part of men not to consider women as their equals because of their lack of education. This was not to say that women should not be educated. But it was not essential that women should receive the same education. Indeed both men and women should stay away from the prevalent system of education. A knowledge of English was not necessary for either. He said: "I do not believe in women taking up jobs or business after an education." Gandhi also opposed child marriages and said that men marrying young girls should educate their young brides before consummating the marriage.

Gandhi took a compromising stand on the women's question. He supported many traditional ideas but to a certain extent openly favoured rights for women. It is worth noting that this support is in no way anti-male, and that his support for the women's movement was not informed by a feminist perspective, but from the point of view of the needs of the nationalist movement for swarajya. This support was qualified by the same ideational limits as his notion of swarajya. But Gandhi's support did help to further the movement, as well as increase women's participation in the national movement. The editorial comment in *Stree Darpan* after Gandhi's speech at Bhagini Samaj commended his perspective on the women's question as against Uma Nehru's.

Some contemporary feminists claim that Gandhi not only cited a suffering and self sacrificing woman as the ideal 'Satyagrahi' but also gave importance to non-violence, passive resistance and fasting as strategies and this imparted a feminist character to the national movement. This is an echo of the revival of Gandhism in our time. The claim being made here is that Gandhism is feminism and feminism is Gandhism. This however is an ideological stand and cannot be considered a factual evaluation of Gandhi's role in the women's movement. Today some of our companions, disillusioned and frustrated with the mistakes of the revolutionary left movements, have taken refuge in Gandhism. Gandhi did help to raise consciousness among women but this was itself shaped by the specific ideological and philosophical structure of his thought. If one subscribes to this structure then one is most likely to be favourably disposed towards Gandhi's efforts at consciousness raising. But if our assumptions about social organization and change are different then we cannot but go beyond the ambit of Gandhi's ideas on the women's movement. The women's movement must inevitably form part of an ongoing ideological struggle.

The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question

PARTHA CHATTERJEE

I

THE 'WOMEN'S QUESTION' was a central issue in some of the most controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal — the period of the so-called 'renaissance'. Rammohun Roy's historical fame is largely built around his campaign against *satidaha* (widow immolation), Vidyasagar's around his efforts to legalize widow remarriage and abolish Kulin polygamy; the Brahmo Samaj was split twice in the 1870s over questions of marriage laws and the 'age of consent.' What has perplexed historians is the rather sudden disappearance of such issues from the agenda of public debate towards the close of the century. From then onwards, questions regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of passion and acrimony as they did only a few decades before. The overwhelming issues now are directly political ones —concerning the politics of nationalism.

Was this because the women's question had been resolved in a way satisfactory to most sections of opinion in Bengal? Critical historians today find it difficult to accept this answer. Indeed, the hypothesis of critical social history today is that nationalism could not have resolved those issues; rather, the relation between nationalism and the women's question must have been problematical.

Ghulam Murshid states the problem in its most obvious, straightforward, form.[1] If one takes seriously, i.e. in their liberal rationalist and egalitarian content, the mid-nineteenth century attempts in Bengal to "modernize" the condition of women, then what follows in the period of nationalism must be regarded as a clear retrogression. "Modernization" began in the first half of the nineteenth century because of the "penetration" of western ideas. After some limited success, there was a perceptible decline in the reform movements as "popular attitudes" towards them "hardened." The new politics of nationalism "glorified India's past and tended to defend everything traditional;" all attempts to change customs and life-styles began to be seen as the aping of western manners and thereby regarded with suspicion. Consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude towards social beliefs and practices. The movement towards modernization was stalled by nationalist politics.

This critique of the social implications of nationalism follows from rather simple and linear historical assumptions. Murshid not only accepts that the early attempts at social reform were impelled by the new nationalist and progressive ideas imported from Europe, he also presumes that the necessary historical culmination of such reforms in India ought to have been, as in the West, the full articulation of liberal values in social institutions and practices. From these assumptions, a critique of nationalist ideology and practices is inevitable. It would be the same sort of critique as that of the so-called 'neo-imperialist' historians who argue that Indian nationalism was nothing but a scramble for sharing political power with the colonial rulers, its mass following only the successful activization of traditional patron-client relationships, its internal debates the squabbles of parochial factions, its ideology a garb for xenophobia and racial exclusiveness. The point to note is that the problem lies in the original structure of assumptions. Murshid's study is a telling example of the fact, now increasingly evident, that if one only scrapes away the gloss, it is hard to defend many ideas and practices of nationalism in terms of rationalist and liberal values.

Of course, that original structure of assumptions has not gone unchallenged in recent critical history. The most important critique in our field is that of the Bengal renaissance.[2] Not only have questions been raised about the strictness and consistency of the

liberal ideas propagated by the 'renaissance' leaders of Bengal, it has also been asked whether the fruition of liberal reforms was at all possible under conditions of colonial rule. In other words, the incompleteness and contradictions of 'renaissance' ideology were shown to be the necessary result of the impossibility of thoroughgoing liberal reform under colonial conditions.

From that perspective, the problem of the diminished importance of the women's question in the period of nationalism deserves a different answer from the one given by Murshid. Sumit Sarkar has considered this problem in a recent article.[3] His argument is that the limitations of nationalist ideology in pushing forward a campaign for liberal and egalitarian social change cannot be seen as a retrogression from an earlier radical reformist phase. Those limitations were in fact present in the earlier phase as well. The 'renaissance' reformers, he shows, were highly selective in their acceptance of liberal ideas from Europe. Fundamental elements of social conservatism such as the maintenance of caste distinctions and patriarchal forms of authority in the family, acceptance of the sanctity of the *shastra* (ancient scriptures), preference for symbolic rather than substantive change in social practices — all of them were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century. Specifically on the question of the social position of women, he shows the fundamental absence in every phase of any significant autonomous struggle by women themselves to change relations within or outside the family. In fact, Sarkar throws doubt upon the very assumption that the early attempts at reform were principally guided by any ideological acceptance of liberal or rationalist values imported from the West. He suggests that the concern with the social condition of women was far less an indicator of such ideological preference for liberalism and more an expression of certain "acute problems of interpersonal adjustments within the family" on the part of the early generation of western educated males. Faced with "social ostracism and isolation," their attempts at "a limited and controlled emancipation of wives" were "a personal necessity for survival in a hostile social world." Whatever changes have come about since that time in the social and legal position of women have been "through objective socio-economic pressures, some post-independence legislation, rather than clear-cut ideology or really autonomous struggle. Mental attitudes, and values have conse-

quently changed very much less." The pattern, therefore, is not, as Murshid suggests, one of radical liberalism in the beginning followed by a conservative backlash in the period of nationalism; Sarkar argues that in fact the fault lies with the very inception of our modernity.

The curious thing, however, is that Sarkar too regards the social reform movements of the last century and a half as a failure — failure to match up to the liberal ideals of equality and reason. It is from this standpoint that he can show, quite legitimately, the falsity of any attempt to paint a picture of starry eyed radicalism muzzled by a censorious nationalist ideology. But a new problem crops up. If we are to say that the nineteenth century reform movements did not arise out of an ideological acceptance of western liberalism, it could fairly be asked: from what then did they originate? The answer that they stemmed from problems of personal adjustment within the family can hardly be adequate. After all, the nineteenth century debates about social reform generally, and the women's question in particular, were intensely ideological. If the paradigm for those debates was not that of western liberalism, what was it? Moreover, if we cannot describe that paradigm in its own terms, can we legitimately apply once again the western standards of liberalism to proclaim the reform movements, pre-nationalist as well as nationalist, as historical failures? Surely the new critical historiography will be grossly one-sided if we are unable to represent the nineteenth-century ideology in its relation to itself, i.e. in its self-identity.

It seems to me that Sumit Sarkar's argument can be taken much further. We need not shy away from the fact that the nationalist ideology did indeed tackle the women's question in the nineteenth century. To expect the contrary would be surprising. It is inconceivable that an ideology which claimed to offer a total alternative to the 'traditional' social order as well as to the western way of life should fail to have something distinctive to say about such a fundamental aspect of social institutions and practices as the position of women. We should direct our search within the nationalist ideology itself.

We might, for a start, pursue Sarkar's entirely valid observation that the nineteenth century ideologues were highly selective in their adoption of liberal slogans. How did they select what they wanted? What, in other words, was the ideological sieve through

which they put the newly imported ideas from Europe? Once we have reconstructed this framework of the nationalist ideology, we will be in a far better position to locate where exactly the women's question fitted in with the claims of nationalism. We will find, if I may anticipate my argument in the following sections of this paper, that nationalism did in fact face up to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in 'modern' society and that it did provide an answer to the problems in terms of its own ideological paradigm. I will claim, therefore, that the relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is not to be explained by the fact that it had been censored out of the reform agenda or overtaken by the more pressing and emotive issues of political struggle. It was because nationalism had in fact resolved 'the women's question' in complete accordance with its preferred goals.

II

I have elaborated elsewhere[4] a framework for analysing the contradictory pulls on nationalist ideology in its struggle against the dominance of colonialism and the resolution it offered to these contradictions. In the main, this resolution was built around a separation of the domain of culture into two spheres — the material and the spiritual. It was in the material sphere that the claims of western civilization were the most powerful. Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft, these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate non-European peoples and to impose their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination, the colonized people must learn these superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporate them within their own cultures. This was one aspect of the nationalist project of rationalizing and reforming the 'traditional' culture of their people. But this could not mean the imitation of the West in every aspect of life, for then the very distinction between the West and the East would vanish — the self-identity of national culture would itself be threatened. In fact, as Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century argued, not only was it not desirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was not even necessary to do so, because in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West.

What was necessary was to cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture. This completed the formulation of the nationalist project, and as an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of western modernity it continues to hold sway to this day (*pace* Rajiv Gandhi's juvenile fascination for space-age technology).

We need not concern ourselves here with the details of how this ideological framework shaped the course of nationalist politics in India. What is important is to note that nationalism was not simply about a political struggle for power; it related the question of political independence of the nation to virtually every aspect of the material and spiritual life of the people. In every case, there was a problem of selecting what to take from the West and what to reject. And in every case, the questions were asked: is it desirable? Is it necessary? The answers to these questions are the material of the debates about social reform in the nineteenth century. To understand the self-identity of nationalist ideology in concrete terms, we must look more closely at the way in which these questions were answered.

The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy : that between the outer and the inner. The material domain lies outside us — a mere external, which influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual which lies within, which is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. It follows that as long as we take care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of our culture, we could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt ourselves to the requirements of a modern material world without losing our true identity. This was the key which nationalism supplied for resolving the ticklish problems posed by issues of social reform in the nineteenth century.

Now apply the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living and you get a separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bahir*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity. The world is a treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, where practical considerations reign supreme. It is also typically the domain of the male. The home in

its essence must remain unaffected by the profane activities of the material world — and woman is its representation. And so we get an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into ghar and bahir.

Thus far we have not obtained anything that is different from the typical conception of gender roles in any 'traditional' patriarchy. If we now find continuities in these social attitudes in the phase of social reforms in the nineteenth century, we are tempted to put this down as 'conservatism', a mere defence of 'traditional' norms. But this would be a mistake. The colonial situation, and the ideological response of nationalism, introduced an entirely new substance to these terms and effected their transformation. The material/spiritual dichotomy, to which the terms 'world' and 'home' corresponded, had acquired, as we have noted before, a very special significance in the nationalist mind. The world was where the European power had challenged the non-European peoples and, by virtue of its superior material culture, had subjugated them. But it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. That is where the East was undominated, sovereign, master of its own fate. For a colonized people, the world was a distressing constraint, forced upon it by the fact of its material weakness. It was a place of oppression and daily humiliation, a place where the norms of the colonizer had perforce to be accepted. It was also the place, as nationalists were soon to argue, where the battle would be waged for national independence. The requirement for this was for the subjugated to learn from the West the modern sciences and arts of the material world. Then their strengths would be matched and ultimately the colonizer overthrown. But in the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer must be allowed in that inner sanctum. In the world, imitation of and adaptation to western norms was a necessity; at home, they were tantamount to annihilation of one's very identity.

Once we match this new meaning of the home/world dichotomy with the identification of social roles by gender, we get the ideological framework within which nationalism answered the women's question. It would be a grave error to see in this, as we are apt to in our despair at the many marks of social conservatism

in nationalist practice, a total rejection of the West. Quite the contrary. The nationalist paradigm in fact supplied an ideological principle of *selection*. It was not a dismissal of modernity; the attempt was rather to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.

III

It is striking how much of the literature on women in the nineteenth century was concerned with the theme of the threatened westernization of Bengali women. It was taken up in virtually every form of written, oral and visual communication, from the ponderous essays of nineteenth-century moralists, to novels, farces, skits and jingles, to the paintings of the *patua* (scroll painter). Social parody was the most popular and effective medium of this ideological propagation. From Iswarchandra Gupta and the *kabiyal* (popular versifiers) of the early nineteenth century to the celebrated pioneers of modern Bengali theatre — Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Dinabandhu Mitra, Jyotirindranath Tagore, Upendranath Das, Amritalal Bose —everyone picked up the theme. To ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the way of a European woman or *memsahib* (and it was very much an idea, for it is hard to find historical evidence that even in the most westernized families of Calcutta in the mid-nineteenth century there were actually any women who even remotely resembled these gross caricatures) was a sure recipe calculated to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences. It was, of course, a criticism of manners: of new items of clothing such as the blouse, the petticoat and shoes (all, curiously, considered vulgar, although they clothed the body far better than the single length of fabric or sari which was customary for Bengali women, irrespective of wealth and social status, until the middle of the nineteenth century), of the use of western cosmetics and jewellery, of the reading of novels (the educated Haimabati in Jyotirindranath's *Alikbabu* speaks, thinks and acts like the heroines of historical romances), of needlework (considered a useless and expensive pastime), of riding in open carriages. What made the ridicule stronger was the constant suggestion that the westernized woman was fond of useless luxury and cared little for the well-being of the home. One can hardly miss in all this a criticism —reproach mixed with envy

— of the wealth and luxury of the new social elite emerging around the institutions of colonial administration and trade.

This literature of parody and satire in the first half of the nineteenth century clearly contained much that was prompted by a straightforward defence of 'tradition' and outright rejection of the new. The nationalist paradigm had still not emerged in clear outline. On hindsight, this — the period from Rammohun to Vidyasagar — appears as one of great social turmoil and ideological confusion among the literati. And then, drawing from various sources, a new discourse began to be formed in the second half of the century — the discourse of nationalism. Now the attempt was made to define the social and moral principles for locating the position of women in the 'modern' world of the nation.

Let us take as an example one of the most clearly formulated tracts on the subject : Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's *Paribarik Prabandha* (essays on the family) published in 1882. Bhudev states the problem in his characteristic matter-of-fact style:

> Because of our hankering for the external glitter and ostentation of the English way of life . . . an upheaval is under way within our homes. The men learn English and become sahibs. The women do not learn English but nevertheless try to become bibis. In households which manage on an income of a hundred rupees, the women no longer cook, sweep or make the bed . . . everything is done by servants and maids; [the women] only read books, sew carpets and play cards. What is the result? The house and furniture get untidy, the meals poor, the health of every member of the family is ruined; children are born weak and rickety, constantly plagued by illness — they die early.
>
> Many reform movements are being conducted today; the education of women, in particular, is constantly talked about. But we rarely hear of those great arts in which women were once trained — a training which if it had still been in vogue would have enabled us to tide over this crisis caused by injudicious imitation. I suppose we will never hear of this training again.[5]

The problem is put here in the empirical terms of a positive sociology, a genre much favoured by serious Bengali writers of Bhudev's time. But the sense of crisis which he expresses was very much a reality. Bhudev is voicing the feelings of large sections of the newly emergent middle class in Bengal when he says that the very institutions of home and family were threatened under the peculiar conditions of colonial rule. A quite unprecedented exter-

nal condition had been thrust upon us; we were being forced to adjust to those conditions, for which a certain degree of imitation of alien ways was unavoidable. But could this wave of imitation be allowed to enter our homes? Would that not destroy our inner identity? Yet it was clear that a mere restatement of the old norms of family life would not suffice : they were breaking down by the inexorable force of circumstance. New norms were needed, which would be more appropriate to the external conditions of the modern world and yet not a mere imitation of the West. What were the principles by which these new norms could be constructed?

Bhudev supplies the characteristic nationalist answer. In an essay on modesty entitled "Lajjasilata," he talks of the natural and social principles which provide the basis for the "feminine" virtues.[6] Modesty, or decorum in manner and conduct, he says, is a specifically human trait; it does not exist in animal nature. It is human aversion to the purely animal traits which gives rise to virtues such as modesty. In this aspect, human beings seek to cultivate in themselves, and in their civilization, spiritual or god-like qualities wholly opposed to forms of behaviour which prevail in animal nature. Further, within the human species, women cultivate and cherish these god-like qualities far more than men. Protected to a certain extent from the purely material pursuits of securing a livelihood in the external world, women express in their appearance and behaviour the spiritual qualities which are characteristic of civilized and refined human society.

The relevant dichotomies and analogues are all here. The material/spiritual dichotomy corresponds to that between animal/god-like qualities, which in turn corresponds to masculine/feminine virtues. Bhudev then invests this ideological form with its specifically nationalist content:

> In a society where men and women meet together, converse together at all times, eat and drink together, travel together, the manners of women are likely to be somewhat coarse, devoid of spiritual qualities and relatively prominent in animal traits. For this reason, I do not think the customs of such a society are free from all defect. Some argue that because of such close association with women, the characters of men acquire certain tender and spiritual qualities. Let me concede the point. But can the loss caused by coarseness and degeneration in the female character be compensated by the acquisition of a certain degree of tenderness in the male? [7]

The point is then hammered home.

> Those who laid down our religious codes discovered the inner spirituality which resides within even the most animal pursuits which humans must perform, and thus removed the animal qualities from those actions. This has not happened in Europe. Religion there is completely divorced from [material] life. Europeans do not feel inclined to regulate all aspects of their life by the norms of religion; they condemn it as clericalism .... In the Arya system there is a preponderance of spiritualism, in the European system a preponderance of material pleasure. In the Arya system, the wife is a goddess. In the European system, she is a partner and companion.[8]

The new norm for organizing family life and determining the right conduct for women in the conditions of the 'modern' world could now be deduced with ease. Adjustments would have to be made in the external world of material activity, and men would bear the brunt of this task. To the extent that the family was itself entangled in wider social relations, it too could not be insulated from the influence of changes in the outside world. Consequently, the organization and ways of life at home would also have to be changed. But the crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life. The home was the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and women must take the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. No matter what the changes in the external conditions of life for women, they must not lose their essentially spiritual (i.e. feminine) virtues; they must not, in other words, become *essentially* westernized. It followed, as a simple criterion for judging the desirability of reform, that the essential distinction between the social roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual virtues must at all times be maintained. There would have to be a marked *difference* in the degree and manner of westernization of women, as distinct from men, in the modern world of the nation.

IV

This was the central principle by which nationalism resolved the women's question in terms of its own historical project. The details were not, of course, worked out immediately. In fact, from the middle of the nineteenth century right up to the present day, there have been many controversies about the precise application of the

home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine dichotomies in various matters concerning the everyday life of the 'modern' woman — her dress, food, manners, education, her role in organizing life at home, her role outside the home. The concrete problems arose out of the rapidly changing situation — both external and internal — in which the new middle class family found itself; the specific solutions were drawn from a variety of sources — a reconstructed 'classical' tradition, modernized folk forms, the utilitarian logic of bureaucratic and industrial practices, the legal idea of equality in a liberal democratic state. The content of the resolution was neither predetermined nor unchanging, but its form had to be consistent with the system of dichotomies which shaped and contained the nationalist project.

The 'new' woman defined in this way was subjected to a *new* patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalism placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition. Sure enough, nationalism adopted several elements from 'tradition' as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was a deliberately 'classicized' tradition — reformed, reconstructed. Even Gandhi said of the patriarchal rules laid down by the scriptures:

> . . . it is sad to think that the *Smritis* contain texts which can command no respect from men who cherish the liberty of woman as their own and who regard her as the mother of the race. . . The question arises as to what to do with the *Smritis* that contain texts . . . that are repugnant to the moral sense. I have already suggested . . . that all that is printed in the name of scriptures need not be taken as the word of God or the inspired word.[9]

The new patriarchy was also sharply distinguished from the immediate social and cultural condition in which the majority of the people lived, for the 'new' woman was quite the reverse of the 'common' woman who was coarse, vulgar, loud, quarrelsome, devoid of superior moral sense, sexually promiscuous, subjected to brutal physical oppression by males. Alongside the parody of the westernized woman, this other construct is repeatedly emphasized in the literature of the nineteenth century through a host of lower-class female characters who make their appearance in the social milieu of the new middle class — maidservants, washerwomen,

barbers, pedlars, procuresses, prostitutes. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women which nationalism claimed it would reform, and it was through these contrasts that the new woman of nationalist ideology was accorded a status of cultural superiority to the westernized women of the wealthy parvenu families spawned by the colonial connection as well as the common women of the lower classes. Attainment by her own efforts of a superior national culture was the mark of woman's newly acquired freedom. This was the central ideological strength of the nationalist resolution of the women's question.

We can follow the form of this resolution in several specific aspects in which the lives and conditions of middle-class women have changed over the last hundred years or so. Take the case of 'female education', that contentious subject which engaged so much of the attention of social reformers in the nineteenth century.[10] Some of the early opposition to the opening of schools for women was backed by an appeal to 'tradition' which supposedly prohibited women from being introduced to bookish learning, but this argument hardly gained much support. The threat was seen to lie in the fact that the early schools, and arrangements for teaching women at home, were organized by Christian missionaries; there was thus the fear of both proselytization and the exposure of women to harmful western influences. The threat was removed when from the 1850s Indians themselves began to open schools for girls. The spread of formal education among middle-class women in Bengal in the second half of the nineteenth century was remarkable. From 95 girls' schools with an attendance of 2,500 in 1863, the figures went up to 2,238 schools in 1890 with a total of more than 80,000 students.[11]

The quite general acceptance of formal education among middle-class women was undoubtedly made possible by the development of an educative literature and teaching materials in the Bengali language. The long debates of the nineteenth century on a proper 'feminine curriculum' now seem to us somewhat quaint, but it is not difficult to identify the real point of concern. Much of the content of the modern school education was seen as important for the 'new' woman, but to administer it in the English language was difficult in practical terms, irrelevant in view of the fact that the central place of the educated woman was still at home, and threatening because it might devalue and displace that central

site where the social position of women was located. The problem was resolved through the efforts of the intelligentsia who made it a fundamental task of the nationalist project to create a modern language and literature suitable for a widening readership which would include newly educated women. Through text books, periodicals and creative works, an important force which shaped the new literature of Bengal was the urge to make it accessible to women who could read only one language — their mother-tongue.

Formal education became not only acceptable, but in fact a requirement for the new *bhadramahila* (respectable woman), when it was demonstrated that it was possible for a woman to acquire the cultural refinements afforded by modern education without jeopardizing her place at home. Indeed, the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from the fact that it was able to make the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an autonomous subject. This explains to a large extent the remarkable degree of enthusiasm among middle class women to acquire and use for themselves the benefits of formal learning. It was a purpose which they set for themselves in their personal lives as the object of their will; to achieve it was to achieve freedom. Indeed, the achievement was marked by claims of cultural superiority in several different aspects: superiority over the western woman for whom, it was believed, education meant only the acquisition of material skills in order to compete with men in the outside world and hence a loss of feminine (spiritual) virtues; superiority over the preceding generation of women in their own homes who had been denied the opportunity for freedom by an oppressive and degenerate social tradition; and superiority over women of the lower classes who were culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom.

It is this particular nationalist construction of reform as a project of both emancipation and self-emancipation of women (and hence a project in which both men and women must participate) which also explains why the early generation of educated women themselves so keenly propagated the nationalist idea of the 'new woman'. Recent historians of a liberal persuasion have often been somewhat embarrassed by the profuse evidence of women writers of the nineteenth century, including those at the forefront of the

reform movements in middle-class homes, justifying the importance of the so-called 'feminine virtues'. Radharani Lahiri, for instance, wrote in 1875: "Of all the subjects that women might learn, housework is the most important . . . whatever knowledge she may acquire, she cannot claim any reputation unless she is proficient in housework."[12] Others spoke of the need for an educated woman to 'develop' such womanly virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience and the labours of love.[13] The ideological point of view from which such protestations of 'femininity' (and hence the acceptance of a new patriarchal order) were made inevitable was given precisely by the *nationalist* resolution of the problem, and Kundamala Debi, writing in 1870, expressed this well when she advised other women:

> If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to *mem-sahib* like behaviour. That is not becoming in a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see how if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place the world would be![14]

Education then was meant to inculcate in women the virtues — the typically 'bourgeois' virtues characteristic of the new social forms of 'disciplining' — of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world. For this, she would also need to have some idea of the world outside the home into which she could even venture as long as it did not threaten her 'femininity'. It is this latter criterion, now invested with a characteristically nationalist content, which made possible the displacement of the boundaries of 'the home' from the physical confines earlier defined by the rules of *purdah* (seclusion) to a more flexible, but culturally nonetheless determinate, domain set by the *differences* between socially approved male and female conduct. Once the essential 'femininity' of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible 'spiritual' qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertainment programmes, and in time even take up employment outside the home. But the 'spiritual' signs of her femininity were now clearly marked: in her dress, her eating hab-

its, her social demeanour, her religiosity. The specific markers were obtained from diverse sources, and in terms of their origins each had its specific history. The dress of the bhadramahila, for instance, went through a whole phase of experimentation before what was known as the *brahmika* sari (a form of wearing the sari in combination with blouse, petticoat and shoes made fashionable in Brahmo households) became accepted as standard for middle class women.[15] Here too the necessary differences were signified in terms of national identity, social emancipation and cultural refinement, differences, that is to say, with the memsahib, with women of earlier generations and with women of the lower classes. Further, in this as in other aspects of her life, the 'spirituality' of her character had also to be stressed in contrast with the innumerable surrenders which men were having to make to the pressures of the material world. The need to adjust to the new conditions outside the home had forced upon men a whole series of changes in their dress, food habits, religious observances and social relations. Each of these capitulations now had to be compensated by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women. They must not eat, drink or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals which men were finding it difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention. The new patriarchy advocated by nationalism conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, and by associating the task of 'female emancipation' with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood, bound them to a new, and yet entirely legitimate, subordination.

As with all hegemonic forms of exercise of dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in an inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother. Whatever be its sources in the classical religions of India or in medieval religious practices, it is undeniable that the specific ideological form in which we know the Sati-Savitri-Sita construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle class culture coeval with the era of nationalism. It served to emphasize with all the force of mythological inspiration what had in any case become a dominant characteristic of femininity in the

new woman, viz. the 'spiritual' qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, etc. This spirituality did not, as we have seen, impede the chances of the woman moving out of the physical confines of the home; on the contrary, it facilitated it, making it possible for her to go out into the world under conditions that would not threaten her femininity. In fact, the image of woman as goddess or mother served to erase her sexuality in the world outside the home.

V

I conclude this essay by pointing out another significant feature of the way in which nationalism sought to resolve the women's question in accordance with its historical project. This has to do with the one aspect of the question which was directly political, concerning relations with the State. Nationalism, as I have said before, located its own subjectivity in the spiritual domain of culture, where it considered itself superior to the West and hence undominated and sovereign. It could not permit an encroachment by the colonial power into that domain. This determined the characteristically nationalist response to proposals for effecting social reform through the legislative enactments of the colonial state. Unlike the early reformers from Rammohun to Vidyasagar, nationalists of the late nineteenth century were in general opposed to such proposals, for such a method of reform seemed to deny the ability of the 'nation' to act for itself even in a domain where it was sovereign. In the specific case of reforming the lives of women, consequently, the nationalist position was firmly based on the premise that this was an area where the nation was acting on its own, outside the purview of the guidance and intervention of the colonial state.

We now get the full answer to the historical problem I raised at the beginning of this essay. The reason why the issue of 'female emancipation' seems to disappear from the public agenda of nationalist agitation in the late nineteenth century is not because it was overtaken by the more emotive issues concerning political power. Rather, the reason lies in the refusal of nationalism to make the women's question an issue of political negotiation with the colonial state. The simple historical fact is that the lives of middle-class women, coming from that demographic section which effectively constituted the 'nation' in late colonial India, changed most

rapidly precisely during the period of the nationalist movement — indeed, so rapidly that women from each generation in the last hundred years could say quite truthfully that their lives were strikingly different from those led by the preceding generation. These changes took place in the colonial period mostly outside the arena of political agitation, in a domain where the nation thought of itself as already free. It was after independence, when the nation had acquired political sovereignty, that it became legitimate to embody the ideas of reform in legislative enactments about marriage rules, property rights, suffrage, equal pay, equality of opportunity, etc.

Another problem on which we can now obtain a clearer perspective is that of the seeming absence of any autonomous struggle by women themselves for equality and freedom. We would be mistaken to look for evidence of such a struggle in the public archives of political affairs, for unlike the women's movement in nineteenth and twentieth century Europe, that is not where the battle was waged here in the era of nationalism. The domain where the new idea of womanhood was sought to be actualized was the home, and the real history of that change can be constructed only out of evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theatre, songs, paintings and such other cultural artefacts that depict life in middle-class homes. It is impossible that in the considerable transformation of the middle-class home in India in the last hundred years, women played a wholly passive part, for even the most severe system of domination seeks the consent of the subordinate as an autonomous being.

The location of the State in the nationalist resolution of the women's question in the colonial period has yet another implication. For sections of the middle-class which felt themselves culturally left out of the specific process of formation of the 'nation', and which then organized themselves as politically distinct groups, the relative exclusion from the new nation-state would act as a further means of displacement of the legitimate agency of reform. In the case of Muslims in Bengal, for instance, the formation of a middle-class occurred with a lag, for reasons which we need not go into here. Exactly the same sorts of ideological concerns typical of a nationalist response to issues of social reform in a colonial situation can be seen to operate among Muslims as well, with a difference in chronological time.[16] Nationalist reform does not, however, reach political fruition in the case of Muslims in independent

India, since to the extent that the dominant cultural formation among them considers the community excluded from the state, a new colonial relation is brought into being. The system of dichotomies of inner/outer, home/world, feminine/masculine is once again activated. Reforms which touch upon the 'inner essence' of the identity of the community can only be carried out by the community itself, not by the State. It is instructive to note here how little institutional change has been allowed in the civil life of Indian Muslims since independence and compare it with Muslim countries where nationalist cultural reform was a part of the successful formation of an independent nation-state. The contrast is striking if one compares the position of middle-class Muslim women in West Bengal today with that in neighbouring Bangladesh.

The continuance of a distinct cultural 'problem' of the minorities is an index of the failure of the Indian nation to effectively include within its body the whole of the demographic mass which it claimed to represent. The failure assumes massive proportions when we note, as I have tried to do throughout this discussion, that the formation of a hegemonic 'national culture' was *necessarily* built upon a system of exclusions. Ideas of freedom, equality and cultural refinement went hand in hand with a set of dichotomies which systematically excluded from the new life of the nation the vast masses of people whom the dominant elite would represent and lead, but who could never be culturally integrated with their leaders. Both colonial rulers and their nationalist opponents conspired to displace in the colonial world the original structure of meanings associated with western bourgeois notions of right, freedom, equality, etc. The inauguration of the national state in India could not mean a universalization of the bourgeois notion of 'man'.

The new patriarchy which nationalist discourse set up as a hegemonic construct culturally distinguished itself not only from the West but also from the mass of its own people. It has generalized itself among the new middle class, admittedly a widening class and large enough in absolute numbers to be self-reproducing, but is irrelevant to the large mass of subordinate classes. This raises important questions regarding the issue of women's rights today. We are all aware that the forms and demands of the women's movement in the West are not generally applicable

in India. This often leads us to slip back into a nationalist framework for resolving such problems. A critical historical understanding will show that this path will only bring us to the dead end which the nationalist resolution of the women's question has already reached. The historical possibilities here have already been exhausted. A renewal of the struggle for the equality and freedom of women must, as with all democratic issues in countries like India, imply a struggle against the humanistic construct of 'rights' set up in Europe in the post-enlightenment era and include within it a struggle against the false essentialisms of home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine propagated by nationalist ideology.

NOTES

1. See Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905* (Rajshahi: Rajshahi University Press, 1983).
2. See for example, Sumit Sarkar, "The Complexities of Young Bengal," *Nineteenth Century Studies,* 4(1973), pp. 504-34, and "Rammohun Roy and the Break with the Past" in *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India,* ed. V.C. Joshi (Delhi: Vikas, 1975); Ashok Sen, "The Bengal Economy and Rammohun Roy," in *Rammohun Roy,* ed. Joshi, and *Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and his Elusive Milestones* (Calcutta: Riddhi India, 1977); and Ranajit Guha, "Neel Darpan: The Image of the Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror," *Journal of Peasant Studies,* 2, no.1 (1974), pp.1-46.
3. Sumit Sarkar, "The Women's Question in Nineteenth Century Bengal" in *Women and Culture,* eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (Bombay: SNDT Women's University, 1985), pp. 157-72.
4. See Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1986).
5. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, "Grhakaryer vyavastha," in *Bhudev-racanasambhar,* ed. Pramathanath Bisi (Calcutta: Mitra and Ghosh, 1969), p.480.
6. "Lajjasilata" in ibid., pp.445-48.
7. Ibid., p.446.
8. Ibid., p.447.
9. M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works,* 64 (Delhi: Publications Division, 1970), p.85.

10. See the survey of these debates in Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante,* pp.19-62, and Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984).
11. Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante,* p.43. In the area of higher education, Chandramukhi Bose and Kadambini Ganguli were celebrated as examples of what Bengali women could achieve in formal learning: they took their B.A. degrees from the University of Calcutta in 1883, before any British university agreed to accept women on their examination rolls. On Chandramukhi and Kadambini's application, the University of Calcutta granted full recognition to women candidates at the First of Arts examination in 1878. London University admitted women to its degrees later that year (Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women,* p.94). Kadambini then went on to medical college and became the first professionally schooled woman doctor.
12. Cited in Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante,* p.60.
13. See for instance, Kulabala Debi, *Hindu Mahilar Hinabastha,* cited in Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante,* p.60.
14. Cited in Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women,* p.105.
15. Ibid., pp.245-56.
16. See Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante.*