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THE NATION AND ITS FRAGMENTS

COLONIAL AND  
POSTCOLONIAL HISTORIES

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## The Nation and Its Women

## THE PARADOX OF THE WOMEN'S QUESTION

The "women's question" was a central issue in the most controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth-century Bengal—the period of its so-called renaissance. Rammohan Roy's historical fame is largely built around his campaign against the practice of the immolation of widows, 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 toward the close of the century. From then onward, questions regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they did only a few decades before. The overwhelming issues now are directly political ones—concerning the politics of nationalism.

How are we to interpret this change? Ghulam Murshid states the problem in its most obvious, straightforward form. "If one takes seriously, that is to say, 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 toward 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 were thereby regarded with suspicion. Consequently, nationalism fostered a distinctly conservative attitude toward social beliefs and practices. The movement toward modernization was stalled by nationalist politics.

This critique of the social implications of nationalism follows from rather simple and linear historicist 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, the same sort of critique as that of the colonialist 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 activation of traditional patron-client relationships; its internal debates the squabbles of parochial factions; and its ideology a garb for xenophobia and racial exclusiveness.

Clearly, 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 argued 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.<sup>2</sup> 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 *śāstra* (scriptures), preference for symbolic rather than substantive changes in social practices—all these were conspicuous in the reform movements of the early and mid-nineteenth century.

Following from this, we could ask: How did the reformers select what they wanted? What, in other words, was the ideological sieve through which they put the newly imported ideas from Europe? If we can reconstruct 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 this chapter, that nationalism did in fact provide an answer to the new social and cultural problems concerning the position of women in "modern" society, and that this answer was posited not on an identity but on a difference with the perceived forms of cultural modernity in the West. I will argue, therefore, that the relative unimportance of the women's question in the last decades of the nineteenth century is to be explained not 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. The reason lies in nationalism's success in situating the "women's question" in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state. This inner domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of "tradition."

## THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IN "TRADITION"

Apart from the characterization of the political condition of India preceding the British conquest as a state of anarchy, lawlessness, and arbitrary despotism, a central element in the ideological justification of British co-

lonial rule was the criticism of the "degenerate and barbaric" social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed, by the religious tradition. Alongside the project of instituting orderly, lawful, and rational procedures of governance, therefore, colonialism also saw itself as performing a "civilizing mission." In identifying this tradition as "degenerate and barbaric," colonialist critics invariably repeated a long list of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women, not so much by men or certain classes of men, but by an entire body of scriptural canons and ritual practices that, they said, by rationalizing such atrocities within a complete framework of religious doctrine, made them appear to perpetrators and sufferers alike as the necessary marks of right conduct. By assuming a position of sympathy with the unfree and oppressed womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country.

Take, for example, the following account by an early nineteenth-century British traveler in India:

at no period of life, in no condition of society, should a woman do any thing at her mere pleasure. Their fathers, their husbands, their sons, are verily called her protectors; but it is such protection! Day and night must women be held by their protectors in a state of absolute dependence. A woman, it is affirmed, is never fit for independence, or to be trusted with liberty . . . their deity has allotted to women a love of their bed, of their seat, and of ornaments, impure appetites, wrath, flexibility, desire of mischief and bad conduct. Though her husband be devoid of all good qualities, yet, such is the estimate they form of her moral discrimination and sensibilities, that they bind the wife to revere him as a god, and to submit to his corporeal chastisements, whenever he chooses to inflict them, by a cane or a rope, on the back parts. . . . A state of dependence more strict, contemptuous, and humiliating, than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindoos, cannot easily be conceived; and to consummate the stigma, to fill up the cup of bitter waters assigned to woman, as if she deserved to be excluded from immortality as well as from justice, from hope as well as from enjoyment, it is ruled that a female has no business with the texts of the Veda—that having no knowledge of expiatory texts, and no evidence of law, sinful woman must be foul as falsehood itself, and incompetent to bear witness. To them the fountain of wisdom is sealed, the streams of knowledge are dried up; the springs of individual consolation, as promised in their religion, are guarded and barred against women in their hour of desolate sorrow and parching anguish; and cast out, as she is, upon the wilderness of bereavement and affliction, with her impoverished resources, her water may well be spent in the bottle; and, left as she is, will it be a matter of wonder that, in the mo-

ment of despair, she will embrace the burning pile and its scorching flames, instead of lengthening solitude and degradation, of dark and humiliating suffering and sorrow?

An effervescent sympathy for the oppressed is combined in this breathless prose with a total moral condemnation of a tradition that was seen to produce and sanctify these barbarous customs. And of course it was suttee that came to provide the most clinching example in this rhetoric of condemnation—"the first and most criminal of their customs," as William Bentinck, the governor-general who legislated its abolition, described it. Indeed, the practical implication of the criticism of Indian tradition was necessarily a project of "civilizing" the Indian people: the entire edifice of colonialist discourse was fundamentally constituted around this project.

Of course, within the discourse thus constituted, there was much debate and controversy about the specific ways in which to carry out this project. The options ranged from proselytization by Christian missionaries to legislative and administrative action by the colonial state to a gradual spread of enlightened Western knowledge. Underlying each option was the liberal colonial idea that in the end, Indians themselves must come to believe in the unworthiness of their traditional customs and embrace the new forms of civilized and rational social order.

I spoke, in chapter 2, of some of the political strategies of this civilizing mission. What must be noted here is that the so-called women's question in the agenda of Indian social reform in the early nineteenth century was not so much about the specific condition of women within a specific set of social relations as it was about the political encounter between a colonial state and the supposed "tradition" of a conquered people—a tradition that, as Lata Mani has shown in her study of the abolition of *sati* (*immolation of widows*),<sup>4</sup> was itself produced by colonialist discourse. It was colonialist discourse that, by assuming the hegemony of Brahmanical religious texts and the complete submission of all Hindus to the dictates of those texts, defined the tradition that was to be criticized and reformed. Indian nationalism, in demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule, took up the women's question as a problem already constituted for it: namely, as a problem of Indian tradition.

#### THE WOMEN'S QUESTION IN NATIONALISM

I described earlier the way nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres—the material and the spiritual. The claims of Western civilization were the most powerful in the material sphere: Science, tech-

nology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of statecraft—these had given the European countries the strength to subjugate the non-European people and to impose their dominance over the whole world. To overcome this domination, the colonized people had to learn those 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 undesirable to imitate the West in anything other than the material aspects of life, it was even unnecessary 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.

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, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us—a mere external that influences us, conditions us, and forces us to adjust to it. Ultimately, it is unimportant. The spiritual, which lies within, is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. It followed that as long as India took care to retain the spiritual distinctiveness of its culture, it could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt itself to the requirements of a modern material world without losing its true identity. This was the key that nationalism supplied for resolving the ticklish problems posed by issues of social reform in the nineteenth century.

Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into *ghar* and *bāhīr*, the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material; the home represents one's inner spiritual self, one's 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 one gets an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the social space into *ghar* and *bāhīr*.

Thus far we have not obtained anything that is different from the typical conception of gender roles in traditional patriarchy. If we now find

continuities in these social attitudes in the phase of social reform in the nineteenth century, we are tempted to label this, as indeed the liberal historiography of India has done, as “conservatism,” a mere defense of traditional norms. But this would be a mistake. The colonial situation, and the ideological response of nationalism to the critique of Indian tradition, 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 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, the nationalists asserted, it had failed to colonize the inner, essential, identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive, and superior, spiritual culture. Here 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 subjugated must learn the modern sciences and arts of the material world from the West in order to match their strengths and ultimately overthrow the colonizer. 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 liberals are apt to in their 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 but an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project.

#### DIFFERENCE AS A PRINCIPLE OF SELECTION

It is striking how much of the literature on women in the nineteenth century concerns the threatened Westernization of Bengali women. This theme was taken up in virtually every form of written, oral, and visual

Or take the following scene, which combines a parody of the pretensions to Westernized manners of the reformists with a comment on their utter impotence against the violence and contempt of the British. A group of enlightened men, accompanied by their educated wives, are meeting to discuss plans for "female emancipation" when they are interrupted by three English soldiers called—yes!—James, Frederick, and Peter. (Most of the scene is in English in the original.)

JAMES: What is the matter? my dear—something cheering seems to take place here?

UNNATA BABU: Cheering indeed, as ninety against twenty—a meeting for the Hindu female liberty.

JAMES: A meeting for the Hindu female liberty? A nice thing indeed amidst poverty.

FREDERICK: Who sit there, both males and females together?

PETER: These seem to be the Hindu Heroes, met to unveil their wives' veiled nose.

FREDERICK: Nose alone won't do—if eyes and head be set to full liberty, Hindu ladies are sure to be the objects of curiosity.

PETER: Curiosity, nicety, and charity too.

UNNATA BABU: This is offensive—this is offensive.

JAMES: Nothing offensive—nothing offensive.

UNNATA BABU: Go hence, ye foreigners. Why come here, ye vain intruders?

JAMES: To dance, to sing and to feast—

With our rising cousins of the East.

He takes Unnata Babu's wife by her hand, sings and dances with her, and then kisses her.

UNNATA BABU [Catches JAMES by the hand]: Leave her, leave her. She is my wife, my married wife.

JAMES [Throws UNNATA to the ground]:

O! thou nigger of butter and wax made,

Dared come, my hand to shake!

If Jupiter himself with his thunder-bolt in hand,

Comes to fight us, we will here him withstand.

[Takes out his sword]

Look, look, here is my sword.

Come, please, stain it with your blood.

[FREDERICK and PETER also take out their swords]

Strike him, strike the devil right and left,

We both better strike the rest.

The English soldiers make their exit with the following words to Unnata's wife:

communication—from the ponderous essays of nineteenth-century moralists, to novels, farces, skits and jingles, to the paintings of the *patua* (scroll painters). Social parody was the most popular and effective medium of this ideological propagation. From Iswarchandra Gupta (1812–59) and the *kabyāl* (songsters) of the early nineteenth century to the celebrated pioneers of modern Bengali theater—Michael Madhusudan Dutt (1824–73), Dinabandhu Mitra, Jyotirindranath Tagore (1849–1925), Upendranath Das (1848–95), Amritalal Bose (1853–1929)—everyone picked up the theme. To ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the ways of a *memsäheb* (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 sari that 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 jewelry, of the reading of novels, 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.

Take, for example, a character called "Mister Dhurandhar Pakrashi," whose educated wife constantly calls him a "fool" and a "rascal" (in English) and wants to become a "lady novelist" like Mary Correlli. This is how their daughter, Phulkumari, makes her entrance:

PHULKUMARI: Papa! Papa! I want to go to the races, please take me with you.

DHURANDHAR: Finished with your tennis?

PHULKUMARI: Yes, now I want to go to the races. And you have to get me a new bicycle. I won't ride the one you got me last year. And my football is torn: you have to get me another one. And Papa, please buy me a self-driving car. And also a nice pony. And please fix an electric lamp in my drawing-room; I can't see very well in the gaslight.

DHURANDHAR: Nothing else? How about asking the Banerjee Company to rebuild this house upside down, ceiling at the bottom and floor on top?

PHULKUMARI: How can that be, Papa? You can't give me an education and then expect me to have low tastes?

JAMES: . . . O! pretty poor lady! We good-bye,  
Pray you—go, go forward—  
Wait upon, and guard your husband,  
A treacherous, bloody coward.<sup>6</sup>

The literature of parody and satire in the first half of the nineteenth century clearly contained much that was prompted by a straightforward defense of existing practices and outright rejection of the new. The nationalist paradigm had still not emerged in clear outline. In hindsight, this period—from Rammohan to Vidyasagar—appears as one of great social turmoil and ideological confusion among the literati. And then a new discourse, drawing from various sources, began to form in the second half of the century—the discourse of nationalism.

In 1851, for instance, a prize essay on “Hindu female education” marshalled evidence that women’s education was encouraged in ancient India and that it was not only not harmful but positively beneficial for women to be educated.<sup>7</sup> It went into numerous practical considerations on how women from respectable families could learn to read and write without any harm to their caste or their honor. In 1870, however, a tract on the duties of wives was declaring that the old prejudices about women’s education had virtually disappeared. “Now the times are such that most people believe that . . . by educating women the condition of the country will improve and that there will be happiness, welfare and civilized manners in social life.”<sup>8</sup>

The point of the new discussions was to define the social and moral principles for locating the position of women in the “modern” world of the nation. Take, for example one of the most clearly formulated tracts on the subject: Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay’s *Pāribārik prabandha* (Essays on the family), published in 1882. Bhudeb states the problem in his characteristic matter-of-fact style:

Because of the 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 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.<sup>9</sup>

The problem is put here in the empirical terms of a positive sociology, a genre much favored by serious Bengali writers of Bhudeb’s time. But the sense of crisis he expresses was very much a reality. Bhudeb is voicing the feelings of large sections of the newly emergent middle class of Bengal when he says that the very institutions of home and family were threatened under the peculiar conditions of colonial rule. A quite unprecedented external condition had been thrust upon us; we were 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 because of 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?

Bhudeb supplies the characteristic nationalist answer. In an essay entitled “Modesty,” he talks of the natural and social principles that provide the basis for the feminine virtues.<sup>10</sup> 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 that gives rise to virtues such as modesty. In this aspect, human beings seek to cultivate in themselves, and in their civilization, spiritual or godlike qualities wholly opposed to the forms of behavior which prevail in animal nature. Further, within the human species, women cultivate and cherish these godlike 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 behavior the spiritual qualities that are characteristic of civilized and refined human society.

The relevant dichotomies and analogies are all here. The material/spiritual dichotomy corresponds to animal/godlike qualities, which in turn corresponds to masculine/feminine virtues. Bhudeb 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?

The point is then hammered home:

Those who laid down our religious codes discovered the inner spiritual quality 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.<sup>11</sup>

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 for 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 (that is, 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.

#### A GENEALOGY OF THE RESOLUTION

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/mate-

rial, 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 that 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 nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern Western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of indigenous tradition, the same tradition that had been put on the dock by colonial interrogators. Sure enough, nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a "classicized" tradition—reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality.

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, washer women, barbers, peddlers, procurers, prostitutes. It was precisely this degenerate condition of women that 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 to 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 life and condition of middle-class women have changed over the last one hundred years or so. Take the case of female education, that contentious subject that engaged so much of the attention of social reformers in the nineteenth century.<sup>12</sup> 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 real 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.<sup>13</sup> The threat was removed when in 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 a total 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.<sup>14</sup> In the area of higher education, Chandramukhi Bose (1860–1944) and Kadambini Ganguli (1861–1923) were celebrated as examples of what Bengali women could achieve in formal learning; they took their bachelor of arts degrees from the University of Calcutta in 1883, before most British universities agreed to accept women on their examination rolls. Kadambini then went on to medical college and became the first professionally schooled woman doctor.

The development of an educative literature and teaching materials in the Bengali language undoubtedly made possible the quite general acceptance of formal education among middle-class women. 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 because 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, which made it a fundamental task of the national project to create a modern language and literature suitable for a widening readership that would include newly educated women. Through textbooks, periodicals, and creative works, an important force that 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 *bhadramahilā* (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, that is, without becoming a *memsāheb*. Indeed, the nationalist construct of the new woman derived its ideological strength from making the goal of cultural refinement through education a personal challenge for every woman, thus opening up a domain where woman was an auto-

nous subject. This explains to a large extent the remarkable degree of enthusiasm among middle-class women themselves to acquire and use for themselves the benefits of formal learning. They set this goal for themselves in their personal lives and as the objects of their will: to achieve it was to achieve freedom.<sup>15</sup> 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 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 of 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 had to participate) that 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."<sup>16</sup> Others spoke of the need for an educated woman to develop such womanly virtues as chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience, and the labors of love. 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 *memsāheb*-like behavior. 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.<sup>17</sup>

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, 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, that made possible the displacement of the boundaries of the home from the physical confines earlier defined by the rules of purdah to a more flexible, but nonetheless culturally 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 programs, 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 habits, her social demeanor, 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 *bhadrahilā*, for instance, went through a whole phase of experimentation before what was known as the *brāhmikā 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.<sup>18</sup> Here too the necessary differences were signified in terms of national identity, social emancipation, and cultural refinement—differences, that is to say, with the *memsāheb*, 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 ways men had to surrender 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 for 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 that men were finding 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 honor 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 exercising dominance, this patriarchy combined coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion. This was expressed most generally in the inverted ideological form of the relation of power between the sexes: the adulation of woman as goddess or as mother. Whatever its sources in the classical religions of India or in medi-

eval religious practices, the specific ideological form in which we know the "Indian woman" construct in the modern literature and arts of India today is wholly and undeniably 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 construct of "woman" standing as a sign for "nation," namely, the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion, religiosity, and so on. 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 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.

There are many important implications of this construct. To take one example, consider an observation often made: the relative absence of gender discrimination in middle-class occupations in India, an area that has been at the center of demands for women's rights in the capitalist West. Without denying the possibility that there are many complexities that lie behind this rather superficial observation, it is certainly paradoxical that, whereas middle-class employment has been an area of bitter competition between cultural groups distinguished by caste, religion, language, and so on, in the entire period of nationalist and postcolonial politics in India, gender has never been an issue of public contention. Similarly, the new constitution of independent India gave women the vote without any major debate on the question and without there ever having been a movement for women's suffrage at any period of nationalist politics in India. The fact that everyone assumed that women would naturally have the vote indicates a complete transposition of the terms in which the old patriarchy of tradition was constituted. The fixing by nationalist ideology of masculine/feminine qualities in terms of the material/spiritual dichotomy does not make women who have entered professional occupations competitors to male job seekers, because in this construct there are no specific cultural signs that distinguish women from men in the material world.

In fact, the distinctions that often become significant are those that operate *between* women in the world outside the home. They can mark out women by their dress, eating habits (drinking/smoking), adherence to religious marks of feminine status, behavior toward men, and so on, and classify them as Westernized, traditional, low-class (or subtler variations on those distinctions)—all signifying a deviation from the acceptable norm. A woman identified as Westernized, for instance, would invite the ascription of all that the "normal" woman (mother/sister/wife/daughter) is not—brazen, avaricious, irreligious, sexually promiscuous—and this not only from males but also from women who see themselves as con-

forming to the legitimate norm, which is precisely an indicator of the hegemonic status of the ideological construct. An analogous set of disjunctions would mark out the low-class or common woman from the normal. (Perhaps the most extreme object of contempt for the nationalist is the stereotype of the Anglo-Indian *triyās*—Westernized and common at the same time.) Not surprisingly, deviation from the norm also carries with it the possibility of a variety of ambiguous meanings—signs of illegitimacy become the sanction for behavior not permitted for those who are “normal”—and these are the sorts of meaning exploited to the full by, for instance, the commercial media of film, advertising, and fashion. Here is one more instance of the displacement in nationalist ideology of the construct of woman as a sex object in Western patriarchy: the nationalist male thinks of his own wife/sister/daughter as “normal” precisely because she is not a “sex object,” while those who could be “sex objects” are not “normal.”

#### ELEMENTS OF A CRITIQUE OF THE RESOLUTION

I end this chapter 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 that was directly political, concerning relations with the state. Nationalism, as we have noticed 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 in 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 Rammohan 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 chapter. 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 that 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 idea of reform in legislative enactments about marriage rules, property rights, suffrage, equal pay, equality of opportunity, and so on. Now, of course, the women’s question has once again become a political issue in the life of the nation-state.

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 struggle in the public archives of political affairs, for unlike the women’s movement in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Europe or America, the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home. We know from the evidence left behind in autobiographies, family histories, religious tracts, literature, theater, songs, paintings, and such other cultural artifacts, that it was the home that became the principal site of the struggle through which the hegemonic construct of the new nationalist patriarchy had to be normalized. This is the real history of the women’s question whose terrain our genealogical investigation into the nationalist idea of “woman” has identified. The nationalist discourse we have heard so far is a discourse about women; women do not speak here. In the next chapter, we will explore the problem of enabling women in recent Indian history to speak for themselves.

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 that felt themselves culturally excluded from the formation of the nation and that then organized themselves as politically distinct groups, their 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 new middle class was delayed, for reasons 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.<sup>19</sup> Nationalist reforms do not, however, reach political fruition in the case of the Muslims in independent India, because 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 are once again activated. Reforms that touch upon what is considered the inner essence of the identity of the community can be legitimately carried out only by the community itself, not by the state. It is instructive to note how little institutional change has been allowed in the civil life of Indian Muslims since independence and to compare the degree of change with that in 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 of neighboring 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 that it claims to represent. The failure becomes evident when we note that the formation of a hegemonic "national culture" was necessarily built upon the privileging of an "essential tradition," which in turn was defined by a system of exclusions. Ideals of freedom, equality, and cultural refinement went hand in hand with a set of dichotomies that 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 liberal notions of right, freedom, equality, and so on. The inauguration of the national state in India could not mean a universalization of the bourgeois notion of "man."

Indeed, in setting up its new patriarchy as a hegemonic construct, nationalist discourse not only demarcated its cultural essence as distinct from that of the West but also from that of the mass of the 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 situated at a great distance from the large mass of subordinate classes. My analysis of the nationalist construction of woman once again shows how, in the confrontation between colonialist and nationalist discourses, the dichotomies of spiritual/material, home/world, feminine/masculine, while enabling the production of a nationalist discourse which is different from that of colonialism, nonetheless remains trapped within its framework of false essentialisms.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### Women and the Nation

#### THE TROUBLE WITH THEIR VOICES

If there is one theme that dominates the new literature which emerged in Bengal in the nineteenth century, it is the theme of change. Everything was changing; nothing was likely to remain the same. Prolonged and bitter debates ensued about how best to cope with all this change. But at bottom the assumption was shared that the force working to alter the very foundations of society was both overwhelming and alien: the source of change itself lay outside and beyond control. It is important to remember this when considering the emergence of a "modern" consciousness of the self under colonial conditions.

The question of the "new woman" was, like other contemporary social issues, formulated, as we have just seen, as a question of coping with change. But who was to do the coping? Bankimchandra, the most eminent literary figure in Bengal in the late nineteenth century, wrote in the early 1870s an essay comparing the virtues and faults of women of an older age with those of women of modern times.<sup>1</sup> Bankim began the essay by declaring that in all societies it was men who always laid down the ways in which women must behave. "Self-interested men are mindful of the improvement of women only to the extent that it furthers their self-interest; not for any other reason." There was, consequently, no confusion in Bankim's mind about the social agency in question when considering the character of women. If the modern woman differed from her predecessors, she did so as the result of social policies pursued by men; men's attitudes and actions were on trial here.

Bankim then goes on to list the virtues and defects of the "new" woman compared with those of the "traditional." It is a familiar list, reproduced, embellished, and canonized in succeeding decades in the prodigious nationalist literature on women. In the past, women were uneducated, and therefore coarse, vulgar, and quarrelsome. By comparison, modern women have more refined tastes. On the other hand, whereas women were once hardworking and strong, they were now lazy and fond of luxury, unmindful of housework, and prone to all sorts of illnesses. Further, in the olden days women were religious. They were faithful to their husbands, hospitable to guests, and charitable to the needy. They genuinely believed in the norms of right conduct. Today, if women do

these things, they do so more because of fear of criticism than because they have faith in dharma.

Bankim may have felt that despite his initial remarks about the responsibility of men as lawmakers of society, the essay was likely to be read as a criticism of women themselves, whether traditional or modern. In the subsequent issue of the journal in which the essay appeared, Bankim appended three letters, supposedly written by women in response to the article. All three complained that women had been treated unfairly by the author. The first retaliated with a list of accusations against the educated male.

Alright, we are lazy. But what about you? . . . You work only because the English have tied you to the millstone. . . . We have no bonds of religion, you say. And you? You are ever fearful of religion because it is like a noose around your neck: one end of the rope is held by the owner of the liquor-store and the other by the prostitute.

The second argued that the defects of the modern woman had been produced only by the "virtues" of the modern man.

Yes, by your virtues, not by your faults. If only you had not loved us so much, we would not have had so many defects. We are lazy because you have made us so contented. . . . We are unmindful of guests because we are so mindful of our husbands and children. . . . And, finally, are we not afraid of religion? In truth, it is only because we are afraid of religion that we dare not tell you what we should. You are our only religion. We are so afraid of you that we have no fear of any other religion. . . . If this is a crime against religion, then it is both your fault and your virtue. And if you do not mind being asked a question by this prattling female—"You are our teachers, we are your disciples: what religion do you teach us?" . . . Oh shame! Don't spread tales about your slaves!

The third correspondent offered to exchange places with the modern male. "Come indoors and take charge of the house. Let us go out to work. Slaves for seven hundred years, and still you pride yourselves on your masculinity! Aren't you ashamed?"<sup>2</sup>

I mention this essay by Bankim at the very beginning of my discussion of women's writings about themselves not only to remind us that the hegemonic discourse which framed these writings—the discourse of anti-colonial nationalism—was in its core a male discourse, but also to point out the capacity of this discourse to appropriate discordant, marginal, and critical voices. In Bankim's case, the device was self-irony. The strand of nationalist thinking Bankim represented sought to create a national leadership in the image of ideal masculinity—strong, proud, just, wise, a protector of the righteous, and a terror to the mischievous. Relentlessly,

he poured scorn and ridicule on an educated elite that, he thought, was failing to live up to this ideal. Self-irony was the mode by which he could, as a member of this inadequate elite, expose to itself its own weaknesses, even by assuming the voices of its "others"—those of the illiterate, the poor and the "mad," and also those of women.<sup>3</sup> The form was used widely. Indeed, fiction and drama in late nineteenth-century Bengal are full of instances of women, from "respectable" families as well as from the urban poor, using the rhetorical skills of "common" speech and the moral precepts of "common" sense to show up the pretentiousness and hypocrisy of the educated male. We must not overlook the hegemonic possibilities of this internalized critique: it could, up to a point, retain its own legitimacy and appropriate both feminine and popular ridicule simply by owning up to them.<sup>4</sup>

The question is: Up to what point? Or rather, in which discursive field? Within what sort of boundaries? We cannot find a historically nuanced answer to this question unless we think of the field of discourse as one of contention, peopled by several subjects, several consciousnesses. We must think of discourse as situated within fields of power, not only constituting that field but also constituted by it. Dominance here cannot exhaust the claims to subjectivity, for even the dominated must always retain an aspect of autonomy. Otherwise, power would cease to be a relation; it would no longer be constituted by struggle.

If nationalist ideology in late nineteenth-century Bengal legitimized the subjection of women under a new patriarchy, its history must be a history of struggle. The difficulty which faces historians here is that by working from the conventional archives of political history, women appear in the history of nationalism only in a "contributive" role.<sup>5</sup> All one can assert here is that women *also* took an active part in nationalist struggle, but one cannot identify any autonomous subjectivity of women and from that standpoint question the manner in which the hegemonic claims of nationalist culture were themselves fashioned.

My argument is that because of the specific conditions of colonial society, this history is to be found less in the external domain of political conflict and more in the "inner" space of the middle-class home. Fortunately, there exists something of an archive for us to delve into: a series of autobiographies by educated women who wrote about their lives and their struggles in this eventful period of modern Indian history. I propose to present here a reading of five such autobiographies, beginning with a woman who was born in the first decade of the nineteenth century and ending with one who reached middle age in the first decade of the twentieth.

The autobiography would seem to be obvious material for studying the emergence of "modern" forms of self-representation. Unfortunately, here

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too the colonial condition works to displace the points of application of the usual critical apparatus. Historians of Bengali literature conventionally agree that the modern forms of the biography and the autobiography made their appearance in Bengal sometime in the middle of the nineteenth century because of the emergence of a new concept of the "individual" among the English-educated elite.<sup>6</sup> Yet, despite the continued popularity of the genre, it is difficult to explain why the facts of social history and the development of new cultural norms for the collective life of the nation, rather than the exploration of individuality and the inner workings of the personality, constitute the overwhelming bulk of the material of these life stories. The first comprehensive social history of nineteenth-century Bengal was written in the form of a biography of a social reformer,<sup>7</sup> while the foremost political leader of Bengal at the turn of the century entitled his autobiography *A Nation in Making*.<sup>8</sup> The "new individual," it would seem, could represent the history of his life only by inscribing it in the narrative of the nation.

Not unexpectedly, autobiographies of women have characteristics rather different from those of men. It is not simply that women's life stories are concerned more with the domestic than with the public sphere, a feature often noticed in women's autobiographies of the modern period in all countries. Nor is it a particular characteristic that the self-discovery of female identity acknowledges "the real presence and recognition of another consciousness" and that "the disclosure of female self is linked to the identification of some 'other.'" In a fundamental sense, all identity has to be disclosed by establishing an alterity.<sup>10</sup> Men's autobiographies, it seems to me, do the same: the difference lies in the textual strategies employed. In the case of the women's autobiographies discussed here, the most striking feature is the way in which the very theme of disclosure of self remains suppressed under a narrative of changing times, changing manners, and customs, and changing values.

When the first autobiographies came to be written in the second half of the nineteenth century by men who had achieved eminence in the new public life of colonial Bengal, the most common title given to these works was the *ātmacarit*. While this was meant to stand as a literal translation of the English word *autobiography*, it also carried, more significantly, an allusion to the entire body of *carita* literature of the classical and medieval eras in which the lives of kings and saints were recorded. *Buddhacarita* by Aśvaghosa and *Harṣacarita* by Bāṇa are perhaps the most well known examples of a whole genre of religious and secular hagiographic writings in Sanskrit, whereas the *Caitanyacaritāmṛta* (1615) is the most distinguished of numerous carit writings in Bengali in the two centuries preceding the colonial age. While the more obvious hagiographic conventions were quickly abandoned in the new biographical literature of the nine-

teenth century, the idea of the carit as the life of an illustrious man, told either by himself or by others, clearly persisted even in its modern sense.

Women's life stories were not given the status of carit. Of some twenty or so autobiographies I have seen of nineteenth-century Bengali women, not one is called an *ātmacarit*.<sup>11</sup> This, in fact, gives us a clue to the nature of women's autobiographical writings in this period: these were not simply variants on men's autobiographical writings but constituted a distinct literary genre. The most common name by which they were described was the *smṛtikathā*: "memoirs," or more accurately, "stories from memory." What held these stories together into a single narrative was not the life history of the narrator or the development of her "self" but rather the social history of the "times." The most commonly employed narrative device was the contrast: "In those days . . . / "Nowadays . . ." The stories told were those of everyday life in the "inner" part of the house inhabited by women, of rituals and celebrations, of births, deaths, and marriages, of the sudden interruptions of everyday routine by calamitous events, and, of course, of how everything was so different "nowadays." It is not surprising that the first systematic surveys of women's autobiographical writings have treated this material principally as a source for reconstructing the social history of nineteenth-century Bengal,<sup>12</sup> and a recent book-length study of women's autobiographies has carried out this exercise much more elaborately.<sup>13</sup>

What made the narrative history of domestic life particularly suitable as a "feminine" literary genre was the belief, inculcated, needless to say, by male guardians of literary conventions, that this required little more than the retelling from memory of impressions left by direct personal experience. One did not have to have the imaginative power or stylistic flair of the poet or the novelist in order to tell one's *smṛtikathā*: anyone could do it. The immediacy, directness, and indeed the very artlessness of the form was seen to make it appropriate for an authentic "feminine" literary voice. When Charulata, the heroine of Rabindranath Tagore's story "The Broken Nest" (made into a film by Satyajit Ray), first tried her hand at writings, she began with an essay called "The August Clouds" but soon discovered that it read too much like another essay called "The July Moon," written by her brother-in-law Amal. She then proceeded to write about the Kālī temple in the village in which she had lived as a child. Tagore approved of this change in Charu's style: "Although in the early part her writing was cluttered by the excessively ornamental style of Amal, it soon acquired a simplicity and charm of its own, filled as it now was with the richness of a rural idiom."<sup>14</sup>

The genre, in short, did not require the author to express her "self" or to examine the development of her personality. It was not the telling of an exemplary life, not even of a life of any importance: to this day, it is useful

girls, first in schools and then in their homes. The attempt had to be given up rather quickly because the idea of women being exposed to Christian influences seemed far too threatening to the men of their families, and it was only in the latter half of the century, when Indians themselves began to open schools for women and to produce what was considered a suitable modern educational literature in Bengali, that the practice of middle-class girls going to school would become legitimate.

In the meantime, Rassundari's education came to an abrupt halt when she was ten because the building in which her school was housed was destroyed in a fire.<sup>18</sup> It is doubtful how far her education would have progressed in any case, because at the age of twelve, in accordance with the prevailing custom, she was given in marriage.

From then on, her life was enclosed by the daily performance of her household duties. After the death of her mother-in-law a few years later, she had to take on the entire burden of running the house. She cooked three times a day for about thirty members of the household. She gave birth to twelve children, of whom seven died in her lifetime. Her responsibilities in the family would not allow her to go anywhere. Even when she did, to visit her husband's relatives on weddings and other ritual occasions, she would be accompanied on the boat by two guards, two maids, and ten or fifteen other people, and, "like a prisoner on parole," would have to return in a couple of days. Rassundari particularly lamented her failure to visit her mother before she died.

I tried in so many ways to go and see my mother, but I was not fated to do so. This is not a matter of small regret to me. Oh Lord, why did you give birth to me as a human being? Compared to all the birds and beasts and other inferior creatures in this world, it is a rare privilege to be granted a human birth. And yet, despite this privilege, I have failed grievously in my duty. Why was I born a woman? Shame on my life! . . . If I had been my mother's son and known of her imminent death, no matter where I happened to be, I would have flown to her side like a bird. Alas, I am only a bird in a cage.<sup>19</sup>

Had this been all there was to Rassundari's life, it would have been no different from those of thousands of other women in upper-caste landed families in early nineteenth-century Bengal, and we would have had no opportunity to read about it in her own words. Fortunately, she nursed a secret dream. She was always a devout woman, and sometime in her late youth she had a longing to read the religious epics and the lives of the great saints. She did not so much as dare look at even a piece of paper that had been written on, for fear of adverse comments, but every day, she tells us, she would pray to her god: "Oh Lord, give me learning, so that I can

to remember, there are fewer biographies of Bengali women written by others than there are autobiographies. The genre required the writer only to tell her readers, mainly women from a younger generation, how the everyday lives of women had changed. This allowed the questions to be raised: How are we to cope with this change? In what ways must we change ourselves? These were, of course, the central questions of nationalist discourse. However, in this particular case, the discourse enabled a more specific question to be asked—and answered: How must women behave in these changing times?

To discover how educated women of the nineteenth century answered this question, we will now look at some of their own writings. We will listen to their own words, but we will also do well to remember that sovereignty over language, a tricky business under the best of circumstances, is doubly vitiated for those who were subordinated, at one and the same time, to colonialism as well as to a nationalist patriarchy.

#### BEFORE ENLIGHTENMENT

Shanta Nag, who came from a generation of middle-class women whose mothers were already educated, tells the story of how she learned to read the alphabet. It was sometime around the turn of the century. Her mother would sit across the table teaching her elder brother and she would stand beside her, silently watching the proceedings. In a few months, without anybody suspecting it, she had learned to read the first two books of the Bengali primer. The only difficulty was that in order to read, she had to hold the book upside down.<sup>15</sup> Of course, by her time the education of women had become normal practice in middle-class homes in Bengal, and she herself would have learned the alphabet and gone to school as a matter of routine. But the sense of acquiring a skill that was really meant for somebody else seems to have stayed with these early generations of educated women.

Nowhere is this more poignant than in the story of Rassundari Debi (1809–1900). For her, learning to read and write was nothing less than a lifelong struggle. She had been born in a wealthy, landed family and the village school was located in one of the buildings on the estate. When she was eight, her uncle sent her to this school, where, for the next two years, she sat everyday on the floor, the only girl in a roomful of boys, and was taught the Bengali alphabet, some arithmetic, and some Persian (which had still not been replaced by English as the language of bureaucracy). The teacher was an Englishwoman.<sup>16</sup> Rassundari does not tell us this, but we know from other sources that during this brief spell in the early nineteenth century, Christian missionary women attempted to educate Indian

read books. . . . If you do not teach me, who will?"<sup>20</sup> And yet, she did not know how this impossible feat would be accomplished.

The way was shown to her in a dream.

One day, in my sleep, I dreamt I had opened a copy of the *Caitanya-bhāgavat* and was reading it. As soon as I woke up, my body and mind were filled with delight. I closed my eyes and again thought of the dream, and realized what a precious gift I had received. . . . I said to myself, "How remarkable! I have never seen a copy of the *Caitanya-bhāgavat* and would not recognize it even if I saw one. And yet, there I was reading it in my dream." . . . Every day I had asked the Almighty, "Teach me to read. I want to read books." The Almighty had not taught me to read, but had now given me the power to read books in my dream. I was delighted and thanked the Almighty.<sup>21</sup>

Rassundari, however, was to be blessed even more generously. That very day, while she was busy in the kitchen, her husband came in looking for their eldest son and said to him, "This is my *Caitanya-bhāgavat*. Keep it here somewhere. I'll send for it later." Rassundari waited until no one was around, removed a page of the unbound manuscript, and hid it in her room. Later, she tried to read it and discovered that so many years after her brief period of schooling, she could not recognize most of the letters. She then stole a page on which her son had practiced his alphabets, and for months thereafter, whenever she was alone, she would compare the two pieces of paper and, painfully and in absolute secrecy, teach herself to read.

Over the next couple of years, she worked her way through the *Caitanya-bhāgavat*. No one in the household, except a few trusted maids, knew of her accomplishment. But Rassundari had perceived the existence of a whole new world that still seemed out of her reach.

My mind seemed to have acquired six hands. With two of them, it wanted to do all the work of the household so that no one, young or old, could find fault with me. With two others, it sought to draw my children close to my heart. And with the last two, it reached out for the moon. . . . Has anyone held the moon in her hands? . . . And yet, my mind would not be convinced; it yearned to read the *purāna*.<sup>22</sup>

Rassundari gathered up courage and shared her secret with her widowed sisters-in-law. To her surprise, not only did they not reprimand her, but in fact eagerly conspired to start a secret reading circle, arranging to procure books from the outer quarters of the house and setting up an elaborate warning system to prevent discovery.<sup>23</sup>

In time, when her sons were grown, it was no longer necessary to keep up the secrecy. In any case, the times had also changed, and men of her son's generation looked upon the education of women as a virtue. It was

with the assistance of her sons that Rassundari learned to read the printed book and later on to write.<sup>24</sup>

Rassundari thought of her achievement as a divine gift. In fact, her testimony is quite unique in the collection we are looking at for the utterly sincere way in which it tells the story of a life shaped entirely by the inscrutable whims and fancies of a divine power, including the dreams and miraculous coincidences in which that power revealed its presence. It could well be a fragment, paraphrased in the prose of the nineteenth century, from the devotional literature of an earlier era. All subjectivity is attributed here to a divine agency, and Rassundari recounts her toil and sorrow—"the burden of three lives thrust into one"—only as the story of a fate assigned to her. I should also mention that she notes with great satisfaction the good fortune of women younger than her, for "the Lord of the Universe has now made new rules for everything. Women today do not have to suffer. . . . Nowadays parents take great care to educate their daughters. I feel very pleased when I see this."<sup>25</sup>

Before we leave Rassundari to move on to the life histories of women whose beliefs were shaped more directly by the sensibilities of this "modern" world, we must note the way in which her story was given a place in the autobiographical literature of Bengal. When her book was published in the early decades of this century, it was introduced with two forewords—one by the dramatist Jyotirindranath Tagore and the other by the pioneering historian of Bengali literature Dineshchandra Sen (1866–1939). Jyotirindranath saw in her writing "a simple and unselfconscious charm" and noted in particular the fact that "it was her thirst for religious knowledge which drove her to learn to read and write."<sup>26</sup>

Dineshchandra saw in it "a true portrait of the traditional Hindu woman," "the original picture of the long-suffering, compassionate Bengali woman." He remarked on the tendency in modern literature to focus on woman exclusively as the subject of romantic love, which produced, he says, a very incomplete picture of the Hindu woman who was, after all, also a mother, daughter, sister, sister-in-law, daughter-in-law, and mistress of the household and "had to earn credit in all of these roles before she would be praised by society." Rassundari's life was a model of such traditional virtues.<sup>27</sup> Of course, the social norms within which she led her life were often oppressive, but those were the undesirable aspects of tradition which had to be reformed.

Nationalists of the twentieth century saw in Rassundari's story only a confirmation of their construction of the true essence of Indian womanhood: self-sacrificing, compassionate, spiritual, and possessing great resources of emotional strength drawn from personal faith and devotion. This essence, they thought, needed to be recovered from the morass of bigotry and superstition into which tradition had fallen, and reform and

education could accomplish this. What they did not recognize was that Rassundari's struggle emanated from a consciousness that was yet uncolonized by the Enlightenment. She submitted to as well as resisted a patriarchy that was premodern; her strategies of resistance also sprang out of traditions that far predated the advent of "women's education" as an agenda of nationalist reform. Above all, the intervention of nationalist male reformers was not required to set Rassundari's consciousness into motion.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, in her time, the nationalist project had not even begun. Only later did nationalism appropriate her story into its own prehistory.

If I might stay with this transitional period a little longer, I would like to bring in here the story of Saradasundari Debi (1819–1907). Saradasundari was married at the age of nine into one of the most prominent families of colonial Calcutta. Ramkamal Sen, her father-in-law, was, as I mentioned before in another context, a close associate of English traders and officials and although very much an advocate of Western education, he was also concerned with the preservation of religious orthodoxy. Saradasundari's husband had been educated into the new world, and every night, in the secrecy of their bedroom, he would teach her to read and write.<sup>29</sup> She, however, became a widow when she was still a young woman, and later in her life, while she could still read, she had lost her ability to write. The account we are reading was dictated by her to a younger male relative.

The story she tells us is one of suffering—the suffering of a widow with small children surrounded by male relatives intent on defrauding her of her property. Her main responsibility in the world was toward her children—giving her sons a good education and arranging for the marriage of her daughters. Whenever she could, she sought to escape the sufferings of the world by going on pilgrimage. She too was a devout woman, and the happiest episodes in the story that she tells occur in her journeys away from home.

Once again, this is a life that might have been led by numerous other upper-caste women of her time. What prompted her amanuensis to record Saradasundari's story was the fact that her son Keshabchandra Sen was one of the most charismatic leaders of the religious reform movement in Bengal in the second half of the nineteenth century. It is as the life history of Keshab's mother that Saradasundari's autobiography found a place in the archives of Bengali literature.<sup>30</sup>

And it is in this respect that her account reveals traces of the struggle inside urban homes caught in the vortex of cultural reform. Unlike Rassundari, Saradasundari is much more self-conscious about her religiosity. She talks about her joy and fulfillment in the many pilgrimages she made in her life, and yet she also expresses a sense of guilt.

I felt then that I was being virtuous. I would not feel the same way now. I was a little childish then. Even now, I go on pilgrimages, but not to earn religious merit. I go only out of love, in the same way that I have love for my children and those who are my own. But I do not believe that I will gain salvation by going on pilgrimages. . . . I had this obsession for religion and a strong urge to see the holy places. Even now I perform many kinds of worship, but all from the same feeling [of love]. I believe in my heart that there is only one God and unless I worship Him I will never find salvation. I cannot say with certainty that people never achieve salvation if they worship the deities with form [sākār], but I do know that they achieve it if they worship the formless God [nirākār] and that my own salvation depends upon His grace.

Those who know the social history of Bengal in this period will immediately hear in these words resonances of that contentious debate between monotheistic Brahmo reformers and the defenders of Hindu orthodoxy. Living in an orthodox family, and yet the proud mother of a son celebrated for his radical religious views, Saradasundari was clearly caught in a conflict that was not of her own making. She had, therefore, to speak in two voices—one recalling with gratitude and joy her visits to the great Vaishnav temples of India and her miraculous visions of the deity, and the other asserting her role as Keshab Sen's mother. It would be presumptuous on our part to declare one of the two as her true voice; what was true was her struggle to make both voices her own.

I had to suffer a great deal because [Keshab] became a Brahmo. I had to bear with much insult . . . and ill treatment. There was not a day when I did not cry. . . . There were times when even I thought that Keshab was doing wrong. I do not think so anymore. . . . I sought advice from my *guru*. He told me, "If your son accepts this new religion, he will become a great man. People will flock to him. Don't worry about this anymore." I was calmed by his words.<sup>31</sup>

It should not be surprising to notice that for this early generation of women from the new middle class of Bengal, the presence of society and religion as a set of regulatory practices appeared in the immediacy of family and kin relations converging upon the home. So did the presence of new currents in the outside world, including the presence of the West itself, appear in the person of a male member of the family, usually the husband or a son. The great conflicts over social reform in a public domain peopled exclusively by males were thus transmitted into the lives of women inside their homes. Women, consequently, had to devise strategies to cope with the new demands made upon their loyalties and their desires. If Saradasundari seems painfully torn between a conventional devotion which gave her solace in an oppressive world and a rational



religion preached by her radical son, we have another testimony which suggests a resolution of this dilemma. Significantly, this occurs in the case of a woman who was able to escape the daily surveillance of the extended family and live a life with her modernist husband, as it were, outside the reaches of "society."

#### THE NEW WOMEN

Kailasbasini Debi (1830–95) was the wife of Kishorichand Mitra (1822–73), a prominent figure among the social reformers of the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>32</sup> Kishorichand was an employee of the East India Company and held important administrative positions in the district towns of Bengal and Bihar. For several years of her married life, therefore, Kailasbasini lived alone with her husband, away from home, in company bungalows and houseboats. Her husband taught her to read and write Bengali and some English as well. Later, when he settled down in Calcutta, Kishorichand built a garden house in the outskirts of the city, where Kailasbasini would often live with her husband and daughter.

In marked contrast to the other stories we have heard so far, Kailasbasini talks of her married life as one of happiness. She looked from a critical distance at the traditional life of the family she had left behind but that was always waiting for her out there. She was horrified by the unhygienic and degrading conditions in which women in traditional homes were confined at childbirth and regretted that other women she knew did not have the benefits of enlightened teaching which her husband had given her.<sup>33</sup> She was quite conscious of the way in which her husband had assiduously molded her thoughts and beliefs, and was grateful for it. Most of these views were rationalist, in the way in which rationalist arguments were used in the nineteenth century to supply instrumental justifications for traditional beliefs and customs. Thus, Kailasbasini says, echoing her husband, widows are traditionally restricted to a hard life devoid of luxury in order to make them unattractive to men, so that they do not become objects of their lust. Meat eating is regarded as polluting because India is a warm country in which meat is bad for the health. Idolatry meets the need to provide a practical religion for ignorant people who find it difficult to conceive of an abstract, formless God.<sup>34</sup>

There is no question that Kailasbasini saw herself as both more fortunate than and superior to other women around her. She was happy in the formative company of her enlightened husband. When he was away on tour, she tells us with a stunning simile, she spent her time "like Robinson Crusoe, eating, sleeping, reading, sewing, teaching my daughter and writing this journal."<sup>35</sup>

AND yet, even for someone so free from the rigors of customary regulation and so happily enveloped by an entirely new conjugal tutelage, Kailasbasini required strategies to protect herself against the consequences of her husband's reformist projects.

I do not believe in the rituals of Hindu orthodoxy, but I follow all of them. For I know that if I relax my hold, my husband will give up the Hindu religion altogether. My closest relatives are Hindus and I can never abandon them. For this reason, I scrupulously follow all the rules of the Hindu religion.

I have this great fear that no one will accept food from my hands. That would be a shame worse than death. As it is, my husband eats out [without observing ritual regulations]; if I too join him, it would be a calamity.

. . . Since I follow the Hindu rules, I have no problems, no matter what my husband does. That is the religion of the Bengalis, which is why those who are clever do not believe in it. But I never say this to my husband, although I know it would please him to no end if he heard it from me.<sup>36</sup>

I wish to suggest that we have here a moment where a strategy worked out within the space of the emergent nationalist middle-class home anticipated the form of a more general strategy which political nationalism would later attempt to use in order to make the solidarity of cultural communities compatible with the requirements of the modern state. A neat separation between a private sphere of diverse individuals residing in bourgeois patriarchal families and a public sphere inhabited by homogeneous citizens was not available to Indian nationalism. The rational-bureaucratic form of the modern state brought to India by the colonial power was premised precisely upon the denial of citizenship to colonized Indians. The strategy, therefore, had to use another distinction—between the spiritual or the inner, on the one hand, and the material or the outer, on the other. The latter was a ground surrendered to the colonial power; the former was where nationalism began to fashion its claims to hegemony. Kailasbasini, speaking from within this emergent middle-class home, is not telling us that religious beliefs and practices are private matters and that what is important for the life of the nation is the public behavior of its citizens. On the contrary, she has discovered that the practices of the outside world which men have to get used to are in the end inconsequential, since what truly matters in the life of the nation are practices in the inner space of community life. Here it is the duty of women to hold fast to the religious practices of the community: even "private" beliefs are of no consequence. Her strategy mirrors a crucial move in the cultural politics of nationalism.

The home, I suggest, was not a complementary but rather the original site on which the hegemonic project of nationalism was launched.

women from the new middle class in nineteenth-century India thus became active agents in the nationalist project—complicit in the framing of its hegemonic strategies as much as they were resistant to them because of their subordination under the new forms of patriarchy.

To return to Kailasbasini: the apparent stability of the manner in which she chose to reconcile the conflicting demands on her loyalty was undoubtedly made possible by the fortuitous distance between her conjugal home and the effective center of her social life. The situation was to be repeated in the cases of many middle-class families of the Bengali diaspora that spread out into the cities and towns of northern India with the expansion of colonial administration in the second half of the nineteenth century. But in her case at least, the fragility of an individual solution worked out in the peripheries of society was exposed rather tragically. In 1873, when Kailasbasini was in her early forties, her husband died.

I took the name "widow." When I hear that name, it is as though lightning strikes my heart. Oh Lord, why have you given me this name? How long am I to live with it? I will not be able to bear the suffering. I hope this name soon vanishes into dust. What a terrible name! My heart trembles at its very sound.<sup>37</sup>

Those are the last words in Kailasbasini's diary. As far as we know, she never wrote again.<sup>38</sup>

The project of cultural reform which nationalist ideology placed on the agenda in the second half of the nineteenth century did, however, provide the resources for women to turn personal misfortune into a new social identity. This becomes clear in the story of Prasannamayi Debi (1857–1939). Born in an upper-caste landed family, Prasannamayi was married at the age of ten to a husband who turned out to be mentally deranged. After she had made two brief visits to her in-laws, her father refused to send her back, and from the age of fourteen Prasannamayi lived for the rest of her life with her parents and brothers. Her father was committed to the cause of reform and arranged not only to give the best possible education to his sons, many of whom were later to reach positions of eminence in their respective professions, but also to educate his daughter at home.

From a very young age, Prasannamayi showed signs of literary talent. Because of her father's literary and musical interests, the family was part of a cultural circle that included some of the most prominent literary figures of the time. Prasannamayi was not only allowed to listen to these discussions but encouraged to take an active part in them. Often she would read aloud her own poetry in these distinguished gatherings. Even as a young woman, her writings began to be published regularly in major literary magazines, and she soon came out with her own books of poems.

Indeed, she became quite a celebrity as a woman who had overcome a personal tragedy caused by the retrograde custom of child marriage and gone on to make a name for herself as a writer. Protected and encouraged by a circle of male relatives and friends that, in the late nineteenth century, was now far more self-assured about its cultural project, Prasannamayi became an exemplary figure, standing for all the virtues claimed on behalf of the "new woman."

We know about the tragedy of Prasannamayi's marriage from other sources,<sup>39</sup> she herself tells us absolutely nothing about it. In ninety-one pages of detailed description of domestic life in her childhood and youth and of dozens of relatives and acquaintances, she does not once mention her husband. All that she says about her experience of married life is that when she first arrived at her in-laws, dressed in the new fashion with petticoat and jacket and surrounded by rumors about her ability to read and write, she was regarded with great curiosity as "the English bride" (*mem bau*), and when she innocently made a display of her accomplishments, including a demonstration on the concertina, she was rebuked by her mother-in-law (PK, p. 44). She allows herself only one comment on the custom of hypergamous *kulīn* marriage, of which she was a victim: "avaricious *kulīn* parents," she says, "in their desire to preserve the reputation of their lineages, did not consider the uncertain consequences of giving their daughters in marriages of this sort, although many of these incompatible marriages led to much unhappiness. But it was difficult suddenly to break with a social custom" (PK, p. 37). She mentions the fact that several other women in her family had suffered because of such marriages, but then adds: "It is best that this unfortunate history remains unknown to the public [*janasamāj*]" (PK, p. 89).

Thus, even as the new form of the conjugal family was being institutionalized within the middle class in Bengal, and its normative ideals produced discursively in the social reform debates and imaginatively in the new fictional and poetical literature, a whole set of differentiations of the inside/outside was also being put in place in order to demarcate those aspects of family life which could be spoken of and those which could not. It is not the case, therefore, that a sphere of the intimate was created, peopled by privatized individuals with subjectivities "oriented toward an audience."<sup>40</sup> Rather, the sphere of the intimate, even when it was subjected to a reformist critique on ethical or aesthetic grounds, was nevertheless declared a subject that could not be spoken of "in public." It was a fiercely guarded zone lodged deep inside the precincts of community life; even its memory could not be revealed in the open arena of the *janasamāj*.

There is only one place where Prasannamayi slips from her objective narrative of social history to allow us a glimpse into the domain where women in her situation had to wage the struggle for identity and recogni-

tion. This occurs when she talks of Indumati, the widowed daughter of the reformer Ramtanu Lahiri (1813–98). “This remarkable woman,” she says, “was born only to teach the world the duty of love, to demonstrate that the purpose of human life is not indulgence, but sacrifice—the sacrifice of the pleasures and desires of youth to the cause of service to others.” But she also knew Indumati as a friend, and in their friendship, both found the means to forget the immediate world.

I cannot explain now how wonderful it was to forget ourselves completely. From morning to evening and then late into the night, we would talk, and time would fly past us. This was no political conspiracy, nor was it a discussion on some scientific problem. It was only the dream-like imagination and the pain of unfulfilled desire of two people inexperienced in the ways of the world. All the feelings and scenes that went into the making of this imagined world were products of our minds, bearing no relationship at all to the world of phenomenal things. (PK, p. 55)

Apart from this brief slippage, the rest of Prasannamayi's story is a model of nationalist social history written from the standpoint of the “new woman.” She is critical of the irrationality and superstitiousness of many religious beliefs and customs.<sup>41</sup> She is horrified by the excesses of caste discrimination and is hopeful that the extreme rigidities of the system will be gradually weakened. “All must join in bringing about the welfare of the nation. We cannot live separately anymore. All must join in worshipping the Mother” (PK, p. 71). She is grateful to her father, her brothers, and their circle of friends for the guidance and encouragement they gave her in fashioning a completely new role as a woman with an identity in public life. Her view on contemporary history is entirely one of the legitimacy of reform and national progress. On the other hand, she bemoans the fact that English education was leading to so much superficial aping of Western manners and the negligence of what was good in tradition: “Young people today can recite by heart the names of [Admiral] Nelson's ancestors but do not know the names of their own grandparents” (PK, p. 51). And she affirms without question the essential identity of woman as faithful wife and exemplary mother:

My mother, Srimati Magnamayi Debi, was very patriotic. Her love for her country was without comparison. Every grain of Indian sand was to her like a speck of gold. . . . Her immediate deity was her husband. Always abiding by the commands of her husband, she built her life according to an ideal and taught her children to follow that ideal. (PK, p. 14)

If we are to take a linear view of history as progress, then our journey that began with Rassundari in the early decades of the nineteenth century has reached its fulfillment with Prasannamayi at the close of the cen-

hemegonic construct would seem to have been actualized; her struggle has been completely encapsulated in the project to produce the nation—everything else is erased from public memory.

### THE WOMEN LEFT OUT

If I stop my culling of these archives at this point, the principal course of the narrative will have thus described a linear movement. Needless to say, this is not an accident. I have deliberately chosen and arranged the four texts in such a way as to produce exactly that effect. My object was to trace through these supposedly self-revelatory texts the genealogy of the nationalist construct of the “new woman.” I could, of course, have read the same texts in the opposite direction, against the grain, as texts that show the marks of resistance to a hegemonizing discourse; I have, even in this account, pointed out several of these marks. But I wish to retain up to this point the smooth linearity of my story, if only to emphasize once more the powers of a hegemonizing nationalism to take in its stride a whole range of dissenting voices.

We have therefore a linear narrative. The nationalist will read this as a movement from bondage to emancipation; the feminist critic of nationalism will read it as a movement from one kind of bondage to another. In order now to mess up the picture and forestall both of these closures, I will continue my story a little further and bring in the autobiography of Binodini.<sup>42</sup>

Binodini (1863–1941) was perhaps the most celebrated actress on the Calcutta stage in the last decades of the nineteenth century. This position of the professional actress was itself a creation of the new educated middle-class culture, supplying a need produced by the requirements of the new public theater modeled on European lines. Yet it was a need that was difficult to fulfill within the norms of respectability laid down for women. The solution devised by the early generation of theater producers was to recruit young women from among the city's prostitutes and train them in the modern techniques of the dramatic arts. It became a remarkable educative project in itself, producing women schooled in the language and sensibilities of a modernist literati who learned to think of themselves as professional career artists and yet were excluded from respectable social life by the stigma of immoral living. Binodini's life as a professional actress was produced by these contradictions of the new world of middle-class cultural production.

She was brought into the theater at the age of ten; when she was eighteen, she was at the peak of her career; at twenty-three, she decided to

leave the stage. The autobiography she wrote and published when she was forty-nine describes the thirteen years of her professional life as a historical sequence of events, but everything before and after exists as though in a zone of timelessness. As a child, she was brought up in a Calcutta slum, in a household characterized by the absence of adult males. In her autobiography, she talks about the environment of the slum with considerable distaste, and remembers herself as a child looking upon her neighbors "with fear and surprise" and hoping she would never have to face such contempt.<sup>43</sup> She had been told of her marriage at the age of five or six, and there was a boy in the neighborhood whom others referred to as her husband.<sup>44</sup> Whether this might have become a significant event in her life can only be speculated upon, because everything changed when her mother agreed to give her to the theater as a child actress on a monthly salary.

For a girl eleven or twelve years old, training to become a professional actress was hard work. But then again, being in the theater was also like living in a large family. Binodini saw her identity as an actress entirely in terms of her place within this family of artistes. She submitted to its rules, did all that was required of her with dedication, and brought fame and popularity to the theaters she worked for. It is only when we locate this collective site where she grounded her identity and into which she poured out her feelings of loyalty—the extended family transposed on to the artificially constructed world of the middle-class professional theater, which to her was the very real surrogate for society itself—that we begin to see the significance of the central theme of Binodini's autobiography: betrayal.

Binodini had been driven by the belief that the shame of being a woman of ill repute would be removed by her dedication and accomplishments as an artist. Indeed, her acceptance of a position of concubinage to various wealthy patrons seemed to her to be justified by the greater cause of art. She desperately needed to believe in the solidarity and well-being of her surrogate family, for it was only there that she could lead a life of worth and dignity. When her theater company faced a crisis, she even agreed, at considerable personal risk, to become the mistress of a wealthy businessman who was prepared to finance the founding of a new theater only if he could have in exchange the famous Miss Binodini. She was led to believe that her "brothers and sisters" in the company would express their gratitude to her by naming their new theater after her. When this did not happen, she felt betrayed.<sup>45</sup> This was the first of a series of betrayals with which Binodini marks out for us the story of her life.

Trained in the language and sensibilities of the new middle-class culture, Binodini, we can well imagine, felt an intense desire to believe in the emancipatory claims made on behalf of the "new woman." Her life in the

theater had introduced her to Greek tragedy and Shakespeare, to the new humanism of Michael Madhusudan Dutt, Bankimchandra, and Dinabandhu Mitra, and to the fervently nationalist representations by Girishchandra Ghosh of Hindu mythology and religious history. When she realized that she could be transformed only to fulfill the cultural needs of a class claiming to represent the nation but would not be given the place of respectability that the class had set aside for its own women, she learned not to believe anymore.

Ever since I was thrust into the affairs of the world in my adolescence, I have learnt not to trust. The responsibility for this lies with my teachers, my social position and myself. But what is the use of apportioning blame? The distrust remains. . . . How deeply rooted it is in my heart will become clear from the events of my life. . . . And it is impossible to uproot it! I realize that faith is the basis of peace, but where is that faith?<sup>46</sup>

Something, Binodini felt, had been promised to her in return for her dedication to the ideals and disciplines she had been taught. If the enlightened virtues of respectable womanhood meant conformity to a new set of disciplinary rules, she was prepared to conform. Yet respectability was denied to her. She had a daughter whom she wanted to send to school; no school would have her. When the daughter died, she felt she had been betrayed once more.<sup>47</sup>

In late middle age, when she decided to write down the story of her life "to blacken white sheets of paper with the stigma of my heart,"<sup>48</sup> she asked her teacher, Girishchandra Ghosh, to write a foreword to her book. Girish did, but Binodini did not like what her teacher wrote. Girish in fact sought to apply the classic appropriating strategy, pointing out "the great moral lesson in the insignificant life of an ordinary prostitute. . . . On reading this autobiography, the pride of the pious will be curbed, the self-righteous will feel humble, and the sinner will find peace." He went on to comment on "the aspersions" cast by Binodini on the guardians of society. "Rather than emphasizing the didactic aspects of her art, she has tried to tell her own story. The concealing of the personal which is the essence of the technique of writing an autobiography has been compromised." Girish recognized that Binodini had her reasons to feel bitter, "but such bitter words are best left out of one's own life-story. For the reader whose sympathy [Binodini] must expect will refuse to give it when he encounters such harshness."<sup>49</sup>

Binodini, as I said, was not satisfied with this foreword and insisted that her teacher and the greatest actor on the Calcutta stage write "a true account" of all that had happened. The revised version never came, because a few months later Girish Ghosh died. To Binodini, this was another betrayal. "My teacher had told me, 'I will write the foreword before

I die? . . . But it was not in my fate. . . . By leaving the foreword unfinished, my teacher taught me once more that all that one wishes in life is not fulfilled."<sup>50</sup>

The most heartbreaking betrayal, however, came in Binodini's attempt to build a life of her own outside the theater. For thirty years, from about the time she left the stage, she lived with a gentleman from one of the wealthiest and most respected families in the city. She put into this relationship all her feelings of loyalty and devotion and felt free, loved, respected, and cared for. What she did not realize was the inevitable fragility of the arrangement, because individual patronage, no matter how sincere, could hardly overcome the boundaries of a newly constructed world of the dominant that could only claim to speak on her behalf but never recognize her as its constituent part. Lying on his deathbed, the worthy gentleman made her a promise: "If I have devotion and faith in God, if I have been born in a virtuous family, you will never have to beg for protection." Death, however, rendered him powerless to fulfill his promise. His family, one can guess, did not feel in the least bit obliged to recognize an embarrassing relationship. Binodini was betrayed once more.

Ignoring the advice and admonitions of all her teachers, therefore, Binodini in turn felt that she was under no obligation to hide her deep-rooted skepticism about the verities of customary belief and convention. Determined to tell "her own story," she violated every canon of the feminine *smṛtikathā* and wrote down what amounted to her indictment of respectable society in the form of a series of letters addressed to her deceased lover. Perhaps her very marginality enabled her to assert this autonomy over her own words. With bitter irony, she wrote in her preface to the book:

Hindu men and women, I take it, believe with complete sincerity in heaven and hell, in birth and rebirth. . . . Although he [her lover] is no longer on earth, he must be in heaven, from where he can see all that has happened to me and can feel the pain in my heart—if, that is, the Hindu religion is true and the gods are true; if, that is, birth and rebirth are true.<sup>51</sup>

Before we close our narrative of the nationalist transition, therefore, we need to remind ourselves of Binodini's story. For it tells us once more that the story of nationalist emancipation is necessarily a story of betrayal. Because it could confer freedom only by imposing at the same time a whole set of new controls, it could define a cultural identity for the nation only by excluding many from its fold; and it could grant the dignity of citizenship to some only because the others always needed to be represented and could not be allowed to speak for themselves. Binodini reminds us once more that the relations between the people and the nation, the nation and the state, relations which nationalism claims to have re-

solved once and for all, are relations which continue to be contested and are therefore open to negotiation all over again.

### A PESSIMISTIC AFTERWORD

Having written this nicely inconclusive last sentence, I am struck by doubt. The sentence promises further episodes in the story of women and nationalism, and I feel I have succeeded in avoiding a closure. Have I?

In a recent article, Edward Said has spoken of "an incipient and unresolved tension" in the contest "between stable identity as it is rendered by such affirmative agencies as nationality, education, tradition, language and religion, on the one hand, and all sorts of marginal, alienated or . . . anti-systemic forces on the other." This tension, he says, "produces a frightening consolidation of patriotism, assertions of cultural superiority, mechanisms of control, whose power and ineluctability reinforce . . . the logic of identity."<sup>52</sup>

Said is thinking of "the cruel, insensate, shameful violence" that has taken place so often in the name of patriotic affirmation of identity in the Middle East. I am thinking of the equally shameful violence that has become virtually endemic in India in the matter of political relations between religious or linguistic communities. I therefore find myself in agreement with Said when he says, "it must be incumbent upon even those of us who support nationalist struggle in an age of unrestrained nationalist expression to have at our disposal some decent measure of intellectual refusal, negation and skepticism."

But then he says: "It is at precisely that nexus of committed participation and intellectual commitment that we should situate ourselves to ask *how much* identity, *how much* positive consolidation, *how much* administered approbation we are willing to tolerate in the name of our cause, our culture, our state." And here I begin once again to have doubts. Are we still trying to sort out that old liberal problem of "good nationalism" versus "bad nationalism"? Must it be our argument that a little bit of identity and positive consolidation and administered approbation is all for the good, but beyond a point they are intolerable? It is hard for me to accept this, because I have long argued against the posing of this kind of liberal paradox.<sup>53</sup>

One of the ways of avoiding the paradox is to question and reprobate the all-too-easy identification, claimed by every nationalist state ideology, of the state with the nation and the nation with the people. As an act of intellectual skepticism, this might well involve risks that are more than intellectual. But speaking now only of effects in the intellectual domain, one important effect will be, I think, the somewhat startling dis-