

Womanhood Laid Bare

How Katherine Mayo and Manoda Devi Challenged Indian Public Morality

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During the 19th century, the meaning of Hindu womanhood was dramatically contested. Reformers focused on the treatment of women in their attempt to erase religion's 'evil customs,'¹ reactionary revivalists saw women as the guardians of Indian 'tradition,'² nascent Indian nationalism constructed notions of 'indigenous superiority' based around the vision of an ideal Hindu woman.³ This furor came to a head in 1929, via a piece of legislation intended to regulate that barest of all acts – sex – by banning sexual activity in girls younger than 14 years old. This essay examines the relationship between the act itself, and two books, apparently written by women, on the sex lives of Indians. The first book precipitated the passing of the act; the second critiqued it.

The Child Marriage Restraint Bill (also known as the Sarda Act) was the result of almost 70 years of agitation⁴ by Indian reformers and legislators, counter-protest by orthodox Hindus, and latterly, campaigns by the All India Women's Conference (AWC).⁵ The age of consent had been set at 10 years old for girls in 1860; the Special Marriage Bill raised it to 14 years for Brahmos in 1872; and in 1891 the age was raised to 12 years for all girls. But reformers considered this to be barbarically low; and their attempts to raise the age of consent still further were seen by conservatives as an attack on Hindu culture. By the 1920s, the debate had reached a stalemate. What happened in 1929 to precipitate the passing of this much-contested law is an interesting illustration of the power of public opinion in affecting government legislation, rather than vice versa. In this case, the catalyst for reform came from an unexpected and unwelcome quarter – a travel-book by an American journalist which luridly contested carefully-constructed notions of Indian female sexuality.

Katherine Mayo's book, published in 1927 and insultingly titled *Mother India* – a reference to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's poem "*Bande Mataram* (Hail to thee, Mother)" which had been adopted as a nationalist song – shocked the American, British and Indian public due to its highly sensational descriptions of the "pitiful" life meted out to Indian women by Hinduism. In an age when the domestic sphere was still considered a largely private affair, Mayo flamboyantly exposed the sexual habits of Hindus by asserting that husbands regularly practised the marital rape of sexually immature girls. 'Early marriage' had been hotly debated in the Legislative Assembly for some time now,⁶ but Mayo's graphic

depiction of India's sex-life grabbed the headlines by linking premature sexual activity to male impotence (she claimed it affected 70-80% of Indian males), infant mortality (of both child-mother and baby), widespread venereal disease, and prostitution. Singling out Brahmin men and their laws for moral condemnation, Mayo also refused to make a distinction between the well-being of high- or low-caste women, insisting that in India, women were universally oppressed. Most shocking of all: she correlated prostitution with Hindu religious practice, alleging that high-caste wives with impotent husbands were sent to temples to be impregnated by priests,⁷ that young girls were bequeathed to priests as *devadasis* (whom she interpreted as prostitutes),⁸ and that the Indian widow "not seldom falls" into prostitution.⁹

This connection – between high-caste women/child-marriage/child-widows and prostitution – was a logical one, and it had been made before. At least as early as 1872, the British official A. Mackenzy, had noted: "In Bengal the prostitute class seems to be chiefly recruited from the ranks of Hindu widows...often it is stated: women of good caste".¹⁰ In 1885, R. Ragoonath Row dramatically described the tribulations of Brahmin widows, concluding: "She is shunned...It then becomes necessary for her to sell her body for the sake of bread".¹¹ In 1918, the reformer Ram Chandra had written: "One of the greatest evils today is the alarming increase in the number of prostitutes...we must devise some means to put a stop to further recruitment of our wives and widows".¹² But Mayo was probably the first person to bring the connection so forcefully into the public domain.

Hitherto an unbridgeable separation had been assumed in public discourse between prostitutes and high-caste Hindu women (*bhadramahila*). In contrast to the attention paid to governmental legislation on *sati*, widow-remarriage and child-marriage – issues which were seen to have direct bearing on upper-caste Hindu women and hence the whole fabric of Brahminical society – 19th-century laws on prostitution were passed without much protest from the Indian elite. Prostitutes may have been "an accepted part of society" but they nevertheless carried too much stigma to be defended from the British, and as Sumanta Banerjee points out, while the various measures legalised by the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 (such as detaining suspected prostitutes for examination) were commented on in the Indian press, they were not seen as a colonial slur on Indian womanhood.¹³ The same definitely could not be said of other British legislation concerning women, the adverse reaction to which partly explains the government's slowness in instigating 'social reform'.

Historians concur that Mayo's "muck-raking" work precipitated the sudden passing of Sarda Act.¹⁴ For the British government, the worldwide focus on India was intensely embarrassing: *Mother India* was seen to "put the British record in India on the line and the viceroy called for action".¹⁵ In Britain and America, "the proceedings of the legislature were followed in as if the outcome would prove or disprove Mayo's conclusions".¹⁶ For Indians, Mayo was a racist,¹⁷ sex-obsessed/deprived spinster,¹⁸ and the "defamer of a nation"¹⁹; the government was criticised for aiding her research, and the "benevolent British press" for "booming" the book.²⁰ But it became obvious to (the majority of) the Legislative Assembly that the world would condemn them unless they passed the Bill.²¹

It is probably true, therefore, that the *Mother India*-induced uproar worked in women's favour to shake "people out of their complacency" (as an editorial in *The Statesman* of

Calcutta put it in 1929).²² But was the Sarda Act really what women wanted? An autobiography of a Calcutta prostitute, published in Bengali in 1929 (and in English two years later), suggested not.

Prostitutes are a popular subject of desire and abuse in most literatures, and 19th-century Bengali popular fiction was no exception. As Ratnabali Chatterjee has shown, the generic *beshya* was used both as salacious literary spice, while also reinforcing the entrenched social dichotomy between the “upper caste Hindu women as the embodiment of moral order” and the “moral decay brought about through the agency of sexually deviant women”.²³ Key to this construction, Sumanta Banerjee argues, was the assumption that the *patitar*, or ‘fallen women’, a “term invented by society to imprison them in an untouchable pigeon-hole”, came from the “condemned fringes” of society.²⁴ The prostitute’s opposite was the *bhadramahila*, the ‘goddess’ and ‘mother’ of Indian nationalism.²⁵

Like Katherine Mayo, Manoda Devi, a Calcutta prostitute, challenged this dichotomy. Polite *bhadramahila* autobiographies were an established form by the time the Sarda Act was coming into force.²⁶ Manoda Devi’s autobiography caused a scandal by presenting the *bhadramahila* as *beshya*.

There has been little academic work done on the Bengali edition of this text, published as *Shikshita Patitar Atmcharit* in 1929, probably (suggests Samanta Banerjee) by one of the “cheap Battala presses”²⁷; and apparently none on the English version, translated as *Autobiography of an Educated Fallen Women* and published as a (presumably more expensive) hardback in 1931. It is anybody’s guess whether the book is the authentic work of a Bengali prostitute, or a (male-scripted) propaganda fiction. The manner in which Manoda Devi’s views on women at times concur with those of male conservatives, suggests it might be the work of a man. Her heated condemnation of patriarchal hypocrisy indicates the opposite. The descriptions of prostitute life, grim as they are, could be seen to match “the indigenous literary formula” of 19th-century fictions written by Bengali men about prostitutes that Ratnabali Chatterjee analyses,²⁸ or the “lurid accounts of positive female sexuality punished” in 19th-century Marathi novels by men, which Rosalind O’Hanlon has studied; then again, Manoda’s conservative moralising tone bears similarities to those of genuine female moralists such as Tarabai Shinde.²⁹ Authentic or fictional, the text is a deft illustration of the complex contemporary relationship between reforming and retrograde public perceptions of female sexuality, child-marriage, and prostitution. Its crisscrossing notions and conflicting agendas give voice to the ambivalence that some Bengali men and women must have felt at the time, with regard to the rapidly changing socio-sexual scene.

As it stands, Manoda Devi’s life-story can be seen, up to a point, to vindicate Mayo’s claim that high-caste Hindu women became involved in ‘low-caste’ professions such as



prostitution. The work purports to be by a Brahmin woman who eloped from home as a teenager, and was forced into prostitution after her lover abandoned her and her father cut her off. Following a few years after the famous actress Binodini Dasi's *Amar Abhinetri Jiban* (My Life as an Actress) [1924/5], Manoda's story is Binodini's mirror-image: whereas Binodini came from the prostitutes' quarters and went on to find fame, Manoda began as a *bhadramahila* and ended up a *beshya*. No doubt the *Autobiography* was designed to exploit that connection.

It is more difficult to judge where Manoda Devi stands in relation to Katherine Mayo.

Some aspects of the *Autobiography* suggest its author was influenced by *Mother India* – the graphic depictions of female degradation; the sardonic attitude to “Khadder”³⁰ nationalists, and “*Bande Mataram*” (Manoda is seduced as she is singing it)³¹; the touristic survey of India's most famous religious sites which Manoda makes during her elopement. Yet Manoda did not become a prostitute for any of the reasons that Katherine Mayo delineates. Quite the opposite in fact.

Born into a “respectable Brahmin family”³² at the beginning of the 20th century, Manoda was given a liberal education. She was first tutored at home, and later sent to the renowned Bethune School – an institution which, as Ghulam Murshid shows,³³ had been the subject of fierce orthodox criticism in the 1850s, and even by the 1910s (when Manoda probably went there) still functioned as a symbol of women's emancipation, or ruin, depending on your viewpoint. Manoda's father, who was inclined to Brahma Samaj ideas, encouraged her education:

“Father used to reply, ‘I won't marry her so early. Let her first of all get through the Matriculation Examination, then, I think, it might be decided’. What people replied to it, it is un-necessary to repeat here. Now-a-days every reader is acquainted with those arguments, that daily fill the columns of our newspapers”.³⁴

So far so broad-minded. But Manoda suspected that her father – his hands full with a second wife not much older than his daughter – had kept Manoda in school because he was too lazy to get her married. A spinster at the ripe old age of 13, Manoda “gradually...grew conscious of my age...Through the negligence of my guardians and a chance favouring, the flame of flesh was ablaze in my heart. I knew of it all and I desired for marriage”.³⁵

Thanks to her schooling, Manoda had read “light literatures” – as well as Byron, Shakespeare and Bankim. So she knew just what to do. Sexually aroused by her books, her



male cousins and her male tutors, she contrived to elope like the heroines of her novels. Alas, like Flaubert's Emma, Manoda quickly found that "The world that I had seen so long in the pages of the novels and the books that I had read, melted away before me as soon as I came in direct touch with it".³⁶ Abandoned and betrayed by her father, her lover, and all her subsequent male protectors, Manoda was forced to fend for herself: she became a prostitute. The moral she draws from her own story is morose but predictable: "some sort of subservience even in emancipation is absolutely unavoidable".³⁷

Orthodox Hindus clearly felt vindicated by Manoda's timely confession: her autobiography seemed to uphold the classic Dharmasutric representation of women's insatiable sexuality and the need to control it.³⁸ Judging by the other books advertised in the end-pages of the English edition of Manoda's work, it seems highly likely that the *Autobiography* was translated by a conservative Hindu publishing house in order to promote the prostitute's life-story as a riposte to the Sarda Act's ban on child marriage. Thus, J.C. Bhattacharya's *Mysteries of Married Life* recommends Manoda's writing as essential reading for anyone who wishes to know why "Hinduism has fallen on evil times, on evil pens and evil tongues".³⁹ Syam Sunder Chakravarty's treatise, *My Mother's Picture: An Attempt to Get at the Hindu Spirit in Connection with the Mayo Challenge*, argues that the "evils to which Miss Mayo refers...in so far as they exist – are really the outcome not of the orthodox Hindu creed, but of a fall from that creed".⁴⁰ While Chakravarty attacks Mayo, Bhattacharya's work, in particular, is a direct retort to the Brahmo Samaj (which encourages "marriage in advanced ages"), Bethune College (for tolerating "all sorts of infectious corruptions resulting out of freedom to women"), and the Sarda Act (for forcing sexually frustrated young girls to "commit illicit sexual intercourse"). Bhattacharya warns that the Sarda Act will make India like Europe ("where after puberty marriages are prevalent women corruptions are so virulent that all sorts of sexual crimes are committed in public places like theatre, bioscope, restaurant and even in shops"). "Such", he observes, "is the baneful result of women freedom".⁴¹

To a certain extent, Manoda concurs. Her life-story, which spans 30 years – from her schooling, to her elopement, to her employment in the brothels of Calcutta – ends in what would have been the present day for the contemporary reader, just as the campaigns in favour of the Sarda Act have reached their height. Manoda, who is by now working as a high-class escort, overhears somebody commenting on the Sarda Act at a polite tea-party. She is unable to restrain herself from speaking out:

"I forgot the fact that I was acting as an educated woman of the so-called advanced society. I remembered those thousand instances where virgin girls unable to stand the first onslaughts of youth gave themselves up to illegal satisfactions of their lust and were forced to take shelter in our quarters...I said, 'In the natural course of time as the girl attends to puberty she readily awakens into sex-consciousness. It is necessary that



she should be married before that...If you approach those ladies that marched the other day towards the Town Hall to lend their support to the Sarda Act, and ask their opinion...they themselves would reply in the same language that I have said".⁴²

As Manoda herself admits, it is not a politically correct response.

Nevertheless, despite her refusal to endorse fashionable liberal practices, Manoda is not writing conservative Hindu propaganda. While she condemns frivolous education, irresponsible literature and even the reformed sari for leading girls into prostitution ("a profession that the heart abhors"⁴³), she no more finds succour in religion than she did in books. Instead, Manoda lays the blame for the fall of women at the feet of men. Like Binodini Dasi, who wrote in *Amar Katha* in 1912 that women "are lured by men... Who are these men? Are not some of them...admired and respected in society?"⁴⁴ Manoda indicts the patriarchal system:

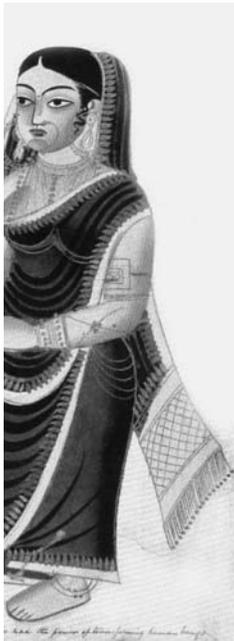
"I am a despised being – I live outside the pale of society... but my autobiography would disclose some pictures of those pseudo-honest men, those lewds that daily come in contact with us and yet occupy the highest seats of honour in our society".⁴⁵

She is writing her autobiography, she tells us, with the express purpose of exposing those who "belong to the blessed groups of poets, literatures, social reformers, legal luminaries, school masters, college-professors, political leaders and their assitans [sic], high officials, Brahmos, Mahamahopadhyas, Sanskrit Pandits holding the titles of Vidyabhuson, and Torkbagish, Priests, Mohunts and religious preceptors".⁴⁶ Manoda is unequivocal: her book is a catalogue of male hypocrisy.

Whether or not Manoda's story was true, it would appear that it was not unusual. Indrani Chatterjee's analysis of the 1935 "Calcutta Police Survey of Prostitutes", shows that police data does not tally either with the contemporary assumption that prostitutes had been lured, abducted or raped into the trade by madams or pimps or that they are necessarily women of low-caste and loose morals.⁴⁷ Like Manoda Devi and her colleagues, the majority of women interviewed by the police came from good homes; they became prostitutes after their lovers or husbands abandoned them, or when they were widowed. What the Survey revealed, above all, was the difficulties faced by woman who transgressed the social norm; for high-caste women were not supposed to either experience lust or fall in love.

Manoda Devi, apparently, did both. The "sensation"⁴⁸ created by the Bengali version of her story, and its subsequent transition to an English readership, indicate the nerve it touched in contemporary society. Seventy years before, the 'fall' of an 'educated woman' may have seemed like a double contradiction in terms. As two unlikely female authors demonstrated, by 1929 the link was not so outlandish after all.

As for the Sarda Act itself, Geraldine Forbes stresses the positive side-effect that campaigns in favour of it had on the burgeoning Indian women's



movement. However, “[e]nforcement of the Act was practically non-existent”, and by 1934, the AWC was “disappointed” with it.⁴⁹ Legal and bureaucratic frustrations notwithstanding, there does seem to have been a general emancipation of discourse concerning female sexuality at this time, as the writer of Manoda Devi’s autobiography proves – even if this did not automatically lead to women’s sexual freedom.

NOTES

1. Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge, 1996) p. 17.
2. See Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi, 2001) p. 229.
3. Indrani Chatterjee. “Refracted Reality: The 1935 Calcutta Police Survey of Prostitutes” In *Manushi*, 57 (New Delhi, 1990) pp. 26-27.
4. The age of consent was set at 10 years old for girls in 1860; the Special Marriage Bill raised it to 14 for Brahmos in 1872; and in 1891 the age was raised to 12 for all girls. Forbes links renewed pressure for reform in the early 1920s with international discussion in the League of Nations (1996, *op cit*, p. 85).
5. Forbes, *op cit*.
6. See The Legislative Assembly Debates (Official Report): Second Session of the Legislative Assembly, 1925, V: III, Delhi, pp. 2823-2852, 2881-2913. It should be noted that while Mayo quotes liberally from the extremist reactions of Hindu conservatives, many of her arguments are culled, unacknowledged, from the opinions of reformist legislators.
7. Mayo, Katherine. *Mother India* (London, 1927) p. 36.
8. Mayo, *ibid*, p. 55.
9. Mayo, *ibid*, p. 84.
10. Quoted in Ratnabali Chatterjee, 1993: “Prostitution in Nineteenth Century Bengal: Construction of Class and Gender”. In *Social Scientist*, 21: 244-46, New Delhi, p.162 (1993). See also Sumanta Banerjee, *Dangerous Outcast: The Prostitute in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Calcutta, p. 88 (1998) for other similar comments by the British on the link between the Hindu ban on remarriage and widow-prostitution.
11. *A Review of the Progress of Knowledge of Hindu Law and Custom Made Among Our British Rulers During the Past Hundred Years*, Madras, p. 18.
12. May 1918: “The Problem of Fallen Women in India”. In *The Vedic Magazine*, 11:10, pp. 549-53, quoted by Madhu Kishwar, “The Daughters of Aryavarta”. In J. Krishnamurty (ed.), *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State* (Delhi, 1989) p. 85.
13. Banerjee, *op cit.*, p.144.
14. The purview of the act was widened to include all Indians, not just Hindus. See Forbes, p. 88; Sonia Nishat Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal 1876-1939* (Leiden, 1996) p. 189; Dagmar Engels, *Beyond Purdah? Women in Bengal 1890-1930* (Delhi, 1999) p. 145.
15. Engels, *ibid*.
16. Forbes, 1996, *op cit*.
17. C.S. Ranga Iyer, *Father India: A Reply to Mother India* (London, 1927) pp. 1-12. See also James Henry Cousins, *The Path to Peace: An Essay on Cultural Exchange and India’s Contribution Thereto With a Prefatory Note on “Mother India”* (Madras, 1928) p. 2.
18. World Citizen [pseud. Shantaram Ganpatrao Warty], *Sister India: A Critical Examination of and a Reasoned Reply to Miss Katharine [sic] Mayo’s Mother India* (Bombay, 1928) p.103.

19. Rai Sahib Harbilas Sarda, Legislative Assembly Debates, V, p. 4410 (Delhi, 1927).
20. Lajpat Rai, *Unhappy India: Being a Reply to Miss Katherine Mayo's Mother India* (Calcutta, 1928) p. xxix.
21. Legislative Assembly Debates I, p. 196-97 and IV, p. 262 (Delhi, 1929).
22. Quoted in Harry Hubert Field, *After Mother India: Being an examination of Mother India, of the first nine volumes written in reply thereto, and of other criticisms; together with certain new evidence mostly from Indian sources*, (London, 1929) p. 214. Field was Mayo's friend, but his book is a useful anthology of press reaction to *Mother India*.
23. Ratnabali Chatterjee, *op cit*, p. 162, 166. This well-established theme, as Sumit Sarkar has illustrated, was connected to concepts of the Kaliyug (see 'The Kalki-Avatar of Bikrampur: A Village Scandal in Early Twentieth Century Bengal', *Subaltern Studies IV*, Ranajit Guha (ed.), Oxford, 1989, pp. 1-53).
24. Banerjee, *op cit*, p. 125.
25. Partha Chatterjee (1989), "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question". In *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (eds.) Kumkum Sangari and S. Vaid (New Brunswick, 1990) p. 248.
26. See Rimli Bhattacharya (ed. and tr.), *Binodini Dasi: My Story and My Life as an Actress* (New Delhi, 1998) p. 21; and Tharu, Susie and K. Lalita (eds.), *Women Writing in India: 600 BC to the Early 20th Century* (London, 1991) pp. 160ff.
27. Banerjee, *op cit*, p. 207.
28. Chatterjee, *op cit*, p. 167.
29. *A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India* (Oxford, 1994) p. 46.
30. Manoda Devi. *Autobiography of an Educated Fallen Woman* (Calcutta, 1931) p. 159.
31. *Ibid*, p. 9.
32. *Ibid*, p. 1.
33. *Reluctant Debutante: Responses of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905* (1983) p. 34, 48, 51ff.
34. Devi, *op cit*, p. 24
35. *Ibid*.
36. *Ibid*, pp. 40-41.
37. *Ibid*.
38. For discussion of this topic, see for example Uma Chakravarti's "Gender, Caste and Labour: The Ideological and Material Arrangements of Widowhood". In Martha Alter Chen (ed.), *Widows in India: Social Neglect and Public Action* (New Delhi, 1998, Sage Books) pp. 68-69.
39. *Mysteries of Married Life* (Calcutta, 1931).
40. *My Mother's Picture: An Attempt to Get at the Hindu Spirit in Connection with the Mayo Challenge*, (Calcutta, 1931) p. xx.
41. *Op cit*, pp.vi-vii.
42. Devi, *op cit*, pp.162-63.
43. *Ibid*, p. 158.
44. Quoted in Sumanta Banerjee, *op cit*, p. 120.
45. Devi, *op cit*, p. vi.
46. Devi, *op cit*, p. 95.
47. Indrani Chatterjee, *op cit*.
48. Banerjee, *op cit*, p. 207, 2n.
49. Forbes, *op cit*, pp. 80, 89, 113.