Also by Anindita Ghosh:

POWER IN PRINT: POPULAR PUBLISHING AND THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN A COLONIAL SOCIETY, c.1778–1905
Behind the Veil

Resistance, Women and the Everyday in Colonial South Asia

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INTRODUCTION

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The overwhelming image of Indian women during the colonial period has been of passivity, of a group silenced doubly—first in nationalist discourses and second in the more recent post-colonial scheme of things. Far too often, we see woman as a silent shadow, veiled and mute before her oppressors, and unquestioningly accepting a discourse that endorses her subordination. As has been pointed out, for the colonial state this was part of a strategy to perpetuate domination: helpless and weak Indian women in need of protection provided one moral justification for colonial rule.1 Later, historians showed how the Indian woman became the site for nationalist constructions of tradition and cultural authenticity in the quest for self-identity from the late nineteenth century onwards. Faced with defeat and humiliation in the political and material world, Indian men constructed their women as the repositories of all that was pure and worthy in their own culture.2 In both perspectives, women


2 Partha Chatterjee, 'A Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Sangari and Vaid, Recasting Women.
emerge as unresisting, inert, and passive objects of defining discourses, as people without any control over their lives. On the other hand, where women are discovered in assertive roles, they are either participants in larger mass struggles under the tutelage of their male peers and guardians (women activists in the nationalist movement), or unusual eruptions within a conventional social fabric (Tarabai Shinde, Binodini Dasi, Pandita Ramabai).

But such representations by no means exhaust the possibilities of defining subjecthood among women in colonial India. We need to grasp the dynamic of hegemonic discourses on the one hand, and women’s subjectivity and agency on the other. There seems to be little recognition of the multiplicity of strategies for constructing selfhood that women have been adept at in South Asian contexts. Far from representing themselves only in ways dictated by males, this book argues, women often imaginatively scrutinize and critique the social world that they experience, and give voice to it in subversive expressive traditions or actions, some more overtly dissident than others.

Studies on women and resistance in colonial India have generally tended to waver between the achievements of the exceptional and educated few—against a presumed backdrop of ignorance and helpless passivity—on the one hand, and radical activities on the other. Among recent compilations of essays dealing with women’s agency in India, only a few are relevant here. While volumes such as those by J. Krishnamurty, Bharati Ray, and Meera Kosambi have made valuable contributions towards increasing the visibility of women in historiographies of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, other more critical and questioning works have opened up debates on resistance and agency underlying gendered regimes of power. A noteworthy exploration of the issues under scrutiny here emerges in a

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5 J. Krishnamurty, Women in Colonial India: Essays on Survival, Work and the State (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999); Bharati Ray (ed.), From the
parallel study by Nita Kumar that sets out to recover women as ‘subjects’ in South Asian history. But while the essays in that volume are principally concerned with the recovery of agency, the present collection aims to problematize the very conditions out of which this agency is constituted. In addition, it knits together a more cohesive narrative of resistance by throwing an exclusive spotlight on the issue.

In some ways, this project picks up the threads of that seminal publication, *Contesting Power* (1992), and uses the methodology evident there in the field of women’s history. We argue here against the traditional emphasis placed on violent confrontational struggles in social and political history writing because of its tendency to ignore everyday negotiations of power that go on between the dominated and dominant on a more sustained basis. Before this, Scott and Adas had studied non-violent forms of resistance among the oppressed that stopped far short of open rebellion, and their significance for power relations in peasant societies in South East Asia. *Contesting Power* extended the model—although not entirely uncritically—to look at everyday resistance in more diverse social situations in South Asia. As the editors, Haynes and Prakash, pointed out:

Rather than insist that one form of resistance is more significant than the other, these essays establish the ‘everydayness’ of struggle in yet another sense: by placing all forms of resistance within the ordinary life of power, the authors study the ways in which the social relations of daily existence are enmeshed in, and transfigured by, resistance, both extraordinary and ‘everyday’. . . Social structure, rather than being a


7 Haynes and Prakash, *Contesting Power*.


9 The volume disagrees for instance with Scott’s critique of the Gramscian notion of hegemony.
monolithic, autonomous entity, unchallenged except during dramatic instances of revolt, appears more commonly as a constellation of contradictory and contestatory processes.\(^\text{10}\)

But in more fundamental ways our volume challenges the present understanding of women's struggles in colonial India. It does so by offering a backdrop of 'invisible' but consistent gendered resistance against which to map the more well-known outbursts of the organized radical feminist movement, or of outstanding female public figures.

In trying to reconceptualize women's resistance in South Asia, the contributions of the Subaltern Studies collective in the 1980s, which studied the underprivileged in colonial India, seem another logical correlate. But a closer look reveals that women did not figure very prominently in that framework.\(^\text{11}\) The reason for this is not hard to find. As a few Subalternists later admitted, in their eagerness to highlight elite oppression of the underprivileged, the collective tended to favour analysis of the more violent and spectacular forms of protest by exploited groups.\(^\text{12}\) To radically confront existing notions of mass inertia in popular struggles, this seemed the most obvious focus. Women, who mostly appeared only in non-combative roles in such works, could not constitute the preferred subject matter. It is not without ground, therefore, that scholars have criticized the virile assumptions underlying most such writings on resistance.\(^\text{13}\) Undoubtedly, therefore the exclusion of more 'peaceful' moments of resistance was a shortcoming. Later historians writing for the series softened the stance by looking at a range of conflicting attitudes—such as in-subordination and even collusion—alongside open revolt.

\(^\text{10}\) Haynes and Prakash, *Contesting Power*, pp. 2–3.

\(^\text{11}\) Not until the fifth volume did women figure as 'subaltern' actors in their own right.


The idea of resistance fashioning everyday social relations is relatively new. James Scott’s study of peasant society in a Malaysian village in the 1970s was path-breaking in highlighting the presence of resistance in everyday life. The constant struggle between prosperous ruling groups on the one hand, and powerless labourers and smallholders on the other, Scott argued, was sustained by a series of seemingly innocuous behaviour such as footdragging, false compliance, pilfering, slander, and sabotage, often without any explicit intention to rebel. This placed serious limitations on coercive structures and diluted their ability to extract resources from the oppressed.\textsuperscript{14} In his later work Scott developed his thesis by exploring what he called the ‘hidden transcripts’ in power relations. He described these as the conscious statements of insubordination by the lower classes, made in safety among confidantes and accomplices—proof of a consciousness that has been able to escape the effects of total domination—even while scrupulously maintaining structures of deference and obedience in the presence of authorities.\textsuperscript{15} Where unable to find more open expression, such moods of resentment and discontent survived more covertly, in the public discourse of dominated groups: ‘we might interpret the rumours, gossip, folktales, songs, gestures, jokes and theatre of the powerless as vehicles by which, among other things, they insinuate a critique of power while hiding behind anonymity or behind innocuous understandings of their conduct.’\textsuperscript{16}

Surveying a wide range of situations across historical contexts, from slave to caste societies, Scott sees how the weak have always expressed discontent using multiple strategies and avenues. From small ‘inoffensive’ acts in the presence of the dominant to louder pronouncements of disquiet in congenial surroundings, the dominated have consistently critiqued the conditions of their subordination. The apparent harmony between oppressors and the oppressed is merely a masquerade as it conceals deeper and ever-present roots of disquiet and change. Closer home, Ramanujan’s work on old women’s tales, both bawdy and imbued with a sense of fun, ‘expressing

\textsuperscript{14} Scott, \textit{Weapons of the Weak}.


\textsuperscript{16} Ibid., p. xiii.
their point of view' and 'ranging from the tragic to the ludicrous', can be seen to be pointing towards the potential recovery of precisely such a domain. 17

Such an approach can be immensely rewarding when analysing women's lives in India, where, given the discursive trappings, even close readings of the historical and archival evidence does not offer much beyond hegemonic narratives of power relations. What has been systematically excluded from accounts of women's struggles is the everyday realm of social relations in which power is constantly and relentlessly negotiated. While some of the essays in the present volume address this sphere, others, inspired by the general shift away from the spectacular and the successful, explore small acts of rebellion and lone struggles on the fringes. In this sense, we have widened the interpretation of 'everyday' to include not just the quotidian, but also the marginal.

There is another difference with the Scott models. Unlike him, we look into the multiplicity of power relations, highlighting not just resistance but also the active complicity of the subordinated within the structures of their own domination. While gender is acknowledged as an immensely important factor of social ordering, other equally contingent praxes—e.g., class, caste, and colonialism—are seen to render the narrative more complex.

II

There are obvious problems in trying to recover the woman as 'subject' in a South Asian context. To begin with, it would seem un-historical to see women as the possessors of essential qualities that characterize them beyond conflict and history. Besides, there remains the sticky issue of resistance itself. How far can we label these hardly visible struggles as 'subversion' or 'resistance', given that women not only continue to operate within dominant structures, often as collaborators, but also have no vision of an alternative social order? And finally, which women are we talking about? Is it right to treat 'women'

as a homogeneous category, ignoring the trappings of power that come with wealth and status?

While the importance of uncovering outstanding opposition to gendered regimes of power is beyond doubt, the underlying complexities that frame these structures are often ignored. In fact, as some studies have shown, the lines of battle are much more ambiguous than we would like to imagine.\textsuperscript{18} Women who dissent do not always emerge only as 'victims', but often as 'perpetrators' in upholding repressive orders. And, as such, their compliance with patriarchy must be placed alongside their resistance in order for us to fully grasp these struggles. This is a contradiction that lies at the heart of women's experiences in India, and partially explains the woman's complex position, like that of her subaltern male equivalent, as both resisting agent and collaborator.\textsuperscript{19}

These are, in fact, some of the issues that we put to the test in order to try and make sense of this vast and indisputable fabric of unsystematic and unorganized activity among women that have only begun to be tapped by historians. The significance of undertaking such a project cannot be underestimated. What Oldenburg says in her chapter on the courtesans of Lucknow in the Prakash and Haynes volume is relevant in this context: 'Their [the courtesans'] struggle obviously cannot be a collective, revolutionary "class struggle" for the gender divisions are vertical, not horizontal, and cut through class lines. [However,] the validity of their struggle cannot be refuted on the grounds that it is engaged in at a private, unobtrusive level. Their will to resist existing gender relations and reproduce the radically ordered social relations within their ambit is as self-conscious and intractable as it is undeniable.'\textsuperscript{20}

The elements of a gender critique are self-evident in the essays

\textsuperscript{18} O'Hanlon, 'Issues of Widowhood', in Haynes and Prakash, \textit{Contesting Power}.

\textsuperscript{19} For an inspiring study outlining similar complexities in lower-caste resistance in Bengal, see Ranajit Guha, 'The Career of an Anti-God in Heaven and on Earth', in Asok Mitra (ed.), \textit{The Truth Unites} (Calcutta: Subarnarekha, 1985).

collected here. Even though not matched by any practice articulate and strong enough to turn the world upside down, they register genuine distress and the desire to overcome it. If these stories of resistance are not recorded for fear of their inability to contribute to a history of women’s struggles in any real sense, we risk their erasure from historical memory. The small rebellious acts of Bengali women would thus be forever frozen, like images behind a camera, were it not for the intervention of scholars such as Geraldine Forbes. Her interrogation, as seen in her essay here, prompted stories not self-evident in the women’s photographs themselves, bringing to life long-lost memories of struggle, and making in the process valuable contributions to the narrative we are trying to knit together.

Most importantly, we note, occurrences of resistance do not themselves always imply pure forms of autonomy or escape from dominant structures. But in treating gender as a site where power is constantly fractured and reshaped by the struggles of subordinate groups, it is possible to see this as part of an ongoing negotiation between the dominant and dominated to condition the material, social, and political structures in which they exist. Dramatic confrontations and resultant radical dislocations, in that sense, are to be regarded as only the visible façades of this continuum. By an extension of this logic, struggle resides in the everyday, even where it is seemingly contradictory, least dramatic, and least visible.\textsuperscript{21}

The move against totalizing conceptualizations of cultures and subjectivities has been witnessed in recent times in Indian anthropological and folklore studies. In exposing the many points of closure and openness, pluralities and contradictions, in the textual and ethnographic domains, scholars have underscored the heterogeneity of mental worlds, as in women’s tales from South India.\textsuperscript{22} In two separate anthropological studies, singing women from both high


and low castes are seen as subverting dominant male regimes in their own innocuous ways, while continuing to subscribe overall to local patriarchal structures.23

The essay by Tanika Sarkar, on the ways in which widows in nineteenth-century Bengal reconstructed their selfhood by borrowing from prevalent dominant discourses on marriage, love, and conjugal-ity, brilliantly highlights precisely this tension between the subordinated on the one hand and hegemonic discourses on the other. It demonstrates how ideologies of resistance can be bred within strong-holds of power, and how women make strategic use of dominant discourses to improve their position in society. Sarkar’s concern is echoed in some other contributions. While discussing ties of gendered solidarity among women in the Bengali antahpur, Anindita Ghosh is thus aware that they are not just bound in ideal sisterhood. Kinship and marital status, among other things, pit them in antagonistic positions in many situations—as between the wife and mother-in-law/sister-in-law; a widow and a married woman, and others. Siobhan Lambert-Hurley’s work also highlights how elite Muslim women in Bhopal, while negotiating gendered colonial medical discourses, were simultaneously reinforcing the divide between themselves and their less fortunate sisters.

In their inspiring volume on women’s songs in North India, Raheja and Gold argue that social relationships are constructed within not one but multiple discursive fields. Women’s apparent compliance in one thus needs to be juxtaposed against their opposition in another, and relative conclusions drawn. Images of Indian women as repressed and submissive can be misleading in that submission and silence may be conscious strategies of self-repre-sentation deployed when it is expedient to do so, before particular audiences and in particular contexts.24 For Kumar too, even though their location within and acceptance of structures of subjugation—apparent from their half-silent and seemingly invisible voices—pose problems, the persistent struggle by women from within structures


24 Gold and Raheja, Listen to the Heron’s Words, see Introduction, p. 117.
cannot be ignored. Just because such resistance is on the ‘inside, private, hidden and silenced’, it does not give the struggle less currency.25

For us what is interesting is the conscious and tactical use of various ideas and identities on both sides of the power spectrum that women make. The social and symbolic splits in their identities are in fact mutually reinforcing, and can offer forceful and critical commentaries on some dominant discourses of gender and authority.26 None other than women themselves are more painfully aware of their dual roles—as wife and sister, or wife and mother. Competing identities and competing perspectives, when put to creative use by singing women in North India, make for interesting narratives. The bold and strategic juxtaposition of their discrepant roles in the songs, argues Raheja, illustrates a reflexively ironic and acute awareness of the duality in women’s social positions.27

What O’Hanlon has to say on subaltern resistance and the subjectivity of the subaltern may be relevant here.28 The problem with the subaltern, she points out, is that he emerges as a ‘self-originating, self-determining individual, who is at once a subject in his possession of a sovereign consciousness . . . and an agent in his power of freedom’.29 Such unproblematic premising of the subaltern’s agency means that his inescapable and simultaneous location within dominant discourses has been largely ignored. ‘The demand for a spectacular demonstration of the subaltern’s independent will and self-determining power’, she goes on, has led to inadequate documentation of the limits of subaltern resistance.30

25 Nita Kumar, Women as Subjects, p. 21.
27 See Gloria Goodwin Raheja, ‘On the Uses of Irony and Ambiguity: Shifting Perspectives on Patriliney and Women’s Ties to Natal Kin’, in Gold and Raheja, Listen to the Heron’s Words.
28 O’Hanlon, ‘Recovering the Subject’.
29 Ibid., p. 191.
The classic problem of historians of social protest and resistance—having to contend with the idea of autonomy versus hegemony—remains in the current literature. Even though it is now recognized that conflict is an integral and necessary part of hegemony, with struggles commonly occurring not outside but inside the realm of power, there has been no sustained attempt to grapple with the problem. Prakash and Haynes marked a departure from Scott’s hypothesis in offering a reasoned critique of subaltern autonomy, but not all contributors were agreed on its precise parameters. On the theme of gender and resistance, in particular, O’Hanlon and Oldenburg differed over the position of women as visible historical and social actors. While Oldenburg discovered women’s agency in clandestine acts in the heart of patriarchy among the courtesans of Lucknow, O’Hanlon was hesitant to accept even a full-blown critique of men in Tarabai Shinde’s rhetorical pamphlet as evidence of free will.

The essays in the present volume revisit the vexed issue, some tackling the question more directly than others. Critics who believe that collective ritual, or lonely, unorganized acts of resistance lack serious social intent will find some of the contributions provocative and thought-inspiring. The survey of women’s resistance in colonial Maharashtra by Padma Anagol puts ‘intention’ at the centre. In the cases she explores, women are seen acting consciously to redress injustice. In this, their response is almost invariably gendered and targets patriarchy, Anagol suggests, even if deeper entrenched socio-economic and political structures are contributory. Nita Verma Prasad’s startling study of widows in North India, fighting law suits either as claimants or defendants to retain property rights, also reveals women as determined agents who can use the legal system to further their own ends (although they are usually assisted by male relatives and their cases are fought by male pleaders). Without pushing the contention of agency too far, she concludes that their actions reveal gaps within patriarchy and the colonial legal system which women manoeuvre to their own advantage. Clare Anderson’s essay on incarcerated women in the penal colonies of Burma, Mauritius, and South East Asia attempts to painstakingly recover, in the absence

of audible ‘voices’, fragments of female convict experiences from ‘cracks in the colonial archive’. Her examination leads her to conclude that the highly unstable gendered boundaries of penal regimes were being negotiated by female convicts through everyday resistance, much to the consternation of jail authorities. Anderson is understandably much more cautious in attributing agency to such acts taking place under highly repressive structures, seeing in them a representation of both the power and powerlessness of such women.

One of the more daring situations in which the question of agency arises is that of the upturned world order, as expressed in customary traditions. Singing women in domestic situations, indulging in seemingly dangerous role reversals, thus present an intriguing facet of power relations in Bengal in the nineteenth century, as shown in the essay by Ghosh. The contribution of safety-valve theories is undisputed. But other studies on rituals of reversal have shown how such practices, while renewing and reinforcing established hierarchies in certain ways, also had an imaginative spillover into everyday life. Comic sexual and ritual inversions of gender hierarchies in pre-industrial Europe, argues Natalie Zemon Davis, can thus be seen as not only strategies of accommodation to systems of power but also ways of nurturing alternative thoughts on family structures.\(^{32}\) The ‘hidden transcripts’ within such carnivalesque worlds keep alive ideas of social rebellion until they actually manifest themselves in overt action. Dramatic instances of role reversals, such as the acts of poisoning and murder that Anagol describes, thus appear less remarkable and more meaningful when traced back to a potent undercurrent of simmering discontent. A similar study of reversed worlds, visible in more sober expressive traditions in recent times, also demonstrates women inserting the philosophy of their songs into their practical, everyday lives.\(^{33}\)

As Scott points out, it would be a mistake to think that the absence of actual knowledge of alternative social arrangements produces automatically the naturalisation of the present, however hateful that


\(^{33}\) See Listen to the Heron’s Words.
might be. Besides, the assumption of inability on the part of subordinate groups to imagine a counterfactual social order is ill founded. They do imagine both the reversal and negation of domination. Printed images of the world turned upside down we know have been replicated in the actions and utterances of insurgents during rebellions. The challenge to cultural discourses encoding female subordination can thus be a more immediate and real threat than hitherto appreciated. Such cultural practices, in fact, free actors to experiment with alternative, normally hidden, views of personal worth and power relations. Turning to Haynes and Prakash again, ‘Resistance, we would argue, should be defined as those behaviours and cultural practices by subordinate groups that contest hegemonic social formations, that threaten to unravel the strategies of domination; “consciousness” need not be essential to its constitution. Seemingly innocuous behaviours can have unintended yet profound consequences for the objectives of the dominant or the shape of a social order’ [emphasis mine].

What is also fundamental to these acts, we would like to add, is the constitution of a moral discourse in which gender identities are constructed, represented, negotiated, and contested in everyday life. The intervening gaps between spectacular protests, we often forget, are not as barren as they seem, and provide crucial succour and agenda to succeeding upheavals. It is impossible to ignore the culture of resistance that lurks beneath a veneer of utter supplication. For, as Scott points out, the greater the power of the dominant, the more convincing the masquerade of normality among the dominated. Similar observations have been recorded for South Asia. Songs sung

34 Scott, Hidden Transcripts, p. 80.
37 Haynes and Prakash, Contesting Power, p. 3.
38 Ibid. See, for instance, pp. 27, 33, 35.
by untouchable Paraiyar women, it has been suggested, could constitute socially meaningful action as they have the potential to instigate changes in local cultural patterns. \(^{39}\) Household proverbs offering a picture of gendered domination, the ‘small acts of rebellion’ remembered and recalled on revisiting family albums and photographs, and the refusal by female convicts in the Indian penal colonies to engage in certain types of labour all demonstrate how subordinates in large-scale structures of domination can maintain a fairly extensive social existence outside the immediate control of the dominant. It is in such sequestered settings that, in principle, a shared critique of domination may develop.

In all the cases discussed in this volume there is a larger hegemonic structure that binds the lonely acts of resistance, a structure which is unquestionably dominant, powerful, controlling. However, as we argue, power exercised by the dominant is contingent on its relationship with the dominated. As such, paradoxically, part of that power is vested in the latter. The methodological leap we have to make is to envision how ‘even the weakest and most muted of efforts assert themselves within such structures of power by posing alternative models. For, to speak in an alternative voice is already to assert a subjectivity.’ \(^{40}\) As Ranajit Guha points out in a remarkable analogous study of resistance among low castes, the absence of overt acts of defiance and even conscious mimicry of the material aspirations of higher castes do not conceal the central theme of social antagonism in the religious beliefs of certain castes and tribes. The elements of a critique are evident, even though not matched by any practice articulate and strong enough to turn the world upside down. This is a contradiction that lies at the heart of lower-caste religiosity, he contends. Both these tendencies—i.e. to conform and to dissent—constitute the social reality of the lower castes in India. \(^{41}\)

Even if resistance in this case does not contribute to any real, discernible, or immediate social change, we believe it constantly re-aligns power relations. It establishes that dominant power structures, 

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\(^{40}\) Kumar, *Women as Subjects*, p. 20.

\(^{41}\) Guha, ‘The Career of an Anti-God’. 
far from being autonomous and monolithic, are being constantly fractured and rearranged by struggle. The whole spectrum of protest must therefore be seen as part of the same structure of power that creates the dominant discourse. Only then can we understand the role of women as both agent and collaborator in these struggles, and see how ‘they are (in that sense) simultaneously, like subaltern male subjects, both empowered and powerless, active and passive, constituted and constituting.’

Nita Kumar’s work offers some insightful analyses of women’s subjectivity in South Asia. In her Introduction she argues that the Cartesian dichotomy between subject and object that privileges knowledge as an abstraction created by an autonomous being has been challenged by postmodernist writings that see all knowledge, and hence power, as constituted of both subject and object working collectively and discursively. But for feminists, the current questioning of subjecthood seems a luxury, for ‘in order to announce the death of the subject one must first have gained the right to speak as one.’ The choice, for those like Kumar, therefore, has to be a political rather than philosophical one. But in pointing out the androcentric and patriarchal nature of discourses on femininity she does offer a polemic—‘a feminist modification of postmodernism’, as she calls it. If the constitution of ‘man as the subject, the rational knower’ is a power ploy, ‘so must the constitution of woman as subject be seen to be.’ Simply reinstating the dominated to centrestage does not help for it reinstates alongside the hierarchy from which the confrontation sprang in the first place. So, ‘to develop an account of the world that treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primarily and constitutive of a different world’ seems the way forward.

Resistance offered by women in their everyday life for us, then, is only a trope, a means of anchoring more complex and multilayered

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42 Kumar, Women as Subjects, p. 21.
44 Kumar, Women as Subjects, p. 9.
struggles for power taking place in society. It is by no means our wish to claim that the instances discussed in this volume possess the force and resolution of wider, organized movements by women that seek to improve their position: they are far from that. However, in the surreptitious and often insidious ways in which they operate (as in Bengali homes and penal colonies), in their firmness of purpose (as in the case of widows in North India and Maharashtra asserting their right to property), in their sturdy imagination of alternative value systems (as in the case of Bengali widows in the nineteenth century), and in the constitution of critical moral discourses on patriarchy (as in the memories of Bengali women surrounding photographs—albeit in different degrees), there is an unmistakable social, political, and moral agenda.

III

The vision of the woman making conscious, ordered, rational choices aimed at wrestling a better life for her lot continues to plague the question of women’s agency in South Asia. The interplay of silence, collaboration, and protest clouds the issue. In almost all the cases discussed here there is partial alignment with dominant structures, so that autonomy is never complete, often ambiguous, and not probably always desired.

But neither power nor knowledge is the prerogative of those in control, for the battle lines are never conclusively drawn. Women’s discourses therefore must be read as ‘their alternative knowledge and also as necessarily exercising power as well, presently or potentially.’

This volume thus collectively aims at re-examining the issue of everyday resistance through essays that explore its significance for gender and power relations in South Asian history and society. Resistance here is not an identifiable thing or object to be retrieved, much less a coherent one. Rather, it is to be understood as a strategic articulation of power relations among social groups, including women, working at multiple discursive levels and involving diverse identities. The intervention that the volume more specifically seeks to make here is against a historiography that has consistently eliminated the

40 Kumar, Women as Subjects, p. 20.
possibility of assertive action and critical assessment by ordinary women in their everyday lives of the patriarchies that dominate them. As Gold’s timely reminder alerts us, ‘South Asian women are too often perceived as veiled figures acting out graceful pantomimes of submission and debasement’.47

Some of the explorations into the idea of both resistance and agency in the volume might give an indication of the kind of rethinking that is underway. Almost all contributors agree that gender is just one of the various strategies of power struggle in society, wielded alongside equally potent ones of class and colonialism. Lambert-Hurley thus demonstrates how elite women in Bhopal were negotiating both socially stratified and gendered regimes of colonial health and medicine to assert their own space; Prasad and Anagol highlight the overarching nature of the oppressive structures framed by colonial law and indigenous patriarchy; the women remembering photographs with Forbes were as much opposed to colonialism as to the nationalist patriarchies which dictated their lives; while the gendered regimes of the penal colonies, Anderson points out, were overlaid with other colonial categories of race and criminality.

The problem that we encounter endlessly in describing such examples as acts of resistance is similar to those faced much earlier by scholars of ‘history from below’. Historians like E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill, who were pioneering in their attempts to retrieve a history of relatively low-key people’s movements in the 1970s, had to contend with the strident contemporary academic climate that favoured the documentation of organised working-class struggles.48 Thompson and Hill were attacked for their valorization of people’s movements that had little by way of either a coherent political ideology or a definite plan of social action. Most were not even successful, it was claimed.49 The prerogative of being deemed

47 Gold, in *Listen to the Heron’s Words*, p. 33.
48 E.P. Thompson and Christopher Hill’s works collectively embody evidence of this *passim*.
49 The literature that can be cited here is prodigious. For a start, see the contributions by Raphael Samuel, Stuart Hall, Richard Johnson and E.P. Thompson in the section ‘Culturalism: Debates Around the Poverty of Theory’, in Samuel,
struggles of resistance, it seemed, only accrued to politically conscious, radical, successful movements.

Very much the same difficulty besets scholars of feminism today. In advancing its very definite political ideology—with its inevitable attachment to liberalism, rationality and progress—feminism seeks to highlight women as either radical achievers or victims.\(^{50}\) Fudging those binary positions, recovering intermediate situations, and unearthing role reversals are seen as retrograde, unexplainable, embarrassing. The intervention that we seek to make is thus also one of methodology. By reopening the debate from a different angle and reinstating the woman as subject in seemingly conflictual and fractured positions, we hope to have gone some way in understanding the ambiguous nature of such resistance in South Asia. The essays here do not claim to offer any glimpse of a sublime sovereign feminine consciousness untainted by complicity in conditions that perpetuate oppression; ours is an unidealizing appraisal of both the potential and the limitations of women’s everyday struggles.

The essay by Forbes uncovers hidden stories behind frozen images from family albums in early-twentieth-century Bengal. While at first glance the photographic project to capture familial moments seems to reinforce patriarchy, the study demonstrates that in fact photographs do not simply fix identity. When women (born c. 1899–1914) who took strong stands on political and social issues showed Forbes their family photographs in more recent times, they often recalled ‘small acts of rebellion’, instances when they defied authority and/or social convention behind the photo shoots. Forbes focuses on these


tellings and raises questions about the nature of resistance and its significance for women’s history.

Prasad’s study relies on the court records of the Allahabad High Court from 1875 to 1911 to show how widows systematically pressed for their claims in inheritance disputes involving their deceased husbands’ property. We see widows suing their in-laws boldly and audaciously over their right to receive regular maintenance payments, their right to effectively manage their late husbands’ estates, and even challenging financial abuses such as the usurpation of property. Sarkar too throws a spotlight on widows: her entry point is the 1856 Act legalizing the remarriage of Hindu widows. This is studied in the context of colonial Bengal where reformist agitation for widow remarriage was first initiated. The various debates and controversies in the Bengali public sphere in the wake of the Act—where liberals and the orthodoxy engage in reinterpreting scriptural sources, customary discipline, gender norms, and the nature of Hindu female love and desire, throw up deep fractures in the older discipline of widowhood and conjugality. Sarkar concludes with a brief speculation about the ways in which the limited and rather ineffective law generated discursive shifts in the ideology of gender relations, with conjugality emerging as a terrain for talking about rights and equality. Significantly, women themselves participated in this debate.

The Ghosh and Anderson essays both look at hidden spheres registering discontent in the face of seemingly stable gender regimes. Ghosh’s essay looks at a world hidden away in the inner courtyards of Bengali homes in the nineteenth century—of religion and ritual, resolute domesticity, and sisterhood—which bound women together in strictly gendered ways and marginalized men in their lives. Anderson, on the other hand, turns her attention to a much neglected group, Indian female convicts, and reads their ‘voices’ and ‘silences’ in the colonial archive in a specific historical context—their transportation to colonial penal settlements across the Indian Ocean. Their sudden appearance as a ‘disciplinary problem’ in colonial records after the 1840s, Anderson suggests, represented not only a discursive shift within local power regimes but also the active role played by convict women in reshaping the boundaries of their incarceration. From accounts left by prison officials and the repertoire
of punishments meted out to them, it is clear that female convicts were engaging in everyday resistance against their prison regime.

The essay by Anagol introduces us to the various strategies of individual and collective assertion and resistance deployed by women in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century colonial Maharashtra. By analysing representations of symbolic gender inversion in women’s literature and theatre, the ways in which women used appeals and complaints to assert their rights to property and productive resources in law courts, as well as some acts of husband-killing, the study demonstrates how women were negotiating the everyday domain of power relations. Not just patriarchy, but also the custom-bound, class-caste nexus of colonial India, it is apparent, played a role in shaping the specific nature of these struggles. Lambert-Hurley too is keen to underscore the various axes along which women participating in colonial medical discourses in Bhopal were reconfiguring themselves, including those of class and gender.

By concentrating on certain specific instances when resistance emerges as a dialogue with hegemonic discourses, an assertion of rights, an invocation of moral obligations, a form of violence, or a sign of freedom—as the case may be—many of the essays here offer more complex, conflictual, and counterintuitive narratives on gender struggles and their social ordering. As such, the volume is as much about resistance as the conditions that produce it. At the same time, ‘everyday’ and ‘small’ (even failed) rebellions are shown as complementing larger meta-narratives of more successful women’s movements, reopening and enriching questions of agency in the process. Far from turning away in embarrassment from such seemingly contradictory and ineffective fragments, their significance is both celebrated and interrogated by the contributors to this book.
A WORLD OF THEIR VERY OWN: RELIGION, PAIN, AND SUBVERSION IN BENGALI HOMES IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

ANINDITA GHOSH

The process of rendering women’s literary and antahpur culture as depraved and in immediate want of correction is apparent in nineteenth-century debates on social reform. Women, in such discourses, appear as a major hindrance to the modernist project by continuing to subscribe to outdated rituals, morally polluting print, and coarse and boisterous entertainment. Implicit in such discursive formulations is also a given consensus on gender issues, not just between men but also among women themselves. The figure of the subservient and passive woman has too often shrouded our understanding of what was a much more varied and heterogeneous response to reformist moves.

While the existing literature on the subject treats this as a realm from which all women sought emancipation, paradoxically in our study this domain of tradition and seclusion emerges as a female haven of comfort and solace on the one hand, and gendered solidarity and struggle on the other. Hidden away in the deepest corners of the inner courtyards was a world of their very own—of religion, superstition, and ritual, resolute domesticity, and sisterhood—where
women held their ground and from which they drew daily sustenance. Whether seeking support from female comradeship and a deep personal spiritualism, or surreptitiously contravening unwritten rules of domesticity, or even occasionally rebelling against ritual—we find women in this world challenging the borders of their gendered existence and voicing their disappointment with the surrounding social world.

Unruly Songs and Private Speech: Subversive Domestic Cultures

The image of compliant, submissive wives and daughters composing didactic tracts to further the cause of domestic reform under nationalist male aegis forms the subject matter of much recent scholarship on nineteenth-century Bengal. What is less appreciated is that, despite such strenuous efforts and the censorious frown of the reformist regime, substantial sections of Bengali middle-class women continued to hold on to their cultural preferences. As I have shown elsewhere, much to the agony and consternation of reformers, women were challenging dominant ideas of literary desirability and creating alternative tastes in reading. In patronizing contemporary racy print-cultures—novels, thrillers, and titillating romances—emerging from cheap presses in Calcutta and its suburbs, literate women were implicitly subverting the reformist agenda.¹ The social tensions created by middle-class women participating in particularly bawdy and earthy forms of feminine entertainment in the inner courtyards of the time have been amply documented in other studies.² That it required a concerted effort from educated Bengali men, English missionaries, and administrators to eventually put an end to such practices bears testimony to the enduring nature of such cultural traditions.


Basar, or wedding songs, occupy a unique position in the print scene of that period, in that some of the most virulent attacks by critics in the columns of bhadra newspapers and journals were targeted at this genre. While novels and related 'useless fiction' were meant to corrupt and waste the female mind, basar songs were looked upon as a veritable source of disruptive and aggressive behaviour among women. These were songs sung by women in the bridal chamber on the wedding night, teasing the groom and engaging in verbal wrangles with him. Inherent in them is an honest admission of love and lust in the physical world, and open enjoyment of it.

Printed collections of these songs were much in demand. While women would have certainly had their own cache of songs from a rich oral folk repertoire, it is very likely that they would have read such works and learnt new, more stylistic, songs from them. The title page of one such work carries a little inscription advertising the utility of the work for a basar participant:

If there is anyone who has to visit a basar at short notice
It would be useful to buy a copy of Basar Jamini quickly.  

In the absence of a significant body of women writers creating this literature—let alone women writing in a lighter vein—it was male authors who catered to the demand for such works. But in as much as women patronized the genre, they 'authored' it as well. By the simple act of reading and enacting the songs printed, women were 'producing' the texts they consumed.  

3 See Lalbehari De, Basar Jamini (Calcutta: 1886). Women in these works are represented as coming prepared on such occasions, armed with not just specific basar songs, but also a wider collection drawn from medieval romances and the latest dramas available in print. See Nandalal Ray, Basar Kautuk Natak (Calcutta: 1877), p. 17.

and a half to four annas, which was very affordable. The popularity of the genre is also evident from the fact that social reformers preferred to table their proposals under the covers of a basar song collection. Thus, Batakrisna Ray presented a collection of debates on widow remarriage in 1875 in the guise of a basar drama. Less than a third of the work deals with a basar, the rest is given over to the debate.

In reformist bhadralok circles basar songs were condemned in no uncertain terms and efforts made to wean women away from the lure of such apparent trash. Writing in the early 1880s Shib Chunder Bose, a Brahmo reformer, recorded his distaste for the practice: 'In the suburbs and rural districts of Bengal, females . . . are tacitly allowed to have so much liberty on this special occasion that they entertain the bridegroom (among other things). . . . with amorous songs . . . Frail as women naturally are . . . [this] has undoubtedly a tendency to impair the moral influence of a virtuous life.' As a staunch Brahmo, Bose was predictably casting his criticism in a religious mould, but in this he was not standing far apart from educated Hindu reformist groups. Basar songs were looked upon as a social disease by the entire bhadralok in nineteenth-century Bengal.

In fictional works, basaraghar rituals were vehemently deplored. One such composition, Kaminikusum Natak, portrayed a bridegroom being smothered to death on his wedding night by revelling women. A play, Basar Udyan, offered vicious representations of these sessions, Batakrisna Ray, Basaraghat Rahasya Natak (Calcutta: Sudharnab Press, 1875).

6 Not just in Bengal, but also elsewhere in India, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the singing of such songs was considered a serious shortcoming in women, and lack of proper education among them was held responsible for the evil. See Nita Kumar, 'Widows, Education and Social Change in Twentieth-century Banaras', Economic and Political Weekly, 27 April 1991, pp. 19–25.

7 Shib Chunder Bose, Hindos As They Are (Calcutta: 1881), p. 67.

8 In fact, even Muslim Bengali gentlemen complained of the practice. See Maniruddin Ahmed, Samajchitra (Brahmanberia: 1908), p. 17.

with the participating women boxing the groom’s ears till they turn red. In the Preface to this work its author says:

Perhaps many of you are aware how village women misbehave with grooms in basars. In particular, their cruel methods of boxing the groom’s ears, and unbearably jubilant cries, turn the happy occasion into a prison-house [for the groom]. This work has been presented with the intention of stopping them from perpetrating such excesses, and in aid of the hapless groom. If this is staged widely, [I am] sure people will heed the advice, and mend their ways.  

While offering a relatively sober portrayal of wedding-night rituals in one of his social novels, Bankim too warned his readership in his distinct authorial voice.

Newspaper reports occasionally complained of basarghar excesses, such as the following letter written to the editor of a leading paper by a bridegroom, sharing his plight with bhadralok readers: “There were women all around me . . . Initially I was welcomed by them, but soon they began to use their hands . . . They slapped me and pulled my ears, and almost tore out my beard and moustache. . . . Then, the ladies asked me to seat my wife on my lap, and began to heckle me. I cannot repeat them. You, and the readers can guess what sort of taunts they were.” The editor took strong note of this letter and warned all male elders of households to discipline their potentially disruptive wives, daughters, and daughters-in-law, advising them to threaten forfeiture of such freedom to their women if they continued to abuse it.

It is, however, easier to see basar songs redefining women’s sexuality in playful and mildly combative terms, rather than as posing any

10 Nabagopal Das De, Basar Udyam (Calcutta: Samachar Chandrika Press, 1880), Introduction.
11 Ibid., p. 10.
12 That the message was important is evident in the way it is introduced. The intervention is direct and uncompromising, and the sombre tones of social responsibility belong clearly to Bankim. See Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, Indira, reprinted in Upendranath Mukhopadhyay, Bankimchandra Upayanas Granthavali (2 vols), vol. 2 (Calcutta: 1909) pp. 405-6.
13 Someprakash, 30 November 1863.
obvious threat to men. The mood on such occasions is normatively relaxed and often bordering on the erotic with rites encouraging the symbolic and literal sharing of bodily secretions between man and wife. Even Bose’s diatribes cannot hide the sexual cavorting underlying the depiction of physically abused bridegrooms.

For the subdued women immersed in the drudgeries of monotonous domestic life this is an occasion of unbridled pleasure. The bride is made to sit on his lap and lie down beside him while he is forced to acknowledge her beauty. The groom is frequently slapped and pinched, and his ears pulled. The attempt is to outwit the bridegroom by their thatta and tamasha [jokes].

A typical basar song collection would depict women gathering for the occasion on the wedding night and inviting the groom to match his wit with theirs. The groom is coaxed and cajoled into singing, while the women indulge him with flirtatious jokes and riddles. Sexual innuendoes abound in what appears to be an honest celebration of the imminent physical union. Curiously, the bride never speaks, her shadowy and passive presence being accepted as a general fact. Rather than resembling sexually inhibited prototypes of docile and submissive bhadramahilas, women on such occasions come across as playful and exuberant, engaging in a frank celebration of bodily pleasures. Culturally imposed modesty is thrown to the winds, for the situation warrants an upsetting of normative sanctions. Women’s deliberate advances match masculine desire through delicate poetry as well as undisguised and bold sexual challenges. Disturbingly for the men, the thin line between sexual reticence on the one hand, and aggressive bawdy fun on the other, stands too obviously exposed.

The groom in Shyamacharan De’s work is greeted by basar women with amorous songs. One participant, Anjana, is so won over by the

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14 The groom was thus expected to chew the same spicy betel leaf that had been chewed by his wife. If he proved obstinate, the chewed betel was ‘forcibly’ thrust into his mouth by the women. Shib Chunder Bose, Hindoos As They Are, p. 69.

15 Ibid., p. 67.

16 Shyamacharan De, Basarkautuk Natak, p. 2.
groom that others chide her for being too easy with him.¹⁷ Elaborate and aesthetic metaphors of sexual intercourse interlace riddles asked by the women, and the groom’s answers match their candour.¹⁸ Vivid descriptions of the general teasing and banter follow. The vocabulary depicted is unmistakably meyeli, or ‘feminine’, in character. The orthography matches the speech style. Informal language and depiction of easy familiarity among the characters make for very engaging reading, even if occasionally bordering on the gently abusive.¹⁹

The mock combats present the women in assertive positions, while the groom is uncertain and cautious. In this brief ritualistic reversal of roles, the groom surrenders himself to frolicking women. While they move closer and encircle him, apparently blocking any chances of his escape, the scene betrays heightened bodily tensions. The women vie with one another for his attention.²⁰ Warming up to the session they refer to the groom in familiar (but abusive) terms, generally reserved for partners, like minshe and shala.²¹ They challenge him to match their verbal assaults, in the form of jokes and repartee. If answered well, he is promised rewards in the form of sexual pleasures by one of the participants, the infidelity and promiscuity implicit in the songs seeming to offer titillating possibilities of impending physical experience.

The transgressive roles of apparently meek housewives in basar sessions, I would argue, underline an imagined world of sexual autonomy and power that challenges prevailing ideas of gender

¹⁷ Thus, e.g. (Q.) ‘What hurts the woman most? (Ans.) Misunderstanding with her lover; (Q) What ensnares the unsuspecting man? (Ans.) The female lover’s hidden trap between her hips; (Q) Who is incapable of pleasing a woman? (Ans.) An ugly man.’ Shyamacharan De, Basarkautuk Natak, pp. 11–14.

¹⁸ Thus, words like pnod (arse) and shala (literally, a married man’s brother-in-law, but often used as an abuse) and minshe (derivative of manush, man) are used in reference to the groom. Shyamacharan De, Basarkautuk Natak, pp. 5, 8.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 8.

²¹ In literary depiction such terms would be generally used in the context of rustic or uneducated women, or women from the lower classes.
hierarchy. Representation of such unharnessed sexuality, not tied to either legitimate procreation or the confirmation of conjugal bonds between husband and wife, is tantamount to virtual rebellion. When viewed in the context of a customary belief in the ability of a married woman, by virtue of her sexuality, to disrupt relations even between her husband and his patrilineal kin, the implication is all the more serious. The songs challenge this devaluation of women’s sexuality and articulate a dramatically different perspective on sexual (and implied power) relations between men and women.

Of course, if we are to understand the basar sessions more fully, we need to place them within a tradition of bold and coarse entertainment—such as licentious songs and dances by low-caste occupational groups—believed to be shared by women, which was sought to be systematically stamped out from bhadralok homes in the nineteenth century. Sumanta Banerjee has located a ‘dissenting space’ in such cultural practices shared by women from all classes against prevailing patriarchal values: ‘The mockery of male depravity (as in the barbed shaft aimed at Krishna’s promiscuity, or in the more openly bawdy description of old Vyasa), based on a common recognition of

22 The dangerous sexuality of young wives, and the power that they have over their spouses, it was held, threatened other relationships within the patrilineal household—such as that between older and younger male members, and brother and sister, and senior female affines and young wives. The assumption was that the husband’s natal ties take precedence over the conjugal relationship, as testified in contemporary proverbs:

Shuno bhai kolir abotar; koner bouri bole bhatar bhatar.

Oh hail the Age of Kali; the ‘cornered’ daughter-in-law [newly-weds being assigned only the corner of any room] cites her husband in every conversation.

The insolence seemed doubly unbearable as all newly-weds were supposed to be shy and obedient in their marital home. See Sen, Women’s Dialect in Bengali, p. 60. Lusty wives are seen as suspect in other North Indian traditions as well, as exemplified in a Punjabi proverb: ‘A woman who shows more love for you than a mother is a slut.’ See Sudhir Kakar, Intimate Relations (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), p. 19.

23 Banerjee, ‘Marginalisation of Women’s Popular Culture.’
tyrannical husbands or unfaithful lovers, was no doubt popular with female listeners, who found in the songs a symbolic solace or perhaps even a revenge.24 Influential opinions like those of Guha would see these more as 'ritual rebellion(s)' that 'reinforce authority by feigning defiance' in a temporary, contained, and innocuous reversal of the otherwise authoritative and unquestioned cultural discourse,25 while still others might consider it as a 'subordinate discourse' rather than an alternative or competing ideology.26 But far from confirming social order through mock inversions, as in carnivalesque rituals, Banerjee argues, these traditions allowed women to think and act in ways well beyond their conventional roles, roles that were fearful to men. In fact, the disruptive potential of such seemingly innocent entertainment was given formal recognition when male reformers of the time launched a forceful campaign against them.

As other studies have demonstrated, even carnivalesque 'safety-valve' reversals do not simply confirm authority. Violent clashes during or coincidental with carnivals show how these could be socially dangerous occasions too, with conflict rather than consensus forming the defining moment.27 To regard this as 'dramatic' and 'occasional' is to miss the point. Ritual is part of the everyday, and struggle exists where we think it is absent.28 The 'hidden transcripts' embedded in such songs make for veiled but serious communication about the singers' alternative self-perceptions and social perspectives. Even Guha acknowledges elsewhere that women may have special command over knowledge and speech concerning their own bodies, beyond the purview of their male guardians, and goes far enough to

24 Ibid., p. 140.
26 O’Hanlon, in Haynes and Prakash, Contesting Power.
note that it 'constitutes a challenge which is genuinely dreaded by
male authority'.

Oldenburg's study of courtesans in North India thus uncovers
'the invisible activism in the domestic arena where women invent
and use covert strategies to resist and undermine the oppression and
drudgery of the average patriarchal household.' More recent anthro-
pological writings have also highlighted women's resistance to and
negotiation with dominant cultural representations within the con-
straints set by patrilineal kinships, and indicated the ways in which
they articulate subversive moral perspectives. Folk songs by Rajas-
thani women thus supply many images of women as simultaneously
seductive and fertile, erotic and domestic, with no apparent unease
or conflict. In highly confident and celebratory songs dealing with
women's bodies and sexual desires, they reverse conventional gendered
representations, and yet do not seemingly aspire for a fundamental
change in their social world. In other performative traditions in
North India it is possible to discover women interrogating the prece-
dence that the natal bond takes over the conjugal in their husbands'
households, while paying overall obeisance to the dominant discourse
on kinship and gender.

30 Oldenburg, in Haynes and Prakash, Contesting Power, p. 25.
31 Gloria Goodwin Raheja, 'Women's Speech Genres: Kinship and Contra-
diction', in Nita Kumar (ed.), Women as Subjects: South Asian Histori-
ces (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1994) and Ann Grodzins Gold, 'Sexuality, Fertility and Erotic Imagination in Rajasthani Women's Songs', in Ann Grodzins
Gold and Gloria Goodwin Raheja (eds), Listen to the Heron's Words: Reimagining Gender and Kinship in North India (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
32 Gold, 'Sexuality, Fertility and Erotic Imagination in Rajasthani Women's
Songs', pp. 30–72. Reversal of gendered worlds in songs of abuse, some especially
reserved for welcoming the bridegroom, also appear to be in vogue among
Dalit women in Gujarat. See Fernando Franco, Jyotsna Macwan, and Suguna
Ramanathan (eds), The Silken Swing: The Cultural Universe of the Dalit Women
33 Raheja, 'On the Uses of Subversion: Redefining Conjugalilty', in Gold and
Raheja, Listen to the Heron's Words, pp. 121–48.
The rich repertoire of nineteenth-century proverbs attributed to Bengali women goes some way in uncovering the tense relationship that prevailed between the sexes within a domestic sphere. While it is possible to read some of this as harmless banter, the inherent mistrust and deep contempt for men (usually husbands) that they embody cannot be bypassed. Women’s speech practices as sites of struggle about kinship, gender definitions, and power have been identified in recent studies. Such practices, it is proposed, may be seen as resistance to a dominant cultural order when they offer alternative visions of the social world, and when they are practised and valued despite attempts to suppress them. For those like Susan Gal they represent opposition to a dominant cultural order (rather than mere rituals of rebellion). She argues that women’s speech genres do not always simply reflect or reinforce an already constituted social order; they may function as strategies in ongoing negotiations and contestations in kinship and gender identities. In fact, the authority of normative discourses begins to disintegrate when juxtaposed with the heterogeneity and resistance often evident in women’s speech.

‘If songs are confined to ritually marked spheres that are somehow set apart from everyday life’, comments Raheja, ‘proverbs insert those interrogations into everyday life …’ Kenneth Burke notes that proverbs are nothing other than ‘strategies for dealing with situations’. They present perspectives on the immediate social world and are invoked to represent or make known the discursive positions of the participating group. The implied shared understanding within the group that deploys them, and the communicative function they

34 Raheja, ‘Women’s Speech Genres, Kinship and Contradiction’, and Minault, ‘Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana’, in Kumar, Women as Subjects.
35 Raheja, ‘Women’s Speech Genres’, in Kumar, Women as Subjects, p. 52.
fulfil in specific speech situations, help proverbs reproduce social relations in everyday life.

In our case, we find them questioning an oppressive patriarchy which has lost the moral authority to continue. This deeply critical attitude can be read in the ways in which women confront and voice their rejection of unworthy husbands, with implications for male control over women’s bodies and lives. The alternative moral discourse comes across in the underlined legitimacy of a husband’s principal role as provider. He who is unable to provide, it is offered, should be stripped of his authority over his woman. The lazy and incompetent husband is whipped mercilessly in this undercover world seething with discontent and failed expectations.

_Bhat dile bhatar, noile gramer chihatar_
(He is a husband only when he can provide, otherwise he is no better than the village carpenter)_39_

_Bhat debar bhatar noy, kil maribar guoshai_
(Not a husband in giving rice, but a guru in thumping me)_40_

_Knure bhatarer patkel shitan_
(A lazy husband gets a brick for a pillow)_41_

By contrast, the housewifely role is much celebrated. A deep sense of betrayal and violation resonates in such proverbs and seeks to undermine the power of the male householder. Inasmuch as the apparent rightful authority of the man is based on his ability to provide and look after his wife, any departure from that trusted role

_40_ James Long, _Prabadmala or the Wit and Wisdom of Bengali Ryots and Women as Shown in their Proverbial Sayings_ (Calcutta: 1869), p. 91 (original translation); for another variation of this, see Sukumar Sen, _Women’s Dialect in Bengali_ (Calcutta: 1979), p. 67.
_41_ Sen, _Women’s Dialect_, p. 66 (original translation). Also, _Kaje knure khete dere, bochone mare puriye puriye_ (He is lazy at his job, eats for one and a half, and yet burns me alive with his sharp tongue); _ibid._
_42_ _Koto dhane koto chal, ginni bine al thai_ (The housewife is not missed until she is gone and disorder reigns, just as paddy goes unappreciated until it transforms to rice grains). See James Long, _Prabadmala_, p. 20.
profoundly damages his public self-image. The worthlessness of a husband who has failed to gain recognition in public is brought out sharply when contrasted with his lording over the woman at home:

Darbare na peye thnai, ghere eshe mag kilai
(Not having found a place in the court, I beat my woman when back at home)

Numerous versions of this proverb did their rounds in nineteenth-century Bengal. Tanika Sarkar has observed that the crucial distinction between two forms of subjection—that of the colonized male in the world outside, and the woman in her own home—was needed to bolster the ruined self-confidence of the bhadralk. The helpless surrender to the will of the lord and master—that is, the husband—and the abject misery that follows are also recorded with due frustration and sadness:

Jar kachhe byabostha, shei kore tin abastha
(He who is vested with the powers [to protect me] ruins my life)

Porechhi doijaler hate, jonjal joray dine rate
(I am in the hands of an unruly lout, trouble manifests itself all the time)\(^{46}\)

\(^{43}\) James Scott has shown how public professions of morality and responsibility by the dominant elite render them more vulnerable to criticism from the subordinated. E.g., priestly castes are most brought into disrepute if shown as promiscuous and glutinous; the benevolent image of the Tsar is undermined if his troops open fire on helpless assemblies of his subjects; and the slave owner’s paternal role is shattered if he is shown as whipping his slaves arbitrarily.


\(^{44}\) See e.g., Long, *Prabadmal*, pp. 120, 127; Lalitmohan Ray, *Meyeli*, p. 5; Sukumar Sen, *Women’s Dialect in Bengali*, p. 66.


\(^{46}\) Sen, *Women’s Dialect*, pp. 66–7; *Ami buror ghor korchhi, na kebol tar mon jogachhi?* (Am I the old man’s wife, or someone who merely panders to his whims?), Rev. K.K.G. Sarkar, *Prabadmal* (Calcutta: 1894), p. 3.
It is obvious that such proverbs and songs would not have been spoken out or enacted in more open shared spaces even within households. Because power relations prevented most women from speaking in the presence of senior male affines, they had to confine their voices to the antahpur world, within a closed, sympathetic speech community. Moreover, the topsy-turvy social situations we encounter are imagined or wished rather than either deriving from or replicated in real life. But the very existence of such communication, often articulating a contrapuntal reading of gender relations, and implicitly shared gendered meanings, is suggestive of a subverted dominant discourse. Far from treating this as ‘ritual rebellion’ that leaves ‘the dominant male ideology more or less intact,’ we need to appreciate the multiplicity of strategies through which women made their disaffection felt. As Goodwin and Raheja demonstrate in their study of North Indian women’s songs in more recent times, ‘Resistance and tradition may not inevitably be at odds with each other. Though the women we know in Uttar Pradesh and Rajasthan do in many ways assent to the dominant ideologies of gender and kinship, they also sing of their resistance to such ideologies . . . [and] insert this stance of resistance into their everyday lives.’

The songs and proverbs analysed above may at times perpetuate gender inequalities, but they also present moral alternatives and arguably nourish prospects of active resistance by women in the future. Through them edgy relationships are opened up and tested, discontent expressed, dominance defied, and the solidarity of the oppressed confirmed. Rather than representing innocuous reversals of a monolithic normative discourse, they powerfully invoke another, also valued, belief system. As Scott points out, it is through such ‘hidden transcripts’ that the idea of social transformation is sustained.


48 It is not a coincidence that the most irreverent of fun among women, and their bawdiest, wildest songs and dances encountered by scholars, have been performed in the cloistered inner courtyards of households, often with the doors safely shut. Gold, ‘Sexuality, Fertility and Erotic Imagination in Rajasthani Women’s Songs,’ pp. 44, 46.

49 Ibid.
in seemingly innocuous rituals, jokes, and songs, until active rebellion realizes that vision.  

The Antahpur as Refuge: Bonds of Pain

The world of domestic rituals and ceremonies surrounding female bodily cycles, routine housework, and feminine entertainment bound women together in strictly gendered ways which marginalized the men in their lives. Coupled with the apparent unruliness and raillery prevailing in such spheres that allowed the practice of immodest and superstitious customs and beliefs, this posed a direct challenge to the male reformist spirit. However, for women, such ties provided vital spiritual succour and the means to survive in a harsh and hostile environment—a comradeship built on sisterly co-operation. In fact, the practice of establishing sisterly ties among women not related by blood through elaborate customs was quite common and celebrated women in contemporary poems. The important role played by the figure of the patano bon (mock sister) or shoi (female friend) is palpable in not just fiction and poetry but also women’s memoirs and autobiographies.  

The emphasis placed by many women writers of the time on childhood is significant. It held a special meaning for them as maturity brought with it a debilitating loss of self, and they were inclined to look back fondly on the relative freedom and power of childhood.  

The happy past is commemorated with loving care in one such verse collection. Recalling happy times spent in playing with dolls,

50 Scott, Domination and the Arts of Resistance, pp. 37–41.
51 Such fictive sisterhoods are also evident in other parts of North India in the nineteenth century. See Minault, ‘Other Voices, Other Rooms: The View from the Zenana’, p. 111.
53 Shoroshibala Debi (Basu), Pushpapunja (Calcutta: 1884). Other works written by her include a book of poems, Pushpakantri (1885), and a biography of 107 pages, Swargiya Mahatma Ramcharan Basur Ibancharit (1900). See Usha Chakraborty, Condition of Bengali Women (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1963), pp. 176–7.
singing to the tune of birds and playing in the rain in 'The Pleasant Days of Childhood', the author, Shoroshibala Debi, laments the loss of that innocence in her later life.\textsuperscript{54} Even when the body matured and the duties of a housewife and mistress of the household took over, the mind held on to pleasant memories of the pre-pubertal carefree world. Many themes pertain to the simple pleasures of life, or yearnings for lost friends and family from childhood days. Thus 'Lonely girl' mourns the loss of the author's mother, while 'Description of my dear friend dying' is an elegy dedicated to a close friend.\textsuperscript{55} In the poem 'On meeting my sister after many years' Shoroshibala celebrates the occasion while sketching her heartfelt longing for her sibling.\textsuperscript{56} Trivial things in daily life, such as a tailorbird's nest, a rose, and a cricket make up the subject matter of some poems in such collections: they fascinate their authors and fill them with sensuous wonder.\textsuperscript{57}

In another such work, published anonymously after the death of the child-author at the tender age of 16, a poem, 'Come, come' (Ay Ay), outlines her craving for the carefree and happy days of childhood.

\begin{quote}
Oh my girlhood days do return
Bringing my tender heart with you.
... Oh do return my gem, my young heart.
Come let us play in the dust
And build toy temples of clay.
Oh come, let us sing girlish songs by the river
And count the boats as they sail by
Lost to the cares of the world
... Oh please do come,
My heart yearns to see you again.\textsuperscript{58}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{55} This friend of the poet died in childbirth aged 18. See ibid., p. 83. Also see e.g., Sri R. Debi, 'On the loss of a Girlfriend' (Shokhi Biyoge), in \textit{Bhabhikash}, privately published by Surendranath Bandyopadhyay (Calcutta: 1894).

\textsuperscript{56} Shoroshibala Debi, \textit{Pusparaj}, pp. 11–25.


\textsuperscript{58} Anon., \textit{Akalkusum} (Calcutta: Sanyal & Co., 1896), my translation. Published
The burden of domesticity had been placed too soon on the shoulders of the young girl and she longed for her days of freedom and easy abandon. The crushing weight of housework was multiplied in situations where a stream of constant visitors characterized the daily routine. Images of the caged bird and the mute prisoner are recurrent even in women’s autobiographies.

Rassundari Debi (1809–1900), a self-tutored woman of a prosperous rural household in Bengal, thus encountered a tyrannical regime of domesticity from the moment she stepped into her marital household, leading a life of non-existence and hard labour—no better, she felt, than the cow harnessed to the oilpresser’s wheel. Vividly described in her now famous autobiography, Rassundari recorded her abject compliance to these household duties—overdone, perhaps, to highlight her victimhood.

As a woman of advanced years, and matriarch of an extended successful family, Rassundari recalls her earlier days with much loathing and grievance. The narrative is based on her experiences in a busy landed family as a young bride and mother, crushed under the burden of domesticity and yearning to read. Driven by the need to read a sacred text, Rassundari ultimately succeeds in teaching herself posthumously by the writer’s husband, Indubhusan Mallik, with a short biographical preface. Apparently, most of the compositions in the work were written at the age of 14.

But women could also vent their steam in surprisingly vicious proverbs like the following:

*Aisho kutom boisho khide, pa dhuabo pakur khide; pith bhangbo chela kathe*

(Come dear guest, sit on the bed, let me wash your feet by the pond; and break your back with a wooden plank)


secretly in the dark corners of her kitchen. In its deep religiosity, unpretentious glimpses into the humdrum details of a rural household, and a naivete bordering on ignorance, Rassundari's memoirs pose a challenge to the rational, hegemonic, reformist discourse from within the borders of the middle-class educated world.

In that harsh regime of selfless sacrifice and hard labour, younger women stuck together for comfort. Afternoons spent in relaxed needlework, hairdos, and careless conversation are recalled with much fondness in many accounts. Reading was an integral part of this companionate world. Not just epics and religious texts, but saucy and potentially disruptive novels and plays were shared in this exclusive space, hidden from the vigilant eye of male guardians. In some cases, of course, the very act of reading was considered mutinous, for Bengal's waking to liberal reform and the cause of emancipation for women was slow and grudging. Once she had learned to read, Rassundari organized regular clandestine reading and singing sessions with neighbouring women and her sisters-in-law. Held in a spot rarely visited, with a person constantly keeping watch—lest the forbidden act be discovered—this session embodied a continuous and flagrant violation of household codes within a consensual feminine space, just the kind that men most felt threatened by. The perceived self-sufficiency and impenetrability of such cultural spheres that unnerved patriarchies—not just in Bengal but also elsewhere in India in the nineteenth century—has been noted by several scholars.

The numerous bratas or household rites for young unmarried girls seeking good husbands and prosperity, arranged round the calendar year, created tightly knit communal networks based on shared experiences of starving, worship, and ritual. In the string of

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64 Rassundari Debi, Amar jiban, p. 37.
65 See Banerjee, 'Marginalisation of Women's Popular Culture'; Minault, 'Other Voices: Other Rooms'.
66 One estimate gives 39 such bratas celebrated round the calendar year. See Basantakumari Dasi, Meyeder Bratakatha Ba Brata Mahaty (Calcutta: 1937).
chores attending the ceremonies—from picking flowers and fetching water from the river to drawing decorative floor designs (*alponas*)—there was much scope for mutual bonding and dependence in daily life. Pursuing the same dreams and aspirations, united against common evils, and following strict regimes of diet and duty, the girls could nurture deep friendships and even fictive sisterhoods. Images drawn in loving detail—of grain mounds, cows, fish, and ornaments symbolizing prosperity—reflect a profound emotional investment in such acts. The enduring impact that bratas had on the lives of women can also be witnessed in contemporary artwork, including embroidery.

A caveat is in order here. The hierarchy of oppression in the household was obviously not just organized along lines of gender. The position and prosperity of the immediate male relative, the age, marital status, and child-bearing capacity of the woman, the extent of her dependence on familial resources, and her particular location in the family tree (e.g. as wife or daughter)—all contributed to the formation of a strict pecking order. Widows, young wives, and poor relatives were particularly vulnerable. Proverbs of the time, while expressing a gendered disaffection of patriarchal norms, also mirror some of these internal conflicts:

*Shashuri nayi nonash nai, kar ba kori dor*

_Age khayi panta bhat, sheshe lepi ghor_

(Neither the mother-in-law nor the sister-in-law is at home,
So I care for no one;
Let me first have some stale rice, and wipe the floor later)

——

A typical brata would entail starving during the day, and living only on milk, fruits and sweetmeats. Meals could be taken in the evening, but only after elaborate rituals had been attended to and the concerned deity worshipped.

67 See Abanindranath Tagore, *Banglar Brata* (Calcutta: 1919), for such representative images.

68 Motifs drawn from the brata rituals can be found on quilts of the time. See Sheela Basak, *Banglar Nakshi Knatha* (Calcutta: Ananda Publishers, 2002), pp. 93–7. For some typical brata motifs, see pp. 61 (Plate 70); 90 (Plate 97); and 115 (Plate 135).

The presumed indolence of the housewife in relation to domestic duties, as witnessed above, is a source of incessant complaint. It is assumed that she is given over to a life of comfort and idleness, and spends her time beautifying herself and demanding more luxuries. Nothing about her is pleasing to the in-laws.

_Pan shajte janena, du paye alta porechhe_

(She does not even know how to prepare betel, and yet can paint her feet crimson)

_Beuer cholon feron kemun, turki ghora jemon_
_Beuer golar svar kemun, shalik knekai jemon._

(How is your daughter-in-law's gait? Like a Turkish horse. How is your daughter-in-law's voice? Like a screeching _shalik_ bird)\(^70\)

But such seemingly contradictory positions can be explained in terms of the stresses placed by an oppressive kinship system on married women. The divergent claims and expectations imposed on the woman by dominant norms compelled a struggle for survival within a harsh patrilineal structure in the conjugal household, which split gender identities and pitted one woman against another.\(^71\) Thus, in condoning gendered oppression on the one hand, and challenging it on the other, women can be seen as deploying multiple strategies to negotiate a better position for themselves in an unforgiving and competitive world. Like the lower castes in Guha's study, they both confirm and interrogate, uphold and challenge, submit and rebel.

**Devotion and Lament: Escape and Critique**

The role of women’s religiosity in articulating narratives of resistance is also worth looking at in this context. For many, faith in a personal

\(^{70}\) Sen, _Women’s Dialect_, p. 59.

\(^{71}\) The implications of such split gendered identities for social relations have been discussed by scholars. See Gloria Goodwin Raheja, ‘On the Uses of Irony and Ambiguity: Shifting Perspectives on Patriliney and Women’s Ties to Natal Kin’, in Raheja and Gold, _Listen to the Heron’s Words_; Lynn Bennett, _Dangerous Wives and Sacred Sisters: Social and Symbolic Roles of High-Caste Women in Nepal_ (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983).
God offered an escape from the misery of daily enslavement. A precious and acutely humanized relationship with the divine pervades the writing of Bengali women in the nineteenth century. It would be erroneous to dismiss this as mere religiosity. For, beneath the veneer of private piety lay a bedrock of gloom and despondency regarding their earthly existence. Condemnation of their wretched condition and hope of deliverance to a better world in the afterlife are expressed, both through anxious lament and burning indignation, in many compositions. Uttered within the conventional rhetoric of piety, such indictment confounded discrete binaries of pain and anger, submission and resistance, thus eluding social sanction. For women, suffering has always been part of the politics of emotion, which is the strategy of the marginal and the disempowered.\(^2\) Punishing the body and mutually bearing the domestic burden were also tantamount to martyrdom and eventual elevation in the eyes of both society and God.

The peculiar condition of women writing in colonial India has been the subject of many writings. Partha Chatterjee points out that their writings were vitiated by a double subjection, to colonialism and to indigenous patriarchy. In echoing the sensibilities and concerns of a nationalist patriarchy, whether in their literary style or attitudes towards sexuality, or their roles in family and society, women were caught up in the male hegemonic discourse.\(^3\) But Chatterjee’s views are derived almost entirely from an examination of the lives of important public figures—famous by virtue of their own activities or those of their partners/sons/fathers.


\(^3\) Even in fictional autobiographies, rendered as first-person narrative, women preferred to toe the hegemonic line. As pointed out, the problem was compounded in the case of educated Muslim women whose deafening silence is underlined by not only the lack of autobiographies, but also fictional writing in the autobiographical mode. See Sonia Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 1996) pp. 214, 229–30. See also Meera Kosambi’s work on the analogous lives of women in nineteenth-century Maharashtra: *Crossing Thresholds: Feminist Essays in Social History* (Delhi: Permanent Black, 2007).
It is far more profitable to turn our focus to the less glamorous lives of small-town, rural, and half-literate figures such as Rassundari Debi. For one, it is possible to hear a softer echo of reformist sentiments in them; and besides, the less exalted social position of the writers allows them to write in a less discursive and more personal and honest style. Indeed, as has been pointed out, it is striking how it is not so much women from progressive reformist circles or great and famous women achievers in the professional world who leave behind accounts of their lives, as women from lesser-known circles—housewives, prostitute-actresses, and so on. Writing for such women constituted social worth, and ‘writing self-reflexively both mirrored and made that self.’

Compared to the derivative discursive mode of the didactic tracts written by their more prominent sisters, these deeply personal tales of pain and pleasure are vibrant with a life of their own, and have another story to tell. These are not overtly polemical or confrontational writings by passionate feminists. Instead, these compositions lack both force and agenda. The culture of the antahpur, where women bonded in mutual sisterhood over shared religious and spiritual life, household routines, and exchanges of intimate familial knowledge, oversaw the nurturing of different sentiments and themes. We are confronted with enduring and often touching images of domesticity and a god-fearing world centred on the family and its welfare.

Rassundari’s autobiography has been a subject of much discussion. While some see her as a ‘traditional’ woman appropriated by a modern, male rationalistic enterprise, others object to this ‘unproblematic annexion and conclusion’ of what is seen as a ‘complex, highly individual endeavour to a different master-narrative.’ There is a lot going on in the memoir that makes it a perfect counter-narrative of the hegemonic discourse. Her earthy, uninhibited


narrative, with its belief in the supernatural and indelicate vocabulary, is proof of a problematic 'enlightenment'. And yet, the discursive mode in which she writes, and the absence of the emotional and personal (except in the Divine Presence), is borrowed from the reformist palate. The easy alternation between prose and verse, with frequent and unpredictable transgression of normative speech boundaries; her silent, 'willing', and even smiling shouldering of daily chores contrasts with her deep hatred of domesticity and wifely roles; and the juxtaposition of an unaltering belief in God with a rationalistic and modern conviction in education for girls—these make any straightforward reading of the work quite impossible.

But let us return to the central subject of this debate, which is Rassundari’s acquisition of literacy. As an endeavour pursued independent of her husband and family, and nurtured in the secrecy of her private space, Rassundari’s efforts to read constituted an act of conscious rebellion. As has been pointed out, the reformist project was irretrievably subverted ‘as she surreptitiously scratched the letters on to the blackened walls of her kitchen’. Most importantly, this desire was prompted not by the need to improve her role as mistress or mother within the household, but to read religious literature. Going against the progressive liberal grain, her work throughout shows a burning passion to read texts like the Chaitanya Bhagavat.

Existing writings on the subject, however, fail to make much more of this deep religiosity in Rassundari. I would tend to regard the profession of faith in a personal God, as a cathartic exercise for women like Rassundari, to escape the prison-house of domesticity. For many like her, I would argue, religion offered a deliverance from the misery of daily drudgery and anguish. My starting point here is again Sarkar’s work: Rashshundari worked out a double-edged stance vis-à-vis her sansar [household] and her identity. She underlined her submission and her unqualified success here. At the same time, she took care to indicate that a deeper truth lay veiled behind this apparent reality, this partial truth, this maya that was her sansar. By evoking this contrast, she wrested for herself an interior space which was her faith. But this faith was not simply a sum total of externally

77 Tharu and Lalita, Women Writing in India, p. 164.
78 Sarkar, Words to Win, p. 66.
prescribed regulations. It allowed the individual to inhabit a peculiar autonomous space constituted of an interplay between the everyday and the sacred, the mundane and the spiritual. The long hours women spent in the rooms of worship by themselves perhaps enhanced this sense of virtual liberation.

Women were exposed to a religious environment from a very tender age, much more than their male relatives. Like all young girls of her times, Rassundari’s childhood days must have been spent in learning the intricacies of domestic religious rituals and performance. While the boys went to village pathshalas, girls learnt to prepare clay shiva lingams and draw decorative and ritualistic designs for auspicious occasions. Ceremonial reading of religious works, or katha-katas, was a regular affair both in rural and Calcutta households, as was devotional singing and performance. The earliest texts that young girls were exposed to were, more often than not, religious. Literate at six, Saralabala sought out religious texts like Sridharamangal, Manasar Bhasan, Ramayana, and Chandimangal.

Religious ritual was an integral part of the daily routine. Worshipping the family deity was often the very first thing that women did on waking up at the crack of dawn, before tending to household chores. The act was doubly liberating. It provided an escape from the mundane and material, a rupture with the everyday. It also helped secure a very private space, sanctified by its sacred alterity—and gave the Bengali woman a ‘room of her own.’ Women saw themselves here as freed from their quotidian life, in direct and private communion with God, who held the promise of deliverance from earthly misery. It was an empowering self-perception that, by coughing dissidence in religious piety, successfully played out the ‘hidden transcript’ of flight.

79 Ibid., pp. 65–6.
80 Prasannamoyi Debi, Sekal O Ekal; Bangalakshmi (Chaitra 1337), reprinted in Sen and Bhattacharya, Shekele Katha, p. 58.
Space and social relations are processes that reinforce one another. Granting or withholding access to social spaces both produces and reproduces power, status, and privilege. Creating gendered spaces, it has been argued, thus helps men secure prevailing advantages. But it would be far more fruitful to view space as a realm of competing ideologies, a discursive territory wrought by the struggle of various groups. Gendered spaces thus cannot simply be imposed on women, who could also subvert and create their own socially specific meanings of that space. The spatial politics of Bengali domesticity I see thus underwritten in the bodily withdrawal of women from an oppressive environment into an unassailable spiritual sanctuary. If it is possible to read space as text, as a transparent representation of the ideologies that produce it, then women were writing their protest within the confines of their room of worship.

The sense of complete abandon and surrender to a personal God, often making use of Vaishnava imagery, permeates the writing of many women of the time. Images of physical deprivation (hunger, thirst, pain) and pleasures (sex, even nuptial bliss) serve as metaphors of craving for, and ultimate union with, the Divine. But then miracles and visions with extremely sexual overtones were not unknown. Mysticism could be a bodily and even highly erotic experience in medieval devotional traditions. The ecstasy of physical union with God was enshrined in the legends of medieval women saints like Mirabai and formed an enduring feature of Vaishnavism. Such fleshly or bodily aspects of piety had become an inseparable part of Hindu religious practice in nineteenth-century Bengal.

For women, in particular, the humanity and immediacy of the Divine were invoked through the images of male lover and child. Young girls would bathe, dress, and play with idols of Krishna as the

boy-child. The ritual worship of Shiva by unmarried girls was embedded in the more earthly pursuit of a suitable groom. While it is possible on the one hand to view this as a continuation of women’s nurturing social roles into the religious domain, the intensity and fierce fervour apparent in the daily enactment of such material relationships among the most devout, I would argue, is indicative of something else. It marks the forging of an imagined alternative existence, where there are no impossible demands made on women’s wifely or motherly (or for that matter, sisterly and daughterly) roles, where there is a greater appreciation of their worth, where all actions are self-controlled, where they are notionally free.

For Bengali women writing in the nineteenth century there seems to have existed an intense and intimate relationship with God, which was much more than a simple literary trope. Pervasive despair and disillusionment, coupled with a deep desire for spiritual communion, resonates in many compositions. For those like Prasannamoyi, married at the age of 10 to a man who would turn insane two years later, her marital home must have signified an abode of terror and oppression. The fears of the young girl are expressed quite poignantly in a poem entitled simply, ‘Prayer’, published when she was only twelve.

I am only a weak and dependent woman
Resourceless as I am, how do I reach you?

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88 For a particularly touching collection of poems, see Subodhika Debi, *Nirabadsadhana* (Calcutta: 1913). Titles of individual compositions in the compilation (e.g. ‘In Despair’; ‘In Vain’; ‘Why this Unreasonable Desire?’; ‘Why Sing?’; ‘Thirst for Death’; and ‘Call Me to Your Abode’) are indicative of such moods.

89 In fact, she was to return to her parental home at the age of 12 and spend the rest of her life there. See Sen and Bhattacharya, *Shekele Katha*, p. 231.
My in-laws are unfavourably disposed towards me
Fear haunts my every moment, oh Lord!\(^\text{90}\)

For the terrified Prasannamoyi, like the unhappy Rassundari, the Saviour seemed to hold all the answers to her problems. The staunch belief in their family deity, Dayamadhab, entrenched in young Rassundari by her mother from a very early age, stayed with her for the rest of her life.\(^\text{91}\) Her uncontested and wholehearted submission to the idea is reflected in an incident from her childhood. When an accidental fire burnt their house down one night, Rassundari, along with her young brothers, were moved to the safer location of the neighbouring cremation ground. Fearful of the eerie surroundings, the siblings prayed fervently to Dayamadhab, and their petitions were seemingly answered for Rassundari when passers-by rescued them and returned them to their family. When the next morning, her younger brother confronted her with the information that they had been saved by an ordinary bearded mortal, so shocked and incredulous was Rassundari that she burst out crying and had to be soothed by her mother.\(^\text{92}\)

In the numerous elegies that poured out from the late nineteenth century onwards, on the death of near and loved ones, there is a profound spiritual refrain.\(^\text{93}\) But the style is also highly emotional and sentimental, belying the more individual aspect of such writing. The genres of bilap and biraha (lament and longing) feature prominently in these compositions. Women here wrote with a sense of acute vulnerability and of an immediate and special relationship to God. Unreasonable accusations and impossible demands directed at the Divine addressee, made in a tentative, conversational, and

\(^{90}\) Cited in Gupta, *Banger Mahila Kobi*, p. 58 (my translation). The poem was part of a collection by Prasannamoyi, published in 1879, and entitled, *Adho Adho Bhashini*.

\(^{91}\) This was also noted by Jyotirindranath Tagore in his introduction to the work. See Rassundari Debi, *Amar Jiban*, Introduction.

\(^{92}\) Ibid. pp. 10–11.

\(^{93}\) See e.g., Girindramohini Dasi, *Asrukona* (Calcutta, n.d.), a collection of poems written on the death of her husband; Sarojkumari Debi's poem on losing her son, cited in Gupta, *Banger Mahila Kobi*, p. 212.
self-reflective style, provide touching images of private mystical piety and grief.\(^94\) It is not a coincidence, however, that the Divine refuge was almost invariably male. For typically, acts of rebellion by the ‘weak’ may also reflect and strengthen dominant structures.\(^95\)

Lament, it has been pointed out, is both a literary and rhetorical device for underlining the misery in women’s lives. Through their survey of women’s writings in the nineteenth century in English, Gilbert and Gubar demonstrate how, as a materially and culturally disadvantaged group, women learn to circumvent dominant ideologies and offer critical but disguised perceptions of their social world. The literature that they produce works like a palimpsest, where surface designs conceal and obscure deeper, less accessible (and less socially acceptable) levels of meaning and offer strategic redefinitions of the self.\(^96\)

The unexpected and sudden passing away of people women were close to undoubtedly provided occasion for sharing in public emotions that were very private, with expectations of a sympathetic audience. But it could also serve as a deeper critique of this-worldly social relations—like a mother’s lament at the maltreatment of her daughter by the in-laws,\(^97\) or the helpless material dependence of women on their husbands and sons.\(^98\) Behind the pain and the grief, thus, there invariably lay a sharp, though elusive, appraisal of social reality. When a grieving mother thus detects unhappiness in the cries of a bird, presumably reminiscing its past life, she succeeds in pouring scorn on prevalent patriarchal narratives of conjugal joy. Addressing the imaginary bird she laments:

\(^94\) See e.g. Sushilabala Debi, Sadhana (Calcutta: 1905), especially pp. 48–51.

\(^95\) See Scott, Weapons of the Weak.


\(^97\) Sushila Sundari, Asrumalika (Calcutta, 1905), thus describes how her young daughter, Charu, died at the age of 16 leaving behind a young child, after being very unhappy in her conjugal household. Apparently, she was oppressed regularly and forbidden contact with her natal family.

\(^98\) Tinkari Dasi, Amar Jiban (Calcutta, 1910), narrates the misfortunes of a married, and reasonably prosperous, woman who suffers the successive
Maybe you were a simple and innocent young Bengali girl (in your previous birth);
Not able to withstand the daily torture of your husband and mother-in-law,
You decided to take your life; and when reborn as a bird, sing to the world of your pain.\(^9\)

Most significantly, it offered an opportunity to express unhappiness within a socially acceptable framework, a legitimation of narratives of personal sadness. It is no surprise that the autobiography of Binodini, the prostitute-actress and femme fatale of nineteenth-century Calcutta, despite being such a pointed indictment of her social world, was presented as a bedona-gatha, a narrative of pain. Understandably it was an amalgam of both ‘an apologia and a defence’, and the literary mode in which it is written throws the serrated edges of the author’s social location and her memories of betrayal into sharper profile.\(^{100}\)

Women’s devotion in a domestic situation was characterized by penitential asceticism or suffering. Patient bearing of illness, selfless service to others, and moderation in consumption were organic extensions of that role. But paradoxically there comes across an extravagant sense of self-worth and deliverance in such voluntary acts of abasement.\(^{101}\) Self-inflicted suffering thus becomes a leitmotif of bereavements of her daughter, mother-in-law, and husband within a very short time. Believed to be an autobiography of a prostitute’s daughter, it tells the story of a humble and ordinary life, suddenly unhinged and rendered agonizing by the tragic events. Also see Usha Chakraborty, *The Condition of Bengali Women*, p. 183. A palpable anxiety in another work, written by a mother on the death of her young schoolteacher son, is that of care and shelter in her old days. See Binodini Debi, *Shokshindhu* (Calcutta: 1910), p. 45.


\(^{100}\) Rimli Bhattacharya (trans. and ed.), *Binodini Dasi: My Story and My Life as an Actress* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1998), Introduction, pp. 27–32.

\(^{101}\) Caroline Bynum has shown how medieval women saints could reclaim the authority that had been denied to them within the institutional Christian world, by resorting to severe physical austerity. Caroline Walker Bynum, *Holy Feast Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley: University of California Press), ch. 7.
emancipation. Rassundari crops up again. Her vitriolic indictment of her drab life, enslaving domesticity, and exclusion from the world of letters sit uneasily with her abject surrender and almost supine dedication to her family. Even when she recounts the rather pathetic tale of her missing food all day on account of domestic obligations, the narrative remains quite remote and dispassionate. Physical subjugation is obviated by an almost transcendent moral stance on submission to duties and God’s will. The relentless affirmation of faith in ‘Dayamay’ or ‘The Merciful’ helps redeem suffering and pain, resembling the faith of a saint burning at the stake.

The dream sequences in Rassundari’s autobiography are complex in the messages they transmit. The visions involving her sons—Pyari’s death, and Bepin’s fall from a horse—both apparently proved true in real life immediately afterwards. The recall of such experiences in later life does not invalidate her claims. It is not the veracity of such allegations that is on trial here but a mother’s love for her offspring. Rassundari emerges a martyr, a symbol of selfless sacrifice and unquestioning obedience—these no doubt the source of her later position of authority in the family—rather than a whining housewife. Like all other aspects of her self-representation, this too was a “carefully calibrated and highly controlled strategy” that spoke of conflict, dissidence, and despair.

Towards Reinterpreting Gender and Conflict in the Antahpur

Within the confines of the antahpur, then, women waged their discreet battles, wielding a variety of socially acceptable strategies—from disorderly and raucous ceremonials, acidic proverbs, and sisterly

103 Ibid., pp. 50–4.
104 Bynum has shown how the reputation and authority of women saints in medieval Europe was based on visions or paramystical phenomena, and defined women’s religiosity in fundamental ways. See Caroline Walker Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1991), especially ch. 2.
bondings, to withdrawn and brooding piety. Shielded from direct surveillance and nourished by oppression, this secluded space proved an ideal breeding ground for gendered social discontent. Its significance is apparent from the unremitting efforts of the bhadralok to penetrate and reform the antahpur as a social site, and the corresponding efforts by women to preserve their cultural order. Undeniably, some sought escape via the ‘liberal’ route of educational reform under male tutelage, but others resisted such easy co-option. For women like Rassundari, entry to the world of letters had to take place on her own terms. Otherwise, unquestioning surrender to the reforming regime signalled newer forms of enslavement. The general consensus on gendered matters—fed by a rich subculture of restrained but resolute subversion of patriarchal codes—drew women together in tight circles of mutual empathy and solidarity. While not suggesting fundamental change, their thoughts and actions constituted some sharp interrogations of the existing social order, expressed unambiguous discontent, and posed moral alternatives.

It would be useless to continually peg the debate about resistance on a dramatic rupture between unchanging tradition on the one hand and radical social transformation on the other. The tremendous potential of hidden domains of conflict in fostering enduring social opinion and struggle has not been sufficiently appreciated. To regard them as ‘occupying merely the social space left empty by domination would be to miss the struggle by which such sites are won . . . and defended by marginal social groups in the teeth of power.\(^\text{106}\) It is only by reclaiming the visibility of such spheres that we can find resistance where we did not see it before, and read conflict in seemingly normative situations.\(^\text{107}\)

\(^{106}\) Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance*, p. 123.

\(^{107}\) A portion of this essay appeared earlier in my book *Power in Print: Popular Publishing and the Politics of Language and Culture in a Colonial Society, 1788–1905* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006); my thanks to the publishers for permission to use it here.