Chapter 3

Women in India: a Socio-Historical-Literary Study
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The previous chapter attempted to explore the phenomenon of motherhood and the various dimensions of the mother-daughter relationship from psychological, social as well as literary perspectives. However, the diverse approaches examined in this connection are all part of Western discourses. Hence, there is a need to look into the conditions that shape the lives of Indian women before trying to explore how the portrayal of the mother daughter relationship in its different dimension is used as a means of assertion of the rights of women by the Indian women novelists of the 1990s.

This chapter attempts to look into the position of women in the Indian society from a sociological-cultural-historical-literary perspective. The first section explores the traditional socio-cultural-religious outlook that shapes the life of an Indian woman. The second section relates to the broad historical spectrum, as it probes social conditions prevailing in India vis-à-vis women during the last two centuries and attempts to map the emerging voice of the Indian woman which finds expression in various political and social movements. The final section of the chapter is a brief glimpse of the portrayal of this feminine voice in the writings of the Indian women litterateurs.

Section I: Social Condition

The girl child:

In her seminal book, The Second Sex, Simone de Beauvoir emphasises the importance of culture in shaping the life of a girl-child when
she remarks that one is not born a woman but becomes one (Beauvoir 295).

However, in the Indian context it would probably be not an exaggeration to say that here the girl-child hardly gets the chance to 'become' a woman; she is 'made' one the moment she is born. The obsession for a male progeny is pervasive across all cultures; but in India it reaches feverish proportions. The desire for sons, which has been age-old here, has always received socio-cultural-religious approval; the following excerpt from Manu detailing how to beget a son may be cited as an example:

On the even nights, sons are conceived, and on the uneven nights, daughters; therefore a man who wants sons should unite with his wife during her fertile season on the even nights.

(Doniger and Smith 48)

Such a desire runs through the Indian veins even today, as is evident from the burgeoning sex-determination clinics and falling female sex-ratios.

According to the entrenched socio-cultural norms and ethos here, it is generally considered almost a moral obligation of every woman to be a mother, and that too of a male-child. The unending yearning for a son can be traced down to both socio-cultural and historical factors, reflecting how social preferences of the most primitive kind still shape our destiny. Infanticide and foeticide are the most extreme manifestations of such an obsession.

Infanticide has its root in various cultures. Unfortunately, so often does the term imply the killing of a girl-child that it has become almost synonymous with female infanticide. The father often exercised absolute control over the
new born in various ancient cultures and the life of the infant depended on his whims. But his power was chiefly restricted to the girl-child; social taboos did not allow him to exercise such a control over the life of a male-child unless he was sickly:

every normal new born male is allowed to live, whereas the custom of exposing girl-infants is widespread (Beauvoir 114).

Adrienne Rich quotes from an essay by Lloyd de Mause where a first century B.C. husband instructs his wife:

If, as well may happen, you give birth to a child, if it is a boy let it live; if it is a girl, expose it (Rich 185-6).

Zimmer and Delbrück, for example, cite the following passage as an evidence of female infanticide in Vedic India

They go to avabhṛtha (the final sacrificial bath); they keep aside the sthālis (pots) and take up the vessels for vāyu; therefore they (the people) keep aside the girl when she is born and lift up (i.e. greet with pride and joy) the son [Emphasis added]

(Taittirīya Samhīta² VI. 5.10.3, quoted in Nabar 53)³.

Debates may rage over the historical point at which female infanticide began in India. But the inferior and subordinate status of the girl-child in the family is stressed repeatedly in the śāstras. Passages cited below bring out the precarious condition of the girl-child and the religio-social approval behind it.
the wife is indeed a friend, the daughter is distress, the son is light in the highest heaven (Aiteraya Brāhmaṇa⁴, 33:1, quoted in Nabar 55).

the son is one’s self, the wife is one’s friend, but the daughter is indeed a difficulty (The Mahābhārata Ādi⁵, 159:11, quoted in Nabar 55).

In a society steeped in religion and tradition such religious disapproval can lead to serious unfairness and injustice to the girl-child. What is ironical is that the mothers who have suffered so much in their own lives often become willing partners in executing female foeticide. Perhaps they find a justification too; since protecting the daughter from sufferings and miseries may well nigh become impossible, the best possible alternative appears to eliminate the daughter altogether.

Foeticide may be the extreme manifestation of the unequal treatment meted out to the women but there are other appalling distinctions that can torment the girl-child. A girl-child is made to feel unwanted even in so called liberal families. The sentiment that a girl does not truly belong to the home may have something to do with such an attitude but this perception is again a social construct. A daughter is often considered a liability and must play second fiddle to her brothers. The resultant discrimination affects her in all walks of life.

In an economically vulnerable family this prejudice spells disaster for the girl where even her bare necessities are dispensed with. The women in
poor families can have their food only if there is enough after feeding the other male members of the family. The girl child too suffers as a consequence, a reflection of which may be witnessed in the widespread malnutrition prevalent among them. The same phenomenon can be observed in the case of education also. From the very beginning a girl child is conditioned to believe that her ultimate destiny is marriage and the sole purpose of her education is to make her more sellable in the marriage market.

The discrimination against the daughter becomes too obvious when the question of bestowing the parental property arises. Manu proclaims that the brothers should individually give a quarter of their share of property to their virgin sisters (Doniger and Smith 211). However, he prefers to remain silent about the sisters who get married. Manu describes “a wife and a son as one’s own body” and “one’s daughter as the supreme object of pity” (Doniger and Smith 91). Though the Hindu civil code confers equal right to inheritance to the daughters, the Hindu mind is seldom as progressive. Even today, in many a Hindu family the daughters are often deprived of their ancestral property. The same axiom holds good for other religious communities as well.

The gender bias that prevails in a traditional society like India is largely shaped by the religious sanctions against women. Manu denies independence to women – both young and old – “even in (her own) house”. “In childhood a woman should be under her father’s control, in youth under her husband’s, and when her husband is dead, under her sons. She should not have independence” (Doniger and Smith 115). The woman is here suggested by a
mere impersonal ‘she’ who is switched from one master to another. Her role as the subordinate must remain unchanged.

**Marriage:**

The most potent way of reining in the women has been the institution of marriage. The Indian society places much importance on wedding and, as per the various śāstras, it is a sacrilege not to marry one’s daughters. Though celibacy is an option open to the males it is unthinkable in case of the women. “A man could remain celibate all his life, while at least in medieval and modern times marriage has been absolutely necessary for every girl” (Kane 438).

The rituals concerning marriage have hardly evolved over the period of time. The same Brāhmaṇical codes laid down in the ancient śāstras are still in vogue. Though the average Indian is hardly knowledgeable of these classical texts, they nevertheless have greatly influenced the communal ethos.

The traditional Hindu view divides life into four phases, each with distinct functions and responsibilities. The second phase is that of gṛḥasthāśrama, or the family life, which one enters after marriage with the chief objective of procreation. The Vedas are silent about the ancient matriarchal societies; however, in the *Mahābhārata*, there is a reference of Pandu telling his wife Kunti of an earlier period when women were licentious in nature (Nabar 100).

Anthropologists have pointed out the female centrality in earliest agricultural societies, where women were regarded as life-givers and fertility-
symbols. It is this perception of women which gave birth to "ritual sexual promiscuity and polyandry" (Patil 103). The depiction of women as wanton in nature in the subsequent societies is a way of spreading patriarchal hegemony, which legitimises greater control and dominance over the female sex.

The patriarchal culture in every society has a history of constraining and enslaving women on the ground that they comprise the inferior sex. The myths have often been tampered with to serve such a purpose. Elizabeth Gould Davis in *The First Sex* analyses one of the most important aspects of the Judaeo-Christian world view – 'Genesis' – to show how the matriarchal agricultural society and its traditions were trampled over by the patriarchal revolution. According to Davis, the Biblical episode is only an alteration of a Sumerian legend, that of goddess Tiamat, the creator of the world. In the *Enuma Elish*, the ancient legend says: "In the beginning Tiamat brought forth the heaven and the earth ... Tiamat the mother of all gods, creator of all." These lines are later transformed into "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth ..." (Davis 141-142). Davis contends that the same form of makeover is even applied to the Adam and Eve story; according to one version Eve is created along with Adam, which is later transformed into "God creates Adam, then the animals and finally, as an after thought, makes woman out of Adam's rib!" (Davis 142). Davis traces the same process of transition from a matriarchal to patriarchal social structure in India as well, where Râma, "the dissident Aryan ... converted India from gynarchy and goddess worship before our era" (Davis 134).
Such an argument also finds favour with Rupert Sheldrake when he goes on to illustrate the peaceful existence of early agricultural societies which worshipped goddesses. However, in between 4000 and 3500 B.C. the invading warrior tribes asserted their own culture by making their warrior-gods superior to the native goddesses who were reduced to mere consorts of the former. According to Sheldrake, the advent of the Aryans in India marked a similar transition in this country (Sheldrake 17-18).

The Hindu theology is unique in its balance of the male and the female aspects. Indeed the correlation between the two is so strong that a deity cannot often be conjured alone. Viṣṇu is inconceivable without Lakṣmī, Kṛṣṇa without Rādhā, Rāma without Sitā and Śiva without Pārvatī. The union of the male and the female as the source of the creative life giving energy is depicted by the symbol of the lingam standing on the base of yoni. Likewise, the Hindu male too is considered incomplete without his wife. According to Śatapatha Brahmāṇḍa, a man “secures a wife, he gets progeny and then he becomes complete” (Kane 428). Indeed the wife has been often described as the ardhaṅgini of her husband in various Hindu scriptures.

However, this delicate poise between the male and the female aspects in the Hindu pantheon exists only theoretically. Paradoxically, real life practice follows a completely opposite course to that envisioned by this philosophy. The various terms relating to marriage themselves suggest women to be passive objects to be manipulated by active male agents. The term vivāha suggests the taking away of a girl, while the term pāṇigrahan implies the
holding of a girl's hand for the purpose of marrying her and so on. It is the males who act while the females are envisioned as passive objects for such actions.

The same male supremacy is under display when the physical attributes of the bride are primarily focussed on as opposed to the intellectual abilities or professional qualifications of the bridegroom. Even the system of inter-varna marriage is loaded in favour of the men where a male member of higher caste is allowed to marry a woman of lower caste and not vice versa. The inferior status of the woman gets asserted by the presumption that she attains the caste of her husband. Manu proclaims, "When a woman is joined with a husband in accordance with the rules, she takes on the same qualities that he has, just like a river flowing down into the ocean" (Doniger and Smith 199).

The dominance of the males also resulted in politicization of the birth process, making men more fundamental to women so far as the birth of a child is concerned. As Manu says, "the revealed canon is divided in two about who the 'husband' is: some say that he is the begetter, others that he is the one who owns the field" (Doniger and Smith 200-01). Manu here embarks upon a traditional argument whereby he regards the woman to be field and the man to be the giver of seed. This is parallel to Aristotle's intention on "dislodging women from the central function of giving birth. It is man, according to Aristotle, who gives form to the human embryo; women simply provide a vessel and biological support for the new life" (Barbara 84). Manu too views men as active
agents and women as passive principle; he claims unequivocally "Of the seed and the womb, the seed is said to be more important, for the offspring of all living being are marked by the mark of the seed" (Doniger and Smith 201).

The image of the woman as property over whom a man exercises his right is common to all patriarchal cultures. Levi Strauss has drawn attention to the vocabulary of Russia, where the groom is called 'merchant' and the bride 'merchandise' (Levi Strauss 36), thus exposing how women are regarded as commodities. The same principle gets illustrated in various myths of India. The most obvious example that comes to one's mind is one from Mahābhārata, relating to Draupadī. Her case is unique since hers is the only case of polyandry that has come down to us by way of literary traditions. Arjuna wins the hand of Draupadī at her swayamvar. The five Pāṇḍavas who were at exile return to their cottage with Draupadī. Arjuna asks their mother to see what aim he has brought to which she casually remarks to divide it equally among all his brothers. Draupadī thus becomes the property of the five brothers, a sexual object to be enjoyed in turn. Her position as an object in the life of her husbands becomes obvious when she is pawned and lost by Yudhistir in a game of dice. She is publicly insulted as a whore for her relationship with her five husbands. This turns to be suitable ground for her sexual abuse in the court – the attempt to disrobe her in front of all. She becomes the prize treasure of the two confronting sides and it is her humiliation that triggers off the fatal battle. What is ironical about the vāstraḥaraṇ episode is that Draupadī, who has all along been subjected to constraints, has been protected in her
house even from the touch of wind (Young, 285) in order to protect her honour, is thus subjected to public humiliation by her own relatives. This event highlights the hypocrisy that underlies the so called patriarchal norms.

The mythical representation of such constraints on women is witnessed in the event concerning Laksmana, as depicted in the Rāmāyaṇa. Sitā sends her husband Rāma in pursuit of a golden deer, actually the demon Mārīcha in disguise. Mārīcha is killed by Rāma, but before his death the demon cries for help mimicking the voice of Rāma. A nervous Sitā sends Lakṣmaṇa, Rāma’s brother to help her husband. Before leaving her, Lakṣmaṇa draws a line imploring Sitā not to step out. Sitā forgets the instruction when the demon King Rāvaṇa comes to seek alms in the disguise of a saint. She steps out of the line and is abducted.

In the Indian context the Laksmaṇarekha symbolises the boundary beyond which no woman has the right to step out. Though Sitā disobeys the injunction in order to perform a benevolent act she has to face the consequences for disobeying the male dictate. Indeed, Rāvaṇa may be interpreted as the hostile patriarchal force ready to punish women for violating male injunctions. A recent Marathi poem by Padma Gole highlights the constraining forces working within the society by drawing on the image of the Laksmaṇarekha.

Lakṣmaṇa drew but one line
in front of Sitā.

She crossed over it –
The result was the *Rāmāyaṇa*.

We face Lakṣmaṇa-rekhas on all sides:

they have to be crossed,

the Rāvaṇas confronted (from Nabar 111).

Even when Sitā is freed after a bloody battle, she has to undergo the ignominy of going through an *agniparīkṣhā*¹¹ to prove her chastity. Her ordeal however, does not end with this event; she is sent to exile as gossips about her possible sexual encounters with the demon-King spread. Finally, she is asked to prove her chastity once again before all and sundry. Sitā, further unable to suffer such humiliation returns to her mother Earth. Sitā’s story suggests that the patriarchal society does not value a woman for her own sake; the epic battle is fought more to avenge Rāma’s loss and restore his lost honour. For Rāma it is not sufficient that she is chaste; what is of primary importance to him is that she also appears to be chaste.

The androcentric, patriarchal culture of India has thrown up many a myth-heroine – their qualification being sacrifice, submission and devotion to the men. So we have Sāvitrī¹² and Behulā¹³ bringing back their husbands from death to life, winning over providence with their devotion to their husbands. Even Kāli, the indomitable goddess going on a destructive rampage, can only be controlled by her husband, Lord Śiva.

Historically, such blind devotion towards their husbands, families and clans can be traced in the act of mass suicide of the Rajput queens by
plunging themselves into fire, when the Rajput armies were defeated at the hands of the Islamic invaders. Their act is considered heroic even to this day. However, in giving away their lives they were only following the patriarchal ethos which showed extreme authoritarian possessiveness regarding their women which found expression in their exclusivist attitude to women, once sexually violated.

These quasi-historical and historical icons may be celebrated and mythicised for ages for their sacrifice; but most of the women are not so lucky. They simply fade into oblivion. Hira Bansode's poem 'Yosodharā' with its focus on Buddha's wife is a case in the point. Nothing is known about her except how she is deserted by her husband when he is sick of worldly sorrows. Later she has to hand over her son Rāhula, when Buddha asks for him. Without husband, and now without her son, she is completely blotted out from the pages of history as if her life has no meaning without them.

The obliteration of the woman's identity is prevalent in all cultures in the form of the woman assuming the surname of her husband after her marriage. In certain cultures of India, even her first name is altered to give her a new identity altogether. The ritual of sampradān, whereby the father hands over his daughter to his son-in-law during marriage, clearly brings out the impossibility of a woman to have her own identity, for she must always belong to somebody.

The institution of marriage ensures patriarchal control over a woman by reinforcing her position in the society as a commodity. She can only gain
admiration by going into a marriage, which again traps her in a position of inferiority.

**Widowhood:**

The institution of marriage recognises a woman in connection to her husband and as a natural corollary; a widow is offered to play only a limited role in the social and familial sphere. Manu prescribes a life of abstinence for widows; chastity, vegetarian diets, fasting, restraint and endurance are among the long list of stipulations set by him (Doniger and Smith 115). Even the desire for progeny is not considered sufficient reason for a woman to remarry. “But a woman who violates her (vow to her dead) husband because she is greedy for progeny is the object of reproach here on earth and loses the world beyond. No (legal) progeny are begotten here by another man or in another man’s wife; nor is a second husband ever prescribed for virtuous women” (Doniger and Smith 116). In contrast, a widower is not only permitted to remarry once the last rites of his ex-wife have been performed but it is considered a sacred duty on his part to do so. “He [widower] must never neglect the five (great) sacrifices, but should take a wife and live in his house, in accordance with this rule, for the second part of his life” (Doniger and Smith 116).

The Śāstras abound in severe stricutures meant for a widow. The aim is to constrict her life and regulate her conduct to the utmost extent. A society afraid of uncontrolled female sexuality imposes all sorts of social restrictions
and hardships in the absence of her prescribed guardian, her husband.

Consequently she is considered to be "more inauspicious than other
inauspicious things" and a man is advised to "avoid even their blessings like
the poison of a snake" (Kane 584 – 585).

Widowhood is considered to be the most wretched situation that may
occur in a woman’s life. The orthodox Hindu wife considers it to be a fortune if
she dies a suhāgan before widowhood can curse her. A woman’s life is always
connected to her husband, whose death triggers off a life of misery, misfortune
and loneliness for her. Bahinabai Choudhari15, a Marathi poet, ironically brings
out the connection between the husband’s life and wife’s fate when she
mockingly asks the fortune teller to look for her fate not in her palm but in the
parting of her hair:

The fate-line is hidden
beneath the kumkum on my forehead:
the kumkum wiped away,
the fate-line is revealed... (from Nabar 150)

One may suggest that the lots of the widows today have turned
remarkably better. They establish themselves professionally, raise children
and get remarried; in most middle-class homes the strictures regarding
widowhood are not as strictly adhered to as in the yesteryears. Even India’s
only woman Prime Minister also happened to be a widow16.

Nevertheless, insensitive, hypocritical orthodoxy has apparently not lost
its sway. The controversy over Deepa Mehta’s unfinished film Water, which
intended to portray the lives of three generations of widows at Varanasi, the torment they go through, the exploitation they face, the repression of their desires and the possibility of their revolt, bring out the character of the socio-political space over which such reactionary forces dominate. The religious community strongly protested against the film firstly because it depicts the various āshramas as places of possible sexual exploitation and secondly as it puts a slur on the Indian widows by attributing sexual desire to them. The religious āshramas can justifiably protest against any suggestion of their involvement in sexual exploitation of widows, if it is untrue. However, by trying to put forward the opinion that Hindu widows are free from any sexual urge they are actually violating the rights of the very women, whose cause they claim to champion.

The motive behind denying widows any sexual craving is a ploy for putting the onus of adhering to the socially prescribed moral code on women. The Ādiparva proclaims immoral behaviour on part of males to be quite natural: “Just as birds flock to a piece of flesh left on the ground, so all men try to woo [or try to seduce] a woman whose husband is dead” (Kane 584). By making the widows responsible to protect themselves from the natural licentiousness of the males, the society proclaims measures by which such an objective may be achieved. Hence, the sexual instinct in widows is totally denied, they are prohibited from consuming foods which are regarded as sexually arousing, are condemned to don only white dresses, barred from attending social occasions and considered inauspicious. However, the
alternative of regarding men, who exploit the vulnerability of widows, as
harmful, malevolent and inauspicious elements of society was never given a
thought. The same mindset is displayed even today in court cases dealing with
rape, where the argument of the defence counsel generally veers round the
questionable character of the victim.

A discussion on the Hindu widows must remain incomplete without any
reference to the practice of sati, or immolation of women once their husband
die. Kane shows the prevalence of widow burning among ancient Greeks,
Germans and Slavs (625). Whether such a practice entered India from outside
cannot be definitely ascertained. Kane asserts that the Vedic passages are
silent about any such practice and among the Dharmasūtras only Viṣṇu makes
any reference to sati. The passage reads: “On her husband’s death the widow
should observe celibacy or should ascend the funeral pyre after him” (Kane
626). Nowhere is the practice of sati claimed to be mandatory. Kane holds that
the practice was rare and only confined within the Kṣatriya royal families.
Moreover, the custom was entirely voluntary and the widows were generally
dissuaded from taking such an extreme measure.

But gradually the practice assumed a romantic aura, especially in the
hands of the Rajput queens, who immolated themselves in droves to protect
themselves from the Muslim invaders. It resulted in valorisation of the custom
of satī. Within a span of a few centuries the practice of satī no longer remained
a social and patriarchal obligation, it became a binding duty. The enemy were
no longer outside invaders; they remained within the society. The widow was
to burn herself so that she could not be sexually abused. A society which could not give protection to its own women from sexual torments nevertheless gloated upon the purity of its galaxy of satī. A satī was thought to possess great moral power – enough to protect her husband from the most heinous of sins and purify three families: those of her mother, her father and her husband (Kane 631).

The practice of satī was legally prohibited in 1829 by Lord Bentinck, but sporadic events continued. The resurgence of the practice in the form of Roop Kanwar incident in 1987 was an eye opener to all, demonstrating the favour such traditionalism enjoys among a large populace. The active participation of the common people in her organised murder, the churni mahotsav that followed, the large number of pilgrims who throng the numerous sati shrines all across the country, definitely put a question mark on our belief that such a ghastly practice is a thing of the past. The spirit of satī lives on – often in a much deadlier manner – in the form of wife-burning, bashing, infidelity and rape.

Section II: The Historical Background

The early reforms:

The attitude of the Indian society towards its women hardly marked any significant change through centuries before the advent of the British colonisers in this country. The arrival of an alien culture influenced the educated Indians, which resulted in a pro-reformist tilt in the social sphere. It is no wonder that
Bengal and Bombay, the two provinces which first came under British
domination, were also the first to witness social movements concerning
women.

One of the most progressive voices to emerge during the first half of the
nineteenth century was that of Raja Rammohan Roy. He analysed the Bengali
society and deduced that the rigid ‘purdãh’ system, early marriage, illiteracy,
insensitive interpretation of the scriptures served to reduce women into sexual
slaves. The greatest of the social evils was, however, the practice of satî.
While many widows were forcibly put on the funeral pyre of their dead
husbands, others volunteered to become satî to escape the ignominious life
that lay in front of them. Rammohan made a composite attempt to improve the
lot of women besides focussing on giving women the right to life by banning
satî. His efforts bore fruit when he interpreted the Hindu scriptures in a new
light and satî was finally banned in 1829. The other reforms that he felt most
essential for improving the condition of the women are: a) Prohibition of child-
marrige, b) Prohibition of kulism and polygamy, c) Reform of the
marriage-laws, d) Widow remarriage, e) Right of women to inherit property, f)
Spreading of women's education (Kundu, “Ek Álok-Jātrī” 376). Though he
failed in most of his attempts, he nevertheless laid the foundation for
subsequent reforms.

The Young Bengal Movement, though short-lived, had a profound
impact on the Indian Renaissance. Derozio, a teacher in Hindu College,
inspired his students to organise various social reforms, many of them
championing the cause of the women. The members of this group\textsuperscript{20} regularly wrote in the columns of \textit{Jnānānvesan} and \textit{Bengal Spectator} to advocate greater rights for women.

Even the orthodox voices supported limited reforms relating to women so long as they were kept within the traditional wife-mother role. Radhakanta Deb, who was a stalwart of the orthodox camp and a firm opponent of the Young Bengal Movement, too supported partial freedom for women, when he became the patron of \textit{Strisikshā bidhāyak}, the first Bengali work to support female education by Pandit Gourmohan Vidyalankar.

One of the most ambitious reforms carried out during this period was the passing of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 at the behest of Pandit Iswarchandra Vidyasagar. It was a follow up of his predecessor Raja Rammohan Roy. If Rammohan spearheading the movement for banning satī acquired for women the right to live, Vidyasagar's effort was to bestow dignity on them. He was not satisfied only with making the law effective; he took a personal interest in its actual implementation. However, his triumph was more theoretical than practical. With the legislation, enthusiasm for widow remarriage actually fizzled away.

The movement had its impact on the reformists of Maharashtra, who set up a special society for promoting widow remarriage in 1866 under the auspices of M.G. Ranade, Gopal Hari Deshmukh and Vishnushastri Pandit (O'Hanlon 14). Here too the euphoria achieved very little as most of the
proponents of such reforms had to eventually abandon their pursuit in fear of social ostracism.

In Bengal, the Brahmo Samaj provided the much needed fillip to the reform process. The movement gained greater strength when the body was joined by the firebrand reformist Keshub Chandra Sen in 1857. The Brahmos took active steps to promote female education, widow remarriage, setting up of temperance organizations, night schools and small charities. Often they had to renounce their parent-families as the Hindus were not ready to allow the practice of a distinct religion by the members within the same family. The Brahmo movement thus helped in breaking up joint families. Men and women began to live more among their peer group than among the elders, resulting in departures from conventions. At this stage, the British often supported the Brahmos in their reformist agenda leading to the rise of an articulate group of women – the bhadramahilā (Borthwick 54).

The Brahmo women were the first to break with orthodox customs in matters of education, dress and discarding of purdāh. They began to embody a progressive image of womanhood with a social role. They were capable of running the new kind of household and provide support and understanding for their husbands. However, in spite of all the advances that marked the lives of the Brahmo women, they still envisioned themselves in the role of the wife-mother rather than seek their goals as individuals.

The diluted form of the Brahmo bhadramahilā gradually disseminated in other parts of India as well. Rosalind O'Hanlon in her introduction to the
translation of Tarabai Shinde's *A Comparison between Women and Men* observes: "This model for a new womanhood was a fusion of older brahmanical values of *pativrata*, of feminine self sacrifice and devotion to the husband, with Victorian emphases upon women as enlightened mothers and companions to men in their own 'separate sphere' of the home. Such idea had very considerable appeal. They were not really radical or threatening, either to older notions of female dependence or to developing ideology of home and the domestic as sacrosanct domains of tradition and religion; in fact, they actually reinforced them" (14 – 15).

In western India we see the emergence of these radical ideas in the 1870s within the circles of the Prarthana Samaj. M.G. Ranade, G.V. Kanitkar, G.V. Joshi, Hari Narayan Apte all began to educate their children in earnest. Arya Mahila Samaj, an association of women was formed in 1882. Pandita Ramabai, a noted Sanskrit scholar, joined the Samaj. In 1877, M.V. Walvekar, member of Prarthana Samaj and editor of its *Subodha Patrika* started the first Marathi periodical for women, *GrihiQi*.

The orthodox versus reformist debate started in the 1880s, particularly over the establishment of high schools for girls in Poona and Bombay. The traditionalists including Bal Gangadhar Tilak opposed the move as they felt women's education would ruin their traditional virtues. Liberals like Gopal Ganesh Agarkar on the other hand felt that the Hindu society would remain backward till its women were educated, as they were at once the foremost victims and utmost supporters of status quo (Wolpert 35 – 37).
A similar debate over women’s education was prevalent in Bengal as well. Often educating of women began in a clandestine manner within the family circles as the emerging middle class men often preferred ‘educated’ wives, who could run the new and more sophisticated kind of household. Formal education for women practically began with the establishment of the Bethune School in 1849. Many such schools were established after the 1860s, prominent among which are Hindu Mahila Bidyalaya and Victoria College established in 1873 and 1883 respectively. In the initial phase, it was only the Brahmo and the Christian communities which allowed their women to join such schools. It was only after 1900 that the Hindu families could overcome the taboo of women’s education. These resulted in a spurt in the number of schools for women. In Bengal, the number of schools for girls increased three fold between 1901 and 1911 (COI, 1911, 366) and in the three decades the number of girls attending schools increased from 50,000 in 1901 to 4,50,000 in 1931 (COI, 1931, 343).

The reform movement gained momentum and left its mark on the nationalist political movement as well. The early leaders of the Indian National Congress clearly defined a political role for the organisation feeling that the social issues were best left to the communities themselves. However, the reformist camp under the leadership of Ranade, established the National Social Conference to discuss social issues. It is due to the active support of these social reformers that the women joined the political mainstream as early as the first decade of the twentieth century.
Women in the freedom movement:

The social reforms which came about in the 19th century paved the way for the awakening of the Indian women. The freedom movement that swept the nation from the 1880s marked the arrival of the women in the public sphere in large numbers. Besides clamouring for India’s independence, the women were greatly responsible for bringing about changes in their legal status, establishment of girls’ schools, setting up their own associations and publication of their own magazines.

The educated middle class women became pioneers in social activities and established numerous associations, especially between 1880 and 1930, to champion the cause of women. In 1886, Swarnakumari Devi founded Sakhī Samiti. Her daughter, Saraladevi Choudhurani was involved in the establishment of Bhārat Strī Mahāmandal in Allahabad in 1910. Pandita Ramabai founded a home for the widows in 1889 called Sharadā Sadan with the aim of making them economically self sufficient. One of the earliest women’s organisations established in 1904 was the Bhārat Mahilā Parishad. It worked hand in hand with its parent body, the National Social Conference, to promote social reforms pertaining to women. Ten years later, the All India Muslim Ladies’ Conference came about at Aligarh. Founded by the Begum of Bhopal the conference concentrated on social reforms and education among Muslim women.

The first pan-India women’s organisation, The Women’s Indian Association, was founded in 1917 by Dorothy Jinarajadasa, Margaret Cousins
and Annie Besant in Madras. The organisation had its branches all over the
country and educated middle-class women belonging to all religions
participated in its activities. It had its own journal called Strī Dharma. Besides
making women realise their duties and responsibilities as daughters of India,
the Association was also functional in demanding the rights of women to
contest and participate in elections to all municipal and Legislative Councils.

Soon women began to join active politics as many of them felt that the
emancipation of the country and the women were intrinsically linked. One of
the pioneering women who actively began to challenge the colonial rule was
Bhikhaji Rustom Cama. She is noted for her fiery speeches demanding swarāj,
in many of the radical gatherings spread across Europe. In 1907, she made
history by first unfurling the flag of India at the International Socialist
Conference in Stuttgart. Madame Cama was also the publisher of the patriotic
journal Bande Mātaram.

The Indian National Congress, established in 1885, became an
important political platform for the women. In 1917, the Congress elected
Annie Beasant, a British political reformer, as its first woman President.
Various events like the Partition of Bengal in 1905 and the Amritsar Massacre
in 1919 jolted the Indian womanhood and helped them understand the sad
plight of the country under foreign domination.

The first mass movement was sparked off when Lord Curzon decided
to partition Bengal ostensibly for administrative reasons but with the real
motive of weakening the growing nationality. When the policy of pleading and
appealing failed, a call for swadeshi (purchase of only home-made products) and boycott (rejection of all British goods) was made. The movement gained popularity and the women enthused with a political passion participated in it in large numbers.

The swadeshi and boycott movement, however, had a distinct local flavour. Much of India remained unaffected by what seemed to be a provincial crisis. This was soon to change with the advent of the First World War. Though India was not a party to the war, the country had to pay a heavy price for it. Numerous lives were lost as Indian soldiers were made to participate as part of the allied force. The country also made huge economic sacrifices. All this happened for a cause too distant for most of the Indians to fathom. Especially the women had to suffer most as they lost their sons, brothers and husbands in the battle field and were the worst sufferers in a depleted economy.

The Indian political leadership acted in good faith during the First World War. The British had promised wide ranging political reforms once the war ended. However, the actual implementation in the form of the Government of India Act, 1919, failed to live up to the Indian expectations. The passage of the Rowlatt Act in the same year giving the police extensive power also led to wide ranging resentment among the populace.

General strikes and demonstrations against the Act were organised in all corners of the country. Especially, Punjab became the hotbed of activities. In Amritsar, the European quarters were attacked in retaliation against the
arrest of two popular leaders. The reprisal was swift and violent. On 13th April, 1919, police under General Dyer fired indiscriminately at an unarmed crowd gathered in the city square. The firing stopped only when the bullets were exhausted. The result was 379 deaths, with injury to over 1200 (Visram 21).

The confidence in British civility was lost for ever and the people made a new resolve to fight for independence. Henceforth, the movement underwent a change and direct confrontation replaced the politics of pleading. The Amritsar massacre also helped in transforming the freedom struggle to a truly mass movement. People of all classes, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, merchants and peasants, higher castes and harijans all joined the movement. Women too joined the movement in hundreds and thousands, a new phenomenon in the Indian context. India also witnessed the meteoric rise of Mahatma Gandhi as a national leader and with him the politics of satyagraha and ahimsa, something unique in the annals of Indian history.

It was Gandhi, who was able to mobilise women into the mainstream struggle. For him the freedom movement's objective was not only independence but also establishment of social equality which would have remained a pipedream without the active participation of women. He relied upon the inner strength and courage of Indian women and believed that they had an active role to play in any freedom struggle:

To call woman the weaker sex is a libel, it is man's injustice to woman. If by strength is meant brute strength, then
indeed woman is less brute than man. If by strength is meant moral power, then woman is immeasurably man's superior...If non-violence is our being, the future is with woman (quoted in Visram 23).

What made Gandhi distinct from other leaders was his emphasis on satyagraha, self-control and simple life style. His call for absolute non-violent struggle was a political weapon which found mass support and specially appealed to the women. When Gandhi launched the non-cooperation movement in 1920 women in large numbers eagerly joined the movement. They went on collecting funds, donated their own jewellery and attended meetings and processions. Part of the non-cooperation movement consisted of boycott of foreign goods and practice of swadeshi. Women came forward to put their dresses in the bonfire and adopted the coarse home spun khadi.

Gandhi also included the practice of home-spinning as part of the non-cooperation movement. It was based on a simple economic principle. The objective was to hurt the British economy as much as possible by boycotting the imported garments and revive the local village industry of spinning which had earlier been a source of independent income for women. The spinning wheel became a symbol of the economic independence of the women as well as of the freedom struggle.

Another feature of the non-cooperation movement was to encourage people to abstain from alcohol. The British Government earned huge revenue
by way of taxes imposed on liquor. The boycott on liquor helped to prevent the drainage of wealth from Indian to foreign hands.

Women were specially entrusted by Gandhi to organise picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops. The response was overwhelming and picketing boards and committees were formed to oversee the movement. The movement proved to be a huge success.

There were however many sceptics who doubted the ability of the women to perform such extreme modes of protest as they were secluded all through their life. They were proved wrong; not only did the women campaign actively, but also they kept their resolve once the police clamped down heavily on the picketers. The Government suffered huge loss in revenue and declared picketing to be illegal. More than 17000 women were convicted during the first ten moths of the movement and other heavy handed punishments were meted out to them by the police (Visram 26).

Gandhi organised numerous movements, both local and national, between 1920 and 1930. The most famous is the ‘Salt March’ carried out in 1930. The movement was against the British law which prohibited Indians from producing salt. It affected the poor people living in the coastal belts for whom, the production of salt was a means of livelihood. Gandhi accompanied by 79 followers began the ‘salt satyagraha’ on 6th April 1930 by marching to Dandi, a coastal village to produce salt himself and call every Indian to break the salt law. He intended to keep the women out of the movement but that was not to be. Sarojini Naidu led a campaign to raid the salt depots at Dharasana, near
Bombay. She was arrested and imprisoned for a year. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay raided the depots at Wadala in Bombay. She too was arrested but the movement went on. Soon the movement had its desired effect and the village women participated to break the salt law.

The outbreak of the Second World War put the British in a very tight spot. Every political activity including peaceful demonstration was banned. In August 1942, the Congress called the nation to join the ‘Quit India’ movement, which saw a tremendous upsurge in the freedom struggle. Gandhi's demand of independence and his slogan ‘Do or Die’ inspired millions of men and women.

The Government responded to the biggest ever non-violent movement with coercion. Important Congress leaders were put behind the bars. But it did not deter the country from taking the active plunge into the freedom struggle. Like the earlier movements the women did not lag behind.

Women organised protest marches and prayer meetings all across the country. In many villages they led protest demonstrations and hoisted the national flag on the local police stations and law courts. Matangini Hazra, an aged lady in Bengal and Kanaklata Barua, a fifteen year old girl in Assam, lost their lives while leading such processions.

As all the important leaders were imprisoned the women leaders like Aruna Asaf Ali, Sucheta Kripalini, Usha Mehta got an opportunity to give shape and direction to the Quit India movement. They had to work
underground and risk much hazards as the Government machinery worked overtime to nab them. They guided and led the movement, kept high the morale of the activists, collected money for the movement and also planned the campaigns.

Usha Mehta took up the onus of running an underground radio station for the Congress. It became the only means of a direct communication between the various leaders and the public at large. The centre ran successfully from 14th August 1942 to 12th November 1942. Usha Mehta was finally arrested and sentenced to four years of imprisonment.

Away from their motherland, the Indian expatriates in South-East Asia demonstrated their patriotic zeal by forming the Indian Independence League. The League had women's wings concentrating on relief works and collection of funds for the Indian National Army. When Subhas Chandra Bose took over the commands of the INA, he fired the imagination of the Indian women by calling them to join the Army. In 1943, the Rani of Jhansi Regiment of the INA was formed. The Regiment comprised of two units – a military section and a nursing section. The women soldiers underwent full fledged military training and dressed in soldiers' uniform. No distinction was made between the men and women in the INA and they were ready for combat situations. However, the INA had to retreat before the Rani of Jhansi regiment had a chance to take part in active warfare.

The Quit India movement was regarded as sabotage to the British war efforts by the Government. Consequently, the Government retaliated with
every means of possible coercion. The women had to bear the brunt of much of the police atrocities. They had to face brutal \textit{lathi} charge, undergo physical and mental torments, and face insults and abuses. Many of the women were even raped. Even pregnant women were not spared. The attack on women's modesty was a deliberate ploy to weaken the spirit of the movement.

The Quit India movement died down in 1945, but not before dealing an irremediable blow to British Imperialism. Though the British emerged on the victorious side in the Second World War, their economic, political and military prowess was thoroughly challenged, thereby compelling them to withdraw from India in 1947.

The freedom struggle in a way paved the way for the emancipation of women in India. Before this they were restrained within the familial sphere for centuries. But once the nationalist spirit swept the country the women could no longer be kept tied down to their traditional role. The freedom movement could have hardly succeeded with half the populace remaining outside its purview. With the men folk often under police custody or remaining underground women were compelled to move away from their secluded recluse and take independent decisions. Thus though the nationalist fervour was essentially a political one, it also served a social cause – an improved awareness of the capability and potential of women in India.
Political rights of women in independent India:

The immense contribution of the women in the freedom movement was recognised by the Indian National Congress when it adopted the resolution of political equality to women in its Karachi session, as early as 1931. The vision was translated into reality when the Constitution guaranteed universal adult suffrage and the right of the women to compete and get elected in any of the constitutional bodies. Further, the constitution promised women equality of status and opportunity.

The Indian legislature proved to be quite active in its early days to uplift the status of women in the country. The Hindu Code passed in the form of various Acts in between 1950 and 1955 reconstructed the laws regarding Hindu marriage and divorce, inheritance and adoption. Subsequent laws framed to benefit women included the Maternity Benefit Act and the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961, the legalisation of abortion in 1971 and the introduction of the principle of equal pay for equal work in 1975. The bureaucracy was also revamped with many women specific projects to ensure gender equality.

The women belonging to the upper and middle classes of the society and formed the mainstream of the social and political movements in the pre-independence period were quite pleased with the state policies as they were the chief beneficiaries. Many of the women’s organizations were institutionalised. The state as well as many of these organizations believed in the concept of ‘welfare’ and hence became patrons of women’s cause.
These women organizations, however, faced much criticism as they tended to keep women in a state of social dependents and did not let them assume new responsibilities. The most vehement criticism came from the Communist women leaders, who dismissed the state policies, legislatures and Government and party promises as feudal in nature. Vibha Farooqui founded the National Federation of Indian Women (NFIW) to focus attention on "(women's) struggle for equal rights and responsibilities in all spheres of life and for improvement in their living condition" (Tenth Congress of the National Federation of Indian Women 3). The Gandhian women, on the other hand, felt the need for economic and social development of women before their legal and constitutional rights. Being dissatisfied with Government policies they often volunteered themselves in grassroots projects.

The contribution of the Government to the cause of equality for women in the society was challenged severely by a report on the status of women in India, called Toward Equality (1974). The report was prepared by a Government appointed committee, chaired by Dr. Phulrenu Guha, the then Union Minister of Social Welfare, to study the impact of various constitutional, legal and administrative measures on the social life of women. The report stated that the condition of the women had, in fact, deteriorated since independence:

The review of the disabilities and constraints on women, which stem from socio-cultural institutions, indicates that the majority of women are still very far from enjoying the rights and
opportunities guaranteed to them by the constitution (Toward Equality 359).

The impact of the report on Indian policies and programmes has been enormous. The Indian Council for Social Science Research has encouraged many research projects to look into the status of women in contemporary India. The same objective also led to the foundation of the Research Centre for Women's Studies at SNDT Women's University in 1974 and Centre for Women's Development Studies in 1980.

All these research institutes present a grim picture of the conditions of Indian women. Much of the research focuses on failures of government policies. Though there is no dearth of successful women in this country, the moot point remains, that majority of women have not yet benefited from this development and still remains economically, politically, technologically and socially handicapped.

Participation of women in politics:

The participation of Indian women in politics, particularly in high offices, has been quite impressive. While it is true that males still dominate most of the political forums, female participation compares favourably when compared to many countries. Women have consistently held 4-5% seats in the Lok Sabha till 1980s when their representation increased to some extent to reach between 7-8%. On the other hand, women representation in Rajya Sabha, has always been in the range of 7-10% (Forbes 229). As of June 1991, India's
percentage of women in parliament at 7.1% compares favourably with USA’s 6.4%, UK’s 6.3% and France’s 5.3% (Ragab 8).

However, compared to the enormous participation of women during freedom struggle these numbers seem to be insignificant. It suggests that women have failed to transform themselves from agitation politics to electoral politics. The distance of the women from the political sphere may be attributed to the crudeness associated with it. Society has, as a consequence, regarded politics as a male bastion. Women braving their way into politics have had to endure sexual harassment and sordid gossip. Naturally, women in general have preferred to work as a social worker rather than as a politician.

In spite of the reluctance of the women to join politics, what is worth noting is the number of women who have held high offices. Rajkumari Amrit Kumari, Sarojini Naidu, Sucheta Kripalini, Vijaylakshmi Pandit are some of the most notable of these women. The most distinguished name in this long list is probably that of Mrs. Indira Gandhi who became the second woman to head a state in the twentieth century.

Critics have attributed various reasons for the ascendency of the women in Indian politics. Mary Katzenstein attributes the leadership role of women to two factors – the mass participation of women during freedom struggle and the kinship factor, whereby women belonging to important political families don the mantle of their fathers and husbands (Katzenstein 483). Geraldine Forbes on the other hand points to the differences between various women politicians with regards to their social position and feels that
attributing the rise of the women to dynastic politics may be simplifying matters a bit. She feels that a combination of family culture, opportunities and individual personalities has only catapulted women to power (Forbes 235).

The heightened status of individual women in power and the general condition of the ordinary Indian women suggest a stark contrast. This anomaly has been termed by Ashis Nandy as "(the) commonplace paradox of every social interpretation of the Indian woman" (Nandy 158). In his view the political success of the women leaders is due to viewing of aggressive and activist traits to a realm of non-gendered attribute by the cultural milieu. Susan S. Wadley expresses an almost similar viewpoint when she finds a cultural link between shakti and the feminine (Wadley ix – xv).

One hopes that the 73rd Amendment of the Constitution passed in 1993 will perhaps lead to balance the anomaly by allowing women to participate at the grass root level politics in far greater number. The Act reserves 33% of the total seats for all three tiers of panchāyats for women. Though serious doubts have been raised over the quality of participations as most women functionaries happen to proxy candidates, one cannot ignore the long time implications of such a policy. Bidyut Mohanty observes, "The fact that about one million women came into the public arena for the first time is expected to create a ripple in tradition-bound Indian society" (Mohanty 31).

Even if the empowerment of the women at the grass root level seem to be an encouraging outcome, the sincerity of the lawmakers to politically make Indian women dominant has seriously been put into question by their inability
to pass the Women's Reservation Bill which provides for a similar reservation
of 1/3rd of the seats for women in the Parliament and State legislatures. All
political parties have only gone on to provide lip service to the bill but have
done little to resolve the disputes that continue to peg it for ever. This failure
on the part of the Parliament is a serious disservice to the Indian women as it
denies them the right to be a part of the legislative process. The irony of the
situation is that one of the chief opponents of the bill – the Bahujan Samaj
Party – is actually led by a woman – Mayawati.

In spite of having so many women leaders the women of India find their
problems unanswered. "Many of the women in power have referenced their
gender in political campaigns, referring to themselves as mothers, wives or
dutiful daughters, but they have not engendered their political roles" (Forbes
236). The question of political exigency has not allowed the women leaders to
look into matters of women's concern or look at issues from a feminist
perspective. Naturally, they have failed to live up to the dream cherished by
millions of Indian women.

**Women's participation in social movements:**

Women have been more vocal in India in the social sphere than in the
political world. 'The first wave feminist movement' began as early as the pre-
independence era (Forbes 525 – 36). During this period women were
recognized to belong to an oppressed class bound by tradition and religion
because of their sex. The early feminists felt that the women differed from men
biologically, psychologically and spiritually and asked for representation of
women in public life based on such differences. Such a social feminist
viewpoint fitted well into the scheme of the nationalist leaders, particularly
Gandhi, who wanted large scale participation of women in the freedom
struggle. However, with India attaining independence such a pattern of
feminist movement gradually lost its appeal.

From the 1960s the women's organizations began to associate
themselves with the agitations of the rural poor and industrial working class.
The 1970s saw the emergence of rural and working women as leaders
(Omvedt 76 – 77). However, there was no proper synchronization between the
urban, educated women and the oppressed sections. Consequently, no proper
articulation of the sufferings of the oppressed women was possible.

The UN declaration of 1975 as the International Women's Year and the
subsequent decade as the International Women's Decade led to the
documentation of women's status. The Guha Committee's landmark report,
*Toward Equality* served as an eye opener for all concerned. Individuals, grass
root activists, academicians all began their search for ways to prevent "the
oppression and exploitation, sexual harassment and domestic violence
experienced by all sections of the society" (Desai, A.R. 992).

The contemporary feminist movement emerged in the late 1970s and
early 1980s. The women's organizations worked as small autonomous groups
connected with each other informally. The feminist press, the coverage of
women's issues in the general media all helped the process. In October 1975
the United Women's Liberation Struggle Conference was organised in Pune. Women belonging to all classes of the society discussed issues ranging from dowry to non-availability of drinking water (Omvedt 92). Other such conferences followed. These conferences saw the coming together of the intellectual and working class women on the same platform.

The contemporary feminist movement attempts to break the silence and thereby expose the ‘various categories of humiliation, atrocities, tortures and individual and mass assault to which they were subjected’ (Desai, A.R. 992) thus shattering the traditional image of Indian women as accommodating, docile and self sacrificing. The present-day feminists thus prove to be a critique of the family, society and state who all intend to bind women to the traditional sphere.

In 1979 *Manushi, A Journal about Women and Society* was published. This premier feminist journal deals with women's issues like sexual harassment, violence against women, history and literature by and on women.

The late 1970s witnessed the women's movement focussing on growing violence (“Towards Beijing”). The increased number of dowry deaths has been the chief focus of the feminist studies as such deaths “indicated increasing dysfunctionality of the institutions that Indian women value greatly – their natal and matrimonial families” (Mazumdar and Agnihotri 234). Indeed, “dowry has come to provide a rationale for murder of adults, infants and female foetuses involving collusion between families, law enforcement
agencies, medical and other professionals, and certain identifiable policies of
the State, such as population control" (Mazumdar and Agnihotri 234).

Sati revived, albeit in only one known case, with the burning of Roop
Kanwar at Deorala in Rajasthan. The event mobilized the Indian women most
of whom regarded it to be a cold blooded murder.

The government reacted to these situations by passing more legislation.
In 1982 the Krishna Sahi Parliamentary Committee looked into the working of
the Dowry Prohibition Act of 1961 and as per its suggestions a more stringent
law was passed in 1986. Similarly, the Deorala incident led the Government to
pass the Sati Prevention Bill, a repeat of the 1829 legislation. However, the
lawmakers have actually failed to look into the deeper social malice. The laws
fail to curb the growing violence against women as the law enforcing agencies
have continued to look at women from the prism of established social outlook.

The complex interconnection between various issues is a pointer to the
need for the multiple dimensions of the feminist movement as well as its
periodic shift in foci, priorities and agenda. Many groups hold the autonomy of
the movement from political forces as sacrosanct while others prefer to work
under a political umbrella. Similarly, there is a growing disparity in attitudes
towards women's issues between 'academicians' and 'activists'. However, in
spite of all such ideological differences, the different bodies often work in
tandem, as immediate issues take precedence over long term objectives.
Overall, these organizations have served the cause of women much to a
satisfactory extent given the stark choice they are often left with.
Section III: The Literary Scenario

The projection of the image of woman, in their predicament, longings, frustrations and a new 'bildungsroman' in their own writings is the literary expression of this historical-cultural-sociological process evolving around us today. The aspirations and apprehensions of the Indian women have found expression in their writings which form a rich tapestry of language and culture. Spanning over a century, the writings in English by Indian women, comprise of a rich component of this tapestry. The background is studded with illustrious personages whose endeavours are noted below.

The first and foremost of the women writers in India writing in English is Toru Dutt (1856–1873). Not only is she the first woman poet of any merit, Indian English poetry practically begins with her. Her works include, *A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields* (1876) – a translation of the works of about a hundred French poets, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* – a compilation of her renderings of the classical Sanskrit stories in English, her unfinished novel – *Bianca, or the Young Spanish Maiden* and her French novel *Le Journal de Mademoiselle d’Arvers*. Though her untimely death never allowed her to reach a full bloom, she would always be remembered as the pioneer who transcended Indian English poetry ‘from imitation to authenticity’ (Naik 37).

Sarojini Naidu, nee Chattopadhyay (1879-1949) is another remarkable poet who has won accolades both at home and abroad. More noted for her
active role in the freedom struggle, she is the author of several volumes of poetry which includes *The Golden Threshold* (1905), *The Bird of Time* (1912), *The Broken Wing* and *The Feather of the Dawn* (1961). Her poetry is marked for its evocative lyrical quality which has earned her the laurel 'The Nightingale of India'.

Contrasted to this lyricism of Sarojini Naidu, stands Kamala Das a poet fiercely modern in her theme and language. Kamala Das has published five volumes of poetry. They include *Summer in Calcutta* (1967), *The Descendants* (1967), *The Old Playhouse and Other Poems* (1973), *The Anamalai Poems* (1985) and *Only the Soul Knows How to Sing* (1996). She is also the author of a novel *Alphabet of Lust* (1977) and published a collection of short stories called *Padmavati the Harlot and Other Stories* (1992). Her autobiography *My Story* (1976) has also raised many eyebrows for its candour. Among the many women poets who have contributed to the corpus of Indian English poetry Kamala Das stands out for her uninhibited frankness about sex. Her candour is actually a celebration of her essential femininity.

It is however, in the arena of fiction where the Indian women writers have attained remarkable success. One of the earliest writers in this genre is Cornelia Sorabji. Cornelia explores the inner sanctum of a traditional Indian household and goes on to portray how women are made victims within the social system. Her collections include *Love and Life behind the Purdah* (1901),
Sun-Babies: *Studies in the Child-Life of India* (1904) and *Between the Twilights* (1908).

Another writer, Iqbalunnisa Hussain, also brings out in a similar vein the life pattern of the Muslim women within a traditional Muslim family in her work *Purdah and Polygamy: Life in an Indian Muslim Household* (1944).

The major women novelists belong to the post-independence era. One of the pioneers of this group is Kamala Markandaya. Her novels are: *Nectar in a Sieve* (1954), *Some Inner Fury* (1957), *A Silence of Desire* (1961), *Possession* (1963), *A Handful of Rice* (1966), *The Coffer Dams* (1969), *The Nowhere Man* (1972), *The Two Virgins* (1973) and *The Golden Honeycomb* (1977). Kamala Markandaya leaves her mark in the field of Indian English fiction for her evocative prose. Besides she deals with a variety of themes which shows her modern sensibility. Her favourite themes are tragic waste, the hopelessness of unfulfilled love, the suffering of artistic ambition, the search for truth and self-realization. All these themes make her writing universal in dimension. However, her knowledge of India with all its confusions, violence, convulsive social and political changes add a new dimension to her writings as this enables her to capture the Indian sense and sensibility.

Mrs. Ruth Prawer Jhabvala, though born in Germany of Polish parents, is considered to be a significant contributor to Indian English fiction because of her interest in Indian subject matters. Her writings can be divided into two broad motifs – comedies of urban middle class life and the interaction between the East and the West. In the first group we can include novels like *To Whom*
She Will (1955), The Nature of Passion (1956), The Householder (1960) and Get Ready for Battle (1962). The novels dealing with the second motif are Esmond in India (1958), A Backward Place (1965), A New Dominion (1973) and Heat and Dust (1975). Jhabvala focuses on the oddities of human behaviour and makes them alive with her gentle irony and good humoured satire.

Nayantara Sahgal is the exponent of the political novel in India. She is also anxious to portray the modern Indian woman’s search for freedom and self respect. She is the author of five novels namely, A Time to be Happy (1958), This Time of Morning (1968), Storm in Chandigarh (1969), The Day in Shadow (1971) and A Situation in New Delhi (1977). Her strength lies in her uncanny understanding of the ramblings and intrigues that goes on inside the corridors of power.

Attia Hosain shows a remarkable sense of sensitivity for human nature in her novel Sunlight on a Broken Column (1961) and her earlier collection of short stories, Phoenix Fled (1953).

Anita Desai is considered by many as the greatest of the Indian women novelists. Her expertise lies in the portrayal of the mindscapes of the characters. Naturally, her novels portray the varied psychological dimensions of the human kind instead of focusing on the socio-political aspects. The novels written by her are: Cry, the Peacock (1963), Voices in the City (1965), Bye-bye Blackbird (1971), Where Shall we Go this Summer (1975), Fire on the Mountain (1977), Clear Light of Day (1980), In Custody (1984), Baumgartner’s

According to her, her novels, 'deal with ... the terror of facing, single-handed, the ferocious assaults of existence' (Desai, interview with Yashodhara Dalmia, The Times of India, 29 April, 1979). Her protagonists are chiefly women of varying age groups for whom 'aloneness alone' is 'the sole natural condition, aloneness alone the treasure worth treasuring'.

Another novelist, who has successfully captured the nuances of human psychology and women's psychology in particular, is Shashi Deshpande. In all her novels Deshpande creates a world of the women, in all its complexity. Though it is a world almost sans male figures, the authority of the patriarchal society heavily breathes upon it. The novels by Deshpande are The Dark Holds No Terrors (1980), That Long Silence (1988), The Binding Vine (1992), A Matter of Time (1996) and Small Remedies (2000). She also excels in the genre of short story. Some of her collections are The Legacy and Other Stories (1978), Roots and Shadows (1983), The Miracle and Other Stories (1986), and The Intrusion and Other Stories (1993). Deshpande's protagonists are all women in crisis. She, nevertheless, has a very positive message to offer. However, bleak a situation her protagonists might be in, they emanate a hope which is born out of the experiences they undergo.

Sobha De, once the best selling author among the Indian writers in English is notorious for the sexually explicit nature of her novels. Though her novels are a reflection of the high-society life in the Indian metros, her obsession with sex often reduces her works to the level of 'pulp fiction'. Her novels include Socialite Evenings (1988), Starry Nights (1990), Sisters (1992), Strange Obsession (1992), Sultry Days (1994), Shooting from the Hip (1994), Snapshots (1995), Small Betrayals (1995), Second Thoughts (1996). She has also written an autobiography titled Selective Memories: Stories from My Life (1998) and has edited a book on the urban sexual behaviour in India along with Khuswant Singh called Uncertain Liaison: Sex, Strife and Togetherness in Urban India (1993).

Githa Harihara stands out to be one of the most outstanding authors of the present era. Her use of myths to describe the condition of the Indian women has added a new dimension to the genre of Indian English fiction. Her novels include The Thousand Faces of Night (1991), When Dreams Travel (1999) and In Times of Siege (2003). Githa Harihara is not simply a narrator of stories. Her fiction is marked by a definite mission; it is in giving shape to the women's social and political agenda.

Manju Kapur deals with the life of middle class Indian women in her two novels Difficult Daughters (1995) and A Married Woman (2003). The novels are set against the backgrounds of the partition of India and the communal riots that follow the demolition of Babri Masjid respectively.
Probably no other writer has attained so much of fame, critical aplomb, popularity and money with her debut novel as has Arundhati Roy with her Booker winning *The God of Small Things* (1997). Set in Ayemenem in Kerala, the novel traces the course of events in the history of a Syrian Christian family during two periods – 1969 and 1992.

Bharati Mukherjee is the most famous of the expatriate Indian women writers. Settling in Canada and U.S.A. Mukherjee draws upon her immigrant experiences in her writings. Her writings actually demonstrate a variety of phases in her life. Her earlier works like *The Tiger’s Daughter* (1972) and *Days and Nights in Calcutta* [co-authored with her husband Clark Blaise] (1977) clearly show her Indian root. The next phase of Mukherjee’s writings is dominated by her experiences of racial hatred as prevalent in Canada to which she herself was subjected to. In this period she published *Wife* (1975), her collection of short stories *Darkness* (1985) and *The Sorrow and the Terror: The Haunting Legacy of the Air India Tragedy* [co-authored with her husband Clark Blaise] (1987). The third phase marks Mukherjee as an immigrant writer narrating about immigrant experiences in a country of immigrants. This theme is much in evidence in her collection of short stories *The Middleman and Other Stories* (1988), her novels *Jasmine* (1989), *The Holder of the World* (1993), *Leave it to Me* and *Desirable Daughters* (2003).

Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni is an accomplished poet, short story writer and a novelist, presently settled in U.S.A. Her various poetry collections include *Dark like the River* (1987), *The Reason for Nasturtiums* (1990), *Black

Another writer of the Indian Diaspora who has been in the headlines in recent year is Jhumpa Lahiri. Her Pulitzer award winning short story collection Interpreter of Maladies (1999) captures the conflicting, complex world of the immigrants. Like all expatriate works Lahiri’s collection captures the multifarious cultures of both the worlds – the tradition of India and the realities of America.

Beside these writers there are many other writers who have tried their hands at the art of fiction writing with moderate to considerable success. Some of these writers along with their works are – Ameena Meer – Bombay Talkie; Anita Nair – Satyr of the Subway, The Better Man, Ladies Coupe; Anita Rau Badani – Tamarind Mem, The Hero’s Walk; Anjana Appachana – Incantation and Other Stories, Listening Now; Gauri Deshpande – The Lackadaisical Sweeper; Ginu Kamani – Jungle Girl; Jaishree Mishra – Ancient Promises; Kiran Desai – Hullabaloo in the Guava Orchard; Manjula Padmanabhan – Harvest [a play], Getting There; Manorama Mathai – Lilies that Fester, Mulligatawny Soup, An Unsuitable Woman, The Big House, In Other Words, More Short Stories for Bangkok and Beyond, Vox, The Wind in the Eye and Other Stories; Margaret Mascaranhes – Skin, Passion Fruit; Meera Syal – Life Isn’t All Ha Ha Hi Hi; Meira Chand – The Gossamer Fly, Last Quadrant, The
This is by no means an exhaustive survey; rather this is a bird’s eye view offering a glimpse of a cross-section of the major Indian women writers over the decades who have dealt with various aspects of Indian life like oppression of women, their unfulfilled love, freedom movement, partition, the tussle between the traditional and the modern, poverty, the meeting of the East and the West and so on and so forth in their attempt to capture the essence of the Indian woman in an array of psychological complexities. But one emerging pattern that can be traced in their writing through the last decade of the last millennium is a growing preoccupation with a theme which has been engaging women’s writing across the globe today. It is the problematics of the relationship between the mother and the daughter in a changing social scenario.

In the following chapters I propose to address this aspect of Indian women writer’s novels with particular reference to a spectrum of such novels that appeared in the last decade of last century. It is a very selective list no doubt, but at the same time it represents a much broader spectrum as well as a common paradigm.
Notes:

1. The deficit of women in India (in demographic terms) has increased from 3.4 million to 32.1 million in absolute numbers in between the years 1901 and 1991. The deficit of women as percent of total population in the same period has gone up from 1.4 to 3.8 (Visaria 82).

2. Samhitā refers to a collection of hymns, composed approximately between 4000 – 1000 B.C. The Taittirīya Samhitā, found in the Black Yajurveda, is a mixture of prose and metrical hymns, and derives its name from the Tittira bird.

3. P.V. Kane, however, contends that the passage does not refer to female infanticide, but only brings out the fact that the birth of a boy was greeted more joyously than that of a girl.

4. Aitareya Brāhmaṇa is the ritual text of the RgVeda.

5. The Ādiparva section of the Mahābhārata.

6. These four phases are brahmacharya – the life of abstinence spent in learning Vedas, gṛhaustha – the family life, bāṇaprastha – the life of gradual withdrawal from family life and saññyas – life of an ascetic.

7. Kane observes that the references to the period in history when marriage did not exist are rare. Moreover, there is a tendency to describe such a period as one of unrestrained wantonness among women.

8. The Hindu pantheon celebrates the union of the male and the female principles in the concept of ardhanāriswar. The unity is also explored in the form of the union between purusa (Cosmic Person) and prakriti (Nature).

9. *Satpatha Brāhmaṇa* is the Brāhmaṇa text of the *Vājasaneyī Samhitā* of White *Yajurveda*.

10. Padma Gole, born in 1913, is a Marathi poet who questions conventional gender-attitudes in her work.

11. *Agniparīkṣa* is the trial by fire mentioned in the Indian scriptures. One enters the fire to give proof of one’s innocence before the society. If innocent, s/he comes out unscathed; otherwise s/he is consumed by the fire.

12. Sāvitrī married to Satyavāna, refuses to give him up to Yama, the God of Death, and ultimately prevails over him.

13. Behulā loses her husband Lakshminder on the bridal night. She, however, is able to give him a second lease of life by pleasing the Gods in heaven.

14. Hira Bansode, born in 1939, is a Marathi poet who deals with the injustices suffered by women, especially by those belonging to low-castes.

15. Bahinabai Choudhari (1880 – 1951) was a Marathi poet from an uneducated family. Much of her poetry was composed while working in the fields and around the house.

16. Indira Gandhi, the only woman Prime Minister of India, served the post from 1966 to 1977 and again from 1980 till her assassination in 1984. Sonia Gandhi, Indira’s daughter-in-law, would in all probability have been the
second Prime Minister of India, in 2004, if she did not decline the post. Incidentally, she also happens to be a widow.

17. The Ādiparva section of the Mahābhārata.


19. Kulinism is the practice by which some sub-castes of the higher-castes viz. brahmaṇas and kāyasthas were considered superior. A woman belonging to a kulin family could only be married to another kulin. This led to widespread polygamy and child-marriage.


21. Purdāh, literally meaning veil, refers to the practice of keeping women isolated from the public life/gaze.

22. Laxmibai, the Queen of Jhansi, was one of the prominent leaders to fight against the British during the First War of Indian Independence (Sepoy Mutiny) in 1857. She has been an inspiring icon for the Indian women for her resolve, courage and indomitable spirit.