

# Mothers, *Memsahibs*, Goddesses and Whores: debates over women's education in late nineteenth-century India

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Women's education, or rather the lack of it, was, along with sati, child marriage, polygyny, and the treatment of widows, one of the major components of the British argument that Indian women were oppressed, and that this was the source of India's 'backwardness'.<sup>1</sup> While the causal argument is difficult to substantiate, it is true that Indian women in the early nineteenth century had less access to education than their British contemporaries. In traditional Hindu society women's education was considered improper and even dangerous. There was a superstition even among women that education led to widowhood; given the dependence of Hindu wives on their husbands (and the unavailability of social and economic roles for unmarried women), "pursuing knowledge was tantamount to suicide", as Geraldine Forbes writes.<sup>2</sup> Women's traditional education was limited to the household arts; at best, some women in propertied families might learn to keep accounts, and women from 'respectable' families might learn to read as a "pious recreation".<sup>3</sup>

The traditional view in Bengal was that where education did not prevent marriage altogether it produced adulteresses and widows, according to Meredith Borthwick. More concretely, education was believed to take women away from housework, requiring servants to be hired to replace the woman's unpaid labor. Given these prejudices, a Bengali family in the mid-eighteenth century could not look on educating its daughters as other than an economic liability; where an educated son would have an advantage in finding work, an educated daughter would be unable to find a husband and so would end up a drain on her parents' resources.<sup>4</sup>

To some extent this may have been a recent development. Reformers up through the twentieth century constantly claimed that education was among the rights and benefits that women had once had in the Vedic 'golden age' and had now lost, as in these excerpts from a paper by S. K. Chattopadhyaya written in 1929:

In the beautiful days of the Vedic period of India the glory of which still surrounds the country like a faint halo, women took part freely in the social and political life of the country, and, in the celebration of religious functions and rituals, they had a special place of importance assigned to them.... They were also earnest students of philosophy and took active part in subtle philosophical debates.... Such social disabilities as purdah and child

<sup>1</sup> Forbes 12

<sup>2</sup> Forbes 33

<sup>3</sup> Forbes 36

<sup>4</sup> Borthwick 61

marriage were entirely unknown.... Their rights of inheritance and succession were fully recognized, whether they were widows or daughters.<sup>5</sup>

Company surveys in Bengal and Bihar in the 1830s found as many as 100,000 parochial schools in those regions, teaching in the vernacular and concentrating on religious instruction; these may have been (and were believed by reformers to have been) coeducational. The establishment of English as the official language of government and of high school education after the publication of Macaulay's Minute in 1835 affected these schools severely. "As the new system of education came into vogue, the old Arabic and Sanskrit schools gradually closed down and the country lapsed into illiteracy," wrote Hannah Sen in 1938.<sup>6</sup> "Knowledge ceased to be an end in itself." When education began to be seen only as a practical tool, "the agency for the running of a bureaucratic machinery," the education of women, who were not expected to become bureaucrats, naturally lost its value.<sup>7</sup> But even male literacy in early nineteenth century India was low and women's literacy significantly lower.<sup>8</sup>

It was not until the 1850s, when both the colonial government and various Hindu reform movements such as the Brahmo Samaj began to support women's education, that female literacy made any significant progress. At a time when men's education was becoming a significant avenue for advancement, women's education was seen as a way to promote social reform.<sup>9</sup> Partha Chatterjee argues that the most important element in the growing acceptance of formal female education in Bengal from the 1850s was the development of Bengali teaching materials and "educative literature," as a spiritually and ideologically acceptable alternative to the suspiciously Christian English-language girls' schools and home schooling of the day, largely the work of missionaries.<sup>10</sup> In a development that somewhat parallels developments in India's Muslim communities, education—in Bengali—became seen as a way for women to acquire cultural refinement, to help reverse a "degenerate social tradition."<sup>11</sup>

By 1870 a certain amount of education was beginning to be seen as an asset rather than a liability for a woman seeking a husband. But there was also a belief that women with 'a little learning' would come to think of themselves as 'educated women' and become "unduly proud and arrogant".<sup>12</sup> Or literacy might expose women to immoral influences from which they would otherwise be safe. "A little learning" was seen as being, for "all those women in whose hearts there is no natural purity...

<sup>5</sup> Chattopadhyaya 1-3

<sup>6</sup> Sen 94

<sup>7</sup> Sen 95

<sup>8</sup> Forbes 35

<sup>9</sup> Forbes 41

<sup>10</sup> Chatterjee 245

<sup>11</sup> Chatterjee 246

<sup>12</sup> Borthwick 103

who are incapable of thinking independent thoughts... totally disastrous—the cause of their downfall.”<sup>13</sup>

Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that the debate over women’s education in Bengal was shaped by the difficulty of creating a nationalist identity that was simultaneously ‘modern’ and ‘authentic’. The ‘modern’ required assimilating the idea of a civil society, the idea of a distinction between public and private, and with it a definition of the role of the private, i.e. the individual, with regard to the public, i.e., the state.<sup>14</sup> In the discourse of ‘civilization’ that nineteenth-century Bengali reformers took from Europe, the construction of the nation both required and facilitated the construction of the individual; the prevailing ideology argued that success as a nation required the development of industrious virtues in the individuals that composed it, while the prevailing definition of individual-as-citizen could apply only to free citizens of an independent nation, not to subjects of a colonial state.<sup>15</sup> The ‘authentic’ required that this idea of the free citizen, of freedom, not destabilize the prevailing norms of the extended family.<sup>16</sup>

Chatterjee casts the debate in slightly different terms, contending that the Indian nationalist ideology was formed by the contradictory demands of mastering European technology and techniques without allowing Indian culture to be assimilated. The contradiction was resolved by separating the “domain of culture” into material and spiritual spheres; in the material sphere, it would be acceptable to imitate the West, but in the spiritual, it was critical that the “distinctive spiritual essence” of the East—which was anyhow superior—be maintained.<sup>17</sup> This material/spiritual separation developed as a separation of ‘inner’ and ‘outer’. The material sphere was “a mere external,” the spiritual “genuinely essential.” In practical terms this meant a separation of “the social space” into home (*ghar*) and world (*bahir*). What makes the particular Indian construction of this dichotomy in the late nineteenth century more than just a defense of ‘traditional’ patriarchal norms is the colonial context. “The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture.” Women became the symbolic representation of this “inner, essential identity.”<sup>18</sup>

There are some parallels with the way the issue of women’s education was approached in India’s Muslim communities, but some differences as well. Chatterjee points out that the nationalist “cultural formation” necessarily excluded Muslims,

<sup>13</sup> Borthwick 102

<sup>14</sup> Chakrabarty 51

<sup>15</sup> Chakrabarty 52, 54

<sup>16</sup> Chakrabarty 65

<sup>17</sup> Chatterjee 237-238

<sup>18</sup> Chatterjee 238-239

eventually (in the post-independence period) creating a “new colonial relation”; questions of the inner/outer, home/world dichotomy among Muslims necessarily involved self-definition not only in relation to the colonial state, but in relation to Hindu culture as well. Among Indian Muslim elites in the late nineteenth century, Gail Minault writes, women’s education became tied up with questions of religious and class identity. The *ashraf*, the noble class that had provided the Mughal dynasty with its military officers, civil servants, and clerics, had been transformed into a broader category of ‘culture’ and ‘respectability’ that encompassed the Muslim middle and upper middle classes and had its own set of virtues: piety, frugality, education, and self-restraint. These virtues were contrasted to the failings of the late Mughal nawabs, who were seen as wasteful, immoderate, and forgetful of Islam.

The identity of the *ashraf* was increasingly rooted in its literary and religious culture, and women’s role in the maintenance and transmission of that culture consequently came under scrutiny. It was discovered that women were, in Minault’s summary, “backward, unable to provide intelligent companionship to their husbands or discipline to their sons... ignorant of the basic tenets of their faith, tied to wasteful customs and ritual observances that had little to do with scriptural Islam”.<sup>19</sup> Male reformers implicated women deeply in the decline of Muslim culture. The *zenana*, Minault writes, was seen “as the locus of both extravagance and ignorance”. “The solution,” she writes, “was a greater regulation of women’s lives by both scriptural piety and intellectual discipline, as prescribed by men.” The twin goals of reformers were a return to “the true, pristine Islam of the Prophet” and the recovery of frugality and self-restraint; the necessary components, for both men and women, were literacy to allow one to read the Quran and arithmetic to balance the household accounts.<sup>20</sup> If in the process what autonomy women had was compromised and the *zenana* was, in effect, colonized by male authority and values, this was not seen, by men at least, as a problem.<sup>21</sup>

The Muslim debate in the late nineteenth century was not so much whether women should be educated as how, and in particular, where. It had long been customary for girls to be tutored or taught in small groups in the *zenana*; this allowed them to maintain *purdah* and to avoid endangering their own or their families’ reputations by going out in public.<sup>22</sup> In the 1860s the colonial government of the Punjab even subsidized such *zenana* ‘schools’, but in the 1870s and 1880s was forced for financial reasons to reduce its support.<sup>23</sup> This paralleled similar debates in Hindu society but by this time those debates had mostly been resolved; partly on economic grounds, partly because the newly strengthened ‘spiritual identity’ of Bengali women

<sup>19</sup> Minault 5

<sup>20</sup> Minault 56

<sup>21</sup> Minault 6

<sup>22</sup> Minault 215

<sup>23</sup> Minault 164

paradoxically made it more possible for them to leave the home: “the image of woman as goddess or mother,” Chatterjee writes, “served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home.”<sup>24</sup> The development of Muslim girls’ schools seems to have lagged decades behind the development of schools for Hindu girls; the educated Muslim women were overwhelmingly home-schooled well into the early twentieth century.<sup>25</sup>

In the Muslim community there was little if any debate over the content of women’s education; not so in the Hindu community. The British government believed that Western education for women was crucial if the loyalty of their Western-educated husbands in the civil service was to be ensured; they also hoped that Western-educated women would raise Anglophile children.<sup>26</sup> (Their hopes proved unfounded.) Indian male reformers, many of whom accepted the British view that India was held back by its treatment of women, hoped to shake the image of a “decadent and backward” society.<sup>27</sup> But here they ran up against the issue of maintaining a native cultural identity—women being the symbol of all that had remained authentic, pure, and spiritual, women’s education became the battleground on which the identity battle was fought. Educational institutions for girls and women founded on English principles and using English curricula were denounced as “denationalizing.”<sup>28</sup> ‘Denationalization’ of boys was one thing; after all, they were training for careers in a Europeanized civil service—or in a ‘world’ dominated by European material culture. Denationalization of the Hindu woman, the repository of Hindu virtue and Hindu traditional culture, was something else.<sup>29</sup> Whether it was Chakrabarty’s norms of the extended family or Chatterjee’s spiritual inner essence that was being defended—in practice the two would not easily be separated—education came to be perceived alternately as a blessing to be courted or a curse to be avoided.

The conflict was symbolized by the twin figures of Lakshmi, the auspicious goddess who was the wife of Vishnu, embodying the virtues of loyalty, devotion, and fidelity, and Alakshmi, her malevolent opposite, the embodiment of malice, jealousy, and discord.<sup>30</sup> Jealousy, it was believed, was in the nature of women, and if not controlled by *grihakarya*, “the auspicious rituals of domestic work”, would weaken or even destroy the family.<sup>31</sup> Advocates of women’s education argued that the right sort of improving education—in *dharma*, ritual, and morally instructive literature—would remove jealousy and restore to women their Lakshmi-nature. “Malice and hostility”

<sup>24</sup> Chatterjee 249

<sup>25</sup> Minault 267

<sup>26</sup> Forbes 60

<sup>27</sup> Forbes 15, 61

<sup>28</sup> Borthwick 91

<sup>29</sup> Borthwick 92-93

<sup>30</sup> Chakrabarty 58-59

<sup>31</sup> Chakrabarty 60

were, they claimed, the natural state of the ignorant and uneducated woman.<sup>32</sup> By the 1860s it was to many Bengali authors, male and female, self-evident that it was lack of education that was responsible for the (widespread, according to these critics) laziness, incivility, and in general barbarism of Bengali women; for their Alakshmi-nature, in other words.<sup>33</sup>

However, education itself could also be a source of Alakshmi-nature. ‘Improper’ education could produce women who were not only lazy but immodest, arrogant, disrespectful of the husbands they were meant to treat as ‘divine beings’, and neglectful of their duties.<sup>34</sup> Chakrabarty argues that these references to *grihakarya* were not so much about the economic value of household work (which in the relatively affluent families to whom extensive women’s education was an option would have largely have been done by retainers or hired servants) as they were about the Lakshmi virtues of modesty and obedience. “The invocation of ‘household duties’... worked rather as a cryptic cultural code for the qualities of personhood that made a woman both ‘modern’ and desirable.”<sup>35</sup> For opponents of women’s education, the stereotypical *memsahib* became the bugbear; the educated woman in her final, developed form was “a purely social being who never did any housework”, a parasite on her family and on society.<sup>36</sup> Improperly educated women were compared not only to *memsahibs* but to whores (*beshyas*) and male ‘dandies’ (*bibis* or *boubabus*).<sup>37</sup> In fact all these terms were interchangeable, writes Chakrabarty: “Alakshmi, beshya, boubabu, memsahib, etc. were terms that stood for individual assertiveness on the part of women and its undesirability. They were the figures of imagination that helped demonize the ‘free’ and ‘private’ (female) individual whom the European writers on conjugality idealized.”<sup>38</sup>

The education of English women took on complex dimensions in the debate over women’s education in India. Proponents of women’s higher education had to defend themselves against “the stereotype of the blue-stocking”; in an oft-quoted passage written in 1870, Kundamala Debi told her readers: “If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to *mem-sahib* like behaviour.”<sup>39</sup> But if educated English women were not respected, the prevailing English attitude toward higher education for women was: the English reluctance to admit women to study for university degrees was cited as evidence of the foolishness of the idea. The University of Calcutta admitted its first women degree students in 1878, some months before the University of London, and at a time when higher education was still seen in England

<sup>32</sup> Chakrabarty 60

<sup>33</sup> Chakrabarty 61

<sup>34</sup> Chakrabarty 61

<sup>35</sup> Chakrabarty 62

<sup>36</sup> Borthwick 104

<sup>37</sup> Chakrabarty 61

<sup>38</sup> Chakrabarty 64

<sup>39</sup> Borthwick 105

as unfeminine.<sup>40</sup> It was argued that “the ruling race” itself did not believe that degree examinations fit women “for worthy positions in life” or made them “better individuals in any sense of the expression.”<sup>41</sup> Satirizing the prevailing attitude of the period, Mithan Chocksi wrote in 1929:

In 1883, the Bombay University roll shows the names of eight girls who matriculated. But collegiate education for women was in general yet unthought of and if the idea was entertained, the ridicule of commonsense at the imposition of additional burdens upon the frail feminine mind must have effectively negated [sic] any tentative proposals—even as in Victorian England.<sup>42</sup>

By the turn of the century the grounds of the debate had shifted. No longer was the debate over whether women should be educated, but only how far education should go. If the English government’s hopes that education would create Anglophile mothers raising Anglophile sons proved unfounded, so did the belief of reform-minded Hindu men that educated women would be content to limit their role to that of repository of virtue and cultural purity. Turn-of-the-century educated women maintained their belief in the value of domestic work and the importance of traditional virtues, but saw no incompatibility between these ideals and the ideas of higher education, political participation, and in general taking an active role in the shaping of Indian modernity. In the twentieth century the men would have to find new ways to adjust to this. The fundamental issues of defining gender roles and maintaining cultural identity in the face of colonialism had not changed. What had changed was that the reforms of the previous decades had created a new class of educated women who were now beginning to take an active part in the discussion of their future and that of their daughters.

<sup>40</sup> Borthwick 94, 97

<sup>41</sup> Borthwick 97

<sup>42</sup> Chocksi 63-64

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