Devoted Wife/Sensuous *Bibi*: Colonial Constructions of the Indian Woman, 1860–1900

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Current research has rather tended to neglect the print culture of 19th-century British India and its contribution towards the formation of gender ideologies. This article attempts to scrutinise the clamorous voices of the print culture: the newspapers, popular periodicals as well as copious published works, and to unravel the complex and sometimes contradictory web of constructions that these built around the gendered colonised.

The second half of the century witnessed a definite cultural focus on the Indian woman. Among other things, this interest took the form of a constant engagement with the subject of the 'native' female in the print culture of the British community resident in India. The article explores the multifaceted and pluralistic representation of the Indian woman, ranging from prurient accounts of native female sensuality and discussion of social reform issues to laudatory inscriptions of wifely devotion and the sati. In other words, the image of the Indian woman was constantly being reconstituted and proscriptions of her sensuousness were interwoven with prescriptions of passive feminine behaviour.

Admired models of perceived Eastern female docility were often selectively drawn upon, in a process constituting an 'Indianisation' of the Anglo-Indian female paradigm. While it is well recognised that representations of Indian women were strategically linked to the agenda of empire, what this article also tries to show is that, due to the complex interconnections between the ideologies of gender and empire, these gender representations also served to contain disturbing issues raised by the contemporary women's movement in England.

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Introduction

The establishment of empire in India in 1858 appears to have been accompanied by a renewed interest in the 'native' woman. Due to a number of social and historical factors, not least of them being the large-scale arrival of white women in colonial India from this time onwards, as well as the obsession with the contemporary 'native' female social reform movement, the second half of the 19th century witnessed a definite cultural focus on the Indian woman. Among other things, this interest took the form of a constant engagement with the subject of the 'native' female in the print culture of Anglo-India (that is, the British community resident in India).[1] This Anglo-Indian community was not just the British abroad; the community's own lived experience of India inevitably shaped its thinking and modified or strengthened its inherited metropolitan perspectives.

For nearly fifty years then, discursive writings of the Anglo-Indian community foregrounded the Indian woman. In addition to missionary writings that had in the past dwelt on the subject of Indian women, the new generation of Anglo-Indian newspapers, journals, travel writings, as well as studies by *memsahib* writers discussed different facets of such a woman. A feature of this discursive writing was the fact that the bulk of it was by memsahibs themselves—which was also a reflection of the significant presence in colonial India of the middle-class white woman by this time. Indeed, the Indian woman came to occupy a position of such striking prominence in the discursive writings of the second half of the 19th century that in 1869 a journal like *The Calcutta Review* called the 'native' woman question 'the absorbing topic of the day'. In fact it focused on the Indian woman in several issues during the period 1861 to 1891.[2]

Although a great deal of exciting and important work has been done in recent years on various aspects of the Indian woman in the colonial period, current research has rather tended to neglect the print culture of 19th-century Anglo-India and its contribution towards the formation of gender ideologies in the colony. This article then is an attempt to scrutinise the clamorous voices of this culture: the newspapers, popular periodicals as well as copious published works, and to unravel the complex and sometimes contradictory web of constructions that these built around the gendered colonised.

Indian *Bibi*-White Sahib: The Problem of Miscegenation

The fact that historical interracial relationships in India were, as in most empires, also sexual in nature, involving the white man and the Indian *bibi* (in this context, concubine), it is perhaps a strong enough indication that at one level the 'native' female was essentially perceived as a sexed subject. As in all colonial cultures, the colonised woman was perceived, among other things, as the gendered 'Other', sexually accessible, sensual and in many cases the legitimate target of sexual exploitation—a perception no doubt compounded by the latent race/gender ideology of Victorian Britain, which tended to look upon women of other races as sexually available. Initially, the pattern here as in all European empires tended towards intermarriage with local women so that by the mid-18th century it is estimated that 90 per cent of Englishmen in India had formally married either Eurasian or Indian women.[3] The latter were sometimes from upper classes, with many East India Company officers, for instance, marrying into aristocratic Muslim families (Hyam 1990: 116). But although interracial *marriages* gradually came to an end by around the beginning of the 19th century, the 'native' concubine or bibi continued to be kept and interracial sexual liaisons were widely, and sometimes even overtly, practised. Indeed, as late as 1858 a military officer could openly write in his letter home about his Eastern princess 'mistress who answered all the purposes of a wife without any of the bother' (Hyam 1990: 118).

Generally, however, by around the 1860s, due to several social and historical factors, shifts and changes became increasingly evident in attitudes to miscegenation, which came to be frowned upon by both society and the colonial government; even having a bibi gradually became a matter of shame, meeting with sharp social and official disapproval. The diverse reasons for this change included the events of 1857, which caused a rift between the races, the establishment of empire, a consequent cultivation of an aloof imperial identity and, perhaps most important, the encouragement by the government of white, resident wives. The ethos of empire came to be rooted in a middle-class sensibility marked by a preference for a self-contained English-style society—as it was felt that the stability of empire necessitated, among other things, the reaction of such a society moulded on the pattern of home. It also required a distancing of the English administrator from the 'native' woman, thereby containing in effect the power of 'native' female sexuality over the white man. Colonial government policy of encouraging white, resident wives was clearly undergirded with the aim of doing away with the presence of the 'native' woman from the white man's domestic set-up in India. In a sense then, the newly-arrived generation of white women were effectively positioned as sexual rivals to the Indian bibi and were deployed, as it were, to disrupt the existing relationships between European men and their concubines.

What followed was the colonial community's increased policing of themselves around the issue of interracial sex (Strobel 1993: 6–7). An Indian mistress came to be constructed as a threat to white cultural hegemony, eroding the identity of the Englishman by making him 'go native' and threatening to dismantle racial hierarchies. However, beyond the seams of Anglo-Indian discursive writings, which maintained a silence on the subject, the keeping of Indian concubines continued in actual practice, especially in a covert fashion in remote far-flung plantations or distant *mofussil* postings (Macmillan 1988: 57). Among the former group (especially for the next 30 years or so), it remained fairly common to keep an Indian bibi and after some years acquire an English wife from England and suitably pension off the 'native' woman (Masani 1987: 53). But, undoubtedly, even if secret sexual liaisons with Indian women continued to be tolerated in the submerged, secret life of the community, interracial marriage became a cultural anathema.

In a somewhat earlier era another important group of Indian women who interacted on an erotic plane with the European coloniser before the large-scale arrival of the memsahibs were the courtesans or *nautch* (dancing) girls. These women, some of whom had great talent, formed a part of British cross-cultural social life in India from the 18th century till about the middle of the next. The nautch constituted a popular form of entertainment during formal interactions between British colonials and wealthy Indians (Kincaid 1973). Early-19th-century British colonial discursive writings construct the nautch with mixed feelings of fascination and revulsion—in 1832 one Captain Mundy pronounced it disturbingly sensual and 'even bordering on the disgusting' (Singh 1996: 110). To the Anglo-Indian gaze the practice signified Eastern decadence and institutionalised sensuality, occupying a space outside the familiar and containable one of domestic space. By the second half of the 19th century, however, due to several factors, interaction between courtesan and coloniser virtually came to an end—although over the Anglo-Indian imagination at least the courtesan continued to exercise an erotic power till the late years of the 19th century, as is evident especially in colonial literary productions.[4]

While the colonial government of India frowned upon miscegenation among the 'officer' class, in contrast, it virtually arranged for the British soldiers coming from the lower classes to visit Indian prostitutes, ensuring their safety from venereal diseases by passing the Indian Contagious Diseases Act in England. Unlike in England, however, no appeals against detention were possible on the part of the women, and there was no upper time limit for detention (Ballhatchet 1980: 44–62). While military authorities rationalised that prostitution was a hereditary profession among 'natives' and therefore not 'immoral' by Indian standards, nevertheless the contradictions in the official attitudes to miscegenation for different classes of Englishmen indicated a concern to preserve the structure of power and to ensure the necessary social distance between the official elite and the subject people.

Ayahs and Peasants: Colonial Paternalism and the Indian Woman

In a social context where upper-class/caste women practised *purdah,* interracial contact was logically confined to Indian women of the lower social orders. After the establishment of empire and the cultivation of social distance by the new generation of imperial rulers, interactions became further narrowed to the class-based relationship between white master/memsahib and 'native' servant. In particular the Anglo-Indian press—the voice of the broad majority—focused upon the *ayah* (child's maid) who in any case was the Indian female with whom the average white man or woman now came closest in contact. Anglo-Indian representations of the ayah seem to have been divided—*The Pioneer* in 1880 eulogised her as devoted surrogate-mother who 'has given her life for years to her master's family.... The children will carry in their hearts the *ayah's* laughter and tears ... after all else Indian has passed out of their lives.'[5] Echoing this some years later Maud Diver, articulate spokeswoman and novelist of Anglo-India wrote about the ayah's 'propensity to worship at the shrine of the "Baba-log" (Diver 1909: 35). In contrast, a memsahib's reservations in *The Calcutta Review* in 1885 about the unreliability of the ayah ('the tender mercies of the wicked are cruel!') cast her in the old colonial mould of the morally obliquitous 'native'.[6]

In any case, the ayah's influence on white children was unanimously considered undesirable, irrespective of whether she was perceived as lovingly indulgent or cruel. Thus, British nannies were strongly recommended for the child's early years in India in *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) co-authored by the vocal and influential memsahib writer, Flora Annie Steel, which soon became a virtual 'bible' for all memsahibs (Steel and Gardiner 1909: 166). Maud Diver too voiced reservations about the ayahs' adoring indulgence and claimed that their lack of disciplinary methods eroded the British strength of character of the 'small gods and goddesses they worship' (Diver 1909: 35).

The danger most often voiced in Anglo-Indian discourse was over the creation of an 'Indianised' English. But what was perhaps more disturbing was the deep emotional bond, the close relationship that was often formed, between ayah and Anglo-Indian child, both communicating in a 'native' language inaccessible to the child's parents, with the ayah almost appropriating the mother's role. Clearly then, embedded in this situation was the disturbing potential of an oppositional site *within* the very heart of Anglo-Indian domesticity, which threatened to undermine colonial hierarchies within the colonial nursery and to dismantle barriers between ruler and ruled (Chaudhuri 1988: 531).

In addition, since the colonial rulers were most comfortable with groups whom they perceived as socially subordinate, social categories such as peasants, domestic servants, 'simple' tribals and their womenfolk tended to be sympathetically inscribed in colonial writings. Particularly valorised were peasant women (especially of the Punjab), 'spirited' Pathan tribeswomen of the North-West Frontier Province and simple hill-girls, tall and fair-skinned. In addition to class, the factor of race and colour too clearly played an operative role here as all these women were pale-skinned and markedly 'Aryan' in their physiognomy and build. An article in *The Calcutta Review* in 1885 remarked, 'I really think hill-women ... are charming.'[7] In this context Flora Annie Steel privileged rural women of Punjab over women of the town for a perceived rural female athleticism —'they were a tall people, men and women, physically fit' (Steel 1929a: 16)—and lauded female industriousness when she noted that 'in rural India the women do a lion's share of outdoor work' (ibid. 162).

Clearly enough, in these discursive gender representations the culturally privileged masculine traits of industriousness, physical fitness, bravery and honesty too were appropriated and transferred to the figure of the 'native' woman. In keeping with the masculinist bias and philathleticism of metropolitan England of the 1880s and 1890s, with its public school ethos, these gender constructs revealed not only a colonial preference for a supposedly unthreatening rural simplicity but also a noticeable emphasis on physical fitness and athleticism.

Behind the Veil: Anglo-India and the *Zenana*

One of the most striking features of the Anglo-Indian discourse on Indian women was its preoccupation with purdah, which was in fact the great divide, the impenetrable barrier, subject to numerous fantasies, curiosity and myth-making, separating as it did the 'native' women from the imperial rulers. In most regions of the country upper-caste/class families (regardless of their religion) hid their women inside the *zenana*, the *antahpur* or the *gosha*, as the inner quarters of the home were variously called. Access to this world of women was available (in a limited and closely monitored fashion) to English women alone. Towards the latter part of the century access took the form of the occasional, mutually-disliked purdah visits to the homes of Indian women by memsahibs. More frequent were female missionary visits behind the veil, in the form of zenana schools or, from the 1880s onwards, as a part of the Female Medical Aid programme.[8] But these upper-caste/class Indian women remained completely and literally invisible to the white man—barring of course a small percentage of women belonging to the Parsi community in Bombay or those from 'advanced' families in Bengal who had started emerging in mixed company sporadically around the 1860s but more numerously by the 1880s (Borthwick 1984: 261–65).

It has often been pointed out that male Anglo-India resented the purdah system because it placed white men on a footing of disadvantage *vis-à-vis* their male subjects (Macmillan 1988: 60). For while their own women were visually available to the 'native', they were denied sight of their gendered subjects and were instead 'dependent, entirely, or almost entirely on such information as native gentlemen themselves choose to give us', as *The Friend of India and The Statesman* complained in 1880.[9] Moreover, as *The Calcutta Review* cautioned in 1861, the Indian in his turn 'resents as an insult, or suspects as in insinuation, any enquiry into his domestic affairs'.[10] Thus, while 'native' men evidently sought to control their women's sexuality and bodies by shutting them up inside the zenana away from the colonial gaze, the efforts of the Anglo-Indians were geared towards bringing these very women out into the open through the gradual eradication of the purdah system. The body of the 'native' woman thus became the terrain over which the two groups staked out a struggle for mastery. Indeed, the colonial reform programme was so much undergirded by the psychosexual desire to *possess* the body of the Indian woman as it were that in the last phase of the controversy which surrounded the Age of Consent Act (1891) Indian journalists attacked the British for harbouring lascivious intentions behind the facade of the law.[11]

Not surprisingly, therefore, an enormous curiosity prevailed in the mind of Anglo-India regarding the zenana, which the missionary Weitbrecht (1875: 93) defined thus in *The Women of India and Christian Work in the Zenana*: 'What is a zenana? This is a question constantly asked by those who are being aroused to sympathy for their Hindu sisters.' Indeed, the task of disseminating ideas and information on the subject generated a number of studies from around the 1850s to the 1870s, usually by missionaries. As the category of white people with arguably the greatest access and supposedly the closest knowledge of the intricacies of 'native' households, missionaries wrote widely on the subject of purdah and the majority of them constructed a negative picture of it as an oppressive system. Influenced by their description, *The Calcutta Review* in 1861 drew attention to the barrenness of existence, the idleness of women 'doomed to inactivity', the lack of education or access to it and the tyranny of the mother-in-law.[12] Elucidating further on the physical discomforts, missionary accounts of the zenana located it in the darkest, dampest, unhealthiest part of the house. Moreover, architecturally too purdah was seen to signify both 'native' fears for the woman's chastity as well as fears of the woman's own potentially disorderly desires:

> The women have always the worst part of the house assigned [to] them … usually presenting to the eyes of the European the appearance of a prison; for the windows, if any on the outside, are very small and high

> up, so as effectively to preclude the possibility of the women looking out, or of anyone from the outside looking in. (Weitbrecht 1875: 106, 94)

It may not be out of place here to notice some overlaps in the Anglo-Indian projection of the veiled Indian women and the construction of the white colonial woman in respect of a supposed female idleness. Not unlike the memsahib, the *purdahnashin* (women who observed purdah) too were inscribed as idle, whatever may have been the actual household burden they had to bear. 'Idleness and listlessness are also grave defects of the character of Hindu ladies ... they should be well and actively employed', admonished *The Calcutta Review* in 1864, while Weitbrecht remarked on 'the monotony of zenana life' about a decade later pointing out that 'the life of the rich lady is most uninteresting' (Weitbrecht 1875: 44).[13] In the first decade of the next century Flora Annie Steel too remarked that 'they are petty, they are idle; indeed idleness in the women of the towns ... is responsible for much' (Steel 1929a: 162).

As I have argued elsewhere, in the case of the memsahib the question of female mental health in the colony occasionally came up in discursive writings and the white women's susceptibility to fits of despondency, anger, jealousy, nervous breakdown or hysteria was noted (Sen 1997: 371–72). In a curious overlap, Anglo-Indian constructions of the 'native' female too marked a vulnerability to hysteria—echoing some of the 'inscriptions' about the mental health of white colonial women. Thus, Margaret Urquhart in her study of the Hindu purdahnashins of Calcutta remarked in 1925 'the monotony and confinement of the women's lives often result in a lack of nerve control which shows itself in various forms of hysteria', going on to add, 'many Bengali women are noticeably hysterical and neurotic, whatever the cause' (Urquhart 1925: 60, 67). Whether they were *constructed* as being more vulnerable to nervous disorders or whether the reported instances of mental breakdown were socially caused through the stresses that they were subjected to needs to be investigated further and cannot be established with the present data.

A variety of constructs of the zenana are available for that period. For instance, one strand in white women's discursive writings of the late 19th century de-sexualised the harem and domesticated it as an image of the middle-class home.[14] Thus, Mary Frances Billington, the journalist-author of *Women of India* (1895) sought to demystify its lurid aura and called it 'a rather dull place, if anything' (Billington 1973: XII). However, while one missionary opinion located it as an oppressive world under the tyranny of the mother-in-law (Weitbrecht 1875: 43), in contrast Billington (1973: XIII) observed that 'Indian women are not altogether in such a pitiful plight as some of their so-called friends come and tell us'. Most notably, Maud Diver valorised the community behind the purdah ruled by the Big Mother or grandmother. She argued that life behind the purdah was in fact less lonely than that of a single English working woman's and that well-meaning English workers in the zenana had not understood the complexities of the situation (Diver 1909: 165–68). Diver constructed purdah as a female domain with plenty of human communication, generating thereby a dominant myth of a privileged and pristine female space, which even today continues to have wide currency.

Different views prevailed about the origin of the social practice of seclusion. Although some still believed that it was the result of Muslim conquest, from around the 1860s onwards the general Anglo-Indian opinion appeared to trace it to a 'native' distrust of female sexuality and located the custom of purdah as an attempt to control it. *The Calcutta Review*, for instance, noted in 1861 that seclusion had existed for 'centuries even before the rise of Moslemism'.[15] It attributed 'the evils of the zenana' to the 'tyranny and selfish folly' of the 'native' male, who had rationalised seclusion by invoking the uncontrollable sexuality of women, and went on to cite 'Menu's' (Manu's) definition of female sexuality: 'It is the nature of women in this world to cause the seduction of men.'[16] Echoing this viewpoint, Weitbrecht (1875: 104) pointed out that everywhere it *means* the same thing, namely, that women are not to be trusted, but must be shut up as birds in a cage—'must be hidden from the sight of all but their own husbands'.

Prurience and Prejudice: The Myth of the Sensual Indian Woman

A well-established colonial trait found in lands where local women use the veil has almost invariably been to make those behind the veil the object of the white man's sexual fantasy, projecting them as excitingly sensual, subservient and eager to please. Sometimes this results in indulging in near-pornographic fantasising about female sexuality as well as lesbianism behind the veil (Alloula 1987). In a similar fashion, despite Anglo-India's critique of the reported Indian male sexual suspiciousness and tyrannical patriarchy, the purdah's associations with female sensuality fully permeated its own discourse. Consequently, Anglo-India too constructed the zenana woman as dangerously sensual and in need of being sexually contained or reshaped. Thus, at various and different levels their discursive writings foregrounded the languid sensuality of female life behind the veil. For instance, in 1880 *The Friend of India and The Statesman*, inscribing zenana life as full of 'amusements' that 'are indelicate and are utterly unfit to be witnessed by [women]', hinted at these women's moral degradation since it was impossible that 'a woman may see and hear any amount of immoral behaviour and conversation without detriment to her modesty'.[17] Echoing this in the first quarter of the 20th century, Flora

Annie Steel criticised the zenana's 'obsession of sexuality', which had made 'the exercise of the sexual function ... the central topic of lives confined to twelve feet square of roof' (Steel 1929b: 245). Margaret Urquhart too denigrated the 'purdahnashin's too great emphasis upon the purely physical functions' and the 'subtle atmosphere of animality' arising from seclusion, and denounced 'the insistence upon the glories of fecundity', which she claimed to have found in the Bengali antahpur (inner quarters of the home) (Urquhart 1925: 67, 69).

Strictly speaking, Urquhart was writing well beyond the period under consideration in this study, but her views indicate the tenacity of this myth of 'native' female sensuality—a perception that was actually part of a larger Western construction that Indians in general, regardless of gender, were a decadent and lascivious people for whom human happiness consisted 'solely in sexual pleasures' (Steel 1929b: 247). Cited as evidence were Hindu religious worship of male and female phallic symbols, erotic temple carvings and the early sex experienced by girls especially under the child marriage system (referred to by *The Calcutta Review* in 1861 as 'a premature acquaintance with the contingencies of connubial life').[18] Other cultural practices such as polygamy, early parenthood and a marital relationship supposedly based only on a crudely physical need rather than on love or companionship were also referred to. Then again culturally inscribed as sensual was the sari. Initially a single piece of material worn without any other undergarment, it was denigrated for its transparency and invoked as a sign of 'native' female libidinousness and the sensual moorings of Indian culture. In fact, even somewhat earlier in the first half of the 19th century, Fanny Parks, an otherwise enthusiastic admirer of most things Indian, expressed her reservations about the sari that she saw worn by Calcutta zenana ladies:

> On beholding their attire I was no longer surprised that no other men than their husbands were permitted to enter the *zenana* ... the dress was rather transparent, almost useless as a veil ... the form of the limbs and tint of the skin is traced through it. (Parks 1975: 59–60)

However, the opposite opinion was voiced about two decades later by Weitbrecht (1875: 45), who remarked that the sari of 'a Bengali female ... was most modestly disposed ... only a little of her neck and half way up her arm ... could be seen'. By the 1890s Billington pointed out that many Anglo-Indians found these garments '"unseemly", "indecorous", or as I have even frankly heard it called, "indecent"' (Billington 1973: 178). However, displaying the somewhat broader perspective of the metropolitan visitor, Billington was dismissive about Anglo-India's 'pious susceptibilities' and ridiculed their not finding native garments 'sufficiently opaque!' (ibid.).

But only a minority opinion located the sari as a modest garment and till the end of the century the general construction of it continued to be that of obscenity. Indeed, the dress reform movement, which became an intrinsic part of the social reform programme in Bengal around the 1860s and 1870s, and spearheaded by the Westernised Bengali intelligentsia, quite possibly had some of its roots in this English notion of 'decency' (Bannerji 1995: 67–106). At any rate, the guiding principle behind the female dress reform movement, which sited the body of the 'native' woman as its terrain, was a very Victorian concept of female modesty. And the reformed dress, clearly far less suited to the climate and obviously designed on an English sartorial model, aimed at concealing and covering the 'native' female's body. It consisted of a blouse, an under-petticoat worn beneath the sari, along with shoes (Borthwick 1984: 244–48). Clearly based on the feminine role-model provided by the English woman, it demonstrated how the colonisers and their Indian allies participated in a strategy to conceal and suppress the supposed libidinousness of their subject women, and the body of the 'native' woman became the site of a contest between 'tradition' and 'modernity'.

Moreover, the Indian female was sometimes associated with an exotic feminine mystique, the mythical sensuous appeal of the hidden Indian women heightened by reports of their beauty and allure.[19] *The Calcutta Review* in 1861 expounded on 'the beautiful symmetry of their small hands and feet, the clearness of their complexions, and the great regularity, if not exceedingly delicate chiselling, of their features', while *The Englishman's Saturday Evening Journal*, rapturous over a Muslim lady's beauty, wondered in 1876 'whether the Eastern *houris* do not, after all bear away the palm of beauty from Western sisterhood'.[20] But this was by no means a unanimous view and, although by and large men were the targets of attack, women were not always exempt from racist contempt. Nearly a decade and half later *The Friend of India* denigrated the Bengali woman's reported beauty in patently racist terms, sneering that 'her *lota*-crowned head requires a kind of toilet [that] can be seen any day going on in the bazaars or in the monkey's cage in the zoological garden'.[21] Possibly, this kind of racism was linked with cultural shifts and changes, particularly during the last two decades of the century, which included, among other things, the abjuring of all things 'native' including perhaps the concept of female beauty.

One specific Anglo-Indian view saw power in the zenana and discerned within the oppression of the veil a form of female domination over men. In the 1850s Fanny Parks, referring to her experience two decades back, stated 'women have more influence over men in India than in any other country' (Parks 1975: 140). This was echoed in 1861 by *The Calcutta Review*, which pointed out that 'their influence behind the scenes, is not less powerful than western women's', a point it went on to enlarge in 1864:

> She is neither a slave nor a drudge ... as several old and some recent writers would have the European world believe. She, on the contrary, exercises a considerable influence on the domestic and social concerns of the Hindu.[22]

Indeed, this kind of construct that continued to be reiterated, inscribing the tyranny of the purdah women over their menfolk, had several other complex implications besides that of female sensuality. One was the reification of the myth of the effeminacy and effeteness of the Indian male who could be ruled, as Flora Annie Steel put it, by 'feminine despotism' or 'the woman's law', which prevailed in the zenana (Steel 1929a: 162–64).

On the other hand, behind this myth of female purdah power there also lay inextricably intertwined the paradigm of the *devoted* Indian woman. In fact, Maud Diver in 1909 attributed the power of veiled women primarily to their devotion, pointing out that it was 'their worshipful service' that allowed them to 'dominate the men they serve as unveiled women cannot hope to do' (Diver 1909: 145). Indeed, modern scholars today recognise as intrinsic to colonial cultures the coexistence of the twin construct of female sensuality as well as devotion associated with women's power.

In Search of the *Sati*: The Ideal of the Sacrificing Indian Wife

Serving to strengthen this myth of female devotion was the influence of British Orientalism of the 18th and 19th centuries where scholars like William Jones and H.T. Colebrooke had recovered the spiritual and devoted Vedic woman of a noble, historical past. Some of the writings of the mid-19th century and a little later showed a similar interest in the woman of the past such as Speier's *Life in Ancient India* (1856), which, written under the influence of British Orientalist scholarship and specifically Max Mueller's writings, focused on ancient Indian 'women's interests in holy themes' and glorified Maitreyi's learning and her urge to 'contemplate the soul alone since everything is soul' (Speier 1973: 166–67). In a related vein, Clarisse Bader in *Women in Ancient India* (1867) eulogised the 'ardent piety' (Bader 1925: 333) of the Vedic woman and inscribed her as possessing, 'spiritual and ascetic tenderness, complete abnegation of herself, [and] unlimited devotion to her family' (Bader 1925: 333). During this period *The Calcutta Review* too constructed the Vedic woman as noble and spiritual in numerous articles in 1872, valorising 'the development of the spiritual element' in these women and their 'ready moral perception' and attributed this to 'the precepts of the *sastras* [which] were powerful in their influence on the female mind'.[23] This construction of female spirituality and the idea of its relevance in the present was further strengthened in 1880 by the journal when it urged that modern Indian female education 'must be distinctly religious' since woman was 'the moral providence of man'.[24]

The paradigm of the self-sacrificing and devoted wife was underscored commonly by the names of Sita, Savitri and Sakuntala, with *The Calcutta Review* admiring in 1861 'the beautiful story of Savitri' and its 'picture of womanly fidelity'. This view was echoed in 1875 by Weitbrecht who praised Savitri's 'beautifully unselfish devotion to the partner whom she has chosen' (Weitbrecht 1875: 26).[25] Indeed, undergirding this ideal of 'native' wifely fidelity was the image of the woman who makes the ultimate self-sacrifice, the woman who had become a *sati* (the word sati here being synonymous with 'a faithful wife') on the husband's funeral pyre. The practice of sati had of course been banned by legislation in 1829, but even in the past, despite its opposition to widow immolation, the European imagination seems to have been fired at some level by the image of burning women, inspiring horror but, in an attitude full of ambivalences, also some kind of covert admiration (Chakravarti 1989: 31). More so, now that it was no longer seen as such a pressing contemporary problem (although in actual fact instances of sati still did occur covertly), by mid-19th century the practice was inscribed with more ambivalences than ever. For instance, Speier, equated sati with womanly love (Speier 1973: 454) while Clarisse Bader saw the practice as awe-inspiring, noting that while the 'law commanded the woman to identify her life with her husband's', the woman who committed sati 'went further and identified her death with his' (Bader 1925: 332). Behind such a perspective there obviously lay a Victorian outlook that glorified gentle and sacrificing 'womanliness'. It was in keeping with this mid- and late-19th-century gender ideology that the idea of sacrifice and female passivity was valorised as a kind of feminine strength by Urquhart (1925: iv) who observed that 'to be passive ... is to wield the greatest of all force'.

'Chivalric Rescuers': Anglo-India and the Agenda of 'Native' Female Social Reform

As modern scholars have pointed out, the 'native' woman question in fact became a strategic tool of colonial ideology with the 'rescue' of the Indian woman from oppressive social practices feeding into myths of Victorian chivalry, thereby justifying the need for continued colonial presence in India. The social practices that it identified included the problems of female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, female illiteracy and, of course, purdah. Anglo-Indian discourse routinely constructed the 'native' perception of women as degrading in contrast to its own chivalric 'exaltation' of womankind—a theme *The Calcutta Review* etched in 1861, intermeshing it with the agenda of social reform. It attributed concern for oppressed Hindu women to the 'chivalrous sentiments of English men and the benign and elevating aspects of our sublime faith towards the sex'.[26] Some years later in 1868 the same journal constituted the colonial presence in self-congratulatory tones: 'Englishmen have saved the children from the Ganges, the aged widow from the flames and the child-wife from that living tomb, in which she was confined after the death of the sexagenarian husband.'[27]

Colonial race and cultural hierarchies were, however, inflected with ambivalences as Anglo-India's self-perception of superiority came to be complicated, at one level, by a sense of being rejected by the subject people as *inferior*. Indeed, the awareness of the British that from the perspective of caste they were looked down upon as 'untouchables' by Indians, both Hindus and Muslims (Steel 1929a: 74), created a virtual inversion of colonial hierarchies, which had effectively been restructured and reconstituted by the caste system. A case in point was a letter from a 'native' gentleman to *The Friend of India and The Statesman* in the 1880s, which pointed out:

> There are thousands upon thousands even in Calcutta who would consider themselves defiled by shaking hands with a European.... European ladies visiting the zenanas meet with the feeling most strongly from the elderly Hindoo ladies ... loathing from the idea of shaking hands ... or even of touching their garments.[28]

Class too played a role here and the womenfolk of upper-caste/class families of princely or *zamindar* households, both Hindu and Muslim, often perceived the middle-class memsahib as their inferior. Taking advantage sometimes of the white woman's ignorance of the language and the intricacies of 'native' etiquette, these upper-class/caste Indian women would treat them in a subtly insulting manner (Steel 1929b: 166) and, in effect, briefly undermine colonial hierarchies through such behaviour.

Among the issues concerning the Hindu woman, the situation of the upper-caste widow was the one most often highlighted. With sati being banned for nearly a generation now the sympathy was for what *The Calcutta Review* called in 1861 'the hopeless and intensely wretched life of widows', and the debates (found for instance in *The Calcutta Review*) now shifted to the question of widow remarriage and implicitly to the widow's sexuality.[29] It ought to be noted at this juncture that the representations of the 'native' woman in Anglo-Indian discursive writings of this period displayed a large degree of plurality. Thus, missionary writings, even when discussing the Vedic past, concentrated on the present degradation, generally providing a negative picture of social evils. On the other hand, a journal like *The Calcutta Review* focused on works of Orientalist scholarship and sought to recover a glorious past, while in contrast the Anglo-Indian press as a whole barely showed any interest in the 'native' woman, except in the area of female education. For instance, newspapers like *The Madras Mail* and *The Friend of India* especially gave wide coverage to the growth and development of schools for girls during the years 1869 to 1890.

While reform measures in the earlier part of the 19th century had taken the form of legislations banning social evils, by the second half of the century the focus had shifted to the gradual removal of these evils by recasting and reshaping the minds of Indian women through education. Education was perceived as a means to strengthen and shape female morality and equip Indian women to be good wives and mothers. *The Calcutta Review* in 1864 argued that 'education ... need not oppose nature, which has framed her to be a wife and mother' and simultaneously in another article in the same issue urged the importance of 'the connection between education and morality'.[30] In essence, the thrust of this educational effort appears to have been to recast the much-maligned Indian female sensuality of the zenanas with its preoccupations with the body and bodily functions, and rites focusing on sex and sexuality.

Not only was the emergence from the zenana to be the long-term objective of the education programme, but equally importantly the attempt was to help in shaping the Indian 'New Woman' (Urquhart 1925: 148), the Westernised, modern woman who was to be modelled on the pattern of the English (read Victorian) woman. The concept of the Bengali *bhadramahila* (genteel woman), for instance, which came into prominence around this time (that is, the 1860s and 1870s) was, among other factors, a product of the Westernisation of Bengali male reformers. It coalesced the Hindu female's ideal of self-sacrifice with the Victorian lady's ability to cooperate in the furtherance of her husband's career with her moral goodness, basic education and social presence—apart from also being his companion and helpmeet (Borthwick 1984: 56; Karlekar 1991).

We may remind ourselves that Victorian female emancipation movements were at their height in contemporary Britain. Yet, significantly enough, neither by the imperialists nor by the Indian intelligentsia was the 'strong-minded', independent Victorian spinster like Mary Carpenter or Frances Power Cobbe held up as a role-model; instead, the ideal was the Ruskinian notion of the gentle and subservient wife. It is true that Weitbrecht had expressed some initial reservations about the Savitri ideal, since its 'principle of unquestioning obedience ... has brought about the enslavement of women' (Weitbrecht 1875: 26), but in the end even she endorsed the ideal 'of self-denial and ... the cultivation of that meek and quiet spirit' (ibid.) By the turn of the century these attitudes to the 'native' woman's question seemed to be fairly crystallised. Not surprisingly, in a manner reminiscent of the resistance to women's higher education in contemporary Victorian England, university education for 'native' women too was strongly opposed by Anglo-India. For instance, Maud Diver, a great advocate of basic 'native' female education wrote against their higher education. She argued that the 'premature development of mind and body rest upon no solid foundation of physical strength' (Diver 1909: 193), and attributed the purely coincidental early deaths of several gifted, educated Indian women to this. Billington too supported Diver's position (which was also voiced by a Mrs. Wheeler, inspectress of schools in Bengal in the 1890s) that the university-educated Indian women 'become arrogant, are seldom successful as teachers, and frequently develop hysteria and nervous complaints. It is too great a brain effort with no hereditary preparation' (Billington 1973: 34; Diver 1909: 127).

Indeed, this category (albeit numerically small) of Indian women—Westernised, middle-class and educated—remained virtually ignored in much of the Anglo-Indian discursive writings, for example, in the press and journals.[31] Only towards the end of the century in some studies by memsahibs was this class of Indian women saved from textual silence, as in E.F. Chapman's *Sketches of Some Distinguished Indian Women* (1891), which paid tribute to highly educated 'native' women, celebrating the achievements of Chandramukhi Bose, the first M.A. from Calcutta University in 1884, and Kadambini Ganguly, the first Indian woman to graduate and doctor (Chapman 1891: 17–18). Diver's *The Englishwoman in India* (1909: 168–232) devoted an entire section to 'Pioneer Women of India' and valorised the achievements of women like Toru Dutt, Pandita Ramabai and Anandbai Joshi. Nonetheless, she was careful to caution: 'But more than one generation must pass away before the undeveloped brains and bodies of India's women can safely be subjected to the ruthless strain put upon them by spirits athirst for knowledge' (ibid.: 230).

Possibly behind this otherwise studied silence on highly educated Indian women were feelings of insecurity regarding a category of Indians perceived as potentially subversive politically, culturally as well as socially. With the universities of Madras and Calcutta being opened to women even before the University of London (the first B.A. degree being awarded to a woman in Calcutta University in 1883), Anglo-Indians were in no position to patronise this category of women, their worries and insecurities no doubt increased with the entry of the educated Bengali woman into anti-colonial politics at the turn of the century.[32] Yet, as imperial rulers fought with their own colonial anxieties and insecurities, they needed the reassurance of colonial hierarchies—without fears of the subversion that they increasingly located in the problematic, emerging category of the educated middle-class Indian, both male and female.

Anglo-India and the Victorian 'Woman Question'

Before we conclude, we need to address the Anglo-Indian perspective on the 19th-century woman question, an issue that was of such prominence in contemporary England. As we have seen, the colonisers claimed to give to the gender question enormous weightage, inscribing themselves as the great emancipators of Indian womanhood. This indeed lends an even greater significance to the subject and necessitates a brief examination of the issue.

It is striking that in this period the 'woman question', which was generating such passionate debates in the mother country during these very years, was either completely ignored or met with hostility in the Anglo-Indian press. In 1870 *The Englishman's Saturday Evening Journal*, in keeping with its generally conservative stand, ridiculed feminists as masculine women who were 'wild for woman's rights' and inscribed them as 'bold in habits or without modesty in mind'.[33] Twenty years later the same newspaper went on to attack what it described as contemporary metropolitan British 'eulogies in praise of the mental capacity of women' and reasserted that women's intellectual inferiority would increasingly become clearer.[34] In its turn *The Madras Mail*—an otherwise fairly liberal paper—opposed medical professions for women in the 1860s for fear that its 'coarse and immodest associations' would destroy 'a woman's modesty'.[35] In contrast to all this—and a strikingly rare exception—was an article in *The Calcutta Review* in 1870, devoted entirely to the British 'woman question', which actually privileged careers for women. It supported J.S. Mill's views on women's subjection and opposed the idea of 'separate spheres' and regretted that women were discouraged from thinking and 'forbidden to look beyond the home circle'.[36] But the overall discursive writings on the subject were clearly so gender-conservative that it led even Maud Diver (1909: 25) to despair about Anglo-Indian society's reluctance in recognising and accepting 'the modern advance in the intellectual and social position of women'.

Where then did the 'native' woman's uplift fit into this debate on the 'woman question'? What were the collusions as well as contradictions/ambivalences in the interfaces between the colonisers' position on the liberation of their own women back home and their concept of the emancipation of 'native' women? In the 1890s Christina Bremner (1891: 119) voiced a liberal metropolitan point of view, seeing a link between the oppression of 'women in our happy land' and the conditions of women in India. She welcomed the advent of Indian women into Calcutta University, saying that 'the seeds of rebellion have been sown' and hoped that 'presently India, like England, may expect the full corn in the ear' (ibid.: 121). Recent research has focused on the perceptions of British feminists on the emancipation of the Indian woman and their complicated entanglements with imperialism (Burton 1994). However, similar research is wanting on how Anglo-India perceived both the British feminist movement at home and its interfaces with the 'native' female social uplift programme. A scrutiny of Anglo-Indian discursive writings reveals their negative representation of the 'woman question' at home and their fear of its disruptive influence (on white women) in the colony. Indeed, they often cited the women's emancipation movement in England as well as the paradigm of the liberated 'New Woman' in metropolitan England as a dangerous model to be *abjured* in their own programme of 'native' women's social amelioration. Indeed, even Flora Annie Steel—who was marginally associated with a conservative wing of the suffragette movement in England (Burton 1994)—betrayed fundamental contradictions in her approach when she attacked certain strands in the metropolitan women's emancipation movements. In her tirade on the interrogation of the institution of marriage, associated especially with the 'New Woman' movement of the 1890s, she pointed out that in contrast to the emancipated woman at 'home' the Indian woman regarded marriage as a 'solemn religious duty' (Steel 1929a: 166). She lauded this 'native' female devotion to marriage as 'the highest that the world has ever known' (ibid.) Critiquing Western feminist self-assertion, she went on to point out that for the Indian woman marriage was an occasion for self-denial rather than self-assertion. Steel thus held up the 'native' female as an exemplary feminine role-model of self-sacrifice in order to *contain* the self-assertiveness of the Western woman, and made the pronouncement that 'the Western woman has as much to learn from the Eastern woman as the Eastern has from the Western' (ibid.: 165).

This of course meant that the image of the Indian woman was constantly being constituted and reconstituted. While at one level she was *proscribed* for her sensuousness and other alleged 'moral' failings, she was at another level also held up as a *prescriptive* model for passive feminine behaviour. Indeed, the European woman and the Indian often came to be, implicitly or otherwise, set off against one another. Although, as we have earlier seen, it was the memsahib who was generally inscribed as the female role-model for the emerging bhadramahila, yet sometimes this comparison was in fact to the distinct *disadvantage* of the white woman. For instance, in the earlier decades of the century, an Anglo-Indian magistrate voiced a preference for the 'feminine' paradigm as located in 'native' women, whom he described as 'so anxious to oblige' that a person 'after being accustomed to their society shrinks from the idea of encountering the whims or yielding to the fancies of an English woman'.[37]

Indeed, Flora Annie Steel's ambivalent attitude to Victorian feminism sometimes found an echo in the Anglo-Indian press and in the periodical literature of that time. Clearly betraying deeply-rooted anxieties about the contemporary Victorian feminist movement and its impacting upon their own gender hierarchies, Anglo-India sometimes engaged in a discursive exercise devoted to the containment of this feared female assertiveness. Thus, in a curious and contradictory volte-face, Anglo-Indian opinion in fact sometimes went so far as to momentarily valorise certain 'native' social practices that it had all along condemned as oppressive and was indeed engaged that very moment in eradicating through reform. Thus in 1861 *The Calcutta Review*, even while discussing the purdah and other social evils and urging their removal, went on half-jestingly, to inscribe the veil as 'less evil' than the English women's movement, with its 'idea of their rights and privileges'.[38] And nearly two decades later in 1880 *The Friend of India and The Statesman*, even while otherwise sharply criticising the zenana, made the wry observation that it 'would be a desirable institution in some sections of the European community'.[39] Clearly then, embedded within Anglo-Indian perceptions of gender there lay profound contradictions that were rooted in a fear of a threat to patriarchal control in their own culture.

It is of course a well-recognised point today that the colonisers essentially drew upon gender as a tool to further their 'civilising mission' in India and adopted the 'native' female social reform project to advance their larger imperialist design. However, a less well-known feature is that when the patriarchal structures of their own society seemed to be under attack in the light of the women's movement in contemporary Britain, Anglo-Indian anxieties took the form of contradictions and ambiguities towards certain 'native' patriarchal practices (such as purdah), which they now reinscribed in their discursive writings as exemplary. In other words, models of a perceived Eastern female docility were often selectively drawn upon in a process constituting what we may call an 'Indianisation' of the Anglo-Indian female paradigm. As I have argued elsewhere, ideas about what constituted 'decent/indecent' *white* female conduct in the colony came to be redefined in the light of the colonial experience, and commonly accepted Western social practices and female attire often came to be frowned upon (Sen 1997: 369). Noticeably, many of these disapproving voices were those of middle-class white *women* in colonial India—women like Steel—who often themselves participated in this strategy of gender-containment, thereby indicating the complex and even contradictory nature of patriarchal ideologies and their hegemonic hold over the colony.

Notes

1. The term 'Anglo-Indian' is used in its original sense of the British community resident in India.
2. 'Hindoo Female Celebrities', Part I, *The Calcutta Review*, Vol. 48, No. 95, 1869, p. 54. The journal focused on the Indian woman in several issues during the period 1861–91, covering

various aspects like female education and other social reform topics, but mainly concentrated on the position of Indian women in ancient times.

3. The word 'Eurasian' is used in its original sense of a person of racially-mixed parentage.
4. See for instance novels like 'Hafiz' Allard's (1869) *Nirgis: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny,* Flora Annie Steel's (1894) *The Potter's Thumb* or Edmund White's (1898) *Bijli, the Dancer.*
5. *The Pioneer,* 22 October 1880, pp. 5–6.
6. 'Englishwomen in India', by an English Woman in India, *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 8, No. 159, 1885, p. 143.
7. Shirley, 'An Indian Hill-Station', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 81, No. 162, 1885, p. 413.
8. Barring zenana work in the early 1840s in Parsi homes, the first zenana missionary was sent out by the Indian Female Normal School and Instruction Society in 1862. The Female Medical Aid movement started from the 1880s onwards (Jayawardena 1995).
9. *The Friend of India and The Statesman,* 8 September 1880, p. 834.
10. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 316.
11. *Dacca Prakash,* 6 January 1895, cited in Engels (1989: 430).
12. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, pp. 331–33.
13. 'Hindoo Women', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 40, No. 79, 1864, p. 92.
14. However, this was only one strand, and should not be homogenised as an undifferentiated feminine projection of the Oriental as done by Reina Lewis (1996: 130).
15. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 316.
16. Ibid., p. 319.
17. *The Friend of India and The Statesman,* 8 September 1880, pp. 834–35.
18. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 325.
19. In this respect it is difficult to agree with Inderpal Grewal's (1996: 57) generalisation that 'colonised women, and here my focus is on Indian women, were never seen as beautiful in the way English women were believed to be'.
20. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 328; and *The Englishman's Saturday Evening Journal,* Vol. V, No. 44, 9 November 1867, p. 662.
21. The newspaper was questioning a metropolitan English visitor's admiration for the Bengali woman's 'delicate bangled wrists and anklets' and 'her small classic head' (*The Friend of India and The Statesman,* 25 February 1880, p. 162).
22. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 335; 'Hindoo Women', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 40, No. 79, 1864, p. 81.
23. 'Development of the Female Mind in India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 55, No. 109, 1872, p. 57.
24. Edward Nicholson, 'The Education of Indian Women', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 70, No. 139, 1880, pp. 522, 531.
25. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 318.
26. Ibid., p. 315.
27. 'Sutte' [sic], *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 46, No. 92, 1868, p. 261.
28. *The Friend of India and The Statesman,* 21 July 1883, p. 1049.
29. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 343.
30. 'Hindoo Women', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 40, No. 79, 1864, p. 94; and 'Education in Bengal', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 40, No. 79, 1864, p. 467.
31. In all the Anglo-Indian newspaper issues that I saw, I came across only one reference to highly educated women—Pandita Ramabai in *The Friend of India and The Statesman,* 13 February 1883, p. 241.
32. Mrinalini Sinha (1992: 152) points out that by 1883 the roles were almost reversed when, during the Ilbert Bill agitation, it was possible for the *Amrita Bazaar Patrika* to publish what it claimed was a memorial in favour of the Bill by educated bhadramahilas who argued that while many of them were well educated and some even had degrees, there was 'not a single graduate' among the English ladies who were opposing the Bill. That

the memorial turned out to a be hoax did not in any way reduce the validity of the argument.

33. *The Englishman's Saturday Evening Journal,* Vol. 8, No. 31, 30 July 1870, p. 619.
34. *The Englishman's Saturday Evening Journal,* 1 November 1890, p. 1035.
35. *The Madras Mail,* 22 January 1869, p. 2.
36. 'Woman', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 51, No. 102, 1870, p. 259.
37. S. Sneade Brown, *Home Letters Written from India, 1828–41* (London, 1878), p. 17, cited in Hyam (1990: 117).
38. 'Women of India', *The Calcutta Review,* Vol. 36, No. 72, 1861, p. 327.
39. Cited in *The Friend of India and The Statesman,* 22 September 1880, p. 882.

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