

Sangay Foshi
New Delhi
Apr 1992

RECASTING WOMEN

Essays in Colonial History

Edited by

KUMKUM SANGARI

SUDESH VAID



1989

She must be refined, reorganised, recast, regenerated ...

KOYLASCHANDER BOSE,

"On the Education of Hindu Females," 1846

Recasting Women: An Introduction

KUMKUM SANGARI and SUDESH VAID

THIS ANTHOLOGY has grown out of our need as academics and activists to understand the historical processes which reconstitute patriarchy in colonial India. We wish to focus primarily on the regulation and reproduction of patriarchy in the different class-caste formations within civil society. This is not in order to underplay the role of the state in maintaining, modifying or aggravating patriarchal practices. Rather, our political understanding and experience as observers and participants in women's protest movements of the seventies has left us, like many others, bedevilled with a host of questions about the nature of the social and cultural processes within civil society which determine the working of patriarchies in the daily lives of women. We feel that the implications of the reconstitution of patriarchies in the colonial period bear significantly upon the present, and this, in fact, is the justification for this venture.

There are two reasons for the consciously exploratory character of this book. Firstly given the regional, class and caste variation of patriarchal practices and their diverse histories, it is necessary to have specific studies, in order to build an adequate theoretical basis. Overarching theoretical formulations are helpful and necessary to undertake any work but they need constant testing and overhauling by historically and materially specific studies of patriarchal practice, social regulation and cultural production. If patriarchies are not, as we believe, systems either predating or super-added to class and caste but intrinsic to the very formation of, and changes within, these categories, then to rush into theoretical generalization at this stage would be to risk both simplification and

rigidity. We are not however making a plea for theoretical eclecticism or "pluralism," but for flexibility within a field which is still being defined. Most of the essays have taken shape through discussing our idea of the book with the contributors. In turn, the richness and diversity of their essays has altered our own understanding as it is reflected in this introduction.

Secondly, the social and political developments of the past two decades have shattered the post-colonial complacency about the improving status of women and with it has gone the legitimacy of nationalist models of reform and 'development'. It is now apparent that far from enjoying the benefits of so-called development, the majority of women have in fact been pushed to the margins of the production process. Alongside this 'invisible' economic process, there is a visible escalation of communal conflicts and an increasing politicization of 'religious' identities. These latter developments have given a new lease of life to patriarchal practices under 'religious' sanction. There has for example been a resurgence of widow-immolation in parts of northern India. The role of the state and its apparatus has also been far from negligible. In fact the urban women's protest movements in the 1970s were in part propelled by the frequency of dowry murders — usually treated by the police as a private 'family' matter — and custodial rape — a symptom of the acquisition of greater repressive powers by the state. All of these matters have given a pressing urgency to questions about the inter-relation of patriarchal practices with political economy, religion, law and culture — in sum, questions about the politics of social change. This situation has introduced into feminist research the need for a different object of enquiry.

I

Feminist historiography now implies in some sense a move towards the integrated domain of cultural history. It may be appropriate to describe what we mean by feminist historiography. Historiography may be feminist without being, exclusively, women's history. Such a historiography acknowledges that each aspect of reality is gendered, and is thus involved in questioning all that we think we know, in a sustained examination of analytical and epistemological apparatus, and in a dismantling of the ideological presuppositions of so called gender-neutral methodolo-

gies. A feminist historiography rethinks historiography as a whole and discards the idea of women as something to be *framed* by a context, in order to be able to think of gender difference as both structuring and structured by the wide set of social relations. In this sense, feminist historiography is a choice open to all historians. Not as a choice among competing perspectives, or even as one among personal predilections of the sort which dictate interest in a particular region or a particular historical period. Nor is the issue here the tokenist inclusion of women or the numerical or even qualitative evaluation of their participation in this or that movement. Rather as a choice which cannot but undergird *any* attempt at a historical reconstruction which undertakes to demonstrate our sociality in the *full* sense, and is ready to engage with its own presuppositions of an objective gender-neutral method of enquiry, as well as with the presuppositions of the social moments and movements it sets out to represent. The fact that this is a choice seldom exercised may perhaps even be partly ascribed to the emergence of women's studies in India which appears to be a convenience for mainstream historians who can now consign the onus on specialists in a 'separate' discipline, and so recreate yet another gender-based division of labour within the rarefied world of academia.

Cultural history seems to be the richest, most integrated, and yet most difficult form available for feminist historiography. Both its difficulty and its energy are, in one sense, generated by the obtuseness of the present situation. In order to understand the construction of gender difference — through ideologies, concepts and behaviour — and their relation to class and colonial economy, it is necessary to press against the boundaries of established disciplines. This not only involves knowledge of and working at the interface of various disciplines, but also a simultaneous questioning of the histories and assumptions of these disciplines. The act of understanding our construction as agents and subjects of social processes is itself a kind of intervention in the creation of exclusive knowledge systems. Perhaps the greatest difficulty lies in relating the ideological to the experiential; that is, of relating various symbolic constructs to the lives and actions of women, and in relating the often hegemonic ideologies produced about women (converging across region, caste and class) to existing divisions of labour and systems of production. Though there is no neat fit between

4 *Recasting Women*

symbolic constructs and the ordering of social relations or between consciousness and causality (as some sanitized versions of sociology and anthropology would have us believe) yet ideas, invented traditions, symbolic constructs do intrude upon the labour process in a number of ways ranging from the causative to the legitimizing.

The essays in this collection either attempt to construe the lived culture or social relations of a particular time and place through available records, or to show the making of a selective tradition through discursive and political processes. The essays are confined to the dominant Hindu community, largely in the north of India, and deal mainly with the middle classes. We feel that the exclusion of all other religious communities and of marginalized groups (dalit and tribal; agricultural and bonded labour) and the slender representation of women belonging to peasant and working class groups is a serious limitation because it is not possible to understand a dominant class or religious community without locating its relationship to other strata and religious groups. The geographical scope of the book is another kind of limitation considering the regionally differential intervention of colonialism. Finally, all except one essay are confined to areas under direct British rule. However, no anthology or even generalization about Indian women could hope to be representative. The book, though limited in terms of such representativeness is, however, held together by a common concern with the changing position of women both in its material specificity, and in its often inverse representations in the discourses which legitimize their social status. These may be useful for further work concerning the reconstitution of patriarchies.

Uma Chakravarty's paper traces the colonial and indigenous construction of a Hindu-Aryan identity. Lata Mani analyses the premises and parameters of the colonial discourse on *sati* (1805-1830). Sumanta Banerjee describes the making of a respectable Bengali middle class culture through the marginalization of the cultural forms of lower classes in Calcutta and the emergence of the *bhadramabila's* (educated wives and daughters of the *bhadralok*) literary voice. Vir Bharat Talwar gives an account of women's magazines and issues of reform taken up by the middle class within Uttar Pradesh during the same period. Partha Chatterjee addresses the "nationalist resolution" of the women's question, and shows how the new woman is the product of a new patriarchy

formed along class lines. Susie Tharu traces the representation of the devoted wife, Savitri, within Indo-Anglian writing, in both its nationalist and post-independence incarnations. Nirmala Banerjee analyses the effects of industrialization on working class women in Bengal. Prem Chowdhry discusses the conjoining of colonial economic interests with the patriarchal practices of a local dominant peasant group, the Jats in Haryana. Kapil Kumar demonstrates the inter-relation of gender and class oppression among agricultural working women in Oudh (U.P.) and the nature of their participation in the movement led by Baba Ram Chandra. Vasantha Kannabiran and K. Lalitha discuss the perceptions of women who participated in the Telangana people's struggle (1946-50) showing both the liberating role of the movement and its limitations. Taken together, the papers elicit different kinds of relationships of patriarchal practices with class, nationalist reform, social movements and colonization. What emerges implicitly is the dialectical relation of 'feminisms' and patriarchies, both in the inventions of the colonial state and in the politics of the anti-colonial movements.

II

The relation between classes and patriarchies is complex and variable. Not only are patriarchal systems class differentiated, open to constant and consistent reformulation, but defining gender seems to be crucial to the formation of classes and dominant ideologies. Again, the relation between changing modes of production, patriarchal structures and class positions is both aligned and disjunct. For example, men and women in the same class often have a differential access to forms of social privilege, to wages, and to the means of production. Further, though patriarchies are entangled with modes of social ordering, for example, and with existing hierarchies and modes of subjection, they also appear to have no single one to one relation with a given mode of production but seem to change through overlap and reformulation. In this sense they have a relative 'autonomy' and a different duration. The lives of women exist at the interface of caste and class inequality, especially since the description and management of gender and female sexuality is involved in the maintenance and reproduction of social inequality.

The compulsion of colonial rule to extract surplus, create classes

conducive to its rule, and to produce legitimizing ideologies, led in part to an aggravation of existing unequal relations within many sections of Indian society. Though there are many histories of social legislation and educational 'reforms' in relation to women there is as yet relatively less work on the relation between colonial intervention in the form of land revenue settlements and local patriarchal practices. Such ostensibly gender-neutral land settlements, whether guided by notions of preserving the 'village republic' or of creating a landed gentry, in fact, began a process of social restructuring which was simultaneously and necessarily a process of re-constituting patriarchies in every social strata. As most of this is either unrecorded or hidden history we can only briefly indicate some aspects of the changes in the agrarian economy which involved women.

Land settlements produced the following inter-related transformations. First, former landholding groups were re-empowered to a great extent within the new context of individual ownership of land and of market relations. This further impoverished both tenants and agricultural labour and exacerbated existing forms of extra-economic social coercion. It impinged thus on both the individual and social lives of women of these classes, and was perhaps one of the factors which later led to their wide participation in peasant struggles. Second, individual property rights were vested primarily in the hands of men, and women generally had only ancillary rights accruing from their subordinate relationships with men. In this there was both a continuation and a reinforcement of the exclusion of women from ownership or control of the means of production prevalent in the pre-colonial agrarian structure; where matrilineal systems did exist they were slowly transformed to patrilineal patterns of succession. Third, even when women of the subordinate classes did control some land (as tenants, for example), they had little access to the colonial legal and administrative machinery developed to manage the changed agrarian structure. The workings of an impersonal bureaucratic 'rule of law' administered from mofussil towns and district headquarters (as distinct from the working of the village panchayat) further marginalized the women from the 'public' sphere, even while it subjected them to its control. Such marginalization intensified their dependence on men. Fourth, along with land settlements, the colonial regime codified the customs of the dominant land owning and other rural

groups. This froze custom into law and gave a juridical sanction to certain patriarchal practices regarding marriage, succession and adoption. Further, high caste Hindu norms in these matters, codified piece-meal as statutory Hindu law, were often privileged over customary law to the disadvantage of *all* Hindu women whether rural or urban.

A complex inter-relationship of contest and collusion between indigenous patriarchal norms, and those held by British administrators is visible in the colonial regulation of agrarian relations. For example, in Haryana (then the south-east part of the Punjab province), as Prem Chowdhry points out, the British while granting certain rights to widows in the interests of revenue extraction, were anxious to discourage them from availing of those very rights. Significantly, the attitudes of the British officials were determined by a conservative response to the feminist agitation in England which finally won the reforms in the Married Women's Property Law after a long struggle (1856-82). Many of these officials perceived the acquisition or control over property and money by women as both unfair to men and as socially dangerous, a perception which was shared locally. If the colonial regime, out of political and financial interests, sought to reinforce the local customary form of widow remarriage (*karewa*) in order to ensure male control over inheritance and property, reform organizations like the Arya Samaj found common ground with them and legitimized the custom as Vedic practice, and so enfolded the Jat landholding peasantry into the confines of high-caste Hinduism. It also gave a material grounding to the myth of the woman of the Vedic golden age, but at the expense of peasant women. Here the older form of the control of widows of ritually lower caste groups merges with the reformed Hinduism of the upper castes to make new instruments for ideological control of the widow through an acceptance of *karewa* — a process which is matched by the workings of the colonial law. The stability of both the home and of the agrarian economy was thus sought to be maintained.

In the princely state of Hyderabad, where the Telangana peasant struggle was later to take place, agrarian relations were a crucial determinant of the patriarchies experienced by both the women of ruling groups and by those from the exploited castes and classes. The system of subsidiary alliance with native rulers, one of the bulwarks of colonial rule, in one sense replicated, at a larger level,

the effects of the land tenurial arrangements within regions in directly ruled territories. We are not in a position to indicate the nature of the change in patriarchies in states like Hyderabad where there was no direct colonial intervention in the agrarian economy but where a partial change in land tenurial arrangements was effected by the ruler. Perhaps future research in this area will facilitate comparison between the transformation of patriarchies within territories under direct British administration and those under indirect control.

In many parts of direct British administered regions, however, there are clear indications that colonial intervention in the agrarian economy generally intensified the oppression of the majority of rural women. For instance, in Oudh, the post-mutiny Taluqdari Settlement (1858) transformed the former ruling group of rajas, chiefs, and tax-collectors into landlords legally empowered to grant tenancies on the basis of a 'free market' economy.¹ This re-empowering of the *taluqdars* (landholders) along new juridical and economic principles at one level integrated an existing system of feudal agrarian relations within the framework of the colonial economy. Not only did this exacerbate patriarchal practices among the exploited classes (such as distress sales of daughters and harassment of women tenants), but it increased the regulatory power of landlords and upper castes (for example, through village and caste panchayats) in maintaining caste and class based marriage norms and sexual morality.

It may be noted that, contrary to popular notions, sections of the landed aristocracy created and supported by the British attempted to be as 'liberal' as the urban classes. Some Oudh taluqdars, for instance, took up matters of education and social reform for women.² The rural-urban divide was as such more spatial than social in the colonial context. Not only the urban landed aristocracy but the trading communities which later emerged as capitalists were also crucially linked to the agrarian economy and to rural society. This involved a certain degree of continuity in patriarchies practised in town and village.

On the other side, the working class both within and outside the industrial sector was also a product of a changed agrarian economy. Recurrent famines, the decline of artisan production, and the gradual emergence of the modern organized industrial sector all led to changes in occupational structure. These changes had spe-

cial significance for women. Many were edged out of traditional village occupations and found only limited opportunities in the new sector, for instance in the textile and jute mills. Whether they were single (mostly widowed women) or with families, working women were, however, soon forced out of the new industries. Thus many women of the productive classes were pushed into the 'domestic' sphere, replicating to some extent the division between the 'private' and 'public' domain as defined by middle class ideologies.

The middle class, to some extent, also derived from rural society. In addition to the urban professional and trading classes, the small landholders and village literati who sought jobs in the colonial administration and related professions, also became a part of the middle class. It was this middle class which was to develop ideologies of 'Hindu' and 'Indian' womanhood in contradistinction to the actual patriarchal norms prevalent among the other classes and in opposition to the 'western' woman. These notions were constructed and popularized through social reform and nationalist movements. As we shall see later, peasant movements were also to become carriers of such constructs.

III

Middle class reforms undertaken on behalf of women are tied up with the self-definition of the class, with a new division of the public from the private sphere and of course with a cultural nationalism. To some extent this book begins a sketch of cultural nationalism wherein the underbelly of every attempt towards identity has been a redescription of women of different classes. The imperatives have been both local and national, the ideologies have ranged from the conservative to the radical, and the class alignments have differed. This is a hidden history swept under the liberal carpet of 'reforms'; though these reforms have been stringently interrogated in terms of their class and caste character, their role in redefining gender and patriarchies has been largely ignored.

Through the nineteenth century different versions of female emancipation came to be slowly tied to the idea of national liberation and regeneration. The early colonial constellation of the Arya woman is a sternly elitist concept in class and caste terms, and

finds its nationalist shape in social and political thought, in literature and in a dominant historiographic model of India wherein the Muslim interregnum is made to be responsible for all manner of deterioration in the status of women. The Vedic (and later, the Puranic) model becomes both a part of popular consciousness as well as of organized reform such as that of the Arya Samaj and is fed into the companionate models of the middle class family. The recovery of tradition throughout the proto-nationalist and nationalist period was always the recovery of the 'traditional' woman — her various shapes continuously readapt the 'eternal' past to the needs of the contingent present. Religion is the medium first for middle class and then for nationalist reform in the deepest sense. Selection from scriptural texts, and the construction of canons are not only serviceable in building an identity opposed to the colonial but are also related to the inegalitarian social structure. These reconstructions become ideological when highly selective and exclusive versions are sought to be universalized. The formation of desired notions of spirituality and of womanhood is thus a part of the formation of the middle class itself, wherein hierarchies and patriarchies are sought to be maintained on both material and spiritual grounds. The Vedic woman, both in her own time, and after her appropriation by upper castes and classes in the nineteenth century, is built upon the labour of lower social groups and is also a mark of distinction from them. Nowhere is the class character of middle class and nationalist reform of women more apparent than in the differential construction of the private and public sphere in the colonial period.

IV

The formation of the public and private spheres is a differential process which takes place on several levels, the discursive, the linguistic, the political and the economic, and usually in relation to other classes. The process of the formation of the private sphere as an indigenist alternative to western materialism is, in a sense, instituted at the beginning of the nineteenth century and comes into its own in nationalist discourse which sets out to establish, as Partha Chatterjee points out, a series of oppositions between male vs female, inner vs outer, public vs private, material vs spiritual. Since most middle class cultural production is tied, either explic-

itly or implicitly, both to its own formation within wider economic and political processes as well as to the anxieties of nationalism, the discursive production of public and private spheres occupies literature, popular writing as well as the writing on reform.

Sumanta Banerjee's essay gives an indication of how women are tied into the process of the cultural homogenization of the urban Bengali *bhadralok*. The need for a common middle class culture may have been produced as part of new economic market relations and the erosion of discrete caste cultures in the face of urbanization. Some degree of class polarization must also be taking place which requires a sharper differentiation at the cultural level. A new kind of segregation is imposed on women, whose identity is now to be defined in opposition to women from lower economic strata. This process is not dissimilar to the one which pushed the middle class woman into the seclusion of the private sphere as a mark of class status and superiority (among other things) in Victorian England. The channels for continuity between middle and lower class culture are domestic service, village and *kul* connections, as well as the transformation of rural landowners into middle-upper class urban groups. For women especially, organized social activities do not develop till the second half of the nineteenth century; till then they are restricted to *pujas*, *utsavs*, religious festivals, and ritual social functions like marriage. Upper caste women were barred from other public places. In the case of urban Calcutta it is popular culture, a space shared jointly by women of different social strata, which is pressed out by a hybrid middle class squaring colonial attitudes (to popular and vernacular performance and literature) with its own compulsion to 'modernize' patriarchy. For the Bengali *bhadralok* popular performative genres become opposed to a literary-ethical instruction which will eventually refine the 'soul' of their women. Popular cultural forms are virtually construed as sexual threats which will literally lure women into adultery. What is at issue here is both women themselves and the language in which they will speak, think, read and write.

The women who are sought to be excluded from the private space of the *bhadralok* home and from what is now seen to qualify as cultural activity are either relatively independent and literate such as the Vaisnavite women, or women from the lower strata, courtesans and prostitutes, i.e. women who have hitherto had greater access to a 'public' sphere of street, marketplace, fair and festival.

Significantly the principle of exclusion is at work here, and not as in the case of the *bhadramahila*, the procedures of reform. The women who are now sought to be excluded are in a sense outside rigid formations and part of a hitherto acceptable liminality, which perhaps because it is not so clearly contained by caste, class, gender or a demarcated space, is more threatening. The middle class public sphere which has come into existence, seeks not only to be somewhat different to this one but also to reposition it in relation to itself. The repositioning of cultural forms, then is implicated in the formation of a predominantly middle class public sphere, in a desired version of Indian culture and in desired versions of ideal women. It is also at the same time implicated in a new formation of the home as the insulated private sphere which is to be free from even temporary challenges to male authority. And indeed it is this guarantee which will ease the access of women to the middle class public sphere as both reformed women and as women reformers.

The relation between gender, speech and status, and the making of a 'literary' as opposed to a popular language is also of interest here. At one level it is orality which is under attack from the 'literacy' of written forms. For example *Vidya Sundar*, a courtly eighteenth century text, should have passed muster with the *bhadralok*, but for the fact that it had been appropriated by oral popular traditions. At another level, language itself is a site for contest in defining class, gender and the private sphere. This has been quite a protracted process. Thus Mritunjay Vidyalankar, himself a teacher of Bengali, disparaged the vernacular as a "naked and prostituted female" compared to Sanskrit — "a beautiful and virtuous woman".³ The 'enrichment' of vernacular Bengali throughout the first half of the nineteenth century was a twin process of *sanskritization* and *anglicization*.⁴ The purification of female vernacular may in fact be connected with both. William Carey, the Baptist missionary, deeply immersed in the Orientalist restorative project, produced in 1801 with the help of 'natives' a reader for the students of Fort William College called *Katbopakathan* or *Dialogues*. A compendium of sketches of various castes and classes, it depicts the idiomatic language, manners and customs of women, merchants, fishermen, beggars, labourers, and attempts to reproduce their speech patterns. Linguistic sophistication is proportionate to social status. Bengali women are identified as low caste through

the 'vulgarity' of their speech while the vocabulary of higher caste women is represented as a mixture of refinement and vulgarity.⁵ Even at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century the difference between vernacular and genteel Bengali obtains not merely between different classes but also between men and women in the same household. For the *bhadralok* it is the man who represents the mind and the woman the heart, and it is the heart of the woman which requires improvement. And so it is to the morally ennobling texts of English culture that middle class women are to turn. It is in this historical intersection that women begin to constitute themselves in journals, autobiographies, poems, narratives and diaries, and to which we owe the formation of an Anglo-Indian literature and the specific versions of a female sensibility that are present, for example, in Toru Dutt or Sarojini Naidu. Indeed the easy absorption of Victorian structures of feeling into the structures of Indian myth, as Susie Tharu describes, may well be related not only to the nature of the reforming venture, and to the specific acculturation of a section of the middle class on the 'English literary' model, but also to changes in the nature of the middle class and its definition of public and private spheres in opposition to the language, behaviour and culture of the lower strata.

The differential construction of the public sphere is also at issue. For middle class women it signals their partial emergence into a different kind of economic sphere (into which they will carry the constraints of conduct inculcated by the private sphere) — the service sector, professions etc. For poor women it signals a partial shift from the traditional 'public' sphere of agricultural labour into the modern industrialized sector, and also, as Nirmala Banerjee shows, a steady marginalization from both traditional activity and the modern industrial sector and hence from the productive process itself. And quite often the women who join the industrial sector have no supportive private sphere at all though they are sought to be regulated by its norms.⁶ Thus most Bengali women workers in Calcutta's mills in the 1890s are widows or deserted women with no children to support them, often forced to live under male 'protection', and are consequently stigmatized and become virtual outcasts. So it is in fairly direct opposition to working class women that the private sphere of the *bhadralok* is built. The conditions of industrialization (wages, migration, hous-

ing), as well as attendant patriarchal practices constitute the social reasons for the exploitation of working women, but the *bhadralok* put the onus on the immorality and 'independence' of women in the public sphere. Among other kinds of labour, the intensified work of resident wives of migrant labourers, which invisibly subsidizes the industrial sector and the supply of labour to the city,⁷ creates some of the material preconditions for a middle class private sphere.

For middle class women entry into the political movements of nationalist struggle did not naturally mean an entry into the economic sphere. For poor women, their subsistence labour or cottage industry may be carried out in the private space of the home but in that case the home should not qualify as a private sphere. And the definition of their labour as household work, i.e. unproductive labour, may work towards a derecognition of the 'public' nature of their labour. In fact, the redefinition of such public labour as an extension of private housework can and does open women to new and severe economic and patriarchal oppression. So not only do the familial ideologies of the middle class mediate in different ways the entry of women into the labour market and the economic sphere, they also become a constricting force which has often ensured that political or economic participation of women will not mean or be equal to a wider emancipation.

V

The social reform movements then are tied into the wide processes of defining class differentiated public and private spheres as well as into nationalism. Women internalize the offered models and constitute themselves with varying degrees of conformity — indeed the formation of the *bhadramahila* is paradigmatic in this respect. Towards the end of the century as women begin to organize and speak for themselves we find that many of the ambiguities in their own thought and practice have to do with this history of class based and male initiated reforms. For example in the Hindi speaking belt, women take up the issue of widowers remarrying with far more emotional involvement than that of widow remarriage. This is not surprising considering that at about the same time, Gandhi was quite wholeheartedly advocating the remarriage of virgin child widows but had many reservations about the remar-

riage of adult widows who, unlike the child, have understood the sacredness of marriage. So he too shifts some of the weight of the problem onto widowers and criticizes the social system which allowed men to remarry with ease. He advises young men to marry child widows.⁸ Speaking of widowhood he said in 1920:

Impatient reformers will merely say that remarriage is the only straight and simple remedy for this. I cannot say so. I too have a family of my own. There are so many widows in my family but I can never bring myself to advise them to remarry and they will not think of doing so either. The real remedy is for men to take a pledge that they will not remarry.⁹

Though reforms do seem to perform a service in a relative homogenizing of the middle class (perhaps nationalism itself also homogenizes the middle class culturally), the question of how many groups were actually touched by 'reform' issues such as sati, widow marriage, child marriage, female education, eradication of *kulin* polygamy, remains. The cultural forms of the lower strata in urban Calcutta, for instance, scarcely reflect any involvement in these issues. Perhaps negotiating these areas itself becomes a way of being inscribed culturally into the middle class, and that is why they seem to preoccupy upwardly mobile groups as well as the innumerable caste associations which were formed in the latter part of the century.

Social legislation which set out to improve the situation of women, was at times counter-productive. The most notorious example is that of the Regulations (1812) introduced in Bengal Presidency to curb widow immolation. Based on a selective use of shastric interpretations made by pundits, the Regulations introduce the invidious category of 'illegal' and 'legal' sati and of opposed categories of 'voluntary' and coerced sati. Not only were the Regulations totally ineffective in their stated purpose (between 1812-16, out of 400 reported cases, only 10 illegal sats were prevented), but they also led to an actual increase in the number of incidents, for they were widely interpreted as being a sign of government approval of widow immolation.¹⁰ What is not generally known is that though the Bentinck Abolition of Sati Act treated widow immolation as homicide, the category of "voluntary" sati (that is, suicide), was reintroduced a decade after, through an amendment of the Indian Penal Code (IPC). This amendment of

"voluntary culpable homicide by consent," later incorporated in the IPC 1860, with some modifications, was an accommodation both to 'liberal' British opinion of so-called non-interference in the customs and religion of the 'natives' as well as to the opposition made to the abolition by the Dharma Sabha.¹¹ The notion of 'voluntary' sati foregrounded during the colonial period by both the British and the Indians, became a persistent component of the continuing ideology of sati. Its consequences for our own times are self-evident.

A product of the 'good' intentions of British administrators and the middle class, social legislation was often counter-productive because it did not distinguish between the forms of patriarchy which were cross caste or class and those which were specific to particular groups. Further, such legislation had its own conservative biases and later came to be dominated by the familial ideology of the middle class. Take, for instance, the Widow Remarriage Act (1856). Virtually a paper legislation in terms of the negligible number of marriages performed, it was of course important in raising, both before and after its enactment, social awareness about the condition of child widows in particular and high caste widows in general. However, there were certain important clauses in the Act, which in fact not only constituted a barrier to the marriage of high-caste widows but also affected women belonging to those castes which did not have a customary bar on widow remarriage or practised levirate marriage. These clauses debarred the widow, on remarriage, from any right to maintenance or inheritance from her husband's property, "as if she had died," and also vested the guardianship of her children with the relatives of her deceased husband.¹² In other words, the economic stake which the high castes had in not allowing widows to remarry, was firmly protected by the Act. Even if a widow were willing to forgo customary right to maintenance or to property, she would be faced with the painful dilemma of having to give up her children. And on top of that incur a social stigma. It is not surprising that apart from the obvious interests of the natal and in-law families, few widows would themselves have been willing to avail of the legal right to remarry. For most women of other castes, and they formed the majority, remarriage was customary. But where property interests were at stake, such as in the *karewa* form of marriage among the peasantry in Haryana, it meant that the widow lost it all if she violated custom

and married outside her husband's family. Thus the Act served to reinforce *karewa* and allied practices among various social groups. In a sense, the Act homogenized at the legal level, the disabilities of upper caste Hindu widows attendant on remarriage.

Labour legislation was no exception. As Nirmala Banerjee points out, the industry employed the relatively cheap labour of women in the mines when the industry was expanding, and pushed them out when there was a recession. This was ostensibly in the interests of women's health. It should be noted that the ban on women working underground was lifted with the onset of World War II and reimposed at its end. Not only women but the entire family lost out since the women normally worked in family teams. There was hardly any alternative means of livelihood made available to the retrenched women. With a drop in what were in any case subsistence earnings, families migrated from the collieries in search of petty employment elsewhere.¹³ What is noteworthy is that work in mines was extremely harmful for both men and women. Instead of granting them the right to safe conditions of work, a welfare ideology of protection of 'the weaker sex' was both invoked and perpetuated to deny what little opportunities the modernized sector of the economy afforded to working women.

VI

Both tradition and modernity have been, in India, carriers of patriarchal ideologies. As such neither is available to us in a value free or unproblematic sense, nor is either, as they are usually conceptualized, necessarily the solution. How then do we fight surviving and reconstructed feudal ideologies? Both tradition and modernity are eminently colonial constructs. We think it is time to dismantle this opposition altogether and to look at cultural processes in their actual complexity. Change has continued to occur (though it may not have been in the desired direction); we need to see how women and womanhood are inserted into, and affected by social change, and how change is made to appear as continuity. That is, the ideologies of women as carriers of tradition often disguise, mitigate, compensate, contest, actual changes taking place. Womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity. Many kinds of distinctions need to be made, on the basis of future work, between actual continuity and desired conti-

nity. And yet actual continuity is never either pure or uncontaminated. For it appears in different combinations at different historical junctures, has different social and ideological locations, and responds to different crises (colonial presence being one such). Further, the long duration and resilience of patriarchal practices makes the matter more complex.

Women's studies and feminist movements feel impelled to construct a positive and inspirational history. The danger here is both of literalizing and simplifying the 'model' women as well as of legitimizing the way in which reform and nationalist movements took up the woman question. Instead perhaps we need to admit that certain doors are opened, even that the consciousness of women exceeds quite often the ideologies which create it or enable it, but that class and caste have a formative role. Women may sometimes exceed or violate the prescriptions of a particular set of ideologies, precisely because they are members of a dominant group. The national movement too constructs an inspirational model of the past, and if feminism is to be different, it must acknowledge the ideological and problematic significance of its own past. Instead of creating yet another grand tradition or a cumulative history of emancipation, neither of which can deal with our present problems, we need to be attentive to how the past enters differently into the consciousness of other historical periods and is further subdivided by a host of factors including gender, caste, and class. Indeed the full ideological power of reconstructed Hinduisms and certain tendencies in nationalism can perhaps only be understood through the analysis of posited gender relations, and such analysis in turn will change the object of our enquiry.

Perhaps the most positive thing about the reforms is that though they shape women's entry into the public sphere, the labour market, and their self-constitution, they cannot entirely determine it. Through the very contradictions, pressures and inconsistencies of various ideologies in relation to their material circumstance, women began to articulate their position afresh, and to organize.

The history of reform — whether colonial or indigenous or nationalist — undertaken by men and by women does not seem very inspiring, freighted as it is with many kinds of patriarchal assumptions, and involved as it is in recasting women. This is not a matter of despair, nor is it merely or only a question of historical 'limits'. By this argument one is pushed to a position of sympa-

thetic criticism which is to say that at that time, at that place, they tried to do their best but inevitably could not exceed the limits of their age; and if contemporary feminists wish they had done so, they are not only being unrealistic but are also reading history solely by hindsight. We think this is a more a question of being able to see how the history of feminism in India (and probably elsewhere) is inseparable from an history of anti-feminism. The questions which arise are: first, how in the face of conservative anti-feminism, projected reform and change can proceed no further since they are constantly being contested (thus despite the strategic/internalized use of scriptural sanction for prohibiting sati, or for allowing widows to remarry, the projected reforms were bitterly opposed); and second, that nowhere can or have reforms been directed at patriarchies alone, but they have also been involved in re-aligning patriarchy with social stratification (both existing and emerging) and with changing political formations. To be rid of patriarchies altogether then would consist in imagining and effecting a thoroughgoing social change.

VII

With regard to social movements we can perhaps make a broad distinction between the 'modernizing' of patriarchal modes of regulating women and the 'democratizing' of gender relations both in the home and the work place. Social movements which try to change, to whatever degree, both the base (the sexual division of labour in production and property relations) and the ideologies of a specific patriarchal formation may be termed 'democratizing' movements. Movements by working class and peasant women have a greater potential for democratizing patriarchal power relations than the 'modernizing' movements. Among the latter sort may be placed the social reform, the 'nativist' and nationalist movements, as discussed earlier, which provide a more 'liberal space' for middle class women. Whereas democratizing movements seek to alter class relations at the same time as undertaking some levelling of gender relations, the modernizing movements in colonial India seek to partially level gender relations either without attacking class inequality or by positively affirming it. In practice, however, there was an area of commonality between the two. The historical role of the modernizing movements was that of

'recasting' women for companionate marital relationships and attendant familial duties as well as of enabling middle-class women to enter the professions and participate in political movements, in a limited way. On the other hand, the democratizing movements which attacked both colonial and feudal structures were often themselves either infused with middle class familial ideologies and agendas for reform or unable to break entirely with feudal patriarchal forms.

Democratizing movements were potentially more revolutionary not only because they brought women of the most oppressed strata, who constitute the majority, into a struggle for their rights, but also because in fighting for their class rights women did attain an enhanced sense of self-respect as workers and producers rather than being confined simply to familial or caste-related 'identities.' Like the political movements for national freedom, these movements also surface some of the latent contradictions between the experiences of women and 'containing' patriarchal ideologies. Whether such contradictions are even acknowledged and in what manner they are handled by the organization leading the struggle is of course a crucial issue for feminist historiography. The broader question is what kind of abilities did peasant and nationalist movements need, and what kind of women — with what aspirations — did they make? How were the ensuing contradictions handled? The women active in these movements are usually a part of male-dominated societies and/or the middle class. The conditions of their formation would largely determine the possibilities for social action, the kind of 'self' formed and the modes of self expression. The relation between the experiential and ideological dimensions of female participation remains a complex and rich field for further investigation. Within the present materials available it is difficult to ascertain the full political significance of the demands of peasant women in the course of peasant struggles.

In this context, two aspects of the Oudh peasant movement are striking. The first is the repressive attitude of the Congress towards the movement. When Gandhi visited U.P in February 1921 where the peasants, both men and women, were facing large-scale police repression, he issued a set of 19 instructions asking them to treat the landlords as friends and not to resort to social boycott and other forms of protest to redress their grievances.¹⁴ These instructions, as is well known, amounted to a call to abandon their strug-

gle. What is seldom noticed is that the oppression women faced due to the agrarian class structure thereby remained intact. Thus we find that the resolutions of the Kisanin Panchayat reflect a set of oppressions in the thirties and forties similar to those which the women were subjected to in the 1920s. Ironically the Congress which curbed the movement and with it prolonged the class based forms of the patriarchal oppression of women, at the same time had a 'reform package' for women on its agenda.

Second, the middle class ideology of 'pure' womanhood enters the very working of the movement, which in the thirties and forties combined peasant issues with the nationalist programme. The Gandhian ideology on women as well as Baba Ram Chandra's own notions about gender relations combine into a visible attempt to regulate the mobility of women, and to restructure marriage norms and family life in conformity with upper caste patriarchal norms. In this respect, the reference to a "Kurmi-Kshatriya Sabha" in Baba Ram Chandra's papers is of interest.¹⁵ Upper caste mobility for the Kurmis, who were the principal cultivating caste in the region, is being sought, in part, by reorganizing the patriarchal practices of the caste. If there is indeed a link between caste or group mobility and political movements, then here it finds its clearest expression in the attempt to reorder gender relations. There also appears to be some sort of relation here between 'Hinduisation' and the political movement. This connection is expressed both in terms of organizational needs — i.e. upper caste Hinduism appears to offer a model of regulated gender relations — and in an ideological sense — i.e. in the nature of the link forged with dominant nationalist tendencies.

In this sense a preoccupation which is common to both modernizing and democratizing movements is the preoccupation with the regulation of sexuality and different modes of control in the face of the emergence of women into a new public sphere, political participation, new labour processes and the consequent changes in the family structure. When Baba Ram Chandra seeks to introduce the companionate model of marriage upheld by middle class reformers, this involves both an erasure of certain freedoms as well as an access to respectability for the peasant women. Baba Ram Chandra's reorganization of marriage and morals bears a notable resemblance to Gandhi. The moral and austere new woman he tries to create, not only has a long genealogy in various kinds of

middle class interdictions but is also related to the imperatives of active political participation by women and to a sanskritizing upward cultural mobility. Baba Ram Chandra does not advocate monogamy in the middle class sense but a quasi-legal regulation of male-female relationships, as well as certain associated middle class values. Firstly, upholding such norms equals a form of moral surveillance of female sexuality which does not square with the plural practices and different patriarchal modes prevailing in the lower strata. Widow remarriage in this area among the Kurmis was a form of cohabitation called *dharaua*, where certain features of the Hindu marriage were left out. (This may explain why it does not find a place in the Census). Secondly, since women are also bringing up their own issues it is not possible to determine how much of the initiative here was their own, reflecting a desire for one-to-one relationships, and how much was Baba Ram Chandra's. But Baba Ram Chandra's own equation of respectability, and eligibility for female political participation with a relatively more formal marriage is not very distant from Gandhi's attitude to marriage as one of the guarantors of a higher morality. Indeed Gandhi's extreme resentment at the inclusion of the prostitutes of Barisaal in the cause of the Congress party was on the ground of their immorality. Again like Gandhi, Baba Ram Chandra's relation to religion is both a matter of metaphor and mobilization. He too uses, though to different effect, symbolic constructs, to mobilize women and to change the social relations of rural women.

Perhaps the most ironic consequence of the attempt to introduce a middle class sexual morality into peasant movements is the fact that this morality is a product of the emergence of a middle class private sphere, and is sought to be superimposed on women who are already involved in the production process. Thus peasant women in Telangana, who must never have had an exclusively domestic role, are being given a role in the political movement which is perceived in part as an extension of their domestic role. In Telangana, there is a pressing contradiction between, on the one hand, an insertion of such domestic ideologies into the movement and, on the other, the representation of the movement as a higher cause for which women must, if called upon, give up even their children. Here we would like to make a few observations about the principal issues that arise from a study of that "magic time." Feminist writing in the past two decades has sought to analyse the

problematic relation between class and gender oppression in the wake of ample empirical evidence of the continuance of patriarchy within post-revolutionary societies such as the Soviet Union and China — particularly the vexed relation between Marxist theory, the actual history of class struggles, the programmes of organized left parties, and the location of women in revolutionary movements.

Theoretical positions which locate patriarchy as the primary contradiction in society pose the following problem. To put it crudely, patriarchy becomes an ahistorical category within an originating myth of male coercion. The strength of this position, however, lies in the fact that it foregrounds patriarchal oppression as existing within all historically known modes of production and as a socio-cultural system cutting across class divisions. Its weakness lies in treating women as a 'class' by themselves, leading to a disregard of the fact that women of the exploited classes may indeed have closer group interests with men of their own classes than with women belonging to the dominant classes. The problem with those Marxist positions which locate women's oppression solely within the system of production relations is that they tend to relegate patriarchy to the 'superstructure.' This ignores the fact that through the gender based division of labour within the production and procreation processes, patriarchy rests quite securely within the base itself. That is how it is reproduced both within social relations of production and within the family of the propertied as well as of the non-propertied classes. The resultant ideological formations invade all realms of state and civil society, reconstituting and strengthening patriarchies at the level of the base in different historical conjunctures.

In other words, class struggle will enable a fight only against those features of patriarchy which are directly related to the public productive sphere and to exploitation by the oppressor class — unequal wages, bonded labour, coerced sexual service, rape etc. It will not enable a struggle against those formations and ideologies which are carried within the movement itself both by middle class activists and by the people engaged in struggle. Recent Marxist and non-Marxist studies of the communist-led movements of the forties — Telangana, Tebhaga, Warli — have in different ways pointed to this crucial fact.¹⁶ As these studies show, contradictions arising out of patriarchal power relations within the movement did surface,

but they were either dealt with tangentially or suppressed. At that historical juncture, the Marxist theoretical position had honed itself on the practice of the Soviet Marxism. The Maoist position which takes patriarchy, both material and cultural, as a specific oppression which the Communist Party must include in its revolutionary struggles, did not become a model (see for instance, Hunan Report, 1927). The stringent yet constructive critique of the theory and practice of the left by socialist feminists also lay decades ahead. However, these contradictions cannot be treated as peripheral to the left. There are small signs, thanks principally to the feminists within the organized parties, that patriarchal relations within organizations are now beginning to receive some attention. Nevertheless, gender in an encompassing sense has yet to become central to the understanding of social inequality for the organized left and to replace 'women's issues' in the narrow sense; a revolutionary redefinition of public and private has yet to enter the agenda alongside class struggle.

VIII

The value of this collection may lie not necessarily in its provisional answers but in the fact that it sets out to interrogate the very nature of feminist questioning. In its seclusion or segregation of women's issues, much feminist research and practice has been contained within the colonial and nationalist historical paradigms of reform and reawakening. These paradigms by their very nature have designated the production processes, land and revenue settlements as in themselves gender neutral even when they acknowledge gender discrimination in practice. Gender difference is seldom seen as a structuring principle in economic processes. Again, in concentrating, like the reformers, on issues of family, education, and economic participation, feminist research often implicitly accepts and locates itself within the division of public and private spheres constructed in the colonial period and neglects the materiality of the wider economic and legal processes by which these spheres came into being. In one sense, peasant movements and urban 'feminist' reform have been opposite sides of the same coin. If peasant movements attempt to overthrow class oppression then questions of land, revenue, taxation are perceived as gender neutral, and questions relating to women as secondary.

The urban reforms which set out to demand greater egalitarianism for women in the home and in the work place do not challenge the binary construction of these spaces, and show little concern with class inequality.

If we take seriously the implications of the reconstitution of patriarchies in colonial India, there may be other ways of conceptualizing the feminist problematic. First arises the question of how much of its legacy remains in the structures of institutions, (both of the state and others), in the agrarian and industrial sectors, in the contemporary parodic and rhetorical nationalisms, in the emerging forms of religious fundamentalism, and in contemporary ideologies about women. Second, there is a perceptible relation between colonial reforms, especially in so far as they took juridical shape, and the homogenization (operating with a regional specificity) of different classes, both rural and urban. What is at issue here is both the relation of gender description to economic processes within a changing mode of production, and the mediatory power of super-structural discourses upon the base. Given the uneven development of capital and the changed location of India today in the wider global economy, these questions now have an even greater urgency. Patriarchies after all are *still* being reconstituted, and not all the modalities of this process have altered. In such a context existing anti-women practices are not feudal remnants alone which will vanish in time but are products of a sustained reformulation of patriarchies.

NOTES

1. See Jagdish Raj, *Economic Conflict in North India: A Study of Landlord-Tenant Relations in Oudh, 1870-90* (Delhi, Allied, 1978).
2. Thomas R. Metcalf, "Social Effects of British Land Policy in Oudh," in *Land Control and the Social Structure in Indian History*, ed. Robert Frykenberg (Delhi: Manohar, 1979), p. 149.
3. "Bedanta Chandrika," *Mritunjay Granthabali*, p. 28, quoted in David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance* (Calcutta: Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969), p. 207.
4. See Hiranamay Banerjee, *Iswarchandra Vidyasagar* (1968; 2nd ed. Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 1987), pp. 58-61.

5. See Kopf, *British Orientalism*, pp. 90-94.
6. See Radha Kumar, "Family and Factory: Women in the Bombay cotton textile industry 1919-1939," *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 20 no. 1 (Jan-March, 1983), p.88,
7. Kalpana Bardhan, "Women's Work, Welfare and Status," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20, no. 5 (Dec. 1985), p. 2208.
8. *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, vol. 30 (1926), p. 340.
9. *Ibid*, vol. 18 (1920), pp. 319-21.
10. V.N. Datta, *Sati: Widow Burning in India* (Delhi: Manohar, 1988): pp. 19-70.
11. Vasudha Dhagamvar, "Saint, Victim or Criminal," *Seminar*, 342 (Feb. 1988), pp. 34-39.
12. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, *Indian Women's Battle for Freedom* (Delhi: Abhinav, 1983), p. 54.
13. *Ibid*, p. 89; and *Towards Equality: Report of the Committee on the Status of Women* (Delhi: Govt. of India, 1974), p. 191.
14. Gyan Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism, 1919-1922," in *Subaltern Studies*, ed. Ranajit Guha (1982; rpt. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986), pp. 143-45.
15. Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1983), p. 203.
16. Indra Munshi Saldhana, "Tribal Women in the Warli Revolt, 1945-47; Class and Gender in the Left Perspective," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 21, no 17 (April 1986), pp. 41-52; Peter Custers, *Women in the Tebbaga Movement* (Calcutta: Noya Prokash, 1987); Stree Shakti Sanghatna, *We were making history: Life stories of women in the Telangana people's struggle* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).

Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?

Orientalism, Nationalism, and a Script for the Past

UMA CHAKRAVARTI

MEN AND WOMEN in India, whether or not they have formally learnt history, carry with them a sense of the past which they have internalized through the transmission of popular beliefs, mythology, tales of heroism and folklore. Formal history also percolates down, often in a transmuted form, to a wider range of people through articles in popular journals, discussions, and through what may be termed as the 'dispersal effect', so that elements of oral history may be overlaid by more serious historical conclusions forming a sort of medley of ideas. It is just such a medley of ideas that forms the basis of our understanding of the status of women in ancient times; and is also part of our deeply embedded perceptions of the past in a more general sense.

Particular elements that constitute a given community or group's sense of history are not, however, timeless and unchanging. Perceptions of the past are constantly being constituted and reconstituted anew. At specific junctures the sense of history may be heightened and the past may be dramatically reconstituted, bringing into sharp focus the need of a people for a different self-image from the one that they hold of themselves. One such juncture for India, when historical consciousness was being reshaped, came in the nineteenth century. In the new script for the past the women's question held a key place, but it is important to bear in mind that it was only one element in a set of related elements, all of which