

Status, Caste and Patriarchy in Colonial-Princely India: The Case of Shobha Manjari and Govind Kumari of Kanker, 1934-37

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Introduction

Let me begin with a story. In early 1934 Shobha Manjari, the *Rajmata* (queen-mother) of the princely state of Kanker in central India, the widow of the deceased ruler Komal Deo (1902-25), suddenly left Kanker with her sixteen year old daughter Govind Kumari to go to Benaras on a pilgrimage. She did not intimate the Kanker state officials nor kept in touch with them during her travels. She was later traced to Jhansi in U.P., a northern province of British India, where she had got her daughter married to a commoner, Jyotilal Mehrotra. Jyotilal was from the Khatri caste which, though an upper caste in north India, was seen as inferior to the Rajput caste from which the Kanker royal family, as also most of north and central India's ruling families, drew their lineage. He was also from the Arya Samaj, a reformist and revivalist community popular among the Khatri. This marriage created a stir in Kanker and among the royal families of the Eastern States. That this marriage had taken place when the princess was under the supervision of her mother, the widow queen, was taken as a sign of willful and unforgivable transgression on the part of the latter who was expected to uphold norms of royal and caste honor. In consultation with colonial officials and some rulers of the Eastern States, the Kanker administration attempted to bring Shobha Manjari and her daughter back to Kanker and to get them to renounce this marriage. When this effort failed, Shobha Manjari and her daughter were banished from Kanker with a small pension. Not much is known in Kanker about what happened to Shobha Manjari thereafter. In fact, it would not be wrong to say that Shobha Manjari and her daughter were deliberately forgotten.

In the palace at Kanker, on a wall adorned with sepia-toned photographs of the Raj, there hangs one of a woman of royal station wearing a long-sleeved frilled

blouse, a silk sari with an embroidered border and heavy jewelry. Unlike the other photographs in the collection, this one has no citation. This unnamed photograph is that of Shobha Manjari. This forgetting I argue was part of the suppression and erasure of a life that interrupted the norms of honor and propriety of royal, caste and patriarchal society in princely India. Shobha Manjari's actions were a transgression of the conduct expected of a royal Rajput widow. Her banishment and forgetting were reactions to limit the damages from this transgression.

Scandalous rumors about Shobha Manjari's departure abounded at the time the marriage came to light and were recalled as late as the 1980s and 1990s by those of that generation still living in Kanker town. The invariable narrative was that these royal women had brought *badnami* (bad name, disrepute) to the royal family and the people of the state in the affair and later marriage of Govind Kumari with the commoner Jyotilal. The archive is equally censorious. In the letters exchanged between the Superintendent of Kanker, the officials of the Eastern States Agency, the Chhattisgarh Residency, and some rulers of the Eastern States, this matter is discussed and dealt with in great detail.¹ These exchanges follow the developments of the 'case' beginning with the unexpected leave-taking of Shobha Manjari and her party for pilgrimage in early 1934 to her final departure from Kanker later that year. What emerges in these exchanges is the view that Shobha Manjari had brought *beizzati* (dishonor) to the royal family. If popular perception was stigmatizing Shobha Manjari, the colonial state moved quickly to suppress her dissent. It is in this set of correspondences that the decision to discipline her – either by making her disavow Jyotilal or by her banishment – took shape. The colonial officials continued to follow the life of Shobha Manjari for a couple of years after her banishment on the issue of her decision to travel to England in 1935-36, as this move on her part was seen as an infringement of the punishment

given to her.² Much of these sets of correspondences were 'secret' and attests to the colonial state's need to keep Shobha Manjari and its own necessary interest in her firmly out of view.

This essay will seek to understand the terms on which the notion of transgression was constructed and applied in the case of Shobha Manjari. It will also attempt to bring into view the other side of the story, the possibilities within which Shobha Manjari acted. Here I wish to understand transgression as it is lived by the transgressor, not as the end but the beginning of possibility. In this essay I hope to evoke a life in a 'borderland'³ in early 20th century India, lived at the limits of royal, caste and patriarchal society. I believe it is important to track lost voices and struggles; and to break the composure of forces, and sources, that suppress them.

A Landscape of Honor

Let me begin by recounting more fully the story I alluded to at the outset. In early 1934, barely ten years after the death of her husband Komal Deo, Shobha Manjari and her daughter Govind Kumari, accompanied by two maids, left Kanker for a pilgrimage to Benaras without informing the Superintendent of the Kanker administration. Since the state was under minority rule,⁴ the said official was the chief functionary of the government and thus responsible for all matters concerning the royal family. His efforts to know about their whereabouts failed until later that year he was able to trace them to far away Jhansi in U.P. To his surprise and horror, Govind Kumari was now married to Jyotilal, a commoner from the Khatri caste and an Arya Samaji. The Superintendent immediately got in touch with the Viceroy's Agent to the Eastern States through the Resident at Raipur, the two colonial officials to whom he reported. To him it was a scandal of the gravest nature as it could harm the reputation of the minor ruler and therefore required swift action.

There was much uproar in the Kanker town once word got around, for the Superintendent constantly refers to how the 'people' felt that their honor had been besmirched.⁵ He was referring to the bureaucratic and business classes of Kanker, people who were associated with the state and its economy and derived their information from the gossip of the royal household and court to which they had direct or indirect access. Unlike the majority subject population of Kanker which was either tribal or from the subaltern castes, these classes were mostly upper caste Hindus and concentrated in the Kanker town, the only urban area of the princely state. A large proportion of them were Brahmins, from families that claimed high lineage and remembered their close ritual association with the ruling family down the ages. The other significant

group was that of Kayastha administrators who had been settled in Kanker from the late 19th century onwards by its rulers to provide the personnel for the colonial-princely apparatus of rule that had been taking shape since that time. The newest members of this circle were the Kutchi and Sindhi businessmen, recently arrived, who were facilitating the exploitation of Kanker's substantial forest wealth.

The 'people of Kanker' also included a small but vocal group of the Rajput kinsmen of the ruling family. The Kanker family claimed to be Chandravanshi Rajputs and derived its genealogy from the ruling family of Puri, a ritually important Hindu family of Odisha.⁶ Though there is a legend about how the founder of the Kanker dynasty brought with him from Puri a band of kin followers, most of these Rajput families were actually locally derived and systematically elevated and set up as 'Thakurs' (a local name for Rajputs) to provide solidity to Rajput rule in Kanker.⁷ Whereas caste considerations were common to all the groups mentioned above, this one was particularly invested in the notion of Rajput honor, an ancient but continuously revitalized monarchical, casteist and patriarchal code of conduct widely upheld by north India's most numerous and widespread ruling group of the Rajputs.⁸

Significantly, the legend of the founder of the dynasty Vir Kanhar Deo holds that he was suffering from leprosy when he left Puri and came wondering into the forests of Kanker in the 14th century. In the forest he came across some sages who asked him to bathe in the river Mahanadi, an important river in Hindu religious thought which originates in Sihawa in Kanker, to get rid of his leprosy. Vir Kanhar Deo did as asked and was cured of this corruption. His new form was pure and brilliant and was recognized as such by the people of the area who therefore made him their king. This legend echoes one of the myths of the origin of the Rajputs, where the first four clans are supposed to have emerged from purifying fire; and posits lineage purity as the first condition for being a Rajput, and in the case of the Kanker family, for their prerogative to rule.

Members of these groups either manned administrative offices in the Kanker in the agriculture, revenue, forest, police, justice, education and medical departments, or were posted to villages as *malguzars* (revenue collectors) and *tehsildars* (land record officials).⁹ In both cases they had been granted lands, often revenue free, across the state. In their capacity as officials and landholders, they connected with the larger tribal and rural population and exercised considerable social authority over them. Created by and obliged to the ruling family and the colonial state, they comprised a ruling stratum that helped fashion and sustain a moral code of proper

social behavior that valued the exclusivity of royalty, the distinctions of caste and the rules of patriarchy. In all these discourses, the surveillance and control of women was a central feature. By such standards, Shobha Manjari had behaved improperly; and since she was a queen, her guilt was very serious. This was a time when a minor was on the throne and therefore this community of clients probably felt even more obligated to uphold normative values. As will be discussed later, Shobha Manjari had already achieved notoriety in this circle for her role in the question of succession after the death of her husband Komal Deo in 1925.

The Superintendent Raghuvir Prasad Shrivastava, though an official from outside Kanker appointed with special powers to oversee the administration of the minor ruler, was no different in his thinking from the Kanker ruling classes and groups. He was among a growing group of Kayastha bureaucrats in colonial service in the early 20th century who began circulating among princely states in central and eastern India on special assignments as more and more of these states sought to modernize their administrations.¹⁰ They were also preferred to local administrators in cases of minority rule. By traveling and living in these princely states they had gained familiarity with royal customs and mores. In this case Shrivastava was particularly sensitive to questions of propriety as the ruler of Kanker, Bhanu Pratap Deo, was a minor (about twelve years old) and the full responsibility of the ruling family lay with him.

It was then not surprising that Shrivastava quickly got in touch with the other rulers of the Eastern States, especially those related to the Kanker family. He wrote to the rulers of Korea, Talcher and Kalahandi, and to the *zamindar* of Ratu, among others.¹¹ By the 1930s, these rulers and related *zamindars* were in any case beginning to meet among themselves quite frequently to discuss issues of common concern. More than forty in number, they were linked to each other through ties of common or related lineage, marital ties and proximate territory. Colonial administrative organization brought them together further as in the case when they were bunched together as Eastern States in 1933 for the purpose of managing their relationship to the Crown. One important set of occasions where this royal society was beginning to gather were the meetings of rulers as the governing body of Rajkumar College in Raipur, a school set up in 1882 to educate princes.¹² Members of the region's ruling families were therefore coming face to face more often now and forming a greater sense of community in many of the school's social functions. They were also reasserting in their interaction, especially in their discussion of the vision for the school, the notion of righteous, socially appropriate behavior for rulers.

This notion of honor was drawn entirely from that of royal, caste and patriarchal superiority and English aristocratic values. In 1902, its Principal G. D. Oswell had written:

*The classes for which the college was primarily intended were to be the sons and near relatives of the feudatory chiefs, zamindars, large landed proprietors and other native gentlemen of position...great care has been exercised in the selection of candidates for admission. The college authorities have always had before them the danger...of morale suffering from the opening of the college to a lower stratum of society...the sensitiveness of the aristocratic classes is a further factor to be taken into consideration...The aims and objectives of the college are then declared to be to provide a place where the boys of classes above mentioned may receive training which shall fit them for the important duties and responsibilities that would ultimately devolve on them.*¹³

It is this honor, based on the distinction of social station and gender, that the rulers consulted by the Superintendent believed had been threatened by Shobha Manjari.

Not only were these rulers desirous of maintaining honor in relation to those they ruled, it was also a question of their prestige among themselves in the Eastern States and in the larger community of native states of India. As Barbara Ramusack has argued, the frequent coming together of rulers in the Conferences of Princes since 1913 and the Chamber of Princes since 1921, heightened the competition for symbolic status among them.¹⁴ Smaller states like those of the Eastern States were particularly vulnerable in this regard and were constantly trying to argue for equal status with the bigger and ceremonially more prestigious ones. The purity of dynastic lines had always been a marker of prestige and was seen as a matter with greater stakes in this scenario. The rulers related to the Kanker family were especially perturbed by the developments in Kanker as this was likely to lower their stock in the community of princes.

Shobha Manjari's case, as it was perceived by colonial officials, can be seen as symptomatic of this larger anxiety. The matter of princely prestige in general had acquired a new urgency in the early decades of the 20th century. Ramusack contends that the princely states were experiencing an erosion of authority because of the changes due to 'modern communication and transport, an increasingly centralized British administrative structure and demands of Indian political leaders'.¹⁵ The maintenance and reiteration of their traditional aura acquired a particular significance in this context. In 1917, the Committee of Four, a princely delegation arising out of the Conferences, mentioned the 'maintenance of the *izzat*, or honor, of the princes' as one of their chief demands to the Secretary of State Montague.¹⁶ This remained an important point of discussion throughout the following three decades.

The colonial government had believed that its own paramountcy, among other things, depended crucially on the legitimacy of the symbols of princely power.¹⁷ In her post-1857 declaration, Queen Victoria had said that the Crown would 'respect the rights, dignity and honor of the Native Princes' as its own.¹⁸ In the new situation of the 1920s and 30s, when nationalist opposition to it was mounting, the colonial state once again drew close to its reliable princely allies. Ramusack writes that the 'princely concern with ceremony was often reinforced by the outlook and actions of the British officials from the viceroy down to the local political agent'. The manual for instruction to officers dealing with the princely states advised in 1924 that

*the first duty of a Political Officer is to cultivate direct, friendly and personal relations with the Ruling Princes and Chiefs with whom he works... (he) has a dual function: he is a mouthpiece of the Government and the custodian of imperial policy; but he is also the interpreter of the sentiments and aspirations of the Durbar.*¹⁹

Colonial officials responded to the structures of mutual legitimation, immediate political need and their own notions of aristocratic order in condemning Shobha Manjari and Govind Kumari and marking them out for punishment. A scandal that threatened any section of the native royalty was not in any way in their interest, especially not in the turbulent circumstances of the 1930s when both princely and colonial power were being seriously challenged by those who cared for neither.

It is this formidable array of opponents – local and imperial notables and the rulers of the Eastern States – that Shobha Manjari confronted by her acts. It is in their eyes and by their standards that she had transgressed. One does not have to look far to know what was expected of her instead. The figure of Shivnandini Devi, Komal Deo's senior widow, is a study in contrast. Even during her husband's lifetime, Shivnandini had acquired a reputation of being a pious woman.²⁰ As a widow, she became famous for her religiosity, charity and renunciation not just in the territory of Kanker state but the larger region of Chhattisgarh and Orissa.²¹ Through her *tapasya* (variously translatable as penance, self-mortification and asceticism) she was even seen as having acquired spiritual powers.²² When she died in 1975, the last of her generation from the royal family, there was much public praise for her. Widowhood generally amounted to social death but in this case it came wrapped up in queenly duty, the duty of being an example of self-denial.

A Strong Woman

In contrast, Shobha Manjari is marked out in public memory for her ambition, worldly aspirations and

political designs. This becomes clear if we turn to the other significant event for which she is remembered in popular memory, once again negatively. In 1925, the then ruler of Kanker, Komal Deo, fell grievously ill with chronic syphilis.²³ Though Komal Deo had three wives, one of whom had predeceased him, he had only one daughter from his youngest queen Shobha Manjari. In the absence of male heir, the strongest contenders for succession were the three sons of Komal Deo's sister.²⁴ Through a set of events about which much is fuzzy, the dying ruler came to adopt Bhanu Pratap Deo, the three year old son of Shobha Manjari's sister Lalit Manjari, as his heir. The latter was married to Nand Kishore Nath Shah Deo of the much larger Ratu *zamindari* in what is today the Indian state of Jharkhand. The partisans of Komal Deo's nephews alleged that Shobha Manjari had unfairly managed to get a rank outsider and a minor nominated as the successor. Komal Deo did not recover sufficiently to clarify his decision. The family of Komal Deo's nephews was never able to accept this decision and remain to this day hostile to the successors of Bhanu Pratap Deo.²⁵ This family had a considerable following among the ruling class of Kanker and Shobha Manjari was seen with great hostility in its circles. For our purpose, the matter to note here is the fact that in Bhanu Pratap Deo's enthronement, Shobha Manjari, his aunt and only blood relative in Kanker, suddenly acquired a pre-eminent place in the dispensation. Her detractors definitely expected her to consolidate her hold over the state through the guardianship of her minor nephew.²⁶

But let us step away from these censorious portrayals to the side of Shobha Manjari. What happens when we read transgression not as an ending but as the beginnings of possibility? This succession dispute is a good place to begin. In Bhanu Pratap's accession, Shobha Manjari seemed to have gained an upper hand in the administration but it was probably a small consolation for what she had lost. This becomes clear if we look at the silence surrounding the deceased ruler's only child, Govind Kumari, in the matter of succession. Though female succession has in general been as rare among Indian ruling families in the colonial period as it was before, it would not be unreasonable to consider the possibility of Govind Kumari's succession. Only four years earlier, in 1921, there had been a female succession in the neighboring princely family of Bastar, with whom the Kanker family was related.²⁷ In this case the British had 'acceded to public request', and accepted the dead ruler's only child, his daughter Prafulla Kumari, as Bastar's new ruler. They had however made it clear that this was an exception and not a matter of right.²⁸ Though popular support in Kanker lay with the nephews of Komal Deo and the British aversion to such exceptions

was clear, would it have been absolutely out of the realm of possibility for Shobha Manjari to expect a similar turn of events in Kanker?

Komal Deo is known to have been very fond of his daughter. He had settled and named a village outside Kanker in her name²⁹ – Govindpur – and had set aside the revenue of about a hundred villages, roughly a fifth of the total number of villages in the state, for her even during his lifetime.³⁰ Prafulla Kumari was eleven when she succeeded to the *gaddi* (throne) in Bastar.³¹ Though Govind Kumari was only six years old in 1925, there might have been a possibility around her in the question of succession which patriarchal social and colonial powers frustrated.³²

If Shobha Manjari had maneuvered to get her minor nephew the *gaddi* in Kanker with a view to controlling the *bandobast* (administration), her hopes were soon dashed. In Kanker, the minority succession of Bhanu Pratap provided an occasion for the colonial state to replace the ruler's chief minister, the *diwan*, who had been so far a local person tied by relationships of client-hood to the ruler, by a Superintendent, a person drawn from a growing pool of native but outsider professional administrators of whom mention has been made earlier. These supra-regional native bureaucrats were mostly from the traditional scribal Kayastha caste, outsiders who moved from one princely state to another according to their appointments by the colonial state and had an impersonal attitude towards their duty. Raghuvir Prasad Shrivastava, who replaced *diwan* Bhupatkar as Superintendent in 1925,³³ might have marked the beginnings of a professional colonial bureaucracy in Kanker; and was responsible not to the members of the princely families in Kanker but to the Resident of the Chhattisgarh States in Raipur, who in turn reported directly to the Political Agent of the Eastern States in Calcutta.³⁴ While Shobha Manjari is alleged to have over-awed Bhupatkar and directed the events leading to the succession of Bhanu Pratap through her favorite Mohanlal, the Secretary to the ruler,³⁵ she did not wield power in the same way with Shrivastava. Further, the child Bhanu Pratap was taken directly into the care of Shrivastava and sent away to study in Rajkumar College in Raipur, and later Mayo College at Ajmer, both boarding schools.³⁶ During vacations, he was sent off to his parents in Ratu.

The years following this succession thus came to be hugely frustrating for Shobha Manjari. Not only was her income reduced systematically and substantially, we know that Govind Kumari was not given a proper English language education.³⁷ It was in this situation of reduced power, income and possibilities that Shobha Manjari began in about 1932 to look for a suitable princely match for her daughter. Once again she was faced with

an intransigent state administration. When discussing this issue, colonial officials in 1934 complained about the demands Shobha Manjari had been making in this regard.³⁸ Shobha Manjari was very keen to get her daughter married to a good princely house and was unhappy because the Superintendent-led Kanker administration was not willing to give her a free hand in pledging a large dowry to the prospective grooms' families. With her income curtailed and the administration acting miserly, Shobha Manjari was now being denied a chance of getting her daughter married honorably. It was in the midst of another frustrating marital negotiation with the princely state of Nagod in central India in 1934, and in the face of an administration which would not back her, that Shobha Manjari abruptly decided to go on a pilgrimage to Benaras. Finally the widow Shobha Manjari had been forced to give up.

Desire and Defiance

But only momentarily. For the trip to Benaras turned out to be fateful. Whatever Shobha Manjari's state of mind was during the pilgrimage, it was sufficiently volatile to allow her to take the decision about Jyotilal. Of all the victims of this affair – Shobha Manjari, Govind Kumari and Jyotilal – the last alone is given a voice in the archive. In the colonial dossier on the matter, there is a two-page 'statement' by Jyotilal, made by him at the behest of the Superintendent in Kanker who was probing the intentions of this commoner in making so bold an attempt to pursue a princess.³⁹ Jyotilal Mehrotra writes that he first saw the pilgrim party in the Delhi railway station: 'As soon as I saw the girl, I was struck by her beauty and fell in love with her'. He introduced himself to them during the journey to Benaras. In Benaras, he kept in touch with the party and secretly exchanged letters with Govind Kumari through one of the maids. Then one day, he writes, he turned up to meet the *Rajmata*, confessed his love for her daughter and was almost immediately granted his wish to marry her. If the colonial officials were hoping to find clues to a schemer, they must have been disappointed. Not only was the statement fairly candid, it must have dawned on them that the responsibility for what happened lay as much, if not more, with Shobha Manjari and her daughter as it did with Jyotilal.

The speed with which the marriage was conducted once again points to Shobha Manjari's wholehearted and even active part in making it possible. Govind Kumari was sixteen and wholly dependent on her mother. Jyotilal was a commoner and would have had little choice had Shobha Manjari refused his proposal. On the other hand Shobha Manjari was very upset with the state of affairs in Kanker and knew the consequences of marrying her

daughter to a Khatri, Arya Samaji man. To a widow-queen of an orthodox Rajput princely family, who was expected to uphold tradition in an exemplary way like Shivnandini Devi, the decision to allow her daughter's marriage with Jyotilal would have been nothing short of a rebellion. That it was done secretly from the Kanker administration and colonial authorities shows Shobha Manjari's attempt to avoid attention until the marriage had been solemnized.⁴⁰ The lengths to which the administration went to undo this marriage must have confirmed her belief about their expected attitude to prevent and the negate it.⁴¹

Shobha Manjari remained in Jhansi for much of 1934, showing no desire despite financial hardship to return to Kanker. It was the Kanker administration that traced her to Jhansi and persuaded her to return.⁴² In Kanker, the intentions of the authorities became clear to Shobha Manjari. She was first asked to renounce the marriage and return to her life in Kanker with her daughter. If the daughter was unwilling, Shobha Manjari was asked to break her relationship with her. But instead of submitting, Shobha Manjari countered by not only demanding that her daughter's marriage be recognized but that Jyotilal be given ceremonial dignity and be seated next to the ruler.⁴³ To those who expected her to make her daughter and son-in-law perform the customary obeisance to the family deities, she retorted that they would not do so as they were Arya Samaji.⁴⁴ This impasse could not be broken and thus Shobha Manjari's party left Kanker for good at the end of that year.

Against All Odds

To what extent did her decision to become a commoner in a Khatri, Arya Samaj community represent a choice of freedom over constraint? What was she losing and what was she gaining? At first glance it would appear that the society to which she was going was a freer space than that of royalty in Kanker. Shobha Manjari acted with confidence on her return from Jhansi, putting forward elements of her new life – her son-in-law, the Arya Samaj – as counters to official censure. Her final leaving too points to her eventual choice of difficulties in Jhansi over comfort in Kanker. In mid-1935 Shobha Manjari, Govind Kumari and Jyotilal were able to leave for England, something that would perhaps not have been possible quite like this had she remained in Kanker. Yet a closer examination of her new circumstances shows both the continuing limitations of her situation as also her characteristic refusal to accept them quietly. Shobha Manjari's used her unique position – that of a queen among commoners – to create possibilities for her daughter and herself even as she was dogged by old adversaries and not particularly

helped by new friends. For this we must turn to her life in Jhansi.

The Khatri were traditionally an upwardly mobile business and administrator caste.⁴⁵ Despite their mercantile vocation however, they claimed the higher status of Kshatriyas, the originary *varna* of warrior-rulers, one of the four functional divisions of the Brahmanical social order to which castes and sub-castes were attached.⁴⁶ Though this was particularly true in the Punjab where British ethnographers had largely accepted this claim, it would have applied to Khatri elsewhere as well.⁴⁷ Khatri society was organized into *biradaris* or patrilineages and Jyotilal was from a fairly prosperous *biradari*, as is attested by the wedding which was attended by more than five hundred people at a time when Shobha Manjari's resources were running low.⁴⁸

Jyotilal was also like many Khatri at this time a member of the Arya Samaj, a Hindu reform and revivalist movement that, according to its practitioners, rejected the notion of caste and caste practices which it considered as corruption of a pure Vedic tradition.⁴⁹ It was also seen as standing for inter-caste marriages, widespread education and the general uplift of women, including widow remarriage.⁵⁰ Anshu Malhotra has argued that in reality the Arya Samaj remained wedded to and even re-asserted notions of caste purity and gender hierarchy.⁵¹ From the time of its founder Dayanand Saraswati in the late 19th century, the Arya Samaj had a conception of society 'populated by healthy, upper caste Aryan men' uncorrupted by the 'social chaos of caste inter-mixture'.⁵² Their program of women's uplift, especially education, was limited to the preparation of women for domestic duties where devotion to husband and children was paramount.⁵³ Malhotra has also shown how the Arya Samaj's discourse on widow remarriage, in the first place inspired by fears about a widow's sexuality and economic liability, was superseded by its ideal of ascetic and social service oriented widowhood.⁵⁴ In this light, the Samaj's reformist posturing, says Malhotra, was only a response of high caste and patriarchal groups like the Khatri to overcome under the garb of progressivism, the 'vulnerability of a caste of professional men encountering an alien colonial culture daily'.⁵⁵ The rationalist, modernist rhetoric of the Samaj helped counter the impression of caste backwardness even as its traditionalist basis reinscribed anew older caste and gender prejudices.

Even though the 'moral language'⁵⁶ of the Arya Samaj fortified her in her negotiations with the Kanker administration, from the above discussion it would appear that Shobha Manjari and her daughter were merely exchanging one restrictive space for another. With her income severely curtailed, she would have been left

with few choices in Jhansi. But Shobha Manjari used her relative advantages as a royal among commoners and a commoner among royals to give herself and her daughter new possibilities in the form of their trip to England. A brief look at the events following her return to Jhansi from Kanker will bear this out.

We know of the England trip from a set of secret correspondence between the Agent of the Eastern States Agency, the Political Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department and the Secretary in the Political (Internal) Department, India Office, London. In January 1935, Govind Kumari requested a sum of Rs.40,000 from the Kanker administration for the purpose of travel to England with her husband for studies.⁵⁷ The Kanker administration refused this request.⁵⁸ Soon after in June, Shobha Manjari applied for a passport to go to England 'on grounds of health' and 'asked for a special additional allowance (over the Rs. 500 she was being given monthly) for her maintenance and treatment there'.

Coming so close after the refusal of her daughter's request, this was rightly seen by colonial authorities as a sign of 'her determination...to forward the plans of her daughter'. The colonial authorities had several reasons to believe so. The three medical certificates that Shobha Manjari submitted to make her case mentioned a series of ailments – from insomnia to joint pain – without specifying a root cause.⁵⁹ None of the symptoms mentioned pointed to the condition of chronic syphilis which she could have been suffering from as it had been the cause of the death of her husband, the late ruler of Kanker.⁶⁰ And she had also not exhausted the avenues of treatment available in India in order to claim the need to travel to England for better care.⁶¹ Later in England, she was diagnosed as having 'much fibrositis in the muscles of her shoulder girdle and two painful palpable nodules in the lumbar region'.⁶² Her physician in London, Dr. Gow, complained that her 'attendance from treatment was most erratic and she often failed to keep her appointment'.⁶³ In order that the two issues – Shobha Manjari's illness and Govind Kumari's education – not be seen as part of one plan, Govind Kumari and Jyoti Lal applied for their passport to the Government of U.P., while Shobha Manjari and her cook Chatur Singh did so to the Agent of the Eastern States at Ranchi.⁶⁴

The colonial authorities were divided on the question of granting a passport to Shobha Manjari. The Political Agent recognized the risk in refusing her a passport without good reason, especially as medical opinion, however dubious, advised her sea voyage, change of climate and treatment in London.⁶⁵ The Superintendent in Kanker on the other hand drew attention to her previous conduct and argued that this desire to visit England was

in keeping with her previous behavior and 'unbecoming of her station and to her condition as a Hindu widow'.⁶⁶

The main discussion however was concerning the funds for her travel, living and medical expenses in England in the light of the fact that Kanker was refusing to admit any obligation towards her requirements, even in the matter of her illness. The Political Agent, in defending his decision of eventually granting her a passport, mentioned that he believed, on the basis of the information the Superintendent had provided, that she had 'considerable financial resources of her own'.⁶⁷ The latter had reported that at the time of leaving Kanker, Shobha Manjari had carried with her 'upwards of Rs.60,000/- in cash and currency notes, and jewelry and ornaments of about the same value'.⁶⁸ The Political Agent's fear was not so much that Shobha Manjari would become destitute in England as the possibility that 'she would allege such a condition in order to obtain through representations in England what she had failed to obtain here...either an increase in her allowance or the restoration of her villages'.⁶⁹ As such he suggested that the India Office be warned of this eventuality so that they could be saved some embarrassment and could deal with her 'exaggerations' appropriately.⁷⁰

The Kanker state administration did not recognize her when it came to the issue of funds but was unwilling to give up its interest in her when the possibilities of her destitution and all-round embarrassment in England were raised. Repeatedly the administration made it known that neither was it in a position to support her nor approved of her visit.⁷¹ It worried that 'her presence in England might cause embarrassment to the authorities of the India Office and elsewhere'.⁷² The Political Secretary's Office in India tended to share the apprehensions of the Kanker administration, in response to which the Political Agent had to defend his decision to grant her a passport.⁷³ One of their worries was that in case Shobha Manjari did in fact, whether truly or untruly, present herself as a destitute in England, and the Kanker administration reiterated its inability to take responsibility, they would be left to deal with the matter, including the question of funds.

Endgame

In any case, Shobha Manjari left for England on the 20th of June 1935 with her daughter, son-in-law and cook. Much of this confusion is known to us in letters exchanged between officials post-facto, i. e. her departure for England. The party intended to stay in England for two years, as the negotiations for a rental accommodation show⁷⁴, but was forced to return to India via Marseilles by the 20th of August, 1936⁷⁵.

Their stay in England was difficult but not entirely fruitless. The difficulties were largely on account of financial strains resulting from Shobha Manjari's gamble, her decision to attempt a project beyond her means on the premise that sooner than later, the Kanker administration, hurried on by the Political Agent, the Governor General's Office and India Office, would relent. Or at least would be shamed by her penury to give her what she thought she deserved. If Shobha Manjari had the resources, as the Political Agent speculated, she pretended penury beyond her own good. For if the purpose was to stay in England for at least two years and to set her daughter and son-in-law on a career of education and beyond, her necessary reliance on the government for funds forced her return a year too early. It would then be safe to assume that she was short of funds from the very beginning, contrary to the official view that she had enough or even more and was pretending dereliction to procure more from the state.

Her financial difficulties are evident from a letter written by one of her physicians, Dr. A. E. Gow of Upper Harley Street, London, to the Indian Office in May, 1936. He mentions that from the very beginning of his treatment of Shobha Manjari, that is September 1935, she seemed to be 'very difficult about times'.⁷⁶ Her financial obligations piled up quickly. She seems in all to have consulted seven doctors and one dentist, and used the facilities of at least three hospitals.⁷⁷ She was advised the services of a masseuse and regularly employed one.⁷⁸ She lived in two accommodations one after the other in this duration, both on Westbourne Terrace Road in the borough of the city of Westminster, central London, employing a gardener at least in one of them.⁷⁹ There were three people to be looked after from the small sums that Shobha Manjari and her daughter – £ 375 and £ 205 in all respectively – received from Kanker.⁸⁰ The cook was sent back in July 1935 perhaps because of her inability to support him. There are mentions of a couple of fur coats and a one-time payment to a 'Fellowship Club' in July 1935 in her list of expenditure, but such leisure spending seems to have been minimal.⁸¹ Even the India Office believed that 'the record of expenditure supplied does not suggest undue extravagance in relation to the position of the party concerned'.⁸² It is possible that Jyotilal fell ill with appendicitis soon after reaching England and was operated for it.⁸³ There would also have been the payment of fee for his Special University Entrance Exam for admission into a B. Sc. Program at the London School of Economics, and the cost for its preparatory study.⁸⁴ Shobha Manjari was forced by mounting expenses to borrow from T. L. Wilson and Co. By the end of May 1936, according to the estimate of her financiers Wilson

and Co. and Mr. Patel, one of her landlords, she was in debt of about £ 833.⁸⁵

It is in this dire situation that Shobha Manjari wrote again to the Kanker administration for funds. We get a rare sympathetic account of this from the intervention of Sir Lynden Macassey, K. C., of whom there is mention in the reports of India Office.⁸⁶ Macassey was 'advising' a group of states in the Eastern India Agency and was in this capacity asked by India Office, to whom her creditors T. L. Wilson and Co. came for redress, to intervene on Shobha Manjari's behalf. In his meeting with her, Macassey was told about her treatment by the Kanker State and furnished with some correspondence that demonstrated the nature of her grievance. Macassey thus came into the possession of some 'improper letters' sent to Shobha Manjari by the Superintendent of the Kanker State which he used to argue for relief for her. Macassey warned the government that Shobha Manjari 'had been advised by her friends in this country to publish her grievances in the Press'.⁸⁷ In order to 'avoid publicity', he advised that the Kanker State take responsibility for the royal party. We also know that Shobha Manjari might have been contemplating a petition to the Governor General directly on the advice of Macassey himself.⁸⁸

When pressure was brought to bear on the colonial officials in this manner, India Office persuaded their colleagues in India to grant Shobha Manjari a sum of £ 1000 on behalf of the Kanker state to defray her loans and get a passage back to India.⁸⁹ The India Office argued that since the Kanker state was under minority administration, the Kanker officials could not 'disavow all responsibility for the *Maharani* (queen) and her daughter if they become stranded (in England) without resources'.⁹⁰ More importantly they contended that this would help avoid a 'scandal'.⁹¹

This sum was to be advanced however on the condition that Shobha Manjari's party return to India as soon as possible. The advice of Dr. Gow and Dr. V. V. Thomas was sought in this matter and they might have been forced to give an early date for the completion of their patient's treatment, which turned out to be at the end of June, 1936.⁹² Through hectic parleys among colonial officials, a decision was also taken to impound the passports of the party on arrival at Bombay.⁹³ The party was kept uninformed of this order as is testified by Jyotilal who, on reaching Bombay on the 20th of August 1936, found to his surprise that their passports were collected by the passport office without any explanation.⁹⁴ Shobha Manjari's adventure had come to an end.

In the light of these developments, Shobha Manjari and Govind Kumari decided to keep a low profile when Jyotilal applied for the return of his passport at the end

of August that year in order to return to England to take his seat at the London School.⁹⁵ Keeping the royal women in his life carefully out of sight, assuring the authorities of his independent financial worth (which was Rs. 4000 in personal savings) and advancing the plea that this concerned his career and future life, Jyotilal argued for a couple of months with the Government of U.P., the Government of India and the Passport Office in Bombay to retrieve his passport.⁹⁶ The question of Govind Kumari's education was not raised at all. It is by de-linking himself from the Kanker trail that Jyotilal eventually managed to leave for London later that year. Macassey, who claims that the young man made an impression on him and also that he had used his influence to get him into the London School, might also have played a part.⁹⁷ The last we hear of Shobha Manjari is in a mention of Macassey in Whitehall's letter to the Political Secretary in Delhi.⁹⁸ In his visit to India Office in late 1936, Macassey seems to have spoken of 'the destitute state of the lady in Jhansi' and of the fact that 'nothing could be done here'.⁹⁹ Finally Shobha Manjari's transgressions had been contained.

Conclusion

Dominant discourses mark the limits of the possible as transgression. Transgression is the unspeakable, hence the secrecy of the archive and the forgetting in popular memory. But for Shobha Manjari, whose life choices as a woman, a widow and mother were sought to be suppressed, transgression was a moment of possibility – that of her daughter's succession, of her marriage of choice, of her education, of their life. What she pursued as opportunities for life and dignity were marked as transgression against royal station, upper caste and gendered values. Shobha Manjari's life was an unusual one, lived as it was continually in transgression. This is precisely why it forces itself out, despite the suppressions, in popular memory and the archive, as a dissonant sign, full of desire and implacable. It is the choices that she made that thrust her into our vision: between a life of royalty and that of a commoner, wealth and destitution, silence and activity, conformity and dissent. These choices challenged the repose of royalty, caste society and patriarchy and at the end, left them a little anxious.

Notes

1. IOR/R/1/1/2598, Clandestine marriage of Maharajkumari of Kanker, Eastern States Agency, with one Jyotilal of Jhansi. Treatment accorded to the Junior Maharani of Kanker and her daughter during the minority of its ruler, London: British Library, 1936-7.
2. IOR/R/1/1/2704, Visit of and the question of the grant of passport to the Junior Maharani of Kanker to England,

- London: British Library, 1935; IOR/R/1/1/ 2825, The Junior Maharani of Kanker's visit to England. Impounding of her passport and the passport of her party, London: British Library, 1936.
3. I use this term like it is in Carolyn Steedman, *Landscape for a Good Woman: A Story of Two Lives* (London: Virago, 1986), p. 5.
4. The ruling chief at this time was the twelve year old boy Bhanu Pratap Deo.
5. IOR/R/1/1/2598
6. V. D. Sahasi and J. R. Valyani, *Bastar aur Kanker Riyasat Ka Rajnaitik evam Sanskritik Itihas* (Raipur: Divya Prakashan, 1998), p. 80.
7. Ibid.
8. Pratibha Jain and S. Sharma, *Honour, Status and Polity, Rajputana* (Jaipur: Rawat Publication, 2005).
9. IOR/V/1368-1372, *Annual Administrative Reports of the Kanker State, 1941-46*, London: British Library, 1947.
10. Ibid.
11. IOR/R/1/1/2598.
12. T. L. H. Smith-Pearse, *Past, Present and Future: Being an Account of and Plan for the Rajkumar College Raipur, CP, 1882-1947* (Unknown Binding, 1947).
13. G. D. Oswell, *A Sketch of Rajkumar College Raipur Central Provinces* (Allahabad: Pioneer Press, 1902).
14. Barbara Ramusack, *The Princes of India in the Twilight of the Empire: Dissolution of Patron-Client System, 1914- 39* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1978), p. 15.
15. Ibid., p. 76.
16. Ibid., p. 79.
17. Ibid., p. 26.
18. Ibid., p. 13.
19. Ibid., p. 19.
20. Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, p. 131.
21. Ibid.
22. Stories of her miraculous powers abound in Kanker.
23. That the ruler had syphilis is not talked about. This is mentioned in relation to Shobha Manjari's later illness in colonial records. OR/R/1/1/2704.
24. Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, p. 135.
25. *Bastar Bandhu*, Kanker: December 2001.
26. Ibid.
27. Nandini Sundar, *Subalterns and Sovereigns: Anthropological History of Bastar, 1854-1996* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 192.
28. Ibid.
29. Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, p. 132.
30. There were 564 villages in the Kanker State in 1941. IOR/V/1368, *Annual Administrative Report of Kanker State, 1941- 42*, London: British Library, 1943, p. 8.
31. Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, p.132.
32. Govind Kumari is mentioned as being sixteen in 1934. IOR/R/1/1/2598.
33. *Bastar Bandhu*; Sahasi, *Bastar aur Kanker*, p.137.
34. IOR/V/1368-1372, *Annual Administrative Reports of the Kanker State, 1941-46*, London: British Library. 1942-47.
35. *Bastar Bandhu*, p. 3.

36. IOR/V/10/1370, *Annual Administrative Report of Kanker State, 1941-42*, London: British Library, 1942, p. 2.
37. Ibid.
38. IOR/R/1/1/2598.
39. *Statement by Jyotilal*. IOR/R/1/1/2598.
40. IOR/R/1/1/2598
41. Ibid.
42. Ibid.
43. Ibid.
44. Ibid.
45. Anshu Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identities: Reconstructing Class in Colonial Punjab*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 32.
46. Ibid.
47. Ibid.
48. IOR/R/1/1/2598.
49. For an early treatment of the Arya Samaj see Lala Lajpat Rai, *The Arya Samaj*, Delhi: Renaissance, 1989
50. D. Vable, *The Arya Samaj: Hindu without Hinduism*, New Delhi: Vikas, 1983, pp. 40-50.
51. Malhotra, *Gender, Caste and Religious Identity*, pp. 38-46.
52. Ibid., 39.
53. Ibid., 144-155.
54. Ibid., 82-115.
55. Ibid., p. 38; This point has also been made by Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharma: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976.
56. Bob van der Leiden, *Moral Language From Colonial Punjab: The Singh Sabha, Arya Samaj and Ahmadiyahs*, Manohar: Delhi, 2008, p. 11-12.
57. She had suffered a miscarriage (Incomplete Abortion, which occurs before the 20th week of pregnancy) in late 1934 within five months of conception and was therefore unencumbered in domestic life. IOR/R/1/1/2704, Letter from Agent, E.S.A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 29 June 1935, p. 3.
58. Ibid.
59. Ibid., Copies of certificates from Mohan Lal Mehra (Jhansi), N. J. Bachru (Sholapur) and Ganeshi Lal (Nagpur), June 1936, pp.4-6.
60. Ibid., pp. 1-2.
61. Ibid., p. 2.
62. Ibid., Letter of Dr. A. E. Gow of 3, Upper Harley Street to the Medical Adviser to the Secretary of State for India, India Office, Whitehall, 13 May 1936, p. 1.
63. Ibid.
64. Ibid., Joint Secretary's Note, p. 14.
65. Ibid., Letter from Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 14 August, 1935, p. 2.
66. Ibid., Letters from Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 29 June 1935, p. 3.
67. Ibid., Letter from Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 14 August, 1935, p. 1.
68. Ibid.
69. Ibid., pp.1-2
70. Ibid., Letter from Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 29 June 1935, p. 3.
71. Ibid., Letter from Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 14 August, 1935; Letter from the Political Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 1 July, 1936.
72. Ibid., Letter from Agent, E. S. A. to Political Secretary, Government of India, 14 August, 1935, p. 2. Emphasis is mine.
73. Ibid.
74. Ibid., Letter of K. Noble to India Office, Whitehall, 16 April, 1936.
75. IOR/R/1/1/2825, Express Letter from Chief Secretary, Government of Bombay, Political and Reform Department, 24 August, 1936.
76. Ibid., Letter from Dr. A. E. Gow to India Office, 13 May 1936.
77. Ibid., List of Expenses incurred by Her Highness the Maharani of Kanker, T. L. Wilson and Co., 29 May, 1936.
78. Ibid., Letter from Dr. A. E. Gow to India Office, 13 May 1936.
79. Ibid., List of Expenses incurred by Her Highness the Maharani of Kanker
80. Ibid., Letter of T. L. Wilson and Co. to India Office, 29 May 1936
81. Ibid., List of Expenses incurred by Her Highness the Maharani of Kanker
82. Ibid.
83. Ibid., Letter from Jyoti Lal to Passport Office, Government of Bombay, 29 August, 1936., p.1
84. Ibid., Letter from Secretary of State's Office to Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, 12 June 1936.
85. Ibid., Letter of T.L. Wilson and Co. to India Office, 29 May 1936.
86. Ibid., Letter from Secretary of State's Office to Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, 23 May 1936.
87. Ibid., p. 1-2.
88. Ibid., Letter from Secretary of State's Office to Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, 7 January 1936.
89. IOR/R/1/1/2825.
90. Ibid., Letter from Secretary of State's Office to Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, 23 May 1936, p. 3.
91. Ibid., Letter from Foreign and Political Department, Government of India to Office of Secretary of State, India Office, 29 June 1936.
92. Ibid., Letter from Dr. V. V. Thomas to the Medical Adviser, India Office, 21 May 1936.
93. Ibid., Letter from Political Agent, E.S.A. to Political Secretary, Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, 1 July 1936.
94. Ibid., Letter of Jyoti Lal to Passport Officer, Government of Bombay, 29 August 1936.
95. Ibid.
96. Ibid.
97. Ibid., Letter from the Secretary of State's India Office to Political Secretary, Foreign and Political Department, Government of India, 7 January 1937.
98. Ibid.
99. Ibid.