PEER TEACHING (CC 13): AN OVERVIEW

A Historiographical Study of Sati, Purdah, Age of Consent, Women as Figures of Obscenity, Widow Remarriage, and the Education of Women

INTRODUCTION: THE COLONIAL CONTEXT AND THE 'WOMAN QUESTION'

The nineteenth century in colonial India was a period of profound intellectual, social, and political ferment. The encounter with British colonialism did not merely impose new administrative structures upon Indian society; it precipitated a deep and often turbulent interrogation of existing social norms, religious practices, and cultural identities. At the very centre of this upheaval stood the figure of the Indian woman—her body, her education, her sexuality, and her role within the family became a contested terrain upon which debates about tradition, modernity, nationhood, and imperial authority were fiercely played out. To understand the emergence of social reform movements in this period, one must first comprehend the specific historical conditions that made the *'woman question'* not merely a social issue but a political and ideological battleground of the highest order.

British colonial discourse consistently portrayed Indian society as morally and civilizationally inferior, and the treatment of women was central to this imperial narrative. Practices such as *sati* (widow immolation), *purdah* (female seclusion and veiling), child marriage, and enforced widowhood were deployed by colonial administrators and writers as evidence of Indian 'backwardness.' **James Mill**, in his influential, *The History of British India* (1817), condemned sati as proof of Hindu civilization's degenerate character, while British administrators such as Lord William Bentinck framed legislative interventions—most notably the Bengal Sati Regulation of 1829—as exercises in humanitarian benevolence and moral superiority. This narrative served a specific function: it legitimized British rule by presenting it as a 'civilizing mission,' a phrase that would be critiqued with devastating force by later postcolonial scholars.

Crucially, the colonial intervention in matters of gender was accompanied by a broader discourse about Indian masculinity. Colonial ethnography frequently characterized Bengali Hindu men as 'effeminate'—physically weak, intellectually over-refined, and lacking the martial vigour that British imperial culture associated with true manhood. This stereotype, which **Mrinalini Sinha**

has analysed at length in her work, *Colonial Masculinity*, was not merely a casual prejudice but a structural component of imperial ideology. It served to justify British political dominance by arguing that Indian men were constitutionally unfit to govern themselves or to protect their women. The charge of 'effeminacy' thus created a peculiar double bind for Indian male reformers and nationalists: to defend their culture was to risk appearing complicit in the oppression of women; to reform it was to appear to be yielding to colonial pressure and surrendering cultural sovereignty.

It was within this fraught context that the Indian social reform movement emerged. Educated, largely upper-caste Bengali men—the *Bhadralok*—who had been exposed to Western Enlightenment philosophy, rationalism, and political thought through colonial education, began to critically examine their own social institutions. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar did not see themselves as Westernizers abandoning Hindu tradition. Rather, as the historiography reveals, they constructed themselves as 'restorers'—scholars who believed that the practices they sought to abolish were later corruptions of a purer, more egalitarian Vedic past, a 'Golden Age' in which women had enjoyed higher status and education. It provided the ideological scaffolding for virtually all mainstream reform activity. Yet, as feminist and postcolonial historians have consistently demonstrated, the reform movements, for all their progressive intentions, remained deeply embedded within patriarchal structures. The women on whose behalf debates were conducted were rarely consulted. Their voices, experiences, and desires were systematically marginalized in favour of debates conducted between male reformers, male orthodox opponents, and the colonial state. The following discussion examines the specific reform debates—concerning *Sati*, *Purdah*, *Age of Consent*, *Women as Figures Of Obscenity*, *Widow Remarriage*, *Women's Education*, and related questions—through the lens of the rich historiographical tradition that has grown around them.

(I) SATI

PRESENTERS: NOORAFSHAN HASSAN

MENTORS: ADRIJA CHATTERJEE, ADRITA GANGULY, ATREYEE BANERJEE, NILUFAR FIROZ, SANJANA DEY, SINJINI ROY

The practice of sati—the immolation of a widow on or near her deceased husband's funeral pyre—occupies a central and deeply contested position in Indian historiography. Early Vedic texts, including the Rigveda, contain no clear injunction towards widow-burning; on the contrary, early texts laid down norms for widow life and, in some interpretations, permitted widow remarriage. It was in the later Dharmashastras, Puranas, and Smritis that the figure of the pativrata—the devoted wife who preferred death to the dishonour of widowhood—was increasingly glorified, providing a ritual and ideological basis for what would become a complex social institution. **Romila Thapar** and other historians of early India argue persuasively that sati originated amongst the Kshatriya warrior aristocracies and became significantly more visible after approximately 500 CE, particularly as Brahmanical norms of chastity and lineage purity were adopted by warrior-caste lineages. By around 1000 CE, the practice had achieved the status of an accepted custom among certain high-status groups, most notably the Rajputs.

The practice was never geographically uniform. British missionary records for the early nineteenth century report several hundred cases annually, with one set of figures recording 8,134 satis in the Bengal Presidency between 1815 and 1829. Higher incidences were documented in parts of Rajasthan, the Gangetic plain, and Bengal. The colonial record, however, must be approached with historiographical caution: the collection and publication of such statistics served specific ideological purposes, and colonial writers from Abbe Dubois to James Mill had strong incentives to emphasize the prevalence and brutality of the practice. The British abolition of sati through Regulation XVII of 1829 has long been presented in liberal historiography as a straightforward humanitarian triumph. This narrative was reinforced retrospectively by nationalist writers who celebrated Raja Ram Mohan Roy as the pioneering hero of Indian social reform. However, modern historiography has subjected this self-congratulatory narrative to rigorous and illuminating critique.

The most influential intervention in this field is that of **Lata Mani**, whose *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India (1998)* transformed scholarly understanding of the issue. Mani demonstrates with careful archival precision that the nineteenth-century colonial debates on sati were never centred on the lived experiences, desires, or rights of widows. Rather, the debate revolved almost entirely around the question of scriptural legitimacy—around whether the Brahmanical texts sanctioned or prohibited the practice. Both colonial officials seeking to abolish sati and indigenous male reformers seeking the same end grounded their arguments not in a concern for women's welfare per se, but in the authority to define what 'authentic' Hindu tradition required. In this process, as Mani incisively argues, the widow herself became 'the ground of the discourse' rather than its subject—her voice was structurally excluded, and even testimonies of distress at the pyre were refashioned within the dominant language of 'voluntarism.'

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's intervention in her celebrated essay *'Can the Subaltern Speak?' (1988)* adds a further critical dimension. Her formulation of the colonial narrative as 'white men saving brown women from brown men' captures with precision the triangulated dynamic through which the abolition of sati served simultaneously to legitimize British imperial authority as morally superior, to portray Indian society as backward and in need of civilizational tutelage, and to exclude the widow herself from the speaking position. Indian male elites, whether reformers or revivalists, participated in these debates primarily to defend or reinterpret tradition and thus maintain their own authority—in both cases, the woman remained the object rather than the subject of reform.

Uma Chakravarti's concept of Brahmanical patriarchy provides the structural framework within which sati must ultimately be understood. **Chakravarti** argues that the regulation of women's sexuality and reproductive capacity was absolutely central to the maintenance of patrilineal inheritance and caste purity. Sati was not an isolated or aberrational custom; it was a functional component of a broader system designed to control women's bodies and ensure the stability of lineage and property relations. This argument is reinforced by the economic dimension: under the Dayabhaga legal system prevalent in Bengal, widows held rights to inherit their deceased husbands' property. Coercing or encouraging a widow into sati effectively transferred that inheritance back to the husband's male kin. Sati thus served simultaneously as

ideological control—reinforcing the ideal of the pativrata—and as a mechanism of property consolidation.

The revivalist opposition to the abolition of sati, led by figures such as Radhakanta Deb and the Dharma Sabha, was framed primarily as a defence of religious autonomy and scriptural legitimacy rather than as a direct endorsement of widow immolation. Revivalists argued that the colonial state had violated its own commitment to non-interference in religious matters and that sati was a voluntary and spiritually meritorious act (sahagamana) rooted in sacred texts. They attacked Raja Ram Mohan Roy as a cultural traitor aligned with colonial and missionary interests.

Modern historiography, however, reveals the profound contradictions within this position. Mani's analysis shows that revivalists, like reformers, relied heavily on Brahmanical scripture and thus contributed to the transformation of Hinduism into a textualised system privileging elite male interpretation. **Uma Chakravarti** further challenges the revivalist mythology of a 'golden Vedic past' in which women were supposedly honoured: she demonstrates that patriarchal control over women was deeply embedded in Brahmanical social structures long before any colonial intervention, thereby exposing revivalist claims as politically motivated ideological constructions rather than historical realities. Spivak's contribution is equally incisive: both colonial and revivalist discourses silenced the subaltern widow—she appeared as either passive victim or heroic martyr, but never as a speaking subject capable of articulating her own experience and desires.

Thus, as **Deniz Kandiyoti's** concept of the 'patriarchal bargain' suggests, the reform of sati can be understood not as a rupture with patriarchal authority but as its reorganization. **Michel Foucault's** theoretical framework is equally apposite: power shifted from the overt and spectacular form of the burning pyre to subtler, more pervasive forms of disciplinary control over widows' bodies, mobility, and sexuality. Authority over women was transferred from traditional indigenous structures to colonial and reformist male elites, but control itself remained firmly in male hands.

(II) PURDAH

PRESENTERS: SAIKA PARVEEN

MENTORS: ADRIJA CHATTERJEE, ARCHISHA DEY, ATREYEE BANERJEE, SANJANA DEY, SINJINI ROY

The historiography of purdah—the system of female seclusion encompassing both physical veiling and the spatial confinement of women within domestic quarters—is characterized by a complex multiplicity of interpretive positions. One influential line of interpretation attributes the origins of purdah to Islamic traditions of female seclusion introduced by the Turko-Afghan and Mughal rulers of medieval India. This view, while widespread in popular discourse, has been challenged by historians such as **R.C. Majumdar**, who points out that forms of female seclusion already existed among upper-caste and royal households in India before the advent of Muslim rule. A third interpretation, advanced by historians including **Satish Chandra** and **Ishwari Prasad**, connects the intensification of purdah practices to periods of political instability and foreign invasion, particularly among Rajput communities for whom the preservation of female honour became a matter of martial prestige and community survival.

Feminist historians, led by **Uma Chakravarti**, have decisively challenged the notion—common to both revivalist and some nationalist discourse—that purdah was a later distortion caused primarily by external, particularly 'Muslim,' influence. **Chakravarti** demonstrates that restrictions on women's mobility and autonomy were intrinsic to Brahmanical patriarchy and were structurally embedded in systems of caste, lineage purity, and property transmission long before the medieval period. By rejecting the 'foreign corruption' thesis, **Chakravarti** and others expose the ideological function of such arguments: they serve to naturalize patriarchal control as a specifically indigenous and culturally authentic tradition, while deflecting critical scrutiny by attributing oppression to external forces.

Partha Chatterjee's theoretical framework, developed in *Colonialism, Nationalism and Colonised Women* and expanded in *The Nation and Its Fragments*, provides the most influential

analytical model for understanding how purdah reform was negotiated within the context of colonial nationalism. **Chatterjee** demonstrates that nationalist discourse responded to colonial critiques of Indian culture by dividing the social world into two distinct domains: the 'outer' domain of politics, economy, and public life—associated with Western modernity and firmly under male control—and the 'inner' domain of home, culture, and spirituality—assigned to women as the custodians of authentic Indian civilization. Within this framework, purdah and female seclusion were not merely social customs; they were ideological markers of cultural sovereignty. To reform *purdah*, in the nationalist view, was to surrender the last uncorrupted domain of Indian civilization to colonial influence.

Revivalist thinkers elaborated this position most systematically. They argued that the *zenana*—the domestic women's quarters—represented the final sanctuary of genuine Indian culture, untouched by colonial contamination. Women were thus elevated symbolically to the position of grihalakshmi, the guardian deity of the household and emblem of national honour, while being simultaneously confined in material terms to a domestic space from which any significant public participation remained strictly circumscribed. As **Tanika Sarkar's** scholarship illuminates, the control over women's bodies became, for nationalist men experiencing the emasculating humiliations of colonial subjection, a compensatory mechanism for the loss of political autonomy. The 'new woman' produced by reform—educated, mobile, influenced by Western norms—was attacked by revivalists as a product of colonial mimicry rather than authentic emancipation.

Yet the reformist position offered no genuine liberation from patriarchal structures. **Kumkum Sangari** and **Sudesh Vaid's** foundational edited volume, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History,* demonstrates with characteristic force that colonial modernity did not dismantle patriarchy but reconfigured it through new ideals of respectability and domesticity. The reformist project produced a new model of femininity—the Bhadramahila—who was educated, literate, refined, and culturally sophisticated, yet remained expected to be modest, morally disciplined, and domestically oriented. **Partha Chatterjee** aptly characterizes this outcome as the creation of a 'new patriarchy': women gained literacy and limited public visibility, but they remained confined within the domestic sphere under renewed male authority, now justified not by religious injunction but by the rhetoric of national culture and bourgeois respectability.

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is particularly illuminating in this context. In colonial Indian society, women's education, modesty, and controlled visibility became markers of family honour and social respectability—attributes that enhanced the status of male household heads in the competitive social world of the emerging middle class. Reform thus allowed men to present themselves as progressive and modern without relinquishing substantive authority over women: female behaviour continued to function as a vehicle for male status, merely through different and more subtle mechanisms. Drawing on Foucauldian analysis, one may further observe that purdah's transformation did not eliminate control over women but rendered it more pervasive and less visible—shifting from overt physical confinement to internalized norms of modesty, sexual respectability, and appropriate feminine conduct.

(III) WIDOW REMARRIAGE

PRESENTERS: MEGHAMALA BANERJEE, ANUSHKA CHRISTINE SORENG

MENTORS: ADRIJA CHATTERJEE, ADITI SINGH, SADRITA MUKHERJEE

In nineteenth-century Hindu society, particularly among upper-caste communities, widowhood was associated with one of the most harsh and socially degrading conditions that a woman could experience. Upon the death of her husband, a widow was typically required to shave her head, adopt plain white clothing, abstain from ornaments, and adhere to strict dietary restrictions. She was excluded from auspicious social ceremonies on account of her inauspicious status, and her very presence was often regarded as malignant. Historian **Bipan Chandra** has observed that the condition of widows reflected the deeply patriarchal structure of nineteenth-century Indian society, in which a woman's identity and social worth were inextricably tied to her marital status.

The situation was rendered particularly acute by the prevalence of child marriage and practices such as kulin pratha—the Bengali custom by which *Kulin Brahmin* men of high lineage married multiple women, leaving many child-wives widowed before they had lived as wives in any meaningful sense. These child widows were condemned to a lifetime of austerity and social marginalization, having committed no transgression of their own. The suffering of such widows became a central concern of the reform movement, and their plight was deployed by reformers as

evidence of the irrationality and inhumanity of existing custom. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar—Sanskrit scholar, educator, and social reformer of extraordinary intellectual force—was the pre-eminent advocate of widow remarriage in nineteenth-century Bengal. His reform strategy was distinguished by its careful, methodologically sophisticated engagement with the Hindu scriptural tradition. Rather than rejecting that tradition outright, Vidyasagar undertook a painstaking examination of the Dharmashastras and argued, drawing on the authority of the *Parasara Smriti*, that widow remarriage was not merely permitted but actually enjoined by certain ancient texts. By doing so, he attempted to demonstrate that the prohibition of widow remarriage was itself a later distortion of authentic Hindu law rather than its expression.

Sumit Sarkar has rightly emphasized that this strategy of scriptural reinterpretation—'reconciling social reform with scriptural authority rather than challenging religion directly'—was not merely a rhetorical convenience but a structural necessity. In a society in which traditional religious authority remained a powerful social force, reforms that appeared to violate Hindu tradition were likely to fail entirely. Vidyasagar's genius lay in his capacity to make progressivism appear orthodox. He organized public campaigns, wrote widely circulated pamphlets, submitted petitions to the colonial government, and mobilized support among the educated public—all of which culminated in the passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 legally permitted Hindu widows to remarry and declared children of such unions legitimate. However, the Act was simultaneously a reformist triumph and a compromise with conservative opinion: widows who chose to remarry forfeited the property rights they had inherited from their deceased husbands' families. **Lucy Carroll** has argued compellingly that this provision rendered the legislation 'intrinsically conservative in character,' endorsing the Brahmanical norm of rewarding only the chaste, faithful widow by disinheriting those who chose to exercise their newly legalized freedom. The Act thus gave with one hand while taking with the other, reinforcing economic dependency as a deterrent to remarriage.

The practical impact of the Act was severely limited. Strong social stigma remained attached to widow remarriage among upper-caste communities. Families feared the loss of property rights and social respectability. Orthodox leaders condemned the reform as a violation of Hindu tradition, and in some regions—most notably in the Poona debates of 1870—reformers were formally defeated in public argument and subjected to social pressure. By the end of the

nineteenth century, only 38 widow remarriages had been recorded in Maharashtra, and couples who did remarry faced severe social ostracism.

Geraldine Forbes's social historical perspective adds an important further dimension: widow remarriage had, in fact, already been commonly practised among lower-caste communities throughout this period, for whom the ideological prohibition was less rigidly enforced. The 1856 Act thus primarily targeted the norms of elite upper-caste society rather than transforming Indian social life as a whole. Ironically, as Forbes and others have noted, the very emphasis on reform may have spread the upper-caste prohibition downwards through a process of Sanskritization, causing lower-caste communities to adopt the very norms that reformers were seeking to dismantle among the upper castes. **Uma Chakravarti's** analysis states the prohibition of widow remarriage firmly within the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy. The prohibition was, she argues, not merely a social or religious convention but a functional mechanism for preserving caste purity and lineage continuity. Widow remarriage posed a threat to the patrilineal order because it could introduce ambiguity regarding lineage and inheritance: a remarried widow's children from her second marriage complicated the transmission of property and the maintenance of caste endogamy. The prohibition thus served the structural interests of patrilineal upper-caste society regardless of its ostensible religious justification. **Kumkum Sangari's** analysis further argues that the reform movement did not liberate women but restructured patriarchy within the framework of colonial modernity. The 'respectable woman' who emerged from reform discourse was a woman whose sexuality and social behaviour were regulated in new ways suited to the requirements of a modernizing bourgeois order. **Lata Mani's** critique applies equally in this context: the debates around widow remarriage were conducted largely through scriptural interpretation and ideological argumentation, while the lived experiences of widows—their fears, desires, and daily suffering—were systematically absent from the centre of discussion. In her work, *Widows of Colonial Bengal: Gender, Morality and Cultural Representation*, **Aishika Chakraborty's** focus on the literary and cultural dimensions of widowhood in colonial Bengal adds yet another layer of complexity. She demonstrates that social anxieties about female sexuality and morality continued to shape public perceptions of widows long after 1856, and that legal reform did not translate into social acceptance. The cultural representation of widows in nineteenth-century Bengali literature frequently reinforced rather than challenged the view that a woman's social existence was properly terminated by her husband's death.

(IV) WOMEN'S EDUCATION

PRESENTERS: AMISHA KUMARI JHA, NANDANI SHAW, NAMRATA EKKA, SANJANA PAUL, VEDIKA PRABHAKAR

MENTORS: ADRIJA CHATTERJEE, SANJANA DEY, SINJINI ROY

Before the nineteenth century, formal educational opportunities for women in India were profoundly restricted. While ancient literary tradition preserved the memory of learned women such as Gargi and Maitreyi, these figures were exceptional rather than representative of women's educational experience in any broad social sense. For the overwhelming majority of women, and particularly in the medieval and early modern periods, education remained confined to domestic instruction, religious learning, and oral traditions—forms of knowledge transmission deeply determined by caste, class, and the overarching norms of patriarchal authority. By 1881, female literacy across India stood at less than one per cent—a statistic that reflects not an absence of intellectual capacity but the systematic exclusion of women from institutionalized learning.

Colonial educational policy, while it formally acknowledged the importance of female education through instruments such as Wood's Despatch of 1854 and the Hunter Commission of 1882, remained cautious, limited, and deeply paternalistic in practice. Colonial authorities promoted education for women not as a means of achieving gender equality or intellectual development, but as a vehicle for producing better wives and mothers—moral anchors for the domestic sphere who would raise children in conformity with emerging standards of respectability and hygiene. The colonial approach thus reproduced rather than dismantled patriarchal gender norms, merely encoding them in a new institutional framework. Indian social reformers played a decisive role in bringing women's education into public discourse. Raja Ram Mohan Roy viewed women's education as essential for the regeneration of Indian society, arguing that female ignorance was causally linked to the persistence of social evils such as sati. Drawing on both Enlightenment ideals and indigenous intellectual traditions, Roy advocated for women's rational

development—while still, it must be observed, situating this advocacy within a domestic framework in which women's education was valued primarily for its contribution to family and social life rather than as an end in itself.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's contribution to institutionalizing women's education in Bengal was enormous: he established girls' schools across the province and advocated for curriculum reform that would give women access to serious intellectual content. His educational work was closely connected to his campaign for widow remarriage, in which education figured as a means of restoring dignity and agency to women who had been consigned to social death. However, as **Sumit Sarkar** and **Tanika Sarkar** have argued, even Vidyasagar's reformism reflected a negotiation between progressive change and cultural conservatism—education was consistently framed within ideals of respectable femininity rather than as an instrument of genuine female independence. **Judith E. Walsh's** scholarship on nineteenth-century debates about women's education highlights how thoroughly these debates were tied to reforming domestic life rather than transforming women's public role. Educated women were expected to become better companions for their educated husbands and better mothers for the nation's children—a phenomenon that historians, drawing on **Partha Chatterjee's** framework, have characterized as the construction of a 'new patriarchy' or 'global domesticity.' The *Bhadramahila*—the refined middle-class woman—was educated, literate, and culturally sophisticated, yet her education confirmed rather than challenged her assignment to the domestic inner domain.

Women's education confronted formidable social resistance throughout the nineteenth century. Many families believed that educated women would become disobedient, unsuitable for marriage, or morally compromised. Literacy among women was in certain communities associated with misfortune—a belief that reinforced parents' reluctance to invest in daughters' education. The prevalence of child marriage frequently curtailed education before it could meaningfully begin. Christian missionary schools, while institutionally important in expanding educational access, generated anxieties about religious conversion among Hindu and Muslim families, limiting their impact until Indian-led secular organizations such as the Brahmo Samaj and the Arya Samaj established culturally 'safe' alternatives. Class and caste disparities profoundly shaped access to education. As **Rosalind O'Hanlon** has highlighted, early reform efforts were overwhelmingly focused on upper-caste women, while women from Dalit and lower-caste communities faced compounded discrimination on the basis of both gender and

caste. Marxist historians have further noted that the economic empowerment associated with women's education was concentrated within upper- and middle-class households, leaving the vast majority of women—particularly in rural and labouring communities—entirely untouched by reform initiatives.

Nevertheless, a number of remarkable individual women transcended these constraints and left an indelible mark on the history of Indian women's education and empowerment. Savitribai Phule, who opened schools for girls in Pune in the 1850s in collaboration with her husband Jyotirao Phule, endured considerable public hostility and social ostracism in her determination to extend educational access across caste boundaries. Pandita Ramabai—scholar, social critic, and feminist avant la lettre—provided a sharp and subversive critique of both patriarchal Hindu tradition and the limits of mainstream reformism, arguing in The High-Caste Hindu Woman that the reform movement had failed to address the root causes of women's suffering. Her establishment of Sharada Sadan in 1889 as a home and school for destitute widows represented a genuinely radical departure from the dominant reformist model. **Meera Kosambi's** work has emphasized that Ramabai's reformism constituted a feminist intervention because she challenged the *Shastras* directly from a woman's standpoint rather than seeking male scriptural authority for her positions. Beyond its social and economic dimensions, women's education in colonial India had profound cultural and psychological effects on those women who were able to access it. Education gave women the tools of literacy and the conceptual frameworks through which they could begin to articulate their own experiences, question the structures that confined them, and participate—however tentatively and within limits—in the broader intellectual life of their society. Many educated women began to read books, journals, and periodicals; some began to write letters, essays, and autobiographies, gradually transforming themselves from passive objects of reform discourse into active participants in social and cultural conversation.

Yet education also produced, in many women, profound inner conflict. Women were trained in intellectual disciplines and exposed to progressive ideas, yet they were simultaneously expected to remain confined within domestic boundaries and deferential to male authority. The contradiction between intellectual capacity and social subordination was a source of frustration and emotional tension—and, paradoxically, education made women more acutely conscious of the restrictions they endured, thereby intensifying rather than alleviating suffering in the short term. As the scholarship on cultural and psychological impacts compiled from colonial period

sources makes clear, education was simultaneously a source of empowerment and a tool of discipline: it expanded women's self-awareness and confidence while imposing new forms of regulation consistent with bourgeois patriarchal norms.

(V) AGE OF CONSENT AND WOMEN AS FIGURES OF OBSCENITY

The Age of Consent Controversy:

PRESENTERS: NICOLETTE MARIAN ANTHONY

MENTORS: ADRIJA CHATTERJEE, ADRITA GANGULY, ARCHISHA DEY, ATREYEE BANERJEE

The Age of Consent Act of 1891, which raised the age of marital consent for girls from ten to twelve years, was precipitated in significant part by the tragic death of Phulmoni Dasi—a ten-year-old child-wife who died from injuries inflicted by her thirty-five-year-old husband in 1889. The case became the catalyst for a reform campaign that drew on medical, legal, and moral arguments in combination. **Behramji Malabari**, the Parsi social reformer and journalist, had already laid the intellectual groundwork through his 'Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood' (1884), which forced the colonial government to confront the issue publicly. **Indrani Sen** has identified Malabari as the crucial bridge between Indian social reform and British legislative action—a figure who strategically deployed the 'civilizing mission' logic to shame the colonial state into action.

The medicalization of the reform debate was a particularly significant historiographical development. Thirteen lady doctors, including Edith Pechey-Phipson, petitioned the Viceroy with detailed medical evidence of the physical injuries sustained by child-wives. **Dagmar Engels** has argued that this medicalization was crucial because it allowed British authorities to bypass the politically sensitive terrain of religious personal law by recasting the issue as one of 'public health' and the 'protection of life.' Pandita Ramabai, characteristically, went furthest of all reformers: she argued that both mainstream reformers and orthodox opponents had failed to address women's genuine autonomy, insisting that what was needed was not merely a legal adjustment of the age of consent but comprehensive educational and social empowerment for women.

Women as Figures of Obscenity:

PRESENTERS: SNIGDHA SAHA

MENTORS: ADRIJA CHATTERJEE, ADRITA GANGULY, ARCHISHA DEY, ARATRIKA MUKHERJEE, ARUSHI GHOSH, ATREYEE BANERJEE

An often overlooked dimension of the nineteenth-century reform project concerns the campaigns waged by reformist organizations against what they characterized as 'obscene' popular culture—the Battala literature, Jatra performances, and Kheur songs that circulated among the urban poor of Calcutta. The Brahmo Samaj, led by Keshub Chandra Sen and Sivanath Sastri, conducted vigorous campaigns to suppress these cultural forms, which they regarded as morally degrading and incompatible with the refined sensibility of the emerging Bhadramahila.

Sumanta Banerjee's path-breaking study *The Parlour and the Streets* argues that these reformist campaigns effectively silenced the authentic cultural voices of lower-class women. The *Battala* literature and the oral traditions of *Jatra* and *Kheur* performance were cultural spaces in which subaltern women had significant participatory roles; the suppression of these forms in the name of 'respectability' was thus simultaneously an act of cultural colonialism within Indian society, imposing elite bourgeois norms on popular culture and marginalizing the expressive traditions of working-class and lower-caste women.

Tanika Sarkar's analysis of Vidyasagar's role in the 'obscenity' debate reveals an important tension within the reformist project. While celebrated as a champion of widow remarriage and women's education, Vidyasagar was also a member of the committee for the suppression of what reformers deemed obscene literature, and he supported the standardization of a 'pure' Bengali prose style (Sadhubhasha) that marginalized the colloquial registers and oral traditions associated with women's everyday speech. Reform thus operated not only on the level of formal social institutions but at the level of language and cultural expression, imposing a disciplinary regime of respectability that extended into the most intimate domains of social life. **Mrinalini Sinha's** analysis of Malabari's obscenity campaigns connects them explicitly to the discourse of national 'manliness.' The argument that a civilized nation capable of self-governance must reform its treatment of women in public spaces—eliminating the harassment of women at festivals and the singing of 'vile' songs—was structured around the colonial logic that had constructed Indian men as 'effeminate' and therefore unfit for political autonomy. Reform of public culture towards

women thus served a double function: it addressed a genuine social problem while simultaneously being deployed as evidence of Indian civilization's capacity for self-improvement and, therefore, its fitness for political self-determination.

CONCLUSION

The social reform movements of nineteenth-century colonial India were, taken together, a phenomenon of extraordinary intellectual complexity and lasting historical significance. They challenged practices of immense cruelty—sati, enforced widowhood, child marriage, the degradation of purdah—and produced legal reforms, institutional changes, and intellectual debates that genuinely transformed the conditions of Indian women's lives, at least for some sections of society. The passage of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act, the expansion of women's education, the establishment of schools and institutions for destitute women, and the gradual erosion of certain forms of strict seclusion all represent real, if partial, achievements. Yet the historiographical tradition examined in this report consistently illuminates a deeper continuity beneath the surface of reform. As **Uma Chakravarti**, **Kumkum Sangari**, **Lata Mani**, **Partha Chatterjee**, and **Tanika Sarkar** have demonstrated through their respective analyses, the nineteenth-century reform movements did not fundamentally dismantle Brahmanical patriarchy. Rather, they reorganized and modernized it—shifting authority over women from traditional indigenous structures to colonial and reformist male elites, reconfiguring older forms of control into newer, more socially acceptable mechanisms rooted in respectability, domesticity, and bourgeois moral regulation, and conducting debates ostensibly about women's welfare in terms that systematically excluded women's own voices, experiences, and agency.

The figure of the Indian woman in nineteenth-century reform discourse was, above all, a symbol—a site upon which anxieties about colonial subjection, cultural authenticity, national honour, and civilizational worth were projected and contested. Whether she appeared as the victim of sati demanding rescue, the respectable Bhadramahila embodying national culture, the educated companion of the modern man, or the morally pure guardian of the inner domain, she was defined primarily in relation to male needs and male ideological imperatives. The voices of actual women—their grief, their resistance, their desires—were present in this history, but they were marginalized, mediated, and frequently silenced. The significance of this historiographical tradition lies not only in what it reveals about the nineteenth century but in what it demands of

historical method. It insists that we read reform as a complex, multivalent process rather than a simple narrative of progress; that we attend to questions of class, caste, and gender simultaneously; that we listen for the silences in the archive as attentively as we read what is present; and that we recognize, with **Spivak**, that the subaltern woman's voice, though structurally excluded from dominant discourse, is not therefore absent from history—it awaits, in the fragments of vernacular writing, oral tradition, and embodied practice, the scholar attentive enough to receive it.

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