

THE LIMITS OF GENDER IDEOLOGY: BENGALI WOMEN, THE COLONIAL STATE, AND THE PRIVATE SPHERE, 1890-1930

DAGMAR ENGELS

German Historical Institute London, 17 Bloomsbury Square,
London WC1A 2LP, U.K.

Synopsis—Colonial as well as Indian nationalist concern for so-called female issues was to a certain extent due to the significance of the “female discourse” within the colonial conflict which was primarily articulated by men. Women’s interests clearly came second. Here the concept of the “private sphere” is singled out in order to investigate the development of gender stereotypes in a changing historical context. The British and Bengali discourse on gender was marked by culturally specific notions of femininity and masculinity. Despite these differences, women’s identification with the domestic sphere allowed British and Bengali men to acknowledge the situation of women when it suited their wider political aims, but to banish women—figuratively speaking—to their *zenana* when legislative innovations or female activism threatened to clash with male political or patriarchal prerogatives.

Purdah, the set of social practices most commonly associated with the seclusion of women, was often criticised by Western observers of Indian social conditions as the cause of poor health and arrested intellectual development amongst women (*Girl's Own Paper*, 1892; Urquhart, 1926; Weitbrecht, 1875). They saw female seclusion, which was in fact rigidly practised only by a minority of women, as the dominant social custom regulating the relations between men and women because it fitted in with late-Victorian sex roles which firmly located women in the private sphere of the household. Yet Bengali gender ideology and social practices were very different to those of their colonial rulers, and it is an analysis of those differences that concerns us here. What was the significance of the private sphere and of women’s identifica-

tion with it in the context of colonial domination and Indian opposition? To what extent did colonial authorities respect the domestic sphere as out of bounds to their representatives? Were Bengali men ready to accept the erosion of women’s identification with the domestic sphere once they became involved in the wider world?

In Bengali and British middle-class culture the concept of the “private sphere” was linked with a strict code of conduct for women. In Britain the affect-controlled lady was the ideal. In Bengal, as the notion of *purdah* might suggest, spatial aspects were equally important. Family and home were referred to as *bari*, that is, “house.” While men spoke of *amar bari*, my house, home, family, married women differentiated between *baper bari* and *sasur bari*, that is father’s house and in-laws’ house. If they said *amar bari* they were most likely referring to their fathers’ houses where they felt more at ease because there *purdah*-related values were less strictly enforced.

Legislative regulation of the domestic sphere occurred in connection with virtually all social reform. Legislation, such as the abolition of *sati* in 1828, the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856, the Age of Consent Act of 1891 and the Child Marriage Restraint (Sarda) Act of 1929 reached into the private sphere and attempted to redefine women’s

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position therein. All but the abolition of *sati* had little positive impact on women's lives. Those laws which fixed the age of marriage or consent were useless as long as birth registration was not obligatory. In fact, what little concern there was over age was limited to the private sphere of middle-class families.

In the early 1920s women in the nationalist movement actively sought to escape from the private sphere. The colonial political strategy of reinforcing gender segregation was challenged and its patriarchal bias became an issue of contention. Indian men faced the challenge of women leaving their homes for the first time in significant numbers and confronted or defended a traditional Hindu ideology which cast secluded Bengali women in the role of guardians of Bengali culture.

During the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the colonial discourse on social reform and gender issues in India often centred on conditions in Bengal, in particular when gender relations within marriage and inside the domestic sphere were at stake. The contemporary discourse suggested that social conditions in Bengal were worse than elsewhere and thus in need of special attention (*Age of Consent Report*, 1929). But it is more plausible to suggest that Bengal's exposed position at the forefront of, first, colonial co-operation and, later, nationalist opposition, moved the province's social problems, that is, female issues and conditions in the so-called private sphere, into the centre of colonial discourse. To highlight the political relevance of the "private sphere" in colonial India it is thus useful to pay particular attention to the pattern of events in Bengal.

Here two qualifications must be added. This paper deals with Bengali Hindu middle-class culture alone omitting references to the Muslim as well as peasant and working class population. These omissions follow the pattern of the colonial discourse on gender and sexuality. As Bengali Hindus, not Muslim, were singled out by the Raj as their most articulate and dangerous opponents, British officials focused their attention on the formers' sexual practices because only these were relevant in the political discourses. In addition, Bengali Muslim culture and social response to colonial rule were distinctly dif-

ferent from the Hindu equivalents which prevents social historians from any summarising analysis of the two groups. Similar reasons can be given for the omission of peasants and the working class. But in this context it is important to note that while middle-class Muslims and Hindus shared some values regarding the status of women such as *purdah* and purity for instance, the majority of Bengalis did not. This study is thus clearly class-specific.

INDIAN PATRIARCHAL RIGHTS AND COLONIAL NONINTERFERENCE

Until the early 1920s representatives of the Raj did not attempt to implement colonial policies when this meant interfering with Indian middle-class women who were in theory, if not in practice, restricted to the domestic sphere. This became particularly obvious when social legislation for the protection of women, such as the Age of Consent and Sarda Act, was passed after lengthy and excited debates in the Legislative Council and Assembly. The Indian Government warned local Governments and police authorities that implementing these laws might be politically unwise and should, if possible, be avoided.

Despite such concerns for political feasibility, the Age of Consent and the Sarda Act were passed because they were a matter of principle to colonial administrators. The acts embodied the idea of individual legal protection of women, as opposed to the traditional Indian concept of female protection by the social system, that is, the joint family. There, according to Hindu gender ideology, the father and husband acted as the sole guardian of a woman. When the Age of Consent Bill was introduced into the Legislative Council in 1891, the Legal Member, Sir A. Scoble, supported his Government's initiative to raise the age of consent from ten to twelve with the argument that "giving effectual legal protection to these poor little girls" (India Office Library and Records [IOLR], P/3951, App. D) was the duty of the colonial state. In contrast, a petition to the Viceroy by "the inhabitants of Bhowanipur, Kalighat and the neighbouring places in the suburbs of Calcutta," insisted that male family members could look after women properly because "the dishonour of their women is worse than

death itself" (IOLR, P/3951, App. W). Nonetheless, the Bill became law because the traditional (male) honour-based concept of female protection in the joint family had to make way for the modern concept of individual safety and legal protection (Heimsath, 1962).

In practice, however, the Age of Consent Act became a dead letter because British administrators were reluctant to interfere in the Indian domestic sphere other than through ideological means. Indian patriarchal power which was based on the ideological and actual restriction of women in the private sphere was not curtailed by colonial interference. Indian opponents of the Age of Consent Act argued that the Act implied a threat to female honour because a false accusation could lead to the loss of reputation, to a girl being dragged off to a medical examination, or being forced to give evidence in court (IOLR, P/3951, App. U, A16). What Indian opponents of the Act feared most—and what made the decisive impact on Government decision making—was an uncontrolled power to enter the *zenana*.

The role of the police in the implementation of the new law was at the basis of Indian opposition. In February 1891 a Government Pleader in Hooghly district expressed these reservations to the Bengal Government: ". . . it is a regrettable thing to have to bear in mind, that, despite the efforts made from time to time to reform the police, the Bengal Police is notoriously bad" (IOLR, P/3951, App. U). Social legislation which required the regulation of intimate aspects of life in Bengal depended either on a well-trained and reliable police force to enforce the law or it opened the door to legal abuse and bribery placing "a mighty engine of oppression" in the hands of bad men and unscrupulous officers as the inhabitants of Bhowanipur informed the Viceroy (IOLR, P/3951, App. W).

In England legislation on social issues had brought about notorious police practices, but in a society where citizens and the members of the police force had only fairly recently become acquainted with the western administrative system, widespread abuse was feared. The whole notion of sexual regulation—that is, interference with the private sphere—via legislation stemmed from the

context of modern industrialised societies in which civil servants including the police had internalised the social values on which the "rule of law" depended. This was not the case in colonial India. Most policemen used their power more like "oriental despots" than like guardians of the law. But they were the representatives of the state with whom villagers were most likely to come into contact. The passing of the Age of Consent Act entitled them to extend their authority into Indian bedrooms (Arnold, 1985; Foucault, 1979; Stedman Jones, 1983).

However, before the police could step into action Government issued new regulations which in fact put an end to any implementation of the law. Five days after the Act was passed Lansdowne, the Governor-General, arranged for a circular to be sent to all local Governments admonishing them to apply the Act "with the utmost care and discrimination." Enquiries should only be held by Native Magistrates, it stated, but if there were any doubts, prosecution should be postponed (IOLR, P/3889; IOLR, MSS.Eur. D558/20).

It was little wonder that there were very few prosecutions under the Act. Between 1891 and 1893 there was an average of two or three cases a year per province which, however, were either dropped because of false evidence or ended with a one or two-year prison sentence if violence and cruelty were involved. In 1893 the Indian Government asked the local Governments to discontinue the submission of annual reports on the working of the Age of Consent Act, because it had turned into an empty bureaucratic exercise (IOLR, P/4351). For the following thirty years the memory of the failure in the 1890s was sufficient to stop any legislative initiatives suggesting further changes of the age of consent or of marriage.

During the 1920s—in a changed political climate—new legislation on the age of consent and of marriage was passed, but ended with similar results. After the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act in 1930 Government warned officials to administer the Act with utmost care and, as a consequence, there were only a few prosecutions under the Act (National Archives of India [NAI], Home/Judicial [H/J], 181/1/1930; 357/1931; 523/1931). Government shared the view

which was taken by an Assistant Secretary to the Bengal Government in 1924 that effective interference with private matters like the age of consent would only be possible “by aggressively enforcing the provisions” and thus causing “domestic tragedies” (NAI, H/J, 416/1924). Police interference would almost certainly lead to “domestic tragedies” because, as the Secretary of the Marwari Association in Calcutta saw it:

The rigorous enforcement of the law and conviction and punishment of the husband will not only mean disgrace and trouble in many ways to the families of the husband and the wife but will also spell utter ruin to the wife for life. (NAI, H/J, 416/1924)

Adopting the Indian definition of a woman’s honour and happiness as suggested by Indian men, British administrators capitulated before the task of implementing social legislation which was intended to protect women’s health inside the domestic sphere.

However, in those cases in which Indian gender ideology was less favourable to patriarchal power in the family than western legal concepts, Indian men welcomed colonial intrusions into the domestic sphere in order to shift the balance of gender power. The debates concerning the restitution of conjugal rights highlight this point. The restitution of conjugal rights was a colonial innovation and alien to Indian social practices. It enabled a husband to file a case against his wife if she refused to fulfil her marital duties. When social reformers and British administrators suggested the removal of the act from the statute book, Indian orthodox men protested—this time against the colonial state’s withdrawal from the Indian domestic sphere.

In pre-British times, an Indian Hindu woman who refused to join her husband—her legal guardian—was considered fallen, and had to stay at her parental home. This informal way of handling an unwanted husband was challenged by the restitution of conjugal rights in English law. Seen within the context of child marriage, a refusal to join her husband was the only way a Hindu wife could object to the spouse whom her family had chosen for her. There was, ac-

ording to Hindu religion, no divorce in India (Max Müller, 1975).

In 1793, the restitution of conjugal rights, based on the Christian ecclesiastical law, was first introduced into Indian legal practice in the Bengal Presidency. In 1859 it became part of the Civil Procedure Code which applied to the whole of British India, but it was unclear how the decree should be enforced (Macpherson, 1850; McCarthy, 1986). A new act was passed to cover this difficulty. Act XV of 1877 recognised two classes of suits by a husband for the purpose of obtaining the society of his wife: first, for the recovery of a wife who was being held by somebody else, and, secondly, for the restitution of conjugal rights (IOLR, P/2962). If the wife refused to obey, the decree was to be enforced by imprisonment or attachment of property. In England, however, the Matrimonial Clauses Act of 1884 put an end to imprisonment and confiscation of property as a means of enforcing a decree of restitution of conjugal rights against a wife (IOLR, P/6125). Soon afterwards, British and Indian reformers started lobbying for legal change in India as well.

The new Indian law clearly limited the traditional freedom of a Hindu wife, even though the law provided for the maintenance of an abandoned wife when her husband refused to live with her. As a wife rarely had property which could be attached, imprisonment was the remaining method of enforcing her return to her husband (IOLR, P/3662). These regulations, which could work out as drastic interferences with domestic privacy, were only applied if somebody bothered to argue the case, which was only likely to happen among wealthier people. In the majority of cases women simply returned to their parents’ homes. Others either supported themselves or chose to live with other men. Besides, village men would seldom ask for the help of an urban court for the return of absent wives. But for educated and wealthy people the restitution of conjugal rights in colonial law increased the control of men over “unruly” women in the private sphere.

It was the case of a traditional husband, Dadaji Bhihaji, versus an educated, and therefore unorthodox, wife, Rukhmabai, that the law was first put into practice. In 1875, they got married when the bride was

nine years old. After their wedding the young wife stayed at her father's home to attend middle and high school and to pass her matriculation. But then her husband insisted on her company and she joined him, albeit against her wishes. When her new family turned out to be hostile towards her intellectual accomplishments, denying her access to any books, Rukhmabai returned to her father's house and in 1885 her husband sued her in Bombay for restitution of conjugal rights. The British codification of Hindu law had followed the male-dominated Brahmanical interpretation of the law and pictured the ideal wife to be submissive, in this case to a Christian principle. Accordingly, Rukhmabai was found guilty and was sentenced in the first and second instance to prison with manual labour. While she was in gaol her final appeal went to Queen Victoria who in an unprecedented manner set aside her post-Mutiny declaration of religious non-interference and released Rukhmabai from her marriage. Set free, Rukhmabai made use of her intellectual potential. She studied medicine and became head of a Hindu hospital in Poona where Hindu girls were trained as nurses. Despite her "happy end," the case demonstrated clearly that the enshrinement of Christian norms in Indian law on marriage, discriminated against women (IOLR, P/2962; Woodsmall 1916-1917).

In 1887, motivated by the Bombay case and by the recent change in the British law, the Bombay Government suggested an amendment to Act XV of 1877, so as to prevent further imprisonment of unwilling wives. The Government proposed to introduce judicial separation and, if a husband was guilty of adultery, alimony was to be paid to the wife or, if the application was made by the husband, her property was to be paid or settled for the benefit of her husband and her children. Once the colonial Government had become involved in regulating conjugal partnership they could not sound the unconditional retreat. Thus, instead of dropping the Act, the ultimate punishment of divorce was raised, a proposition which was even more alien to Hindu, although not Muslim, society than the imprisonment of an unwilling wife (IOLR, P/2962).

Indian men, by arguing against divorce, could barely hide how much they appreciated

the state's interference in the domestic sphere when it increased rather than curtailed patriarchal power. Hindu conservatives, particularly in Madras and Bengal, strongly opposed any change in the law, and the idea of divorce in particular. Whereas Bengali Muslims supported the amendment—they saw their own law as sufficient—Bengali Hindu notables almost unanimously objected to any change of the law. Maharaja Jatindra Mohan Tagore, for instance, endorsed Hindu law according to which the husband was the legal guardian of his wife and required her to live in his house. But if the wife refused to do so for immoral reasons, imprisonment was, he believed, the best possible punishment. Divorce, however, could not be in women's interest because it would, he thought, drive them either to prostitution or beggary. Raja Peary Mohan Mukherjee, later to become a leader in the opposition to the Age of Consent Act, argued that divorce could not be introduced because marriage in Hindu society was so very different from marriage in England. The ritual importance of Hindu marriage made it a union for life. He recommended the existing law of imprisonment (IOLR, P/3662). The arguments of Bengali men in favour of the existing law showed a male fear of mischievous female intentions and of losing their own control. In order to keep women at bay, they were even ready to overcome their disapproval of social legislation by the colonial authorities. "Judicial separation with alimony," suggested for instance P. M. Mukherjee, Secretary to the British Indian Association, "would be a premium on immorality." The ultimate male fear was to have to pay for a promiscuous wife. "The hardship, relatively considered," wrote P. M. Mukherjee,

is much greater in a polygamous country on the side of the husband than on the side of the wife; the more so, as the wife does not forfeit her right to maintenance by contempt of the order of the Court in a suit for the restitution of conjugal rights. (IOLR, P/3662)

He saw imprisonment as a means of keeping wives in check or paying them back because otherwise "the husband would have no remedy whatever for the wrong done to him"

(IOLR, P/3662). Indian opposition against any changes regarding the restitution of conjugal rights was so effective that only Act XXIX of 1923 did away with imprisonment as the last resort of enforcing a decree for the restitution of conjugal rights (McCarthy, 1986; NAI, H/J, 478/1922). Already in 1901, however, the Indian Government had instructed judges to abstain as far as possible from passing prison sentences. Although Indian men were reluctant to renounce the law's assistance for the punishment of "unruly wives" Government officials were equally aware of the public outcry which might follow a prison sentence in a restitution case (IOLR, P/6125).

THE POLITICISATION OF THE PRIVATE SPHERE

Until the early 1890s the British, supported by Indian male social reformers, had dominated the discourse on social reform and on the position of women. Orthodox male Indians were used to reacting, clarifying and justifying the issues chosen by the reformers. In the mid-1890s, however, an interesting change took place. By questioning British intentions behind reform rather than just discussing the issues—most of them concerning "female subordination"—the Bengali opposition to Western-style social reform began to politicise the private sphere and to render the British impotent on the discursive level.

Comparing the arguments of the Bengali opposition to further legislation on the restitution of conjugal rights in the late 1880s and in the mid-1890s, we can trace how discursive strategy on women in the private sphere changed. In 1887 Bengali male fear of "mischievous" women was deep-seated and divorce was rejected with orthodox arguments. In 1894, however, the newspapers attacked British male jealousy, emulating the last phase of the age of consent controversy. Instead of writing about the nature and purity of Bengali women, male journalists attacked the British for harbouring lascivious intentions behind the law. They argued that the white sahibs were concerned about female liberties only to profit from them as they did in Burma. There, European officials

lived with "free" women, whereas in Bengal only "coolie women" in tea plantations had been at their disposal (*Dacca Prakash*, 6 January 1895; Engels, 1983).

The Bengali opposition thwarted the British attempt to "liberate"—as they imagined—women from traditional bonds through the introduction of divorce in case of marital alienation. The Bengali refusal to participate in the debate on the "status of women" can be seen as part of the strategy of Hindu Revivalism. It was the first step in a new direction, where women were perceived as active subjects—rather than as sole objects of male will—albeit still restricted to the private sphere.

Encouraged by the discovery of "the glories of ancient Aryans" by scholars like Max Müller, promoters of Hindu Revivalism reinterpreted the Hindu past as an ideological basis for future nation building (S. Sarkar, 1973, 1984). Within this approach an essentialist image of women focusing on motherhood became the incarnation of India's hope for an independent future. In Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel, *Anandamath* (1882), the long-standing tradition of Shaktism—the worship of female power in Bengal—was transformed into a political message. Bankim equated the incarnations of female power, the goddesses Durga and Kali, with India, the mother-land. As every woman possessed sakti, every woman became the symbol of the motherland. Respect for women meant respect for India.

By equating India with the Mother, Bankim created a strong emotional basis for the nationalist movement because he allured to "the most compelling and widespread religious idea among the Hindu people and . . . the strongest and most profound emotional tie in their social relationships" as Van Meter (Baumer) put it in her thesis on Bankim Chandra (Van Meter, 1964). In his novels *Anandamath* and *Sitaram* Bankim popularised the worship of the Mother, as well as female duties and power, thus laying the foundation for women's active participation in the nationalist movement in years to come. But in his own novels he stopped well ahead of recommending female political activities. In fact, he propagated the socially-conservative ideal of the Bengali Hindu girl who was to be in Van Meter's words:

Basically educated, deeply religious, married at an early age, modest in behaviour, showing deep respect and devotion for her husband in the traditional Hindu ways, and ready to sacrifice her own life whenever the domestic situation demanded it. (Van Meter, 1964)

Accordingly, in his novels a high number of women committed suicide. Not socially-constructive participation, but self-destruction was to be in Bankim's view the result of female heroism. Moreover, women outside of male control by fathers or husbands, that is widows, were normally too weak to comply with the high standards he set for female virtue. They were bound to succumb to the temptations of the flesh. Bankim saw their failure partly as a consequence of loosening morals and female emancipation from *purdah* traditions: in *Debi Chaudhurani* Bankim "mourned the good old days" when women respected the rules of strict *purdah* and excelled in fulfilling their wifely duties without being distracted by other activities (Van Meter, 1964).

In this context, the difference between orthodox or revivalist protagonists of the 1880s and 1890s and the nationalists of the turn of the century can be clarified. Hindu orthodoxy in Bengal saw women in the private sphere as symbols of tradition which needed to be protected against reformist efforts. Bankim as a Hindu Revivalist was, like his orthodox contemporaries, socially conservative with regard to female issues. But by identifying the Mother with India he surrounded female symbols with a political aura. To Bankim as well as to Sri Aurobindo, Bengali revivalist and radical political activist, the glorification of motherhood was, despite its Hindu roots, less a cultural defense mechanism, than the articulation of a future political programme. Sri Aurobindo evoked the "vision of the Mother" in order to inspire his fellow countrymen to struggle for India's independence:

Love has a place in politics, but it is the love of one's country, for one's countrymen, for the glory, greatness and happiness of the race, the divine ananda of self-immolation for one's fellows, the ecstasy of relieving their sufferings, the joy of see-

ing one's blood flow for country and freedom, the bliss of union in death with the fathers of the race. The feeling of almost physical delight in the touch of the mother-soil, of the winds that blow from Indian seas, of the rivers that stream from Indian hills, in the familiar sights, sounds, habits, dress, manners of our Indian life, this is the physical root of that love. The pride in our past, the pain in our present, the passion for the future are its trunk and branches. Self-sacrifice and self-forgetfulness, great service, high endurance for the country are its fruit. And the sap which keeps it alive is the realization of the Motherhood of God in the country, the vision of the Mother, the perpetual contemplation, adoration and service of the Mother. (Mukherjee & Mukherjee, 1958)

Aurobindo's invocation of the Mother was clearly action-oriented, not just defensive in the manner of former political campaigns. Love for the Mother was to inspire nationalist activities. Nevertheless woman was only referred to as the Mother who stood for the great Goddess and for the mother country, not as a living and active person. The essence of womanhood, that is reproduction and nurture, which connected women with their biological nature rather than with achievement or performance, attracted the attention of the revivalists.

Swami Vivekananda, the disciple of Ramakrishna (the worshipper of the Divine Mother and the founder of the "mother cult" in nineteenth-century Bengal), was the first to connect female symbols with female activity and to outline the path the nationalist movement was going to follow in the twentieth century. He spoke of a mother's love—not love for the mother—when he asked his Indian followers to work for India's future. "Liberty is the first condition of growth," he said in his lecture on "Vedanta and Indian life." He continued:

It is wrong, a thousand times wrong, if any of you dares to say, 'I will work out the salvation of this woman or child'. I am asked again and again, what I think of the widow problem and what I think of the woman question. Let me answer once for

all—am I a widow that you ask me that nonsense? Am I woman that you ask me that question again and again? Who are you to solve women's problems? Are you the Lord God that you should rule over every widow and every woman? Hands off. They will solve their own problems. (Majumdar, 1966)

Vivekananda questioned the reformers when they became obsessed with reorganising the private sphere. But he did not support orthodoxy and its conservative approach towards gender relations. Instead he suggested that women themselves should become actively involved in the country's social and political life (Majumdar, 1966).

WOMEN'S ACTIVISM: FROM CONFIRMATION TO CONFRONTATION

Women's involvement in the nationalist movement developed within the parameter which was outlined by traditional gender ideology and colonial concepts of legality both identifying respectable women with privacy and domesticity (Sarkar, 1987). By the 1920s, however, mass demonstrations, shop and court picketing by women challenged Indian and colonial gender stereotypes. While the revivalist change of discursive strategy in the 1890s limited the British discursive dominance, in the twentieth century women's political participation challenged British political authority in practice, that is in the countryside and in the streets of towns and cities. The British safeguarded colonial law and order and their political dominance. But by clearing protesting women off the streets they had to give up their image of being supporters of social progress and of the women's cause.

During the period of Swadeshi agitation, following the partition of Bengal in 1905, for the first time women took part in politics on other than an individual and elitist level. The issue, namely the division of the "beloved motherland," was particularly suitable for awakening female compassion. Whereas political and economic rights were abstract values to many *purdah* women, the unity of the province was universally felt not least because migration of educated males to the cities of Calcutta and Dhaka spatially extended

family networks and the notion of home (Sarkar, 1973).

The activities in which women predominantly participated were ideologically and spatially linked to the private sphere of middle-class women. Few exceptions apart, women from lower strata of society hardly participated: the Hindu middle-class bias in the Swadeshi movement excluded them just as much as their husbands. For middle-class women, however, traditional domestic activities were politically reinterpreted. Their mobilisation for the Swadeshi cause was based on the essentialist notion of women as spiritual and fertile beings and as incarnations of the Mother, that is, India. Accordingly, religion was the ideal medium of drawing women into the movement. Women's domestic religious rituals, *bratas*, and customary rites from within the family provided a pattern for women's political involvement (Forbes, 1977b, 1985; Sarkar, 1973). This strategy was extremely successful for drawing women into the nationalist movement—without in the least challenging traditional stereotypes regarding women's restriction to the private sphere.

During Swadeshi and boycott agitation women who broke with gender stereotypes or colonial law were few. Some of them, like Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, were glorified as individual incarnations of the motherland. Her elite background, style and leadership qualities made her the probably most popular Bengali woman during the first decades of the twentieth century (Sarkar, 1973).

But others were less fortunate. Those who neither conformed with the British image of a lady nor the Bengali ideal of a heroic woman were singled out and harshly punished by colonial authorities as well as Bengali society. Nanibala Devi for instance, born in 1888 in Bali, Howrah district, supported the revolutionary movement in an unassuming way. Married at the age of eleven, Nanibala became a widow at 16 and was then inspired by her brother to support the Swadeshi movement. But as a widow her family expected her nevertheless to obey the ritual restrictions connected with her status, to live and dress simply, to work in the house and to fast regularly. Instead she posed as the wife of revolutionaries in order to rent accommodation for them or, once they were arrested, smuggled

messages in and out of prison. After her arrest Nanibala Devi spent several years in prison where she was treated harshly. Her revolutionary connections as well as her social background did not qualify her for the special considerations British officials reserved for respectable middle-class women freedom fighters. On her release in 1919 her family refused to take her back because her conduct was seen as dishonourable for herself and for her family. Being a widow, but having posed as a wife was an unpardonable sin for a Bengali woman (Das Gupta, 1963).

By then, however, Indian society was on the brink of a new era in women's political involvement. Non-cooperation in 1920/21 and Civil Disobedience in 1930 drew women out of the private sphere and into mass movements. Bengali gender ideology which marked women as incarnations of the motherland, now had to adapt to women as being among the protagonists of the movement. To British officials the gradual and, later, widespread participation of Indian women in the struggle for freedom was a forceful reminder of the importance of gender issues and Indian womanhood in nationalist ideology. Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience apart, women protested alongside men in various Satyagraha campaigns, in numerous rural protests and in revolutionary activities where they excelled in individual courage and will-power (Bhattacharyya, 1977; Forbes, 1980; Interview with Santa Deb, 1985; Report of the Contai Enquiry Committee, 1930; T. Sarkar, 1984).

Among the male leaders, Subash Chandra (Netaji) Bose, in particular, supported female activism, however, with an ideological twist which showed to what extent he still identified women with the domestic sphere. While Gandhi often restricted women to supportive tasks, Bose argued in favour of equal participation. For this purpose, he classified women into two groups, namely sisters and mothers, who were to fight and to support respectively. Significantly, he chose classifications which did not carry sexual connotations. Netaji, then living in celibacy, was unable to accept sexually-active women—wives—as equals and fellow-fighters (Forbes, 1984; Gandhi, 1942; Kishwar, 1985).

British and Bengali officials of the Raj found it exceedingly difficult to cope with

women *satyagrahis* because their activities ran contrary to what they regarded as fit for English or Bengali women. Changes in the image of Bengali women, which glorified them as saviours of the nation, could not be integrated into the *Weltbild* of police officers and district magistrates. Helpless, they tried to remind women activists of traditional female conduct. In 1922 P. Sen, a high-ranking Calcutta police officer, was still “hoping to get them round and to create a feeling that these processions are not proper and should be abandoned altogether” (West Bengal State Archives [WBSA], Political/Political [Poll/Poll], 48/1922). When these hopes proved futile, P. Sen used his contacts with moderate politicians such as S. N. Bannerjea and leaders of the Brahmo Samaj, a Hindu reform sect, in the hope of putting pressure on women to stay at home. The dominant impression among officials was that women activists had temporarily lost their reason or had been instigated into their unruly behaviour by men. The dogma of noninterference with the private sphere where women used to belong was challenged by women who came out.

Active women threatened male authority in a more complex way than male freedom fighters (Theweleit, 1977). Political involvement and struggle was natural for men, but when women demonstrated the ideological cosmos of British officials fell into disarray. In 1930, for instance, the District Magistrate of Noakhali feared the emergence of “forces which I may be unable to cope with with barely a hundred constables” in case it came to violent scenes between “unarmed peaceful women volunteers” and the police (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, Notes, App. B). Large numbers of men could be *lathi*-charged and arrested. But what could be done with “respectable” women while the urban public was watching? Against peasant women involved in the *no-chowkidari* tax movement in remote villages police did not hesitate to use lathis and even guns (T. Sarkar, 1984).

The presence of women activists created disciplinary problems in the Calcutta police force. “Any attempt made by them to assert authority has been questioned” wrote the Commissioner of the Calcutta police in 1922, and he wondered when they would lose their tempers which “has been stretched to breaking-points” (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 48/

1922, Notes No 3). A decade later, police in the mufassal faced the same problems. "I believe our difficulties are unique," wrote the District Magistrate of Tippera, and his colleague in Bakarganj informed the Bengal Government, "These encounters are apt to be demoralising for the police" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, S no 3 and Notes, App. C).

The helplessness of the police stemmed from a strategy which aimed at avoiding women's arrests. In 1921–22, when only 30 to 60 women regularly participated in street demonstrations and shop picketing in Calcutta, the official policy was not to arrest any women "unless in case of absolute necessity, e.g., if they are causing a hopeless obstruction" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 48/1922, Notes, No 1). This policy did not express a special concern for women, but fear of the consequences of female arrests. In December 1921, the arrest of Basanti Devi, C. R. Das' wife, and two other women had had the clear effect of strengthening the movement. In addition, women jails in Bengal were in such a state that a respectable woman would have suffered a severe loss of status in such conditions and company (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 48/1922, Notes, No 1). This, however, would have led to a wave of nationalist protest which Government was anxious to avoid.

At the beginning of 1930 police violence against women in Contai had resulted in a Congress Enquiry Committee and much publicity in the press (Interview with Dr. M. Basu; Report of the Contai Enquiry Committee May 1930; WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, Notes, App. A). Consequently, the Deputy Superintendent of the Bengal police instructed "all officers dealing with lady *satyagrahis* . . . to be very polite in their manners and to use the minimum of force if possible" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, Notes, App. E). After Gandhi's Salt March in April women participated in numerous Civil Disobedience campaigns in district towns all over East and Central Bengal and created confusion among the local police forces. Women's activities were particularly successful when they interrupted local government by picketing law courts and other government buildings in many district towns (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, Notes, App. G; Poll/Poll, Confidential Files, 1930–31).

Police officers and district magistrates,

barred in the early phase of the Civil Disobedience campaign from asserting their authority against women by force, recouped themselves by asserting their moral superiority over male *satyagrahis*. It was taken for granted that women had no independent political minds. They were either keen to escape male domination, "jumping at the chance offered of coming out of *purdah*" or the victim of male "mean tactics." In both cases, men were the active culprits, women passive innocent victims. Bengali men were described as active when putting "their womenfolk on the streets," but deserving of little respect (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, S.No 3 and 4). The Bakarganj District Magistrate wrote: ". . . they have literally thrown their wives and daughters into the streets with the cowardly satisfaction that they can thus cause annoyance and save their own skin" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, Notes, S.No 4). The commissioner of the Chittagong division drew his own conclusion from this and similar incidents. "If they do not consider this a most unchivalrous act," he wrote to his Government, "I do not see how they can have any reason to resent any action taken against their women" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, S.No 6).

When it was impossible to deny that women became politically involved on their own initiative, their respectability and femininity was questioned. After an encounter with resolute women *satyagrahis*, the District Magistrate of Bakarganj consoled his men and himself with the thought "that we were not the husbands of any of them. If they could perform like this in public they must be dreadful in their own homes." Women who could not be controlled did not deserve his respect. "They are not ashamed," he concluded, "to prostitute themselves in this way to draw a crowd" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, S.No 4).

As long as police were confronted with women-only groups they could handle them with "gentlemanly" tactics—carefully avoiding any physical contact—such as cutting off the water supply to their picket line in the hot sun or by cordoning them off for hours until they were bored and hungry. During the Calcutta Civil Obedience campaign, however, Jyotirmoyi Ganguli and Urmila Devi, the organisers of women's demonstrations, coor-

dinated their actions with male leaders to optimise the effect. To the surprise of the police, men mixed with on-going women's processions. The event was shocking to officials and the Police Commissioner gave an account: ". . . the ladies and these youths then grew violent, encircled the police officers, fell down before them, clutched their legs and seized the reins of the mounted police horses. "Men and women united presented "a very difficult problems for the police." They could not violently break up the procession without injuring women. More importantly their ideological stereotypes of cowardly men and manipulated women failed to explain the situation. The police needed more efficient means of control and the Commissioner suggested "applying for summons against Urmila Devi and Jyotirmoyi Ganguli and any other ladies whose identity can be established who took a prominent part in the procession." Two months later, in September 1930, Bengal of all provinces had the highest number of women prisoners (All quotes in this paragraph, WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, S.No 12; also Women Satyagrahis, 1930).

For the average female *satyagrahi*, however, such drastic measures were exaggerated. Instead, the traditional institutions for the domestication of women were appealed to, namely religion and the family. A high-ranking police official suggested "gentle persuasion" and "most polite and courteous language" in order to convince members of the gentler sex of their true vocation:

They should also be told that it had been laid down in all religions that the women should be at their respective homes and look after the welfare of their family members and children and if they neglect to do it they would fail in their sacred duties and God would take revenge for their culpable negligence and their family would be ruined. (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, Notes, App. E)

Police were confident that such appeals would find the support of many Bengali middle-class families who "would really welcome action which would keep their womenfolk from participating in such public matters" (WBSA, Poll/Poll, 599/1930, App. C).

Across political lines, patriarchal gender ideology seemed to unite many Bengali families and the colonial authorities in their efforts to keep women in their subordinate positions — regardless of the essential contribution by Bengali women during India's struggle for freedom.

CONCLUSION

The ideological construct of the "private sphere" confirmed patriarchal power across politically and racially dividing lines. During the Age of Consent debate Bengali men linked the preservation of the private sphere with the protection of their cultural identity. While the restitution of conjugal rights was discussed, it became clear that cultural traditions ranked secondary to male domination.

Colonial authorities in Bengal forgot about noninterference in the domestic sphere, Indian cultural values and female honour once British rule was at stake rather than women's welfare. They also forgot their maxims of gentlemanliness when the women concerned were not the equivalent of English ladies, but came from the peasantry or working class.

This suggests that an ideological term like "private sphere," which implied male control of female sexuality within its boundary, was highly negotiable and its meaning obviously depended on changing political circumstances, on the class background of men and women involved and, in particular, on activities by women. We can thus question the argument of some recent publications, for instance Ronald Hyam's "Empire and Sexual Opportunity" (1986) and Mrinalini Sinha's "The Age of Consent Act: The Ideal of Masculinity and Colonial Ideology in Late 19th Century Bengal" (1986) who assumed male sexuality and sexual domination to be driving forces behind colonial expansion and rule. In particular M. Sinha argued that there was "a connection between imperialism and the ideal of manliness" and that "colonial politics was mediated through a set of gender relations and gender identities." While this can be argued regarding virtually any form of political rule, it might nevertheless be dubious to emphasize sexuality as a driving force. As we have seen, there were no two

blocks of clearly defined male sexual identity competing with each other.

If gender ideology had any clear-cut meaning this was connected with male power over women, less so in the sphere of male political competition. When women started to participate in the nationalist movement they did not dare to break simultaneously with social conventions, but became active within the boundaries of the household. Rather than perceiving this as the publicisation of the private sphere the dominant ideology defined women's activities which addressed the public as extensions of their private lives. Consequently, in later years women's political mass participation and Indian patriarchal gender ideology smoothly combined to the advantage of men. They glorified women as incarnations of the motherland, they allowed the politicisation of the private sphere and they extended the parameters of respectability to include imprisonment in the name of nationalism. In the last resort women were controlled by compartmentalisation: as mothers and sisters they were stripped of their sexuality and as sexually active wives they remained subordinated to male control in the "private sphere." Bengali and colonial British gender ideology combined smoothly in not granting women equal rights with men.

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