Chapter III

MARRIAGE AS CONTRACT?

BRAHMONS AND THE SPECIAL MARRIAGE ACT OF 1872

Introduction

Even as the passage of the Widow Remarriage Act continued to agitate Calcutta’s Hindu society, a new challenge emerged in the early 1860s from the ‘protestant’ Brahmo community. In the nineteenth century Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj emerged as the most representative, institutional expression of the Bengal Renaissance. Starting with the prohibition of Sati, the Samaj provided leadership and crucial support to reformism, pursuing not just religious and spiritual reform, but enthusiastically responding to Vidyasagar’s agenda on widow remarriage and women’s education. It is hardly surprising, therefore, that Brahmos initiated a rethinking of the ideal of the sacramental marriage. Prior to the Brahmo challenge, reformists and traditionalists, however bitterly divided on issues about marriage, agreed on the sacramental nature of the Hindu marriage. A range of scriptural, ethnological and genealogical sources were marshalled from the 1850s to establish the reinvented ideal of the Hindu marriage as integral to a sacral and unchanging tradition of India, handed down from the ‘revealed’ sources of the Vedas. Their understanding also informed legal-juridical interpretation of ‘Hindu’ marriage.

It is in this context, that the Brahmos inaugurated a new debate about the possibility of civil forms of marriage. They mounted a sharp criticism of sacramental Hindu marriage, marked by idolatry and non-consensual elements that denigrated woman and infringed upon the liberty of the individual. Two major issues were involved: first, the identity of the Brahmo community, as part of or outside the juridical definition of Hinduism and, second, the possibility, within a religious/spiritual framework, of forms of marriage that allowed consensual and contractual elements. The Brahmo Marriage Bill,
virtually the only example of an attempt to bring marriage under civil law, further enhanced the significance of 'marriage' as a pivotal issue in these contesting discourses between colonialism and cultural nationalism.

Historical literature on the Bengal Renaissance has characterized Brahmo reformers as avant-garde social reformers. Under the influence of western rationalism and egalitarianism the Brahmos, a group of serious-minded intellectuals, developed a new cultural and religious identity of their own. Founded by Raja Rammohan Roy in the early nineteenth century, the Brahmo Samaj represented an amorphous body of ideals, drawing on Hindu Vedantic monotheism that invoked God as nirguna and nirakar. Unlike the ‘static classicists’, argued David Kopf, Brahmos, a body of ‘dynamic classicists’, drew on history to justify social reform, as they believed that the classical heritage could be appropriated for a society in transition.\(^1\)

However, to the Hindu mind, Brahmoism meant an act of apostasy. Brahmos, gradually isolated from the mainstream Hindu society, were perceived as transgressing traditional social norms. In spite of exerting considerable moral influence, Brahmos had to work in social isolation.\(^3\) In their own lives, they experienced a separation from ancestral home and family, excommunication and in many cases, loss of patrimony. Debendranath Tagore once said, ‘We Brahmos are situated amidst a community which views us with no friendly feelings’.\(^4\) This estrangement was experienced in all social exchanges, particularly in marriage relations, as the Hindus refused to ‘exchange daughters’ with the ‘heretic’ insiders of their own caste-community.

The attempt to formalize a separate Brahmo Marriage Act, underlining their distance from mainstream Hindu society, was perhaps a response to such alienation. In fact, precisely those who rejected traditional marriage rites of all the major religions designed the proposed marriage law. But the issue of colonial legal intervention and the prospect of an Act that would govern all Brahmo marriages invoked serious opposition

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even within the Brahmo community. The community, in the early 1860s, was already beset with differences over maintaining traditional caste rites and hierarchies. In 1865, the issue of whether non-Brahmins could officiate at prayer meetings led to a split between community elders and younger radicals led by Keshab Chandra Sen. The former were called ‘Adi’ Brahmos, while the latter set up the ‘Brahmo Samaj of India’ or the Bharatbarisiya Brahmo Samaj on 11 November, 1865. There were visible differences between the two factions, one led by Debendranath, a Hindu mystic and spiritualist, and the other by Keshab Sen who embarked on an aggressive mission to proselytize and institutionalize the new ‘church’. Opponents of the Brahmo Samaj exposed the logic of their extreme subjectivity as ‘a conjunction of the verb to think’. Dr. Dyson, a Christian propagandist and a critic of Keshab Sen, declared that Brahmoism was what ‘I think, you think, he thinks and they think’. Indeed, at every crucial congregation, notes of dissent raised new questions about the nature of Brahmo ideology. But their differences were never as obvious as it was during the Marriage Bill controversy of 1868-72.

The ideological encounter between Tagore and Sen included the question of state intervention in the domain of religion. While both rejected the government’s characterisation of Brahmo marriages as ‘godless’ and Brahmoism as an indefinable religion, they differed on the crucial issue of legalizing their marriage on the basis of a separate religious identity. The government, facing opposition to the Bill from different parts of India, finally resolved to pass a Special Marriage Act (Act III) in 1872, in a much watered down form. The Act was not a ‘runaway success’ as anticipated by the conservative Adi Samaj of Debendranath. Numbers of Brahmo marriages solemnized under this Act were few indeed.

The period after the Act, 1872-1877, was marked by two opposite pulls within the new Bharatbarisiya Brahmo Samaj. On the one hand, there was a waning of the reformist spirit as Keshab, once the firebrand leader, virtually banished social reform. On the other hand, a radical fervour among a younger section of progressive Brahmos led to celebrate marriages under the new Act. Young Brahmos were open to ‘unconventional’ partners in

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marriage, including prostitutes and widows, and inter-caste marriages. Their contribution lay in drawing in the previously ‘unmarriageables’ within the ambit of the companionate marriage that they espoused as the ideal unit of a progressive society.

The credibility of the Brahmo movement was, however, undermined in 1878, when Keshab Chandra Sen, the chief architect of the Special Marriage Act, arranged a marriage between two minors, his daughter and the raja of Cooch-Behar. In a volte-face, he agreed to a full-fledged Hindu ceremony. The Cooch-Behar marriage does not appear unpredictable in view of Keshab’s growing conservatism, his flirtation with Vaishnavism and his increasing anti-reformist rhetoric. But the Cooch-Behar episode was a major embarrassment to the younger Brahmos, who proceeded to establish their own separate church, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj in May 1878.

Differences regarding marriage was a significant internal issue among the Brahmos, between Debendranath and Keshab, over the Brahmo Marriage Bill, and later the Cooch-Behar marriage, which led to another split in the Church. The quest for alternatives to traditional marriage norms was a tense and uneasy exercise, creating fissures within the reformists. While to conservative Brahmos, marriage became a medium for reconciling Hindu metaphysical thought; to liberals, it was a device to forge new social and cultural identities. The entire process of negotiation was, however, marked by an obsession with rituals, ceremonies and a formal redesigning of marriage. They neither succeeded in jettisoning fully rituals of brahminic marriage nor did they adopt a marriage totally based on consent and compatibility. The more traditional Hindu rituals and ideologies crept back into Brahmo marriages as the nineteenth century drew to a close. By the turn of the century, their moment, one might say, had passed. Brahmos failed to pose any viable social alternatives: in religion, in caste observances, or in marriage. In the case of marriage, the Hindu ideal of a sacrament proved more powerful.

The nature and extent of Brahmo ‘radicalism’ has been questioned by historians. But, even its sternest critics acknowledge that the greatest contribution of the Brahmos was in the field of ‘emancipation’ of women, albeit confined to women from the elite class. They sponsored women’s education and their entry into the ‘public’ domain of

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employment and politics. The Brahmo Marriage Bill, stipulating a minimum age of marriage for women and promoting the ideal of consensual, contractual adult marriage, represented an aspiration towards a more egalitarian gender relationship within marriage. This aspiration failed on many counts. As mentioned earlier, many Brahmos failed to sustain the high ideals of the Marriage Bill, including Keshab himself. Second, the underlying ideal of companionate marriage and a new balance in gender relations was not shared very widely. Apart from a small group of radicals, most Brahmos were unable to accept the ‘license’ given to the new women. Some sections of the Samaj grew alarmed at the prospect of women’s self-determination, education, employment, rights of divorce and remarriage. The basis of male control within the family was threatened by such prospects, despite the fact that the Brahmo vision of women’s ‘emancipation’ remained highly limited, circumscribed by notions of spiritual discipline and social duties. The Brahmo’s new woman, even though anchored in the patriarchal family, offered too radical a break from the familiar past. Keshab Chandra Sen, in his latter, more conservative, phase represented an extreme example of recanting the liberal agenda. But he was not the only one. His discomfort was shared by many others, and there was greater continuity with Debendranath’s more limited agenda. While the long-term influence of the radical few should not be underestimated, the waning of the Brahmo movement showed how powerful the notion of sacramental marriage was among the elite, and how limited was the emancipation of the Brahmo’s new woman.

In the 1970s, historians were prone to dismiss the Brahmo movement as a brief elite phenomenon, limited in range and scope. While much of this is true, Brahmos, especially Brahmo women, have left a long and powerful legacy. The challenge they represented became evident in the response of traditional Hindu society. The vilification of the Brahmos was out of all proportion to their numbers or the extent of their so-called ‘radicalism’. History has judged them as ‘ambivalent modernizers’, ‘somewhere in the middle’ between the westernizer and the nativist. It was their ambiguity and moderation that made the Brahmo movement so vulnerable to the wave of Hindu chauvinism in the era of strident cultural nationalism.

7 Sen, Hindu Revivalism, 29.
Marriage Reform and Internal Discord

Along with issues of religious and social reform, Brahmos were confronted with more mundane questions regarding daily domestic customs and rituals. From the 1860s, these 'domestic' issues gained prominence. Rejection of idolatry was translated easily into boycott of 'pujas' or traditional forms of worship. But God was easier to handle than society. Much graver problem arose with life-cycle rites (dasakarma), which were believed to be long-established custom among upper caste Hindus. Brahmo spiritual philosophy with its emphasis on a single 'formless' God was at odds with customary Hindu rites and ceremonies involving, usually, the yajna or the worship of the sacrificial fire.

Some Brahmos began experimenting with alternative forms of life-cycle rituals. Nirishwar Bibaha (non-deist 'Brahmo' marriage), as christened by Debendranath Tagore, was one significant development. He retained the notion of a 'sacrament', emphasizing rather the spiritual aspect of marriage, but visibly disregarded Hindu shastric achara (scriptural services). On 26 July 1861, the first marriage was celebrated in line with this revised ritual (anusthanpadhdhati) between Debendranath's second daughter Sukumari and Hemendranath Mukhopadhyay. According to Sivanath Sastri, the marriage was the first step towards reform, although it closely followed orthodox Hindu rituals. The marriage was followed by the jatakarma (post-natal ceremony) of Karuna Chandra, son of Keshab Sen. Debendranath officiated in the ceremony, adapting his new code of ritual. Other Brahmos soon followed the examples set by the two leaders.

However, by the late 1860s, a serious difference of opinion overtook the Brahmo Samaj regarding the ceremonial liturgy of marriage. Debendranath, representing mainstream conformists, was loath to disparage the Hindu Vedantic version of marriage, while 'radical' Brahmos, under the leadership of 'the diehard iconoclast', Keshab Chandra Sen, were eager to celebrate non-idolatrous, civil marriages in a 'non-Hindu' atmosphere. Brahmo marriage, they said, must exclude Hindu 'idolatrous content', symbolized by the presence of the sacred stone shalagram as the prime witness. Liberals

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9 Sastri, History, 85.
10 Ibid, 90, 93.
denounced the ritual called *sampradan* or 'gift of the bride', commending rather mutual consent (*sammati*) of the bride and bridegroom, treating them as individuals. They renamed *sampradan* as *bhararpan* or 'charge over'. They condemned the practice of infant marriage (*gouridan*) and the Hindu ban on inter-caste and widow marriages.

The controversy gave birth to an unbridgeable gulf within the Brahmo Samaj. *Indian Mirror*, the organ of the liberals, reported the unprecedented popularity of 'secular' marriages in unlooked-for quarters. In 1864, one such 'secular' marriage was celebrated between Gurucharan Mahalanabish and a Brahman widow, Rukmini. She had escaped from her village and was married in the month of *Chaitra*, traditionally prohibited for Hindu marriages. In August 1864, another momentous marriage took place between Parvati Charan Dass and a Brahman widow, Swarnamoyee. The last one was not merely a widow remarriage but also an inter-caste marriage. These events startled conservative Brahmos and were considered to have led to the split.

By 1865, the Brahmo Samaj was divided into two factions and on 11 November of that year, the *Bharatbarsiya Brahmo Samaj* was formed. While a group of elderly leaders remained close to Hinduism, the others, aged between 18-25 years, veered further away. They fretted against bearing caste marks and the ceremonial *Adi Brahmo* marriage, characterized by Sanskrit verses and recitation of Upanishads. Some of these young men, like Durga Mohan Dass and Dwarkanath Ganguly, proposed to admit their wives and daughters into public life, a cataclysm strongly opposed by Hindus and elderly Brahmos.

After the formal secession, the progressive Samaj celebrated an inter-caste marriage between Prasanna Kumar Sen and Raj Laksmi Maitra on New Year's Day, i.e. 1

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11 Ibid, 96-97.
12 Chanda, *Brahmo Samaje*, 94.
13 Sastri, *History*, 106-115, 134-137. Sivanath Sastri recorded that the new missionaries of the Samaj preached one gospel - 'Act, act, act according to your convictions. Discard idolatry and caste, for they are abominations'.
15 Sastri, *History*, 156; Mahalanabish, ibid, 45.
16 Sastri, ibid, 101-104; Mahalanabish, ibid, 38.
17 Progressive Brahmos demanded equal rights and participation in public life by both men and women. 'Nara Nari Sadhorer Samon Adhikar, Jaar Ache Bhakti, Pabe Mukti, Nahi Jaat Bichaaf'. (Men and women have equal rights. One who has the devotion, will get freedom, irrespective of caste divisions. Sivanath Sastri, *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj*, (Ramtanu Lahiri and his contemporary Bengali society), New Age Publishers, Calcutta, first published 1903, reprint 1983, 246.
January 1866, and according to a much revised ritual. The Adi Samaj, in a retaliatory mood, reintroduced some characteristic Hindu marriage rites like sapta padigaman, going seven steps together with the husband, already forsaken by new Brahmos. Marriage, declared the Adi Samaj, must include homa (worshipping the fire), kushandika (the central part of Hindu marriage that involved changing of bride’s agnate etc.) and saptapadi. They, however, rejected the sacred black stone or shalagram, as it did not figure as an essential part of marriage in the classical past. In his scriptural defence of Brahmo marriage, Anandachandra Vedantavagish furnished another version. Ideally, a Hindu marriage, he said, should consist of seven necessary components, nandimukh sraddha (ceremonial offering to ancestral lineage before starting any sacramental service), sampradaan (gift of the bride), grahan (the act of accepting) kusandika, homa, panigrahan (accepting the hand of the bride by the bridegroom) and sapta padigaman. However, Brahmos, argued Vedantavagish, retained only three indispensable ‘Hindu’ rites, namely sampradan, panigrahan and sapta padigaman and rejected the four others as mere accessories.

After the secession, the Adi’s mission remained primarily religious, leaving social reform to individual inclinations. In response to the radical cry that Brahmoism was ‘catholic and universal’, the Adi Samaj asserted that ‘Brahmoism is Hinduism’. However, it never stood up forcefully against its more ambitious rival except in the case of the Brahmo Marriage Bill during 1871-1872.

As the ‘legal insecurity’ of the ‘secular’ Brahmo marriages became a disquieting issue in the Bharatharsiya Brahmo camp, the bid to fashion a new marriage involved state legislation. The liberals became more anxious when the Advocate-General declared marriages, celebrated according to ‘the unique rituals’ of the Brahmos, as legally invalid. To memorialise the government, Shastri noted, the Brahmo Samaj of India held a public

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18 Sastri, History, 155-156.
19 Kushandika is divided into six segments, first, the agni-sthapana or establishing the fire, second, the asmakramana or treading the stone, third, the saptapadi gamana or taking seven paces together by husband and wife, fourth, gotrantar or changing of bride’s agnate, fifth, bhogana or feasting and the sixth, sindur daan or putting vermilion by the husband on the parting of the hair of the wife.
20 Pal, Nabajugber Bangla, 143.
22 Sastri, History, 119-121.
meeting on 5 July 1868, and Keshab Sen went to Simla to meet the law member, Henry S. Maine. Subsequently, the Native Marriage Bill was introduced in the Viceregal Council, providing for a civil marriage to all non-Christians who refused to be married according to any of the established religious forms.  

The Bill met violent opposition from Hindu members of the council who were joined soon by the landholders of Bengal, Benares pandits and conservative Hindus. The Bill was also opposed by the Parsis of Bombay who feared that the proposed law would encourage heterodox unions within their community.  

David Kopf maintained that the controversy between 1869-1872 over the proposed Act was so ‘violently abusive’ and ‘interlaced with other issues’ that it led to ‘a final and irrevocable split between the Adi Brahmos and the Keshabites’. The Adi Samaj feared that such a law would further alienate their community, already sequestered from the parental Hindu society. The demand for a separate marriage law was, for Debendranath, a ‘reckless’ and ‘improvident’ action. Both Keshab and Debendranath discussed ad nauseum precise ritual modalities of marriage. As Debendranath’s chief concern was to stay within the Hindu Vedic and Smriti-Shastra tradition, he strengthened his case with testimonials from pundits of Kashi and Nabadwip. Keshab Sen’s party, too, won the approval from some renowned Sanskrit scholars.  

The forthcoming marriage regulations, Debendranath pointed out, represented a complete rejection of traditional usage and rituals. It undermined the Hindu lineage system and the very notion of the Hindu family (kula). A Hindu patriarch, Debendranath maintained that (brahminic) genealogical hierarchy formed the foundation of the Hindu family, and every Hindu marriage must be preceded by a ceremonial service to ancestors, called the Briddhi Sraddha. Contrary to the Western ‘civil contract’, there

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23 Ibid, 155-156.
24 Memorial of the Parsees of Bombay Against the Native Marriage Bill, N.R. Raina, Bombay, 1868.
26 Sastri, Ramtani Lahiri, 272.
was no scope for individual consent or acquiescence in Hindu marriage, which was a union between families rather than of individuals.  

Debendranath also argued that the Hindu marriage system was central to the ‘Religious Proprietary Family’, based on religious observances, lineage structures and the extended family comprising several generations of members. The European system, however, resembled the ‘Romantic Proprietary Family’, which was rooted in the romantic love of the couple, individual men and women. The neo-Brahmos, Tagore argued, were moving towards a system, which was somewhere in-between. Their endeavour to extricate marriage from traditional bindings, on the one hand, ran the danger of destroying the existing notion of the ‘Religious Proprietary Family’. On the other hand, they did not contemplate a complete break from the Hindu religious propriety and lineal heritage. The Brahma family, according to Debendranath, was just a refined version of the extant Hindu family. Although the liberals were ideologically opposed to brahmanic caste rules, marriage reform was, in practice, restricted within three upper castes of Bengal—Brahman, Vaidya and Kayastha.

Moreover, the mutual assent (sammati) of the bride and the bridegroom, on which the liberals laid so much emphasis, maintained Tagore, became ultimately subject to their parental, i.e. familial consent or acceptance (anumati). Brahma marriage, in its new guise, stood midway between the ‘contract’ of the Occident and the ‘sacrament’ of the Orient. In spite of proclaiming an overt preference for the so-called emancipation of women, Tagore accused new Brahmos of failing to catch up with the ‘feminist movement’ of the West. There was no sign of any ‘romantic union’ in the Brahma household and the wife hardly enjoyed equal status and privilege. Their new marriages were not promoted as ‘contracts’ and no legal divorce had taken place in a Brahma family.

Even if the new reform was ‘a half-way house’, it was difficult for the Adi Samaj to endorse clauses on divorce, inter-caste marriages or remarriage of upper caste widows. Debendranath feared that the proposed marriage law would destroy traditional

28 Ibid.
29 Ibid, 408.
31 Sen, Hindu Revivalism, 29.
gender relations and familiar patterns and idioms of female behaviour. Certainly, divorce, he believed, would provoke wives to forsake their husbands. His writings, in the *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, revealed a deep anxiety about an impending social revolution in which women, freed from their customary restraints, would seek to dominate men. A world turned upside down!

The cardinal point of discord was the status of women. However, as far as the *woman question* was concerned, the opinion of Keshab Sen, the leader of progressives, was not very different from Debendranath. Keshab endorsed female seclusion and segregation. In one of his sermons in 1874, he warned of imminent social disaster if women were not kept within their *assigned* place. It was only after much persuasion and threats by radicals like Dwarkanath Ganguly and Durga Mohan Dass that he allowed women to sit alongside men in prayer meetings.

Though never in favour of female emancipation, Debendranath, however, allowed his daughters higher education. He did not prevent his daughters and daughters-in-law from performing in private theatres. His sons went many steps further. We find Jnanodananandini Debi accompanying her husband, Satyendranath, to a *levee* at the Governor-General’s house. Jyotirindranath taught his wife horse riding and together they used to go out on horseback. Later some girls of the Tagore family attended school, married late and selected their own husbands.

Yet, the crux of the division in the 1870s was not just a tussle between the Hindu’s traditional woman and the Brahmo’s *new woman*. It revolved round conflicts between its two leaders. For Keshab, the Brahmo Marriage Bill became a purely personal question and a test of his popularity and success among the new Brahmos. Once close to the Tagores in the early years of his life, Keshab gradually estranged himself from the

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32 Debendranath Tagore, ‘*Nirishwar Bibaha*’ (Godless Marriage), *Tattwabodhini Patrika*, Pous, 1789 (Saka), Calcutta, December 1876, 281, cited in Sen, ibid.
33 Sastri, *History*, 168. Keshab Sen had a strong prejudice against university education and science education of women. According to Sastri, there was no easy settlement on the differences between Keshab and radical Brahmos on the subject of female education and emancipation.
34 Sen, *Hindu Revivalism*, 44.
Adi Samaj. Later Dwijendranath and Jyotirindranath, the two sons of Debendranath, emerged as the deadliest enemies of Keshab, both ideologically and personally.  

Even after the Bill was passed, ratifying the Keshab line, the Adi’s resistance to the new marriage did not cease. Debendranath slowly withdrew from Brahmo affairs to Santiniketan, leaving the presidency of the organization in the hands of his more militant successors. The aggressive new generation of the Adi Samaj lashed out against the marriage reform from the pulpit, in public meetings and in editorials in the National Paper and the Tattwabodhini Patrika. The Tagores, now joined by Rajnarain Bose and Nabagopal Mitra (more famous as National Mitra), were firmly committed to Hindu Brahmoism and cultural nationalism.

Bipin Chandra Pal, an erstwhile liberal Brahmo and a nationalist leader, observed that the new nationalism came out into the open early in the 1870s, when Keshab Sen asked for a new marriage law from the colonial authorities. The primary reason for the resistance to the new marriage Act was the ‘undue’ British intervention into the private affairs of the Hindus. The Adi Samaj retorted, ‘it was enough that the British had secured the control of our Government and Administration. They could not be allowed to be the masters of our mind and manners, of our social, religious and spiritual life’.

In his official memorial, Rajnarain wrote that the marriage reform would injure the course of religious reformation India. In ‘An Appeal to the Brahmos of India’, he stated that the Bill in question would impose a new form of marriage in the presence of the registrar, which questioned the validity of all Brahmo marriages previously solemnized. He asked,

Are the nuptial rites nothing, and the form of marriages imposed by the Legislature everything? Is not this a plain insult to our religion? .... Moreover, how can a Brahmo say before the Registrar that he takes a
Rajnarain said, 'for the first time in the history of India, the Government is going to interfere with the religion of a class of her Majesty’s subjects, by rendering a civil ceremony essential for the religious one'. While several other creeds of India, like Sikhs, Nanak-panthees, Vaishnavas, enjoyed the privilege of their special matrimonial rites, Rajnarain asked, 'why should we only, Brahmos, be deprived of it? Never before this time did the Government interfere with this privilege'.

While Keshabite Brahmos leaned towards Christian rationalism, Rajnarain and Adi Samaj proclaimed the superiority of Hindu religion and culture over European civilization. Rajnarain’s lecture in Bengalee on ‘Hindu Dharmer Shresthata’ or the ‘Superiority of Hinduism’ aggressively asserted the supremacy of Hindu religion. Regarding marriage, Rajnarain upheld the caste system for producing good lineages, and cautioned against new-fangled ideas of courtship and consensual marriage. Marriage was the foundation of family, of the human society and, above all, he affirmed, marriage was based on chastity.

Sir Henry Maine, the Law Member, supported legislation, while the Governor-General, Lord Mayo and some of the senior bureaucrats remained hesitant. Mr. Fitzjames Stephen, who succeeded Sir Henry Maine, modified the Bill after receiving the Select Committee’s report. Brahmos, he said, by professing a common religion and known by a common name, adopted forms of marriage different from those commonly in use. Stephens took some of the sting out of the controversy by declaring the Adi Samaj marriage as also valid under law. He, however, emphasized the nature of marriage as a contract. ‘Call this what you will, an institution, a state of life, a sacrament, a religious duty’. Stephens continued, ‘[I]t may be any or all of these, but it is a contract too, and in

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44 Ibid.
45 Ibid.
the very nature of things it always must be so'. Whatever words one chose to apply, he said, 'all the elements of a contract were to be found wherever a marriage occurred'.

By the beginning of 1871, the new marriage law had been decided upon. But, in an unexpected move, on 31 March 1871, the day on which the Act was supposed to be passed, a petition carrying the signatures of two thousand Brahmos from the *Adi Samaj* was sent to Simla to stall the Act. The petition, to begin with, rejected the characterization of the marriage reform as laid out in the Bill. A powerful lobby of Hindu conservatives, who condemned official encouragement of disruptive forces in Hindu society, reinforced the position of the *Adi Samaj*.

In the face of this dual opposition, the government was forced to drop the original Bill. Reverting back to the 1868 position, but with slight changes in nomenclature, they enacted a special Civil Marriage Act for Indians to be availed by all people who did not follow any established religion. The Act required the contracting parties to formally declare that they did not belong to the Hindu faith. The much-revised rituals were now shorn of many 'unnecessary' ceremonies. In the place of *sampradan* or the gift of the bride, mutual vows were introduced, thus making the rite more Christian than Hindu.

Though not called the Brahmo Marriage Act, the Act III of 1872 was accepted by Keshab’s group as their own marriage law.

**Desacralising Marriage: Towards ‘Practical Social Reforms’**

After the passage of the Act III of 1872, Brahmoism gained a distinct legal identity. The Brahmo marriage had now become a civil act requiring, in the first place, a legal registration followed by a mutual declaration by the husband and wife. Immediately after the passage of the Act, Keshab Sen wrote several letters to the Bengal Government, stating that the Brahmo community was rapidly expanding through the addition of high caste Hindu recruits. In May 1872, Sen informed C. Bernard, the officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal, that 'a number of native gentle men are ready to avail

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51 Sastri, *History*, 156.
themselves of the benefits of the New Act.'\textsuperscript{53} He solicited the appointment of Brahmo registrars. However, H.L. Dampire, the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, thought that the appointment of denominated registrars required 'a sufficient number of Brahmos'. As Brahmos remained a small community, not found in all parts of Bengal, it would be difficult, he said, to argue a case for Brahmo registrars across the province.\textsuperscript{54} In a separate report, however, Colonel Henry Hopkinson noted the steady headway by the Brahmo movement in the North-East Frontier and Assam. By 1872, several associations of 'Brahmo Samaj' were established in different parts of the country.\textsuperscript{55}

Contemporary newspapers and autobiographies confirmed the initial spread of the movement. In practical terms, the process of marriage reform started well before the passage of the Act. During 1860-1870, young Brahmo men in different parts of Bengal rescued many kulina women and widows from forced marriages or enforced celibacy, causing a furore in society. When Brahmos helped women escape unhappy or coercive family situations, Hindu guardians often sued them under penal/criminal law.\textsuperscript{56} Gurucharan Mahalanabish, in his memoirs, enlisted a number of court-cases relating to Brahmo marriages.\textsuperscript{57} Baikunthanath Sen married widowed Bhabani while Addweswari, the adopted daughter of Annadacharan Khastagir, was married with Haripada Das. While the new Act had outlawed polygamy, Trailokyanath Chakraborty married thrice, in accordance with the Brahmo rite, and two of his wives were widows from other castes.\textsuperscript{58} Many of these cases involved remarriages of high caste widows from respectable families. Gurucharan, married to a high-caste widow, established a home for destitute widows and kulina women and arranged several marriages. Under the aegis of the liberal Brahmo agenda, Ramdurlabh Mazumdar married Sunila, the widowed niece of Sashibhusan Sarkar, and Bhagaban Chandra Mukhopadhyay married Biraja Sundari, the widowed sister of Debiprasanna Roychaudhry. In 1868, Upendranath Das married a low

\textsuperscript{54} Ibid, from H.L. Dampire, Secretary to the Government of Bengal, to Baboo Keshub Chandra Sen, 28 May 1872, Calcutta, June 1872, 5.
\textsuperscript{55} Ibid, from Colonel Henry Hopkinson, Agent, Governor General, North-East Frontier and Commissioner of Assam to the secretary to the Government of Bengal, Calcutta, June 1872, 5.
\textsuperscript{56} Sastri, \textit{Atmacharit}.
\textsuperscript{57} Mahalanabish, \textit{‘Atmakatha’}, 41-45.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid.
caste Hindu widow, which was celebrated as a significant event by the young Brahmo reformers. The marriage was, said Sivanath Sastri, performed, in part, according to the ceremony recommended by Vidyasagar, and, in part, following the Brahmo divine service. In early 1868, Sivanath arranged the remarriage of his widower-friend Jogendranath Bandyopadhyay with Mahalakshmi, the widowed sister of Ishan Chandra Roy. A major part of the marriage expenses was borne by Vidyasagar. In another incident, Netyakali Gangopadhyay, a Hindu Brahman widow from Sohagdal, in East Bengal, ran away with her three minor children to join the Brahmo Samaj. Even after repeated appeals, she refused to return to her family, and later gave her daughters in marriage outside her caste. Her daughter, Sudakshina Sen, narrated in her autobiography the story of Parvati, a child widow of her village, who was similarly rescued by the Brahmo reformers.

In 1870, Bamabodhini Patrika reported a court-case related to a Hindu widow named Ganesh Sundari who was converted to Christianity by an English missionary, Mr. Vaughan. Her family members first instituted a case in the High Court against the missionary for 'forcible' conversion. The missionary justified the conversion on the ground that Ganesh Sundari, unwilling to comply with the severe austerities of widowhood, wished to leave the fold of Hinduism. However, relatives of Ganesh Sunadri, allegedly encouraged by some young Brahmo reformers, beat up the missionary. Meanwhile, the widow decided to change her religion and this time to Brahmoism. Eventually, some Brahmo leaders dragged the case to the High Court. Ganesh Sundari was provided shelter by Sivanath Sastri, who later arranged her remarriage with his friend Radhakanta Bandyopadhyay.

The Brahmo endeavour to shelter, rehabilitate and arrange marriages for prostitutes was chronicled in the autobiography of Sivanath Sastri. Lakshmimoni, a 13-year-old prostitute from Dacca, was given shelter by Sivanath and was later married to a

61 Ibid, 89-90.
63 Ibid, 34.
64 *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 85, Bhadra, 1870, 6, 147.
65 Sastri, *Atmacharit*, 121-123.
Brahmo reformer. Sivanath also described the story of Thakomoni, a kulina wife, who took up prostitution. She approached Sivanath to protect her baby daughter, as she was anxious to keep her out of her own profession. Golap Sundari Dasi, the famous prostitute-turned-actress of the Bengali theatre, was married to Goshtha Bihari Dutta under the Act III of 1872. Nagendranath Chattopadhyay, a Brahmo liberal, officiated at her marriage. Golap, the writer of the famous play ‘Apurba Sati’, was later rechristened Sukumari Dutta.

Sitanath Tattvabhusan, a contemporary observer, however, noted the limitation of the movement. Though many Hindus joined the Brahmo Samaj with an initial euphoria, he said, as soon as it became necessary to get their daughters and sisters married, they went back to the old society deserting the movement. Many others, having similarly joined the Samaj with great enthusiasm, would, on the death of their wives, marry back into the old society, severing their connections with the Brahmo church.

Notwithstanding such limitations, ‘Brahmo marriages, by the novel ritual attending them’, Tattvabhusan described, ‘drew large crowds of sight-seers everywhere’. Sometimes it was impossible, simply on account of rushing crowds, to hold the celebration in a peaceful manner. Tattvabhusan, however, praised the ‘Baranagar Widow’s Home, run by Brahmo reformer Sasipada Banerjee, who himself married a widow, Girijakumari Sen, and provided shelter to destitute high caste women including widows. The ‘Home’ succeeded in getting at least forty widows remarried. In November 1868, the ‘Home’ arranged a controversial pratiloma marriage between Chandranath Chaudhuri, a Sadgope, with a Brahman widow, Kusumkumari.

Haimabati Sen, a child widow who became a doctor, provided a different account of the ‘Widow’s Home’ run by Banerjee. Haimabati recalled the experience of Tara, a

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66 Sastri, Atmacharit, 152, 158, 170-72.
67 Thakomoni explained that she took to prostitution for the pleasure of ‘monkeying around’. Quoted in Sastri, ibid, 171.
69 Sitanath Tattvabhusan, Social Reform in Bengal, a Side Sketch, Papyrus, Calcutta, 1904, reprint 1982, 139.
70 Ibid, 144.
72 Tattvabhusan, Social Reform, 125, 138-142.
resident of the 'Baranagar Home'. Tara said to Haimabati, 'It is better that you should 

beg for your living than go and take shelter at that place'. Sasi Babu's eldest son seduced Tara, with promises to marry her. However, his liberal parents refused permission and when Tara became pregnant, threw her out of the shelter.74 Haimabati condemned the hypocrisy and pretentiousness of some of the Brahmo reformers. She was later married to a Brahmo missionary, Kunja Behari Sen, who was a merciless wife beater.75

While Haimabati's writings conjured up a darker picture of the Brahmo movement, all unconventional Brahmo marriages did not fail. The reformers succeeded in many dramatic 'rescues' of Hindu women from all parts of Bengal. Invoking a series of court cases between 1870-71, the marriage of Bidhumukhi Mukhopadhyay produced quite a stir in Bengali society.76 Bidhumukhi, an 18-year-old kulina Brahman girl of Dacca, refused to marry a kulina man who already had thirteen wives. Bidhumukhi was living with her mother Durga Sundari who stayed at her natal home like many kulina wives of her time, under the guardianship of her uncle, Shrinath Halder. Bidhumukhi's father was an orthodox kulina who married about twenty wives, and used to visit Bidhumukhi's mother once in eight or ten years.77

Bidhumukhi was educated and having 'advanced opinions on the subject of marriage, refused to comply with her grand-uncle's wishes'. She requested her Brahmo maternal uncles Barada and Sarada Haider to rescue her, as she feared the marriage might take place against her consent.78 Accordingly, she was rescued and given shelter in the house of Durga Mohan Dass in Barishal.79 Bidhumukhi's granduncle demanded her return and filed criminal cases against her uncles. A counter application was filed on behalf of Bidhumukhi in the High Court. On 21 January 1871, at the hearing of the case, Monmohan Ghosh, Barada's counsel, argued that Bidhumukhi was an adult, capable of taking her decisions independently.80 Ghosh won the case. Bidhumukhi converted to

75 Ibid, 347.
76 S.D. Collet, Brahmo Year Book, Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Calcutta, 1879.
77 WBSA General-Ecclesiastical, Proceedings of the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Proceedings 1-5, September 1872, from Baboo Durgamohan Dass, Registrar of Marriages under Act III of 1872 to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, 49-51.
78 WBSA ibid; Bamabodhini Patrika, 87, Kartik, 1870, 6, 211.
79 Gangopadhyay, Banglar Nari Jagaran, 62-63.
80 Ibid.
Brahmoism. In 1872, Durga Mohan along with other Brahmo leaders arranged her marriage.\(^{81}\)

Further obstacles awaited Bidhumukhi. Brahmo marriage legally required the acceptance (anumati) of the parents/guardians of the girl, unless she was widowed or above the age of 21. The officiating Advocate-General, G.C. Paul, pointed out that the Act III did not alter the status of Bidhumukhi who was still 'subject to the General Hindoo law'.\(^{82}\) As Bidhumukhi’s mother found herself unable to come to Calcutta to deliver her consent, her marriage was delayed till she reached the age of 21. On 9 May 1874, Bidhumukhi married Rajaninath Roy who later became the Deputy Controller of Paper Currency of the Government of India.\(^{83}\) Keshab Sen officiated at the marriage, which was celebrated in accordance with Act III.\(^{84}\) Sudakhsina Sen recalled in her memoirs that Bidhumukhi’s name became widely respected and many young progressive Brahmo girls used to look up to her with great reverence.\(^{85}\)

In the 1860s, the young Brahmo activists took up the cause of reform with almost religious zeal.\(^{86}\) *Bamabodhini Patrika* reported that between 1864-1884, remarriage of 50 widows took place within the Brahmo community. Another official report stated that between 1872-1882, 106 marriages were held according to the Special Marriage Act, and 36 of them were widow remarriages. Between 1864-1879, Brahmos celebrated at least 12 inter caste marriages.\(^{87}\)

The Special Marriage Act of 1872 was the first attempt at a civil definition of marriage in India.\(^{88}\) It also introduced two notions, novel in Hindu marriage but characteristic of Muslim marriages, marriage as a ‘contract’ rather than as a ‘sacrament’ and ‘consent’ of the parties to the marriage, both the bride and the groom. These

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\(^{81}\) *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 90, Magh, 1870, 6, 303.

\(^{82}\) WBSA, General Ecclesiastical, Proceedings 1-5, No 2895, from G.C. Paul, Officiating Advocate General to J.W. Edgar, Officiating Junior Secretary to the Government of Bengal, Calcutta, 16 and 20 August 1872.

\(^{83}\) Gangopadhyay, *Banglar Nari Jagaran*, 64.

\(^{84}\) Sen, *Jibansmriti*, 66.

\(^{85}\) Sen, *ibid*, 87; Chitra Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, 41.


\(^{88}\) On 2 May 1889, a Brahmo marriage was celebrated between Snehalata Gupta and Kumudnath Sen, in accordance with the Act III of 1872. A copy of the original marriage registration certificate, including signatures of its three witnesses, Ramesh Chunder Dutt, Ananda Mohan Bose and Bireswar Sen is included at the end of this chapter.
provisions enabled many women to exercise their choice in marriage. Simultaneously the Bill allowed inter-caste and widow-marriage, and restricted child marriage.

However, the attempt to raise the age of marriage was marked by serious discord among the Bharatbarsiya Brahmos. Keshab Sen refused to concede to the young radicals. In April 1871, as the President of the Indian Reform Association, Keshab addressed a circular letter to some of the leading medical authorities in the country, both European and Indian, asking for a statement of their opinion on the subject. While most of the doctors were in favour of age 16 as the minimum marriageable age for girls, some went further to hold it at 20-21.  

Table 8: Opinions of medical persons on the minimum and proper age of marriage for girls

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Minimum Age</th>
<th>Proper Age</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dr. Chandra K. Day</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nabin K. Bose</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A.V. White (Bombay)</td>
<td>15/16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mohendra Lal Sircar</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tumiz Khan Bahadur</td>
<td>16</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Norman Chevers</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D.B. Smith</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18/19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ewart</td>
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<td>18/19</td>
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<tr>
<td>Frayer</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>18/19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S.G. Chakraverty</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atmaram Pandurang</td>
<td>20</td>
<td></td>
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</table>


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89 Sastri, *History*, 158.
Keshab Sen, however, did not agree with the majority medical opinion. He accepted age 14, recommended by Dr. Charles, as ‘the starting point of reform in this direction’. The Act declared that no marriage should be performed ‘until the bridegroom had completed his 18 year and the bride her 14 year of age’. On 30 September 1871, in his famous speech at the Town Hall, Keshab said, ‘... it would be expedient to follow the provision in the Bill which makes fourteen the minimum marriageable age of girls, leaving it in the hands of time to develop this reform slowly and gradually into maturity and fullness’. But the young followers of the Samaj refused to be restricted by the decision of Keshab in the pursuit of personal and social freedom. They pledged not to marry (if they were unmarried) before the age of 21, nor marry a girl under the age of 16.

The period 1872–1877 witnessed Keshab’s transformation, much to the discomfort of the young Brahmos. He became increasingly self-assertive and intolerant of dissent. The reformist spirit of the Samaj was in the decline as Keshab steadily disassociated himself from educational and institutional activities. The church became divided on the question of ‘female emancipation’. While Anandamohan Bose, Durga Mohan Dass and Dwarkanath Ganguli set up Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya and started journals like Abala Bandhab to promote ‘practical reforms’, the Keshab faction condemned these ‘highly revolutionary’ ideas, which sought ‘to unsex women’ endangering society. Sivanath Sastri’s Samadarshi Party, alarmed by the hero-worship by Keshabite missionaries, criticized the lack of constitutional forms and methods in the management of the church.

At the beginning of 1877, when Keshab moved away from social reform, the spirit was running high among progressive Brahmos. The latter battled against idolatry and religious prejudices and also against early marriage that was ‘eating up the vitals of the country’. They sought abolition of child marriage. The Brahmo Public Opinion was to declare a few months later, ‘if Brahmoism had for one of its objects the social regeneration of this country, then we say, the abolition of the obnoxious custom of early

90 Ibid, 158-159.
92 Pal, Memoirs, 314.
marriages had been its aim, and from the very beginning'.

It was, however, an incidence of child marriage within the Brahmo community, organized by no less than its leader Keshab Sen, that undermined the Samaj and the cause of marriage reform, leading to another split in the movement.

**The Cooch-Behar Marriage Divides the Samaj**

‘My birth was always remembered in connection with a storm which occurred when I was six days old, a most important time for a Hindu baby’, Sunity Debi, Maharani of Cooch-Behar and the daughter of Keshab Sen, recalled in her autobiography, ‘perhaps people will think the stormy weather in the beginning signified a stormy future for me’.

A storm did indeed cause turmoil in the Brahmo movement on the occasion of her marriage, famous as the Cooch-Behar marriage. ‘We are continually reminded in the textbooks on Bengal renaissance’, maintained David Kopf, ‘that the exciting cause for the schism between the Sadharans and Keshab was precisely the issue of Keshab’s hypocrisy in marrying his sexually immature daughter to a polygamous, idol-worshipping, jungly Maharaja of Cooch Behar’. Was the Brahmo social reform movement shattered by this single lapse of its veteran leader? Or did the Cooch Behar marriage provide radicals an opportunity to break away from Keshab’s highhandedness and assertive authority?

The Brahmo Year Book of 1878 noted that the marriage marked an epoch in the history of the movement. ‘A sad epoch, indeed’, in the history of the Brahmo Marriage Movement, which was ‘full of such heroic episodes’, maintained S. D. Collet. That its own minister dealt the fatal blow was doubly dismaying, she said. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, when Brahmoism had ‘taken deep root in Indian society’ came the ‘astounding announcement’ from its leader Keshab Chandra Sen that his 13-year-old daughter was getting married to the minor Maharaja of Cooch-Behar.

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The most ‘astounded’ were the various groups among Brahmos, the Female Emancipationists, the Constitutionalists, the Secret League, the Five Lamps, which represented the more radical reformists, committed to democratisation of the movement. They joined together in protest against the proposed marriage. Sasipada Banerjee, Shib Chandra Deb, Durga Mohan Dass and Anandamohan Bose registered the first protest. A protest letter by twenty-three Anushthanik Brahmos of Calcutta stated that the ‘well being of the church depended to a considerable extent on the personal attainment of the individual actions of Keshab Sen’. The infringement on his privacy (of marriage) was justified, as ‘we should be failing in our duty if we remained silent on this critical occasion’. The letter listed some objections to the contentious marriage.

First, early marriage was looked upon as a sin by Brahmo reformers. Keshab Sen was marrying off his daughter when she was below fourteen. Secondly, the minimum marriageable age for men had been fixed at 18, whereas the prince of Cooch-Behar had yet to complete his sixteenth year. This marriage between two minors, protesters said, could not be regarded as marriage at all. The reformer had decided to ‘make over to one child the charge of another child’. Further, religious ceremonies of the proposed marriage did not follow the provisions of the Act, which were avowedly non-Brahminic and non-idolatrous. If celebrated according to pure Hindu rites, the marriage could hardly be looked upon as Brahmo. The Act III categorically prohibited polygamy. But Keshab was allying himself with a family in which polygamy was customary. The prince and his family were never known as Brahmos and they had not taken any interest in the Brahmo movement, so far.

Protesters then appealed to Keshab Sen, ‘a religious father—specially a father like yourself—should attach greater importance to the religious and moral interests of a daughter than to considerations of wealth or rank’. The protest letter repeatedly asserted that ‘we regard early marriage as a hateful custom and we look upon it as a sin for parents.

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100 Ibid.
to be concerned in such marriages. In conclusion, we entreat you not to proceed with this match, and thereby avert from our Church great future injury.\footnote{Ibid.}

Ostensibly, however, Keshab waived the conditions of the Act of 1872 in consideration of the acceptance of the Brahmo Samaj as the state religion of a Hindu principality. The deficiency in the age of bride and bridegroom was considered a price worth paying for the spread of pure theism in the native state of Cooch- Behar. On the contrary, protesters said, material gains from the marriage were not negligible. In 1863, Maharaja Nripendra Narain Bhup, the bridegroom, succeeded his father, Maharaja Narendra Narain. With the termination of his minority, he would reign over a province of 1307 square miles, which, at one time, contained the whole of kingdom of Assam. The marriage that struck a blow at the new religious movement ensured that Sen’s child would become the wife of an Indian prince of some importance.\footnote{‘A Serious Crisis in the Brahmo Samaj of India’, \textit{Indian Daily News}, reproduced in \textit{Brahmo Public Opinion}, 28.}

\textit{Brahmo Public Opinion}, thus, reproached,

\begin{quote}
{[T]}he word preached must be verified by the word practiced. Very dazzling, we confess, is the offer of the hand of a prince; but very appalling, in this case is the price to be paid.\footnote{\textit{Brahmo Public Opinion}, 1878-79, 29.}
\end{quote}

Protap Chunder Mozoomdar and Gour Govinda Roy, two loyalists of Keshab Sen, however, immediately repelled the accusation of avarice. In defence of the Cooch-Behar marriage, they proclaimed that the marriage had not been entirely in accordance with Keshab’s wishes. If any wrong was committed in course of the proceedings, he was ready to protest against it ‘as openly and loudly as any other Brahmo’. The minister was, in fact, indifferent to his daughter’s marriage. He did not go out in search of a suitable match, they said. By an unforeseen course of events the proposal was placed before him. He took the circumstance as ‘providential’, and without hesitation dealt with it as such. The defence maintained, ‘Is this thing right or is it wrong?... His heart said it was right, and circumstances proved that his daughter’s future husband was brought before him providentially’.\footnote{Protap Chunder Mozoomdar and Gour Govinda Roy, ‘An Address to the Brahmo Public of India’, cited in Sastri, \textit{History}, 571. Also produced in Ghosh ed., \textit{Shibchandra Deb}, 325-338.}
Keshab Sen, said his supporters, was led to arrange the marriage following a 'Divine Command' or direct command of God (Adesha). Sivanath Sastri refused to accept the story of 'divine providence', since before the proposal was made to Sen, the bridegroom's party had approached three other Brahmos of Calcutta who had refused to accept the condition of a Hindu marriage ceremony. 'Would it therefore be said that God went abegging from door to door and finding others unbending he came to Keshub Chunder Sen!!!' He wrote with biting sarcasm,

\[W\]hen the new marriage law was passed, it was said to have come direct from the hand of God and now when marriages are celebrated in contravention of the provisions of the marriage law, it is said to have received the sanction of the same God. Babu Keshub Chunder Sen on earth has made God restless in heaven.\(^{105}\)

The first proclamation of the marriage came as a formal betrothal. In her memoirs, Sunity Debi held that nothing was settled until 27 January 1878. It was not her father, but Lord Ulick Browne who solicited her hand for the prince. It was the British authorities, she argued, who were responsible for settling details of the ceremonial.\(^{106}\) British guardians of the young king repeatedly assured Keshab in a series of letters that the Rajah had expressed 'his distaste to being married at all' because he knew that he was not to be permitted to live with his wife at once. As the prince was going to England to finish his studies, his guardians wanted him to marry before he left for England. 'In fact', authorities in Cooch-Behar declared, 'the marriage will not be a marriage in the ordinary acceptance of the term but a solemn betrothal'. Sunity wrote, 'this letter by the British government smoothed away all my father's objections. This way the age difficulty vanished'.\(^{107}\) Ironically, however, Sunity Debi chose to describe the chapter on her betrothal as 'Marriage' and the prolonged negotiation and her crucial interview with British authorities, deputed by the Maharaja's estate, as her 'Romance'.\(^{108}\)

Denying the charges against her father, Sunity argued that her marriage was a 'romantic union'. It was neither wealth nor reputation, but commitment and love for the young prince that apparently prodded the young girl to overlook 'trivialities of the

\(^{105}\) Sivanath Sastri, 'Is this a Brahmo Marriage?'; Jadunath Chakravarti, 'The Fall of the Founder of the Brahmo Samaj of India', reproduced in Brahmo Public Opinion, 1878, 54.
\(^{106}\) Sunity Devi, Memoirs, 74-78.
\(^{107}\) Ibid, 55-57.
marriage’. Once she confessed to her sister, ‘one thing is certain, I shall not change my religion. Yet, Bino, I love the Maharaja and will marry no one else’.109

While Keshab was anxious about ceremonial details the government initially had promised to concede to some compromises. Later, however, Godfrey T. Dalton informed Sen that the marriage would have to avoid every ‘unnecessary display of Brahmoism’. Dalton wrote to Jadab Chandra Chuckerbutty, the magistrate of Cooch-Bihar and also the chief negotiator of the marriage,

[I]n marrying a Brahmo girl the Rajah makes a great concession to enlightened ideas, but it is most desirable that this connection should be softened as much as possible... at Cooch-Behar and elsewhere, [people] are still wedded to the old superstitions, and... would look with horror upon any departure from the old Hindu formula.
I was, therefore, to dissuade Babu Keshab Chundra Sen from bringing with him any of those who might be called his followers. In fact, we can not permit any Brahmo demonstration whatever... a single speech... relating to Theism versus Idolatry will not be permitted.
So far as possible, not only Hindu customs, but also the ideas and even the prejudices which arise from these customs must be respected.110

Finally, a compromise was reached between the Cooch-Behar state and Brahmos of Calcutta. The intended marriage, it was said, should include adhibas (the ceremony on the previous day of marriage), Brahmo Divine Service, bagdan (betrothal), and rituals performed by women in the andarmahal like stri achar, barana, svastivachan and kshamagrahcma. It must also include sammati (consent), sampradan (gift of the bride), varadakshina (the ceremonial offering of the bridegroom price), udvaha pratijna (mutual vows) and prarthana (prayer). It was also settled that neither the bride nor the groom would take part in any idolatrous ceremony, that no image of God, no fire, no ghats (earthen pitcher, symbolic of idolatrous worship) would be kept at the place of marriage, that no mantras that were not agreed upon would be recited.111

On 9 February 1878, Indian Mirror came out with the formal announcement of the marriage. On the very same day, the protest letter carrying signatures of twenty-six

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108 Ibid.
110 Ibid, 63-65.
Brahmos was handed over to Keshab Sen, who trampled it under his foot. On 25 February 1878, the bridal party left for Cooch- Behar with the pomp and extravagance usual to the marriage of a prince. ‘It seemed ages before we reached Cooch- Behar’, Sunity described, ‘that reduced our spirits to zero’. After reaching Cooch- Behar, she said, surprisingly, the state officials were still found devising a postponement of the marriage. ‘After a long delay’, Sunity said, ‘I was told to get ready. I was draped in a pretty sari and went in one palki’. As she approached her ‘future home’, said Sunity, though ‘outwardly calm’, she was a ‘very scared, miserable little girl’. She was greeted with a ceremonial welcome (varan) in the zenana quarter of the Cooch- Behar palace. She was tired and nervous among a great crowd of women who made various comments on her appearance.

However, many surprises were sprung upon the bridal party as the ceremony at Cooch- Behar openly violated Brahmo ideals. Keshab found himself ‘absolutely helpless’, when the wedding was held according to the ancestral custom of the Raj. For his visit to England, Keshab was held an outcast and was not allowed to give away his daughter. He was not even admitted into the bibaha mandap or the place of marriage. His brother, Krishna Bihari, was asked to perform the sampradan. All the orthodox Hindu marriage rituals were observed, including the installation of the shalagram, with due observances of the rules of caste. No Brahman who had renounced his sacred thread was allowed to officiate or to participate in the marriage. Protap Mozoomdar, the Assistant Secretary to the Brahmo Samaj, wrote that on the one side was the government and on the other the queen, the mother of the young Maharajah. Caught in between, Keshab was unable to influence the course of events.

Sunity described that on the day of her ‘wedding’, she ‘had to go through a host of trivialities before the actual ceremony’. Sunity’s grandmother, Saradasundari Debi, who accompanied her granddaughter to Cooch- Behar, also narrated the grand occasion.

114 Ibid, 68.
117 Ibid.
118 Cited in Ghosh ed., *Shib Chandra Deb*, ibid.
119 Ibid.
She recollected that the wedding morning started with a big bang, with a majestic ‘gaye halud’ (the ceremony of anointing the body of bride and bridegrooms with turmeric). ‘Then there was the Maharajah’s nandimukh service; lines of fishes coloured with vermillion were placed before the ground’. ‘Maharani was with me, all along’, said Saradasundari. When she refused to give the royal priest a token sovereign, ‘the grandmother of the Maharajah gave away the coin on her behalf, taking it from Sunity’s hand’. By this rite, Brahmo reformers accused, Sunity was expiated of apostasy and readmitted into Hinduism. According to Saradasundari, Keshab gave away his daughter by a theistic divine service. The king’s party performed the homa. Besides that single lapse, said Saradasundari, ‘over and above, it could be called a perfect Brahmo marriage’.

Protests against the Cooch Behar Marriage were on two grounds, first, the minority of the bride and groom and, second, the performance of full-blown idolatrous ceremonies. Sivanath Sastri’s ‘Ei ki Brahmo Bibaha?’ (Is this a Brahmo marriage?) reaffirmed that the Hindu ceremonies like briddhi Sradha and nandimukh were performed while the Brahmo divine service was performed in haste and in an obscure corner. The marriage vows taken and the instructions given remained subdued. Furthermore, the bridegroom had to be present at the time of the homa. As in other royal marriages, dancing (bai-dance) and other accompaniments were allowed. Jadunath Chakraborty further pointed out that a Brahman priest read out the marriage ritual and there were ghats and symbols of Hurgowri (Idols of God Shiva and Goddess Durga) at the place of the marriage. Moreover, the Brahmo bride was forced to commit expiation before marriage.

Reacting to these criticisms, Sunity Debi wrote,

[M]any of my father’s followers insisted that my marriage had been performed in accordance with Hindu rites. Yet it was not an idolatrous one, and I often wonder why the British Government never publicly defended my father and declared the truth. For the Government was most anxious for the Maharaja to marry me, and could easily have made the case to the public. However, the marriage was now an accomplished fact. I was Maharani of Cooch Behar, and it was left for

120 Ibid.
121 Sastri, ‘Is this a Brahmo Marriage?’, 54
me to prove the success and failure of the first Indian marriage which had defied traditional custom.\textsuperscript{123}

In *The Inquirer*, on 8 June 1878, Protap Mozoomdar strongly asserted, whatever be the conditions of the Brahmo Marriage Act, Keshab Sen’s mission was greater and he was not bound by ‘petty restrictions’. The Marriage Act certainly embodied many principles binding upon Brahmos ‘who marry under ordinary circumstances’. However, Mozoomdar wrote, ‘to insist upon technical conformity is to enforce upon a social and moral slavery’. In his words,

\begin{quote}
[Early marriages, he [Keshab] does not condemn, if these do not transgress the laws and limitations of nature; late marriages, he does not uphold when it is nothing but the love of animalism that introduces and promotes them…. Ceremonies are but the ornaments and drapery of social relationship. Idolatrous absurdities we discard on principle…. Such ritual...would impart impressiveness, effect, sanctity and the nameless aroma of national (identity) antiquity to our marriage.\textsuperscript{124}
\end{quote}

Mozoomdar continued, ‘in the light of the above principles’, Cooch-Behar marriage was an ideal Brahmo Marriage. ‘Kuch Behar is an independent State’, he said, ‘where the said Act is not in force’. As the Act III was useless, unavailing and inapplicable to the present case, it was set aside. Secondly, even before the Cooch-Behar marriage, the Minister had solemnized many marriages where the ages of the girls ranged between 11-13.\textsuperscript{125} Mozoomdar further affirmed that ‘the model of European marriage does not apply to this country as regards age, or courtship, or rites, or domestic arrangements. We want to remain *Hindus* with such modifications only upon the old usages as become morally and religiously necessary’. As Keshab Sen did not sermonize any ‘social ideal’, ‘cut and dry’, in social matters such as marriage, he preferred to leave the field of operations as wide as possible.\textsuperscript{126}

Mozoomdar’s counterclaim led to an open indictment from Brahmo liberals. Apart from a tedious debate over marriage ceremony and ritual, the contention was the age of marriage. Protesters pointed out that a few years before the Cooch Behar marriage, when the second daughter of Rajnarain Bose was married at 13, *The Mirror* declared

\textsuperscript{123} Sunity Debi, *Memoirs*, 73.
\textsuperscript{124} Extract from *The Inquirer*, June 8, 1878, produced in *Brahmo Public Opinion*, 1878, 98.
\textsuperscript{125} ‘Address’, cited in Ghosh ed., *Shib Chandra Dev*, 335.
forcefully that, 'an idolatrous marriage is far more allowable than one in which the most unnatural outrage is offered to the harmless infancy of our little girls'.

Keshab Sen, who once advocated a higher age of marriage for girls, now declared ‘certain physical development’ the standard marriageable condition for Brahmo girls. ‘This is the sad logic of expediency!’, asserted Brahmo Public Opinion, to ‘bow to such logic of your ideas would be revolting to the higher notions of marriage’. Moreover, ‘as the Brahmo Samaj acted as a reforming agency in social matters, abolition of early marriage could not remain ‘apart from religion’, but ‘a part and parcel of Theism’.

The fall from the lofty idealism of the movement, which owed so much to the personal magnetism of Keshab Sen, came as a blow to the Samaj. It provoked almost universal disapproval from his followers all over the country. Bipin Chandra Pal wrote of a resolution against the Minister’s decision moved by Sitanath Dutta (Tattvabhusan). It pointed out that the infringement of Act III of 1872 would prove disastrous for the rising generation of Brahmos. Secondly, such a step would seriously compromise the character of the leader of the Church and, thirdly, the fact of giving in marriage to a person who was never known to be a Brahmo would lead young men to attach secondary importance to religious faith in matters of matrimony.

The Cooch-Behar marriage proved a major embarrassment for the Brahmo movement as a whole. It lowered the Samaj in public estimation. ‘The Brahmo Samaj rose with Keshub Chunder Sen;’ wrote Sivanath Sastri, ‘with him, perhaps, it has gone down in public regard’. With a deep sense of shame, Sastri regretted that Brahmos, the standard-bearers of the new faith, failed to prove worthy of the trust reposed in them. In hindsight, however, the marriage controversy provided a well-timed opportunity for the disgruntled young leaders who were disaffected with Keshab’s arbitrariness. Different branches scattered over India decided to shut the pulpit of Brahmo Samaj to Keshab Sen. A split was clearly the only solution. On 14 May 1878, in Indian Mirror, Protap

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126 P.C. Mozoomdar, Extract, The Inquirer, 8 June 1878, Brahmo Public Opinion, 98.
127 Indian Mirror, 1 April 1867, reproduced ‘Has the Brahmo Samaj A Social Ideal’, Brahmo Public Opinion, 95-96.
128 Brahmo Public Opinion, 2 May 1878, 57-58.
129 Pal, Memoirs, 336-337.
130 Ibid, 338.
131 Sastri, History, 193-194.
132 Chanda, Brahmo Samaje, 194-199; Pal, Memoirs, 339-341; Sastri, Atmacharit, 188.
Mozoomdar declared that ‘an essential identity of conviction and faith’ held all Brahmos within an all-inclusive church. On the very next day, however, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj was officially established. On 19 February 1879, in Sunday Mirror, Keshab Sen accepted the separation. In an article entitled, ‘The Church Cleansed’, he proclaimed that ‘the winnowing fan, the Cooch Behar marriage, has done and is doing immense good to the Brahmo Samaj by removing the chaff from its membership’.

**Rehabilitating the Brahmo Marriage**

As the century drew to a close, differences among three factions of the Brahmo Samaj became sharper. Each section of the Brahmos followed separate codes of conduct in their domestic and social lives. Adi Brahmos clung to the revised Vedantic rites; the Sadharans stressed more on social ideals, emphasizing the issue of consent, companionship and proper age of marriage. While the Adi criticised the Sadharans for being too radical to be socially beneficial, the Sadharan Brahmos considered the former too conservative for real progress.

But, so far as Brahmo Samaj of India led by Keshab Sen was concerned, the difference was not one of degree but of kind. According to David Kopf, differences between the progressives and Keshab had appeared already in 1872 when they disagreed about the statutory age of marriage in the Act. The key division continued to be regarding female emancipation. In 1878, Sivanath Sastri emphasized the centrality of the woman question in the Brahmo reform movement, ‘To the Brahmo Samaj the question of female emancipation has not come as a mere partner of social reform. It is involved in its religious principle’.

However, even within the Sadharan Samaj the new woman remained circumscribed by notions of spiritual discipline and conjugal duties. On 27 June 1878, the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj celebrated the marriage between Sarala Dass and Prasanna

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Kumar Roy. The marriage, hailed as a ‘love marriage’, was represented in the pages of the *Brahmo Public Opinion* as an ‘exemplary Brahmo marriage’. It was celebrated in a theistic fashion where the bride’s father Durga Mohan Dass ‘gave away’ his daughter in the presence of God. At this first ‘Brahmo love marriage’, Durga Mohan said, ‘Let the people of Bengal see that the principle of freely choosing each other for husband and wife, the principle on which you have today been initiated into the mysteries of domestic life is the only true and approved way to obtain pure conjugal happiness and connubial bliss’. Dass advised the couple that the bond of marriage was ‘the holiest and the most responsible bonds of life. There is no other relationship in this life which is closer than that established between you today’.

The homily of the Brahmo father on the future wifely responsibilities of his daughter bore striking affinities with the ideal of Hindu wifehood, *pativrata*. He advised,

> [D]ear Sarala, today a very heavy responsibility is thrown upon you. Now you are the mistress of a house. ...Frugality is the first duty of a housewife, without it, the house becomes cheerless and forsaken by the goddess of wealth. Be meek to venerable relations, affectionate to other relations and friends, kind and gentle to servants and dependents and courteous to all. In weal and woe be you ever the companion of your husband.

To the bridegroom, Prasanna, the advice was extended in a different manner.

I hope you will not fail to make her (Sarala) worthy of you. You should therefore be always forgiving to her; her faults you should forgive. According to the state of our country, the husband has to perform the duties of a teacher and instructor; in this respect you are rather more fortunate than many.

Anandamohan Bose, officiating at the marriage, said in his sermon to the newly wedded pair, ‘Show in your lives by action how the lives of Brahmos and Brahnikas ought to be formed’. From this exemplary marriage, he envisaged, ‘hundreds of men and women will be attracted to the life of a Brahmo—a moral life’.

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137 *Brahmo Public Opinion*, 1878, 79.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Ibid.
141 Ibid.
Some Brahmo wives attained such an ideal of ‘sacrificing and supporting wifehood’ with perfection. Abala, the second daughter of Durga Mohan, relinquished her studies to marry Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose, the eminent scientist. On 7 September 1884, on the occasion of the marriage of Tarala, her father Bhuban Mohan Dass declared in his sermon, ‘after 16 years of careful upbringing, today I am handing you over to a suitable man’. ‘I wish your heart should always follow his. Never for a moment should your heart drift towards the other way, opposing his will. .... Then you will understand that your husband is the supreme lord of your heart’. The ideal of wifely devotion permeated the Brahmo companionate marriage. Dass said, ‘It is very difficult to be a (perfect) housewife. Housewifery requires religiosity, education, perseverance, sacrifice, intelligence, prudence, love, devotion, sincerity and an overall fulfilment of character. I don’t know what she does not require. She deserves each and every attribute under the earth’. Durga Mohan concluded by saying, ‘Don’t ever think of the great chaste women you have come across in history, Ramayana, Mahabharata, novels and fictions as mere images of imagination. Always try to emulate their ideal (in real life). May God, the Supreme Power be with your side’.¹⁴³

*Bamabodhini Patrika*, a leading woman’s magazine edited by Brahmo liberals, published a series of articles upholding the ideal of a sacrificing, devotional wifehood.¹⁴⁴ Ishan Chandra Basu’s *Nari Neeti* (Ideal of womanhood) declared to the new Brahmo wife, ‘You are the wife, the mother of his (your husband’s) children, the keeper of this house... and the follower of the husband in his entire course of life’.¹⁴⁵ In his *Stridiger Prati Upadesh* (Advice to women), Basu enunciated steadfastness of a wife who was required to serve her husband without any expressed sexual desires.¹⁴⁶ In 1899, upholding the Brahmo ideal of consensual and companionate marriage, Ananda Chandra Mitra, however, wrote, ‘the *Shastra* says the woman is the living deity of the house and poetry goes to hail her as the better half of a man. In reality, the man becomes the real thing,

¹⁴³ Ibid.
¹⁴⁴ *Nari O Paribar, Bamabodhini Patrika*, translation mine.
relegating the woman into his mere shadow'. Mitra condemned the practice of *sampradan* or the gift of the bride in marriage. This ritual denigrated woman, he said, as if she had been rescued, gratified by, or burdened upon her husband. The act of marriage meant, Mitra argued, handing over a helpless female deer to a mighty elephant.147

Apart from theological debates, another distinctive feature that characterized the marriage among the *Sadharan Brahmos* was refashioned attires of Brahmo brides, who now looked more 'Christian' than 'Hindu'. The experimentation with sartorial fashion started with Jnanodanandini Debi and from the house of Tagores. Discarding the Hindu’s red bridal apparel, Brahmo brides used to wear white *sarees*. They also covered the face with a white veil with orange blossoms bedecking the net, much like English brides. Hemlata, the eldest daughter of Sivanath Sastri, chose to wear an off-white *saree* at her marriage. However, Shailabala Dass, the youngest daughter of Durga Mohan Dass, preferred the traditional red *Benarasi saree*.148 Sarala Debi, the granddaughter of Debendranath and the daughter of Swarnakumari Debi, was chosen as the young bridesmaid (*niktone*) in both marriages. Sarala, who later became a Hindu nationalist leader, married a Punjabi *Arya Samaji*. Draped in a red *Benarasi*, she married in accordance with *Adi Brahmo* rites, accompanied by the *gaye-halud* of the Hindu marriage and allowed the ‘*homa*’, which was still not accepted in Brahmo marriages.149

While *Sadharan Brahmos* spurned the Hindu ceremonial service and ostentatious celebration of marriage, on the other side of the camp, such ‘cut and dry’ principles of marriage were not considered acceptable. Keshab’s Brahmo Samaj of India, now called the *New Dispensation*, adopted an amorphous blend of marriage ceremonies. Protap Mozoomdar once stated in defence of the Cooch-Bihar marriage that sacramental services were necessary to embellish dry rational theories. National identity, he maintained, could only be gained through practice of Hindu marriage norms, with all its idiosyncrasies. Experiments with marriage norms, especially remodelling gender relations within marriage did not receive, henceforth, any support from the *New

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Dispensation. Keshab Sen encouraged orthodox practices, including female seclusion and modesty. One of the leading features of Sen’s preaching, during this period, was to cry down attempts at ‘women’s emancipation’. In the column of the Sunday Mirror, the minister said, ‘...where men are carnally panting for woman’s company, and women are carnally panting for liberty, there I see the seed of great danger...’

At the meeting of the Arya Nari Samaj, Keshab Sen suggested four vows of chastity and devotion for its female members: Savitri Brata, Draupadi Brata, Maitreyi Brata and Lilavati Brata to which the Victoria Brata and Nightingale Brata were subsequently added. While Savitri Brata was intended to promote wifely devotion, Maitreyi Brata was aimed at inculcating spiritual companionship of a woman with her husband. Draupadi Brata was included for indoctrinating an active and dutiful housewife.

The non-idolatrous iconoclast Keshab Sen also glorified Hindu deities like Durga, Saraswati and Lakshmi as incarnations of chaste womanhood. ‘They were not bare idols made of clay’, he said, ‘India must worship these chaste women to regain its virtue and there is no other way’. In Brahmi kadiger Prati Upadesh (advice to the Brahmikas), Keshab Sen delivered a number of sermons to Brahma women. In a number of essays like Patiprana Sati (The devoted chaste wife) and Pati O Sati (the husband and the chaste wife), Keshab invoked the brahminic notions of chastity of wife. In Narisrijaner Uddeshya (the objective of creating women) and Narijatir Bishesh Bhab (The unique nature of woman), Keshab harangue on the naturalization of women’s characteristic mildness, gentleness and kindness. Prem O Seba (love and service), Dasibrata (the ritual of female slavery/ service) and Deeksha (Initiation) lauded steadfastness, chastity and unwavering devotion of women to their husbands.

149 Ibid, 187.
150 Sastri, History, 211.
151 Ibid, 207.
152 Keshab Chandra Sen, Acharya Keshab Chandrer Baktrita (Sermons of the chancellor Keshab Chandra Sen), Pyary Mohan Chowdhury, Calcutta, 1910. His recurring identification with Hinduism and Hindu forms of worship, undoing the cause of Brahma monotheism was also ascribed to the influence of the Hindu saint Ramakrishna Paramhansa, Amiya Sen, Hindu Revivalism, 58.
153 Keshab Chandra Sen, Brahmi kadiger Prati Srimadacharya Keshab Chandra Sener Upadesh, (The advice of the chancellor Keshab Chandra Sen to the brahmikas), Calcutta, Bidhan Yantra, 1807, Saka.
154 Ibid, 71-72.
Wary of radical change, Keshab warned liberal Brahmo husbands of the deplorable consequences in their households if wives were too quickly released from purdah. ‘Go slow’, he told the reformers and ‘give women the inner strength with which to protect themselves’. Miss Akroyd openly labelled Keshab as being ‘hypocritical’ because of the variance ‘between preaching and personal practice’. Keshab condemned ‘denationalized female education’ and cautioned the students of Normal School against the harmful and dangerous effect of reckless female emancipation. He said, ‘We have no desire to make Europeans of our ladies’. According to Akroyd, Keshab was hardly distinguishable from an orthodox Hindu, whose women were ‘steeped in ignorance and child-like innocence’. She described Jaganmohini Debi, the wife of Keshab Sen, as ‘an un-emancipated Hindu woman’, ‘covered by a barbaric display of jewels, playing with them like a foolish petted child in place of attempting rational conversion...’

While Keshab Chandra and his New Dispensation retreated from social reform, the Adi Samaj experimented with ‘Hindu-Brahmoism’, focussing on modern, liberal, humanist and universalist principles to be shared by Hindus and Brahmos alike. The attempt to position Brahmoism, as a higher and modified version of Hinduism, was started by Maharshi Debendranath. His sons, Dwijendranath, Satyendranath, Jyotirindranath and Rabindranath extended his experiments to their logical conclusion. Kopf argued that Rabindranath, particularly, attempted an intellectual reconciliation with Hindu modernism and to crystallize a Hindu-Brahmo identity. A section of the progressive Hindu bhadralok, under the intellectual leadership of Rabindranath, began to observe marriages by adapting the older Brahmo rituals. It was argued that Rabindranath became key to the reconciliation between Hinduism and Brahmoism within the context of an emerging cultural nationalism.

A special feature during this time was ‘wedding songs’ composed by Rabindranath Tagore. His songs recreated a romantic imagination combined with devotion and spiritualism. Songs like ‘Sumangali Badhu’ (the gracious bride), composed

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159 Ibid.
during the 1930s, enjoined all possible virtues for the bride, ‘in weal and woe be always poised and firm’. Marriages, often officiated by Rabindranath, were accompanied by his poetic contributions, which served to enhance and elevate the ritual in the eyes of the immediate social circle. In the marriage of Amita Sen, the daughter of the noted Sanskrit scholar Kshitimohan Sen, Rabindranath blessed the new bride in an ode to her happy married life. The poem, *Badhu*, (The Bride) runs thus, ‘At this turbulent moment of change, dear child/ I see you dressed as a bride, a dancing torrent/Meeting quiet waters, immersing your playful steps/ In the deep, taking on the universe, unafraid/ Unfolding the mystery of creation, of life, ever new’.

Where, then was the *new woman*? Was the companionate wife placed on an equal footing with her husband? Did she savour freedom in an all-new Brahmo household? While versions of marriage may have varied from extreme radicalism to extreme orthodoxy, the ideal of the devoted wife remained more or less constant. None of the three factions of the Brahmo Samaj challenged the ideal of *pativratya*. The ideal of a new woman, placed on equal footing with a man, remained a far cry.

**Hindu Backlash against Brahmo Marriage Reform**

Even while a section of the Brahmos sought to reassert their legal and social identity as ‘Hindus’, to the Hindu eye, ‘Brahmo’ was a metaphor for deviance, transgression and ‘reckless modernization’. Indeed, the Brahmo reformist attitude on marriage and female emancipation invited, as Debendranath once pointed out, ‘practical hostility’ from the Hindus. Countless dramas and plays representing the conservative Hindu view were written during 1870s-1890s by Amrita Lal Basu, Indranath Bandyopadhyay, Atulkrishna Mitra, Rakhaladas Bhattacharyya, Panchanan Roychaudhury, Purnachandra Mitra, Monomohan Basu, Kaliprasanna Kavyabisharad (*Fakirdas Babaji*), Gangesh Kumar Chattopadhyay, Girish Chandra Ghosh, Pyary Mohan Chaudhury and many others. These plays addressed a variety of issues, arranged around thinly veiled fictionalisation of the more sensational contemporary events. There were two major axes around which the

satires revolved: caste and gender. There appeared to have been a perception of a Brahmo rejection of the Brahminic caste hierarchy, despite the ambivalence regarding caste within the Brahmo Samaj and the heat generated by debates regarding the privileges of Brahmans, especially in matters of worship. A relative caste mobility within the Brahmo community, most of the plays portrayed, provided opportunity for many low caste men to move up the caste ladder by remarrying high caste widows. Indranath Bandyopadhyay (1849-1911), writing pseudonymously as Panchananda, virulently attacked the Brahmo rejection of caste marks and their marriage reforms in *Kalpataru* (1874) and *Kshudiram* (1887).

Far more ink was, however, spilt over the threat to traditional gender relations. Brahmo reformism, it was felt, was inviting a reversal of gender roles and, consequently, a terrible destruction of the social order. There were at least three major identifiable issues with regard to ‘women’s emancipation’: women’s education leading to their rejection of traditional wifely roles; second, the ‘Brahmiqa’ sartorial reforms leading to the breach of female seclusion and women’s public appearance; and the third most emotive issue was the Brahmo marriage reforms. Hindu hostility increased as the Brahmos enthusiastically adopted widow remarriage and experimented with prostitute marriages. The idea of ‘sammati’ vis a vis ‘sampradan’, and the provision for divorce, allowing women a degree of autonomy in marriage decisions, was perceived a direct attack on the patriarchal privilege.

The hostility heightened when young Brahmos encouraged high caste Hindu widows to escape from their homes by establishing shelter homes and providing them suitable grooms. In 1885, Purnachandra Sarkar’s *Haal Amoler Sahyata: Baro Majar Katha* (Modern civilization: very funny affair) recreated the dramatic escape of Bidhumukhi Mukhopadhyay, and the court cases preceding her marriage.

Atulkrishna Mitra (1857-1912) wrote against the Brahmo mission of widow remarriage, but his sharpest criticism was against the Brahmo attempt to marry prostitutes. Mitra’s ‘*Gadha O Tumi*’ (Ass and You), a retort against ‘*Dada O Ami*’

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166 Indranath Bandyopadhyay, *Kshudiram*, Biharilal Sarkar, Calcutta, 1887.
(Brother and I), by Upendranath Dass (staged at the New National Theatre), was staged at Emerald Theatre on 26 January 1889. Mitra’s play described the reformist adventure of two low caste *nouveaux-riches* of Calcutta, Sarada Das Guin and Barada Das Guin. Sarada’s mission was to marry an ‘emancipated prostitute’ because ‘the prostitutes are the only women who are free from birth’. The marriage, they said, was the only option to ‘raise Mother India from her death–bed’. Barada was eager to marry a respectable educated woman. They were no less ‘free’. Finally, however, both brothers selected two prostitutes, Lalanmoni and her daughter Lavender Kumari, and married them in a theistic fashion. The Brahmo Pelaram recited Hindu funeral chants to solemnize the marriage.

In his short story *Hatabhagini* (the distressed woman), Atulkrishna highlighted the ‘sensational’ escapades sponsored by the ‘Widow Remarriage Division’ of the Brahmo Samaj. It involved immoral traffic in women, according to Mitra. His *Dulalchand* represented the degeneration of a high caste Hindu Brahman under the influence of Brahmoism. Dulalchand, the son of a village headman, migrated to Calcutta to study at the Presidency College. Under the influence of some Brahmo reformers, Dulalchand decided to marry Bhagabati, the educated daughter of a prostitute. Her mother filed a criminal suit against them. Dulal was acquitted and celebrated his marriage in the Brahmo fashion. Back home, Dulal’s father was ostracized and died a painful death. Dulalchand turned mad in despair and bereavement.

The most persistent assault against the Brahmo reformist venture came from none other than Amrita Lal Basu (1853-1929). Bipin Chandra Pal attributed the origin of Hindu revivalist movement in Bengal to Amrita Lal’s theatrical satires against the anti-Hindu wave in Bengal. Amrita Lal’s father Kailash Chandra Basu was the head master in the Oriental Seminary School, and taught some illustrious students like Chandranath

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169 Ibid, 300.
170 Ibid, 301.
173 Ibid.
Basu, Krishnadas Pal, W. C. Boneijea and Gurudas Banerjee. Born to a conservative Hindu family, Amrita Lai lost his father at the age of 12. Later, in his autobiographical narrative-verse, he hailed the unavering celibacy of his young widowed mother. A student of medical science, Amrita Lai was also close to leading Brahmo men like Keshab Chandra Sen and Tagores of Jorasanko. At the age of 22, he joined the Great National Theatre as manager. Contemporary newspapers reported that Amrita Lai’s farcical dramas captivated the Calcutta audience for thousands of nights at the Star, National and Minerva theatres. The most popular of them were *Bibaha Bibhrat* (The marriage fiasco, 1884), *Sammati Sankat* (The Consent Dilemma, 1890), *Tajjab Byapar* (An amazing stuff, 1891), *Tarubala* (1891), *Babu* (1894), *Ekakar* (Confused conglomeration, 1895), *Bau-ma* (Daughter-in-law, 1897), *Abatar* (The incarnation, 1901) and *Khas-Dhakhal* (The permanent possession, 1912).

While his principal target was the Brahmo programme of widow remarriage, Amrita Lai also posited an alternative to the chaste, devoted and steadfast Hindu wife/widow. *Tarubala* depicted the resistance of ‘Hindu’ wife to the radical reformism of their male relatives. Akhil, Tarubala’s husband, was, however, a liberal Brahmo who was disillusioned with his loveless marriage and conservative wife. He was keen to marry an educated prostitute, Parul, after a ‘divine courtship’. Akhil’s sister, Shanto, embodied the Hindu ideal of widowhood. Rejecting Beni, a radical Brahmo reformer, Shanto said, ‘I am a widow of a Hindu family. …The self-immolation is banned by law; otherwise I would have gladly sat on my husband’s pyre at the moment of his death.’ The octogenarian Mritunjay ruminated over the recklessness of Vidyasagar’s and the Brahmo programme of widow remarriage to the ruin of desachar. The play ended with Akhil returning to his devout wife, Tarubala, and Beni going to Kashi for expiation.

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179 Akhil’s sister, Shanto, embodied the Hindu ideal of widowhood. Rejecting Beni, a radical Brahmo reformer, Shanto said, ‘I am a widow of a Hindu family. …The self-immolation is banned by law; otherwise I would have gladly sat on my husband’s pyre at the moment of his death.’  
180 Ibid, 44, translation mine.  
181 Ibid, 45-46.
Amrita Lal’s Babu ran to full houses at the Star Theatre from January to March 1894. The play described how the reformers contrived the ‘widow problem’. A review in the contemporary journal, Anusandhan, described the performance, ‘as if we are looking at the true images of our surrounding’. In the play, the reformer Kandarpa forced his widowed grandmother to marry the scientist Ashani Prakash, who was experimenting with a ‘galvanic battery’ to anaesthetise pangs of widowhood. Sajanikanta, a Brahmo reformer, married a widowed woman and her daughter bore the surnames of her mother’s two husbands. Bancharam Sadhu-Khan, a low caste Brahmo activist, married a Brahman widow, Kshamasundari, after a ‘sacred absconding’. However, Kshama fretted against the moral lectures of Sajanikanta, a caricature of Keshab Sen. The farce scathingly derided sartorial fashions and the puritan decorum of Brahmo men and women.

However, the most remarkable satire against widow remarriage was Khas-Dakhal or the Re-Entrée, which was published in April 1912, and was staged at the Star Theatre a month earlier, ‘drawing bumper houses in every show’. Bipin Chandra Pal, in a letter, congratulated Amrita Lal saying, ‘...I want my daughters to see Khas-Dakhal. It is a must see for the people who are vulnerable to the winds of change coming from Ballygunge’. The satire, as its name ‘Khas-Dakhal’ suggests, dealt with the ownership of a woman/widow by her husband. The play centred on the remarriage of widow Mokshada, representing an untenanted, vacant land, while contending parties vied with each other for lease-holding/ownership of the land. Mokshada’s husband, Loken, a Brahmo reformer, died a mysterious death, while Mohit, deserting his uneducated, naïve wife Giribala, decided to marry Mokshada. Labanya, representing the new woman, justified widow remarriage. ‘This is quite natural’, she said, ‘don’t we order a new pair of shoes after the old shoes are worn out? Don’t we buy a new horse after the old one is dead? Don’t we rent out our house after the old tenant evacuates?’ Netai, a character played by Amrita Lal himself, asked, ‘who will take possession of a remarried widow

183 Indian Daily News, 1 January 1894, cited in Mishra, Bangla Prahasaner, 159.
after her death? Is there a high court in heaven?’ The answer was, ‘the first mortgagee is the first possession’. Finally, Netai announced the morale of the story. Hindu marriage was an arrangement, representing the permanent settlement of land. In the absence of the legal landowner (the husband), his land (the widow) should not be auctioned by suitors (reformers).

Girish Chandra Ghosh, the foremost playwright of late nineteenth century Bengal, criticized Brahmo marriage reform in two satirical farces Panch Kone (Pancha Ranga) (The five brides and the fifth comedy, 1895) and Jamini Chandramahina Madhur Chumban (A dark night and a lovely kiss, 1878). In Panch Kone, Bengali reformers tried to convince Puna leaders, who were more interested in the politics of the ‘congress’,

[T]ry to accept at least the reform on marriage. Increase the marriageable age and abolish the dowry system. Make thirty the minimum age of marriage for women. The marriage must not include any ceremony other than the mala-badal [exchange of garlands between the bride and the bridegroom]. And there must not be an exchange of gifts and presents.

Jamini Chandramahina dealt with the conjugal disharmonies in Brahmo households and clandestine adultery by Brahmo wives.

Amrita Lal’s Tajjab Byapar (An amazing stuff, 1891) was a vehement critique of Brahmo’s new women, and forecast an impending reversal of gender roles. The English educated independent woman was an easy object of ridicule and satire. Pash Kara Magh (The educated woman), written by Panchanan Roychoudhury set a new trend in farces. The theme of the farce was repeated time and again by many early twentieth century writers. In this play, Labangalata was an educated woman who believed in ‘free love’, and resolved to divorce her newly wedded husband under the influence of liberal emancipation. She challenged the right of her father to ‘gift her in marriage’ and gave herself in a second marriage ‘with full consciousness and without any instigation’.

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188 Amrita Lal Basu, ‘Khas –Dakhal’ (Permanent Possession), Amrita Granthabali, 2, 50, translation mine.
189 Ibid, 45-46.
190 Ibid, 58.
192 Panchanan Roychoudhury, Pash Kara Magh (The educated woman), published by Kanailal Dhar, Calcutta, 1902.
193 Ibid.
Gangesh Kumar Chattopadhyay’s *Fachke Churir Kirtikandam* and *Kalir Meye* (Woman of the kali era) were the two most popular farces of the 1920s following in the Amrita Lal tradition. *Fachke Churi* told the story of a kulina wife Gajadanti who refused her old, senile and much-married husband. She desired to become a Brahmo in order to obtain a legal ‘divorce’. Induced by her promiscuous associates, Chatura, Choparani, Chalakini and Bakchanchala, she deviated from the path of virtue but wound up committing suicide. Her liberal father, Hutum, repented the freedom he had sanctioned his daughter. The play invoked the two famous court cases involving Rukhmabai (Maharastra) and Bidhumukhi (Bengal).

*Kalir Meye*, another farfetched rendition of educated modern women, was about Nirmala Mukherji(ni), a ‘graduate female’, who decided to divorce her uneducated, kulina husband, Kamalakanta and to ‘engage a new husband’. She cautioned her husband against the impending future when ‘women will work in offices and ride the phaeton, while men sit in the corner of the house like trapped rats’. Nirmala joined the Brahmo Samaj and married a lower caste man. Refusing to bear children to ensure the husband’s lineage she resolved on surrogate motherhood. Kamalakanta intervened in the marriage only to get killed by her Brahmo ‘brothers’.

Bipin Chandra Pal traced the emergence of the ‘revivalist movement’, or cultural nationalism, as we call it today, with the Bengali theatre, which openly declared war upon the Brahmo Samaj. He maintained that Hinduism, almost exclusively personal in the past, commenced, in response to the Brahmo movement, as a kind of organized congregational worship through *Harisabhas* or *Bhajans*. Contemporary Bengal was then split into two camps, one on the side of Hindu orthodoxy and the other on the side of Brahmo orthodoxy. However, whereas Brahmo iconoclasm and radicalism were ultimately subverted by factionalism, Neo-Hinduism rose in protest against both Brahmo liberals and aggressive Christian propagandists. At the close of the century, Brahmos

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194 The basic meaning is adventures of a mischievous girl. The satirical twists in the title appear to be untranslatable.
196 Chattopadhyay, *Fachke Churi*, 39-44.
198 Ibid, 33.
were still willing to negotiate western liberalism, religion and social practices in their quest for a more liberal order. Hindu nationalism, however, was more vocal against the cultural domination of the ‘stranger within our gate’ who had captured the machinery of the state and administration. 201

Conclusion:

The Brahmo reform movement faltered at the high point of Hindu cultural nationalism. If it did not succumb completely to successive inroads made into its credibility by forces of Hindu reaction, it certainly conceded to the pressure of changing social and political realities. Hindu revivalists after the 1870s, argues Amiya Sen, developed an extensive network of missionaries to check the spread of Brahmoism, especially in the mufassil. Ramakrishna Paramhansa’s ‘gentle rebuke’ and hostile reactions from Sasadhar Tarkachuramoni led to a further watering down of the Brahmo social ethics and puritanism. 202 Under the impact of the neo-Hindu movement, some important ingredients of the Brahmo faith underwent subtle shifts in scope and definition. At the close of the nineteenth century, the Census found that many Brahmos returned themselves as Hindus. The number of Brahmo marriages, performed between 1872-79, showed the limited popularity of their marriage reforms. 203

The upsurge of Hindu nationalism tended to temporarily blur differences within Brahmo identity. Some prominent Brahmos openly identified themselves with a Hindu world-view and the apparent ‘weaning away’ of well-known Brahmo figures was perhaps the result of a long process of systematic and deliberate Hinduization. 204 Bipin Pal argued that in Bengal, the movement of religious revivalism and Hindu social apologetics found expression through Bankim Chandra and his new organ Prachar, on the one hand, and on the other, through Pundit Sasadhar Tarkachuramani who found a ready-made organ in the Bengali weekly Bangabasee. 205

200 Ibid, 428.
201 Ibid, 424-427.
202 Sen, Hindu Revivalism, 56.
203 Ibid, 41-42.
204 Ibid, 62-63.
205 Pal, Memoirs, 429-431.
The crusade to stamp out the evil of early marriage was carried to the end of the century by various reformist camps in various parts of India. The problem of early marriage was taken up by Hindus and non-Hindus alike. The provision for the dissolution of marriage, however, remained a contested motif throughout the 1880s. This coexisted with the contentious debate over infant/non-consensual marriage, which reached its peak when Rukhmabai in Maharashtra challenged the validity of her infant marriage in 1884.
REGISTRAR’S CERTIFICATE.

I, Sakari Ghosh, certify that on the 2nd day of May 1872, Ahmad Nath Sen and Miss Anuradha Gupta appeared before me, each of whom in my presence and in the presence of three credible witnesses, whose names are signed hereunder made the declarations requested by Act III. of 1872, and that a marriage under the said Act was solemnized between them in my presence.

(Signature of Registrar) Sakari Ghosh
Registrar of Marriages under Act III of 1872,
for the District of Calcutta

(Signature of Bridegroom) Kumudini Sen

(Signature of Bride) Anuradha Gupta

Signature of three witnesses

Romesh Chunder Dutt, C.B. 20 Beach Street, Calcutta
Ananda Nath Bose Barrister-at-Law, 17 Pinery Lane, Bissewar Park, No. 10 Lansdown Row, Calcutta

Dated the 2nd day of May 1872
True Copy,

Dated 2nd May 1872.

Registrar of Marriages under Act III of 1872,
for the District of Calcutta