

Introduction



Some time towards the end of 1880, a local policeman in the small village of Olpad, near Surat in south Gujarat, heard rumours that a young widow of the village was pregnant. Her name was Vijaylakshmi, she was twenty-four years old and the daughter of a local brahman family. He paid her a visit, satisfied himself that the rumours were true, and reported the affair to the District Magistrate to prevent her from disposing of the child in secret. Nothing more was done, then, until March 1881, when the body of a new-born baby was found on a rubbish heap in the village. The local chief constable went immediately to see her and, convinced of her guilt, had her put on a bullock cart and taken to Surat. She confessed to the second class magistrate that she had given birth to the child, and to avoid shame had killed it by cutting its throat with a cooking implement. A Dubla servant woman had disposed of the body on to the rubbish heap. Vijaylakshmi was examined by the civil surgeon, then put back on the cart and returned later in the day to Olpad. In April of 1881, she was brought to trial before the local sessions judge, and sentenced to hang. The case was then heard before the Appeal Court in Bombay where, amidst sensational publicity, her sentence was mitigated to one of transportation.¹

Vijaylakshmi's was not an uncommon case, particularly among brahman and other high caste Hindu women in nineteenth century India, married before puberty and encouraged to conform to a model of ascetic chastity if they were unlucky enough to lose their husbands. But Vijaylakshmi's case in particular, the attention she

received and the way she was discussed in the press and in public debates, seem to have come almost as the last straw to one woman observer, prompting her to put pen to paper in a furious rebuttal. As Tarabai Shinde saw it, these public discussions of Vijaylakshmi and her horrible crime were symptomatic of much wider attitudes towards women in India, attitudes which she felt had become more pronounced during her own lifetime. She published the resulting book, *A Comparison between Women and Men*, in 1882.²

I came across this book when researching into other aspects of western India's social history, and it seemed interesting enough to be worth translating. As I soon discovered, however, this on its own did not seem to be enough. I therefore added the present essay as a means of 'translating' in a larger sense, to draw out themes from the text and explain what I understood to be their wider significance. What results is, I fear, a very awkward combination of translation and an introductory essay which is itself almost as long. Readers understandably averse to such a combination can find basic information about Tarabai in the first section of this essay, and thereafter read her text independently.

In trying to make sense of the text and of Tarabai's wider social milieu, I have been greatly benefitted by recent advances in the wider fields of women's history and gender studies in India, which have not only expanded rapidly themselves, but have added to our understanding of much broader processes of change in colonial Indian society. One important advance here has been our clear break with the old liberal interpretation of the debates over 'social reform' for women that were so widespread in India during the nineteenth century.³ This interpretation, shaped by the modernization theory which dominated much post-war western historical writing about India, viewed such concern for women as little more than a natural response to the real disadvantages that Hindu 'tradition' in particular imposed upon them. Lata Mani and others have argued that 'women' actually appeared in this public discussion more as a symbol of the moral health of the 'tradition' itself* as this was debated among male colonial officials and missionaries, and Indian reformers, nationalists and conservatives, to the exclusion, very largely, of the views and voices of women themselves.⁴

Other historians have pushed forward our understanding of the influential new models for middle class female respectability that were emerging from the mid-century, amid a plethora of new

periodical and pamphlet guides to the 'domestic' as women's peculiar sphere, with its own expertises of enlightened childcare, cookery, accounts and family education.⁵ As Meredith Borthwick has pointed out, these models, clearest in the *bhadramahila* of late nineteenth century Bengali reformist circles, seem a peculiar amalgam of brahmanic and middle class Victorian social values, with their emphasis on wives that were at once selfless angels of the hearth and cultivated helpmeets to their husbands.⁶

This perspective links up with wider questions of social change. Some historians have suggested, convincingly, I think, that social and religious identities in colonial society may have become more caste-bound and 'brahmanic' in character than they were in pre-colonial India.⁷ In this 'traditionalization' of colonial society, gender relations emerged as a powerful new means for the consolidation of social hierarchy and the expression of caste exclusivity. Gender may also have been a key element in the construction of colonial hegemony itself, shared idioms of femininity providing key groups of Indian and British men alike with a common language in which they were able to discuss and agree on important aspects of the Indian social order.⁸ Others have identified areas of co-operation and agreement in the widespread assumption that politics and administration constituted a particular 'public' and masculine domain, as opposed to the domestic as a sacrosanct private realm of family and religion, a view that appealed not only to Victorian colonial officials, but to important classes of Indian men anxious to find means of preserving these areas of their own power against colonial intervention.⁹ This in turn raises the much-debated issue of gender within Indian nationalist politics. In particular, as Partha Chatterjee and others have noted, questions of women's emancipation seemed to disappear from most nationalists' political agendas from the last decade of the nineteenth century, and it is by no means clear why.¹⁰

What makes all of these questions difficult to answer is in part the relative paucity for most of the nineteenth century of women's own testimony, particularly in matters of politics, power and their perceived relationships with men. For an important if obvious test of our answers to them lies in the extent to which they can encompass and explain women's own expressed views and experience. For these reasons we need more access to women's own writing in this period, and indeed there has recently begun to

emerge a very good range of anthologies, translations and life histories for various parts of India, including historical as well as contemporary material.¹¹

What, then, do we know about Tarabai Shinde, author of *A Comparison between Women and Men*? She came from a prosperous family of Marathas, one of western India's major agriculturalist communities. Like other social groupings that came to constitute 'dominant castes' in later colonial India, the Marathas had two centuries earlier been one of a number of pioneering peasantries who took advantage of the weakening of Mughal power to tighten their own hold on rural resources. At this period, the term 'Maratha' was itself actually very narrowly applied, to mark off those small numbers of elite families who aspired to the position of independent kings and the royal or *kshatriya* status that went with it. For the rest, most peasant cultivators identified themselves simply as *kunbi*, the local variant of one of India's generic and occupational terms for a farmer. As with other pre-colonial agriculturalist communities, the boundaries of the Maratha-*kunbi* complex were loose and permeable, enabling most people who took to settled agriculture to be assimilated over a period into *kunbi* networks of commensality and marriage. This social flexibility was a considerable advantage in the mobile and highly militarized society of late Mughal India. As the loosening of Mughal control from Delhi opened up regional state systems to new political competitors, power came increasingly to depend on their ability to attract and incorporate men and skills, and the success of warbands upon some principle at least of egalitarianism and brotherhood.¹²

As a loose agglomeration of armed lineages, small autochthonous gentry and mobile peasant cultivators doubling as military recruits during the campaigning season, the Marathas first emerged as a significant force in the fluid politics of the subcontinent in the mid-seventeenth century under the famous leadership of Shivaji Bhosle, son of a petty *jagirdar* of the Ahmadnagar Nizamshahi kingdom. Over the course of the eighteenth century, a number of key families (those; indeed, whom Tarabai mentions) had established themselves as important regional powers and 'little kings' in their own right, connected through ties of kin and clientship with a network of substantial local gentry. These prominent Maratha families, as well as their wider client communities of lesser gentry and humbler *kunbi* cultivators, were transformed during the early part of the

nineteenth century into more village-based peasant communities, very much in line with the drive of the East India Company to make mobile and military people into sedentary and revenue-paying farmers. It was from this period that Marathas, in common with other 'warrior-peasant' communities in India, seem to have developed more rigid community boundaries against outsiders, and a stronger emphasis on status and hierarchy within it.¹³

We can date Tarabai's life with some precision, and have some basic information about it.¹⁴ She wrote and published this, her only book, between 1881 and 1882, and a contemporary remembers her still living, as an elderly woman, about 1905. Her life, then, would have spanned most of the second half of the nineteenth century, and a little beyond. Her own family was one of four that formed the social elite of Buldhana, a small town of about three thousand people in the fertile alluvial cotton-growing tracts of Berar in central India. The family owned some land outside the town, but her father, Bapuji Hari Shinde, worked as a head clerk in the office of the Deputy Commissioner in the town. She was the only daughter in a family of five, and her father was reputed to have doted on her. He was also an early member of the Satyashodhak Samaj, the reformist and anti-brahman 'Truth-seeking society' set up in western India in 1873 by the Poona radical Jotirao Phule.¹⁵ Phule was also a close friend of the family, and, as we shall see, an important and influential contact. Without her father's reformist commitments it is most unlikely that she would have learned to read or write: as it was, she did so not only in Marathi, but to some extent in English and Sanskrit also.

Despite these connections, it is also likely that the Shindes, as a respectable Maratha household, practised some form of seclusion for its women. Tarabai certainly refers to herself as someone who has been 'kept locked up and confined in the proper old Maratha manner'. The term she uses here, *marathmola*, refers in particular to the seclusion of Maratha women, although, as we shall see, this may well have been more of a nineteenth century innovation than an ancient or invariable principle.¹⁶ Tarabai was married, but a *gharjavai* husband was found for her. This meant that her husband, whose name was also Shinde, came to live with her in her father's house, instead of the more usual Hindu joint family practice whereby brides left their natal homes and were absorbed into their husbands' households.¹⁷ It is not clear why this arrangement was

made: with her four brothers, the immediate family was not short of sons to manage its concerns. In her book, Tarabai herself refers with some bitterness to wealthy fathers who arranged *gharjavai* marriages for their daughters just so that they could keep them with them at home, even though grooms procured in this way were usually poorer and less well-educated. This might possibly have been the reason for her own *gharjavai* marriage. But such a marriage did at least mean that she would have enjoyed the relatively larger freedoms of life with an indulgent father in her own *maher* or natal home. If these were indeed her domestic circumstances, they would have contributed very considerably to Tarabai's being able to push her way into the masculine world of reading, writing and publishing. For, as many contemporaries as well as historians have noted, the most immediate opposition to a woman's learning her letters in this period came usually from her mother-in-law and senior women in the household.¹⁸ Tarabai outlived her husband, although it is not clear when she was left a widow. The pair had no children, and she did not remarry. Nor, as far as we know, did she ever publish again.

Two specific personal memories of her have been preserved. The prominent Maratha politician, Barrister Ramrao Deshmukh, was at school in Buldhana between 1901 and 1907. He remembered how he and his boyhood friends lived on different sides of the Shinde house, and how great was their terror each time they had to run past it: in part, because of the pair of large dogs that guarded the house, but much more lest the 'harsh grey figure' of Tarabai herself should catch them. This was in 1905, when Deshmukh was about twelve, and he also remembered going with his mother to Tarabai's house, and the white sari that she wore indicating that she was a widow.¹⁹ Gadadhar Govind Pathak, a *vakil* of the town, recalled having seen Tarabai at about the same time:

She was a short and dumpy woman, with thick glass spectacles on her eyes. There was always a stick in her hand. She had her fields where the T.B. sanitorium now stands in Buldhana. She used to go off to her fields very spiritedly on foot; I never saw her ride a horse. Her face was very cruel-looking. She had a very fiery temper. Whenever she saw small children, she would chase after them, hitting at them with her stick. We children used to be very much afraid of her. We never saw her husband.²⁰

These memories may well have been mediated and coloured by an adult male knowledge of Tarabai's outspoken venture into print. But they give us an insight into something at least of the reputation that she had acquired for herself towards the end of her life, as a hardy, independent and somewhat pugnacious woman, whose shortage of proper feminine qualities was probably due to too much reading.

Her text consists of 52 printed Marathi pages. It was printed in Poona, and sold for 9 annas, about average for a pamphlet of its size. It has no very clear internal structure: indeed, she says in her introduction that 'This is my very first effort, so the book has passages that are disconnected and fragmentary, and it's written in the rough and harsh language of Marathas of old'.²¹ Yet her main points are clear. She has been stirred to fury, she explains, by the way in which it was always women who got blamed for every kind of evil and suffering in Indian society. With a strong sense of herself as a loner addressing a hostile male readership, she launches into a bitter denunciation of the men who were actually culpable. In reality, it was men who had destroyed Indian manufactures and sullied their own cultural traditions in their headlong rush to embrace those of their English rulers. It was male priests who had made up all sorts of absurd religious rules for women, such as the idea that widows should not be allowed to remarry, or the notion that *pativrata*, self-effacing devotion to her husband, should be the informing principle of a woman's life. It was male religious writers who tried to reinforce them, by making up all sorts of absurd stories about womanly virtue and sacrifice. And it was male reformers, politicians, journalists and writers who now demanded that women continue to conform to these rules, in a society where everything else was changing and the same men themselves were gaining a whole range of new rights and freedoms, habits of consumption and dress, and opportunities for work, education and travel. In short, it was men who monopolized all rights and freedoms for themselves, while women such as the widow Vijaylakshmi were loaded down with the blame for all of society's evils. To drive the point home, Tarabai quotes mockingly from older and nineteenth century texts that vilified women in just this way, and then goes through the list of their supposed moral failings to demonstrate that exactly the same points were much better made about men. At the same time and in strong contrast to the tone of her writing, it is clear that Tarabai continued to hold some rather conventional and old-fashioned ideas about women and their proper rights and

duties. This ambivalence resonates throughout the text, and we see her sometimes struggling and sometimes playing ironically with the contradictory implications of what she has to say.

Here, then, we have a text of considerable interest. Of course, women's literacy and concerns of this kind in India were by no means new. As in other regions of India, the women beginning to write at this time had good precedents in a small but very long-standing tradition of female literacy and writing. Pre-colonial western India produced literate women of many different kinds: saint-poets of the region's important *bhakti* devotionalist tradition, regents and widows who ruled in their own right, the women of important political families, the daughters of pundits, accomplished courtesans.²² Moreover, the *bhakti* saint-poets were extremely adept at using the tradition's anti-caste and anti-brahmanical arguments for their own purposes as women. Women such as Muktabai, sister of the great mediaeval saint Dnyandeve, Janabai the maidservant of his contemporary Eknath, Kanhopatra the sixteenth century dancing girl who found her god in Pandharpur, or Bahinabai the disciple of the seventeenth century saint Tukaram, all wrote of their sadness at their supposed spiritual unfitness within any brahmanic religious hierarchy, and turned to the loving personal god of *bhakti* for salvation and a sense of their own worth as women.²³

While vernacular print culture developed throughout much of India from the early nineteenth century, it was not until the 1860s and 1870s that women began to write and publish in any numbers. Even then, a direct concern with questions of gender was uncommon. Tarabai's is the first text that I know of, for western India at least, in which a woman addresses herself so squarely and polemically at the question of women's relations with men. Some of her questions are historical and political, as she asserts that there has been a long-term loss in women's access to power, compounded by the emergence of a new and exclusively masculine sphere of public life. On another level, she deals with a range of very practical matters, with marriage mores and conventions concerning widowhood and purdah, women's education and personal mobility, domestic politics and problems in everyday marital and family relationships. She is also deeply concerned with the ways in which women were represented, in texts of classical literature, in newspapers and modern novels and plays, and with the processes through which

these textual norms and models for women's behaviour came to be invented and imposed. Particularly interesting is her strong sense that women in nineteenth century society have been placed in a peculiarly invidious and impossible position, urged to conform to extraordinary models of wifely self-abnegation, mostly drawn from old books, in circumstances and with men that made it quite impossible for them to do so. When they failed in their task as bearers of unattainable ideals, their failure naturally expanded to encompass all of society's crimes and ills. And yet caught as they were in this cleft stick, women had no means of making themselves heard amongst the voices that constantly discussed them and constantly found them deficient. As I shall argue, Tarabai has here put her finger on a set of extremely important processes in colonial culture and gender relations.

My purpose here, then, is to explore these themes in her book, to illuminate and explain some at least of her concerns by setting out the background and circumstances in which they developed, and lastly to see how far this unusual commentary, with its insights into a woman's own experience, might extend or reshape our present understanding of gender relations in the nineteenth century. I shall also set her arguments in their Maratha context. This is important because of what many historians have observed to be the particularly liberal and relatively egalitarian nature of society for women in Maharashtra. Yet Tarabai herself assumed that she had something to say about more than just her own social circles. The purpose of her book, as she says in the introduction, is 'to defend the honour of all my sister countrywomen. I'm not looking at particular castes or families here. It's just a comparison between women and men'.²⁴

GENDER AND 'SOCIAL REFORM' IN NINETEENTH CENTURY INDIA



In exploring the wider milieu in which Tarabai wrote, I want first to discuss those forms of 'traditionalization' of nineteenth century society referred to above, for these were to shape gender relations during this period in fundamental ways. Three linked processes in particular were important here. First,

brahmanic religious values and religious texts appear to have become more widely diffused throughout Hindu society, extending what had been a narrowly applied model for social exclusiveness and respectability into one for much wider circles of upper and middle peasant castes, petty government employees, artisans and small tradespeople. Second, caste hierarchies seem to have grown more rigid and their boundaries less flexible and permeable. Third, and connected with this, questions of caste, 'custom' and family were from the very early Company period treated as private and changeless matters that were outside the normal purview of the state. Here, of course, East India Company strategies of rule were deeply affected by nineteenth century social theory and its division of social life into 'domestic' and 'public' spheres.²⁵

At one level, of course, tendencies of this kind were not new. Many historians have seen these processes already in train in parts of late pre-colonial India, as emerging regional states sought to identify themselves more closely with their own local warrior-peasant communities, and brahman social groups, such as the Chitpavan brahman peshwa government of western India, came to pre-eminence as the demand intensified for their ritual and scribal skills.²⁶ Susan Bayly has explored the religious dimension of these processes, showing how until the later eighteenth century, the religious culture of the Tamil south had been a highly syncretic rather than a brahmanical one, incorporating a range of traditions: Saivite and Vaishnavite ritual, the worship of fierce female divinities associated with blood, battle and sacrifice, and popular veneration for local saints in which Hindus and Muslims alike shared.²⁷

If some of these processes do seem to have been in train before the East India Company emerged as a major territorial power, others, as Christopher Bayly has described, had a more distinctly colonial origin.²⁸ The gradual replacement of Muslim by brahman service elites within the colonial administration throughout much of India helped to disseminate principles of hierarchy and more brahmanic models for social behaviour. The East India Company's preoccupation with texts as the source of all legitimate and authentic knowledge may have had a similar effect. For texts in this context meant predominantly brahman texts, as opposed to the orally based customary law and literature that were common

outside literate circles.²⁹ Alongside these East India Company initiatives, moreover, were a whole range of Indian groups and movements. The Arya Samaj in north India, the Brahmo Samaj in Bengal or the Prarthana or Satyashodhak Samajes in the west also sought originality and authenticity in texts, as they attempted to 'purify' Indian social life and return it to its early noble simplicity.¹⁰ Other factors may have affected the great warrior-peasant caste groups in particular. For them, the longer term and gradual replacement of labour in the eighteenth century by land in the nineteenth as a scarce resource, may have meant that the old political strategies of inclusion and incorporation gave way more decisively to an emphasis on exclusion and distinction. Amongst Rajputs, Jats, Patidars, Marathas and the like, community boundaries seem to have become less permeable to outsiders, while different classes within them became more sharply concerned with demarcating gradations of status and wealth: between mere small peasant cultivators, new rich peasant farmers benefitting from the spread of cash crops, district-level office holders in the service of the raj, old aristocratic families who could trace their lineages back to the eighteenth century but were now increasingly impoverished, or had separated themselves off as an urban rentier or service class.³¹

Above all perhaps, these processes may have been intensified by the colonial government's own developing techniques of rule. The Pax Britannica in India effectively cut those links between caste identity and political power which had earlier kept such identities mobile and flexible. As many historians have noted, the East India Company learned rapidly to disguise its political function by declaring large areas of Indian society, including that of 'caste', to be private and changeless domains of tradition and custom, family and religion, where the state had no routine role and politics no place. This actually represented a very considerable contraction in the functions of state and ruler, which had both in Hindu and Indo-Muslim traditions of rulership intervened very actively in the regulation of a wide range of social and religious institutions.³² This severance of domains formerly closely connected meant, of course, that new means had to be developed by which to incorporate key groups of Indians into the framework of colonial government. Increasingly from the mid-century, political representation, access to education and other forms of privilege came to depend precisely

on the assertion of clear and bounded caste identities, a task that was most often undertaken by the 'caste associations' that proliferated in India from about this time." For all their rhetoric of modernization and 'reform', these associations embodied just those processes described above, typically combining an acute concern to forge new forms of caste unity, identity and history, with an effort to raise the status of the caste by disseminating new high-caste forms of social practice.

Together, these processes were to have far-reaching implications for women. The intensification of social and caste competition meant that marriage strategies and the control of women assumed new importance as higher and middle peasant castes in particular competed in the more crowded and static milieu of rural colonial society. Particularly in Hindu cultural contexts where wife-takers were more highly valued than wife-givers, these strategies and forms of control could be crucial in establishing new patterns of local caste dominance. Alice Clark, for example, has described how marriage strategies and the limitation of women's numbers helped in different ways to protect and consolidate the power of Rajputs and Kanbis in Gujarat. For the former, it was of key importance to limit the numbers of their women for whom husbands had to be found, to avoid having to give them to social inferiors. For the latter, keeping their numbers of marriageable women static helped prevent the fragmentation of inheritance and landholding in an increasingly densely populated agrarian economy.³⁴ As caste groupings searched for new ways of expressing identity and social distinction, moreover, the public conduct of their women became paramount, and was judged according to standards increasingly brahmanical in character.

Ideas of a realm of custom and family beyond the reach of the state quickly entered the rhetoric of Indian politicians and reformers themselves, with important effects for women. From the early years of the century such ideas were used back against the colonial rulers as a means of denying their competence in all such 'social' questions; later, nationalists developed it more positively to identify the home and domestic life as the inviolate site of Hindu spiritual values, as opposed to the gross materialism of colonial culture.³⁵ These longer-term changes subordinated women more firmly to caste and family authority, and consigned them to a domain of 'private life' supposedly outside politics. Thus seen as the very

embodiment of home and domestic life, 'woman' also became, as Lata Mani has described, the intensely discussed index of the tradition itself, her solid virtues a measure of its ancient strength, or, as liberals and reformers asserted, her ignorance and backwardness a sign of its deadly deficiencies.³⁶ This meant an intensifying public scrutiny of women's behaviour, just when women themselves were being excluded and pushed out of the 'public' domain.

Indeed, the social reform debates of the nineteenth century reveal an absolutely striking preoccupation with questions affecting women. With the exception, perhaps, of the issue of caste and untouchability, all major questions of the reform of Hindu society taken up at this period concerned women: *sati*, female infanticide, child marriage, the remarriage of widows, the seclusion and education of women, prostitution, brideprice and dowry. Let us now look at some of these campaigns and their consequences for women in western India in more detail.

Here as elsewhere in mid-century, the 'problem' of widow remarriage received an enormous amount of attention, discussed at length in the new vernacular press, in a spate of books and pamphlets and petitions to the Company government.³⁷ The 'problem' itself arose because brahmanic Hinduism placed enormous value upon womanly chastity and wifely devotion: a wife who was a true *pativrata* was an auspicious ornament to her family and an assurance of beatitude to her husband.³⁸ Brahman and other high castes in particular therefore viewed remarriage for women of whatever age as a source of embarrassment and social inferiority, and expected girls as well as older women to confine themselves to chaste and ascetic lives with their husband's families. Many women did so; others, like the widow Vijaylakshmi referred to above, disgraced themselves. Indeed, that widows were sexually available was both a social commonplace and a source of humour: the Marathi terms for widows and prostitutes were in many contexts interchangeable.³⁹ There were legislative as well as social obstacles in the way of women who wished to remarry: Hindu textual law, as expounded by the Anglo-Indian courts and embodied in a progressive accretion of case law, proscribed widow remarriage for higher castes and held the children of such marriages to be illegitimate. These marriages were finally recognized with the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, passed after an India-wide campaign led by the Bengali reformer, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar.⁴⁰

These issues were taken up most strongly in western India from the mid-century by the group of Bombay liberals who formed around the deist reform society, the Prarthana Samaj.⁴¹ There were accompanying campaigns in the *Indu Prakash* newspaper, which had been set up in 1862 for the purpose by the leading politician and gradualist reformer M. G. Ranade, the prolific Marathi polemicist Gopal Hari Deshmukh and the uncompromising radical Vishnushastri Pandit. There was even a special society for the promotion of widow remarriage, set up in 1866. After the initial euphoria, however, all this produced rather little. The Act of 1856 certainly produced no rush of women remarrying; rather, the reformers had to search for volunteers or, as in the case of Vishnushastri Pandit, volunteer themselves. Amidst much invective and hostility, conservatives in the Bombay presidency formed a society of their own, the Hindudharma Vyavasthapak Sabha, and the two sides engaged in a series of public contests, culminating in Poona in 1870 with a formal debate presided over by the Shankaracharya of Karvir Math, one of western India's foremost arbiters of orthodox rectitude. Vishnushastri's party were declared in error, and, rather than risk social ostracism, most of them accepted the rituals of penance and purification prescribed by the Shankaracharya. Defeat followed on defeat. One of the few to resist recanting, M.G. Ranade, bowed to pressure from his family when his first wife died in 1873, and agreed not only to marry an eleven-year-old girl rather than a widow, but to bar his friend Vishnushastri from the house.⁴²

With these setbacks, direct reformist efforts subsided for a decade, but, as elsewhere in India, questions of 'womanhood' still remained very much in the fore of public discussion. Most importantly here, there emerged in the 1870s, as in Bengal a decade earlier, a debate and consensus concerning the ways in which Indian and Hindu women might develop and transform themselves, whilst preserving what was best in 'traditional' culture. As Borthwick has described, the model of the *bhadramahila* emerged first amongst advanced reformist circles in Bengal and was then in diluted forms gradually disseminated elsewhere in urban middle-class India. This model for a new womanhood was a fusion of older brahmanical values of *pativrata*, of feminine self-sacrifice and devotion to the husband, with Victorian emphases upon women as enlightened mothers and companions to men in their own 'separate

sphere' of the home. Such ideas had very considerable appeal. They were not really radical or threatening, either to older notions of female dependence or to the developing ideology of home and the domestic as sacrosanct domains of tradition and religion; in fact, they actually reinforced them. And for colonial India's emerging middle classes of government employees, professionals, teachers, journalists and the like, an 'educated' wife was rapidly gaining a range of attractions. She could be a career asset, in a social world that took women's education as a sign of civilized values. She could be an asset in running the new and more expensive types of household that many urban middle-class people were now establishing for themselves. Finally, employment in colonial administration in particular saw the gradual development of a much sharper distinction between work and home than existed in pre-colonial society. Home thus needed to be more of a haven from the peculiar cares of working in such an environment, with sympathy from a wife who understood something of its problems and disappointments.⁴⁵

We can certainly see elements of these ideas emerging in western India during the 1870s in the circles around the Prarthana Samaj. M.G.Ranade, G.V.Kanitkar, who was a judge, reformer and translator of J.S.Mill's *The Subjection of Women*, the lawyer G.V.Joshi, and the novelist Hari Narayan Apte all tried to put them into practice by educating their own child-wives.⁴⁴ Together with their menfolk, and joined in 1882 from Bengal by the eminent young Sanskrit scholar Pandita Ramabai, these women founded the Arya Manila Samaj, the 'Aryan Women's Society', as a basis for what was planned to be a much wider organization throughout the presidency. The new periodical press and other new print genres were also an important means for disseminating their ideas. In 1877, Moro Vitthal Walvekar, member of the Prarthana Samaj and editor of its *Subodha Patrika* newspaper, started Marathi's first periodical for women. This was *Grihmti*, 'Housewife', and it was a typical example of the new vernacular journals for women now appearing in many parts of India.⁴⁵ Walvekar advertised it thus:

It has been deliberately started for women. Included in the issues are subjects useful to women, such as the lives of women from history and famous women from the

puranas, knowledge about nature, health and the science of cooking, sewing work and the like. Some of our learned friends have promised to write for us. Very great care will be taken that the essays in the book should always be mature, serious and restrained, and in easy and straightforward language.⁴⁶

Hari Narayan Apte's second novel, *Ganapatarava*, which was serialized in *Manoranjana*, the monthly magazine that Kanitkar and Apte started in July 1886, was also replete with these themes. The start of the novel, for example, depicted an earnest discussion between two Poona college students, one of whom was just reading Mill's *Subjection*, about how marvellous it would be if husbands and wives could be equal and mutually respected companions to one another, each in their own spheres.⁴⁷

The 1880s saw a return to more intensified controversy. The beginning of the decade saw the emergence of the politicians Bal Gangadhar Tilak and Gopal Ganesh Agarkar to public life, with the foundation of their more outspokenly nationalist newspapers *Kesari* and *Mahratta* in January 1881.⁴⁸ As nationalist opinion itself became more self-conscious and better organized, questions affecting women were debated with renewed intensity? The Parsi reformer, Behramji Malabari, infuriated nationalists by publishing lurid descriptions of the suffering caused by child-marriage, and the hidden epidemic of sanguinary crime that was associated with what he called 'enforced widowhood'. Pressing for legislative intervention, he submitted two Notes to the government of India, and the latter instituted in 1884 a broad process of public consultation through presidency and local governments, to elicit further information and opinion from 'such official or non-official persons as were considered to be well-acquainted with native feeling on the question'.⁴⁹ The weight of these masculine opinions (no women were asked) was against state interference, and Malabari's suggestions were dropped. Women's education, and in particular the establishment of high schools for girls in Poona and Bombay during the 1880s, also became a subject of acrimonious controversy. Conservatives, Tilak included, urged that teaching Hindu women to read would ruin their precious traditional virtues, making them immoral and insubordinate. Liberals like Agarkar countered with the view that in fact nothing could be done to

remedy the whole backwardness of Hindu society until women were educated, because women were at once the foremost victims and the strongest defenders of the status quo.⁵⁰ Antagonisms grew still more bitter over the case of Rakhambai, the educated daughter of a Bombay doctor who in 1887 refused to go and live with the much older husband to whom she had been married as a child. Sued by her husband who demanded the return of his promised wife as his lawful property, Rakhambai was first tried and acquitted under the ordinary civil law and given her freedom. This sparked a wave of conservative fury, and on appeal the Chief Justice ruled that she should be tried under Hindu law, which she was, and ordered to return to her husband.⁵¹

These tensions converged with particular intensity around the figure of Pandita Ramabai herself. For conservatives, of course, she was a startling and uncomfortable figure: a widow of twenty-four, an excellent Sanskrit scholar, a woman with pronounced views on the position of women in Hindu society, and finally, in 1883, a highly publicized convert to Christianity, on the grounds that it made no distinction of spiritual worth between men and women in the way that Hinduism did.⁵² However, it was not merely the fact of her conversion that sparked off so much public hostility. Nor was it her heretical suggestion that Rakhambai's case revealed a positive alliance between the colonial government and Indian men in questions involving women, or that the most strident nationalist demands for free speech and political rights tended to be made by men firmly opposed to such things for their own womenfolk.⁵³ Rather, as Ram Bapat has argued, her very public condemnations of the consequences of 'respectable' domestic life for Hindu women caused fury most of all because they hit precisely against nationalist attempts to identify the home as a sacrosanct domain for Hinduism's innermost 'spiritual' values.⁵⁴

It was also clear that these pressures and disagreements would impinge directly on nationalist political organizing itself. It was therefore, of course, that the early founders of the Indian National Congress made it very clear that it was to be a purely political organization, eschewing 'social' questions and problems as matters purely for internal resolution within the different communities themselves. These lines were drawn even more firmly in 1887, when Ranade and others helped establish the National Social Conference as a separate platform for the discussion of social

issues, to be held after the main annual meeting of the Congress, which would enable it to attract delegates as well as to make use of the same pavilion. Even this slender connection, however, proved too much, and particularly in the context of the more aggressively Hindu and revivalist themes that spread through nationalist politics through the 1890s. Fearful of alienating the Congress's wealthy conservative supporters at its Poona session in 1895, and fiercely opposed to the reformers' having 'nationalist' pretensions or associations of any kind, Tilak campaigned successfully to have the National Social Conference barred from using the Congress pavilion.⁵⁵ In this climate, 'social reform' issues for women receded from the forefront of nationalist and political debate.

Having sketched in this background and some of its wider implications for women, let us turn now to look at Tarabai Shinde's own more immediate social milieu. This was in some ways rather different from the predominantly brahman reformist and nationalist circles described above, and, as we shall see, Tarabai viewed both of these with scepticism and hostility. This was certainly in keeping with the politics of the Satyashodhak Samaj in which her family was immersed, and which had itself been established amongst prosperous merchant and lower Maratha service people to contest the growth of brahman power within British administration, and of brahman social values within Indian society more generally. While these were the basic concerns of the Samaj and its founder Jotirao Phule, questions concerning women were important for them in several ways. Like all other reformers, they emphasized the importance of women's education for the wider uplift of 'backward' caste communities like their own. Denouncing 'brahmanic' practices such as child-marriage and the prohibition of widow remarriage could also be a powerful means of attacking brahmans. At the same time, as we shall see, Marathas were as much concerned as other caste communities about dignifying their social practice and to mark themselves off more clearly from social rivals in rural and urban contexts alike through the behaviour of their women.

Certainly Phule himself had a considerable interest in a range of issues concerning women, whom he presented as victims of brahmanic culture and power in common with other lower caste and untouchable people. From 1848, he and his wife Savitribai ran a school for girls in Poona, for which his father threw them out of

the house.⁵⁶ During the 1860s, he ran a 'home' in his own compound for pregnant brahman widows, which was advertised provocatively by means of notices pasted up publicly in the brahman quarter. He was very clearly adept at using women's issues in this provocative way: one of his friends recalled, for example, how he deliberately employed an old brahman woman, Gangubai, on very large wages, as a servant in his house, as a way of mocking the wealthy brahmans who usually employed poor women from other castes to do their menial work. He seemed to have succeeded, for Gangubai's relatives came to Poona and took her away.⁵⁷ In the early 1880s he was drawn into the controversy over Pandita Ramabai. His pamphlet *Satsar*, 'Essence of Truth', published in September 1885, defended her against critics of her conversion, and referred also to Tarabai as another valiant defender of women's rights and dignity. He described how:

Today, through the power of the English rulers, a few of the harassed womenfolk of this country have begun hesitatingly to learn to read and write. So in this issue a small effort is made to lay out before women's eyes all of the evil men's tricks through which the cunning Aryans have for thousands of years tormented all women in all sorts of ways, and still do so now.⁵⁸

He defended Ramabai, pointing out that brahmans had always invented all sorts of mischievous lies about women and stopped them from being educated for fear that this would make daughters-in-law too rebellious. But he also pointed out that she had not been the first, because 'before Pandita Ramabai came to Poona, Mrs Tarabai Shinde of Buldhana in Berar, wrote a book called "A Comparison between Women and Men"'. Referring intimately to Tarabai as *chiranjivi*, 'our dear daughter', he explained that she had intended the book to express the anger that many women felt at their ill-treatment by menfolk, and to spell out to men what they needed to do to recover their women's affection and loyalty.⁵⁹

It is clear, then, that Tarabai and Phule shared much in common, both in their hostility to orthodox religion, and in the language they used to condemn it. Indeed, Satyashodhak language seems to have provided her with a kind of dictionary which she deployed for her own purposes, its highly-coloured images of cunning and lustful brahmans reappearing in her own rhetoric as

cunning and lustful men as such. For Phule, brahmanic religion oppressed lower caste people because it had been devised by brahmans; for Tarabai, it oppressed women because it had been devised by men. Yet other aspects of her life and writing mark it off very sharply from Satyashodhak political culture, in ways which clearly reflect her greater political marginality as a woman: her sheer irreverence and mockery of all, and not just brahman male authority, her disdain for idealized models of feminine respectability, and her sense of isolation as a writer and defender of women's dignity before a readership and political audience that she assumed to be almost exclusively masculine. Issues such as education, remarriage or the seclusion of women mattered to her also because they had an immediate and practical bearing on real women's circumstances, rather than as disguised political ammunition for other causes. What seems extraordinary, indeed, and to underline the very different implications for women even of a radical political movement like the Satyashodhak Samaj, is that the Shinde household still practised some sort of seclusion for its women, as Tarabai complains at the start of her book.⁶⁰ Here, as on the issue of women's rights to remarriage, her point was not just that things were difficult for women in comparison with the increased freedoms that men enjoyed in colonial society, but that they were actually getting worse. I want to turn now to explore these parts of her argument, and to suggest that they might best be understood in the wider context of processes of 'traditionalization' referred to above.

TRADITIONALIZING WOMEN: SECLUSION AND REMARRIAGE IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY



Like 'caste', the practice of purdah has often been regarded as very much a feature of 'traditional' India.⁶¹ Yet there is much evidence that for 'warrior-peasant' people like the Marathas, purdah came actually to be more rigidly enforced during the nineteenth century, as well as acquiring a more distinctively Hindu rather than Muslim form. As H. Papanek and others have argued, it is possible very broadly to distinguish different rationales underlying the two, although in practice they often merge. For

Muslims, the veiling of women with the *burqa* before outsiders emphasizes the unity of a trusted circle of kin; for Hindus, veiling is practised within the home as well as outside, and relates rather to relations of authority and respect amongst affines, particularly between a woman's natal family and that of her husband, within which she was required to show considerable modesty and deference, especially in her early married life. This suggests, as Papanek points out, that for Hindus purdah was not simply an alien measure adopted at the time of the Muslim invasions; for Hindus it was and is an elaborate means of signalling female modesty and obedience.⁶²

What is much less clear, however, is the extent to which the seclusion of 'respectable' women was actually consistently practised in the mobile and highly militarized societies of late pre-colonial India. It has become a historical commonplace that the Marathas secluded their women as a result of their long association with Mughal court culture. An early Marathi dictionary of 1829 thus defined *marathmola*, 'the true old Maratha custom' as meaning 'the practice whereby the women of those who call themselves Marathas have to wear the burqa'.⁶³ Yet, for western India at least, it is striking how far eighteenth-century commentators agreed that women were seldom veiled. A late-eighteenth-century Persian manuscript recorded that 'the women of all ranks, both rich and poor, go unveiled; and those of distinction go in palankens without curtains. The wives of soldiers ride about on horseback'.⁶⁴ Colonel Tone, who commanded a regiment of the Maratha peshwa's army, wrote in 1798 that he had seen the daughters of princes in the field sitting making bread with their own hands and 'otherwise employed in the ordinary business of domestic housewifery'.⁶⁵ The writer of a history of the Maratha Bhosle family in 1801 recorded that 'the Mahratta women expose themselves more than the women of other parts of India, and the greatest of them are frequently on horseback; nay, some are said to lead armies and mix in battle'.⁶⁶ Perhaps the closest observer of women in the Maratha camps was Thomas Broughton, who spent a year with the army of Mahadaji Shinde in 1809. He reported that

A Mahratta line of march exhibits a collection of the most grotesque objects and groups that can possibly be imagined; and at no time is the difference in the treatment of women, between the Mahrattas and other

natives of India, more strikingly displayed. Such as can afford it here, ride on horseback, without taking any pains to conceal their faces; they gallop about and make their way through the throng with as much boldness and perseverance as the men. Among the better sort it is common to see the master of a family riding by the side of his wife and children, all well-mounted, and attended by half a dozen horsemen and two or three female servants, also on horseback; and I have often seen a woman seated astraddle, behind her husband, and keeping her seat with no small degree of grace and dexterity.⁶⁷

'The Mahratta women', he said, 'are generally speaking, very ugly; and have a bold look which is to be observed in no other women of Hindoostan'. Interestingly, however, Broughton's remarks do suggest some form of public veiling in the Shinde camp. The women wore 'when abroad a Chadur or large veil, and sometimes a shawl, which envelops the whole figure'.⁶⁸ This may reflect Shinde's particularly close ties with the north Indian Muslims and Rajputs who came to dominate his armies during the years of his campaigning in northern India. Richard Jenkins, resident at the Maratha court of Nagpur in the 1820s, reported, on the other hand, that 'The Maratha women are under little personal restraint. They appear unveiled in public'.⁶⁹

It may well have been, then, that, for all the aura of tradition surrounding the term *marathmola*, its eighteenth century existence was partial and interrupted. What should have changed to make the seclusion of women more widespread in the course of the nineteenth century? For all those who moved to the expanding new towns, it may have seemed an important means of protecting a family's dignity in a strange environment where familiar social markers were lacking. This was certainly the case in other parts of India, where there are also hints that a more 'Hinduized' form of seclusion was taking hold. The Bengal government servant Mirza Abu Taleb Khan wrote in 1801 that

Before the Mussulmans entered Hindustan, the women did not conceal themselves from view; and even yet, in all the Hindu villages, it is not customary; and it is well known how inviolable the Hindus preserve their own

custom, and how obstinately they are attached to it; but now so rigidly do the women in the great towns observe this practice of concealment from view, that the bride does not even show herself to her father-in-law, and the sister comes but seldom into the presence of her brother.⁷⁰

Other factors may have worked in the same direction. The more sedentary and demilitarized society that the East India Company strove to create clearly removed those aspects of geographical mobility that may have prevented military families from imposing seclusion in a rigid way. Perhaps most powerfully, those processes described above making for more rigid and bounded caste communities in a more static colonial social order may have impelled the great agricultural castes in particular to adopt this potent new means of expressing their social standing.

Certainly from mid-century at any rate, contemporaries refer increasingly to *marathmola* as a practical reality, a reality that, significantly, appeared now to be taking a more Hinduized form. Writing in 1861, the social critic Tukaram Tatya Padval observed that

The Marathas lived within the Muslim state, and so they adopted many of their practices. What is called 'marathmola' really only means keeping women in purdah. If a woman cannot ever meet her father or brother when they come to visit, who can she see! Even if the Marathas fall on very hard times, they will not allow the women out of doors, and because there are no servants in the house, the men have to do it themselves.⁷¹

This kind of feminine modesty was, of course, still difficult to impose and not always successful. A disapproving correspondent to the *Dnyanodaya* newspaper wrote in the same year that

Some Marathas and other vulgar people among us, when their sister-in-law comes to visit; stand right out in the road, and exchange such conversation and gestures with their hands that I feel ashamed to write about it. What happens to their marathmola then?⁷²

It was a commonplace in almost all the Bombay presidency Gazetteers of the early 1880s that all those gentry, village headmen

and large landholders now claiming descent from the ancient royal Maratha houses, adopted *marathmola* and secluded their women. In Sholapur district it was reported that

When going out women of the higher Maratha families cover themselves from head to foot in a broad white sheet which prevents any part of the face from being seen. This is commonly known as the Maratha mola, or Maratha practice. They do not work out of doors, the water being brought home by servants or the men of the house. An upper class Maratha woman on no account shows her face before strangers.

These families also refused to remarry their women, unlike ordinary *kunbi* agriculturalists, whose women helped their husbands in the fields and could remarry after the death of a spouse.⁷³ In Satara, 'the well-to-do strictly enforce the women seclusion system called *ghosha*, that is curtain, or Marath mola, that is, Maratha custom'.⁷⁴ In Nasik, 'rich Marathas do not allow widow remarriage, strictly enforce the *zenana* system, *goshe*, and wear the sacred thread which is given them at marriage'.⁷⁵ The Ahmadnagar Gazetteer described the domestic arrangements of these Maratha gentry:

Marathas live in better class houses with brick walls and tiled roofs. Those whose women do not appear in public divide the house into two; the back part called the *janankhana* is given entirely to the use of women and the front called the *devadi* or vestibule is used by the men.⁷⁶

Purdah in these contexts was clearly part of a more Hinduized system for the expression of female modesty within the house as well as without. This was reflected in the interior dress of Ahmadnagar Maratha women, who used the *padar*, the end of the sari, not only to cover the shoulders and head, but also to veil the face.⁷⁷ In Tarabai's own district of Berar, it was reported that Marathas

observe the *parda* system with regard to their women, and will go to the well and draw water themselves rather than permit their wives to do so; but the poorer Marathas cannot maintain the system and they and their wives and children work in the fields.⁷⁸

The strength of *purdah* amongst Marathas naturally attracted considerable criticism, not least from their brahman political rivals who made much of the absurdity of these Maratha attempts at social dignity. Articles in the *Kesari* newspaper in 1882, for example, suggested that *purdah* had never originally been a rule amongst the Marathas, but that somehow, perhaps from their association with the Muslim ruling power,

the belief must have spread that women who go out of doors are poor, ill-born and coarse; and so out of pride some began to make a fuss about their women not going out. Even if they are not able to bring food to eat, the water needs fetching, or the women need their saris washing, they think it's all very good!

Now, the writer went on, 'Amongst royal Maratha houses such as that of Shinde, Holkar and Gaikwad, and amongst some other Marathas who call themselves high-born, the authority of this custom is enormously strong'. Marathas defended seclusion in different ways. Some said that 'their morals and *pativrata* are the greatest ornament of women, and in order to protect them, this custom can never be abandoned': a ridiculous argument, because it implied that women who were not veiled were all immoral. Other promoters of veiling for women were simply extreme misogynists, 'thoughtless philosophers who hate women and say that women's carnal desires exceed those of men eight times over, and if they are not thus put in awe, the very next day they will run away hand in hand with someone else'. The writer concluded that 'some Marathas of education and understanding must have felt complete contempt for this barbaric practice, but out of fear of public hostility have each died in his place without doing anything about it'.⁷⁹

In central India and Tarabai's own district, we can follow this interplay very closely between caste, the local rivalries of old and new rural elites, and the development of new models for respectable women's behaviour. A number of commentators emphasized the declining fortunes of the old Maratha military aristocracy of the region, families who had accumulated land and property in the service of pre-colonial states and now found themselves trying to maintain some semblance of their old styles of living on ever more divided shares of their old estates.⁸⁰ Alongside these were evidently

a rising group of newer Maratha gentry, who were employed as magistrates, members of district and taluka boards, who held large estates, and had in many cases titles of *deshmukh* granted them by the British in recognition of their services.⁸¹ These families now tried to constitute themselves into a separate and superior caste of Maratha Deshmukhs, with the behaviour of their women a key mark of their status. In Buldhana district in 1910, it was recorded that Deshmukhs had developed

into a sort of aristocratic branch of the caste and marry among themselves when matches can be arranged. They do not allow the marriage of widows nor permit their women to accompany the wedding procession. A Deshmukh Sabha has been formed for Berar, one of its aims being to check intermarriage with ordinary kunbis.⁸²

Older Maratha families of the region, led by Nilkanthrao Bhausahab Khalatkar, himself a Deshmukh and honorary magistrate and district council member from Nagpur, strongly resisted the efforts of these low-born office-holders to try to convert their titles into a superior caste status. Khalatkar pointed out that 'a deshmukh is a title given by the government, it is not to be thought of as a caste. And it is also not to be thought that real Marathas have a lower rank because they are not Deshmukhs'. It was also not true that the marriage and other social practices of Marathas and ordinary *kunbi* families were the same: for the latter allowed second marriages, did not keep purdah, and did not put on the sacred thread, all things which Marathas did. The fact was that 'kunbi deshmukhs are really just kunbis, though kunbi deshmukhs themselves do not agree'.⁸³ As for Marathas themselves, he lamented the spread of seclusion amongst rich and poor alike:

Today among the Marathas, there is such terrible purdah, that women do not even give water to the men of their own house, young or old. So how can they appear at their married homes before fathers-in-law or brothers-in-law? This is absolutely against nature. To put on purdah before the men of the house is nothing - but a sort of prison. It means that the men have to work like slaves in front of the women who are in purdah, and women themselves become lazy. If there is just one man and one woman in the house and a friend or

relation comes, and there is either no one else at home or the house is a poor one, then the man himself has to go to the well like a woman, draw water and bring it back on his head, while she is in the house doing housework or cooking, and the friend or relation has then to be sat down to eat on his own, and he has to serve him, so that all in all, having purdah is more a cause of sorrow than of happiness.⁸⁴

Even poverty was no deterrent, for 'women of poor families go out to the fields, and then when they come home, they put on purdah. What is the point of that sort of purdah?'⁸⁵

Interestingly, Khalatkar's recommendation for alternative models for female behaviour begins to reflect the updated and 'Victorianized' ideal wife that we have already encountered in liberal circles, where external social constraints were replaced by internal ones of proper feminine modesty and self-control. Thus, he urged,

Purdah should not be taken to extremes. Women should not appear before people outside, but they should be able to appear before household people using a burqa or padar in a moderate way. They should not giggle, and they should not talk too much. They should not make jokes. They should not behave rudely to anyone. Purdah should never be completely abolished, but women should be able to go before their relatives and own family using their padar. They should not just speak to any old Tom, Dick or Harry. They should not go completely bare-headed, or with their faces in full view, whether they are at home or not.⁸⁶

The danger, he urged, was that if there was not a reformed purdah of this kind, then 'it is purdah in front of the father, and behind it, + + +'. The best thing of all would be 'if women were given education in order to behave themselves in proper bounds and to act with good morals'.⁸⁷

Purdah in western India, therefore, may well have been very much a nineteenth century creation, as western India's rural Maratha gentry and their rivals amongst the newly wealthy competed to mark out their status and sharpen up their marriage strategies in an increasingly crowded and static rural environment.

Moreover, these more Hinduized forms of purdah were relatively cost-free, for they did not even require womenfolk to withdraw from labour on the family farm. Poorer families whose women had to work could make the point just as easily by the strict seclusion of their women before elders, menfolk and visitors within the home. More research is needed, but there is some evidence at least to suggest that India's other large agricultural caste groups were moving in a similar direction. Sherring reported that it was only from the early nineteenth century that the Jats, for example, stopped intermarrying with members of lower agricultural castes, and began to seclude their once-free women.⁸⁸ David Pocock has described how Kanbi women in Gujarat were increasingly secluded and confined from the early nineteenth century, as patidar factions grew more competitive and greater stress was placed on the purity of women.⁸⁹

If indeed new forms of female seclusion were developing in these ways, they might explain something of the anger and perturbation that observers like Tarabai would have felt as they surveyed the emerging contrast between men's and women's freedoms in colonial society. As she remonstrated with her male readership,

You shut women up endlessly in the prison of the home, while you go about building up your own importance, becoming Mr, Sir and so on... Right from your own childhood you collect all rights in your own hands and womankind you just push in a dark corner, shut up in purdah, frightened, sat on, dominated as if she was a female slave. And all the while you go about dazzling us all with the light of your own virtue. Learning isn't for women, nor can they come and go as they please. Even if a woman is allowed to go outside, the women she meets are all ignorant like her, they're all just the same. So how's she to get any greater understanding or intelligence?⁹⁰

If purdah was one major concern for Tarabai in these emerging new Hindu models of female respectability, rights to remarriage and the social status of widows were others. Some historians have made the point that the institution of *sati*, widow burning, has only affected a tiny minority of Indian women, quite out of proportion

to the attention colonial rulers and historians alike have paid to it.⁹¹ Much the same point might be made about widowhood. What may also be important, however, is the way in which both *sati* and restrictions on remarriage helped to disseminate and reinforce models for female self-abnegation and deference to a much wider audience of Indian women than were ever directly affected by either. Tarabai herself certainly makes the point that it is not merely the social difficulties of widows themselves that concerned her, but the way in which the dread of widowhood shaped the behaviour of all married women.⁹²

In many social contexts, of course, where women gain their identities principally as wives and mothers, widows and particularly younger or childless widows have constituted a special 'problem'.⁹³ This was particularly so in brahmanic religious culture, where, as we have seen in the case of Rajputs and patidars, 'surplus' women such as widows who had to be remarried could constitute a serious threat to a community's social and material standing. In this context, as Julia Leslie has described, older brahmanic ideals laid great emphasis on a wife's obedience to her husband during his life and her continued faithfulness to him beyond his death. The ideal wife, the *pativrata*, is one whose duties, purposes and identity derive entirely from her husband.⁹⁴ As enjoined in Sanskrit texts such as the Institutes of Manu and their vernacular reworkings, her husband is a wife's spiritual guide and her personal god. This relation of worshipper and god is expressed in rules for dress and ornament. A man's sacred thread and the signs on his forehead mark out his own religious affiliation, while the symbols of a woman's married state—the *kumkum* on her forehead, her bangles and the *mangalsutra* fastened round her neck during the marriage ceremony, indicate that her personal god is alive and there to ensure her social and ritual status as worshipper.⁹⁵ This relationship also emerges in contrasting notions of *dharma* itself. Whereas the masculine form *svadharma*, 'one's own *dharma*', refers generally to right action and religious duty in a broad sense, *stridharma*, the *dharma* or religious duty of woman, means *pativrata*, a chaste wife's devotion to her husband.⁹⁶ These connected ideas in turn meant that untimely widowhood represented an extreme of ill-luck and impurity. As the eighteenth-century Maratha pandit Tryambaka put it, 'Just as the body, bereft of life, in that moment becomes impure, so the woman, bereft of her husband, is always impure,

even if she has bathed properly. Of all inauspicious things, the widow is the most inauspicious'.⁹⁷ Even the contemplation of remarriage would violate her *pativrata*; the only hope for a widow lay in ascetic self-denial until she could be reunited with her husband after death.

It is much more difficult to ascertain how far these attitudes to remarriage actually shaped social practice. They were widespread amongst brahmans in western India in the eighteenth century although, as Kadam has noted, the public campaigns against the remarriage of brahman widows suggests that widow celibacy may have been more of an ideal than a reality for some families at least. It was also a key point of contention between the peshwa's Chitpavan brahman community and their political rivals in the Sonar and Prabhu castes, who sought to enhance their status by preventing their women from remarrying, and were ordered by the peshwa to give their women freedom in this respect.⁹⁸ One way in which elite Maratha families in the eighteenth century marked their political arrival was also by restricting remarriage. Beyond these very narrow elite groups, however, women appear to have been able to remarry without difficulty.⁹⁹

What is less clear, however, is how far this continued to be true through the nineteenth century. Early colonial observers certainly saw that remarriage carried something of a social stigma. In his description of the Deccan village of Lony in 1823, Thomas Coats reported that widows were sometimes permitted to remarry, 'but it is looked on by some families as disreputable, and not practised. It is only widowers who marry widows, and the offspring is not entitled to inherit in the same proportion as those by a first marriage'.¹⁰⁰ The reformer Balshastri Jambhekar reported in similar terms a decade later, that

with the exception of a few very superior castes, second marriages may take place; though many of those who have no religious obstacle to enjoy that liberty, consider it a degradation to exercise it, in their love of imitating the higher classes.¹⁰¹

For the British themselves during the 1820s, this early picture was confused because they were still trying to distinguish between 'high' castes whose affairs should be regulated by the book law of the *shastras*, and lesser communities whose practices were

enshrined in customary law. Assembling his legal digest for the Bombay Deccan in 1826, Arthur Steele noted that 'the custom of a second and inferior marriage, allowed to wives and widows in riiany castes' was one of the main differences between the two: 'The second marriage of a wife or widow (called Pat by the Mahrattas and Natra in Goozerat) is forbidden in the present age at least, and to twice-born castes. But it is not forbidden to Soodrus'. The prohibition of widow remarriage, Steele reported, also distinguished well-born Maratha families from ordinary agriculturalists: 'Such of them as are high Mahratta (as are the families of the Sattara Raja, and other houses of pure Mahratta descent) do not allow their widows to form Pat'.¹⁰² With the emergence of more organized social reform movements from the 1860s, it became something of a commonplace that this was primarily a brahman problem: reflected, for example, in Pandita Ramabai's concern with the 'high-caste' Hindu widow. Historians have often tended to assume the same.¹⁰⁵

What is striking in Tarabai's text, however, is her insistence that the practice was actually spreading to a much broader range of middling communities:

It's just not true these days that only the brahman castes stop their widows getting married again. Lots of other castes and families do the same: Prabhus, Shenvis, Gujaratis, Bhatias, Marwadis, Marathas, Desais, Deshmukhs, Inamdars; and Marathas with names like Shirke, Mahadik, Jadhav, Bhosle and Mane, families from places like Sholapur, Satara, Pune, Gwalior and Indore, the very families who died for the Maratha power. You can see an even stricter rule than the brahmans in their families against the remarriage of widows. In these people's houses you can wait till the end of your life and it won't happen. If one husband goes off and dies, too bad—they'll never let you have another one.¹⁰⁴

Rates of remarriage for the nineteenth century are, of course, extremely difficult to estimate, since it was not until the Census of 1881 that provincial governments began routinely to enumerate marriage and widowhood. Yet there does seem to be some evidence to suggest that from mid-century a much wider range of people were beginning to incorporate restrictions on remarriage

into their social practice. Admittedly much of this evidence is fragmentary and anecdotal, but it comes from a remarkably wide range of sources. The silk-weaving Khatris of Bombay, for example, did not remarry their women, as a correspondent to their caste newspaper, the *Vichardarpan*, lamented in 1860.¹⁰⁵ Tukaram Tatyapa Padval reported of the Bombay Sonar goldsmiths that 'until quite recently, these people were accustomed to *pat* marriages of their widowed women, but within the last twenty years, the custom has been absolutely stopped'.¹⁰⁶ The Panchkalshes, an inferior writer people of Bombay, looked as, though they were going in the same direction: 'These people still have the custom of marrying widows with *pat*, but within the last ten years, Hari Keshavji and other respected and influential gentlemen in the caste have been carrying on efforts to get the practice stopped'.¹⁰⁷ The Bhandari toddy-tappers of Bombay shared the same reluctance, for 'even though they still have the practice of *pat*, they feel ashamed when they remarry their widowed girls'.¹⁰⁸ As another Bhandari explained, his caste fellows often got these attitudes when they went off to work for the government and mixed with high caste employees: 'Some people just get a bit of education, then go off to do government and other service, and it's amongst these people that all these pure practices have spread, by their mixing together with superior castes'.¹⁰⁹ In 1865 the *Dnyanodaya* reported the suicide of a young brahman widow, adding that while it was certainly true that brahmans did not allow remarriage,

the bar has not just stayed limited to them alone; within the last few years, even Sonars, Prabhus, Khatris, Panchkalshes and other such castes who behave like the brahmans have basically out of pride got their feet well and truly stuck fast in the vices of this custom.¹¹⁰

Many of the male respondents to the government of India's enquiries in 1884 argued that recent years had seen changes in the practice of lower castes. Shantaram Narayan, a pleader in the High Court of Bombay, reported that

Widow remarriage being disallowed among the latter as sinful, the lower classes, though exempted from the ban, intuitively, as it were, learn to look upon it with some prejudice: and, in illustration of this, one could mention non-brahman communities among whom widow

remarriage was allowed, and prevailed formerly but who have, within living memory, declared themselves against the custom.¹¹¹

Venkat Rango Katti, a translator in the Education Department from Dharwar, reported having seen similar instances:

Shaved widows wearing red cloth can be seen in numbers among the Komties, the Kasars, the Sonars and the Gingars. I have read a long letter in the last month written by a Lingayat priest of Hoobli to one of the Canarese priests of Dharwar, in which the writer condemned widows remarried, freely availed of by his sect, as a stepping stone to hell, and invited his castemen to adopt widow celibacy which he praised in the most alluring way.¹¹²

Ramchorlal Chotalal reported that 'there are many castes of the Hindu community, such as the Kunbees, in which widow remarriage is freely allowed; but even among that caste there are some families who would not remarry their widows on account of the respectability of the family'.¹¹³ The surgeon Sakharam Arjun reported that "'Enforced widowhood", though an institution of a pretty long standing among the brahmanical classes, has been of comparatively recent origin in the other castes', and had arisen, he said, 'due to that rage for imitating their superiors which constantly seizes an inferior class'.¹¹⁴ With much disapproval, Satyashodhak activists noted the same trend. Narayanrao Lokhande reproached some of his Mali and Maratha caste fellows 'among whom there was the custom of widow remarriage, and now, imitating what the brahmans say, they have given up remarrying young widows'.¹¹⁵ Jotirao Phule observed that 'because the Aryan brahmans brought this custom into use, impressionable and ignorant farming people, sonars and other castes have taken up their example, and so their daughters-in-law fall into difficulties in just the same way as the brahmans'.¹¹⁶

All of this is very difficult to back with any hard evidence, and I do not want to press the argument too far. However, the first large-scale figures for female widowhood that we have, those of the 1881 Census, do seem to point in the same direction. The following table gives figures for male and female widowhood in the Deccan region of the Bombay presidency for a cross-section of caste groups.

MALE AND FEMALE WIDOWHOOD
PER THOUSAND IN THE DECCAN, 1881¹¹⁷

| | <i>Under 15</i> | | <i>15 and over</i> | |
|---------------------|-----------------|----|--------------------|-----|
| | M | F | M | F |
| Deshasta brahman | 2 | 12 | 130 | 371 |
| Konkanastha brahman | 1 | 7 | 103 | 338 |
| Prabhu | 3 | 3 | 85 | 317 |
| Maratha-kunbi | 2 | 8 | 73 | 288 |
| Mali | 2 | 7 | 70 | 257 |
| Sonar | 12 | 19 | 101 | 286 |
| Sutar | 3 | 9 | 72 | 233 |
| Kasar | 4 | 10 | 101 | 277 |
| Kumbhar | 5 | 11 | 82 | 257 |
| Lohar | 3 | 7 | 72 | 234 |
| Mahar | 3 | 8 | 62 | 259 |
| Mang | 3 | 9 | 73 | 234 |

What is striking about the figures in the table is their suggestion that if the numbers of widowed women relative to men are any guide, middle and lower caste practice by the 1880s did not actually differ fundamentally from that of the first three high caste groups in the table. The report itself repeated the usual view that, 'the remarriage of widows is a practice confined to the lower and middle classes', but almost in the same breath pointed out that 'the large proportion of the widowed females is one of the main characteristics of the returns for the whole indigenous community'. It gave no overall explanation for the very large numbers of widowed Hindu women, merely noting that these were diffused over the whole age range, rather than being concentrated at the end of life as it was amongst the Muslims, and that although the famine in the southern part of the presidency in 1876-7 had pushed up the numbers of widows there, their ratio for the Deccan and Gujarat was actually very similar.¹¹⁸

It does seem, therefore, that possibilities for remarriage may have become increasingly restricted for quite a wide range of women over the course of the century. In part, this may have been a result of the way in which, as Lucy Carroll has argued, the

Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, administered by brahman lawyers and Victorian judges, tended to promote 'brahmanical values which held widow remarriage in disrepute', by driving out customary law, under which most widowed women had rights of inheritance in their husband's estates, in favour of statutory and brahmanical book law which disinherited them.¹¹⁹ But it may also have been associated with the same social processes that produced the tighter and more Hinduized forms of purdah described above. Like purdah, moreover, restrictions on remarriage could also be a relatively cost-free means of enhancing family dignity, particularly for those whose social aspirations outran their resources. Indeed, such restrictions may actually have been an effective way of protecting and adding to those resources. They removed the danger that women might seek to partition the family estate, and also enabled families to retain a widow's labour. Many nineteenth-century observers reported that widows often did the heaviest and dirtiest work about the home, such as grinding, while the Maratha reformer, Vasant Lingoji Birze, admonished his caste fellows for what he saw as their increasing reluctance to remarry their widows:

Those people who have fallen into brahman customs should rethink this. Because today, many brahmans openly do widow remarriage. So it is not very sensible to cherish the desire to do as those who call themselves brahmans do. We should never think that widowed women are very useful in doing housework, so they should stay at home.¹²⁰

In rather different forms, these trends may have been present in large peasant communities more widely in India. David Pocock has noted that the patidars of Gujarat gave up remarrying their widows towards the end of the nineteenth century, as prosperous kanbis built a respectable 'patidar' status for themselves and sought new marriage strategies to consolidate their dominance in rural society. For the Jats of Haryana, Prem Chowdhry has described how widows could remarry, but family pressure meant that a woman almost always married one of her husband's younger brothers. What the Jats lost in social status they regained in material terms, since in practice Jat women's rights to their husband's estates were seldom in danger of leaving the family.¹²¹

Set in this wider context, then, Tarabai's own insistence that restrictions on widowed women were not just a brahman problem becomes more explicable. What also seems to have goaded her, however, was the way in which widows were written about and discussed in public, particularly when they failed to live up to the impossible ideals of chastity prescribed for them. In particular, she mentions the case of the widow Vijaylakshmi referred to above. Vijaylakshmi's case may have been partly what she had in mind when she talked in her introduction of how

everyday now people go about pinning the blame on women all the time, as if everything bad was their fault! When I saw this, my whole mind just began churning and shaking out of feeling for the honour of woman-kind. So I lost all my fear, I just couldn't stop myself writing about it in this very biting language. In fact, if I could have found even stronger words to describe how you men all stick together and cover up for each other I would have used them in my clumsy way. Because you men are all the same, all full of lies and dirty tricks.¹²²

To conclude this section, it is worth just looking at a little of this public discussion. It covered a broad spectrum of opinion, from sympathy for Vijaylakshmi in view of the temptations to which the miserable lot of Hindu widows made them subject, to outraged demands that her unchaste life and monstrous crime receive the ultimate penalty. Conservative opinion was unambiguous. A correspondent to the *Shivaji* demanded to know why any mercy should be shown to this inhuman mother: widows, he said, ought to refrain from immoral lives, and if they abandoned themselves to vice they must take the consequences.¹²³ Tarabai herself mentions the *Pune Vaibhav*, which had evidently denounced Vijaylakshmi as an example of Indian womanhood corrupted from her *pativrata* by modern values.¹²⁴

In many ways, however, liberal opinion *actually shared the same* set of assumptions. If for conservatives, women were wicked, for liberals they were morally weak. The Prarthana Samaj newspaper *Subodha Patrika* pointed out the temptations to vice and crime that widows were subject to, and urged that they should be educated as the means of avoiding them.¹²⁵ The *Bombay Samachar* agreed that the crime of infanticide was indeed a horrible one,

but urged that account should be taken of widows' peculiar circumstances, and a period of imprisonment instead of outright execution used to deter women from wickedness.¹²⁶ This theme of imprisonment and shame as a deterrent to women was given wide publicity. The well-known Maratha reformer and Diwan of Baroda State, Sir T. Madhava Rao, published a long article in the *Times of India*. He agreed that capital punishment was too extreme; a long term of imprisonment would be a much better deterrent because it would actually be a much harsher punishment to the woman than hanging, in which 'the woman is released from all pain in five minutes'.

Imprisonment would punish the woman by making her suffer that pain—that very pain which she most dreaded. Sentence her publicly, send her to gaol publicly, keep her there publicly, and let her suffer the pain of shame which she had dreaded so much. Would not that be a sufficiently deterring punishment ?

It would also be a much better deterrent. For women in India seldom went to see executions, and most of them were unable to read about them in the newspapers.

But in the case of the punishment I advocate, the female culprit being alive in gaol, is likely to be seen, especially if sentenced to labour. Being kept alive, she is frequently the subject of conversation, and consequently her punishment is kept more before the female public mind.¹²⁷

This, then, was liberal logic carried to its conclusion. Infanticide was still basically the women's fault, but because this fault sprang from weakness, women should not actually be hanged, but punished and made an example of to encourage others to resist temptation. In his summing up, the judge, Mr Justice West, added his own view that women deserved no clemency at all when, as in *this case*, 'the ordinary associations which clustered around the ideal of a woman were entirely perverted':

The woman who herself disregarded the proper functions of her sex was in an especial degree disqualified from claiming the kindness and consideration which we ordinarily accord to the sex, because of their having feelings which this woman had thrown aside.¹²⁸

It is not clear exactly what of this Tarabai might have read apart from the *Pune Vaibhav*, although the themes of female vice and weakness are common enough. It is not difficult to see why she should have been angered by it, or have felt that 'when a woman like Vijaylakshmi goes wrong, every woman gets included in the blame'.¹²⁹ While restrictions on remarriage were getting tighter, and liberal reformers talked impotently from the sidelines, widows like Vijaylakshmi found themselves in an impossible position: urged to impossible ideals of *pativrata*, condemned from either side when they failed, and all this in circumstances which made it very hard for them to answer back.

There were other areas too where Tarabai was concerned with *pativrata* as an increasingly popular model for women's behaviour. She also saw it running through much of the new Marathi print culture, with far-reaching consequences for the more general ways in which women were talked about and represented in nineteenth century society. We turn now to examine these aspects of her argument and their context.

PATIVRATAS AND WHORES: WOMEN IN POPULAR LITERATURE



Historians have long appreciated the extent to which later nineteenth century vernacular literatures were important vehicles for a range of religious and regional political identities. It is only more recently that we have begun to discover their significance in the construction of gender identities.¹³⁰ Tarabai's text is illuminating here, for in it we have the views of a woman actually reading and seeing some of the new vernacular print genres taking shape, and not in the least liking what she sees. For what dominated many of them was a peculiar mixture of adulation for an idealized *pativrata*, titillating descriptions of suffering womanly virtue under seige, and scandalized accounts of 'independent' loose women and whores. As we shall see, this popular and commercially very successful genre reflected very much the blending of Victorian and brahmanic values that elsewhere shaped some of the new models for respectable Hindu

womanhood. Here, too, we have the same combination of veneration for wifely purity and revilement for women who showed any evidence of independent sexuality, as a sure sign of women gone wrong. This literature seems to have reinforced Tarabai's sense of contradiction and impossibility for women in this emerging Hindu culture: made as they were into a symbol for all sorts of traditions and institutions over which they had little control, alternatively encouraged towards impossible models of wifely devotion and held as the innate sources of moral weakness behind all social evil, constantly discussed but without a public voice of their own.

Like other Indian vernaculars, Marathi literature was before the coming of print at the end of the eighteenth century dominated by verse forms, in the shape of versions of and commentaries on the great classics of Sanskrit literature, as well as a rich and flourishing tradition of devotional poetry associated with the *bhakti* tradition. From the 1820s and 1830s, print literature and the use of prose expanded together, and with patronage from missionaries, the Bombay government and a range of private societies, Marathi writers brought out translations of the Bible and of Persian, Sanskrit and English tales: *Aesop's Fables*, the *Arabian Nights*, the Sanskrit *Panchatantra*, *Robinson Crusoe*, *Ivanhoe*, Lamb's *Tales from Shakespeare*, as well as a range of Victorianized homilies intended for the instruction and improvement of readers.¹³¹ From mid-century, however, many Marathi writers began to give their work a rather sharper moral point, in the collections of tales, short stories and little sketches, from which emerged the first Marathi novels and plays of the 1860s. Most strikingly, though, they were dominated by themes and stories about women, as the editors of the *Dnyanodaya* and *Dnyanprakash* newspapers agreed in the course of one of their exchanges about the worth of this new genre in 1864.¹³²

Typically, these were highly-coloured romances, featuring racy and explicit fantasies of women's virtue in danger and the shocking vices of the fallen. They drew clearly on a variety of earlier literatures: on tales like the *Arabian Nights* for their adventure element, on the mildly pornographic tradition of Sanskrit stories for their accounts of lusty young men's adventures, on the highly moralizing dramas about virtue in danger that were popular in contemporary Victorian literature, and on the strong themes of *pativrata* and womanly chastity that pervaded brahmanic religious culture. The result was an extremely ambiguous blend of fantasy,

voyeurism and stern injunctions about the consequences of womanly weakness. Tarabai describes some of these stories and plays in detail: *Muktamala*, published in 1861, *Manjughosha*, in 1868; the play *Manorama*, published in 1871, and a virtual genre in itself of *Stricharitra*, 'Lives of Women', that were published from the 1850s onwards. All of these were extremely popular. *Stricharitra* was on to its third part by 1862, and spawned more imitations: *Vidagdha stricharitra*, 'Lives of Clever Women', in 1871, and *Sushikshit stricharitra*, 'Lives of Educated Women' in 1872. *Muktamala* was into its fifth edition by 1880; *Manjughosha* was in its third by 1874 and *Manorama* was in its second by 1877. There were many others in the same genre, and they appear to have enjoyed considerable commercial success.¹³³

There were a range of *Stricharitra*, and it is not quite clear which one exactly Tarabai refers to, though their themes were fairly consistent. First published was that of Ramjee Gunnojee, a retired hospital assistant, referred to as 'Doctorsahib' throughout the book, who warned in his preface that he had got a special *sanad* or warrant from the Calcutta government to stop anyone from pirating his book.¹³⁴ Its full English title was

Streechuritra or Female Narration, comprizing their course of life, BEHAVIOUR, and undertaking in four parts with Moral reprimands checking Obscenity to secure Chastity.¹³⁵

The stories in the book are based round the nightly meetings of the 'Doctor' with the young girl Pritai, when he tells her tales of virtue always on the brink of corruption, and the terrible fate of wives who are 'hard-hearted, cunning and wicked'.¹³⁶ The 'Doctor' finished each of them with a *tatparaya* or moral, like the following:

Such is the love of adulterous women. Because the woman who deserts her home and wedded "husband loses all her fear and behaves just as she likes. Through that, she gets into great difficulties. So, Pritai, you should not be like that. Woman's minds are very fickle, and so when the fortitude of their minds is undone, they have no fear of the worst courses of action.¹³⁷

Often, the concern with womanly unchastity was hardly even a veneer for what were actually pornographic tales. The stories in

Chintaman Dixit Joshi's *Vidagdha Stri Charitra* might well have been those that Tarabai described as 'so nasty and disgusting you feel ashamed just reading them'.¹³⁸ They moralize about 'clever' women really just as a frame for a collection of Decameron-like tales about the amorous adventures of two young men with a series of wildly lustful and gratefully submissive women who are prepared to go to any lengths to deceive their husbands. More commonly, though, the element of moralizing about *pativrata* in its updated form dominated. The reformer, Govind Vinayak Kanitkar's *Sushikshit Stricharitra*, aimed at showing 'the meaning of the word pativrata, and its glory', dealt directly with questions of women's virtue, and how far they could have education and independence without endangering it.¹³⁹ Far from ruining *pativrata* and making women idle and insubordinate as many traditionalists thought, Kanitkar urged that education was in fact the best guarantee of womanly chastity and enlightened respectability in mothers and daughters alike. We are led into this through the adventures of the virtuous princess Chandraseniya, whose experiences lead her to admonish readers that

So women, bearing all these reasons in mind, should never ever allow the desire for a man other than their husbands to enter their minds. Because in this matter, men's affairs are one thing and women's quite another. Women do not have the same independence given them as do men. Women absolutely have to remain a part of the man's body. If women start to wish for the same independence as is given to men, great disasters will follow.¹⁴⁰

The best way of avoiding this was actually the right kind of education for women. Chandraseniya's mother was a fine example of 'how much an educated woman takes care that her daughter remains in a good state':

So that she should not turn out mischievous, she taught her to behave with restraint. She never even let filthy language, and the words of naughty jokes fall upon her ears... averting the face modestly before men, keeping the eyes lowered, protecting her modesty, being shy, behaving humbly, not speaking any bad words, not

letting bad ideas come into her mind, not chatting idly here and there, reading religious books, teaching her morals—the mother and father held to the course of guiding her along such a good path. And so in this way, the chances of daughters turning out bad is very small.¹⁴¹

For these reasons, Kanitkar urged, 'women should at all times and always stay true to their *pativrata dharma*. There is no clothing, no jewels, nothing that so ornaments a woman as her loyalty to *pativrata*'.¹⁴² With impossible models of womanly purity like these, we can well understand Tarabai's furious demand to know 'how much truth there is in all these stories? You can look as hard as you like for some real-life examples, but you won't find any'.¹⁴³

This peculiar mixture of romantic fantasy, titillation and concern with updated forms of *pativrata* ran through all of the works that Tarabai discusses. *Manjughosha*, by Naro Sadashiv Risbud, a head clerk in the Public Works Department in Sholapur, is interesting because it is clearly where Tarabai encountered the verses about women's evil natures from the old Sanskrit poem the *Bhartrhari*, which she quotes earlier in her book.¹⁴⁴ Risbud puts the words into the mouth of the outraged raja of the story, who has just been told that his daughter has been sneaking out of the palace to meet her lover, and is probably several months pregnant already:

See, however much a man may be thoughtful, wise and a lion in bravery, once he falls into the clutches of such an enticing and bold woman, he becomes at once soft and cowed. There is a very good sloka of Bhartrhari describing this.¹⁴⁵

This, with Tarabai's equally misogynistic extract from Shridhar's popular Marathi *Ramavijaya*, is the subject of her elaborate rebuttal over the second half of the book.¹⁴⁶

Here, then, we have older brahmanic constructions of feminine nature feeding through directly into colonial print culture, and blending very comfortably with its more Victorian themes. Against these, Tarabai demanded of her male readers: 'Why do you cry so much about pativrata dharma, when it's you men that scheme and ruin homes and families?'¹⁴⁷ We can also see why she felt so strongly that such stories actually tainted all women with the

same stain of moral weakness and vice, including the very mothers and daughters of men like Risbud who wrote this nonsense:

These are all women too, aren't they? Or are these all different, all from a different species of women? If you talk about women, you have to talk about them all. You say that women are like axes, vessels of all cunning, market-places for wickedness, wreckers of the path to heaven? But if you hand out names like that to women, what names should we call you? Mother-haters? Slanderers of your own mothers?¹⁴⁸

The play *Manorama* is perhaps the most extreme combination of misogyny, voyeuristic detail and heavy-handed moralizing. Published in 1871 by Mahadev Balkrishna Chitale, a Senior Student in Deccan College, Poona, it was not a romance at all, but the first of what were to be many plays and short stories dealing with the 'social problems' of abortion, infanticide and prostitution said to be associated with early marriage and the denial of rights to remarriage. *Manorama* treads an extremely thin line between sensationalism and 'serious' reformist concern, with Chitale himself defending the play as only a mirror held up to nature.¹⁴⁹ The stories in the book were certainly explicit. We have drunken scenes from a Karachi brothel, where the inmates explain how they have run away from bad homes and husbands, and knowing widow prostitutes persuade younger women of the attractions of freedom.¹⁵⁰ There is a melodramatic episode in which a brahman widow apprehended with a dead baby in her arms is led away by sepoys, to confess to the police inspector how the local prostitutes helped her to get medicine to induce an abortion.¹⁵¹ Then there are the inevitable scenes concerning *pativrata*, such as when the adulterous wife boasts of her virtue only to be unmasked by her lover, who stands up and says he knows she has two moles on her right thigh, and holds up the ring she gave him the previous night 'in the throes of passionate love'.¹⁵² Concern for the plight of widows is certainly the overt theme of the play, but its main attraction looks likely to have been its highly spiced detail. As Tarabai retorts to Chitale's plea that his purpose was serious moral instruction, 'what I want to say to you, Mr Author, is—don't even dream of pretending that the story will frighten men and women so much they'll never do it again'.¹⁵³

To refute such representations of women, Tarabai also tried to bring out what she felt to be the the real social pressures shaping women's behaviour. She depicts the successful man, impatient for a smart new bride and caring no more about his old wife than he would 'the alley or cowshed at the back of the house'.¹⁵⁴ She talks of an ordinary wife's burden of heavy domestic labour, and her particular anxieties—wanting a son, wanting her husband's affection, her chilling fear of widowhood when he became ill.¹⁵⁵ She discusses the plight of women lured from their homes by lovers who promise them everything, and then desert them to infanticide or a life of prostitution. While she voices strong disapproval of adultery and sexual licence, she makes it clear that she is not, like many of her more conventional contemporaries, just attacking prostitutes and 'immoral women' themselves. Prostitution was not a symptom of women's natural propensity for vice but rather a social phenomenon for which men were largely responsible. There was no 'nest somewhere, that all prostitutes come out of: rather, they were women who had been lured or turned out of their homes by men, and now they engaged in it because 'it's just the way they earn their living, and if they don't do what their customers tell them, next day they go hungry'.¹⁵⁶

It is worth noting that Tarabai was by no means the first to attack these new genres of literature and their lurid depictions of women. There was a prolonged newspaper debate in 1865 on these emerging Marathi novels and plays, and in particular on the question of how far their ostensible 'social' concern with women was actually for serious moral purposes. A correspondent to the *Dnyanodaya* affirmed that there were

many people who will take up such shameful work for the sake of money, and people who put on plays are among them. These plays started up ten or twelve years back, and because they have been supported by some learned and senior gentlemen in Bombay, they have spread very much.

The writer described how he had gone unsuspectingly to one such play as a schoolboy, but it had been full of foul language, and its audience, while containing a few educated men, were mainly 'just people who pretended to be learned, and illiterate dolts'.¹⁵⁷ Another correspondent ascribed the spread of plays in particular

to their great commercial potential, as people saw how companies attracted audiences and the support of local magnates:

The Poona Hindu players made a huge amount of money from their work, and also got a lot of support from educated people. So, seeing this, Nagar people's mouths began to water, and they took up the same work themselves. So the Poona Hindu players took the so-called foundations of reform to Nagar. Not content with that, these reformers of the country have even moved to graze the rich pastures of Rahuri: I never even dreamed that they would favour Rahuri: As in Nagar, there also the munsif, mamledar and other important people gave their support, and so the work is going on well in this place also. The performers earn a lot of money, and the people of Majkur town, seeing that such very important gentlemen were all in favour, began also to learn the work. And also, some people wanted to come and see the play but could not or did not want to pay the money. So our charitable bigwigs here said that even without money people ought to come and see this fine performance, and paid with their own money to invite anyone to come who wanted to!¹⁵⁸

The early literary critic K. B. Marathe was also very disdainful, lamenting that it was impossible even to buy any of the old Maratha histories now, while two editions of *Muktamala* and *Manjughosha* had gone through in a year.

In each novel, there are tremendous assaults on the pativrata of women. At every turn, there are such difficulties that it seems as though pativrata must be ruined. It seems utterly impossible that these women's pativrata should remain unstained through these difficulties. The women who remain pure through these trials of their pativrata are not of this world.¹⁵⁹

Not only did these works lack any coherent plot or sense of who were the main protagonists, but their focus on drunkenness, prostitution and adultery were not calculated to instil moral purity into anyone. 'Even men will feel sorrow to hear such descriptions of women; is it any wonder that women will loathe them?

Respectable women will tear up these books and throw them on the fire."⁶⁰

How, then, can we understand the evident popular appeal and commercial success of books and plays on these themes? Between them, these two genres would have spanned a wide range of audiences. Those for the books, whilst relatively narrow in social terms, were clearly voracious consumers, and would probably have come from backgrounds similar to those of their authors: provincial officials like Risbud, lesser professional people like the hospital assistant Ramjee Gunnojee, college students like Chitale. These were people who had literacy, money and leisure enough to read, whose wealth derived in large part from state employment, and for whom these new print genres represented an important means of participating in its wider culture. Audiences for the plays were clearly wider, including, as the *Dnyanodaya* correspondents suggested, local magnates who were their patrons, some educated, and large numbers of local people with little or no literate skills. With its images of chastity, suffering and deference, and its lurid accounts of positive female sexuality punished, this new literature held out what seems to have been a very attractive blend of racy detail, prurient moral earnestness and social conservatism.

There is a further and final dimension to this new writing, which may have lent Tarabai's fury a sharper edge. For these authors and audiences were also in the process of shaping and creating Marathi as a print language suitable for prose and dramatic literature, as were their counterparts in other parts of India at the same time. In his introduction to *Muktamala*, Laxman Moreshvar Halbe said that it was his aim as an author to develop people's interest in Marathi as a language suitable for prose writing.¹⁶¹ At another level, the same was true for Marathi newspapers. It is possible to see the same sense of having to invent a new language, 'a new terminology to make our writings effective' in Tilak's reminiscences about early difficulties with the *Kesari* newspaper.¹⁶² In a range of different fields, such writers were consciously exploring and actively promoting Marathi as a print language and powerful new means of communication and representation. And as Tarabai saw it, this new medium was not only being monopolized by men, but employed in a particularly damaging way against women. Hence, perhaps, her furious accusation:

With you, you don't use the knowledge you have in your own bodies. You roam around from one place to the next, looking through all sorts of books. You get so full of learning you can play any part you please, get yourself out of difficulty—it all comes so easy to you. But these poor women, always shut in the house—what knowledge can they have, except of what's between the stove and the doorstep?¹⁶⁵

This brings us to wider questions of politics and power as they appear in Tarabai's writing.

GENDER AND POLITICS IN COLONIAL SOCIETY



Like her male contemporaries in the Satyashodhak Samaj, Tarabai saw colonial rule as a source of many benefits for women. Under the British, they had 'the gift of education and their minds made strong enough to face all sorts of mental and practical circumstances with courage'.¹⁶⁴ In other ways, however, a deeper sense of regret pervades her text for what she sees as the ruin of the country at the hands of men who flocked to the culture of the rulers even as they tried to lock women out from any of its benefits and to cut back on their freedoms. The Maratha circles to which she belonged had a very strong historical sense, particularly of the progressive loss of their power and status as warrior-landholders within a colonial culture seemingly now dominated by brahman administrators and professionals. What is interesting is that Tarabai has her own clear sense of a vanished Indian warrior and courtly culture, where some women at least had commanded power and wealth on their own terms. This had been a culture of magnificent consumption, where women were indispensable to the status and honour of the court, where queens lived in luxury and enjoyed a measure of sexual freedom while their men were away campaigning, and where women had some means of asserting themselves:

People in those days used to yield to three kinds of will: of women, of children, and of kings. But in today's circumstances there's only one, and that's rulers. Children can still be wilful about things too. But women

can't get their way any more, I don't see how they can. If any of them tries she loses the skin off her back with a beating, a ration enough to make her remember it for six months or more. This is what happens when women try being wilful now.¹⁶⁵

But all this was now gone, as men under the new regime became penpushers instead of warriors and scrambled to take on the rulers' culture, with such damaging consequences, as she saw it, for women. This was one of the things, she explained, that had pushed her into writing:

I'm doing it to make you men open your eyes and take a new look at your country and have some pride in it, rather than each one of you just abandoning the dharma, habits and customs of his own country. I'm doing it out of the hope that you might stop treating all women as though they had committed a crime and making their lives a hell for it.¹⁶⁶

What, then, are we to make of Tarabai's pervasive feeling of regret at the disappearance of India's old royal and military cultures, and of particular disadvantage for women in colonial society? In some ways, her views may well have had a powerful logic of their own. Almost all recent studies of India during the eighteenth century have emphasized the fluidity of its politics and the openness of its state systems to men with appropriate military, political or entrepreneurial skills.¹⁶⁷ There has been rather less discussion of the extent to which this was also a congenial political milieu for ambitious and independent women at many different levels of society. As we have seen above, many ordinary women went on campaign with their husbands without being secluded, and enjoyed a considerable degree of freedom in the camps. As many eighteenth-century observers noted, royal courts as well as armies provided opportunities of patronage and support for a wide range of women.¹⁶⁸ At the level of high politics in particular, women had remarkably good access to state power. Neither Indo-Muslim nor Hindu rules for succession, as they were applied in the eighteenth century, assumed any automatic right for eldest sons. Rather, as Bayly has described, rivals for power emerged from the complex of ties of blood, affection and power within the *zenana*,

and a successful contender established his authority and legitimacy in the process of beating off competition itself and thereafter of ruling with an appropriate combination of authoritarian ruthlessness and incorporative skills.¹⁶⁹ Aristocratic women were not only particularly well placed to influence these processes; they could themselves assume power as regents or widows if they had ambition and the right qualities. Moreover, marriage ties assumed a particular importance in late pre-colonial India. In the building up of many new rulerships, these were often a more powerful means of consolidating alliances and incorporating key groups such as financiers, military entrepreneurs, centres of religious power and the like, than clientship alone. In many eighteenth century states, a dense network of marriage ties linked royal with banking and military families, and this also placed women in strategic positions.¹⁷⁰

In western India certainly, women could and did pursue these opportunities in the shifting alliances of eighteenth century politics. Women such as Tarabai Bhosle, Ahalyabai Holkar and Tulsabai Holkar all ruled for long periods as widows or regents.¹⁷¹ The three widows of Mahadji Shinde went to war against his adopted son for a larger share of his estate, supported by his alienated brahman servants, and were themselves on campaign for long periods at a time.¹⁷² The brahman women Anandibai and Gopikabai, while not direct contenders for power themselves, exercised in different ways a profound influence on the political strategies of their menfolk.¹⁷³ Others deputized for absent husbands, such as the wife of Hiroo Nand, minister to the Maratha chief Fatehsingh Rao Gaekwad of Baroda, and others again were active as diplomats on their husband's accounts within the wider political system, such as Lakshmbai, wife of the Kolhapur chief Khem Savant, who obtained for her husband titles and emblems of royalty from the Mughal emperor, or Dipamba of Tanjore, who arranged conciliation between Ekoji and Shivaji Bhosle early in the century.¹⁷⁴ Questions of caste and social practice were another arena in which women were extremely active, fighting as Dipamba did in Tanjore or Gopikabai did in Poona to maintain and improve the purity of caste practice.¹⁷⁵ Women were also able to enhance their power by forming sexual relationships with ministers or pretending to do so.¹⁷⁶ Whatever formal seclusion there was in the *zenana*, then, it did not cut women like these off from politics, but rather the

opposite. The half-humorous references of nineteenth century observers like Sleeman to 'domination from behind the curtain' may actually have reflected what was once a serious historical reality.¹⁷⁷

Early Company governments like Elphinstone's in Bombay were naturally anxious to recruit a range of influential and skilled groups into the colonial administration: brahmans for their scribal skills and presumed religious authority, princely rulers like the old Maratha raja of Satara to undercut the authority of the defeated regime of the peshwas. Women powerholders found, of course, no corresponding role.¹⁷⁸ This was not because they lacked political, administrative, or scribal skills; as we have seen, women with these skills were by no means unusual. Nor were women seen as a source of expertise in early social reform debates such as that over *sati* even though women in pre-colonial India had been active in such matters, and most of these issues concerned women directly. What is remarkable, indeed, in the long stretch of social reform debate and consultation from the question of *sati* onwards, is how completely 'Indian opinion' came to mean masculine opinion, for colonial administrators and Indian reformers, nationalists and conservatives alike. As for those women who were left in positions of political power in the Indian states not yet absorbed into Company territory, they appear in the records now only as a succession of obstinate old dowagers or intriguing regents who have somehow to be got rid of for their feminine incompetence or sexual misdemeanours.¹⁷⁹ Later in the century indeed, colonial officials found a more effective way to sever the links that remained in Indian states between court women and the exercise of political power, by transferring young princes and future rulers into the closely supervised and masculine world of the new Indian public schools. In 1844, Sleeman complained that in India 'there are no universities or public schools in which young men might escape, as they do in Europe, from the enervating and stultifying influence of the zenana'. By 1893, his editor Vincent Smith could congratulate himself that this was no longer the case, although as he noted, 'the influence of the zenana is invariably directed against every proposal to remove a young nobleman from home for the purpose of education'.¹⁸⁰

Therefore, if there were many areas in which the Company's government and the Indian elite sought to preserve 'tradition', women's participation in politics was certainly not one of them. Rather, the nineteenth century saw the gradual removal of women,

except as tokens and figures in exchanges between men, from what came to be the more exclusively masculine 'public' world of politics and administration, social reform debate and early nationalist organizing. According to this model, as we have seen, respectable women's proper sphere was now home and domestic life, and the public models for their behaviour variants on the themes of devoted wife and enlightened motherhood. In this context, it is ironic, indeed, that so many reformers and nationalists turned to the image of the 'ancient freedoms' of Aryan women when they wished to provide 'indigenous' examples of powerful and respected women. Eighteenth century history might have furnished examples much closer to home.

Much more difficult to explain, of course, is the place of these complex social changes in the construction of colonial hegemony. As I have argued elsewhere, however, it may be significant that on these issues at least, colonial officials and key groups of elite Indian men came to share very similar language and preconceptions about the significance of women and their proper sphere and duties.¹⁸¹ For both, debates about the moral worth of cultures and traditions were most appropriately conducted as it were at second-hand, around the objectified figure of woman, whose domain of family, custom and religion both sides agreed to be outside the normal realm of politics and the state. Partha Chatterjee has seen these emerging divisions between public and private, politics and the purely 'social' domains of family, custom and religion, as an effective way of resisting colonial intervention, driven by the refusal of nationalism to make the women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state.¹⁸² On another reading, though, it may well have been that just the reverse was true. For what is striking is actually the broad degree of consensus between Indian politicians and the colonial state, established early in the nineteenth century, and reinforced in the years after the wars of 1857, that for all routine civil purposes domestic and family questions were outside the purview of the state, except in so far as it was necessary to 'administer' the appropriate community and religious law. There were, of course, occasions where Indian governments did legislate, as in the abolition of *sati* in 1829, the Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, or most controversially in legislating to raise the age of consent in 1891. Even these interventions, however, were in practice extremely limited in their social

effects, and made with extreme reluctance, often after prolonged campaigning by non-official groups. Certainly, there was no general colonial project actively to 'modernize' and transform Indian society. This, indeed, was precisely the problem from the perspective of someone like Tarabai, and for other politically active people outside nationalist circles who continued to look to the colonial state for such a radical role, and were continually disappointed.

If domestic public distinctions were more an area of broad agreement than one where nationalists thwarted and resisted the colonial state, the same distinctions also served to extend the authority of Indian men at many different levels—caste and family heads, social reformers and conservatives, politicians and lawyers—over their own womenfolk, and at a time when such control had taken on a new importance for a range of social and caste rivalries. There were now a much wider range of fields and issues in which women had no recourse to the state, or had recourse only under the rubric of a separate 'religious' law that was itself being defined very much in a brahman image. It was precisely such questions of men's power over women that were at stake when, for example, the conservative Bombay lawyer V. N. Mandlik opposed legislation in the 1884 enquiry on the grounds that it would 'introduce a system of state interference with the most cherished objects of Hindu domestic life'.¹⁸³

It is in this broad context that Tarabai's critique of the politics of gender in colonial society is best understood. As she sees it, men had gained access to a new range of powers under colonial rule, which they used for their own vanity and self-aggrandizement, even as they tried to shut women out from its benefits and lock them into an ossified religious culture for which men themselves now had no regard. She looks at dress, food, travel, new forms of consumption, employment and education that Indian men embraced so enthusiastically, from boots and stockings to pigeon and liquor for supper, from travel by steamship to living in colonial-style bungalows, a rush to embrace British fashions that only made men a laughing stock. Yet many of the same men had the effrontery to put themselves forward as the champions of an inviolate religious tradition at home:

You keep on trying to be just like them, yet you go on about them not putting their hands in our religion! But how much of this religion is there left now? You go

wherever you like in trains and boats, you dress just like them—a jacket on your back, a hat on your head, trousers, socks and shoes, a little handkerchief sprinkled with lavender water in your hand, a pipe in your mouth to finish it off. You turn yourselves into real live sahibs... then you turn round and claim you're great defenders of dharma! Aren't you even a bit ashamed saying it?¹⁸⁴

Reformers who pretended to want to do something were no better. Men were 'full of talk' about reform,

but who actually does anything? You hold these great meetings, you turn up at them in your fancy shawls and embroidered turbans, you go through a whole ton of supari nut, cartloads of betel leaves, you hand out all sorts of garlands, you use up a tankful of rosewater, then you come home. And that's it. That's all you do. These phoney reform societies of yours have been around for thirty, thirty-five years. What's the use of them? You're all there patting yourselves on the back, but if we look closely, they're about as much use as a spare tit on a goat.¹⁸⁵

Far from seeing the home and family as some sacrosanct domain, she positively demanded state intervention to make it easier for women to live and marry independently, and to punish men who corrupted the innocent. For, as she says, 'If they don't reach in and change this religion of ours, make women who are weak strong and rescue them from this sham dharma and all the misery it makes—if they don't, who will?'¹⁸⁶

DIGNITY AND RESISTANCE:

WOMEN'S SUBCULTURES IN COLONIAL SOCIETY



If Tarabai was so savage in her criticism of the way that men depicted women and excluded them from power, what positive ideas of her own did she have about women's real natures and proper rights and freedoms? The wide range of ways in which she herself describes and represents women, contrasting strongly with the impoverished stereotypes of contemporary

masculine discourse, is the most striking aspect of her text. Her voice itself moves from urbane social commentary to the scathing female abuse of the market-place, from mocking descriptions of men's sexual pretensions to the pleas of a pious wife for domestic harmony and companionship. We begin with her worldly-wise picture of a 'real' woman at home with her husband, determinedly refusing to be disturbed while she has her tea, swearing over the cooking, and refusing to relax with her husband after dinner with some *pan*. From there we move to a celebration of women's very real power and importance, as opposed to the insults and belittlement common in contemporary public culture: women as a source of power and pleasure in the world, 'even more piercing than money', women as auspicious wives so much more esteemed than 'a stray solitary man on his own', women whose bright glances could reduce men to helplessness, women whose sexual appeal was like 'a blazing ball of fire', women who were devoted wives and loving mothers, whose 'soft minds' were so easily deceived only because 'God has weighed them down with all life's burdens'. But then there are free women with bayonets in their hands more ferocious even than the warrior queen of Jhansi, women who curse and spit at the very names of lovers who have left them, women who disdainfully reject inferior husbands or brazenly set up with other women as prostitutes in order to survive. Finally, it is to women that Adimaya, the source of all generative power in the universe, has given 'a fickle strength' like her own.

And it was her she set to drive on this cart of worldly life. You men have only one thing to do and that's fill up the cart. It's in her hands to look after it and drive it forward. This is one power womankind has.¹⁸⁷

Besides this, she demands of her male readers: 'Who cares about a vagabond like you? Neither child nor little lad. You might as well lay down your head under a tree, it makes no difference to any one.' It was because of this special place in the world that people called women Lakshmi, goddess of fortune and source of all auspicious grace, who created a splendid temple wherever she made her home.¹⁸⁸ Indeed, right at the end of the text, and in strong contrast with much of her earlier language and imagery, she makes a plea for a genuine and benevolent *pativrata*. This was not the absurd idealized self-abnegation that journalists and politicians,

priests and novelists talked about, but a kind of public dignity and respect for women through which they should all be able to be virtuous and respected wives in happy homes, 'beloved by all and their foreheads filled with the auspicious marks of marriage'.¹⁸⁹

It is clear then, that she was not arguing from abstract or 'modern' principles of rights or equality, except at the most commonsense level. Nor, indeed, does she draw at all on themes from devotional religion, through which as we saw above, some women in pre-colonial society expressed their dissent from brahmanical religious culture. For her what seems to have mattered was not merely a religious milieu in which women could find acceptance as equals, but much more concrete changes in the domestic and social circumstances of women. What, then, were the sources of her arguments and ideas about women? Some, like her nostalgia for aspects of pre-colonial Indian culture, may have been part of her Maratha social milieu, given an extra edge by her own position on its political margins. In other and contradictory ways, she was clearly caught up in and drawn to a political culture which saw the colonial state as a potential agent of social change, laying the basis for a new kind of educated and self-respecting womanhood for whom the original ideals of *pativrata*, observed by men and women alike, would still provide a basis for dignity and mutuality in marriage.

Other themes about the honour and worth of women may reflect a wider contemporary female culture. Sometimes, of course, this is difficult to say with certainty: images of woman as Lakshmi and as Adimaya, for example, are shared at many levels in Hindu religious culture.¹⁹⁰ It is more difficult to know how far her own reading of these images, which confers on women such absolute superiority over men reduced to mere servants and vagabonds, would have been a common one. Other themes, however, are more clearly traceable. Her images of women as ferocious warriors with a fiery sexuality is strongly reminiscent of the fierce female power divinities that Susan Bayly has described in eighteenth century south India religious culture outside the narrow circles of brahmanic precept and practice.¹⁹¹ Very many of her themes are echoed in women's oral tradition, certainly if the collections of Marathi women's songs that were made in the 1940s are any guide. These songs, sung mostly as women sat grinding corn together in the early mornings, express many of the sentiments and images of everyday

life and the very practical concern for women that emerge in her writing. These songs talk of the tender love of wives, mothers and sisters compared with men's inconstancy and hardness of heart, the hardships of daughters-in-law who toil like hired bullocks, the misery of wives given to unsuitable husbands like cows to the butcher, the wickedness of fathers who give their daughters to old men or to men already married, the love and freedom that women find when they return to their mother's homes, and women's proud tradition of chastity compared to the selfish pleasures of men. Many of the stories and characters of Hindu mythology that Tarabai invokes and plays with so easily also appeared in women's songs.¹⁹²

There is also much evidence to suggest that what she says belongs squarely to a subculture of 'respectable' widowed and other women living outside conventional family structures, who were prepared to defy caste and brahmanic convention to help each other or themselves to maintain some kind of dignity and independence. A correspondent to the *Dnyanprakash* newspaper in 1855, for example, reported about a woman in Satara district:

In Padali village of Taragava peta, a man called Dada Purohit forcibly cut off the hair of his young widowed sister, against her will, and then he came to carry off her household property. But that learned widow wrote out a plea with her own hand and sent it in to the town, and her brother was taken away and put in prison. Our readers will be able to judge from this story what feats women can do who are clever at writing and the like.¹⁹³

Women often acted together. In 1860, the Khatri newspaper *Vichardarpan* described how a meeting had been convened by some 'respectable and thoughtful gentlemen' of the caste to establish a caste association to bring about reform amongst its members. But on the very day appointed for the association's new rules to come into force, disaster struck:

At that critical moment as fate would have it, the woman Sakhi, who had been boycotted from the caste and was residing pregnant at the house of her sister Bhivari and been brought to bed, was found to have been performing her Shashti puja and other such corrupted rituals.

The gentlemen of the caste had been aghast at such impropriety, and, feeling that the behaviour of the two women was not to be borne, brought a petition to the caste heads against the two sisters.¹⁹⁴ Sometimes, women were able to act with a remarkable degree of independence because of the support of their own parents. In 1883, a disturbed correspondent to the *Indu Prakash* newspaper reported a brahman woman who had left her husband to live with her father, and who was now planning to marry her two daughters without even consulting her husband. The correspondent demanded to know

if she brings the marriage off, will it be according to the shastras, or what? And if it happens without her husband's permission, then with whose permission does it happen? So I hope that someone will find out a shastra that forbids it, and publish it in your newspaper.¹⁹⁵

The Government of India's 1884 survey on widow remarriage reported a range of women who clearly shared Tarabai's views, and some even who wrote as she did. Gurshidapa Virbasapa, Deputy District Collector of Belgaum, reported that

There is at present a brahman lady in Nasik, the wife of a deceased first class mamlatdar. She has not shaved herself on grounds that she does not want her body to be touched by another man. Her conduct is a model of morality. She has composed an essay to the effect, 1stly, that it is cruel on the part of men to disfigure women because their husbands happen to die; and 2ndly, that it is shameful to a spirited Hindu who secludes his wife from society simply to keep her off the evil eyes of bad men to allow his female relatives to be handled by the barbers.¹⁹⁶

Pandit Narayan Kesow Vaidya reported that the widows of Surat, 'a most conservative district' were agitating for reform and had lodged a petition with the town authorities to introduce change.¹⁹⁷ There is also evidence from a much later period, in 1911, when women in the Poona Widows and Orphans Home were asked to write down their experiences. These again make points and use images that are strikingly similar to those Tarabai uses. 'KM', for

example, began by demanding to know whether all the myths were true about the fate in hell of men whose wives refused to shave their heads:

But who had discovered that the husband of a widow is thrown into a pit of nightsoil unless she is shaved? Who will guarantee that all shaved widows remain moral? Every village has its outcasts. A woman with pure thoughts needs no such protection. Note the proverb, 'Outwardly painted face often carries a tainted heart'. A widow is not allowed to speak to a male stranger, but she is forced to go alone into a clpsed room to get herself shaved by a low class barber! Bravo! Such relations, bravo! ... Why is a widow treated so harshly? She has not killed her husband. She never even brooked the idea!¹⁹⁸

Widows who were 'independent' and, even worse, refused to shave their heads, were also the subject of a number of extremely hostile plays, again combining the themes of purity and prostitution that we have seen above: *Svairasvakesha*, 'Wanton widows who keep their hair', or D.V.Joglekar's highly salacious play, *Independent Widows and Their Youthful Daughters*, which depicted brahman widows running a public eating house that doubled as a brothel.¹⁹⁹ This is interesting, because a number of sources from the 1860s describe how high-caste widowed women with no other means of support used to set up eating houses, something they could do since their caste status ensured ritual purity. N.V.Joshi, for example, reported numbers of new public eating houses run by widows springing up in every quarter of Poona in his description of the town in 1868, although, as he reported, 'if any timid gentlemen eats in one of them, he is likely to come away hungry, because those women never serve you enough to fill your stomach'.²⁰⁰ Such ventures attracted considerable hostility, as much, it seems for the scandal of women living and earning independently as for suggestions of sexual impropriety, although for critics such as Joglekar at least, the two amounted to exactly the same thing. Writing, he said, 'solely and deliberately to improve the state of high-caste people', this lurid play depicted the widow Ganga as one of a number of foul-mouthed and greedy proprietresses who made a fat living by selling the sexual services of their suffering virgin daughters.²⁰¹

Another widow, Mathurabai, runs a 'widows' club' at her house, where we see one of its members sitting in an easy chair reading a book, a sure sign of female dissoluteness.²⁰² For the sake of the whole community, Joglekar demanded, 'we must put a stop to these independent widows, and particularly those that run businesses selling food'.²⁰³ When Tarabai referred, therefore, to widows and women who were no longer prepared to keep quiet because they could see that men were not keeping to the old religious values any more, she evidently spoke with good authority.²⁰⁴

CONCLUSIONS



Despite her relative youth when a *A Comparison between Women and Men* appeared in 1882, as well as her own evident powers of rhetoric and invective, Tarabai never published again. In this she was unlike the great majority of her male contemporaries, for whom authorship and publication usually represented ongoing activities engaged in over a number of years. Part of the reason for this may have been that her book was received with contempt and ridicule in one of the major Maratha newspapers of the time. This was the *Shetkarayanca Kaivari*, edited by Krishnarao Bhalekar, himself the author of numerous anti-brahmanical tracts. The original of this newspaper has not survived, but Jotirao Phule made a short reference to it in 1882, which suggests also that some at least of Tarabai's criticism may have been directed at men within her own Maratha circles. It was certainly true, Phule said, that her opinions had been very hotly stated.

But one stupid newspaper editor at least did not like what she wrote, probably because he feared that the burden of all her accusations would fall around his own neck. So in order to denigrate Tarabai's book, he poured scorn on all the advice given in it and threw it down amongst the rubbish, and thus with great disdain repaid Tarabai's efforts by abusing her instead.²⁰⁵

This kind of public hostility may in part explain Tarabai's reticence in later life, for we hear nothing more of her, either directly or from

her male contemporaries, until S. G. Malshe's enquires in the early 1970s referred to above. In part, this may have been because she was not working in the kind of liberal reformist milieu which, elsewhere in India, gave women writers like herself greater public support and recognition although if she had been, her views might well have been less forcible and interesting.²⁰⁶

Yet it is important that we rediscover the writing and lives of such women, not only for what they can tell us about women, but for their value in generating new questions and insights for a wider social history. For, as I have argued, questions of gender had a peculiar significance for politics and society for India in the nineteenth century. First, and in particular for the old warrior-peasant communities that have now come to constitute many of India's 'dominant peasant' classes, the colonial peace meant a search for new means both of expressing social distinction, and of limiting and controlling social relations between strata of society that had hitherto remained relatively flexible. For both of these purposes, women and the development of more restrictive models for their social behaviour assumed a considerable new importance. Second, the politics of gender enabled colonial officials and key groups of elite Indian men to find important areas of agreement. Shifting as these may have been, it was from such links and grounds for co-operation that the larger structures of colonial hegemony were built.

If gender thus shaped key political relations in this period, it was in turn shaped by them. Uma Chakravarty has argued that the kind of womanhood invented in the nineteenth century has continued to be extremely influential in the twentieth, helping to construct the 'Sati-Sita-Savitri' model that pervades much social practice in the present day.²⁰⁷ That womanhood, as we have seen it constructed here, was a kind of Victorianized *pativrata*, with the implication always of a peculiarly feminine moral vulnerability underlying it. These models for womanhood, reinforced with Hinduized forms of veiling and outward modesty for women, were particularly important for emerging dominant peasant castes like the Marathas, Jats and Rajputs in the later nineteenth century. As Madhu Kishwar has noted, these newly hegemonic upper and middle caste peasant groups now generate some of contemporary India's most repressive cultures for women, and it is from them that such models of female respectability are now being more

widely disseminated.²⁰⁸ As was the case in the later nineteenth century, moreover, many of these images and models continue to be disseminated through forms of popular entertainment. With their themes of submissive virgins, chastity under siege and independent female sexuality punished, the nineteenth-century wifery discussed above would have been entirely at home with much popular Indian cinema in the present day.²⁰⁹

In other ways, too, this was a crucial period for gender relations in the wider context of politics, law and the state. As it was in western societies, this was the period in India when large areas of life affecting women were declared more firmly to be either 'domestic matters' beyond the state's competence, or, in the Indian context, a matter of community 'religious' law, which the state was competent only to administer. In the years after Tarabai wrote, of course, these distinctions were replicated in the structure and purely 'political' orientation of the Indian National Congress itself, and marked out more clearly in the widening divide with the National Social Conference. It was on the basis of these separate domains, moreover, that so many writers and publicists of the 1880s and 1890s moved to develop contemporary images of objectified femininity for more overt nationalist and religious revivalist purposes, from Vivekananda's ideals of Aryan womanhood to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's images of a sacred motherland.²¹⁰ It is in this context, as Uma Chakravarti has remarked, that we can best explain the disappearance from the 1890s of women's issues from the agenda of nationalist politics: they were no longer compatible with these more deified forms of Hindu tradition and Hindu womanhood.²¹¹ Moreover, when women did begin to enter the political arena as comrades in nationalist politics in the 1920s, their roles continued to be shaped by many of the same themes, and Indian 'tradition' itself constructed in the thinking of Gandhi and others in the same images of idealized nineteenth century femininity.²¹²

These emerging trends were very much the focus of Tarabai's concern. In some respects, her ideas remained limited and constrained by her own Maratha milieu and class. From these derived the elements of nostalgia in her writing, although this nostalgia was not without a certain logic of its own. While deriding all contemporary notions of *pativrata*, moreover, she did not entirely relinquish the idea itself. In other ways too, her writing emerges from an

oral culture in which women were dignified by their maternal and sexual power and by their capacity for personal devotion, although, as we have seen, these assertions of women's honour were easily turned into means of shaming and ridiculing men. Yet if the countermodels she offered were in many ways flawed and contradictory, her critique, and her sense of what these trends in contemporary politics and culture would mean for the future of women in 'modernizing' India, were no less pointed and effective.

Notes

1. Details of this case and of the Appeal Court hearing in Bombay are in the *Indian Spectator*, 27 May 1881.
2. Tarabai Shinde, *A Comparison between Women and Men*, Poona 1882. I refer to this henceforward as *A Comparison*.
3. A good example of this liberal approach is Stanley A. Wolpert, *Tilak and Gokhale: Revolution and Reform in the Making of Modern India*, University of California Press, Berkeley, 1961.
4. Lata Mani, 'Contentious Traditions: The Debate on *Sati* in Colonial India' in Kum Kum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 1989.
5. See, for example, Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 184J-1905*, Princeton University Press, 1984, which also contains information about the first generation of Bengali women writers from the 1860s. These themes also run through the essays in Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*; see also Madhu Kishwar, 'The daughters of Aryavarta' in J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Survival, Work and the State*, OUP, Delhi, 1989.
6. Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women*, pp. 55—6.
7. See, for example, Susan Bayly, *Saints, Goddesses and Kings: Muslims and Christians in South Indian Society 1700—1900*, Cambridge University Press, 1990, especially the conclusion.
8. R. O'Hanlon, 'Gender, Discourse and Resistance in Colonial Western India' in D. Haynes and G. Prakash (eds.) *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, OUP, Delhi, 1991. This essay contains some of the arguments that I have put forward here.
9. See, for example, Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Woman's Question' in Sangari and Vaid, *Recasting Women*, p. 249.
10. *Ibid.*, pp. 249-50.
11. For present-day oral accounts see, for example, K. Lalita et al, (eds.) *We were Making History: Life Stories of Women in the Telengana People's Struggle*, Zed Books, London 1989, and Madhu Kishwar and Ruth Vanita, (eds.) *In Search of Answers: Indian Women's Voices from Manushi*, Zed Books, London 1984. More historical material will be in K. Lalita et al (eds.), *An Anthology of Women's Writings, 1830-1897*, Kali for Women, 1992.
12. See C. A. Bayly, *Rulers, Townsmen and Bazaars: North Indian Society in the Age of British Expansion, 1770-1870*, Cambridge University Press, 1983, pp. 48-51.
13. There is a large literature on these developments in Maratha history, but see in particular S. Chandra, 'Social background to the rise of the Maratha movement during the 17th century in India' in *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, September 1983; F. Perlin, 'Of White Whale and Countrymen in the Eighteenth Century Maratha Deccan: Extended Class Relations, Rights and the Problem of Rural Autonomy under the Old Regime' in the *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 5,2 (1978); Andre Wink, *Land and Sovereignty in India: Agrarian Society and Politics under the Eighteenth Century Maratha Svarajya*, Cambridge University