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# Mothers and Non-mothers: Gendering the Discourse of Education in South Asia

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## Chapter 6

### **Mothers and Non-Mothers: Gendering the Discourse of Education in South Asia**

#### **Education in South Asia**

Three issues shape the narrative of the educational history of modern India. One issue is that of the early nineteenth century Anglicist-orientalist controversy, as it is called, which marked the shift from a high evaluation of 'oriental' literatures and languages to a conclusive victory for English both as a medium for higher instruction and as a discourse surrounding the highest body of knowledge. English in both senses then made progress: the number of institutions expanded over the nineteenth century, the curriculum was further developed and successive generations of students were produced who were at home in the new cultural world of English literature and European philosophy, history and science.<sup>1</sup> The second issue, taken for granted and poorly documented, is that of the progressive marginalisation and final near-extinction of 'indigenous education'. The lack of analytical attention to the possible meanings for those in the nineteenth century of this dramatic change in social relationships and shifts in epistemologies and common sense has produced a unique thin-ness in the social history of modern India.<sup>2</sup> Finally, the third issue centres on the consciousness of racism and discrimination on the part of Indians, leading to nationalist efforts to create a history and a nation for themselves, including setting up national schools.<sup>3</sup> These three issues produce rich narratives and I will return to them at the end after building up a case for how they may be more holistically recounted by being made into gendered narratives.

However, even with all this wealth of plots, the history of Indian education remains a very constricted one because it leaves out the histories of all those who did not go to colonial schools, government or private. These were groups across the caste and class spectrum: Sanskrit *pandits*, merchants and owners of various industries, artisans, petty traders

and workers. By excluding them, the history of education in India leaves out the complex workings of professional apprenticeship, domestic learning, the transmission of *samskaras* or ethics, and indeed all the processes of social and cultural reproduction that take place outside the school. Those on whom the history of education does focus, the few thousands who did go to colonial schools, from among whom emerged the class we could call the new Indian intelligentsia, are also curiously two-dimensional. They seem to exemplify the despotic machine of capitalist and modernist transformation in the older story of Europe, with the minor modification that they were also the products of colonial transformations as well as that which colonialism failed to transform. In terms of education, they seem to be formed by a fairly coherent and progressively elaborate ideology of English studies and European Enlightenment discourse, and yet to be not so much formed by alternative discourses, as to delve into some kind of raw, pre-discursive material called 'tradition' or the 'indigenous' or 'vernacular' that goes into their making in unspecified ways.

The Indian historical case, I have suggested elsewhere, illustrates that education is a multi-stranded process occurring at plural sites, not so much contradictory as cumulative, producing results that go beyond the schemes of any one organiser of the process. To ignore some of these sites because they are overtly 'domestic' or 'private' is to entrench those same gendered private-public dichotomies that we should be deconstructing (Nicholson 1986). The share in modern education of those who are themselves not subscribers to it consists of both facilitating modern education and also opposing it by teaching other epistemologies, neither of which processes has been explored yet.

My argument concerns both the field of education and of women and I focus here on the education of the intelligentsia and on women within the discourse of motherhood. The position of the mother in Indian history has been unjustifiably obscured by pursuing only the equation of the 'Mother' with the idealised land and nation itself. True, certain members of

the Indian intelligentsia, mostly Hindu, particularly Bengali, collapsed mother with the motherland and found then every reason to keep this mother confined and protected. One may say that this was not necessarily any more imaginary and political than earlier constructions of women, but it was a tighter, more efficacious discourse. More importantly, one may say that recognition of that construction does not remove the onus from us to enquire into how *she* constructed herself or how we might otherwise understand her. Significantly, almost all the description of the new role of the nineteenth-century woman is in the passive voice: 'There was a shift within thinking...'; 'there was a keenly felt need...'; 'there was also a thorough examination...' (T. Sarkar 1995: 98-9). Although the passive voice may be chosen for a variety of reasons, I find that its choice here underscores my point: we do not seem to be sure who the subjects and agents of our story are. Because we are not apportioning responsibility more carefully, we resort to explanations of 'confusion', 'tension' and 'ambivalence' (T. Sarkar 1995: 102-3).

When we do have a description of the new woman in the active voice, the voice is that of the vernacular press, and of reformist pamphlets and tracts, that is, the voice of the male intelligentsia (Forbes 1996, Minault 1994, Orsini 2002). There is not likely to be an equivalent source to give us the voices of women. In the absence of other strategies to present her participation in this social-discursive history, we are left with a story which is, to put it most simply, the story of the 'child' about the 'mother'. It is neither the story of the 'mother' about the 'child' nor, which would be most desirable, a combined story told by both 'mother' and 'child' (Shree 2000).

As a corollary to this, there is a historiographical trend of relegating women as a special case within South Asian education, as self-evidently a kind of community, without problematisation, to be approached in studies of 'the education of girls', 'women teachers', specific institutions for girls and the problems of women (Amin 1984, Forbes 1996, Karlekar

1991, Minault 1998). A history of education in India which is gendered would see multiple positions of women in it. I would also like to add a new problematisation regarding the feminist politics embedded here. The gain for 'education', I argue, that is chiefly men's education, was in the mother occupying the particular spaces she did. But this, in turn, was a loss for the cause of womanhood. Our feminism would necessarily side with the reformers. She *should not* have been so much of a mother, and she *should not* have been so confined to inside worlds. Even widowhood, which we might redefine as a chance for her to gain greater agency, was a mixed blessing, if blessing it might be called at all, in that it assigned her to sainthood. She *should* have been saved – but preferably by herself.

Two necessary tasks can be approached simultaneously. The discourse of education in South Asia can be expanded to include other sites and processes than what a Eurocentric, colonial-modernist history writing might allow. And bringing it closer to the actual processes of 'informal' education of the subcontinent means necessarily to pay attention to the family, the community, mothers, servants and other unrecognised teachers. This wider discourse fills in the more familiar, limited discussion of schooling, and it is gendered.

### **Mothers: in the service of modernity**

The category of mother, as I see it, is an unattractive one. Caught in the web of marriage – which was child or adolescent marriage in South Asia in the nineteenth and most of the twentieth centuries – in the predictable bonds of kinship, household, childcare, petty responsibility, then all too often, widowhood and social and emotional deprivation, she is difficult not to treat as a victim. The new bourgeois romanticisation of the mother starting in the latter nineteenth century (Chatterjee 1989) reduced her more pitifully yet to a passive site for male transactions (Bagchi 1990, Chowdhury-Sengupta 1992). Even abstractly if we take up a neutral definition of mothering as a culturally and historically variable relationship 'in

which one individual nurtures and cares for another' (Glenn 1994: 3) mothering continues to seem to be two ironically contradictory things: overblown and idealised, and insignificant and unimpressive.

The first problem here of the unattractiveness of certain spaces inhabited by women is already partly understood in the literature. It lies largely in the categories themselves: 'mother', 'home', 'childcare' versus 'intelligentsia', 'the nation', 'education'. The former cluster has to do uniquely with women and is private, passive, apolitical and ahistorical. The latter has to do only with men and is public, important, the stuff of politics and history. The category 'intelligentsia', particularly as defined by class, education, occupation and ideology, is male, a woman intellectual being not an exception so much as unnatural and an oxymoron. This intelligentsia then bears the mantle of History itself. The intelligentsia of colonial countries like India bears a wider mantle: to develop the will and the desire to *have* a History. Women are accepted well enough commonsensically as having a *place* in history; they do not *imagine* or *make* this new 'History'.

This necessary work of developing the will and then of engaging in the technical manoeuvres of constructing a History, is accompanied by a certain pain and has been described as such, both by the male intelligentsia themselves and by scholars. In earlier versions, it was the pain of bearing forth an immanent Idea without support from a non-co-operative political economy (Sen 1977). In later versions, it is the pain of struggling with unspecified obstacles, maybe the dilemma of creative sensibilities confronting conflicting worlds (Kaviraj 1995). In both versions, one of the obstacles is by implication the female dead weight in society, somewhere equivalent to the feudalism, superstition, hierarchy of pre-modernism. Yet, for all the suffering, even in their aborted efforts towards a realisation of a destined History, the intelligentsia retains an effect of unity. Surely this is achieved chiefly through exclusions and repressions of important parts of the story? Certain 'men' find

themselves confirmed in history, and others, such as ‘women’ get positioned ‘so as to confirm the truth of that operation’ (Crosby 1991: 148) The ‘essence’ of the intelligentsia—troubled, questing, struggling, building—gets predicated on the larger non-intellectual activity of their societies and, specifically for us, on the non-intellectual activity of the women of their class. The history of the intelligentsia is confirmed by the non-essential and non-historical.

How would we reposition the non-historical? Even within this foundational, modernist narrative of the intelligentsia we can introduce elaborations. First, a history of the intelligentsia in the nineteenth century should necessarily be a story of men with wives at home. One focus of our discussion should then legitimately be a reinterpretation of the division of political (public, historical) and ‘natural’ (domestic, maternal). We could redress the balance by which housekeeping and maternity, while seen as the very bulwark of human survival and reproduction, become an instrument of subordination, and maternal responsibility is ‘used as an alibi to exclude a woman from power, authority, decision and a participatory role in public life’ (Krishnaraj 1995: 34). In South Asian history, including the history of education, this work has barely begun. In my study of the education of girls in Banaras for instance (Kumar 1994: 211-31), I have a detailed discussion of the historiographical problem of the invisibility of women, but the most cursory mention of the role of women as wives. For the Agrawal Samaj school in Banaras (f. 1896), we have a passing comment that not only are women teachers and staff members absent from the records, so also are those who ‘permitted men to have the necessary leisure for all this public activity through management of the homes—the same management that led both males and females to claim when the question arose that women did not have “enough time” for public work’ (Kumar 1994: 215). The *Agrawals* are a trading caste with pride in their work ethic and their social ethic. Like other such groups, they set up modern schools for their children, while keeping their social boundaries intact. This is not merely a case of record keeping, since the

whole edifice of this community, the *Agrawal Samaj*, was kept up through the marriage links in which women were crucial, links maintained sometimes across vast distances and leading to preferred reproductive results. Women were the resources for creating alliances and were at the heart of any notion of the community as 'solid' and 'pure'. Any work, including that of building up educational institutions, was possible for men to undertake because of the roles relegated to women. We need a *structural* understanding of this as basic to the history of education in India. We need to place squarely in Indian educational history the few nuggets of first-person data such as the following:

Sometimes in fun I tell him that although people call him Maharshi, some of the credit is due to me. For if I had not managed the family affairs and set him free to carry out his public activities, he could not have achieved so much. But that is merely in the lighter vein. I consider myself fortunate that I should give him some help in his great work (Karve 1963).

However, members of the intelligentsia are born, not as autonomous actors who then proceed to throw off the yoke of colonisation, but as malleable infants who are then socialised into roles sustaining the rationale of their class and time. They cannot possibly be formed *only* by their experience of new occupations, colonialism, racism, nationalist organising and attendant self-questioning and self-development, as our history-writing seems to imply. Because all history-writing is based on a European model and the European case does not include a story of plural sites of subject-formation, there is an invisibility of this plurality in the Indian case also. The most elementary biographical facts about members of the nineteenth-century Indian intelligentsia are the following.

The fathers of the new intelligentsia were themselves members of the 'old' intelligentsia (their famous sons' names are in parentheses): *darogas* or police inspectors (Akshay Kumar, b. 1828), *diwans* or chief ministers (Rammohan Roy, b. 1772, Raghunath

Rao, b. 1831), other kinds of court officials (Syed Ahmad Khan, b. 1817, Mahadev Ranade, b. 1842), clerks (Haracharan Ghosh, b. 1817, Vembankum Ramiengar, b. 1826) and *pandits* (Iswar Chandra, b. 1820). As pillars of society, the fathers typically honoured caste and sectarian rules, practised gender and age hierarchies, and believed in child marriage. Akshay Kumar and Mahadev Govind Ranade were married at thirteen, Rammohan Roy at nine and ten, Sivnath Sastri at twelve, Bhabhanicharan Bandopadhyaya at nine, Gopal Hari Deshmukh at seven, Lajpat Rai at twelve, Gopal Krishna Gokhale and Bal Gangadhar Tilak at thirteen, Dhondu Karve at fourteen.

The mothers of the first- and second-generation intelligentsia were often widowed while their sons were still students (the age of the son on losing his father are given for some), such as those of Akshay Kumar Dutt (19), Baladev Palit, Gopal Hari Deshmukh (13), Kandukuri Veerasalingam, Krishnachandra Majumdar, Pratap Chandra Majumdar (9), Sasipada Banerji (5), Shyamacharan Sarma Sarkar and Surendranath Majumdar. Even without recourse to psychoanalytical discussions of the strong mother-son bond in India (Carstairs 1961, Kakar 1981) one may hypothesise that after the father's death the mother's bond with the son became further strengthened. At any rate she was obliged to take over much of the double work of parenting.

There were specific ways in which she did this. When her own labour was needed, the means available to her were thrift, forethought and sheer physical obduracy. She could spin yarn, engage in simple unskilled labour like making paper bags or do domestic service. Typically this was done to see her son through school, where colonial schooling was available. While the biographies of men reflect an idealised notion of nurture and we would be right to discount their hyperbole, there are precise references to mothers' work with reference to schooling. In Akshay Kumar's case, the widowed mother was responsible for his education. Veerasalingam's mother Purnamma, widowed when he was four, 'wanted to give

her son the best possible education. So she sent him to the Government District School'. Dhondu Karve's (b. 1858) mother, when solely responsible for his future, became very 'careful' with his upbringing, particularly with his education, because that is where the future lay (Paranjpye 1915). The *bhadralok* in Bengal, an educated middle class, and its equivalent elsewhere, was not a prosperous class *sui generis* and more hardship was sustained for educational purposes than we know only from the well-known cases of Vidyasagar, Akshay Kumar Datta and Dhondu Karve.

The work aside, the very *decision* to continue with his English schooling, sometimes in the face of great financial odds, was necessarily taken by the widowed mother. This in itself is an important missing link in the history of modern education in India. The commitment to English schooling was regularly made even when the husband was alive, as in the following rare case of a daughter. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay's father died in 1910, when she was seven.

Her mother, she records, was a disciplinarian, and where her father would be indulgent, the mother believed in a stricter upbringing. When Kamaladevi showed reluctance to go to school initially because she found the untrammelled outdoors more interesting than the stifling and stultified atmosphere of a conventional classroom, it was her mother who overruled her father's indulgence and insisted that she had to get a proper education, even tricking her into going by pretending to take her on an outing and depositing her straight at the school gates, as Kamaladevi recalled (Narasimhan 1999: 17). Similarly Bepin Chandra Pal recalls in his autobiography (Pal 1932: 34-5) that his father withdrew him from school for political reasons and seemed content to have him stay on at home, unschooled, but when his mother arrived from the village, she was resolute that he return to school.

This missing link has a curious twist to it that goes further unrecognised. Far from accepting, along with our sources, that such support is only 'natural' for mothers, we could

consider the conflict in the mother's identity that this kind of decision and its future entailed. We see this in the example of Dhondu Karve's mother. She was widowed when he was studying. Her almost total illiteracy went—in a typical way—with 'religiosity' which, while otherwise opposed by her son in public life, was transmitted to him as 'charity' and 'love'. Her devotion to her son upon her being widowed became intensified. Her 'old ideas' notwithstanding, she 'fully appreciated the great work being done by her Dhondu...'. (Paranjpye 1915: 33).

Indeed her willingness to *travailler pour l'armée* – 'to accept the uses to which others will put one's children' (Ruddick 1980: 354)—is both the problem and the achievement. A problem because she is colluding in her own subordination in numerous ways, indeed, expanding its possibilities through abetting changes without questioning them, and typically neglecting her own daughters for her sons. An achievement because she is interested in the growth and success of her son, someone who does not automatically guarantee her continuity as he does her husband's (Sen 1940), and this she works for without reservation. But perhaps an inadequately theorised aspect of 'feminine' or parental thinking is how the parent expands the limits of her own life by working hard to expand the limits of her children's lives. We learn, for former slaves in America, how the 'struggles of these Black mothers and grandmothers, especially to ensure an education for their children, pushed back the boundaries, the limits, set by a white, racist world' (Aptheker 1989: 19). For South Asia we have no documentation or discussion yet about how women imagined their world expanding through the education of their sons, but such an imagining is consistent with the nineteenth-century data.

The more common notation of the mother's labour is therefore in the form of counselling and identity formation. In the case of Gooroodas Banerjee (b. 1844), 'the mother on whom the task of bringing up the child now devolved was a woman of great sweetness and

force of character, and the gentle but firm touch of her hand had been in no mean degree responsible for the character of her distinguished son' (Chatterji 1979). Dadabhai Naoroji's widowed mother did more than work for her child. She was illiterate but still his wisest counsellor. 'She made me what I am', he wrote (*Indian Worthies* 1906).

The two characteristics of mothers, their labour, and their decision to support their sons in the pursuit of English education regardless of where it led them, are attested to directly and obliquely. Vembankum Ramiengar (b. 1826), 'the first Indian in Madras to keep his house in European style, to teach English and European music to the females of his family, and to invite European gentlemen to parties at his residence,' attributes his good education to his mother through her two practices of physical service and intellectual counselling (Chatterjee and Mukhopadhyaya 1931). Sometimes it was simply her position as member of a particular caste and class that made her the socialising influence that she was, as Hatcher argues for the grandmother and, less so, mother of Vidyasagar (Hatcher 1996). Pratapchandra Mazumdar's mother was unlettered, like other women of her time, though she had received the high training of her caste and her position. When educated, such as the mothers of Syed Ahmad Khan, Raghonath Rao (b. 1831) or Rama Verma (b. 1837), the mother was actively and directly involved in the son's training.

All these activities of mother—their labour, their decisiveness, their counselling—should be read more actively as part of the story of modernity. The point here is not to attribute to a 'mother' a particular set of characteristics and emphatically not to discuss these characteristics pre-discursively as wisdom or sacrifice. The point can only be to restore, even while problematising it, the sociological status of the mother—and of the surrogate mothers of the family—as the primary caregiver(s) and socialiser(s) in the child's infancy and, when widowed, in diverse even more intense ways afterwards. I see her not as '*the mother*', that is, I see *them* not as '*the mother*'. I see them as engaged in the *work* of mothering. Mothers are

then due to be given their place as subjects of modernity in that they actively chose and laboured for a new education for their sons, and occasionally daughters. But we also glimpse that while engaged in productive labour that went beyond physical reproduction and nurturing to social and cultural reproduction, the work actually went even beyond that, to actively producing a *new* historical subject.

### **Mothers: in the service of the 'indigenous'.**

What kind of a new historical subject did they produce? Here we encounter several historiographical difficulties. No great person's biography gives a description of the earliest years spent with his mother, as Walsh points out, though Walsh in her turn gives attention exclusively to the father when discussing 'growing up' (Walsh 1983). Great men feel obliged to remember their mothers only in the most generalised ways: 'About my mother I can only say that she was the typical ideal mother described by everybody...' (Karve 1963: 137). There is no evocative scene from a dim past store of images, such as we find in the fictitious description of Nabin Singh, modelled on some nineteenth-century Calcutta grandee, perhaps Kali Prosonno Singh, who spent his days when a toddler with his mother, feeding her pet birds and so on, one corner of her sari tightly bunched in his fist. She 'didn't know one letter from another' (Gangopadhyaya 1981: 24).

Apart from difficulties with data, there are conceptual difficulties as well. If we want to uncover gendered processes that suggest difference to existing models, we have to cast our net wide. Biological nurturance and early infant rearing are unexplored areas for the last 200 years of South Asian history. Nancy Chodorow's psychological location of gender-specific roles and traits in primary parenting (Chodorow 1978) gives an important insight into the subject of *western* mothers. But even in Europe until the eighteenth century, the family as we know it today, the 'sentimental family' as it may be called, and marriage as we know it, or

companionate marriage, did not exist (Cowen 1983, Okin 1981, Shorter 1975, Stone 1977, Trumbach 1978). In South Asia, for many classes and communities, it still does not exist (Harlan and Courtright 1995, Shree 2000, Trawick 1990). Although the diversity of the homogenous seeming 'mothering' function and experience has been acknowledged, particularly for divisions of race and class (Glenn 1994), and historical period (Hays 1996), cross-civilisational comparisons are rare (Gold 1994) and those that can take into account *all* the many variables rarer still.

We may hypothesise that, while we progressively recognise that mothers in the past may be different from the contemporary and the western, and contemporary mothers themselves may be very diverse, we still tend everywhere on the globe towards an over-determination and essentialisation of the woman as 'mother'. The corpus of myths and scriptures in Hinduism, on the other hand, shows mothers to be alternatively powerful or helpless, auspicious or malign. Nor is a woman most centrally a mother. The glorification of the powers of motherhood is offset by description of the actual powerlessness of the role. All studies of Devi, or the Mother Goddess(es), in contrast, and all myths with women characters, startle with the unexpected location of power in the mother. All in all, South Asia exhibits fecund complexity of characterisation at the ideological, functional and cultural levels.<sup>4</sup>

Equally troublesome are the very male-female divisions in South Asia. Even if the primary parents are acknowledged to be mothers, with clear work and space segregation, their other traits such as sacrifice, gentleness, non-violence and nurture, can be comfortably shared by both men and women, whether this is marginalised (Chowdhury-Sengupta 1992, Nandy 1980, Sinha 1995) or celebrated. The binary opposition expressed in western Judeo-Christian civilisation by figures like Eve or Mary is replaced in Indian civilisation by a more reciprocal male-female structure, exemplified by Shiva, Durga and Kali (Gold 1994).

For the new educated class, especially the *bhadralok* in Calcutta and the gentry in other metropolitan centres, there was a striving for the ideology of Europe from the second half of the nineteenth century (Bose 1994, T. Sarkar 1992). But the new educated class was minuscule in India, and its gendered analysis has only yet begun (Amin 1984, Chowdhury-Sengupta 1992, Sinha 1995). On one level, its ideology of family life was progressively based on the European model, including an extended domain for mothering by one specialised parent. There was a new division of the inside and outside, the domestic and public, the private and worldly. The control of women in new cities like Calcutta was stricter than either in the countryside or in older cities. Looser and more dynamic social situations in the cities meant more concern about maintaining social status. Seclusion of women was ensured in the *antahpur*, literally the 'inside'. Other versions of this were the *mol* in Maharashtra and the *parda* in North India.

On another level, the divisions were far from entrenched, and new relationships worked in connection with the old in complex, unpredictable ways. Even as a succession of young daughters-in-law entered the home, the stress continued to be on fraternal bonds and the mother-son link. "A husband's relation to his wife was subordinate to that with his mother" (Borthwick 1984: 12, Mandelbaum 1970). The wife's situation improved only upon becoming the mother of a son. She could then look forward to authority over her own sons and daughters-in-law who would continue to stay with her.

There were still other levels of difference with Europe which we should mark to help us with the history of both Europe and South Asia. One concerns how women themselves experienced their lives as bigger than that contained in the over-determined category of 'mother'.<sup>5</sup> There is no reason to doubt the vitality, creativity and security of the women's work, leisure and ritual worlds. Given the limitations of an inherently secluded life, many separate insights into these worlds can be gleaned from assorted interpretations.<sup>6</sup> Even with

modernisation, mothers in South Asia continued to be, and today can be seen to be, categorised as varied in their characteristics, and not merely as the soft, sentimental, emotional creatures of bourgeois discourse. The family was not (and is not) a nuclear one united by conjugal love and family love. Mothering was not a full time occupation with its own science and the husband and children were not seen as exhausting a woman's whole world. The female world continued to include the world of popular culture: balladeers and performers, storytellers and masseurs, ritual specialists and salespeople of the streets (Banerjee 1989).

The only theoretical statement we have regarding a separate world is the notion of the 'backstage', as in the following:

Confronting man woman is always play-acting; she lies when she makes believe that she accepts her status as the inessential other, she lies when she presents to him an imaginary personage through mimicry, costumery, studied phrases... With other women, a woman is behind the scenes; she is polishing her equipment, but not in battle; she is getting her costume together, preparing her make-up, laying out her tactics; she is lingering in dressing-gown and slippers in the wings before making her entrance on the stage; she likes this warm, easy, relaxed atmosphere... For some women, this warm and frivolous intimacy is dearer than the serious pomp of relations with men (de Beauvoir 1961: 512-13).

We need a theoretical statement adequate to the South Asian data where the women's world can be read as not frivolous, but of sociological weight, even as it may be frivolous-seeming. The importance of this for the story of education is that it allows us to unravel one more strand of the extra-scholastic influences on the intelligentsia. According to the discursive-administrative understanding embedded in the colonial archives, there were no proper schools in the nineteenth century, even as varieties of ways of instruction were

systematically recorded. Observers like Adam, Thomason and Munro made a critique of the lack of discipline and totalisation in existing Indian practices. Those who followed them moved on from there to further critique. Indigenous schools were reformed out of existence, some systematically ignored and others deliberately starved of funds and recognition. The number of women who came to be educated in the new scheme was tiny, bordering on non-existent. The rest continued to belong to the world of the 'indigenous', the 'vernacular' and the 'traditional'. What they transmitted to their children were narratives from this world, or rather, these diverse, plural worlds, both narratives in the sense of stories, verses, tales and myths, but also narratives of the self, or how the self could possibly be constructed. It is important to see this imparting of alternative sensibilities, sacraments and narratives to the ones being imbibed in the school and the workplace as *work*.

Certainly, nurturing is also work, at which some women labour exceptionally hard, others may be emotionally inept, spiritually impoverished, materially handicapped or voluntarily or involuntarily retired from doing. Yet most do the best they can, and on the whole they are the specialised workers at this. The category of 'maternal thinking' brings the material and the intellectual close in a way crucial to my analysis. Because she is not a machine or an unskilled worker but a reflexive actor engaged in a discipline, making choices, asking questions and establishing criteria for the truth of proposed answers, a mother engages in a particular kind of intellectual activity (Ruddick 1980). In doing this she exercises a particular influence which is different to more formally organised teaching. It is particularly different when the formal teaching and the domestic narratives belong to two different ideological sets, as in the case of colonial schooling and unschooled mothers in South Asia.

The problem and the continuing paradox of the subject is that even while the work of nurturing is 'essential', that is, indispensable, an irrefutable contribution to human history, it is 'non-essential', that is, not 'natural' to its practitioners but the institutional product of

insidious forms of patriarchy. We do not want to elevate its importance as if it was the only thing to say about women's position in education history. If we make a case for nurturing, we are implicitly belittling women's larger work and if we emphasise the latter, we seem to defensively deny the largest part of the work that they actually did. So, we have to walk carefully here, trying to ensure that in restoring power to women in the history of education we do not in fact restrict them further.

It is important to note that I am not making the claim that what mothers taught was 'authentic' in any sense. It was highly coloured by the snippets picked up by them from the 'media' of that time: gossip, servants, performers, men of the family and the emerging press. It was generously coloured by their own biases and prejudices and the patriarchal ideology they neither dreamt of, nor aimed at, changing. It was probably very orientalist in its construct of India's past, ranging from less to more orientalist over the course of the nineteenth century. While not educated in formal schools, all women were part of the emerging world of certain public discourses of 'Indian' history and culture (Orsini 2002). But while the teaching of women was thus orientalist in its constructions at the national, class, caste and even gender level, it was less so in its constructions of the home town or village—as in Satyajit Ray's protagonist Charulata's writings (Ray 1964)—its stories, its gods and goddesses and the way that a day and a life could be run. We cannot, after all, posit a real, pure, authentic representation out there to which this woman's ideas did not measure up.

I do therefore want to propose a 'woman's world', but also to suggest that it is disempowering merely to interpret it as a discourse that kept the woman 'in place' and served the intelligentsia's purpose of separating a corrupted, colonised world from an unadulterated, privately dominated world (Chatterjee 1989, S. Sarkar 1998, T. Sarkar 1996). Because it does not seem self-evident that the male intelligentsia profited in their nationalism from such a separation as much as they were *formed* by it. Apart from being educated at school, members

of the intelligentsia were educated in the home, in languages, ethics and world views that never left them and were evolved further by them in their maturity. They and their work—political, reformist, institutional—can be understood only in a gendered context in which their work came to be what it was because of the work of women. Women played many roles simultaneously and alternatively. Women were the guides and teachers, they were the exemplars and models, they were the apprentices and helpmeets, they were the objects of reform *and*, as we shall see below, they were also active opponents of change.

But most of all we must integrate what we know of the intelligentsia as the producers of certain discourses with the processes by which the intelligentsia themselves were produced, including by some of the same structures they had helped to put in place. To seek to describe how women ‘were’ or what women did is not a question about authenticity at any point. A gendered history of education reveals that there are *multiple* discourses: women were formed by men through a discourse of reform and the ‘private’, and *men were formed by women through a discourse of motherhood and family*.

### **Methodological possibilities**

I have laid out in this essay many of the shortcomings of the current discussions of education, and the possibilities of enlarging it through specific attention to the construction of subjects by the mother. I propose that the woman as the object of the reformer’s gaze was equally instrumental in teaching, simply by being more than this putative object, or in our modern parlance, by being ‘herself’ and ‘a real person’.

First we have in this literature on South Asian women a familiar separation of two academic discourses, roughly speaking, the historical and anthropological. Each is somewhat informed by the other, but the overall disciplinary tendency is to stay aloof from the other's analytical field. Thus, for historians like Geraldine Forbes, Nita Kumar, Samita Sen or

Barbara Southard (Forbes 1996, Kumar 1994, Sen 1993, Southard 1995) it is self-evident that women should be entering the fields of modern medicine, forming associations and seeking wider freedoms. For anthropologists like Margaret Trawick, Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold (Raheja and Gold 1994, Trawick 1990) women have different avenues of power altogether. Women's worlds not only exist, they are little-known only because of androcentric discourse in both society and the academy. These worlds demonstrate power, structure, meaning and legitimacy. Such women and such worlds do not find recognition in Forbes or Gail Minault. In Partha Chatterjee (Chatterjee 1989) they are not even given a passing nod as existing. The narrative told is of the man's world, including its encompassing and reconstruction of others.

We can imagine that it was precisely the kind of women described by the anthropologists whose forbears must have been the objects of reformers' angst. In fact, we have direct evidence of this, in the form of the *galis* or abusive songs that women sing on sacramental occasions like weddings. They did so in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries and they continue to do so today. These were the kinds of songs that reformers directed their ire against, holding them responsible for the backwardness of particular communities.

It seems unlikely that the subjects and sites of the anthropologist (local, usually village-based, little-educated, seen-from-the-inside) and that of the historian (colonial-national, usually metropolitan or at least urban, contextualised-in-a-larger-whole) would come together. This again produces a thin-ness of interpretation as we speak, seemingly, about two Indias. The anthropologist's women's world is rich and powerful and in no imminent danger of extinction by reform. The historian's is imitation-modernist, reforming, in search of an identity. This analytical separation prevents us from seeing the actual interplay that constituted the reformers and would-be reformed, and from using sources imaginatively to note how each presented a politics and a threat to the other. In the fascinating study of

women's work and secrets today by Sirpa Tenhunen (Tenhunen 2003), the *historical* debate on the emergence of a separate sphere for women has a marginal place, when both analytical fields could probably be illuminated by directly being made to shed light on each other.

A similar expansion of interpretive possibilities could occur with taking seriously the insights of literature. If women are written about in history as successfully reformed or else trapped in male discourse, and in anthropology as complex and autonomous, fiction succeeds in representing them at several levels simultaneously and also leaves open the very possibility of multiple discourses (Handler and Segal 1990). I give here a sample of how the subjects of history and literature *can* be brought together, as in Tarini Devi, the mother of India's first modern man, Rammohan Roy (b. 1772).

In the story of Rammohan Roy's formation a description of the complex factors that go into his making is given by Rajat Ray: Sanskrit and Arabo-Persian classical learning, the mastery of English and the awareness of problems accompanied by a desire for reform (Ray 1995). In the whole discussion of his formation, we have no mention of his mother, which seems particularly extraordinary since she was a Sanskrit scholar who actually taught him some Sanskrit. But again, even if she had not, her teaching him his mother tongue, Bengali, would be sufficient to merit inclusion in his strata of learning (Garner, Kahane and Sprengnether 1985). From the little we know, this mother seems to have been a 'conventional' one in her acceptance of social discourses. 'Conventional' too, we should think, in that Tarini Devi was a powerful woman with her own ideas, not quickly swayed by others. Such women arguably bring up their sons to be questioners: 'The determination and singlemindedness that was evident in Rammohan's whole life was in fact the quality bestowed by his mother' (Dwivedi 1917: 14). While for a historian such a hypothesis might remain a weak one, we could, if we were to permit ourselves, take women and their sons in

fiction as additional evidence (for instance Gobar and his mother in Premchand's *Gift of a Cow*) (Premchand 1968).

Tarini Devi was conventional again, in that she opposed the iconoclasm of her reformer-son, and opposed him to the end. We have no idea of what influence this had on him but we know that he frustratedly continued to wish for her support until his death. We do know that she showed great determination and agency in choosing what was for a woman in her situation a legitimate cultural choice: to spend her last years dedicated to the service of Jagannath in his temple.<sup>7</sup> Realising that in a pilgrimage to get *darshan* of the lord there should be acceptance of physical strain, she did not take even one maid with her. Not only that, she made no arrangement for comfort on the way and undertook the pilgrimage like an ordinary sufferer. She spent the last day of her life in the service of the Lord Jagannath. Like a servant, she would sweep the temple of Jagannathji every day (Mishra 1917: 9-10).

The novel *Mai* by Geetanjali Shree bears a startling similarity to the story of Rammohan Roy and his mother. The two stories are different insofar as Rammohan Roy and his mother's story is a lost historical one, about which we can only make educated guesses, and *Mai* is a piece of fiction about Sunaina, the narrator of the story, her brother Subodh and their mother. Rammohan Roy and his mother's story takes place between 1772 and 1834; Sunaina and her mother's some time in the 1960s and 1970s, although we should note for the record that both 'mothers' had histories before these dates which belong to their offspring. For me this similarity that spans over 200 years highlights the centrality of certain questions in Indian history. It allows me also to suggest that our historiographical imaginations could well be triggered not only by pondering ethnographic findings, but by reading fiction more carefully.

The narrator and her brother in *Mai* want to save their mother, just as Rammohan wanted to save women. Both sets of reformers saw women as victims, trapped, hopeless

people who needed to be given a voice and opportunities to develop themselves, lead autonomous lives and be fulfilled. Mothering and its attendant housework together with all the limitations it demanded, such as little or no education, total seclusion inside the house, what appeared to be no pleasures or social activity, was seen as a pathology, a problem that had to be taken up and a cause to be fought against. Much like Rammohan, the novel's reformers grew up with a consciousness of being weighed down with the necessity of action and change.

The novel problematises what I suggest should be problematised in Rammohan's life as well. That is, how did the mother produce the possibility of both the recognition of her problems by the child, and the child's faith in his/her ability to question and change? The first required a bonding, an empathy with problems that were not directly one's own but came to be felt as personal ones. The second required a letting go, to learn from diverse sources, challenge and speak up and break loose from one's bonds. The children in both cases are impressed forever with the abuse the woman suffers. With schooling (which the mothers actively permit them to pursue) they learn a language for her problems; they think of *chains*. Their education teaches them that their own solution lies in going out, finally to England, in learning English and becoming the opposite of their parents and grandparents. The education does not offer any solutions or accommodations that are acceptable to the wider society, including their objects of reform.

Most importantly, there is nothing archetypal about the nurturing of these mothers. They nurture their children towards questioning and independence. They themselves make 'sacrifices' with confidence but do not glorify these virtues. Their children love them but condemn their lives and will not be like them. That is, the mothers' nurturing is not cyclical and repetitive; it produces change, but through tactics beyond those we directly grasp, such as encouraging other influences towards change on their children. The mother's contribution to

change is certain, but while her labour, nurturing and guidance are accessible to us, the exact nature of her disclosure of possibilities in the future is difficult for us to grasp.

In both the history and the fiction, the mother is mistakenly understood to be a victim. The novel questions again and again whether she is a victim because we can see that she is a strong character with a mind of her own, including in resisting her children's reforms. Tarini Devi was equally not a victim, but a strong character with a mind of her own. We have no words spoken or written by her, but we have a record of her action in opposing Rammohan. Both mothers turn around on their very saviours and oppose the plans for saving them that are being proposed. The offspring in both cases feel betrayed. But they feel that a statement of strength is being made that eludes them: wherein lies this strength? Why is the life-long dream of emancipation of this beloved mother-figure finally not successful? The novel suggests some answers in the way of fiction. Perhaps it is because there are other ways of 'saving' than those adopted by the reformers. Perhaps the mother 'saved' herself rather than be 'saved' by her son or daughter. In addition, there might be another liberating mechanism at work here. Presuming she was dominated by her father, then her husband and various other family members, the mother now does not permit her son/daughter to dominate her, thus closing the cycle and demonstrating another alternative to that of domination, as well as averting the next generation's possible guilt in the future. Rammohan Roy did not succeed in saving his mother, but she succeeded in saving *him* from the doubtful role of saviour.

### **Non-mothers**

The category of mother is further to be grasped through its opposite, the non-mother. The most eminent category of non-mothers is men or women who deny themselves, or allow themselves to be denied, their parenting privileges. In many cases these 'non-mothers' are only seemingly that. I would like to underscore the fact that even in the 'mothers' discussed

above, there were plenty who performed the work of mothering but were not biological mothers, and were more literally the fathers, grandparents, uncles, older brothers and servants of various descriptions—all of whom deserve attention.

Other kinds of non-mothers are women who might well be engaged in mothering, but find that another role determines their identity, such as worker or labourer, skilled or unskilled. Their poverty and insecurity makes their mothering invisible, by implication deficient and unsuccessful. In the history of education, the fate of those who could not for various reasons grasp the opportunity of the new colonial education is often blamed on their mothers. In a continuation of this idea today, the problem of children who do not go to school or drop out is blamed on their mothers.

The non-mother who will concern us in this essay is not the man who could have mothered, or the skilled or labouring woman mentioned above, but the 'unsexed' woman, the ascetic or nun dedicated to a higher cause. Apart from men and their wives, there were active women in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as there continue to be today, who have defined their activity with no reference to the men of their families. They were not married, or if married, were freed of the obligations of that status through widowhood. They were child widows and grew up with no other work but their chosen one, albeit performed through social and intellectual struggle. Or they were adults when widowed, and even if mothers, opted for a role that defined them as something else. They were either privileged in that they were in control of some resources, or were ambitious enough to raise resources. They were active in public life, collecting funds, building institutions, administering them, recruiting teachers and students.

The case I will look at is that of a north Indian city, Varanasi, neither a metropolitan centre nor a provincial capital, and not in Bengal. This is important because the history of gender and of women followed different paths according to the extent of colonial penetration,

economic destabilisation and corresponding self-questioning regarding one's identity. In Varanasi, the penetration, destabilisation and questioning were less severe and different than in Calcutta. The case is therefore important partly to balance the historiographical bias towards Bengal that has emerged in Indian history, equating 'Bengal' with 'India' against all empirical evidence (Conlon 1986), and partly because we want to explore the very avenues of women's activity exemplified by provincial towns. I use for my argument here the case of several schools founded and/or run by 'non-mothers': Central Hindu (1904), Durga Charan (1918), Bipan Behari (1922), Arya Mahila (1933), Rameshwari Goel (1939), Sarojini Vidya Kendra (1930s), Vasanta Kanya (1954), Nandlal Bajoria (1955) and Gopi Radha (1963). Each of these institutions was started by a woman who had no other commitment but to the cause at hand, defined modestly as 'providing education to girls', built up over the years to span primary and secondary schools and often intermediate and then degree colleges, with impressive endowments, buildings and student numbers. Because they were founded by women of various Hindu sects, even while they were open to teachers and students of Muslim sects, their ambience and discourses were all purposefully Hindu. Without conflating Hindu with 'Indian', I am obliged below to discuss educational activity within Hindu terms.

The institutional histories are straightforward and I will not narrate them here. I could problematise their narratives and show how much had been distorted in the records and the subsequent reporting to outweigh the contributions of certain men against other men and women in general. I could construct many interesting parallels between the various efforts to make points about the nature of reform, the changing understanding of education and the phases in urban social life where women's education was differently emphasised as problem and solution. What I want to stress here, however, is the existence of several discursive spaces that could be occupied by the women educators in question for their own defined purposes against the apparent will of society.

The ambiguity of the category 'mother' that has been alluded to in the first section is a space in itself. The three axes of the contemporary myth of motherhood – ‘that all women need to be mothers, that all mothers need their children and that all children need their mothers’ (Oakley 1974: 186)—are not borne out as central to the ideology of South Asian motherhood. At the simplest, differences arise from the differential workings of capitalism and technology (Rothman 1994), but the workings of epistemological constructs of the body and mind, the senses, human qualities, hierarchies and so on, if more elusive, demand attention as well (Marriott 1999). Anthropological and literary work tells us that not only the maternal but the feminine may be more central and multi-vocal in Indian society and culture than allowed for. We know particularly of the high evaluation of androgyny and sexual inversion and of tales of ‘bleeding female *lingams*’ and ‘male *yonis*’ (Ferro-Luzzi 1987). Most of all, it is in myths that we find the most disregard for any normalisation of the mother figure (Bose 1994).

A first glance, certainly, even at education, reveals a seeming obsession with the figure of the mother: in textbooks, in school magazines, in ceremonial lectures and classroom teaching, and in the *vratas* (fasts and their narratives) that are among the main teaching for girls outside schools. Yet, even in these very places, there are alternative preoccupations or suggestions that seem to offer the possibility of opening up into wide spaces.

In the 1988-89 annual number of the school magazine of Durga Charan Girls' School in Varanasi the principal begins her piece on 'Women's Education' with

Ma. There are so many feelings embedded in the very word. She is both the giver of *shakti* [power] and the giver of *mukti* [freedom]. Mercy, pity, sympathy, and other such feelings are contained in this word. She gives *shanti* [peace] as well. So, from ancient times women were considered a form of *shakti* and were worshipped. A

Russian writer has praised the importance of women thus: 'Give me 60 mothers, and I shall give you a great nation...' (Ghosh 1989).

The article continues with criticisms of the double thinking that allows women to be thought of only or primarily as housewives, even when they have careers. As we move towards the twenty-first century, 'it is the call of the times that women should get the same freedom as men to get an education and choose an occupation according to their interest and ability' (Ghosh 1989). This contradiction in the ideas of the opening and closing of the piece is common. If reflective in feminist terms of a dominant ideology—'the oppressor within each of us'—it also acted to provide a space for those who needed it.

The bottom-line argument in favour of girls' education was throughout that they were the future mothers of the country. If we think of the different ways that gender hierarchies were constructed, legitimised and maintained in Hindu India, it is the *varnashram* (the class and stage of life) and *jati* (genus, literally, caste) discourses that presumed a woman to be constituted by birth as a separate kind of being. Anyone who knew Sanskrit seemed to be able to confirm this. When the first journals appeared that were directed at women, they elevated the *dharma* or duty of women into a religion with highly charged images evocative of Vedic rituals. The wheel of the world rotates on a hub, and if woman, who is this hub, is not disciplined, how will the universe survive? But if we ask who could challenge this discourse, the answer is again those who knew Sanskrit. It was they who could quote examples of learned and free women in the 'past'. Nationalist discourse often referred to Vedic times as a time when women were educated and competent, so that after centuries of degradation one could recover the ancient glory by returning them to their place. Manu's strictures notwithstanding, there was sufficient variation in the vast corpus of texts and their interpretations to historicise the essentialist category 'woman'. That is, the very discourse of the woman as housewife and mother contained within it the possibilities of a reversal.

The Sanskrit-based discourse could further be challenged at the vernacular level by those who could cite the case of *viranganas* or women warriors; of *bhakti* or a one-to-one devotional relationship with one's god that did not recognise, and even reversed, gender; and of *shakti*, or mother goddess-worship.<sup>8</sup> A different case of non-mothers whose position as worker and quasi-professional is ignored are those in artistes' and artisans' families. In the *kathak* (literally, storyteller, performer) community, women are spoken of as private, secluded, devoted to the home and unsullied by public work or appearance. In fact, *kathak* women are highly proficient in the arts of their families. During the early- and mid-twentieth-century changes, some *kathak* women did go public, and made a relatively smooth transition from being domesticated to being highly acclaimed professional performers.

In all these cases, the main method of challenging accepted norms seemed to lie through sheer action beyond language and discourse. Women simply *did*, without lecturing or publishing on it. The internal differentiation into 'mothers' and 'non-mothers' within the overall category of 'women' was never mentioned in the spoken or written word even obliquely, even by the most radical women and the most successful institutions for girls. Education seemingly fit into the reproduction of motherhood and the category of 'mother' seemingly encompassed all women. Yet most of the founders and administrators of schools and a great many of the teachers, were not mothers, but were either widowed and childless or unmarried or separated and alone. A school like the Arya Mahila School had set up special services for widows to provide for self-sufficient futures, but in public the message reiterated was only about motherhood.

The women who were thus active in the twentieth century, Sarojini Devi, Satyavati Devi, Godawari Bai, Vidya Devi, Gayatri Devi, Krishnabhamini, Ushamayi Sen and Manorama Chatterjee, among others, all had identical experiences of bereavement, then inspiration to act and then a lifetime of service. Satyavati Devi was widowed at thirteen,

resumed her education at first privately, then in recognised colleges. She became a teacher and upon retirement, started a school of her own with two girls 'under a tree on the road'. She was gradually helped by her family then the larger *Agrawal* community and the school took off to become one of the most popular for girls (co-educational in lower classes) in the city.

The women were similar in that they either had funds or succeeded in raising them and had no children for whom to save directly. They were of different castes: *Brahman*, *Kayastha* or *Baniya* and of different regional origins: Punjab, Maharashtra, Karnataka, Bihar, Bengal and Uttar Pradesh. Even when supported by a brother or father they felt alone and claimed that their lack of preparation for supporting themselves inspired them to defend other girls from such a fate. Uninterested in the question of widow remarriage, they worked directly for the education and training of girls.

These non-mother educationists were regarded not as professional workers but in negative terms, as those who practised sacrifice and self-denial—of sexuality and motherhood—a categorisation that my own coining of the awkward term 'non-mothers' echoes. Yet I mean my term to be ironic, to celebrate the hidden spaces that are exposed by reversing even the most over-determined categories. A widow is potentially the most over-determined category equalling, it would seem, powerlessness and inauspiciousness just as a mother equals fertility and the power of nurture. But the latter ascriptions themselves can be turned around for the widow to equal the *power* of austerity and asceticism.

All the women I have mentioned adopted and were relegated to the role of ascetics, that is, beyond worldly distinctions including those of gender. Of the several discursive spaces open to women – the *virangana*, *bhakti* and *shakti* already mentioned, the *ardhangini*, or the complementarity of male and female – the most potent turned out to be that of self-fulfilment, or *atma* (self/soul) development. In indigenous terms, it could be said that 'education' comprised a series of disciplines which revealed the truth inside the self. Many of

the disciplines related to food, sleep, sexual abstinence and control of the *chit* or nature, leading to the transformation of gross energy into subtle energy. These were the kinds of exercises that seemed to come painlessly to women, or at least we have no record of any kind – but we could search more thoroughly in fiction – of pain from them.

These women had access to a discourse of *sewa*, or service that permitted them to be respected, even revered, for going beyond themselves as people and, especially women should do. The objects of service were, variously, womankind, the caste or regional-linguistic community and the nation. The women often came to be not merely revered, but assimilated in turn into the role of 'saints' and 'goddesses', which in turn gave them the freedom and power in public life which is only the ascetic's or god's. What came together for these women, I think, is the reality of a power that was otherwise an abstraction. These women stood forth as powerful by any criteria: raising, controlling and administering funds; managing people and institutions; starting new institutions and seeing them grow to capacity; given public recognition for their work. This was in return, as it were, for leading disciplined, ascetic lives, for showing themselves to be saintly or goddess-like in every respect other-worldly. Vidya Devi was eulogised in the following way: 'From the viewpoint of learning, Saraswati; from that of raising funds for her school, Lakshmi; and from that of showing courage and discernment in countering undesirable people, Durga'.<sup>9</sup> Obviously, this was an instrumental technique of the simplest yet most effective kind. Through manipulation of symbols – what she wore, what she ate, how she talked – the public efficacy of the worker was immeasurably enhanced.

This power comes together, I claim, with another which similarly goes beyond gender. Also instrumental, this is the power gained through austerities first to control one's senses and then, through self-control, to achieve single-mindedness of purpose and through that, to control the outside world. In other words, the ascetic non-mothers who turned to

education believed in their asceticism as a means of achieving their purpose – and indeed they did achieve it.

In a different way to mothers, non-mothers also made History. The women ascetics of Banaras performed a task that would have been otherwise challenged and found themselves eulogised for so doing. This was the founding of half a dozen important schools for girls that were identical to the schools for boys with no separate curriculum or treatment for girls. In this respect of gross action on the institutional front, Varanasi, in spite of having a larger proportion of widows in its population, is not different to any other part of non-metropolitan India.

Nor is it different in the other contribution made by women: that they did not question the new educational system. Their schools, though Gandhian, Aryan, nationalist and so on in name, were identical in structure, form and content with all the other colonial schools. This had the advantage of allowing girls to get the same education as boys. It had the disadvantage of not passing on to students any of the beliefs or qualities of the educationists, in an ironical parallel with the case of mothers who also 'permitted' the next generation to choose for themselves. No matter how conservative or, at best, liberal feminist their efforts appear, these educationists were remarkably radical in their own lives and work. The changes they let loose were no less radical.

This radicalism becomes invisible because the women tend to be seen as 'saint' like beings who should not be spoken of in the same material, aggressive way that men and men's work is narrated, or in the way we might discuss the normative, dominating category of 'mothers'.

## **Conclusion**

It is important to be methodologically innovative and perform the elementary service for women of coming up with new insights into the spaces available to women for action. We see that these spaces are prolific and all around and that they are used in creative ways by 'mothers' as well as 'non-mothers'. But the primary aim of this essay has been to expand the discourse of education and simultaneously show that whichever question we ask, whichever part of the process we look at, education in South Asia can only be spoken about in a gendered perspective.

I began by outlining three common plots in Indian educational history: that of a burgeoning English education, that of a faltering indigenous education and that of nationalism. I conclude by proposing that these should all be shown to be coincidental and interdependent and, equally, interdependent with what they exclude. Thus English education produced the intelligentsia but this was an intelligentsia that was simultaneously produced in the site of the mother's work, a mother that both promoted the English education and also subverted it. Indigenous education died in its formal setting but continued in innumerable locations in the home, family, neighbourhood and community. Nationalism and reform can be understood only if we ask how the reformers were produced and how their very targets of reform were instrumental in the making of the history. Because of course the reformers belonged to both the modern school and the unreformed family, and marked their difference from colonialism not by a political alliance with 'tradition' but perhaps with their half-voluntary formation by another education. These 'other' processes of education are what I suggest I have no name for as yet, because family, community, tradition, the indigenous and the domestic all savour of the marginalised and are imprecise, non-evocative categories. My essay suggests that they were sites of central, powerful, discursive processes that we should recognise as crucial to an understanding of education in India.

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<sup>1</sup> All the writing on the history of education and that on colonialism that touches on education, regardless of certain different emphases, follows this unstated plot structure, for instance:

Aparna Basu, *The Growth of Education and Political Development in India, 1898-1920* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1974); B. K. Boman-Behram, *Educational Controversies in India: The Cultural Conquest of India under British Imperialism* (Bombay: D. B. Taraporevala sons & Co, 1943); Kalyan K. Chatterjee, *English Education in India* (Delhi: Macmillan, 1976); Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996); David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization 1773-1835* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) and *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979); Syed Nurullah and J. P. Naik, *A History of Education in India* (Bombay, 1951); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Lynn Zastoupil and Martin Moir (eds), *The Great Indian Education Debate: Documents Relating to the Orientalist-Anglicist Controversy, 1781-1843* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1999). For a critical essay see Percival Spear, 'Bentinck and Education', in Thomas Metcalf (ed.), *Modern India: An Interpretive Anthology* (London: Macmillan, 1971).

<sup>2</sup> There is no good single study focusing on this question, which itself is part of the marginalisation of the subject; for indigenous education the best study remains Dharampal, *The Beautiful Tree: Indigenous Indian Education in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century* (New Delhi: Biblia Impex, 1983). For a study of the change in a socially contextualised milieu, see Nita Kumar, 'Families, Languages and Communities: The Plural Learning of the Nineteenth Century

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Intelligentsia', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* Special Issue 'Explorations in Colonial and Precolonial Intellectual History' (2001), pp. 81-103.

<sup>3</sup> Among many interesting works on the subject see Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony: History and Power in Colonial India* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997); Bruce T. McCully, *English Education and the Origins of Indian Nationalism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1940); Haridas Mukherjee and Uma Mukherjee, *The Origins of the National Education Movement 1905-1910* (Calcutta: Jadavpur University, 1957); and the three I would consider exemplary institutional histories, David Lelyveld, *Aligarh's First Generation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1978); Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband 1860-1900* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1982); Sanjay Srivastava, *Constructing Post-Colonial India: National Character and the Doon School* (New York: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>4</sup> There are too many studies on the subject to be listed here, but the ones I have found particularly useful are: Vidyut Aklujkar, 'Anasuya: A Pativrata with Panache', in Mandakranta Bose (ed), *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 56-68; Jayatri Ghosh, 'Satyavati: The Matriarch of the Mahabharata', in Mandakranta Bose (ed.), *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 33-47; John Hawley and Donna Wulff (eds), *The Divine Consort: Radha and the Goddesses of India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982); Madhu Khanna, 'The Goddess-Woman Equation in Sakta Tantras', in Mandakranta Bose (ed.), *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 109-23; Tracy Pintchman, *The Rise of the Goddess in the Hindu Tradition* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994); David Kinsley, *Hindu Goddesses: Visions of the Divine Feminine in the Hindu Religious Tradition* (Berkeley:

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University of California Press, 1997); Wendy Doniger, *Women, Androgynes and other Mythical Beasts* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

<sup>5</sup> Although she could hardly have been unique in her experiences, someone who was exceptional in that she wrote her experiences down was Rashsundari Devi, discussed in Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993); Susie Tharu and K. Lalitha (eds), *Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Early Twentieth Century* (New York: Feminist Press, 1991); Sumit Sarkar, *Writing Social History* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998); Tanika Sarkar, 'A Book of her Own, a Life of her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth Century Woman', *History Workshop Journal* 35 (1998), pp. 35-65.

<sup>6</sup> Among some of the basic and most interesting descriptions are in Sumanta Banerjee, *The Parlour and the Streets: Elite and Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Calcutta* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1989); Patricia Jeffery, *Frogs in a Well: Indian Women in Purdah* (London: Zed Books, 1979); Gail Minault, 'Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana', in Nita Kumar (ed.), *Women as Subjects: South Asian Histories* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, and Calcutta: Stree, 1994), pp. 108-24; Hanna Papanek and Gail Minault (eds), *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi: Chanakya, 1982); Gloria Raheja and Ann Gold, *Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).

<sup>7</sup> Rabindranath Tagore's story 'Streer patra (Letter from a Wife)' translated in Kalpana Bardhan, (ed.), *Of Women, Outcastes, Peasants, and Rebels: A Selection of Bengali Short Stories* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990), 96-109, is an eloquent description of a woman's surfacing self-awareness that culminates in her decision to leave her home and spend her days in the Jagannath temple at Puri. For an adverse comment on Tarini Devi's

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decision to do the same, see Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

<sup>8</sup> Kathryn Hansen, 'The Virangana in North Indian History: Myth and Popular Culture' (1988); Madhu Khanna, 'The Goddess-Woman Equation in Sakta Tantras', in Mandakranta Bose (ed.) *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp. 109-23; Mary McGee, *Inverted Identities: The Interplay of Gender, Religion and Politics in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000); Eleanor Zelliot, 'Women Saints in Medieval Maharashtra', in Mandakranta Bose (ed.), *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval and Modern India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), pp.192-200.

<sup>9</sup> *Shubhabhinandan Patrika* 1986. In Hindu iconography, Saraswati is the goddess of learning, Lakshmi the goddess of wealth, and Durga the warrior-goddess, even while they are all aspects of the same goddess.