

# Three

Gender, Caste and Religion in the  
Making of Middle Class Modernity



# Domesticity and Middle-Class Nationalism in Nineteenth-century Bengal\*

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In nineteenth-century Bengal the intelligentsia was engaged in a convoluted critical exercise. This exercise involved interrogating power relationships within indigenous customs and traditions—especially gender norms within such customs—though there were definite patriarchal limits to this interrogation. The exercise involved, simultaneously, questioning the connections established between the local and the metropolitan—in short Bengal’s overall colonial connection. The problems so interanimated and complicated one another that, far from reaching a resolution, Bengal’s intelligentsia was unable to set itself an agenda with any absolute certainty. Emergent nationalist consciousness, which straddled a complex range of forms and possibilities, posed yet more questions and doubts to settled convictions instead of offering any clear answers.

It is perhaps time to remind ourselves that colonization did not necessarily simplify the range of questions and problems for the colonized. Recent historiographical and cultural studies sometimes tend to reduce the whole complex enterprise of colonialism to the manageable yet impoverished proportions of a crude binary framework: whether the local assented to or refused the structures of colonialism. Further surgeries displace these structures from the realm of colonial

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political economy into a conveniently attenuated rump of the epistemological and ontological aspects of colonial mastery—these are now to be regarded as the *real* structures. The recent historiographical shift further simplifies its task by locating these structures in a single form of Western power-knowledge with monolithic and fixed signs. A flat, uninflected, deductive, structural determinism then reads the consciousness of the colonized mechanically off these signs. Moreover, since these signs are vested with totalitarian powers, the consciousness of the colonized is divested of all claims to an autonomous life and made parasitic upon the master discourse of colonialism. This discourse supposedly constitutes the iron cage of language and meaning within which the colonized mind may only perform mimetic gestures.<sup>1</sup>

There is no denying that colonialism spawned the nineteenth-century intelligentsia. It is equally true that the history of the new middle classes was marked by many absences and voids—the absence of economic and political leadership being dominant and constitutive. The aftermath of 1857 left little doubt about the coercive and violent aspects of colonial rule. The sense of racial discrimination was heightened steadily through Lyttonian repression in the 1870s: the vernacular press and the theatre were muzzled, the Indian population was forcibly disarmed. The rabidly racist rhetoric during the Ilbert Bill agitation of the 1880s and a relatively moderate government's capitulation to it constituted crowning proof. Given the new political conditions, which largely demystified colonial myths about their non-discriminating fairness and the existence of a rule of law, Bengal's earlier reformism soon got over its hopeful youth. The Brahmos were split right down the middle and Vidyasagar spent his law few days in bitter disillusionment over his own agenda.<sup>2</sup> Earlier creative innovations within the new arena of education lost their initiative: a standardized and officialized uniform education policy proceeded to unfold itself from the 1880s.<sup>3</sup> The initiative would not be recovered till the time of the Swadeshi Movement.

The formation of a nineteenth-century political sphere is usually located within the religious and political associations that began to acquire pan-Indian aspirations from the 1870s. [...] In the late-nineteenth-century middle-class context, however, the politics of associations, of self-government bodies and of lower-class protest acquired immediacy and substance largely through the mediation of vernacular printed journals which described these developments

in close and vivid detail, and opened up such activity to widespread debate and comment.<sup>4</sup> The debate did not stop there. The public sphere, at this stage, remained integrally linked to domestic issues. A substantial number of journals and newspapers came into existence to debate issues of *sati*, *kulin* marriage, widow remarriage<sup>5</sup>—domestic issues which generated a wide range of authors and readers, from Bankimchandra to Battala farces.

[...]

Not only were there very substantial popular writing traditions even before the entry of print, the fact is that print itself stimulated new expressions of urban popular culture—the theatre, woodcut prints, Battala literature. [...] These were written by and for a literate but little-educated, sprawling readership and authorship which rarely read or wrote anything else. [...] Cheap woodcut prints, and later oleographs, similarly carried pictures of religious matters, of current scandal, and of the new city elite into a much larger number of lower-middle-class and even rural homes.<sup>6</sup>

The new Calcutta theatre, again, boomed largely through lower-middle-class patronage, and, in its turn, stimulated the growth of print through the continuous turnout of play scripts. [...] The red light area of Chitpur Road borders on it and this, in the nineteenth century, was the main source for the supply of actresses. The success of the theatre depended significantly upon lower-middle-class themes and preferences. While the classical themes and chaste language of Madhusudan Dutt's early plays were displayed to depressingly empty halls, the fortunes of the lately established Bengal Theatre picked up and flourished in the early 1870s with the performance of a popular farce—*Mohanter Ei Ki Kaj*. This play enacted a scandal that had rocked the popular imagination when the *mohunt* of the Tarakeswar pilgrimage seduced a young girl who was, later, murdered by her husband—an employee, interestingly, at a printing press.<sup>7</sup>

Print revolutionized reading habits and possibilities. It penetrated into all sorts of times and spaces within everyday life by its sheer portability. Earlier, manuscripts were extremely rare commodities with a slow and thinly spread-out circulation. [...] Each page had to be carefully extracted from between the wooden *pattas*, read, and then restored to its proper place. This whole complicated, delicate and time-consuming reading exercise could be carried out only at special times and places and involved fixed postures. The new, plentiful, cheap, portable, and replicable printed books, in contrast, inserted themselves

into all kinds of times and spaces effortlessly. This unprecedented and easy availability was augmented by the introduction of primers and textbooks in school and *pathshalas*. [...] Within the confines of a limited class, reading became a non-specialized, fluid, pervasive, everyday activity. This is why vernacular presses developed and proliferated, provoking comment from many observers of contemporary society.

The growth of vernacular prose and the press made possible the incorporation of a new range of themes within literate culture which neither the English works, nor classical Sanskrit/Persian education, nor theological and imaginative literature could have included within their scope: themes concerning everyday life. In the Bengali language catalogues of the Imperial Library holdings, for the three decades between the 1870s and the 1890s roughly half of all prose works deal with problems pertaining to the organization of everyday living. Simultaneous with the entry of these new themes, an extended range of new authors was created. A cross-section of thinking men, and even a few exceptionally fortunate women, could, without formal learning, develop and express ideas within a public debate over the shape of their own daily lives. A vast range of 'non-authors' could at least follow the debates on themes involving themselves. Within this shared yet contested enterprise, the middle class could recuperate something of what it lacked, in terms of an articulated position, within the production process and the power structure. By marking out an autonomous discursive field of force, which drew within its orbit men as well as a few women, highly educated professionals as well as petty clerks, artists, artisans, hack writers, and theatre persons, the Bengali middle class was certainly present at its own making.

This autonomy was expressed primarily through a paradox. A deep, pervasive awareness of political subjection did not elicit from this class of people, for a long time, any direct or explicit demand for independence. What it did was to make the middle class dolefully deny its own energies, to refuse any description of itself except those that were deeply negative and bleak. [...] The general run of popular observation as well as more erudite literary production would equally characterize present time as degenerate, recasting the old trope of *kaliyug* to express new kinds of anxiety about a modernity ushered in under alien direction.<sup>8</sup>

For a long time, unease about foreign rule would be obliquely expressed through a critique of modern times. Spectacular changes, technological growth, and breakthroughs that were revolutionizing

their own life and experiences—railways, electricity, telegraph, urban growth, city crowds, street scenes—were steadfastly refused recognition into the symbolic order of these sections of people, except in a tangential and negative sense. It is disconcerting to find how scantily Calcutta was being represented as a city, whether in Bankim's novels, or in bazaar paintings, or in woodcut pictures which dwell on domestic situations and interior scenes. [...] In 1829, the newspaper *Bangadoot* had pioneered one of the first definitions of the new middle class. It was then described in terms of a marked increase in the size and circulation of wealth.<sup>9</sup> During the last few decades of the century, vernacular journals were unanimous in their description of a diseased, unproductive, morally decaying *bhadralok*.

## II

Middle-class Bengalis chose to read certain features of their physical and economic environment obsessively, as symptomatic elements, as metaphors of their larger condition. It seems useful to point out some of the physical and economic changes which particularly engaged their attention, and the ways in which these were used as narrative devices to describe their lives and times.

Concrete physical reasons shaped much of the bleak mental landscape which the nineteenth-century middle class inhabited. The Hindu nationalists of these times belonged largely to Calcutta or to the western, southern, and central parts of the province which had been, for the past several centuries, the key cultural zones of the region. [...] Large *zamindari* estates provided patronage to art and manufacture, while the growth of foreign trade from the seventeenth century stimulated local artisanal, commercial, and peasant economies.<sup>10</sup> The rise of the port of Hooghly bore testimony to the growth of new commerce.<sup>11</sup> Political turbulence and economic disasters over the eighteenth century, however, combined to fearfully destabilize the entire region. Eighteenth-century Shakta devotional poetry expressed these experiences in terms of existential uncertainties: coming back again and again to the unknowable countenance and the inscrutable intentions of the Divine Mother.<sup>12</sup>

From the late seventeenth century, and especially throughout the eighteenth century, the very land itself went through a major crisis.<sup>13</sup> The western arm of the Ganga, which bore most of the river's water-flow, gradually silted up, leading to the formation of a moribund delta in this region.<sup>14</sup> Productivity was lowered markedly due to frequent

inundation: by the 1830s, some of the land which had yielded two crops a year was producing a harvest only every three or four years.<sup>15</sup> Low food-supply weakened the Bengali constitution and made it vulnerable to the fevers and epidemics of stagnant waters: the Burdwan or Hooghly fever which was a great killer; cholera epidemics from 1817; and the smallpox that raged once very seven years.<sup>16</sup> [...]

A dread of prolonged and fatally weakening fevers, and of sudden and unexpected epidemics, structured the self-awareness of Bengalis. Enough ecological information had come in by the first three decades of the century<sup>17</sup> to build up a pessimistic picture of the land, the air, and the people. Contrasts between an earlier era and present times were most often made in terms of impaired health.<sup>18</sup> The woman in much of nineteenth-century literature presides over the sick bed.<sup>19</sup> Interestingly even though children, young women, and agricultural labourers were the worst victims of fevers and epidemics, it was the vulnerability and degeneration of the body of the Hindu male babu which became the most significant sign of the times. One might even say that this is how the Bengali middle class sought to express its hegemonic aspirations; not by attributing to itself political or economic leadership roles, not through claims to power, but through ascribing to itself all the ills and deprivations that marked nineteenth-century Bengali society as a whole.

As the volume of water flowing down the Hooghly branch of the Ganga shrank, and as early colonial depredations shattered established economic and political patterns, a number of flourishing commercial, manufacturing and administrative centres went into decline. The decay, of the great port of Hooghly was dramatic. The ruin of Dacca—though this did not lie on the moribund delta—caused extensive comment. Malda, Murshidabad, Krishnanagore, Vishnupur—all were broken cities.<sup>20</sup> [...] Mid-century famines and ravages caused by forced indigo cultivation by white planters led to havoc and panic in rural areas. Bengali journalists agitated extensively over these issues.<sup>21</sup> The sense of depression produced by such sights and news came to make larger sense when they were fitted into a framework of systematic, critical knowledge shaped by theories of drain, de-industrialization and poverty.

The growth of the colonial urban sector provided little comfort or hope. The higher reaches of the new liberal professions were racially structured and congested. The massive tertiary sector provided scope only for very small-scale investment. The larger part of the middle

class found employment as petty clerks in foreign administrative or commercial establishments. In the discourse of the master race, manhood was defined not just through financial solvency but by the nature of relationship to property. A passive and subordinate working life produced, therefore, a deep sense of emasculation.

Yet, in the early decades, the *bhadralok* had seemed poised on the brink of a major entrepreneurial breakthrough when several wealthy Calcutta houses began to make substantial fortunes from shipping, insurance, mining, and some foreign trade.<sup>22</sup> The boom was over by the 1840s, and after the 1860s hardly any new fortunes were made that way. Hopes of business success had already formed a new economic vocabulary. Debendranath Tagore talks in his autobiography about the failure of their business enterprise as the time ‘when we lost all our property’,<sup>23</sup> even though the Jorasanko Tagores still retained substantial rural estates and a solid Calcutta establishment. Property, for some time at least, meant a specific kind of activity, that is, business. [...]

Bengali capital was to be tied up largely in urban real estate and rural landholding, which did not require much acumen or entrepreneurship, and in local trade, which had little potential for growth.<sup>24</sup> By the late nineteenth century the second rung in business activities had been monopolized by Marwaris, the top rung having already long been an European preserve. By the mid-nineteenth-century Bengalis had only a marginal presence in *Burrabazaar*—the heart of indigenous business in Calcutta.<sup>25</sup>

[...] *Sambad Prabhakar* complained in 1892: ‘The Lakshmi of sound commerce has abandoned Bengal. Mother Bengal now produces coolies and clerks alone.’ The tragedy was caused, said the paper, by a self-destructive inclination towards easier or more luxurious foreign alternatives.<sup>26</sup>

Women were primarily responsible for deciding household purchases. They, therefore, served as the target of both nationalist appeal and blame. A large body of tracts and folk art depicted the modern woman as a self-indulgent, spoilt and lazy creature who cared nothing for family or national fortune. This charge encompasses the triadic relationship between women, gold and servitude—*kamini*, *kanchan*, *dasatva*—that the nineteenth-century saint Ramakrishna was to engrave so deeply upon the Bengali moral order.<sup>27</sup> The archetypal evil woman of these times was not the immoral or the economically independent one, but one who, inspired by modern education, had

exchanged sacred ritual objects (the conchshell bangle, the ritually pure fabric, sindur) for foreign luxury ones.<sup>28</sup> There was thus an interchange between economic compulsions and pleas for feminine commitment to ritual.

The rent-revenue gap that the Permanent Settlement had generated and guaranteed had constituted the major security area for Bengal's middle-class *bhadralok*. It had ensured a whole spectrum of fairly comfortable rentier incomes at many levels. Certainties of absolute manipulative power over rent began to be breached—though in a very limited sense—from the mid-nineteenth century by the Rent Acts of 1859 and 1885. They intended to give a measure of security to upper tenants and curb some of the arbitrary coercive powers exercised by the landlord's *kutcheries* on unofficial courts-cum-dungeons. The Rent Act of 1859 had come about partly as a result of missionary pleas on behalf of the tenant.<sup>29</sup> Missionary-inspired colonial interference into the hitherto closed world of largely upper-caste Hindu *zamindar* and the lower-caste or Muslim peasant was curiously coextensive with very similar instructions into the closed world of Hindu domestic practices. Both aroused a keen sense of the fragility of economic and domestic arrangements that had cushioned some of the traumas of the Hindu *bhadralok*. After the 1859 Act, landlords had been complaining that the loss of disciplinary power had eroded their moral authority and affected rent collection. The grievance closely parallels the dirges that were composed over each colonial or reformist suggestion for new conjugal laws. Clearly, the moral order of Hindu patriarchy was in peril.

If an alien, imposed modernity was represented as a series of deprivations, then nationalism could situate its emancipatory project only by enclosing a space that was still understood as inviolate, autonomous. Much of nineteenth-century nationalism identified this space as the 'Hindu way of life'. The fundamental distinction between reformers and Hindu nationalists of the nineteenth century did not lie in the fact that the former were less patriotic or that the latter were more rooted in indigenous tradition. It stemmed from two different readings of Hindu domestic practices and custom. While liberal reformers described them as a distortion of earlier purity and a major symptom of present decay, Hindu nationalists celebrated them as an excess reserved over and above colonization, any change in which would signify the surrender of the last bastion of freedom. [...] Colonization

had made it imperative to introduce an absolute distinction between the Self and the Other, while emergent nationalism made it equally imperative to stake out claims to sole representational authority over the self.

[...]

The concern with domestic practice initiated much discussion and debate. The consequent transparency of concrete practices demystified the self-legitimizing arguments around custom and, eventually, put far too many strains on the commitment to it. The Hindu nationalist agenda consequently moved out of the area of human relationships into the more public and reified domain of social service and patriotism towards the turn of the century. I would, then, relocate some of the vital beginnings of Bengali nationalism away from the recognized issues in the political sphere and into the politics of relationships within the family.

### III

The Hindu home was the one sphere where improvement could be made through personal initiative, and changes wrought whereby education would bring forth concrete, manipulable, desired results.<sup>30</sup> The home, then, had to substitute for the world outside and for all the work and relations there that lay beyond personal comprehension and control. 'Just as the King reigns over his dominion, so the head of the household (*karta*) rules over his household'<sup>31</sup>—began a mid-nineteenth-century tract on domestic management. 'The *karta* sometimes rules like a King, sometimes needs to legislate like the lawgiver and sometimes he adjudicates like the chief justice,'<sup>32</sup> said another. 'Whoever can run a Hindu family can administer a whole realm'<sup>33</sup> was an assertion frequently made within this body of writing. Yet another tract advised the *karta* on how to marshal his forces to face a rebellious woman within the family.<sup>34</sup> The *karta*, therefore, becomes within the home what he can never aspire to be outside it—a ruler, an administrator, a legislator, or a chief justice, a general marshalling his troops. Apart from compensatory functions, the strategic placement of the home assumes other functions as well. The management of household relations becomes a political and administrative capability, providing training in governance that one no longer attains in the political sphere. The intention is to establish a claim to a share of power in the world, a political role that the Hindu

is entitled to, via successful governance of the household. A possibly unintended consequence, however, is that in the process this renders household relations into political ones.

This was an unintended consequence because the Hindu nationalist strategy centred its critique of colonialism primarily on the loveless, purely deprivational, unrequited nature of its political arrangement, an arrangement which endowed the dominant group with absolute power and profits and the subject people with helpless surrender—with no possibility of self-fulfilment. If the home was not merely an escape from this world but its critique and an alternative order in itself, then love and affect had to be the organizing principle of this inner, hidden nation, and the exercise of power needed to be replaced with the notion of self-surrender and general self-fulfilment. Household relations had to be shown as supra-political ones, relations of power represented as purely emotional states.

Out of the entire gamut of household relations, conjugality was found to be ideally relevant to this project. Conjugality was based on the apparent absolutism of one partner and the total subordination of the other. As such, it was the one relationship that seemed most precisely to replicate colonial arrangements. Hence, this would best constitute the grounds for challenging and contesting colonial arrangements—that is, by showing the supposedly real and radical difference between the two sets of relationships despite their apparently similar basis, and by establishing where the moral superiority of the one lay over the other. [...]

[...]

[...] Hindu nationalists needed to naturalize love as the basis for Hindu marriage, a higher form of love that excelled allegedly utilitarian, materialist and narrowly contractual western arrangements. They argued that non-consensual Hindu marriages could, indeed, be more loving than the western pattern of courtship based on class and property qualifications more than on love. In the Hindu case, a lifetime of togetherness beginning with infancy guaranteed a superior and more certain compatibility. Nationalists denied that the production of sons was the sole aim of Hindu marriage: they argued it was a complete spiritual union through perfect love. It was also kinder to women since it ensured not just a hold on the husband's affection but an integration with the family which gave her greater security. While the entire system of non-consensual, indissoluble, infant marriage was to be preserved intact and inviolate, each aspect of the

Hindu marriage needed to be written as a love story with a happy ending.<sup>35</sup>

Let us look at a very typical description of a child bride.

People in this country take great pleasure in infant marriage. The little bit of a woman, the infant bride, clad in red silk.[...] Drums are beating and men, women and children are running in order to have a glimpse of that lovely face. From time to time she breaks forth into little ravishing smiles. She looks like a little lovely doll.

The key words are ‘little, lovely, ravishing, pleasure, infant, doll’ – inserted at carefully chosen selected intervals.<sup>36</sup> The community of ‘men, women, and children’ formed round this figure is bonded together by great visual pleasure, by happiness. Loveableness bathes the trauma of patrilocality in warm sensuousness and grounds non-consensual indissoluble infant marriage in mutual desire alone.

Given this sensual starting point, the absolute and unconditional chastity of the Hindu wife, extending beyond the death of the husband, was equally strongly grounded by this discourse in her own desire. This purity, since it is supposedly a conscious moral choice, becomes at once a sign of difference and of superiority, a Hindu claim to power. The politics of women’s monogamy then is the condition of the possible Hindu nation: the one is often explicitly made to stand in for the other. ‘We are but a half civilised, poor, sorrowful, subjected, despised nation. We have but one jewel and for us that is the treasure of seven realms, a priceless gem.’<sup>37</sup> [...] Woman’s chastity, then, has a real and stated, not merely symbolic, political value.

Willed chastity enables the widow to desire the austerities and sacrifices that her condition imposes on her. Since she still belongs spiritually to her husband in a transcendental sort of way, worldly comforts have actually ceased to matter and her body and soul draw pleasure, not pain, from the rigours of material existence. Her life is not marked by loss or absence but by surfeit because her voluntary abdication of an earthly life is a form of *sanyas* within the household.<sup>38</sup> It not only gives her moral and spiritual energy but also ensures a reservoir of spirituality in each home and for the Hindu order as a whole. Also, strict ritual observances root the widow’s body in ancient India, thus miraculously enabling her to escape foreign domination. The cloth she wears is necessarily indigenous, the water she drinks is to be carried from the sacred river and not through foreign water pipes, and the salt that goes into her food is special rock salt untouched by machines. Ergo, the nation needs ascetic widowhood.<sup>39</sup>

The final and highest test of the supremacy of Hindu conjugality was the proven past capacity for self-immolation by widows.<sup>40</sup> The sati was an adored nationalist symbol, her figure representing the moment of climax in expositions of Hindu nationalism. Bankimchandra saw in it the last hope of a doomed nation.<sup>41</sup> [...]

Rabindranath's writing of the early Swadeshi period recall her glory.<sup>42</sup> An immense body of patriotic tracts routinely invoked the act as an unailing source of nationalist inspiration and pride.

[...]

It was the nature of the woman's commitment to the conjugal order that bound the system together. Moral initiative therefore passes on to the woman, uniquely privileging her activism. If the household was the embryonic nation, then the woman was the true patriotic subject. The male body, having passed through the grind of western education, office, routine, and forced urbanization, having been marked with the loss of traditional sports and martial activities, was supposedly remade in an attenuated, emasculated form by colonialism.<sup>43</sup> The female body, on the other hand, was still pure and unmarked, loyal to the rule of the *shastras*.

This construction of the Hindu wife could also bind wide-ranging social segments around her practices and norms in order to formulate a middle class which, in colonial Bengal, lacked a clearly articulated economic base. [...] Since the new economic man did not appear in Bengal, it would be the new domestic woman who had to carry the image of a class.

#### IV

The image of the loving heart of Hindu conjugality was, understandably, more an act of heroic imagination and conviction than of lived experience. Paradoxically, the stronger the expression of conviction in the vision, the more strongly critical attention would focus on concrete aspects of the reality and render the project enormously complicated. Four developments problematized the Hindu nationalist discourse on conjugality in the last two decades of the nineteenth century. There was already an old and deeply influential counter-tradition of folklore and verse that described marriage and domesticity as a source of profound unhappiness for the woman.<sup>44</sup> Nineteenth-century discursive prose would extend these desperate sobs into critical argument, interrogation and frontal challenge: into a movement for change. From the 1860 women's own writings began to appear,

further confirming this tradition.<sup>45</sup> And finally, there were reformist campaigns for change that, from the mid-1880s under Malabari assiduously picked up and wove together all the material evidence on force and coercion within Hindu marriage. Two sensational events—Rukmabai's demand to be released from a marriage contracted at her infancy, and a little girl Phulmani being raped to death by her husband—seemed to abundantly vindicate the reformist critique and added strength and urgency to their campaign.<sup>46</sup>

Women's voices had frequently been borrowed by male authors to express a profound sense of bleakness about her existence. Jayadev's Radha had remained implacably angry about sexual double standards.<sup>47</sup> A particular stream within eighteenth-century Shakta devotional poetry—the Agamani songs—would use the mother's voice to mourn Durga's imminent parting at the end of her annual visit to her parent's home: 'Do not pass away the night of Nawami, leave her with me just a little longer.'<sup>48</sup> These songs, enormously popular throughout the nineteenth century, would find a double resonance from within a very wide-ranging age group among Bengali women. Thanks to the widespread custom of infant marriage, women, by their early twenties, might be daughters longing for their mothers, and, simultaneously, young mothers pining for their married daughters. In lullabies and folk verses, probably composed largely by women themselves, married sisters threatened to drown themselves unless their brothers came and took them away from 'this place of torture'. A little girl would plead with her playmate to play a last game with her, 'for the son of a stranger is coming to take me away and I shall never play again'. A young mother, hungry for the sight of her baby—from whom the endless duties of a joint family routine separate her—plans thus: 'I'll run away to the forest with my baby, and there, in solitude, I'll gaze upon the face of my treasure.'<sup>49</sup> A complicated variety of female rites—*vrats*—were evolved to eliminate the threat of the co-wife.<sup>50</sup>

The experience of their own subjection, however, gave to colonized men a fresh and acute sensitivity in relation to bondage. *Adbinata* became a peculiarly loaded word, fraught with a double guilt: the sin of submitting to foreign domination, which necessarily conjured up the associated guilt of submitting the woman to a state of subjection. The two senses of the word would continuously flow into each other, interanimate each other. They would sometimes be posed as cause and effect. 'When our white masters kick us, we return home and soothe

ourselves by kicking our wives.<sup>51</sup> Or, 'Our women lost their freedom when we lost ours.'<sup>52</sup>

[...]

Occasionally one kind of subjection was so closely linked to the other that they interchanged as metaphors. There is a poem on the caged bird and the title of this poem refers to the incarceration of women within the home:

Free bird, how do you hope to be happy within the cage?  
Imprisoned, you have forgotten your own speech.  
And you repeat the words of others mindlessly.<sup>53</sup>

Loss of one's language was also the most familiar trope for describing political subjection.

A whole alternative, contestatory description developed from the extended guilt over subjection, representing the Hindu home as the very antithesis of pleasure. [...]

The interrogation was not restricted to reformers. Hindu nationalists themselves, by relentlessly focusing on conjugality, problematized the entire arena. Even the most status-quoist tracts, which conclude with very orthodox prescriptions, do so not with confidence and certainty but after a compulsive and obsessive probing of all the tension spots.<sup>54</sup> This endless preoccupation reveals continuous doubts rather than any final resolution, since excessive speech points at anxiety just as surely as silence does.

The alternative, challenging description gained in authenticity once Hindu women began to write about themselves from the 1860s. They wrote about the trauma and not the beauty of infant marriage, the deprivations of the widow, the absence of love in the lives of wives. 'Conjugal love has disappeared from our country,' wrote a Hindu woman in 1863. She also claimed that Hindu women suffered more than anyone else in the world.<sup>55</sup> The Hindu household was described as 'a most terrible mountain range, infested with wild beasts.'<sup>56</sup> [...]

All varieties of women's writings unanimously identified and condemned two problem spots within the Hindu woman's existence—the pain of patrilocality and the longing for knowledge. Whatever the format and whatever the basic political stance towards patriarchy, women's writings at this time agreed on these points of criticism. The longing for systematic learning was not a desire implanted by male reformers, missionaries, and colonialists. A pious Hindu housewife, spending her life in a non-reformed domestic environment where no woman ever learnt to read, was so driven by this sharp desire that she

taught herself the letters in great secrecy and with difficulty. When she finally started reading, a measure of her triumph was conveyed by her coining of a magnificent new word to describe her own achievement and ‘mastery over the word’—*jitakshara*.<sup>57</sup> [...]

In 1884 Rukmabai, a low-caste, educated, Maharashtrian girl sought to repudiate an unconsummated marriage contracted at her infancy with an illiterate, dissolute, sick husband.<sup>58</sup> Over this sensational challenge, Malabari mobilized reformers and renewed his campaign for the introduction of divorce and for a higher age of consent—demands that seriously eroded the principles of indissolubility and of infant marriage. A higher age of consent for the girl would also jeopardize the fundamental Hindu tenet of *garbhadhan*, that is, the obligatory ritual cohabitation as soon as the wife attains puberty—for otherwise her womb is tainted and her sons lose the right to serve up ancestral offering.<sup>59</sup> Since in the hot climate of Bengal puberty may occur fairly early, a higher age of consent, it was feared, would interfere with this injunction.

For some time, in Hindu nationalist circles, Rukmabai became a name more dreaded than Malabari’s or those of colonial legislators.<sup>60</sup> They would still valiantly argue that a true Hindu wife must find the husband desirable, irrespective of external circumstances [...]. Already, however, the basis of conjugality had shifted from love to prescription as soon as the imperative ‘must’ was introduced in the statement. A structured duality thus complicated the representation of conjugality. The two compulsions and possibilities of construction—preservation of conjugal discipline and accent on love—would inevitably prove incompatible.

Reformers had an easier time of it since they were willing to surrender the principle of sacrament to the principle of willed and regularly consummated conjugal love. Widows could remarry because the physical relationship was over for them and hence the marriage was over as well. Similarly, wives of endlessly polygamous Kulin Brahmins were really not married since, in their case, consummation was rare, if not impossible. Infant wives, thrown into a relationship not chosen by them, could similarly repudiate their marriage tie. Hindu nationalists, on the other hand, fused love into sacrament which, once performed, must reign supreme, irrespective of absence of consummation or consent. There were not gradations within marriage—a child widow who had not seen her husband was as meaningfully married to him as the wife of a monogamous, loving husband. Once love and willed

surrender were separated out from the sacrament, however, Hindu nationalists had to take their stand on the latter alone in order to preserve the totality of the conjugal system.

They continued to sensualize the discipline of the sacrament—up to 1889 at least, when a more severe jolt occurred. Phulmani, a girl of ten, was raped to death by her twenty-nine-year-old husband Hari Maiti. Since she was beyond the statutory minimum age of ten, Hari Maiti could not be punished under existing Penal Code provisions. The event seemed to fully justify Malabari's allegations and a very hesitant government was at last inclined to give in to proposals for a higher age of consent.<sup>61</sup>

The narrative of Hindu marriage could no longer use the language of love; it had to be rewritten in terms of force and pain. If the element of difference from other systems was so obviously seen to lie in discipline, then Hinduism had to be celebrated as a superior coercive power. 'The Hindu is truly very severe, even cruel,' exulted Chandranath Basu in 1892 in his rejoinder to Rabindranath on the question of 'Hinduivaha'.<sup>62</sup> Self-fulfilment and pleasure were now demoted to a rather lower order of values. If infant marriage led to violence, even to bloody death, then it was the unique privilege and strength of the Hindu woman to accept the risk. Its practice could lead to weakened progeny and racial degeneration. But 'the Hindu prizes his religion above his life and short-lived children.'<sup>63</sup> Hindu scriptures did impose harsh injunctions on the wife as well as the widow. Yet 'this discipline is the prize and glory of chaste women and it prevails only in Hindu society.'<sup>64</sup>

[...]

Yet the grounding of an imagined nation upon sheer pain could not proceed beyond this point. Hinduism has come far too close to its own description of the perspective, loveless, disciplinary regime that is colonialism. The discourse reaches its breaking point and begins to collapse into self-travesty, the beginnings of self-disgust. When Joygobinda Shome said in 1891: what if infant wives die in childbirth since female scorpions always do in any case—the limits of this discourse had been reached.<sup>65</sup> Rajendralal Mitra had earlier raised a laugh at a Shobhabazaar Raj palace meeting when he described the Hindu wife as 'an article of gift...she is given away even as a cow or any other chattel.'<sup>66</sup> I suspect that the laugh was uneasy. The hegemonic desires of Hindu nationalism clashed too violently with the starkness of its discipline. Love had to re-enter the nationalist narrative.

Over the last decade of the century a new organizational principle, a new centre of gravity, was sought beyond conjugality. The axis was eventually located in the loving relationship between mother and son. This time, however, this was no flesh-and-blood woman, all too easily visible within an all-too-accountable household, but the new and supreme deity within the Hindu pantheon—the Motherland, the reified woman.<sup>67</sup> With the reoriented figure of the woman came a crucial shift in the very placing of the patriotic project. It was taken out of the problematic home space and into the wider, more public arena of the Hindu community—which is an abstraction. The defence of Hindu domesticity, the preservation of the Hindu home, fell away from the nationalist agenda. Vivekananda, who had found the whole age of consent agitation profoundly uncomfortable, proposed to add muscle and sinew to the decadent Hindu through work-oriented asceticism and social service. [...] The experience of something approaching a mass upsurge over the age of consent issue generated enabling rhetoric and techniques for political mobilization and agitation that were, for the moment, found to be more efficacious than the politics of petitions or the annual Congress forums. The very success of the struggle over domestic issues, paradoxically, carved out a political sphere that could now be separated from the domestic arena.

Questions of internal power arrangements were not to be completely resolved. They constituted—as I suspect or hope they still do now—implacable pitfalls, the internal limits within the discourse. Bankim, in the last pages of his last novel, had mocked the grandeur of his own apocalyptic vision through the casual gossip of common people who dismissed the Hindu-Muslim war as supremely irrelevant for themselves. Vivekananda was asked by an American woman missionary in 1898 if he foresaw any hope of eliminating child marriage and cruelty to widows. Sadly, he said, no. The missionary went on with her account: ‘Even at the height of his popularity, with the Hindu world at his feet, the Swami shows a strange foreboding of ultimate failure. I cannot give you an adequate impression of the effect, but sitting there at twilight, in the large, half-lighted hall, it seemed like listening to a cry.’<sup>68</sup>

#### NOTES

1. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (London, 1978) has acquired enormous canonical value for recent perspectives on the colonial period. For an equally influential application of Saidian dicta, see Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse?* (Delhi, 1986).

2. See Asok Sen, *Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones* (Calcutta, 1977). In fact, the presumed naive faith and hope of the early reformers can be looked at very differently. For a more pessimistic reading of that phase, see Sumit Sarkar, 'The Complexities of Young Bengal', in *A Critique of Colonial India* (Calcutta, 1985).

3. All experimentation with courses and pedagogic methods gradually dried up after the Despatch of 1854 which introduced a drab uniformity through a systematic examination system. See Romesh Chandra Mitra, 'Education: 1833-1905', in N.K. Sinha (ed.), *The History of Bengal, 1757-1905* (Calcutta, 1967). See also Kissory Chand Mitra, *On the Progress of Education in Bengal* (July 1887), reprinted in *Nineteenth Century Studies* (January 1975).

4. See Swarajit Chakraborti, *The Bengali Press, 1818-1868—A Study in the Growth of Public Opinion* (Calcutta, 1976). According to Rev. Long's evidence before the Indigo Commission, in 1860, the controversy on widow remarriage alone gave birth to twenty-five new publications in the vernacular press and the issues of early marriage and female education were similarly widely discussed. Benoy Ghose, 'The Press in Bengal', in N.K. Sinha (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, p. 227.

5. Ibid.

6. William G. Archer, *Bazar Paintings of Calcutta* (London, 1953). Regarding the circulation of reading matter, visual and art objects, and cultural performances within a popular circuit, see Jyotindra Jain, *Kalighat Paintings: Images from a Changing World* (Ahmedabad, 1999).

7. See Brajendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Bangiya Natyashalar Itibas, 1795-1876* (Calcutta, 1943), p. 151.

8. For the reorientation of this traditional myth under colonial conditions, see Sumit Sarkar, 'The Kalki Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal', in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies VI: Writings on South Asian History and Society* (Delhi, 1989).

9. *Bangadoot*, 1829. Cited in R.C. Majumdar, *History of Modern Bengal, Part I, 1765-1905* (Calcutta, 1975), p. 253.

10. Hitesranjan Sanyal, *Social Mobility in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1981), pp. 36-44.

11. See P.J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Period in Eastern India 1740-1828* (Cambridge, 1987), pp. 25-9, 139.

12. See a discussion on Shakta poetry in Shashibhushan Dasgupta, *Bharater Shakti Sadhana O Shakta Sahitya* (Calcutta, 1960).

13. Frank Perlin, 'Proto Industrialisation and Pre-Colonial South Asia', *Past and Present*, 1983, p. 56. Although he ascribes the major structural changes to a period well before the establishment of colonial rule, there is no doubt that colonial innovation and interferences sharpened the processes in the nineteenth century.

14. Marshall, *Bengal*, p. 4. It is interesting that findings about the formation of the moribund delta became widely known by 1833.

15. Ibid.

16. Chowdhury, 'Agrarian Economy and Agrarian Relations in Bengal 1858-1885', in N.K. Sinha (ed.), *The History of Bengal*, pp. 241-3. Also Marshall, *Bengal*, pp. 5, 18-19.

17. Marshall, *Bengal*, p. 4.
18. See, for instance, Rajnarayan Basu, *Sekal O Ekal* (reprinted Calcutta, 1988), pp. 31–6.
19. *Garhasthya* (monthly journal: Calcutta, 1884).
20. Marshall, *Bengal*, pp. 160–1.
21. Ghose, 'The Press in Bengal'. See also Chakraborti, *The Bengali Press*.
22. See Nilmoni Mukherji, 'Foreign and Inland Trade' in Sinha (ed.), pp. 339–62. Also Sabyaschi Bhattacharya, 'Traders and Trade in Old Calcutta', in Sukanta Chaudhuri (ed.), *Calcutta: The Living City*, vol. I (Calcutta, 1990), pp. 204–8. Also Marshall, *Bengal*, pp. 166–7.
23. Debendranath Tagore, *Atmcharit* (Calcutta, 1898), reprinted in *Atmakatha* (Calcutta, 1981).
24. Marshall, *Bengal*, p. 13.
25. Bhattacharya, 'Traders and Trade in Old Calcutta'.
26. *Sambad Prabhakar*, 11.8.1892 in Ghosh, (ed.), *Samayik Patre Banglar Samajchitra* (Calcutta, 1978), p. 127.
27. Sumit Sarkar, 'Kaliyug, Chakri and Bhakti: Ramakrishna and His Times', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18 July 1992. See also, Chatterjee,
28. See Tanika Sarkar, 'Nationalist Iconography: The Image of Women in Nineteenth-Century Bengali Literature', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21 November 1987,
29. Chowdhury, *Agrarian Economy*, pp. 295–9.
30. A mechanical application of a simple divide between the home and the world is derived from an untenable extension of a mid-nineteenth-century Victorian situation into a very different socio-political context. Partha Chatterjee argues along the lines of a series of binaries since he sees the nineteenth-century 'nationalist' agenda as being a mimetic gesture. See Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women Question', in Sangari and Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women*. The concept of the Victorian home and its separation from the public sphere, again, is an undifferentiated social construct, taking an active entrepreneurial segment as representative of the middle class. For a very different positioning of the domestic sphere within a less activist, non-entrepreneurial world of the clergy, see Howard M. Wach, 'A "still, small voice" from the Pulpit: Religion and the Creation of Social Morality in Manchester, 1820–1850', *The Journal of Modern History*, September 1991.
31. Narayan Ray, *Bangamahila* (Calcutta, n.d.), p. 51.
32. *Garhasthya* (monthly journal: Calcutta, 1884), p. 1.
33. Monomohan Basu, *Hindur Achar Vyavahar* (Calcutta, c. 1872), p. 99.
34. Chandrakanta Basu, *Sangjam Shiksha* (Calcutta, c. 1904), p. 81.
35. See Tanika Sarkar, 'Conjugality and Hindu Nationalism'.
36. *Ibid.*
37. Basu, *Hindur Achar Vyavahar*, p. 31.
38. Pratapchandra Majumdar, *Stri Charitra* (Calcutta, n.d.). Interestingly, the model for the chaste Hindu widow is Queen Victoria. Also Kamakhyacharan Bandyopadhyay, *Stri Shiksha* (Dacca, c. 1901). Interestingly, even Rev. Lal Behari Dey, who had converted to Christianity, became rather lyrical in his praise of chaste Hindu widows. The most unqualified admiration was evoked by Sister

Nivedita. See *The Web of Indian Life*, first published Calcutta, 1904 (reprinted Calcutta, 1955).

39. *Ibid.*, p. 57.

40. Sati was routinely evoked as the climax, the highest proof and the essence of the Hindu wife's chastity. 'The woman's chastity is the bright jewel of an Aryan family. The chaste wife is sitting at the heart of flames, with the feet of her husband clasped on her breasts. She is chanting Hari's name with a face radiant with love and joy. Whenever we think of that, we are filled with pride.' See Girijaprasanna Raychaudhury, *Grihalakshmi* (Calcutta, c. 1887), p. 67.

41. Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Kamalakanter Daptar', *Bankim Rachanabali*, vol. II (Calcutta, 1954).

42. Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–1908* (Delhi, 1972), pp. 47–63.

43. See Tanika Sarkar, 'Conjugalinity and Hindu Nationalism'.

44. Bhabataran Datta, *Bangladesher Chhara* (Calcutta, n.d.).

45. On this, see Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Responses of Bengali Women to Modernisation* (Rajshahi, 1983).

46. See Tanika Sarkar, 'Conjugalinity and Hindu Nationalism'.

47. On the importance of this twelfth-century text, see S.K. De, *Early History of the Vaishnava Faith and Movement in Bengal* (Calcutta, 1961), pp. 9–11.

48. Rasikchandra Ray, 'Nabamir Gan', in Prabhat Goswami (ed.), *Hajar Bacharer Bangla Gan* (Calcutta, 1969).

49. Datta, *Bangladesher Chhara*.

50. Nandalal Sil, *Vratakatha* (Calcutta, 1930).

51. Prasad Das Goswami, *Amader Samaj* (Serampore, 1896), p. 14.

52. Bhattacharya, *Banga Vivaha* (Calcutta, c. 1881), p. 76.

53. *Ibid.*, p. 194.

54. See for instance, Saudamini Gupta, *Kanyar Prati Upadesh* (Dacca, third edition, c. 1918). Even though it teaches the daughter how best and most graciously she can submit to patriarchal discipline and demands in her married life, the text simultaneously undermines the patriarchal hegemonic claim by asserting, again and again, that this was going to be a life of sorrow and problems, 'All women must live out their lives without their relatives or close ones near them (p. 3) [...] My child, I cannot advise you on when or how much to eat, for whatever you do, you must know that, you will most probably be criticised.' (p. 41)

55. Kailashbashini Debi, *Hindu Mahilaganer Heenabastha* (Calcutta, n.d.), p. 62.

56. *Ibid.*, p. 45. Also *Narishiksha*, part I (Calcutta, 1884: first edition c. 1868), p. 6.

57. Rashsundari Debi, *Amar Jiban*, 1876, reprinted in *Atmakatha* (Calcutta 1981). See also Sarada Debi, *Atmakatha* (Calcutta, 1979), for a similar longing for the written word. In her case, however, it remained unfulfilled.

58. Charles Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform* (Princeton, 1964), pp. 91–4.

59. Tanika Sarkar, 'Conjugalinity and Hindu Nationalism'.

60. On folk poems about the Rukmabai episode sung on Calcutta streets, see Asit Kumar Bandyopadhyay, *Bangla Sahityer Itihas*, vol. V.
61. See Tanika Sarkar, 'Conjugality and Hindu Nationalism'.
62. Chandranath Basu, *Hindutva (Hindur Prakrita Itihas)* (Calcutta, 1892).
63. *Bangabashi*, 25 December 1890, *Report on Native Papers* (hereafter *RNP*), Bengal, 1890.
64. *Dainik O Samachar Chandrika*, 14 January 1891, *RNP*, Bengal 1891.
65. Cited by Nagendranath Bandyopadhyay, *Balyavivaha* (Calcutta, 1888), p. 31.
66. Cited in *Hindoo Patriot*, 19 September 1887.
67. On the composition and control of a dominant cultural symbol and its relationship to a real physical support in society, see Luisa Accati, *The Larceny of Desire: The Madonna in Seventeenth-Century Catholic Europe*, in Obelkevich, Roper, and Samuel (eds), *Disciplines of Faith: Studies in Religion, Politics and Patriarchy* (London, 1987).
68. Lucy E. Guinness, *Across India at the Dawn of the Twentieth Century* (London 1898), p. 147.