

# COLONIAL PERCEPTIONS OF WOMEN IN INDIA AND THE NATIONALIST RESPONSE: DECONSTRUCTING BANKIM'S DRAUPADI

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In 1813, a contentious and highly publicized debate took place in Britain over the renewal of the East India Company's Charter. It centered on the question of whether India ought to be opened up to missionaries and free traders, but during the debate, company directors also inquired into the operation of the Governor-General Cornwallis's administrative system and sought to examine his racial ban on Indian's being employed as judges and revenue officials and broached the question of what should be the role of Indian's in their own government. During the debate questions were raised about the morality of colonial rule, Britons paternalistic attitudes toward their Indian subjects and the maintenance of British Colonial prestige.

Even a cursory examination of the papers of that debate will reveal that there was no great shift in general British attitudes away from the common belief that Indians' were morally depraved. Any reference to Britons near obsession from the 1880s onwards regarding Indian Widow Burning (Sati) or the ritual strangling of travellers, supposedly committed by Thugs (Thuggi) will readily attest to the fact that if anything, these attitudes hardened during this period and into the British Raj.<sup>1</sup>

British colonial officials, and many colonial track authors, during the second quarter of the nineteenth century, generally regarded Indians' as "misguided children in morals", as Bengal legal official Sir Archibald Galloway put it in 1932.<sup>2</sup>

Like eighteenth and nineteenth centuries Britons who regarded the parents pedagogical role viz-a-viz their children as very important, many nineteenth century British colonial officials argued that Britons needed to guide Indians on how to become 'moral men' and eventually capable of governing themselves, with others doubting whether Indians were morally redeemable. James Fritz James Stephen, a well known Raj era conservative, would point

out for example, in 1870, that Indians were incapable of any moral improvement and simply needed to be ruled.<sup>3</sup>

That there was widespread discontent amongst the Indians with the failure of Cornwallis to provide adequate governance, was apparent. This was on account of his firing of Indian judges and revenue officials and the enacting of the permanent settlement, which robbed peasants of their customary rights on the land and grafted Western notions of landownership onto Bengal. The courts were now flooded with massive case backlogs for which the Indians were again blamed. Lord Minto, writing in 1811, argued that British judges had to constantly face the prevalence of crimes of perjury and forgery. James Mill, in his *History of British India*, (1817), framed the issue in starkly religious-cultural terms. Indian duplicity, he argued, could be traced to Hinduism, treating perjury as “a very trifling and venial offence”, which was in marked contrast to Britons high regard to the truth attributable to Protestantism’s emphasis on individual moral responsibility. This unwillingness to tell the truth by the Indian, became for the colonial administrators a key marker of their cultural and racial backwardness.<sup>4</sup>

The tide of opinion amongst the British administrators shifted, eventually, albeit slowly, toward a recognition of the failure of Cornwallis’s policies and several officers pointed out the danger of continuing to deny Indians a major share in colonial government, for endangering British colonial rules’ broader popularity with its subjects. Imperial Roman policies of the inclusion of local elite and conciliation were invoked, and, various moral arguments in favour of devolving further colonial responsibilities onto Indian subordinates were advanced.

This led to the reforms of 1831, piloted by Lord William Bentinck, whose own opinion had evolved and changed on the issue. A quarter century earlier, while serving as the Governor of Madras, Bentinck had opposed entrusting further responsibilities of governance to Indians. By the time he assumed the reigns of the Bengal government in 1828, he regarded it as a monstrous absurdity to continue committing the entire Bengal government to ‘less than four hundred strangers’ and questioned the morality of Cornwallis’s racial ban.<sup>6</sup>

The 1831 reforms were far less than what Bentinck had hoped for, for example, he had recommended that the salary cap for Indian uncovenanted servants be raised tenfold from Rs 100 (twelve pounds, ten dimes )to Rs 1,000 a month(one hundred and twenty five Pounds). This was bargained down to Rs four hundred (fifty Pounds),prompting Bentinck in 1832 to write a letter to the

President of the Board of Control, Charles Grant, that the new top salary that an Indian official could receive was still no more than what “your wretched and incapable British functionary” received as his initial salary upon arrival in India. Not quite seeing it this way, his colleagues, by deliberately choosing this lower salary cap, sought rather to balance greater Indian employment access with the maintenance of British racial privilege and practice.<sup>7</sup>

The early 1830s marked the height of colonial administrators’ enthusiasm for Indianization, the British conceded at least in theory, considerable Indian participation at most levels of colonial administration. No Indian, however, would gain entry into the covenanted service, the colonial bureaucracy’s upper most rung, for another three decades, despite a legal mandate after 1833, for Company Directors to appoint qualified Indians’ (which they simply ignored, claiming that no Indian was qualified).

During the 1840s and 1850s, opponents of Bentinck partial Indianization policy came to the fore, the worry was that Indian bureaucrats came generally from the ‘wrong’ social classes. Because most Indian officials were not landed elites but rather increasingly urbanized, western educated middle class Bengalis, some worried that they would likely subvert whatever powers they were granted to their own private benefit and there was the old persistent stereotype of universal Indian moral depravity, that could be trotted out whenever needed.<sup>8</sup>

That the Company had mercantile interests at heart ought not to be forgotten, as also the fact that this is an era prior to the Indian National Movement, that led eventually to independence in 1947. Indeed this is antecedent to the first war of Indian Independence in 1857.

By 1853, the Company had lost all its monopolistic trading rights and in 1858, was nationalized by the British. The British Raj ICS were often wont to claim that only they were seriously committed to India and the welfare of the Indians’ they ruled over, unlike their predecessors who worked for the East India Company, prior to its nationalization in 1858.<sup>9</sup>

For the next ninety years to Independence in 1947, the officials of the Raj were chosen via a written exam, held annually in England, based on the Oxford, Cambridge subjects. That this resulted in a selection of those best suited to govern India was doubtful, as the system did tend to favour those who could learn by rote and master theory, as opposed to those who were best fitted for Indian conditions. Theoretically, however, they were now open to everybody,

even Indians. In 1864, an Indian, Satendranath Tagore, did qualify and by the 1880s twelve additional Indians (out of a total of twelve hundred) successfully joined the ICS. As Mrilalini Sinha has shown, the British tried various expedients during the late nineteenth century that further Indians, and especially Bengalis such as Tagore, failed to qualify. They progressively lowered the upper age limit, held the exams annually, only in England till 1921 and, continually revised the exams, so that the Indians and undesirable Britons from lower social classes, could not successfully cram for them. Finally, introducing at the end of the nineteenth century, the horse riding test, to weed out those who were not proper English gentlemen!<sup>10</sup>

The company policy of partial Indianization, it was contended, was essentially a sham. Was not the Company acting hypocritically, Mir Salamat Ali demanded, when it decried dishonesty and corruption amongst its Indian Employees while still continuing to pay them salaries that were plainly inadequate to live on?<sup>11</sup>

With the passage of time, and with the mounting pressure of the Indian national movement, increasing Indianization of India's administration occurred, albeit slowly. Attitudes, however, were even slower to change.

Therefore, liberal philosopher and high ranking London-based Company official John Stuart Mill, doubted whether Indians were moral enough to become covenanted servants. Unlike his father who had attacked Bentinck's partial Indianization of the colonial bureaucracy in 1831 as being the most dangerous "Hinduphilism", Mill supported admitting Indians to "all situations to which they were fit".<sup>12</sup> He acknowledged that the Company was breaking the law by refusing to appoint them as covenanted servants, however, he argued that this policy though illegal was a practical expulsion that needed to be maintained until Indian morality improved. This was an extraordinary statement coming from an individual otherwise greatly concerned about justice, liberty and equality. The literature available from the times, the minutes of official meetings, reports and published opinions are strung with such words of endearment and reveal an ideological concern to keep out "weak kneed, effeminate, effete Bengalis".<sup>13</sup> It was essential that the superiority of the English be maintained in the Public space and it was this that eventually felicitated the political struggle for liberty from a colonizing power that did not see its subjects as essentially equal.

That was a struggle that was located in the public space, but what of the home, the private space? The image and the metaphor of the 'threshold' brings us to the public/private dichotomy that has had

a long and chequered career in feminist literature. That binary is perhaps redundant in today's world and the "personal is intensely political",<sup>14</sup> however for, the purposes of historical research, these notions are still of utility and can be employed to demarcate the spheres of public and private interactions within the home and outside of it. Following Meera Kosambi, it is possible to view the two spheres as not dichotomous but simply different spheres with a porous boundary. The public sphere is naturally divisible into political, socio-cultural and, economic domains. Of these the political sphere is the domain of political power, inhabited by Indian as well as British men and dominated by the latter. The socio-cultural sphere subsumes social customs and institutions involving the family (including marriage) as well as health care, education, literature and related matters. This domain is inhabited by Indian men and women and dominated by the former.<sup>15</sup>

This division was implicit also in the colonial State's perception of the political sphere as its legitimate area of domination, while the social and religious matters remained within the exclusive purview of various Indian religious and caste communities. The demarcation was further reinforced by Queen Victoria's proclamation in 1857, to guarantee non interference by the state in the socio-cultural arena. The political and socio-cultural spheres, needless to say were both defined by a gender bias and a caste bias, their predominant Indian occupants were men of the upper castes, much as they are now.

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 colonial rule was the criticism of degenerate and barbaric social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed by religious tradition. In identifying this tradition as degenerate and barbaric, colonist critiques invariably repeated a long list of atrocities, perpetuated on Indian women, not so much by men or a certain classes of men, but a whole body of structural canons and ritual practices, that they said, by rationalizing such atrocities within a complete framework of religious doctrine, made them appear to perpetrators and suffers alike, as necessary marks of right conduct. Western views on Indian society were particularly critical of the way Hindus treated their women. 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 sigh of the inherently oppressive and unfree nature of the entire cultural tradition of a country.<sup>16</sup>

At the same time, indigenous questioning of tradition was also deeply involved with the same issue. The debates on *sati*, widow remarriage, child marriage, polygamy and women's education were central to the nineteenth century programmes of reform. The relevant agendas were partly prompted by the desire to set ones house in order in response to western criticism, but their origins were traceable to a new concern for rational and humane social conduct and introspection, induced thereby, in short, to sensibilities of western derivation.<sup>17</sup>

An early nineteenth century British traveler in India had this to say:

“At no period of life, in no condition of society, should a woman do anything at her mere pleasure. Their fathers, their brothers, their husbands, their sons are verily called their protectors, but it is such protection! Day and night must woman 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 their 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 that they form of her moral discrimination and sensibilities, that they bind the wife to revere him like a god and, to submit to his corporeal chastisements, whenever he chooses to inflict them, by cane or by rope, on the back parts...and, 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 Veda... (a woman) must be foul as falsehood itself and incompetent to bear witness...will it be a matter of wonder that, in the moment 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?”<sup>18</sup>

It was *sati*, of course that came to provide the most clinching example of this rhetoric of condemnation—“the first and the most criminal of their customs”, as William Bentinck, the Governor General who legislated its abolition, described it.<sup>19</sup>

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 that project. In broad terms then, the British response to the condition of women in India was as follows:

1. Indian women were uneducated
2. Were dependent for all things on their men

3. Were the repository of all superstition
4. Were promiscuous

The nationalist response separated the domain of culture into two spheres, the material and the spiritual. The West was apparently superior in the material domain, science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, modern methods of Statecraft, their domination of the world was a consequence, and it was imperative that this domination be overcome by the colonized by learning these new techniques of organizing material life and incorporating them within their own cultures. However, if this imitation of the West was extended to other domains as well, then, self identity and national culture itself could be threatened, and, it was therefore equally important that the spiritual essence of national culture be strengthened.

Partha Chatterjee has shown that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous but ideologically far more powerful dichotomy: that between the inner and the outer. The material domain, argued the 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 that 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. Applying the inner/outer distinction to the matter of concrete day-to-day living separates the social space into '*ghar*' and '*bahar*', the home and the world. The world is the external, the domain of the material, the home represents one's true spiritual self. The world, treacherous, is dominated by the male, the home, with the woman as its representation, must remain sacrosanct from profane material pursuits. And thus one arrives at the identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of social space into *ghar* and *bahar*.<sup>20</sup>

The world was where the west had subjugated the non European people on account of its material superiority, but the nationalist asserted, it had failed to colonize the internal, the essential identity of the East, which lay in its distinctive and superior spiritual culture. Therefore, while the apparent, inferiority and subjugation of the East had to be overcome in the material world, in the space where battles for national independence had to be fought and won, the inner world, the spiritual essence, the 'home' needed to be protected and no interference was to be tolerated therein by the

colonizer. This then was the ideological framework within which the women's question was resolved by the nationalists. Not a total rejection of the Western project, for its application in the material world was acceptable, (which is why it was possible for them to envisage western education, and participation in the struggle for independence for women) however modernity was to be consistent with the nationalist project and the ideological principle of selection was to be applicable here.

It is striking that much of the literature on women in the nineteenth century concerns the threatened westernization of Bengali women. This refutation of the colonial perspective, couched in terms of authenticity, was put forward as the authentic Indian response and was intended to serve nationalistic pride. Coming into existence from the late nineteenth century and starting very specifically with the Bankim discourses, it blossomed and developed along a specific socio-cultural agenda. The one singularly important point on which debate was conducted was to retrieve Indian women from both (a) colonial construction, and, (b) colonial deconstruction.

The colonial construct of middle class Indian women, metaphorically referred to as the 'mehsahib' was contested by the nationalist construct of the 'bhadramahila' and in similar fashion, the rural/urban dichotomy was posited as a contestation between colonial subversiveness and Indian authenticity (the post colonial discourse figured out that this anti colonial reaction was installed with a great deal of derivativeness and questioned its authenticity asking for a reading of real voices marginalized thus far, in order to discover genuine authenticity...it is some of those voices this present project seeks to explore).

Homi Bhabha, in this context, used the metonyms of 'hybridity' and 'mimicry'. Mimicry subsumes under a local manifestation of colonial cultural adaptability, whereas hybridity has been imputed with a property of conscious interpretativeness, of cultural truce, presenting a critical approach to progressiveness.<sup>21</sup>

Thus while the Indian 'mehsahib', imitating the new western fashion in dress and mannerism was caricatured and laughed at, there did merge over a period of time, a hybrid identity, the 'bhadramahila', educated in western ways, cultured and 'Kulin', rooted nevertheless in the essentials of Indian-ness, in the quintessential spiritual domain.

## I

Bankim's explanation of the subjection of India is not in terms of material or physical strength or the lack thereof amongst the Indian



people, it is couched in cultural terms, a difference of culture that distinguishes the Hindu from the European, the Hindu attitude toward power. In a long essay on Samkhya philosophy, he argues, that the central philosophical foundation of the overwhelming part of the religious beliefs in India, including Buddhism, lies in the philosophy of Samkhya, and the chief characteristic of this philosophy is its emphasis on 'vairagya'.<sup>22</sup>

The present state of the Hindus is a product of this excessive otherworldliness. The lack of devotion to work which foreigners point out as a chief characteristic is only a manifestation of this quality. Our second most important characteristic—fatalism—is yet another form of this other worldliness derived from Samkhaya.<sup>23</sup>

Europeans are devotees of power. That is the key to their advancement. We are negligent toward power, which is the key to our downfall. Europeans pursue a goal which they must reach in this world: they are victorious on earth. We pursue a goal which lies in the world beyond, which is why we have failed to win on Earth.<sup>24</sup>

The critique of Indian culture here is in every way a rationalist critique and so is the critique of Samkhaya philosophy. It follows therefore that Bankim supports the acquisition of material skills; the project is to achieve positive knowledge. Thus he accepts entirely the fundamental methodological assumptions, the primary concepts and the general theoretical orientation of the nineteenth century positivist sociology and the utilitarian political economy. He wholly shared the Enlightenment belief in the perfectibility of man and agreed with the positivist view of looking at the history of social institutions as developing from less developed and imperfect forms to more developed and perfect ones. He accepted, for instance, that free trade was a more developed form of economic organization than anything that had existed previously, including protectionism, because it represented a rational scheme of division of labour and was beneficial to all parties involved in economic exchange.<sup>25</sup>

Thence to the question of 'mimicking' the West. Is all imitation bad? That cannot be, as "one cannot learn except by imitation, just as children learn to speak by imitating the speech of adults, to act, by imitating the actions of adults, so do uncivilized and uneducated people, learn by imitating the ways of the civilized and educated. Thus it is reasonable and rational that Bengalees should imitate the English...but almost as soon as Bankim has made this characteristic thrust of logic, he feels compelled to back track...of course we agree that it may not be entirely desirable for Bengalees to be as imitative as they are now".<sup>26</sup>

But what of 'home' and what of women?

Bankim's conception of *dharma*, an organic moral authority incorporated into a national religion or culture, and the need for a revival of *dharma* in contemporary India, made him an unsparing opponent of the principle form of elite nationalist politics of his time, viz, social reform through the medium of the legislative institutions of the colonial state. It is not that he disagreed with the reformers' critique of the various Hindu customs and practices; he however, vehemently questioned both the mode of reasoning employed by the reformers' and their means for achieving the reform. He was opposed to their attempts on the one hand to persuade British administrators to legislate on social questions by appealing to enlightened reason and logic and on the other to neutralize conservative opinion by a highly selective interpretation of Hindu scriptures in order to show that the reforms were sanctioned by the Shashtra. This he thought as hypocritical. Moreover, somewhat paradoxically in the context of his general sympathy for utilitarian social theory, he had little faith in the efficacy of legislation to bring about a genuine reform of social institutions.<sup>27</sup>

Reform, in order to succeed, had to flow from a new moral consensus in society, and this new consensus, this new morality was inevitable on account of the new socio-economic conditions that defined the modern age. Thus it was clear, he thought, that polygamy, to the extent that it was ever common in Hindu society, was rapidly on the decline. This decline had come about without State legislation or injunctions by religious leaders. Given the changing social conditions, its ultimate disappearance was inevitable. Consequently, he thought that there was little difference between the efforts of reformers like Vidhyasagar and Don Quixote!<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the prime purpose for the existence of the colonial State was the extension of colonial power that was founded on a superiority of force. To match and overthrow that superiority, Indian society would have to go through a similar transformation. And the key to that transformation must lie in a regeneration of national culture embodying in fact an unrivalled combination of material and spiritual values. Indeed, mere reform negates the nationalistic problematic itself, for it assumes that the Oriental (the Indian, the Hindu) is non autonomous, passive, historically non active indeed, for that very reason a historical, and therefore, ever in need to be acted upon by others.

Draupadi<sup>29</sup>

Draupadi, the heroine of the *Mahabharata*, married simultaneously to the five Pandava brothers, was an image of Indian womanhood used by the colonizers to mock and ridicule. Indian women, symbolized by Draupadi, who had such acceptance, even veneration amongst the masses, were seen as dependent, in need of protection, immoral and unholy.

Bankim's essay, entitled "Draupadi", is his response to and the negation of that colonial caricaturing. His counterargument in defense of Draupadi and her extraordinary life situation, took all his ingenuity. Couched in high *dharmic* terms, it is at once his negation of the colonial projection as well as his building up of a character, that placed in extremely trying and difficult life situations, fulfils her *dharmic* duties to a 'T'. the essay paints an image of Indian womanhood, in dramatic contrast to the colonial telling of the tale. This was in consonance with Bankim's belief that behind every word that was uttered was a belief, in turn embedded in a culture and if one was not conversant with the norms of that culture, then, no matter how good one's command over language may be, perceptions would be skewed. The objective in writing the essay is therefore twofold, a deconstruction of the colonial image as well as the construction of a morally edifying nationalist response.

The first part of the essay opens with Bankim contrasting the character of Draupadi with the traditional image of ideal Indian womanhood. The kind of features traditionally found in heroines are that they are devoted, soft natured, shy and tolerant, these he says were the qualities found in Shakuntala, Damyanti and Revathi, who were the multiple images of Sita, Draupadi alone is the exception from the essentialized ideal of a good Aryan wife, a Bhadramahila. (The rest of the essay is at pains to establish the fact that though this may seem to be the case on the surface, if one were to look at the whole situation as a metaphor and were to analyze it from the Dharmic standpoint, then Draupadi too, in a transcendental sense, is a bhadramahila.)

Therefore, he says, the ideal is the image of Sita, who is included, Draupadi is not the ideal Aryan wife and is therefore, excluded. The only similarity between them, he goes on to say, is that they both were devoted to and worshiped their husbands. Sita was completely devoted to Rama, and Draupadi's devotion to her five husbands could not be faulted, hence they could both be invoked as "Sutees"

Apart from that one similarity, Draupadi, says Bankim, is nothing

like Sita, the differences abound. Sita, though born a princess is essentially the image of a loyal wife. Her identity stems from being Rama's wife. In contrast, Draupadi has a regal persona and bearing, independent of the fact that she has five royal husbands. Contrary to the image of a woman dependent on a man for protection, Draupadi has all the qualities of a female who is tough. For Bankim, if Sita is the ideal wife of Rama, Draupadi is the ideal companion for Bhima. He goes on to say that if Ravana had had the gall to come for Draupadi, then he surely would have been defeated by her 'bahubal' her physical prowess.

The Mahabharatha tells, of Draupadi, springing from the fires of the yajna, fully grown and completely endowed with all the qualities that were essential for the fulfillment of her purpose in life, which was the avenging of her father's humiliation at the hands of Dronacharya. She and her brother, her twin, Dhristdhumna, were both endowed with physical strength and skills at war. Her older sister Shikhandini, (Amba, reborn) was the commander in chief of Drupad's forces. Both these women, far from being weaklings, dependent on men, were fully capable, self sufficient women, capable of beating down the unwanted aggressor.

Bankim uses the Jayadrath episode to highlight the essential strength, physical as well as that of the spirit of Draupadi's character. Jayadrath, married to the only sister of the Kauravas, and thus brother-in-law to Draupadi as well, comes to the forest to visit Draupadi, knowing full well that her husbands are not home, his intent obviously malafide. She first extends the welcome that is due to his station, and when he makes his intentions obvious, she tries to convince him of the essential immorality and unethicalness of the intended deed. When none of her arguments work, she uses her physical strength to literally throw him to the ground. Jayadrath eventually succeeds in overpowering her and forces her unto his *ratha*. She, however, does not despair; her belief in her ability to protect herself and in that of her husbands to be with her is not shaken. She does not wail like an ordinary woman, rather she continues to taunt Jayadrath with gruesome word pictures of his inevitable misery upon the arrival of her mighty husbands. She is in full command of her senses even in a moment of deep crisis when she is alone.

That, in Bankim's opinion is absolutely different from the image of Indian women that the British colonists have favoured.

Another charge levied by the British was that Indian women were denied choice in making decisions that were fundamental to their lives. Draupadi too was married to the five brothers, merely because

their mother made an unfortunate error of asking the brothers to share whatever it was that they had gotten, as was their customary wont, without realizing that it was a woman they had won this time. Bankim's skills are truly tested in finding a Dharmic explanation for Draupadi's unusual marital situation and this is the argument he extends.

European scholars, Bankim says, believe that Indian women are promiscuous based on the sole example of Draupadi's multiple marriage, and that it is tradition in India to have multiple partners which shows how uncivilized and uncouth a race Indians are (contemporary England had accepted the monogamous morality of the Victorian age with all its inbuilt social intricacies, in theory at least, if not in practice).<sup>30</sup>

Bankim is seriously offended with this allegation. "Nowhere in the *itihas* and the Puranas, is there any testimony of polygamy or polyandry" and by citing the one example of Draupadi, the politically motivated European scholars degrade the Indian female.<sup>31</sup> That derivation, Bankim contends, is seriously simplistic, it is so simplistic as it were to say that Ferguson, by seeing naked sculptors, concluded that women had no sense of clothing. Bankim contends that there is no historical testimony of polyandry, there is not even an exception before Draupadi. Therefore, even if this unusual marriage of Draupadi were historically true and the Pandavas had existed in fact, then it would be reasonable to conclude that such a marriage would have attracted considerable public censor and would not have been socially acceptable.

Therefore, Bankim contends, the marriage is to be seen as part of the grand schematic, the grand plan, engineered by the poet for the purposes of advancing the story. Draupadi has a very duty bound marital relationship with each of her husbands. She has one male off spring from each of them, not more, not less, no daughters are told of and no one missed out. None of these children survive the war and not one of them succeeds to the throne of Hastinapur. For Bankim, this is obviously an idealized pre-calculated scheme, fiction rather than history. Moreover Bankim contends, Arjuna and Bhima have other wives as well. Yudhithara, Nakula and Sehdeva had not, as the *Mahabharata* is primarily the story of Kunti's sons and the sons of Madri play only a minor part, it is possible that Draupadi, if indeed this story had actually come to pass, may have been married only to Yudhithara and the rest may be only the poets imagination.

The obvious purpose of such a contention is to establish that monogamy, at least for the female is the accepted norm.

At the *swayamvara* organized by her father, Draupadi is appalled at the sight of Karna, a Suta putra a low caste unworthy of her hand in marriage, getting up to test his skills at the archery task that had to be fulfilled in order to win her hand. She knows that he has the skills to do so; however it would defeat the purpose of the grand narrative if he were allowed to win. She voices a clear rejection, couched in caste terms. She will not marry the low born Suta putra. That quells Karna's ambition, and Bankim says her behavior here, even though she is yet only a princess, not the legally wedded wife of a king, a rajrani, is a prologue to how she would behave in the dice episode. She has a clear opinion about what she wants and what she does not and has the ability to voice that opinion, to a room full of the all the worthies of the land. Draupadi's rejection of Karna on account of his birth, on caste grounds has been a blot on her character. Is she blind to merit and ability? Is this an acceptance of tradition, regardless of human concern? Bankim exonerates Draupadi of these charges. This is the politics of masculinity he says, and the writer of the epic, the grand patriarch Ved Vyasa, makes a scapegoat out of her, by putting that rejection in her mouth. An ideal Arya would not refuse the challenge of another, regardless of his caste, Karna's challenge presented a tricky situation, he was worthy and able, yet he had to be prevented from winning in order to further the purposes of the grand narrative. That tricky situation was resolved by the writer by letting the woman take the blame for the ousting.

Her voice is heard, loud and clear again in the dice episode. She uses all the arguments at her command to establish the essential unfairness and injustice of it all. "Did Yudhisthra first lose himself, or did he lose you?" she asks, a woman in dialogue with Dharma himself about the righteousness of his conduct. Her confidence that might appear on the surface as pride (*darpa*) is actually a serious intellectual query. This self-esteem is an attribute of all the major male characters of the Epic, Bhishma, Arjuna, Ashvathama, but not of the females. Draupadi for Bankim, actually breaks the boundaries of the male and female characterizations, if self esteem defines the man, then why not the woman? More of a 'man' than her husbands Draupadi lashes out at them, at Vidhur and Bhishma, for letting what happened the Kurusabha, transpire. She can clearly see that Dharma has been lost that day, despite the presence of these great men in the house.

Bankim then marvels at the ingenuity of the poet. Draupadi is a woman after all and she is, teaching the men lessons in righteous conduct. She has to be brought down from her performance of a

'man', brought down to the level of a female. The poet the grand patriarch of the epic, Ved Vyasa, achieves this by literally disrobing her masculinity to reveal her vulnerable femininity. Disrobed, she is weak and feeble, in need to male protection, in the form of Krishna. Her sense of justice morality and ethics, indeed her firm location in her realized Dharma, is yet not lost. Granted a boon by Dhritrastra, she asks that Yudhishthara be released from slavery, because she says that she doesn't want her son to be called the son of a slave. Granted another boon, she asks that the rest of the Pandavas be freed. Asked to seek another, she proceeds to advise Dhritrastra on the Dharma of a kshatriya. Greed she says, is the greatest of all sins. The Vaishya may be granted one boon, the khatriya two, the king three, and the Brahman as many as he desires. "As my husbands are no longer slaves and I am therefore the wife of a Kshatriya, I should ask for two and no more than two boons."

She has balance and restraint, much in contrast to the treatment meted out to her by the Kauravas.

Bringing his arguments to a close, Bankim provides a philosophical explanation for the poet's imagination, the purpose that the grand narrative is intended to serve.

The man/god Krishna is seen as transcendental, he says, at once a man and a god, 'stithopragya', unaffected by the material circumstances of his life he can therefore, partake of the carnal at will. If that be so, so can Draupadi. She is located in the Epic with five husbands and that is a situation that could lead her into whorism, however she views the five as actually one, in the same manner in which a Bhakta views all the demigods as being the manifestation of the one omnipotent one. Far from being promiscuous, Draupadi for Bankim is the female counterpart of the ideal transcendental man. This, Bankim asserts, makes the Indian tradition more inclusive than the gendered western tradition of only male Christ figures. The fact that she is at once attached and unattached is proven by her having only one male offspring with each of her husbands. This detaches her from the carnal and shows her as having fulfilled her role in the grand scheme of things.

I am no puritan, Bankim declares, and have no difficulty with the pleasure principle, but it would be wrong to think of the feminine as inferior to the masculine. Draupadi obviously is the female counterpart of the male icons who have elevated from the mundane. She despite being placed in a very difficult situation transcends the difficulties presented by the framework and becomes the female epitome of Dharma.

## II

That then is Bankim's counterargument. His reading of Draupadi clearly structured to refute the colonial construct and at the same time designed to construct a nationalist response.

Several concerns emerge out of this for me.

First, is what I see as his selective reading of the text of the *Mahabharata* on which his postulates are based.

While it is true that Draupadi's polyandrous marriage is unique and no other such finds mention in Shastric tradition, it is also true that that is but half the story. There are several instances where women in the *Mahabharata* have multiple partners for various reasons. The practice of '*niyoga*' is common, performed for instance by Ved Vyasa on Ambika, and Ambalika, the widowed wives of Satyawati's son vichitraveera, and on Parishshrami their maid who gives birth to Vidhura.

Krishna Dypayana, Ved Vyasa himself is Satyawati's son by the Sage Parashar, with whom she had a Gandharva Vivah, before she was married to Shantanu, the king of Hastinapura. Kunti gives birth to Karna, before she is married to Pandu, and later has three sons with three different men, or Gods if you will, as does Madri who has her twins Nakula and Sehdeva with the Ashwini Kumaras who are themselves twins, while still being married to Pandu.

Also, contained in the *Mahabharata*, is the tale of Madhavi, the daughter of the king Yayati, prostituted by the Sage Galava, on the Kings authorization, to three powerful kings, including those of Ayodhya and Mithila, and the Sage Vishwamitra, for the obtaining of a thousand white horses, with one black ear each, for a year at a time with each man, each of whom fathers a son with her.

In claiming that norm that the Shastric tradition establishes is that of monogamy, especially for the female, or perhaps for the female alone, Bankim ignores all these alternate telling, each narrative proving insights into the location of women in the Indian Shastri/Epic tradition. Women belong to fathers and brothers; much as other forms of property does, with the patriarch having ownership rights over the body and souls of the women of the household. Draupadi too, is in many ways an instrument for her father, who raises her to be the means of his revenge over Drona, which is the purpose Dharma defines for her and this she ultimately fulfills. She seems to have no conscious agency of her own in all this, her fate predefined; dignity accrues to her, in an acceptance of that fate, not in defiance of it.

Bankim goes on to say that since monogamous marriage was the



norm, perhaps she was married to Yudhishthara alone and the rest is merely the poet's imagination as there is no mention of another wife for Yudhishthara while Bhima and Arjuna have other partners. This is an exercise in sanitizing the narrative; the *Mahabharata* mentions that Yudhishthara is married to Devika, the daughter of Govasana of the Shaivya tribe, who bore him a son named Yaudheya, similarly Sehdeva was married to his maternal cousin, Vijaya, the daughter of Dyutimat the king of Madra and had a son named Suhotra with her, Nakula likewise was married to Karenumati, the daughter of the King of Chedi and a had two sons with her.

I do not know, therefore, how Bankim arrives at the conclusion that he does, unless it be a deliberate exercise in weeding out uncomfortable complexities.

Bankim's counter argument is couched in high moral language and presents an ethically morally edifying Dharmic explanation for the situations in Draupadi's life, emphasizing the idealized role she plays as a Sati, an Aryan wife completely devoted to her husband in keeping with the accepted Dharmic norms of Bankim's time. There is therefore no space in his narrative for her special love for Arjun, a love that becomes the cause of her falling from grace, a transgression of righteous conduct and her eventual death during the Mahaparinirvana. All complexity is brushed out of the narrative and a clean Dharmic argument is advanced.

If the remedy, as Bankim believed, for the cultural backwardness that had resulted in the loss of political sovereignty was in cultural national regeneration, then what ought to be the contours of that regeneration? Bankim's burden was to show that "Hinduism is the greatest of all religions"<sup>31</sup> all that was necessary was to "sweep it clean of the dross that that accumulated over the centuries, to interpret its tenets in the light of contemporary social situations".

Why this new national religion had to be based on a purified Hindu ideal is of course an interesting question. This was not the only religion practiced in India and more than half of Bankim's home province of Bengal was Muslim.<sup>32</sup>

In the Indian case, neither language nor racial distinctiveness was a suitable criterion for defining national solidarity. Rather, within the thematic and the problematic, two elements combined to define Hinduism as the likely candidate which could provide Indian nationalism with a viable cultural foundation and nationhood; first, the possibility of a large popular basis and, second, the very identification by the modern Orientalist scholarship of the great spiritual qualities of classical Hinduism.

The main task in establishing this national religion was a 'reformation' of Hinduism. The true Dharma had to be extracted from the impurities of folk religion and then decimated among the people. The project was to retrieve the high classical ideal, made known by the Orientalist, now all but covered by dross. As one looks at this project from the post-colonial, post-modern perspective, its derivativeness is apparent. It negates the authenticity of the folk traditions, the multiple cultural telling, the narrative complexities that were the lived realities of the common people and seeks to implant a derivative discourse, derived from Bankim's location in late nineteenth century Bengal, educated in the Enlightenment tradition, with purposive rationality as its defining discourse.

This reformed Hinduism had an idealized woman, at the centre of the cultural project, a 'Devi' committed to Dharma, wedded to her role as the ideal Aryan wife. It was also a project in 'selection', in that this idealized woman could be educated and informed, could play a part in human and social affairs, could be articulate, so long as she remained devoted to her husband, her home and hearth, submitting in the final analysis to his will in all things.<sup>33</sup>

Patriarchy was clearly all pervasive and, despite the fact that Enlightenment taught rationality as well as the moral equality of all human beings, the gender hegemony remained, as it does to this day. Bankim realizes this when he says that Draupadi is often made the scapegoat of gender politics in the narrative that her voice is used to articulate all that which would be not quite right for the male to utter, that she is to play the part of a man, only this far and no further, that her masculinity has to be literally disrobed in order to reveal her essential feminine weakness, she has to be brought down to the level of a female.

However, he does not quite rise to the next level of displacing this male centering in the essay. Draupadi is defended in the context of the image of her drawn by the colonial, but defended from the standpoint of a patriarchal dharma that is outraged with the attack on its own righteousness, a dharma that nevertheless continues to prioritize the male over the female. She remains secondary and essentially subservient to the will of her husbands and in Bankim's reckoning, her acceptance of that fact, renders her a 'Sati' to be emulated and revered.

This, I think, is a dangerous argument, for it removes the Indian woman from the realm of the ordinary and turns her into this ideal, far removed from the real. It then negates and denies the primacy of the felt experiences of body and soul that a real woman experiences,

rendering her joys and her pains inconsequential. It dehumanizes and defleshes her, giving her a transcendental luster that denies her the quest for pleasure, her life is idealized as one of submission and sacrifice. That is an image of the Indian woman that persists today, and has been the cause of much pain and misery.

A few years after Bankim's death in the year 1894, a clear split could be observed among Indian nationalists. It resulted from the tendencies on the one hand to root nationalism in already existing or latent native institutions and ideas and on the other to work for the creation of a nation that resembled European notions in its social and political structure and aims. The dominant nationalist group that was responsible for the creation of the Indian National Congress, supported the creation of conditions that they knew from their knowledge of the west, should exist before a nation, embodying all of India's people could make her identity felt, having at its base an anti traditional, liberal democratic, secular and politically oriented concept of the nation, they aimed for the establishment of mass education, economic advancement, social reform and a unity of the kind that the Western nations enjoyed.

Challenging this moderate Congress leadership in the 1890s and thereafter were nationalists who believed that unity could rapidly be achieved, indeed it existed in a latent form, among Indians who recognized their common heritage as a single religious community. Following Bankim's indications, the extremist political leaders, led by Tilak, began to expound on their national heritage as Hindus and to distinguish that heritage from tradition associated with Muslim or British rule.

One of the most urgent questions that emerged from this debate was: should social reform precede political reform or vice versa? And at the heart of the social reform question was the women's issue.

The consensus as it emerged within the nationalist leadership, gradually and not without opposition, was in favour of postponing social reform till such time as political independence was achieved. Even Renade and Telang among the Reformers failed to support their colleagues in the Social Conference who urged the priority of social over political reform. Telang's famous speech, "must social reform precede political reform in India", remained for many years the frankest exposition of the strategy of expediency to be issued by a prominent nationalist.

"If we compare the Government and the Hindu population to two Forts facing the army of reform, can there be any doubt, that the wisest course for that army is to turn its energies first toward the fort

represented by government where we have numerous and powerful friends amongst the garrison...as for the other fort, the case is as far as possible from being one of *veni vedi vici*. The soldiers of the old garrison are not in the least ready to give up and in some respects we have yet got to forge, and to learn to wield, the weapons by which we have to fight them,” and so he concluded, “let us then all devote the bulk of our energies to political reform.”<sup>34</sup>

Two further considerations profoundly affected the nationalist view of social reform; one, the personal failings of reformers themselves in living up to their protestations,<sup>35</sup> and, two, the publicized encouragement that the reform movement received from the British.

The official position on social reform and its relation to political reform received its most cogent and memorable formulations in the eighteen eighties by Sir Auckland Calvin, finance member of the Governor-Generals Council and after, 1897, Lieutenant Governor of the North Western Provinces. He wrote, “Societies that will not make any combined effort to reform their own shortcomings, are not to be much trusted, when they combine to reform public affairs. They lay themselves open to suspicion that in the profession of public zeal, they find an agreeable cloak for the discouragement of private duty.”<sup>36</sup>

Such statements, finding their way into the media, served to fuel nationalist sentiment and anti British feeling.

The reforms were abandoned, they would be best dealt with by an independent Indian government. The woman’s question has been awaiting the emergence of social consensus ever since. This has been slow to come about and the Indian State has remained rooted in patriarchy. The selective agenda of the nationalist movement has continued to infirm its policy. Alas, the sovereign Indian State seems to operate within an inherited derivative discourse!!

### Notes

1. Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 1998. Martin Van Woerkens, *Strangled Traveler: Colonial Imaginings and the Thugs of India*, Translated by Catherine Tihanyi, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2002.
2. Sir Archibald Galloway, *Observations on the Law and Constitution and Present Government of India*, London, Parbury, Allen and Co. 1832, p. 323.
3. James Fitz James Stephen (ed), *Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1967, pp. 89-91
4. Minto Minute, Extract Bengal Revenue Consultations, March 6, 1811, BL/APAC/10R/F/4/408/10172. James Mill, *History of British India*, New York,

- Chelsea house Publishers, 1968, reprint of 1858 edition, Volume V, p. 433.
5. On the roman empire's broad and deep impact on the 19th century British imperialists, see Pieter Brandon, *Decline and Fall of the British Empire, 1781-1997*, London: Jonathan Cape, 2007; Stephen Patterson, *Cult of Imperial Honour in British India*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 3.
  6. John Roselli, Lord William Bentinck; *The Making of a Liberal Imperialist, 1774-1839*, Berkeley, university of California Press, 1974, pp. 203-4.
  7. *Ibid.*, p. 204.
  8. See for example, Edward Parry Thornton, *History of the British Empire in India*, London: Wm H. Allen and Co, 1841, 6 volumes, Volume V, pp 184-85; Leitch Ritchie, *British World in the East*, London, WH Allen and Co, 1846, 2 volumes, Volume I, p 382; Joseph Sramek, *Gender Morality and Race in Company India, 1765-1858*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.
  9. Patterson, *Cult of Imperial Honour in British India*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, pp. 83-84.
  10. Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The Manly Englishman and the Effeminate Bengali in the late 19th Century*, Manchester, University of Manchester Press, 1995, pp. 103-4.
  11. Mir Salamat Ali, *Notes and Opinions of a Native on the Present State of India and the feelings of the People*, Ryde, UK, George Rutler, 1848, pp. 56-93.
  12. Eric Stokes, *English Utilitarians in India*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1959, p. 64.
  13. Sinha, *op. cit.*, p. 104.
  14. Gisela Bock, 'Challenging Dichotomies: Perspectives on Women's History' in *Writing Women's History: International Perspectives*, edited by Karen Offen et al, Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 1-23 (p. 4).
  15. Meera Kosambi, *Crossing the Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History*, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2007, p. 7.
  16. Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial Histories*, Delhi: OUP, 1994, p. 118.
  17. Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Perceptions, Emotions and Sensibilities, Essays on India's Colonial and Post Colonial Experiences*, Delhi: OUP, 1999, p. 13.
  18. J W Massie, *Continental India*, London, Thomas Ward, 1839, cp 2, pp. 153-54.
  19. Chatterjee, *op. cit.*, p. 119.
  20. *Ibid.*, p. 120.
  21. Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, London: Routledge, 2002.
  22. Jogesh Chandra Bagal (ed), *Bankim Rachnabali*, (hereafter BR) Volume II, Calcutta, Sahitya Samsad, 1965, pp. 221-34.
  23. *Ibid.*, p. 222.
  24. *Ibid.*
  25. *Ibid.*, p. 312.
- Thus trade between India and Britain he thought had led to an expansion of agricultural activity in India. To the charge of the destruction of indigenous manufacturing he said, "The weaving trade may have collapsed, but why does the weaver not move to another occupation? He may not be able to feed himself by weaving cloth, but there is no reason why he cannot do so by cultivating rice." The real reason weavers were not seizing opportunities opened up by expanded agricultural activities, was cultural, the inertia of backwardness and outmoded social customs.
26. 'Anukaran', BR, p. 201.

27. Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Delhi: OUP, p. 73. Also, Subrata Dasgupta, *The Bengal Renaissance, Identity and Creativity from Rammohan Roy to Rabindranath Tagore*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2007.
28. 'Vahuvivaha', BR, p. 315.
29. 'Draupadi', BR, pp. 179-185. Translated by Dr Kaustav Chakraborty, Fellow, IIAs, Simla.
30. See, Antionette M Burton, "The White Woman's Burden, British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865-1915" in, Nupur Chaudhari and Margaret Strobel, (eds.), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Indiana University Press, 1992, pp. 137-157.
31. 'Dharmatva' BR, p. 651.
32. Chatterjee Partha, *Nationalist Thought*, op. cit., p. 75. "this is an interesting question that has embarrassed secular nationalists in the 20th century India, who have sought to give Bankim an important place in the Pantheon of nationalist heroes."
33. Bankim writes in Dharmatva, "a woman is not strong enough to either protect or to feed and provide shelter to her husband, but it is within her to reach and serve and to bring happiness to her husband. That is her Dharma." Quoted from, M. K. Halder, *The Foundation of Nationalism in India: A Study of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee*, Delhi: Ajanta, 1989, p. 57.
34. Kashinath Trimbak Telang, *Selected Writings and Speeches*, Bombay, 1916, 2 Volumes, pp. 288-99.
35. "Renade's second marriage to a young girl in 1873 may have been a dim memory twenty years later but Telang's decision to marry his two young daughters, ages 10 and 8, in 1893, reinforced a popular impression that most reformers were no more courageous than anyone else in their personal lives" Quoted from, Charles H. Heimsath, *Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform*, New Jersey: Princeton, 1964, p. 221 and "never did the community of social reformers in Indai experience a shock so profound as when Sen (Keshav Chandra), on the basis of his spiritual revelation, decided to allow his daughter to be married to the young Maharaja of Kutch-Bihar. The girl was 13 and the Maharaja not yet 16, both below the minimum that Sen himself had advocated, and the marriage ceremony was a flourish of the most unmitigated orthodoxy", p. 96.  
 "A deviation from reform ideas on marriage probably kept G. K. Gokhale from lending his full support to the social reform movement. He had married a second wife while the first, an incurable invalid, was still alive, and therefore wished to save the social reform cause from any reflection that would be made against it, if he became one of its leaders", p. 222.
36. Dayaram Gidumal, *The Status of Women in India, or a Handbook for Hindu Social Reformers*, Bombay, 1889, pp. 122-23.