Chapter VII

Conclusion

Eighteenth century had witnessed the steady expansion of British trade followed by political power in India. It also facilitated the British to know more closely about the Indian society. During the eighteenth century the Indian contact with the British was chiefly confined to matters of trade, despite the enthusiasm shown by Orientalists like Jones and Colebrooke in ancient Indian literature and history. This interaction, in the beginning of the nineteenth century, permeated to other levels of activities too. One of the consequences of this interaction was the emergence of a new class of Indians with a high regard for British culture and a determination to eliminate the evils that had crept into Indian society. This transformation in the attitudes of a group of people was clearly visible in the education provided for Dwarkanath Tagore by his father. He was sent to a school where western subjects were taught, instead of to a patasala. In the early years of the nineteenth century, Indians saw English education as a passport to official appointment and as a tool of commerce.¹ As was in the case of Dwarkanath, Western education produced a class of young men with high regard for western culture. Dwarkanath, no doubt, admired western culture, at the same time worked in collaboration with Ram Mohan Roy for the regeneration of India. He participated in the parties of his British

colleagues and entertained them in his parties too. Though the interaction with the British seemed inevitable due to his business interest, it could not be ignored for the sake of business interest alone. In fact, he admired the British way of life and it was said that he wanted to educate his fifth son in England. After the death of his wife, he stayed more or less permanently in England till death overtook him.²

The intimacy of Dwrkanath Tagore with the English and for the same reason, his alienation from traditional way of life reflected upon his domestic life. Digambari Devi whom he married at the age of seventeen (when she was nine), utterly refused to co-operate with him. Brought up in a very conservative family, she could not tolerate her husband’s deviation from tradition. A question arose in her mind whether, as an orthodox Hindu lady, she would live in the same house with a husband who mixed freely with foreigners or should she live separately.³ Finally, she made up her mind to stay with her husband in the same house so that she could serve her husband and keep her pativrata intact; but decided to keep away from any physical contact with him. It was said that even if by accident she touched him, immediately she would purify herself by bath. Indeed, Digambari’s religious obstinacy might have annoyed Dwrkanath who was a diligent, energetic man with full of innovative ideas. His


³ Ibid.,59.
business with the East India Company officials and the management of his vast zamindari occupied him most of the time and he was little concerned with what was happening in the zenana.⁴

Dwarkanath’s family can be taken as one of the many traditional Indian families affected by the impact of western ideals in the early years of the nineteenth century. He might have desired some changes in the family too, on Western lines; but it seemed out of place on account of his wife’s extreme religiosity. Biographical accounts of Dwarkanath showed that he respected his wife’s way of life and he did not cause any inconvenience to her other than a refusal to change his western life style. Since more Indian youths came out of schools, colleges, and universities where western subjects formed the curriculum, it was only a matter of time for the educated Indians in the urban areas to look at the life of their women scornfully. Indian women stood in complete contrast to English women. They were rarely seen out of their inner quarters. Illiterate, secluded and superstitious, Indian wives stood nowhere as companions of their English educated young husbands. If Indian society carried on the movement for women’s emancipation almost a century without losing spirit, the determination of western educated Indian men contributed much to it. They wanted to make Indian women fit for a society where western ideals and values were the symbols of modernity and progress. Raja Ram Mohan

Roy, pioneer of the movement for women’s emancipation, did not have this broad idea of transforming tradition bound Indian woman to a lady with sufficient qualification for a society modernized by the etiquette of British society. Therefore, Ram Mohan Roy turned his back to women related issues with the abolition of sati in 1829. The main objective of his virulent campaign against sati was to make Indian women and society free from an inhuman and uncivilized practice. However, the campaign for women’s emancipation did not meet its end with the abolition of sati. It acquired momentum with the support of western educated Indians.

The campaign against widowhood can be considered as an outcome or almost an inevitable consequence of the abolition of sati. From an economic point of view, the custom of sati removed the burden of maintaining the widow. It also relieved the possible stain of the consequence of unprotected sexuality of widows. Thus, the abolition of sati raised the question of maintenance and control of the unprotected sexuality of widows. Though Vidyasagar took up the cause of widows, out of his humane feelings, one cannot ignore the undercurrents of those above said factors in the campaign for widow marriage. A review of the movement against widowhood indicated that it did not achieve much success. Indeed, one can blame the conservatism of a traditional society for not being able to achieve the desired result. Even the educated Indians could not break off the shackles of absurd practices. Nonetheless, the movement empowered girl-widows, like Subhakha, to express
their intense desire to get remarried. Subhakha, a sixteen-year-old widow, was an inmate of Sister Subhalakshmi’s Widows’ Home. One day, the Sister received a letter from a sympathiser of widow marriage requesting her to select for him a widow in the Home for him to marry. She dismissed any prospects of marriage and found the topic not worth discussing. However, Subhakha approached the Sister directly and said, “I should like to marry that man.”

The education of widows and girls in general found more supporters than in the case of widow marriage. While education of widows provided priority to vocational education, girls’ education did not intend to prepare them for any vocation. The purpose of girls’ education was to make them good wives and mothers. The rudiments of reading, writing and a little arithmetic, hygiene, needlework, embroidery and knowledge in Bengali, the vernacular as well as English were regarded as being more than adequate for them. The educated young Indians seemed very particular about the education of their wives. If their girl wives were illiterate at the time of marriage, they themselves tutored the girls. When Govind Vasudeo Kanitkar (18154-1904) married Kashibai (1861-1948), she was illiterate. He wanted his wife to be educated to

---


6 Malavika Karelkar, “Kadambini and the Bhadralok. Early Debates over Women’s Education in Bengal,” *Economic and Political Weekly* Vol.xxi.No.19, April,26 1986:
accompany him when he attended or participated in public functions. \(^7\) Kashibai herself was not bothered of her ignorance or illiteracy. She showed an inclination for reading when her husband detested her ignorance. It indicated that ignorance of Indian women was no longer encouraged and the image of Indian women as venerated in the early or first half of nineteenth century was not entertained in the second half of the century. Rasundari Debi’s (1808-1896) reminiscence threw light on this change in the image of woman during the nineteenth century. When she came to her in-laws’ house she was only twelve years old and illiterate. She explained those days thus: “I never thought of worldly affairs, my one thought was how to do all my work and how to please everyone. Nonetheless, it is deplorable that I was not allowed to educate myself because I was a woman. How very lucky are girls of this generation! These days many try to educate their daughters. Whatever other may say, I think this is a most positive development.”\(^8\)

Indians, who were exposed to western ideals and desired for a change in the existing social set-up during the early years of nineteenth century, did not attempt a change in their private spheres. Their intimacy with British friends, their respect and adulation of western ideals and way of life was confined to the public realm. As a matter of fact, women were found too hostile to any


innovations in their life on western lines, as they had spent their life in seclusion and utter ignorance. As more young Indian men got into western education, they did not admire the ignorance and seclusion of their women. One can observe the introduction of western ideals in private spheres too during the second half of the nineteenth century. Lakshmibai Tilak described with a subtle humour in her autobiography Smriti Chitre, her husband Wamanrao Tilak’s, attempt to transform their house on western lines. She writes:

Tilak began his shopping. First household necessities arrived. Everything was of new, foreign fashion, cups and saucers, spoons, forks and knives, sugar pot, milk pot, butter pot, kettles, soup-plates, dinner plates, flower pots and wash hand basins. He bought a great deal of furniture. I did not even know the names or the use of the various things, and he never considered it. I did not like to see these strange pots and vessels before my eyes.

‘Why have you filled the house with breakable China?’ I asked. He was always annoyed with such remarks, and would say, ‘You have no appreciation,’ using the English word. Having furnished the house, he turned his mind to clothes.

He had four new suits made for himself. For me he had two ‘gowns’ made! ‘What is this you have done?’ I said, ‘Why did you not bring me two saris instead of these?’

‘You do not understand psychology. When a man has done something with great pleasure you should not cast him
down. This is why you and I never get on. You are never pleased with what I do.

Each one of us had three pairs of boots made...I never in my life put on even an ordinary pair of sandals. Though I had received two or three lectures on ‘psychology’ and ‘appreciation’ I still said, ‘Why this useless expense? If you had brought gold into the house instead, it could at least have been use in an emergency. 

The opposition of Lakshmibai Tilak to the introduction of these strange items in their house appeared as accommodative. Indeed, she did not have any choice but to follow her husband’s dictates.

Ironically, the concept of pativrata did a lot in liberating Indian woman from traditional practices and adapting her to the ideal of an emancipated woman! Kamala Sathianadan’s suggestions for encouraging women’s education reiterated unambiguously the nature of women’s emancipation envisaged in the nineteenth century. She observes:

It must be shown them that it is worth while to be educated, here again what can be better than the influence of the husband? The Hindu wife thinks her husband a God. She will respect all his wishes. Consequently if he plainly shows her that it is his desire that she should be educated if he teaches her the value of literature by constantly reading or explaining to

---

No doubt, the picture of the new woman, which evolved out of the discourse on emancipation during the nineteenth century, was very much influenced by the paternal care of her husband. This could not be otherwise as women broke the purdah and started adapting the new life style befitting the refined tastes of the period with the help and support of their men. The life of Sudha Majumdar in the early quarter of twentieth century amply represented the new woman image produced as the result of the nineteenth century discourse on women. The development of Sudha Majumdar’s personality from a child-wife to a social activist undoubtedly was due to the loving care of her western educated, civil servant husband.

An examination of the male reformers’ view on women’s emancipation shows that they tried to effect a change in the prevailing state of women without causing much damage to their domination in the society. To make it clearer, reformers’ perception of emancipation was very much determined by their magnanimity in relinquishing the privileges in society, which they enjoyed as being men. Viewed from this standpoint, reformers were not able to challenge the patriarchal set up which is the source of both male domination and women’ degradation. Thus, women’s emancipation, as perceived by the

reformers, did not achieve any remarkable change in the position of women except for the fact that women were rescued from certain decadent customs.

The British who enjoyed the privilege of dictating the rules and regulations of legislating on women's issue vacillated between their concern of political stability and their image of the most civilized nation in the world. In spite of the superiority of their civilization, the British society too could not provide women an equal role with men in society. Her role in society was subordinated to the interests of men. The kind of education prescribed for nineteenth century British women very clearly emphasized the subordination of women. Hannah More explicitly asserted the role of education in preparing them for playing a secondary role to her husband in future. She explained:

The profession of ladies, to which the bent of their instruction should be turned, is that of daughters, wives, mothers and mistresses of families. They should be therefore trained with a view to these several conditions.... When a man of sense comes to marry, it is a companion whom he wants, and not an artist. It is not merely a creature who can paint, and play and dance; it is a being who can comfort and counsel him; one who can reason, and reflect, and feel, and judge; and act, and discourse, and discriminate, one who can assist him in his affairs, lighten his cares, soothe his soreness, purify his joys, strengthen his principles, and educate his children.\(^\text{11}\)

As part of the race of rulers, the British women in India were expected to keep up those fine qualities of women appreciated in British society. Margaret Macmillan opined that even the wives of the ordinary soldiers who came out on the strength of their husband’s regiments were expected to behave themselves. Indeed, the education that they received from girls’ boarding schools, which sprang up during the second half of eighteenth century shaped the girls to behave properly in the civilized societies. They were instructed in cookery, needlework, drawing, music/dance, French language and rudimentary form of arithmetic. These schools devoted exclusively to the acquisition of ornamental accomplishments. No doubt, a British lady with these kinds of accomplishments appeared before the educated Indians as a dazzling angel and a model to be imitated compared to the illiterate and secluded Indian woman. Woman’s role in the domestic realm was given prominence than her role in other fields in British society even in the last quarter of nineteenth century. It was generally accepted that the role of wife and mother was incompatible with a career, not only because of the time and energy required, but also because of the very different qualities and characteristics it demanded. Interestingly, the image of Indian woman evolved from the emancipation of nineteenth century


did not surpass the Victorian ideal of womanhood, which dominated the British society till the turn of the nineteenth century.

The British projected themselves as the protectors of Indian women by rescuing them through legislation that banned customs like sati, widowhood and early marriage. A close analysis of their role in the movement for women’s emancipation revealed that they approved of women’s emancipation in so far as it did not affect their political interests in India. The British did not take side with either the supporters of women’s emancipation or the opponents of it in order to avoid any serious threat to their political power in India. They kept a neutral attitude till the debate on a particular issue related to women took a clear indication of the stance of the public. They prepared the legislation in such a way that it did not in any way antagonise public opinion against the British. It seemed that the primary concern of the British was the safety of their empire in India than a genuine concern for women. Thus, the British did not try to impose their image of women in India. When a demand rose from the Indian public for a change in the position of their women, the British drafted the legislation according to the nature of their demand. It was only because of the dogged persistence of the western educated Indian subjects that they were compelled to move.¹⁴ No doubt, the movement for women’s emancipation

under the most civilized nation in the world could not transform the Indian woman to one of substance.

While men, both Indian and British were guided by their own interests in effecting a favourable change in the state of women, female reformers were forced to articulate their views and implemented their programmes for women’s emancipation either within the parameters set by the male reformers or within the structural framework of patriarchy. As part of the oppressed lot, their views on women’s emancipation assume a special significance. Indeed, women reformers’ views on their emancipation and their efforts to implement them threw light on their whole hearted and pragmatic approach to women’s emancipation compared to that of men. Even the female protagonists in the fictions of nineteenth century women novelists succeeded in presenting more accurately the inner conflict of women in relation to men and society. The reason might be their instinctive perception and insight into the women’s reactions and perplexities and the complex working of their inner selves and their emotional involvement and disturbances. A perusal of the activities of male reformers indicated that they concentrated more on improving the condition of widows. Unlike the male reformers, women reformers did not show much enthusiasm in arranging and celebrating widow marriages. When a proposal came from Dondo Keshav Karve to marry Godubai, the first inmate of

Sarda Sadan, Pandita Ramabai did not show much interest to pursue the proposal. She opined, “Mr. Karve does not look very strong and healthy. He is short and frail. He does not earn a good salary at the college. Besides, he has a twelve-year-old son.” She advised Godubai to wait a year to take a decision in the matter. The marriage was conducted with the full co-operation and participation of the inmates of Sarada Sadan and, Pandita Ramabai was there to direct and manage the function. But for Ramabai, widow marriage did not mean a celebrity function to remove the apprehensions of people about widow marriage. As a matter of fact, she did not conduct the marriage of anyone of her inmates for the above said reason. Her aim was the rehabilitation of widows and if she found that the widow would be able to lead a happy life through marriage, she consented to it. A number of widow marriages celebrated under the auspices of male reformers did not produce the desired results as the reformers paid little attention to ensure the happiness of widows through a thorough enquiry being made to know the whereabouts of bridegrooms before marriage.

Ramabai’s intention was very evident from the priorities she provided for training in different crafts to the inmates of her Widows’ home. She found through careful observation that the chief needs of Hindu women are self-reliance and education. Evaluating her achievement in giving women a life

---

through training in different crafts in her Home, she said, "Eighty five of the old and new girls are either married or earning their living as teachers and workers in different places. Over two hundred girls promised to be good schoolteachers because of their "native" intelligence. Sixty were learning to be cooks and forty were mastering the weavers' trade and over fifty could sew their own garments." Pandita Ramabai was found more radical than anyone of the contemporary women reformers both in her views about emancipating women from degradation and in her attempt to realise those ideals. While sister Subhalakshmi refused to solemnise the marriage of the inmates of her Widows' Home to avoid the suspicion of the orthodox elements about her identification/association with reform, Pandita Ramabai celebrated the remarriage of her first inmate discarding the opposition of the orthodox. When the proposal came from Dondo Keshav Karve, Ramabai was found more concerned with the girl's happiness in the proposed marriage than the opposition of the anti reform party. In the opinion of Parvathi Athavale, one of the contemporaries of Pandita Ramabai, "Women should try to come out of their present degradation by involving some home based industries and if unmarried women wished to remain so, working for society, she should remain under the protection of relatives." Her preference to a protected life for


women might be due to her own experience in life. She started her career as a social activist under Dondo Keshav Karve and continued to work under his constant guidance and inspiration throughout her career as a social activist. On the other hand, Pandita Ramabai’s career as a social reformer showed that she rarely came under the influence of any male reformer of her period. Though very much aware of the criticism of her conversion to Christianity, she did not hesitate to relinquish Hinduism for Christianity. Ramabai’s conversion shocked Indian society and it eventually deprived her of the support of male reformers in her activities. She did not lose her strength and the successful management of Widows’ Homes with a number of inmates with multifarious activities under Ramabai’s direction and guidance showed that male reformers could not bully her for deviating from their line of thinking.

The writings of women like Pandita Ramabai and Tarabai Shinde indicated pioneering attempts in relating the degradation of women in the nineteenth century to the *sastric* interpretation of the ideal womanhood. In the opinion of Ramabai, the low estimate of women’s nature in the sacred literature was the root cause of the seclusion of women in India. She blamed Manu, one of the ancient Indian lawgivers, than anyone else for the low status accredited to women. The high respect that *sastras* bestowed on women was nothing but to appease her. She observed, “I can say honestly and trustfully that I have never read any sacred book in Sanskrit literature without meeting this kind of hateful statement about women. True, they contain here and there a kind word
about them, but such words seem to me a heartless mockery after having charged them, as a class, with crime and evil deeds.\textsuperscript{19} Tarabai Shinde's work, \textit{A Comparison between Women and Men} is a classic example of women's efforts to reveal the demonstration of gender discrimination recorded in the \textit{sstras} during the nineteenth century. She asked: "Did the authors of the \textit{sstras} keep their savage glares just for women? They really use their heads, these authors of \textit{sstras}, when they made all this up. All very comfortable for them."\textsuperscript{20} She explained through an anecdote from Ramayana, how the concept of \textit{pativrata} was utilized for the advantage of men.\textsuperscript{21} Obviously, women reformers like Pandita Ramabai and writers like Tarabai Shinde understood the fact that men were the custodians of \textit{sastric} laws, the device by which men kept women under control. Considering this fact, women reformers' fight was not only against the customs which deprived women of her independence but also against the dominant male who dictated the laws and norms of society based on the \textit{sastric} laws. Tarabai Shinde testified to this attitude of the male thus: "Starting from your childhood you collect all the rights in your own hands and womankind you just push in dark corner far from the real world, shut up in


\textsuperscript{20} Tarabai Shinde, \textit{A Comparison between Women and Men} (Buldhana: Sri Shivaji Press, 1882) 90.

\textsuperscript{21} See appendix x for details.
Throughout her essay, Tarabai Shinde argued for women’s equal share with men. She refused to accept the superiority of men in gender relation. She said, “What’s good for a man ought to be good for woman as well.” While Tarabai Shinde found the privileges enjoyed by men to be cause of the degradation of women, Pandita Ramabai tried to relate women’s deprivation of rights to the institutions in the society through which men received power to suppress women. When Ramabai observed that caste rules, ancient customs and priest craft were too powerful to be beaten up through education and philosophies, she must have indirectly meant the hypocritical and half-hearted attempts of many male reformers in effecting a change in the deplorable condition of women. One can not deny the influence of those elements in the activities of male reformers in diverting and diluting the true purpose of reforms. This prompted her to remark thus: “If anything has been done by anybody at all, it was through those people who have come under the direct influence of Christianity.” Though expressed sarcastically, Tarabai Shinde too favoured the British for the cause of women’s emancipation. In her view, with the coming of the British government, women had got the gift of education, and

22 Tarabai Shinde, 87.

23 Ibid., 88.

their mind was made strong enough to face all sorts of mental and practical circumstances with courage. Tarabai Shinde must have reached this conclusion after having observed the hue and cry over women's emancipation and its effect on the condition of women. She understood that it was difficult and almost impossible for male reformers to defy the sastras for the advantage of women because; under the sastric injunctions they could dictate rules and regulations to control women. Ramabai was prudent enough to understand the undercurrents of the ideology behind women's emancipation during the nineteenth century. The court decree against Rukhmabai provoked Ramabai to allege that both British and Indian men were against women. She said "We cannot blame the British government for not defending a helpless woman; it is only fulfilling its agreement made with the male population of India."25

The attempt in favour of a positive change in the prevailing state of women during the nineteenth century undoubtedly indicated the determination of Indian society for progress. Reformers were in general, eloquent in criticizing the low status of women and the need for a change. However, they differed widely in their views on the nature of the position that a woman should occupy in society after rescuing her from anomalous practices. Private spheres of reformers to some extent helped to trace the practical aspects of the "new woman image" projected in the public. While male reformers applied their

paternalistic pressure in inducing their women relatives for a change in their existing condition, women accepted it as a “great concession” that derived from men’s magnanimity, and a reflection of the progressive attitude of the most civilized people in power. Even women reformers were unable to recognize the fact that the process of emancipating women was attempted and carried out within the precincts of a patriarchal colonial state by a patriarchal native society.

The ambiguity in defining women’s position in the nineteenth century is also revealed in the contemporary literature. Both Bankim Chandhara Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore were not able to provide a respectable life to the widows in their fiction. When they transgressed the established norms of widows’ life style, their accommodation in the society appeared impossible. Rohini, protagonist in Bankim’s novel Krishnakanter’s Will and Binodini, protagonist in Rabindranath Tagore’s novel Binodini represented widows who showed boldness in transgressing the traditional restrictions imposed on them, but ended their life in shame and seclusion. In the portrayal of women as wives too, the writers could not offer a choice of an alternative life for them outside marriage. When Binodini wrecked Asha’s married life, Asha spent the rest of her life in reading and learning at home. Brhamar, protagonist in Bankim Chandhra’s novel Krishnakanter’s Will could not withstand the separation of her husband and died prematurely. Kapalakundala, the unconventional heroine in Bankim’s novel Kapakundala provided the picture of a woman with an
independent self. Her premature death before allowing her to experiment with
the ideals of married life is a dilemma confronted by Bankim in giving space to
the individuality of women in married life. The portrayal of women
protagonists in fiction reflected the ambiguity encountered by reformers in
allotting a place befitting women in the changed scenario.

In spite of a century long struggle for emancipating women, the
Indian woman’s image was entangled in the ancient ideal of Sita and Savitri.
Women’s emancipation in the nineteenth century did not bestow on women an
independent stance in the society. It is true that she was rescued from the
anomalous practises like sati, widowhood and early marriage as a result of the
unprecedented preoccupation of the nineteenth century with women’s
emancipation. The controversy on the age of consent in the last quarter of the
nineteenth century and the subsequent legislation which fixed the age of
consent as low as twelve years showed that Indians had to go a long way in
emancipating women from all kinds of bondage. The rise of nationalism in the
last quarter of the nineteenth century diverted the attention of the reformers
from women’s issues. The speech delivered by K.T.Telang before the Students
Literary and Scientific Society on 22nd February 1886 provided a clear
indication of the diversion of interest from social issues to political activities.
He said: “I say we must and ought to devote the greater portion of our energy
to political reform, but so as to still keep; alive a warm sympathy for social
The new cult of patriotism discouraged all attempts to modernize Indian women on Western lines by applying non-Indian values. Commenting on the double advantage derived from the consequences of the new interest displayed by reformers on women’s emancipation Sumit Sarkar remarked: “Patriotism in nationalist activity implied social prestige rather than social ostracism reducing the need for conscious efforts at inter-personal adjustments within the family.” The Indian reformers were no longer amused to see an emancipated Indian woman as a replica of English woman. The earlier infatuation of the educated Indian towards the refined, elegant and educated English woman had given up for an Indian image of an emancipated woman.

A look at the life of Digambari Devi in the first half of the nineteenth century and that of Sudha Majumdar in the early years of the twentieth century throws light on the change in the life of women as a consequence of the movement for women’s emancipation in the nineteenth century. While Digambari represented the picture of a conventional woman, Sudha reflected the picture of an emancipated woman. Her life as a social activist came as a result of her stay with her husband in a nuclear family. This was possible as the Indian joint family system itself turned unpopular with the introduction of the


27 Sumit Sarkar, A Critique of Colonial India (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1985) 74.
nuclear family system of the British. Sudha’s civil servant husband was definitely influenced by the British connection in his decision to take Sudha along with him wherever his official work took him. She had no choice but to follow him. Here, one should take note of two factors, which determined the parameters of women’s emancipation in the nineteenth century. In the first case, women’s question formed a part of the male reformers’ response to the changes in their society, economy and polity as a result of colonial administration. It is very clear why the contours of women’s emancipation were shaped so as not to alter the prerogatives of men. In the second case, women were responding to the changes effected in the life of their men and families. Apparently, women’s perception of their emancipation was entangled in their traditional attitude towards men and family. In brief, Women’s question in the nineteenth century was determined within the space where the patriarchal Indian society mediated with the patriarchal colonial state.