

“Self-Sacrifice” versus “Self-Interest”: A Non-Historicist Reading of the History of Women’s Rights in India

Rochona Majumdar

Srimati Basu’s important study of women and property in present day New Delhi begins with a very timely and pertinent question, namely why have laws of equal inheritance not worked for Indian women in over four post-independence decades?¹ As Basu rightly observes, Hindu inheritance practices have remained remarkably unaffected by legislative interventions. Thanks to the passage of the so-called Hindu Succession Act of 1956, Hindu women now have unquestioned legal access to their paternal property even after they get married. Yet, numerous women, all over India, willingly sign away this right after they get married in order to appear in their brothers’ eyes as truly good-hearted sisters. The act happens by choice, though there are, no doubt, cultural pressures that promote this particular decision. “One of the central tropes that codes Indian women’s disenfranchisement to property on the grounds of customs and ancient loyalties,” Basu tells us “is the specter of the uncaring and greedy sister who claims family property.”² Basu is absolutely right in pointing to this peculiar anomaly that marks the lives of many women in India—women who in every other way are politically conscious, socially active citizens of the nation. Through an extensive series of interviews Basu concluded, “what might appear to be a jumble of deluded attitudes from women refusing property were often complex attempts at optimizing material survival and bridging emotional alienation within a system giving them limited agency and subjectivity.”

I would like to utilize the conclusions drawn by Basu as a starting point from which to undertake a reconstruction of the history of women’s rights in India. Basu argued that, women’s decisions to give up their property rights implied that they were locked in a patriarchal system where they “maximized their short-term priorities at the cost of undermining their long-term material interests, and feelings of love and loyalty toward parents and the natal family were enacted in ways that bolstered male privilege.”³ While I agree with Basu’s assessment of the situation, I would like to posit that looking at the articulation of rights by Indian women historically, might present a more optimistic picture than the one emerging from Basu’s ethnography. I argue that from the turn of the twentieth century as Indian women became democratic individuals, they did so under the pull and pressure of different and contradictory ideals of personhood. The story of women’s rights emerged out of a seemingly continuous divide between law on the one hand and sentiments and duty on the other in such a way that women in India have often lived out the tension between their rights and sentiments related to duties. The woman who relinquishes her claims to property may not be as resigned to that fate as Basu’s analysis suggests, however. This conflict between legal rights and sentiments was not a replay of the modernity ver-

sus tradition binary. At issue was a tussle between a modern, liberal idea of the individual as a bearer of interest and an equally modern romanticization of the sentiments of the extended family.

Women’s rights and the Indian Past

The poster advertising *Mr. And Mrs. 55*, a popular Hindi film released in 1955, starkly captured contemporary perceptions of the role of women in the years immediately following the independence of India.⁴ The years 1955-56 are memorable in the annals of an Indian “modernity” because sections of the famous Hindu Code Bill, which among other things gave Hindu women the right to institute divorce proceedings and inherit a share of their paternal property were codified as law during this time.⁵ The film was a satirical romantic comedy based on the pitfalls of Western liberal reform in India. The film’s poster was divided into two parts. In one the heroine (Guru Dutt) was shown buckling the heroine’s (Madhubala’s) shoes as she stood attired in Western garb. The other half of the poster showed the heroine clad demurely in a sari touching the hero’s feet.

Both these images are a good guide to understanding the way in which the question of history was framed in debates on Indian/ Hindu womanhood. One position favored by legislators and activists, both male and female, advocating women’s legal rights was that history—the collective past of Indian society—represented a disadvantage for Indian women. It therefore became incumbent upon all reform-minded men and women to overcome that history in the struggle for women’s rights so that women could become the equals of men in both public and private life.⁶ The other position put forward in opposition to this—not, however, with any intention of barring women from public life—was that it was indeed Indian history that empowered women to meet the demands of modern nationhood by providing inspiring examples of women of virtue such as Sita, Savitri, and Damayanti. These mythical names became iconic and routine in what was written about women’s emancipation from about the end of the nineteenth century. Individuals opposed to this point of view simply inverted the sign attached to these names. That is to say, instead of looking on these names as recalling a history of women’s agency and respect in Indian society, they saw them as totems of patriarchal oppression and deprivation of women. The past was thus an important item in public debates to do with women’s modernity. The central question around which this discourse evolved was whether the past produced the disadvantages that women had to overcome in order to be fully participating citizens, or was it a resource that made Indian women specially suited to participation in national life, whether as virtuous mothers and wives at home or as dutiful members of the public sphere?

This became—and has remained—an enduring question in many public and historiographical debates on “women’s status” in India. But one can also see that by turning history into an either/or proposition, this debate, while often rhetorically powerful, both focused on and at the same time emptied the past of all its details. Women came to be depicted either as capable of sacrificing their interests and therefore being virtuous, or as interest-bearing subjects who were disadvantaged precisely through the talk of self-sacrifice.

Two examples from the turn of the twentieth century will help in illustrating the dualism inherent in the early and mid-twentieth-century face-off with the past. They will also help to demonstrate how that same dualism has marked some eloquent and sophisticated historical accounts of the period. In the opening section of her remarkable analysis of the life and works of Pandita Ramabai Uma Chakravarti asks why Indian history writing has remained silent on Ramabai’s achievements?⁷ She suggests that Ramabai’s absence from dominant historiography is not a case of forgotten history but a case of suppression. This is evident when we consider how vocal historical accounts are about the achievements of figures like Annie Besant, “whose life and work invariably find mention in any history of modern India.”⁸ Annie Besant provides “a counterpoint to Ramabai and was probably perceived as such.” Chakravarti notes that Annie Besant’s views on women’s reform were markedly different from Ramabai’s.

Analyzing the contents of a lecture (also published as a pamphlet in 1904) entitled “The Education of Hindu Girls” she notes how Besant advocated, “the launching of a ‘national movement of girls’ education’ on ‘national lines’, which should not be dwarfed by the modern view. Women were to be thought of as mothers, wives, or ‘Brahmavadinis’ of the older days,” and not as rivals and competitors of men. Besant’s ideal according to Chakravarti was to “bring back the Gargis and Maitreys of yore” and therein she felt lay the salvation of India.⁹ Contemporary as well as present-day perceptions on Annie Besant viewed her as working for the welfare of Indian women by celebrating and attempting to revive some of the mythic icons of the past. By contrast, Ramabai mounted a strident critique of Brahmanical society, and her rejection of the “past” was eventually best captured by her decision to convert to Christianity and even “led other high-caste Hindu widows to do likewise.” In Chakravarti’s analysis, the fact that Ramabai “symbolized a threat to the moral and social order of the kind of nationalism being forged by Hindu nationalists” accounted for her marginalization in historical accounts of the period.¹⁰ Ramabai’s critique/ rejection of the past was viewed in some accounts, both then and now as pivotal to her project of bettering Indian women’s (specifically the Indian widow’s) lot. The question facing us is whether either Besant or Ramabai provide an adequate lens with which to analyze the rise and growth of an Indian feminism. Can we take either of their views of the past as representative of the numerous women who worked, wrote, and fought for women’s rights under colonial rule as well as in postcolonial India? Do either of the two women provide a complete exemplar of the ways in which women’s rights have been articulated in the Indian context, or are there strands in both their writings that inform the history of rights?

In this essay, I turn to a corpus of written work—women’s writings, biographies of reformist women,

the writings of notable legislators, and editorial reports from a few early twentieth-century newspapers—to undertake a different way of positioning the past in order to analyze the history of women’s rights in India. My aim is to document that Indian women’s self-fashioning bears plural and contradictory relations to liberal conceptions of personhood and rights. Towards the close of the nineteenth century, and even in the early decades of the twentieth century, a very influential ethic among both men and women was that of self-sacrifice. While a certain Hindu “tradition” was invented and invoked to justify this imagination, what made the figure of the “new woman” fundamentally democratic was the insistence—utopian to be sure, but heard in all reformist literature—that all acts of sacrifice be absolutely voluntary. This is why nineteenth century reformism could be critical of domestic violence—because such violence extracted sacrifice and submission only by force—and yet fail to find any solutions to women’s problems through their participation in public life.

With the rise and spread of women’s education, the entry of increasing numbers of women from all social classes into the labor force, the increasing visibility of the plight of innumerable child widows in the twentieth century, and educated middle-class women became more aware and impatient of the limitations of a literary, humanist critique. The feeling that other kinds of guarantees, such as those provided by legal safeguards, were needed was strengthened as the era of mass politics began and women became a political category (and later an electoral one as well). These feelings also gave birth to various women’s associations and what eventually became the organized women’s movement in India. This, however, does not mean that the humanist criticisms of the family immediately declined yielding to a more self-consciously political critique. The ethical figure lived on alongside the political critique—producing plural “sources of the self” for women—and found elaboration in novels, films, biographies, and women’s own writings about themselves. And it is at the point of intersection of these two critiques—the ethical critique of self-interest and the legal-political defense of the same idea of interest – that we may locate the birth of a notion of women’s rights in India.

No history of women’s rights in India is possible without addressing the legacy of the nationalist movement. Indian nationalism was undoubtedly a key factor in the rise of the women’s movement. Women first articulated their demands and rights in the context of the national movement. We need to be careful, however, in our understanding of the relationship between nationalism and feminism, for sometimes the effort to understand the activities of early reformist women through the axis of nationalism results in attributing more agency to the national movement than to the individuals and their respective projects. Furthermore, many of these explanations presume that the goals of the national movement led by the Indian National Congress and those represented by the organized women’s movement in India were always perfectly aligned to one another. While this was true in some cases, we find many instances especially from the 1920s when the women’s movement diverged from the goals of the congress. Moreover, many of the women I will designate as India’s early feminists defined their life activities without ever explicitly addressing the question of nationalism. Keeping these caveats

in mind it will be useful to briefly summarize certain influential and pertinent arguments about the relationship between progressive women's work and nationalism.

According to some analyses of the rise of the women's movement in India, the call of the nation brought numerous women out of their homes. Once the task of liberating the country from the foreign yoke was completed, women could retreat into the domestic domain. Geraldine Forbes, writing of women who participated in the non-cooperation and civil disobedience movements led by Mahatma Gandhi, observed that women "wanted to demonstrate their patriotism, not rebel against society." In order for family roles and patriotism to be mutually compatible, they often rebuffed patriotic gestures toward their cause by subaltern groups such as. As Forbes astutely remarked,

First-wave feminism in India, was dominated by social feminism. This ideology maintained men and women were different by nature and that this difference justified women's claim to a voice in the laws of the country. Women leaders focused their attention on the problems of high-caste Hindu women: child marriage, training and employment for widows, female education, and social skills necessary to participate in a changing world. These were not the most significant issues for low-caste women, women who worked for a living, or Muslim women.¹¹

Nationalism maintained the essential differences between the sexes, and this difference paved the way for women to articulate a demand for "women's" rights. Furthermore, in Forbes's analysis there was no solidarity between upper and middle-class women and their lower and lower middle-class counterparts. It was not until the 1930s, she argued, that the leading feminist voices became aware of the problems of women laborers, and "even then they constructed solutions without consulting the women they wanted to help. Their feminism was class and caste limited and above all, respectable."¹² Forbes also argued that middle-class women often pragmatically deployed images of mythical female characters in order to draw into the nationalist cause those less educated than themselves. Citing the case of Latika Ghosh who was active in the Gandhian movement and was also inspired by Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose, she wrote,

Gandhi chose Sita as the ideal because he knew the image would resonate with his female audiences. And he was not the only one to use this tactic. When Latika Ghosh wanted to mobilize Bengali women, this Oxford educated, socially radical woman talked about Durga, the Suras and Asuras, and exhorted her audience to emulate the goddesses of old. Like Gandhi, Latika knew that she had to address her audiences in an idiom they understood. The majority of women were not well educated but they knew Puranic stories and could talk knowledgeably about goddesses and heroines.¹³

The "nationalist resolution of the women question"¹⁴ allowed for women to step out of the house without defying their traditional roles as wives and mothers and devote themselves to the service of the nation. Their participation in the movement as "Indian" women prepared the discursive terrain upon which an indigenous patriarchy could stake its claims to nationhood vis-à-vis alien rule.¹⁵

Forbes's reading of women's participation in Gandhian

movements must be counterpoised against other recent feminist readings of Gandhi. Madhu Kishwar, for instance. While critical of Gandhi's notions of "voluntary enlightened widowhood" as a great "social asset" because he believed that a Hindu widow had "learnt to find happiness in suffering and accepted suffering as sacred," conceded that he wanted men to emulate the same ideal.¹⁶ Gandhi argued, "Hinduism will remain imperfect as long as men do not accept suffering as many widows did and, like them withdraw their interest from the pleasures of life."¹⁷ The capacity in both men and women to sacrifice out of a wellspring of empathy for fellow humans was celebrated in nationalist-reformist writings from the nineteenth century until about the third decade of the twentieth century. Reformist literature, in both the fictional and nonfictional modes, created a romantic and ethical woman subject, whose highest and most ethical act consisted in sacrificing—entirely by choice—her interests to those of the men in both her natal and husband's family. What made this sacrifice an ethical and democratic choice was that it was made entirely voluntarily. This vision of ethics was opposed to all forms of forced submission of women to men. One can see now why a Sita who withstood Ravana's advances or went through fire to prove her honor was an image that resonated so powerfully in nationalist period. The self-sacrificing woman in private life became a counterpart to the nationalist imagination of the public man as one who renounced all self-interest. This is best exemplified when we think of Gandhi.

Most nineteenth century ideologues did not articulate their reformism in terms of a demand for individual rights. It would be a mistake, however, to assume that their agenda was opposed to rights. They had an idealized faith in legality while maintaining that rights were ends to the inculcation of a harmonic social order. Social harmony constituted for them, rhetorically speaking, the essence of an "Indian" civilization and tradition. Thus, in different contexts Gandhi articulated a faith in the ideal of enlightened voluntary widowhood, while Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose's autobiography *An Indian Pilgrim* can be read as a quest for a nationalist self, whose *telos* went beyond the creation of a nation-state.¹⁸ At the core of this reformist nationalism was the figure of an ethical individual (both male and female) whose ultimate principled act consisted in making sacrifice, or *tyag*. As recently observed by Ranajit Guha, "Translated loosely in English as renunciation or sacrifice and trivialized by indiscriminate use in common parlance, *tyag* speaks for the ethics of overcoming the resistance of what stands in the way of becoming. It works, in this role, closely with *sraddha*, the respect an individual owes to others as one who is adequate to his own possibility and entitled to his own respect."¹⁹ The critical point is that this nationalist imagination however patriarchal and impractical, had an irreducible element of democracy in it, the requirement that sacrifice be completely voluntary and unforced.

While the figure of the self-reformed, humane man or woman was central to early nationalist expositions, from about the 1920s there was a deliberate distancing of the organized women's movement from these tropes. A number of factors underpinned this new orientation of women's goals. From the turn of the twentieth century, middle-class Indian feminists became increasingly aware of certain currents in a more "global" feminism. As argued by Antoinette Burton, British feminists caught up in the suffrage agitation during

this time represented Indian women as a "special feminist burden." In British suffrage periodicals, Burton has shown us, the Indian woman was depicted as lacking in emancipatory consciousness. She was considered to be an "unrepresented colonial constituency" whose political and social wellbeing could only be safeguarded by imperial feminists. "Indian womanhood" was therefore mobilized in the English suffrage movement as one of the most important justifications for granting the vote to Englishwomen. As enfranchised subjects, the latter could uphold the interests of women in the remote corner of the empire called India, thereby making imperialism more benevolent.²⁰

Arguments like the above, as shown by Mrinalini Sinha, were in turn co-opted by Indian women to challenge the colonial state "for ignoring women's demands and for bolstering Indian orthodoxy." Sinha shows how in the context of the Sarda Bill, which became the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, Indian feminists used the American writer Katherine Mayo's controversial book *Mother India* to argue that the colonial state had done little to remedy the ills afflicting women's lives. As they struggled for more radical reforms in the 1920s, Sinha argues, "organized women's growing impatience with sentimentalized invocations of the past was beginning to be voiced in various forums." She quotes Kamlabai Lakshman Rao refuting the use of *shastras* (scriptures) by "orthodox" politicians to oppose the Sarda Bill with the declaration, "we want new *shastras*."²¹ Similarly, at the international women's conference organized by the British Commonwealth League in London, Dhanvanthi Rama Rao declared, "We are not prepared now to talk of our sentimental past. We are only looking at what now exists and trying to make the future as glorious as our pasts."²² These attitudes were reflected in the resolutions that were adopted in the "Charter of Womanhood's Vision of a Reformed India" on 29 December 1927. The resolutions called for "equal pay for equal work, maternity benefits for factory women, 'Equal Standards of Morality', and equal rights to divorce for women."²³

Sinha has also shown us how in the course of these political developments in the second and third decades of the twentieth century, institutional nationalism and feminism often parted ways. Her analysis of women's agitation for the Sarda Bill delineates how organized women's demands for radical reform helped in shaping a nationalist agenda, which was not necessarily in perfect alignment with the line espoused by the official nationalism of the Indian National Congress.

As an organized women's movement gathered further strength, a politics oriented toward safeguarding women's rights and interests as *women* came into being. This was most apparent at the times when the women's movement declared its differences with the official nationalist line. For instance, when the British government appointed the Hindu Law Committee to review the diverse body of Hindu family laws under the chairmanship of B.N.Rau, there was some question whether women's organizations like the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) would cooperate with the committee because the Congress had also launched the civil disobedience movement. Gandhi argued that women should not spend their time and energy on the question of their legal status, but focus their attention on more pressing matters.²⁴ Jawaharlal Nehru too gave greater priority to agrarian questions than to

family law and opposed cooperation with the British government.²⁵ Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, a follower of Gandhi, however, "disagreed with him and said that the AIWC had worked very hard to get the government to appoint this committee and so women should cooperate with it."²⁶ Many women like Vilasini Devi Shenai declared that the battle for women's equality was equally, if not more, important than the struggle for Indian freedom.²⁷ Increasingly large numbers of educated, middle-class women focused their energies toward giving shape to an independent women's movement in India.

The result of such agitation by women, Sinha rightly points out, was the "abstract construction of normative citizen subject"—one who was above all divisions of class, race and religion.²⁸ Middle-class women used the "rhetoric" of women's empowerment and national improvement to elide internal differences that existed between women coming from diverse social groups. Sinha's analysis on the importance of the "rhetoricity" that underpinned women's self-representation is key to understanding the emergence of a movement for women's rights.

This abstract argument could be posited by the women's movement in the 1920s because from the late nineteenth century, progressive women were becoming increasingly aware that a humanist critique of existing domestic arrangements in India would have only limited application. As we analyze the work done by Swarnakumari Devi or Saroj Nalini Dutt in the arena of women's welfare or editorial reports in the women's section of leading newspapers, we find how middle-class women's activism to uplift of their less privileged sisters at the grass roots level paved the way for the birth of a liberal citizen subject—defined in terms of her rights and interests rather than class or community identity. While in their own lives, many feminists retained the marks of an idealized humanism, it no longer central in defining women's political persona in the way it had been in the nineteenth century or in the works of people like a Mohandas Gandhi or a Rabindranath Tagore.

In order to chart the complex relationship of the "Indian" past to the more global history of rights, I will now analyze the writings of some important women who devoted their lives to the cause of female empowerment from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. This is by no means an exhaustive analysis of the achievements of all progressive, middle-class women. I have selected a few representative examples from Bengal—women who illustrate in their lives' works the complex negotiations with the past mentioned above. I have also restricted my study to Hindu women. This period also saw the emergence of a number of remarkable Muslim women into the public sphere, like Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Nurunnehar Khatun, Fazilatun Nesa, and many others.²⁹

Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Feminism

It is well known that a large amount of colonial legislation pertaining to women and marriage was the result of male reformist activity. Existing historical works by numerous scholars such as Lata Mani, Asok Sen, Amales Tripathi, Lucy Carroll, Tanika Sarkar, Mrinalini Sinha, and Dagmar Engels establishes conclusively that the abolition of *sati*, the remarriage of Hindu widows, and the raising of the age of consent for sexual intercourse within and outside marriage were all the handiwork of male reformers.³⁰ Rarely did reformers seek

female opinion even in matters that had direct impact on their daily lives. Much of nineteenth century reformism, targeted mostly at Hindu women, was propelled by a male vision of civility and humanism. Women, naturally, constituted an important component to this overall vision. But, there was no (overt) effort made to accommodate, or cultivate, a parallel feminist imagination of reform in the nineteenth century. This pattern of social reform started to change in the late nineteenth century when we witness the beginnings of a rudimentary women's movement in India.

In 1882, two organizations were established in Bengal and Maharashtra respectively, the "Sakhi Samiti" by Swarnakumari Devi, sister of Rabindranath Tagore and the "Arya Mahila Samaj" by Pandita Ramabai Saraswati. While the former was turned into a craft center for widows and young girls, Ramabai went on to establish a number of women's associations in various towns of Bombay presidency and an institute called "Sharda Sadan" that was committed to providing education and employment to young widows. In 1901 the "Bharat Stri Mahamandal" was founded by Saraladevi Chaudhurani, daughter of Swarnakumari Devi, regarded by many historians as the first all-India organization for women.³¹ Muslim women, as shown by Gail Minault in the case of north India and Sonia Nishat Amin in Bengal, also entered the field of reform, in comparatively fewer numbers, around the 1880s. While most early feminists struggled to spread women's education and equip young widows to earn a livelihood, with the exceptions of radicals like the leading Bengali Muslim feminists, Begum Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and Pandita Ramabai, they never challenged the basic gender norms operational in Indian society. It is necessary, however, to closely analyze the writings of some of these women to reach a fuller understanding of the radical import of their works.

In 1889 the Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore presented his impressions of a lecture delivered by Pandita Ramabai he recently attended in the western Indian city of Poona.³² While the author generally admired the work done by Ramabai and was extremely critical of some dissident male voices in the audience who booed Ramabai forcing her to end the lecture prematurely, the piece contained some significant refutations of the position she upheld. Tagore argued that there existed certain "natural" differences between men and women. Rooted in biology, these differences made women more emotional, loving, gentle and sentimental in comparison to men. While he condemned violence perpetrated by men against women, the poet made a scathing statement against some anonymous women who "in a nasal voice keep complaining we are subordinated to men, we are bound to seek their protection, our conditions are terrible."³³ Such attitudes, he remarked, "tainted the man-woman relationship." It was the wife's "duty" he argued to seek the shelter provided by her husband, just as it was a man's duty to respect his wife. To argue that this natural organization of social life was loathsome for women would eventually bring harm to women and sow the seeds of discord in family life.³⁴

Swarnakumari Devi (1857- 1932), was a prolific writer of many novels, short stories and historical romances as well as an essayist on scientific matters, wrote a strong rejoinder to Tagore's essay.³⁵ In this essay, I will be looking at her rejoinder to the essay by Rabindranath Tagore published in *Bharati*, four other non-fictional prose pieces, her autobiography *Sekele*

Katha and counterpoise these works against her successful novel *Snehalata Ba Palita* (Snehalata Or The Adopted One). Together the contents of these works give us a window into the world of one of the earliest late nineteenth century feminist thinkers.³⁶ It is clear from these writings that even though Devi, like many other progressive women of her time, regarded education for girls and women as utterly crucial to any project to alleviate the conditions of Hindu women and considered education the ultimate equalizer between men and women, this project was conceived within the ambit of a hierarchical but humane vision of family life that male writers like Rabindranath Tagore idealized. Historians like Himani Bannerji have argued that such a point of view was the product of women like Devi imbibing ideals of Victorian femininity. Bannerji saw a utilitarian logic always triumphing over sentimentality in the works of Devi and her contemporaries. Bannerji characterized feminine writing in contemporary popular periodicals on social reform issues in the following manner:

There was that 'feminine' sensibility combined with refinement and sentimental predilections, but this was simultaneously undercut, most vigorously by women themselves, with utilitarian reformism—through the practical homemaker and the figure of an asexual, moral, forthright female educator for whom conjugality and mothering is less a pleasure than a duty.³⁷

In a recent article on women's education Tanika Sarkar aptly observed that, the notion that English and Victorian middle-class domesticity was a real reference point and a usable model for middle-class Bengalis seems particularly unconvincing.³⁸ After all, she argues, the Victorian lady did not have to hide her literacy; she did not have to go through child marriage or the experience of being with a polygamous husband, nor was she forbidden to remarry when widowed. Drawing from Sarkar's work, I would argue that while Victorian ladies could well have, and indeed often did, serve as exemplars to their Indian counterparts, to understand Indian women's decisions through the yardstick of Victorian Britain often ends up simplifying the past and ignoring the complex negotiations that everyday life brought for many women on the ground. By drawing such comparisons, historical representation of women invariably eschews a part of feminine subjectivity in order to understand their radical potentialities. We need to ask whether it is possible for women to be progressive and, at the same time, idealize and enjoy their roles as good and virtuous mothers, daughters and sisters. In so doing, is it not possible that they would look to past icons as role models? In invoking these multiple images and strategies to their cause, progressive women were also reflecting their perceptions of the differences that existed between their own social and economic conditions and those of poorer, lower-class women. Most middle-class reformist women often alluded to iconic figures of the past as inspirational and national archetypes, but they were also acutely aware that in a country where the bulk of women were in dire need of the basic necessities of everyday life, idealization of the past could provide little solace from the daily travails of existence. There was a gap between the way in which middle-class women fashioned themselves as feminists/ humanists and the programs they deemed necessary for their less privileged sisters. They were acutely aware that for many lower-class women or widows the very concept of a family and support

was in question.

In this sense turn-of-the-century feminism in Bengal was as much an "uneven development" as its nineteenth century Victorian counterpart.³⁹ Bengali feminist writers like Devi would have agreed with women like Caroline Norton (whose personal case was crucial in the passing of the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act in Britain) that women had a "right" to male protection. This right was "founded on nature, equity and religion." Norton had argued that power "is on the side of men—power of body, power of mind, power of position. With that power should come, not only the fact, but the *instinct* of protection." There are strong resonances between this position and Devi's refutation of Tagore. Devi argued that it was not as if Ramabai was opposed to looking upon men as a source of support. Nor did Ramabai, according to Devi, regard *pati-bhakti* (devotion to husband) as contrary to a woman's duty. Ramabai stood against the daily injustices perpetrated by men against women and considered these detrimental to society. It was to erase these injustices that she raised her voice in protest. Viewing Ramabai as part of a global women's movement Devi wrote,

I believe—that the movement for equality between men and women now seen in Europe and America is rooted in a desire to be freed from these daily injustices of men. Women are reluctant to tolerate men's cruelty any longer, but they are not averse to treating men as sources of support. The day the latter happens humankind will become extinct from earth for that day women will no longer want to enter the bonds of matrimony. The bond of marriage is in reality an acceptance of men's support.⁴⁰

She interpreted Ramabai's statements on equality between men and women as a call in favor of women's education. If education were the primary means by which women could realize the true implications of being a *sabadharmini* (sharer of *dharma* or the path of duty) and *sangini* (friend or companion) to her husband, and more importantly if education were the only means by which a people could realize its greatness, then why are men so neglectful of the cause of female education? The answer, she argued, lay in the fact that in this matter they did not consider women equal partners. Furthermore, a handful of middle and upper-class *bhadramahila* (literally, gentle women, refers to upper and middle-class ladies) acquiring University degrees was no index of the education of Bengali women generally. Devi was critical of those who considered middle-class female education as a mark of progress in Bengali society. She noted,

Even if we are to concede that getting degrees is the real hallmark of being educated, then we ought to ask how many women in fact manage to acquire such degrees? Irrespective of the numbers how much do these women relate and invest in Hindu society? People who are able to give their daughters and sisters the privileges of a University education are by no means members of the general populace. They belong to a small minority group within Hindu society. It would be fallacious to regard this tiny minority of educated women in Hindu society as representative of society at large.⁴¹

Her essays on the introduction of a Bengali curriculum in Bethune school encapsulated her vision of a broad-based

primary education for young girls, which would initiate them into the Bengali language. The essay contained a detailed discussion of existing school syllabi and their pitfalls. At a time when most girls were married by the age of eleven, imparting basic education in English was a sheer waste of time. Most students were likely to forget a foreign language as soon as they were away from formal instruction. In comparison, it was much easier to cultivate reading habits in Bengali even when they were not formally enrolled in school. The availability of science and math texts in Bengali made this process easier, and she congratulated the authorities of Bethune school for deciding to launch a Bengali section. Unfortunately, most parents wanted to increase their daughter's marriageability by giving them a superficial and rudimentary education in English. Instead, Devi favored instruction in the vernacular and urged the inclusion in the curriculum of the epics *Ramayana* and *Mahabharat* because these texts were the bearers of national honor, lore, and pride; no one was properly educated unless they were familiar with the tales contained in these epics. Devi's writings echo the belief that the key to real education lies in knowledge of the nation's past as encapsulated in the mythical stories of the Indian epics. They provided the ideals, which could be considered "national." These were the key to national character building. This is what distinguished India from Japan, she argued, a country that sacrificed its originality to the West.⁴²

For Devi the most expedient way to ensure an improvement in women's condition was through education. Education was the most important item on her reformist agenda as evidenced by the following statement in her essay entitled "Purushera Sreshtatva" (Male Superiority)

We have no dispute with the view that at the present instant men are superior to women in matters of intellect and knowledge. Women have been subjected to the worst degradation for centuries, they have not been afforded equal educational opportunities as men. So it is hardly a surprise that their present capabilities are lacking when compared to men. Provide them with the same facilities for some time, allow them the opportunity to pursue knowledge in the same way as men and then we can truly judge whether women are innately lacking in intellectual capacities compared to men.⁴³

Education she felt was the best guarantee for improving the conditions of the greatest number of women. In the same essay she appended a long passage from Romanis on the goals of the women's movement. It will be instructive for our purposes to cite some parts from this appendix because it reveals the ways in which Devi understood the goals of a women's movement in Bengal vis-à-vis a wider, global movement for women's empowerment. According to Romanis,

Among all the features of progress which will cause the present century to be regarded by posterity as beyond comparison the most remarkable epoch in the history of our race, I believe the inauguration of the so-called women's movement in our generation will be considered one of the most important. For I am persuaded that this movement is destined to grow; that with its growth the highest attributes of one half of the human race are destined to be widely influenced; that this influence will profoundly react upon the other half, not only in the nursery and the drawing room, but also in the study, the academy,

the forum and the senate....⁴⁴

Not only did Devi share in this reformer's ideas of the future of womankind, but she was also clearly in agreement that the focus of the movement should mainly be educational empowerment and not a promotion of libertarianism. She quoted Romanis as saying, "But while we may hope that social opinion may ever continue to be opposed to the woman's movement in its most extravagant forms—to these as which endeavor to set up an unnatural, and therefore impossible, rivalry with men in the struggles of practical life—we may also hope that social opinion will soon become unanimous in its encouragement of the higher education of women."⁴⁵ Despite her limiting the aims of the "women's movement" to the cause of education alone, we should not underestimate the radicalism inherent in Devi's statements. As Mary Poovey, observing the role played by Caroline Norton in the context of the Matrimonial Causes Act of 1857 in Britain, argues, "Norton's usurpation of the defender's role, her revelation of the role politics and money have played in her domestic woes, and her entry into political discourse...already collapsed the very differences she seems to support."⁴⁶ For Devi too, quoting a European reformer who saw women having an impact "not just in the nursery or the drawing room, but also in the academy and the senate" was significant. As observed by Tanika Sarkar, *strishiksha*, or female education, one of the issues on which women expressed themselves relatively freely, unlike matters such as *sati* or infant marriage, was the first major concern that drew women into debates in the public sphere.⁴⁷ Devi was definitely among the most vocal participants in such debates. Even as she upheld and supported Bengali domestic ideology, the fact that she was a defender of women's education and the rights of educated women in the public sphere showed that those domestic arrangements were the subject of a critical, feminist, reformist gaze.

The complexity inherent in Devi's feminism is best portrayed in her novels. The protagonists of these novels were often young, educated widows. Of these the most well-known was *Snehalata Ba Palita* (Snehalata, The Adopted One).⁴⁸ A self-conscious rejoinder to Bankimchandra Chatterjee's *Visavriksha* (Poison Tree), the novel and resembles its plot line in many ways. Throughout the novel Devi tried to establish the moral point that the protagonist Snehalata was not a poison tree like Bankimchandra Chatterjee's Kundanandini, but a loving creeper who should have been cherished, not uprooted and cruelly discarded. Snehalata's is the story of a young, educated widow driven to commit suicide by the treachery of the men in her life. As recently observed by Rajul Sogani in her analysis of the figure of the widow in Indian literature, "The author regards her death not as a retribution for moral transgression but as a reflection of the callousness of the patriarchal system."⁴⁹ Snehalata was an ideal woman—like Bankim's Kundanandini, she was shy, quiet, and demure. At the same time like Suryamukhi, the protagonist of *Visavriksha*, she was mature, educated and thoughtful. As Sogani points out, Devi's vision for women like Snehalata was not remarriage but further education and eventual economic independence. Snehalata was depicted as arguing that many women in Europe stay unmarried and spend their lives usefully in helping others. Ironically, however, it took a male character Jiban to vindicate Snehalata's beliefs when he admitted that, "her life is precious for *she has worked and suffered*

for the sake of others, and that it is Bengali society and Bengali men who have been responsible for the suffering of women like her."⁵⁰ Using a Socratic dialogue as her format, Devi argued in this work,

While men have the advantage of education, women's inherent qualities are superior to those of men. Women are more sympathetic and selfless. Men are shrewd: they know how to get away with their wicked deeds.... Because higher moral standards are imposed on women, they are blamed even for minor lapses while men are forgiven for actions a thousand times worse.⁵¹

Devi carried the point about women's superiority over men further when she made Jiban say that while only a few outstanding men like Buddha or Christ have sacrificed their lives for others, thousands of women in ordinary homes do that every day. For her this proved women's moral worth over men.

After all this, one is left wondering why Snehalata ended up committing suicide. While commentators have argued that Devi's feminist stance is explicit in this novel because she effectively depicted the sad plight of widows and their dependence on their male relatives who took advantage of their ignorance of the Dayabhaga system of law and often tried to cheat them of their property, it is significant that the novel established Snehalata's virtue as well as society's failure to grant protection to women like her through the act of her committing suicide. It is this feature of the novel, I would argue, that reminds the reader of similar literary strategies evoked by Victorian women in staging their own social battles. Once again, we are reminded of Poovey's analysis of the use of melodramatic form by women like Norton to not only present herself as the wronged woman and innocence personified, but also as the defender of her virtues in the absence of a male. In her tracts, Norton became "judge, jury, and executioner all at once."⁵² I would argue that Devi deliberately utilized the melodramatic novel form to make her points about male cruelty and social indifference to women's conditions, which eventually led to Snehalata's death.

At the same time, the novel embodied Devi's vision of a better future, the key to which lay in the education of increasing numbers of women. In one passage in the text she made a dig at the male critics of women like Pandita Ramabai by making Jiban ask the family patriarch, "Don't you know, sir, that Pandita Ramabai is opening an ashram for widows and she is getting help from Americans? Yet we say that no other people have such compassion as we do. O God, can such a race ever prosper!"⁵³ At the end of the novel the patriarch, Jagat babu is shown making a contribution to "Sakhi Samiti," the organization Devi founded in real life. Yet significantly, as Sogani observes, he is doubtful whether the high ideals governing widowhood in the past can be revived. Jiban's response to Jagat babu's doubts is a crucial point in the novel, which, to my mind, best illustrated its author's stance on a feminist future, "Time never turns back. Life does not remain the same forever. What we call good today we might consider evil tomorrow; so if you want to see the ideal widows of the past in today's world, you will probably be disappointed."⁵⁴ Here we are reminded that even though she hailed the iconic figures of virtuous women in the past, Devi was aware that the reality of contemporary Bengali life made it impossible to realize these women in truth, for in order for

women to uphold such virtue, it would be necessary to have the support and protection of men—something that was not easily forthcoming. This is where reform became important in her vision. Jiban urged Jagat babu to make a contribution to Sakhi Samiti by arguing, "...but does that mean that such ashrams do not serve a purpose? Just think how many women can find shelter in them and spend their lives in a fruitful manner...."⁵⁵

Therefore, in never making her protagonists re-marry Devi made iconic figures like Savitri models for Bengali widows. These icons were seen as a glorification of the chastity of widowhood. While this could be seen as a conservative stance that did not support widows' remarrying, we can also read into Devi's delineation of her widow characters as being educated but single, a sign that for contemporary Bengali women there were other alternatives to matrimony. Virtue consisted in being self-sacrificing and generous while the importance of economic self-reliance and education was repeatedly stressed. All these factors together made up the fabric of feminism for this important writer.

Devi's views are echoed by a number of late nineteenth and early twentieth century women writers, like Krishnabhamini Das, Gyanadanandini Devi, Hiranmayee Devi, and Sarala Devi many of whom were widows and active in the women's organization, "Bharat Stree Mahamandal." All of these women argued that under the changing conditions of life in a colonial society, education was central in making women responsible mothers and wives. As noted by Krishnabhamini Das,

There are some who raise objection to women's education on the ground that women lose their womanly virtues through the influence of education. They compete in everything with men and pay no attention to housework, etc. But if they [those who object] were to open their eyes they could see that this belief is wholly erroneous. In spite of the great amount of progress made in women's education in America, women there are neither inattentive to their homes, nor ignorant of child-care. In fact they are able to do both child-care and housework with great regulation and discipline, thus increasing happiness within the home, and facilitating the progress of the nation. Of course a few women, wearing men's clothing, abuse their independence and higher education, but does it make any sense to be outraged about women's education and independence in general by the examples of a few?⁵⁶

It is by now clear that most reform-minded ladies during this period considered education the sacred tool of reform. Ostensibly, this education would help women in performing their roles as mothers and wives with greater success and refinement. Thus, reading the epics was stressed because it was felt turn of the twentieth century Bengali women would draw inspiration from the models provided by Sita, Draupadi and a host of mythic female characters, but to focus on this aspect of their educational program alone would be to present an incomplete picture of late nineteenth and early twentieth century feminism. Devi and others like her were clearly aware that the didactic aspect their work would be of limited efficacy in a society where the doors of educational institutions were barred to most women. There were numerous reasons for this. As she noted in her essay on the Bethune school,

most girls were withdrawn from schools around the age of eleven to be married. Even though most parents complained about the societal pressures that forced them to marry their daughters at such a tender age, none of them had the courage to stand up against such pressures. While a handful of these girls could then continue their education informally, widowhood posed an impossible hurdle in the path of learning. Furthermore, for a large percentage of women in contemporary society, economic conditions did not permit the pursuit of knowledge.

We should bear in mind in this context that Swarnakumari's own daughter, Sarala Devi (1872- 1945) remained unmarried until the age of thirty-two. She was not only well educated, but also adept in music and a variety of martial arts. Sarala Devi's example, however, makes it clear that middle class women were aware of a gap between the roles they fashioned for themselves and their progeny and the possibilities that realistically existed for women not belonging to the same economic class. To really benefit the latter, it was not enough to preach humanistic ideals in prose works for the consumption of *bhadralok* readers alone. For the bulk of women in Bengal, it was far more crucial to have an infrastructure that would allow them to acquire basic educational tools. The abject condition of the large masses of Bengali women contributed an activist dimension to the work of middle class women reformers. In the arena of social work for the uplift of such women, we find them taking positive steps toward cultivating economic self-reliance among underprivileged women. In order to have a fuller appreciation of women's rights in the Indian context, we need to track the history of this activism.

In 1888 Swarnakumari Devi founded a women's organization called Sakhi Samiti (An association of female friends) with the goal of increasing cooperation and interaction among women whose lives were spent in the confinement of the *antahpur* (inner quarters). In an essay written in 1891, she commented that one of the charges most frequently heard against contemporary women was that they were less generous and kind than their earlier counterparts. Colonial society, she argued, was vastly different from the precolonial social order.

...the joint family system for various reasons is breaking down, previously it was possible for ten people to derive equal benefits from the income of one. Nowadays it is no longer possible to do so. The conditions of widows is [*sic*] much worse than before, and a daughter's marriage has become a much more expensive proposition than it previously was. Most *grihastha* families feel the scarcity of food and other resources. As a result the numbers of women without any means of sustenance are rapidly increasing. If generous ladies will direct their kind attention to their condition then society will benefit greatly.⁵⁷

To organize the help given by upper class women to the less privileged, she founded Sakhi Samiti. Its stated goals were "to nurture, educate and where necessary provide financial support to poor unmarried girls and widows, and once the organization was able, to appoint these newly educated women as teachers in the *antahpur*." This kind of activity would not only promote self-reliance among these poor women, but would also engender self-respect. It also helped in opening up another avenue for young widows whose only options previ-

ously were to remarry or lead a life of penury. Economic self-sufficiency, she argued, might restore their faith in Hindu society. Even though many missionary women had been active in trying to achieve precisely these goals, Indian women themselves would better execute the work. Training women to be teachers was not the only aim of Sakhi Samiti. Depending on individuals' abilities the association would promote higher learning so that some of the women could become doctors. Others with an inclination towards the arts could be trained in painting or music.

But running an orphanage with such aims cost 500 rupees a month at the very least. In 1891, there were six girls who lived in the organization's care. Devi's aim was to expand the scale of operations to match those undertaken by Ramabai in a similar organization in Bombay. The latter was a shelter to any widow who wished to be taken under its umbrella. Ramabai had raised the funds for her organization with American aid. Issuing an appeal to wealthy Indian families to extend their support to her cause, Devi wrote,

Americans contribute a thousand rupees every month to help in Ramabai's endeavors to promote widows' welfare. Won't the kind-hearted folk in our own country extend their charity to help their own orphaned women and thereby perform their duty to the country!...We, your own countrywomen stand at your door with our palms outstretched for your alms. By displaying your kindness and respect to women you will make India memorable....⁵⁸

These statements are redolent with a nationalistic fervor. But as observed earlier even though Devi attended meetings of the Indian National Congress, her reform work had little to do with official Congress-led nationalist policy, and she was not the only woman who carved out a reform agenda that was separate from nationalism. We find the same in the case of Saroj Nalini Dutt (1887- 1924), wife of Guru Saday Dutt, the well-known civil servant and founder of the *bratachari* movement in Bengal. Dutt's life provides an excellent instance for demonstrating the numerous influences that went into the making of the women's movement in India.

Deeply Gandhian in many of her beliefs, she was the inspiration behind an extensive network of women's organizations spread out in numerous districts of Bengal and Bihar, which had no links with the official Congress-led national movement. They were to a large extent modeled upon Tagore and Gandhi's rural reconstruction programs and to that degree might be said to have been inspired by the cultural ethos of nationalism. But she was also, as we shall see, equally inspired by certain organizations for women in England and maintained links with them throughout her short life. Dutt died at the young age of thirty-seven, a death many attributed to physical strain and over work, but in this brief life she built up a network of Mahila Samitis (women's groups), which were brought under the umbrella of a single organization "The Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association" (SNDMA) in 1925, by her husband. While the political impact of these Mahila Samitis in the evolution of women's rights in India cannot be underestimated, it is striking, given the predilection among historians to view feminism through the lens of the political struggle for Indian nationhood, that they have not received much of a mention in historical accounts on the period.⁵⁹

Dutt was acutely aware of the impossibility of mobilizing women for any project of their upliftment, unless there was a unification of the more privileged lot in the cities with the millions of rural women. She remarked,

In Calcutta men and women get so absorbed with city life that they forget the real country outside. The thought of the vast country outside, of the miseries and pains of thousands of villagers, of the sufferings of millions of women caused by social, economic, and physical wrongs, does not touch their hearts. No improvement of the rural masses is possible without joint effort, but nobody makes it. The shame of this we must remove at whatever sacrifice. Let us establish in Calcutta, whatever the cost, a Central Mahila Samiti to unite the whole womanhood of Bengal into a corporate life.⁶⁰

According to Guru Saday Dutt, the idea of a central organization for women occurred to Saroj Nalini in 1921 after a visit to the National Federation of Women's Institutes of England and Wales. Her conversations with the main officers of this organization—Miss Ferguson, Secretary of the National Federation, Miss D.A. Parr, and Mrs. Nugent Harris, the chief organizer of the Women's Institutes—gave her some idea about how to bring the numerous *Mahila Samitis* she had helped set up since 1913 into a single, workable rubric. Most of these *samitis* suffered from want of a central organizing body and often folded up in Dutt's absence. Describing the plight of these bodies she wrote,

In three different districts, in my capacity as the District Officer's wife, it has been given to me to organise Mahila Samitis.... Some are doing good work, but others exist only in name, as there is no one sympathetic enough, or with the necessary ability, to guide the work. It is for this reason that I have a scheme in my mind which, if worked properly, will solve this difficulty and help to keep these scattered organizations in touch with each other and with a central organization, thus supplying the advice and guidance they need.⁶¹

Dutt's writings bear testimony to the various linkages through which the practice of politics came into the lives of Indian women. For Dutt herself, it was the fact of being a civil servant's wife with exposure to national and international organizations that gave her an opportunity to learn about women's movements abroad. Her knowledge was then transmitted to women in the districts and rural areas through the *Mahila Samitis* she helped to set up. As we look into her reminiscences we notice how the workings of these organizations gave women hands-on experience with democratic structures.

Describing the work of a district *Mahila Samiti* in the district of Bankura in present-day West Bengal, Dutt remarked, "For the benefit of those who have no idea as to what a *Mahila Samiti* in the districts and villages, if properly organized, can do, I shall give a brief account of the work that the Bankura *Mahila Samiti* has done and is still doing and can do if further organised."⁶² She continued by recollecting, "We started the Samiti with about eighty members who paid one rupee (one shilling and six-pence) annually for membership. There were a few generous members, however, who voluntarily paid more than one rupee. The Samiti consists of an Executive Committee with a President and a Vice-President and Secretaries and about a dozen members. The

Executive Committee meets once a month and discusses business and accounts." What followed was a detailed statement of the working of a grassroots organization of and for women.

The General Committee meets once in every two months. All carriage expenses are paid by the Samiti, as otherwise no members would come. As funds are short, the general meeting cannot take place more than once in two months. These meetings are mostly of a social nature. At the same time it is the intention of the Samiti to impart education, and with this view interesting lantern lectures form a feature of these social gatherings and have been much appreciated. An exhibition of Mrs. Bentley's cinema film 'The Cry of Children' was arranged by the Bankura Samiti in their last general meeting.... The Samiti has presented gifts of articles, such as cooking utensils and brassware, etc., for the hospitals in the town which did not possess any such things. Articles of furniture, clothes, and eatables, etc., for the use of patients have been presented by the Samiti. The Samiti encourages education institutions in the town by giving medals and prizes. The Samiti has taken up the difficult but important work of training midwives, and has also recently started a Child Welfare Clinic.⁶³

She went on to advocate,

The Mahila Samitis should be left entirely free to manage their own affairs, control their own funds, and undertake whatever work seems to the members best suited to their locality. Anyone desirous of starting a Mahila Samiti in a particular district or village will be expected to write to the General Secretary of the Bengal Mahila Samiti Federation, who will put the correspondent in touch with the local Committee responsible for the propaganda work in connection with the Mahila Samitis of the province.⁶⁴

Regarding the umbrella organization, which coordinated the activity of the local *samitis*, Dutt wrote,

An organisation to be called the Bengal Mahila Samiti Federation should be formed in Calcutta, and should consist entirely of women workers.... This organisation should have an Executive Committee consisting of half a dozen, a President, and one or two Secretaries as may be necessary. The Bengal Mahila Samiti Federation should be prepared to give the fullest information as to how Mahila Samitis are to be formed, to furnish speakers, to supply model rules and helpful literature, and to assist in securing expert demonstrators and lecturers, with lantern slides if possible, when required, and generally to give the movement every encouragement.⁶⁵

The Mahila Samitis, which started in the districts of Bengal and Bihar, also spread to Assam, Orissa and the Central Provinces. Inspired by the Bengal example the Junior Maharani of Travncore and representative women from the Punjab, Madras, Berar, and Bombay were also reported to have attempted to form similar *samitis* in their respective provinces. In the chapter entitled "A Growing Movement" Guru Saday Dutt recorded the achievements of numerous Mahila Samitis in Hoogly, Jessore, Baraset, Tangail, Bally, Dasora, Talla, Shibgunj, Satsang, and Margram. In addition, a survey of the two largest circulating dailies in Bengal namely the *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Statesman* provides records the

rapid advances made by these organizations among both Hindu and Muslim women.⁶⁶ By 1940, when the SNDMA was celebrating its fifteenth anniversary, two additional features had been added to the structure of Mahila Samitis, which Saroj Nalini had founded. They included the Basanta Kumari Widows Home in Puri (present-day Orissa), which also had a girls school attached to it, and the Saroj Nalini industrial school that offered courses in "sewing, sculpting, embroidery, cotton weaving, dhurrie weaving, carpet making and other handiwork by which poorer middle class women could earn a livelihood."⁶⁷

An exchange that reportedly took place between Dutt and an elderly male critic in Birbhum beautifully captures the essence of her feminism. Upon being asked whether the Mahila Samiti movement did not represent a travesty to the idea of an "Indian civilization," she responded with the counter question, "In ancient India did not women take a leading part in the intellectual life of the country? Who has not heard of Maitreyi, Gargi, Lilavati..." or "Khana, a woman of Bengal, who is still our greatest authority in agricultural science and agricultural economics?"⁶⁸ She then argued,

...is it not a fact that even at the present time in Bengal a housewife, in referring to her work, always speaks of her '*ghar-sansar*' (*ghar* = home; *sansar* = world.... This conclusively proves that in old times the woman's legitimate sphere of work in our country was considered to be not the home alone but the world as well as the home, neither of which can be neglected without great detriment to the other. In course of time the men of our country, in their blind and shortsighted selfishness, persuaded the women to believe that their world was synonymous with their homes....⁶⁹

Feminism as envisioned by women like Dutt was therefore in complete harmony with the age-old values of society. It was more a movement that would give rise to "a new orientation of life...by giving the women of the country a new status of respect and dignity in which they are able to take their rightful share in the work of national uplift without hiding their faces from men." This is what Dutt's life works helped to achieve. As remarked by Guru Saday Dutt, "Through their manifold activities, the Mahila Samitis are thus opening out to the women of India a new world for the development of their courage, confidence, and personality, and a new, joyous, and ever widening field of self-improvement, social intercourse, social service and social leadership."⁷⁰

The same biography also noted that Dutt was no "mem" (foreign lady), but someone who felt completely at home in the company of purdah women because of "her own fondness for the Hindu women's innate simplicity and modesty of manner and her deep and loving respect for the old customs of the country."⁷¹ When it came to widow remarriage she remarked, "Let those widows who want to remarry do so by all means. But marriage is such a sacred tie in the eyes of a Hindu woman that it is my belief that few widows who have had an opportunity of loving their husbands will marry again."⁷² This excluded child widows and Dutt worked hard both to spread awareness about the remarriage of child widows and to raise the age of marriage. Her attitude to the question of women's empowerment and its relationship to Europe is perhaps best captured in a statement from a letter she wrote to one of her lady friends:

What distresses me more than I can tell you is to see a certain section among our higher-class young Bengali women running mad after adopting everything European! Why, for example they are so eager to transplant the European custom of ballroom dancing, with its 'kalajagahs' and other similar institutions, into our national life is what passes my comprehension. Has the West nothing better to offer us? Why can't we leave these distinctively Western customs alone and imitate, instead, the spirit of tireless activity and initiative of the Western people, their zeal for scientific learning and invention, their genius for democratic progress, their national solidarity, the spirit of self-help and self-reliance among their women, and above all the wonderful spirit of social service and mutual help which is such a remarkable feature of the internal life of the more advanced European countries and particularly of England!⁷³

From our analysis of the writings and activities of Swarnakumari Devi and Saroj Nalini Dutt we could conclude that the feminist sentiments expressed by both was primarily a call for Indian women's economic empowerment. They were both respectful of Indian social structures, or domestic arrangements in an idealized form, but were critical when cruelty towards women and domestic violence tended to break those structures as they often did in Bengali society's current state. Both women, and others like them, were aware that this social ideal was also class-specific and could only be present in small pockets of *bhadralok* society (if at all), but could by no means be applicable to all of society. This perception marked their writing on women's uplift, which we have seen was dominated by a plea or demand of economic and educational rights. Alongside these statements, however, the image of a virtuous, self-sacrificing woman was also upheld who would not use her education to overturn existing social structures, but would be strong enough to resist male violence. We see a reflection of these attitudes in numerous women's meetings in the first two decades of the twentieth century. Even a cursory analysis of reports in the *Statesman* from the 1920s, shows that most progressive women supported the custom of purdah, while agitating for education for the *pardanashin* woman. It was argued in meetings organized by the Calcutta League of Women Workers, that many purdah women who did not know a word of English were well versed in Indian politics. Women also showed an awareness that Muslims would have greater difficulty doing away with the practice of purdah than Hindus. In fact reports on education conferences held in the 1920s show that the subject of establishing a purdah college for Muslim girls was hotly debated during this time.⁷⁴

From all these facts it may be concluded that education was a central issue of feminist propaganda in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It was expected to inculcate economic self-sufficiency among women. But most feminists were silent on women demanding economic privileges from their families and would probably have considered these to be dissonant with a feminist ideal. Devi in particular displayed an awareness that even though widows had a right to property under the Dayabhaga system of law, they were often deprived of their rights by their male relatives. She was extremely critical of such actions, as we noted, in her novel *Snehalata*. Her answer to this problem was in women's educa-

tion and employment rather than in a system that would call for a change in the structure of property. Even at this point, these feminist women hoped to raise male consciousness through their writings and life work so that the abuses they were keenly aware existed in society would be eradicated. A humanist idealism therefore lingered in the work of feminist writers and thinkers well into the second and third decade of the twentieth century.

What Constituted a Feminist Politics?

As mentioned earlier, the 1920s marked a break in the evolution of feminist thought in India. While the humanist idealism we have noted in the writings of notable women like Swarnakumari Devi and Saroj Nalini Dutt continued to mark the writings of popular writers like Prabhavati Devi Saraswati (1905-), Shailabala Ghoshjaya (1894- 1974), and Anurupa Devi (1882-1958), newspaper articles by women reflected a much more self-conscious consideration of what was meant by feminism, or what constituted political behavior in a woman of the future. It was significant that the *Statesman*, which was one of the largest circulating English dailies in Calcutta, started a column known as "The Woman's Forum" from the early 1930s. Analyzing some of these articles will help us appreciate the changes that came into the women's movement during this time.

In an article published on 19 November 1939 the writer, one Uma Nehru, noted that she had witnessed two radical shifts in women's behavior in public life in her lifetime. For her the First World War marked a watershed event in the history of the women's movement all over the world, and she was keen to locate the women's movement in India against this larger backdrop. Tracking the history of the movement in India she noted, "Until the last century all talk of women's rights was theoretical with negligible practical results; and this led to the formation of groups and associations that agitated for equal rights and opportunities for women."⁷⁵ It is interesting to note how this writer distanced herself from the legacies of nineteenth century reformism locating herself squarely in the needs of the present. Gradually, she observed, women's groups divided into two distinct classes of workers—"one purely feminist, the other mainly political, but believing in the same demands." Interestingly, here her focus became global as she noted,

...nation after nation conceded women's rights. Sweden followed the Nordic countries by granting women suffrage in 1921. Great Britain was characteristically cautious and granted women's suffrage in 1918 with full equality in 1928. In the new republics that grew after the war there were strong socialistic tendencies and equal rights for women with men were incorporated in the new constitutions. The women of Germany, Czechoslovakia and the Baltic states were thus emancipated, but in the Latin countries and in the East prejudices still held strong and women's suffrage was not conceded.

Statements like Nehru's displayed more self-conscious awareness of women's interests than had been the case with the early feminists. Nehru's article ended with lines, which are worth quoting at length to appreciate this notion of woman as an interest-bearing subject,

The general position of women in 1918 was immensely better than that of fifty years before, but slowly though

surely, the women's movement allied itself to the general political movement of the state. Here the suffragettes of old were caught unawares. She had divided life into two distinct halves—had eliminated politics from her sphere of activity and had satisfied herself that she was concerned with feminism and no more. She had failed to appreciate that the two halves were indivisible and that ultimately each would depend on the other to an extent to which only inseparables can. Once the right to vote was conceded the suffragette clamour died down. Woman now faced with the next problem of life itself—how would she shape herself in the world of the morrow where there would be individual distinctions between one individual and another based on sex, caste and creed.⁷⁶

Uma Nehru's piece therefore raised the question of what constituted the substance of a feminist politics from the end of the 1920s. Many women of the period appeared to have been concerned with precisely such a query. We find numerous pieces in the newspapers on what a modern woman must be like, what her responsibilities were as well as a discussion of the codes of accepted social behavior. One could argue that these were the main subject matter of reform manuals for women from the mid-nineteenth century. Once we start to take note of the contents of these articles. It becomes obvious that the notion of a self-possessed subject had indeed gained a lot of ground by the third decade of the twentieth century. In addition, we also begin to notice a widening of the arena of women's politics in ways that call into question the notion that early Indian women's politics was limited by class. All these trends informed the debate with which I began this article, namely whether the Indian woman ought to be regarded as a subject of sentiments alone or whether she was a possessive individualist defined in terms of her rights and interests.⁷⁷ We will find that the evolution of women's rights did not end up privileging either of these two positions completely. It was clear by the 1950s however, that both these trends, in mutual tussle shaped the development of a notion of women's rights and made this history one that was deeply situated in its own social context.

An interesting case in point was Dr. Prabhavati Das Gupta, one of the most important leaders of the jute workers' strike of 1929. She was also the leader of a scavengers' strike that immobilized Calcutta in July 1928.⁷⁸ While the involvement of an educated middle-class lady in working class protest testified to the widening of women's political and leadership horizons, we would be hard pressed to comprehend this political involvement in terms of worker-socialist, or laborer-trade-unionist relationships. Middle-class women's (and indeed men's) relationship to the working classes were also refracted through sentimental, semi-religious, and familial metaphors that must be taken into consideration to fully understand the nature of such politics. Various union pamphlets described Prabhavati Das Gupta as "Mother Provabati," "Mataji," "the father and mother of poor."⁷⁹ Das Gupta's own reminiscences, cited in Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Rethinking Working Class History* are instructive in helping us reach an understanding of how women thought of themselves in their role as political and labor organizers of the working poor. At one point she is quoted as saying that, "she only has to lift her little finger and the workers would obey." Or, "We were not doing trade union movement, we were helping the poor peo-

ple." "So," she asked explaining the absence of trade union dues and membership fees from workers, "why should we have money from them?"⁸⁰ Das Gupta also added that "wherever I went I was welcomed by the slogan *Mataji ki jai*, *Mataji ki jai* [Hail the mother]. That was my reward." Chakrabarty argues, "the ideal, democratic principle of representation based on voluntary and contractual relationships was thus never realized in the trade unions of Calcutta jute-mill workers, and representatives instead became masters."⁸¹ I would argue that Chakrabarty's early work also displays signs of the binarism with respect to the past. Democratic subjecthood and even a socialist working class politics in India cannot be thought of without these hierarchical relationships between workers and elite women. This was not something specific to women alone. Even male *bhadralok* leaders for all their "enthusiasm for socialism and strikes" often represented the working class in their prose as "daridra Narayan," the Hindu god Narayan in the shape of the poor.⁸² Sentimentality and politics were inextricably linked in every facet of Indian public life in the tumultuous decades of the 1920s–1950s.

On the one hand this period saw an abundance of statements from ordinary, educated women demanding equal rights and privileges for women that would help them be on par with the levels of progress attained by women in other parts of the world. On the other, there were equally numerous statements where women themselves argued that in order for them to be truly Indian and modern, they needed to privilege a code of duty and familial responsibility over a demand for rights. The latter, they argued, was baneful to a happy and just society.

For instance, her article entitled "The Modern Girl," Krishna Hutheesing argued that while much was being said in contemporary society against such a girl, before making a value judgment on this creature, we need to define who the modern girl was.⁸³ Usually the epithet "modern" was used to describe young women who "dance, dress, or make-up according to western ideas, who learn not the best the West has to offer but perhaps the worst."⁸⁴ But these external accoutrements did not make one modern. It was frequently charged that the modern girl was "frivolous, gay, pleasure seeking and not serious minded." She was therefore regarded as a "drain on society."⁸⁵ In fact from this description we could aver that someone like Swarnakumari Devi's Snehalata would be far from this type of "modern." But, the writer continued to argue that the modern girl was fully aware of her responsibilities, was "capable and efficient," and "desires to exercise her right to an independent existence." She also "demands" equality of treatment in all spheres of life and "having rebelled against social tyrannies and out of date traditions she is determined to fight for the freedom she has achieved to some extent." The modern girl's attitude to pleasure was also more complex than before. The author remarked that "pleasures are more conspicuous than they used to be, and girls who have to work in offices or at other jobs, desire some sort of recreation during the evenings. All young girls cannot be expected to sit at home after a hard day's work and read books, though there are always exceptions.... But those young people who like a little gaiety and frivolity should not be condemned unless they make a fetish of it."⁸⁶ The sentimentalization of hierarchical family relationships that was ubiquitous in all nineteenth century and early twentieth century writing was also gradually

being called into question as evidenced by statements like, "That the young girls of today resent authority may be true of a few, but not of the many, because there seems to be far more friendship and respect between parents and children nowadays than there has ever been before. This exists because there it is based on a better understanding of each other's spheres and activities."⁸⁷ The modern girl was keen to exercise choice in matrimony. She refused to be ornamental and wanted to "share" everything with her husband. "A young girl does not want to be tied down to someone she has never set her eyes on before, whose ideas and tastes may come into constant conflict with hers."⁸⁸ She now demanded both "comradeship and affection." Her vision was more global, and she wanted to keep up with women in other, modernizing parts of the world. Hutheesing ended her description of the modern woman saying,

Incredible changes have been wrought among women of other countries, like Turkey, China, Japan, Egypt, Iran and Persia etc. It was by no means an easy task for these women to win their emancipation, but they braved all criticisms and threats and forged ahead attaining their goals and after untold hardships. Today these women are far ahead of us—taking part in the reconstruction of their countries and fighting side by side with their men. In a world that is changing so rapidly it is but fit that the modern Indian girl keeps pace with other women of the world and does not lag behind.⁸⁹ In the changed social context, feminism acquired a richer meaning for many women. As one Manjari put it in an article called "Feminism," also published in the "Woman's Forum" of *Statesman*, the word "feminist" has taken on a different meaning.⁹⁰ "Formerly," she wrote, "it meant a suffragette, one who advocated women's rights." But, "today when one refers to a feminist one means a woman who not only believes in the complete emancipation of womankind, but one who appears to be a sort of man-hater."⁹¹ Despite the oversimplification, it is interesting to note some of the oppositions this author set up as being the challenges and obligations that faced feminists. Writing against the man-hating feminist she argued, "I do not believe in this sort of feminism, nor do I think that this is a correct attitude of mind to have specially in the present-day world when men and women are so interdependent on one another." She appeared to be writing for an audience that had experienced a certain level of "emancipation," for she continued by observing, "I do believe in the emancipation of women, but not at the cost of annihilating the men. No one sex should dominate over the other."⁹² Women's fight, she reminded the reader, had not been merely for economic and political emancipation. "It has also been her fight against the tyranny of each individual man, who has been her guardian such as father, brother and particularly her husband."⁹³ It was true that women had always played a part of submission, but now that she had gained considerable freedom she "should not abuse it." "If one were free from all human ties, father, brother, husband etc. would one be happier? To live in isolation is hardly possible and supposing it were, would it not make us into terribly conceited egoists?"⁹⁴

The Hindu Code Debates

In order to understand the ideological power of this binary between interest-pursuing and the ethical sentiment of

self-sacrifice through which the question of women's rights has often been framed in India, in this final section I will be analyzing a debate between two important women intellectuals—Anurupa Devi (1882-1958) and Saralabala Sarkar (1875-1961). Both were public intellectuals in twentieth century Bengal. The debate took place 1954, on the pages of a leading Bengali daily *Anandabazar Patrika*, when the clauses of the Hindu Code Bill were being debated in regional and national print media all over the country.⁹⁵ Both Anurupa Devi and Saralabala Sarkar were renowned writers of their period. Both were prominent in the public sphere. Anurupa Devi argued that since men were the main bearers of a lineage, property should accrue to them. Women moved into a different *kula* (lineage) after marriage. So property was best safeguarded if it stayed under male control. Moreover, due to various changes in social organization property was being splintered among brothers. Adding women to the equation would render the fractions even more minuscule. The new system in addition, was likely to add a new dimension of brother-sister rivalry to the already existent scenario, rife with rivalry between brothers. Furthermore, given that women received no training in property management, she contended that it might be risky to encumber them with property rights by legal means. Finally, women, she felt, received their share of paternal property at the time of marriage through gifts and dowry. To give them an even further share would be a gross injustice to her brothers.

Sarkar made a strong case for women's financial independence *vis-à-vis* men in her reply to Anurupa Devi. She wrote that, the absence of any economic or property rights for women have bred a slave mentality among women all through society. She described women without property rights as "meek," "dependent," and "needy" and argued that unless they were given these privileges there would be no scope for women to learn and master the art of property management. There are many women who, she argued, despite having a formal share in the property, did not so much as receive a monthly allowance. Only rights would engender a sense of responsibility. There were no congenital shortcomings in women that would disable them from being able to manage property. In regard to the escalating tension to which further fragmentation of property would lead, Sarkar argued that since there were divisions made in order to distribute property among all the brothers, it was hard to logically imagine why the same privilege could not be extended to sisters. To say that to do so would encourage squabbles among brothers and sisters when hitherto there had only been quarrels among the male siblings seemed a weak proposition. Distributing property among men and women, she felt, could also be a panacea from the social menace: dowry. Further, if sharing property with sisters resulted in a reduction of the family's total wealth, the wealth accrued through the daughter-in-law had to be factored in by opponents of women's property rights. Finally to argue that men were the carriers of honor for the lineage was to deny the role played by women in perpetuating that lineage.

Similarly, with regard to divorce Anurupa Devi had argued that instituting formal means to legally end a marriage might detract from the sacred character of the institution. Sarkar's riposte was,

But why should the burden to uphold sacred-

ness fall on women alone? Men following *sastric* (scriptural) injunctions uttered the same verses that women did at the time of marriage. But until not so long ago they practiced polygamy and still reserve the right to do so.... To think that society would be beset with numerous problems if divorce was instituted was a fallacy, and if that does happen it will be the fruit of already existing social maladies. If divorce law leads many couples to the break up then we must conclude that our family life was poisoned to begin with and this condition does not bode well for a happy, strong, family unit. So, under certain given conditions to make provision for divorce will actually benefit our social lot.⁹⁶

She went on to observe that what these arguments against property rights and divorce in effect demonstrated was that women identified themselves as "male property." The prolonged habit of dependence upon others had instilled feelings of vulnerability and slavishness among women. As a result even when men wanted to empower them by giving them rights, they shuddered at the thought of what they would do with these rights?⁹⁷

Sarkar stood for a group of women who primarily identified themselves as liberal, citizen subjects, endowed with a certain set of rights. This generation of women co-opted the legacy of male reformist endeavors to further women's cause. They embraced a liberal model of reform where, moved by the plight of masses of women, they sought a remedy in legal intervention by the state. In both cases, these reform-minded individuals empathized with women's suffering in their respective societies and sought to tackle the problem through recourse to rights—obtainable by rational appeals made to the state on behalf of the silent anguished masses.

Anurupa Devi's stand bewilders readers in its apparent passivity. It seems perverse that someone considered a progressive woman writer in her own time should argue against making certain basic rights general among women. Yet it is important to listen to Anurupa Devi if only because she was an important voice in Calcutta public life. In the Lila Lectures that she was invited to deliver by the University of Calcutta she stated:

Today we boast of women's emancipation and progress in the arenas of knowledge and power, but that we are still far behind the woman of yore in the arena of *tyaga* (renunciation) is something that often slips our minds because of our altered values. We forget that never has a rootless flower named "right" bloomed anywhere in the world, nor will it ever do so. The extent to which we are able to demonstrate our magnanimity and good sense, society will reciprocate to the same extent by endowing us with "rights". It has always done that and will continue doing so in the future. In the pursuit of pleasure and luxuries, women started by copying men and have now surpassed them. Even after they see their fathers made destitute by the pressure of marriage dowry, they are seeking state intervention to divide the remaining paternal property with their brothers.⁹⁸

How do we interpret these radically different viewpoints articulated by two women, both of whom as I have pointed out were prominent in the contemporary public sphere? One

option would be to practice some kind of historicism, i.e. to see Anurupa Devi—a contemporary of Saralabala Sarkar—as somehow representing a point of view that belonged to the past. But that would amount to what in Fabian's terms is a denial of the coevality of Devi and Sarkar. Yet there is no denying the presence of a particular nationalist position in Anurupa Devi's position. As argued earlier, towards the close of the nineteenth century, and even in the early decades of the twentieth century, a very influential ethic among both men and women was that of self-sacrifice. With the rise and spread of women's education and politicization we have also shown how women started to express their impatience with these literary, humanist critiques.

Sarkar and Anurupa Devi reproduced in their debates an old binary – self-interest versus self-sacrifice—that has had a long life in modern Indian history. I have not approved of the binary but read it to underscore the enduring appeal to women of older nationalist constructions of self-sacrifice as an ethical act, which Anurupa Devi's position exemplifies. Sarkar, at the same time, shows the inadequacy of Anurupa Devi's nationalism from the point of view of a feminism devoted to the question of women's rights. Yet this nationalist legacy cannot be simply discarded as useless for women. For, then we too end up reproducing the binary. Besides, as Saba Mahmood and others have shown, women have often used nonliberal forms of thought to empower themselves.⁹⁹ The task for feminist thinkers today must be to engage this nationalism and explore its investment in ethics in order to bring the talk of rights and interests and the talk of ethics into a conversation with each other that helps promote the ends of feminist struggles.

NOTES

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¹Srimati Basu, *She Comes To Take Her Rights: Indian Women, Property and Propriety* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1999), 4.

²Basu, *She Comes To Take Her Rights*, 5.

³Basu, *She Comes To Take Her Rights*, 157.

⁴*Mr. and Mrs. 55*, released in 1955, was produced and directed by Guru Dutt. Guru Dutt, Madhubala, Lalita Pawar, and Johnny Walker were the main cast. The film was based on a play by Abrar Alvi.

⁵It must be noted here following J. D. M. Derrett that, "The name Hindu Code Bill is now obsolete, since the projected Code was broken up for ease of treatment and was introduced, Bill by Bill, into the Indian Parliament. But the old name, which originates, sticks, and it is as such that the public know of the project." J. D. M. Derrett, *Hindu Law Past and Present* (Calcutta: A Mukherjee & Co., 1957), 55.

⁶We are reminded in this context of Joan Scott's discussion of modern French feminism. Scott helps us to see a paradox that historians chronicling Indian women's participa-

tion in public life from the beginning of the twentieth century often encounter and sometimes reproduce. Much like women in many other parts of the world Indian women's political struggles involved a demand for rights that would make them equal to men. Simultaneously, in making this demand for the erasure of sexual difference Indian women, like Scott's examples of French feminists, had to make their claims on behalf of "women" thereby reaffirming sexual difference. Joan Scott, *Only Paradoxes to Offer, French Feminists and The Rights of Man* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

⁷Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998).

⁸Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, viii.

⁹Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, xii-xiii, note 7.

¹⁰Chakravarti, *Rewriting History*, ix.

¹¹Geraldine Forbes, *Indian Women and the Freedom Movement: A Historian's Perspective*, RCWS Gender Series (Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies, S.N.D.T. Women's University, 1997), 10- 11.

¹²Forbes, *Indian Women and the Freedom Movement*.

¹³Forbes, *Indian Women and the Freedom Movement*, 9- 10.

¹⁴Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1999), 233- 254.

¹⁵Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution."

¹⁶Madhu Kishwar, *Off The Beaten Track* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 212.

¹⁷Kishwar, *Off The Beaten Track*.

¹⁸Subhas Chandra Bose, *An Indian Pilgrim* (London: Asia Publishing House, 1965). ed., by Sisir Kumar Bose.

¹⁹Ranjit Guha, "Nationalism and the Trials of Becoming," *The Oracle* 24, no. 2 (August 2002): 18-19.

²⁰See Antoinette Burton, "The Feminist Quest for Identity: British Imperial Suffragism and 'Global Sisterhood,' 1900- 1915," *Journal of Women's History* (Fall 1991): 46- 81. For a more detailed statement about the relationship of the images of Indian women to imperial feminism see Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865- 1915*, (Chapel Hill & London: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).

²¹Mrinalini Sinha, "The Lineage of the 'Indian' Modern: Rhetoric, Agency and the Sarda Act in late colonial India," in *Gender, Sexuality and Colonial Modernities*, ed. Antoinette Burton (London & New York: Routledge, 1999), 217.

²²Sinha, "The Lineage of the 'Indian' Modern."

²³Cited in Sinha, "The Lineage of the 'Indian' Modern," 217.

²⁴M. K. Gandhi, "The Position of Women," *Young India* (17 October 1929).

²⁵Cited in Aparna Basu and Bharati Ray, *Women's Struggle: A History of the All India Women's Conference, 1927-1990* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990), 49.

²⁶Ray and Basu, *Women's Struggle*, 49-50.

²⁷Ray and Basu, *Women's Struggle*, 50.

²⁸Sinha, "The Lineage of the 'Indian' Modern," 218.

²⁹For a detailed and rich analysis of Muslim women's reform activity at the turn of the twentieth century see Sonia

Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876- 1939* (Leiden, New York, London: E.J.Brill, 1996).

³⁰Amalek Tripathi, *Vidyasagar: The Traditional Modernizer* (Bombay: Orient Longman, 1974); Sumit Sarkar, "The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal," in *A Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta: Papyrus Press, 1985), 71-76; Tanika Sarkar, "Rhetoric Against The Age of Consent: Reason and Death of a Child-Wife," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 4 September 1993, 1869-1878; Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly' Englishman and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1995); Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal 1890- 1930* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999).

³¹Basu and Ray, *Women's Struggle*, 2- 3.

³²Swarnakumari Devi became editor of this journal from 1884.

³³Abhijit Sen and Abhijit Bhattacharya, eds, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha* (The Collected Works of Swarnakumari Devi) (Bikalpa: Calcutta, 1998), 208.

³⁴Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*.

³⁵For more details see Chitra Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 1980), 57- 58.

³⁶These essays are, "Ramabai" (1889), "Streeshiksha O Bethune School" (Female education and the Bethune School, 1887), "Purusera Sresthatva (Male Superiority, 1888), "Sakhisamiti" (1891), "Saat Batsare Sakhisamiti" (Seven Years of Sakhisamiti, 1893), and "Bibhababibaha O Hindupatrika" (Widow Remarriage and Hindupatrika, 1909) in Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*.

³⁷Himani Bannerji, *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* (New Delhi: Tulika), 169- 170.

³⁸Tanika Sarkar, "Strishiksha and Its Terrors: Re-Reading Nineteenth Century Debates On Reform," in *Literature and Gender: Essays for Jasodhara Bagchi*, ed. Sajni Mukherjee and Supriya Chaudhuri (Calcutta: Orient Longman), 155.

³⁹I use the phrase "uneven developments" here in the same spirit as it was coined and used in Mary Poovey, *Uneven Developments, The Ideological Work of Gender in Mid-Victorian England* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1988).

⁴⁰Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 211.

⁴¹Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 98- 99.

⁴²Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 103- 104.

⁴³Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 110.

⁴⁴Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 110.

⁴⁵Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 110- 111.

⁴⁶Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 69- 70.

⁴⁷Sarkar, "Strishiksha and Its Terrors," 154.

⁴⁸Swarnakumari Devi, *Snehalata ba Palita*, in *Srimati Swarnakumari Granthavali* (Calcutta: Basumati Sahitya Mandir, 1916).

⁴⁹Rajul Sogani, *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature* (New

Delhi: Oxford University Press), 181.

⁵⁰Sogani, *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature*, 186 (Emphasis mine).

⁵¹Sogani, *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature*, 186.

⁵²Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 67.

⁵³Poovey, *Uneven Developments*, 187.

⁵⁴Sogani, *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature*, 187.

⁵⁵Sogani, *The Hindu Widow in Indian Literature*.

⁵⁶Cited in Bannerji, *Inventing Subjects*, 141.

⁵⁷Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 113.

⁵⁸Sen and Bhattacharya, *Swarnakumari Devira Samkalita Prabandha*, 115.

⁵⁹Historians who have dealt with the development of child welfare and female education mention the work done by the SNDMA in their accounts. See Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal 1890- 1930* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999), 148, 183- 184.

⁶⁰G. S. Dutt, *A Woman Of India, Being the life of Saroj Nalini (Founder of the Women's Institute Movement in India)* (London: Leonard and Virginia Woolf, 1929), 113.

⁶¹Dutt, *A Woman Of India*, 116.

⁶²Dutt, *A Woman Of India*, 116.

⁶³Dutt, *A Woman Of India*, 116- 117.

⁶⁴Dutt, *A Woman Of India*, 117- 118.

⁶⁵Dutt, *A Woman Of India*, 117.

⁶⁶For a few representative samples see *Amritabazar Patrika*, 6 February 1926; 11 February 1926; 13 February 1926; 21 February 1926; 15 July 1928, 18 July 1928. The fifteenth anniversary of the organization in 1940 saw the publication of a large number of reports. See *Statesman*, 16 January 1940 noted that SNDMA founded in 1925 had established 400 Mahila Samitis. It reported that, "The movement had helped to solve the economic problems of a large section of women."

⁶⁷*Statesman*, 20 January 1940.

⁶⁸*Statesman*, 20 January 1940, 98.

⁶⁹*Statesman*, 20 January 1940, 99.

⁷⁰*Statesman*, 20 January 1940, 139- 140.

⁷¹*Statesman*, 20 January 1940, 82

⁷²*Statesman*, 20 January 1940, 71.

⁷³*Statesman*, 20 January 1940, 75- 76.

⁷⁴See for instance, "Women's Education: Conference to meet in Calcutta," *Statesman* 11 February 1938; "Education of Girls in Bengal, Women's Conference," *Statesman* 18 February 1938; "Provision for Council Chamber Criticized: General Discussion on Bengal Budget Opens," *Statesman*, 22 February 1938; "Calcutta Women's Conference: Ideals of Communal and Social Harmony," *Statesman*, 26 November 1939.

⁷⁵Uma Nehru, "A Call to the Women of Today," *Statesman*, 19 November 1939.

⁷⁶Nehru, "A Call to the Women of Today."

⁷⁷C. B. Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism: Hobbes to Locke*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1974. According to Macpherson, from the seventeenth century there arose a notion of the subject grounded in the right of private ownership of one's own person. According to

Macpherson, possessive individualism implies a "conception of the individual as essentially the proprietor of his own person or capacities, owing nothing to society for them. The individual was seen neither as a moral whole, nor as part of a larger social whole, but as the owner of himself." Macpherson, *The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism*, 3.

⁷⁸For details on the strike and Dr. Prabhavati Das Gupta's arrest during this strike see articles entitled: "Scavenger Strike and The Police—Recent Arrests: Great Indignation at Worker's Meeting," *Amritabazar Patrika*, 1 July 1928; "Massive Strike: Subhas Bose Involved," *Amritabazar Patrika*, 5 July 1928.

⁷⁹Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History: Bengal 1890-1940*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 145- 146.

⁸⁰Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 145.

⁸¹Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 141.

⁸²Chakrabarty, *Rethinking Working Class History*, 144.

⁸³Krishna Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl," *Statesman*, Sunday, 21 January 1940.

⁸⁴Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl."

⁸⁵Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl."

⁸⁶Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl."

⁸⁷Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl."

⁸⁸Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl."

⁸⁹Hutheesing, "The Modern Girl."

⁹⁰Manjari, "Feminism," *The Statesman*, 18 August 1940.

⁹¹Manjari, "Feminism."

⁹²Manjari, "Feminism."

⁹³Manjari, "Feminism."

⁹⁴Manjari, "Feminism."

⁹⁵Sarkar's essay, "Hindu ein committee r bill sambandhe koyekti katha" (Some reflections on the legislation of the Hindu Law Committee) was originally published in *Anandabazar Patrika*, 12 Kartik (October) 1954. Reprinted in *Saralabala Racanasamgraha*, vol. 2, ed. Chitra Deb, 624-626.

⁹⁶Sarkar, "Hindu ein committee," 626.

⁹⁷Sarkar, "Hindu ein committee," 626.

⁹⁸Anurupa Devi, *Sabitye Nari: Srastri O Srishti*, (Women in Literature: Creators and their Creations) (Calcutta: University of Calcutta, 1949), 7. This text is a compilation of the Lilaflectures delivered by Anurupa Devi to the University of Calcutta in 1944.

⁹⁹See Saba Mahmood, "Feminist Theory, Embodiment, and the Docile Agent: Some Reflections on the Egyptian Islamic Revival," *Cultural Anthropology* 16, no. 2 (2000): 202-236.