Feminism in modern India

The experience of the Nehru women (1900-1930)

Elena Borghi

Thesis submitted for assessment with a view to
obtaining the degree of Doctor of History and Civilization
of the European University Institute

Florence, 16 October 2015

European University Institute
Department of History and Civilization

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Examining Board

Prof. Dirk Moses, European University Institute (Supervisor)
Prof. Laura Lee Downs, European University Institute (Second reader)
Prof. Padma Anagol, Cardiff University (External Advisor)
Prof. Margrit Pernau, Max Planck Institute for Human Development

ABSTRACT

The dissertation focuses on a group of women married into the Nehru family who, from the early 1900s, engaged in public social and political work for the cause of their sex, becoming important figures within the north Indian female movement. History has not granted much room to the feminist work they undertook in these decades, preferring to concentrate on their engagement in Gandhian nationalist mobilisations, from the late 1920s. This research instead focuses on the previous years. It investigates, on the one hand, the means Nehru women utilised to enter the public sphere (writing, publishing a Hindi women's journal, starting local female organisations, joining all-India ones), and the networks within which they situated themselves, on the national and international level. On the other hand, this work analyses the complex relations between the feminist and nationalist movements at whose intersection the Nehru women found themselves. The vicissitudes of the Nehru family—and of its female members in particular—work as a lens through which a different light is shed on the political and social realms of early-twentieth century India. As the story unfolds, it becomes clear that its protagonists were all but the passive recipients of others' choices and priorities: their stances—resulting from time to time in resistance, negotiation, acquiescence, or critique—were actually dictated by strategic considerations of political or social expediency, and bespoke an emerging feminist agency.

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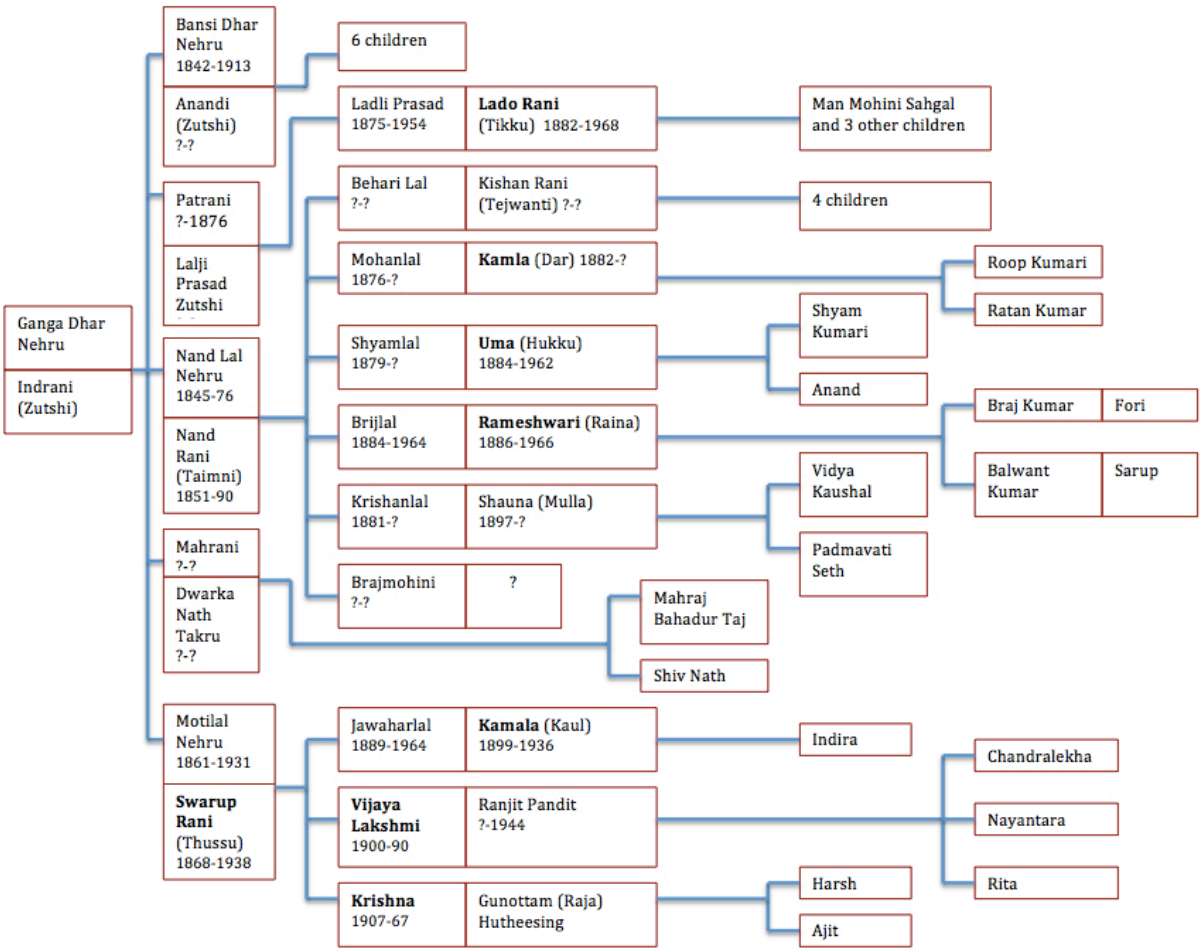
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Many people have accompanied me through the journey that has led to the writing of this thesis; to each of them I am deeply grateful. At the European University Institute, the most enriching academic environment I could wish to be part of, Professor Dirk Moses and Professor Laura Lee Downs have been encouraging and extremely conscientious advisors, as well as scholars whose teachings I have appreciated immensely. Professor Padma Anagol, from Cardiff University, has proven a priceless external advisor, and a historian to whose works I have returned countless times during these years as a PhD researcher. I am honoured to have benefitted from their patience, learning, generosity and passion as historians. Dirk, Laura and Padma: thank you so much!

I owe a note of thanks also to the archivists and librarians I have encountered along this journey. They have helped me find my way through the collections of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, the Marwari Library, the National Archives of India, and the library of the All-India Women's Conference, in Delhi; the British Library and the Women's Library, in London; the Archive of the Centre for South Asian Studies, in Cambridge; the library of the Nagari Pracharini Sabha, in Varanasi, and that of the Hindi Sahitya Sammelan, in Allahabad. I am equally grateful to the colleagues I have met in the various archives, with whom I have shared many hours of fascinating work. My gratitude and admiration go to many EUI friends and colleagues, a brilliant and inspiring bunch of people.

My sincerest thanks to the people who have *supportato* (supported) and *sopportato* (tolerated) me in these last few years of intense work. My family and closest friends have displayed incredible amounts of patience and understanding, glossing over the many occasions in which I have taken time from them, to devote it to this thesis. The energy all this has required has derived largely from their love and support, for which I am deeply grateful. Last but not least, to my partner, who has shared with me all the joys and the worries, the enthusiasm and the anxiety, the hardships and the pride, as well as countless nerdy conversations and readings. For your unfailing support, love and understanding (and for being still around!), thank you.

NEHRU FAMILY TREE



Names in bold are those of the women who, each in her own way, participated in the nascent feminist movement.

INTRODUCTION

The protagonists of this work are a few Indian women who lived between the late nineteenth and the second half of the twentieth century. They were married or born into the renowned Nehru family, which would pass into the annals of history as the main character of the anti-colonial movement and the leading dynasty of independent India. The women on whom these pages focus were the daughters, wives, sisters and cousins of men like Motilal Nehru, his only son Jawaharlal and his many nephews, prominent among the makers of modern India. The oldest of the Nehru women around whom this story develops was Swarup Rani, Motilal's wife and the orthodox soul of the family. Kamala Dhar, Lado Rani, Uma and Rameshwari belonged to the next generation, and entered the Nehru family between the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, as the teenage brides of Motilal's nephews. Kamala Kaul was the youngest among the women who became a Nehru through marriage; she married Jawaharlal in the mid 1910s and was approximately the same age as his sisters, Sarup (called Vijaya Lakshmi after her marriage) and Krishna. At various stages, all these women, their husbands and children lived together as a joint family in the affluent Nehru household in Allahabad, in today's Uttar Pradesh, in a mansion that Motilal had named *Anand Bhawan*, 'The abode of happiness'. There, women witnessed at close quarters the developments of a momentous part of Indian history. They made acquaintance with the most prominent personalities and the latest trends of their time, travelled more than most of their fellow Indian women would ever dream of, and were drawn into the diverse enthusiasms of late-colonial India, from the nineteen-century modernising frenzy that seduced local elites, to the austerity and abnegation of Gandhian politics from the 1920s onward.

The Nehru ladies also played an essential role in another wave that traversed the Indian political landscape in the early twentieth century, namely the women's movement. The so-called "women's question" had until then been the monopoly of male-led reform movements that, oscillating between revivalism and quest for modernisation, often referred to the "Indian woman" mainly as a category through which indigenous identity could be shaped, rather than a subject whose condition was the actual priority.[1]

[1] Lata Mani, *Contentious traditions: the debate on* sati *in colonial India* (London: University of California Press, 1998); Rochona Majumdar, 'Self-sacrifice versus self-interest: a non historicist reading of the history of women's rights in India', *Comparative Studies on South Asia, Africa and the Middle East*, vol. 22, nos. 1-2 (2002), pp. 20-36.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the first autonomous women's groups emerged, which would eventually unite in pan-Indian associations that led the struggle for women's rights, built ties with the broader international women's movement, and participated in all major political developments of late-colonial India. The women at the centre of the following pages were among the beginners of the feminist movement in their region, known at the time as the United Provinces of Agra and Oudh, in northern India (approximately corresponding to the present-day states of Uttar Pradesh and Uttarakhand). To this embryonic feminism the Nehru women dedicated their first political efforts as writers, editors of a Hindi women's monthly journal, and founders of a women's association in Allahabad in the early 1900s—activities that would lead them to participate in the creation and development of the all-India women's movement in the ensuing years.

Despite such early engagement for the cause of women, history has not granted the Nehru ladies much room. When it has, the focus was usually on their nationalism and participation in the Gandhian-led freedom movement on their men's side, from the late 1920s, which have overshadowed the feminist work they independently undertook in the previous years.[2] As has been the case for the Indian women's movement in general, even for the history of the Nehru women the habit to focus on the antagonistic relation between imperialism and nationalism, which has traditionally characterised historiography on modern India, has silenced one side of the picture, glossing over an important dimension of women's agency. A widespread fixation on "the theme of the 'birth-of-the-nation'" and the tendency to write about modern Indian history "as a contest between the British Raj and Indian nationalism" has led to the neglect of women's agency, Anagol has argued.[3] How was it that women, all of a sudden, found it possible to take such an active part in the nationalist movement, facing the police and

[2] Suruchi Thapar, 'The Nehru women: conflicts and stresses during the freedom movement', *Manushi*, 77 (1993), pp. 13-21; Suruchi Thapar, 'The domestic sphere as a political site: a study of women in the Indian nationalist movement', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 20, no. 4 (1997), pp. 493-504; Suruchi Thapar, 'Women as activists, women as symbols: a study of the Indian nationalist movement', *Feminist Review*, 44 (1993), pp. 81-96; Mushirul Hasan *The Nehrus: personal histories* (New Delhi: Roli & Janssen, 2006). The hagiographic biography of Rameshwari Nehru, described as a "patriot and internationalist", acknowledges two distinct phases in her life: first, from the early twentieth century to the late twenties, her dedication to the cause of women's uplift and to editorial activity; and secondly, from the late twenties to 1940, her "maturity and development", and emergence "as a woman leader at the national level inspired and influenced by Gandhiji and Jawaharlal Nehru". Despite this demarcation, the author only elaborates on the latter, leaving aside the former. Om Prakash Paliwal, *Rameshwari Nehru: patriot and internationalist* (Delhi: National Book Trust of India, 1986), pp. 17-18.

[3] Padma Anagol, 'Agency, periodisation and change in the gender and women's history of Colonial India', *Gender & History*, vol. 20, no. 3 (2008), p. 603.

colonial authorities, organising picketing and demonstrations, travelling by themselves and addressing immense crowds? What happened, by the late 1920s, to the shyness, unfamiliarity with the English language, uneasiness about people not belonging to the family, traditional upbringing and habit to seclusion that were the baggage of the Nehru women when they entered the family as teenage brides, at the dawn of the twentieth century?

What kind of history is this history? On genres and terminology

The difficulty of reconciling these two images of the Nehru women and their nationalist participation taken as a given worked as "clues". In historian Giovanni Levi's understanding of the term, "clues" are indications of elements that do not quite fit and need further investigation, and the primary questions on which microhistorical research is grounded. Under the lens of microhistorical analysis, phenomena that seemed to have been sufficiently explained take on wholly different meanings.[4]

This work, which aspires to be a piece of gender history, also falls within the genre of microhistory. It belongs to the former genre by aiming to shed light on the discourses constructing the relationships between the sexes, the gendered roles, norms and assumptions that informed the thought, behaviours and emotions of the group of individuals at the heart of this analysis, as well as of the broader *entourage* to which they belonged. Influenced by many notable examples of gender history works on modern India, these pages wish not only to recover an under-researched part of history, but also, more importantly, to ask questions about gender relations in a given context.[5] The prism

[4] Giovanni Levi, 'On microhistory', in Peter Burke, *New perspectives on historical writing* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991), pp. 93-113.

[5] Influential women's and gender history works on India abound as, starting from the 1980s, the field has grown immensly. Among the most notable book-length studies are, in chronological order: Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting women. Essays in Indian colonial history* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989); Susie Tharu and K. Lalita (eds.), *Women writing in India, 600 B. C. to the present* (New York: The Feminist Press, 1991); Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar (eds.), *Women and Indian nationalism* (Delhi: Vikas, 1994); Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial masculinity: the "Manly Englishman" and the "Effeminate Bengali" in the late nineteenth century* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995); Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996); Uma Chakravarti, *Rewriting history. The life and times of Pandita Ramabai* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998); Mani, *Contentious traditions*; Tanika Sarkar, *Words to win: the making of* Amar Jiban*, a modern autobiography* (Delhi: Kali for Women, 1999); Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation. Community, religion, and cultural nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001); Padma Anagol, *The emergence of feminism in India, 1850-1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Maitreyee Chaudhuri, *Feminism in India* (London and New York: Zed Books, 2005); Mrinalini Sinha, *Specters of Mother India. The global restructuring of an empire* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2006); Meera Kosambi, *Crossing thresholds: feminist essays in social history* (Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2007); Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds.), *Women and social reform in Modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008); Mohua Sarkar, *Visible histories, disappearing women: producing Muslim*

through which such questions are raised is what allows for categorising this work as a microhistorical analysis. It explores the lives and experiences of a small group of individuals, the members of the Nehru family, most of the time further reducing its focus to concentrate on the women, if not on only one or two of them. Again, like microhistorical analyses, this work insists on the specificity of a case, not in search of any alleged typical or emblematic character, but because of its potentiality to raise questions that can be generalised. In this sense, a close analysis of the vicissitudes of which the Nehru women were the protagonists in the first decades of the twentieth century allows for questions relevant to the broader history of women and gender relations in late colonial India. Such questions concern, for instance, the relationship between organised Indian women and the male nationalist leadership, as well as between the feminist and nationalist movements and the colonial presence, or the meanings attached to the idea of modernity, their changes through time, and the symbolic and concrete role of women in its pursuit. The scale of analysis is necessarily small: the goal is to study the characters in context, valuing choices, examining constraints and contradictions as forces that are constantly at work in the everyday existence of individuals that motivate social change.[6]

Focusing as it does on a few individuals connected through family ties, this story is also a sort of group biography. In line with many of the biographies on women written in the last few decades, it tries to uncover the emotional dimension, familial relationships and domestic lives of its subjects, as much as to analyse their public political work, writing and intellectual journey.[7] Moreover, in my own approach to this research work and in the thinking process on which it is grounded, I have noticed several elements of those ironically described by Jill Lepore as typical of biographers. Like many of them, I have fallen in and out of love with those I have come to refer to as "my women", on the one hand constantly tempted to idealise them, and on the other feeling like I was stalking them, in the attempt to plunge deeper and deeper in the

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womanhood in late-colonial Bengal (Durham: Duke University Press, 2008); Anjali Arondekar, *For the record. On sexuality and the colonial archive in India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009); Charu Gupta (ed.), *Gendering colonial India. Reforms, print, caste and communalism* (Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2012).

[6] Giovanni Levi, 'Microhistory and the recovery of complexity', in Susanna Fellman and Marjatta Rahikainen (eds.), *Historical knowledge: in quest of theory, method and evidence* (Newcastle upon Tyne, Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2012), pp. 125-126.

[7] Barbara Caine, *Biography and history* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 44-46.

innermost folds of their lives, thus becoming their "closest ally and bitterest enemy".[8] I have harboured mixed feelings towards my subjects' living relatives—struggling to find my way among their memories and projections, and having a hard time trying to convince them of the disinterested and purely intellectual nature of my curiosity—before I discovered that relatives have been called "the biographer's natural enemies", who behave "like the hostile tribes an explorer encounters and must ruthlessly subdue to claim his territory".[9] More importantly, stressing the path of a few individuals and their relation to the context, this work aims to investigate "the interstitial—and nevertheless important—character of freedom that agents are able to exert", for whose analysis Levi has found biography "the ideal place".[10]

The theme of women's ability to assert freedom (that is, agency) is indeed the backbone of this historical narration. Analysed in relation to the context around them, most Nehru women's stances can be described as the result of a clear agency, understood not forcibly (or not only) as residing in subversion or resistance, but in the ability to realise one's interest despite the presence of obstacles on one's path. A *fil rouge* seems to underlie these women's activism, often recognisable behind their actions and discourses, despite its unfolding in different and not always predictable ways—depending on the times, interlocutors and challenges women found themselves facing. Such a *fil* can be described as a strategic positioning, which recalls Judith Butler's definition of agency as linked and consequential to the construction of social norms and distant from "a predefined teleology of emancipatory politics".[11] Agency becomes here "a process of negotiation with structures—often subversive rather than frontal or visible, and as likely to involve capitulation—and not simply a linear, unidirectional story of overcoming and eventual emergence into modern, liberal, and/or 'feminist' subjecthood".[12] As the story unfolds, it will become clear that its protagonists were all but the passive recipients of others' choices and priorities: their stances (resulting from time to time in resistance, negotiation, acquiescence or critique) were rather dictated by

[8] Jill Lepore, 'Historians who love too much: reflections on microhistory and biography', *Journal of American History*, vol. 88, no. 1 (2001), p. 134.
[9] Janet Malcolm, *The silent woman: Sylvia Plath and Ted Hughes* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994), p. 9. Quoted in Lepore, 'Historians who love too much', p. 136.
[10] Giovanni Levi, 'The uses of biography', in Hans Renders and Binne de Haan (eds.), *Theoretical discussions of biography: approaches from history, microhistory, and life writing* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2013), pp. 106-107.
[11] Saba Mahmood has discussed the notion of agency as understood by Butler and other philosophers in her work on women's movements in contemporary Egypt. Saba Mahmood, *Politics of piety: the Islamic revival and the feminist subject* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 2012 ed., p. 20.
[12] Sarkar, *Visible histories, disappearing women*, p. 21.

strategic considerations of political or social expediency. A process will become evident through which women progressively experimented, reinforced, acknowledged and claimed the public recognition of their own subjectivity. Throughout these pages, I will refer to such process as feminist.

Feminism is by no means an unproblematic and self-explanatory label in the context of a study on Indian women. Scholars of Indian history have utilised this term to describe a variety of phenomena, ranging from feminist nationalism, to Gandhian feminism, to eco-feminism.[13] In the early twentieth century, some Indian women opposed the use of the term "feminist" as understood in Europe and America, convinced as they were that it projected an anti-male ideology. Sarojini Naidu, in her "I am not a feminist" speech as president of the All-India Women's Conference in 1930, maintained that a feminist is a woman who admits her "inferiority and there has been no need for such a thing in India as the women have always been by the side of men both in councils and the fields of battle".[14] "Women's liberation movement of the West is very far away from us", remarked Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya.[15] The Maharani of Baroda clarified the same concept in the 1912 preface to her book; she explained that, although every country "by intelligent observation" can learn from other nations, each should preserve its own characteristics, "just as each sex should endeavour not to ape the other, but to make the most of its own peculiar distinctions of character". She concluded: "what is required is not antagonism, but co-operation between the sexes".[16]

Time has passed, but the standard criticism of feminism has not changed. The term (and its practice) has often been charged of being alien to the Indian context or "culture".[17] Among those within the Indian women's movement who consider the term inappropriate, the example of Madhu Kishwar is notorious. In 1990, she defined *feminism* and its sub-categories (socialist/radical/bourgeois feminisms) as "imported labels" suggesting the Indian movement's compulsion "to act as an echo of the

[13] Kumari Jayawardena, *Feminism and nationalism in the Third World* (London: Zed, 1986); Devaki Jain, 'Gandhian contributions towards a feminist ethic', in Devaki Jain and Diana Eck (eds.), *Speaking of faith. Cross-cultural perspectives in women, religion and social change* (Delhi: Kali, 1986); Maria Mies and Vandana Shiva, *Ecofeminism* (London: Zed, 1993).
[14] AIWC, Fourth Session, Bombay, 1930, p. 21. Cited in Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 158.
[15] Smt Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay (interviewee), recorded by Shri K. P. Ruganachary and Dr. Hari Dev Sharma (interviewers), Dec. 6 1967, p. 59, Oral History Transcripts, NMML.
[16] Maharani of Baroda, *The position of women in Indian life* (London, New York, Bombay and Calcutta: Longmans, Green & Co, 1912), pp. xv, xvi.
[17] Tejaswini Niranjana, 'Feminism and cultural studies in South Asia', *Interventions: International Journal of Postcolonial Studies*, vol. 9, no. 2 (2007), pp. 209-218.

supposedly more advanced movements in the West".[18] In the same years, others, like the historian Veena Oldenburg, defended the use of *feminism* by holding to a definition of the term broad enough to apply to a variety of contexts. To her, a feminist is "a person (and not necessarily a woman) whose analytical perspective is informed by an understanding of the relationship between power and gender in any historical, social, or cultural context".[19] Even more recently, any scholar openly utilising the "F word" in their work have felt the necessity to devote a part of their introductions to clarify their views about the term: this was the case, for instance, with Padma Anagol's 2005 book on the emergence of feminism in India,[20] or with Srila Roy's work on South Asian feminisms, published in 2012.[21]

In my work, I describe as feminist those actions, people, movements and words that bespeak women's desire to be acknowledged as individuals and subjects worthy of a voice, rights, respect, and a share in power. I understand the term as broadly as scholars of Indian history like the ones mentioned above have done, attaching to it no special western authorship, nor to the multiple practices which can be described as feminist. Such practices are, I believe, as varied, plural and multifaceted as are the geographical, political, historical and social contexts within which women (and some men) have felt the need and found the courage to contest the various declinations of an unjust balance of power between the sexes. In the following pages, I also utilise the formula to which the majority of the women who make the subjects of this research resorted: "the women's movement" thus appears countless times in this work, as an attempt to be as faithful as possible to "my women"'s intentions and self-representations.

On sources and content of chapters

A variety of documents form the source base of this work. Fundamental for the construction of this story were: the private papers and correspondence of the Nehru

[18] Madhu Kishwar, 'Why I do not call myself a feminist', *Manushi*, no. 61 (Nov/Dec 1990), pp. 4-5.
[19] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, 'The Roop Kanwar case: feminist responses', in John Stratton Hawley (ed), *Sati: the blessing and the curse. The burning of wives in India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), pp. 102-103.
[20] Anagol has defined "Indian feminism" as "a theory and practice based on presenting a challenge to the subordination of women in society and attempting to redress the balance of power between the sexes". Anagol, *The emergence of feminism in India*, p. 13.
[21] Srila Roy (ed.), *New South Asian feminisms. Paradoxes and possibilities* (London: Zed, 2012).

family, preserved at the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library (NMML), in Delhi; the issues of the Hindi women's journal that some of the Nehru women edited and contributed to in the 1910s and '20s, shamefully absent from the shelves of the NMML and scattered through the libraries of Delhi, Allahabad and Varanasi, often in a state of decay; the writings penned by the Nehru women and published in other magazines, as well as their speeches and addresses, as reported in newspapers and police reports; the speeches and writings of other members of the women's movement of the day, featured in the individual collections of the NMML, or printed in journals and pamphlets, preserved at the Women's Library in London; the organisational papers, minutes, reports and mouthpieces of pan-Indian women's associations like the Women's Indian Association and the All-India Women's Conference, which I have consulted in Delhi and, in London, at the British Library and at the Women's Library; the autobiographies of members of the Nehru family, who over the decades have written extensively about their own vicissitudes; and the memories of some of them, descendants of "my women", who have been so kind as to devote some of their time to meet me, between autumn 2012 and summer 2013, in Delhi, Dehra Dun (Uttarakhand), Kasauli (Himachal Pradesh), and Brussels—answering my questions, showing me family pictures, and in one case even hosting me at their house for a few days.

The chapters of this thesis are arranged in chronological order, and each draws mainly (though not exclusively) on one of the above-mentioned sets of sources. The first two chapters adopt a very small scale of analysis, and investigate the domestic realm within which the characters lived at the beginning of the Nehru saga, in the early 1900s. The first chapter introduces the women who are the subject of the narration, and gathers information about their life prior to their entrance in the Nehru household as young brides, at the dawn of the century. The second chapter sheds light on the intimate realms of the Nehru mansion. It studies its functioning under the guidance of the family patriarch, Motilal Nehru, investigates how the notions of modernity and progress to which he held shaped everyday life, and analyses the gendered discourses moulding behaviours within the domestic environment. As "the domestic is always already the public, the private is always already the national, and the household is always already the political",[22] understanding how the family functioned is essential to capture wider processes, that go beyond domestic walls, but have their roots in them. I trace the partial

[22] Antoinette Burton, *Family history* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. xviii.

image of the Nehru women with which we are familiar back to the gendered norms and narratives governing the Nehrus' domestic and private life that eventually influenced how memory was handed down to posterity, the family narrative was constructed, documents were preserved and repositories of the Nehrus' history were built.

This first section draws mainly on the private correspondence of family members in the early 1900s, and on autobiographies and memoirs penned by their descendants over the following decades. Letters were mostly exchanged between Motilal and the younger men of the family—his son Jawaharlal and his nephews, at college in Britain—and among the young men themselves. The autobiographies and memoirs were authored by the sons, daughters and siblings of the women who are the protagonists of these pages. Although these authors did not necessarily live in the family mansion or witness the events they describe, their memories are the only sources on those women's pre-Nehru life, on their cultural and family background, which would otherwise be impossible to reconstruct. The texts belonging to this group are: *Nice guys finish second*, authored by Rameshwari Nehru's son Braj Kumar; *An Indian freedom fighters recalls her life*, by Lado Rani Zutshi's daughter Manmohini, edited by Geraldine Forbes; *An inheritance*, written by Uma Nehru's cousin (who was also, as we will see, a sort of step sister to her), Dhanvanthi Rama Rau.[23]

To these must be added the autobiographies and memoirs written by Motilal Nehru's children, Jawaharlal, Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna. They actually lived with the rest of the joint family in the same house, and their texts contain countless details about its everyday life. The first of such autobiographies to be published was Jawaharlal's *An autobiography*, in 1936.[24] Krishna's autobiography, *With no regrets*, was published in 1945, and her family biography, *We Nehrus*, came out some twenty years later, in 1967.[25] Vijaya Lakshmi's memoir, *The scope of happiness*, was the last to be published, in 1979.[26] The texts differ from each other substantially in the tone they utilise and in the different relevance they ascribe to events, that is, in the purposes with which they were written. Jawaharlal's autobiography deals almost exclusively with the political events, facts and personalities linked to non-cooperation and the struggle for Independence.

[23] Braj Kumar Nehru, *Nice guys finish second* (Delhi: Penguin, 1997). Geraldine Forbes (ed), *Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal. An Indian freedom fighter recalls her life* (New York: M. E. Sharpe, 1994). Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, *An inheritance. The memoirs of Dhanvanthi Rama Rau* (London: Heinemann, 1978).
[24] Jawaharlal Nehru, *An autobiography* (London: John Lane the Bodley Head, 1936).
[25] Krishna Nehru, *With no regrets*. *An autobiography* (New York: Asia Press, 1945). Krishna Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus* (New York, Chicago, San Francisco: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1967).
[26] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, *The scope of happiness* (London, Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1979).

However, as the author himself writes in the preface, it is not meant to be a history book, nor an objective report of the development of early-twentieth century nationalist thought and activism. Written in 1934-35, while Jawaharlal Nehru was serving a two-year imprisonment in Dehra Dun, the autobiography was conceived mainly as a self-reflection, a way to overcome the solitude of prison life, and not written "deliberately for an audience".

Like her brother's autobiography, Krishna's *With no regrets* owes its origin to the loneliness generated by a prison sentence. She started to write her text in 1941 when her husband was imprisoned, went back to her work and finally concluded it more than a year later, after Raja's new imprisonment. It was the long hours at her hands, and the necessity to reorder her memories that—as it had been the case for her brother—led her to write what would eventually become a book. In Krishna's autobiography the personal and the intimate take the whole scene, and shape the story of a family seen from the point of view—the "innocent eye", writes Amiya Chakravarti in the introduction—of the girl, the teenager and the young woman that Krishna was when witnessing the events she narrates. *With no regrets* is thus the most naif of the texts authored by the Nehru siblings, and the one apparently less indebted to the grand narrative that would loom large in later writings on (and by) the Nehrus. Writing at a time when the destiny of India, the outcomes of the nationalist struggle, and the political fate of the Nehru dynasty had not yet been decided, Krishna could take the liberty of sketching the characters and events of her story in a way that sounds more sincere than the one her sister Vijaya Lakshmi would utilise more than thirty years later—and to which she would resort herself, in her 1967 book. In her first memoir, Krishna felt free to hint at her difficult tom-boy childhood, her mixed feelings towards her brother and sister, the resentment of her father's authority, the lack of attention from her mother, the conflicting models and values epitomised by her parents, as well as the smallest details of domestic and family life.

We Nehrus, though preserving Krishna's simple way of writing and attention to the intimate dimensions of life, is not as candid as its predecessor. Written with Alden Hatch, the American biographer of a number of illustrious individuals, the second text is more polished and somewhat more cautious; published shortly after Pandit Nehru's death, it was probably meant to sketch a popular picture of him and of the vicissitudes of which he and his family had been the protagonists. Its first chapters, however, retain at

least in part the tone and atmosphere of Krishna's autobiography, describing the years prior to the explosion of nationalist agitations.

Also Vijaya Lakshmi's memoir, *The scope of happiness*, narrates the years before the late 1920s in an intimate way. In it, Vijaya Lakshmi recalled her childhood, young age, and family life in a tone similar to Krishna's, even though mitigated by her much older age, and political and social responsibilities. Most importantly, her memoir must have been influenced by the political situation that India was facing at the time of its drafting, after Indira's declaration of the state of Emergency in 1975. In this context, Vijaya Lakshmi might have used *The scope of happiness* as a way of distancing herself from her niece's choices, and restoring the public image of the Nehru family, by telling once again (to Indians, as well as to the international community) the story of the Nehrus' origins and of their traditional commitment to the values of freedom, democracy, and justice.

At any rate, what is relevant for these pages is how the two Nehru sisters (and, to a lesser extent, Jawaharlal) talked about their family life. Through their narration, the reader is told the story of an epoch through the smallest details of the everyday material life, habits and practices of the people living in the Allahabad family mansion—the cornerstone of the family's vicissitudes, intertwined with those of the entire country. The authors take the readers through the house's corridors and rooms, attract their attention to how they were furnished, give details about the smallest domestic rituals taking place in those spaces; in doing so, they reveal the aspirations, needs, biases, rules and hierarchies governing not only the family's daily functioning, but also the wider social and political framework within which it positioned itself. Krishna and Vijaya Lakshmi, in particular, used the domestic space and their private memories of home as the archives on which their histories were based.[27] As Antoinette Burton has convincingly argued, homes, their physical spaces, and the material practices they have historically contained are "archives that produce histories", not more provisional and porous than all archives, and "not simply representations but material evidence of the gendered experiences of domestic life and family culture that help to constitute the political past, the national story, the colonial narrative".[28] The authors understood not only the house, but also the daily practices of its inhabitants, and their physicality, as

[27] Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling in the archive: women writing house, home and history in late colonial India* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 6.
[28] Burton, *Dwelling in the archive*, pp. 26-27.

inextricable from the political history of India. Vijaya Lakshmi wrote about her mother's renouncing the ritual of having her feet washed and perfumed, to explain the extent to which non-cooperation had changed the Nehrus' life in the 1920s. "Mother's feet", she wrote, "somehow became for me symbolic of the hardships we had to endure during that period".[29]

The autobiographies thus give access to spaces that hardly feature in traditional archives. Those spaces hide invaluable information on the understanding of gender relations within the Nehru household, which on these matters was far less progressive than hagiographic literature has suggested. A contradiction existed in the Nehru lifestyle between the men's eagerness to style their tastes, public behaviour and physical appearance on westernised, progressive models, and their traditional patriarchal understanding of gender roles and norms. This can at least partially explain the scant consideration granted to the early activism of the family women, which—unlike their nationalist engagement—did not involve their male relatives, and thus could not enjoy either their sanction or that of mainstream historiography. Only when a male leadership could be claimed to be guiding women's political engagement, channelling it into the wider nationalist struggle, did women's activism became worth noticing and keeping record of. The ways women were thought of within the family, the biases from which they suffered, and the wider mentality governing their domestic life may have prevented the Nehru brides' feminist engagement to be considered as the groundbreaking force that it was.

From the third chapter, the focus of the narration moves beyond the walls of the Nehru mansion to the outside world. The section analyses the forms of feminist activism in which the Nehru ladies engaged. It investigates the means they utilised to enter the public sphere (writing, publishing a women's journal, starting local female organisations, and joining all-India ones), and the networks within which they situated themselves on the national and international level. Concentrating on the first years of such activism, from 1909 to 1916, the third chapter analyses the beginnings of the association that Rameshwari Nehru and other women of the family co-founded, the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti (Allahabad Women's Society), and its mouthpiece, the monthly journal *Strī Darpaṇ* (Women's Mirror). This section places such editorial venture within the political, literary and social context of the day, when movements for the

[29] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 44.

standardisation and propagation of Hindi as a print language in the Devanagari script were permeating north and central India. Although the Nehru women's choice of editing a Hindi journal in their city (one of the main centres of nationalist thinking) could seem to bespeak an uncritical adhesion to the cause of nation building, their writings and the topics discussed by the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti raise different hypotheses.

The first issues of *Strī Darpaṇ* constitute the main source base of the third chapter. Never analysed before, to the best of my knowledge, they allow for a reconstruction of the main topics with which the first engaged women were concerned. The chapter details two topics in particular: female roles and duties within the cultural construct of domesticity, which at the time was being redefined as a mixture of ancient Hindu and modern Victorian ideals; and women's education, which *Strī Darpaṇ* championed, through the presentation of role models to its readers, and through discussions of the main girls' institutions and of political decisions on the matter. Two influences shaped the beliefs of these first participants in the women's movement: the ancient Hindu tradition and western developments. The Puranas and exemplary women like Sita, Savitri and the Rajput women offered support to their cause, and worked as justifications for women's stances against some obscurantist practices. They often referred to the Vedic past as a glorious period, during which women took part in the social and political life, and enjoyed important positions performing religious rituals. They were said to travel about freely and to have a voice in the selection of their partners in life. Women considered as examples of freedom and self-assertion the ancient heroines and mythological figures, who had shown themselves capable of taking decisions, administering an empire and fighting in battle, and were by no means content with domestic and wifely roles. Women leaders found reasons for this ancient freedom in the absence of customs like child marriage and *pardā* (the custom of secluding women), and in the existence of property and inheritance rights for women, which of course became an argument for the abolition of the same, and for urging the restoration of past justice.

At the same time, Indian women closely followed developments in the European movement, where women were gaining rights and responsibilities. Like most other women's journals of the day, *Strī Darpaṇ* always featured commentaries on the major events and changes occurring outside India, thus constructing an imagined community of women that would acquire more definite and concrete shape in subsequent years. At

the same time, most Indian women also agreed on the need to forge a specifically Indian path to women's liberation, for western feminist movements were felt as too antagonistic towards men and irreconcilable with Indian gender relations. Among the Nehru women, Rameshwari upheld these views, in tune with most of her contemporaries. Her sister-in-law Uma held instead a very different understanding of Indian society and tradition, and of the relations to be forged between the Indian women's movement and its western counterparts.

Uma Nehru, whose contribution is discussed in the fourth chapter, was a discordant voice within the choir of elite women engaged in the nascent feminist movement. She went so far as calling into question male representations of women and their bodies, thus introducing very modern concepts, and openly charging men with the construction of a misogynist society, which enslaved women and relegated them to stereotypical roles. Though *Strī Darpaṇ* published only a few articles by her in the late 1910s, what emerges from them is a profound feminist consciousness that broadened the horizons of women's discourse from a reformism doing no harm to the traditional social structure, to a narrative which—though rooted in reality—reached a fairly complex degree of theorisation, and questioned the very foundations of the patriarchal system. The discussion of her writings is inserted in the fourth chapter, for I have understood the emergence of her voice as belonging to the general broadening of horizons that concerned the women's movement in the years 1917-1919.

It is to this two-year period that the chapter is devoted. Besides reflecting on the changes that occurred at this time within the Nehru women's circle, the chapter analyses the novelties taking place from 1917 at an all-India level, and the interactions between the two realities. With the foundation of the first truly pan-Indian women's association (the Women's Indian Association, WIA), the landscape of women's activism in India underwent some major changes, both at the theoretical and at the practical level. Prominent among them was Indian women's participation in the global movement for female enfranchisement and, as a consequence, their experiencing organised political action, petitioning the government, lobbying Indian political bodies such as Congress and the Muslim League, and making contacts with international suffrage organisations. The latter aspect, in particular, proved fundamental, as it provided the Indian women's movement with universalistic ideological grounds from which the figure of the universal

citizen-subject would eventually emerge.[30] *Strī Darpaṇ* and the organisational papers, reports and publications of the WIA constitute the main source base of this chapter.

The fifth section concentrates on the early 1920s, which, both for the Nehrus and for politicised India at large, were characterised by Gandhi's entrance on stage. In this chapter, we watch politics aggressively enter family life, Jawaharlal and Motilal disagree over the respective desires to follow or keep distance from Gandhi and his unconstitutional methods, and the rest of the family wait for its future to be decided by either decision. The former position eventually prevailed, and the entire family was dragged into Gandhian politics—a "conversion" that has traditionally been described in triumphalist terms. Ignored so far was the question of the price of this turn upside down for the women of the family. To investigate the burden that Gandhian politics represented especially for women, in terms of normativity and conservatism, a telling event in the intimate life of Jawaharlal's sister Vijaya Lakshmi is analysed, which has usually been carefully concealed from the Nehrus' official histories. Throughout the chapter, adherence to non-cooperation is analysed from the point of view of women who underwent a number of intrusions, emotional adjustments, changes in their everyday lives and in bodily appearance; a subsection of the chapter is devoted to the latter aspect and to Gandhian rhetoric on clothing.

Finally, the fifth chapter discusses women's understanding of the potential of non-cooperation, which resulted in their appropriation of Gandhian idiom and values. A debate that animated the pages of *Strī Darpaṇ* in 1921 is studied in this light as evidence of women's conscious reworking of Gandhi's words to sanction their feminist message. Although the family men's adhesion to the Gandhian agenda came at a high price for the women, they were not mere passive receivers of the discourses of the day; on the contrary, they were able to utilise the non-cooperation movement as an opportunity for their own empowerment. They would soon picture social and political engagement as viable means of women's own personal fulfilment in the first place, rather than (or before) understanding it as a duty towards the nation.

Chapter six, focused on the late 1920s, details the birth, functioning and message of the second pan-Indian women's association in which some of the Nehru women participated. Designed as the apolitical counterpart of the increasingly pro-Gandhian politics Women's Indian Association, the new All-India Women's Conference (AIWC)

[30] Mrinalini Sinha, 'Suffragism and internationalism: the enfranchisement of British and Indian women under an imperial state', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, vol. 36 (1999), pp. 461-484.

was primarily concerned with the promotion of education and with the abolition of social customs hindering girls' access to it, like child marriage. A section discusses AIWC's vision on the type of education to be imparted to girls, and analyzes its understanding of domestic roles, on which the association's construction of Home Science symbolism was grounded. As the argument unfolds, and women's enthusiasm and sense of their own power emerge from AIWC meetings' reports, it becomes clear that their insistence on the need for Home Science education was all but a reactionary move sanctioning their subaltern condition. Building their arguments on the consideration of motherhood and care work as tasks of paramount importance, women advocated Home Science education as a tool that would further sanction their authority. Moreover, constructing domestic work as scientific, and as a field that, like any other profession, required training and skilfulness, women denaturalised the link between the female sex and domesticity. As a direct consequence of such construction of their position within Indian society as prominent and authoritative, came their demand for greater representation in official political bodies and the enlargement of their scope of activities to social questions affecting women.

The last section of chapter six is devoted precisely to one such question that women felt as especially urgent, child marriage. The section details the campaign that organised women carried out since 1927, lobbying for the passage of a law that would decisively ameliorate their lot. Exploiting the unprecedented political and social climate originated by the publication of the highly controversial book *Mother India*, women strategically constructed their demands in tune with nationalist India's wounded pride, presenting the passage of the bill as a nationalist priority—something that secured most of Indian politicians' support to their cause, and made women have their way in 1929. Passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act has been considered by recent historiography as the successful result of nationalist India's reversal of the imperialist propaganda voiced by the author of *Mother India*. Yet, was organized women's participation only functional to the cause of Indian nationalism, or did its importance lie elsewhere? This section argues that organized women's involvement in the debate over child marriage in the late 1920s was momentous especially because it represented an important step within the nascent feminist movement: namely, women's acknowledgment of their subjectivity, composed of physical, intellectual, emotional and experiential elements, as worthy of a place within high politics.

In the seventh and last chapter the focus of analysis is the Nehru family. The narration is set in the late 1920s and early 1930s, when, due to the political climate looming large in India, family members underwent several changes and adjustments. We watch our characters move to several cities, travel to Europe, contract diseases, give birth to children, and we witness the discursive overlap of the Nehru family with India and the struggle for its independence grow increasingly more significant, until the outbreak of civil disobedience. Dedication to work for the nationalist cause quickly became part of women's daily life, and the chapter investigates the degree of involvement, the reasons behind it and the results it produced, which differed significantly from one woman to another, according to their age, previous experiences and position within the family. While for the young women nationalist activism represented their first occasion of public engagement, for those of the previous generation nationalist discourse overlapped with the other framework of thinking that had so far fuelled their public engagement and impacted on their thinking, adding a decisive nationalist nuance to their feminist stance.

Such impact is analysed through the experiences of Kamala, Uma and Rameshwari. For young Kamala, whose personality had been overshadowed by her husband Jawaharlal, civil disobedience worked as an opportunity to emerge as a person in her own right. In the few years before her health deteriorated irreversibly in 1934, Kamala's efforts for the nationalist cause not only granted her the respect and consideration of the whole country, but also a self confidence and contentedness that she had never experienced before. The example of Uma's engagement with nationalist politics is studied through the Hindi translation of *Mother India* that she published in 1928, in whose preface she voiced nationalist-flavoured arguments against the book and its author. In the case of Rameshwari, the impact of nationalist thinking was particularly evident in the work she did in London in the early 1930s as president of the London branch of the Women's Indian Association and through close cooperation with the India League, as well as (upon her return to India) with her association to Gandhian ideals and social work against untouchability. The chapter shows that, for all this, for women like Uma and Rameshwari, who experienced feminist politics before the nationalist movement became a mass phenomenon, nationalist fervour did not erase or overshadow their early feminist stances, neither theoretically nor from the point of view of practical engagement. Nationalist politics was, in their understanding, one more arena

for their own assertion, agency and public recognition.

This journey, through which women built and claimed their own voice, forms the subject of the following pages. It lasted some three decades and was truly transformative; women who, at the beginning of the 1900s, had just come out of *pardā*, could hardly speak English, and were intimidated by the sumptuous dinners at the Nehrus, by the early 1930s were unafraid to address audiences of several thousand people, travelling all over India and Europe as official delegates and representatives, sitting on government committees, or writing a book on the most heated controversy of the day. This is the story of what happened in between.

1. BECOMING A NEHRU

Swarup Rani was barely fourteen when, in 1882, she married a widower aged twenty-five who had been chosen for her. While her husband was, by that time, a young and confident man, building his career as a lawyer at Allahabad High Court, she was a thin and petite looking child, and had been raised in the orthodox ways deemed appropriate for the girls of her kin. The photographs of her show a girl adorned with heavy North Indian jewels and ornaments, staring at the camera with big dark eyes that seem to betray a mix of anxiety and resigned sadness—a glance that would remain unaltered in later portraits of her as an adult woman, and finally as an old lady.

As was natural at that time of strict endogamy, Swarup Rani belonged to the same social and ethnic group of her husband, the Kashmiri Pandits. A Kashmiri stock, this was a highly mobile Brahmin group, which had moved from their region to the North Indian plains at different stages. Like their origins, shrouded in legend, even the Pandits' reasons for leaving their homelands are unclear, and probably differed from one family to the other. At any rate, the diasporic community became a group of its own, with internal ties much stronger than the ones linking it to the Pandits who remained behind in Kashmir. Its members, mostly employed in the administrative sector, usually were very active contributors to the political and cultural life of the places where the community settled.[1] Although eager (and bound) to interact with other social, religious and ethnic groups, the Kashmiri Pandit community retained cultural traits that distinguished it from the others to a degree that could vary according to the orthodoxy of its members. The ethnographic studies of T. N. Madan, for instance, have showed the high regard in which the concept of purity was held among the Pandits of Kashmir[2]—a preoccupation of the diasporic community, too. Its most orthodox members, concerned by the loss of personal and domestic purity, would avoid any type of intimate physical contact and commensality with 'impure' people (above all the Muslims), observe strict dietary restrictions, and perform a number of purificatory rites—from the simple washing of one's hands to the *prāyaścitt*, a ritual of atonement whose importance for the community will be demonstrated by an anecdote narrated in the next chapter.

[1] For a detailed study on the Kashmiri Pandits, see Henriette M. Sender, 'The Kashmiri Brahmins (Pandits) up to 1930: cultural change in the cities of North India' (Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, Madison, 1981).

[2] T. N. Madan, 'The ideology of the householder among the Kashmiri Pandits', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 15, nos. 1/2 (1981), pp. 223-249.

Although such a strict observance of religious norms did not extend to the entire sub-group of Kashmiri Pandits on whom this work focuses—the Nehrus, among which many were all but orthodox—other features, having to do with social rather than religious realms, may have remained part of their set of values and shaped their behaviour. One of these was, arguably, the predominance of the reality of everyday life over spiritual or philosophical concerns in the minds of the family men and of its patriarch in particular, as will become evident in the next chapter. In the article quoted above, Madan has noticed that most of the Kashmiri Pandits that were the object of his study, when questioned about their group identity, described it as characterised by a concern not about "the inward-looking emphasis on selfhood", but rather about "the proper performance of social roles (*duniyā-dārī*, literally 'world-maintenance') in consonance with dharma".[3] *Dharma* was to be pursued through thoughtful discrimination and moral consciousness, an ordered balance of *kāma* (pleasure, bodily appetites) and *artha* (wealth), and respect of all prescribed elements of a 'right' conduct. This world-view obviously centred on the figure of the householder, the *gṛhastha*, who had the primary duty of begetting children (preferably sons), and of attaining worldly success, affluence and good reputation. In the ideology of everyday life, the Pandit and the *gṛhastha* coincided; becoming a householder was the most desired accomplishment for a Kashmiri Pandit, be it a man or a woman. As the mean granting this status, marriage was considered the most important of the rites of passage; within the newly sanctioned domestic nucleus, the man/husband stood at the centre, and the woman/wife, though enjoying an essential role within the dynamics of everyday life, was invariably defined in relation to him.[4] Analysing the paramount importance assigned to marriage by the Kashmiri Pandits, Madan has shown how a woman's identity as a wife prevailed over all her other identities and roles, as it was through (given or taken) wives that households and families could be linked.[5]

This chapter thus focuses on the marriages celebrated between the male members of the Nehru family and the girls chosen for them from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, to grasp the dynamics at work in the choice of prospective wives. Moreover, focusing on such marriages allows for an understanding of the non-

[3] Madan, 'The ideology of the householder', p. 227.
[4] Madan, 'The ideology of the householder', pp. 244-247.
[5] T. N. Madan, 'Structural implications of marriage in North India: wife-givers and wife-takers among the Pandits of Kashmir', *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, vol. 9, no. 2 (1975), pp. 217-243.

Nehru girls' social and educational background, information that will prove fundamental to place in context the stances they would take in the ensuing years.

Swarup Rani, Bibi Amma, and the Nehru joint family

The name of the handsome widower to whom Swarup Rani's hand was given in marriage was Motilal, and he was a Nehru. His ancestors had left Kashmir much before the bride's group, and at the time when this story begins his family was settled in Allahabad, in the region then known as the North Western Provinces and Oudh. After the Mutiny of 1857, they moved there from Delhi, where they had settled one hundred forty years earlier, when one Raj Kaula's erudition in Persian and Arabic had attracted the attention of the Mughal emperor Farukhsiyar, convincing him to invite the scholar to leave his native Kashmir to become the personal tutor of his children. Raj Kaula thus moved to Delhi in 1716, and living (or, according to other accounts, having been given a *jagir*, an assignment of land revenue, from a piece of land) near to a river, a *nehar*, he came to be known as Nehr-Kaul, which in the course of time became Nehru.[6] Settled in Delhi, the family prospered. The accounts report Pandit Lakshmi Narayan (grandson of one of Raj Kaula's grandsons) as the first *vakil*, a legal representative of the East India Company at the Mughal court of Delhi; and his son Pandit Gangadhar being a police officer at the time of the Mutiny, when the family was forced to flee the city, settling in Agra.[7] The only record left about the family from the period is a little painting that portrays him in Mughal court dress, holding a curved sword.[8]

Gangadhar had three sons and two daughters: Bansidhar, Nandlal, Motilal, Patrani and Maharani. He died in 1861, three months before Motilal's birth. The family was thus left to the care of Gangadhar's widow, Indrani, who looked after everything and everyone "according to the traditional pattern, and was . . . feared a little for her sarcasm and sharp tongue"; she was a determined woman who taught herself to read and write Hindi and even some Persian by sitting with her sons while they had their lessons.[9] As

[6] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 5; Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 1.
[7] Motilal Nehru, 'Short history of the Nehru family', 3 July 1916. Motilal Nehru Papers, Sub. File No. 1, NMML.
[8] Hasan, *The Nehrus*, pp. 16-17.
[9] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 27.
In his autobiography, Jawaharlal Nehru speaks of her as "an old lady with a tremendous will of her own who was not accustomed to be ignored", who by the mid 1930s was "still remembered amongst old

Bansidhar had left Agra, Nandlal was left to help his mother to raise her last-born son, Motilal, and look after the family's financial needs. After serving as *diwan* (prime minister) in Khetri, a princely state in Rajputana, he returned to Agra, and then moved with the entire family to Allahabad, where he had qualified as a *vakil* (lawyer).[10] At that time, in the early 1870s, Nandlal and his wife Nand Rani had five sons and a daughter: Biharilal, Mohanlal, Shyamlal, Kishanlal, Brajlal and Brajmohini. When Nandlal suddenly died, in 1887, Motilal took it on himself to look after them and his sister-in-law. While, under the guidance of his brother and until the death of his mother Indrani (in 1886), the family had lived in the crowded Meerganj,[11] in Allahabad's old city, Motilal made everyone move to the fancy Civil Lines—the European section, far more consonant with his aspirations. The family thus settled at 9 Elgin Road.[12] By then, Motilal had been serving as a *vakil* of Allahabad High Court for four years, and married for five to his second wife. The first one had died a year after their wedding and so had their baby son.[13] A widower at nineteen, Motilal had resolved not to remarry; but his mother's will finally prevailed, and his second marriage was arranged to the fair-skinned child he had seen at a family wedding.[14]

When Swarup Rani moved to her marital home, her older sister accompanied her; a child widow with no home of her own, Rajvati (whom the children called Bibi Amma) had indeed devoted herself to Swarup Rani. Rajvati was in the less-desirable condition that a Kashmiri Pandit (and generally a Hindu) woman could imagine for herself, the victim of a misfortune worse than the loss of a son. With her social, jural and ritual statuses altered, traditionally regarded as ominous,[15] the only choice left to a woman thrown out by destiny of her householder status and thus unable to participate in that ideology of everyday life governing the Kashmiri Pandits' existence, was indeed to rely on relatives who still enjoyed that position and could therefore offer shelter and food. So great was Rajvati's dependence from her sister that she died less than a day after her, from the very symptoms that had killed Swarup Rani. B.K. Nehru, Rameshwari's son, describes her as a "joyless troublemaker whose whole outlook on life seem[ed] to have

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Kashmiri ladies as a most dominating old woman and quite a terror if her will was flouted". Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 3.

[10] Motilal Nehru, 'Short history'.

[11] B. N. Sharga, *Kashmiri Panditon ke anmol ratna.* Vol. VI (Lucknow: Sharga Publications, 2005), p. 206.

[12] B. R. Nanda, *The Nehrus. Motilal and Jwaharlal* (New York: John Company, 1963), p. 30.

[13] Nanda, *The Nehrus,* p. 24.

[14] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 19.

[15] Madan, 'Structural implications', p. 221.

been soured by her early widowhood"[16]—something hardly surprising, considering Rajvati's orthodoxy and the times in which she lived.

Rajvati's nieces and nephew had a different memory of their aunt, and shed light on other sides of her personality. They recall her quick wittedness, alertness, sense of humour, and fearlessness, as well as her ability to overcome the shock caused by the family's modern ways—an ability that her sister did not possess. Bibi Amma was the one to whom the children would go to ask for advice; life and misfortune had indeed made her strong, capable of looking after herself and of forming her own opinions. Swarup Rani, on the contrary, "had always depended on others for guidance and had never had occasion to make up her mind about anything".[17] Her daughter Vijaya Lakshmi speaks of her as someone whose "horizon did not extend beyond her family", and whose "philosophy of life was simple and her mind uncluttered by doubts. She accepted the background and traditions that she had inherited and was content to function unquestioningly within that framework". Faithful to her wifely role, she was completely devoted to her husband, whose decisions and wishes she never opposed, though not always approved.[18] Like her sister, she had never received any sort of formal education, spoke no English, was deeply religious, and stuck to the principles of orthodox Hinduism.

The other man Swarup Rani admired and loved unconditionally was her son Jawaharlal. After his birth in 1889 only daughters had come: Sarup Rani (called Vijaya Lakshmi after marriage), born in 1900; and Krishna, born in 1907. So evident was her preference for Jawaharlal that his sisters (Krishna in particular) resented it to the point of nourishing well into adulthood feelings of nostalgia and longing for their mother's attentions. Krishna recalls the anecdote of her brother's return from England, on a June day in 1912, as an event for which all the family and servants had been making preparations for weeks. "Mother was unable to conceal her joy and lived in a fever of excitement", she remarks, and adds: "I remember how happy she looked during these days—how her face glowed with a radiance I had never seen before".[19] A few years later, when it was time for her to become a grandmother, Swarup Rani had no doubts that the baby Kamala and her son had generated would be a boy; she was so disappointed at her

[16] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 15.
[17] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 125-126.
[18] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 39.
[19] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 26. The event of Jawaharlal's return also opens Krishna's family biography: Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, pp. 1-2.

dashed hopes that—Vijaya Lakshmi recalled—she could not even announce the birth of her granddaughter to the relatives waiting for news outside Kamala's room.[20] "Mother's joy was shadowed by regret that it was not a boy", her daughter Krishna noted.[21] Swarup Rani's beliefs might have made more troubled her relations with Kamala, whom she was likely to blame for not having a son.[22]

Kamala and Lado Rani

Another orthodox presence was Nand Rani, the widow of Motilal's brother Nandlal, and one of the several members composing the large joint family,[23] together with her five sons and one daughter. Mohanlal, her second son, born in 1876, learned manners at the house of a famous courtesan of Allahabad, was taught Urdu and Persian at home, then at the Muir Central College and at the University of Allahabad. At twenty, he married Kamala Dar (from Kashmiri Mohalla, Lucknow), and the two moved to Kanpur, where Mohanlal started his legal practice. In 1900 he was employed as assistant professor at the Law College of Allahabad, and he and Kamala returned to the city, where they lived in a nucleated household arrangement. After three years, he decided for another career change, and started a printing press, the Allahabad Law Journal Press, which, as we will see, would play an important part in the ensuing years.[24]

One year after Kamala and Mohanlal, in 1897, another nephew of Motilal got married. He was the son of Motilal's sister Patrani, who had died in 1875, leaving a three-month old baby, Ladli Prasad. After some years at his grandmother's, he was taken care of by his uncle Motilal, as his father Lalji Prasad Zutshi, though he never remarried, had no contact with him. Apparently, his father showed up only years later, when it was time for Ladli Prasad to marry, and arranged his son's engagement. By that time, though, Motilal had already chosen a wife for the boy, and claimed that his own arrangement should stand, as he had been like a father to Lalji Prasad since his childhood, while his biological parent had not. Motilal finally had his way, and this was the first and last contact Ladli Prasad had with his father. The wife his uncle had chosen for him was Lado Rani Tikku, who had lost her mother at a very young age and had been raised by her

[20] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 57.
[21] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 31.
[22] Promilla Kalhan, *Kamala Nehru: an intimate biography* (Delhi: Vikas, 1973), p. 135.
[23] Nanda, *The Nehrus,* p. 42.
[24] Sharga, *Kashmiri Panditon*, pp. 207-209.

aunt, along with the latter's own six children. According to her daughter Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal, this aunt was quite progressive for her times, and Lado Rani was granted much freedom until she was married off at fifteen. Lado Rani had not received any formal education, so when she entered the Nehru family she had to learn how to speak English, wear shoes and stockings, and use cutlery.[25] This she did easily, as she was strong-willed and fearless.

With time, Lado Rani would turn out to be "a woman with radical ideas", who was unafraid of behaving differently from the rest of the family. In 1910, after the birth of their fourth daughter, she and her husband moved out of the Nehru mansion to their own house, leaving the joint-family life, as Mohanlal and Kamala had done some years earlier. In that house Lado Rani organised her daughters' music lessons, engaging a teacher who was instructed to arrive in the afternoon, when men were at work and women were having their siesta, and sing softly, so as not to arouse the neighbours' suspicions. Moreover, Manmohini (Lado Rani's third daughter and the author of the autobiography from which all information about Lado Rani's life comes) was the first Nehru girl to be sent to a proper school, and joined St. Mary's Convent in Allahabad. But the most striking stance Lado Rani took was another one: in 1917, along with her daughters, and leaving her husband behind, she moved back to Lahore, where her father lived.

Although her daughter offers the simple explanation that her mother's decision was dictated by her desire to give her daughters the education that she desired, and that she deemed impossible to obtain in Allahabad with all its restrictions, the event must have had more complex causes. As early as 1914, Motilal was referring to Jawaharlal about some troubles between Lado Rani and her husband Ladli Prasad, who had apparently forbidden his wife to see someone and was "prepared to suffer the odium of a permanent separation from his wife with its necessary companion scandals rather than give in on the point".[26] A year and a half later, Lado Rani was once again the talk of the town, and Brijlal referred to her as having been influenced by "ideas relating to the emancipation of women", and being the "aptest public" of the man spreading them—Manjar Ali, the son of Motilal's personal secretary.[27] At any rate, in 1917 Lado Rani

[25] Smt. Lado Rani Zutshi, Maukhik Itihās Inṭarvyū'. Oral History Transcripts, NMML.
[26] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 9 December 1914. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 62, NMML.

[27] Brajlal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 21 June 1916. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. I, Vol. No. 55, NMML.

moved to Lahore, and as soon as she settled there she engaged in a number of activities: she joined the YWCA to continue her English and painting lessons, which she reached everyday by bike, something no other woman would do; she started a ladies' recreation club and a *kumārī sabhā* for the girls, besides participating in Congress activism. The contacts that she and her daughters kept with Allahabad were, however, limited to the holiday weeks the girls would spend there from time to time;[28] Lado Rani therefore did not work side by side with the other women of the family living in Allahabad.

Much more intertwined with the joint family life were the younger sons of Motilal's brother Nandlal, Mohanlal's brothers Shyamlal, Brajlal and Kishanlal. Small children at the time of their father's death, they were raised and educated as if they were Motilal's own sons. Unlike their brother, at this stage they all lived with the joint family, and would do so until much later. As their marriages were arranged, the newly-formed families were included in the large Nehru household, and the wives constituted, along with Kamala and Lado Rani, a middle generation of women, between the older ladies mentioned above, and Motilal's own daughters and son's wife.

Uma

Of the three younger sons of Nandlal, Shyamlal "was the unsettled one", a jolly young man "always waiting for something better to turn up", and lacking the determination and strong will of his brothers.[29] His descendants speak of him as an entertaining, handsome man who could not make up his mind as to what career he wanted to pursue; he ranked low in the familial hierarchy.[30]

In 1901, Shyamlal married the girl chosen for him, Uma Hukku. Motilal might have known about her from Tej Bahadur Sapru, a lawyer who practiced at Allahabad High Court from 1898 and who would soon be regarded as the most noticeable advocate in India,[31] a member of the Indian National Congress and a close friend of Motilal. The latter must have found the possibility of a connection with this colleague's family particularly desirable as, years later, he tried to make it even stronger by starting to arrange a marriage between his son and Tej Bahadur's daughter; the arrangement failed,

[28] Forbes, *Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal*, pp. 3-16.
[29] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 29.
[30] Interview with Mrs. Radha Khan, New Delhi, 15 September 2012, and Mrs. Kamal Fischer, 9 May 2013.
[31] D. A. Low, *Sapru, Sir Tej Bahadur*, Oxford Dictionary of National of National Biography, available at http://www.oxforddnb.com/templates/article.jsp?articleid=47758&back=

however, due to Motilal's hesitations (he thought that the girl would prove a "self-willed wife")[32] and finally to the girl's family decision to promise her to someone else.[33]

Tej Bahadur was the son of Ambika Prasad Sapru and Gaura Hukku, the sister of Uma's father; he and Motilal might have been arranging their respective relatives' marriages at the same moment, and decided to look no further when they learnt about each other's children. Though her parents, like most Kashmiri Pandits, were originally from North India, Uma had been raised in Hubli, in Bombay Presidency. They had left the region in the early 1880s, when her father Niranjan Nath, who worked for a railway company, decided to go south because of better prospects.[34] Moving with him, Uma's mother, Kailas Dhar (but the family was known as Shah), also followed her elder sister Bhagbhari, whose husband Roop Krishna Handoo was a member or the Railway Community and had decided to leave North India as well.[35] It is the memoir of Bhagbhari's daughter, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, that discloses some details about the otherwise unknown figure of Niranjan Nath. She describes him as "a few years older than my father, better educated, more serious-minded, and intellectually more gifted. He had read about the work done by social reformers of an older generation and was progressive in his thinking".[36]

Even less is known about Uma's mother, who died in childbirth on 8 March 1884. Uma was born in Agra, either because her father had not yet settled in the south or, more likely, because—even though having already moved—her mother might have gone back to her family house for her confinement, as was usual at the time. Since her mother had died, the baby girl's custody was given to her aunt Bhagbhari, who looked after Uma until her step-mother (whom her father had in the meantime married) was capable of raising her, along with Uma's step-brother Raja, and sister. Strangely, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau does not mention this sort of adoption in her memoir, probably due to the fact that she was nine years older than Uma, who must have been back to her father's house by the time Dhanvanthi was born. Even so, Mrs. Mira Hazari (Uma's grand daughter, who lived with her for some time as a young girl) recalls her grandmother telling her how

[32] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 September 1910. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 59, NMML.
[33] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 12 October 1911. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 60, NMML.
[34] In his book on Kashmiri Pandits, B. N. Sharga mentions Pandit Parmeshwar Nath Sapru as Uma's father (Sharga, *Kashmiri Panditon*, p. 206). Her descendants, however, agree on the name of Niranjan Nath Hukku.
[35] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, pp. 25-28.
[36] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, p. 27.

grateful she was to *mami*, her aunt, for having raised her.[37] Uma might therefore have spent the early years of her life at her aunt and uncle's, though she might have not seen much of the latter, who was often away for working purposes. By the time she was born, twenty-year old Bhagbhari had just given birth to her first daughter, who had not lived more than three days, which might have enabled her to breast-feed Uma. She must then have been raised along with her aunt's other children, the first of which was born just one year later, in 1885.[38]

According to her daughter's account, Bhagbhari was quite an unusual woman for the time. Married off at eight to Rup Krishna Handoo, she had moved to the house of her in-laws in Delhi, grown up along with her child husband, and adapted to the rules and expectations of his household, developing into a clever and strong young woman. The young couple broke up with the joint family and started an independent life after a quarrel with Rup Krishna's mother, a most courageous and unusual decision in those days. Initially living in Ajmer, Rajasthan, they accepted the offer of railways authorities of Rup Krishna's transfer, and moved to Hubli. Her father, says Dhanvanthi, was "a very intelligent man with a love of reading" and a deep love for the Persian language. Her mother, "on the other hand, had never been to school, and her education at home had trained her only in domestic skills, in reading and writing Hindi, and in simple arithmetic. Her reading was confined to the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata*. She was a deeply religious woman".[39] She also had no social life of sort, as there wasn't any Kashmiri Pandit community in Hubli, unlike any city in north India, and she and her husband could not really merge with either the Indian community living in the city, given that they did not speak Kannada, nor with the Anglo-Indians living like them in the Railway Colony, who were mostly Christians and spoke English, a language Bhagbhari never learned.[40] Furthermore, she was mother to an ever-increasing number of children, who kept her busy at home from dawn to night. Despite these many obstacles, and "as a result of the isolation in which she lived . . . she began to think, question, analyze".[41]

Slowly but surely, this solitary thinking made Bhagbhari conscious of the meaninglessness of the social and religious norms she had always deemed inviolable. The lack of opportunities from which daughters traditionally suffered, in particular,

[37] Telephone interview with Mira Hazari, 9 May 2013.
[38] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, p. 28.
[39] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, p. 26.
[40] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, pp. 3-4.
[41] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, pp. 33-34.

troubled her, and it was to make up for this injustice that she decided to take an unpopular, unprecedented step. Rama Rau relates that in the early 1880s a small Roman Catholic Church had been built in Hubli's Railway Colony, St. Mary's Church; in the private school attached to it Catholic missionaries taught to the children of railway workers, from kindergarten stage to the pre-matriculation class. The parish priest and school principal was Father d'Souza, a Goan Catholic who spoke Hindi; one day, he visited Bhagbhari and her husband to persuade them to send their children to St. Mary's School, probably expecting a firm refusal. But "my mother", says Dhanvanthi, "and, with her insistence, my father had already accepted the idea of formal education for their children even though they had only two of school-going age at that time, both girls". They were slightly worried about the company their daughters would keep at that school, built for Anglo-Indian children whose Indian mothers tried as hardly as possible to behave as their European husbands. Bhagbhari was instead not at all preoccupied by the issue Father d'Souza considered the most important; and when he assured her that her girls would not be obliged to take Bible classes, she "replied briskly that she wouldn't think of depriving her children of the opportunity of learning about other religions. A study of Catholicism would only widen their vision. She would take care of their Hindu education at home". Bhagbhari's two oldest daughters (Kamala, aged six, and Bishan, aged four) were thus enrolled in school, becoming "the first girls of the Kashmiri community to attend school . . . the first to be instructed in English, the first to study Christianity, the first to associate with children of all communities and to learn from personal contact the manners and customs of other very different families".[42]

As her daughter relates, Bhagbhari found much "support and encouragement in breaking down old prejudices and outmoded customs" in Uma's father, Niranjan Nath.[43] He must indeed have endorsed and shared his sister-in-law's ideas on girls' education, as Uma also enrolled in St. Mary's School, probably in the same period in which Bhagbhari's daughters started to attend it.[44] It must have been at St. Mary's that Uma obtained her knowledge of the English language to such a degree that years later she could undertake the translations of at least two texts—*Mother India*, by American journalist Katherine Mayo, to which we will return in the last chapter; and the play *The*

[42] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, pp. 34-36.
[43] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, p. 27.
[44] Uma's bioprofile as a former member of the Lok Sabha describes her as having been educated at "St. Mary's Convent, Hubli (Karnatak)". http://164.100.47.132/LssNew/biodata_1_12/900.htm.

tragedy of Nan, by British poet and writer John Edward Masefield.[45] This familiarity with the English language, like all other aspects of the education she received (at school, but also in her unusually progressive household) made her upbringing, and arguably her mind, very different from those of her contemporaries.

This diversity would not be considered a minor matter by the larger social and cultural group to which she belonged. Indeed, although there were some examples of educated girls among other progressive Indian families, educating one's daughter at a formal institution was generally deemed inappropriate in the late nineteenth century; even more so, if the school was a Christian one run by missionaries and using English as the medium of education.[46] It "was not a matter of pride in those days", as Dhanvanthi sums up.[47] The most frightening side-effect of a girl's formal education was the difficulty her parents had to face in finding a husband for her, that is, in convincing the community that an educated girl was not unfit for a respectable home. Bhagbhari could not bear such anxiety and, under the pressure of relatives and friends, she married off her eldest daughter at thirteen, even though she was a brilliant student. When it came to her second and third daughters, though, regretting the decision she had taken in the previous instance, Bhagbhari let them attend school until it was time for them to take the matriculation examination. The girls would have liked to go to college, but this was a step too far for their parents, who feared ruining their reputation. The two daughters were finally married at eighteen and sixteen respectively, when they were already considered too old to be brides.[48]

Fears like those of Bhagbhari must have inhabited the mind of Uma's father, facing the task of marrying off a daughter who was unlikely to match the standards required by most Kashmiri Pandit families in the north. This might have been the reason behind the decision of finally promising Uma to Shyamlal Nehru.[49] She was a girl whose

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[45] Uma Nehru, *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā" (sachitra Hindī anuvād)* (Allahabad: Hindustan Press, 1928); and *Biptā* (Allahabad: Hindustan Press, 1929).

[46] Among the young women who received formal education in this period were: Anandibai Joshi, from Maharashtra, who obtained a medical degree in the United States; Toru Dutt, she too from Maharashtra, educated in France and England in the 1860s-70s; Kamini Roy, a Bengali who obtained her B.A. degree at Bethune College in 1884; Sarojini Naidu, who passed the matriculation exam at a very young age and then studied in England; Radhabai Subbaroyan, from Mangalore, Karnataka, who studied at the Presidency College Madras and in Oxford. Padmini Sen Gupta, *Pioneer women of India* (Bombay: Thacker & Co, 1944). One such example in north India is Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, born in 1877 in Lucknow, who enrolled in a school in England after receiving her primary education at home. 'Pen portrait of Rajkumari Amrit Kaur', IOR: MSS EUR F-341/146, British Library.

[47] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, p. 36.

[48] Rama Rau, *An inheritance*, pp. 45-52.

[49] Nehru, *Nice guys*, pp. 69-71.

education and open-mindedness made her difficult to marry off; and, though for opposite reasons, finding a match for him was perhaps equally hard. The family was known for being forward-thinking and would be more eager than others to welcome a girl who had had a progressive education, provided that she would be married to their worst available bachelor; someone who, unlike his brothers, was not a man of the world, could not boast an English education, nor a prestigious job. However, her being 'different' must have been very much part of the family narrative, as indicated by the biographies and autobiographies of other family members referring to it as a matter of fact.[50] After all, as will become clear in the fourth chapter, the progressiveness with which her writings oozed could not go unnoticed, made even more evident by the extent to which it contrasted with the views of most other women of the family.

Rameshwari

Quite different was the background of the girl who, one year after Uma and Shyamlal's wedding, married the latter's brother, Brijlal; and very different indeed was he from his brother. Brijlal was Motilal's youngest nephew, who had been raised as if he was his own son. He was one of the Nehru boys to be sent to school in Europe in the early 1900s, along with his older brother Kishanlal, and his cousins Shridhar and Jawaharlal, the sons of Bansidhar and Motilal respectively. In December 1902 Brijlal married Rameshwari Raina, a Kashmiri Pandit fifteen-year old girl from Lahore, in Punjab. Her family was of aristocratic descent, and owned considerable landed estates with a substantial income. Her father, Dewan Narendra Nath, was a graduate of Lahore Government College, and a scholar of Persian and Arabic, who was very well versed in theology and knew by heart entire passages of the Quran. From 1895 (and until his resignation in 1915), he was also one of the few Indian men who, having received a

[50] "Uma bhabi . . . had had a wider education than was available to the girls of the north at that time", recalled Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit. Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 32. And Indira Gandhi mentioned her, when asked if there were no anglicised girls among the Kashmiris. Kalhan, *Kamala Nehru*, p. 133.
The interplay of several elements, in the end, must have led to a sort of hierarchy within the family, that results in the ways in which its different members have been remembered and narrated (if at all). Coming from a highly mobile family, grown up away from North India and its conservative customs, more educated than the average young women of the family, not enjoying the protection of a respected and powerful husband (as was Rameshwari's), and not mincing her words, Uma must have suffered a higher degree of ostracism in the process of memory building. It is telling, for instance, that when her daughter Shyam Kumari died all her documents, books and letters were sold as waste paper. Interviews with Manjari Menon, 10 September 2012, and Radha Khan, 15 September 2012.

modern university education and hailing from local influential families, were recruited by the Raj on the recommendation of the Viceroy, to fill the ranks of the Statutory Civil Service, a body that was meant to make up for the very limited numbers of Indian officers in the Indian Civil Service.[51]

As most girls of her community and status, Rameshwari never went to school, and was kept in *pardā*, a custom that, despite evidence, some of the Nehrus reported to exist only in a limited way, as an imported habit associated to social status.[52] In a speech she delivered many years later, she described her childhood:

> I belong to a rich and enlightened family of the undivided Punjab. . . . no caste restrictions were observed in my parental household. Women education was also considered necessary. But what sort of education? Just enough to enable a girl to look after her household, to able (sic) to write letters, knows (sic) something about her religion and be able to carry on her household work with some efficiency. This is mere literacy and no education according to modern conception of education. Sending girls to school for respectable families was unthinkable in those days. Accordingly I and my sisters were given a little smattering of education by the *pandits* and *moulvies* who were engaged to give us a little coaching in Hindi and Urdu. My father was a great scholar of Persian and Arabic and therefore he thought it necessary to give us some knowledge of Urdu and a little Persian. But these *pandits* and *moulvies* could come to us only for a limited time till we were considered old enough to be thrown into *purdah* and that was about the age of thirteen or fourteen. Later on we were also able to acquire a little smattering of English through the governess engaged in the house. This was the sum total of our education and we were considered by everybody to be educated girls. . . .
>
> In the whole of Northern India with some differences of degree the practice of *purdah* or seclusion of women prevailed in higher classes. So it did in the Punjab where I had my home and so I was brought up in strict *purdah.* We had our own big compound and garden veiled from outside with a hedge or wall. We were free to play and walk about in this big compound, but we could not go out of this portion of the house. These two portions into which the house was divided were called *Mardana* and *Zenana*.[53] The former being the

[51] Nehru, *Nice guys*, pp. 10-12.

[52] "Kashmiris . . . have never had any *purdah*, or seclusion of women, among themselves. Finding this custom prevailing in the Indian plains, when they came down, they adopted it, but only partly and in so far as their relations with others and non-Kashmiris were concerned. That was considered then in northern India, where most of the Kashmiris stayed, an inevitable sign of social status". Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 10.

[53] Cornelia Sorabji offers a sketch of the women's quarters in her contribution to *Our cause*, 'The position of Hindu women fifty years ago': "English chairs had no place in the *Zenana*, had indeed to be fetched in for any visitor with a 'chair' habit. There was usually a roomy wooden swing, hung from the ceiling placed in the verandah or at the end of the *baithak-khana*; this served for a siesta, or in bolt-upright occupation, was used as a sofa. Books were seldom seen in the *Zenana*: the 'Outside' held all that the family possessed.

> State of men and the latter that of the women. If ever we dared to step out into the men's portion we had to rush back to our own part of the house the moment we saw the face of a stranger. There were no motor cars in those days, we had horse carriages and were taken out for long drives every evening. Once we were out of the crowded part of the city, we were free to lift the curtains and allow some fresh air to come in. But each time a man was seen somewhere on the road, we were given a tap by a man relative who sat out with the coachman for the purpose and immediately we pulled the curtains to save ourselves from the evil eyes of the man. Whenever we stepped out of the house, we had fully to cover our faces with a veil. I have personally worn a veil, a *burqa* which is still worn by some Muslim women in India and in some other countries.
>
> Such were the conditions prevailing in those days and in a household which by all means was a progressive household. . . . ours was a liberal household where new ideas were acceptable. In some other households conditions were still worse. I know of families where women had never seen a horse or a railway station.[54]

Although Rameshwari's mother favoured higher education for girls, her father considered it unnecessary, as "his heart and mind pulled in different directions. His wisdom admitted the impropriety of the Purda system but deep in his heart he still could not accept women going out freely".[55] He, "the Grand Old man of the Punjab", is described in a 1940s book sketching the biographical profiles of twenty eminent Hindu men of his region as a staunch rationalist, an autocrat of extraordinary self-confidence, and a nationalist, "the stern sentinel of the Hindu interests in the Punjab".[56] He indeed served for a certain time as the President of the All India Hindu Maha Sabha, and was influenced by the Arya Samaj ideology.[57]

Writing desks were placed on the floor, the women sat at these, cross-legged, though the younger generation was beginning to demand writing-tables and chairs. . . . 'The Inside' was built round its own courtyard, and women lived a 'community' life, all generations of women together entirely apart from men. Privacy in the *Zenana* was rare. . . . The occasions on which women met one another were ceremonial: births, marriages, deaths and festivals which necessitated ceremonial feasts. The Joint Family system, was general for the strictly orthodox in all Provinces, and emphasized the Patriarchal aspect of the household". Cornelia Sorabji, 'The position of Hindu women fifty years ago', in Shyam Kumari Nehru (ed.), *Our cause* (Allahabad: Kitabistan, n. d.), pp. 6-7.

[54] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Changes that took place during the last few decades: impressions of Smt. R. Nehru'. Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings with no date, File no. 108, NMML.

[55] Paliwal, *Rameshwari Nehru*, p. 2.

[56] N. B. Sen, *Punjab's eminent Hindus, being biographical and analytical sketches of twenty Hindu ministers, judges, politicians, educationists and legislators of the Punjab by some well-known writers of this province* (Lahore: New Book Society), pp. 103-108.

[57] Paliwal, *Rameshwari Nehru*, p. 2.

Both organisations were part of the larger movement known as 'Hindu nationalism', whose ideology was defined between the 1870s and the 1920s, as a reaction to the colonial government and the Christian missions. The movement aimed at preserving the fundamental principles of Hindu tradition, while simultaneously conjugating them with some aspects of modernity and locating India's glorious times in an ancient Golden Age, which was indigenous but also characterised by modern values.[58] The Arya Samaj was founded in Bombay in 1875 by Dayananda Saraswati, who preached the superiority of Hinduism, both as a religion sanctioned by the Vedas and as a civilisation. Received quite coldly in Bombay, the Arya Samaj found much more support in Punjab, and was reconstituted in Lahore in 1877, from where its ideology spread among the Hindu population of the entire region. There, the organisation also engaged in the task of converting back to Hinduism those Punjabis who, in the ancient past, had been forced to convert to a different creed, something which addressed mainly the Muslim population, and was felt as violent by the latter.[59] The Hindu Mahasabha arose instead a few decades later. Founded in 1914, it based its action on the thought of Hindu ideologue V. D. Savarkar, a Maharashtrian Brahmin and the author of *Hindutva: Who is a Hindu*, from which the word describing 'Hinduinness' was borrowed, and came to represent the whole of Hindu nationalist ideology.[60] It was from its ranks that came the four men who, along with Congress member Keshav Baliram Hedgewar, would later on establish the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh. The RSS imparted martial training to high-caste Hindus, to defend themselves in communal conflicts, referred to Savarkar's theories claiming Hindu superiority, and considered Muslims as the enemies of the Indian/Hindu nation.[61]

Arguably, then, Rameshwari's father sympathized to some extent with Hindu nationalist ideas, and the education he imparted to his children, as well as the values according to which he organised his household, were quite likely imbued at least partially with this ideology. This influence was bound to continue in later years, too,

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[58] Christophe Jaffrelot, *The Hindu nationalist movement and Indian politics, 1925 to the 1990s* (Delhi: Penguin, 1999), p. 11.

[59] Michelguglielmo Torri, *Storia dell'India* (Bari and Rome: Laterza, 2000), pp. 459-460.

[60] On Hindutva ideology, see, besides Christophe Jaffrelot, Sikata Banerjee, *Make me a man! Masculinity, Hinduism and nationalism in India* (New York: SUNY Press, 2005); Paola Bacchetta, *Gender in the Hindu nation* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, 2004); Jyotirmaya Sharma, *Hindutva: exploring the idea of Hindu nationalism* (Delhi: Penguin, 2003). For an analysis of a female precursor of Savarkar's thought see Padma Anagol, 'Gender, religion and anti-feminism in Hindu right wing writings: notes from a nineteenth-century Indian woman-patriot's text "Essays in the service of a nation", *Women's Studies International Forum*, no. 37 (2013), pp. 104-113.

[61] Torri, *Storia dell'India*, pp. 540-541.

even after Rameshwari was married to Brijlal Nehru and moved to Allahabad, as—contrary to what must have been the case for Uma, whose family lived far away from the city to which she moved after marriage—Rameshwari maintained very close contacts with her family in Lahore. Soon after marriage, Brijlal went to Exter College in Oxford, where he stayed for some five years[62] (with visits to India during that period),[63] while Rameshwari divided her time between her parents' *haveli* in Lahore, and her in-laws' mansion in Allahabad.[64] She thus kept shifting between her family, when the ladies observed *pardā*, and the Nehrus, where she had to adjust to a completely different environment, and to the presence of Swarup Rani, Motilal's wife, who (according to Rameshwari's son Braj Kumar) "did not exactly live up to the high ethical standards to which we as a family were accustomed".[65]

Kamala and the other younger women

The third generation of women living in the Nehru residence was constituted by those born around the turn of the century. These were the daughters of Motilal and Swarup Rani (Vijaya Lakshmi, born in 1900, and Krishna, in 1907); the daughter of Uma and Shaymlal (Shyam Kumari, born in 1902); and the daughter of Kamala and Mohanlal (Roop Kumari, born sometimes after her brother Ratan Kumar, in 1902). Kamala Kaul joined their group in 1916, as the bride of Motilal's son Jawaharlal.

Kamala was born in Delhi on 1 August 1899, the first daughter of Rajpati and Jawaharmul Kaul. The latter was one of the sons of Pandit Kishan Lall, who had served as private secretary to the Maharaja of Jaipur, and had then settled in Delhi, a wealthy old man at the head of a large household. Jawaharmul ran a cloth shop and a flourmill, and the family lived comfortably, if not luxuriously. They led a traditional life, with women's movements being limited to the interior of the house, and their education to the private teaching of Hindi and Hindu scriptures.[66] Kamala appeared for the first time in the discourses of the Nehru men trying to organise Jawaharlal's arrangement in 1912, mentioned by Motilal in a letter to his son: "Braj is now busy at work in your interest. He

[62] Paliwal, *Rameshwari Nehru*, p. 9.
[63] Rameshwari Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 23 November 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Part I, Vol. No. 71, NMML.
[64] Paliwal, *Rameshwari Nehru*, p. 9; Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 13.
[65] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p.15.
[66] Kalhan, *Kamala Nehru*, pp. 1-10.

has seen a girl in Delhi and is pressing me to go to see her. He speaks of her as the most desirable acquisition for the Nehru family and is simply charmed with her appearance and manners though she is only twelve or thirteen".[67] Motilal included the photographs of another candidate, joking about the possibility of Jawaharlal's falling in love with them or the ones he may send later, thus assuring for himself a very romantic marriage. A few days after, another letter followed, in which Motilal expressed his admiration for "the Delhi girl", and concluded by telling his son that one more girl was now waiting for him. And even though Jawaharlal had protested, claiming that she was too young for him, being ten years his junior, the engagement was eventually arranged.[68] The three years that were to precede the actual marriage could be employed to make Kamala acquainted with some English, and with the sophisticated manners she would be required to display at the countless parties and cocktail rounds that took place at the Nehrus'. She moved to Allahabad some months before the marriage, accompanied by her uncle, so that she could glimpse the life she would be living. It was during that period that Krishna, her prospective sister-in-law, saw her for the first time, a beauty her parents never tired of showing off, as "she was not only pretty, she was the picture of health".[69] Soon after, Motilal insisted that she moved to their house to take lessons from his daughters' governess, Mrs. Hooper. "At first poor Kamala was completely confused and uncomfortable", Krishna recalls, "in a place so different from her home. The big dinners with crystal and china on the long table and rows of wine glasses at everyone's place, the strange food, and, most of all perhaps, the quick, loud voices of our many British guests, made her feel lost and lonely".[70] Equally uncomfortable must she have been with her other sister-in-law, Vijaya Lakshmi, "who felt the usual complicated sister-in-law feeling toward her", probably due to Kamala's never complete adaption to the ways of her in-laws.

These were the women who were married into the Nehru family from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century. There seems to be a sort of strategy in how Motilal selected them for the family's bachelors, assigning those coming from very traditional households to his most promising boys, and establishing links with other prominent families within and outside the United Provinces. All the young women,

[67] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 5 April 1912. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre-1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 61, NMML.
[68] Quoted in Kalhan, *Kamala Nehru*, p. 7.
[69] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 112.
[70] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 9.

irrespective of backgrounds, found ways to come to terms with the expectations of the household they were "given" to, as Madan put it. What is more, they also engaged in carving a space for themselves among the often-cumbersome personalities of their husbands and in-laws, and negotiating the rules governing life at the Nehrus'; these, as the next chapter will show, were indeed quite rigid, especially when it came to gender roles.

2. PERFORMING PROGRESS

"Mrs. Wallach is simply mad after it!", reported Motilal Nehru in a letter to his son Jawaharlal, a student in England. "She wouldn't wait to order a new one of the same make and must have mine".[1] What made so envious the wife of the popular British barrister at the High Court of Allahabad was Motilal's new car, a Lancia. The purchase had caused a sensation, gaining "the admiration of Allahabad", but its owner must have been used to all this by then. Five years earlier, Motilal had been the first in Allahabad to import a car,[2] and the move had been quite a shock to some members of the Kashmiri community, who considered it to be "the machine of the devil" and ran off the street when they saw Motilal driving it. More amused than worried, he "took great pride in this"; so much so that, before the purchase of the Lancia in 1909, he had added two more cars to that initial, shocking one.[3]

Anecdotes like this fill the pages of the autobiographies and memoirs written by members of the Nehru family, as well as by professional writers and historians, who have invariably depicted the figure of Motilal Nehru as exceptional. Sketching the portrait of this man, they have spoken of his choices as original and uncommon, and described them as taken independently from the expectations of his social entourage, and from the unwritten rules of his time and culture. Such accounts have thus stressed his difference from his contemporaries, the first example of that uniqueness whose derived sense of pride has been the background against which the Nehru saga has developed, from the late 1880s up to contemporary age. "In our community we stood out", Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit remarked in her memoir; "we were different because our family was more progressive than others and our way of living was foreign oriented".[4] And Braj Kumar Nehru recalled having replied to a comment about the Nehrus as a family having always been arrogant by saying: "And we have much to be arrogant about!"[5]

However, contrary to what such examples may have led family members as well as professional historians and writers to conclude, a different perspective can be

[1] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 10 March 1910. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 59, NMML.
[2] Nanda, *The Nehrus*, p. 31.
[3] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 22.
[4] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 32.
[5] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 12.

discovered that goes beyond the category of *progress* usually associated to the first episodes of the Nehru saga. What allows for such a reconsideration are the details brushed under the carpets of eulogistic historical accounts, hidden between the folds of romanticized and polished biographies, peeping out of autobiographies and memoirs, or openly showing themselves in the letters exchanged by family members. Combining the details that such material reveals into a puzzle, and placing them in a wider social and historical picture suggests that—rather than following unprecedented paths—the family in fact functioned according to precise social norms and behavioural patterns.

This section focuses on such behaviours and unwritten rules, on the ways they were socialized and interiorized by the different members, and on their impact on the daily life of the family. The intention behind this analysis is to reconstruct the domestic, intimate and emotional dimensions of the Nehru household, as it is within this environment that the ideas and actions that are the object of this study were shaped, and roles assigned and negotiated. As will become clear, the complex interactions of Indian and European cultural assumptions that regulated the characters' daily life were highly gendered, and entailed a hierarchical power structure to which can be traced at least in part the roots of the selectiveness behind the history of the Nehru family, and the neglect of a significant section of it.

Motilal Nehru

Motilal was a member of what in British India were called the "English-educated elites", those "persons, Indian in blood and colour but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect" that Macaulay had envisioned in his *Minute on Indian Education*. They were a group of people sharing a common vocabulary and conceptual framework, absorbed through the medium of English education.[6] Though a tiny minority, this emerging social group enjoyed from the mid nineteenth century disproportionate importance, constituting the base from which reformism and the first theories of nationalism would emerge. The presence of English-educated Indians was not homogeneous across the different regions; they concentrated mostly in Madras, Bengal and Bombay, rather than the United Provinces or the Punjab. The familiarity with the English language allowed them to communicate and establish contacts across the whole

[6] T. B. Macaulay, *Minute on Indian Education*, 2 February 1835.

country; it also made them highly mobile, enabling them to search for employment out of their region of birth, and to become acquainted with the currents and ideologies circulating outside India.

Historians of modern India have extensively debated the labels for this group. Some, like Sumit Sarkar, have found the representation of the English-educated as "elite-groups" not very convincing. Firstly, he has claimed, if it is true that they mostly came from the upper castes, the only group that could be rightly considered an elite in the context of colonial India was the British. Secondly, the group of English-educated Indians seldom clung on an ideology of defence of its privileges, and instead often engaged in social-reform movements undermining the very basis of upper-caste privileges. Sarkar has noticed that the other label usually assigned to the English-educated, namely that of "westernised middle class" (often considered synonymous to that of "westernised elites"), is equally imprecise. While they drew upon bourgeois ideals and projected themselves as a middle-class group, borrowing its model from Europe, western-educated Indians did not have their social roots in industry or trade, but in sectors like law, journalism, education, or government service.[7] Neither have Cambridge-school historians of the early 1970s, and David Washbrook in particular, found the above-mentioned definitions satisfactory, deeming them too vast to account for differences and factions within the ranks of the English-educated, and imprecise in ascribing to this group political and economic powers it never in fact enjoyed. As an alternative to the category of the westernised middle class/elites, Washbrook and Seal have proposed that of middlemen, mere intermediaries between indigenous magnates and the British Raj. This proposed solution, however, did not put an end to the debate, as the latter label did not convince everyone. One more reading has come from Italian historian Michelguglielmo Torri, who has suggested Gramscian models of "intellectuals". Gramsci defined them as a set of people sharing a common professional role, theorists and organisers who are not an autonomous social group, but rather act on behalf of autonomous social classes. The category of "intellectual" thus overlaps partly Washbrook's "middlemen", and partly the traditional "westernised middle class/elite".[8]

However variegated their roles within Indian political, economic and social life may have been, Indian men educated in colonial educational institutions did share a

[7] Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India, 1885-1947* (Delhi: MacMillan, 1983), ed. 2012, pp. 65-67.
[8] Michelguglielmo Torri, '"Westernised middle class", intellectuals and society in late-colonial India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25, No. 4 (27 January 1990), pp. 2-11.

common conceptual framework, whose roots originated deep in their childhood years. They were familiar with the ideas backing the "civilising mission" that filled the pages of textbooks praising acculturation, and suggesting that the acceptance of Western values and ideals would entail a share in the government and ruling of British India.[9] The underlying assumption was that India and its people could not but benefit from the British influx, as—according to a set of mutually exclusive categories—the West was considered naturally better and superior to India. While concepts like efficiency, rationality, civility and hard work were associated to the former, the latter was often related to laziness, superstition and savagery. It was typically the sons of upper-caste families, with an established tradition of literacy (in Persian, Urdu or Sanskrit), who were encouraged by their fathers and older relatives to embark on the adventure of Anglicisation and of acquiring with it social status and economic prosperity. These children would leave their home towns and move to bigger cities; the move was psychological as well as physical, and entailed a coming to terms with their traditional background, often resulting in refusal of and rebellion against its restrictions.

As one of these first-generation English-educated men, Motilal Nehru, after a traditional primary education at the Muslim *maktab*,[10] where he learned Persian and Arabic, joined at twelve the government high school at Kanpur and, after his matriculation, the Muir Central College in Allahabad. The college was conceived in 1868 by the Lieutenant Governor, Sir William Muir, who found the number of graduates in the United Provinces astonishingly low compared to Bengal. "Besides providing the means of a higher education to the native students of these provinces", Sir Muir thought that the college could "appropriately afford similar facilities for pursuing a University career to the English scholars of our European schools, for whom there exist at the present time no such opportunities". Carrying a clear European imprint, at the time of Motilal the college was indeed staffed by a British principal and mainly British professors teaching all subjects but Persian and Sanskrit, which were taught by the college's only two Indian professors.[11] Motilal left college after four years, most of which he had spent

[9] Judith E. Walsh, 'English education and Indian childhood during the Raj, 1850-1947', *Contemporary Education Dialogue*, 1 (2003), pp. 35-75.
[10] *Maktabs* were primary-level educational institutions intended mainly for Muslim pupils, usually funded by local landowners and attached to the town's mosque. Parna Sengupta, *Pedagogy for religion: missionary education and the fashioning of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2011) p. 133.
[11] Amaranatha Jha (ed.), *A history of the Muir Central College, 1872-1922* (Allahabad: Allahabad University, 1938), pp.1-2, 9-10.

playing games, rather than studying,[12] and though such a career never culminated in a degree, it did leave a visible mark on the young man, moulding him into an ardent admirer of the British and their life-ways.

This admiration was reflected in all aspects of his existence. A previously unenthusiastic student, Motilal quickly turned into a committed professional at the High Court of Allahabad, embodying those virtues of punctuality, ambition and reliability that were considered the peculiarities of western men, and the essential features of anglicised Indians longing for British esteem. This he earned to a degree that surprised even some Englishmen.[13] In 1896, he was admitted to the roll of Advocates by unanimous resolution,[14] one of the first four Allahabad Vakils to have been raised to this status.[15] According to professor Rushbrook Williams, a British scholar of Indian history teaching at the University of Allahabad in the 1910s, Motilal Nehru was one of "the two unchallenged leaders of the legal profession" (the other being Tej Bahadur Sapru).[16]

His professional ability was not the only reason for his being in such high favour with the British. He was also as "magnificent" a host as he was a lawyer,[17] a *bon vivant* who enjoyed holding sumptuous receptions at his mansion, according to the finest European standards of hospitality. Writing to his son about a garden party to be held at their house in honour of a friend's appointment as Vice Chancellor of the University, Motilal reported that even the Lieutenant Governor and Lady La Touche had accepted the invitation, and concluded: "All Allahabad and his wife will be here. Poor old Sunderlal is taking lessons from me as to how to talk to the ladies".[18] Tales about the lavish parties and banquets held at the Nehrus' fill the memoirs written by members of the family. They speak of Motilal's "meticulous attention to detail and talent in getting

[12] Surendra Nath Sanwal, 'Pandit Motilal Nehru: a political biography', M.A. thesis, Indian Residential School and College, Naini Tal, 1940, p. 1. Motilal Nehru Papers, Miscellaneous, File No. 6, NMML.
[13] "When I came to Allahabad", recalled Chief Justice Grimwood Mears, "and was beginning to learn the names and positions of the various members of the Bar, I was struck by the respect and pride with which all his colleagues at the Bar spoke of Pandit Motilal Nehru. When I had the chance of meeting him, I understood the reasons for the affection with which he was regarded". *The Leader*, 8 February 1931. Quoted in Sanwal, 'Pandit Motilal Nehru', p. 5.
[14] Motilal Nehru, 'Short history of the Nehru family', 3 July 1916. Motilal Nehru Papers, Sub. File No. 1, NMML.
[15] Sanwal, 'Pandit Motilal Nehru', p. 3.
[16] L. F. Rushbrook Williams, *Inside both Indias, 1914-1938*, p. 19. Rushbrook Williams Papers, Cambridge South Asian Archives.
[17] Rushbrook Williams, *Inside both Indias*, p. 20.
[18] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 15 February 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 57, NMML.

the right people together",[19] of the dining table being set "with Sèvres, crystal, and silver, and with flowers to match the particular dinner set used that night",[20] and of guests arriving "in smart cars or carriages drawn by lovely horses each vying with the other in showing off their pomp and splendour".[21] The British, noticed Rushbrook Williams, "deeply respected his eminent position and his princely hospitality",[22] and some of them were so close to the family that the children treated them as relatives.[23]

Devoted to worldly success, Motilal was guided by that "certainty of opinions and absence of self-doubts" that in her study of autobiographies Walsh has found typical of first-generation English-educated men of his like:[24] "I am taken for a magician!", he proudly wrote to his son, speaking of his list of cases that had "reached its climax". "In my mind it is simple enough. I want money, I work for it and I got it".[25] Indeed, besides being one of the purposes of domestic life, according to the principles of Kashmiri Pandits mentioned in the previous chapter, wealth was also intimately linked to all projects of Anglicisation. Those who could display the credentials of progress were likely to obtain good and well-paid jobs, that is, richness; the latter, in its turn, secured the permanence of the sahib-like position, and—as wealth increased—its perfectioning.

It was thanks to economic affluence that Motilal Nehru could construct his life in the way he did, following for about forty years, with Carthusian attention to detail, the road to Anglicisation into which he had turned as a young man. Such attention was actually essential to the success of any Anglicisation project, which did not rely only on the public aspects of the men embarking upon it. Extending itself well beyond the professional and social realms of people's lives, it plunged its roots deeply into their personal and domestic dimensions.

Home

Starting from the early nineteenth century, home became the main field in which a wide range of social and political ideologies were being shaped. By that time, middle-

[19] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 43.
[20] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 37.
[21] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 34.
[22] Rushbrook Williams, *Inside both Indias*, p. 21.
[23] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit recalled their addressing Sir Harcourt Butler (the governor of the United Provinces in 1921-22) as 'Uncle Harcourt'. Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 54.
[24] Walsh, 'English education', p. 60.
[25] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 November 1908. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 56, NMML.

class European ideas about home and family life were being grouped into a set of practices and norms to be exported on a global scale. Such a normative domesticity spread mainly through a proliferation of manuals and magazines that—given the close association of the domestic sphere with the female figure—were directed to (and often written by) women, in Europe, North America and the colonies. To understand the significance of the discourse on domesticity, suffice it to say that more than one hundred English advice manuals were published in England and the United States between 1815 and 1911, more than forty were written in Bengali between 1860 and 1900, and at least ten in Hindi and Urdu between 1868 and 1895,[26] while in Maharashtra even Pandita Ramabai wrote a domestic manual in 1882, *Stri dharma niti*.[27] An increasingly wider female reading public could, thanks to this advice literature, be schooled in what were considered the standards of household management and proper family relationships.

In the colonies, the discourse on domesticity was part of the broader 'civilising mission'. It worked as a universal and naturalised code of domestic conduct that the colonisers, as well as the colonised, must perform. For the British in India, it was a matter of fashioning themselves and their empire as rational, ordered, and peaceful like their Indian homes. British women played an essential, dual role within this project: as reproducers both of legitimate imperial rulers and of the values and ideals legitimating imperialism itself.[28] For Indians, home became one of the symbols of Anglicisation (that is, potential access to power), and the site where male reformers and early nationalists could act autonomously from imperial constraints, starting reform from the socialisation of women into the new patriarchy required by the emerging middle class. For colonisers and colonised, *home* was thus intimately linked to *nation*, and the domestic world became "the context for interior explications of national identity".[29]

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[26] Judith E. Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India. What women learned when men gave them advice* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), pp. 19-23.

[27] Meera Kosambi has noticed that Pandita Ramabai's voice – which would become radical in the ensuing years – was in this text that of "a surrogate male reformer, exhorting 'illiterate, ignorant and stupid' women to recast themselves in a more cultured mould through self-reliance and through an impossibly ambitious plan of self-education". Meera Kosambi, 'Tracing the voice: Pandita Ramabai's life through her landmark texts', *Australian Feminist Studies*, 19, 43 (2004), p. 21. A few years earlier, however, Uma Chakravarti had offered a more nuanced reading of the text, suggesting that it was about women's self-cultivation, rather than the companionate wife. Chakravarti also wondered whether economic reasons were behind the writing of such a text by Ramabai, who was one of the first nineteenth-century women to make a living out of writing and lecturing. Chakravarti, *Rewriting history*, p. 316.

[28] Alison Blunt and Robyn Dowling, *Home* (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 150.

[29] Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, p. 28.

The Nehru household, both as a material place and as an idea, was no less complex in shaping and being shaped by a variety of social needs, gendered ideologies, normative narratives. The mansion where several generations of Nehrus would be raised, and which would become so tightly linked to the history not only of the family, but of India itself, was bought by Motilal Nehru on 7 August 1899. The ten-acres estate on 1, Church Road, consisted of the main house and in "buildings, stables, out offices and lands", to which further plots of land were added in the ensuing years.[30] It was a huge, white, one-story brick house, with a central courtyard and verandas all around external walls, open on the gardens' luxuriant vegetation. The site on which it stands was a pilgrimage destination to many Hindus, who worshipped it as one of the sacred places of the Ramayana, and therefore visited the house and its gardens, especially during the Kumbha Mela festivities.[31]

In its new owner's mind, however, the mansion was to convey all but the religious meaning assigned to it by those Hindu pilgrims. It featured all symbols of the West-oriented mentality, needs and aspirations of a number of Indian men of the time, whose social, economic, professional and intellectual status paralleled that of the Nehrus. Standing at the heart of the Civil Lines, the house was located in the English quarter, whose costs of living and appearance assured that the population of the Indian sector observed the unwritten rule of spatial segregation. The main bazaar, around which the Indian part developed, had "winding lanes, open drains, and ill-ventilated houses", and narrow roads on either side of which were small stalls selling any sort of goods, from brocades to fruits and vegetables, at the presence of several dogs and cows. Few roads away stood the exclusive Civil Lines. Regarded still today as the elegant part of Allahabad, it must have seemed unreachable to the inhabitants of the *chowk* one century ago, with its large roads, the shopping centre selling European goods, and the beautiful Company *Bagh* where the band played Western music every Saturday, between the benches marked "for Europeans Only".[32]

The property itself was by no means less elegant than its surroundings. In their autobiographies, Motilal's daughters speak of the house as an Eden-like place, full of light, industriousness, and joy. In such accounts, the mansion is described as being

[30] *Anand Bhawan Case*, Motilal Nehru Papers, Sub. File No. 6 (Pt. 1), NMML. The mansion belonged to Raja Rai Kishen Das, who sold it to Motilal Nehru for 20,000 Rupees. The other plots of land were purchased by M. Nehru in 1902 and 1912.
[31] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 22.
[32] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, pp. 41-42.

exactly like their father had envisaged it, when he had chosen to name it *Anand Bhawan*, the "abode of happiness". Naming one's house—the first step for turning it into *home*—entailed a number of underlying meanings in late colonial India: the name assigned to the house was as evocative as the material objects it contained, and as descriptive of its inhabitants' identity and aspirations. The British people who moved to hill stations from the Indian plains during the hot weather, for instance, named the houses they rented there, even if it was just for the season; the names they chose, like 'Moss Grange', 'Ivy Glen', or 'Sunny Bank', evoked memories of Britain, their home country.[33] Through the appropriation of this British habit, Indian elites could participate in the domesticity endorsed by the colonisers. Within this context, Motilal's choice mirrored a much wider narrative that, drawing on nineteenth-century European bourgeois ideals, depicted home as a sort of refuge to which men could return after an entire day spent working in the outside world. Home was to be the warm and joyous realm where husbands would recover from the hardships of salaried work, the nest that women would maintain clean, well ordered, elegant and comfortable: the stage, in other words, on which companionate, heterosexual, bourgeois family life would be performed. Such a narrative drew on the distinction between the private and public spheres, two broad categories that allowed for a whole range of dualistic understandings, gendered and hierarchical.[34]

In the Indian colonial context, the private/public dichotomy often served the male reformers and early nationalists' need for exerting their sovereignty. Deprived of any autonomy and power in the public sphere, where they were subordinate to the norms and decisions of the imperial machine, they turned inward, to the domestic and private sphere, as the only realm over which they could rule. It was, thus, within the walls of their houses that such men began to rework the aspects of Indian tradition they considered barbaric, and to provide their wives with the education they were thought to

[33] Blunt and Dowling, *Home*, p. 159.

[34] On debates on domesticity in India, see Swapna Banerjee, 'Debates on domesticity and the position of women in late-colonial India', *History Compass*, Vol. 8, No. 6 (2010), pp. 455-473. Mary Hancock, 'Home Science and the nationalization of domesticity in Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 35, No. 4 (October 2001), pp. 871-903. On Anglo-Indian domesticity, see Alison Blunt, 'Home, community and nationality: Anglo-Indian women in India before and after Independence', in S. Raju, M. Satish Kumar and S. Cordridge (eds.), *Colonial and post-colonial geographies of India* (Delhi: Sage, 2006); Alison Blunt, 'Imperial geographies of home: British domesticity in India, 1886-1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1999), pp. 421-440. On Victorian domesticity, see John Tosh, *A man's place: masculinity and the middle-class home in Victorian England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007), esp. Ch. 2.

need to become better mothers, companionate partners, and the guardians of that uncolonised space where an essentialised Indianness was to be preserved.[35]

Anand Bhawan itself was organised according to a number of dichotomies, the most evident being the one between West and East. The two categories feature continuously in the descriptions that Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit and Krishna Nehru make of their home and its inhabitants: "When he came back to us from England", wrote the latter about her brother Jawaharlal, "he was more West than East, with his superbly tailored clothes from Savile Row and his head full of radical ideas".[36] Everything, from the people who lived in the house, to the language they spoke, down to the garden's flowers, could be described according to this categorisation.[37] Such a dualistic understanding took a concrete shape in the house's spatial organisation, which mirrored the structure of most cities: it had a western and an Indian section.

The western section comprised the reception and dining rooms and Motilal's offices. These rooms were, most significantly, "in the front of the house overlooking the garden".[38] They occupied, in other words, the *external* side of the house, while the Indian wing was positioned in its *interior* part. The rooms in the western section were "crowded with Western furniture in the somewhat dubious taste of turn-of-the-century England":[39] tables, chairs, carpets, and a number of the most fashionable European objects and decorations that Motilal himself carefully chose during his trips.[40] While he

[35] Among the most relevant analysis of the Bengali case are Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation*, esp. Ch. 1; Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), esp. Ch. 8; Sinha, *Colonial masculinity*; Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The difference-deferral of a colonial modernity. Public debates on domesticity in British Bengal', in F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (eds), *Tensions of empire: colonial cultures in a bourgeois world* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), pp. 373-405; Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Postcoloniality and the artifice of history: who speaks for the Indian past?', *Representations*, vol. 37 (1992), pp. 1-26; Partha Chatterji, 'The nationalist resolution of the women's question', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), *Recasting women.* On the development of the discourse on women and home in Maharashtra, see Chakravarti, *Rewriting history*, esp. Ch. 4.

[36] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 5.

[37] "[At Anand Bhawan] There were wonderful gardens in which English flowers—gladioli, chrysanthemmus, delphiniums and a formal garden of roses—bloomed beside the gaudy flowers of India: deep red poinsettias, pink and yellow hibiscus, and masses of buganvillea". Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 20.

[38] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 43.

[39] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 20.

[40] In his autobiography, Bengali nationalist Bipin Chandra Pal reflected on the symbolic role played in shaping his thinking by the western-style furniture his father had given to him: "In buying the furniture of young Shaw for my use, my father unconsciously introduced a very great innovation in my life which had, I feel, a far-reaching effect in giving certain impulses for my future life and evolution. In my young days I was very partial to English ways and idea; and I have often wondered whether the accident that led my father to bring me up while I was a boy in the use and enjoyment of the furniture of young Shaw had not something to do with it". Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of my life and times* (Calcutta: 1973), p. 42. Quoted in Walsh, 'English education', p. 59.

took great pride in such purchases, Swarup Rani was rarely equally enthusiastic: "Why should we be like King Edward?", she asked once, when her husband went home with a newly purchased set of Bohemian glass that he claimed to be just like the one bought by King Edward VII.[41] She was, indeed, much more familiar with the other section of Anand Bhawan, the Indian one, her "domain"; she ruled it with the help of her elder sister, Bibi Amma.[42] There, among "delicately carved Indian furniture",[43] life went on as in any other orthodox Hindu household, with "carpets, big bolsters, low stools, and cushions strewn around", so that people could sit on the floor, as was customary,[44] or on the wooden platforms covered with mattresses and white sheets typical of Kashmiri households.[45]

Each section of the house was arranged to meet the culinary tastes and ritual needs of its inhabitants and guests. The western-style kitchen employed Muslim and Christian staff: a chef and several servants, supervised by Motilal's personal valet, Bhola, and by the butler, Ashgar Ali, who was to stand behind his master's chair during dinners.[46] In the Indian kitchen worked only Hindus, who prepared the food according to the norms of Brahmanical tradition. This was the food that the entire family—and not just Swarup Rani and her sister—ate one day a week and on Hindu festivals, picking things from silver *thali* with the tips of their fingers. For the remaining six days, the family ate "in Western style, wearing English clothes and sitting in Victorian chairs at the big table that would seat twenty four people", and having "thoroughly British" food, which the men accompanied with some of the finest European wines and liquors from Motilal's cellar.[47] If during the day everyone was free to have their meals whenever they wished, irrespective of any mealtime, Motilal would allow no exception in the evening: dinner was to be eaten "in a proper manner in the dining room".[48] A seemingly insignificant detail, this obsession with dining is revealing, if situated within the above-mentioned context of a late colonial India imbibed with the 'civilising-mission' ideals. "Creatures of the inferior races eat and drink", claimed Isabella Beeton in her 1861 *Mrs. Beeton's book of household management*, the most popular English domestic manual of

[41] Pandit, *Scope of happiness,* p. 37.
[42] Pandit, *Scope of happiness,* p. 43.
[43] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 20.
[44] Pandit, *Scope of happiness,* p. 43.
[45] Forbes, *Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal*, p. 7.
[46] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 5.
[47] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, pp. 6-7.
[48] Pandit, *Scope of happiness,* p. 45.

all times and a mine of Victorian values; "man only dines". Indeed, she explained, "the nation which knows how to dine has learnt the leading lesson of progress. It implies both the will and the skill to reduce to order, and surround with idealisms and graces, the more material conditions of human existence; and wherever that will and that skill exist, life cannot be wholly ignoble".[49] Motilal must have had something of this sort in mind when he insisted that his family joined him at the table and engaged in dinner conversation.

"Order", as mentioned by Mrs. Beeton, was an essential word in the civilising-mission vocabulary, declined in its variants of punctuality, elegance, cleanliness, discipline and rationality. And it was according to such principles that the Nehru household was run, and its inhabitants expected to function. The ability to make an efficient and productive use of time was considered a sign of superiority; from office work[50] to study,[51] from domestic chores[52] to human relationships, everything was to be done at the right time—as the British did.[53] It is Krishna Nehru who shed some light on the management of time at the Nehrus'. "Adhering to strict rules and regulations", she wrote, speaking of her childhood "every minute of my life was planned out from the

[49] Isabella Mary Beeton, *Mrs. Beeton's book of household management* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 363. Quoted in Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, p. 120.

[50] On the aversion to *chakri* (salaried work) in Bengal, see Sumit Sarkar, '"Kaliyuga, "chakri" and "Bhakti": Ramakrishna and his times', *Economic and Political Weekly*, 27-29 (18 July 1992), pp. 1543-1559, 1561-1566.

[51] In the 1883 Bengali manual *Kumārī śiksa* (Education for girls), Navinkali Dasi advised: "When you realise how precious your time is, you will not want to be lazy anymore. Even if you spent thousands of rupees today, you could not get back that bit of time you wasted yesterday in play. You'll surely need that same amount of time today to learn whatever reading and writing you would have learned in that bit of time yesterday. Instead, you've lost whatever you would have learned today in that amount of time. Whatever extra educational skills that extra practice would have given you – that too you've lost. And whatever extra benefit those lost extra educational skills would have given you, again, that too has been lost. So, you see, you will lose both the time you wasted *and* the time it takes to learn the amount you *would have learned* in the time you wasted – so twice as much time has been wasted. And in trying to make up for that wasted time, two times more time will again be wasted. In this way, you'll waste half your precious life making up for wasted time". Judith E. Walsh, *How to be a goddess of your home. An anthology of Bengali domestic manuals* (Delhi: Yoda Press, 2005), pp. 128-129.

[52] In her above-mentioned manual, Ramabai wrote: "Every day you should note down what is to be done at what time, and do it exactly at the noted time without fail". Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai through her own words* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), p. 78. Equally, in her 1841 *Treatise on domestic economy*, American Catharine Beecher praised what she called "a habit of system and order" in domestic chores, and advised women to keep a clock in the kitchen, as following a regular time schedule would make their "whole family machinery moving easily and well". Quoted in Walsh, *Domesticity in Colonial India*, pp. 24, 122.

[53] In his domestic manual, Bengali Anukulchandra Datta wrote in 1906: "How the English appreciate the value of time! They work at the right time, eat at the right time, attend office at the right time, and play at the right time. Everything they do is governed by rules. . . . It is because of this quality that the English get the time to accomplish so much. Nowhere among the educated, civilised nations are instances to be found of a people disregarding the value of time and misusing it as we do". Anukulchandra Datta, *Grihashiksha* (Calcutta: 1906), pp. 55, 62. Quoted in Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 225.

minute I woke up to the time I went to bed".[54] Miss Hooper, the English governess Motilal hired in England in 1905,[55] was as much of a disciplinarian as he was,[56] and was entrusted with the task of making such a strict schedule operative and respected at any cost. This she did easily, belonging "to the old school which believed in stern discipline and unswerving obedience".[57] As a child, Krishna "resented it very much", and envied the other children who were not forced into a childhood "of clock-like regularity" as she was.[58] Vijaya Lakshmi describes Miss Hooper as someone under whose regime "discipline was imposed, food habits regulated and, most annoying of all, early bed enforced in the evening".[59] Adults were equally expected to value time; so much so that—besides spending it wisely during their everyday work, either outside or within the house[60]—even when on holidays, they could not but fall under the spell of time's efficient use. Motilal's letters to Jawaharlal are full of details about journeys' durations, hour of arrivals and departures, and daily schedules; they betray an interest of which one of the most striking examples is a letter he sent him from Bad Ems, Germany, where he had gone with his wife and daughter for some treatment. "We have begun the treatment today", he wrote, "or rather I have done so . . . My treatment will leave me no time even to write letters. Here is my timetable". What follows is a to-the-minute description detailing every single activity, from "washing of feet" (from 7.30 to 7.45), to "gargle" (8.15 to 8.25), "nasal douche" (8.35 to 8.40) and so on, until "dinner" (7pm).[61]

Making good use of time was only one of the skills required by the pursuing of "order" and "improvement". The other was external appearance, both of houses and their inhabitants (that is, of the nation and of its citizens).[62] The latter's attention to their physical health, hygiene, shape and elegance was to be mirrored in the former's proper construction, ventilation, tidiness and cleanliness. Motilal Nehru greatly valued both forms of taking care of one's appearance, and ensured that everyone and everything around him conveyed this ideal. Eager to equip his mansion with the latest gadgets and

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[54] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 23.
[55] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 23.
[56] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 134.
[57] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 25.
[58] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 24.
[59] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 52.
[60] Krishna Nehru laments to have rarely enjoyed the company of her parents, as "Father was always very busy", and "Mother could never sit quietly, and always had to be doing some house-work in spite of a fleet of servants waiting to carry out her smallest commands". Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 24.
[61] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 19 August 1908. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 56, NMML.
[62] Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 224.

improvements, he spent much of his time in England buying fittings for Anand Bhawan, one among the few Allahabad houses that could boast electricity and running water.[63] But Motilal's interest apparently went beyond the simple desire of possessing such comforts, and extended itself to a semi-scientific curiosity to understand how they worked, as testified by the presence in his library of American and European manuals like *Practical bell fitting* and *A practical treatise upon the fitting of hot-water apparatus*.[64] One's body, no less than one's house, was to be efficient. Sports were the means whereby physical health and vigour could be achieved, as well as European habits imitated. The house thus featured an indoor swimming pool, a tennis court, a riding ring, a number of horses; Motilal himself was fond of hunting and riding, and encouraged his children to take up sports.[65]

If the house was to be managed properly and orderly, a fleet of servants was required, as was customary in all elite European (and European-oriented) households of the time. In her *Wonderings of a pilgrim in search of the picturesque*, Fanny Parks has maintained that a mid-nineteenth century private family needed about forty-to-fifty servants.[66] According to Mrs. Evelyn Dagmar Bogle, who lived in the United Provinces in the 1920s, the number of "essential servants in the household of Europeans" could instead be reduced to a dozen: a bearer, a sweeper, a cook, a butler, a gardener, a washer man, a sewing man, a *caprāsī*, an *āya*, a *chaukīdār* and a groom to look after the horses.[67] At Anand Bhawan, the trend was similar to the one described by Fanny Parks, and the family employed several tens of servants, at whose top was Mubarak Ali. A Muslim of illustrious descent, he was Motilal's *muṅshī* (legal assistant and personal secretary), and was exceptionally trusted by the family; he lived in a cottage at Anand Bhawan with his orthodox wife and his son, Manzar Ali, who was considered one of the children of the family, and who will appear again in this story.[68] Making Anand Bhawan keep pace with

[63] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 12.
[64] Nanda, *The Nehrus*, p. 31.
[65] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 24. Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 March 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 57, NMML.
[66] Fanny Parks, *Wonderings of a pilgrim in search of the picturesque, during four and twenty years in the East. With revelations of life in Zenana*, Vol. I (London, 1850), pp. 209-211.
[67] Evelyn Dagmar Bogle, 'Memoir: India in the 1920s'. Bogle Papers, Box No. 4, Cambridge South Asian Archives. The *caprāsī* was the house's official messenger; the *āya* was the family lady's maid, and the babysitter; the *chaukīdār* was the night-watchman.
[68] Forbes, *Manmohini Zutshi Sahgal*, p. 6. The western-wing employees whose names have been handed down to posterity are: Miss Smith, the Anglo-Indian housekeeper who looked after the Christian, Muslim and untouchable servants; Mr. Dickson, the electrician, who took care of the generator and, later on, of the garage; de Souza, the cook; Miss Ingles, the nurse; Jessie, the *āya;* the girls' tutors: Miss Hooper, from 1905 to 1910, and from 1911 to 1914; and Miss Rice, from 1910 to 1911 (Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 44); and

its proprietors' standards was very expensive and required, according to Motilal's calculations, a monthly income of at least two thousand Rupees. Such expenses made him consider selling the property, but the idea was never put into practice: Anand Bhawan was to remain for another fifteen years the sumptuous place it had been since its birth.[69]

Motilal's admiration for the best and the latest was evident also from his own attire. His older daughter recalls that he "was particular about the way he dressed and disliked equally sloppiness of attire and sloppiness of mind. He was always very groomed himself, and mentally alert, and expected the same of others".[70] Keen on luxury and fashion, Motilal was fond of precious stones to such an extent that he designed himself the jewels to be worn by his son's bride at their wedding.[71] From the first time he visited England in 1899, he had all his clothes made there,[72] and completed his outfits with the accessories that he bought himself in Europe, or commissioned from his son.[73] While he wore European clothes outside the home, he dressed according to the traditional style of the region when at home,[74] one more habit to mark the concept of separate spheres. The other men of the family followed the same trend, while married women dressed traditionally, a contrast particularly evident in husband-and-wife photographs.

Jawaharlal's tutor, Mr. Brooks, from 1900 to about 1903 (Nehru, *An autobiography*, p. 14). There were, moreover, Bhola, Motilal's personal valet; and Ashgar Ali, the butler (Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 5). Besides these qualified staff, there were a number of other servants, such as the *dhobi* (the washer man, Gangadin), the fan pullers and the men waving palm-leaf fans (Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, pp. 37, 52), the gardeners and the stable boys. To these were added the servants of the Indian side: Swarup Rani's personal valets, and the kitchen staff.

[69] Swarup Rani was "very much opposed to the idea" of selling the property, and Motilal himself had grown fond of his house – but, more importantly (as he was decided not to "be guided by sentiments"), the Rani who wished to buy Anand Bhawan for one lakh Rupees never agreed to meet Motilal's counter proposal of one hundred twenty-five Rupees. Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 February 1906, and 29 March 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 57, NMML.

[70] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 36.

[71] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 37.

[72] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 21.

[73] Once, for instance, he asked Jawaharlal to have the famous spectacles makers Curry&Paxton send him from London two pairs of pince-nez (one black and one gold). Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 9 June 1910. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 59, NMML.

[74] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 36.

Rameshwari and Brijlal Nehru (1902)

Photo courtesy: Mr. Vikram Nehru

Motilal appreciated elements of European fashion in women's attire. And so did

other men in the family, judging from a letter that a B. Nehru (probably Rameshwari's husband Brijlal) sent to *The Leader* in 1910. In it, the author voiced his views on "the immense superiority of the Englishwoman's dress to that worn inside the Zenana", noting that the adoption of European clothes, though slow, was unmistakably taking place among Indian women "generally regarded as enlightened or advanced". Rightly so, in his opinion, as the sari, a "primitive piece of drapery", could not be compared to a "delicate confection from Paris or London".

> The Sari . . . even though made of the most costly or gorgeous materials, presents the same eternally monotonous appearance which it has worn probably ever since our forefathers first made India their home. . . . Besides, the positive disadvantages of the Sari are many. It is only when they begin to go out . . . that the women realise the deficiencies of the dress to which they have been used. The Indian custom is absolutely unsuited to any form of outdoor life, walking, badminton, lawn tennis, riding, driving, or motoring, for the wind plays brave with the *palla* of the Sari, which has continuously to be adjusted, in the great detriment of the game or pastime. There are other defects also to which I could draw attention, such as the absence of fit, but for the present this will suffice. Innumerable pins . . . have to be employed to overcome them, but these are only temporary devices to put off the inevitable day when the Sari will be finally discarded in favour of the successful rival. The force of circumstances sooner or later will compel this change. . . . European dress has conquered Japan, Turkey and Egypt, where the most fashionable women dress regularly in European style. Why should India be ashamed to follow their example?[75]

Resigning to the family men's views, Swarup Rani eventually accepted to wear "the hideous blouses then in fashion in the West" and to get "a Western hairstyle". She must have done so unwillingly, though, judging from the sorry way in which her daughter described the result: the blouses "did not go well with Indian dress", and the hairstyle was "also most inappropriate". One can picture the unfortunate mix of the two styles, and almost feel for the lady who submitted to such a masquerade, just because it was "the 'done' thing in so called modern homes of the day".[76] Once, far from India and

[75] B. Nehru, 'European dress for Indian women', *The Leader*, 23 April 1910, p. 2.
[76] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, pp. 38-39.

in the only company of her husband and daughter, Swarup Rani even "threw away her costume", in favour of English dresses—Motilal was so favourably impressed that he reported the news to his son: "She looks very nice", he commented. "Nan [her daughter Vijaya Lakshmi] is always looking at her".[77]

Their children's as well as their own physical appearance was one of the topics on which took place the subterranean conflict between the two life-styles and sets of values that Motilal and Swarup Rani epitomized. While there could be no doubt about Jawaharlal's appearance, the natural consequence of his western education, Swarup Rani's ideas on what her daughters should look like must have differed a lot from her husband's. Her hopes and efforts were bound to fail, however, as they could do little against a whole environment favouring her husband's ways. "In a very short time she had changed my outward appearance into that of a little English girl of the period, including the hideous corkscrew curls", Vijaya Lakshmi recalls, speaking of Miss Hooper.[78] Swarup Rani must not have made a mystery of her dislike for the governess' attempts, if Krishna, despite her young age, noticed: "the person who frustrated Miss Hooper most in her attempt to make me an English lady was my mother, who wanted to make a good Hindu out of me".[79] Similar small incidents and anecdotes open up windows into a relation—the one between the two models peeping out of every aspect of Nehru family life—that was never simple nor smooth, being tightly intertwined with gender and power dynamics, whose roots were strong and consequences far-reaching.

Towers of strength and ceramic dolls

The above-quoted statement by Krishna suggests that Swarup Rani, too, like her husband, considered bodily appearance as a marker of identity. To her, western-like ways and clothes opposed not so much Indian mores as Hindu ones—a common understanding of the matter. The assumption that westernisation would wipe out the most superstitious and backward Hindu practices had been a trope of reformist thinking since the nineteenth century, and met with the favour of many elite men, in whose opinion scorn of religious traditions was to symbolise their more general preference for

[77] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 26 July 1908. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 56, NMML.
[78] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 52.
[79] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 26.

rationality. At Anand Bhawan, this resulted in a tension between Motilal and Swarup Rani's respective beliefs, a tension whose conflictual character would mainly remain untold and unheard, as the two sides of the controversy held very different power positions.

In his children's accounts, Motilal is described as a staunch rationalist, sarcastic and scornful of religious precepts. Vijaya Lakshmi spoke of him as a "rebel and an iconoclast from his earliest years", who "boldly opposed everything he considered harmful to development and social progress" and would joke on the orthodox's disapproval of his ways and ideas.[80] Krishna's descriptions of her father convey an identical understanding of him, the cheerful man who could barely hide a glint of laughter, when posing for pictures in his English coat and stripped trousers, and found "the whole business" just as "deliciously funny" when his first trip to Europe shook the orthodox Hindu community.[81] It was 1899 and, returning to Allahabad, he was asked to perform the purification ritual required to those having polluted themselves by crossing the *kala pani* (ocean, literally "the black water"). Not even the threat of ostracism convinced him to submit to his fellow caste members' will, and in a letter to a friend he assured that, even if he was to die for it, he would not "indulge in the tomfoolery of *proschit*" and that—while "waiting for some foeman worthy of [his] steel to take the field"—he would pass by "with the most studied indifference and contemptuous silence" those members of the *biradari* who kept "howl[ing] and bark[ing]".[82] Nine years later the issue arose again and Motilal, then in Switzerland, wrote to his son Jawaharlal in London to inform him that his "worthy uncle (Premnathji)" was gathering two conservative groups in a movement. "[W]ith their combined forces [he] hopes to expel us all from caste", reported Motilal; even more indifferent to the whole matter than he had been earlier, he concluded: "I am of course treating their outburst with silent contempt".[83]

"No two people could have been more unlike each other than my parents", concluded Vijaya Lakshmi, referring to Motilal and Swarup Rani's different

[80] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 35.
[81] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 21.
[82] *Prāyaścitt* is the hindi word for 'penance, amends'. Motilal Nehru to Pandit Prithinath, 2 Dec 1899. Quoted in Nanda, *The Nehrus*, p. 39.
[83] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 27 Aug 1908. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 56, NMML.

understandings of life and approaches to tradition.[84] She never went so far, however, as to state explicitly the basic assumption behind such "unlikeness". Her brother and sister, on the other hand, did so. Jawaharlal—a male and the firstborn, and therefore one who had rightful access to the family men's world—revealed the obvious: "father and [the] older cousins treated the question [of religion] humorously and refused to take it seriously", as "it seemed to be a woman's affair". It was, indeed, women who "indulged in various ceremonies and *pujas* from time to time", and the firstborn son, who as a child enjoyed these rituals, was instead induced to "imitate to some extent the casual attitude of the grown-up men of the family".[85] Krishna sensed so, and reported that her brother's consideration of religion was just like her father's, something to be regarded "with benevolent tolerance as women's foolishness".[86]

Swarup Rani's attempts to promote a more orthodox way of life, according to Hindu custom, were therefore to remain spatially restricted to the interior part of the family house. In that isle of strict vegetarianism within a carnivorous household, "in surroundings where religion was scoffed at, she continued, with quiet dignity, her prayers and her religious fasts and all the paraphernalia of Hindu worship".[87] Her sister (described as someone who held fast to the "very sad life" that widowhood had imposed on her since adolescence)[88] was the only one sharing her ways, and the two composed a narrow circle that could sometimes be enlarged to the younger women relatives of the family, but that never really included her children and husband. Swarup Rani and her sister went to temples, performed the prescribed rituals on Hindu festivities, and told the children stories from Hindu mythology and ancient texts, in which Bibi Amma was particularly learned.[89] But Jawaharlal, Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna would retain only a confused and rather disinterested view of Hindu custom:[90] the narrative that mostly shaped their upbringing was a different and stronger one, imbibed as it was with much of the colonisers' superiority complex.

It is indeed to images of strength that his children associated the figure of Motilal in their autobiographical writings. Jawaharlal spoke of his father as the man whom he "admired tremendously", and who "seemed the embodiment of strength and courage

[84] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 40.
[85] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 8.
[86] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 7.
[87] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 39.
[88] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 27.
[89] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 8.
[90] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, pp. 7, 26;

and cleverness, far above all the other men". As a boy, Jawaharlal recalled, "I treasured the hope that when I grew up I would be rather like him": brilliant, iron-willed, with a strong sense of humour and a quick temper.[91] Motilal, in his turn, had clear in mind that his son was to be his spiritual (as well as material) heir, the one who would complete what his father had just started. He wrote all this explicitly to Jawaharlal in 1905, after having left him in England; the boy would spend the ensuing seven years there, getting the education his father had never had, and preparing for a success even brighter than his parent's.

> You must bear in mind that in you we are leaving the dearest treasure we have in the world and perhaps in other worlds to come. We are suffering the pains of separation from you simply for your own good. It is not a question of providing for you as I can do that perhaps in one single year's income. It is a question of making a real man of you which you are bound to be. It would have been extremely selfish – I should say sinful – to keep you with us and leave you a fortune in gold with little or no education. I think I can with vanity say that I am the founder of the fortunes of the Nehru family. I look upon you my dear son as the man who will build upon the foundation I have laid and have the satisfaction of seeing a noble structure of renown rearing up its head to the skies. We leave you in flesh but will always be with you in spirit. You must pursue your noble object without feeling that you are separated from your loving and devoted parent. In less than ten months I will again be with you to find I hope and believe ample justification for leaving you behind and in about two years you will be in a position to pass a few months among your old surroundings at Allahabad. But what a difference would there be! London with all the honours within your reach at Harrow, and budding into a vigorous manhood – to see you successful. I have not the slightest doubt that you will rise to all my expectations and more – you have enough of work to keep you engaged. Apply yourself to it like a man and accomplish your mission. Work includes the preservation of health, be perfect in both body and mind and this is the only return we seek for tearing ourselves from you.[92]

Almost a manifesto of the Anglicised, English-educated thinking discussed above, Motilal's letter is also significant in regard to the gendered assumptions that it contains. Leaving his fifteen-year-old son in London and plunging him into a British educational

[91] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 7.
[92] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 20 October 1905. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 56, NMML.

institution are, according to his father, ways of "making a real man" out of him; "like a man" the boy is expected to apply to the work of becoming one; and as a successful person "budding into vigorous manhood" he is waited for by his family and surroundings in his home country. Motilal summarises all this in the last line: in brief, Jawaharlal's perfection is the *only* return his parents expect from him—a point Motilal would stress in several of his letters to Jawaharlal.[93]

The latter's descriptions of Motilal appear exactly identical in the writings of Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna. The latter, in particular, filled her first autobiography of very evocative images of her father: "a shepherd who . . . kept a vigilant eye on all his flock"; someone to whom everybody had always "associated strength and health", who "had always fought against odds and won" and whom she thought could win even against death; a "tower of strength" and "a refuge from all hardships"; "the embodiment of all that was fine, courageous and strong".[94] Such characteristics distinguished Motilal from those who benefited from them, namely the women of the family.

The ways in which her children described Swarup Rani are diametrically opposed to the representations of their father. Vijaya Lakshmi described her as a "little ivory figurine"[95], and Krishna spoke of her as a "tiny, dainty little person hardly five feet tall, a typical Kashmiri type, perfect in form and feature like an exquisite doll", treated first by her family and then by her husband as "a fragile doll" and "a priceless gem", a "little mother" whom her daughter considered "an exquisite and rare flower to be loved, cherished and protected", rather than an adult parent who could take care of her.[96] Jawaharlal recalled that, contrary to the way he felt toward his father, he had no fear of his mother, who "was *petite* and short of stature", a figurine whose most noticeable features that her son admired were her beauty and "her amazingly small and beautiful hands and feet".[97] Motilal himself reinforced the children's view of their mother as a ceramic doll, for instance underlining her inability to bear anxiety: "Your mother would kill herself if I were to tell her about these things", he wrote to his son, speaking about

[93] In such letters, the requirement for "perfection" extends from being "top in every subject" to taking measures against incipient boldness; from reading Latin "again and again" to devoting oneself to Arithmetic; from being ready to "manage the affairs of Anand Bhawan" to becoming the one whose hands would "mould [the Nehru family's] fortunes after the man who has given it its position is no more". Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 March 1906; 23 August 1908; 28 November 1909. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vols. No. 57, 56, 58, NMML.
[94] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 23, 67-68, 75, 76, 134, 155.
[95] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, pp. 38
[96] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 120-121, 123
[97] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 7.

the latter's difficult travelling conditions due to bad weather in Europe. "As it is she remains in blissful ignorance while the anxiety is all my own. But I am strong enough for it, which she is not". [98] Such narrative could be seen as the result of a distorted image that Swarup Rani's daughters and son had of their mother, influenced perhaps by the relationship between her and their father, whose self-confident and cheerful character could make his wife look frailer and weaker than she actually was. However, a closer look suggests that this was not the case.

Indeed, far from being a characteristic ascribed only to Swarup Rani, *weakness* was rather the category through which all grown-up women of the family were generally described. Featuring all over the documents under scrutiny, such category was declined mainly as a physical trait, and took the shape of indefinite frailty or illness (or both, as was the case with Swarup Rani). Women were thus mainly represented as ailing bodies. It was through the description of her mother's pain, that Krishna told (that is, had been told) the story of her birth, reporting of the entire household awaiting for it till late at night, as "mother was having rather a bad time". "After a great deal of trouble I was born", she continues, "a big, fat, healthy infant, little realizing that I had almost cost my frail little mother her life in the very process of coming into this world. For weeks afterwards my mother hovered between life and death", a trauma from which she "recovered slowly, but remained a semi-invalid for a long time",[99] too ill to look after her child.[100] Similarly, when the women of the family appear in Motilal's letters, it usually is in relation to some illness or physical problem: Miss Hooper's suffering due to Allahabad's hot weather, [101] Miss Rice's incipient tuberculosis, [102] Swarup Rani's impossibility to stand the noise of repairing works being done at Anand Bhawan,[103] Uma's need for an operation,[104] Kamla's headaches.[105] Apart from Swarup Rani, Kamla was the one about whose health it was most written and spoken. From her first

[98] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 3 January 1909. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 58, NMML.
[99] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 21.
[100] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 29.
[101] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 29 March 1906 and 16 June 1914. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vols. No. 57, 62, NMML.
[102] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 22 December 1911. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 60, NMML.
[103] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 13 May 1914. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 62, NMML.
[104] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 16 June 1914. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 62, NMML.
[105] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 27 June 1916. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 62, NMML.

moments at Anand Bhawan until her premature death, Kamla was mostly commented on as a sick young woman—ironically enough, considering that Motilal had chosen her for his son because she "she was the picture of health".[106] Among the few documents about Kamla preserved at the Nehru Memorial Archives is a 'Note on Kamala Nehru's case', penned by Jawaharlal in 1935, less than one year before her death.[107] Though her actual conditions were the obvious rationale behind her husband's need to write a history of her bad health, this document is also revealing of the habit of considering women as ailing bodies that has shaped many of women's descriptions by the family males. In the 'Note' the stages of Kamla's several illnesses mix with the political events and prison sentences of Jawaharlal and Motilal, something that almost suggests a mutual influence between the woman's body and the national(ist) one, symbolised by her husband and father-in-law. The document thus becomes a curious hybrid, partly case history, with Jawaharlal playing the doctor, and referring to his wife as "the patient", and partly sketch of the "acute crisis" of the nationalist struggle's first decade, and their concrete consequences on the family.

The 'Note' thus raises a first point that can be made about this peculiar way of considering women, as it asks questions about the actual physical nature of many of the symptoms from which women (Kamla, in this case) were said to suffer. Although in some instances these were the signs of actual illnesses, in other cases they could be indications of indefinite malaises, having emotional (rather than physical) origins, and being perhaps rooted in women's difficulty to adjust to a family whose rules and expectations were very different from the ones with which they had been accustomed as children. This must have been the case with Kamla who, at seventeen, found herself in a completely new environment, where she could find no traces of the traditional upbringing she had had; speaking very little English, being the target of Motilal's insistence on educating her, and continuously struggling to bridge the intellectual gap between herself and her husband, Kamla must have had a hard time at the Nehrus',[108] and not simply—as her husband suggests—because of the "political strain" troubling the family.

[106] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 112.
[107] Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Note on Kamala Nehru's case'. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. I, Vol. No. 55.
[108] In her biography of Kamala Nehru, Promilla Kalhan has repeatedly pointed to young Kamla's difficulties as a young bride. Kalhan, *Kamala Nehru*, pp. 12-28.

A second consideration that can be drawn from the wider discourse on women's frailty concerns the rational/irrational dichotomy that, as is now evident, shaped the frame of thinking within which the protagonists of these pages acted. In Motilal's understanding, such dichotomy resided in people's bodies, no less than in how they managed their time or drew the maps of their houses. "The heart is a fool, the only safe guide is the head", was his favourite refrain,[109] and the criterion that he held (and expected others to hold) on in all matters of life. Trusting one's heart rather than one's head made people walk on an unsafe ground—typical of women, who were described as emotional and childish creatures with a tendency to gossip that created troubles within the family,[110] and a blind faith in the fanciful tales of Hinduism. "Uma's speech is a very creditable one coming as it did from the heart", Motilal conceded, referring to the talk she had delivered at Allahabad ladies' meeting, in which she commented on Viceroy Harding's speech about the situation of Indians in South Africa.[111] But he continued: "The heart however is always a fool whoever it belongs to. The only safe guide is the head and I must say that there is little of it in that speech". Addressing the audience as "my sisters", Uma had indeed not spared the British government her thoughts, accusing it of not taking any step to protect the Indian population in South Africa, while at the same time spouting off its sympathy. "If this can at all be called 'sympathy', call it useless 'sympathy' which we will rather do without", Uma had said, before urging her "sisters" to keep their "fathers, husbands, brothers, cousins and other friends busy with the agitation".[112]

Her honest tone did not meet either with *The Leader*'s taste, and the newspaper published an editorial note on top of her reported speech. The editors made their position clear: "We must completely dissociate ourselves from what she said about the sympathy of his Excellency the Viceroy", whose Madras speech they found "characterised by a rare nobility of heart and exceptionally courageous statesmanship". Despite "agree[ing] with the editorial *we*", Motilal recognised: "the fault is not Uma's. It is of the men of the Nehru family", who had not explained to her how the whole situation actually was, and why her opinions were wrong. As someone bound to be guided by the

[109] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 63.
[110] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 7 June 1916. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 62; Brajlal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 21 June 1916. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. I, Vol. No. 55, NMML.
[111] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 21 December 1913. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 61, NMML.
[112] 'Allahabad Ladies' Meeting. Speech of Mrs. Shamlal Nehru', *The Leader*, 19 December 1913, p. 6.

heart, in other words, Uma could not but come to the conclusions expressed in her speech; it was the duty of the men, more skilful at utilising their mind, to set her right.

A third noteworthy point about the stress on women's several frailties is that it echoes a discourse that, from the nineteenth century, had spread in North America and Europe, as a response to women's growing intellectual, political and economic independence. As such changes were deemed to challenge the balance of power between the sexes, attempts were made to limit them through semi-scientific explanations of women's biological unfitness to bear the burdens of high education, salaried work, and political struggle. Drawing heavily on Darwin's theory of evolution and on Victorian ideas about domesticity and women's sexual property, this narrative of frailty applied in the West only to white, middle-class women.[113] Such narrative had an ample circulation, as part of the wider "feminine mystique"[114] filtered through imperial ties, and found several supporters.[115] For the Anglicised elites of India, appropriating this discourse could serve two more objectives besides the overarching one of representing women as helpless and in need for protection: on the one hand, it reinforced indigenous notions of the high castes' distinction from the low ones, whose women were bound to work;[116] on the other, it brought the Anglicised elites a step closer to the "civilised" ways of their rulers. It became, in other words, a status symbol, as is well exemplified by the custom of moving from the Indian plains up to the hills during the hot season—an originally British habit, quickly adopted by the indigenous elites. Making arrangements to rent vacation houses in Naini Tal, Mussorie and other similar stations, Motilal spoke of the

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[113] Rose Weitz, 'A history of women's bodies', in Nancy Cook (ed.), *Gender relations in global perspectives* (Toronto: Canadian Scholars' Press, 2007), pp. 129-130.

[114] The phrase is borrowed from American feminist Betty Friedan's 1963 book, *The feminine mystique*.

[115] See, for instance the theories voiced by prof. Chiplunkar, that drew heavily on this discourse to demonstrate women's unfitness for being educated on the same terms as men. Drawing upon pseudo-scientific notions of physiology and psychology, and analysing the bad consequences of higher education for women in the West, Chiplunkar demonstrated that imparting to women the same type of education offered to men was "suicidal to real interests of women"—and, most importantly, of society at large. G. M. Chiplunkar, *The scientific basis of woman's education* (Poona, 1930).

[116] Over the nineteenth century, indeed, the respectability of upper-class women came to be defined by a comparison between the women of the Indian toiling masses and the Victorian ideal of proper womanhood. "Decent" women were continuously warned of the negative influences of their lower-caste sisters, whose relative freedom threatened the set of norms elite women were expected to follow. According to Chattopadhyaya: "The working class women, both rural and industrial are comparatively freer than the upper class woman in India. Amongst the former, woman being an earning member and an economic factor, enjoys greater degree of freedom. Economic stress compels this class to be less trammelled by severe social codes. Thus, while divorce and remarriage for widows is absolutely forbidden amongst the upper class, it is prevalent in a customary form in the toiling masses. The same is true of child-marriage and Purdah. The problem of bread saves the poorer women from the dark dungeon of *Zenana*". Kamaladevi Chattopadhyayya, *The awakening of Indian women* (Madras: Everymans Press, 1939), p. 2.

fashion of moving an army of servants and tens of trunks to the hills as a necessary measure to preserve women's health,[117] omitting that it was "considered very plebeian to stay in the plains during the hot weather", as a *memsahib* put it.[118]

It is within this framework that the Nehrus' insistence on their women's frailty could be understood, and it is to this narrative that could be ascribed Motilal's neglect for female education and economic independence. While advocating the need for high-quality education for his son and nephews, he indeed did not see the necessity for a similar education for his daughters. Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna's education was committed to several governesses and tutors, but it was carried out with "no supervision and no plan. Studies were haphazard", in the words of the oldest daughter, "and because there was no competition they were also rather dull".[119] This arrangement made the girls long for going to school, but Motilal always opposed the idea, as "the necessary qualifications for a young lady in those days were to be able to play the piano or some other musical instrument, and to carry out a conversation and mix well in society".[120] Krishna managed to convince her father at a certain point, and was enrolled in a very select school, attended mostly by English children. As a grown-up, she would describe this event as "the beginning of my life", a time that was destined to last but a few years, however: when the family joined the non-cooperation movement Krishna was withdrawn from that British-run school.[121] Motilal's perspective on female education can be deduced also from a glimpse at the ways in which he looked for—and finally selected—the girl who would become his son's wife. What Rameshwari defined "a big wife-hunt tour"[122] must have started when Jawaharlal was a teenager, as by 1906 the subject of marriage was already filling the letters sent to him in London, much to his annoyance.[123] Motilal sent him regular updates on his findings, which usually featured comments on the girl's appearance and docility of mind, besides her level of education. All the girls Motilal seemed to consider appropriate could boast very little education; a post-engagement agreement with the girl's father, however, would ensure that the girl

[117] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 March 1906; 10 March 1910. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vols. No. 57, 59, NMML.
[118] Kate Comley Howard to her sister Julia, Allahabad, 28 January 1895. Kate Howard Papers, Mss Eur/C449, British Library.
[119] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 59.
[120] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 28.
[121] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 28-29.
[122] Rameshwari Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 4 October 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. 1, Vol. No. 71, NMML.
[123] Rameshwari Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 28 February 1906; 9 October 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. 1, Vol. No. 71, NMML.

was privately educated for at least a couple of years before marriage, learn something of a classical language, and "enough of English to be able to write a decent letter". The wife-to-be was also expected to "be able to hold her own in any society", and not be "head strong".[124] Girls suspected to become "self-willed" wives were to be discarded, as was the one who planned to become a doctor—"the greatest calamity that can befall mortal man".[125] Even of women's participation in formal political institutions Motilal did not have a favourable opinion. "Here is another bit of interesting news", he wrote to his son in 1912, announcing his nephew's wife's decision to stand for election to the Municipal Board. "She does not understand a word of English in which language the proceedings are carried on. . . . I hope she will not be elected though I fear the contrary. The novelty of the thing if not the merits of the candidate will induce people to vote".[126]

A closer reading of the autobiographical writings produced by Motilal Nehru's relatives and of some private documents shows, in conclusion, that the Nehru family was not as progressive as most hagiographic literature has described it, especially so far as gender norms were concerned. Motilal himself was opposed to any reform for the cause of women, "for the simple reason that he had never accepted the idea that women had any place in society other than their home".[127] The freedom and consideration enjoyed by the women of the family were actually carefully limited and bounded by a number of more or less explicit rules and normative standards. Expected to adjust to the "modern-yet-modest" paradigm,[128] women were to be able to hold their own in any society, but "in the quarrels of husband and wife, the latter must in the very nature of things yield to the former".[129] Women were to be educated, but too forward-looking men were "to desist from [their] campaign of emancipation for women, . . . likely to produce trouble", and such subject, if discussed at all, "must be [discussed] with the full knowledge and in presence of the husbands", as "private lectures are in principle

[124] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 28 October 1910; 5 April 1912. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vols. No. 59, 61, NMML.
[125] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 8 September 1910. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 59, NMML.
[126] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 29 February 1912. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 61, NMML.
[127] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 80.
[128] Mrinalini Sinha, 'Nations in an imperial crucible', in Philippa Levine (ed.), *Gender and empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), p. 193. For a discussion of the Bengali "modern Lakshmi" (the ideal not-uneducated, nor too-educated woman) see Chakrabarty, 'The difference-deferral of a colonial modernity'.
[129] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 9 December 1914. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 62, NMML.

wrong".[130] As noted, a whole set of similar norms regulated (gendered) behaviours within the family, the results of complex interlacements between indigenous patriarchies, and the needs imposed by the colonial presence; the quest for social respectability of first-generation English-educated men, and the fears of change and loss of male authority over women that modernity entailed; the ambitions of early nationalists, and their difficult positioning in respect to the European rulers.

One can deduce how the activism of the young women of the family could be perceived by their male relatives in a household where the patriarch set behavioural standards. Motilal had no sympathies for women's activism, and apparently minced no words in opposing it. According to Rameshwari's son, "some of [Motilal's] attacks on the women's movement were unrestrained and he used the most violent language against its leaders", claiming to have "the greatest contempt for those who work for their own self interest".[131] If he was openly against them, the younger men were likely to endorse women's activities in a patronising way, at best—which might explain the erasure of the women's feminist stance from the history of the Nehru family. What remains to be clarified is how the women dealt with this bias, to what extent they managed to utilise the outburst of nationalist agitation as a means to have their activism finally sanctioned by the family at large, what they had to renounce and what instead were the gains entailed in their engagement in nationalist politics. While the previous chapters have concentrated on the micro dimensions of family life, the next will enlarge their focus, and take into account the wider panorama of the Indian women's movement, and the national and international networks within which the Nehru women moved.

[130] Brajlal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 22 June 1916. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. I, Vol. No. 55, NMML.
[131] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 80.

3. FIRST STEPS INTO THE PUBLIC SPHERE (1909-16)

"For about a month or two some ladies of Allahabad have been discussing the need of providing the members of their sex with an opportunity of meeting together and exchanging their ideas about the various topics in which they are interested", *The Leader* reported. It was only 1909, and Allahabad élite women were starting to feel the need for women-only gatherings, and for exchanges of ideas on topics of their own choice and interest. After what we may speculate to have been private conversations held at some dinner parties, a few ladies, realising that they shared the same desire, took the lead on the issue, and started to search for ways to fulfil their common desire for a women's collective.

One who stood out amongst the women's gathering was Rameshwari Nehru. With Mrs. Tej Bahadur Sapru and her daughter, Miss Rani, she decided to investigate whether others within the gathering felt the same need for sharing thoughts with other women in a protected, separatist environment. They thus called a preliminary meeting for ladies to discuss the advisability of forming a ladies' club. Seventy-five women were invited, the wives of Allahabad's notables and members of the High Court (such as Mrs. Sunder Lal and Mrs. Madan Mohan Malaviya). Fifty of them responded to the call, and showed up at the Saprus' on the afternoon of Saturday 22 January 1910. Nand Rani Nehru, Rameshwari's mother-in-law, was elected to preside the meeting, and explained the reasons behind that unusual gathering. She then left it to Rameshwari to read out her paper in Hindi on "the necessity of having a club for ladies" and on "the advantages to be derived from a mutual exchange of ideas".[1]

Her enthusiasm must have been contagious: on that very day, the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti (Allahabad Women's Society) was born. The women agreed on some essential practical details: the association would have an initial annual subscription of one Rupee, to be increased in time; its members would meet once a month in a place "settled by the Secreatry [sic] at the invitation of the members"; at each meeting, one of the members would read her paper in Hindi on any given subject, after which other women would be invited to share their own views. In the thoughts of the Samiti's promoters, it was "thus hoped to provide ladies with a suitable occasion for putting their thoughts into proper and coherent order, and also to interest them in things lying outside the domestic

[1] 'A Ladies' Club for Allahabad', *The Leader*, 26 January 1910, p. 4.

routine". It was also decided that Rameshwari Nehru would be the first secretary of the association, and that an account of its proceedings would be published every month in her journal, *Strī Darpaṇ*.[2]

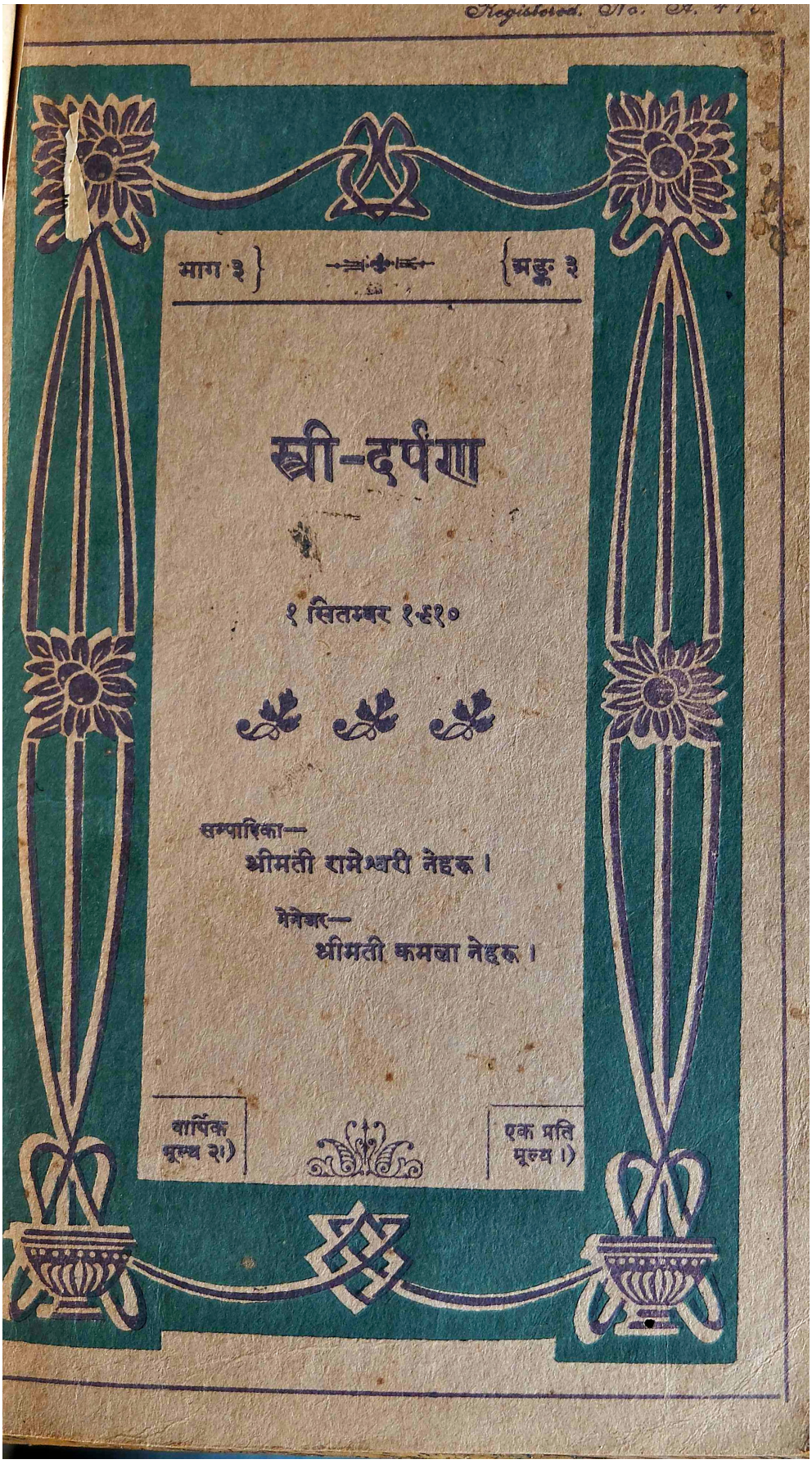
At that time, indeed, Rameshwari had just started the publication of *Strī Darpaṇ*. The 'Women's Mirror' (1909-1928) was a "Hindi magazine for ladies published on the 1st of every month". The journal's annual subscription rate was two rupees and four annas, while a sample copy cost four annas.[3] Rameshwari was the journal's editor, while the manager was her sister-in-law Kamla Nehru, the wife of Rameshwari's husband's older brother Mohanlal.[4] As we have seen in the first chapter, a few years before this editorial initiative took shape Mohanlal and Kamla had returned to Allahabad from Kanpur, and he had started a printing press in the city. It was thus his Law Journal Press that printed *Strī Darpaṇ*, a fact that points to some familial support for the women's idea, even though the women themselves never made any explicit reference to it. From 1923 to 1928, *Strī Darpaṇ* was instead published in Kanpur, and in its last few years was edited by Rajaram Shukla. From January 1916, a girls' monthly came out as *Strī Darpaṇ*'s supplement, *Kumārī Darpaṇ* ('Girls' Mirror'), edited by Rameshwari and Roop Kumari Nehru (Kamla's daughter). Each issue of *Strī Darpaṇ* counted about seventy pages, and featured an editorial, a section containing essays on various socio-political subjects, literary pieces such as short stories, poems, or serialized novels, and a final section with book reviews and letters from the readers; contributions came from both women and men. While it could initially count on six hundred subscribers, by the end of 1910 *Strī Darpaṇ* had about one thousand, and was read even outside the United Provinces.[5]

Today, these might seem insignificant figures, but not so in early twentieth-century north India. There, the extremely low literacy rates made the reading public (and the female reading public especially) very limited, and a comparison with other Hindi magazines of the day shows that *Strī Darpaṇ* was, in fact, a medium-size publication. It was one of the most widely read women's journals published in the

[2] 'A Ladies' Club for Allahabad', p. 4.
[3] Advertisement on *The Leader*, 25 December 1909, p. 1.
[4] Kamala Dar (Mohanlal's wife) is often confused with Kamala Kaul (Jawaharlal's wife). The Kamala involved in *Strī Darpaṇ*'s management is the former, and not (as Shobna Nijhawan has stated) the latter, who belonged to the next generation, was barely ten in 1909, and did not have any relationship to the Nehru family before 1916, when she married Jawaharlal. Shobna Nijhawan, *Periodical literature in colonial North India. Women and girls in the Hindi public sphere* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2012), p. 40.
[5] *Memorandum on the native-owned newspapers published in English, Anglo-Vernacular and vernacular int he United Provinces during the year 1910* (Allahabad: Government Press, 1911), pp. 3-4, 9. (Poll. Branch, July 1911, Nos. 68-69, Part B. National Archives of India, New Delhi).

United Provinces, which were very few in the first decade of the twentieth century: *Gṛihalakṣmi* (1909-29) and *Strī Dharm Śikṣak* (1909-?), both published in Allahabad, could boast seven hundred and one thousand two hundred subscribers, respectively; the circulation of *Jain Nārī Hitkārī* (1909-?), published in Saharanpur, amounted to one thousand, and that of *Mahilā Hitkar* (Dehra Dun, 1907-?) only to two hundred and twenty-five. *Strī Darpaṇ*'s figures are not low even if we compare it to other Allahabad Hindi magazines, dealing with different subjects and aimed at the general public. The most prominent among such publications were the papers of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, started in Allahabad in 1908: *Abhyuday* (containing general news and extracts from other papers), with two thousand subscribers; and *Maryādā*, a literary magazine promoting Hindi literature, with one thousand five hundred subscribers. Another highly influential literary journal of the city was *Sarasvatī*, which had two thousand and two hundred subscribers.[6]

[6] *Memorandum on the native-owned newspapers*.



Front page of *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1910

Language and identity politics in colonial India

Far from being the isolated initiative of one woman, *Strī Darpaṇ*'s editorial project speaks volumes of the social, literary and political context of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century India. From the mid nineteenth century, a process had started through which the multiple linguistic repertoires that people had previously utilised (selecting them on the basis of the different functions they wanted languages to serve), would be eventually replaced by a number of standardised regional vernaculars representing not only languages, but vehicles of regional identities and cultures. These regional cultures, of which vernaculars were the repositories would in due time be constructed as distinctive contributors to the cause of Indian freedom—Maharashtra being the motherland of heroes like Shivaji, Gujarat the land of poets, Andhra the country whose people were skilled producers of hand-spun cloth, and so on.[7]

Through its efforts towards the normalisation and codification of Indian reality, the colonial state played a major role in the shift from linguistic variety and fluidity to the fixation of linguistic identities. It engaged in an incessant classification of Indian languages, trying to discipline Indian linguistic relativism, and mould it into a set of strictly codified distinct languages.[8] Aimed at imposing colonial power, such classification work was based on a number of exclusions and dichotomies, the most evident among them being religious. As Giorgio Milanetti has argued, the studies carried on in the late eighteenth century by European Indologists significantly contributed to this process, as they offered to the western reading public orientalist representations, in which the highest point of Hindu India's past was inextricably linked to Sanskrit. In the present, such cultural and religious identity was to be found within pure literary and linguistic forms purged of external influences, meaning Arab and Persian. The idea that there existed a "language of the Hindus" and a "language of the Muslims" was gradually taking shape.[9] The two languages and their everyday uses were in fact far from being so

[7] Rosalind O'Hanlon, 'Colonialism and social identity in flux: class, caste, and religious community', in Douglas M. Peers and Nandini Gooptu (eds.), *India and the British Empire* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 123-133.

[8] Vasudha Dalmia, *The nationalisation of Hindu traditions: Bhartendu Hairshchandra and nineteenth-century Benares* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 162-163.

[9] The idea gained further strength with the establishment of Calcutta Fort William College in 1800. The College was to facilitate British administrators' relations with the indigenous population, teaching them the 'local' language, which the linguist John Gilchrist called 'Hindustani'. As a popular idiom composed for the great part of Arabic and Persian terms, Hindustani was taught at Fort William in the Persian script; Hindustani-Urdu thus became a language with a fixed alphabet, grammar and vocabulary. In 1802, when Gilchrist invited a Brahman to teach Hindi at the College, this language went through the same process that had taken place in the case of Hindustani-Urdu. 'Hindi' here stands for Khari Boli Hindi, that would

sharply differentiated, but this did not influence in any way colonial policies. The substitution of local reality with externally imposed categories was the quintessence of the project of cultural colonisation: not (only) a way to *dividere et imperare*, according to Milanetti, but the intentional marginalisation of indigenous cultural constructs, and their replacement with a global cultural structure aimed at colonising Indian civilisation as a whole.[10]

Besides the colonial effort, other elements contributed to the calcification of Hindustani-Urdu and Hindi as two different and culturally-loaded languages, laying the foundations for what would later become the pro-Hindi movement. Firstly, Christian missionaries preached, translated, published, and opened schools that taught in "the language of the Hindus"—that is, the polytheist Indians to whom they devoted their evangelising efforts, whose language they identified in Hindi in the Devanagari script. Secondly, the Mutiny of 1857 played a prominent role in the decomposition of Indian society, as the various social, caste and family groups of the Hindi area reacted in different ways. These elements led to severe divisions within the social fabric, fragmented according to different interests in its responses to the colonial presence. The second half of the 1800s was thus characterised by power vacuum (from which the Mutiny had generated), and by the increasing marginalisation of the Muslim community (that resulted from the revolt, with the Mughals' downfall). Thirdly, the colonial state's need for controlling and deciphering its Indian subjects increased after the Mutiny, imposed by the intention to prevent other rebellions. In 1871, with the introduction of censuses, the Raj institutionalised its efforts at controlling Indian society, fragmenting it along caste, religious and ethnic bases—criteria on which recruitment for the

later become modern standard Hindi. Khari Boli was the "lingua franca of the bazaar over the whole northern and central India"; Braj Bhasha was instead the medium for poetry. Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere. Language and literature in the age of nationalism* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 3. Debates on which of the two variants would be more suitable as 'standard Hindi' went on for decades, and drew on heavily gendered conceptualisations; Braj Bhasha's sweetness was associated to emotions, and considered symbolic of effeminacy, while Khari Boli's supporters underlined 'their' language's rationality and distance from any eroticism, depicting it as the virile language that would best suit the necessities of nascent nation needing men. Charu Gupta, 'The icon of mother in late-colonial North India: "Bharat Mata", "Matri Bhasha" and "Gau Mata"', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 36, No. 45 (2001), pp. 4291-4299.

[10] Giorgio Milanetti, 'La tradizione inventata: in qual modo una bella lingua indiana senza un nome preciso fu chiamata hindi e trasformata in *power construction*', in Michelguglielmo Torri and Elisabetta Basile (eds.), *Il subcontinente indiano verso il Terzo Millennio* (Milano: Franco Angeli, 2002), pp. 458-465.

administrative sector and for the army would be grounded.[11] Within this context, the movement for the standardisation and propagation of the Hindi language had much to do with attempts at appropriating power on the part of some Hindu caste groups.

The political side of the pro-Hindi movement became more evident from the 1880s. In this period, an increasingly strong process of sanskritisation permeated North and central India: linguistically, it led to the replacement of words and language constructs with their Sanskrit counterparts, and to Hindi's 'purification'; but it impacted also the social level, as some caste groups (like the merchants) started to emulate the habits and customs of the highest castes, thus seeking legitimisation for their social ambitions. A number of literary associations were founded that engaged in the task of creating a whole myth around the Hindi language; as these bodies were headed by and mostly composed of Brahmans, their values and views—through the celebration of Hindi as the national language—were imposed on Indian society as a whole.[12]

The work started in the second half of the nineteenth century continued and gained momentum in the first decades of the twentieth. In addition to those first institutional spaces working for the standardisation and spreading of Hindi as a print language in the Devanagri script, new literary associations, schools and text books, printing presses, publishing houses and journals emerged; they all shared the same objective, to make Hindi "fit for . . . serving the many purposes of a modern nation".[13] By then Hindi was perceived not only as a cultural symbol of Hindu belonging—just as Urdu was felt as the instrument for preserving Muslim self-identity—but also as a symbolic instrument against colonialism and English dominion.[14]

Journals were among the main means through which Hindi was to be fostered. Although publications of this kind had been edited since the early 1800s—the first being the *Udant Mārttanḍ*, printed in Calcutta from 1826 to 1828—only in the ensuing decades would the phenomenon increase and spread. Among the first examples and milestones of Hindi journalism was the journal edited by Bhartendu Harishchandra, considered one of the founding fathers of modern Hindi: *Kavivachansudhā* ('Nectar of the poet's word', 1859-1885), initially a monthly paper, then a weekly. Bhartendu also

[11] For a discussion of the census as an instrument for Hindu communal forces, see Charu Gupta, 'Censuses, communalism, gender and identity: a historical perspective', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 39, no. 39 (2004), pp. 4302-4304.
[12] Milanetti, 'La tradizione inventata', pp. 466-495.
[13] Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere*, pp. 20-21.
[14] Krishna Kumar, 'Hindu revivalism and education in North-Central India', *Social Scientist*, vol. 18, no. 10 (1990), p. 7.

edited the first women's journals in Hindi, *Bālābodhinī* ('Instructions for girls', 1874-79). In 1877, another illustrious journalist of the time, Balkrishna Bhatt, founded *Hindī Pradīp* ('Hindi's light') in Allahabad with the stated aim of spreading the Hindi language. In the same year, and for the same purpose, Bhatt also founded the *Hindī Varddhinī Sabhā* ('Society for the diffusion of the Hindi language). Similar were the objectives of *Bhāratmitr* (India's friend); founded in Calcutta in 1878, it became the most famous Hindi paper, and lasted for fifty-seven years, first as a fortnightly, then as a weekly, and finally as a daily paper. *Brāhman* was another of such Hindi papers, a monthly published in Kanpur from 1883 to 1894 by Pratapnarayan Mishra.[15] In 1903, in Allahabad Mahavir Prasad Dvivedi started to edit *Sarasvatī*, which marked an important point in the history of Hindi journalism: firstly, unlike its predecessors, which had mostly been founded for the purpose of 'serving Hindi' and with no commercial objectives, the paper became the first commercially viable magazine; secondly, *Sarasvatī* helped shift the centre of Hindi journalism from Calcutta (where publishing had traditionally been concentrated) to the United Provinces; thirdly, due to its editor's strictness in selecting the articles, both in terms of content and language, Dvivedi's magazine showed that the journal could be a means of education and standardisation.[16]

By this time literacy was assuming a complex connotation, which went beyond the mere familiarity with a script, and involved the power to create meanings, and share them through printing. As Krishna Kumar has noticed, the mushrooming of printing presses and the development of a postal system changed the scope and aims of communication, making any individual a potential participant in text-creation. More vital than school education in the dissemination of knowledge, journalism "performed the role of putting together into a sense of community a heterogeneous town-based society".[17]

[15] Mariola Offredi, *I primi cento anni del giornalismo Hindi (1826-1926)* (Dolo: Istituto Tipografico Editoriale, 1971), pp. 13, 25-31, 35-69.
[16] Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere*, pp. 52-54.
[17] Krishna Kumar, 'Quest for self-identity: cultural consciousness and education in the Hindi region, 1880-1950', *Economic and Political Weekly,* vol. 25, no. 23 (1990), p. 1247.

Strī Darpaṇ: for the nation or for the women?

Strī Darpaṇ must be situated within this context of cultural excitement and quickly maturing socio-political discourse, whose debates it echoed. At the Samiti's first meeting, held on 1 February 1910 at the house of Mrs. Prag Das, the paper which Smt. Kailas Rani Vatal read out to the audience was titled "Our mother tongue".[18] In a period and in a geographical area in which a variety of Hindi dialects prevailed, speaking of Hindi as one, common "mother tongue" was hazardous at best. Such narrative was widely utilised within pro-Hindi literary and journalistic environments, however. As Orsini has noticed, Dvivedi (the above-mentioned editor of *Sarasvatī*) was the personality who helped shape the ideological construct of the 'mother tongue', which not only legitimised print Khari Boli Hindi as a symbol of one's religious and cultural identity, but also—through the mother metaphor—suggested the language's identification with the motherland, working as an element that would unify all Hindus, irrespectively of their original linguistic heterogeneity.[19] A common language, Dvivedi claimed on the pages of his magazine, "creates in the hearts of the people a longing to be one. They long for their whole country to be one . . . Without a common language there can never arise true national pride, there can never be national unity. Only Hindi can attain the status of country-wide language".[20] Within this view, utilising Hindi was a way of serving the nation, and we can assume that a sense of pride deriving from being part of this noble venture is what filtered through Rameshwari's words, when she remarked that Mrs. Vatal's "paper was thoughtful and *written in excellent Hindi*", adding: "Great credit is due to Mrs. Vatal, and the club is to be congratulated on having such an accomplished member".[21]

The editorial of *Strī Darpaṇ*'s September issue announced the first meeting of the Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan. The "Conference on Hindi Literature" would be held in Varanasi on 10 and 11 October 1910, as a product of the Nāgari Prachārinī Sabhā (Society for the propagation of Hindi) of Varanasi, founded in 1893 with the aim of

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[18] Rameshwari Nehru, 'The Allahabad Ladies' Club', *The Leader*, 4 February 1910, p. 4.

[19] Discussing the metaphor of mother in nationalist discourse in late-colonial north India, Charu Gupta has showed that the construction of Hindi as *mātri bhāṣā*, 'mother tongue', served the purpose of differentiating it from Urdu. Through gendered conceptualisations similar to those opposing Khari Boli and Braj Bhasha, pro-Hindi supporters described Hindi as a respectful woman, while linking Urdu to luxurious eroticism, effeminacy and vice, and picturing it as a Muslim prostitute. Gupta, 'The icon of mother', pp. 4293-4295.

[20] Dvivedi, 'Deśvyāpak bhāṣā' [The nationa language], *Sarasvatī*, November 1903, p. 27. Quoted in Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere*, p. 129.

[21] Nehru, 'The Allahabad Ladies' Club', emphasis added.

spreading Hindi through translations, publications, and everyday use on the part of its members. In the ensuing decades, with the political and literary sides of the pro-Hindi movement growing increasingly distinct, the Sammelan would come to identify itself with the former stream.[22] The meeting announced on the pages of *Strī Darpaṇ* would be led by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, a member of Allahabad's Hindū Samāj. According to the journal, at the Sammelan proposals would be presented, one of which would describe "the practices that are detrimental and those that are beneficial to the development of the Hindi language";[23] one would underline the importance of having a history of Hindi language and literature; and one would raise the necessity of publishing scientific and historical texts, informative and historical novels, and "ancient Hindi gems". Though recognising the value of such initiatives, Rameshwari concluded:

> It is sad to notice that no texts important for women were mentioned. In my opinion, the Nāgari Prachārinī Sabhā should make sure that, besides historical books and novels, such texts are also published. The great men who devote their time and money to the development of the Hindi language, and who are honoured by the Sammelan with nicknames like 'Bhartendu' and 'Bharat Bhushan' should know that if attempts for the better are made, Hindi will greatly benefit from them.[24]

Such sarcastic remarks shed a different light on what could initially seem to be an uncritical adherence to the cause of the national language on the part of the women gathered around *Strī Darpaṇ* and the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti. The choice of Hindi as the language of the magazine and of the Samiti's proceedings, the decision of dedicating the association's first meeting to a paper on the 'mother tongue', and Rameshwari's comments on the purity of the Hindi utilised in that occasion can be seen as something more than mere support to the pro-Hindi movement of the day. Rameshwari and the other women might have glimpsed an unprecedented opportunity under the surface of a social discourse that encouraged the use of Hindi in any way, especially as a print language. Many of the women participating, if not all of them, were probably equally

[22] For a discussion of the name of this association as symbolising "the whole process of cultural construction started to sanskritise and brahmanicise, with Hindi, the entire India", see Milanetti, 'La tradizione inventata', p. 486.
[23] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Pratham Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan Kāshī' [The first Conference on Hindi Literature, Varanasi], *Strī Darpaṇ*, 1 September 1910, p. 113.
[24] Nehru, 'Prathan Hindī Sāhitya Sammelan', pp. 114-115. *Bhartendu* and *Bharat Bhushan* mean 'India's moon' and 'India's gem', respectively.

versed in Urdu and Hindi; Rameshwari herself (as a Kashmiri Pandit from Lahore) should not have had any special preference for Hindi over Urdu, as Kashmiri Pandits were traditionally closer to Indo-Muslim culture. As we have seen in the first chapter, Rameshwari's own father was a scholar of Persian and Arabic, as several of the Nehrus had been, over the centuries. And Rameshwari herself, educated at home, had been given "a little coaching in Hindi and Urdu",[25] and was familiar with both scripts,[26] as was the case with others in the family. English would always remain for her "a foreign language", one through which she would "labour" and which she considered a "handicap":[27] it would therefore have been impossible for her and the women around her to edit a journal in English, as did some of their contemporaries in other parts of India.[28] Hindi in the Devanagari script, however, was not the only option at their hands, either. Still, that was the language they decided to utilise.

This choice, given the period and place in which they lived, added strength to their project. At a time when associations were mushrooming all over the region, fuelled by the favourable opinion of many Hindu notables and intellectuals, giving their new-born Samiti and journal a pro-Hindi flavour might have functioned for the women as a way to legitimise their enterprises in the eyes of public opinion. What the organisers had in mind was the creation of a space for women to meet and discuss among themselves, a group that their families (all belonging to Allahabad's upper-caste, professional elite) would allow them to attend. In a social context that denied women any autonomous movement, and where many of them still lived in (or had recently come out of) *pardā*, the most prudent way to build such a separatist space was arguably to narrate it in terms that men would find easy to understand; this would supposedly make them more inclined to give their consent to the initiative.

Having women join gatherings was indeed no easy task. At the preliminary meeting that gave birth to the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti, only some of the fifty women who attended became members; "the remainder took time to decide after consulting with

[25] Nehru, "Changes".
[26] Among the Rameshwari Nehru Papers of the NMML are, indeed, also letters in Urdu.
[27] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Women's Conference presidential address', delivered in 1941, in Somnath Dhar (ed.), *Gandhi is my star. Speeches and writings of Shrimati Rameshwari Nehru* (Patna: Pustak Bhandar, 1950), p. 181.
[28] In South India, for instance, the monthly *Indian Ladies Magazine* was published in English from 1901, under the editorship of Kamala Sattianadhan. Mytheli Sreenivas, 'Emotion, identity, and the female subject. Tamil women's magazine in colonial India, 1890-1940', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 14, no. 4 (2003), pp. 59-82. *Stri Dharma*, the journal of the Women's Indian Association (1917), was also mainly in English, even though it featured articles in Tamil, Telegu and, sporadically, Hindi.

their friends and relatives".[29] Women themselves would often hesitate to cross their home's threshold, and Rameshwari recalled the difficulties she faced "in persuading women to come out of their houses even to join women's parties in the early years of the present century. I remember I had to go from house to house and devise various methods of engaging the interest of women to persuade them to come to the meetings where we talked about various problems concerning women".[30] In this context, we might understand the women's move towards cultural nationalist concerns and priorities as a strategy to initially carve out a space for themselves and have it legitimised by the mainstream social environment; once created, that legitimate space could become the place to discuss topics they felt as more urgent and closer to their needs.

This is not to deny our protagonists' sympathy for nationalist thought. Rameshwari's affection for "the Indian nation (if there is anything like it existing in the world)"[31] is evident in some of her early letters to Jawaharlal, where she exhorted him to become "a valuable and indispensable son of our common old mother India". She described her country as "our poor dear afflicted India", whose hopes had just been frustrated by the then Secretary of State for India, John Morley, saying that it was "a 'folly' to think that the time has come when Indians ought to take part in the administration of their own country".[32] In a speech she delivered in Hindi on the centenary of Motilal Nehru's birth, Rameshwari recalled that, although when she started her journal she was not at all acquainted with politics, her sympathies sided with the thought of Pandit Sunderlal, then a member of Allahabad University. Due to some writings that the university's authorities considered seditious, he was suspended, and retired to some hill station; from there, upon Rameshwari's request, he sometimes sent articles to be published in *Strī Darpaṇ*, which she remunerated. Rameshwari wished this to remain their secret, as Motilal held at the time moderate views on politics, and she was afraid of the way he would have reacted, had he known that she was in some way financially supporting an extremist renowned for his anti-British feelings. Her fears became a reality one day in 1910, when the post ended in Motilal's hands, and he

[29] 'A Ladies' Club for Allahabad', *The Leader*, 26 January 1910, p. 4.
[30] Nehru, "Changes".
[31] Rameshwari Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 29 October 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Part I, Vol. No. 71, NMML.
[32] Rameshwari Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 28 February 1906. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Part I, Vol. No. 71, NMML.

discovered that someone in the family was sending money to Sunderlal for some reason. However, when Rameshwari confessed that she was remunerating him for some articles he wrote for *Strī Darpaṇ*, Motilal simply replied: "Just make sure you are not inviting any police search at Anand Bhawan", and this closed the incident.[33]

Given Rameshwari's sympathies, nationalist concerns were present in the pages of *Strī Darpaṇ* from its inception. In May 1911, for instance, the journal published an article on patriotism written by a member of the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti, who invited the men and women of India to show more love to their motherland, rely on its products and discard their fascination for "everything that glitters", namely foreign goods.[34] In *Strī Darpaṇ*'s early years, however, references to patriotic and nationalist sentiments were in most cases related to the question of female emancipation, and a direct link was traced between the freedom of India and that of Indian women, as if these were two sides of the same coin. An article republished on *Strī Darpaṇ* from *Ārya Prabhā* in September 1910 read:

> Nowadays in the West, due to freedom, women get mental diseases just like men fall due to other illnesses, something which happens much less often in India, despite poverty and hunger. The following article by the superintendent of a mental hospital in Murshidabad and Rampur sums it all. He writes: "The number of mad women in Europe is increasing day by day; compare to them, which is not the case for Indian women. Compared to Europe, the women of this country have less mental issues". This is due to the fact that Indian women are traditionally under their parents' control and docile.
>
> Let God keep such traditional subjection unchanged. When will we Indians understand the meaning of freedom! Oh! Snap! In a country where independence is seen in this way, what else can we expect?[35]

At a time when the nationalist message considering political independence a precondition for women's freedom was not yet on everyone's lips, women conceptualised this matter in the exact opposite way: no political freedom would ever be possible before the accomplishment of women's own liberation. As we will see, women

[33] Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings by her, File no. 60, NMML.
[34] Savitri Devi, 'Deś prem', *Strī Darpaṇ*, May 1911, pp. 308-310.
[35] 'Swatantratā meṁ pāgalpan' [Independence madness], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1910, p. 122.

would endorse this argument until the early 1920s, when the quickly-changing Indian political scene entered more predominantly among the priorities of our characters, as among those of the Indian women's movement in general.

For the time being, issues more closely related to women and their life experiences took the centre stage. Lado Rani, another woman of the Nehru,[36] also engaged in activities for women in Allahabad, before she left the city (and her husband) to settle in Lahore, in 1917. In the interview issued to the Nehru Memorial Library, she recalled having done something for Allahabad Ladies Club (which had always been run by British women, and was apparently in dire straights in the early 1900s) and having started a Mahilā Sammelan, or 'Women's Convention'. Women would meet on a weekly basis, but "no references were made at the time to the country, we exclusively concentrated on women's condition, and tried to make it better".[37]

Devotion, efficiency, and modesty

Rameshwari's group seemed to share common interests as the Allahabad Ladies Club: at its third meeting, the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti already distanced itself from cultural nationalist topics to concentrate on issues more closely related to women. On Sturday 2 April 1910, the group met at the house of Smt. Kailas Rani Vatal, defying the hot weather. Several Nehru women were present: Kamla, Rameshwari, Lado Rani and Nand Rani, who was elected President of the meeting. It was Smt. Gopal Devi's turn to read out her paper, and she spoke on *pativrata dharma*, the duty of the faithful wife.[38]

Similar topics loomed large in the debates of late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century India, when the purpose of public discourse on women mostly consisted in acquainting them with the art of "appropriate domesticity".[39] Analysing the British case, Davidoff and Hall have shown that, as the separation of home from the work place and the construction of the former as a female domain opposed to men's reign in the outside world, came to be markers of a middle-class status, domesticity became one of the main preoccupations of an entire class.[40] Swapna Banerjee has argued that in India the

[36] See Ch. 1.
[37] Smt. Lado Rani Zutshi, Maukhik Itihās Inṭarvyū', p. 2. Oral History Transcripts, NMML.
[38] 'Allahabad Ladies' Club', *The Leader*, 3 April 1910, p. 5.
[39] Sreenivas, 'Emotion, identity, and the female subject', pp. 62-63.
[40] Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family fortunes: men and women of the English middle class, 1780-1850* (Oxon: Routledge, 1987), esp. Ch. 8.

cultural construct of domesticity did not result only from the colonial encounter, but also from a reconsideration of the pre-colonial past. From ancient times—when the patriarchal home emerged as the form of household organisation that most fitted the needs of nascent monarchies[41]—up to the Mughal period, narratives on domestic ideology and wifely virtues permeated Indian culture.[42] In the nineteenth century, normative texts and domestic manuals were the means through which women were to be socialised in the roles assigned to them within the "new cultural logic of domesticity". In their pages, such prescriptive texts constructed *new women* as a mixture of the self-sacrificing Hindu women, embodied by cultural symbols like Lakshmi and Sita, and the companionate Victorian lady, efficient and committed to a puritan work ethic. In so doing, they "charted a new vision of the domestic ideal and prescribed a specific code of conduct for middle-class women thereby carefully distancing them from other classes".[43] These notions, combined with Gandhian principles and concepts deriving from international feminisms would, in the ensuing years, give birth to debates on the introduction of Home Science in women's educational curricula—that is, to an appropriation by women of discourses on domesticity as a source of authority and power.

For the moment, however, the tone of writings pertaining to the domestic sphere was normative and prescriptive, in line with what Orsini has termed the "reformist phase" of women's journals.[44] Stretching roughly from the 1870s to World War I, this

[41] Kumkum Roy has shown that the emergence of monarchy from around 700 B.C. was related to the privileging of the household "characterised by patriarchal control, exercised over the procreative powers of the wife, and over productive resources, which were ideally transferred from the father to the son(s)". The ruler supported this domestic organisation, as he found easier to negotiate with single heads of households, rather than with corporal groups. The patriarch seeking dominance, in turn, was strengthened by the ruler's support. Hierarchical patriarchal order was thus established in the private and public domains, based on women's marginalisation and on control over their bodies. Kumkum Roy, *The emergence of monarchy in North India: eighth to fourth centuries B.C.* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994). Quoted in Barbara Ramusack and Sharon Sievers, *Women in Asia* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), p. 23.

[42] Swapna Banerjee, 'Debates on domesticity', pp. 456-458.

[43] Banerjee, 'Debates on domesticity', pp. 462-463. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, one of the most prominent figures of the Indian women's movement, was in no doubt about how notions of decency and respectability worked in shaping class belonging and women's subjection at the same time: "The working class women, both rural and industrial are comparatively freer than the upper class woman in India. Amongst the former, woman being an earning member and an economic factor, enjoys greater degree of freedom. Economic stress compels this class to be less trammelled by severe social codes. Thus, while divorce and remarriage for widows is absolutely forbidden amongst the upper class, it is prevalent in a customary form in the toiling masses. The same is true of child-marriage and Purdah. The problem of bread saves the poorer women from the dark dungeon of *Zenana*". Chattopadhyayya, *The awekening*, p. 2.

[44] Francesca Orsini, 'Domesticity and beyond: Hindi women's journals in the early twentieth century', *South Asia Research*, Vol. 19 (1999), p. 137.

phase focused mainly on socialising women into forms of appropriate domesticity. It was initially men who published magazines for this purpose: in the Hindi region, the first such journal was started in 1874 by Bhartendu Harishchandra, with the telling title *Bālābodhinī* (Instructions for girls). With the beginning of the twentieth century this trend started to change, and women emerged as editors, managers and writers for their own magazines; the imageries and social norms conveyed to the readers, however, did not suddenly change. It is worth noticing that, besides *Strī Darpaṇ*, two other women's magazines were started in Allahabad in 1909: *Gṛihalakṣmi* (Manager of the home), and *Strī Dharm Śikṣak* (The teacher of women's duty), whose titles leave no doubt about their focus and objectives. The former was edited by Mrs. Gopaldevi and her husband Sudarshanacarya, who was an Ayurvedic practitioner like the latter's editor, Mrs. Yashoda Devi. She was a renowned practitioner, who established a dispensary for women in Allahabad in 1908, followed by an Ayurvedic Pharmacy and several other dispensaries across the United Provinces, as well as her own publishing house. Yashoda Devi was indeed also a prolific writer, whose texts on women's health mixed notions from traditional medicine with Western medical knowledge, household advice, case studies, social norms and Hindu middle-class ideals. Her first writings had titles like *Nārī-Niti Śikṣā* (Teachings on ethics for women, 1910); *Sachchā Pati Prem* (A story of a true wifely love and devotion, 1910); *Ādarś Hindū Vidhvā* (Ideal Hindu widow, 1912).[45] Yashoda Devi was herself a member of the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti,[46] and the ideals featured in her writings were precisely those linked to *pativrata dharma*, the subject of the Samiti's third meeting: woman's duty to worship her husband as god, irrespective of his faults and misdeeds, please and serve him, listen with devotion to what he says, and countless other similar manifestations of submission and modesty.[47]

Strī Darpaṇ itself published some prescriptive texts conveying similar ideals. Its contributions to the discourse on domesticity ranged from innocent "tips for the housewives" on domestic hygiene,[48] to more explicitly normative texts. On the issue of

[45] Charu Gupta, 'Procreation and pleasure: writings of a woman Ayurvedic practitioner in colonial North India', *Studies in History*, Vol. 21, No. 1 (2005), pp. 17-44.
[46] See 'Prayāg-Mahilā-Samiti meṁ chandā' [Donations to the Prayāg-Mahilā-Samiti], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, p. 67.
[47] Anupama Roy, *Gendered citizenship: historical and conceptual explorations* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2005), pp. 104-108.
[48] 'Gṛhiṇī ke liye kuch upkārī baten' [A few tips to housewives], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1910, p. 122-123.

December 1910, an anonymous poem instructed women in the art of serving their husbands,[49] and an article explained them how to behave at their in-laws' house:

> At your in-laws' house, make them happy by always behaving in accordance with your father-in-law, mother-in-law and husband's orders. Get along well with your sisters-in-law, never fight with them. Always love their children. Even though this might cause you sorrow, don't abandon your devoutness. Never go to your father's house without the call of your parents or the permission of your husband.
>
> At your in laws' house, considering your mother-in-law like your own mother, do any work she orders you to do, because at the in-laws' house no one else cares for the daughter-in-law's interest as the mother-in-law does. . . . In every occasion pay attention to this: don't cause in any way your parents-in-law's sorrow, because serving their husbands is women's ultimate duty. The husband's main duty is to serve those from whose womb he was born, so you should also serve them and respect their orders with no hesitation.[50]

The author did not suggest here in any way forms of solidarity among the women of the household. The peace they were invited to preserve, and the docility and obedience they were asked to perform towards their female in-laws were only functional to the devotion they must show to their husband, and served no other purpose. The only alternative to this imposed peace would be competition among women, as illustrated in the second part of the article by an anecdote on a young woman who had no affection for her mother-in-law, and mistreated her. "The son to whom I have given my life . . . for whom I have endured countless sufferings, whom I have married, that son is now the possession of this astute woman", the old woman sighed.[51] According to this ideology, the husband was the pivot around which all relationships within the joint family must be shaped; all other relationships were pushed into the background, and so were women's chances to forge alliances with other female relatives, autonomously from male control.

[49] 'Pati-sevā' [Serving one's husband], *Strī Darpaṇ*, December 1910, p. 316.
[50] Mahadevi Kunghar, 'Striyon ka prati updeś' [Advice to women], *Strī Darpaṇ*, December 1910, pp. 313-314.
[51] Kunghar, 'Striyon ka prati updeś', p. 314.

The journal also hosted articles by men, which advised women on how to behave properly and fulfil at best their "natural" function. Between the following lines, one will recognise the naturalised understanding of gender roles that governed the functioning of the Nehru household, discussed in the previous chapter.

> Men and women have totally different body structures, as if these were modelled for different tasks. Men's body is modelled in such a way that they cannot do the feminine tasks, and women's body structure does not allow them to perform masculine tasks. While the male body is strong, hard-working and well built, women are weak, fragile and tender. Women's mind as well as her body is tender. While the man works hard to earn money, the woman stays at home and manages his money to make sure that it is well spent and wisely used. . . . Men should do their work, and women should do theirs. . . . The greatest joy in the world comes when a woman makes herself a true home-goddess. A woman who respects her mother, father, in-laws and elders is a true home-goddess. . . . A woman who leaves behind her personal benefits and happiness to take care of the sick, the poor and the elderly . . . and who stands by her husband in happy and in sad times, and looks after her children's education and growth is a home-goddess. . . . An ideal Indian woman marries into a home and lives happily when her family is happy, and sadly when her family is sad. If a woman is well-mannered, a household becomes a hundred times happier. Kindness, pity and shame are the signs of a good woman. It is ever woman's duty to wear these ornaments of good manners and look beautiful from the inside. They can achieve anything, if only they try.[52]

Patriarchal as it sounds, the journal was progressive compared to its contemporaries, providing a formidable prescriptive narrative. An exemplar is *Gṛihalakṣmi*:

> It is written in the *shastra* that a woman's god is none other than her husband. Brahma, Vishnu and Mahesh, all dwell within the husband's body. . . . The happiness of a woman who is not dear to her husband is of no use. Eating, drinking, sleeping and other pleasures, in short, life itself becomes useless for a woman. A woman who does not

[52] Chaturvedi Dvarkaprasad Shukla, 'Gṛh-Lakṣmī' [The manager of the home], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, pp. 98-100.

> love her husband is born into the world without a purpose. . . . Be it the father, son, brother or any other relative, nobody should be dearer to a wife than her husband. A virtuous task turns into its opposite, that is, a vice if a woman performs it without receiving the order to do so from her husband. . . . a woman without a husband is not useful for any virtuous thing. Ill-tempered, unfortunate, evil, inert, diseased, or poor, whatever the characteristics of a husband may be, the wife must respect and serve him. . . . She takes care of her husband, worries about him, and does everything to please him. . . .
>
> If women want to obtain happiness they also need to pay attention to the following:
>
> i) It is appropriate for women that they *immediately* do what their husbands tell them to do. . . .
>
> ii) If the husband is upset for some reason and speaks harsh words or abuses her in anger, it is appropriate for the woman to be upset about this and to condemn it, but she should not show her anger or fear in front of her husband. Rather, in that moment she should fill her heart with happiness and tolerate him and when she notices that her husband is calming down and he appears happy again, she may say the proper and improper thoughts that she has to say in a humble and polite voice. . . .
>
> iii) It is appropriate for women that they never do anything that is against the orders of the husband.[53]

Behind such discourse was the cultural logic of domesticity discussed above, which wanted upper-caste women subservient and docile like the consorts of Gods in Hindu mythology, and at the same time incorporated Victorian ideals of efficiency and companionship—thus combining "the dual actions of religious duties and the daily chores in the household in the formulation: the wife's service to her husband *is* her worship to god".[54]

The first signs of above-mentioned women's appropriation of the discourse on domesticity as a source of authority were, however, starting to surface. Some women considered being versed in the arts of appropriate domesticity a step towards further empowerment. In 1911, *Strī Darpaṇ* published an article of Smt. Bhubaneshwari Devi, in which domestic work was seen as a synonym of basic education; only after acquiring

[53] Ambikaprasad Shukla, 'Striyon ka mukhyā dharma – pativrata' [Women's main duty – serving their husband], *Gṛihalakṣmi*, September/October 1913. Quoted in Nijhawan, *Periodical literature*, pp. 255-257.
[54] Chakravarti, *Rewriting history*, p. 202.

that skill, would women of the United Provinces be able to hope for higher education, like the women from other parts of India.

> Almost everybody today is in favour of women's education. Many people have gone as far as desiring us to graduate like the women of Bombay, Madras and Bengal. No one can reach a higher step in the ladder. For this aim, first we must be given the essentials of basic education. If we don't know how to thread a needle, or how to cook food, if we don't know how to do domestic work, what is the benefit of learning to read books?
> In the United Provinces we don't even have female teachers who could make us versed in domestic work, and we don't have such wise books for us to read, that could turn us into true and ideal home-goddesses (*gṛhalakṣmi*), either. . . . First, female teachers must be trained, and useful books published; only then will there be hope that the work of women's education can start.[55]

Another article in *Gṛihalakṣmi* raised a similar point. The author first stressed at length the role women must play in preserving domestic peace, order and serenity, and concluded with a request to men—a sort of reward in exchange for women's docility, or the price men had to pay to ensure themselves such subservience on the part of women: education.[56]

Female education was a topic that had fuelled debates across India since the nineteenth century. After the first attempts at establishing girls' schools on the part of European missionaries, Indian reformers engaged in this field, but only towards the end

[55] Bhubaneshwari Devi, 'Strī Śikṣā' [Women's education], *Strī Darpaṇ*, March 1911, p. 150.
[56] "Whether peace is established or the quarrelling and sorrow persists, all depends on the wife. . . . She should make the home a place for refuge and protection. This does not simply mean overseeing things related to the house, raising the children and cleaning; it also includes caring for her own body. That is, a woman must also keep in mind her looks and what she wears so that she may keep her husband content. One must always remember the impact that a woman can have on her husband. . . . It is the dharma of a woman to keep the home organised and tranquil for her master. If he cannot rest at home, the home is of no avail to him. He is required to work hard outside and thus desires peace at home. Our women should pay special attention to this, because mostly, when men come home exhausted after a difficult workday, they must deal with quarrelling rather than being greeted by the comfort of a fan and instead of enjoying sherbet they are forced to listen to grievances.
This essay has been written exclusively for women, but it is necessary to discuss few more topics to which men can also relate. . . . My first request is directed at the father, that he may arrange a proper education for his daughter. The second request is directed at the brothers that they may impart knowledge to their sisters and thus also become virtuous. The third request is directed at the husband that he learns to respect his virtuous wife". Anandidhan Bandyopadhyay, 'Strī Prabhāv' [Women's influence], *Gṛihalakṣmi*, September/October 1913. Quoted in Nijhawan, *Periodical literature*, pp. 278-279.

of the century did institutions proliferate, and the number of educated women grow.[57] After decades men spent discussing among themselves whether or not women should be educated, by the first decades of the twentieth century women were ready to step into the debate, and the argument shifted to what type of education would be most appropriate for girls.[58] At least, this was the case in the most progressive areas of the country.[59]

Education?

As suggested in the *Strī Darpaṇ* article, female education was mostly advanced in the regions of Bombay, Madras and Bengal. *The Indian Ladies' Magazine* reported that in 1904-1905 the figures concerning girls' schools and pupils were higher than those of the previous year in all the three areas, with native Christians and non-Brahman Hindus representing the bulk of the female student population. Compared to these regions "United Provinces are woefully backward", stated the article; it also added, however, that "public opinion . . . seems to be changing and matters are improving to a certain

[57] What was perhaps the first girls' school was opened in 1818 in Bengal by a member of the London Missionary Society, at the same time when the wife of another LMS missionary was opening one for Eurasian girls in Madras. In 1919 Baptist missionaries, with the support of some English ladies, started the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society, aimed at organising female education. Following missionaries' propaganda in England, the first missionary woman was sent to India in 1821 especially to promote female education. Missionaries from several missionary societies did similar work in Bombay and Madras, where mostly Christian or low-caste girls were instructed. Among the Indian reformers working for female education was Vidyasagar, who founded over thirty girls' schools in Bengal; Keshub Chandra Sen, who started a teachers' training and a primary school for the daughters of Brahmos, an institution that in 1878 would merge with Bethune School (opened in 1849) to become Bethune College. Madras benefited from the presence of the Theosophical Society, but even in these areas secondary and higher education remained very rare for decades. Aparna Basu, 'A century and a half's journey: women's education in India, 1850s to 2000', in Bharati Ray (ed.), *Women of India. Colonial and post-colonial periods* (Delhi: Sage, 2005), pp. 183-190.

[58] Forbes, *Women in modern India*, pp. 32-35.

[59] Among the earliest examples of Indian women craving for knowledge are some women from Bengal and Maharashtra. Rasasundari Devi (born in Bengal around 1809) secretly taught herself to read and write, and even wrote her autobiography, *Amar Jivan*. For an analysis of her figure, see Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation*, Ch. 3; Sarkar, *Words to win*; Tharu and Lalita, *Women writing in India*. Another Bengali, Haimabati Sen (c. 1866-1932), showed an equal desire for education, and finally managed to be enrolled in school. See Geraldine Forbes and Tapan Raychaudhuri (eds.), *The memoirs of Dr. Haimabati Sen: from child widow to lady doctor* (Delhi: Roli Books, 2000). In Maharashtra, Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) was the epitome of female learning, one who was taught in the first place by her own mother, and who then personally worked for the progress of women's education. There exists a huge amount of literature on Pandita Ramabai. See, among others, the works of Meera Kosambi and Uma Chakravarti: Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai's American encounter* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2003); Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai's feminist and Christian conversions: focus on* Stree Dharma-neeti (Bombay: S.N.D.T. Women's University, 1995); Meera Kosambi, *At the intersection of gender reform and religious belief: Pandita Ramabai's contribution to the Age of Consent controversy* (Bombay: S.N.D.T. Women's University, 1993); and Meera Kosambi, *Pandita Ramabai through her own words*. Chakravarti, *Rewriting history*.

extent".[60] Indeed, although the figures of girls attending all kinds of school was extremely low in the region, colonial statistical data showed a steady increase in the number of female pupils over the years.[61] While there were about eleven thousand and three hundred girls under instruction in the United Provinces in 1889, by 1911-12 the figures increased to fifty-four thousand—still, only 0, 24% of the U.P. female population, and little above one fourth of the girls attending schools in Bengal and Madras in the same year.[62]

The Report on the progress of education in India (1912-17) voiced concerns similar to those appearing in the *Strī Darpaṇ* article. Considering the problem of female education "still social, rather than educational", the report denounced several impediments in mainstreaming girls' education, such as "the apathy of the parents and, in many cases, the active hostility of the mother who resents every hour spent at school as time lost from domestic duties", and the difficulty of having pupils from different castes and creeds join the same schools. Moreover, due to lack of funds and of regular girls' schools, co-education was often utilised, mainly in villages and rural areas. In places where funds were enough for only one *pandit* to be hired, either girls attended school with boys, or the teacher held separate classes for them in his spare time, something that made the quality of education very poor. The custom of *pardā* further complicated things, and made it necessary to resort to *zenānā* classes, with teachers visiting certain houses on a regular basis, and gathering around them *pardā* ladies of the neighbourhood; finding competent teachers, however, proved an extremely difficult task.[63]

The dearth of female teachers was one of the main issues hindering women's education. Families naturally preferred their daughters to be instructed by women and, if some could accept male teachers in primary schools, in secondary schools this would not be tolerated. Already in 1866 Mary Carpenter had recognised the need for more

[60] 'A year of female education in India', *The Indian Ladies' Magazine*, September 1906, pp. 229-233.
[61] The total number of girl students was 290.261 in 1889 (1,8% of the female population of school-going age; Europeans, native Christians, Hindus and Muslims). *Education in British India for the year 1888-89. Statistical summary of the results of education* (Home Dept., Educational Branch, Jan 1890, Nos. 76-106, National Archives of India). In 1910-11 the total number increased to 864.363, that is, almost twice the figures of 1901-1902. *Indian educational policy, 1913. Being a resolution issued by the Governor General in Council* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1913), p. 15.
[62] 54.329 girls were under instruction in the United Provinces in 1911-12; 226.685 in Madras, 153.090 in Bombay, 236.140 in Bengal. Government of India, Bureau of Education, *Progress of education in India 1912-17*, p. 169.
[63] *Progress of education in India 1912-17*, pp. 171, 174-176.

women teachers for the development of female schools,[64] and some forty years later colonial inspectors were still dealing with the same issue. As Bhubaneshwari denounced in her article, the U.P. case was especially serious: lack of funds and teachers made the demand for education in some districts exceed the supply, and contributed to making the spread of education among girls extremely slow.[65] By 1917, only two hundred and thirteen women were under training in the United Provinces, while Madras and Bombay counted more than eight and seven hundred, respectively.[66] The government assigned special scholarships to the U.P., "almost solely to encourage girls to become teachers".[67] However, prejudices against women earning a living were strong: the Maharani of Baroda reported in her book on the position of women in India that in 1911, at a meeting of the Legislative Council of the United Provinces, it was commented that the dearth of female teachers was due to people themselves, "who thought it beneath the dignity of the better class of Indian women to earn their living as teachers"; only widows would consider entering the profession, having no husband who could provide for them.[68]

The discourses concerning female education, in other words, felt the effect of several overlapping interests and beliefs. For almost a century, colonial administrators, and male Indian reformers and traditionalists had been discussing this subject. Opposition to female education within traditionalist circles was due to superstitious beliefs, looming large within Hindu and Muslim households alike, about the disastrous consequences of women's reading and writing. Such taboos claimed the existence of a direct relation between women's literacy and widowhood—that is, a woman's worst possible condition—something that made some women the first opponents of female education, and the agents of that "active hostility" noticed in the above-mentioned report.[69] For their part, male traditionalists feared that educated women would neglect their natural duty of devoting themselves to their husband and family, or even grow discontented with their condition: "Start with founding a high school for girls and it would soon lead to women running away from the home", wrote Bal Gangadhar Tilak.[70]

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[64] Basu, 'A century and a half's journey', p. 191.
[65] 'Education in the United Provinces', *The Leader*, 8 January 1910, p. 3; 'Female education in the United Provinces', *The Leader*, 6 February 1910, p. 2.
[66] *Progress of education in India 1912-17*, pp. 180-181.
[67] *Progress of Education in India, 1912-17*, p. 182.
[68] Maharani of Baroda, *The position of women*, p. 16.
[69] Chakravarti, *Rewriting history*, p. 209.
[70] Quoted in Basu, 'A century and a half's journey', p. 184.

From colonial authorities' point of view, (western-style) female education was a step towards the construction of loyal subjects.[71] In their plans, educated women would become the wives of western-educated civil servants, contribute to the making of homogenously westernised households, and raise their children to be anglophiles.[72] Projecting the figure of the educated woman as a symbol of modernisation and progress, colonial discourse made her an essential tile within the world of western-educated Indians. According to the chief inspectress in the Punjab in the 1910s:

> Indian public opinion has slowly changed from its former attitude of positive dislike to the education of women and is now much more favourable . . . though it is only recently that this necessity has been at all realised. Professional men now wish to marry their sons to educated girls who can be in a real sense companions and helpmates; therefore education is beginning to be valued by parents as improving the marriage prospects of their daughters.[73]

If British authorities mainly considered female education as a means to lubricate the gears of the colonial machine, Indian reformers assigned to it an equally functional role. Their reasons for supporting education for women mostly lay in their desire for upward social mobility, and for purification from customs and traditions that were considered the proof of India's unsuitability for self-rule. Moreover, on a more private level, they needed companionate partners who could support them during their professional careers, and mothers who could educate their children according to a balanced mix of modern/western and traditional values.[74] Even within the most "modern" households high-quality education was not considered necessary for girls—the Nehrus being a case in point, as showed in the second chapter. Motilal, while having the family's boys educated at British prestigious institutions, was content to commit his

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[71] The resolution on Indian educational policy, 1913, reported the King's reply to the address of the Calcutta University, a speech he delivered on 6 January 1912: "It is my wish that there may be spread over the land a network of schools and colleges, from which will go forth loyal and manly and useful citizens . . . And it is my wish, too, that the homes of my Indian subjects may be brightened and their labour sweetened by the spread of knowledge with all that follows in its train, a higher level of thought, of comfort and of health. It is through education that my wish will be fulfilled, and the cause of education in India will ever be very close to my heart". *Indian educational policy, 1913. Being a resolution issued by the Governor General in Council* (Calcutta: Superintendent Government Printing, 1913), p. 1.
[72] Forbes, *Women in modern India*, pp. 60-61.
[73] *Progress of education in India 1912-17*, p. 171.
[74] Chakravarty, *Rewriting history*, Ch. 4.

daughters' education to some governesses, and opposed their desire to join a proper school; and, when selecting a wife for his son, what he was looking for was a girl educated enough to be able to write a letter in English, "hold her own in any society", and not be "head strong".[75] Within colonial as well as Indian reformist plans, elite women would thus be granted a limited emancipation, which would not represent a threat to the existing hierarchical patriarchal order.[76]

When women stepped in the debate concerning their own position in society, at the dawn of the twentieth century, their arguments in favour of female education were similar to those of Indian reformers. This is hardly surprising, as it was precisely from upper-caste, professional elites that the first female activists came. Speaking at the Sixth Ladies' Conference, held in Lahore on 30 December 1910, Saraladevi Chaudhurani pictured the split between reformers' progressive stances and their wives' backwardness envisioned by colonial thought, highlighting the need for work to be done by women for their own cause.

> The husband is perhaps a great orator, a staunch advocate of social reform, giving edifying lectures from platforms on female education, widow remarriage, and puts his foot down against child marriage; but no sooner the poor man comes home, after huge applauses from an admitting crowd, he meets his wife, who greets him with a vehement torrent for allowing his ten years old daughter to remain unmarried. What forces can this public orator bring to withstand this vehement home oration? In ninety-nine cases out of a hundred he succumbs. . . . Women browbeat the social reformer at every turn of the reform. Woman is, in fact, the maker, preserver, and destroyer of society, and not man. . . . woman is the mother of the nation, and if she be given the lamp of truth in her hands, she will guide her son's path of true development, but if she be carrying no torch of truth dark will be the way of the sons and daughters in their walk of life. . . . Let us now [set up] an honestly called (sic) Bharat Stri Mahamandal. There should be one central body with branches all over India; the object should be mainly

[75] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 28 October 1910; 5 April 1912. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vols. No. 59, 61, NMML.
[76] Sumit Sarkar, 'The "women's question" in nineteenth-century Bengal", in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Women and culture* (Bombay: S.N.D.T. Bombay University, 1994), p. 106. Janaki Nair, 'Reconstructing and reinterpreting the history of women in India', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 3, no. 1 (1991), p.133.

> educational advancement and matters pertaining to the well-being of women in India and we should combine to work for the cause.[77]

Saraladevi, a Bengali, was one of the few women graduates of her time, and the founder of the first (and short-lived) all-India women's organisation, the *Bhārat Strī Mahāmaṇḍal*.[78] After her marriage she had moved to Punjab, this being the reason for her participation in the debates going on at the time in north India. She was the daughter of Swarnakumari Devi, a prominent novelist and the editor of *Bhārat*, the first monthly journal in Bengali. *Strī Darpaṇ* published an article on the two women in December 1910, which defined Swarnakumari Devi "a radiant example of the propagation of female education".[79] The same article sketched the life of another Bengali woman, Kumudini Mitr, the founding editor of the journal *Suprabhāt* and a prolific writer.

> Some people think that girls do not receive any training in domestic work through English education. Miss Kumudini's lifestyle makes this a false statement. Many girl students perhaps would not believe that "a girl with a B.A. also does housework". Kumudini Devi does all the small and big tasks that need to be done at home; she cooks food, cleans etc. When all domestic work is done, she starts her intellectual work. This B.A. woman does perhaps all the work that any uneducated woman does. This is all due to her mother's beneficial influence. Her mother is a learned woman herself. Thank to her lessons and her model, her daughters have become accomplished home-goddesses. Kumudini's small sister also holds a B.A. degree. She is normally good at house work, too. . . . Our readers will realise that studying a lot does not bring one far away from God; on the contrary, it makes faith grow. . . . My sisters! She is one of you. She is a totally naïve, innocent girl. She might seem a great sage woman to you. . . . Higher education has not spoiled her habits.[80]

The example of Kumudini allowed the author to raise several points. It reassured (male?) readers on the effects of women's higher education; it offered the (female?) public a narrative that not only was heartening, but, more importantly, stressed the

[77] 'The Sixth Indian Ladies' Conference', *The Leader*, 8 January 1910, p. 2.
[78] On the figure of Saraladevi Chaudhurani, see Bharati Ray, *Early feminists of colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002).
[79] 'Baṁg-mahilāoṁ ki kāryyāvāhī' [The work of Bengali women], *Strī Darpaṇ*, December 1910, p. 319.
[80] 'Baṁg-mahilāoṁ ki kāryyāvāhī', pp. 326-329.

feasibility of any individual education project, presenting it as being within any woman's reach; and it traced a female genealogy of education, emphasising the beneficial, liberating influence that an accomplished mother could have on her daughters (in contrast with the antagonistic relationship between old and young women discussed above). Kumudini thus embodied what every Indian woman of her class could apire to, and become.

At the end of the article, a picture of her completed the author's task of presenting this B. A. graduate as a blend of the accomplished, Western-educated, upper middle class young woman, and the inoffensive Indian girl. The picture indeed displayed several symbols of the former identity (from her graduation cap and gown, to the medals on her chest; from the *chaise longue* against which she is leaning, to the wall paper barely visible in the background), combined with elements of her 'Indianess' and traditional femininity, namely the *sari* that she is wearing under her gown, and the necklace, rings, and bangles.[81]

[81] On photographic representations of learned Indian women in colonial India, see Malavika Karlekar (ed.), *Visualizing Indian women, 1875-1947* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006), pp. 39-58.

Kumari Kumudini Mitr, B. A. 'Sarasvati' (in her graduation gown)
Indian Press, Allahabad
Strī Darpaṇ, December 1910

However, despite cases like Kumudini's, higher education was a true rarity among Indian women at the time. By the mid 1910s there were very few colleges for women across British India: two in Madras city, three in Calcutta, one in Punjab, and one in Bangalore (for Europeans only). The United Provinces could boast four women's colleges, but only one of them was open to Indian girls, Lucknow's Isabella Thoburn College.[82] Four professional colleges (one for medical education, in Delhi,[83] and the others for teachers' training), and a handful of vocational schools (the U.P. had one in Lucknow, teaching needlework) completed the picture of female higher education.[84] When, in the early 1910s, the idea of establishing a Hindu university in Benares was being discussed, *Strī Darpaṇ* participated in the debate. Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya had been working at this project since 1905, raising funds from the upper-caste, landed aristocracy of the United Provinces, Central Provinces and Bihar.[85] This endeavour must be inscribed within the framework of the activities for the promotion of the Hindi language discussed above: strong symbolic meaning was attached to the community project of establishing a 'Hindu' university in the heart of the Hindi region, in the most sacred of the cities, where not only Hindi language and literature would acquire the status of university subjects, but where Hindi would be the medium of instruction. When Banaras Hindu University was inaugurated, in 1916, things went differently: Hindi did not become the medium of instruction, nor the name of a department. This outcome naturally caused heated debates across north and central India, and public opinion did not quieten until 1921, when two Hindi lecturers close to the Nāgari Prachārinī Sabhā were finally appointed.[86]

What is relevant to our discussion is the shift that *Strī Darpaṇ* brought about when, in 1911, it told its readers about th BHU embryonic project. In her editorial in the July issue of 1911, Rameshwari acknowledged the dozens of letters that readers had recently addressed to her magazine, all enquiring about Hindu University. "This idea seems to have captured the imagination of the Hindus like no other idea has ever done

[82] Woodstock College (Mussorie), the Allahabad European Girls' High School and All Saints's Diocesan College (Naini Tal) were for Europeans.
[83] The Lady Hardinge Medical College was the only medical college intended for women, and supplied "a much felt need", as it overcame the reluctance of many women practitioners to attend male colleges. The college also included a training course for nurses, with forty-eight students enrolled in 1917 and trained by a principal, six professors and an assistant, "all highly-qualified ladies". It formed "an important element in the scheme for providing medical aid to the women of India" and marked "a decided advance consonant with the spirit of the times". *Progress of education in India 1912-17.*
[84] *Progress of education in India 1912-17*, pp. 172-175.
[85] Kumar, 'Quest for self-identity', p. 1248.
[86] Orsini, *The Hindi public sphere*, pp. 104-107.

before", she commented. She regretted that many letters were against the project of fusing Malviya's project with that of Annie Besant, who also intended to found a university in Banaras.[87] The following month, reassured by Malaviya's public declarations on the agreement with Mrs. Besant, Rameshwari was able to raise her point: "I hope that the women of this country will also benefit from this", she wrote in her usual suggestive tone, "even though I am not sure how they could take advantage of such university, or whether it will have a special college for women".[88] She thus shifted away from the debates opposing those who supported the idea of including Mrs. Besant to those who feared her interference, and a watering of the original Hindu ideal promoted by Malaviya. Rameshwari was once again trying to carve a place for women within existing frameworks: siding with the most progressive of the parties involved in the debate—that is, with the views probably endorsed by her own family and kin—but moving a step further from its focus, towards her real concern. An article in the same issue of the magazine clarified her doubt, lamenting that none of the people involved in the establishment of Banaras University had ever mentioned a girls' college to be part of the project.[89] Girl students were admitted at BHU only in the mid 1920s, when they were allowed in the classrooms, though kept apart from male students. In 1929, the Women's Junior College was established, but it was casually organised, and imparted quite limited education to the girls, showing a somewhat poor picture of female higher education, in comparison to the colleges of Madras and Bombay.[90]

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[87] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Hindu Viśvaviddyālaya' [Hindu University], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1911, pp. 1-3.
[88] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Hindu Viśvaviddyālaya' [Hindu University], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, pp. 65-66.
[89] Shivnarayan Shukl, 'Hindu Viśvaviddyālaya', *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, pp. 68-72.
[90] "There are at present 42 students, 13 in the second year, 25 in the first year. There are five women teachers, all B.A.s, one M.A and two men teachers for Sanscrit and Hindi. It was explained that the men teachers are elderly and therefore not dangerous. The teachers are all Hindus, three of them from outside the United Provinces, one from Queen Mary's Madras and one from Furgeoson College, Poona and one from Wilson College, Bombay. The Queen Mary's teacher explained that she was struck with the difference between the College atmosphere in Benares and Madras. The women's education is very retarded, the atmosphere is hardly that of a College, there is very little freedom. The students from Bombay in the class said that there was all the difference in the world between the United Provinces and Bombay, that Benares was fully 25 years behind. . . . She was impressed with the fact that women in the United Provinces had not yet begun to take any political interest. The Women's College offers only English and History, no Mathematics or Science. . . .The dormitory accommodated four girls in each room giving a certain degree of privacy, but the general appearance is very slip-shod. The verandah and dining room are very untidy. The dining room is in the Hindu style, low individual tables and wooden seats. The main Living room is rather a barren place; a few Hindu pictures and Dhurries (rugs) on the floor. This room serves for an Assembly as well as a Living Room. The inside courtyard is in the centre of a circular cemented platform used for early morning prayers. Saris were spread out on the grass, drying. . . . The impression of the Hindu Women's College is that it is just in its beginning and is as yet in a rather casual state of organisation". Mss Eur F341/174, British Library.

Besides offering role models to its readers and discussing higher education, *Strī Darpaṇ* also presented them with several primary education institutions.[91] Readers could in this way acquaint themselves with the schools' functioning and management, virtually meet the people who founded them and those who attended their classes. An article in the September issue of 1910 described the Arya Kanya Mahavidyalaya of Jalandhar, in Punjab, founded in the 1890s by a member of the Arya Samaj, Lala Devraj. The text praised the school for having women equally involved as men in its management and committees, and for imparting both western and Indian education: Indian classical languages such as Sanskrit, religion, cooking, sewing and home management. It reassured the readers: "the people who think that outside the *pardā* everything is bad should come and see these goddesses; they would thus know the reality".[92] Again, in 1911 Rameshwari wrote enthusiastically about a new school in Lucknow,[93] opened in the name of Mrs. Leslie Porter, the wife of the officiating Lt. Governor of the United Provinces, and a regular guest at the Nehrus'.[94]

When Gopal Krishna Gokhale introduced his Bill for compulsory primary education in the Imperial Legislative Council in 1911, *Strī Darpaṇ* and its editor favoured it with much enthusiasm. Gokhale was a professor from Pune, a champion of education, the founder of the Servants of India Society, and a prominent Congressman. After an article praising the benefits of free compulsory education, and listing its successes in Baroda (where compulsory education had been introduced in 1906), Japan and the Philippines,[95] the magazine again took the occasion to bring to public attention the Bill's effects on female education, as it did for the BHU debate. "Imagine if the Bill passes!", exhorted an article in August 1911's issue, a few months after Gokhale's initiative (way

[91] See the short article on Ms. Kavasji, the second Parsi woman who obtained a medical degree outside India. "Hopefully the female gentry of India will make good use of the inspiration provided by such highly qualified women", concluded Rameshwari in her editorial. 'Ek Bhāratiya Leḍī Ḍākṭar' [An Indian lady doctor], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1910, p. 4.

[92] Mannan Dvivedi Gajpuri, 'Kanyā Mahā Viddyālaya' [Girls' College], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1910, pp. 125-128. On Jalandhar Kanya Mahavidyalaya, see Madhu Kishwar, 'Arya Samaj and women's education: Kanya Mahavidyalaya, Jalandhar', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 21, No. 17 (26 April 1986). News about another Arya Samaj institutions was given in Rameshwari Nehru 'Ārya Kanyā-Pāṭhśālā Prayāg' [Aryan Girls' School, Allahabad], *Strī Darpaṇ,* November 1911, p. 1.

[93] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Misez Porṭar kī Kanyā Pāṭhśālā' [Mrs. Porter's girls' school], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, pp. 254-255.

[94] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 20 January 1911; Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), Pt. I, Vol. No. 60, NMML.

[95] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Ārambhik Śikṣā-sambandhī Misṭar Gokhale kā Bil' [Mr. Gokhale's Bill for compulsory primary education], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1911, pp. 3-4.

too optimistically, in fact, as the Bill was rejected in March 1912).[96] "Men will definitely benefit from the initiative, but what about the women? . . . We are willing to shell out as much money as needed for the education of men, but when it comes to women's education the strings of the purse are always tightened." The writer doubted that Indian parents would ever treat their daughters like their sons, opposing traditional customs; mothers could not be counted on, either, as, due to their own lack of education, they would simply follow in their husband's footsteps, and neglect their daughters' education.[97]

The nascent women's movement, however, found ways to overcome the isolation of women and the hurdles to their empowerment through education, and to help them shape independent views that could overstep the boundaries of family life.

Strī jāti, an imagined community

One of the most powerful tools of empowerment was the creation of a metaphorical community, constructed as comprising all women. References to this symbolic entity, *strī jāti*, filled the writings and speeches of the women of the day. *Strī jāti* can be translated as 'women's group', 'womanhood', 'female sex', but it conveys further shades of meaning. *Strī* means 'woman', but there is more in *jāti* than a mere

[96] J. C. Aggarwal, *Landmarks in the history of modern Indian education* (Delhi: Vikas, 2007), pp. 33-35.

[97] Gopal Krishna Devadhar, a member of Gokhale's Servants of India Society, submitted a *Note on female education in India* to the Government of Bombay in 1916, urging the State to work for the speedy expansion of the education of the masses, as required by popular opinion, and to resort to "measures amounting to compulsion on the lines advocated by the late Mr. Gokhale by making education free in its primary stage at least". He also acknowledged "a general awakening in regard to the value of education being imparted to women . . . [and] the intelligent interest which is evinced by the women of the land in matters affecting their well being as is shown by a steadily growing number of organisations for and by women at almost every centre of educational importance and influence in India". He, however, reached the same conclusions voiced by *Strī Darpaṇ*'s article: "people naturally do not attach . . . as much importance to the education of their daughters or wives as they attach to the education of the male members of the family, because in their opinion, it is the boy on whom would fall the burden of maintaining and supporting the family and not on the shoulders of the girl". G. K. Devadhar, *A note on female education in India* (1916), pp. 1-15.
In the United Provinces, even in the 1920s, compulsory primary education for girls was not being seriously considered. Besides the obvious social factors, this trend reflected also a lack of "governmental will or interest": female education committees in the United Provinces seemed to be inefficient, as denounced by the director of Lucknow hostel for female medical students, according to whom all progresses in female education were due to "the inspectresses, who one and all continue to perform their often discouraging work with unflagging zeal" (Government of India, Bureau of Education, *Indian education in 1914-15*, p. 24). A similar opinion was expressed by the Piggott Committee, appointed by the U.P. Government in 1913 to advise on methods to improve primary education, and by local reports of the "arduous duties of the staff and of the conscientious way in which they are discharged by its members" (*Progress of Education in India, 1912-17*, p. 168).

'group': *jāti* is 'birth', and one's positioning within society fixed at birth – that is, 'caste'; it is 'community', 'race', 'species'; it has to do with strong belonging, and those who have no *jāti*, or have been thrown out of theirs, are outcastes; by extension, then, *jāti* is also 'nation', 'family', 'lineage'. Analysed in the framework of a nascent feminist movement, the concept of *strī jāti* thus involves at least two aspects: on the one hand, the *natural* (as fixed at birth) belonging to women's community *qua* women, a descriptive aspect emphasising womanhood as a biological destiny; and, on the other hand, the attachment of social and political meaning to such belonging, its positioning within existing power hierarchies, and its potential as a group that—as other subaltern groups—can claim rights.

Inherent in women's forging the concept of *strī jāti* was the formation of their subjectivity, and the ground-breaking discovery of its potentials. Padma Anagol has detailed the emergence of the notion of *bhaginivarg* (sisterhood) in late-nineteenth century women's writings in Maharashtra. This marked "an important step in the formation of Hindu women's consciousness of themselves as a 'collective'", and provided the nascent feminist movement with remarkably modern theoretical tools.[98] In the writings by north Indian women of the period, *Bahinoṁ*! ('Sisters!') was the most common incipit of journal articles, a rhetoric device incorporating the two aspects (the biological and the political) of the relationship connecting women, and crafting a symbolic community transcending all differences, a community of sisters. Journals played a prominent role in helping women through such process of realisation of selfhood, providing the protected space where women could engage in a dialogue that would have otherwise been impossible. As Anagol has showed in the case of Maharashtra, women's journals often took non-partisan stances towards reform issues so that readers could form their own opinions from hearing several, even contradictory, voices. What mattered was facilitating dialogue, discussion, and the shaping of women's own independent views, in a friendly and encouraging environment.[99]

Who was to participate in such exchanges, and how far did the borders of *strī jāti* extend? Very far indeed, according to *Strī Darpaṇ*. The *strī jāti* it had in mind included not only the women from other parts of India, but also those from the world over, symbolically involved in the debate through the publication of articles related to the

[98] Padma Anagol, 'Feminist inheritances and foremothers: the beginnings of feminism in Modern India', *Women's History Review*, vol. 19, no. 4 (2010), pp. 534-535.
[99] Anagol, *The emergence of feminism in India*, pp. 72-73.

female condition in a number of different countries. Through this strategy, the journal brought the entire world to the homes of women who had probably never left their region, and at the same time placed Indian women within a world-wide community of equals, who shared similar concerns, had been through and overcome similar grievances, had devised creative solutions, or were fighting the same battles. At a time when national organisations—not to mention international ones—had not yet been established in India, women's journals were paving the way for a broad, global movement for the betterment of women's conditions. In her editorial on *Strī Darpaṇ*'s July 1910's issue, Rameshwari Nehru wrote about female education in Gwalior, where women took part in and headed educational councils; girls' primary education in Germany, a country making strong financial efforts towards this aim; and marriage in China:

> In China, like in India, there are no courtships; other people arrange the marriages, to the extent that the bride and groom don't even steal a glance of each other before marriage. Marriage is considered a great responsibility. Once the wife enters her husband's house, she is taken as her mother-in-law's unpaid servant. The son tries to impress his mother showing lack of attention towards his wife, even though he might in fact have just the opposite feeling for her. . . . One of *A Lady's Realm*'s authors writes that there are several places where women decide not to marry; it is a matter of joy that times are changing. Nowadays, young men have also started to demand to see their wives.[100]

This article, despite its brevity, conveys much information about Rameshwari. Firstly, it speaks of her way of subtly advancing a criticism without naming her actual target: the topic of Chinese weddings was utilised here as a pretext, a mirror looking at which Indian readers could not but see their own marriage system, a parallel Rameshwari herself suggested *en passant* in the very first line. Shifting the focus from India to China, she could openly invite her readers to shift their attention to the system of arranged marriages and women's condition within the husband's family without openly touching one of India's raw nerves. The second interesting feature to notice is Rameswhari's quoting from *The Lady's Realm*, which probably means that she was a

[100] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Ṭippaṇiyā' [Comments], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1910, pp. 2-3.

subscriber to the British monthly and kept a close watch on the British feminist movements: this speaks volumes of her attempts at reaching out to women from other parts of the world, but also gives clues about the influences shaping her own journal, suggesting that she might have been familiar with several other women's publications of the day, coming especially from Britain.[101]

For women part of a household like the Nehru's, contacts with the British world were indeed frequent. As seen in the previous chapters, Rameshwari and Kamla's husbands, like most of their male cousins and brothers, had spent several years in Britain as students. Jawaharlal himself studied there from 1905 to 1912, and in her letters to him Rameshwari longed for the brilliant discussions he had with his schoolmates, and discussed the books by British authors that she was reading.[102] Motilal and the other men constantly kept an eye on British politics, society, and latest trends, besides holding countless receptions and dinners at Anand Bhawan, to which were invited the most prominent British personalities passing through Allahabad. The Nehru women were therefore well acquainted with England and its developments, although such familiarity was mainly filtered through the experiences of their male relatives.

At the turn of the century, personal relationships between Indian and British women even within the highest social strata were not as common and frequent as they were between men. This was due on the one hand, to Indian women's limited mobility outside the home; and, on the other, to the *memsahibs*' own relative isolation from the world outside the British compounds and social life. Indian and British women, in other words, lacked those occasions of interaction granted to their men, for instance at workplaces and clubs, which could give birth to personal relationships. Despite this situation, the nascent women's movement in the colony looked with curiosity at British women and their enterprises. An article titled 'Our English sisters', written in 1911 for *Strī Darpaṇ* by a Mrs. Ramdulari Dube residing in London, illustrates the point. In the introduction, the author described her times as characterised by a proliferation of social

[101] *The Lady's Realm* (1896-1914) was an illustrated women's monthly aiming at an upper- and middle-class audience; while it initially conveyed mainly ideals of Victorian domesticity and home-management, it later on widened its scope, discussing women's work outside the domestic realm, and including discussions on social and political matters of the day. It appealed to women who were both familiar with 'New Woman' ideals, and interested in retaining more traditional concepts and roles associated to femininity. Among the magazine's contributors figured Flora Annie Steel, the author of *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook* (1898), the famous domestic manual for British women living in India. Gràinne Goodwin, '"I was chosen out as oracular": the *fin-de-siècle* journalism of Flora Annie Steel', *Women's Writing*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2011), pp. 505-523.

[102] Rameshwari Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 29 October 1906, and 24 October 1907. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Part I, Vol. No. 71, NMML.

movements; expressing her joy for Indian women's being part of such mobilisation for rights, she underlined the need for them to know about women's movements in other countries, and look to them for inspiration. She regretted the lack of interaction among Indian and British women, blaming for it the harsh conditions faced by European women in India, and their considering Indian women less civilised than themselves: "When they will realise that we are equal to them, we should ask them about the lives of Western women, and about their movements". Tracing the trajectory of British women's movement, Ramdulari told *Strī Darpaṇ*'s readers about the seventeenth century, when women in England enjoyed quite a high status—"like Kaikeyi, Padmini, Sanyukta and the Rani of Jhansi"[103]—and worked at home, while the men were out to earn a living. The two sexes were equal, being both uneducated. At the end of the century, as men began to work as traders and merchants, means of education started to flow in, but women did not benefit from them:

> [they] were told that their ultimate aim was to marry, and they were taught beauty, manners and household chores. Fourteen was the ideal age for marriage. . . . Unmarried women were made fun of and ridiculed. Gradually marriage became women's profession. . . . Women just lived in the shadow of men and had no independence. Even if the husband was cruel and unjust, a wife had to bear all his actions and wrongdoings. The woman was now a dependent creature who was a servant of the man, and produced children. That was the typical role of women within the English society of the day. Women who were once their husbands' advisors and councillors were now limited to being slaves. During the next century women's condition kept declining. They remained uneducated. . . . educated women were ashamed to openly speak about their education, for fear of mockery. Gradually though, women began to protest against this, and started to study openly and publicly. They were called 'Blue Stockings'. Such women belonged to rich and reputed families, and had moderate goals. They had not let go of their traditional values. Their ideology was weak and they were not very successful. But their actions opened up a mass discussion about female education.

[103] The author mentioned Indian women known to all for being symbols of strenght and courage: a character of the *Ramayana*, Kaikeyi was the queen of Ayodhya and the last of Dasaratha's three wives; Padmini lived in the fourteenth century, and was the wife of a Rajput king; Sanyukta was a medieval queen, the wife of Rajput Pritviraj, king of Delhi, and a figure notorious for being headstrong and passionate; Rani Lakshmibai—queen of the Maratha state of Jhansi—was one of the leaders of 1857 Mutiny.

> Slowly, women started not just to acquire an education, but also to write. . . . All these debates split society in two factions: one following the old ideology against women's education, and another one – the modern faction – in favour of educating women and empowering them towards independence. The latter gradually became the nation's logic.[104]

Ramdulari here wished to show to her readers the path that had led British women from ancient splendour, through subalternity, towards new energy and agency; however, in a way similar to that used by Rameshwari when she spoke of the Chinese marriage system, this example also served another purpose. Between the lines of this account on British women one can easily see a description of Indian women's own condition as it was usually pictured at the time: passing through the mythic golden age of women's high status, in the Vedic past, and through stages of degradation in the subsequent centuries, Indian women were now experiencing the phase of living in a society split in two, when it came to the subject of their emancipation. There had been pioneers, and the women who now participated in the movement for women's independence—writing, editing journals, supporting female education through their own experience—would one day witness their ideals become the mentality of the whole nation.

References to the historical trajectories of women's movements outside India thus provided Indian activists with role models, examples to emulate, and confidence in the future outcomes of their endeavours, besides helping to build a global imagined community. This must have been the objective behind the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti's fourth meeting, on 11 June 1911, when Kailashrani Watal gave a speech titled 'The reasons behind the progress of Japanese women'.[105] According to her account, Japan was one of those rare countries where, contrarily to what happened in India, men and women were considered equal. The reasons behind Japanese women's progress were mainly four: their love for education (be it their own or their children's education), and the general consideration of uneducated women as dead weights upon their husbands; women's self-confidence (unheard of in India), a consequence of the empowerment they acquired through education—which did not prevent them from being gentle and well-mannered; women's belief in their country and in its self-sufficiency; women's abilities in all

[104] Ramdulari Dube, 'Hamārī Angrezi bahneṁ' [Our British sisters], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1911, pp. 28-30.
[105] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Prayāg-Mahilā-Samiti', *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1911, p. 8.

professional fields, equal (if not superior) to men's skilfulness.[106] To deepen the readers' understanding of women's condition in Japan, *Strī Darpaṇ* inserted in the same issue an excerpt from a report published in 1907 in *The Indian Review*. It praised the establishment of a women's university in Japan, the first such institution in Asia, describing the peace reigning over the campus and its gardens, where women worked, sang, and played tennis: "all the girls are smiling and happy", reported the author. He found the type of education imparted to women there particularly valuable, as—differently from what happened in European and American universities—it focused not on bookish learning, but on practical skills, on the appreciation of beauty and nature, and on hygiene. Girls learned to take care of pet animals, wash clothes, make textiles, cook, milk cows and make butter, besides managing the campus bank, publishing a newsletter, and acquiring some medical and artistic knowledge. The university's aim was "to educate women in such a way that they become well versed in their tasks as mothers and wives, and contribute to the development of society at large", something that the author considered worth imitating in India, where, "despite the conditions of women" no university had been opened yet.[107]

The analysis of the oldest issues of *Strī Darpaṇ* has shown, in conclusion, that a plurality of concerns characterised the first years of Nehru women's activism. Within an environment particularly reticent to progressive understandings of female rights and roles, such as north India was at the time, a handful of women were able to raise issues like women's appropriate position within the cultural construct of domesticity, or female education and its consequences. However, more subtle and symbolic issues were also at stake (though not clearly theorised yet) within this first, ground-breaking experiment of women's public engagement: the need for *separate* spaces for women; an attempt to coin new feminist terms and phrases; the necessity to mould a public voice for women that, rather than attacking male social forces at work within Indian society, found strategies to circumvent them, thus slowly carving out a safe and authoritative space from which women could speak. The theoretical tool of *strī jāti* as an imagined community allowed Indian women to establish connections to their "sisters" from the world over. In the early 1910s such links were mostly symbolic, permitted by the

[106] Kailashrani Watal, 'Jāpānī lalnāoṁ kī unnati ke kāraṇ' [Reasons behind the progress of Japanese women], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, pp. 86-91.
[107] Gangashankar Mishr, 'Jāpān-Strī-Viśvavidyālay' [Japan's Women's University], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1911, pp. 81-85.

circulation of news and magazines, and mainly resulting in writings and discussions. By the end of the decade, such theoretical opening to the wider women's movement would give birth to close cooperation between Indian and British feminists, inaugurating a phase of increasingly stronger and far-reaching links connecting Indian and global feminisms. The following chapter is devoted to the developments of the late 1910s, consisting in better politically defined objectives, bolder arguments, and wider mobilisations for the cause of Indian women.

4. WINDS OF CHANGE (1917-19)

The period with which this chapter will deal brought changes in the history both of the Nehru women, and of the broader Indian women's movement. So far as the former were concerned, the main novelty consisted in Rameshwari's departure from Allahabad, which she announced to *Strī Darpaṇ*'s readers in February 1917. Her husband Brijlal had left for Rangoon in 1915 as a member of the Indian Civil Service, and Rameshwari and their two sons (born in 1909 and 1916) joined him in Burma a couple of years later. Just as she had done as a new bride, while her husband was studying in Britain, in a similar fashion, during his first years in Burma, Rameshwari had divided her time between her in-laws' house in Allahabad, and Fairfields, her parents' mansion in Lahore. Her presence at Anand Bhawan, though not continuous, had allowed her to be in touch with the other Nehru women, as well as with all major political events and figures of the Indian scene of the day—contacts and intellectual stimulations from which *Strī Darpaṇ* had greatly benefited. Rameshwari's role as the journal editor, however, could not go well with her move to Burma, and she saw herself forced to reduce her work for the journal, and to hand the editorship over to Kamla, who had been the manager so far. Though feeling deeply sorry for having to leave, Rameshwari reassured her readers: they would notice no difference in the journal's quality.[1] Kamla's daughter Rupkumari would be the editor of *Strī Darpaṇ*'s insert dedicated to girls, *Kumārī Darpaṇ*, announced to the readers in July 1915 and started soon after.[2]

Moving to Rangoon, where she stayed until 1921, must have been a challenging experience for Rameshwari. Braj Kumar, her eldest son, recalled that the city was very different from the two towns with which his mother was familiar, Allahabad—at that time "no more than an overgrown village"—and Lahore. Rangoon had motor cars, hotels, wide and well-paved streets, tram cars, telephones, restaurants, cafés, and hair dressing saloons—things mostly unheard-of in north India. Besides the look of the city, people inhabiting it were also different from Rameshwari's close relations in India, mainly belonging to the Kashmiri Pandit community. There was only one such family in Rangoon, with whom Rameswari and her husband socialised; the rest of their friends, mostly Bengali, included members of the family of the renowned nationalist leader C.R. Das, the daughter of Brahmo Samaj co-founder Keshab Chandra Sen, and Saleh and

[1] 'Sampādakīya: *Strī Darpaṇ*' [Editorial], *Strī Darpaṇ,* February 1917, p. 60.
[2] 'Kumārī Darpaṇ', *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1915, p. 3.

Akhtar Tyabji, from the prominent Tyabji family.[3] Following the Indian political events of 1919, Rameshwari's husband, Saleh Tyabji and others started the first non-British-owned newspaper in Burma, the *Rangoon Mail*, which was to reflect nationalist opinion, and, her son reported, "Maji [mother] also started making speeches and organising Indian women into some kind of activity".[4]

In fact, Rameshwari had engaged in the mobilisation of Indian women settled in Rangoon since the very first months of her Burmese sojourn. She thus continued the work she had initiated in Allahabad, taking it upon herself to revive the local women's committee, at that moment going through a phase of inactivity. In her first speech, she described the status of women in India as similar to slavery, and exhorted her audience to work towards its change.

> Instead of ruling, she [the Indian woman] is being enslaved; instead of giving orders, she is taking orders; instead of showing the correct path, she is following . . . As if she were a servant or slave, her work is confined to the kitchen, and she does not have the power nor the will to come out of it. . . . Serving is the most important duty of humankind, and serving those we love is of utmost importance. But it is not enough. While serving, we should also be allowed to rule, while taking orders we should have the right to give orders, too. . . .
>
> Sisters, this is not the time to sit quietly. The peoples of the world are moving forward in the race of progress. . . . If, sisters, you want your breed to live in this world and not get crushed under others' feet, then work, leave laziness, and start working. Our first task is to blow life in this dead committee, and by joining it and helping its members, work with our body, mind and wealth for the advancement of our society.[5]

On another occasion, Rameshwari dedicated her speech to the Rangoon women's group to female dependency, subordination and *pardā*—the custom of secluding women and having them avoid any type of contact with men outside the family. *Strī Darpaṇ* once again printed the text she read out to her audience:

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[3] For a study of the Tyabji family and its modernist stances, especially with regard to women's position, see Daniela Bredi, 'Continuity and change in women's role in Indo-Muslim society seen through a few female members of the Tyabji family', *Annali di Ca' Foscari*, vol. XLII, no. 3 (2003), pp. 223-241.
[4] Nehru, *Nice guys*, pp. 16-17, 24-26, 33
[5] 'Sampādakīya: strī kā kartavya' [Editorial: women's duties], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1917, pp. 2-6.

> Breaking *pardā* is the first step towards freedom. . . . As a child, I've heard elders say that women's respect and prestige can be attained only if they are kept within their house, with their faces covered. I was then a little girl, and those words had much impact on me. I used to think: So, is a woman born just to sit in her house with her face covered? Even today, I can still hear those words. . . .
>
> It is our duty to win freedom for ourselves. If men are not prepared to give us our rights, we should take them forcefully; 'we are weak, we cannot compete' are excuses that should not be used. There is nothing in this world that a woman wants to do but cannot do; if we start working hard, and do things properly, not only will we progress, also our men and our country will benefit from it.[6]

At the end of the text, *Strī Darpaṇ*'s editors inserted a telling drawing, which gave further strength to Rameshwari's words: the image seemed indeed the iconographic representation of freedom. It depicted a bucolic setting, and a woman on a swing hung on a luxuriant tree; besides the nature surrounding her, the woman's body, too, conveyed a sense of liberation and happiness: her hair was down and windswept, her head reclined, and her arms widespread as if, rather than holding the swing's ropes, she was rejoicing at something. Moreover, the *pallu* (the sari's end portion) was left free to flow, a particularly significant detail in light of the several meanings attached to this part of the traditional Indian garment: depending on the way it was (and is) used, the *pallu* would give information about a woman's religious, caste, marital and social status, conveying normative ideals of Hindu traditional womanhood, and giving a woman control over the ways in which others saw her; pulled on the woman's head it showed her modesty, and her respect towards those standing in front of her, while both protecting her and making her invisible to the external world's eyes—exactly like the custom of *pardā*, whose literal

[6] 'Sampādakīya: pardā' [Editorial: *pardā*], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1917, pp. 60-64 and 109-112.

meaning is "screen", "veil".[7] In the context of a speech against *pardā* and in favour of women's freedom, the *pallu* as it is depicted in the drawing can thus be understood as an explicit metaphor of woman's liberation from the constraints of tradition, custom, and imposed, normative roles. Placing such an evocative picture at the end of Rameshwari's text, *Strī Darpaṇ*'s editors seemed to be visualising for their female audience the desirable future of Indian womanhood.

Uma Nehru, a discordant voice

Besides Rameshwari's move to Rangoon, another novelty concerned *Strī Darpaṇ* and the Nehru-women group in the period under analysis. This was the emergence of Uma Nehru as a writer with a voice radically different from that of all other contributors of the journal. As discussed in the first chapter, Uma did not rank very high in the family hierarchy; this was mostly due to her husband Shyamlal's own low positioning within the Nehru household, compared to his brothers, but was probably also a consequence of her being somewhat "different" from the rest of the family's young brides. Uma was indeed more educated than the other women of the family, as she had attended a formal school of Christian inspiration—something that, besides making her familiar with the English language, had exposed her to a variety of views and ideas; she had lived in the progressive south, mixing with people with diverse backgrounds, and had never experienced oppressive customs such as *pardā*, typical of the northern regions. All this contributed to make Uma a woman who did not mince her words, and who understood the world around herself in ways different (if not opposite) to those held by her female relatives, and by most elite Indian ladies composing the nascent women's movement.

Though the sources speak of her participation in the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti since the very beginning, Uma's most radical articles appeared in *Strī Darpaṇ* only from 1918. It might not be by chance that the journal granted her some space only after Rameshwari's departure and Kamla's becoming its editor; Rameshwari's views were indeed far more cautious than Uma's, accommodating, and preoccupied with the

[7] For a discussion of the semiotics of the sari, see Clare M. Wilkinson-Weber, 'India and fashion's new geography', in Stella Bruzzi and Pamela Church Gibson (eds.), *Fashion cultures revisited* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2013); and Mukulika Banerjee and Daniel Miller, *The sari* (Oxford: Berg, 2003). On the *pallu* as a bearer of multiple meanings, and a metaphor of a woman's degree of freedom and awareness, see Geetha Ramanathan's analysis of Aparna Sen's movie *Parana*: Geetha Ramanathan, *Feminist auteurs: reading women's films* (London: Wallflower, 2006), pp. 23-30.

possibility of disappointing the mainstream nationalist and reformist thinking. Before that, however, Uma had started to collaborate with the literary magazine *Maryādā*, a partnership that must have been mutually satisfying if the journal assigned Uma the editorship of a special issue on women in June 1916.[8] It was in *Maryādā* that Uma published some of her most irreverent writings, then reprinted in *Strī Darpaṇ*.

'Hamāre hṛdya' (Our hearts) was one of those. In it, Uma openly held men responsible for crushing the "hopes of spiritual and mental development, and desires to satisfy their bodies", instilled by nature in women's hearts. Men, she held, "the men who are always so aware of Western trends and culture, the heartless men of our country have crushed these desires of ours" as soon as they started to surface. As a consequence, "our hearts, full of hopes, have been destroyed in such a way that they have completely forgotten about those desires, and today's women well reflect this state of things". "Our hearts burn like lamps, but you do not realise our suffering. There were dreams, and they were crushed", Uma denounced. She then engaged in a harsh critique of the widespread narrative that praised sacrifice as the highest of womanly virtues.

> The tales of sacrifice of the ancient days have now gone, and your women are standing in front of you, asking for the pieces of their hearts. Give back those pieces to their unfortunate owners, over whose hearts you have been treading upon.
>
> We are not criticising the past, here. Not at all! Sacrifice is a heavenly concept, and there is nothing better than that. What we are saying is that we have sacrificed our souls, our bodies and our hearts to cruel destroyers, to those who themselves act as obstacles in the path of their children's growth, to those who make society weak. That is not sacrifice, that's suicide. . . .
>
> Up to the moment these foolish hearts have understood such suicide as sacrifice, what have we not faced? . . . Illusions! Lies! The soul for whom we killed our desires considers us petty. The body for which we let go of the world started inflicting pain on us. The feet we worshipped kicked us so viciously that we cried tears of blood. What can those hearts do now? If it were left to them, they would still be submissive, but the world will no longer let it be so. . .

[8] *Maryādā*, June 1916, pp. 1-94. The issue featured, among other articles, a piece on India's development and womankind, by 'a nationalist', urging women's participation in the cause of national uplift; one by Annie Besant on the same topic; an article on women's place in Hinduism; one by Rameshwari Nehru on motherhood; one by Kamla Devi Srivastav on women's rights; and one by an 'Orthodox Hindu' explaining why marriages of menstruating women were not to be considered against the *shastras*.

Uma reserved her bitterest tones to those opposing women's freedom in the name of an alleged Indian tradition to be respected. She replied to all main critiques of the nascent feminist movement—from those accusing Indian women to be aping western women, engaging in a sex war against men, to those assuming men to know about women and their needs more than women themselves, to those considering women's subordination as natural and unquestionable.

> [Our hearts] cannot remain chained to old customs. You might try and resist this, but it will be futile. . . . The world is now in favour of freedom. Follow the stream! Opposing the course of nature is just illogical. What? Is this not true? Are you aware of history? Do you think we cannot feel change approaching? Are we stupid? . . . We are not devotees of an alien culture, we are full of love for our own country! We do not aim at angering the womankind, but to awake it from its deep slumber. Without women's progress, social development is hardly possible.
>
> You assume that a man knows a woman's heart more than herself, but that is an illusion. We, as women, know very well what women want! And we can assure you that their condition is not happy, but pathetic! They have been hiding their sorrows deep into their hearts. They burn like lamps. Slowly. But they will not talk to you about this. And you believe silence is the proof of happiness?!
>
> If you were dependent on us, and we owned your heart, soul and body, if we robbed you of all your cherished freedoms, what condition would you be living in? The lack of national independence has made you so eager, so sad and angry: imagine our condition – we are not only deprived of national independence, but even our mind, body and soul are dependent upon you. We are like a bird which, though trapped in a cage, pleases everyone with its beautiful voice. The illusion of the bird's owner fades away only when he notices the difference between his bird's singing and that of the free birds, or when he sees his bird killing itself inside the cage. . . .
>
> But what can you do? You are helpless. This is how God has planned it all, right? No, this is a lie. . . . Gods have not made men strong and women weak, or men free and women dependent! In their eyes, we are all equals. Nature is indifferent to caste and social strata. All this is your creation. We will not accept it any longer! . . . Love between a master and a slave is revolting and unnatural. Where companionship substitutes servitude, the man woman relationship becomes nobler, purer and more encompassing. . . .
>
> Remember! History teaches us that the love for freedom

> could never be silenced. . . . Our hearts are full of patriotic blood. You can let it flow, but before long also we women, too, leaving behind the men, will obtain human dignity and rights.[9]

At a time when prominent figures like Gandhi, as well as most of the activists in the women's movement, praised the ideal of self-sacrifice as the highest point of women's *dharma*, Uma Nehru called it "suicide", described Indian women as "slaves", and the roles assigned to them by male-imposed tradition as "cages" within which the dreams, desires and aspirations of women were constantly neglected. All women around her were tirelessly repeating that, unlike in the West, Indian women had no intention of fighting against their men, but only wished to cooperate with them; Uma, on the contrary, did not spare Indian men her anger, and openly accused them of being responsible for women's condition. Anticipating the scholarly point on nationalist men's separation between the material (westernised) sphere and the spiritual (Indian/traditional) domain, whose respective guardians were to be men and women,[10] Uma ironically commented on the paradoxical stances of those whom she called "our social reformers":

> A Sita or Savitri is conceivable only in the context of a Ramchandra, a Krishna, a Bharat and a Yudisthir. But for men attired in coat, pant, collar and necktie with a lilting ambition for western economic ideals, the desire to produce such ideal Indian women is like wanting to find the proverbial but mythical flower in the sky.[11]

A comparison of Uma's stance on the nationalist ideal of the traditional, goddess-like Indian woman with Gandhi's arguments shows how distant the two positions were. On the same issue of *Strī Darpaṇ*, the speech Gandhi had given at Pune's women's organisation, the Bhaginī Samāj, was published, and went as follows:

> Men have laid down the principles of social organisation, which are flawed in many ways. In order to rectify social

[9] Uma Nehru, 'Hamāre hṛdya' [Our hearts], *Maryādā*, January 1918, pp. 158-161. The article was reprinted in *Strī Darpaṇ* in May 1918.
[10] Chatterjee, 'The nationalist resolution of the women's question'.
[11] Uma Nehru, 'Hamāre samāj sudhārak' [Our social reformers], *Strī Darpaṇ*, March 1918. Quoted in Vir Bharat Talwar, 'Feminist consciousness in women's journals in Hindi, 1910-20', in Sangari and Vaid (eds.), *Recasting women*, p. 228.

> inequalities . . . we shall have to reimbue women with the purity, firmness, resolve and the spirit of self-sacrifice of Sita, Damyanti and Draupadi. If only we are able to produce such women, then today's women, pure as satis, would begin to command the same respect in Hindu society as was enjoyed by their ancient prototypes.[12]

Even more radical within Uma's contribution to the debate on women's condition was the argument she built in defence (and for the recognition) of female subjectivity, as intimately composed not only of spiritual and mental dimensions, but also incarnated in a body. She constructed the Indian woman as a desiring subject, assigning to her (also) a physical dimension that existed irrespectively of her reproductive capacity; she thus introduced concepts that were extremely modern, compared to the typical female rhetoric of the time. While the latter never contested the existing patriarchal order, and at best claimed an enlargement of women's traditional motherly and wifely roles beyond the domestic sphere, in the service of society at large, Uma saw patriarchy itself as the main cause of women's oppression.

She took such a bold stance particularly clearly in another of her articles dealing with the question of female beauty. The text, published in *Strī Darpaṇ* in two parts, in July and September 1918, critiqued men's construction of beauty as women's only valuable property. She described beauty as the "siren song that immediately supplies a woman with her provider"—that is, a husband—in a world that made marriage a woman's only way to earn a living. "Why are we surprised, then, if we are preoccupied only with our physical beauty, rather than with the development of our hearts and minds, of the whole of our self?", Uma sarcastically wondered. She denounced men's devotion to physical beauty and women's longing to be beautiful as ignoble ideals, harmful to women as well as to men, despite the latter's owning the authorship of such ideals. "I want to show", she held, that "man has not done his work intelligently"; his selfishness "while being women's ruin, interfered also in the path of men's own spiritual development". Protected by tradition, man had been allowed to be unaware of his own condition, and proceed unquestioningly and unquestioned on his path.

The contrast between *purush* (man) and *strī* (woman) was recurrent in Uma's article. As women conceptualised themselves as members of a collective *strī jāti*, they

[12] Quoted Talwar, 'Feminist consciousness' p. 231.

equally thought of men as a social group that, holding an immensely powerful position, had shaped society and written the norms to which women were expected to conform.

> What's the real purpose of the physical beauty's ideal? In my opinion, this purpose is admirable, not condemnable. I think that it has become so virulent only due to the work of men. . . . it is not correct to say that the norm was not set by men and men do not force women to follow. It's typical of man to construct ideal models. Because he is the one who has always been the head of society, he has made woman dependent on him for food and clothes, and has not assigned to her any freedom-based career in society. Also, man has built society so that the woman, through her physical appearance, acted in accordance to his worshipping of beauty. The stomach can't be filled with beauty, and the woman – seeing that giving to beauty the place of bread would be a big mistake – has left aside her own aspirations to beauty, and has started to look for methods to provide bread for herself. This financial dependency, which is the main cause of woman's decline, has made her become man's toy, and has led to her downfall. . . .
>
> Calling it [the acquisition of physical beauty] a source of joy for the woman is ridiculous. Bodily beauty can't bring woman any pleasure. It is indeed only an object that gives pleasure to others. . . . Therefore the purpose of constructing bodily beauty is not to obtain pleasure from that beauty, but to provide a toy for others' pleasure. . . . This does not make woman a woman, it just makes her men's toy. . . . It is unjust to consider beauty the characteristic of women, while that of men is the development of their hearts and minds. . . . [T]his unjust arrangement has destroyed women's happiness and development. For this poor [woman] there has remained neither the pleasure of worshipping beauty, nor the happiness of making the world her own. . . .

The obsessive pursuit of beauty prevented women from taking any interest in other matters, turning them into meaningless dolls. Uma denounced those men who, while advocating women's isolation and distance from wordly matters as dangerous to their beauty and frailty, were in no doubt about making women perform the humblest domestic chores. If independence might spoil their beauty, she sarcastically wondered, how would domestic work preserve it?

> Look at those girls—beautiful, lovely, super soft, but

> nervous, powerless, looking like sirens, with a special charm on their mouths, a desirable body. But they are neither allowed, nor capable of understanding the worldly situations, of fighting against them, and winning over them. They get disturbed by these things, let alone worldly advancements, they don't even have the capacity to fill their bellies. They sell their faces and bodies to any customer's hand, and are helplessly dependent on them for eternity.
>
> The scar of this poisonous knife called beauty becomes even larger when we see that the selfish customers not only decorate women because they love them, but also to make them do the tasks of the humblest slave. Women need not be powerful or independent. Progress of the heart and the brain, the ability to succeed in the world damage her tenderness, her colour and tone, and therefore do not suit her. Her tenderness seems however not to be affected by domestic chores, such as working in the kitchen, taking care of the garbage, washing clothes and utensils. . . . Had it been possible, we too would have worshipped the men in the same way in which they worship us "Lakshmies".[13]

In the second part of her article, published in September 1918, Uma wished for a change in Indian attitudes towards female physical appearance. She wished India to be inspired by what was happening in the West, recently awakened from its deep slumber and surprised of such awakening's outcomes. According to her, the normative ideal of female beauty was so deeply rooted in everyone's minds, that even women themselves found it hard to recognise its evil effects, and unconsciously reproduced its logics. To illustrate such subtle mechanisms, Uma provided her readers with some sketches of imaginary female characters. Writing about a prospective mother-in-law selecting a bride for her son who could "brighten up the house and become an attraction for everyone", Uma sarcastically commented:

> Does her son have lotus-like eyes, too, or is his nose also fat? Does his presence brighten up the house, or does it darken people's lives? If he does not have any of these characteristics, why does his mother want to bring a helpless beauty and sacrifice her to this man? If bad looks are to be a consideration, it should be for both,

[13] Uma Nehru, 'Hamārī sūrat' [Our appearance], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1918, pp. 30-36.

men and women. Why are aesthetics irrelevant in the case of men? Is this not unjust?[14]

Uma's passionate critique of normative ideals socially imposed on women—the backbone of all her writings—seemed to spring from personal experience. This trait marked, once again, Uma's difference from most of her contemporaries, and made her closer to late-twentieth century feminists, whose political engagement was centred around their own most personal and intimate dimensions. In the second of her *Strī Darpaṇ*'s articles, 'Hamāre sāmājik dhāṁche' (Our social structures), Uma described the moulds Indian society had imposed on women in the course of history, from the Vedic times to contemporary age. Speaking of the Indian social structure of the day, she illustrated the example of a Western-educated young bride joining a traditional Hindu family—a picture in which one can easily see the reflection of Uma's own experience. After a description of the psychological tension faced by a young woman in such a situation, and the annihilation of her identity resulting from it, Uma concluded the article with a metaphorical tale. She told the story of the Greek bandit Procrustes, who had a bed on which he would put to sleep any lost travellers; he pulled all those who happened to be shorter than the bed, till they finally fitted it, and chopped off the extra parts of those who were larger than the bed. "Indian society", Uma concluded, "is like a cruel Procrustean bed for women".[15]

As might be expected, her feminist critique soon proved to be too sharp for her times. In August 1918, *Strī Darpaṇ* published an editorial comment against Western-style education for women,[16] and refused the article Uma sent as a reply, by which she understood that the journal did not welcome her views, and stopped submitting her writings. It was only in 1920 that her articles started to appear again on the pages of *Strī Darpaṇ*, when the journal, Uma maintained, increased in scope and political awareness.[17] In January and March 1920, one more article in two parts thus appeared, similar in tone and topics to her 1918 writings, in which Uma further investigated the issue of female bodily appearance. She told the story of Kamla, who decided to stop wearing the typical ornaments Indian tradition considers a must for women to display,

[14] Uma Nehru, 'Hamārī sūrat' [Our appearance], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1918, pp. 141-142.
[15] Uma Nehru, 'Hamāre sāmājik dhāṁche' [Our social structures], *Strī Darpaṇ*, April 1918. Quoted in Talwar, 'Feminist consciousness', p. 228.
[16] 'Deśī aur vilāyatī nārīśikṣā' [Indian and foreign female education], *Strī Darpaṇ*, August 1918, pp. 60-61.
[17] Uma Nehru, 'Hamāre jevar' [Our jewels], *Strī Darpaṇ*, January 1920, p. 5.

and provoked a number of different reactions in the people who saw her. One woman accused her of being disrespectful of Indian century-old culture, another one charged her with having succumbed to Western ideas, and a Champa advised her to value her beauty, and adorn her face with jewels to add charm to it. Uma utilised the story to make a point about beauty as a culture-based concept, which each society understood in its own specific way: some considered long, stretched necks to be a sign of female attractiveness, others linked it to unnaturally small feet, or to corset-shaped wasp waists. However different the idea of beauty within the different cultures, there was one trait all of them shared:

> To look beautiful, a woman must not consider her own happiness and sorrow, but must subject herself to all pains. Society is to be blamed for all she has to go through, as it is society that decides what 'beautiful' means. . . . In all societies, man-woman relation has degraded to extreme lows; but while noticing the ills of other societies, men have become blind to the injustice they are inflicting upon their own women.[18]

In Uma's story, one of the women commenting on Kamla's decision suggested that she should wear ornaments because of their symbolic value, to show to the world that she was married and that her husband was alive. The author utilised her comments as a pretext to make another important consideration:

> The core concept is that at one side of the marriage system stands the man, with his glamour and grandeur, and at the other side lies the woman, with her submissivness and eagerness to follow instructions. On her nose, ears, and hands, the woman must constantly wear the signs of her ruler, her master, to tell the world that her guide is still alive. Making us look weak, docile, and innocent, these ornaments make our soul dependent. We never develop the skills of confidence, independence and self-sustenance. We grow under the shadow of men's power, money and knowledge. Ornaments symbolising marriage are the iconographic signs of this shadow.[19]

[18] Uma Nehru, 'Hamāre jevar' [Our jewels], *Strī Darpaṇ*, March 1920, p. 147.
[19] Nehru, 'Hamāre jevar', March 1920, pp. 151-152.

A reading of Uma Nehru's few available articles makes understandable the marginalisation to which she was subjected. Too acute to be mainstream, too sharp-tongued to win the approval of many, too educated for her arguments to resonate with most other women's experience, Uma was bound to remain an isolated case. Her sister-in-law Rameshwari, much more in tune with the Indian context of her times, more preoccupied with social and political correctness, married to a powerful and respected husband, and holding far less progressive and dangerous views, would enjoy more popularity, both during her life time and in the historical record. At any rate, while Uma's critical voice was bringing some fresh air to women's thinking in north India, other important events were happening in the south, which would soon concern the female movements all over the subcontinent.

Uma Nehru
Photo courtesy: Mrs. Kamal Fischer

Pan-Indian and international aspirations: the Women's Indian Association

At an all-India level, the period 1917-19 was particularly significant, for it brought to the foundation of the Women's Indian Association (WIA), the first truly pan-Indian women's organisation. As the events of the following decade would show, the foundation of the WIA in Madras, on 8 May 1917, was to become a milestone in the history of the subcontinent: as the first institutionalised women's organisation, the WIA laid the foundations for the construction of women as a collective public identity, and for a reimagination of the relationship between the state and society.[20] For the moment, however, what is worth noticing is that the theoretical frameworks on which the WIA was grounded, how its objectives were formulated, the rhetorical strategies its founders utilised, and the discourses and narratives on which they drew resonated with many of the concepts and views expressed—though somewhat confusingly—within the circles of north Indian women's activism discussed in the previous chapter. What seems to surface from the writings and theorisation of the WIA is a systematisation of the ideas informing the engagement of women who apparently did not have much in common with the founders of the first all-India organisation. An analysis of the WIA's origins and of its founders' backgrounds will help to illuminate this point, allowing for speculations on the Indian cultural and political environment of the day, and on the common grounds bonding the first indigenous women's groups to the initiative of three non-Indian women.

The WIA was started by three British ladies, who had settled in India between the 1890s and 1916 to work for the cause of Theosophy. Although the main interest of Annie Besant, Dorothy Jinarajadasa and Margaret Cousins resided in the syncretism of mysticism, occultism and scientific thinking preached by Theosophy, in Europe they had also engaged in a number of social, intellectual, and political issues, including feminism and suffragism. Besant, the first of the three to have settled in India, had distinguished herself in England as a proponent of Fabianism, Radicalism, and Free Thought, and had moved to India in 1893 to spread the Theosophical message. She had always been a well-known figure at Anand Bhawan; Motilal Nehru had joined the Theosophical Society in its early days, and even though he had soon dropped out of it, when the time came to select a resident tutor for his son Jawaharlal, he asked for Annie Besant's advice. Due to his tutor Ferdinand T. Brooks, himself a Theosophist, Jawaharlal had the chance to

[20] Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, pp. 9-16.

participate in the weekly meetings he held in his rooms, and grew increasingly interested in the metaphysical arguments being discussed, and in those speculations about reincarnation, auras, super-natural bodies, and Hindu scriptures. After attending Annie Besant's lectures in Allahabad, Jawaharlal's fascination with Theosophy increased to the point that he asked his father's permission to join the Theosophical Society; he was barely thirteen when Besant herself officiated the ceremony of initiation. His experience with Theosophy, like his father's, would not last long, and ended when, two years later, he left India to go to school in England. What neither father nor son ever lost, however, was their admiration for the white-haired Irish lady who had introduced them to theosophical thinking.[21] As Jawaharlal would later recall, Besant was, in the eyes of the Indian rising middle classes, the figure who mostly boosted their confidence in their own spiritual and national heritage; she blended religious and mystical thinking with a strong political background, giving Indians "some cultural roots to cling on to, . . . something that would reduce the sense of frustration and humiliation that foreign conquest and rule had produced".[22]

Therefore, when Besant started to broaden the sphere of her activities beyond Theosophy, and became a popular figure as the leader of the movement for Home Rule, people at Anand Bhawan closely followed her achievements. Built on the model of its Irish counterpart, the Home Rule League Besant started in 1916 aimed at obtaining self-government for India after the war, and by the spring of 1917—when the story of the WIA began—it counted seven thousand members and several hundreds branches.[23] While Motilal was initially sceptical, the League instantaneously appealed Jawaharlal, now back to India and just married to Kamala. His sister Vijaya Lakshmi, too young to join the Allahabad branch, had instead to be content reading Besant's paper, *New India*, that regularly reached Anand Bhawan, and wearing a pin with an H and an R in emeralds and rubies, representing the Home Rule colours.[24]

Margaret Cousins, the main proponent of the WIA, was also a renowned character of the Irish intellectual and political scene. She had been among the leaders of the militant Irish Women's Franchise League from 1907 to 1913, and for its aims she had faced imprisonment, hunger strikes, and all sorts of political demonstrations. When, in

[21] Nehru, *An autobiography*, pp. 14-16.
[22] Jawaharlal Nehru, *The discovery of India* (New Delhi: Penguin, 2010), pp. 373-374.
[23] Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, Sucheta Mahajan, K. N. Panikkar, *India's struggle for Independence* (Delhi: Penguin, 1988), pp. 160-166.
[24] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 62.

1915, Annie Besant invited Margaret's husband (the poet and theosophist James Cousins) to join her in India and serve as literary subeditor of her newspaper *New India*, the couple left Ireland and settled at the Theosophical Society's headquarters at Adyar, Madras. They had heterogeneous intellectual interests that ranged from astrology to vegetarianism, from occultism to agricultural cooperatives, to Irish cultural revival, mythology, reincarnation and antivivisection. To these they added a strong stance on anti-imperialism and internationalism, which made them fit in the group of European émigrés in India, who opposed British colonial rule and wished for a spiritual and metaphysical successor to it, an ideal meeting point between philosophy and politics, beyond the either/or perspectives of colonialism and provincial nationalism.[25] Nostalgic of a Celtic pre-colonial Irish past, they grew equally interested in Indian past, its nativism, indigenous literary traditions, and mysticism. They saw India as an archetypal repository of wisdom and richness that could provide an alternative to modernity and Western materialistic influence, and lead the world towards a new reconstruction. According to the Cousins' pan-Asian romantic faith, indeed, Asia, under Indian guidance, would save a war-ridden, depredating West from self-destruction.[26]

Margaret, in particular, drew on her studies of Hindu and Buddhist texts to shape a peculiar understanding of gender- and sex-related concepts. As a woman who found "certain techniques connected with sex" revolting, wished for humanity to substitute them with "some more artistic form of continuance of the race",[27] and eschewed sexual intercourse as a consequence of her beliefs, Margaret Cousins engaged in the formulation of her own sexual theory. She endorsed a concept of gender proposing an alternative to the logic of separate sexual spheres, according to which each individual contained even shares in masculinity and femininity. She named such sort of androgyne the "femaculine", and defined it as an entity presenting common mental and diversified physical functions, behind which was a spiritual unity. Although toying with a theoretical model echoing androgyny, however, she often relied on sexual duality in the construction of her militant strategy—the references to motherhood and "Mother Ireland", which filled her discourses during her Irish years being a case in point, and seemingly contradicting Cousins' personal refusal of motherhood. In fact, Candy has

[25] Gauri Viswanathan, 'Ireland, India, and the poetics of internationalism', *Journal of World History*, vol. 15, no. 1 (2004), pp. 7-11.
[26] Viswanathan, 'Poetics of internationalism', pp. 24-25.
[27] J. H. Cousins and M. E. Cousins, *We two together* (Madras: Ganesh, 1950), p. 108.

showed, she did not understand motherhood in literal terms, but as a metaphor for a much broader concept, which included feminist activism; thus picturing herself as a "mother", she constructed her right to participate in the maternalist narration of the nation.[28]

Margaret Cousins brought such rhetorical strategies and understandings along to India, where they could not but appeal to the local public. Her theosophical orientalist fascination for the country, the mystical drive behind her political fervour (that openly challenged European reason), the insistence on the revival of indigenous traditions, the familial metaphors she utilised, and her understanding of Indian women as symbols of gentleness and purity made her words resonate with the Indian nationalist, educated audience that she addressed, and with Indian female activists. The first issue of *Stri Dharma*, the WIA's monthly mouthpiece, contained references to all the main aspects of Cousins' thought—from familial and motherhood-related metaphors to references to a golden past, from religious insights to classic nationalist rhetoric. Within the WIA, the first issue claimed, women were "as sisters in a great family, bond together by mutual desire to help each other, and to do something for the welfare of humanity". If India wanted to have a place among the world nations, "her sons and daughters must be equal in culture and capacity with those of every land", and overcome obstacles on its way to freedom—prominent among which was "the lack of education and development of so many Indian women". As the future of India largely lied in women's hands, they must be knowledgeable in hygiene, nutrition and health, so that the bodies of future Indian citizens be strong and healthy. Wishing for WIA branches to be established in every town and village, its founders appealed to Indian men to understand India's urgent need for female education, and to encourage women to form mutual study and help groups. "So shall the daughters of India, aided by their brothers, become more useful, more efficient, more able to serve the Great Mother".[29]

Also the objects of the association heavily drew on images related to the family realm. The WIA aimed to "present women their responsibility as daughters of India; . . . help them to realise that the future of India lies largely in their hands; for as wives and mothers they have the task of training and guiding and forming the character of the

[28] Catherine Candy, 'Relating feminisms, nationalisms and imperialisms: Ireland, India and Margaret Cousins's sexual politics', *Women's History Review*, vol. 3, no. 4 (1994), pp. 583-584.
[29] 'Ourselves and our purpose', *Stri Dharma*, January 1918, pp. 2-4.

future rulers of India . . . band women into groups for the purpose of self-development and education, and for the definite service of others".[30]

Indian women were mainly pictured as "the mothers and wives of India", but a metaphorical understanding of motherhood surfaced through the lines of the editorial. Motherhood was thus conceptualised as encompassing various aspects of female realisation, which could take on several different shapes.

> [V]ery many of our women are widows, and some also there may be whose vocation is not the married life; these must be given, if they wish it, the opportunity to train themselves along any line that attracts them. Some may wish to be teachers, some doctors or nurses of the sick; others may wish to climb intellectual heights or to work in some science or art. The time has come when it should be realised for the sake of India, that India's daughters must be given the opportunity of developing themselves in every branch of education, art, or science that they wish to follow. Without doubt there is the desire in their hearts, but most of India's sons have up to now not realised their responsibility in these things, and have held their sisters back, while themselves crying out for Education.[31]

Margaret Cousins reiterated her point in the article she wrote for the same issue of *Stri Dharma*, making it even more explicit. She critiqued Indian customs and conventions that, in the course of time, had considered home to be "sufficient for all the needs of women", and condemned the widespread "narrow conception of household dharma", which prevented women from acquiring any knowledge of the outside world. Women's isolation within their respective small family groups was, according to Cousins, responsible for women's weakness and conservatism, resulting from their forced separation from each other. Only if women united would they find the strength to pursue their aspirations and face criticism. Through women's groups, she envisioned, "unaided by men, they will discover their own strength, they will learn to consider themselves as a sex in no way inferior to men and will act accordingly. They will in their meetings cultivate self-reliance and independence so that later there may be true interdependence between men and women". The value of association, she held, men knew very well, as testified by the number of associations and interest groups they

[30] 'Ourselves and our purpose', p. 3.
[31] 'Ourselves and our purpose', pp. 2-3.

established in the course of history. Yet, their doors were closed to women, on whose nature, alleged needs and responsibilities men held "narrow and false views", based on biological elements, that ultimately resulted in denying her opportunities for education, public service, freedom of thought, speech or action. Men did not see that "the needs of a human soul are greater than those connected with sex merely . . . [n]o man can ever fully understand a woman, or satisfactorily express her views on all life's problems", she concluded.[32]

In her article, Cousins outlined what Catherine Candy has named her "radical global materialist agenda, led by the mystical". This would be the backbone of all her feminist and anti-imperialist activities in India, and the rhetoric of the organisations she helped to found. Anticipating Gandhian strategy of blending the religious and the political within the nationalist message, Cousins narrated women's necessary mobilisation in religious and mystical terms. She constructed the Indian woman as a transcendental world spirit, whose associative powers were both the result of female spiritual force, and the sign of their worldly essential functions.[33] Feminist energy, in Cousins' understanding, was already latent within India, for reasons related both to Indian ancient past, and to present-day awakening of women all over the world. Such energy simply needed to be rediscovered by Indian women, with the help of some catalysing forces, like herself.[34] "Shakti, the Divine Energy, the Feminine Power of Divinity" sent forth a wave, which was gradually awakening women all over the world. "[Indian women] already in their hearts . . . are responding to its call and vaguely wishing some change could be made in women's lives", she maintained.

Cousins envisioned the formation of many small women's groups, which would eventually come under the umbrella of a pan-Indian organisation. Working together at the town level, women would shape their ability for "independent thought", formulating their own plans of reform; only then, would they be ready to "combine freely and equally with their brothers in every sphere of life", and attain "a happy and free companionship of the sexes". The Women's Indian Association was started "so that women may feel the

[32] Margaret Cousins, 'The Women's Indian Association: some ideals underlying its name', *Stri Dharma*, January 1918, pp. 4-7. Emphasis added.
[33] Catherine Candy, 'Mystical internationalism in Margaret Cousins's feminist world', *Women's Studies International Forum*, vol. 32 (2009), pp. 30-31.
[34] In the autobiography she co-wrote with her husband, Margaret Cousins spoke of the "inherent genius of Indian womanhood" with which her ideas did and could not interfere; as the process of Indian women's awakening was already in progress, waiting only for a signal to be given, she simply "reacted to the life" around her. Cousins and Cousins, *We two together*, p. 299.

bond of their common womanhood and its aspirations", regardless of religious, caste and national distinctions. All Indian women and sympathetic western women were thus invited to join, "for the essential trials, work and responsibilities of woman are the same all the world over". Through joint work, Indian women would see their past glories finally restored: "The ideal "Mother India" will only be attained as she is manifested in the daily life of every Indian mother".[35]

In this article, one hears echoes of the ideas hinted at in many of *Strī Darpaṇ*'s writings. Concepts like those evoked by Cousins loomed large in the journal: the need for a separatist space for women; the reliance on a mythical era during which women held rights and power; the explicit invitation to build a community of women, an indissoluble group of sisters who, sharing "common womanhood and its aspirations", would overcome all social, geographical, and linguistic differences. The speech Rameshwari Nehru had delivered at the fifth annual meeting of Allahabad Aryan Women's Society in 1915 contained many of such ideas. On that occasion, she had also hinted at the quasi-mystical power inherent in womanhood, and at that latent transformative energy of women, on which Margaret Cousins would ground her feminist activism in India:

> We are the dismal face of a large society. We are the dry bark of a once green, large and shadow-giving tree. We are the broken ruins of an elegant fort. We require enthusiasm, we need water for our roots, we must repair our walls. We might seem dead, the fort might appear torn down, the tree may seem fallen, but this is not the reality. The roots of our civilisation were planted by the legendary Bheeshma, Arjun, Ram, Sita, Krishna, Savitri, Gargi, and so on – men and women. Hence we cannot decay so easily. . . .
>
> Sisters! In reality we are not as weak as people think us to be. We are known for our stubbornness: a woman can make a man do what she wants in many ways. A woman is powerful. Very powerful! We just don't know how to use our power. We can find many such examples from the past and the present. The entire Ramayana happened because of a supposedly weak woman, Kaikayi. . . . Even today, a woman can do anything she wants. She can change the opinion of a man, and she does! . . . A woman can cause rifts in a house. This is an example of women's power. It can be used for both good and bad purposes. In England, Mrs. Pankhurst has shown that women can achieve anything. They are capable of shaking the foundations of an entire empire! In some places in the United States

[35] Cousins, 'The Women's Indian Association', pp. 5-7. Emphasis added.

> and Finland women have succeeded in doing so. There is absolutely nothing a woman can't do! I have utmost confidence in the power of a woman.[36]

Even the avoidance of any open conflict with men, pictured as brothers with whom women should cooperate, started to emerge in *Strī Darpaṇ* in this period. Probably due to some critiques the journal had received, the stress of men as brothers, rather than enemies to fight, loomed large in the journal at this time—an idea that would become the hallmark of Indian feminism, as opposed (in Indian women's understanding) to western feminisms. In her February 1917 editorial, Rameshwari Nehru herself raised points very similar to those featured in Cousins' article.

> We are perfectly aware that many of our brothers feel that it is not appropriate for women to follow the ideas propagated by our paper. We have said it many times and say it again: *Strī Darpaṇ* does not contain anything that is harmful to women. *Strī Darpaṇ* only teaches women their duties, and invites women to help their male counterparts in everything, not to use their strength to drag vehicles like mute animals do. . . . *Strī Darpaṇ* wants to enable women to work for the country's respect. Through women our Mother India will reach again the high status it used to enjoy, its real and rightful place. . . . Even if you believe that the ideas we proclaim are not beneficial to our sisters, is it right to hide those ideas from women? . . . We have heard from our intelligent men that, when protest arises on a wrong issue, the best way to stop it is to prove that issue wrong. We also ask our men that, if we or our writers make some mistakes, they write to us about it, instead of preventing our paper from reaching their women. As it is our task to teach others their duty, so it is their task to bring us back to the right path if we are wrong. Both parties will benefit from this, and the country will progress.[37]

As time passed, reassuring men on the non-belligerent character of the Indian women's movement would remain one of Rameshwari's main preoccupations. In her address as the president of the All-India Women's Conference, in 1941, she reminded:

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[36] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Striyāṁ aur sāmājik kārya' [Women and social work], *Strī Darpaṇ*, March 1915, pp. 166-169.
[37] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Sampādakīya: *Strī Darpaṇ*' [Editorial], *Strī Darpaṇ*, February 1917, pp. 57-59.

> To those of my brothers who do not agree with the policy of the Women's Conference, who see danger in our demand for freedom and sex equality, I say cast off these fears and have trust in us. We shall not fail you nor lose our balance. And even if we do momentarily, I say, to err in freedom is better than to keep straight in slavery. The spectres of disintegration, of disorder, of sex war that haunt some of you occasionally are phantoms of the imagination. There can be no war between the mother and son, between the father and daughter, brother and sister, husband and wife. And if there can be no war between them, there can be none between man and woman. We have no bitterness in our movement. None is likely to come in. All that we want is to establish equity and fair play in the relations of man and woman as well as man and man. That is the only foundation on which a stable structure of civilised society can be built.[38]

Perhaps most significant, however, was another trait with which the nascent feminist thinking of the *Strī Darpaṇ* circle had recently been toying: the rhetorical superimposition of the categories "Indian woman" and "India". The WIA's conceptualisation illuminated what the Allahabad women had vaguely sketched, a narrative which would prove crucial in the development of Indian feminist-nationalist thinking, and in granting legitimisation to women's agitations. "India" and its political grievances started to appear more frequently in the pages of *Strī Darpaṇ* since 1917: following Annie Besant's arrest in mid June, Home Rule and its leader indeed became the talk of the day among the Indian nationalist intelligentsia, and even Motilal Nehru changed his views about the movement. On 22 June, *The Leader* announced that he, among others, had joined the Home Rule League, "as a protest against the arbitrary action of the Madras Government", and the next day he was elected president of the Allahabad branch, while Jawaharlal became one of its joint secretaries.[39] In the metaphor it utilised to explain to its readers India's need for self rule (*swaraj*), *Strī Darpaṇ* equated the country to a family house: "Who understands the need for *swaraj* better than women?", the editorial asked the readers. Like it would be hard to manage a house where a woman has no rights and depends on her husband to look after the

[38] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Women's Conference presidential address', in Dhar, *Gandhi is my star*, pp. 191-192.
[39] Nanda, *The Nehrus*, p. 136.

household's everyday needs, so did India need *swaraj* to take care of its own necessities.[40]

India's subjugation was here being paralleled to women's subjection, and the image recalled the equation India/Indian woman that the WIA pictured in its logo. It represented an Indian woman superimposed to the shape of India, with her feet in the south (the work of the WIA having started in the Madras Presidency); her heart in the region of Benares, as the Association's "life-force springs from religion"; and her head in the Himalayan regions, for "its intellect must be as clear and cool" as them. Her arms "outstretched to sisters and brothers in the East and West", to give them "Beauty and Prosperity represented by the lotus" in her right hand ("the flower that bears within itself male and female qualities equally") and, through the lamp in her left hand, to "extend the steady flame of inspiration which will light the fire of the united life of man and woman, the fire of devotion to our Sacred Religion and of love for humanity, the fire of patriotism, the fire of zeal for reform".[41] In the WIA logo, the Indian woman's body thus coincided with the body of the nation both symbolically—with parts of the former recalling some specific characteristics of the latter—and literally, as the woman's body was mapped on the geo-body of the country.

The identification of India with a female figure was not an invention of the women's movement. Since the 1880s, India had started to be associated with the Hindu goddess Bharat Mata (Mother India), a superimposition that was part of the process of nation building, and an attempt to give a tangible and visible shape to the idea of India, which is still today much in vogue in the subcontinent.[42] The WIA (and the Indian women's movement in general), however, appropriated the nation's anthropomorphic construction as female in an original way, which assigned different meanings to the classical patriotic, male-produced representation of Mother India. In the woman of the logo there were no traces of the usual triumphant, bejewelled, and radiant mother/goddess of nationalist pictures. Dressed in a simple sari, and wearing no ornaments, the female figure sketched by the WIA was an ordinary Indian woman, the symbol with which all ordinary women whom the WIA addressed could identify. While nationalist representations tended to invisibilise precisely this type of women in the

[40] 'Ham ko svarāj kyoṁ chāhiye' [Why we need home rule], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1917, p. 117.
[41] *Stri Dharma*, January 1918, p. 1.
[42] For a discussion of the feminisation and divinisation of the idea of India, and of its visualisation as 'Mother India', see Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The goddess and the nation: mapping Mother India* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

political imagery—"as if the male homo-social patriotic compact between the mother, her men, and her map necessitated the absenting of women from the picture(s)"[43] —the WIA envisioned the common woman as the most suitable to symbolise the Indian nation. Her needs, vision, intelligence, and devotion would illuminate the path towards reform; the process of her liberation would shape that of the entire country's liberation, as *Strī Darpaṇ* suggested. In the case of the WIA, the theosophical ideals endorsed by Margaret Cousins certainly contributed to the production of this representation, as it is evident for instance from its mystical flavour. However, as will become clear, for the broader Indian women's movement this imagery, whether theosophical or not, proved a powerful strategic tool that enabled female activists to selectively voice their concerns and shape their demands on behalf of their sex, the Indian nation, or both, according to the different occasions and addressees.

Logo of the Women's Indian Association, *Stri Dharma*

[43] Ramaswamy, *The goddess and the nation*, pp. 238-239.

The WIA, freeing women slaves from indentured labour and demanding women's franchise

Although women of the Nehru family were well acquainted with the thought and action of Annie Besant, they might have been in the dark about the WIA for a while after its foundation.[44] In October 1917, *Strī Darpaṇ* was still reporting about an article written by one of the WIA's founders on Besant's paper *New India* as having been authored by "a woman named Dorothy Jinarajadasa", without making any reference to the Association she had contributed to start a few months earlier, despite the fact that by October one of the WIA's twenty-seven branches was in Benares.[45] In that article, *Strī Darpaṇ* told its readers, Jinarajadasa detailed European women's fights for the vote, being one of those so-called "Suffragists" herself.[46]

The issue of women's franchise did not elude *Strī Darpaṇ* and its editors, and was repeatedly featured in the journal's pages from late 1917. In August the colonial government had declared its intention to enact a new scheme of political reforms (which would result in the Government of India Act of 1919), and to establish self-governing institutions aimed at forming a responsible government in India as part of the British Empire. At the news that the Secretary of State for India, Edwin Montagu, and a handful of British Members of Parliament would visit India to judge things for themselves, women's groups started to discuss the possibility of sending a deputation to them. Just like a women's deputation had addressed the Viceroy on the issue of indentured labour, *Strī Darpaṇ* argued, another one should be formed to bring Indian women's demands for rights to the attention of the Secretary of State.[47]

What the journal alluded to was the initiative that, earlier that year, had made organised Indian women experience political lobbying for the first time. Following nationalist debates of the mid 1910s on the abolition of indenture—in which prominent figures like Gokhale, Gandhi, and Allahabad-based Pandit Malaviya had participated—the Nehru women took it upon themselves to work for the cause of the Indians recruited to work in British plantation colonies, and there bound to live as slaves. They thus

[44] See, for instance, the editorial comments on her imprisonment: 'Misej Besanṭ kī kaid' [Mrs. Besant's imprisonment], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1917, pp. 1-2; 'Misej Besenṭ kā antim patr' [Mrs. Besant's last letter], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1917, pp. 118-119; 'Misej Besenṭ' [Mrs. Besant], *Strī Darpaṇ*, October 1917, pp. 169-171.

[45] "Women's education", Mutulakshmi Reddy Papers, Speeches and writings, Vol. I, Part I, pp. 137-141, NMML.

[46] 'Niṣkriya pratirodh' [Passive resistance], *Strī Darpaṇ*, October 1917, pp. 172-173.

[47] 'Striyāṁ aur Mi. Mānṭegū' [Women and Mr. Montagu], *Strī Darpaṇ*, October 1917, pp. 171-172.

dedicated the February 1917 meeting of the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti to the issue, about which both Nand Rani (Rameshwari's mother-in-law) and Uma gave speeches. The former denounced the use of fraud and abduction in the recruitment of Indian workers, and stressed in particular the conditions to which female indentured labourers were subjected, moulding her argument in classical nationalist terms:

> The labour lords do not wish to hire women, as they cannot make them work as much as men do, and yet have to pay the same rail and ship fares they pay for the men. They only want the women who are either prostitutes, or can be made prostitutes. . . . One man has told Mr. Andrews that our women are so shameless that they change husbands as easily as if they were clothes. My question is: what is these women's fault? First they are abducted, then transported like cattle. Men and women are loaded together, no distinction is made among good and evil people. They sleep, eat, drink, wake up, sit and stand all together, for a long time, in the company of people who consider it a game to dishonour women. What else do you expect to happen in such a situation? You first dishonour women, and then tell them they are morally lax. What kind of justice is that? . . .
>
> We ask the Viceroy to let the plantation colonies know that Indians are not ready to send their labourers to their countries, and tell them to make other arrangements. In this way, our country's honour will not be lost. . . .
>
> Sisters, arise! Remind our men that we are continuously being dishonoured. And that it is their duty to win our honour back. There is a mark of disgrace on our faces, and it is their duty to wash it off. Whoever you meet, let them know about this, and ask them to tell it to their families. Spread the protest in every house, and let us see how men will consider the insults launched at their sisters, and will drag our country out of this bad situation.[48]

Uma spoke right after Nand Rani, and used less rhetorical terms to make her argument against indentured labour, presenting it as an issue related to capitalist and imperialist logics, rather than a nationalist one. Concluding her speech, however, she could not escape the question of national honour, though elegantly moulded: "Sisters! Why are we so wretched? It is because we have kept it like that. Because we are selfish, and not ready to serve our breed. We are afraid, and consider our life more important

[48] Nand Rani Nehru, 'Striyāṁ aur bhartī' [Women and recruitment], *Strī Darpaṇ*, March 1917, pp. 152-160.

than our honour . . . Till the time we do not get determined to complete our pledge, it will be hard for the country to improve. Only the courageous emerge in this world".[49]

What is more interesting, though, is the reference Uma made to the political expediency of organising women's protest at that specific time, "the African moment of Gandhiji". Hinting at the popularity of Gandhi and his mobilisations in South Africa, to which the British Government could not but pay attention, Uma suggested that women not miss the opportunity to have their say on the topic of the day. This allows for speculations on the strategic move behind the choice of sending a women's deputation to the Viceroy, showing that it was more than a simply benevolent move on behalf of their sisters from rural and working-class backgrounds, or a demonstration of anti-imperialist feelings. Though cautiously shaped according to the mainstream male-defined nationalist agenda, elite women's initiative was (also) a way of asserting their existence as a political group, testing their capacity to confront the highest ranks of the colonial government utilising constitutional methods, seeking recognition from their (male) compatriots for supporting nationalist claims, and ultimately starting to carve an autonomous space from which they would later on be able to voice other, more sensitive concerns. Such a strategy, after all, was not new; British feminists utilised it in similar ways, when they claimed to be taking upon themselves the plight of their Indian sisters and, through this feminist engagement, sought credit for participating in the empire's civilising mission.[50]

> On behalf of the women of India . . . we may express how, as women, we have felt the misery and shame of our sisters in the colonies as if they were our very own. It is for this reason that we have thrown aside our customary abstention from matters outside our domestic circles, and taken the unprecedented step of appearing before you in this public manner. In the name of the women of India, we come to you to plead the cause of the poor, helpless and ignorant women who are taken from our villages and made the victims of the indenture system in the colonies. It is not necessary for us here to recapitulate the evils of this system, . . . but only to put before you how acutely we are touched and pained by the consciousness of the

[49] Uma Devi Nehru, 'Striyāṁ aur bhartī' [Women and recruitment], *Strī Darpaṇ*, April 1917, pp. 200-204.
[50] Shobna Nijhawan, 'Fallen through the nationalist and feminist grids of analysis: political campaigning of Indian women against indentured labour emigration', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, Vol. 21 (February 2014), pp. 111-133. See also Antoinette Burton, 'The white woman's burden', in N. Chaudhuri and M. Strobel (eds.), *Western women and imperialism: complicity and resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp. 137-154.

> sufferings of those brothers and sisters of ours, the misery, the humiliation, the utter helpnessness which must overcome our simple Indian women, who are by nature weak and timid, and unable to help themselves when they find that they have been beguiled into a situation involving complete separation from their families and homes. . . . We are convinced that to preserve the self-respect and uphold the honour of the Indian nation it is absolutely necessary that not a single Indian, man or woman, should ever go out under indenture again. . . . [W]e beg Your Excellency to enter fully into our feelings, and to take the necessary steps to abolish permanently this system which has proved destructive to the purity and honour of Indian womanhood.[51]

Strī Darpaṇ praised the deputation that finally met Lord Chelmsford on 24 March 1917 as "a novelty in Indian history". The journal published a summary of the petition in Hindi, as well as the translation of the Viceroy's reply to that deputation, composed of Women who would later become prominent names of Indian feminism, such as Sarojini Naidu, Mehri Tata, Uma Nehru, and Jahangir B. Petit.[52]

Among them were the women who, only a few months later, engaged in another deputation. They met the Viceroy and the Secretary of State Montagu, as *Strī Darpaṇ* had suggested in October 1917, and presented them with Indian women's views on the reforms that were to come after the war. Margaret Cousins, who organised the "all-India women's deputation" with the support of Professor Karve's Women's University at Pune, drafted the speech, and approached some "of India's best known women in public life" to form the delegation. The fourteen women would be supported by the telegrams of women from all over India—among which was Uma Nehru's—and Sarojini Naidu was to be their spokeswoman. As she would later recall, "in those early days, when most of the members of the Association were very young . . . it seemed very enterprising that a deputation of women should approach such high patronages", and the women had chosen their costumes with "flutterings of hearts . . . [to try] to effect in themselves a magic harmony of colour so as to present a perfect picture that would appeal to their eye and strengthen the arguments they were putting forward!"[53]

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[51] *Speeches by Lord Chelmsford, Viceroy and Governor General of India* (Simla: Government Monotype Press, 1919), pp. 292-293.
[52] 'Sampādakīya' [Editorial], *Strī Darpaṇ*, April 1917, pp. 169-171.
[53] *Mrs. Margaret Cousins and her work in India*, *compiled by One Who Knows* (Madras: Women's Indian Association, 1956), p. 8.

When the time came to meet Lord Chelmsford and Edwin Montagu on 18 December, in Madras, Naidu was the one who read out the deputation's address. It voiced a number of different concerns: women's rights to be "recognised as people", and be granted the franchise on the same terms as men; a reform of Indian educational system, consisting in the government's pronouncement in favour of compulsory and free primary education for boys and girls, and in the removal of "the unwise differentiation which provides facilities for ten times as many boys as girls"; provisions of "educational means by which to cope with the disastrously high rate of infant mortality and the high death-rate of young married women".[54]

Initially, the memorandum was to include requests in the fields of education and social reforms, and did not mention women's franchise. Only after the secretary made clear that only deputations dealing with "political subjects" would be received, Margaret Cousins "circulated a couple of extra sentences about political rights or rather 'opportunities for political service'", and thus was born the first Indian women's claim for the vote.[55] Poetess and long-time Congress-attached Sarojini Naidu had previously been sceptical about the suffrage movement as she had seen it in England in the early 1910s, and had described the vote as something that meant nothing to Indians: "Here no doubt it is a symbol of standing for the ideal of equality", she had told the *Westminister Gazette* in 1914. "There, it is an empty word suggesting a foreign ideal".[56] Even Margaret Cousins, whose activism in Ireland could leave no doubts about her faith in the importance of women's franchise, was not as positive about it when it came to the Indian case, and she believed "it would be a century before Indian women would understand, or be interested in political matters".[57]

Despite this initial scepticism and the somewhat casual beginnings of the claim for the vote, organised Indian women enthusiastically participated in this first phase of the suffrage campaign. WIA branches organised meetings all over India,[58] and lobbied the Muslim League and the National Congress to win their support. Women were

[54] Copy of the Memorandum submitted by the All-India Women's Deputation, *All-India Women's Conference souvenir, 1917-1970*, p. 16.
[55] Margaret Cousins, *Indian womanhood today* (Allahabad: Kitabistan, 1941), pp. 33-34.
[56] Quoted in Hasi Banerjee, *Sarojini Naidu, the traditional feminist* (Calcutta: Bagchi & Co., 1998), p. 60.
[57] Cousins, *Indian womanhood*, p. 34.
[58] "Women and the coming elections", Muthulakshmi Reddy Papers, Speeches and writings, Vol. I, Part II, p. 453, NMML.

anxious to prove to the Raj Indian men's eagerness to grant women the vote,[59] as a reply to Montagu, who had questioned whether the men of India would allow or oppose female enfranchisement.[60] The National Congress was the first to take steps towards this end, and passed early in 1918 a resolution suggesting that "the same tests be applied to women as to men in regard to the franchise and the eligibility for election to all elective bodies concerned with Local Government and Education". The resolution was then withdrawn, and the WIA sarcastically commented that no one would ever regret that; it instead wished for it to be replaced the following year, "we must make sure, by a Resolution more worthy of the Congress and the unrestricted admission of women to their full share in the national life".[61]

Sarojini Naidu unfailingly lobbied the Congress, speaking on behalf of women's suffrage at several sessions. To persuade Congressmen, she utilised tones that ranged from praise to reassurance, to veiled menace, but always featured an all-encompassing nationalist narrative linking women's enfranchisement to national progress and strengthening—that is, the preconditions for political independence. "We ask for the vote", Naidu assured her audience of Congressmen in August 1918, "not that we may interfere with you in your official functions, your civic duties, your public place and power, but rather that we might lay the foundation of national character in the souls of the children that we hold upon our laps, and instil into them the ideals of national life".[62] Just like the suffragists of other parts of Asia—and differently from Euro-American ones[63]—Indian women were thus crafting their demands in terms that could not but make an impact on male-led nationalist bodies. Constructing women's political rights as imperative for national uplift, they could push for reforms that would blur the lines of traditional gender hierarchies.

Such a narrative took on a different shape when the audience was made of women. In that case, the promises of docility and non-interference were replaced by descriptions of men's inability and political failures, and women were narrated as

[59] The WIA made an appeal to women from the pages of its mouthpiece: "It will be the work of our women during the coming year to prove this by getting the National Congress, the Provincial Conferences, and all important organisations in the country to pass Resolutions supporting the demands we women have formulated". Margaret Cousins, 'Woman's part in public life', *Stri Dharma*, February 1918, p. 21.
[60] Margaret Cousins to E. S. Montagu, in *Mrs. Margaret Cousins and her work in India*, pp. 12-13.
[61] 'Coming events cast their shadows before them', *Stri Dharma*, February 1918, p. 17.
[62] *Report of the Special Session of the Indian National Congress*, Bombay, August 19-31 and September 1, 1918, pp. 109-110. Quoted in Forbes, *Women in modern India*, p. 94.
[63] Louise Edwards and Mina Roces (eds.), *Women's suffrage in Asia. Gender, nationalism and democracy* (London: Routledge, 2004), esp. the Introduction.

potential leaders who could achieve what men had not been able to. This was what Sarojini Naidu suggested, when, in January 1917, she addressed the women of the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti. She described Indian men as prisoners, caught in chains whose keys were in the hands of women, and exhorted the latter to work for achieving the objectives that men had not been able to pursue, due to their being paralysed within a web of power relations. In her speech, she depicted women as powerful beings, deriving their strength from their reproductive capacity and supposedly natural inclination to care for others; their traditional characteristics of modesty and self-sacrifice—invested of new, creative meanings—made them the most suitable agents of national progress, as by freeing their men they would free the nation at large.[64] Kailashrani Watal, a member of the Prayāg Mahilā Samiti, utilised a similar empowering narrative when she spoke at a girls' meeting. Linking womanly virtues and abilities in house work to national service, she invited young women to take upon themselves the task awaiting for them, twice as burdensome as that reserved to men: "They only have one task, you have two. Why two? One is the house, the other the country. The same work you accomplish at home needs to be done for the country. . . . A community of model girls will accomplish these tasks and redeem *Bhārat* (India)".[65]

While the arguments with which Indian women campaigned for the franchise seemed to be effective in the case of their male compatriots, they did not sound equally reasonable to the ears of British statesmen. As the all-India deputation to the Secretary of State had not resulted in any visible achievement, women doubled their efforts when the Southborough Committee (aimed at collecting Indian opinions on the reforms and the franchise proposals) visited India in 1918.[66] Dorothy Jinarajadasa, one of the WIA's founders, toured north India between December 1918 and January 1919, holding meetings for women; "a good one" was held at the house of Rameshwari Nehru in Allahabad, probably the first occasion on which the Nehru women personally met that unknown woman, whose article on British suffragism *Strī Darpaṇ* had published a year earlier. The north Indian tour reinforced Jinarajadasa's views on the urgency of a change

[64] 'Śrimatī Sarojanī Devī Naidū kā vyākhyān' [Mrs. Sarojini Naidu's address], *Strī Darpaṇ*, February 1917, pp. 60-63.
[65] Kailashrani Watal, 'Ādarś kanyā' [The ideal girl], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1917, pp. 121-125. Quoted in Nijhawan, *Periodical literature*, p. 277.
[66] Jinarajadasa sent a letter to all women activists, urging them – upon Millicent Garrett Fawcett's advice – to immediately start to send letters to the Franchise Committee, hold meetings and pass resolutions, and make arrangements to have an interview with the Franchise Committee. Copy of WIA's letter, 14 November 1918, 7MGF/A/1/173b, Women's Library.

in the conditions of Indian women—"in subjection, uneducated and wanting the freedom of movement enjoyed by all living beings except birds in cages". She was instead more optimistic about the main objective of her travel, that of securing the support of nationalist male-led bodies to the cause of women's suffrage: "there is practically no opposition among politicians in India on this question", she wrote upon her return.[67]

In her own reading of the franchise matter, Uma Nehru, from the pages of *Maryādā,* invited the readers to look at the European example. There, two answers had been found from which the Indian case could benefit: "that the citizens of a particular nation are the real kings, and should have the full rights to manage their own country; and that discriminating against women and denying them equal rights does not do good for the country". Drawing again on the European experience on the issue of suffrage, she overturned the widespread Indian argument against women's enfranchisement:

> [N]o woman, in any country, becomes less feminine due to her gaining political rights. The history of the feminist movement shows that women acquired those qualities, which men consider 'manly', only because they had to fight against men to win their social and political rights. They became 'manly' not because of rights, but because of the lack of those rights.
>
> India has not yet reached the point when women need to fight against men to obtain their rights. But if they do not learn the lesson of western society, and do not grant women the rights they deserve, Indian men too will have to face the same situation. The only way to keep women feminine and not force them to be manly is to give them their rights.[68]

Despite all petitions submitted to request that women as a sex not be excluded from the franchise proposals, when the report of the committee was circulated in April 1919, it became clear that women's demands had been totally ignored. The members of the committee had found them unsuitable to the Indian context of the day, whose prevailing social customs, they held, made the granting of the vote premature. Women

[67] Dorothy Jinarajadasa, 'Editorial notes', *Stri Dharma*, April 1919, pp. 73-74. At the end of 1918, writing to British militant suffragette Millicent Garrett Fawcett, Jinarajadasa had expressed the same views on Indian nationalists, "anxious and willing to give equal rights to women" (D. Jinarajadasa to M. Garrett Fawcett, 23 October 1918, 7MGF/A/1/172, Women's Library), and reiterated this point when she addressed the Franchise Committee in November that year (D. Jinarajadasa to the Franchise Committee, 20 November 1918, 7MGF/A/1/173c, Women's Library).

[68] Uma Nehru, 'Striyoṁ ke adhikār' [Women's rights], *Maryādā*, January 1919, pp. 1, 3.

were furious, and organised demonstrations all over the country to voice their discontent; at a meeting in Bombay, they decided to send their representatives to London, to lobby the Joint Select Committee that was appointed in July 1919 to take evidence of representative Indians on the suggested reforms. The WIA appointed Annie Besant and Sarojini Naidu as its representatives, while the Bombay Committee on Women's Suffrage chose Herabai Tata and her daughter Mithan. From north India, women made clear that they understood these two Parsi ladies as the representatives of all Indian women for, though the idea of appointing them originated in Bombay, "women of the entire nation support[ed] the cause".[69] *Strī Darpaṇ* continued to inform its readers about the progresses of Indian women's representatives in England, where they made innumerable speeches, wrote memoranda for the committee, and established contacts with (and had resolutions sent to the Secretary of State by) all main British suffragists and women's associations.[70]

Despite all this work, the report that came out on 17 November 1919 was to disappoint women's hopes once again. Faithful to the Raj's policy of non-interference in Indian sensitive social matters—that is, matters likely to provoke male upper-caste, conservative sections—the Secretary of State showed the same preoccupations he had voiced in 1917, when the women's deputation had first approached him. He "asked the House not to support the amendment, for there was a strong conservative feeling in the country, amounting even to religious feeling in different parts of the country . . . so Parliament would do good not to interfere".[71] The report left the question of female enfranchisement to be settled by the Legislative Councils—that is, by Indian men—a solution that hardly satisfied women. As Herabai Tata pointed out, "the Legislative Councils are not made of men and women, they are composed of men only. These Councils will not be of progressive men only having advanced views on life. But the composition may per chance be problematical and far from progressive, as property is more represented than education". Wishing for Parliament to tackle the issue itself, Tata ironically wondered why the demands of outcastes and depressed classes had been taken into consideration, while those raised by women—"one half of the Indian nation"

[69] 'Striyāṁ aur voṭ' [Women and the vote], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1919, pp. 159-161.
[70] See, for instance, 'Strī aur deś sudhār' [Women and national progress], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1919, p. 49, and 'Striyāṁ aur voṭ' [Women and the vote], *Strī Darpaṇ*, October 1919, p. 215. For an account on Herabai and Mithan Tata's work in England, see Acc. No. 612, Miscellaneous Items, NMML.
[71] Herabai Tata to Jaiji Petit, 7 December 1919. Acc. No. 612, Miscellaneous Items, NMML.

—had been ignored. "It is wonderful that only the women's question is to be put off to the future Legislative Councils to be decided", she protested.[72]

British Parliament's (in)decision was in fact all but wonderful, but Indian women's first campaigning for the franchise did bring them some valuable gains, if not the vote. Statesmen who had had to witness suffragist struggles for decades, before they eventually enfranchised (some of) their fellow countrywomen, could hardly be expected to apply different criteria to the Indian case. Through their mobilisation for suffrage, however—and particularly thanks to the Tatas' sojourn in England—Indian women were able to establish contacts with and win the support of several international women's organisations. Engaging in a cause like suffrage, a struggle with an explicitly global scope that transcended national boundaries,[73] Indian women started to appropriate a universalistic idiom which, applied to the Indian context, would allow them to construct the figure of the universal citizen-subject. Differently from the nationalist subject, such figure would be unmarked by class, caste, and religion, and would be constructed on the model of the modern Indian woman emerging from international suffragist politics. Drawing on such internationalism, the Indian women's movement would in due time be able to "provide ideological cover to a hegemonic nationalism that remained vulnerable to critiques of its unspoken gender, caste, class and religious hierarchies".[74]

In late 1919, when the Government of India Act (from which women were left out) was introduced, the movement for female enfranchisement turned to a different audience, and concentrated on lobbying Indian Legislative Councils. Despite the fact that many of them extended the franchise to women from the early 1920s, the number of women qualified to vote was extremely limited. The colonial government would become again the target of pro-franchise women's agitations in the late 1920s, when steps would start to be taken for the formulation of a New India Act, the Simon Commission would reach India, Round Table Conferences would take place in London, and women would start to aim at adult franchise. For the moment, however, the first phase of the suffrage campaign had come to an end.

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[72] Herabai Tata, untitled article. Acc. No. 612, Miscellaneous Items, NMML.
[73] For a discussion of this point, see Edwards and Roces, 'Orienting the global women's suffrage movement', in Edwards and Roces (eds.), *Women's suffrage in Asia*.
[74] Sinha, 'Suffragism and internationalism', pp. 483-484.

It was the dawn of 1920 and several forces at work in the country, not just the women's movement, were experiencing frustration and discontent. A combination of several factors would soon lead to dramatic changes in the Indian political landscape that, as we will see in the next chapter, would leave untouched neither the Nehru family and its women, nor the larger women's movement.

5. ENTER GANDHIJI: CONVERSIONS AND ADJUSTMENTS AT THE NEHRUS' (EARLY 1920S)

Intimate interventions

By the late 1910s, events were taking place in India that would give rise to dramatic changes. At the Nehrus', the different reactions to the political developments, which the next pages will detail, led to a conflict whose two poles were Motilal and his son Jawaharlal. The latter, impatient with his profession at the High Court, undertaken after his return from England in 1912, had thrown himself into active politics as a member of the Home Rule League, stirred by the internment of Annie Besant in 1917. As we have seen in the previous chapter, this episode had led to Motilal also joining the League, and slightly drifting away from his usual orthodox moderate position. However, even though the Moderates within Congress were at the time increasingly distancing themselves from the other members, and Motilal was dissatisfied with their philosophy, he still hesitated to take a definitely forward line. Jawaharlal recalled that "[a]t home, in those early years, political questions were not peaceful subjects for discussion, and references to them, which were frequent, immediately produced a tense atmosphere".[1] After the end of World War I, it became clear that the constitutional changes expected from the Raj as remuneration for India's contribution to the war effort would not be easily obtained.[2] Equally clear was that Turkey's destiny after the war was far from what British statesmen had promised Indian Muslims. The news that the Caliph of Turkey, considered by Indian panislamists as their religious head, would retain no control over the pre-war Ottoman (holy) territories provoked the rapid growth of the *Khilafat* movement during 1919, with which Gandhi was especially sympathetic.[3]

At the time, Gandhi was gradually advancing within Indian politics, and his methods were one of the reasons for the conflict between Motilal and Jawaharlal. The introduction of the Rowlatt Act, curtailing Indians' civil liberties in the name of fighting terrorist violence, was greeted with indignation by political India, and led to constitutional protest. This having failed, Gandhi's proposal had its way: he founded a

[1] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 34.
[2] The introduction, through the Government of India Act, of the long-awaited reforms could have smoothed a tense political climate, which was quickly eroding all arguments in favour of British rule in India. But its scope was limited, its main innovation consisting in the setting up of a system of diarchy: departments with less political weight were transferred to elected ministers, while British officials retained control over departments such as law and order, and finance. Also, the Act broadened electorates, and introduced a division of revenue resources between the centre and the provinces. Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 165-168.
[3] Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 195-198.

Satyagraha Sabha, whose members would disobey the Rowlatt Act and other specific laws, which would lead to the first nation-wide *satyagraha* campaign in April 1919. Jawaharlal, who had first met Gandhi in 1916 at the Lucknow Congress, learned his idea from the newspapers. As he recalled, "I was afire with enthusiasm and wanted to join the Satyagraha Sabha immediately. . . . But suddenly my ardour was damped and I realised that all was not plain sailing. My father was dead against this new idea. . . . [T]he more he thought of the Satyagraha Sabha and its programme, the less he liked it".[4] Though wishing to counter the Rowlatt Acts, and admiring Gandhi for his actions on behalf of South African Indians, Motilal's personal beliefs and professional training would not allow him to endorse extra-constitutional means. A decade earlier, he had ridiculed passive resistance as a "charming expression which means so little and suggests so much". Picturing the eventuality of all government and aided schools and colleges closing, all municipal and district boards abolished, and the elected element of the legislatures done away with, he had asked: "Where shall we be? The answer is plain enough: nowhere. . . . Remember the price you have been paying upwards of a century for the few blessings that you enjoy. Remember the greater price you will have to pay if you throw away these blessings".[5] To a man used to holding on a motto like "The heart is a fool, the only safe guide is the head",[6] unconstitutional means seemed foolish, hazardous, and futile. Elements of his old admiration for the British still survived; shortly before, in August 1917, presiding over the second United Provinces Conference at Lucknow, Motilal had invited the audience to trust the British people, and when someone (believed to be Jawaharlal) had shouted out "question!" at his statement, Motilal had queried back: "Who dared question that! Who else is the arbiter of our destiny, if it is not the British democracy?"[7]

As the conflict between father and son unfolded, the rest of the family watched anxiously, and waited for its future to be moulded by either position. "Mother felt acutely miserable over all that was happening", recalled her daughter Vijaya Lakshmi. "The person she loved most, her son, was deeply disturbed and unhappy", and the tension between him and her husband greatly troubled her.[8] The joyous atmosphere

[4] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 41.
[5] Presidential address to the Allahabad Provincial Conference in 1907. Quoted in Nanda, *The Nehrus,* pp. 159-160.
[6] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 63.
[7] Quoted in Sanwal, 'Pandit Motilal Nehru', p. 7.
[8] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 69.

that had characterised family interactions at the Nehrus', to which the mansion's name itself (Anand Bhawan) was to testify, was quickly giving way to sarcasm, shouting, and misunderstanding. Krishna's memories of this time resembled those of her sister Vijaya Lakshmi: "These were most unhappy days for all of us, especially for Mother and Kamala, who could not bear to see father and son torn by politics and endless arguments. The atmosphere was tense all the time and one hardly dared to utter a word for fear of rousing Father's anger or irritating Jawahar".[9]

Motilal's doubts, however, would soon be clarified, and the fate of the entire family decided for good. The events that took place in Amritsar on 13 April, a few days after the beginning of the *satyagraha* campaign, brought Motilal several steps closer to his son. The killing by the army of hundreds of unarmed people who had gathered at Jallianwala Bagh, unaware of the ban on public meetings, drastically changed his views on those he had always considered to be benevolent rulers. When martial law was lifted from Punjab, Motilal, Jawaharlal and other Congressmen were permitted to enquire after the massacre and collect evidence for the Congress Inquiry Report. Besides allowing both father and son to know more of Gandhi, also part of the committee, this first-hand experience strengthened Motilal's new political vision: "His whole legal and constitutional foundation were shaken . . . and his mind was gradually prepared for that change that was to come a year later", remembered Nehru.[10] The first *satyagraha* campaign was already coming to a halt,[11] but Gandhi's 'Indian experiment' had begun, and for the Nehrus there was no way back. "The conversion of Jawahar", as a contemporary and close associate of the family noted, "meant the conversion of entire Anand Bhawan, father, mother, sister and all".[12]

Though often described in triumphalist terms, such "conversion" came at a high price for the family women. We must once again turn to the private and intimate vicissitudes of domestic life to discover what Gandhi's walk on stage entailed for those "mother, sister and all": the sequence of events that unfolded around young Vijaya

[9] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 32.
[10] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 44.
[11] On 18 April 1919 the movement was withdrawn, as its leader was overwhelmed with the brutal violence and repression it had met.
[12] A. S. Iyengar, *Role of press and Indian freedom struggle: all through the Gandhian era* (Delhi: Kulbhushan Nangia, 2001), p. 23.

Lakshmi (Jawaharlal's sister) in 1919 is a case in point.[13] In February that year, her father Motilal decided to start a rival daily paper, as he was dissatisfied with the policy of the Allahabad newspaper of which he was a shareholder, *The Leader*, whose political line he considered too moderate. As the first editor of the *Independent*, Motilal appointed Syed (or Syud) Hossain, a young and glamorous East-Bengal Muslim, particularly handsome and educated at Oxford. As the young man moved to Allahabad, he and Motilal's daughter Vijaya Lakshmi, then nineteen years old, fell in love. It is hard to tell when exactly the affair began, but by September Vijaya Lakshmi was mentioning Syed in her letters to her friend Padmaja, Sarojini Naidu's daughter, and making references to a "Shammie" (perhaps Uma's daughter Shyam Kumari) having enquired about her feelings, and advised her not to mix with Syed.[14]

Shortly after its inception, the Syed Hossain affair must have been made public. In January 1920, Cornelia Sorabji, the famous female lawyer who was at the time enrolled as a *vakil* in the Allahabad High Court, wrote to her friend Elena Richmond about the "exciting" news of "the marriage of Motilal Nehru's daughter with a Mohamodan". The girl whom Sorabji had met as a "little *adorable* Home Ruler" at a party had "suddenly turned Mohamodan and married with Mohamodan rites" to a "friend of her father who abused Motilal's hospitality, entrapping this girl. Motilal never dreamt that the Hindu-Muslim unity, which he was promoting could go so far and stab his own soul. . . . They say he is a broken man. He has followed the couple to Calcutta where they are said to be in hiding", Sorabji concluded.[15] It is difficult to discern whether the marriage actually took place or Cornelia Sorabji's report was the product of distorted information, spread like wildfire across the city's elites. Certainly, though, the *liaison* between Vijaya Lakshmi and Syed sparked off the rage and preoccupations of the Nehru men and of Gandhi, who joined efforts to break up a relationship they considered wrong and unnatural: a Hindu Brahmin girl could not in any way entertain a love relationship with a Muslim man. He was, to put it as mildly as Vijaya Lakshmi's sister Krishna did, "a young man whom Father considered unsuitable", even though Vijaya Lakshmi "thought

[13] By this time Motilal's daughter actually still held her maiden name, Sarup Rani, to be changed to Vijaya Lakshmi after her marriage. For the sake of clarity, however, I always refer to her as Vijaya Lakshmi, the name by which she is known to all.

[14] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Padmaja Naidu, 12 September 1919. Padmaja Naidu Papers, NMML.

[15] Cornelia Sorabji to Elena Richmond, 21 January 1920. In Kusoom Vadgama (ed.), *An Indian Portia. Selected writings of Cornelia Sorabji, 1866 to 1954* (Delhi: Zubaan, 2011), p. 395. Emphasis in the original.

herself in love" with him.[16] The talk of Hindu-Muslim unity so *en vogue* at a time when the Khilafat movement loomed large, and was strongly endorsed by Gandhi, clearly could not go so far as sanctioning interreligious unions, as Vijaya Lakshmi would soon find out herself.

Put to the test of intimacy, the Nehrus' alleged "modernity" was once again to vacillate, and Gandhi proved an invaluable ally in making conservative attitudes have their way. Upon his suggestion, in February 1920 Vijaya Lakshmi was sent to his ashram, near Ahmedabad. In her autobiography, she explained the move as aiming at her being "subjected to a simpler way of life. . . . [N]obody asked me specifically whether I wanted to go but the idea of the simple life was about to begin in India. Bhai [brother] had already adopted it and it was obvious that there would be many changes in our life-style before long. I was the pampered daughter of the house and needed discipline".[17] From what she wrote to her friend Padmaja, her opinions on Gandhi's ashram become clearer:

> I shall probably go with him [Gandhi] to his Ashram about the end of this month, and I might tell you (in strict confidence of course!!!) that *I am not* looking forward to the life at the Ashram! I was there for three days after the Congress, and someone else who was also staying there at the same time told me he felt as if he were dead but not yet buried! I assure you, I felt infinitely worse!! Having to wear white muslin saris all the time *does* get on one's nerves and I hate '*chapals*' for they succeed in making my feet look like – what shall I say? But these things are as nothing compared to the discomfort of the night. . . . And the food!!! One of my friends, when he heard I was going to stay at the Ashram for a month, seriously started contemplating if he shouldn't go into mourning for me at once, as he was firmly convinced I would never return alive, and he did his best to dissuade me from what he considered to be an attempt at suicide![18]

The correspondence between Vijaya Lakshmi and Padmaja also discloses the real aim of the girl's removal from Allahabad and entrustement to Gandhi's care: she and Syed had to be separated. Several men cooperated to this end, depriving Vijaya Lakshmi

[16] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 46.
[17] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 65.
[18] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Padmaja Naidu, 7 February 1920. Padmaja Naidu Papers, NMML. Emphasis in the original.

of any agency over a matter that intimately concerned her. Additionally to the efforts of her father, brother, and Gandhiji came those of George Joseph. A barrister from Kerala, Joseph had renounced his profession to "follow the siren cry of the Mahatma", and had settled with his wife Susannah at Gandhi's ashram in January 1920.[19] By early February, Motilal was suggesting Joseph's name for editorship of the *Independent*, endorsing him as the best possible editor, just as he had done with Syed Hossain one year before.[20] Syed was thus relieved of his duties at the *Independent*, and replaced by George Joseph. Vijaya Lakshmi strongly disliked the new editor, whom she perceived as a double-crosser pretending to sympathise with her, while in fact standing by her brother and father's side. "As if I wanted *his* sympathy!", she complained in a letter to her friend Padmaja. "I have never come across a more filthy, despicable type of humanity than the above mentioned specimen".[21]

While Vijaya Lakshmi was to receive nothing in return for renouncing her love, Syed's departure from Allahabad was justified and sweetened by a tempting proposal. "The public know what happened to Syed Hossain . . . for he had to leave India", one of his colleagues elegantly glossed over the issue.[22] In fact, thanks to Gandhi's intervention, the young Muslim was included in the delegation of Khilafat leaders, and packed off to England, which he and the others reached on 26 February 1920.[23] He would remain in England for about a year, working as the editor of *India*, the weekly journal published by the British committee of the Congress. In 1921, when the magazine ceased publication, Syed Hossain left to the United States, where he would stay for some twenty-five years, working as a lecturer and editor. In 1945, he asked Jawaharlal Nehru whether he could return to India to work towards Hindu-Muslim unity and stand for election. But, as the rumour has it, that was a time when Syed and Vijaya Lakshmi had reunited in the US, her husband having by then died. Back in India, Gandhi had apparently come to know about the relationship, and had decided to forbid it once again. After consulting the Mahatma, Jawaharlal cabled Syed: "Gandhiji thinks you can do more important work in America".[24]

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[19] George Gheverghese Joseph, *George Joseph: the life and times of a Kerala Christian nationalist* (Delhi: Orient Longman, 2003), p. 102.
[20] Motilal Nehru to Jawaharlal Nehru, 6 February 1920. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers (pre 1947), NMML.
[21] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Padmaja Naidu, 13 March 1920. Padmaja Naidu Papers, NMML. Emphasis in the original.
[22] Iyengar, *Role of press*, p. 20.
[23] M. Naeem Qureishi, *Pan-Islamism in British Indian politics: a study of the Khilafat Movement, 1918-1924* (Leiden: Brill, 1999), p. 145.
[24] M. O. Mathai, *My days with Nehru* (Delhi: Vikas, 1979), pp. 53-55.

So there Syed stayed until 1947, when he briefly returned to India, and then became its first ambassador to Egypt, an office he held until his death, two years later.

In 1920, while he set off to London with the Khilafat delegation, at Gandhi's ashram Vijaya Lakshmi was being submitted to the teachings of the Mahatma:

> He [Gandhi] told me . . . that this event had shaken his belief in all Mussalmans! 'How *could* you – he said to me – regard Syed in *any* other light but that of a brother, what right had you to allow yourself, even for a minute, to look with love at a Mussalman'. Then later: 'Out of nearly twenty crores [two-hundred millions] of Hindus couldn't you find a single one who came up to your ideals, but you must needs pass them all over and throw yourself into the arms of a *Mohammedan*!!!' Poor man!, to him it is unconceivable for a Hindu and a Mussulman to marry and live happily.[25]

Lecturing Vijaya Lakshmi on proper behaviour, Gandhi told her how he woul have reacted to Syed's feelings, had he been her. For the girl, this "didn't carry much weight, because being Gandhiji it is absolutely impossible for him ever to enter into *my* thought or feelings". Yet, squatting on a little mat in front of the Mahatma, she could not but receive his lecture.

> 'Sarup, had I been in your place, I would *never* have allowed myself to have any feelings but those of friendliness towards Syud Hossain. Then, supposing Syud had ever attempted to show admiration for me or had professed love for me, I should have told him gently but very firmly – Syud, what you are saying is not right. You are a Mussalman and I am a Hindu. It is not right that there should be anything between us. You shall be my brother but as a husband I cannot even look at you'.[26]

Opening up to her friend, Vijaya Lakshmi tried to see the whole issue ironically. "Isn't that a nice, ladylike speech and worthy of a Hindu girl, the descendant of a thousand Rishis?!!!", she asked Padmaja. And concluded, showing to be aware of the powerful and authoritative position Gandhi held, in the eyes of her own family as well as more generally: "But then, if I started telling you the good Mahatmaji's objections I

[25] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Padmaja Naidu, 13 March 1920. Padmaja Naidu Papers, NMML. Emphasis in the original.
[26] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Padmaja Naidu, 13 March 1920.

should fill a few hundred pages, and though it would make quite amusing reading, it would also be taking a great risk!" Vijaya Lakshmi's description of the dialogue between Gandhi and Syed reveal that the young couple had contemplated (if not celebrated) marriage, and that the relationship had not been a chaste one, either—something Gandhi would not tolerate. He understood Hindu-Muslim brotherhood in a literal sense: in his view, a love relationship between a Hindu and a Muslim was by no means different from incest.

> Gandhiji also asked Syud how he had dared to make love to a Hindu girl whom he ought to have looked upon like a little sister, and that gentleman rather lame reply was: 'Well, I did look upon her as a sister in the beginning'. 'And does a brother after a little start making love to his sister?'[27]

By late spring 1920, at any rate, the whole issue was resolved. Vijaya Lakshmi apparently understood her "mistake" and in a letter dated 12 May apologised to her father. After much thinking and "more than one talk" with his son Jawaharlal, Motilal was ready to forgive her.

> I am happy to tell you that I accept every word of what you say in that letter. If you took away some ten years of my life by forgetting yourself for a time, you have restored at least five of them by the assurance you have given. I wish I could say that the incident has passed away without leaving its mark, but that would be neither true nor possible from the very nature of it. So far however as you are concerned you have made such amends as it was in your power to make and I am thoroughly satisfied on that point. I wish you would overlook my hesitation to accept your statements after you were led to abuse the unlimited confidence I placed in you. Now that you have realised your mistake . . . I entertain no misgivings whatever and you are to me as you always have been. Please have no doubt on this and be the same loving and confiding child as you were before the devil crossed your path.[28]

To Gandhi, however, the girl's apologies must not have seemed enough. He recommended that she undergo a *prāyaśchitt*, the Hindu traditional amends that twenty

[27] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Padmaja Naidu, 13 March 1920.
[28] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 14 June 1920. Motilal Nehru Papers, NMML.

years earlier the orthodox community would have liked Motilal to perform after he had dared crossing the ocean to go to Europe.[29] While in that case he had reacted with arrogant sarcasm, now that his daughter was advised to do penance, Motilal showed to be more accommodating towards religious tradition. "I . . . would certainly not waste your time in making you read any books, however good they may be, hundreds of times by way of doing penance", he wrote to his daughter. "But it is essential that you should now make up the very serious deficiency in your education and learn to understand the great books of your own religion. I should certainly have you read, understand and thoroughly digest the great books recommended by Gandhiji". Under the guidance of her brother Jawaharlal, Vijaya Lakshmi could thus make "a serious study of them for the sake of the treasures of true knowledge they contain". Motilal admitted his ignorance of those texts, but quickly justified himself: "things have often come to me intuitively and I have thought deeply over them". Concluding his letter to Vijaya Lakshmi, Motilal reassured her about his forgiveness, and did not forget to link it to his daughter's having finally come "into [her] proper place", resigned at last to the bright destiny that had been chosen for her.

> The only thing which concerns me now is your happiness. Please do not let the idea that you have caused us so much suffering weigh on your mind. All that is forgotten and forgiven. . . . As for your future you may be sure that it will be as happy and prosperous as we have ever in our fondest dreams pictured it to be. . . . Having lost it for a while you have now come into your proper place and are within easy reach of the nobler part you are destined to play.[30]

In mid November that year, at Anand Bhawan, Vijaya Lakshmi met Ranjit Sitaram Pandit. He was a young barrister from the princely state of Rajkot (Gujarat), and had recently written an article in *The Modern Review* praising Jawaharlal Nehru, "the Guru", as a rising star of Indian politics.[31] Arranged through the mediation of a cousin who had studied with Ranjit at Oxford, their engagement took place on that occasion. The union was not formally announced to anyone beyond the family except Gandhiji, who had sanctioned it, since Ranjit's father was an old acquaintance of his.[32] Relieved as everyone

[29] See Chapter 2.
[30] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 14 June 1920. Motilal Nehru Papers, NMML.
[31] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 71.
[32] Ranjit Pandit to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 14 December 1920. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.

else after the Syed affair, Gandhi had even allowed the two fiancés to correspond.[33] By early December, he was already "lecturing" Vijaya Lakshmi, and giving her "some good advice" about the new relationship,[34] obsessing especially on one point: "Gandhiji has particularly emphasised that I must be extremely good when I am married and not lead *you* into temptation", Vijaya Lakshmi told her fiancé.[35] Though often speaking ironically of the Mahatma, the girl perceived him as someone who had a strong influence on her. Writing about the Nagpur Congress session of December 1920, she reassured Ranjit: "the Congress is hardly the place for a flirtation and besides I'm most awfully proper . . . at a meeting, and if Gandhiji is within hundred yards of me I shall not even dream of looking at a man, let alone speaking to one".[36] The Mahatma had in a very short time come to be considered by everyone as a powerful ally of the family men in directing and taking decisions about women's behaviour and affective life.

A different life, "that does not trouble him as much as it does us": home, affects, and the female body during non-cooperation

The changes of the early 1920s saw the Nehru women facing several other intrusions, and undergoing a number of emotional adjustments. Generally constructed as inevitable side-effects of the *satyagraha* faith, these were in fact burdensome modifications, symbolic as well as concrete, which severely altered private and domestic existence, increasingly intertwining it with national life. The highest price women had to pay was the emotional burden of having their beloved ones taken away from them by politics and eventually interned by the British. Vijaya Lakshmi sensed this as early as December 1920 after attending the Nagpur annual session, which committed the Congress to the attainment of *Swaraj* by peaceful, legitimate means and extra-constitutional mass action. A few months earlier, in September, the Congress had accepted non-cooperation as its own, and Motilal had joined the movement "wholeheartedly".[37] As he enthusiastically wrote to his daughter, "Brother and I expect

[33] Ranjit Pandit to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 4 December 1920. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.
[34] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 2 December 1920. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML.
[35] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 7 December 1920. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML. Emphasis in the original.
[36] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 7 December 1920.
[37] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 16 September 1920. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.

to be back in Allahabad . . . free from all earthly troubles—non-cooperators".[38] Describing the Nagpur Congress session to Ranjit, in his absence, Vijaya Lakshmi wrote:

> This session was a huge triumph for Bapuji [Gandhi] but of course if anything is to be achieved there is hard work ahead for everyone – and prison and the Andaman Islands for a good many. . . . On the last day of the Congress Mohamed Ali came to say good-bye to us and he embraced my brother and said: 'I wonder if we shall ever meet again Jawahar', and I could not help thinking as I looked at my brother – so pure and good, so absolutely sincere in everything he does – how long we should have him with us. I know the thought does not trouble him as much as it does us, because he looks upon his duty to his country as coming above everything else – but I feel sorry for my poor little Bhabi [Kamala]. She is so sensitive and quiet and not meant for suffering at all. I wish you could have seen her a year ago. She was at that time just as she was meant to remain.[39]

While Motilal and Jawaharlal tried to free themselves of their "earthly troubles", other such troubles soon befell the family women in the guise of policemen, warrants of arrest and searches. The first such episode happened on 6 December 1921, when Motilal, Jawaharlal, Shamlal, and Mohanlal (together with the *Independent*'s editor George Joseph) were arrested. Krishna recalled the women being distressed at the arrest; her father and brother, instead, seemed to expect it and behaved calmly. The episode was hardest of all for her mother, for whom the preceding "months of constant change had been a sort of nightmare she had not quite fathomed". As they watched their husbands being taken away by the police, her mother and her sister-in-law Kamala smiled courageously, in Krishna's memory, but "there were sadness and loneliness in their hearts. . . . [T]he home that a moment ago had been so full of life suddenly seemed ever so quiet and bereft of all joy".[40] While the men started their "pilgrimage to the only temple of liberty now existing in India . . . viz., the jail",[41] the women began "a life of uncertainty, of sacrifice, of heart-ache and sorrow", made of many police searches and home objects being taken away in lieu of fines.[42] For Indu (Indira Gandhi), four years old

[38] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 6 October 1920. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.
[39] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 6 January 1921. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML.
[40] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 35-36.
[41] Pandit Motilal Nehru, 'Onward to the Temple of Liberty'. Quoted in Mahatma Gandhi, *The pilgrims' march: their messages* (Madras: Ganesh & Co., 1921), p. 48.
[42] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 36-37.

at the time, "a strange childhood" had begun. From then on "she heard nothing but talk of politics", and the atmosphere at home made her "serious and intense", a little girl who used to "line up her dolls and make political speeches to them, exhorting them to work for *Swaraj* and practice *Satyagraha*", and who "was never a child".[43]

Meanwhile, in Lucknow District Jail, the men gradually accustomed themselves to incarceration. Jawaharlal organised gymkhanas and races, Motilal studied Hindi,[44] Shamlal (Uma's husband) was considered as usual "of no use". The first jail experience was not harsh on the Nehru men, and led Motilal to conclude: "no political prisoner in India except perhaps Gandhiji is treated with anything like the consideration accorded to me".[45] Speaking of the jail authorities' worry at his having lost a few kilos, Motilal noted: "they are really anxious to make me as comfortable as they can which is more than any other Govt. can claim as regards to political prisoners in its charge". And concluded: "One cannot help wishing that if Brother [Jawaharlal] has to go to jail again it may be somewhere in these Provinces".[46]

Further emotional adjustments were required from women during non-cooperation. The men's siding with Gandhian principles resulted in a drastic change of the living standards at Anand Bhawan, as Krishna, at the time only a thirteen-year old girl, had sensed when Gandhi first visited Anand Bhawan, in 1920. At that time the Nehru mansion "was still geared to the old pattern", with armies of liveried servants, glittering chandeliers, carpets, and masses of flowers: "obviously, not the right setting for a Mahatma", for whom a special room had to be prepared in the Indian wing of the home, where "arrangements were made for sitting on the floor".[47] To Krishna, who wondered what all the general excitement around that little man was about, only one thing seemed clear: "to follow Mahatma Gandhi's idealistic way meant giving up all the pleasant things of life". And, since Gandhi had told Motilal that he wanted not only him on his side, but every member of his family, "the end of an era", as Krishna put it, would befall the entire household. "We will not be able to live in the way we have", Motilal announced to his wife, and proceeded to sell the horses and the dogs, "the beautiful china and glass and many other lovely things", the wine cellar, his wife's jewels and

[43] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 54.
[44] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 6 February 1922. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.
[45] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 25 March 1922. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.
[46] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 26 March 1922. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML. Life at the jails to which the Nehrus and Joseph were kept – Agra Central and, later on, Lucknow District Jail – was also described as comfortable by Joseph in his letters to his wife. Joseph, *George Joseph*, pp. 109-111.
[47] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 64.

those of Kamala. The two kitchens became one, the old habit of having English food six days a week, and Indian food only on Sundays, was reverted, and the legendary European-style parties were abolished.[48] The same women who, some fifteen years earlier, had been required to acquaint themselves with the most sophisticated habits of Indian anglicised elites, now had to reacquaint themselves with austerity and extreme simplicity.

As the rituals and comforts of domestic life changed, so did bodily appearance. Since Congress' adoption of non-cooperation, Gandhian indigenous goods movement, *swadeshi*, gained prominence, which linked a nationalist politics of consumption to India's attainment of self-government, *swaraj*. Drawing upon a number of regional and international ideologies (from Bengal "constructivism", "drain theory" and the *swadeshi* campaigns of 1905-10, to Theosophy, to the ideas of several critiques of industrialism and materialism),[49] and in line with Indian traditional consideration of cloth as evoking symbols of community and rectitude,[50] Gandhi initially articulated his *swadeshi* politics as a critique of western modernity. He put his reformist ideas into practice in 1917 with the foundation of the Satyagraha Ashram at Sabarmati (Ahmedabad), whose inhabitants committed themselves to giving up manufactured goods, but did not attach any special emphasis to hand-spinning, for which he would later become known. What would eventually become the symbol of Gandhian *swadeshi* politics entered the ashram's routine only after Gandhi met Gangaben Majumdar. A widow committed to social and educational work, it was she who taught the Mahatma how to spin, and he credited her with having led him to consider *swadeshi* to be a form of political resistance and a means for national reconstitution.[51] Within a year, the symbolic importance of *khadi* (or *khaddar*, home-spun and home-woven cloth) was established, and *swadeshi* acquired further meaning, becoming "a moral system of labor and consumption for the nation".[52] While the Bengali *swadeshi* leaders of the early 1900s had utilised home-spun as a political symbol, Gandhi narrated it in religious terms, turning the creation of cloth

[48] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, pp. 34, 48-49.
[49] For a discussion of the multiple influences on Gandhian utopianism, see Richard Fox, *Gandhian utopia: experiments with Indian culture* (New York: Beacon, 1989).
[50] Christopher A. Bayly, 'The origins of swadeshi (home industry): cloth and Indian society, 1700-1930', in Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The social life of things. Commodities in cultural perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 285-319.
[51] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *Gandhi: an autobiography. The story of my experiments with truth* (Ahmedabad: Navajivan, 1940), Chapter 163.
[52] Lisa Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's nation. Homespun and modern India* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007), p. 9.

through spinning into a prayer:[53] "we shall . . . accomplish the vow when we shall deem it a religious duty to use only that cloth which is entirely produced in the country and refrain from using any other", he warned.[54]

Khadi goods provided a so-called visual vocabulary of the nation, creating group solidarity along sartorial lines and a range of visual objects. Mass *khadi* adoption did not only serve the purpose of endorsing *swadeshi* politics; the plain white cloth also signalled that people belonged to a uniform group expressing their common interests beyond the individual ones traditionally associated with caste, status and religion, of which one's attire had so far been the distinct marker. The *topi* (cap) and *khadi kurta pajama* (tunic and pants) became the male Congress uniform *par excellence*, neither western nor strictly Indian, invoking tradition while at the same time inventing a new style.[55] As European-style clothes had earlier marked the Indian elites' social and professional belonging, conveying the ideals of superiority and strength considered typical of the English body,[56] so would *khadi* clothing now testify to one's commitment to national regeneration and unity, economic self-sufficiency grounded on non-industrial and craft-based structure, non-violence and moral superiority.

Even more than men's clothing, women's received special scrutiny by Gandhian *swadeshi* rhetoric. Within this discourse, the adoption of *khadi* by women not only testified to their rejection of western modernity, but also went hand in hand with one of Gandhi's main concerns, the control of sexual/material desire. Plain, white *khadi* clothing would undermine women's consumer desire for adornments and physical beauty, a desire driven, according to Gandhi, by their wish to be attractive to their husbands. Too heavy to be seen through, and thick enough to disguise the body's outline, such dress would also contain male desire, thus enabling both men and women, liberated from worldly temptations, to focus all of their energies on national uplift. "Woman must cease to consider herself the object of man's lust", Gandhi held; only refusing to adorn herself for men, including her husband, "she will be an equal partner with man".[57] After all, was this not the point he endlessly stressed, advising Vijaya

[53] Bayly, 'The origins of swadeshi', p. 312.
[54] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 'The swadeshi vow-I', in *The collected works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 17 (Delhi: Government of India Publication Division, 1972), p. 395.
[55] Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's nation*, pp. 39-40, 72-73.
[56] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'Clothing the political man: a reading of the use of *khadi*/white in Indian public life', *Journal of Human Values*, Vol. 5, No. 3 (1999), pp. 3-13.
[57] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 'Treatment of women', *Young India*, 21 July 1921. Quoted in Anand T. Hingorani (ed.), *To the women. By Mahatma Gandhi* (Allahabad: Law Journal Press, 1943), p. 17.

Lakshmi about her married life. As she sarcastically wrote to her her husband-to-be, "he rather thought I would lead you into temptation, you of course being a poor, innocent, little boy so liable to be led into temptation by me!"[58] Even on the evening after their marriage, Gandhi did not miss the opportunity to remind the bride: "So you love Ranjit? See to it then that you do not distract him from his duty!"[59]

Homespun cloth thus worked as a powerful tool to desexualise women. Another characteristic, besides its coarseness and thickness, made it the perfect means to this end: its colour. As the colour white is associated with widowhood in Hindu culture, *khadi* clothing was to recall those virtues of self-denial and disembodiment that Gandhian nationalists deemed essential for Indian women's participation in public life as the bearers of moral purity. Only rendered invisible as (sexual) individuals could they move legitimately in public, their potential immorality overcome, and their safety (as well as that of their fellow countrymen and of the nation at large) preserved. Besides erasing class, regional and religious identities, *khadi* clothing marked women as the symbols of virtue and authenticity, the harmless and desexualised partners of the Indian male subject-citizen.[60]

As Gandhian rhetoric captured the imagination of urban high-caste Hindus, a section of popular Hindi literature developed that elaborated and popularised the *swadeshi* gospel, particularly stressing gendered dress discourses. In her analysis of such rhetoric's reception in colonial United Provinces, Charu Gupta has shown that multiple social and patriarchal anxieties were expressed through the lens of women's fashion. Hindu nationalists, publicists and ideologues associated *swadeshi* clothing for women with asceticism and the ability to control domestic expenses, loading it with moralising tones to signify a return to Hindu past glories *vis à vis* western frivolity. Upper- and middle-class Indian women who had adopted 'westernised' fashion were depicted as potentially dangerous, sexually licentious and lazy, in contrast with traditional Hindu women, of whose thrift and domestic morality *swadeshi* clothing was to be the marker.[61] Women and their bodies thus came once again to function as means through which wide

[58] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 16 December 1920. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML. "Gandhiji has particularly emphasised that I must be extremely good when I am married and not lead *you* into temptation", she had written a few days earlier. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 7 December 1920. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML. Emphasis in the original.
[59] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 74.
[60] Trivedi, *Clothing Gandhi's nation*, pp. 83-89; Anshuman Mondal, 'The emblematics of gender and sexuality in Indian nationalist discourse', *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 4 (2002), pp. 913-936.
[61] Charu Gupta, '"Fashioning" swadeshi. Clothing women in colonial North India', *Economic & Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, no. 42 (2012), pp. 76-84.

national concerns were to be expressed, as a few decades earlier, when the emerging middle classes assigned them the same task.[62]

The multiple meanings attached to homespun cloth and to *swadeshi* clothing for women resulted in what Emma Tarlo has named a "sartorial anxiety". Torn between political nationalist concerns and their own intimate aesthetic taste, habits and desires, Indian women engaged in a struggle that, although going back far in women's history, now had to to be (literally) tailored to the new circumstances of the day. "I have done my packing racked with conflicts as to what to take and what not to take with me – whether to wear *khaddar* dress . . . or *swadeshi* silk . . . whether to be smart and fashionable as of old or to be simple and common only",[63] wrote to Gandhi Saraladevi Chaudhurani, the first elite Indian woman to wear *khadi* at a public ceremony in 1920.[64] Only one decade earlier, a woman of her status would have had the opposite concern, as Indian men of the urban westernised elites wished their women's attire to be more "modern". Many of the Nehrus agreed on this ideal, even though it often contrasted with their wives' own opinion. As we have seen in the second chapter, at the dawn of the twentieth century the family men would rather see their women attired in western-styled clothes, considered better in many ways than traditional Indian ones, and unequivocal markers of advancement and progressive thinking.

By the eve of the new decade, the opposite vision had become commonplace at the Nehrus', and women were expected to conform to it. Habits that no one had ever questioned became sources of concern for the young Nehru women, and pastimes requiring special attire that could not be replaced with *khadi* clothing had to be given up or pursued almost secretly. "I suppose the difficulty is what you are to wear", guessed Ranjit when Vijaya Lakshmi wrote that she would renounce horseriding, and advised: "Do go on in the old way, does not matter what the people say, they won't be up early enough in the cold weather to see you".[65] In her reply, Vijaya Lakshmi confessed: "The trouble with me is that I never forget . . . the desire to rebel against *khaddar*! But you ought to squash me and tell me that *khaddar* is absolutely the only thing to wear etc. etc. I have attached far more importance than anyone ought – up to now – to my clothes,

[62] See chapter 2.
[63] Saraladevi Chaudhurani to Gandhi, 3 May 1920. Quoted in Emma Tarlo, *Clothing matters: dress and identity in India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), p. 94.
[64] M. K. Gandhi, 'The uses of khaddar'. *Collected works*, Vol. 20, p. 237.
[65] Ranjit Pandit to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 5 December 1920. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.

shoes and appearance generally, and it is quite time I reformed".[66] And, the day after, confirming Ranjit's guess on the issue of what to wear for riding, and voicing fears of breaking the norms regulating the appropriate nationalist behaviour of the day: "I can't promise you that I will ride every morning because I don't know what to wear. I simply dare not go out for a ride in these days in a habit – at any rate not in Allahabad, and I don't know what else I can wear. I adore riding, but I have only been out once since my return from Mussoorie".[67] Though trying her best to conform to the *swadeshi* dress code, young Vijaya Lakshmi did so reluctantly, and could not bear the sight of the trucks full of clothes being taken from Anand Bhawan to the places of public burning: "It seemed to me pure vandalism and the thought of it hurt me", she recalled in her autobiography.[68]

So strict were Gandhian prescriptions that, once the date of her wedding was fixed, the Mahatma had to be informed about her attire. He would not approve of the gold-embroidered sari and jewellery Vijaya Lakshmi would prefer, like all her ancestors before her: Gandhi decided that she would wear *khadi*, and that jewels were absolutely out of question. "Mother could not have been more angry!", recalled Vijaya Lakshmi, but she had to be content with the bride wearing the *khadi* sari woven by Gandhi's wife, fine enough to be dyed the traditional pink, and with flowers replacing gold on her ears, neck and wrists.[69] Krishna resented having to do without her old clothes as much as her sister Vijaya Lakshmi did, and remembered her first *khadi* sari as "a coarse, shapeless thing that felt like sackcloth".[70] But the limitation she found the hardest to accept was her withdrawal from school, resulting from the boycott of British institutions part of non-cooperation, and from Gandhi's tour in the United Provinces, in late November 1920.[71] Krishna's destiny befell also her cousin Shyam Kumari (Uma's daughter), then attending Allahabad Muir Central College.[72] Since, it will be remembered, Motilal was not in favour of his daughters attending formal institutions, Krishna had been allowed to attend school only after much insistence. No matter how unsettled and unhappy, she was now

[66] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 6 December 1920. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML.
[67] Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit to Ranjit Pandit, 7 December 1920. Ranjit Pandit Papers, NMML.
[68] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 83.
[69] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, pp. 72-73.
[70] Nehru Hutheesing, *We Nehrus*, p. 49.
[71] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 'Speech at students' meeting, Agra'; 'Speech at students' meeting, Banaras'; 'Speech on non-cooperation, Allahabad'; 'Speech at women's meeting, Allahabad'; 'Speech at public meeting, Allahabad'; 'Speech at students' meeting, Allahabad'. *Collected works*, Vol. 22, pp. 3-5; 10-17; 28-37.
[72] *The Leader*, 21 November 1920, p. 5.

made to leave it and her friends, and had to be content with some private tutors and much free time that she found hard to fill.[73]

Reworking non-cooperation

All hardships notwithstanding, by the early 1920s organised women started interacting with Gandhian politics at various degrees, as shown by the contents appearing on the pages of women's magazines. On the one hand, such interaction resulted from the Mahatma's drawing on a network of elite ladies already engaged in social and political work for the cause of the female sex (Sarojini Naidu, Saraladevi Chaudhurani, and Lady Tata as cases in point) to act as role models and spread his message among women, of whose potential contribution to the nationalist struggle Gandhi was well aware.[74] On the other hand, women themselves must have realised in turn the potential of Gandhian politics for fostering their own concerns, and consciously appropriated its idiom and values. By the second half of 1920, *Strī Darpaṇ* published Gandhi's writings on spinning and weaving and the letters he addressed specifically to women.[75] In one letter, Gandhi complimented Indian women for their participation in boycotting foreign goods, for picketing liquor shops, giving away their jewellery, and accepting to have their English clothes burnt as they would have done with something infested by worms, "an essential action to save the national body from this deadly disease". Women's participation, Gandhi held, was evidence of the righteousness of non-cooperation. Still, for the *swadeshi* movement to succeed a greater effort was required from them: they must boycott foreign clothing entirely in favour of *khadi*, showing for the latter the same affection any mother would feel for her baby, regardless of its ugliness; and they must spin the *charkha*, considering it a national duty. "The future of this country is in your hands, as it is you who will raise the children. . . . [It] is much safer in your hands than it is in the hands of the government", Gandhi concluded.[76]

The women behind *Strī Darpaṇ* did not need to be asked twice. In the same September 1921 issue another article appeared, by a 'Desh Bandhu' (Friend of the

[73] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 31.
[74] Nijhawan, *Periodical literature*, p. 20.
[75] Mahatma Gandhi, 'Hāth se sūtakātnā aur bunna' [Hand spinning and weaving], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July-December 1920, p. 284.
[76] Mahatma Gandhi, 'Striyon ke nām M. Gāndhī kī chiṭṭhī' [Gandhi's letter to the women], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1921, pp. 155-158.

nation), conveying reactionary opinions according to which women should focus their attention on religion and on serving their husbands, aware of the harms deriving from freedom, and keeping their distance from politics, a men's business. Commenting on the article, the editorial clarified *Strī Darpaṇ*'s view on the matter: women could not be content with sitting at home, acting as the mere supporters of men, and encouraging them to join the nationalist movement.[77] On the same issue, *Strī Darpaṇ* took the occasion of Gandhi's article 'The position of women', which had appeared in *Young India* in June that year, to comment and encourage women to consider themselves equal to men. The women behind *Strī Darpaṇ* reworked Gandhi's words to sanction their feminist message. They glossed over the Mahatma finding the treatment of women in India as serious as untouchability a gross exaggeration; they also overlooked his understanding of women as pure, disembodied creatures, and did not mention his insistence on lust and "the modern artificial life of sensual enjoyment" as the root causes of women's (and India's) subjugation.[78] Thanks to a number of elisions and additions, Gandhi's article worked in *Strī Darpaṇ*'s editorial as a pretext to voice encouragements much more radical than the Mahatma would ever utter. Gandhi considered women's condition as a consequence of lust and sensual desire, whose annihilation he endorsed; *Strī Darpaṇ*, instead, viewed women's situation was a concrete social evil, rooted in the unjust patriarchal norms and behaviours endorsed and enacted by men from time immemorial. Rather than praising purity and asceticism, as Gandhi would do, the editorial pushed women towards self-fulfilment, confidence in their own strengths, and a prolific political engagement.

> Gandhiji states that it is very harmful the habit some parents have of keeping their daughters uneducated, and having them believe that marriage is their only purpose. It is a mistake. A girl is taught from a very early age that her sole responsibility is making her husband – not herself – happy. The solution to this lies in her own hands: she should adorn herself for her own pleasure, rather than to please her husband, if she wants to stand equal to men. . . .
>
> This is not the time for a girl to worship her husband as a god, and consider that her sole duty. . . . Mahatmaji says that women should take part in every aspect of national life. You should teach this to your daughters. Do not teach them that their only purpose is

[77] 'Sampādakīya' [Editorial], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1921, p. 162.
[78] M.K. Gandhi, 'The position of women', *Young India*, 21 July 1921. *Collected works*, Vol. 23, pp. 468-469.

> to get married, and spend their entire life serving their husband. Tell them that it is fine to get married and spend time with their husband, but they should not forget their responsibility towards the world and their country. . . .
>
> In most countries women revolted and took their rights, but our country is still lagging behind. If you do not fight for your own freedom, things will not change, and you will be forever oppressed.[79]

Strī Darpaṇ had adopted the same strategy a couple of months earlier, in an editorial on *swadeshi* clothing. After all, the magazine "was started at a time when no one cared about women", led by its editors' desire to help women,[80] and it thus stuck to its main concern. Inviting women to foster the production of *khadi* fabric by spinning the *charkha*, the piece drew a parallel between European women's engagement during World War I and the nationalist work now required from Indian women. As a result of their effort, English women had acquired many of the rights for which they had long asked and struggled, the editorial stated: "If in India we understand our roles and duties, and contribute in the freedom struggle accordingly, the handful of people who still oppose women's rights will realise what women have done within the nationalist movement, and their mouths will be shut for a long time . . . [and] we will win our rights without much of a struggle".[81]

The same women who, a decade earlier, had considered female liberation as a prerequisite for national political freedom, were now starting to conceptualise the matter in the opposite way.[82] The latter objective, it seemed to them, could work as one (if not the sole) viable shortcut to the former. To reach it, women only needed to do their part within the nationalist ranks, and show themselves worthy of being granted equal rights with men and a more just social position. Although some of *Strī Darpaṇ*'s contributors still considered women's progress a prerequisite for national development, the argument subordinating the satisfaction of women's demands to the success of the nationalist venture would increasingly gain strength, spread by nationalist leaders and quickly becoming commonplace. The outcomes, however, as we will see, would be

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[79] 'Sampādakīya: striyon kā sthān' [Editorial: women's place], *Strī Darpaṇ*, September 1921, pp. 163-164.
[80] Thus the editorial of December 1921, when the editors announced an increase in the magazine's pages and price (3 Rs) from January 1922. 'Sampādakīya: *Strī Darpaṇ*' [Editorial], *Strī Darpaṇ*, December 1921, p. 329.
[81] 'Sampādakīya' [Editorial], *Strī Darpaṇ*, July 1921, pp. 214-215.
[82] See chapter 3, '*Strī Darpaṇ*: for the nation or for the women?'

different from those optimistically anticipated by women in the early 1920s, at the dawn of non-cooperation.

Male contributors to the magazine voiced diverse opinions on the issue of women's rights and active participation in nationalist politics. Some encouraged the female readership to take up the spinning wheel, and show their love for India as the men were doing. There was for them "no greater task at hand than assisting the men in the fight for freedom".[83] Others tried to dissuade women from aspiring to rights and active political participation, erroneously considered as leading to "real happiness", leaving both to men. Wrote a male contributor to *Strī Darpaṇ*:

> You will not reach true happiness by getting the franchise and the right to enter the Councils. Mahatma Gandhi has said that you can obtain real happiness by staying at home and supporting the freedom struggle. You must earn the love and respect of your husbands and brothers, and they can represent you in the Councils. . . . You all want to take part in the fight for freedom. However, if all the women of this country jump into the fight with spears and guns, who will nurse the wounded? Do not consider your work to be menial . . . If you cannot help solving the problems of the world, and cannot give love to the needy, how will you be of any use to the mankind? . . . I am not opposed to your freedom, but it seems to me that you are getting caught in a web in the name of freedom.[84]

Besides discussing and reworking the non-cooperation discourse in their writings, women also took the movement as an opportunity for their own active political empowerment. By 1920, figures like Bi Amman (mother of the Ali brothers, the famous Khilafat leaders) and Saraladevi Chaudhurani began touring north India to address meetings exhorting people to join the Khilafat and non-cooperation movements.[85] Even at the Nehrus, after Jawaharlal, Motilal, Shamlal and Mohanlal were arrested on 6 December 1921, women came forward in ways more visible than had so far been the case. Invited by Gandhi to replace the men of their family at that year's Congress session, held in late December, Swarup Rani, Kamala with little Indira, Krishna, and some of their female cousins (probably the wives of Shamlal and Mohanlal, Kamala and Uma) set off to

[83] Viśvambhar Nāth Jinnā, 'Strī kā kartavya' [Women's duties], *Strī Darpaṇ*, November 1921, pp. 226-229.
[84] Keśavnārāyaṇ Agravāl, 'Hindū Samāj men striyon ka pad aur svatantratā kī lahar' [Women's position in Hindu society and the freedom struggle], *Strī Darpaṇ*, December 1922, pp. 311-312.
[85] Visalakshi Menon, *Indian women and nationalism: the UP story* (Delhi: Shakti Books, 2003), pp. 63-66.

Ahmedabad. In Krishna's memoirs the experience is described as an exciting adventure. The party travelled third class for the first time, undertaking an uncomfortable but enjoyable trip, "an education in itself", staying at Gandhi's ashram and adjusting to its hardships. Krishna remembered the trip to Ahmedabad as "a grand experience";[86] though only a girl at the time, she must have sensed the atmosphere surrounding the ashram and the Congress venue, where thousands of women (whose men, like the Nehrus, had been imprisoned) met each other for the first time in such numbers. After the Congress session, a Ladies' Conference was held, with over six thousand women attending, and Bi Amman (mother of the Ali brothers at the head of the Khilafat movement) presiding.[87]

The void left by men's mass imprisonments allowed women to take decisive steps beyond the circle they had so far carved out for themselves, sanctioning their active political participation. Stirred by the Ahmedabad experience, they returned to their homes with new enthusiasm, resolute to act as protagonists within the movement. Just as the absence of men pushed Muslim women to join the Khilafat movement, leave their homes and discard the *pardā*,[88] it also facilitated Hindu women's participation in the Gandhian movement. By the end of January 1922, even Motilal's wife Swarup Rani, the "ceramic doll" who had more or less silently suffered from her husband and son's joining Gandhi, co-organised and presided a meeting in Allahabad attended by over five thousand people, and exhorted them to become Congress volunteers.[89] Also Jawaharlal's wife Kamala seemed to regain strength after her several malaises, when she addressed the audience of the Dehradun Women's Conference,[90] or went with Rameshwari to Benares to address a students' meeting at Benares University. Motilal did not appreciate such a move, defining it as "a fool's errand", and wishing that "the Benares party . . . returned home wiser than they left".[91] As the renowned nationalist and Sarojini Naidu's sister-in-law Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay recalled, in due time Kamala would grow into a young woman whose "soft exterior was misleading, for beneath the melting surface there was a hard core. . . . [S]he could be sufficiently assertive to gain a point or decision on action, in her own quiet way. . . . [S]he had devised and nurtured a mechanism of her

[86] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 37-38.
[87] Menon, *The UP story*, p. 68.
[88] Menon, *The UP story*, p. 71.
[89] Menon, *The UP story*, p. 69.
[90] 'Dehrādūn Strī-Kānphrens' [Dehra Dun Women's Conference], *Strī Darpaṇ*, December 1922, p. 334.
[91] Motilal Nehru to Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit, 25 January 1922. Vijaya Lakshmi Pandit Papers, NMML.

own to preserve her entity and not be reduced to a shadow by the menfolk of the family, especially her husband", of whom she was "neither an echo nor a pale reflection", no matter how over-powering he may have been.[92]

Whether the family men liked it or not, women quickly grasped within Gandhian non-cooperation the opportunity to carve out one more space of action for themselves. Historiography has often considered the Nehru women's participation in non-cooperation campaigns as a consequence of their menfolk's, but a closer analysis of the events unfolding around the Nehru women in the early 1920s, at both the intimate and political levels, uncovers a different picture.[93] Although the family men's adherence to the Gandhian agenda came at a high price for their mothers, sisters and wives, women like Swarup Rani, Rameshwari, Uma, Kamala and Vijaya Lakshmi were not the mere 'victims' or silent receivers of the discourses of the day. On the contrary, they were able to appropriate Gandhian rhetoric in their writings and mould it subtly enough to make it a means for their feminist messages' sanction and propagation, as well as a sign of their siding with the family's nationalist faith. On a more practical level, Nehru women showed themselves capable of appropriating non-cooperation as an empowering tool when, after their men's first imprisonment, they threw themselves into active nationalist politics, with an intensity to raise their male relatives' suspicions. By 1922, the editors of *Strī Darpaṇ* and *Kumārī Darpaṇ* were able to picture "the service of society" as a valuable alternative to marriage, "not the sole purpose in the life of a woman":[94] social and political engagement featured here as a viable means of women's own fulfilment, rather than a duty towards the nation.

[92] Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, 'Kamala Nehru'. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay Papers, Speeches and writings, File no. 78, NMML.
[93] Forbes, *Women in modern India*, p. 129.
[94] Rameshwari Nehru and Roop Kumari Vancu, 'Sampādakīya: laṛkion se bātcit' [Editorial: a conversation with the girs], *Kumārī Darpaṇ*, May 1922, pp. 39-40. Quoted in Nijhawan, *Periodical literature*, p. 250.

6. "THE TIME HAS NOW COME FOR WOMEN TO REVIEW AND REFORM THIS SYSTEM"[1] (LATE 1920S)

The AIWC and female education: "teaching in the ideals of motherhood"[2]

The fact that politicised women showed themselves eager to endorse and participate in non-cooperation should not overshadow the rest of their concerns. Even after Gandhi's entrance on stage, throughout the 1920s, they remained faithful to topics like female enfranchisement, widowhood, prostitution, the progresses of national and international women's movements, domesticity, marriage and women's duties toward the family.

Female education occupied a most prominent place among such concerns. By the mid-twenties, women's organisations became more active than ever to address the dreadful status of female literacy in India, especially after the incentive uttered in June 1926 by Mr. Oaten, the Director of Public Instruction at Bethune College, Calcutta:

> You have asserted yourselves in the field of politics. How long is it before you assert yourselves in the field of secondary and higher education? How long are you going to tolerate a man-made syllabus, a man-made system, a man-made examination, and a controlling authority in which women have no influence as the dominating arbiter of your educational destinies? . . . We must have the co-operation of women to help us remedy what is wrong in women's education. . . . I would urge that women, who alone can help us adequately, should tell us with one voice what they want, and keep on telling us till they get it.[3]

Margaret Cousins, the Secretary of the Women's Indian Association at that time, did not need to be asked twice. She immediately sent a circular letter to all Indian groups and women leaders, inviting them to form local committees in each province and state by the end of October to voice their opinions on female education. The women elected as their representatives would bring the constituencies' points of view for general discussion at an all-India meeting in a few months time. The letter proposed three main topics: primary education, "to remove the stain on India that only two per cent of its women are literate"; secondary education; and college education. Also, local

[1] 'All-India Women's Conference Memorandum', p. 94. AIWC Papers, File no. 2, NMML.
[2] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona, 5th-8th January*, *1927*, p. 29.
[3] Quoted in All-India Women's Conference, *All-India Women's Conference souvenir, 1927-1970,* p. 12.

committees should take into account issues related to education, such as early marriage, views on the raising of the age of consent, and *pardā*, "only a few of the points which need solving by women's brains, their experience of young people, and their intuition, in addition to all that men so far have done".[4]

Like many other elite Indian women, the Nehru ladies responded to Cousins' call. They founded and led branches in their area: Uma Nehru was the head of the Allahabad branch (the Allahabad Women's Conference Committee on Educational and Social Reforms), whose two hundred members passed a few resolutions to contribute to the all-India meeting. The Allahabad group endorsed the foundation of an all-India organisation of women dedicated to educational matters; and it supported the inclusion for boys in primary schools of "political and vocational training", and of "lessons in domestic ideals and economy" for girls.[5] Besides the Allahabad branch, the U.P. counted two other of the initial twenty-two constituent conferences:[6] one in Cawnpore (Kanpur), and one in Benares, led initially by a Mrs. Mehta and then by Miss Asha Adhikari until 1930, when she resigned and was suggested by Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay to have Uma Nehru replace her.[7] Rameshwari Nehru instead founded and led the Delhi branch, the Delhi Women's League.[8]

The first all-India meeting, in January 1927, would prove momentous in the history of the Indian women's movement. Held in Pune between the 5th and the 8th of that month, such a gathering marked the beginning of a new national women's organisation, the All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform (AIWC). Designed as the apolitical counterpart of the increasingly pro-Gandhian politics Women's Indian Association,[9] from whose ranks came the founders of the AIWC, the new organisation was primarily concerned with "promot[ing] education in India of both

[4] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 14.
[5] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 78. 'Work done by Agra Constituency Allahabad', Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 30, Reel no. 3, NMML.
[6] 'All-India Women's Conference Memorandum', p. 94.
[7] Letter from A. Adhikari to K. Chattopadhyaya, 31 March 1930. Papers of the All-India Women's Conference, File no. 4, Reel no. 1, NMML.
[8] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 53.
[9] Kamala Visweswaran has considered the figure of Muthulakshmi Reddi – Madras Presidency's first woman legislator and a founding member of the AIWC – as exemplary of some WIA members' dissatisfaction with the association's alliance with Gandhian politics and its class/caste elitism. As Reddi herself, the AIWC sought to position itself strategically: its being 'apolitical' was to allow it independence from elite nationalists, and freedom of action in the political arena (through legislation, constitutional reform, collective action) to address problems of women's lives. K. Visweswaran, "Family subjects" (PhD. diss., Stanford University, 1990). Quoted in Hancock, 'Domesticity in colonial India', p. 894.

sexes and at all stages";[10] and it also concentrated on the abolition of social customs hindering girls' access to education, like child marriage and *pardā*. Among the resolutions passed by the first conference were two fundamental points, to which the following pages are dedicated: one resolution made recommendations on the type of education to be imparted to girls; another demanded the raising of the age of consent to sixteen. To this end the latter resolution endorsed Sir Hari Singh Gour's Age of Consent Bill, then about to be discussed in the Legislative Assembly.[11]

With the former resolution the AIWC advocated special curricula for girls. It wished "that in all education of girls in India teaching in the ideals of motherhood and in the making of the home beautiful and attractive, as well as training in social service, should be kept uppermost".[12] The AIWC thus held views like those that had long been endorsed by the government, local educational bodies, and several Indian educationists. The Governor General in Council had suggested in 1913 that girls' education should be practical "with reference to the position which they will fill in social life", and "should not seek to imitate the education suitable for boys".[13] The 1917 Report on education noted that "the more thoughtful among the educated class of parents have begun to claim for their daughters an education such as it will fit them for their inevitable lot in life, i. e., that of wives and mothers". The Report made clear that "attempts at differentiation" had been going on for years, with needlework being taught "in the majority of girls' schools" and "special schoolbooks for girls" being in use in several provinces. It also assured that the government "aim[ed] at wider differentiation and the improvement of the teaching of special subjects".[14]

As for Indian educationists, many felt the same way about female education. Prof. Chiplunkar, a fellow of Pune Indian Women's University, drew on a number of European and American medical and paramedical sources about women's psychology and physiology to argue against equal education for boys and girls. He warned his readers of the evils of higher education for women, claiming the western experience to have proven that it "adversely affected maternity, home-life and marriage".[15] Higher education, he held, had caused a "sex-war" in the West, with women "desir[ing] to

[10] 'The Constitution of the All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform', Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 1, Reel no. 1, NMML.
[11] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, pp. 28-29.
[12] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 28.
[13] *Indian Educational Policy*, pp. 15-16.
[14] *Progress of education in India*, pp. 178-179.
[15] Chiplunkar, *The scientific basis,* p. 13.

dominate men in all walks of life" and "consider[ing] their lives outside the home more important than their lives within the home and the family".[16] To avoid repeating western mistakes, Chiplunkar suggested that Indian girls' education should include "Household Arithmetic, Unlimited literature, Hygiene, House-keeping in all its aspects, Some of the Fine Arts, Psychology of the child, Knowledge of sex-hygiene, Moral training".[17]

At the first AIWC meeting, several women averred that motherhood and wifehood were the main roles for which girls should be educated. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, for instance, felt that "beautifying the house should be an essential feature of a girl's education", since if women paid more attention to the beautifying of their homes, "men would spend less of their time in the clubs".[18] The amendment proposed by a Mrs. Bahadurji, according to whom the expression "teaching in the ideals of motherhood" should be omitted, unless teaching in the ideals of fatherhood was also mentioned, as both the sexes "should co-operate in the beautifying of the home", was declared lost. The original resolution, recommending that "teaching in the ideals of motherhood and in the making of the home beautiful and attractive . . . should be kept uppermost" was thus passed with only three dissenters.[19] Fifteen years before the creation of the AIWC, its first president, the Maharani of Baroda, had written that "in the proper use of education lies the salvation of her [the woman's] sex", for "only by education can a woman fit herself to be the companion and inspiring helpmate of her husband" and "direct the children's course and follow their careers with loving, intelligent sympathy". This is why, according to her, "the women of every country should feel it their duty to seek the highest culture within their reach, that they may be in truth the moral and intellectual mothers of their children".[20] At the second conference, held in Delhi on 7-10 February 1928, Mrs. Das, chairwoman of the reception committee, highlighted in her opening speech that "our object should be to give an education which will make a woman more useful and happier in her home and not one that will drive her out of it".[21] The same point was made by Her Highness the Begum Sahiba of Bhopal, according to whom "[w]oman was not made by nature to take part in the struggle of life to compete with man in the domain peculiarly his own". Female education, she held,

[16] Chiplunkar, *The scientific basis*, p. 27.
[17] Chiplunkar, *The scientific basis*, p. 75.
[18] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 28.
[19] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 28.
[20] Maharani of Baroda, *The position of women*, pp. 15-16.
[21] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Delhi, 7th to 10th February 1928*, p. 18.

"should be such as may enable her, among other things, to help man in his struggles, to comfort him in his troubles, and create a happy home".[22]

Following such insights, the various branches took action fostering a type of education for girls centred on domestic skills. The Allahabad branch, for instance, described its working programme on education as revolving around "Health and Sanitation, Child welfare and nursing . . . needle work and other handicrafts".[23] The Delhi Constituency worked along the same lines: it recommended that domestic science consisting of hygiene and first aid, home nursing and child welfare, sewing and cutting out be made compulsory subjects for girls in the matriculation examination, and that domestic science consisting of cooking, sewing, embroidery, laundry, home decoration and simple drawing be made compulsory in the middle classes.[24] The Delhi branch also reported having made an offer to the Education Department for organising lectures on domestic science for teachers.[25]

With such work, AIWC members were trying to make up for the lack of what they considered a crucial aspect of girls' education, namely Home Science.[26] Come into common use in the 1920s, Home Science combined elements of U.S.–made Home Economics and of Domestic Science/Economy as taught in England and British India, to shape a new subject, the product of several interlocking values. While the colonial administration endorsed Domestic Science as a subject capable of dampening political activism and instilling imperial modernity in Indian homes, Gandhian rhetoric also assigned a prominent role to the domestic sphere, increasingly politicising it, and placing women's bodies and behaviours under constant scrutiny. Internationalist feminism, with its stress on Home Economics aimed at promoting bodily and eugenic health, individuality, and social order, was another element of these interactions. The influence of American home economists, in particular, was crucial, as some of them settled in India, where they designed teacher-training programs and manuals; moreover, elite Indian women travelled to the U.S., coming in contact with Home Economics through American women's clubs and reform associations, appropriating some of its methods, and spreading them among their fellow women activists upon their return to India. The princely state of Baroda was a case in point, given its long acquaintance with

[22] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 29.
[23] 'Work done by Agra Constituency Allahabad'.
[24] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 102.
[25] 'Report of Delhi Constituency', Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 30, Reel no. 3, NMML.
[26] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 191.

Home Science thanks to the work of a resident American lady, and to the travels to the U.S. of Hansa Mehta, the daughter of the Prime Minister.[27] It was not by chance, then, that its Maharani was the AIWC's first president.

Home Science was thus a combination of Indian and western knowledge, and in the understanding of organised Indian women it would serve a number of purposes. Since the early 1920s, the Women's Indian Association had begun to informally sponsor Home Science Education within its educational and social reform projects in the Madras area: to widows, destitute and criminal women, slum dwellers, prostitutes and *devadasis* (temple dancers) Home Science education would offer the chance of becoming skilled domestic workers, thus gaining financial independence and social rehabilitation. But it was only in subsequent years, when the AIWC took it upon itself to foster higher education in Home Science, that the subject acquired further symbolic meaning.

The AIWC members' understanding of domestic roles will help illuminate what was entailed in the construction of Home Science symbolism. The women gathered for the AIWC sessions conceptualised their domestic roles (and especially motherhood) as sources of power, and their speeches were imbued with empowering images recalling female strength and authority. Referring in her address to the history of Maharashtra (where the first meeting was held), the Maharani of Baroda mentioned Shivaji, the region's mythical hero and an example of virility. "My mind cannot but recall the extent to which the character of this leader of men depended upon the education and training he received under the loving care of a mother, deserted, yet awake to her highest function". India would not have had such a hero to worship, the Maharani implied, had it not been for his mother, who "gave herself up" and dedicated her time, strength and intelligence to shaping the body and soul of her son.[28] The following year, the Maharani again stressed the power that Indian women should claim as their own: "[t]he whole of India will be influenced by what takes place during these days", she assured. "Let us move Heaven and Earth to accomplish great things".[29] And then, inviting women to replace men in the work to find "the Right Solution" to women's problems: "Let me tell you also, that Men are still groping blindly in their honest wish to do their best for us".[30] Of the same opinion was the Begum of Bhopal, president of the 1928 AIWC conference,

[27] Hancock, 'Domesticity in colonial India', pp. 880-890.
[28] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 16.
[29] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 11.
[30] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 12.

according to whom the state of Indian womanhood was due to the fact that, up to that moment, "whatever has been done for the education of women, was done by men". Although women could not but be grateful to men for their efforts, they would not "blink the fact that men cannot fully realize our needs or look at them from the same view-point as we can. They simply cannot grapple with our problems to our satisfaction", she concluded.[31] "Women can do much that men cannot do", echoed Begum Mazharul Haque, chairwoman of the third AIWC session, held at Patna on 3-7 January 1929. "[T]his is a fact which everyone after a little consideration can understand. After all men are brought up and nursed in our laps and they get their intellect and intelligence from us".[32]

Women's sense of strength and power was also boosted by the whole atmosphere of the first AIWC meetings. Gathering in the same place, addressing the same goals, and sharing life experiences with hundreds of other female delegates were for most of the women present unprecedented experiences, which enhanced their confidence in the possibilities of Indian womanhood. The ideals of global sisterhood and mutual help, as they were first conceptualised at the beginning of the century in the pages of women's magazines, animated the AIWC meetings, and the speakers never tired of making references to them. As Sarojini Naidu told her audience at the first AIWC gathering, "[o]ne thing is unchangeable throughout the world, the indivisibility of womanhood: . . . many things make for divisions, but womanhood combines; the queen and the peasant are one, and the time has come when woman should know her divinity. . . . We must show that Womanhood is one and indivisible, and transcends rank, creed and race".[33] At the second AIWC session, thanking Lady Irwin (the wife of the Viceroy of India) for her speech and support, Naidu stressed the same point, declaring that East and West had met that day "in the kinship of women, that indivisible sisterhood"[34] which, according to the Begum of Bhopal, differentiated women from their "brothers in India", disunited by ignorance and narrow-mindedness.[35] In 1929, proposing the Rani of Mandi to the presidential chair, Saraladevi Chaudhurani introduced her to the audience as a role model, to whom all Indian women could look for inspiration. Coming from a state where the strictest *pardā* was imposed on women, the Rani had been "like a little bird in a cage

[31] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, pp. 25-26.
[32] *The third All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Patna, 3rd to 7th January 1929*, p. 10.
[33] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, pp. 46-47.
[34] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 21.
[35] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 25.

with a stifled voice"; but she longed to fly, and to carry a message to women like herself, so in time she had turned into "a woman who by the sheer force of her will has brought herself out of purdah and the darkness of illiteracy into the wide world of fellowship with her enlightened sisters". Chaudhurani spoke in particular to the women attending that AIWC session from behind the *pardā*, reassuring them of their power to break free from seclusion, the same force the Rani had found within herself.[36] Speaking of her, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay concluded: "so far as our movement is concerned, we all stand as one, whether she be a Maharani in the palace or whether she be a poor woman in the hut. Whatever she may be, she is a woman", and on that ground she was rightfully participating in what Shareefah Hamid Ali defined "a mysterious sympathy".[37]

Women's insistence on the need for Home Science education was, in this context, all but a reactionary move sanctioning their subaltern condition. It has been argued that their stance should "be taken as evidence that [women] understood their subordinate position very well",[38] but the speeches given by several AIWC members reveal a rather different picture. Building their arguments on the consideration of motherhood and care work as tasks of paramount importance, women advocated Home Science education as a tool that would further sanction their authority. Moreover, constructing domestic work as 'scientific', and as a field that, like any other profession, required training and skilfulness, women denaturalised the link between the female sex and domesticity. While they did understand themselves mainly as mothers, conceptualising house and care work not as 'natural' (that is, inevitable) knowledge, but as skills that needed training to be learned, allowed women to consider domestic work as *a* career – the career that arguably most Indian women would pursue, but not (any longer) the only one available to them.

Women soon acknowledged the need for new institutions to strengthen and spread Home Science education. At the Delhi 1928 session, when the Maharani of Baroda suggested that Indian women needed "home colleges with new ideals, with new shapes to old ideals",[39] the AIWC formed the All-India Women's Education Fund Association. With Lady Dorothy Irwin as its president, the new branch-association aimed to raise funds to open a new institution. This dream was fulfilled in 1932 when,

[36] *The third All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 18.
[37] *The third All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, pp. 25-26.
[38] Forbes, *Women in modern India*, p. 61.
[39] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 12.

having collected four hundred thousands rupees, the AIWC inaugurated the Lady Irwin College in Delhi, a women's college "imparting the unique training in Home Science and teacher education".[40] It was a financially self-sufficient institution that offered a three-year diploma course in Home Science and teacher's training, "with the object of training young women to be good house-wives and good mothers as also to be teachers of Home Science in Schools".[41] Lady Irwin College aimed to "enable women to utilise the advantages of Science in their homes and to add to them the loveliness of Art", and to prepare them "to be new types of teachers, up-to-date home-makers and mothers, and capable organisers of public services such as their new status as citizens demands".[42] Beginning with just eleven students on 11 November 1932, the college soon started to enrol pupils from all over India, had to shift to a bigger building a year later, and buy the land to build an entire campus in 1938.[43] Hannah Sen, whom the AIWC described as "a devoted wife and a loving and understanding mother",[44] was the college's first directress. According to her, when it came to female education, domestic science was "entitled to a place in the scheme of things—a honoured position in all curricula—primary, secondary and university". Sen did not find paradoxical the fact that "while the progress of higher education reduced the inevitability of marriage as the only career for women, greater stress [was] being laid on the study of domestic subjects". Rather, this was "a denial of the age-old belief that women are gifted with an inborn genius, a heaven given intuition for home building"; training was essential, she argued, for housewives to know their job.[45]

For all that, women often reminded themselves that a 'Home Science career' was not the only one to which they could aspire. While Home Science education was understood as a means for empowerment, both within the home and as potentially opening up professional opportunities,[46] other paths were also available to them. The Rani of Mandi found that excessive diversification between the curricula designed for boys and those foreseen for girls was not advisable in the higher stages of instruction, as

[40] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 191.
[41] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 191.
[42] Cousins, *Indian womanhood today*, p. 107.
[43] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 192.
[44] *All-India Women's Conference souvenir,* p. 56.
[45] Hannah Sen, 'Education of women and girls', in Nehru, *Our cause*, pp. 100-101.
[46] Hannah Sen, for instance, found that a greater number of "advanced institutions, like the Lady Irwin College, should be established for instruction of a professional character for teachers and social workers", as "a woman's usefulness is not circumscribed by the limited demands of her husband and children". Sen, 'Education of women and girls', pp. 100-103.

"the highest culture and enlightenment should be the birth-right of women as well as of men". Women should not be satisfied, she held, with the mid-Victorian ideal enunciated by Tennyson in his *In memoriam*: "She knows but matters of the house / and he, he knows a thousand things". As women benefit by the highest education as much as men do, it would have been unjust to seek to "fit woman only for the needs of motherhood and domestic life", while the same was not required from man.[47] At the fourth AIWC session, held in Bombay on 20-24 January 1930, Lady Skyes remarked the same concepts in her opening address: "We must try and educate the Indian public into dropping the old prejudice against independent careers for women. They must come to see that there is nothing derogatory in an Indian girl taking up teaching or nursing or business as a profession, as her sisters do in the West".[48]

As a direct consequence of women's construction of their position within Indian society as prominent and authoritative, came their demand for greater representation in official political bodies. By defining their association as 'apolitical'—that is, equidistant from Gandhian politics, British administrators, and Indian dynasts—AIWC members were able to claim a place for women within all political arenas, in order to have a say about the issues befalling the female sex. Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay voiced this opinion at the 1928 AWC Delhi session, stating that the only efficient way for women to bring about any appreciable change in the system of education was to obtain greater representation on all educational and local bodies controlling education, as well as on administrative bodies.[49] A Mrs. Sarojini Mehta from Bombay further elaborated on this point. Stepping into the debate concerning the conference's resolution that urged the Government to nominate at least two women to the Central Legislature to discuss the pending legislation on child marriage and the *devadasi* system, she gave a speech that *Stri Dharma* (the mouthpiece of the Women's Indian Association) would report as having inspired "a sense of greatness . . . and a pride in womanhood not before realised".[50]

> I think the women of India remain so backward because their destinies have been in the hands of men. It is not easy for a

[47] *The third All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, pp. 22-23.
[48] "Programme of the fourth session of the All-India Women's Conference, Bombay", p. 14. AIWC Papers, File no. 2, NMML.
[49] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 13.
[50] 'The All-India Women's Conference at Delhi', *Stri Dharma*, March 1928, p. 65.

> man to understand the difficulties that come into a woman's life and even when they do, they conveniently neglect them. . . . I think man has chalked out the lines on which women ought to walk, but in the present century I am sure that none of us would like to follow the lines drawn out by man. The present century is rightly called the woman's century. *We really want to rule the world*, and so we must enter into every field of work, political, educational and social, and we must be on the legislatures. Politics have become so intriguing because women have kept out of it too long.[51]

Work in the educational field was thus felt as insufficient. The AIWC, which had envisioned to engage with social reform since its beginning, was by its third meeting ready to formally acknowledge the need for a specific section devoted to social questions. The new section would be added to the initial one, dedicated to educational matters. It was Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay who raised the issue of the inefficiency of a purely educational conference, and after much debating the AIWC members came to a decision: from then on the AIWC would be known as the All-India Women's Conference, a body working not only in the educational field, but formally concerned also with social reform. The Educational Reform Sectional Committee would work for the drafting of a special curriculum based on the ideals of the conference, for the revision and creation of new text books, and for investigating the conditions of teachers' training all over India. The Social Reform Sectional Committee would instead focus on a campaign to raise the age of marriage.[52] Rameshwari Nehru became secretary of the latter section, to whom all branches were supposed to send a record of their work.[53]

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[51] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 63. Emphasis added.

[52] *The third All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, pp. 52-59, 74-75.

[53] See letters to Rameshwari Nehru from: Subhadra Jadhar, 19 August 1929; Laj Kaur, 28 October 1929; Khadijah Begam Ferozuddin, 30 August 1929; Shoila B. Das, 10 August and 2 September 1929; P. K. Sen, 4 December 1929; L. Pritam Singh, 19 December 1929; Alice Ward, 15 December 1929; Sharada Mehta, 23 December 1929; K. B. Ferozuddin, 13 December 1929; Lazarus, 16 December 1929; Mandakini Ambeqarkar, 19 December 1929; K. B. Ferozuddin, 1 January 1930; L. D. Srinivasgam, 1929. Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 8, Reel no. 1, NMML. Letter of Rameshwari Nehru to Margaret Cousins, 4 July 1930. Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 9, Reel no. 1, NMML. Letter from Sushama Sen to the Standing Committee Members AIWC. Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 10, Reel no. 1, NMML. Letter to Rameshwari Nehru from Gwalior, 15 July 1931. Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 34, Reel no. 2, NMML.

"A self waiting to be developed":[54] women's subjectivity, astute rhetoric, and the debate over child marriage

By the late 1920s, child marriage had been an issue in India for some decades. A heated controversy on the age of consent had agitated Indian reformers, orthodox Hindus, public opinion and the British in the 1880s and 1890s.[55] A few decades later the subject regained prominence, following the League of Nations' 1921 global convention and prescriptions on international trafficking, which in India were considered relevant to the child marriage issue.[56]

It was only in 1927 that efforts at reforming domestic affairs multiplied. That year saw the publication of American journalist Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*, a book denouncing India's backward social practices. Turning the world's spotlight on the subcontinent, *Mother India* aroused fierce nationalist reactions and boosted legislative action in the legislatures, reformed in 1919 to grant limited representation to Indians through the election of their leaders to the Central Legislative Assembly. Two bills were introduced in 1927 on consent and marriage: Hari Singh Gour's Children's Protection Bill, proposing to raise the age of consent to fourteen within marriage and to sixteen without; and Rai Sahib Harbilas Sarda's Hindu Child Marriage Bill, setting the minimum age for marriage at fifteen and twelve for boys and girls respectively, and recommending the invalidation of marriages contracted at earlier ages. The latter gained more political resonance than the former,[57] originating heated debates that, thanks mostly to the

[54] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 38.

[55] Child marriage was one of the customs that nineteenth-century movements tried to reform. The controversy around this issue resulted in the 1891 Age of Consent Act, which raised the age of consent within marriages from ten to twelve, making intercourse with a wife below that age statutory rape. On the controversy: Meera Kosambi, 'Girl-brides and socio-legal change: Age of Consent Bill (1891) controversy', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 26, no. 31/32 (1991), pp. 1857-1868; Padma Anagol, 'The Age of Consent Act (1891) reconsidered: women's perspectives and participation in the child-marriage controversy in India', *South Asia Research*, vol. 12, no. 2 (1992), pp. 100-118; Tanika Sarkar, 'Rhetoric against the Age of Consent: resisting colonial reason and the death of a child-wife', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 28, no. 36 (1993), pp. 1869-1878; Antoinette Burton, 'From child bride to "Hindoo Lady": Rukhmabai and the debate on sexual respectability in imperial Britain', *American Historical Review*, vol. 103, no. 4 (1998), pp. 1119-1146; Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation*; Meera Kosambi, 'Child brides and child mothers: the Age of Consent Bill (1891) controversy', in Kosambi, *Crossing thresholds*, pp. 274-310; Padma Anagol, 'Rebellious wives and dysfunctional marriages: Indian women's discourses and participation in the debates over restitution of conjugal rights and the child marriage controversy in the 1880s and 1890s', in Sarkar and Sarkar, *Women and social reform in modern India*, pp. 282-312; Ishita Pande, 'Coming of age: law, sex and childhood in late colonial India', *Gender & History*, vol. 24, no. 1 (2012), pp. 205-230.

[56] Geraldine Forbes, 'Women and modernity: the issue of child marriage in India', *Women's Studies International Quarterly*, vol. 2 (1979), p. 411.

[57] Ishita Pande has argued that Gour's Bill was overlooked in favour of Sarda's because, despite its apparently neutral language, it followed a global logic of age of consent legislation, according to which children were, by definition, female – and it thus failed to mitigate familial anxieties about the protection of boys. Ishita Pande, 'Sorting boys and men: unlawful intercourse, boy-protection, and the Child Marriage

crucial lobbying of organised women, led to an enlargement of its scope and to its passage into law on 1 October 1929 as the Child Marriage Restraint Act.

Historians have investigated the controversy originated by *Mother India* and the dynamics that led to the debates over the Sarda Act being highly charged with political meaning. Mrinalini Sinha has produced especially insightful analyses of the issue, shedding light on the interplay between the colonial state, Indian nationalists, and women's organisations at this crucial point in Indian history. She has argued that organised women's support for what would become the Child Marriage Restraint Act constituted a most telling response to *Mother India*, "the cornerstone of nationalist India's reversal of Mayo's imperialist propaganda". Women's efforts to build publicity around Sarda's Bill exposed the myth of the Raj's benevolent paternalism, entrapping the colonial state in the dilemma of either supporting the Bill (thus jeopardising the political alliance with the orthodox religious sections of Indian society, and going back on British promises of non-interference in matrimonial issues), or withholding official support for the Bill, sacrificing claims of the colonial presence as a modernising agent. Sinha has argued that organised women, making Indian male leaders in the Central Legislative Assembly see the passage of Sarda's Bill as a way to rehabilitate indigenous nationalism in the eyes of global public opinion, took the woman's question away from the colonial state, and made it "available for the nationalist appropriation of a new Indian modernity".[58] Passage of the Sarda Act would thus have been "an authentically transformative moment in the agonistic relation of colonialism and nationalism".[59]

Sinha has described women's participation in this debate as resulting in a radical contribution, that is, the rhetorical invention of new subject positions for women. At this juncture, women did not act as mere 'sites' for the definitions of competing notions of 'tradition' and 'modernity' (as most nineteenth-century reform had constructed them),[60] nor as the bearers of an essentialised Indian tradition (as nationalist discourse had described them). Indian women, according to Sinha's analysis, were able to construct themselves as the champions of modernity, and to stand up against both the colonial

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Restraint Act in colonial India', *Journal of the History of Childhood and Youth*, vol. 6, no. 2 (2013), pp. 332-358.

[58] Mrinalini Sinha, 'Refashioning *Mother India*: feminism and nationalism in late-colonial India', *Feminist Studies*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2000), pp. 629-631.

[59] Mrinalini Sinha, 'The lineage of the Indian modern: rhetoric, agency and the Sarda Act in late colonial India', in Antoinette Burton (ed.), *Gender, sexuality and colonial modernities* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), p. 208.

[60] Mani, *Contentious traditions*.

state and orthodox indigenous patriarchies. They did so for the benefit of the nationalist cause: their lobbying laid the ground for both the political legitimacy of Indian nationalism, and the new ideal of the citizen-subject as neutral, free from the gender, class, caste, and sectarian configurations that characterised nationalist discourse. According to Sinha, through organisations such as the All-India Women's Conference, which preached women's unity and solidarity beyond caste, class, and communal divisions, Indian women would allegedly have constructed their movement "as the model of the true national community".[61] Though fascinating, such an interpretation suffers from the effects of the imperialist-nationalist analytical framework within which it operates. It leads to a partial reading of women's participation in the debates over the Sarda Bill, since, as has been noticed at several junctures in the previous chapters, analyses of modern India centred on the agonistic relations between imperialism and nationalism have often resulted in an overshadowing of women's agency, at best describing it as functional to other (higher) political concerns.

The Sarda issue is no exception. Analysing the papers of women's associations like the AIWC and women's public speeches, from a feminist view point that locates women themselves, rather than imperialist-nationalist antagonism, at the centre of the narration, allows for a different reading. The radical character of women's participation in the child marriage issue lay in their conceptualisation of female subjectivity as worthy of public acknowledgement and a place within the domain of official politics. The figure of the Indian woman, whose outline women had started to sketch in the early 1900s, trying to sharpen it to their own eyes, and making it stand out from the undifferentiated background into which colonial and indigenous patriarchies had cast her, was now coming into further focus. Having spent some twenty years building their own discourse on womanhood within the protected spaces of journals and local informal groups, and having experienced since 1917 work at the all-India level and some initial contacts with the colonial state, organised Indian women were now ready to take a further step towards the definition and legitimation of their own subjectivity.

Within a narration that considers such subjectivity as the core of its analysis, the shift women caused in Indian politics, though crucial, takes on wholly different proportions. Women's contribution to the nationalists' appropriation of the ideal of modernity does not seem to be their primary objective, but rather a consequence of

[61] Sinha, 'The lineage of the Indian modern', pp. 213-218.

their matured articulation of female subjectivity as composed of bodily, intellectual, and emotional aspects, whose right to integrity and fulfilment needed to be publicly, politically and legally recognised. The accent women's organisations placed on the abolition of child marriage as evidence of India's right to a place among the 'modern' nations of the world was in fact a strategic rhetorical tool to secure legitimacy to concerns and discourses dearer to them than the nationalist one. As they had done on other occasions, dealt with in the previous chapters, organised Indian women once again grasped the opportunity opened up by a specific conjuncture (the global resonance of the *Mother India* controversy) to advance their objectives. Such priorities had been on the agenda of the organised women's movement, embodied by the Women's Indian Association and the All-India Women's Conference, at least since the introduction of Gour's Bill in the Assembly in 1924.[62] That Bill had been defeated, but when, at the height of the *Mother India* debates, Sarda's Bill came up for discussion in the Assembly in September 1927, organised women took their chance to construct their demands in tune with nationalist India's wounded pride, and articulated their priorities in a language that could not but resonate with those who would have the last word on the Sarda issue. This was organised women's recurring strategy. Shortly after the Sarda Act had come into force in April 1930, the Women's Indian Association, realising that the law was constantly violated by orthodox sections of Indian society, began obbying against such violations in *Stri Dharma*. Wishing to address specifically the orthodox audience, the WIA published articles "dealing exclusively with the evils of child marriages and showing how they were against the sacred texts of the Hindu scriptures".[63] Once again, organised elite women fashioned their arguments according to the discursive framework of the male audience they needed to convince.

Within the separate spaces of their meetings women resorted to other dicourses. When speaking among themselves, they most often resorted to concepts that hardly resembled the arguments they addressed to Indian male leaders and to the general public. The debates held in protected, separate spaces bespoke women's construction of themselves as right-bearing subjects and individuals *qua* women. As noted above, it was on such new understanding that women grounded their demands for political power

[62] See *Stri Dharma*, July-September 1925.
[63] "The opinion of the Women's Indian Association on the Bill of Mr. B. Das in the Legislative Assembly to amend the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929". Papers of Eleanor Rathbone, 7ELR/01/38, Women's Library.

and for greater representation in all of India's bodies having the potential to take decisions affecting women's lives. They "really want[ed] to rule the world", not only to contribute to the cause of the Indian nation. In the same consideration of women as subjects was rooted their abhorrence of social customs like child marriage: reading them in light of their personal experiences, women understood such practices as unjust and harmful in the first place to their bodies and their minds, rather than to an abstract or symbolic national community.

From the AIWC ranks thus emerged a reading of the child-marriage issue that no other participant in the debate had ever voiced. The colonial government, Indian orthodox sections against reform, and Indian reformers in favour of legislation built their arguments, each in their own way, upon considerations of social and political opportunity, naturally eluding issues related to women's lives and bodies that could not but escape them.[64] Women, instead, grounded their arguments against the practice of child marriage in their own subjectivity and individual experience, deploring it as a custom hindering a girl's self-knowledge and self-development. If, as Tanika Sarkar has suggested, the 1880s controversy over and passage of the Age of Consent Act constructed woman as a legal person, but considered such personhood as restricted to her body,[65] women taking part in the 1920s debate struggled to extend that notion to the wholeness of the female person, giving prominence also to her emotional and intellectual aspects. When, at its first meeting in 1927, the AIWC passed a resolution supporting Gour's Bill (Sarda's had not yet been introduced in the Assembly), it thus stressed the dangerous effects of early marriage on girls' intellectual development. A Mrs. Janakibai Bhat from Pune emphasised the wrong done to little girls in interrupting their education in the primary stage, when their interest in learning was at its peak, thus impeding their minds' development.[66] Also the Maharani of Baroda, in her opening speech, described child marriage as a practice robbing girls of their childhood and youth, leaving them unaware of the joys of a cultured life, and deprived of the instruments necessary to live a happy life. She recommended eighteen as the minimum age for

[64] For a discussion of British and Indian (men's) arguments in favour or against legislation on child marriage, see Sumita Mukherjee, 'Using the Legislative Assembly for social reform: the Sarda Act of 1929', *South Asia Research*, vol. 26, no. 3 (2006), pp. 219-233.

[65] Sarkar has argued that the Act introduced the notion of the woman's legal right to life, to a sexual life and to immunity, constructing a new identity as a legal person. For the moment, such personhood was actually restricted to her body, since the "consent" the Act referred to was, in fact, the readiness signified by the woman's body; it was therefore her mere physical existence that enjoyed protection by the law. Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu nation*, pp. 241-245.

[66] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 29.

marriage, and invited women delegates to advocate the passage of Gour's Bill with every means, as on the reform of Indian marriage system, she held, rest the success or the failure of the AIWC's educational programme.[67] As the Bill was then about to come before the Legislative Assembly, the AIWC decided to send a deputation to convey to the Assembly the views of the some ten thousand Indian women it represented. AIWC delegates by this hoped to overcome the opposition of the colonial government, and the indifference of the Indian members, which had appalled Mrs. Faridoonji when she had attended a previous sitting on the same Bill.[68]

In non-separate contexts, women framed their position on the matter in terms very different from those they had utilised at the AIWC's first session. On a 'mixed' and filo-nationalist occasion such as the Indian National Social Conference,[69] Muthulakshmi Reddi, vice-president of the WIA and one of the AIWC founding members, spoke of child marriage in her opening speech as the chairperson of the Conference's reception committee. Reddi held that India must get rid of child marriage if it wanted to "grow into a robust, strong and self-respecting nation" enjoying its full physical and mental height. To the "worshippers of custom and tradition" she reminded: "Those civilised nations who do not indulge in such practices, are healthier, stronger and more powerful, are richer and more prosperous, more advanced in every respect than we in India, nay they are our masters and dictators".[70] It was December 1927, Sarda's Bill had been discussed in the Legislative Assembly for about three months, and the *Mother India* furor was at its peak: playing their nationalist card was the smartest move women could make.

By the time the AIWC met in Delhi in 1928, women had multiplied their efforts for securing passage of legislation against child marriage. The Rani of Mandi proposed another resolution supporting reform of the legal age of marriage, and demanding that it be raised to sixteen for girls and twenty-one for boys (instead of Sarda's proposed ages of twelve and fifteen, respectively). Although the brief speech she gave featured some nationalist-flavoured passages, the women joining the debate afterwards centred their arguments against child marriage on girls' subjectivity and right to full development. A case in point was a Miss Ferozuddin from Punjab, according to whom the custom of child

[67] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, pp. 16-17.
[68] *All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform. Poona*, p. 30.
[69] The Conference was started at the third meeting of the Indian National Congress, in 1887, as a forum for the discussion of social issues. Forbes, *Women in modern India*, p. 66.
[70] "The Report of the proceeding of the 40th Indian National Social Conference", Madras, December 1927, pp. 3, 6. Pamphlet Collection, PC/06/036, Women's Library.

marriage treated female children as women, depriving them of their girlhood, and thus denying them any possibility of getting an education: "want of education leads to want of self-knowledge, which means want of self-discipline and self-development", she held. And added: "in every individual there is a self, unique and interesting, waiting to be developed. This merging of personality into nature without leaving time for the display of that inner excellence is an ethical sin, it is not a moral sin".[71]

In light of these discussions, women planned further practical steps to have their demands heard as widely as possible. They decided to elect a small committee within the AIWC to watch and report on the progress of the Child Marriage Bill, coordinate the activities of the provincial constituencies, and urge their views upon the legislatures. A nation-wide campaign was to be organised, which included propaganda meetings and lectures, literature and posters, petitions, postcards addressed by people to the Legislative Assembly, and fund raising.[72] As part of that AIWC conference's programme, on 9 February 1928 women delegates attended a Legislative Assembly session during which Gour's Bill was discussed. They left it "hot with indignation" at the open opposition of the government, whose proposal to form a committee to investigate the question of child marriage and age of consent "satisfied no woman present". AIWC members were "burning to press women's views directly on those responsible and powerful in the Legislatures".[73] "Yesterday . . . we felt the need of a woman in the Assembly to voice our demands", Margaret Cousins told the AIWC members the day after their visit to the Legislative Assembly, underlining the urgency of having female representatives elected in the legislatures and in the committee that the colonial government wished to establish.[74] Women thus decided to send a deputation to the Viceroy and to the leaders of the various political parties in the Legislative Assembly, and seek their cooperation in supporting legislation against child marriage. Rameshwari Nehru was one of the women composing the deputation that on 11 February 1928 met the Viceroy, the non-official European members of the Legislative Assembly, and the Indian party leaders. The latter meeting was deemed "the most interesting and lively", as it confronted women not only with the supportive claims of leaders like Motilal Nehru

[71] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 38.
[72] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 40.
[73] Margaret Cousins, 'The Women's Assembly in Delhi. Impressions of the Second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform', *Stri Dharma*, March 1928, pp. 67-68. See also File no. 5, AIWC Papers, reel 1, NMML.
[74] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, p. 63.

and Jinnah,[75] but also with the opposition of conservatives like Pandit Malaviya, to whom the women of the deputation fearlessly replied: "We want new Shastras!", and "We have had enough of man-made laws!", thus bringing the meeting to what the AIWC report defined "a happy and impressive close".[76]

In the pages of *Stri Dharma*, women voiced opinions like those held by AIWC members. They advocated the right to take decisions on matters that concerned their own life instead of having men deciding on their behalf. "It is a most important question vitally concerning the women and children of this country who should have self-determination in this matter", wrote S. Bhagirati Ammal. "They alone have the moral right to say whether they want the bill or not and the men should have no voice in passing it however much they protest". She then made a crucial point, highlighting the prominence of women's experience in this regard over any type of abstract knowledge: "Education is not needed to form an opinion on this matter, for which women's experience is sufficient".[77]

As most other women, Rameshwari Nehru also resorted to different discourses on child-marriage legislation, according to the audience she addressed. As the leader of the Delhi Women's League, she organised a number of meetings in support of social legislation, at which she, too, acknowledged that education was not enough to ensure the eradication of child marriages. "Even men holding B.A. and M.A. degrees marry off their daughters and sons when they are only children. . . . How will you convince them to quit this habit?", she asked the women present; only legislative means, she concluded, would ensure an improvement in women's status in society.[78] A few days later, at another women's meeting, she praised women's direct involvement in pushing for legislation on child marriage: "We cannot depend much on men to help us through this change. Because even though men and women suffer equally under unequal laws the real harm is to women and the people who benefit are the men. Hence we must remember that in this struggle we will have to master all our strength and in one united voice to demand

[75] Enquired on what his Swaraj Party would do to support anti child marriage legislation, Motilal Nehru replied: "I will see that your cause will not suffer through any action of the Swaraj Party", and "We will do our best to see this business through". Cousins, 'The Women's Assembly in Delhi', p. 68.
[76] *The second All-India Women's Conference on Educational Reform*, pp. 78-79.
[77] S. Bhagirathi Ammal, 'Raising the age of marriage', *Stri Dharma*, April 1928, pp. 12-13. Quoted in Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, p. 170.
[78] The meeting was held on 26 January 1928. 'Samāj kī ruprekhā'. Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings, File no. 9, NMML.

those rights".[79] However, as a woman member recommended by the WIA to serve on the Age of Consent Committee (established by the government in 1928 to check the pulse of India in relation to Gour's Bill), Rameshwari fashioned her arguments in the nationalist renowned narrative. Addressing a public meeting in Peshawar in September, she deprecated child marriage as being "detrimental to the interests of the Nation and Country".[80]

The efforts displayed by organised women in the years 1927-1929 for the construction of the Sarda Act as a nationalist priority eventually proved successful. So intense had Indian nationalist leaders espousal of the cause as their own that, on the eve of the vote on the Bill in the Legislative Assembly, Motilal Nehru wrote: "We are today on our trial before the civilised nations of the world, and the measure of the Assembly's support to the Sarda Bill will be the measure of our fitness to rank among those nations".[81] The Child Marriage Restraint Act's scope was enlarged to include all communities (while the Sarda Bill applied only to the Hindus), and the minimum age of marriage was set at fourteen for females, and at eighteen for males. Women's organisations, although they had wished the minimum age to be set at sixteen at least, saluted it as "a great victory".[82] They were soon to realise its limited effectiveness, however: its enforcement was practically non-existent, Muslim leaders asked for their community to be excluded from the Act's provisions, and the number of child marriages did not decrease, while the colonial government and Indian reformers blamed each other for not doing enough.[83]

Organised women's work therefore continued on the same lines as before. On the one hand, they kept lobbying Indian party leaders in the Legislative Assembly, stressing the Act's enforcement as a necessary measure for national welfare. "Medically, it has been proved beyond doubt that child marriage . . . is highly detrimental to the physique of the nation", wrote Amrit Kaur, the AIWC's chairwoman, to Harbilas Sarda, inviting him to bring her views to the Assembly at large. "The Sarda Act . . . merely strives to bring into effectual disuse social customs which have hitherto barred the way to all

[79] Meeting of 5 February 1928. Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings, File no. 10, NMML. Translated in Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, p. 191.
[80] 'Women's meeting at Peshawar', *Stri Dharma*, October 1928, p. 309.
[81] Telegram from M. Nehru to Congress, Nationalist, Independent, and Central Moslem Parties in the Legislative Assembly. *Stri Dharma*, September-October 1929, p. 495.
[82] *Stri Dharma*, January 1930, p. 70.
[83] WIA Report 1930-31, pp. 7, 18. *Stri Dharma*, April 1931, p. 251.

progress and have done and are doing incalculable harm to the nation as a whole", she continued. And concluded with an appeal to the legislators: she invited them to keep in mind "our beloved country" standing "at the portal of a new era of life", and to support all measures of social reform, "without which India can never aspire to attain her rightful place amongst the nations of the world".[84] On the other hand, in their appeals to the colonial government, women resorted to the argument on which they had built their support to the Sarda Act during the AIWC meetings, putting their experience and subjectivity at the core of their demands. Declaring themselves to be "greatly disturbed" by the orthodox Hindu and Muslim leaders' work against the Act in the Legislative Assembly, women wished to express their "horror" at the likelihood of any amendment being passed to water down the Sarda Act's provisions. They invited the government "to regard this question purely from the women's point of view", as "the evil effects of child marriage cause untold suffering to women and women only. Men have only an academic interest in the subject, while the girls and women suffer physical torture".[85] Shareefah Hamid Ali would voice the same argument a few years later, reproaching Mr. Sastri for having given a speech at a university, in which he defined the Sarda Act as "a mistake". Speaking of some Muslim leaders' critique of the Sarda Act, she wondered whether Sastri was aware of the fact that, instead, "all thinking educated Muslim women . . . entirely agreed with their educated Hindu and other Indian sisters that this Act—made much stronger—should be in the Statute Book". She added:

> After all, it is the women who suffer, it is the girls whose bodies are torn into bits when their bodies are not fit for child bearing, it is we who are more concerned in passing of this Act and not mere academical legislators who all happen to be men and who also, unfortunately for us, are immune from the bodily suffering that child marriages entail on women, or girl wives.[86]

Irrespectively of its practical effectiveness, the Sarda-Act debate thus worked for organised Indian women as an unprecedented opportunity. It allowed them to lobby for the recognition of their subjectivity, composed of physical, intellectual, emotional and experiential elements, as worthy of a place within high politics. Relying on the previous

[84] Amrit Kaur to Harbilas Sarda, 3 September 1931. Harbilas Sarda Papers, Correspondence, NMML.
[85] AIWC Papers, File no. 1, NMML.
[86] Shareefah Hamid Ali to Sastri, July 1935. AIWC Papers, File no. 1, NMML. See also *Stri Dharma*, February 1931, p. 146.

decades, when they had started to acknowledge, name, and construct such subjectivity through collective thinking, discussing and writing, organised women were now able to take a further step. They could draw upon their reflections to make a case for a nation-wide campaign in favour of social legislation, unafraid of dealing with the representatives of official political power, be they colonial state officials or Indian party leaders. Counting on the ideal of global sisterhood that they had been constructing and practicing for more than a decade, Indian women were able at this juncture to stand united and eventually have their way. Bypassing the personal laws of all communities, the Act indeed recognised them as a single constituency, a homogenous group that defined itself by its gender, rather than by some religious or caste affiliation, and thus kept its distance from sectarian identities traditionally responding to patriarchal logics. Certainly, women voiced the most profound reflections on which they grounded their support for anti-child-marriage legislation mainly within their separate meetings. Yet, this should not overshadow the feminist maturity backing their arguments. Women's strategic use of narratives like the philo-nationalist one, tailored on the exigencies of the male audience which they needed to convince, looks in this light as further evidence of their self-awareness, and of their knowledge and mastery of the mechanisms governing the world outside their conferences' halls.

7. NEHRU WOMEN'S "FULL SHARE OF RESPONSIBILITIES" (EARLY 1930S)

A burdensome political context

The years leading to the late-1920s upswing in social and political mobilisation in India were characterised by stagnation and readjustments. The events that involved the various members of the Nehru family once again perfectly epitomised the developments taking place at this point of Indian history. Deeply involved in Congress politics, Jawaharlal and Motilal witnessed the stasis that had taken place within the nationalist ranks after the withdrawal of non-cooperation in 1922 and the imprisonment of Gandhi. Congress was split into two wings: on the one hand, 'no-changers' advocated boycott of Legislative Councils (as during non-cooperation); on the other, 'pro-changers' endorsed participation in Council elections and Council entry as a new line of political activity that would arguably allow non-cooperation to continue 'from within', and extend its policy of obstruction to councils themselves, thus forcing the British to concede further reforms. A convinced pro-changer, in 1923 Motilal Nehru founded with his fellow-Congressman C. R. Das the Swaraj Party, which would take part in elections due that year, present the national demand for self-government in the councils and, in case of its rejection, wreck the councils from within through continuous obstructionism. Gandhi instead, though in jail, led the no-changers, who endorsed continuation of non-cooperation and the constructive programme, consisting of spinning and weaving, working to remove untouchability, fostering Hindu-Muslim unity, and boycotting British cloth and other goods. No-changers considered council entry as possibly causing people to neglect constructive work and to be tempted by political corruption. The strife between the two wings eventually ended in November 1924, when Gandhi, Nehru and Das signed a statement according to which the Swaraj Party would work in the legislatures on behalf of the Congress as one of its integral parts.[1] Motilal Nehru became the party leader in the Central Legislative Assembly in Delhi, while his son Jawaharlal was one of those Congressmen who entered municipalities and local bodies, which they believed could be used to promote the constructive programme. After his release from prison, in March 1922, he became chairman of Allahabad Municipality, an office he would (reluctantly) hold until 1925.[2]

[1] Chandra et al., *India's struggle for Independence*, pp. 235-246.
[2] Nehru, *Autobiography*, pp. 116-119.

Among the salient traits of this period of Indian history was the growth of Hindu and Muslim communalism. The prominence given to the Khilafat movement during non-cooperation and the participation in it of a number of Muslim religious leaders, as well as Gandhian discourse that heavily drew on Hindu concepts and mythology to appeal to the illiterate masses, had increasingly related religion to politics, giving everything a "religious twist" that, according to Jawaharlal, "prevented all clear thinking".[3] Gandhi's withdrawal of the non-cooperation movement in 1922 and Attaturk's abolition of the Ottoman Caliphate in 1924, which deprived Indian Muslims of their main slogan, together with the extension of separate electorates foreseen by the Montagu Chelmsford reforms of 1919, contributed to widen the divisions between Muslims and Hindus. The growth of a number of communal associations and groups compounded this trend.[4] As communal tension arose and riots broke out all over the region, Hindu communal concerns fuelled the propaganda against the Swaraj Party by political adversaries like Madan Mohan Malaviya, a prominent Congressman, former colleague of Motilal Nehru at Allahabad High Court and one of the leaders of the Hindu Mahasabha. Among the supporters of political Hinduism and its campaigns, particularly the cow-protection movement, was Uma Nehru's husband Shyamlal, who in 1926, after his mother's death, appears to have sided with those denouncing Motilal as 'anti-Hindu' and coined the slogan *māṁ merī mar gayī, gāy merī māṁ hai* (My mother is dead, the cow is my mother).[5]

Other members of the Nehru family were also undergoing changes and adjustments. Rameshwari, her husband Brijlal and their two sons left Rangoon and returned to India in 1921, when Brijlal took extended leave, undecided about resigning

[3] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 72.

[4] *Tabligh* (propagation) and *tanzim* (organisation) bodies emerged among the Muslims as counterparts to Hindu *shuddhi* (purification; conversion to Hinduism from other religions, especially Islam) and *sangathan* (unity among Hindu castes and currents; community defence) movements launched in the United Provinces by the Arya Samaj leader Swami Shraddhanand in 1923, and promptly incorporated by the Hindu Mahasabha. Charu Gupta has analysed the gender dimension of the *shuddhi* and *sangathan* movements, arguing that they aimed to transform traditional religious identities into modern political ones. In this process, they constructed an ideal of Hindu masculine man in opposition to images of effeminacy previously associated to the Hindu male—as a reply both to British colonialists and the Muslims. The latter's masculinity was simultaneously constructed as lustful and a constant danger to Hindu female chastity. Charu Gupta, 'Anxious Hindu masculinities in colonial north India: *Shuddhi* and *Sangathan* movements', *Cross Currents*, December 2011, pp. 441-453; Charu Gupta, 'Articulating Hindu masculinity and femininity: "shuddhi" and "sangathan" movements in United Provinces in the 1920s', *Economic and Political Weekly*, vol. 33, no. 13 (1998), pp. 727-735.

[5] Gyanendra Pandey, 'The ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh', in *The Gyanendra Pandey Omnibus* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 100. Interview with Mrs. Radha Khan, New Delhi, 15 September 2012.

from government service for good in response to Gandhi's call. As the emotional enthusiasm decreased after withdrawal of the movement, Brijlal stopped playing with the idea of resigning, and Rameshwari and the children followed him to Calcutta in 1922, Allahabad in 1923 and Delhi in 1926.[6] Ranjit Pandit, the man Vijaya Lakshmi had married on 10 May 1921, had been as preoccupied as Brijlal about his profession at the Bar but, unlike his relative, he eventually decided to resign and leave Calcutta. Upon Gandhi's advice, the young couple settled in the groom's native Rajkot to work on the constructive part of the national programme there, mainly in relation to the promotion of *khadi*.[7]

Also for Kamala, Jawaharlal's wife, the mid '20s were a difficult time. Not only did the son to whom she gave birth at the end of 1924 die two days after his birth, she also had to lie in hospital for several months, diagnosed with a tuberculosis that kept worsening, until doctors advised that she be treated in Switzerland. Jawaharlal, in search of "an excuse to go out of India", welcomed the idea, and in March 1926 he left for Europe with Kamala and Indira. Jawaharlal's sister Vijaya Lakshmi and her husband also took the occasion for a long-planned holiday and went with them. Krishna joined Jawaharlal, Kamala and Indira in Geneva a few months later and spent the following year and a half accompanying her brother to conferences, meeting a number of Indian exiles and travelling across Europe—experiences that Krishna would regard as highly instructive and enriching. In the meantime Kamala, mostly confined to bed, had time to think and make plans on what she would do on her return to India. In her late twenties, Kamala now held opinions that no one would have thought possible for the fragile girl she was when, ten years earlier, she married Jawaharlal. "Day by day I am getting more and more determined that on my return home I shall take my sisters along with me", Kamala wrote in a letter. "I shall urge them . . . to fight for their own freedom, educate their daughters so that they are not in trouble like us and join the struggle for independence so that we do not have to spend our lives in shame".[8] Motilal also joined his children in September 1927, tired with the work he had done for the previous seven years and disturbed by the impression of having "failed to advance the cause of the country in any appreciable way".[9]

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[6] Nehru, *Nice guys*, pp. 34-57.
[7] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, pp. 80-85.
[8] Quoted in Kalhan, *Kamala Nehru*, p. 34.
[9] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 51-52.

By the end of 1927 the family reunited in India, and a relatively peaceful period seemed to be awaiting them. On their return from Europe, Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna settled down in Allahabad. The latter, finding it hard to adjust to the old routine after the hectic months in Europe, decided to apply for a job at the Montessori school just about to be started in Allahabad. Convincing her father proved an arduous task, as Motilal could not conceive of his daughter doing non-honorary work; "for the first time I deeply resented his authority", Krishna recalled. Her mother did not endorse her decision either, as taking up a salaried job would significantly decrease Krishna's marriage prospects. Only Jawaharlal's intervention succeeded in persuading them to let his sister Krishna join the school and finally be "thoroughly contented".[10] Vijaya Lakshmi returned to Allahabad with Ranjit and their two daughters after the death of his mother, enjoying that period in which their personal life was "slightly more peaceful and orderly than it had been for some time".[11] As for Rameshwari and Uma, as the previous chapter has shown, the foundation of the All-India Women's Conference in 1927 catalysed their enthusiasm: they led the AIWC branches of Allahabad and Delhi, and devoted themselves mainly to the issue of child marriage, working to secure passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act.

Peace would not last long, however, as events soon took place that further strengthened the link between the Nehrus and the Indian nationalist cause. In 1928, the Simon Commission, appointed by the British government to advise on constitutional progress for the country, reached India. The appointment of this commission, on which not a single Indian representative had been considered fit to serve, originated a wave of resentment in India. The movement of boycott and the protests that followed led to the formation of a number of youth leagues and associations, providing a platform for action to a new generation of young politicians, among whom Jawaharlal Nehru emerged as a leader. Holding radical ideas on the future of India, Jawaharlal was dissatisfied with his father's support of dominion status as the desired form of government for India as voiced by the 'Nehru Report', the 1928 scheme of constitutional reforms of which Motilal was the principal author. In December that year, Motilal presided the Congress meeting in Calcutta, during which—as Krishna recalled—"Jawahar's and Father's differences of opinion came to a head". Unlike his father, Jawaharlal pressed for *purna swaraj* (complete independence) as the Congress' goal, and opposed what seemed to

[10] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 60.
[11] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 90.

him to be a compromise. As the conflict between father and son continued, "the atmosphere at home as well as outside became more and more tense".[12]

For the Nehrus, "home" and "outside" thus increasingly came to coincide. The year Congress had conceded to the colonial government for accepting the proposed constitution based on dominion status was almost over, when governmental unwillingness to seriously formulate a scheme for its implementation became clear. At the Lahore session of December 1929, Congress therefore pledged to *purna swaraj*, ending negotiations and inaugurating an era of confrontation with the colonial government. Upon Gandhi's indication, Jawaharlal Nehru, who had popularised the idea of complete independence more than anyone else, was invested with the office of Congress president. In that capacity, Jawaharlal gave a presidential address that invited all Indians to take action to free India from foreign rule, and called for a peaceful mass movement.[13] In Krishna's memoirs, her brother's investiture was described as Motilal's handing over to Jawaharlal the highest honour, confirming his son as not only the heir to his worldly possessions, but also in the political field.[14]

After all, the discursive overlap of the Nehru family with India and the struggle for its independence had materialised a few months earlier when Motilal gave away the Nehru mansion "as a gift to the nation".[15] Handing Anand Bhawan over to Jawaharlal in his capacity as both his son and Congress president, Motilal renamed it Swaraj Bhawan, the "Abode of Independence", which would become the headquarters of Congress activities. The family moved to the new Anand Bhawan, that he had built on the same premise with the *grandeur*, luxury and attention to details he had put into the construction of the first family mansion.[16] Independence Day was declared on 26 January 1930, and meetings were organised all over the country to read out the independence pledge. On that morning, for the next seventeen years, the Nehrus and their servants would gather on the upstairs terrace of Swaraj Bhawan to read the pledge, hoist the Congress flag and sing the national anthem.

The increasing identification between the Nehrus and India naturally impacted on the family women, too. As political events unfolded, dedication to work for the nationalist cause quickly became part of their daily life, though the degree of

[12] Nehru, *With no regrets*, pp. 61-62.
[13] Chandra et al., *India's struggle for Independence*, pp. 260-270.
[14] Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 62.
[15] Pandit, *Scope of happiness*, p. 96; Nehru, *With no regrets*, p. 63.
[16] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 79.

involvement, the reasons behind it, and the results it produced differed from one woman to another according to their age, previous experiences and position within the family. For Kamala (Jawaharlal's wife), Vijaya Lakshmi and Krishna (his sisters), nationalist activism represented their first occasion of public engagement. For women of the previous generation, like Rameshwari and Uma—who by 1930 had been acquainted with political work for more than two decades—nationalist discourse instead overlapped with the other framework of thinking that had so far fuelled their public engagement, namely feminism and the cause of women's uplift. As the wave of nationalist enthusiasm grew, it impacted on their thinking, adding a decisive nationalist nuance to their feminist stance. It did so, as will become clear, in ways that, far from originating an involution in their thought and activism, broadened their range of action and opportunities for assertion, agency and public recognition.

Kamala Nehru

Among the younger women, Kamala was the one on whose life nationalist activism introduced the most significant changes. As during non-cooperation, the imprisonment of Jawaharlal at this time of renewed political action opened up for her spaces of liberty and personal growth. After her husband was arrested on 14 April 1930 in connection with the Salt Satyagraha, Kamala threw herself into the movement in Allahabad, displaying energy and enthusiasm that her husband, who heard about her activism from within prison walls, found it hard to recognise.[17] By May that year she was picketing with Uma foreign cloth shops and visiting homes to persuade the men to let women leave and join picketing activities.[18] By December, Kamala expanded her sphere of action beyond Allahabad, confident enough to travel to villages and address meetings of thousands of people to advocate non-payment of taxes and rents, stand trial, turn her face away from the court when questioned, and receive her sentence to imprisonment with a smile.[19]

Civil disobedience worked for Kamala as an opportunity to emerge as a person in her own right. In the few years before her health irreversibly deteriorated, in 1934,

[17] Nehru, *Autobiography*, p. 214.
[18] *The Leader*, 1 May 1930, p. 11; 4 May 1930, p. 10.
[19] 'Mrs. Jawaharlal sentenced', *The Leader,* 3 January 1931, p. 12. Prabhavati Narayan, Oral History Transcripts, NMML.

Kamala's efforts for the nationalist cause not only granted her the respect and consideration of the whole country, but also a self confidence and contentedness that she had never experienced before. In his 'Note on Kamala Nehru's case', Jawaharlal noticed that 1930 was a time of unprecedented wellbeing for his wife: she "apparently kept well", despite the "acute political crisis . . . in India in which the whole family [was] involved", and the fact that she took part "in many and exhausting activities" herself. According to her husband, Kamala would never again be as fit as she was at this time. "She is definitely neurotic", he continued, referring to the so-called "heart attacks" from which Kamala suffered, which displayed all symptoms ascribed today to panic attacks. According to Jawaharlal, such neurosis was "probably due to some repressions and maladjustments in her early years. Subsequent happenings, political upsets and excitement have added to this". Yet, it did not escape him that "when she has herself taken an active part in public affairs she has been mentally far happier and the neurotic element has faded into the background".[20] In these days, with the family men in prison and the whole organisation of Congress work in Allahabad on her shoulders, Kamala could display aspects of her personality that had never been appreciated before, perhaps even by herself. The frail girl who constantly felt out of place within her husband's joint family seemed to be replaced by a young woman who could now deploy her strength, intelligence and courage in the service of a wide political cause.

Besides fostering her confidence and self-worth, Kamala's whole-hearted engagement also brought her into sharper focus before Jawaharlal's eyes. He had until then put little effort in getting to know the girl he married, being—in his own words—"like a person possessed", utterly dedicated to the political cause he had espoused, living in a dream-world of his own and looking at the people around himself "as unsubstantial shadows". For many years, Jawaharlal was "far too busy to see beneath the surface, and . . . blind to what she looked for and so ardently desired". Only after Kamala took upon herself the organisation of Congress work in Allahabad in the men's absence, openly showing to possess abilities, enthusiasm and abnegation, did her husband feel that they could meet "on a new footing of comradeship and understanding", and discover each other anew. Jawaharlal could now picture Kamala as the symbol of Indian women, and mix her image with his ideas of India; both were full of faults and weaknesses, elusive and mysterious, and understanding his wife became for Jawaharlal part of the effort to

[20] Jawaharlal Nehru, 'Note on Kamala Nehru's case'. Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. I, Vol. No. 55.

understand India itself.[21] The active part she played in nationalist work thus granted Kamala personal fulfilment in more than one way, compensating for many years of being relegated to the periphery of social life and of her husband's preoccupations.

Kamala's political experience would not last long, as her health kept deteriorating. She spent long sojourns in sanatoria in India, Germany and Switzerland, where she finally died on 28 February 1936. Obituaries in the newspapers praised the political activism animating the last few years of her life, and Kamala was saluted as an example of courage and determination, a patriot and an inspiration to her husband.[22] She had cheerfully accepted all difficulties and discomforts of a public worker, "prepared to face all eventualities in life and even death itself with a [sic] courage and fortitude". With her death, they held, India lost "a brave fighter in the cause of her freedom and a devoted help mate to that idol of the nation" who was Jawaharlal Nehru. Kamala was said to have "lived and died a conqueror", and to have been gifted with "an indomitable spirit".[23] In his condolences to Nehru, Rabindranath Tagore spoke of Kamala as a woman who had shared her husband's heroism in her life, and who "in her death live[d] as the undying glory of that heroism", while Allahabad-based Congressman Purushottam Das Tandon defined her as "one of the bravest fighters" in the cause of Indian freedom.[24]

Uma Nehru and her reply to *Mother India*

Unlike the young women of the family, older women such as Uma and Rameshwari had to reconcile nationalist fervour with the feminist activism to which they had been devoted since the beginning of the century. In the case of Uma, the nationalist turn in her thinking became particularly evident in the book she wrote as a reply to Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*. As mentioned in the previous chapter, *Mother India* was published in 1927 as a denunciation of women's position in India and of traditional social practices related to marriage, sexuality and maternity, originating from the allegedly oversexed Hindu culture. In line with a long imperialist tradition of constructing some social customs as symbolic of India's general degradation and justifying the colonial presence as a civilising agent, Mayo's book presented such

[21] Nehru, *Discovery*, pp. 30-33.
[22] Jawaharlal Nehru Papers, Pt. I, Vol. No. 55, NMML.
[23] 'Mrs. Kamala Nehru passes away', *Forward*, 1 March 1936, p. 5.
[24] 'A bolt from the blue. Kamala Nehru suddenly passes away at Lausanne', *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, 1 March 1936, p. 9.

practices as evidence for India's backwardness and lack of fitness for self government. The physical and moral degeneracy of which child marriage and early sexuality were the effects paralleled, according to Mayo, Indians' physical and moral inability to govern. A firm believer in the imperial responsibility of both her own country (the United States) and Britain, Mayo opposed Indian nationalist claims, and wrote her book in collusion with colonial officials with the deliberate aim to endorse British imperialist propaganda.[25] As the title itself made clear, *Mother India* was meant to expose the condition of Indian mothers as much as to refer to the nationalist iconography of *Bharat Mata* that depicted the nation as Mother or Mother Goddess. The book provoked heated reactions in the United States, Europe and India, and the controversy resulted in various pamphlets, books, conferences and protests either supporting or countering Mayo's argument.

The great majority of Indian responses reacted with indignation deriving from nationalist wounded pride to the allegations of *Mother India*. As Sinha has pointed out, reactions varied from attacks to the West like those that had been launched against India, to positive accounts of Indian civilisation, to whose regeneration precisely the achievements of modern women were to testify. Women, no less than men, joined in the effort to voice nationalist responses to Mayo's claims. While rejecting Mayo's portrayal of Indian women as slaves and helpless victims, leaders of the organised women's movement did not merely defend Indian patriarchal practices, but took the opportunity to advocate social reform—especially against child marriage, as shown in the previous chapter. Their critique also served to challenge Mayo's right to speak on behalf of Indian women, and to project themselves as the only authoritative interpreters of Indian womanhood, thus claiming power positions for themselves in the debate and utilising the controversy as a means for their empowerment. This was especially the case for Sarojini Naidu, on whom Indian nationalists came to rely as the most suited ambassador of Indian womanhood against Mayo's attacks. Her 1928 tour in the United States, which even Gandhi sanctioned, served to spread among the American public the nationalist ideal of Indian womanhood, a combination of modern political activism and traditional values.[26]

[25] Manoranjan Jha, *Katherine Mayo and India* (Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1971).
[26] Mrinalini Sinha, 'Reading *Mother India*: empire, nation, and the female voice', *Journal of Women's History*, vol. 6, no. 2 (1994), pp. 6-44.

Uma Nehru was among the Indian men and women who felt the need to write a response to Mayo's *Mother India*. These included prominent cultural and political figures of the day—ranging from nationalists like Gandhi and Lala Lajpat Rai, to Rabindranath Tagore—as well as various women, from Cornelia Sorabji to leaders of the organised women's movement like Muthulakshmi Reddi. Uma's *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā"* (Miss Mayo's *Mother India*), published in Allahabad in 1928, promised to be a "true Hindi translation" of the book for those who could not read the original English version, in which Uma also wrote an introduction and an imaginary "discussion with Miss Mayo on the subject of western imperialism". As an epilogue, *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā"* featured the Hindi translations of some of the responses to Mayo's book that, authored by prominent Indians, had previously appeared in various magazines: Gandhi's 'Drain inspector's report';[27] Lala Lajpat Rai's 'Mother India', 'Miss Mayo and the government', and '"Honest" Miss Mayo', published in *The People*;[28] 'Miss Mayo's *Mother India*: a rejoinder', by the editor of the *Indian Social Reformer*, K. Natarajan; and Tagore's letter to the *Manchester Guardian*.[29]

In her reply to *Mother India*, Uma seemed to have lost her noted feminist voice. Ten years earlier, she had sarcastically described Indian nationalist social reformers as endorsers of paradoxical views, who wished women to embody the goddess-like virtues of Indian tradition, while men would move around freely in western clothes, pursuing western ideals of 'modernity'.[30] As we have seen in chapter four, she had penned sharp articles in which she did not mince her words, openly accusing men of creating laws and customs that favoured themselves, held them responsible for women's backward condition, and encouraged women to break free from traditional practices and beliefs. By the time she wrote her response to Katherine Mayo's book, Uma did not make a single reference to men's responsibility for the miserable condition of Indian women as depicted in *Mother India*, around which Mayo's argument revolved. Neither did she take the opportunity to counter Mayo's description of Indian women as helpless slaves with accounts of the activism and political engagement of which elite women had been the protagonists in the last few decades, even though—being one of them—she was well acquainted with the movement's struggles and successes. Uma did not even utilise the

[27] Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, 'Drain inspector's report', *Young India*, 15 September 1927.
[28] Motilal Nehru Papers, Writings by others, Acc. No. 483, File No. 2, NMML.
[29] Rabindranath Tagore, 'Letter to the Editor', *Manchester Guardian*, 11 October 1927, pp. 11-12.
[30] Nehru, 'Hamāre samāj sudhārak'.

Mother India controversy to promote social legislation against practices oppressive to women, as did, for instance, Muthulakshmi Reddi, one of the leading figures of the Women's Indian Association. Reddi condemned *Mother India* as a book of gross exaggerations, dictated by imperialist purposes and profoundly ignorant of Indian reality; yet, she recognised that it contained "a certain amount of truth". She invited the Indian public to reflect upon some of the evils denounced in the book, such as untouchability, the rigidity of the caste system, early marriage, girls' dedication to temples, women's illiteracy and exclusion from property rights. "It is very sad", she held, "to note that those that ask for political rights, that ask for *swaraj*, do not even now realise the urgent necessity of . . . social legislation".[31]

Uma, instead, chose to embody a decidedly nationalist point of view. Her reply to *Mother India* never touched upon the specific topics raised by Mayo in relation to the condition of Indian womanhood, rather concentrating on the economic and political causes behind such situation. The argument of her book developed within an imperialist-nationalist framework that traced all of India's problems back to its political subjugation to British rule. Uma's reply spoke of Mayo's book as the umpteenth imperialist blow against India to alienate the sympathies of "the civilised world", and of its author as nothing but a "skilled painter" on the payroll of the Raj. In the introduction to her *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā"*, Uma paralleled the relationship linking Indian and British people to that existing between a king and his subjects: "those peoples cannot exist without causing each other's ruin", she stated. "The words of Rudyard Kipling, full of arrogance, resound in my ears: 'East is East, and West is West / and never the twain shall meet'. And I am starting to think that if East and West cannot meet, cannot stay together, then it is necessary to eliminate one of the two. Which of the two will eliminate the other is for the future to show us".[32] British politicians, Uma held, elected *Mother India* as their mouthpiece, and through it revealed their politics as clearly as they had never done before, presenting to the world their real views on India. They once and for all declared India "a barbaric, ignorant, dirty and extremely inferior country" that they had served for two centuries "with unselfish and infallible labour", before seeing themselves forced to admit that all their efforts "to make it decent" had been in vain. Uma imagined British politicians addressing the world powers through the pages of

[31] Muthulakshmi Reddi Papers, Speeches and writings by her, Vol. II, Pt. I, File No. 91, NMML. See also Vol. II, Pt. III, File Nos. 155-191, NMML.
[32] Nehru, *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā"*, p. 3.

Mother India, and reassuring them: "Undoubtedly, having saved from destruction a degenerate country like India, we have transformed it into a world menace. But now we are prepared to make amend for our faults. Don't be afraid". British imperialists, Uma continued, were seeking global support to the change they were prepared to introduce in their politics: "We'll have to limit even more the few reforms we have passed. The desire to achieve the reforms and also the excitement that results from our mistakes must be suppressed. It is possible that, while we try this, these Hindustanis behave with too much indocility, in which case two or three lessons must be given to them, like in Punjab". In Uma's understanding, Mayo's book was meant to weaken the influence of the Labour Party, which favoured conceding some political rights to India, and to work as "an ignited preamble" to the Simon Commission, dispatched to India in 1928 to advise on constitutional reform. "This worthy book contains all the evidence that can exist in a human head in support of the British Raj's remaining in India", she concluded.[33]

For Uma, *Mother India*'s focus on social issues was nothing but a trick to divert the attention of Indians from more urgent and concrete political matters. After quoting at length some particularly exaggerated passages of *Mother India*, Uma set out to start "a little talk" with Katherine Mayo about the consequences of British colonial rule in India, concentrating on what she considered to be the root cause of India's degeneration, namely its political situation. She imagined to question the author of *Mother India* about India's present severe social, economic and health conditions, as opposed to the affluence it enjoyed before the advent of British rule. She quoted the Mahabharata: "When the king, abandoning the great science totally, oppresses his subjects by evil means of diverse kinds, the age that sets in is called *Kali*. During the age called *Kali* . . . diseases appear, and men die prematurely. Wives become widows . . . The clouds do not pour seasonably, and crops fail".[34] Unlike the "oriental conquerors" who governed India, Uma held, the British never made India their home, and felt no attachment to it; like "birds of prey", they hunted and flew away, depredating the country where they felt "neither happy to come, nor sad to leave". Again, unlike their predecessors, the British did not come from royal and noble families, but were "petty merchants" motivated by the sole aim of financial profit—a point in whose support Uma quoted Adam Smith.

[33] Nehru, *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā"*, pp. 5-7, 26.
[34] P. C. Roy, *Mahabharata of Krishna-Dwaipayana Vyasa*, Vol. VIII, Pt. 1 (Calcutta: Oriental Publishing Co., n.d.), pp. 161-162.

Replying to Mayo's disgust for traditional Hindu practices like animal sacrifices, Uma pointed to the type of human sacrifices structurally embedded in western imperialism and industrial economy. Those sacrifices took place on a massive scale in every corner of the world, she held, under the indifferent eyes of western people. "Trade used to be a medium for society's peace and prosperity. Instead, you have made human society a medium for trade's peace and prosperity", she concluded.[35] In her reply to *Mother India*, Uma thus drafted what Sinha has called "the most original and fascinating contribution" among the nationalist responses to Mayo, sketching a sophisticated critique of imperialism as a political and economic system working on a global scale and producing global effects.[36] Distancing herself from the Indian voices that reversed Mayo's argument by merely penning a parallel critique of the West, Uma enlarged the focus of her analysis to look beyond India and the quarrel over social reform, showing that there existed no social sphere detached from the political one, nor a country-specific political condition disconnected from global dynamics and their consequences.

The idea of interlocking social and political spheres was the backbone of Uma's thinking and activism in this phase. The nationalist turn so evident in her reply to *Mother India* did not obfuscate her feminist eye—for, as later writings would show, she considered participation in the arena of national politics no less a part of women's engagement and empowerment than work and theorising for the cause of female emancipation. Uma's sharply feminist voice emerged in her contribution to a book edited by her daughter in the mid 1930s, *Our cause: a symposium of Indian women*. 'Whither women?', the piece she authored, denounced women's present condition in tones that recalled her writings of the late 1910s:

> Broadly speaking, the condition of the present-day woman with slight modifications and some exceptions is basically the same as it was in the remotest past. She is physically weaker than man: she looks up to him as something higher and mightier: her religion practically is man worship: her morality is of compulsion and of the rod: economically she is the slave of man: intellectually she is ignorant and a non-entity in society . . . She is the mistress of the home and heart: which is an euphemism for a cook, a handmaid, a washer woman, a menial, a bed-fellow—all combined.[37]

[35] Nehru, *Mis Meyo kī "Madar Iṇḍiyā"*, pp. 70-74.
[36] Sinha, *Specters of Mother India*, p. 122.
[37] Uma Nehru, 'Whither women?', in Nehru, *Our cause*, p. 404.

Uma then sketched an overview of women's subordination, analysing the various factors that, in the course of history, contributed to maintaining it as such—from men's physical superiority to religion, exclusion from government and its functions and, as the last bastion of women's subjection, economic dependence from men. "The old home life is dead, not dying, and the economic freedom of woman . . . will lay the last stone on its tomb", she claimed: "[A]s soon as the woman becomes economically free this unpleasant chapter of her history will also end". Defining the future awaiting women as "full of hope and promise", Uma envisioned the woman of the future as physically healthy and strong, "morally a force and responsible member of society: intellectually man's equal if not superior: emotionally the centre of social life: and economically mistress of her own affairs". For, she concluded, "the woman has a destiny higher than that of the wife".[38]

Such a woman, in Uma's understanding, should have clearly in mind that feminism and state politics are indivisible halves, and deserve equal engagement. She noted that since the early twentieth century the women's movement had been slowly though surely allying itself to "the general political movements of the State", a move that had caught "the suffragette of old" completely off guard, for "she had eliminated politics from her sphere of activity, and had satisfied herself that she was concerned with feminism and no more". What such early activists failed to realise was that "the two halves were indivisible, and that ultimately, each would depend on the other to an extent to which only inseparables can". Contemporary society, with all its conflicts, required from women greater strength than it used to ask to "their sisters of yesterday". If women "want to live and be up and about", Uma concluded, "they must take their full share of responsibilities and live up to their rights".[39] It is in the light of her wish to see women's roles and responsibilities increasingly broaden, in tune with their time and contexts, that Uma's engagement with nationalist politics can be understood—one more step towards empowerment and equality, beyond the boundaries of the fields sanctioned as women's proper spheres of activity, and towards full participation in public life.

[38] Nehru, 'Whither women?', pp. 415, 419.
[39] Uma Nehru, 'A call to the women of today', *The Statesman*, 19 November 1939.

Rameshwari Nehru

The nationalist wave influenced Rameshwari's activism, too. As we have seen, since she moved to Delhi in 1926 she devoted her time to work for the All-India Women's Conference and the child-marriage debate around Sarda's Bill. The AIWC's stated apolitical character and the social reform topics it advocated, like female education and child marriage abolition, provided a suitable platform for activism to Rameshwari, who—as the wife of a civil servant—had to be careful and avoid openly nationalist or anti-British behaviours. A personal matter, however, would soon bring her out of India, and allow the nationalist sympathies she had so far disguised to come to the fore. Rameshwari's son Braj Kumar moved to England in 1929, where he was enrolled at the London School of Economics. There he met and fell in love with a fellow student, Magdalena (Fori) Friedmann, a Jewish girl of Hungarian origins. Having grown suspicious from their son's letters about some girl having caught hold of him, Rameshwari and her husband decided that she would go to London and shed light on the matter. In August 1930 she thus sailed to London, where she would stay for the next two years.[40]

Though attempts at having Braj Kumar change his mind about his marriage to Fori proved a failure, Rameshwari's time in London was anything but wasted. Affiliating herself to the now openly nationalist Women's Indian Association, she became chairwoman of its London Committee, formed in 1928 by WIA founding member Dorothy Jinarajadasa with the aim to establish regular contacts with women's groups in England.[41] More specifically, the WIA London branch was to collect facts and figures about the situation in India, and educate the British public in favour of India's freedom.[42] As its president, Rameshwari resorted once again to her ability to mould her arguments according to the audience she addressed. On 6 March 1931 she chaired a luncheon in honour of the WIA, and—in *Stri Dharma*'s words—"sounded the right note", when she reminded the audience that a peaceful and contented India would bring financial benefits to England in terms of exports and, therefore, occupation. India was now learning to produce cloth for itself; but the country's need of goods produced by highly

[40] Interview with Rameshwari's daughter-in-law, Mrs. Fori Nehru. Kasauli (Himachal Pradesh, India), 11 September 2012. Nehru, *Nice guys*, pp. 103-104. Rustomji Faridoonji to Rani Lakshmibai Rajwade, 18 July 1930. Papers of All-India Women's Conference, File no. 10, Reel no. 1, NMML.
[41] Women's Indian Association, 'Golden Jubilee celebration, 1917-1967', pp. 13-14. IOR Mss Eur F341/33, British Library.
[42] 'Our London Committee', *Stri Dharma*, June 1931, pp. 332-333.

skilled labour as Britain could supply was limitless and ever increasing. India's self-government, in other words, would grant Britain greater trade opportunities.[43] Many a British feminist showed interest and support for Rameshwari's work to advance the Indian nationalist cause in their country, convinced as she was that "the change that has come over the Indian mentality" had not yet been fully appreciated by several sections of the British public—as Rameshwari held at the women's conference organised by the WIA London branch on 20 April 1931. "To believe that India will be satisfied with anything less than complete self-government is entirely false", she continued, and urged women's organisations to give India "their serious thought and support".[44] On that occasion, women's rights advocate Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence suggested that the Indian movement send "women nationalist missionaries" to England to inform the general public about Indian demands, a means that would "change the heart of the British people".[45] Other prominent British women who cooperated with the WIA London branch were suffragist Maude Royden and theosophist Lady Lutyens, while Rameshwari's Indian right-hand women were Hannah Sen and Dhanvanti Rama Rau, one of the cousins with whom Uma had been raised in Hubli.

Besides working for the WIA, Rameshwari also devoted her time in London to the India League.[46] Evolved from Annie Besant's Home Rule for India League (established in 1916) and aiming to campaign for India's self-government, the organisation increasingly radicalised since the appointment of socialist lawyer, editor and activist Krishna Menon as its joint secretary, in 1928. Rejecting the goal of dominion status for India, the League in the early 1930s started to advocate full independence, functioning as the Congress' counterpart in Britain. It established various branches all over the country, which worked to inform the British public through meetings and lectures, and mobilise it against colonial rule. Jai Kishori Handoo (Dhanvanthi Rama Rau's sister-in-law) was responsible for the League's women committee, a capacity in which also Rameshwari served, after her.[47] These relations, together with the acquaintance her son had made

[43] 'A report of the speeches made at our London Committee Luncheon on March 6th', *Stri Dharma*, June 1931, p. 359.
[44] 'Noted from Mrs. Nehru's speech at a Women's Conference', *Stri Dharma*, July 1931, pp. 400-403.
[45] Emmeline Pethick-Lawrence to Rameshwari Nehru, in *Stri Dharma*, July 1931, pp. 394-395.
[46] The India League was an evolution of the Home Rule for India League, founded by Annie Besant in 1916, on the model of the Irish Home Rule League. It was renamed Commonwealth of India League in 1922, and lobbied British MPs, trying to obtain support to self-government for India within the British empire or dominion status. It was transformed into the India League by Krishna Menon, in 1928.
[47] See http://www.open.ac.uk/researchprojects/makingbritain/content/india-league (last visited 2 June 2015).

with Krishna Menon at the London School of Economics,[48] must have facilitated Rameshwari's contacts with the India League, which she joined shortly after reaching London.

Scotland Yard's reports give details on several meetings in which she participated as a speaker. On 8 November 1930 she spoke of police atrocities in India, drawing the public's attention to practices like "suffocating the people with salt until they were nearly dead and beating them with prickly sticks"; these outrages, she held, were patiently tolerated "by the suffering masses in the civil disobedience and non-violence campaign". On 27 November, she spoke at a meeting "to support the Cause of Indian Freedom", as the leaflet announcing it held, and addressed a public of about 800 people. Again, Rameshwari was among the speakers of the conferences organised by the League on 9 May 1931 and, with Maud Royden and Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, on the 14, when they spoke of the work of Indian women in supporting the nationalist claim for Indian freedom. As the chairwoman of the League's women's committee, Rameshwari presided a meeting on 3 July, during which she again presented on the role of women within the nationalist movement and deprecated the colonial government's violence against them.[49]

Had political events unfolded differently in India, she could have dedicated her time in London to one more task. When, in November 1929, the Viceroy announced that the government would call for a Round Table Conference, the WIA immediately asked that women be among its delegates, and submitted the names of Rameshwari Nehru, Sarojini Naidu and Muthulakshmi Reddi "as the representatives of Indian womanhood".[50] However, as the Viceroy declared to Indian nationalist leaders that he could not vouch that the Round Table Conference would formulate a scheme for the implementation of dominion status (rather than, as the call read, "discuss" it), Congress decided to boycott the Conference. It was at this juncture that, as mentioned above, Congress ended negotiations with the colonial government and pledged to *purna swaraj*. The WIA stuck to the nationalist agenda, and withdrew its cooperation, as well, renouncing the opportunity to secure one of its members at the Conference.[51]

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[48] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 100.
[49] IOR/L/PJ/12/356, British Library.
[50] *Mrs. Margaret Cousins and her work done in India. Compiled by One Who Knows* (Madras: WIA, 1956), p. 79.
[51] WIA Report 1930-31, p. 4.

Rameshwari did not feel that the tireless work she carried on for two years in London led to any appreciable increase in the British public's interest and sympathy toward India. Some fifteen years later, thinking back on her London experience, she would conclude that no amount of propaganda in any foreign country could materially help the cause of India. No matter how bright the galaxy of supporters the India League could boast, its organisers were aware that they would not make much headway. While the vast majority of the British public remained largely uninterested and ignorant in Indian affairs, the League's conferences were attended by the same old group of British intellectuals, renowned but by no means politically influential. As Rameshwari recalled, Churchill and the imperialist group was "incomparably more effective" and capable of gathering support from thousands of British men and women. "We could never dream of ever getting the same support for our cause. . . . [O]ur salvation depends on our own selves", she concluded.[52]

[52] Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings by her, Subject file no. 4, NMML.

Mrs. Brijlal Nehru,

President, London Branch, W. I. A.

Stri Dharma, May 1931

(Rameshwari Nehru features here with the name of her husband, Brijlal)

In 1933, Rameshwari returned to India, where she came increasingly closer to Gandhi and his work. Her son's marriage, which both she and her husband—no less than the bride-to-be's family—had tried to oppose, had by now proved inevitable. Therefore, before leaving Europe for good, Rameshwari and her husband went to Hungary to meet Fori's family and agreed that, while Braj Kumar finished his studies, Fori would spend a year in Lahore with his family, to see whether she could adjust to Indian ways of living and the marriage could be celebrated.[53] Shortly before Rameshwari's return to India, Gandhi had started the Harijan Sevak Sangh, an organisation devoted to the eradication of untouchability.[54] This was in response to the British government's approval of the Communal Award that had declared the so-called "depressed classes" to be a minority community entitled to separate electorates, no less than Muslims and Sikhs. Gandhi and other nationalist leaders revolted against what they perceived as both an attempt at dividing Hindu Indians along caste lines, and a measure that would crystallise untouchability as a perpetual reality, rather than a social custom that needed to be eradicated. Gandhi's fast unto death led to the Poona Pact, prescribing the abandonment of reserved seats for the depressed classes, and an increase in the number of seats reserved for them in the provincial legislatures. To further his point about the abolition of untouchability, Gandhi founded the Harijan Sevak Sangh; in 1933-34, he then embarked on a nine-months Harijan tour throughout India to fundraise for the new organisation and spread his message.[55] Rameshwari threw herself wholeheartedly into the work for Harijan uplift, and by 1935 she was already serving as the Harijan Sevak Sangh's vice-president. Such work would in the ensuing years make her embark on countless tours across India, where she organised conferences, gave speeches and addressed meetings attended by thousands of people.[56]

In Gandhian work and thought Rameshwari found an ideological framework that resonated with her own thinking. Sexuality was, for instance, one of the aspects in which her views coincided with Gandhi's. Since youth, he conceptualised sexuality as a negative impulse, and declared war on what he perceived to be an energy-consuming and enervating activity. Considering semen as the main source of power in the human body, he saw loss of it as leading to waste of *shakti* (power) and of psychic, physical and

[53] Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings by her, Subject file no. 2, NMML. Interview with Fori Nehru. Nehru, *Nice guys*, pp. 103-104.
[54] 'Harijan' (literally, 'Children of God') was the word that Gandhi used to indicate Dalits.
[55] Chandra et al., *India's struggle for Independence*, pp. 290-295.
[56] Rameshwari Nehru, 'The Harijan movement', in Dhar, *Gandhi is my star*, pp. 90-146.

moral energy. Associated in his understanding with violence (inflicted on oneself and on others, namely women), selfishness, exploitation and aggressiveness, sexuality was to be avoided altogether. Married couples should engage in it only for reproductive purposes, a few times in a lifetime, and live for the rest of the time as brothers and sisters.[57] Closely connected with these views on sexuality was Gandhi's ideology on womanhood revolving around the figure of the renunciator. Within this ideology, woman personified the virtues Gandhi praised as the highest, namely restraint and self-control. Sujata Patel has considered such ideas as belonging to the third phase of Gandhi's conceptualisation of the female figure, dating back to the 1930s following two other phases: the formulation of basic postulates in 1917-1922, when women were first involved in the nationalist project as spinners and champions of *swadeshi* products; and the redefinition of Hindu marriage and family, in 1923-1932, when Gandhi conceptualised women as the moral conscience of the movement.[58] Yet, as we have seen in the fifth chapter, the ideal of woman as renunciator loomed large in Gandhian thinking already at the eve of the previous decade, when it materialised in the plain white *khadi* clothing, which worked as a powerful tool to desexualise women, and made them the symbols of the control over sexual and material desire. Through restraint—which Gandhi populated was easier for the female sex to achieve—women would liberate themselves from their role as playthings for men's pleasure, project themselves as free from physical desires, and restore marriage's original aims: the couple's spiritual development, and service to the family and society.

This ideology could not but appeal to Rameshwari, who was deeply puritanical. Her son recalled this aspect as characteristic of his mother and her family's world-view, to a greater extent than was common at the time within the rigid code of conduct to which high caste affluent families were expected to conform. "Sex was regarded as something dirty and evil", remembered Braj Kumar. Sex was never mentioned in the family, and the only sex education imparted to him came from a book that his father had given him, which "described in the most lurid terms the dire effects of masturbation, one of which was madness". "I cannot conceive of a more unhealthy approach towards sex

[57] Bikhu Parekh, *Colonialism, tradition and reform: an analysis of Gandhi's political discourse* (Delhi: Sage, 1989), pp. 172-206.
[58] Sujata Patel, 'Construction and reconstruction of woman in Gandhi', in Alice Thorner and Maithreyi Krishnaraj (eds.), *Ideals, images and real lives: women in literature and history* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman, 2000), pp. 288-321.

than the one to which I was subjected", Rameshwari's son concluded.[59] Besides being grounded in her education, taboos and personal beliefs, Rameshwari's views on sex probably resulted also from her relationship with her husband. A fragment of a letter she wrote to a friend in 1926 is the only source that sheds some light on this topic, allowing for some speculations on a relationship that was not fully satisfying for Rameshwari. What her son perceived as a puritanical attitude toward sex had arguably much to do with the lack of joy and passionate love in her marriage. The letter fragment shows that Rameshwari, rather than overlooking this lack as an aspect that did not interest her, suffered deeply from it. In the letter she wrote to her, the friend complained about her husband, who despised her education and desire for social and political engagement. "I feel as if the only purpose of my life was to keep my husband happy", she opened her heart to Rameshwari; "Truth be told, sometimes I feel like running away". Although recognising the existence of mutual love between them, she regretted that her husband wasted his enthusiasm and energy in useless pastimes rather than in nationalist activities; she envied Rameshwari's married life, which she supposed was filled by the nationalist work and ideals she shared with her husband. In her reply, Rameshwari spoke of her marriage in wholly different terms, and confessed that she would "consider [her] life to be successful" if her husband, like her friend's, took her out on a ride, or for a walk in the moonlight. Her husband, she wrote, was born old, and she had never had the chance of seeing him as a young man. "You know how excited and childlike I used to be. I was always a romantic", Rameshwari nostalgically recalled; "I did not know that life would land me in such a situation. Life is not that bed of roses that we imagined it to be". At forty, she found herself longing for "poetic romance in real life". "My soul yearns for love", she confessed, speculating on how meaningless it is to relate the experience of love to young age, as the soul is ageless and immortal, and never ceases to crave love.[60]

Whether through belief or for justifying her own loveless marriage, Rameshwari endorsed Gandhian thinking about sex. Linking, as Gandhi did, sexual activity to a waste of a person's genetic force, she preached "the Golden Rule about sex": "Do not think about sex. Discard from the mind all sexual worry. Nothing dissolves energy, will-power and the value of the moral personality more than the obsession with sexual images". According to her, with the advent of civilisation, the natural sexual instinct that

[59] Nehru, *Nice guys*, p. 66.
[60] Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings by her, Subject file no. 26, NMML.

manifested itself at fixed intervals in the primitive man "became perverted, and man acquired the faculty of repeating the sexual act at will". Such faculty led to a drastic reduction of men's years of sexual activity—amounting to about thirty years in the modern age—and of life itself. Sexual disorders were widespread, Rameshwari held, due to uncontrolled sexuality, which could be cured with some yoga exercises.[61]

Rameshwari's conceptualisation of home as intimately bound to national life also bespoke Gandhian influences. In 'Indian home', an article she contributed to Lahore-based *The Modern Girl*, she projected herself not as "an advocate of sex equality", but as holding "a point of view to help the young girl to make a peaceful, beautiful home in keeping with the needs of the country at large". Bearing in mind Gandhi's insistence on men and women's separate spheres, and his ideas on women's purity, endurance and natural disposition to sacrifice themselves for others' welfare, Rameshwari advised young wives not to "expect too much from the husband . . . give and give freely without wanting any return for it", and cultivate "the desire to give unreservedly". "Wife should make the husband feel that his will and pleasure is her joy", she continued; "she may not harbour anger and resentment against her husband's misdeeds", but rather find remedies within herself. She should not consider voluntary subjugation to her husband as a way to make herself inferior to him, but as a choice that would make her stronger—a "voluntary sacrifice of love". "Love, sacrifice, service, mutual consideration and promotion of each other's welfare ought to be the watch-word of the home and they must begin with the housewife", she concluded.[62]

In another text, she incorporated Gandhi's preoccupation with reconciling women's nationalist and domestic duties. Since non-cooperation, Gandhi had found the way to mobilise women's bodies without challenging traditional domestic arrangements, assigning to them the task of spinning *khadi* at home, a type of contribution to the nationalist cause that did not put social material and sexual power relations at any risk. Though performed privately, from within the domestic walls, this activity was constructed as fundamental due to the public economic and political benefits deriving from it.[63] In an article she contributed to the *Literary Star* of Lahore, Rameshwari sketched out a few suggestions for young wives that would allow them "to

[61] Rameshwari Nehru Papers, Speeches and writings by her, Subject file no. 96, NMML.
[62] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Indian home', in Dhar, *Gandhi is my star*, pp. 50-54.
[63] Ketu K. Katrak, 'Indian nationalism, Gandhian "Satyagraha", and representations of female sexuality', in A. Parker, M. Russo, D. Sommer and P. Yaeger (eds.), *Nationalisms and sexualities* (London: Routledge, 1992), p. 400.

serve the country without interfering with [their] household duties". These included making exclusive use of *swadeshi* products, taking care of the servants' literacy, giving some percentage of the household income to charities, and spinning the *charkha* for half an hour every day. "This quiet work at home will be more valuable than much of the noisy work which finds cheap publicity in the newspapers", Rameshwari concluded.[64]

However, Gandhian influences did not replace the feminist ideals that had fuelled Rameshwari's early activism. Rather, especially from the 1930s, these two frameworks of thinking would integrate, complete, and in some instances even apparently contradict each other in Rameshwari's speeches and writings. Unlike Gandhi, she favoured women's economic independence, and believed it to be the foundation upon which a fair and correct relationship between the sexes could be established.[65] "It is as necessary for a woman to have a profession as it is for a man", she held in a speech to female college graduates, lamenting the Indian educational system's attention for men's careers, and neglect of women's professional development. For all that, she would not go so far as to imagine unmarried women professionals; instead, she wished for "an adjustment" on the part of women, an effort to harmonise marriage with profession. She also raised a typically Gandhian point, the critique of modernity via a denunciation of desire and greed. As Mondal has pointed out, Gandhi considered desire to be an integral part of modern civilisation and its inherent violence, hence his general disavowal of any type of material pleasure, whether achieved through sexual activity, rich food, clothing and adornments, or wealth.[66] In line with Gandhian philosophy, in her speech to the women college graduates Rameshwari denounced the "tastes of educated girls" as a deplorable consequence of "modern education". Such girls, she held, were radically different from women of the previous generations, more self-centred and selfish, spoiled by the "love of luxuries, the desire for comfort and a distaste for manual work".[67]

That work for the cause of women was no less a part of Rameshwari's political engagement than Gandhian work was proven by her continuing militancy in the All-India Women's Conference. Writing on *The Sunday Statesman* about an AIWC session held in Allahabad, she showed once again to see no contradictions in voicing the sharpest views against men-made stereotypes on women, and the conservative ideas on

[64] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Home and society', in *Gandhi is my star*, pp. 69-70.
[65] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Indian educational system', in *Gandhi is my star*, pp. 160-168.
[66] Mondal, 'The emblematics of gender and sexuality'.
[67] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Duties of educated women', in *Gandhi is my star*, pp. 171, 176.

women's domestic roles she expressed on other occasions. Commenting on the encomia written by men to praise the leaders of the women's movement, she found them exaggerated and betraying "a feeling of uncomfortable uncertainty on the part of those who indulge in them". Women were there praised as angels, goddesses, personifications of all goodness, power, energy and strength, inspirers and dictators on whose behests the fate of men hanged. What did all this have to do with the deliberations of the AIWC, Rameshwari wondered? In the encomia's emphatic insistence on home as women's appropriate sphere, she glimpsed the intentions of their authors: "chivalrous learned men, who disdain to condemn the women's movement openly, but who cannot get rid of the suspicion with which they secretly look at this new venture". In their messages of goodwill, she held, woman featured as "the uncrowned queen of the household", in possess of super human powers that needed the intervention of her husband, brothers or sons to be brought into action, as "[s]he may not resort to direct action". Rameshwari critiqued the stereotyped descriptions of home and domestic life as women's "heaven on earth", and located herself among those who, turning their faces against it, "have taken to a life of struggle and strife and hard work". According to her, it was an "admitted fact, that in spite of all the lip homage paid to her, woman has never had a fair deal from the world of men". Modern women's subversion against their subordination, Rameshwari continued, was not due to any sentimental reason, as some men held, nor to a theoretical desire for equality; rather, women wished to modify society, whose many defects were grounded in that first, fundamental disparity between the sexes. Although apparently sanctioning female education and the abolition of *pardā*, men fought shy of women's economic independence and of their demand for a single moral standard of conduct, when they did not openly suggest that women were "outstepping the boundaries of decent behaviour", and voiced demands that "savoured of licence in the name of liberty".[68]

The experience of the Nehru women allows for reflections on the complexity of female involvement with Gandhian nationalist politics. While the so-called "myth of participation" has universalized such involvement, projecting it as homogeneous, a detailed consideration of individual experiences provides a more nuanced picture.[69]

[68] Rameshwari Nehru, 'Reflections on the Women's Conference', *The Sunday Statesman*, 10 March 1940, pp. 3-4.
[69] Gail Pearson, 'Women in public life in Bombay city with special reference to the civil disobedience movement' (Ph.D. thesis, JNU Centre for Historical Studies, 1979). Quoted in G. Forbes, *Indian women and*

Despite the nationalist movement's essential conservatism and overarching interest in maintaining the patriarchal order—highlighted by feminist historiography in the last few decades[70]—participation in its politics did not necessarily entail for women a passive surrender to its discourses. Rather, the appropriation of such discourses often provided women with an opportunity for personal fulfilment and for a broadening of their sphere of action. For women who experienced feminist politics before the nationalist movement became a mass phenomenon, as was the case with Uma and Rameshwari, nationalist fervour did not erase or overshadow their early feminist stances, neither theoretically nor from the point of view of practical engagement. As members of India's most prominent nationalist family, whose vicissitudes grew increasingly intertwined with those of the country itself in the decades that have made the object of these pages, the Nehru women undoubtedly espoused the nationalist cause out of belief and solidarity with the family men who first endorsed it. Yet, what emerges from their writings and activism is an understanding of nationalist politics as one more arena for their assertion and agency. At the forefront of the political discourse of their time, building on what they had learned and experienced since the beginning of the century within the early organised women's movement, they were able *also* to appropriate nationalist discourses, and to emerge even more prominently as leaders, writers and renowned figures, making one more step towards the very heart of the public political realm. The same women who twenty years earlier, as young brides, had just come out of *pardā*, could hardly speak English, held separate meetings with a few elite ladies of their city, and were intimidated by the sumptuous dinners at the Nehrus', by the early 1930s were unafraid to address audiences of several thousand people, travelling all over India and Europe as official delegates and representatives, sitting on government committees, or writing a book on the most heated controversy of the day.

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the freedom movement: a historian's perspective (Bombay: Research Centre for Women's Studies, 1997), p. 80.

[70] Jayawardena, *Feminism and nationalism*, p. 108. Maria Mies, *Indian women and patriarchy* (Delhi: Vikas, 1980), p. 121. Vina Mazumdar, 'The social reform movement in India from Ranade to Nehru', in B. R. Nanda (ed.) *Indian women: from purdah to modernity* (Delhi: Radiant Publishers, 1976), p. 76.

CONCLUSIONS

This study explored the lives and experiences of the women of the Nehru household in the first three decades of the twentieth century. It followed their development from teenage years into womanhood, and analysed the changes that, over the years, shaped their thinking and feminist consciousness. Questioning a widespread historiographical narrative that has often presented women's engagement with nationalism as a sudden awakening, crediting Gandhi for it, these pages investigated the decades *before* the outbreak of mass nationalist agitations, and interrogated the roots of that engagement. Concurrently, this work aimed to shed light on the origins of feminist thinking and activism in an area that, as a stronghold of orthodox Hinduism, has been considered less active and prone to emancipatory politics than regions like Bengal and Maharashtra, and has thus not received much scholarly attention.

The microhistorical analysis of the Nehru women group allowed for an illumination of both points. It showed that not in all cases were those "hordes of women pouring out of their homes . . . to give proof of their will, courage and forbearance" simply responding to Gandhi's call, suddenly breaking out of centuries of seclusion and passivity.[1] Even within the Indian nationalist household *par excellence*, engagement with the Gandhian nationalist message did not come out of a void, as an unquestioned response before which nothing existed that could testify to women's ability to make autonomous choices about their political stance and action in the public sphere.

In fact, elite women's engagement with nationalist politics built on the work they had carried out in the previous years within the nascent feminist movement. For the Nehru women, such work started in the early 1900s with the foundation of the Allahabad Women's Association, which strove to overcome women's isolation and confinement to the domestic sphere by involving them in mutual exchanges of ideas over topics that lay outside the domestic routine. At a time when women still lived in (or had recently come out of) *pardā*, and no other subject besides motherhood and wifehood was considered to be their domain, realising the necessity for women to gather and discuss among themselves was a huge step. Although initially arduous, such a step eventually proved fundamental, for thanks to those first attempts women gradually found a voice. At a time when periodical literature was flourishing, the Nehru women

[1] Uma Rao, 'Women in the frontline: the case of U.P.', in Kasturi and Mazumdar, *Women and Indian nationalism*, pp. 28-52.

took the opportunity of this innovative and vibrant inauguration to found their own journal, which would become the association's mouthpiece and, as a forum for discussions of a number of different concerns, an extremely empowering experience.

Within the separate spaces of their meetings and through the pages of their journals, elite women engaged in the recognition and increasing reinforcement of their own subjectivity. Especially in the first years of their venture, Rameshwari Nehru and the women who composed the Allahabd group—although critical of the most obscurantist social customs affecting their sex—endorsed the views and norms that Hindu tradition associated with women. As did many other women's journals of the day, theirs also often focused on socialising women into the values of domesticity, building the ideal woman in the image of the wives of Hindu mythology, while also incorporating Victorian prescriptions of efficiency and companionship. At the same time, women also strongly endorsed female education in their articles, and presented their readership with educated Indian women who could function as role models and inspirations.

In time, elite women's feminist consciousness took on increasingly sharper contours. One of the main achievements of the nascent movement was the discursive creation of *strī jāti*, a symbolic community of sisters of which in theory all women were part, which overcame women's isolation within family, caste and religious communities. Through this category, women defined their subordination as a condition shared by women all over the world, united and mutually empowered by the common desire to fight against it. As Padma Anagol has noticed in the case of Maharashtra, where women coined the term *bhaginivarg* (sisterhood), this "was a crucial step in the formation of feminist consciousness whereby women began to perceive themselves as a collective".[2] The "discordant" voice of Uma started to emerge from within the Nehru women's circle, raising concerns and utilising tones far more radical than those of her contemporaries, and bespeaking a distinct and modern feminist consciousness. Without mincing her words, Uma Nehru openly held men responsible for the dire condition of Indian womanhood, sarcastically critiqued nationalist normative ideals of the traditional, goddess-like Indian woman, and built a powerful argument in defence of female subjectivity, as intimately composed not only of a spiritual dimension, but also incarnated in a body.

[2] Anagol, *The emergence of feminism*, p. 219.

As women's thinking and consciousness increasingly deepened, the horizons of their activism also broadened. Their scope of activity expanded beyond their locality and the subjects with which they had so far been concerned, when, as their first political lobbying experiences, they joined the petitioning work aimed at the abolition of indentured labour and, shortly thereafter, at obtaining the franchise on the same terms as men. Despite their results, such experiences proved enriching for Indian elite women, who—especially through their mobilisation for the vote—started to appropriate a universalistic idiom that would allow them to construct the figure of the universal citizen-subject.[3] By the late 1910s, embryonic ideas and concepts with which women like the Nehrus had toyed for a few years came into further focus, thanks especially to the establishment of the first pan-Indian organisation, which all women were invited to join irrespectively of their religion, caste, or nationality.

When the Gandhian message started to loom large on the Nehru household's horizons, the family women were equipped enough to engage in a reworking of its precepts. The previous pages showed that Gandhi's entrance on stage required many adjustments and sacrifices from the women, for his influence on the family was as high as the level of normativity featured in his prescriptions. Yet, by the early 1920s, the Nehru women seemed to have realised the potential of Gandhian politics for furthering their own concerns. They started to conceptualise work for the nationalist cause as an empowering tool that—like European women's engagement during World War I—would grant them the rights for which they longed. As men's imprisonment became routine, women, in their absence, felt free to step beyond the scope of action they had so far carved out for themselves, showing that they considered nationalist politics not a duty resulting from their men's engagement so much as a viable means of their own fulfilment.

A further important step for the nascent feminist movement took place in the late 1920s. Gathered in the second pan-Indian women's association, organised elite women took decisive action in favour of female education, while their arguments about women's power and position within society grew increasingly more refined. One event, in particular, was evidence of the work women had carried on for the previous two decades, demonstrating their political maturity. The arguments they constructed to secure passage into law of a bill proposing to raise the age for marriage in the years

[3] Sinha, 'Suffragism and internationalism', pp. 483-484.

1927-29 demonstrated women's ability to take advantage of a peculiar historical moment to lobby for the recognition of their subjectivity—composed of physical, intellectual, emotional and experiential elements—as worthy of a place in high politics. At this conjuncture, organised women proved capable of building upon the ideal of global sisterhood to stand united and eventually be recognised as a single constituency, which defined itself by its gender, beyond any caste or religious affiliation.

When civil disobedience broke out and the nationalist wave hit the Nehrus more powerfully than ever, the women of the Nehru family joined it wholeheartedly. Their engagement with Gandhian nationalist politics was anything but passive or derivative. While personal belief and solidarity with the family men undoubtedly played a huge role in their espousal of the nationalist cause, their life trajectories, writings and activism show that they understood nationalist politics as a path that would allow them to further emerge as renowned figures, leading them to the very heart of the public political realm.

After some twenty-five years from the first step the Nehru women made out of the domestic sphere, their lives had changed completely. Inseparably intertwined with the vicissitudes involving the whole household, as well as, in many instances, India at large, the experience of the Nehru women stands as evidence of that ability to carve out spaces of personal liberty and agency, despite an often obstructionist context, which I mentioned in the introduction as the *fil rouge* underlying this work. This story is an exemplar of the capacity to "assimilate and accommodate", which Padma Anagol has found typical of Hindu feminist leaders in mid-nineteenth century Maharashtra[4]—the ability to mediate with social and traditional structures rarely supportive of women's freedom, and deeply patriarchal.

The Nehru women manifested such ability since the inception of their activism. They skilfully managed the slippery public/private dichotomy, on which concrete and discursive arrangements within the Nehru household drew, exploiting the possibility of change, creativity and argument that, as Susan Gal has maintained, is always inherent in established dichotomies, no matter how carefully traced and protected their boundaries are.[5] Women thus initially positioned themselves in an intermediate space that could comply both with their own and the family men's (or society's) wishes. Their activism

[4] Anagol, *The emergence of feminism*, pp. 220-221.
[5] Susan Gal, 'A semiotics of the public/private distinction', *Difference: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13, No. 1 (2002), pp. 77-95.

was *public* in that it involved writing and publishing for an audience, and organising meetings. At the same time, it also featured elements relating to the *private*: the choice of Hindi as the medium, traditionally spoken by the women and within the domestic space, in opposition to English as the language of the professional and political outside world; the fact that public meetings were women-only home meetings (that could echo the custom of *pardā*); and the prominence initially accorded to topics interesting to women's lives. This in-between positioning allowed women's first steps beyond the domestic threshold, making them acceptable both to their own and others' eyes.

In later years, as their scope of activity broadened, organised women modified the content of their strategy, but not the model itself. Their priority, now, was to have their demands for social change endorsed by men in power positions—such as the Indian party leaders sitting in the legislatures, in the case of the Sarda issue. Again, women resorted countless times to their strategic in-between positioning, reassuring men about the non-confrontational character of their activism, appropriating much of the Hindu-flavoured traditional vocabulary, and moulding their arguments in tune with the feelings and aspirations of those they needed to convince. It might be argued that this strategy prevented women from envisioning goals broader and bolder than those they actually pursued, as well as the development of a women's movement, which—more detached from and less prone to conciliation with the surrounding context—could act more autonomously. Yet, the constant dialogue with the nationalist leadership in which organised women engaged proved beneficial for many of them. Within the Nehru household, participation in nationalist mobilisations and endorsement of nationalist thinking were conceptualised by women as empowering: for some of them, they worked as tools for personal assertion, such as was the case with Kamala and, to a lesser extent, with her mother-in-law; for others, like Uma and Rameshwari, nationalism represented one more field of political engagement, besides women's politics. Contrarily to what Geraldine Forbes has argued, they did not necessarily think it impossible "to raise women's consciousness about both politics and women's rights at the same time".[6] As we have seen, they instead pursued both paths, arguably aiming at a personal and political fulfilment, which they eventually obtained.[7]

[6] Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, p. 155.

[7] In the years following those analysed in this work, Uma Nehru was elected to the United Provinces Legislative Assembly, and Congress Member of Parliament in 1951-52, within the first and second Lok Sabha—an office she held until her death, in 1962. Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly of the United Provinces (December 21, 1938). Government of India, 'Members of first Lok Sabha (17 April 1952 - 4 April

The sources on which this study drew thus allow for new reflections on a well-known part of modern Indian history. The close analysis of a specific case and of the lives of a small group of people in a limited period of time has raised questions on much broader processes and given narratives. Both Gandhian nationalism and feminism take on a different light, when analysed through the prism of the lived and emotional experiences of the women of the notorious Indian nationalist household.

Gandhian thinking pervaded the entire family as a new set of norms and values. Through it, a specific set of normative emotions, practices and behaviours replaced or assigned new meaning to the old ones, a process that especially for the women entailed a number of emotional and material losses, and as many adjustments. In the vocabulary of the history of emotions, this moment could be conceptualised as establishing a new "emotional regime", an expression coined by William Reddy to describe the normative order for emotions set by a specific political regime, and the official rituals and practices that express such emotions. While Reddy strictly links the notion of emotional regime to the political arena, this category can also help to decipher the inner working of the Nehru household.[8]

Analysed from this point of view, Gandhian nationalism appears as anything but a novelty. Rather, it represented the second major "regime" governing life at the Nehrus' during the decades under analysis, to which the women were expected to adjust. Women like Rameshwari, Swarup Rani and Kamala had already undergone a similar process of adjustment when, entering the Nehru household as young brides raised according to traditional values and lifestyles, they were required to adapt to the family's westernised and sumptuous ways. They had to renounce most aspects of their traditional upbringing—from the Hindi language to some types of food, from certain garments, hairstyles and furniture to the display of religiosity—or to cope with the family men's continuous scorn of such practices and endorsement of an alleged modernity that came in the guise of western-inspired tastes, fashion, items, habits and ways of thinking entirely new to those women. Similarly, when the Gandhian gospel

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1957)'; 'Members of the second Lok Sabha (5 April 1957 – 13 March 1962)'. Rameshwari, instead, became prominent as a social worker for the cause of women and Dalits, serving as president of the All-India Women's Conference in 1940, and as the honorary director of the women's section of the Ministry of Relief and Rehabilitation at the dawn of Independence, and leading delegations to women's international congresses and conferences—activities which granted her prizes and public recognition both in India and at the international level.

[8] William Reddy, *The navigation of feeling: a framework for the history of emotions* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 112-137.

became the rule and austerity, sacrifice and self-restraint replaced luxury, ostentation and grandiosity, the Nehru household was stripped of all signs of the old "regime", and women once again underwent major emotional adjustments. Not only did they have to renounce objects dear to them, like jewellery, clothes and pieces of furniture; more importantly, they witnessed the disruption of familial ties and routines, and were forced to espouse Gandhian values to the detriment of their most intimate feelings, as was the case with Vijaya Lakshmi, thus undergoing intense emotional suffering.

In this framework, feminist activism worked for the Nehru women as a sphere where their subjectivity was allowed a place. Drawing again on Reddy's theoretical model, we might call it an "emotional refuge", that is, a symbolic or material space "that provides safe release from prevailing emotional norms".[9] We have encountered several examples of the alternative emotional and value system that women built within the spaces of their feminist work. While the conventional wisdom within the Nehru family was that women were weak, superstitious, generally incapable of rational thinking and prone to all sorts of misjudgements, in their writings women represented themselves and their "sisters" as strong, powerful, capable and more far-sighted than men. Contrasting the family men's contempt for female education, in their journal women endorsed it as a priceless goal, encouraging their readers to imitate the role models whose stories they published, and emphasising the benefits of education on women's self-confidence. Again, while the Gandhian rhetoric praised women for their alleged self-sacrificing abilities, in the pages of *Strī Darpaṇ* a woman like Uma Nehru could harshly criticise the ideal of sacrifice as a male invention and an instrument for women's subjugation.

The experience of the Nehru women allows for new speculations on modern Indian feminism at large. The expressions of pride, enthusiasm, energy, hope and confidence that fill the reports of the first all-India organisations arguably evidence that through their writings, speeches and meetings, the women participating in the movement were shaping a new community. Within such a community, organised elite women defined their own values, goals, modes of expression, and the nature of the affective bonds connecting the various members in ways similar to those at work within Barbara Rosenwein's "emotional communities".[10] The fundamental contribution of

[9] Reddy, *The navigation of feeling*, p. 129.
[10] Jan Palmer, 'The history of emotions: an interview with William Reddy, Barbara Rosenwein, and Peter Stearns', *History and Theory*, vol. 49 (2010), pp. 252-253.

feminist activism thus lay not only in its concrete victories and in the changes it set in motion—for instance, in the legislative sphere—but, more importantly, in that it constituted a new symbolic and material space for women, which worked both as a "refuge" and as the starting point for a new set of values and aspirations. This newly formed community, though intersecting and intertwined with others (the nationalist one *in primis*), would remain organised women's reference environment, the boat on which they skilfully sailed through the different epochs and political trends.

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