ; no classified population figures available is 1951 census ; for 1881 three populations and for 1891 four populations available sex-wise.

TABLE 4

TRIBAL WOMEN LITERATES ACCORDING TO HABITAT,
CENSUS 1971.

	1961	1971
Rural	2.90	4.36
Urban	13.45	19.04
Total	3.16	4.85

TABLE 5

DISTRIBUTION OF TRIBAL WOMEN LITERATES ACCORDING TO
TRIBAL ZONES, CENSUS 1971

Tribal Zone	Per cent literate
1. North East India	15.94
2. Sub-Himalayan Region	5.56
3. Central and East India	2.95
4. South India	10.40
5. Western India	3.79
6. Union Territories (other than Arunachal Pradesh)	10.61

TABLE 6
INVOLVEMENT OF TRIBAL FEMALES IN DIFFERENT OCCUPATIONAL PURSUITS, CENSUS 1971*

Category	No. of females in million	Per cent female to total female
1. Cultivator	1.67	8.86
2. Agricultural Labourer	1.91	10.16
3. Livestock, Forestry, Fishing, Hunting, Plantations, Orchards and Allied Activities	0.09	0.50
4. Mining and Quarrying	0.02	0.13
5. Manufacturing, processing, Servicing and repairs	0.05	7
a) Household Industry	0.03	0.27
b) Other than Household Industry	0.03	0.18
6. Construction	0.01	0.07
7. Trade and Commerce	0.02	0.12
8. Transport, Storage and communication	0.01	0.05
9. Other services	0.08	0.42
10. Total worker	3.9	20.75
Total Non-worker	14.9	79.25

* The categories are as given in Census 1971.

Joanna Kirkpatrick

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THEMES OF CONSCIOUSNESS AMONG SOME EDUCATED WORKING WOMEN OF BANGLADESH*

Introduction

This paper is an attempt to put into perspective some of the themes which appeared in the conversations and interviews I had with women professors, lecturers, librarians and physicians at Rajshahi University and in the town. There presently exists a small body of literature on the statistical aspects of women in Bangladesh,² but reports in English which tell us about their feelings about themselves, their life and times and their views of past and future are virtually non-existent.³ Bangladeshis as a nation have suffered immensely during the past decade from the culturally disrupting effects of rapid population growth coupled with political and environmental upheavals. The rates of social disruption, if not social change, in some areas have been rapid and socially dislocating, forcing even members of the privileged elite class to witness the tragedies of hordes of beggars on the streets of main and also provincial towns—people forced out of their rural homes by typhoon or flood ; of explosive growth of poverty housing (bustees) in the cities with their concomitant social and environmental problems ;⁴ of the dead and dying on the roads during famine times, with beggars appropriating corpses as their own kin in the hope of earning “funeral” expenses ;⁵ and all of this brought close to their lives by the massive influx of poor women into urban areas in search of domestic employment with the resulting increased awareness of their disrupted lives that such proximity ensures. Although most of the women I inter-

* Bangladesh was until recently a part of Bengal or India. In many respects West Bengal and Bangladesh have common features and characteristics. Hence this valuable article based on case studies by a trained sociologist is included in the volume.—PUBLISHER.

viewed still had contact with ancestral village homes, it is a paradox of their social status as elites that they never knew as much about the poverty and problems of the rural women in villages as they learnt after hiring them into domestic service in the urban areas.

The rapid inflationary tendency of goods prices in Bangladesh has also added substantially to the problems of families which, although socially of elite status (belonging to the population fraction of the educated middle and upper class strata), are not affluent enough to maintain their preferred style of life by relying, as the rich may do, solely on newly acquired gains in lands and other properties combined with top salaries of the men in the families plus the residues of inheritance. As many people told me, the regime under Sheikh Mujib practically wiped out the middle class while a *nouveau riche* of formerly low-status people came into power. Still, as one person put it, families need income in order to hold up their heads in the world. Reference was constantly made to the low prices of the Pakistan period, as compared to the present, when cloth, food and other necessities had doubled or tripled in price. The resulting threatened reduction in style of living has in large part been instrumental in encouraging increasing numbers of women to enter the professions and other forms of respectable paid employment.⁶ Even nursing no longer has difficulty recruiting women to this profession, whereas in 1947 after partition there were only 50 trained nurses left in East Pakistan in this low status field.⁷ Nursing, incidentally, is still evaluated as less desirable for women than teaching or medicine,⁸ but as in India there has been an expansion of the numbers of women entering this profession.⁹

Despite the tendency for middle class women to enter gradually into the labor force, as Dr. Raunaq Jahan has pointed out they represent a "small fraction of Bengalee women" :

...only 1.75 million [women] are urban, and of these . . . a mere 32 per cent are literate, and only about 1.27 per cent adopt a modern occupation.¹⁰

Still, as the sociologist Dr. Mahmuda Islam wrote recently,

... a beginning has been made towards the breaking down of traditional bondage. Partly due to economic pressure, women [in urban areas] have been permitted to go out of their homes and to seek employment side by side with men.

...these women set the trend of future development of women in this society.¹¹

Thus, the twin factors of socio-political disruptions with their inevitable urban impacts and of rapid inflation have affected the consciousness of middle class women in Bangladesh, causing them to respond in a variety of ways to these issues as they affect their own and their family's lives.

I have chosen to treat their responses as issues in the phenomenology of their consciousness, of both themselves and of others, by selecting certain themes which seemed to me most significant in what was told to me as well as in what I was able to observe. Most of the adult women I interviewed were faculty members of Rajshahi University. At that time there were some 17 women employed full time as teachers in the University. I was able to interview most of them, plus some other female employees both at Rajshahi and at a college in the town, as well as 42 undergraduate students through the use of questionnaires and with the help of student assistants.¹² Advantageous in obtaining data from the women was, of course, my gender identity with the respondents. While I did not have the time to interview respondents' husbands, I knew many of them socially and I interacted with male faculty in my professional capacity at the University. These colleagues and their interactions with me were also enlightening. Finally, I too, foreigner that I was experienced the impact of male attitudes in that society.

I would like now to turn to themes of consciousness which I consider to be important in the lives of my respondents for the reasons that they seemed to consider them of significance. Some issues may not appear as important to these women as they did to me, for I look at them sometimes with the eyes of the outsider. Other themes seem to be universally the issues of working women, and some having to do with male domination evoked resonance in my own consciousness despite our belonging to different cultures.

"Species" Consciousness, or The Theme of Group Identity

The data for this section come mainly from questionnaires, prepared and administered in *Bangla* with the help of student assistants,¹³ which were answered by 21 under-graduate univer-

sity women and 21 under-graduate men. Taking heroes and heroines as evidence of group identification, I found that students' replies to a question asking them to name favourite people in history or literature showed interesting choices. For the women, the most popular hero was Rabindranath Tagore, and the most popular heroine Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain. (Of the women, all were Muslim except for 2 Hindus and 1 Christian.) Whereas half of their hero citations selected a Hindu, 18 of the 21 selected a Muslim heroine.

As for the men, their overall favorites (selected from an initial three-choice panel for hero and heroine each) were Kazi Nazrul Islam and Begum Rokeya. Amidst the preceding three choices, however, the top female favorites were Smt. Indira Gandhi with 20 votes, Begum Rokeya with 16, Begum Fatimah Jinnah with 11 and Poet Sufia Kamal with 8. Among the hero choices, the three most prominent were Kazi Nazrul Islam, Mahatma Gandhi and Qaid I Azam M. A. Jinnah. For male choices, interestingly, there were fewer concentrated votes because the field of choices cited was much larger : male heroes named, 22 ; female, 13. Muslim names predominated in the men's lists, Smt. Gandhi and Mahatma Gandhi being the only major Hindu selections. Although I have not been able to go through all of the data from the students, my impression so far is that the men are more Islamic in their group identification than the women students and also that they are more conservative in their social values with respect to women, filial devotion and tradition.

In the responses from the women students a strong sense of a national identity emerges. Practically all of them mentioned wanting a higher education in order better to serve their country and a large percentage of them believe that women can best contribute to the nation by rearing their children to be good and conscientious citizens of Bangladesh (17 out of 21). Only 4 thought that women's best contribution to their country was to become teachers, doctors, nurses or social workers, and only 7 cited combining children with professional activity.

The women are also *Bangla* language nationalists. I noticed that when the girls sang songs for me, they chose Rabindra *sangit*. The women students also showed a sense of national, as opposed to sectarian, identity in their justifications for choices of heroines : Begum Rokeya was noted more as a helper of the

cause of Bengali women than of women identified solely as Muslims ; Joan of Arc was cited for aiding her people against the English ; the PLO hijacker Leila Khaled for sacrificing for *her* people, and so on. In the 3 citations of Sultana Razia, 2 mentioned her supremacy as a ruler of her country, and only 1 identified her specifically as Muslim. Finally, 20 of the 21 students who had heard of the international women's movement said that its influence was needed to "bring Bangladesh forward with the progressive countries of the world", as one girl expressed it. They thought that it was also needed to help make use of the wasted power and talents of the female half of the nation. In general, I would say that this group of students, (selected through a friendship network and therefore possibly biased), shows a trend toward national as opposed to sectarian identification, and certainly a strong sense of themselves as women at a particular time in history.

The Self as Object : The Theme of Self-Sacrifice

Dr. Jahan wrote that "Girls are taught the two virtues—patience and sacrifice—of ideal Bengalee womanhood", and that "Both the folklore and the religious tradition idolize women who made immense sacrifices for their husbands. . ."¹⁴

They also learn to accept the essentially inferior status of women in society. As girls grow up they perceive the preferential treatment given to their brothers, father and other male members of the family and they are told that getting less of everything and not complaining about it is the ideal behavior pattern of good women. . . . If the family can afford good food, i.e. meat or milk, it is the father and sons who would have the first and major share.¹⁵

Practically all of the women faculty interviewed grew up in large families with many siblings. A few reported that distantly related boarders had also lived in their homes, their education being supervised and paid for by the respondents' fathers. At present these women live in either nuclear or slightly extended families, that is, extended by nieces or nephews, and also by servants with whom there is a quasi-familial relationship as they tend to come from the husbands' natal villages.

That the family looms large in their scale of values is especially

apparent when they discuss their roles as mothers. If they have to neglect one side of their lives, it will be their professional commitments which will go by the board when duty calls at home. This attitude is supported by liberal leave allowances in the University. Visits by in-laws or own kin often require a woman to take leave for a week or so in order properly to care for them. She cannot do any professional work at this time, as "they would not understand, they would "feel hurt" or "it would not look nice, they would think me disrespectful". Kin often urge the respondents to quit their jobs so that they can look after matters at home more adequately, or so that they would not feel so tired.

Each mother of school children discussed in detail her aspirations for their education and stressed her careful attention to their scholastic progress and the supervision of their homework. They think that the schools are not good, and so large amounts of their time are occupied with tutoring children for examinations. The mothers also feel that they should be home when the children return from school or even play, and that they should monitor their play hours as well. Thus, most of them are not able to leave the house regularly every evening for gossip with their friends, as do their husbands; only occasionally do groups of mothers get together for *adda*. The clothing and feeding of each child is also carefully attended, most mothers being very unwilling to leave their children to a servant's care as they, who are illiterate, might teach the children the wrong things. Also, it is felt that the servants really do not care what happens to the children and that they cannot be trusted with them: their work must always be supervised.

Such preoccupation with the children is so great that their mothers say they are overtired and overworked, that there is not enough time in the day for all the duties they must either accomplish or supervise, and some say that they even neglect their husbands in favor of satisfying the children.¹⁰ Tiredness and overwork are certainly pan-human women's afflictions, especially for those who both serve in the home as mothers and wives and in offices as workers. Still, there seems to be a difference between the manner in which these women appease their children as compared with their middle class American counterparts. While the latter pacify children with things: toys, money, food, etc.—the Bangladesh mothers appease with their own personal

attentions. Is this because of the shortage of consumer goods within the country? Or is this another manifestation of the humane, personal emphasis in the culture? In any case, child demands considerably restrict their mothers' mobility. Some women told me that they simply cannot go out of the house without submitting to a cross-examination from the children as to where they are going and why. The children evidently resent the prospect of their mother enjoying some pleasure of which the children may not partake. If the child insists on going along, he or she (usually only he) will be taken along, or the father will take one child out, leaving the other(s) with the mother. If the child has a tantrum about the mother going out, he or she will be pacified by the mother staying home. As one woman told me, speaking of her child, "His need is greater than my pleasure."

Deep emotional involvement and extreme mutual dependence of mother and child will have its dark side, as Jung would say, and I find this to be the way women neglect their health in favor of children and husbands. Although most of the women I interviewed were reasonably healthy, some husbands in the community told me how they have urged and pleaded with ailing wives to take milk and eggs but that the women refuse, saving it all for the children and the men. Their health occasionally deteriorates to the point where they must receive hospital tests or care, expensive medications, doctor's calls and so on, and often they become too weak even to accept the special treatments prescribed by the physicians. Chronic ill health is utterly common among Bangladesh women, especially anemia and its complications.

I discussed the question of anemia with a woman gynaecologist who said that, first, the diet is not all that nutritious even in the middle class; second, women deny themselves food for others' sake even if the families can afford it; and third, that the causes of anemia are diverse and not well understood at this time. In interviews in the community I found many people to be resigned to the felt impossibility of keeping their food and water uncontaminated by parasites and bacteria. And, they said, even if we managed it, the houses of our friends might not be able to do so, so why bother? (The ubiquity of servants in the preparation of food and meals was thought to complicate food hygiene.) Men, too, suffer from chronic intestinal and

bronchial complaints. However, both men and women inhabit the same environmental conditions, yet the women's health is worse, despite the fact that unlike their counterparts in the villages, they are not forced to undergo repeated pregnancies.

As one woman teacher put it, somewhat hyperbolically, "The health of our women is terrible because they only eat the scraps after all the others eat, and if there is no more food they starve!" There is also the widely reported tendency of parents and guardians to neglect the health of female children in favor of the males. This syndrome is, no doubt, learned early in life as the little girls help their mothers with cooking and serving food—when they learn, as Jahan puts it, that female virtue lies in taking less than they might want or need. Such neglect fits the prevailing ideology of female inferiority and invisibility.

Delicate or chronic ill health is also used to manipulate one's husband. This behavioral syndrome of martyrdom through refusing to eat what is good for one is reminiscent of the so-called Jewish mother syndrome in the United States and its WASP tight-lipped counterpart. It is a neurotic means of punishing the oppressor for all of one's self-sacrifice by punishment of self, while simultaneously obtaining the secondary gratifications of all the attention, expense and worry one causes to others. The hostility is directed against the self, but indirectly against the real targets of husband and child who feel, in this society, not exactly guilty but anxious, perturbed, off balance. Since children are the woman's chief source of identity fulfilment, they become the convenient excuse and indirectly the victims, as well, for how can a chronically ill mother have a house full of contented children? Thus the worm turns in Bangladesh.

If patience, obedience and self-sacrifice are the dominant social values for women, then such self destructive behavior can be understood as a symbolic, negative transformation of those very values, for illness both immobilizes and diminishes the person. Thus, the immobility of illness would be a transformation of obedience and patience, just as the physical wasting away of semi-starvation is a symbolic transformation of self-sacrifice. It should be noted, however, that this behavioral syndrome is not restricted to Bangladesh but can be found wherever women have been forced to derive most of their emotional gratification from their relationship with children, especially sons, under con-

ditions of extreme male dominance in the society. Although manipulated in a variety of ways cross-culturally, refusal to eat is a universal expression of hostility within the primary group.

Another manifestation of the self as object is the theme of woman as victim. Papanek noticed this as significant in Pakistan,¹⁷ and its salience seemed important in the responses of some women to the murder of a woman student this year. For example, reactions included the following comments :

Our girls are so naive, they think that the men will respect them, that they are as well brought up as themselves. They want to be friends with the boys and do not realize the danger.

This is what comes of allowing women to mix freely with boys. Their immodesty gets them into trouble. [That is, their symbolic shelters of *orhni* or *burka* no longer are there to protect them.]

It is the result of a girl's not having a male guardian. [The victim's father is dead and she had no brothers.] Her relatives [women] are already receiving threats not to pursue the case.

Of the culprits, people said,

They have caught all but the killer, but they were going about freely for some time after the murder before the police finally arrested them. I hear that the killer's father is influential and already trying to bribe the others out of the jail.

This latter statement reflects a strong sense that justice will not be done in this murder case, men are too powerful.

Those boys should be tried under the martial law !
Here the speaker hoped for retaliation for the crime and she thought that a martial law court would be tougher and less easy to bribe.

As in other societies, like our own for example, the woman as victim is also seen as the temptress. One of the respondents observed that the murdered girl was a rather "flamboyant type" in her appearance, wearing long loose hair and face makeup. Another woman commented that she was quite pretty ; in short, the perfect female victim. The tragic episode, of course, was thought to reinforce the argument of conservatives who still advocate strict segregation if not seclusion of women. As one

woman pointed out, and her observation was affirmed by the others present, there is not much that a woman can do :

Even if a girl walks around campus in a burka the boys tell us that they feel like snatching it off to see what's beneath. They are just as conscious of women *inside* burkas as they are of women not wearing them, even more so, perhaps !

These realizations among women of the barbaric element in the unsocialized makeup of both young males and lower class men who frequent the bazaar lead them to avoid visits to public places where they might be victimized by dishonoring remarks, looks, sniggers, touch, and the general filth and disorder of the market places. One of the male professors of Dacca University told me that the phrase which translates as "to go to market" or to "do the shopping" itself connotes unsavory, unrespectable associations. He said that women of the elite, therefore, avoid *bazaari* for this very reason. My respondents said that they do certain types of shopping, such as visiting the Bata shoe store or particular cloth merchants or stores carrying high class consumer goods, about once per month. The ordinary shopping for daily needs is done either by the husband, a male kinsman or a male servant. When women do enter town market areas they go with husbands, female servants or friends.

Adolescents in Rajshahi sometimes take daring risks unbeknownst to their parents, but my information on these issues relates to youth of the town, not to the under-graduates at the University. (I learned some things about the fancies and follies of the latter, but the data are not that reliable. I deliberately did not inquire about their personal lives or their attitudes about "boyfriends", as I feared such questions might spoil the rapport.) However, one of the teachers at a college in Rajshahi town told me that there is some "dating" among the college boys and girls, who meet each other secretly for attendance at the cinema or to gossip or, exceptionally, to engage in lovemaking. If a woman gets pregnant, her parents try to see that she gets an abortion in another town early enough so that neighbors and kin cannot detect it. He said that such episodes are rare and do not yet represent a problem in serious social delinquency in Rajshahi. He also informed me that there were problem youths who made a practice of trying to seduce girls by promising them that they

were in love with them and wanted to marry them. They were not often successful, however, as the girls knew the identities and habits of most of these "goondas", as he called them. Nevertheless, it is the girls who are the potential victims in these classic sorts of social deviance.

There is one other aspect in which women see themselves as potential victims and that is under the customary male rights to divorce, to put away the wife, or to take another wife. Informants with whom I discussed these issues said that middle class people frown upon such acts, divorce is not respectable to them, yet wives nevertheless fear such forms of repudiation and that this fear operates as a very effective control over any tendencies they might feel toward rebellion against mistreatment by a husband and in-laws. The good wife must satisfy her husband in every respect, and they said that because of this behavioral norm it is the wife who does all the adjusting after marriage. The husband is generally not expected to change his behavior to suit or to accommodate the wife. This one-sidedness is, of course, especially significant early in the marriage, before a couple has had the time to work out their own *modus vivendi*. That not a few women members of the Bangladesh elite are now able to admit anger about the sheer frustration of the twin threats of divorce and of repudiation through the appearance of a co-wife was expressed by delegates from all over the country at a seminar on Women in Economic Development organized under the auspices of the Bangladesh Economics Association on May 9-10, 1976, at the Teacher Student Center in Dacca. As one result of their deliberations, a memorandum was prepared and sent to the DPMLA Major General Zia requesting, among other things, that polygamy be made a crime, and that divorced women be properly provided for by their ex-husbands.¹⁸ As one of my informants who attended those meetings and chaired one of the sessions said to me, "Wait until the old men in the villages hear about this! They will think that the world has come to an end."

*The Self as Actor in Social Exchange: The Theme of the
Person vs. the Non-Person*

Students of the roles of women in Muslim societies have noted that the observation of purda or seclusion of women creates

situations when the woman is socially a non-person.¹⁹ In Bangladesh, so far as I was able to observe and to receive information from the social environment as well as from the women themselves, the fact that they are thought of mainly as social appendages of their men, especially of their husbands, keeps them still in several degrees, sometimes very subtle, of non-personhood. For example, one woman who wished to go overseas for further studies said that her guardian would not want her to do so, even if she earned a fellowship. Although she is a mature adult who has been teaching for some years now, she is still not fully a person in her right to make choices about the direction of her professional activities. Another faculty member told me that as much as she would like to travel she is not free to leave her family long enough to make it worthwhile. Choices about movement are definitely restricted for many of the women I interviewed, and their desires can always be overridden by a husband or children. One woman, the most conscious among those whom I met of herself as a person, said that she was elated by the seminar on women in Dacca because, for the first time, many women had stopped playing the hypocrite by pretending that they loved being the slaves of their families. They were beginning to think of themselves as human beings with generalized, not sexually restricted, human rights. But another brilliant and experienced teacher said that, in the last analysis, "We women are cooks ; no matter what else we do, we must be able to do that well." As one final example of the negative situation, I should mention the remark made to me by several of my respondents, that, as one woman put it, "Men do not like women to have a personality. They want them to be as personally neutral as possible." Or, as one of the men under-graduate students wrote on his questionnaire : "I want my future wife to be a beautiful doll." (This sentiment is so reminiscent of American song and feeling during an earlier era.) What is meant by "personality" here are those traits of self which reflect a separate identity, character, desire, to make choices for herself and thus potentially come into conflict with a male guardian. Or, as another very enterprising woman faculty member expressed it, "If a woman is unhappily married to a man she does not like, she must not complain about this to anyone. She just goes about her duties like a *robot*, and this is how she passes her days."

Nonetheless, there are women with character and personality who make potent choices for themselves and for those in their care. I met one such person who, a teacher in a college, was in her middle age and did not mind if she looked it. She was incredibly aggressive and energetic on behalf of her students ; in a previous job she managed to secure one scientific apparatus from abroad and got it copied by government engineers so that her students could use the correct equipment. When the engineers asked her about international copyright she told them, "Hang the copyright. Ours is a poor country. Just make the equipment and say nothing", and so they did.

Many of my respondents described for me mothers of profound strength of character, some with literary talents which were known only to their children. One woman told me that her mother, widowed for some years, had managed family lands after the father's death and was now virtually managing one son's business for him. She met clients and set prices for contracts. Another woman's mother had written two novels and many poems, and some of this writing was done on the quiet in the kitchen while she was preparing food. One of my respondents had lost both father and brothers in the 1971 holocaust and was herself the sole earning member of what was left of her nuclear family. Finally, one of my youngest respondents, a student, said that she did not wish to be married so that she could devote herself to study and teaching. This notion even today is almost unthinkable for a Bangladeshi woman. There are other examples which limitations on the length of this paper do not permit me to mention. In general, it seems reasonable to conclude from my data, at least, that strength of character is permissible in a woman under two conditions : that she employs it on behalf of the men in her life, especially husbands and sons ; and second, that she uses it as part of her more generalized care-taking duties towards others, like students. Personality employed, or deployed, on behalf of her own individualistic or personal choices is deplored by the social authorities in a woman's life, monitors like a husband, children, a mother-in-law.

The depth of a woman's socialization to her sense of duty in society, living as she does in extended families or segments of them (with the rest of the family not so far away), lends to

women of strong character or personality a stature which seems all the more impressive to one, like myself, who comes from a society which stresses mainly individualistic, often selfish choices as the dimensions of personal development. One sees in so many women of Bangladesh that quality of adulthood which Erikson calls true maturity, the acceptance of one's care-taking of the social vessel with its fragile cargo of humanity.

The Self in History: The Themes of Tradition and Modernity

All of the women I talked with and interacted with who had any relation to teaching were acutely aware of the forces of historical change, not only in their own lives but in the history of their culture, their country, the whole past of the South Asian subcontinent. Naturally, the ideas of historical presence of the under-graduates were more abstract and not of much personal significance to them, although modernity meant various positive and negative forces to them. Let me discuss some of the contrasts present in the thoughts of the mature women, as they reported them to me.

All were aware of a purda-ridden past. None of them wished to return to it, to the types of seclusion practised by their mothers and aunts which prevented many of the latter from receiving more than a rudimentary education, or which hindered them in expressing themselves other than through familial roles. One woman said that she was a conservative in these matters, that women's immodesty in shedding their traditional dress for maxis and slacks, or young women discarding the *orhni* of their traditional north Indian school uniform (*paijama*, *kurta* or "*shārt*", and *orhni*), was leading them astray. She herself dressed and was groomed immaculately, and she did not seem constrained when on the campus always to keep her head covered with the *anchol* of her sari. Nonetheless, she was among those known as pious women. The majority of the women faculty members I interviewed stressed their lack of interest in some of the traditional women's attitudes, like emphasis on one's facial appearance, hair styles, cosmetics, saris and ornaments. Some refuse to wear ornaments most of the time and they dress conservatively in plain saris. They feel themselves out of tune with the non-intellectual faculty

wives, whose feminine topics of conversation bore them. The latter are more traditional, of course, in their pursuit of purely gender-specific behavior.

Most of the women faculty who were also mothers expressed their sense of conflict between familial duties and professional needs. Many were acutely aware that promotion in their jobs was dependent upon their research and publications, but felt that most of the time there was no time for these activities. The pressure of their triple roles as wives, mothers and professional persons was onerous. Some said they would quit their job before neglecting their familial duties, others that they felt guilty about their lack of interest in cooking and hostessing on the one hand, or on the other about their attempts to get some professional writing done when they thought that the children's tutoring would be neglected. The demands of professional duty were thought of as the modern component in their lives, whereas those of their families represented not just tradition, but an element of tradition which was a profound aspect of their consciousness of themselves. Many of these women seemed able to have reduced the dissonance implicit in their situation by stressing the earning aspect of their jobs in relation to the economic hard times current in the country. Only a few said that the money was unimportant, that they worked only to help the country, to make use of their educations, or to keep busy.

Tradition was felt by some as a hallowed expression of their Islamic past and as the continuing practice of religious worship in the present. These women were pious and also strong, highly independent within the range of their roles as teachers and as mothers. These women did not say much to me voluntarily about the position of women in the country. When I asked them what measures would be necessary to improve women's lot, they emphasized the expansion of education as the primary need. This response was even stressed in reply to a question as to why they thought the health of Bangladesh women was so poor. Again, illiteracy and ignorance were cited as the main causes apart from the obvious one of poverty. When I asked, "But what about the number of chronically ill women of the middle class?" they said either that they, too, were ignorant of proper nutrition, or that actually even the middle class

could not afford to eat properly. At this point, they might also mention such factors as a surfeit of pregnancies, miscarriages, and childbearing. Not once did any of them suggest that traditional male attitudes toward women were significant factors in women's existential problems.

During an interview I had with one of the women physicians in the community, also a pious person, I had to probe to get her to respond to my question about resistance to birth control. At first, she claimed that women resisted it, and that the only solution was more education. When I suggested that their husbands might have something to do with it, only then did she admit that some women had asked her for such measures, saying they were fed up with childbearing, only to have the birth control vetoed by their husbands. Another gynaecologist whom I interviewed was less reticent to place some of the responsibility for worn-out and physically damaged women where it belongs. She has a clinic as well as serving in a hospital, so that she sees both rich and poor patients. In her opinion, the main reason why some women suffered physically to an extreme degree was the values in the society which encouraged men to think of women purely as servitors of their needs. Particularly with respect to village men, she said that "They don't worry about their wives' health. If one should die, or become barren, they can always get another wife to replace her." This physician was also known as religious, but of these two pious persons she had had the superior training and the greater clinical experience.

The modernism of those women who were more critical of their culture was sometimes expressed, also, as a criticism of their cultural past. This conceptualization applied to both religions : to Hinduism in the case of the treatment of widows, both Hindu and Muslim, in the sense that the Muslims were unduly influenced by Hindu attitudes ; and to Islam in the matter of women's seclusion. These two forces were seen by most of my respondents as regressive, anti-modern notions about women and their place in society and history. When students mentioned their favorite heroines, the two first choices were Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hosain from the past, and Indira Gandhi. Both of these famous women were persons who expertly blended traditional and modern elements from their

cultures into forces for change within their societies, and the women I interviewed seem to be accomplishing a similar task despite the obstacles.

If the sharing of domestic tasks with one's husband is a sign of modernity, some sharing appeared to take place. But in general the women reported that care of children's needs and household affairs was their responsibility. Whereas Seymour found that the modernizing of sex roles was associated with the absence of kin networks in some urban Indian families,²⁰ the division of labor by sex seemed to be mainly traditional on the Rajshahi campus, even though most of the families were not sharing quarters with the extended kin group. As noted earlier, men do the daily marketing and other town errands, and go to their offices but do very little around the home other than the planting and tending of gardens, an outside activity. Both husband and wife will occasionally go out together to social functions, but if these are in public places the men and women segregate themselves either in different rooms or on either side of the same room. Many of the men are accustomed to spending long hours at the Faculty Club in the evenings. Technically, faculty women are entitled to be members of this Club, but as there is no separate room for them they don't bother to appear in what is obviously a male preserve, except, of course, at specifically ceremonial occasions to which they are invited, such as a concert, or dinner party.

Jahan writes that,

If modernity is defined in terms of literacy, urbanization and adoption of a modern occupation, only a small fraction of Bengalee women can be classified as modern.²¹ In these terms all of my respondents could be so described, and their style of life reflected a modern consciousness. Most of them had deliberately dispensed with the narcissistic preoccupations of the beauty cult, yet they kept track of the appearance of their homes and persons, a competence expressed in neatness which avoided the trappings of excessive material possessions. In part, the austerity of household furnishing was their response to the devastations of 1971 and the insecurity they feel about the political future. Why bother with such things, was their question? They read newspapers and listened to radio broadcasts, and some women felt isolated and out of

it in Rajshahi, preferring to be living in Dacca where there were more interesting and useful activities for them outside of the home, also more diversions of cinemas, libraries, and so forth.

All of my respondents, whether or not they personally stressed religious practice, commented on the changes that had happened to women since their grandmothers' times, when the latter were kept in strict seclusion within the home, not educated or taught only to a class 3 level, and whose extra-curricular accomplishments, if there were any, were mostly ignored. In the maternal generation there appears an awareness of greater scope for personal development of some women, like the mothers who were great fanciers of literature, or who wrote novels and poetry, or who took pains to educate servants or paid school fees for servants' children. These were the women, often, who encouraged their daughters along with the fathers. The apparent result in the present generation of my respondents is women who are talented in research, child rearing, and in culinary arts, the exceptions being the rare persons who stress professional interests over household concerns.

All of the teachers I interviewed see certain changes being institutionalized in the present, such as women serving in the Dacca police force, but they feel that the general rate of change in the modernization of women's lives will be slow. Politics is seen by some as detrimental to such changes, as for example, the contrast of the present with the recent past, when women participated as politicians in the independence movement against Pakistan. Those in favor of outlawing polygamy and of forcing husbands to provide more adequately for divorced wives do not believe that such regulations will be soon forthcoming in a society which they consider to be dominated by the elders in the villages who are linked by relations of patronage with town politicians. Finally, my impression of men's ideas about women is that they are still very traditional, and that men feel threatened indeed by certain aspects of the modernization of women's roles. The implications of these attitudes will be considered in the next section of this paper.

The Self Existentially : Identity vs. Autonomy

If the foregoing aspects of consciousness which I have

attempted to treat thematically can be summed up in any way, it is as aspects of the psychological dimensions of identity and of autonomy. It seems to me that in the context of socio-cultural change (which includes economic, political, ethical and cultural changes), whereas the fundamental existential problem for middle class women in the United States is the question of identity, for middle class women in Bangladesh (and of India and Pakistan in the less urbanized areas, I would surmise), the fundamental problem is the question of autonomy. I mean these concepts as Erik H. Erikson uses them to refer to developmental processes which he treats as universals in the family of humankind. According to Erikson, the growing human person must come to terms with the problems posed for the individual by the orthogenesis of maturity and aging, a process which includes among its stages the resolution of conflicts around autonomy, an early developmental task, and identity, a later development. By identity is meant a self-definition, (whether or not it is or was self-chosen in the individualistic sense of "choice"), which is acceptable to oneself. By autonomy is meant self-determination in the sense of being in control of oneself, as opposed to being under the control, or custodianship, of others. The question of autonomy, it would seem to me, is especially significant in the modern world of rapid socio-cultural change, for without the opportunity to develop some measure of autonomy, the individual is not prepared consciously to handle the contradictions, conflicts, or irrationality of the transition from traditional cultural milieus to those representing degrees of "modernity".

It should be noted here that autonomy does not refer to "free will determinism" controversies, nor to the quantitative approach to "freedom" (how much or how little one has). It is also not involved in the level of social structural analysis which is concerned with issues of deviance, conformity and social control. The issue of autonomy, phenomenologically speaking, refers to a person's sense of self-determination: The ability, for example, to make decisions about oneself, about spatial movements, temporal dispositions, or the employments of one's own body and its activity in social exchange.

I think that we can agree that, in the rapidly changing atomistic society of the United States, identity is a problem for

both men and women, especially as our culture emphasizes individualistic choice-making about the self. (As though the question must be asked, "Let's see which role shall I play today?") This approach to the self is, of course, strongly fostered in the American economy, by the advertising business in particular.) But with the feminists, I maintain that identity in our culture is still more problematic for women than for men. The latter can always identify with their occupations, most of which convey some dignity to their incumbents; whereas the roles of domestic work and motherhood no longer suffice for many middle class American women as positive self-identifications. By way of illustration, one could cite the domestic household worker or nanny as the lowest prestige female occupation in the country. For many women, motherhood can no longer be euphemized as a career, nor do socially conscious women care to be defined in terms of biology. Yet American women have autonomy, more of it probably than any other woman in the world. Their freedom to move about outside the home, to speak to anyone of their choice, to satisfy their inclinations about their time, bodies and persons, is increasingly unquestioned within their social milieus. The traditional tendency to "privatize" women's lives and deeds has been strongly challenged by and through the various manifestations of the new women's movement, and we see in the media things "all hanging out" and "up front" that shock members of still traditional societies. And yet, with all their autonomy, middle class American women who are not identified with a particular occupation have difficulties about their identity; the problem that they should have solved, according to Erikson, as adolescents, has not been solved, and given the nature of American society, will no doubt not be solved until and unless such identity-diffusion and confusion can no longer be exploited economically.

By contrast, the numerically small middle to upper class of Bangladeshi women, who live in a still non-atomistic, familial society, do not appear to me to be seriously plagued by questions of their own identity, which is based on membership in their natal and affinal kinship groups, and enhanced by the social honor of *paribar* and *bangso* of parents and in-laws. In this society it is still meaningful, in fact it is almost exclusively meaningful, to belong to kin groups. Identity in general, for

both men and women, has not been privatized to the extent that it has in the west. As a corollary of the identity value of kin group embeddedness, the production of children is still highly valued despite the national population problem. Middle-class families are smaller, yes, but there are and must be children. Childless couples are pitied. For most of the women I interviewed, their identity as mothers bore more conscious significance than their identities as wives, which was second in importance, or as professional persons, a source of identity which ranked lowest. The few women who wished to place their professional interests ahead of domestic considerations were frustrated by the, even to them, legitimate expectations of members of their families that the family should come first.

In research reported by Dr. Mahmuda Islam,²² that fraction of a fraction of women who undertook work in occupations reported that their motives were mainly to add income to the family purse, or the extra needed for luxuries. Only secondarily did they choose service in order to make use of their educations. Of her sample of 200 working women, in fact, only 14 per cent gave economic independence and a desire freely to spend their money as a primary motive for working; these women belonged to the high income brackets, where one might surmise that the adoption of western notions of autonomy and female choice-making might have made some headway. Here one can see "independence" as an aspect of autonomy, and free spending of one's own money also as an aspect of the appearance of a privatized sense of identity. However, as Islam explained,

The vast majority of women in these income brackets are not keen to claim the right of free spending... The reason for the very low percentage of assertive women is that the basic structure of our patriarchal family has not changed and the time-honoured bias towards masculine superiority has not yet been questioned by our educated women.²³

I would question whether or not the freedom to spend one's income is so much a question of male superiority vs. female inferiority as it is a question of traditional vs. modern notions of what to do with income. After all, if the free spenders are

in the highest income brackets, then presumably their income is not essential to the maintenance of their family's level of living or status. Basically, my impression is that family-mindedness or familial devotion is a theme of consciousness shared by both men and women, and it is reflected in the middle class, for example, in the tendency to spend a lot on the children—clothes ; books and toys if possible—rather than on the parents. At this stage of women's entry into occupations, what they do with the money may not be as significant in estimating their sense of identity and of autonomy as other indicators. In any case, judging by my data, the educated professional women I interviewed and interacted with appeared to identify themselves as both persons of the home and of their professions. Which aspect of their identities they chose to emphasize had to be negotiated in terms of their own psychology and values as well as of those of the others in their lives, but being professional people certainly seemed to separate them, in their views, from women who were only wives and mothers, with whom they felt less in common intellectually.

One could not say, however, that the lives of my respondents are characterized by a degree of autonomy comparable to that exercised by western women, although they seem to possess more of it, and to act on it more, than the available literature on Bangladesh women would predict. For example, the rural women noted by Abdullah, Jahan, Ellickson, Lindenbaum, Sattar,²⁴ to mention a few of the sources, were not free to move into public arenas outside their homes. The University and college teachers were, as are most probably most of the middle to upper class women of Dacca. My respondents could move about outside their homes to their office and to other places on the campus like the Library or other teachers' offices ; they were free to intervisit one another and to go shopping in the bazaar. None of these women wears the burka outside their homes.

Nevertheless, many of them indicated to be directly or subtly that they wish they had more freedom of self-determination of their time and activities. Their husbands have a great deal of veto power over their choices, and, as several women expressed it in one way or another, "A wife must try very hard to please her husband." Pleasing husband, children and in-laws

took up a lot of their time which could otherwise be devoted to research and writing, reading in their subjects, etc. Many women said that they were just not free to develop themselves professionally, that their work began and ended in the class-room, that they simply did not have either the time or the encouragement to keep up with literature or to do any independent research of their own. A few women, however, had managed to triumph over such obstacles by publishing papers or books, either through their own highly disciplined management or because a husband permitted them the necessary time.

The extent to which female children are encouraged to develop a sense of autonomy around the time when it first appears, orthogenetically, at the age of 3, is unknown for this culture as there are as yet no studies of child-rearing which inform on this subject. However, there is indirect evidence from the testimony of some of my respondents that they recognize significant differences in the rearing of female children. This difference was referred to as "bringing girls up like boys". The parents of women who had had this kind of childhood treated their daughters and sons "the same"; both were educated identically with equal opportunities to learn and to develop intellectually. The girls were evidently given a sense of self worth equal to that of their brothers, they were treated with kindness and respect. As one professor told me, this presented a special problem for the parents in choosing the daughter's husband: "Women reared like boys would not want to be dominated, and so their parents must be extra careful in choosing the husband, for he must be a person who will treat his wife with respect, as a person in her own right." This woman also told me that she is rearing her daughters in the same way; she said, "I am very careful with them, I do not want them to feel dominated and so I do not just give them orders. I try to get their cooperation by suggestions and diplomacy." She said that her husband had been well-chosen, that if she needs time for professional duties he does not interfere. Another teacher who was similarly reared by her parents seemed to have the freedom of movement and inner direction one associates with the west. She lived in a different town from her family, because of the posting of her job, and she moved about without concern or fear, teaching and counselling her students, and going beyond the

demands of duty on their behalf. She took it upon herself to solicit dehydrated milk for her students from a local Red Cross official, and got it. Her history was filled with acts of initiative like this. She was, perhaps, unusual in that she had had a period of study in the United States ; she was not provincial but showed an international orientation as a context for discussions of her nation and its needs.

Although the women teachers in my research have more autonomy than most of their compatriots, by their own admission most of them wished they had more. Typical were the words of one professor, who told me,

Women of the educated class in our country lead very frustrating lives, and they are depressed quite often. They do not have enough freedom because of the social customs and conventions. I am depressed sometimes. I love to travel, but leaving my family to do so would be a breach of duty ; my children are not old enough to be left alone [By U.S. standards they were. But Bangladeshi women feel inordinately guilty when they leave their children in someone else's care, even if it is the father's.]... Here I am always torn between my duty at home and to my students. I can never feel as though I am doing anything well. My family criticize me for neglecting them.

When I asked what gave her the greatest sense of accomplishment, she said,

We women have difficulty getting this. I think it is easier for the men, they are responsible for their careers and salary, the women must account for the rest of the household. I have to worry if my children get sick, it is *my* fault in the eyes of my husband and of society.

One of the most autonomous of my respondents is a woman whose parents were very orthodox and conservative, who wanted to marry her off at an early age. She was encouraged by her older brothers, however, who opposed the parents on her behalf. She obtained her college degrees on scholarships. Because her father and brothers died in the liberation war, she is now the only earning member of her family. When I asked her about women in the nation, she said,

The very low marriage age of women prevents them from understanding their future or their life. First, they are obedient to their parents, and then to the husband. 99 percent of them are destroying their lives in this way, because they are illiterate. Of the educated women, only a few know what is really happening to them. Most women are always obedient, they obey their husband as a god.

The girls at Rajshahi University are more progressive than the boys, but the girls are defeated by their parents. In our society the male is more precious than a girl. The fate of women is changing though, the mentality is changing, many women are ready to do any job. There are women in the police in Dacca.

The culture is no doubt undergoing changes, but I think it is fair to say that in varying degrees autonomy rather than identity is the substance of these women's struggles with life. As all of my respondents said, which seems to sum it all up, the freedom given to the bride to move about, to talk to non-related people, to make her own decisions is strictly up to her husband. Not her family, or even her in-laws, but the husband decides how custodial he will be with his wife. Thus, for well educated women the choice of husband is more crucial than ever. As a few women told me, if divorce were as simple in Bangladesh as it is in the United States, hundreds of marriages would be dissolved. They said or implied that an enormous frustration among women of the educated elite simmers just below the usually restrained and conventional surface of social life.

Tentatively, I would say that the women who seemed best adjusted to their transitional existence between a way of life formerly dominated by domestic duties and a present in which the professional and domestic duties both had somehow to be satisfied, were the religious women, those who leaned on piety and faith. These were the women who did not criticize the culture, let alone men, for their problems. Their approach to social dislocations was essentially rationalistic: leaving aside the obvious solutions of technology and development, education was seen by these women as the panacea for social ills, including the problems of women. The male-dominated values of the culture were not called into question, although they nevertheless did not

deplore the disappearance of strict purda from their lives. Either they refused out of discretion to criticize cultural values of male superiority and domination, or they had concluded that these cultural norms would lose power under the processes of modernization of the culture. Interestingly, none of them mentioned Turkey as a model. Their spiritual homeland was the Arab middle east, but religious and social values seemed to have been compartmentalized in such a way that they did not seem dissonant.

Women who were not particularly religious, on the other hand, were not reluctant to cite the domination of male superiority as a value they wished to be freed from, nor were they restrained about allowing their frustration to surface in our conversations. But, as Mernissi shows in her intriguing and valuable book, *Beyond the Veil*, Islam is a man's religion, a creed designed to enhance the relation of man with god at the expense of his relation to women.²⁵ The pious Islamic woman, therefore, must support this position. I believe this is the reason why the pious women I interviewed chose not to accuse the values of male superiority and domination as among the reasons for the wretched general condition of women in their nation, and this is the reason why they emphasized education as the chief remedy. For, in its own subversive way, education defeats the purposes of sexual segregation and inferiority.²⁶ It was education, after all, which was cited as the rationale for parents rearing girls "like boys".

In conclusion, if any conclusion is possible in so transitional a cultural and social context, it seemed to me that of those women who were willing to criticize their cultural tradition, like the modernized women discussed by Mernissi,²⁷ their human goal was not so much a question of a technical equality with men as it was the autonomy they needed to become fully human beings rather than just merely women. To be fully human seemed to entail, for them, respect and dignity as persons, not simply as a consequence of their performance of traditional roles.²⁸ While not seeking to become dominators themselves, they were disgusted with male domination and with the social hypocrisy of continuing to pretend that their subordination as members of their sex was justified.

REFERENCES

¹ This is a revised version of a paper read at the Twelfth Annual Bengal Studies Conference, Panel III on Bangladesh, chaired by Peter J. Bertocci, at the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, April 10, 1976. The research on which this paper is based was carried out while I was Ford Foundation Teaching cum Research Fellow at the Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Rajshahi University, Rajshahi, Bangladesh, 1975-76.

² See, for example, all of the papers in *Women for Women ; Bangladesh 1975* ; Husain 1958 ; Lindenbaum 1974 ; Sattar 1974.

³ Needed is research by women of the culture comparable to Roy 1976 and Mernissi 1975. Pastner's 1974 paper is also noteworthy as having gotten into the woman's perspective of purdah.

⁴ Qadir 1975.

⁵ As reported by a colleague at Rajshahi University.

⁶ Islam 1975 : 108-112 ; for the same forces at work earlier, Husain 1958:54.

⁷ Alam 1975:122.

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ Indian Council of Social Science Research 1975:76 ; Alam 1975:150.

¹⁰ Jahan 1975:3.

¹¹ 1975:93-94.

¹² I would like here to express my gratitude to my respondents for their cooperation in this research as well as for their inspiration to me as fellow professionals struggling to accomplish our aims. Since individuals might be easily identified, I do not wish to publish the exact number of faculty women interviewed out of the total, very small number of women teachers. This information can be obtained from me personally by other scholars. The total number of women interviewed both on and off the campus was 43 ; of these 1 was Christian, 4 were Hindu, and the rest Muslim.

¹³ My enthusiastic student assistants were Miss Sarah Baidya, 2nd year Hons. in English ; and Mr. M. Quamruz Zaman, M.A., M. Phil. candidate in the Institute of Bangladesh Studies, Rajshahi University.

¹⁴ Jahan 1975:3.

¹⁵ *ibid.* 3-4.

¹⁶ Compare Roy 1976 : 121-123.

¹⁷ 1973 : 316. Pastner has also noted manipulation by illness : 1974, 411.

¹⁸ I was unfortunately out of the country when this meeting was called and only learned about it after I returned. My information on the women's demands written up at the meeting comes from one of the Rajshahi University women professors who chaired a session.

¹⁹ Mernissi 1975 : 89-97 ; Papanek 1972 : 298.

²⁰ 1975 : 767-768.