Chapter II

Silent Voices: Women’s Perceptions

"The skies may resound with the proud saga of the Hindu woman or the netherworld tremble at her downfall, yet nothing changes in her life, validating the old saying, "Na sawan sukhe na bhado hare"—neither heat sucks her dry nor rain turns her lush and green. She has always had to write with tears the history both of her ascent, to such heights as would shame the lofty Himalayas, and her descent, which in its depths would compete with seabed. And probably will have to do so in the future as well." ¹

This is how Mahadevi Varma the famous poetess of Allahabad, described the condition of Indian woman in her article of 1933 ‘The Curse of Womanhood’. It is imperative first to understand the conditions in which Indian women lived before tracing the development of medical education and health care systems for women in India in Colonial India. This brings out various social factors responsible for women’s subordinate position in the Indian society and more specifically shows the adversities women faced to get social sanction for girls’ education during early nineteenth century. This comes out more vividly in the nineteenth century social reform movement as the entire focus of attention of this movement had been the status of women, especially high caste Hindu woman, whether it was to highlight her high status in the past or in reforming her low status in the present.

Many British administrators, travellers, missionaries and even historians through their works on India expressed their perception about condition of women in colonial India. In this chapter the perceptions of the Indigenous people of the period are taken up for they provide the insiders view of the circumstances that lead to the subjection of women in the Indian society. It is true that the women during 1920-47 had many opportunities for betterment, which their immediate predecessors didn’t have. This change in their condition was due to the efforts of the social reformers of the nineteenth century and

therefore the women of twentieth century are known as 'Daughters of Reform'. It is not to say that the conditions changed radically and that the circumstances changed completely. In fact in North India, the problems faced by women in nineteenth century continued to persist even in the twentieth century as it had social reforms much later than other parts of the country.

There are two parts in this chapter and the first part deals with the circumstances leading to social reforms concerning women and how the male reformers of the period attempted for the betterment of their women. Second part deals with the women writers and reformers of the period and their perceptions on the circumstances responsible for their subordinate place in the society. In both parts arguments move around issues of the evil practices like sati, purdah, early marriage, enforced widowhood etc, and they show how many of these social practices were associated with women only and how these very social taboos denied them any access to education or even proper health care. The focus in the second part is more significant, as it shows how women perceived their position in the society and how they understood their problems. The women’s writings of this period in fact pose a serious challenge to the long-held notion of the nineteenth century ‘social reforms’.

The focus of men writing of this period was usually on ‘notions of ‘traditions’, ‘customs’, and ‘superstitions’, which are treated as abstractions, that had a certain autonomy and staying power to perpetuate them. However, the writings of women like Tarabai Shinde, Rukhmabai and Ramabai make critique of male power in varying degrees. They showed that ‘tradition’ and ‘custom’ were not mere abstractions and that they continued through the agency of men and women. These writings in fact show that Indian social customs were not gender-neutral and were an articulation of patriarchal structures. Unlike male social reformers of the period these women writers saw neither the legislations nor remarriages as the adequate mode for transforming Indian society or to resolve women’s problems. These writings therefore

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provide a far sharper evaluation of the nineteenth century impulse of reform and fresh insights on the emerging subjectivities of women.

**Colonial State and Social Reforms**

The post-enlightenment state in general and the colonial state in particular exercised power through hegemony, where it exercised power not through fear of punishment but by nurturing the bodies and inculcating loyalty in the minds of the subjects. Education, Public Health and Law are in a sense representative of these aspirations of the colonial state. In Indian context, British colonialism sought to legitimise itself through self-characterisation as rule of law and social reform. Accordingly the passage of British rule in India was marked by passing of many significant legislations pertaining to social reform which sought to penetrate deeply into everyday life and culture of Indians.

"Through the reforming gesture the colonizing country posed as the universal standard of perfection, as a prescribed social model, upon which to base the moral improvement of the colony." In this whole discourse the condition of women was used as an index of both societies, of the perfection of one, and the baseness of the other. This was in fact a strategy followed by nearly all the imperial powers in nineteenth century and it involved denigration of politically and economically subjugated cultures by foregrounding the position of women in those societies, compared with the more obvious freedoms of the European woman. This strategy was carried out by singling out the most extraordinary of cultural practices, especially those associated with women, and then making them emblematic of the culture as a whole. The social practices associated with women like sati, purdah, enforced widowhood, child marriages, female infanticide etc were identified as few of such cultural practices responsible for the degrading position of women in the Indian society. Many legal Acts were

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passed to redeem Indian Women from these degrading conditions. This provided a basis not only for arguments about backwardness of Indian culture but also for the ideological justification of the 'civilizing mission' of the British imperialism in India. Thus the Colonial state became the superior agent of change and thereby reserved the right of interpretation and implementation.

The strategy of women as the gauge of progress of a nation was used for first time by James Mill in his 'History of British India,' (first published in 1826) in Indian context. He argued that women’s condition was one of the most remarkable circumstances of nations and that it could be used as an indicator of society’s advancement. Mill comments on Hindu women’s condition as follows. "nothing can exceed the habitual contempt which the Hindus entertain for their women.....they are held accordingly, in extreme degradation." "a state of dependence more strict or humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot easily be conceived." This criticism of the condition of women in India and the related ‘social evils’ echoed not only in the writings of colonial administrators but also of Christian missionaries, historians and even travellers from west of that period.

Indigenous Reform Movements

The socio-religious reform movements of the nineteenth century in India emerged mainly in response to the above criticisms. The educated urban middle classes sought to reform some of the denigrating socio-religious practices of their time and face the criticism of the colonisers. With the exception, perhaps, of the issue of caste and untouchability, all major questions of reform of Hindu society taken up in this period concerned women like sati, female infanticide, child marriage, the remarriage of widows, the seclusion and education of women, prostitution, bride price and dowry. The improvement in

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8 Ibid., pp. 445-447.
the social position of women and a redefinition of their role came to occupy the central place in all schemes of socio-religious reform. However, it has to be understood that the social reform concerning women, were issues which concerned primarily upper caste, middle class women and they cannot be understood as separate from, and indeed were deeply embedded in the wider changes in the political economy of colonial India. 9 Secondly, it was a distinctly patriarchal form of social reform, with women being the beneficiaries of male concerns and actions.

Raja Rammohan Roy was the pioneer of the social reform movements in India and was greatly responsible for the abolition of the evil practice of sati. On the question of Indian women’s position he once said that, “Women are in general inferior to men in bodily strength and energy; consequently the male part of the community, taking advantage of their corporeal weakness, have denied to them those excellent merits that they are entitled to by nature, and afterwards they are put to say that women are naturally incapable of acquiring those merits......As to their inferiority in point of understanding, when did you ever afford them a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity?” 10

Most of the social reforms were aimed at the high caste Hindu woman, but even among Muslims reformers like Sir Sayed Ahmad tried to bring about reforms for Muslim woman. Muslim social reform movement was comparable to Hindu Social reform in the fact that it was also tied to male visions of the need to stem religious and cultural decline and to define their culture according to a universally recognisable standard. Muslim reformers tried to preserve family through raising the honour and dignity of its women. One issue on which they differed with their Hindu compatriots was the practise of Purdah. While Hindu reformers were willing to see the custom scrapped as an artefact of Muslim rule, for Muslims, the custom had religious sanction and further served as a symbol of the distinctiveness of their culture. “They wanted to

9 Nair, *Women and Law in Colonial India: A Social History*, p. 49.
unveil women's minds, in other words, without unveiling their faces. They eloquently criticised the effects of purdah like women's isolation, ignorance and detachment from externally imposed standards of behaviour, but not the custom itself.

Women's Image and Interrogating Gender Relations

Tradition and scriptural authority sanctified most of practices and customs, which the Hindus sought to reform. Therefore, these social reformers found it necessary to legitimise the attempted reforms by appealing to religious authority and through reinterpretation of the scriptures. They attempted to rediscover ‘pure and proper past’ and from this construction of the glorious past they invented an ideal image of womanhood. This ideal image of the Aryan women, who had great freedom in ancient India, became an indigenous example of powerful and respected women of India for the reformers and nationalists. “They accepted the construct of ‘Hinduism’ as a monolithic entity and subscribed to the idea of its ancient glory, seeking to revive it by returning to its fundamental principles as they conceived them. Their rediscovery of the past was the obverse of their vision of the future.”

This new model of ‘ideal women’, called bhadramahila in Bengal, emerged first amongst advanced reformist circles of Bengal and was then in diluted forms gradually disseminated elsewhere in the urban middle-class India. The image of ideal woman gained wide currency throughout the later nineteenth century and has greatly appealed to the colonial India’s emerging middle classes of government employees, professionals, teachers, journalists and the like.

This model of new womanhood was a fusion of older brahmanical values of pativrata, of feminine self-sacrifice and devotion to the husband, with Victorian emphasis upon women as enlightened mothers and companions to men in their own ‘separate sphere’ of the home. “Reaction to the attacks by

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colonial writers ensured that Indian women were almost built up as superwomen: a combination of the spiritual Maitreyi, the learned Gargi, the suffering Sita, the faithful Savitri and the heroic Lakshmibai.......In this model of womanhood there was no difference between the perceptions of progressives and of conservatives.\textsuperscript{13}

This kind of womanhood invented in the nineteenth century has continued to be extremely influential in the twentieth century too. According to this new model, respectable women's proper sphere was now home and domestic life, and the public models for their behaviour varied on the themes of devoted wife and enlightened motherhood. The ideal woman was educated but this education did not serve as a means for external advancement, because there was no place for them in the public domain as such.

Muslim interest in female education was, like among Hindus, a response to the criticism by missionaries and colonial administrators. While amongst Hindus reform movement lead to the establishment of Samajs, among muslims \textit{Anjumans} like Anjuman-e-Himayat-e-Islam, Anjuman-e-Islam and Anjuman-e-Punjab were established. In Punjab, the number of girls enrolled in the Anjuman's schools had been 169 in 1885 and by 1939 it has risen to 1200. Many women's journals started coming from 1880s like Rafiq-e-Niswan, Akhbar-un-Nsan, Taleem-un-Nisan, Sharif Bibyan and Tehzib-e-Niswan and the main objective of all these journals was to promote education among Muslim women.\textsuperscript{14}

\textbf{Traditional Image and Women's Education}

The traditional patriarchal definition of women was solely as housewife or mother meant an early, pre-pubertal marriage for girls, an immediate post-pubertal consummation of marriage, and early and frequent childbearing. In this definition there was no space for education and even if it was imparted for

\textsuperscript{13} Uma Charavari, 'Whatever Happened to the Vedic Dasi?', in Kumkum Sangari, and Sudesh Vaid, (eds.), \textit{Recasting women, Kali for women}, Delhi, 1985, p. 70.

few years in childhood it was only rudimentary. In many parts of India women were forbidden to read and write as often it was believed that a woman who was educated would become a widow. This lack of education, or even basic literacy, was a factor in underscoring the general inferiority of women by denying them the privileges reserved for men. However, with the emergence of new image of women in the nineteenth century an ideal woman was one who was educated. The English educated young men, imbued with idea of companionate marriage wished for educated wives and this lead to the demand for women's education.

The kind of education imparted to women of this period shows that the purpose of that education was merely for better domestic management of the educated men. An educated wife may have enhanced her husband's status, but she did not necessarily boost her own standing in the household. Thus, the new alignments in the patriarchy “were not really radical or threatening, either to older notions of female dependence or to the developing ideology of home and the domestic and sacrosanct domains of tradition and religion; in fact, they actually reinforced them.” This brought about no major structural changes in the marriage-related customs and thus 'female education' proved to be the least difficult segment of social reform. Despite many reservations, women's education became a prominent axis of the social reform discourse and the reforms concerning women came to be concentrated on their education. “Even the social conservatives were compelled to reconsider their position and evolve a new agenda supporting women’s education selectively where it directly benefited men and the family, while discursively undercutting it in trope of domesticity.”

Even for Muslim reformers education for women was meant to make them better companions to their husbands, better mothers to their children, better homemakers and better Muslims. “Indeed, women’s education among Indian

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Muslims in the early twentieth century was more symptomatic of social change than causative. Men wanted education for their women in order to make their own lives more harmonious, to be sure, but also to perpetuate their culture and social position. The curriculum for girls education included a basic knowledge of religious texts, literary and scientific subjects and a practical knowledge of household skills. Girls were allowed to higher education, though was rare. Women were not to take professional courses but were to get only degrees, which was often for enhancing the marriage value of the girl and to increase the family status and honour.

The importance of education in order to train women into their new roles of companionate wives, good mothers, and class socialisers was recognised and it became the key theme in nineteenth century social reform discourse. Education was thus the anchor to which women were tied more securely to the home and to domestic tasks. Thus, rather than liberating them from traditional patriarchal subordination, it realigned the patriarchal domesticity to maintain the status quo. “For the reformers it was also the tool by which women could be converted into moral beings for a changed social order, a new means by which their strivabhava could be transformed into a suitable variant of the traditional conception of stridharma.” Women were given an agency by providing education yet they were made into ‘instruments of nurture’ or ‘socialisers’ of the emerging middle class. It is important to note here that on the issue of significance of women and their proper sphere and duties concerning them, colonial officials and key groups of elite Indian men shared very similar language and preconceptions. For both, debates about the moral worth of cultures and traditions were most appropriately conducted by objectifying figure of woman with no voice for in these debates. Both agreed that the women’s space was in the domain of family, custom and religion and thus outside the normal realm of politics and the state.

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18 Ibid., pp. 264-265.
Arya Samaj Movement and Women

In the present study Dayanand Saraswati’s perception on women and Arya Samaj movement and position given to the women is taken as an example to understand reformists’ agenda for women. Arya Samaj movement was very popular in North India, which is the area of study of the present thesis and it played a major role in spread of girls education in North India.

Dayanand Saraswati: (1824-1883)

Arya Samaj was founded by Swami Dayanand in 1875 and was one of the most influential movements for reform in women’s position in North India, particularly in Punjab. He wrote ‘Satyartha Prakasa’ in 1875 (revised in 1883), in response to the contemporary climate of colonial domination, Christian Evangelicalism and concern for socio-religious reform among the educated urban middle classes in North India. While Dayanand Saraswati shared their concern for improving the condition of Hindu women by eradicating social evils, he was the first reformer to have given a broadly consistent ideology of social reconstruction with a well-defined place for women in it.

Swami Dayanand’s primary concern was to reform the upper-caste Hindus through the spread of Vedic knowledge and he advocated a way of life broadly in conformity with his own interpretation of the Vedas. His conception of God and all other objects in the universe was founded on the teachings of Veda and other Shastras. He offered a statement of all these beliefs for the acceptance of all good men and for all times.20

Dayanand Saraswati conjured up the vision of a return to the ‘golden age’ when the true religion alone would prevail. He hoped that through Suddhi or purification all peoples would eventually be converted to the universal Vedic religion and Sanskrit would also regain its sway. He saw reform and education as well as the procreation of superior off springs as the means for social

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reconstruction. Since women occupied a crucial place in this conception, he
dwelt at length on their desired position and role in society. 21

Girls' education was discussed by Dayanand Saraswati in his 'Satyarth Prakasa'. Education for girls was as important as education for boys. Initially he advocated education for only upper caste women however; towards the end of his life Swami was of the view that the Sudras should also learn the Vedas. However, Sudra girls were to go to separate schools and not to go to same school as the girls coming from the families of the twice-born. In any case, the girls were to go to schools meant exclusively for them, to be housed a few miles away from any habitation of school for boys, and to be managed exclusively by women teachers and servants. The boy's school should be at least 2 miles distant from that of the girls'. Not even a child of 5 years of the opposite sex should be allowed to enter the school. 22 A total segregation of the schools was to be followed very strictly.

The duration for schooling for girls was only for eight years whereas the boys were to have schooling of seventeen years. This difference determined also the level of education for girls. The contents of the curriculum suggested for girls supplemented by special training suitable for the kind of household to which they were eventually to go after marriage. They were not to be educated for any professions outside the home, except in certain situations, for teaching in a girls' school. Their education was linked up with domestic bliss there by it had no space for any foreign language. 23 Thus girls' education differed from that of boys' in duration and in content. He clearly states that with out the knowledge of the arts like grammar, religion, medicine, arithmetic, handicraft women “.....cannot distinguish right from wrong, behave themselves agreeably towards the husbands and other relatives, beget children properly, nurture, bring up and well train them, do or see the domestic duties done as they ought to be done, cook or superintend the cooking of food, and prepare drink like

22 Prasad (trs.), Satyarth Prakasa, p. 40.
23 Banga, Socio-Religious Reform and Patriarchy, p. 248.
medicine according to the method prescribed by the medical art, so that disease may not attack the household, and all the inmates live happily.\textsuperscript{24}

Nearly all of Swami Dayanand's ideas about the position of women were found in Manusmriti. Manu also suggests that to ensure that woman does not go astray, she should be kept busy with the various responsibilities of the household. The underlying assumption in both the texts was that motherhood is the prime function of woman, devotion to husband her prime duty, the management of his household her prime responsibility and that nature ordained these roles for her.\textsuperscript{25} Thus Dayanand seem to be concerned and recognised women only in their familial roles as wives and mothers and not as individuals.

Regarding the question of remarriage of widows, Swami Dayanand was in favour. However, he advocated remarriage only in the case of virgin widow and widowers. For the other widows and widowers, he recommended niyoga which in his presentation was a legally acceptable but temporary marriage. It was meant primarily for the procreation of superior male offsprings. The purpose of niyoga to have male children was closely linked up also with the idea to protect the property and it also meant that female child had no right to property. The idea and practice of niyoga was meant as much for procreation as for the regulation of sexuality because illicit and unbridled indulgence in Swami Dayanand's view led to social degeneration.\textsuperscript{26}

Arya Samaj Movement and Girls Education

There is a remarkable continuity of the ideas of Dayanand Saraswati to the early twentieth century. The enlightened Arya Samajists like Lal Lajpat Rai also subscribed to the same view on the question of women and their education. In an article published in the Modern Review in early 1920, Lala Lajpat Rai advises the social reformers to have 'a clear grasp of the fundamentals that, because of the 'special adaptation of women’s body to

\textsuperscript{24} Prasad (trs.), \textit{Satyarth Prakasa}, p. 74.
\textsuperscript{25} Banga, 'Socio-Religious Reform and Patriarchy' p. 250.
\textsuperscript{26} Prasad (trs.), \textit{Satyarth Prakasa}, p. 116.
maternity' she would 'always be different from men mentally as well as physically'. A girl, therefore, needed education for her 'complete evolution to womanhood. He also defends the denial of property right to woman. "...the principle is to keep the mother function free of all anxieties and pecuniary cares. Every woman is a mother in embryo. That is her supreme function in life. That is her social mission." Thus, the leading Arya Samajists subscribed, by and large, to the idea that their programme for reform and woman's education should be focused on equipping and training her for marriage and family in the changing circumstance of British rule. They wanted woman 'enlightened' but 'dependent; they wanted to give her 'dignity' but not freedom.

Arya Samaj reformers realised that there was great need for educating girls and undeniably they worked for the progress of girl's education in North India. The conditions of seclusion under which these upper caste women lived left them with limited contacts with outer world and even with their own husbands. Women were left to devise their own inner forms of life within the repressive culture of the zenana, which lead to great gap of understanding between men and women. With the changing circumstances and new demands occurring under the social changes in the colonial rule, it became necessary for women to change their lives and attitudes to adapt to men's requirements. Therefore education for girls was promoted a lot by the Arya Samajists.

When the Arya Samajists took up the cause of female education, the upper caste women were their main focus and the financial support for this venture came from the commercial and trading classes. Later on, advocated education for all girls irrespective of their class or caste. However, the curricula in Samaj schools catered to the perceptions of men regarding the education required by women of their castes and classes. There was great emphasis on religion and domestic economy besides general education and thus education of girls was geared not towards employment but towards the production of a 'modernised'

27 As quoted in Madhu Kishwar, 'The Daughters of Aryavarta', The Indian Economic and Social History Review, 23, 2, 1986, p. 177.
educated housewife. This is because even the champions of higher education for women advocated it primarily as a means to bridge the mental gap between husbands and wives, mothers and sons. Moreover, they argued that ignorant women had a negative influence as wives and mothers.\(^{28}\)

**Case Study of Kanya Mahavidhyalaya, Jalandhar**

Kanya Mahavidhyalaya (KMV) of Jalandhar is best example to understand the kind of education imparted to girls in the Arya Samaj schools as this school was representative of all the new schools established for girls during that period in North India. The literature and curricula of the KMV reflects the aims of the Arya Samaj reformist and their methods to reform the condition of women. In KMV propaganda or prachar, education was seen as the panacea for most of the ills that womankind is heir to, such as child marriage, high female mortality and prostitution. Since child widows were the most vulnerable to a life of vice, people started educating their daughters in the hope of protecting their daughters from such temptations. It was believed that if women married young, before they were fit to be mothers, they were likely to ruin their health and that of succeeding generations. Many other branches of the Arya Samaj, inspired by the success of this school, opened girls’ schools modelled on KMV. By 1918, there were more than 104 schools following the KMV syllabi. Lala Devraj was the key person responsible for the establishment and running of this school. He wrote most of the books, published them and even distributed them. Government later recommended most of these books as texts books to government girls’ schools of Punjab and Central Provinces.

In 1897 KMV also began publishing a magazine called *Panchal Pandita* (in later years, the KMV magazine was called *Jalvid Sakha* or friend of the Jalandhar School) which disseminated the message of women’s education throughout Punjab. It was aimed as a handy periodical for educated ladies and young students and was packed with information about the experiments that were conducted at KMV. Several government schools included *Panchal *

\(^{28}\) Ibid., p. 174.
*Pandita* in their curriculum in addition to the KMV texts. It was thus fairly successful in fulfilling its original objectives: “Of furnishing good reading matter to our sisters, cultivating their mental faculties by... widening their interests by giving them a view of the world outside the closed *zenanas*, and of infusing in them liberal sympathies and elevating ideas.”

Besides Devraj, who did a substantial amount of the writing in the magazine, many students and teachers were also involved in the editing and writing, and the magazine thus became a forum for women’s creative writing. *Panchal Pandita* propagated the view that women’s education was not charitable work but a vital nation-building task and an important part of the regeneration of enslaved India. It was full of essays and stories through which they tried to reform the girls and issues like dowry, show of pomp at weddings, superstitions were addressed.

KMV carried on vigorous campaign for the physical exercises and exposure to fresh air to the girls. The family’s ignorance and superstition prevented women from gaining access to medical care. Many lives were lost because of families’ hesitation to ‘expose’ women to the few available sources of medical care. The *Panchal Pandita* condemned such low valuation of women’s lives and insisted that student’s need to disabuse their minds of such superstitions. Physical well being of the girls and future generations were addressed in the curriculum. In the attempt to produce the ‘modern’ housewife, a whole lot of literature that gave lessons in hygiene and scientific attitudes towards disease was produced. The information ranged from child-care to plague inoculation to personal hygiene. Arya ideology saw the chief role of the woman as reproducer of the race. Therefore, women’s own health became an important issue in the interest of “race maintenance”.

Linked to the promotion of exercises for girls was the campaign against the practise of *purdah* among the upper class and

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middle class families. They felt that the class rooms should not be stuffy and dark like the zenanas, the secluded areas of their houses.

Initially the reformers have devised KMV curriculum as per the needs of upper caste Hindu women but later on many radical turns took place like imparting Vedic education to girls even though this education was traditionally forbidden to women and shudras. KMV trained its students for advanced Sanskrit examinations such as Pragya and Shastri, thus exploding the myth of women’s mental incapacity to master certain disciplines. In 1902 another bold step was taken by introduction of English language in the curriculum. KMV did not just aim at teaching girls in the school alone but tried to reach other girls indirectly through its prachar. It even focused on the training of women as teachers.

Besides this magazine books like ‘Pathshala ki Kanya’, ‘Stri Darpan’, ‘Patra Kaumudi’ etc were kind of guides for girls for their future roles in the society. Often they are filled with chapters on house duties, cleanliness, dress etc. and the range, content and style of these texts suggest the training of girls for the changing roles in the family.

The KMV of Jalandhar was representative of all the new schools established for girls during that period in North India. Most of the schools established under Arya Samaj movement or under its influence had more or less same curriculum and agenda in their education for the girls i.e. to train the girls for the new role in the family. Nita Kumar who studied the schools in Benaras i.e. the Aggarwal Samaj School established in 1886 and the Arya Mahila Vidyalaya established in 1912 concluded that “whichever community or institution they belonged to women worked within a categorization that represented them through negation, repression and opposition.”

The Social reformers efforts gradually made female education more respectable. A certain level of education became a desired qualification in the middle class marriage market. With the growth of this trend, attendance at

government schools also began to alter in terms of caste and class composition. In north India Arya Samaj played a crucial role in bringing about this shift in the class and caste base of women’s education, linked to a corresponding shift in its content. Inspite of its aim at removing many traditional barriers, the Arya Samaj movement worked on the theme that women’s sphere of activity was home. “In fact, in some ways, it can be said that the Arya Samaj movement was intended to ‘reform’ women rather than to reform the social conditions which oppressed them. Women were to educate into becoming more suitable wives and mothers to western-educated men.”

The perception of women in Arya Samaj Movement was very much patriarchal and the reforms introduced through it were only realigning the women’s position with in the frame of patriarchy. The same theme continues in almost all works of the male social reformers of the period. There was no break from the total frame. Neither was there any analysis of the reasons for the subordinate position of women. The improvement envisaged for women in almost all the reformists agenda was with in their domestic sphere and not in the public domain. To get the other side of the picture in this chapter the focus is on the works of women writers of this period. They not only give deeper insights into the actual condition of women, as they are mostly first hand experiences, but also an analysis of how and what is responsible for such subordinate situation.

Women Writers

The latter part of nineteenth century saw for first time the educated women voicing their views through their writings. Many times these writers’ works echoed the male discourse on womanhood, yet there were some writers like Pandita Ramabai, Tarabai Shinde, etc who quite often offered trenchant critiques. It is these writings, which give not only deeper insights in the condition of women of that period but also the reasons for their lowly position

in the society. These writers were not mere objects in the debates on their sex but they tried to show the irony in these debates itself. “These writers contested the structures that were shaping their worlds: they tactically redeployed dominant discourses, held onto older strains and recharged them with new meanings and even introduced new issues, new emphases, new orientations. And in so doing, they left their marks on the worlds we inherit. What emerges from the writings, then, is a subtle and closely textured sense of the struggles and counter struggles through which women’s subjectivities took shape as new worlds were formed around them.”

In many ways the writings of the woman differed from their counter parts of the same period. Unique to these writings was a critique of the failure of the reformers and a sense of betrayal at their lack of courage. They attempted to understand for themselves and their readers how women’s consent for men oppressing women was produced. Some of them like Pandita Ramabai also tried to understand the relationships between women, particularly the politics of household. These works reflected the double standard of morality operating on men and women in the socio-cultural practices of the period. Though there was certain forthrightness in naming the oppressive forces and the power of men to perpetuate the oppressive structures, these writings were also marked with a note of helplessness to change these oppressive forces. “And having named the oppressive forces, and recognised their hold, women’s writing is often pessimistic because there is both a sense of having to battle too many institutions and powers at the same time with little support.”

These early women writers were thus different from the writers of later period who not only voiced their opinions but also fought for their rights. In the first decades of the twentieth century not only were women voicing critiques of legislation, they were demanding new rights and protections. By the 1920s and 1930s women were participating in the national movement and became

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vociferous participants in the debates leading up to legislations like, the Child Marriage Restraint Act 1929. However, these early writers’ works were one of the first voices to be heard from with in and were far different from the conventional literature of the period.

To understand the position of women or the perceptions about women in the colonial period, the writings of the women in the nineteenth century may give the best picture. For this the present study focuses on Tarabai Shinde’s ‘Stri Purusha Tulana’ 1882, Pandita Ramabai’s ‘The High Caste Hindu Women’ 1882, Rukhmabai letters to The Times of India in 1885, Anandibai Joshi’s letters to B.F. Carpenter, autobiography of Dr. Haimabati Sen and the works of Cornelia Sorabji and Mahadevi Varma.

Profile, Context and Significance of their Works

Tarabai Shinde (ca.1850 - ca.1910) belonged to Buldana, a small town in Berar. She was the only daughter of Bapuji Hari Shinde who was an early member of Satyashodak Samaj. She was doted on by her reformist father, which explains her ability to read and write not only in Marathi but to some extent in English and Sanskrit also. ‘Stri Purusha Tulana’ was the only text written by Tarabai and it was published in 1881. This was one of the most polemic work intended to express the anger that many women felt at their ill-treatment by men folk ever written by a woman and she has the distinction of being the first Indian feminist literary critic. In fact, Tarabai has written this text in reaction to a criminal case involving a young Brahman widow, Vijayalakshmi, who was charged with murdering her ‘illegitimate’ infant at birth. The Sessions court sentenced her to death for moral depravity though later the High court commuted the sentence to transportation for life. Though the case and circumstances of the trial was the immediate reason for Tarabai’s writing, she goes on to address the larger issue of the hypocrisies embedded in the Hindu patriarchal system in her work. Parts of her essay suggest she is speaking of her own experiences and she spoke of herself as “powerless dull
woman, prisoner within a Maratha household."\textsuperscript{36} She raised many historical and political questions and asserted that there has been a long-term loss in women's access to power, compounded by the emergence of a new and exclusively masculine sphere of public life. She also dealt with various practical issues concerning women like marriage, conventions concerning widowhood and purdah, women's education and personal mobility, domestic politics and problems in everyday marital and family relationships. In the introduction of her text Tarabai explains her reason of writing it as "I am doing it out in the hope that you might stop treating all women as though they have committed a crime and making their lives a hell for it."\textsuperscript{37}

Pandita Ramabai (1852-1922) was born into a Chitpavan Brahmana family and her father Anant Shastri Dongre was a Sanskrit scholar. She received her training in Sanskrit from her father as well as her mother. At the age of 16, she lost both her parents and elder sister and she and her brother visited Calcutta, which proved to be momentous event in her life. It was the interaction with the social reformers of Calcutta that led to the study of Vedas and Shastras. She married at 22 to Bipin Bihari Madhavi, a Bengali sudra of Brahmo Samaj, but was widowed within two years. Ramabai returned to Poona in 1882 and worked with reformers like Ranade and Bhandarkar. She set up a chain of Arya Mahila Sabhas all over Maharashtra.\textsuperscript{38} Disappointed in her country men she decided to build up her own skills and make contact with people outside India. Ramabai wanted to be trained as a doctor but could not. In 1889 she set up Sharada Sadan, House of learning for widows in Bombay. Pandita Ramabai for conservatives was a startling and uncomfortable figure: a widow of twenty-four, an excellent Sanskrit scholar, a woman with pronounced views on the position of women in Hindu society. In 1883 she became a highly publicized convert to Christianity and one of the reasons she gave for her conversion was

\textsuperscript{36} Tharu and Lalitha (eds.), \textit{Women Writing in India 600 B.C to the Present}, p. 222.
\textsuperscript{37} O’ Hanlon, \textit{A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India}, p. 76.
that Christianity made no distinction of spiritual worth between men and women in the way that Hinduism did. Pandita Ramabai, even after embracing Christianity, never deviated from the sartorial requirements of a Hindu widow. For her mission to be successful, Ramabai knew, it was important ‘to reach Hindu women’. She and those other who worked for the upliftment of their Hindu sisters need to be ‘correct in their morals and conduct’ as Hindus.

‘The High Caste Hindu Woman’, published in 1887 at Philadelphia, was meant basically for foreign readers who wanted to know about social customs of Hindu Nation. The book is divided into chapters named childhood, married life, widowhood, condition of woman and an appeal. Ramabai very analytically portrays the condition of woman in this book. Ramabai clearly brought out in her writings how women were marginalized in the society by men. She drew from her own experiences of widowhood. And secondly, her understanding of widowhood was located in her understanding of the upper-caste woman’s status in society. Thus “her writing on widowhood is analytical, insightful, and sharply presented, unlike much of the writing discussed here which flows out of pens of our writers in a jumble of statements and pleas for help, and is invariably based on personal experience. She tried to show how widowhood was a part of an integral whole and not an aberration in otherwise acceptable structure.”

Anandibai Joshi (1865-1887) born in a chitpavan Brahmin family of Poona and was named as Yamuna Ganapatrao Joshi. She was married off at the age of nine to Gopalrao Joshi, who was an avowed reformist aiming at educating his wife despite many odds. Anandibai became a mother at 14 and the child did not survive. This however deteriorated her health leading to inability to bear more children. She endured a difficult life, often filled with privations, abuse, and social ostracism yet with sheer will became the first foreign trained woman doctor from India. At age of 18, she went to US to study medicine at Women’s Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia where she graduated in

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39 Ibid., p. 17.
40 Chakravarti, *Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai*, pp. 281-82.
medicine in 1886. Although she broke the caste taboos by crossing the seas and took the bold step of studying medicine, the act that she remained a Hindu made her a hero among orthodox circles. 41 In 1886 she was appointed Physician-in-Charge of the women's ward of Albert Edward Hospital in Kolhapur but she passed away soon after in 1887 due to consumption. She became an icon of virtues of ideal Hindu womanhood as she proved that well schooled Hindu Wives were in no danger of losing their religion or their values. 42 Anandibai was just 15 when she started corresponding with B.F. Carpenter of Roselle, Princeton whom she affectionately called 'aunt'. Her correspondence reveals the kind of hardships she faced in pursuing her studies.

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein (1880-1932) was born at Payraband, Rangpur (present day Bangladesh) into a rigidly conservative zamindari family. Though her two brothers were educated at St. Xavier's College, Calcutta, she and her two sisters were discouraged from stepping out of the Andarmahal. Rokeya had only traditional education and was never allowed to attend formal school. She learnt Bengali and English with the help of her elder brother and later in life she improved her English with her husband's help. Widowed at an early age, Rokeya left her husband's home in Bihar and settled in Calcutta where she founded the Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School for Muslim girls in 1911. At the same time, Rokeya pursued her writing career, producing pieces of social criticism aimed at exposing patriarchal subjugation. Both activities made her unpopular with conservatives. A pioneer of the women's movement in Bengal, she was a writer, educationist, social worker, and a visionary who worked unceasingly for female education, which she considered the first pre-requisite for emancipation. She was in fact the first woman among Muslims to launch a systematic and uncompromising campaign for women's education. Many of the essays of Rokeya were written in Bengali and she has written them during twenty years of her stay in Calcutta after husband's death. These essays reflect

42 Chakravarti, Rewriting History: The Life and Times of Pandita Ramabai, p. 255.
her formulations for women's emancipation and some of her works are 'Stree 
Jatir Abanati' 1905 (The degraded condition of women) and 'Ardhangi' 1905 
(His Other half) and 'Narir Adhikari' her last work published posthumously. 
Rokeya's book 'Aborodhbashini' is a collection of articles published in 
Muhamaddhi between 1928-1930. These articles were episodes of women's 
lives in seclusion, based on real life instances and talks about the predicaments 
faced by women due purdah. In her various essays where she propounds her 
theory of feminism, Rokeya forcefully demonstrated how women have been 
disempowered throughout history in the house and outside it, till they were 
reduced to the status of domestic slaves. In Griha (Home) Rokeya drew the 
startling conclusions that as women do not have any genuine power, or 
ownership of the house and its assets, they are in fact 'homeless'.

It was during the early years of her marriage that she wrote an outstanding, 
almost revolutionary piece, 'Sultana's Dream', in English, which made its first 
appearance in Indian Ladies' Magazine in 1905. This was a feminist utopian 
fantasy, and describes a society in an imaginary land, Ladyland, where women 
rule and men are kept at home. In this land it was women who had brains, 
and men did the menial work. Women were free and roam about independently 
in the streets; men stayed in the mardana (men's quarters) as opposed to 
zenanas. Women ordered and men obeyed. Women with truth, love, 
compassion, and welfare as the guiding principles governed Ladyland. This 
remarkable piece, though written in the form of a satirical fantasy, gives a clear 
indication of Rokeya's attitude towards patriarchy, her resentment against the 
many unfair restrictions on women, and her dream of transforming society into 
a more egalitarian order.

Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) was India's first woman barrister. Her parents 
Sorabji Kharsedji and Francina who came to Poona from Nasik came to be 
known for their missionary work, social service and educational reforms. 
Cornelia was brought up in English tradition. Despite many odds Cornelia

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became the first woman student to graduate from Bombay University as well as pass the Bachelor of Civil Law degree from University of Oxford. However, she was denied admission to the British bar and was made representative of the Hindu Purdahnashins who were wards of the Indian government. This gave her the opportunity to travel all over the country and see the condition of women, especially the High caste woman who were secluded in the Zenanas. Her writings thus give insights into the area, which was accessible to neither the men nor the western women.

Cornelia was a prolific writer and she wrote several books of fiction and prose. Her concern and commitment to contemporary women's issues is reflected in her prose writings 'The Purdahnashin' (1971) and 'India Recalled' (1936). 'Love and Life Behind the Purdah' (1901) contains her most moving and skilfully crafted short stories about Hindu women and children, interwoven with her concern for them and her frustrated ambitions to liberate them from their enforced and often self-willed feminity. 'India Calling' (1934) and 'India Recalled' (1936) are the memoirs of Cornelia and in these works she not only depicted her purdah clients in their setting i.e. zenana but also showed it as evidence of the unexplored territory of zenana. ".....the glimpses of zenana life recorded through out India Calling follow a fairly standard procedure: they telescope Sorabji's arrival, her approach to the walled courtyard, her exploration of the inner quarters, her conversation with the Rani or other inhabitants, and her analysis of the customs, practices, and conditions of life on the 'Inside'." 44 Her works help a lot in understanding the socio-economic conditions of zenana life at the turn of the century.

Rukhmabai (1860-c.1950) came from an affluent family and she lost her father when she was just two and half years old. Six years after her father's death, her mother Jayantibai broke the custom that widows should not remarry by marrying Dr. Sakharam Arjun, a doctor of the Grant medical College. Rukhmabai was married off at the age of eleven to Dadaji Bhikaji who was

nineteen but continued to stay at her father place and pursued her studies. Rukhmabai continued to read her step father's books, visit American Mission house and attend zenana parties given by Governor's wife, where she met Dr. Edith Pechey. It was Dr. Edith Pechey who constantly encouraged her to go to England and pursue medicine.\textsuperscript{45} In 1884 when she was twenty two, she refused to live with her husband and he went to court for 'restitution of conjugal rights'. Though she won in the lower court, she lost in the high court where she was asked to live with her husband or go to prison. It was only when Queen Victoria reacted to a special appeal in this case and issued a royal decree dissolving the marriage that Rukhmabai was saved from serving the sentence. During the trial period Rukhmabai had to face lot of public ridicule for her refusal to live with her husband. She wrote letters to The Times of India in May and September 1885, under the pseudonym, 'A Hindu Lady'. She not only discussed about the evils of child marriage and widowhood but tried to analyse the reasons behind them and suggested steps to redeem the situation.

Rukhmabai later on went to England and did an intensive English language course, passed the Society of Apothecaries examination and graduated at the London School of medicine. She also obtained qualifications in Edinburgh, Glasgow and Brussels and returned to India in 1894. Rukhmabai was appointed as first doctor in charge of a dispensary established at Surat under Dufferin scheme. Because of her dedication to her work and popularity she won, that the dispensary, named after Seth Morarbhai Vijnbhukhandas, the donor who provided money for it, continues to be popularly known as the Rukhmabai hospital even today, more than hundred years after she joined it.\textsuperscript{46}

**Haimabati Sen** (1866-1932) was born as Haimabati Ghosh in Khulna district of eastern Bengal, to a wealthy zamindar. Married at age of ten she was widowed within a year and she struggled for next eight years as a child widow to just survive. After the death of her parents and mother-in-law, her brother stole what was rightfully hers and sent her away from home. Even her brother-

\textsuperscript{45} Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, Routledge, p. 87.

\textsuperscript{46} Sudhir Chandra, *Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women's Right*, OUP, Delhi, 1998, p. 211.
in-laws refused to give shelter to her thus was forced to go to Benaras and live in utter poverty as a destitute. She some times survived on fruits left at the ghats as offering, for she often didn't have money to buy food. Despite all her hardships she continued to study whenever she could and learned enough to become teacher in a girls School at Benaras. Haimabati quest for education lead her to Calcutta, when she heard about Brahmo Samj efforts for educating widows. But she could succeed only after two years during which time she had to spend in east Bengal. She got married second time to Kunjabehari Sen, a Brahmo missionary who never cared for responsibilities as a husband or father. Haimabati joined Campbell medical college programme to train in vernacular women hospital assistants, as the course came with a scholarship which helped her to fend for herself. She entered this programme in 1891 as a 26-year-old remarried widow, graduated in 1894, and became the 'Lady Doctor' of the Hooghly Dufferin Hospital for Women in Chinsurah.

Haimabati’s memoirs give a wonderful insight into the problems faced by a child widow, above all the oppression of a wife even though she was an educated professional. Haimabati Sen accepted male authority in her marital but not her professional life. Especially glaring for the modern reader is the contrast in Haimabati Sen's response to the two patriarchies, which governed her life. She rebelled against the medical establishment, which was male, credentialed, and legitimated by the Raj. Of significance is the fact that she opposed British officials on the grounds purdah patients must be treated by women doctors, arguments originally used by British women. At the same time she acquiesced when her husband demanded she behave like a 'proper' wife. In this case, she explained her actions in traditional terms.

Mahadevi Varma (1907-1987) was a distinguished poet, essayist, and critic of her time. She was born into an educated middle class family in Farukhabad, Uttar Pradesh and was raised under the cultural tutelage of her mother and westernised and reformist father. She was married when she was barely nine years old. But was fortunate to continue her studies and complete her BA and
and was one of the two girls in that class. From her daily encounters with women and girls, she understood the basis of gender prejudice and sociocultural suffocation of women and her works hold a mirror to the condition of women all around her. She narrated real life stories of oppressed women in her ‘Ateet Ke Chalchitra’. Mahadevi wrote many articles between 1931 and 1937, which appeared in the contemporary women’s magazines and journals like Chand and Stri Darpan. These were compiled into a volume titled ‘Shrinkhala Ki Kadiyan’. One of the criticisms against Mahadevi was lack of an ideological stance and she shied away from moral responsibility to identify the ‘class enemy’ and she offered no solutions to the ‘Women Question’. However, in the preface of her book ‘Shrinkhala Ki Kadiyan’ Mahadevi says, “The solution to a problem lies in the knowledge of that problem. And the knowledge expects a seeker. It follows therefore that one desirous of attaining rights should also possess them. Generally it is this particular characteristic that will be found lacking in the Indian woman.”  

48 Mahadevi was not just a writer but a social worker too. She became principal of the Prayag Mahila Vidyapeeth in 1930s. Throughout her years in Allahabad, she spent her weekends in the villages of Jhusi and Arail, teaching the rural children the rudimentary literacy and hygiene.  

49 All these writers of whom some were doctors have discussed and analysed upon various issues like purdha, seclusion, preference of male child, widowhood, remarriage, female education etc concerning the position of women in the society. Some of these discussions are as following.

Seclusion and Loss of Identity

The drawing of women as the perpetuator of culture and tradition and the maker of home was questioned by the women writers. Women in the
nineteenth century were faced to stand up to a new ideal, where in they had to adhere to the old traditions and also change according to time. Tarabai criticised this politics of gender in colonial society. She said that with the changing times, men have embraced enthusiastically new practices in dress, food, travel, new forms of consumption, employment and education etc imitating the British fashion. They had also gained access to a new range of powers under colonial rule, which they used for their own vanity and self-aggrandizement. But in the case of women they tried to shut them out from its benefits and lock them into an ossified religious culture for which men hardly had any regard. She said that these very men who never practise religious traditions claim them self to be the champions of the inviolate religious tradition at home. “Particularly interesting is her strong sense that women in nineteenth century society have been placed in a peculiarly invidious and impossible position, urged to conform to extraordinary models of wifely self abnegation, mostly drawn from old books, in circumstances and with men that made it quite impossible for them to do so. When they failed in their task as bearers of unattainable ideals, their failure naturally expanded to encompass all of society’s crimes and ills.”

Women were always standing to the image perpetuated by the patriarchal ideology and in the process they have lost their identity. Seclusion of women has not only lead to their loss of identity but also to total ignorance. Ramabai said that Women have become slavery-loving creatures due to complete submission under the Hindu law for millennium of years. Women were put in seclusion, complete dependence and the absolute ignorance and this has taken toll on their mental and physical health, which was telling on the nation. She warns that this needs to be remedied immediately to evade the disaster to the Nation.

In her memoirs ‘India Calling’ and ‘India Recalled’ Cornelia gave symbolic meaning of her focus on the zenana, which is directly analogous to and

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synonymous to the Orthodox Hindu home. According to her it was a symbolic and material space in need of immediate attention. Mahadevi in her book ‘Shrinha/a ki Kadiyan’ published in 1931 says that, women have lost their individual existence and have turned into mere shadow of men. Instead of looking within, women sought the reflection of their success and failure in man’s approval or disapproval. “In a modern society it has either not been possible for women to develop an appropriate, independent, rational personality, or where her person has developed, her desires, conduct and undertakings continue to reflect the man’s. While the first is an insult to the woman, the second engages her in a ceaseless struggle”51 Mahadevi pointed out that lot of freedom is necessary for the overall mental and physical development of woman and it cannot be achieved in narrow oppressive setting. So first and foremost it was necessary to create a free climate conducive for development. Woman’s personality was formed under the shadow of traditions and conventions, which had no space for any experiences outside family.

Ignorance of women not only about their condition but also of many mundane things like health care sanitation was discussed by these writers. Tarabai showed how men have put women in isolation leading to ignorance and how women never got opportunities for education.

“You shut women endlessly in the prison of the home, while you go about building up your own importance, becoming Mr, Sir, so on....Right from your childhood you collect all rights in your own hands and womankind you just push in a dark corner, shut up in purdah, frightened, sat on, dominated as if she was a female slave. And all the while you go about dazzling us all with the light of your own virtue. Learning isn’t for women, nor can they come and go as they please. Even if woman is allowed to go outside, the woman she meets are all ignorant like her, they’re all just the same. So how’s she to get any greater understand and intelligence?”52

Ramabai said that the ignorance of women was so much that they do not even have knowledge of hygiene and health. “To add to all the disabilities of the Hindu mother in the discharge of her sacred maternal duties, she is as a rule,

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51 Mahadevi Varma, 'Links in the Chain', (tr.) p. 9.
52 O’ Hanlon, A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India, p. 87.
wholly ignorant of the commonest hygienic laws. It must be remembered that she is herself a girl scarcely out of her babyhood, when she becomes mother. At about fourteen, fifteen or sixteen years of age she cannot be expected to know all that is necessary in order to take good care of her child. The first and second of the children of this young mother usually die, and if they survive, they are apt to grow weak and unhealthy adults."

In her book ‘Purdanashins' Cornelia described in detail the life in zenana and the main thing which she noticed, like Ramabai, was the ignorance among the women in the zenanas. “What is the zenana attitude towards domestic sanitation, towards the care of children, towards education? The answer is simple. There is no knowledge at all in zenana of these subjects, as such." She further said that disease was considered as possession of evil and bringing a lady doctor was like inviting another devil in to the zenana.

Mahadevi Varma analysed the condition of women belonging to the three classes-upper, middle and lower separately and she also concludes that ignorance was common to all the women despite their class status. Describing about the miserable condition of the low class women she wrote in the following words. “When the woman who has left home at six in the morning with a child in her arms and a thick charred roti for her meal, returns in the evening at seven, it seems as though the motherhood of the entire universe is letting out a moan through her parched lips.”

Whatever might be the class, on the whole womanhood was cursed to live a life without freedom and women were totally ignorant about the reasons for such condition of theirs.

55 Mahadevi further goes on to say that the affluent women though have freedom were often the exhibits of their husband’s wealth. Mahadevi said often activism was heard from these classes ‘however, their enlightenment will be revering only when these women become the conscious representatives of the multitude of voiceless Indian women groping in the dark.’ The middleclass women do not have time to ponder on their own situation and spend their entire life trampling on all her hopes and desires. Her weaknesses were innumerable and worldly struggles formidable. The most miserable lot were the low class women, who taking care of all the household chores and looking after the children, they have also to assist the husband in the outside activities.
"her condition is similar to that of a mute animal who is crippled with burden, has
tears, streaming from its woeful eyes but is totally oblivious of the reason for its
suffering or the means to overcome it. She neither has knowledge of the sources of
her affliction nor is acquainted with the feeling of avenging her unbearable agony.
......our society has ordained the woman to live a uniform and unchanging life like a
statue, devoid of all pulsation, vibrancy and human failings.” 57

Rokeya first discussed about the issue of purdah and seclusion and saw it as a
construct of patriarchy. She also showed how women have simply ignored
these realities and are living with out any rights or freedom. Thereby she
implied that it is women who need to fight for their own freedom. In the
following lines from ‘Sultana’s Dream’ Rokeya implies that women have
given up the natural right to freedom by their own neglect.

“We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is
lord and master. He has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the
women in the zenana.”

“Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?”

“Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women.”

“A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human
race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your
natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests.” 58

Male Son Preference and Female Infanticide

The preference for male child in Indian Society and the consequent female
infanticide issue was also addressed by these writers. Barbara D. Miller who
worked on female infanticide in Northwest Provinces of India before 1900
wrote that the Northwest Provinces of India was one of the most infanticide-
endemic areas. “It can be said that one-fourth of the population of the North
West Provinces murdered one-half of their female offspring......female
infanticide was not practised by only a negligible number of families. To the
contrary, female infanticide and fatal neglect were quite common there”59

Female Infanticide cases were very much prevalent in Rajputana, North

57 Ibid., p. 31.
58 Tharu and Lalitha (eds.), Women Writing in India 600 B.C To The Present, pp 344-345.
Western provinces and Punjab provinces during nineteenth century. In 1868 Hobart, the Joint Magistrate of Basti, reported about the sorry state of affairs amongst the Surajbansis, Gautams and other Rajput clans. The following table gives the interesting data on sex ratio in Basti district in 1868.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Village</th>
<th>No. of male Rajputs married</th>
<th>No. of male Rajputs Unmarried</th>
<th>Boys under 10</th>
<th>Girls under 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kaour Pakera</td>
<td>446</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>284</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nagpore</td>
<td>280</td>
<td>202</td>
<td>210</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sohangia</td>
<td>186</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luchmipur</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Babu Ranghar Khas</td>
<td>123</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pratapgarh</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bhudawar</td>
<td>199</td>
<td>108</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asoypur</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deokuli</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kudurhi</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dhirouli</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Khunrea</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaisalla</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahuwapur</td>
<td>54</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Poora Marna</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>263</td>
<td>173</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hobart inspected and collected statistics of 99 villages in which there were 1204 boys as against 259 girls under the age of 10. The clan wise statement on the same subject as investigated by Hobart in the Basti district was as follows.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No. of villages investigated</th>
<th>Name of clan</th>
<th>No. of male adult married</th>
<th>No. of male adult unmarried</th>
<th>Boys under the age of 10</th>
<th>Girls under the age of 10</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>88</td>
<td>Surajbans</td>
<td>1756</td>
<td>1224</td>
<td>1109</td>
<td>170</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td>Bais</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>97</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Burwar</td>
<td>105</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Chowhan</td>
<td>116</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>15</td>
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<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td>Gautan</td>
<td>461</td>
<td>252</td>
<td>354</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Kalhans</td>
<td>232</td>
<td>148</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>156</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>2789</strong></td>
<td><strong>1915</strong></td>
<td><strong>1896</strong></td>
<td><strong>356</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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60 Lalitha Panigrahi, *British Policy and Female Infanticide in India*, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1972, p.137.
61 Ibid., p. 139.
62 Ibid., p. 140.
Explaining about the childhood in her book Ramabai tells how the female child was preferred to a male child and describes how the expectant mothers were burdened with the outcome. “In no other country is mother so laden with care and anxiety on the approach of childbirth as in India. In most cases her hope of winning her husband to herself hangs solely on her bearing sons.” 63 Similarly in her letter dated November 15, 1880, Anandibai makes a somewhat sarcastic reference to the universal son preference in Indian families. “We have no polygamy to speak of...our people, if they at all take more than one wife, marry for the sake of sons if they do not have any by first or second wife. So you see how fond we are of sons socially and religiously. The Heavens are open to the man who has a son, but not otherwise.” 64

In a typical UP family, the very birth of a daughter was greeted with dismay. Mahadevi Varma, wrote about this preference of son to a girl in the following words “The moment the arrival of the Goddess Lakshmi in the form of a daughter was announced in a subdued voice, a wretched despair would pervade the house from one end to the other. The elder ladies would silently gesture to the women singers to leave and the elder men would quietly bid farewell to the soundless drummers.” 65

Ramabai discussed about the reasons for the inhuman and irreligious practice of female infanticide among certain Rajputs of North and North-western and Central India, who belong to the Kshatriyas or warrior caste, and how mothers were left with no option some times. “This cruel act was performed by the fathers themselves, or even by mothers, at the command of the husband whom they are bound to obey in all things.” 66 She writes how when a girl is born she is considered as ‘nothing’. After considering how many girls could safely be allowed to live, the father often resorted to killing the girls to protect himself

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63 Ramabai, The High Caste Hindu Woman, p. 42.
65 Mahadev Varma, Sketches from My Past Tr. by Neera Kuckreja Sohoni, Kali for Women, Delhi, 12994. p. xiii.
66 Ramabai, The High Caste Hindu Woman, p. 52.
from the tyrannies of caste and clan. This was as easily accomplished as destroying a mosquito or other annoying insect. There were several other nameless methods that were employed to eliminate the young girls and she wrote of the commonly used excuse of the theft of the baby girls by wolves. “Then there are not a few child-thieves who generally steal girls: even the wild animals are so intelligent and of such refined taste that they mock at British law, and always steal girls to satisfy their hunger.”

Though the situation was not so bad among Muslims even among this community a male child was undeniably preferred. Muslim Pathans of Punjab were known for female infanticide to protect their ‘pride and purse’. “The birth of female child was not considered as auspicious as that of a male. Many families did not bother to announce her birth with azaan, a compulsory religious custom with Muslims for a male child.”

**Early Marriage**

In Indian tradition it was imperative for all girls to be married off. This being the case, and by the pressure of child marriage, every parent was obliged to marry its child within the limit of the age and within the limit of its own caste, be it a fit or unfit match. This practice of child marriages often lead to unfit matches where in a healthy youth may get a rickety consumptive wife and an intelligent girl, an inferior husband. The custom of child marriage exposed the girl-bride to emotional harassment and physical violence, while simultaneously deprived her of education and the chance of personality development. Early motherhood, maternal mortality and widowhood; as husband was much elder to the child bride, were also the consequences of early marriages.

Rukhmabai described in detail the evils of early marriage in a letter published on June 26th in The Times of India. Like Tarabai and Ramabai, she also pointed out how men were allowed to marry as many times as they wish but

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67 Ibid., p. 53.
the same was denied to women. She said how early marriages spelled doom for education of girls, but marriage does not pose any insuperable obstacles in the course of men's studies. "If a girl is married at eight and if she has enlightened parents her education continues till she is ten. Later it depends on the permission of mother-in-law. Even those given an exceptional reprieve did not enjoy it long. Early maternity obliged them to give up their education. Higher female education was not possible while early marriage persisted." 69

The treatment of young brides in husband's house was also described by Rukhmabai. They were subjected to inhuman treatment and were worse off than a servant, who at least had an option of refusing to work. Young brides were deprived of mental and physical freedom. "A torrent of abuse, often followed by direct or indirect corporal chastisement, made the girl "as docile as a beast'." 70 She could be thrown out of the house and would hardly find refuge anywhere, not even her parents for it ceased to be her home after her marriage. Thus women were at mercy of others all through their life and they become 'timid, languid, melancholy, sickly, devoid of cheerfulness and therefore incapable of communicating to others'. She said that men cannot comprehend women's sufferings. "Men cannot, in the least, understand the wretchedness which we Hindu women have to endure' but this did not belie women's desires: because you cannot enter our feelings, do not think that we are satisfied with the life of drudgery that we live, and that we have no taste for and aspiration after a higher life" 71

Anandibai Joshi in a letter to her husband written in 1884 expressed the unkind treatment and harassment she has faced in his hands. She recollected how he hit her with broken pieces of wood at the tender age of ten. When she was but twelve he flung chairs and books at her and often threatened to leave her and go. These severe punishments caused not only physical damage but also

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69 Chandra, Enslaved Daughters: Colonialism, Law and Women's Rights, p. 29.
70 Ibid., pp. 30-31.
71 Ibid., p. 30.
psychologically. She reflected how a Hindu woman has no right to utter a word or advise her Husband. She pointed out the contrast where the husband was free to do as he wishes. She thus brought out the asymmetrical gender relations of the society. Daunted by the rigidity of the social customs, Anandibai pragmatically said that better for women to live in subordination if they lack any other option. She, however, hoped that through the spread of western civilisation and through it, its liberal ideas and institutions, women would be emancipated and freed from their sufferings.

Talking about the evils of early marriage Anandibai said that women were ill most of the times due to the practise of early marriage and early pregnancies. Though she tried to defend Child-marriage as 'national custom' she later on went to say that there was something wrong in the marriage system itself. She believed that the problem of early marriage could be solved only through the legislation for social reform.

Widowhood

Widowhood for women in nineteenth century was a curse. "The marginalisation of widows in North India is consistent with the traditional perception of Hindu widows as inauspicious and guilty women who ideally, should lead a life of austerity devoted to the memory of their husband. This ideological influence, however, may be less crucial than the simple fact that widows are often seen as an economic burden."

Tarabai Shinde strongly addressed the problems faced by widows and the hardships they were to endure till their death. "Once a woman’s husband has died not even a dog would swallow what she’s got to. What’s in store for her? The barber comes to shave all the curls and hair just to cool your eyes. All her ornaments are taken away ....She’s stripped and exposed in all sorts of ways as if she belonged to no one; she becomes a widow-pot hidden in the corner.

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73 Ibid., p. 3193.
She’s shut out from going to wedding receptions women got—and why all these restrictions? Because her husband has died!75 She questioned why men were never subjected to enforced widowhood like women. She asked why men unlike women do not hide their faces when their wives have died, shave off beards and moustaches and go off and live in the wilderness for the rest of your lives. She stated sarcastically that often men would get married on 10th day of wife’s death and widowhood is not for men.76

Tarabai criticised the male hypocrisy of marrying again and again even if the person was eighty years old. Many young girls were married to men who were much elder to them often leading to enforced widowhood of that young girl ones the old man dies.

"the old man spends every minute of his time looking out for a woman, its all he got eyes for. Then its done. The old corpse pays out a couple of thousand rupees and gets a pretty doe-eyed girl for himself, just like you buy a goat from the butcher and tie up as bait to catch a tiger. Then out he goes one day and falls down dead, and it’s all over. His worldly life is all finished and its her again who’s left to suffer."77

Widowhood was a curse on woman and it was a living hell for woman according to Ramabai. She said that widows were void of all hope and denied of any pleasure and social advantage. They had few persons to sympathise with them and life becomes intolerable and a curse. She showed how according to the census of 1881 there were twenty nine hundred and thirty thousand six hundred and twenty-six widows, of all age and caste.78 Among these were six hundred and sixty-nine thousand one hundred widows under nineteen years of age, viz.:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under nine years of age</td>
<td>78,976</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 10-14 years of age</td>
<td>207,388</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>From 15 to 19 years of age</td>
<td>382,736</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>669,100</td>
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75 O' Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India*, p. 89.
76 Ibid., p. 88.
77 Ibid., p. 92.
78 Ramabai, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, p. 133.
In the letter dated 19th September 1885 Rukhmabai wrote very critically about the practice of enforced widowhood and the condition of a Hindu widow in her times.

"It is not only the loss of husband and the stamp of perpetual 'widowhood' which that unenviable creature, the Hindu widow, has to bear. Our shastris do not see anything hard in it, and therefore have invented a mode of torture for the special benefit of Hindu widows by the side of which the torture practised by the followers of Ignatius Loyola pales. This is no exaggeration, for the torture inflicted by the Inquisition, horrible as they were could last only for few hours, and whatever physical agony they occasioned was at worst but temporary. But our throes are mental as well as physical, and they end only with our wretched lives."  

The presence of a widow was shunned and was treated as a leper in the society. Doomed to pass life in seclusion a widow is not allowed to mix freely with her people. If a widow unwittingly intruded any occasion of joy or festivity, the company cursed her presence and regarded it as an evil omen, sure to be followed by some great calamity. The hypocrisy of the society was such that while young girls of even 5-6 years were forced to live like widow till their death, men of even sixty years were allowed to remarry as many times as he wish. Like Ramabai, Rukhmabai also pointed out how a man of sixty was eager to remarry even before the completion of the conventional ten days of mourning. She said how the same men who were so solicitous to gratify his vanity even at ripe age of sixty become philosophically rigid in case his own widowed daughter or grand daughter was 15, just entering on the most critical period of life when girlhood ends and widowhood begins. The comfort he brings to his sorrowing daughter was in this way: "My darling" says the affectionate father. "fate has ordained this widowhood for you and what human effect can upset the decree of fate? This is punishment for the sins of your previous birth and you can only expiate your sins by a life of austerity and devotion. Give up, dear, the vanities of this world, and lead a life of purity."  

79 The Times of India, 19th September 1885 Reprinted in Uma Chakravarti, and Preeti Gill, (eds.), Shadow Lives: Writings on Widowhood, Kali for Women, New Delhi, 200, p. 82.  
80 Ibid., p. 86
Rukhmabai said that it was under the baneful influence of the customs which lead to absence of kind feelings in men and that these customs need to be changed. “Custom, I have read somewhere, is the “Magistrate of a man’s life” if this is a general rule I should say that custom is a “full power” magistrate of Hindu’s life. It blinds his judgement, saps the source of his affectations and make him – though naturally one of the kindliest of human beings – dead to the woes of his daughters and sisters.”

Rukhmabai concluded by saying that problem of enforced widowhood could be removed only by the pressure of legislation “the Hindoo widow–unbeloved of god and despised of man—a social paraiah and domestic drudge, must continue for centuries together to bear her hard portion and pine in solitude till pressure of legislation or the influence of foreign civilization comes to her help and restore her the place which God seems to have assigned her in the scale of humanity”

Mahadevi talked about widowhood in her works and she said that if a woman became widow then her entire world is destroyed as she must spend the rest of her life in utter misery with each moment stretching into eternity. Widowhood is a crime for which she has to bear a punishment graver than the death sentence.

The story of ‘Bhabhi’ written on 11th October 1933 was the recollection of one of the momentous events of Mahadevi’s life and in this she shows the miserable life that widow is cursed to live on. Mahadevi was just 8 years old when she befriended a marwari child widow of nineteen with whom she spent great many days. Mahadevi observed the amount of work she had to do all day and yet she never ate more than once a day as it was prescribed for the widows. And most of the days she was to fast whole day and with this meagre nourishment she was feeble and thin. The young widow was often whipped soundly, without any provocation whatsoever. Innocent act of wrapping her in

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81 Ibid., p. 87
82 Ibid., p. 88
her gift of a colourful duppatta, has invited such rage that the bhabhi was beaten till she fell unconscious. Mahadevi was sick for many days after this brutal incident and left a great mark on her life. This experience had greatly affected Mahadevi and she said that single episode had aged the little girl, had turned the young lady into an old woman.

"Even today when someone expresses curiosity and question me about my aversion to colored clothes, the past comes to haunt the present. How can anyone understand that whenever I see colored clothes, an utterly tragic and withered face slowly begins to crystallise?"... "often I wonder .after the old man shut his eyes never to open them again, what had become of the woman to whom he had denied even the right to see the world? And then, fearing some undefined sinister outcome and responding to some unspoken question, gathering all affection I am capable of feeling, my heart starts to weep in agony- No! ...Never!"85

In the story of ‘Squirrel Lady’, Cornelia shows how the Hindu elderly widows were often abused by their sons for the want of wealth. Some times it goes to the extent of killing them by poisoning or burning them alive.86

Haimabati was married of at age of ten and was widow with in a year of her marriage. Her first husband was a 45-yearold twice widowed man with two daughters only slightly younger than her. Talking of widowhood and its misery she writes “Shame on you, Hindu society, great is your glory! A girl of ten will have to pay for the marriage of an old man of fifty. I bow a thousand times at the feet of parents who would in this way turn a daughter’s life into a desert. .......I was but a mere child and I had already relieved my parents of all responsibilities for me and become a slave dependent for sustenance on my husband’s elder brothers. I had to learn to accept the fact that at this tender age I would be a slave to other people’s whims for a handful of rice."87 Her own experiences and the innumerable widows she came across through out her life testify to the miserable life of widows. There was instance when Haimabati was proceeding to Dacca, she came across a widow who was made pregnant by

85 Mahadevi Varma, Sketches From My Past, Tr. by Neera Kuckreja Sohoni, Kali for Women, Delhi, 1994, p. 33.
a brahmo reformer. During her later years at Chinsura as a doctor many other child widows, who were pregnant, were sent to her. She took care of many orphans who were left behind by these young widows.

Remarriage

Ramabai however went deeper than others in understanding the problem of widowhood. According to her the reformers were being simplistic in assuming that by establishing the system of remarriage ‘all wants of the widow’ would be met. While she agreed that remarriage system needs to be introduced for infant widows who wished to marry, however, this measure alone was incapable and insufficient for meeting their needs and wants. Ramabai reform efforts for women therefore reflect the essence of feminist concerns—providing shelter and education for women, and helping to make them economically self-reliant through vocational training. She also noted how difficult it was to practise remarriage in the prevailing orthodox situations.

"In the first place, widow-marriage among the high-caste people will not for a long time become an approved custom. The old idea is too deeply rooted in the heart of society to be soon removed. Secondly, there are not many men who will boldly come forward and marry widows, even if the widows wish it. It is one thing to talk about doing things contrary to the approved custom, but to practise is quite another matter. It is now about fifty years since the movement called widow-marriage among the High-cast Hindus was started, but those who have practiced it are but few." 88

Mahadevi also described how remarriage is not a solution for widows. In the story of Bittoo, who was a child widow, Mahadevi shows that remarriage is not the solution. 89 She was married again at the age of 35 as a third wife to a man 54. Neither her brothers nor her in-laws wanted her as they felt she was a parasite. Within four years again she was widow and was again the sons of her late husband could not stand her sight, took away all the property and leaving her destitute again

Rukmabai also criticised how men were free to remarry but women were denied the same and were left to live the wretched life till their death. “In our matrimonial laws, or rather in the prevailing customs, a man can marry any number of wives at a time, or wherever he chooses to do so, keeping all of them with him, or driving away those for whom he does not care much; while a woman is wedded once for all. She cannot remarry even after the death of her first husband, nor can she deny to live with him even on reasonable grounds, he may ill-treat her, beat her, drive her away a thousand times, keep her without food, but she must submit to her lot and stay with him (if he keeps her) till she dies a natural death or is killed by him, her sole lord and master.”

Lack of Health Care

Lack of proper health care leading to death of women did not go unnoticed by these women writers. The Census returns of 1880-81 show that there were fewer women than men in India by over five millions. “Chief among the causes which have brought about this numerical difference of the sexes may be named, after female infanticide in certain parts of the country, the imperfect treatment of the diseases of women in all parts of Hindustan, together with lack of proper hygienic care and medical attendance”.

In the story of Radhiya, Mahadevi Varma describes how the poorest sections in the society could not even afford a midwife. Radhiya has cut the umbical cord herself with a sickle after the child was born. In that house, just as a child’s birth was unannounced death came unannounced. Radhiya died after few days.

About the health conditions of Indian woman, Anandibai Joshi in her letter to Carpenter on November 1st 1880 wrote,

“As a rule we Indian women suffer from innumerable trifling diseases, unnoticed till they grow serious. The internal diseases to which women are naturally liable are never known to anybody except sufferers. It is thought indecent to let them go to the

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90 Letter to The Times of India dated 9th April 1887.
92 Mahadevi Varma, *Atith Ke Chalchitr*, pp. 94-104.
knowledge of the other se, much more (so to be) examined by male doctors. You may therefore imagine the mortality among Indian women. If I make no exaggeration, fifty percent die in the prime of their youth of diseases arising partly through ignorance and loathsomeness to communicate of the parties concerned and partly through carelessness on the part of their guardians or husbands. It is not a calamity if a father loses a daughter or two as he is thereby spared much trouble and embarrassment to which he is exposed by adominable customs and manners. (emphasis added)

Education for Girls

Women were left ignorant as they were denied education. The opportunities for girls were very rare and the practice of child marriage further ends any perusal of schooling. Girls who were nine or ten were married off thus cutting them off from any reading and writing because it was shame to read in the presence of others in her husband’s house. It is a popular belief among high-caste women that their husbands will die if they should read or should hold a pen in their fingers. The fear of becoming a widow overcomes their hunger and thirst for knowledge. Ramabai wrote in her book that “Shut in from the world and destitute of the ability to engage in newspaper and useful book-reading, they have little or no knowledge of common things around them, and of the most important events that are daily occurring in their own or foreign lands, ignorant, unpatriotic, selfish and uncultivated, they drag the men down with them into dark abyss where they dwell together without hope, without ambition to be something or to do something in the world.” She emphasised the immediate need for educating women and that the need to better their condition should come from within and not from outside. “We, the women of India, are hungering and thirsting for knowledge; only education under god’s grace, can give us the needful strength to rise up our degraded condition.” Ramabai also said that for general diffusion of education among women in India is large number of women who shall make their life work to teach by percept and example their fellow-country women.

94 Ramabai, The High Caste Hindu Woman, pp. 128-129.
95 Ibid., p. 131.
Pandita Ramabai has pleaded before the Hunter Commission on Education in 1882, for the great need of women teachers and women inspectresses for girls' schools. One reason for the insistence was that "in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred, the educated men of this country are opposed to Female Education and the proper position of woman. If they observe the slightest fault, they magnify the grain of mustard seed into a mountain, and try to ruin the character of the woman."96

Cornelia advised all those who wish to reform the zenana in the following terms "if you wish to reform in India about matters of health and sanitation, if you wish the improvement of the race and the decrease of infant mortality, back you must go to the woman and begin there your work of reform"97 To educate the women enclosed in the zenana, according to cornelia was a very daunting task. She goes on to give some practical suggestions on how to educate the Purdanashins and bring them health care without outraging their custom of zenana. "first step in the education of the Purdanashin women and girls is to inspire a desire to be taught; the next, to give them confidence, to make them realize that education need not outcaste them, or outrage Hindu custom."98

Anandibai described her experiences of going school at about the age of 15. She narrated in following words the immense public scorn and ridicule she faced even in the supposedly progressive city of Bombay in the late 1870s:

"To continue to live as a Hindu and go to school in any part of India is very difficult.......when people saw me going with books in my hands, they had the goodness to put their heads out of the windows just to have a look at me. Some stopped their carriages for the purpose. Others walking in the streets stood laughing and crying out(derisive remarks) so that I could hear (them)........Passers-by, whenever they saw me going, gathered round me Some of them made fun and were convuised with laughter. Others, sitting respectably in their verandahs, made ridiculous remarks and did not feel ashamed to throw pebbles at me. The shopkeepers and vendors spat at the sight of me, and made gestures too indecent to

98 Ibid., p. 73.
describe. I leave it to you to imagine what was my condition at such time, and how I could gladly have burst through the crowd to make my home nearer!"

Women’s education was one of the many controversies Rokeya Hossein addressed in ‘Sultana’s Dream’. The task education has to equip women for the tasks of rebuilding the entire world. She believed that women need the knowledge of modern science and training in the fearless use of reason. As for domesticity, Rokeya was willing to acknowledge the pleasure of cooking or the arts of embroidery, not as fit tasks for the virtuous housewife, but as dimensions of the art of living well. To Rokeya, household duties were secondary; education for self-development was an end in itself. Through education she aimed at attainment of economic independence, which was a very radical idea for that period. Rokeya goes further to claim that the primary obstacle to live as complete human beings was absence of education and women’s equality with men and said it to be the ultimate goal of women’s education. “like our bedrooms which shut out sunlight, our intellect is denied the fruits of enlightenment because there are no adequate schools and institutions of learning available to women.” Thus for Rokeya education had a wider connotation.

Education was the focus of Rokeya and she believed that government should encourage girls, education by establishing more schools. Early marriage and purdah were hindrances in the spread of girls education and Rokeya was against the custom of early marriage.

“Our good Queen liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girl’s schools were founded and supported by the Government. Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage also was stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty-one. I must tell you that, before this change, we had been kept in strict purdah.”


100 As quoted in, Bharati Ray, Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sahawat Hossain, OUP, Delhi, 2002, p. 69.

101 Tharu and Lalitha (eds.), Women Writing in India 600 B.C to the Present, p. 346.
In the essay 'Our Problems' written in 1936, Mahadevi addressed the problem of education to girls. She says that when the structure of intermediary education is erected on the feeble, unsteady foundation of primary education, then it is bound to be devoid of durability and utility. "By the time Indian women reach the intermediary level of education, the special qualities that distinguish them tend to fade away like morning stars or become rare. What is defined as higher education either ends up as a source of ultimate dissatisfaction towards life or as the means to procure necessary amenities. The bitter truth is only two kinds of women head for higher education. Those who aspire to have a degree that can enable them to live an independent life like man or the others whose goal it is to use education to increase their value in the marriage market." 102

Medical Education

Anandibai explained the difficulty experienced by the women in getting a medical education in India, either at the Medical College at Madras (which was open to women at least in theory) or at the midwifery classes in the three Presidencies of Bombay, Bengal and Madras, she said "The education imparted is defective and not sufficient, as the instructors who teach the classes are conservative, and to some extent jealous. I do not find fault with them. That is the characteristic of the male sex. We must put up with this inconvenience until we have a class of educated ladies to relieve these men" 103

Haimabati recollects how education was denied to girls and the problems she faced to learn how to read and write. It was considered ill to read and write as it would make the girl a child widow. When Himabati returned to her home after her husband's death it was attributed to her ability to read and write. She won many prizes for her excellency in reading and it was a source of misfortune to her. She was considered a 'hussy' given to masculine ways. Haimabati writes about the discrimination faced by the women doctors at the hands of their male peers.

counterparts. “Lady doctors and midwives were but pawns in the hands of the male doctors. There was no alternative but a paid job in this situation. But who would give me a job in Calcutta? When I thought of these things, I lamented the fact that we were born as women.”

Amelioration

Ramabai not only points out the problems of Indian women but also the necessary steps to ameliorate their conditions. According to her, the chief needs of high-caste Hindu women are 1- self-reliance, 2- Education, 3- native Women Teachers. Working class women were better off than high caste women for they are not dependent on others economically at least. The high caste women were with out any self-reliance. “if they are left without a protector, i.e. a male relative to support and care for them, they literally do not know what to do with themselves. They have been so cruelly cropped in their early days that self-reliance and energy are dead within them: helpless victims of indolence and false timidity they are easily frightened out of their wits and have little strength to withstand the trials and difficulties which must be encountered by a person on her way towards progress.”

Mahadevi Varma felt that women can find help from women in bettering their conditions. According to her the educated women need to come forward in helping the uneducated women. She however goes on to say that “the enlightened women from the fields of education and medicine have formed a separate social class of their own which has made them indifferent towards the housewife, and has in turn made the housewives suspicious of them......If they fail to emerge as representatives of their less fortunate sisters and continue to view their sacrifice-filled lives with contempt despite their education, wisdom, resources, leisure and self-reliance then the fear of the entire society coming to harm is sure to come true”

Reformers and British Administrators

The efforts made by the reformers and the British Administrators for reforming women’s condition did not go unnoticed by these women writers. Tarabai Shinde wrote that the social reformers of the period were people of little consequence.

“This is so true: your mouths are full of talk about reform, but who actually does anything? You hold these great meetings, you turn up at them in your fancy shawl and embroidered turbans, you hand out all sorts of garlands, you use up a tank full of rosewater, then you come home. And that’s it. That’s all you do. These phoney reform societies of yours have been around for thirty, thirty-five years. What’s use of them? You’re all there patting yourselves on the back, but if we look closely; they’re about as much use as a spare tit on a goat.” 107

Ramabai felt that the reform activities taken up were not enough to bring about improvement in the condition of women in the society. During Rukhmabai case trial Ramabai commented sharply about the same and used the occasion to condemn Hindu law. She showed how all men, be it Indians or British, shared the same view about the position to be assigned too women.

“Our only wonder is that defenceless woman like Rukhmabai dared to raise her voice in the face of powerful Hindu law, the mighty British government, the one hundred and twenty nine million men and the three hundred and thirty million gods of Hindus, all these having conspired together to crush her into nothingness. We cannot blame the English government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India.” 108

Rukhmabai goes on to show the unadaptablity of the Hindu laws in the changing circumstances and the immediate need to reform it. “It seems to me to be an inevitable duty of the present Government (in spite of our old laws and customs) to have the most urgently required reform, suitable to the present age and state of the country. Everywhere a law needs revision in at least a few centuries, to suit the prevailing ages; and how is it possible that our Hindoo matrimonial laws, formed about thousands of years ago, suit the present age

107 Rosalind O’Hanlon, A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India, p. 84.
(an age half-Europeanized)? The only way to face the difficulties is the law reform.” She said that for many years the social reformers like Mr. Malabari, were trying to eradicate the pernicious customs like child marriages and enforced widowhood, but was of little consequence. “But alas! What can one person do without unity and support? By their continuous perseverance and requests the Indian Government was kind enough to make inquiries into the matter, asking the opinions of many influential Hindoo gentlemen: but to the greatest dissatisfaction of every reformer, the numbers of the opponents to the intended reform surpassed that of advocates, and all the aspirations of the anxious reformers were thus at an end.”

Cornelia Sorabji did not believe that reforms alone would solve the problem. Given the fact that throughout the Age of Consent debate, ‘the Indian women’ was invoked as a mute and monolithic character, Sorabji wanted to demonstrate that not all women would fulfill the kinds of colonial cultural expectations reinforced by the language of victimhood and coercion that surrounded the debates in Britain. She believed that through proper education the problem would be solved by itself and she differed from others by saying that even men needed to be educated on these issues. “We have yet to learn in India how to supplement, without appropriating and imitating; and those who would help India have yet to learn in India how to expand what is best and noblest in her without reproducing a faded and monotonous copy of themselves. Marriage reform must begin not in legislation but in education.” She realized that it will take time for society to accept remarriage and mean while the pioneers will suffer.

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109 Letter to The Times of India dated 9th April 1887.
110 Ibid.
111 Antoinette Burton, ‘Stray Thoughts of an Indian girl by Cornelia Sorabji’, in Maitrayee Chaudhuri (ed.), Feminism in India, Kali for Women, New Delhi, p. 100.
Conclusion

The women writers discussed above were most definitely the first women to raise the voice and brought out clear analytical picture of true condition of women in Indian Society. Although they were very radical in their views, yet they tried to live and work with in the existing ideology. Their voices of protest against the women’s secondary condition in the society were muted out. Each of these writers conceded that it was important to go with the system to be in it and then bring about gradual change. Still their voices remain the first insights on their condition from within. Despite all her radical views and activities, throughout her career, Rokeya strategized to accommodate to existing norms and ideology, as she knew the realities of society. For instance, she wore the burqa and never appeared in public without this outer covering. She even wrote a piece in defence of the burqa and hence purdah which she was always careful to distinguish from abarodh or strict seclusion.

One interesting point to be noted about Rukhmabai’s life is, that after the death of Dadaji in 1904, Rukhmabai, decided to don the Hindu widow’s garb though she refused to accept him as her husband. She was not even under any perceptible social pressures, which she faced during her trial. Rukhmabai’s this ‘conformist’ gesture was not to champion the cause of reform nor the orthodoxy. It however, reveals the power of organised social authority to command obedience through the sheer pressure of implicit expectations. That time she was a lady doctor in Surat, who was combating the resistance of its small-town conservative population to sending their pregnant women to her hospital. She struggled for eight years to establish herself and she had to worry about her image among them. Her refusal to accept her widowed status would have put an end to her career. “Having chosen to fade out of limelight, and do quite medical work in local arena, so important in the context of her times, Rukhmabai could not have neglected the pressure to be ‘correct’ in terms that made sense to the beneficiaries of her efforts.”112 Rukhmabai spent thirty-five

112 Ibid., p. 203.
years as chief medical officer in Surat and Rajkot hospitals, living in Bombay after retirement, supporting movements of social reform and writing on the Harmful effects of women’s seclusion in purdah. She retired in 1930 and passed away in 1955, aged ninety-one.

These women writers of the colonial period bring out the prevailing conditions of women of that period. The male members did acknowledge the need for reforming the conditions of women and try to spread education among girls. However, their reform efforts lead only to realignment in the patriarchal structure where in the position of women was more or less same. The purpose of education for girls for most of the reformers was only to train the women in to the new role of the ideal educated wife and mother. Most of the work penned by men of these period, often glorify women of the ancient past. On the other hand the women’s works brought out the first hand versions of the miserable lives they were leading and they tried to analyse the reasons that went in to it. If the works of Cornelia described women in the high class and caste families, i.e. royal families, Mahadevi’s work spoke of the lowest strata of the society and the works of Rokeya brings out the problems faced by the Muslim women. The works of Anandibai, Rukhmabai, Haimabati speak volumes about the immense hardships faced by the first women who ventured into the male bastion of medicine. The problems of enforced widowhood, early marriages, denial of education, female infanticide, purdah, remarriage, were all addressed by these women. The lack of opportunities and even the lack of knowledge of their own problems lead to perpetuation of their condition for centuries. Most of these scholars agreed that education would ameliorate them. And the following century saw a number of educated women who, participated in the national movement and who took up the cause of women by themselves for the first time.