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Oranges for the Girls, or the Half-Known Story of the Education of Girls in Twentieth-Century Banaras

Nita Kumar

In 1933 each girl in the Agrawal Samaj School was charged one anna as *chana shulk* ('fees for grams'), and was given, as convenient, chana and fruits at recess. Kind-hearted people like deshratna Babu Shivprasad Gupta's garden yielded oranges and other fruits that were also occasionally distributed.

The statement, tucked away in one of the many thick Agrawal Samaj magazines [1] I had been perusing, made me smile. Not because the fruit distribution was not an excellent idea; but because the pompousness of the declaration (*deshratna*- 'jewel of the nation'-and 'kind-hearted' in this context) is in inverse proportion to the interest displayed in the first teachers of the school, the women's conference organized annually by them for the Samaj, and the school curricula and the response of teachers' students and guardians to it. The fact of the girls receiving oranges from a rich and patriotic man being more significant than most other facts about the students was an amusing comment on what is considered important in women's history, and also an indicator of the problems in trying to recover any section of this history.

I am interested in understanding how and what girls studied in early twentieth-century Banaras, and here I will carry out a partial investigation through the medium of three girls' schools. In Part 1, I look at Agrawal Samaj School, not so much to give a complete history of the institution as to outline some broad facts and alternative narratives. In Part 2, I look at Arya Mahila School, which had a woman founder who wrote voluminously, leaving no room for complaint of dearth of records. But she has been deified into a saint, a goddess, supposedly above 'worldly' concerns, and this represents the pattern of accommodation of many female activists within mainstream Banaras culture.

In Part 3, I look at Durga Charan Girls' School, reverting again to the 'problem of oranges', the question of what is being repressed when certain statements are made, and how that repression is actually a wielding of power, to construct, define, re-tell and authenticate. An additional theme that arises from the case of Durga Charan concerns the nature of the new curriculum chosen by the people of Banaras in the twentieth century. This new discourse of modernity itself

succeeded, if not exactly in fashioning new individuals, at least in preventing a reproduction of the old. The plans of the founders and managers of all three schools regarding the socialization of their girl students were unsuccessful partly because of these larger changes in discursive formations. Men did not achieve the Indian-Western-synthesis they rather vaguely (judged by their educational experiments) strove for; and nor, for largely the same reasons, did women achieve the Aryan-modern-educated mother synthesis.

There is little evidence to suggest that women received any kind of formal schooling in late nineteenth-century Banaras at all. The institutions where education was imparted-tols, pathshalas, vidyalayas, madrasas, and maktabsh-were exclusively for boys. The three British-controlled or British-aided institutions that had been set up-Cutting, Memorial, Jai Narain Ghoshal, and Sanskrit College-were all for boys. The only formal institution for girls that we have record of is a Normal School set up by the Anglican Missionary Society.

This is not to say that women were not (i) educated, (ii) trained, and (iii) learned. Literacy was imparted informally at home, by senior family members, sometimes to both boys and girls together, more typically separately to the girls, occasionally by semi-professional teachers such as a *panditayani* or a *maulani*. In many occupations, formal training was imperative (singing and dancing); in others, a more informal training (crafts, midwifery, housework). The former involved recognition of guru, school, length of training and level of achievement. The latter did not, but was nevertheless looked upon as systematic, rule-bound, demanding. Finally, there was a knowledge of the scriptures, mythology and the *shastras*, which most women had to a different extent, and which was acquired over many years from many sources, orally and informally. [2]

Given this, and given the absence of any girls' schools in Banaras, we can say that in the nineteenth century there was little worrying about what the new British system of education had to offer or was going to mean to girls. This attitude may be expressed negatively as a stubborn prejudice against education for girls. In 1885, 92 percent of the population of the then North western Provinces and Oudh was quite illiterate, and one in 350 females received an education. In Banaras the number of girl students crossed the 1000 mark in 1924, and 2000 in 1932.[3]

In Banaras there was a marked resistance to British education on the whole. The testimony regarding Sanskrit College put this succinctly and brought out the contrast: the popularity of Sanskrit education demonstrated 'the maturity and strength of Hinduism' as well as 'the dense heathenism of the Sacred City'. [4] Regarding girls, the government regretfully admitted that the people were unappreciative of official efforts, and 'did not want their girls to be educated'. [5] Their reasons, we may surmise, were partly the same as for boys-it was a foreign

and 'meaningless' system-and partly peculiar to the status for females: the new education meant physically leaving the home; coming under the influence of unknown, mostly Christian teachers; and being socialized into norms that threatened social cohesion and the order of morality.

In the twentieth century there began, if not exactly a flurry of activity, some movement to mobilize effort for girls' education. This was typically within the jati structure, jati referring to the category, not only of caste and subcaste, but of linguistic, regional and religious identity. Women-also a jati category-became for each such self-identified group a sign; and while the protected woman had been a sign of male superiority, she became within years the sign of male backwardness. It was the protected and also awakened, reformed and educated woman who was the new persona that had to be constructed. A similar agenda confronted men: how to remain rooted in tradition and also modernize, but there was for women a double leap to be taken since they were emphatically not regarded as the actors.[6]

The Agrawal Samaj School

The Agrawal Samaj, founded in 1896, registered in 1904, made not a sound about females at all in its fast twenty-two years. It held regular annual meetings, worried about land and space, the appropriate orthodox rituals for its sons, the state of business (specially silk), space for its boys' school, and helping destitute members. Not a single resolution was passed in which women figured in any way. The exception was the noting and acceptance of a gift of Rs 12,000 by one Shrimati Jarau Kunwar, widow of Nanhe Babu, from the sale of her house. All the other donors of money for a school building, 22 in all, were men. Its membership grew from 6 to 98 in 22 years, keeping an average of 65 per year, and was, of course, strictly male.[7]

The Girls' School, Kanya Pathshala, is described as established in 1918, the twenty-second year of the Samaj. In retrospect, the history was seen in a different light:

Fifty years ago when the English had made us their mental slaves in order to rule over us, it was laudatory for one man to get the kind of idea in his head that women's education was necessary, and that only an educated woman can bear such patriotic sons who will break the chains of slavery and construct a new nation. This pure and far-sighted goal inspired this school where today over 2000 girls receive an education and over the decades have influenced so many girls who are spread over all parts of the country, building up India.[8]

The founder was Satyanarayan Prasad Agrawal (1895-1931), and the school was merged with the society only four years later. 'With a lot of pleading, begging, and convincing, five girls got admitted to the pathshala . . . This school ran for many years with one teacher in the Harishchandra Peshwa temple at Sora Kuan [a dense lane off Chauk, the heart of the city].'^[9] Damodar Das Shah was appointed in charge of the education of girls upon merger of the school with the society in 1922. With half a dozen girls, one teacher, and no building, it is not clear what he was exactly deputed to do. Whereas his name is present in each version of the Agrawal Samaj history, as is a complete list of all the secretaries in charge of girls' education from that date onwards, the first teacher who held the fort is unnamed, as seen in the reference just quoted. Apparently she was the same Jayanti Devi mentioned by Headmaster Jiwan Das in 1945 as the first headmistress.^[10]

Only in 1950 was the foundation laid for the present building of the school near Town Hall by Seth Chiranji Lal Bajoria in memory of his mother, Sritimati Dakhi Devi. The building was completed in 1953. The only two ladies mentioned at all in the 'Golden Jubilee Souvenir' of the caste association are Dakhi Devi, in whose name Bajoria donated land, and Krishna Devi, the second headmistress. The latter, about whom nothing is told us but the name, was innovative and started an annual Mahila Sammelan ('women's conference') after the annual Samaj conference, but what this included or was like is also not described.

The Agrawal Samaj members are neither the first nor the last to be guilty of weighing the scales in the creation of their history-in this case in favour of the men who developed the ideas for service of their caste, those seths who lent or donated gardens or buildings (or oranges from gardens), and those who occupied various offices in managing committees. The term used is shradhdhanjali, a tribute of holy respect, paid to forefathers. Against these, those ignored are the ones who taught, brought and returned students; organized the daily running of lessons; and, of course, permitted men to have the necessary leisure for all this public activity through management of the homes-the same management that led both males and females to claim when the question arose that women did not have 'enough time' for public work. I bring up this second point only because all the ideological literature produced by the education activists in Banaras is so saturated with identification of the woman as mother and housewife, that one cannot help but look for at least these mothers and housewives as one turns the pages of records of work done.

Some of the questions that remain unanswered today, largely because never raised in the massive records kept by the Samaj, deserve to be discussed:

(a) Was the Kanya Pathshala really a chance idea of Satyanarayan Prasad, or was there perhaps some demand for it from among women? Oral reports from women educated in the 1920s and 1930s suggest that it was girls who had to overcome resistance from guardians and neighbours, often through tears, vows, and hunger strikes.[11]

(b) Who were Jayanti Devi and Krishna Devi, the first two important teachers/headmistresses? When all those who contributed to the building up of the school are named: patrons, -presidents, secretaries, departmental heads, members, assistants, donors-all hundred percent male-the names of these pioneering teachers are completely absent. Indeed, on the occasion of the Golden Jubilee celebrations, the category 'teachers' is simply not included in all the categories remembered and thanked for the school's progress![12]

(c) Whereas the Samaj pressed for 'education for good mothers', did not the teachers themselves, and the young students, and perhaps even some of the mothers/parents have the notion of 'education for employment'? Interviews with older educated women give us a picture of many of them, at least, conscious of education as a gateway to employment and not motherhood.[13] From the Samaj's own records we know that many of the girls were not from very prosperous families, [14] so did they not need to work, even if they did not wish to? The fact that education was free for certain girls is made much of, again implying a low economic level; although wealthy parents liked free education for their daughters too. [15]

(d) Was the shifting of the school from one inadequate building to another not a reflection of the limited interest in the subject on the part of Samaj members? Were they simply waiting for an appropriate donor to appear, even if it took thirty-two years?

When Bajoria donates land and/or money in memory of his mother, thanks is given by the committee to Shiva, to the cooperation of the public, and to the continuous efforts of the workers of the Samaj-but not to the woman whose qualities must have inspired the donor (although the virtues of a mother .are always on the Samaj's mind), or the teachers and other workers who carried on the school, with 630 students by 1947, in a temple garden, a home, a pilgrimage house, and the society office, in turn! [16]

The sight of the building in Goighar today and its evident self-importance immediately impresses with the notion that the Agrawal Samaj has achieved great things in the field of girls' education. And one hears echoes in the city of how 'good' girls schools and colleges are, 'Agrasen, for example' (Agrawal changed its name to Agrasen in 1967, after a government directive to drop all caste nomenclature). But it took the Agrawal Samaj fifty-four years after its inception to begin work on the building, and they were the *richest* caste in Banaras.. Not that it may not have been difficult to raise funds, but one hears of no fund-raising activity either.

What does the school being 'good' mean? Does it, or has it ever, striven for greater freedom for girls, a better future, economic strength, professional training or outlook, career counselling, even education as to how to combine marriage with a possible career? 'Good' in Banaras parlance signifies:

- i. Lack of indiscipline (bandhs, boycotts, protests, marches, demonstrations, riots) such as characterizes boys' schools;
- ii. An average to satisfactory pass percentage in High School and Intermediate;
- iii. A large attendance, with figures growing progressively;
- iv. A building, and, perhaps, endowment, both required for government aid and recognition.

When Agrasen received this aid in 1960 and opened its Intermediate section in 1961 (without science; that was to take thirty years more), 'people had, by that time, come to understand the necessity of girls' education'.^[17] One might rather say, 'Agrawal Samaj had come to understand...'

(e) Linked to the question of quality is the issue of curriculum. As we shall see with greater clarity in the next section on the Arya Mahila School, the silence on this issue is perplexing with the weight given to producing/creating a certain 'type' of person. When the Kanya Pathshata started, it was a primary school with a curriculum similar to- other Hindi

pathshalas. Extra subjects were health education, religious education and art. English was introduced in 1931; class 6 opened in 1940, and classes 7 and 8 in 1941. Three years later we are told: 'Girls now sit for the Anglo-vernacular lower middle and Vernacular lower middle exams regularly with success.' [18]

When other subjects, such as sewing and music, were introduced, they had a chequered career; when problems with space, time or staffing arose, it was these 'extra' subjects that were dispensed with, never the government sanctioned ones. There is no information in the Samaj records about the nature of 'religious education' imparted; indeed, with the exception of the 'extra' subjects, there is no discussion whatsoever of curriculum. This is a problem that I have discussed elsewhere and that will arise again in our analysis of Durga Charan and Arya Mahila schools: however, we may evaluate the goal of these new government-model schools, the goal remained unattainable while the schools themselves marginalized what they considered 'indigenous' (subjects, rituals, physical layout) in favour of the modern and the progressive.[19]

The Agrawal ideology did not aspire to Western bourgeois notions of rights, freedom or equality; and stressed on the contrary inherited hierarchies, social bonds and mutual responsibilities (of siblings, spouses, hosts and guests, parents and children), envisioning a future where they would retain the best in these values together with an acquired veneer of Western science and knowledge. The ideological question that is of interest in this paper does not concern the strength of patriarchy and the techniques of incorporating women into this new schema of change, on which so much has been written already.[20] The ideological question of interest to us is, given that we have established that the conceptualizations of women that exist in the literature are men's conceptualizations, why do we continue to accept them, merely critiquing them, and exercising our interpretive capacities on them in various ways? A more difficult but useful exercise may consist of trying to recover alternate and dominated representations often invisible, always hidden. When the data are scarce, as is certainly the case with the women of the Agrawal School, we may simply have to develop alternate techniques of narrating or hypothesizing the past.

One interesting prejudice is that which trusts the written word above the oral one. Whereas the records of the Agrawal Samaj eulogize certain men, interviews with women activists of the past put the weight of choice, initiative, and effort on the women. An alternative narrative that may be constructed in the style of the *shraddhanjali* we have just quoted, if we were to take the oral testimonies as seriously as the written ones, would go as follows:

And let us remember all those brave women who, as raw girls, had the courage to withstand the hateful comments and condemnation expressed by family, friends, and strangers; who often went hungry and undertook other painful penances to extract certain rights and liberties; who actually could dare to wear chappals and be stared at for doing so as they marched off to their schools. It was thanks to their steadfast efforts that the public in general and the men in the Samaj in particular slowly accepted them and developed a will to act.[21]

A related prejudice favours offices and titles above the unnamed work of those merely active but not bestowed with an office or title. In the education of girls women remain anonymous even when they are engaged in more important work than men. This is part of the larger objectification of women, where they are never directly addressed even when physically present, as they were at the school celebrations, and remain the third person, drained of any will to act. This is doubly ironic because unlike in, say, a reform movement, girls were not merely the objects of education but the very subjects—the teachers, the principals, and the inspectresses.

With this in mind, we could construct an alternative narrative with Satyanarayan Prasad Agrawal, the founder of the school, or Damodar Das Shah, the so-called manager, simply empty names or positions, and pay tribute instead to Jayanti Devi or Krishna Devi: how they sat together into the night and discussed plans, were fired with the need to act, developed ambitious ideas, and finally gave up everyday comfort and peace of mind to pursue these ideas . . .

To conclude, the history of Agrawal Samaj discloses the most obvious kinds of hegemonic activity at work, where no notice is taken of women's demands, expectations and activities, and no recognition is given to their work in building up the institution. Nor is it likely that they possessed the will or agency that we may attribute to them by simply replacing a Damodar Das as eulogized in the literature with a Jayanti Devi. Nor, given the division of labour in the family and the acceptance of it in general, was it likely that girls planned futures of autonomous work—when even for boys it was progressively clear that schools had no direct routes that led to jobs. Agrawal women were important in the reproductive process through the marriage links that united merchant communities across distances. They shared the ideology, worked within the cultural system, and did not seek to upset the overarching economic system with its formal and informal channels of socialization. Not only were they 'contaminated' by patriarchy and left the larger system unaffected in their notion of a small, private circle of autonomous action, they did not develop any perspective of planned action across time or space. But they certainly, even with their economic dependence on men, adopted many ways to act that were

marginally permissible and that could lead to expanded spaces for action-such as, at the simplest level, by choosing to teach and to study.

Arya Mahila Vidyalaya

This school was the main project of the Sri Arya Mahila Hitkarini Mahaparishad established in 1912, itself an offshoot of the Bharat Dharma Mahanmandal set up by Swami Gyananandji to combat the forces of change that were threatening 'the home of Aryan culture'. [22]The trust for women had two parts: the first, a widows' ashram with four sections: (i) to teach Indian music; (ii) to teach domestic science, crafts, religion and languages; (iii) to do propaganda for *varnashram dharma* and a domestic role for women; and (iv) to train Indian governesses who would be better than foreigners. It was against the re-marriage of widows and in reply to the question, if widows do not re-marry, how will they survive, the organization asserted that it could answer: if women want to survive, our organization has begun unparalleled work among widows with which they can happily manage. Those who want to be fallen of course cannot be helped by anyone in the world.

Then, to serve the cause of Hindi literature was started *Arya Mahila*, a quarterly, later a monthly. A series called *Vani Pustak Mala* was published to fill the vacuum of appropriate reading for women. The second part of the Mahaparishad consisted of a regular government- aided school for girls called Arya Mahila Vidyalaya.

The management of the organization was completely in the hands of *paramvidushi* and *tapasvani* (the very learned and saintly) Vidya Devi. A widow from Bihar, she came to Kashi around 1920-21, took initiation from the swami, learnt philosophy and the shastras plus the management of the different trusts from him. She demonstrated, according to the records, the absence of gender divisions in her activities.

Arya Mahila School was inaugurated in 1933, first as a primary school. In 1939, it was recognized as a high school by the Education Department, in 1947 as an intermediate college, and in 1958 as a degree college. By 1962 there were 1300 girls in all. What is special about the school is not its growth, but that from its records we have the most complete picture among all the schools of Banaras of the construction of a mechanism that would create a certain kind of individual. The list of problems with prevailing education was long, but revolved around the lack of realism in the curricula and the overt materialism of it. The solution of Arya Mahila School to this was to take over the existing model of the British school and recharge it with a new spirit. We are fortunate in that Vidya Devi wrote copiously, usually in the journal *Arya Mahila*. Almost every issue of the

journal saw her reiterating how much contemporary education was at fault. In contrast, the discussions of concrete schemes for action seem very feeble. Vidya Devi's technical suggestions consisted of: (i) the publishing of a series of books on Hinduism to be used in the classroom; (ii) special classes in religion; and (iii) 'stirring into' (their term) school life certain rituals, such as *yajna* and *puja*, religious discourses and speeches on annual functions and special occasions, as well as everyday transition rituals in the fields and classrooms.

The school journal in its articles quoted extensively from Manu and *Durgasaptshati*. It reiterated how there had been a great absence of efforts for centuries to rescue women jati from the great pit into which they had fallen. The kind of education given by Arya Mahila, by contrast, was appropriate for the 'true progress, welfare, pleasure and peace, and national development of a nation like India'. That nothing concretely was done is evident from the wordy and abstract discussion on the subject in the magazine, and the absence of any pedagogic suggestions.

The one suggestion that may be considered concrete were the classes for religious instruction. These were arranged beyond and in addition to the government syllabus and, as I have discussed elsewhere, would be ineffective for that very reason. [23] All the subjects of the much criticized government curricular were retained including the useless and despised (as Vidya Devi rated them) algebra and geometry, and then the desired subjects were taught as optional on top of these. All schools that were interested in retaining religious instruction or teaching any other relevant subject found that government regulations were such that there was no time for extra subjects. Yet they persisted in introducing these new classes and pretending that students could carry this double load.[24]

Apart from some rituals and the extra classes, Vidya Devi like other educationists had no suggestions for her school. By contrast, the education minister K. L. Shrimali, talked at an annual day of the lakhs of teachers and nurses needed by the nation. Similarly, Shri Prakash in a 1960 welcoming address, gave a speech with concrete ideas about how education should proceed. Education for jobs was all right, said he, but should not be such that girls run away from housework. The parents had sacrificed the daughters' help at home and were giving them an education. So girls should look after the home alongside. The organization they experienced in school was what they should emulate at home, so that they became competent, and from managing the home moved to managing the nation. Alongside, they should make efforts towards good behaviour, civility and unity. There were many differences in India of caste, religion, language and province . . . these must be removed to create unity 'I hope that your school will be helpful in solving these problems'. [25]

There was not a whisper of such suggestions from the Arya Mahila family. In 1943, even as the school was trying, to meet an intermediate section, it was expressing disappointment with ever achieving any worth-while result within the existing, educational system.[26] Vidya Devi, however, was an unmatched fundraiser. On one of her numerous trips, all detailed in the magazine, she collected Rs 90,000 from Bombay; Rs 68,000 from Calcutta; and again Rs 76,000 from Bombay. Her donors were typically Marwari and Sindhi seths: Khatau, Somani, Bhuwalka, Kanaudia, Bajoria, and so on.[27] She collected the funds for the grand, al of resurrecting the ideal of Aryan womanhood and motherhood, simultaneously preserved and expanded the institution based on the British government model, and complained that achievement of the goal was impossible within this model.

The Arya Mahila School offers us the following conclusions about girls' education: it is the clearest case of a grand philosophy that fails for reasons of a familiar contradiction: the logistical problem of following a modern government syllabus and simultaneously breeding a new generation of Aryan mothers. The much trumpeted Indian culture to be transmitted by her school restricts itself, and that with mixed success, to art, music, dance and recitation, all described as 'optional subjects'.

In her own life, Vidya Devi preached one set of things but demonstrated the opposite: autonomous living, independence from men, free speech, self-dictated movement and action, political interests, and decision-making. In her voluminous writings, by contrast, her commitment to *varnashram dharma*, non-revision of a marriage age for women, opposition to property inheritance for them, and even a pro-sati position was very striking. Why does she, and indeed other women like her, who are seemingly active agents in their own lives, consistently promote male ideology? Because they are contaminated, as we know, by patriarchy. Because they wish to be accepted within the system, and adopt what seem to them the only permissible ways to be active. But also because of their economic dependence; even for a widow with no private ambitions, it is men who are the donors for her public work.

Arya Mahila's is the case of the most disguised patriarchal ideology in so far as its spokesman was always a woman who speaks throughout in a male voice. As with Agrawal Samaj members, she recognizes no female assistants, except one Sundari Bai who is given passing mention. She never includes, in her descriptions of the school, praise or recognition for active female co-workers like teachers, or even ever addresses her staff or students directly. Given the pattern and the weight of her fund-raising, we may question if hers is not in fact the voice of her male donors.

While emphasizing the need for the training of widows, and girls in case they become widows, there is no articulation of a need to work. Only the speeches of Shrimali and Prakash broach the issue and highlight the absence of it in Vidya Devi's many writings. Yet, it would seem that Vidya Devi was ideally placed to argue in favour of training or qualifying women to work, being the accepted and recognized independent activist that she was. Why she did not do so must have had something to do with her own philosophical proclivities, her calculations of success on her impressive fund-raising ventures, and her assessment of what was possible to assert even for an independent widow with a strong personality.

That Vidya Devi was referred to as an ascetic and eulogized for being 'other-worldly' precisely when she was busy and successful in worldly affairs is really the key to the paradox. As an ascetic she had a freedom to travel and interact that was totally denied to ordinary women. Her management of the school and the other ventures of the Trust could be explained as deriving from her dedication to the cause of her guru, Swami Gyananandji. Her orthodoxy reinforced the image of religiousity, and her strength and perseverance in building up the school could be attributed to the concentrated energies achieved by her austerities.

There are no grounds for imagining that the role of an ascetic was imposed on Vidya Devi by her male peers or that she was merely the victim of a certain discourse. On the contrary, there was a very constraining discourse of woman as *grihastini* ('homemaker') that she escaped. This totally dominating discourse specified the 'place' of women in the private, internal domain, and the role of women as mediators and transmitters, including the role as the necessary reproductive link. A woman's dharma, in this discourse, consisted of service, by which she became heir to the fruits of all those karmas that men sought through ritual, gifts and meditation. But what then of the widow who was unable to follow this single path of acquiring merit through service to her husband? On the one hand, she was inauspicious; the discourse of widowhood was a coercive weaving of knowledge and power that tied the individual to an identity in a constraining way. But on the other hand, her 'otherness' rested on an ambiguity that could get re-constituted as a space.

For the widow was available what I have called elsewhere the larger Hindu discourse of '*atma*-development'. Freed from the duty of *patiseva* ('service to the husband'), which would have been consensually ranked as first among duties, a widow could engage in that series of actions that led to control over one's physical self, and gross energy become transformed into spiritual power. This could include learning or not learning from a guru, practise or not practise of certain rituals; but the basic components seem to have been the solitude of bereavement and a deliberately cultivated lifestyle of strict austerity. Vidya Devi, like many other educationists in Banaras who were widows, was often described

with reference to her lifestyle characterized by vegetarianism, early rising and early retirement to bed, plain and coarse cotton clothes, sleeping on hard surfaces, and giving *darshan* ('sight of herself'), with difficulty. She, like other activist widows, was referred to as 'saint-like' and 'goddess-like' (of *satvik pravriti* or *devi swarup*). While the scope and impact of her public activity matched that of any male public figures in Banaras, her image was completely fashioned by this aura of 'other worldliness'.^[28]

I am inclined to consider this as an instrumental technique adopted by widows like Vidya Devi rather than as a victim role imposed upon them by male normative discourse partly because it was so successful. Within Hinduism of course such 'sainthood' with its discipline is regarded as an instrumental technique that almost guarantees success in whatever goals one sets oneself. But in the public world as well, success was possible by this effective deployment of the symbols of sainthood. The 'saint' achieved a freedom of movement and expression, of interaction and opinion that totally escaped from the constraints of the prevalent gender discourse.

Of course these widows worked within existing institutions to consciously uphold the traditional bulwarks of society, and some, like Vidya Devi, championed the new orthodox anti-reformist Hindu (male donors) discourse to an extreme. It is their action we must judge them by, and the consequence of their moderate liberal action was a radical one. Institutions like Arya Mahila School were a radical departure from the kind of private schooling an older generation had received at home. By working firmly within the government model, never challenging any of the principles behind curricula or school rituals at all, trying merely to mix some more 'indigenous' practices with them, which had limited success, Arya Mahila in fact permitted girls to shake off in many cases the *grihastini* discourse and choose alternatives for themselves.

Durga Charan Girls' School

Little is known about the founder, Krishna Bhamini, a widow, except that she came from Calcutta not as a 'deprived' woman, that is, a child widow from an unconsummated marriage, or penniless, or friendless. She was one of those once-happy women who were 'highly charged with nationalism and independence' ^[29] and wanted to teach other widows, to read, for example, so that they kept fruitfully busy, by reading, say, the *Ramayana*; and to work by hand. Thus was a new school started with free education and a syllabus half-academic (English, mathematics, history) and half-vocational (weaving from rags).

This widow had company in that from the 1920s on there came to Banaras widows who did not take their widowhood as a burden to be merely lived with.

Some were from Vivekanand's Sister Nivedita School in Calcutta; one outstanding example was Basumati Ma, who came around 1907, and was famous as the author *Banga Lalana*. Krishna Bhamini was also a student of this institution. In 1918, she started a school with three girls in her father-in-law's house in Ramapura. Upon her death three months later, Hemangini Guha, about whom nothing is written in school records and who is not even mentioned by the manager in 1945, continued the school in another house and called it Krishna Bhamini Girls School. In a few years it had grown to class 6. It was the first such institution where 'Bengali girls could receive proper education in their mother tongue'[30]-at a time when other communities had no arrangement for girls' education at all.[31] A nationalist, Hemaprabha Majumdar, together with Hemangini Guha, renamed the institution Vivekananda Vani Bhawan Krishna Bhamini Balika Vidyalaya and had it registered in 1924. It was recognized in 1931 as Anglo-Bengali Lower Middle Girls' School.[32]

At this point a discrepancy occurs in the school's records: 'some noble-minded gentlemen' are supposed to have worried about the poor condition of the institution and adopted the cause of education. Their association, Nari Shiksha Vidhayani Sabha, took up the school and amalgamated it with the Brojo Sundari Bayan Vidyalaya and then renamed it Vivekananda Vani Bhawan.[33] This latter version could be placed in doubt because it is the manager himself talking about noble-minded and efficient management, and because the women ignored by him are mentioned in both oral reports and in most of the contemporary write-ups.[34]

To continue with the history, the Municipal Board gave a monthly grant from February 1924 onwards, Rs 20 growing to Rs 150, till it was directly recognized in 1931. A prosperous and religious Bengali businessman, Durga Charan Rakshit, lived in Sonarpura, busy with his Shri Ghi business in Calcutta and his religious life in Banaras. He died in 1937. His son Ashok Chandra Rakshit came to Banaras; the latter's wife was equally religious, donating beds to Anandamayi's hospital, books to the library, and building a temple; and they decided to donate Rs 20,000 to the growing school. Durga Charan had apparently been very keen on education, and had had all the girls in his family educated, initially at home and then in school-and permitted them to wear chappals.[35] In October 1937 the school was renamed Durga Charan Girls' School. Of the sum donated, Rs 12,000 was used to acquire land through the Land Acquisition Dept.[36]

The ideology of Durga Charan is nowhere spelt out as precisely as of Arya Mahila or Agrasen. It is clear that its earliest founders, the widows, were motivated by a spirit of nationalism combined with self-help. The managing committee that took over, completely male, emphasized the progress of Bengali girls, and sought support from within the community of Bengalis. There are no

names of Marwari, Gujarati, Marathi, or any other donors or activists in the Durga Charan annals, as there are none of Bengalis in the records of Arya Mahila or Agrasen. Of the three schools we may say that Durga Charan was the least concerned with religion, social orthodoxy or a return to the Vedas. We might further connect this to the nature of the Bengali community and their connection with the bhadrakalok experience in Bengal.

Two pieces in its journals give clues to the ideology of Durga Charan. In the 1988-89 annual number of the school, the principal, Archana Ghosh, begins her piece on 'Women's Education' with:

Ma. There are so many feelings embedded in the very word. She is both the giver of shakti and the giver of mukti [power and freedom]. Mercy, pity, sympathy, and other such feelings are contained in this word. She gives shanti [peace] as well. So, right from ancient times women were considered a form of shakti and were worshipped. A Russian writer has praised the importance of women in these words: 'You give me 60 mothers, I shall give you a good nation.....'

The article continues by describing the fall of women-'who can stop, the wheel of time?' Many women are in high positions today. About Indira Gandhi it was said, 'She was the only woman in her Cabinet'. Ghosh proposes eleven solutions to give equal opportunities to women in all spheres of life so that India may be ranked with the progressive nations of the world. The first ten deal with villages. The last is an open suggestion criticizing society for thinking of women only or primarily as housewives even when they have careers-a 'dual mentality' that must be removed. As we move towards the twenty-first century 'it is the call of the times that women should get the same freedom as men to get an education and choose an occupation according to their interest and ability'.^[37]In the light of this closing suggestion, the opening lines seem as compulsory lip-service to a dominant ideology, reflecting, in feminist terms, 'the oppressor within each of us'.

In the 1972-73 number, Kamala Tonape, lecturer in Hindi, in an article called 'Indian Women's Education' goes through the usual history of Vedic greatness and decline under the Muslims, and then suggests ways of improving a defective educational system. Girls need more training as mothers and housewives, a statement supported by an anecdote about a newly married graduate who was unable to whip up delicious enough halwa for her husband's guests, because she followed the recipe from a book! Among her suggestions for curriculum reform are: one or two discussions per month should be organized by Indian history and language teachers on matters of culture. Books should be fewer and courses

more concise so that students have time for other activities leading to physical and mental development. Some institutions such as Karve University, Pune, and Prayag Vidyapith Vanasthali have tried to make their curricula more relevant. But they cost a lot and ordinary people cannot go there. So it is the duty of the government to improve the system. Only in this way can the state get women's full and successful contribution.[38]

This plea, this despair, was shared as we know, by all the three institutions we have looked at. At one level, then, the ideology espoused by the institution is almost irrelevant—the crandeur of motherhood (Agrasen), Vedic glory (Arya Mahila), or regional cultural nationalism (Durga Charan)—as long as it served to increase attendance. The net result was the same: girls educated in a government-controlled system.

What the case of Durga Charan particularly brings out is the following. In the Durga Charan records, although the founders and principals are mentioned, the manager's returns of 1945 suggests an actual conflict. As in the case of the other two schools, we do not have the records kept of activism or of female consciousness. But not only do we have cracks in the data to reveal that it must have existed, we also have an obvious contradiction that gives evidence of the suppression of one perspective in favour of another. Interestingly, in an 1986 book on Bengal and Varanasi there is no mention of any Bengali woman except for Mallika, the paramour of Bharatendu Harishchandra, and the legendary Rani Bhawani.[39]

As we see from the contemporary extract just quoted, the bottom-line argument in favour of girls' education has throughout been: these are the future mothers of our country. It receives slightly different emphasis in each case. For Agrasen, a few words are used: a few popular quotes from Manu clinch the argument. Arya Mahila is the most stridently missionary in its revived Hinduism. It has the best propaganda machines, intellectual representation, and consistent philosophy. Durga Charan is silent on the subject as a rule, but uses no alternative discourse.

If we think of the many ways that gender hierarchies are constructed, legitimized, and maintained, it is the *varnashram* and *jati* discourse in Banaras that presumes a woman to be constituted by birth as a separate *jati*. Anyone who knows Sanskrit seems to be able to confirm this. Durga Charan spokespeople rarely quote any Sanskrit. It is further maintained with the ways that production is organized. Here we see that Agrawal women play a very clear-cut role as resources for creating alliances and reciprocity between families, and keeping linkages interact. Bengalis have been a diverse group, mostly professional, and though preferring marriage and a quiet domestic role for their daughters, wished to provide insurance against their late or non-marriage. Finally, who challenges

the discourse? Those who know Sanskrit, as I have shown elsewhere, and can quote examples of learned and free women in the 'past'. Those who are smart enough to cite the case of viranganas, bhakti and shakti. And those who, like the Durga Charan female activists, at least named, and the Agrawal activists, totally invisible, cite nothing, but simply do.

Conclusion: In Search of Our Female Subject

Is there any such category as women? The question stands for me as an empirical one that I have answered here only tentatively. To report on any phase of the history of modern Banaras, including that of women, is to go to the Marwaris, the Agrawalas, the Khattris, the Bengalis, the Yadavs, and so on. This community-based approach that I adopt does not overrule the possibility that just as men in Banaras have displayed a self-conceptualization of being men, both as members of *purushjati* (the *jati* of men), and as regional and historical identity, neither of which precludes class and caste-based institutions; so may women display a conceptualization of themselves as 'women'. My data show that regardless of whichever community or institution they belonged to, women worked within a categorization that represented them through negation, repression and opposition.

We face two important difficulties with the representation of women. One is the empirical one of knowing what in fact they were doing or thought they were doing when not fitting in perfectly into the suspiciously watertight discursive structure of housewife and mother. Were they on hunger strikes as our oral reports tell us? Pleading and begging for the new experience of public education? Quietly resentful but unable to speak or act? Simply indifferent?

The second difficulty lies in the discrepancy between the justification for action by women that we have in the literature and the nature of the action itself. Education seemingly fits into the reproduction of motherhood, and the category of 'mother' encompasses all women in the dominant discourse. Yet most of the school founders and teachers were not mothers, but were either widowed and childless, or unmarried, or separated and alone. This internal differentiation within the category 'mother' is never mentioned, even obliquely, even by an institution like the Arya Mahila which had set up special services for widows. Most founders and principals who were non-mothers were relegated to, and adopted, the role of ascetics, that is, in a sense, neither male nor female, beyond gender and other worldly distinctions.

While this indicates a positive self-evaluation on the part of women, as well as politically astute handling, of cultural givens, it also indicates a satisfaction with the larger hierarchy. Women as ascetics, or even simply persons of service to

larger causes than families, were able to gain respect and broaden significantly their circles of autonomous action, even if the structure of patriarchy remained unchallenged. And this points to the crucial, fundamental contradiction in women's efforts to act for themselves: their actions could be radical, but the representations of them were always as merely liberal or more typically as conservative ones.

The contradictoriness of women's position was increased by the nature of schooling as it developed in the colonial situation and continued in the postcolonial one. Schools in twentieth-century Banaras were expected to create a new individual who retained the best in Indian culture while acquiring necessary Western knowledge, and girls' schools were supposed likewise to perform a similar feat of cultural engineering. The two aims, as I have maintained here, and expanded further elsewhere [40] were incompatible in the way they were tried. They were incompatible partly because incompletely conceptualized, being based on inadequate constructions of the past. And partly because of a pedagogic problem: an expanded curriculum set by the state to be further burdened by additional subjects set by a school committee that had no comparable legitimacy. How did schools, as a result, cope with the conflicting demands of society? They did not. Which was a fortunate result for women in so far as they had not had audible voices to begin with, and after the modern schooling such as offered by Agrasen, Arya Mahila and Duroa Charan, they had expanded spaces for action but still no voices.

Notes

A shorter version of this paper was presented at the faculty seminar at the Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, in March 1992. I would like to thank all the participants at the seminar for their comments.

1. Sri Agrasen Kanya Vidyaleqa Swarna Jayaitti Smarika. 1972 (Sri Agrasen Girls' School Golden Jubilee Souvenir). No pagination; my page number 40 (All references henceforth from this volume have my pagination.)
2. On indigenous education and nineteenth-century institutions see Nita Kumar (forthcoming) School curricula in twentieth-century India.
3. Selections from the vernacular newspapers published in the Punjab, North West Provinces, Oudh, Central Provinces, Central India, and Rajputana. 1885. vol. 18; Annual Administrative Report of Banaras Municipality, 1910-11.
4. Sherring 1863: 163; 1884: 174.

5. File V/261860/1 I (India Office Library).
6. See Kumar 1991 a; also Kumar in Crook, ed., Education and transmission of knowledge (forthcoming).
7. Sri Muraridas (headmaster), ed., 1918.
8. Rajkrishna Das 1972. In Swama Jayanti Smarika, p.4.
9. Ibid., p. 13.
10. Sri Jiwandas 1945.
11. Interviews with Leela Sharma, August 1991 and February 1992.
12. Swarna Jayanti Smarika, p. 43.
13. Kumar 1991b.
14. Swarna Jayanti Smarika, p. 43.
15. File No. V/26/860111 (India Office Library).
16. Swama Jayanti Smarika, p. 41.
17. Ibid.
18. Ibid.
19. See Kumar in Nigel Crook, ed. (forthcoming) Education and transmission of knowledge.
20. See Uma Chakravarti, Partha Chatterjee and Lata Mani in Sangari and Vaid, eds., Recasting women: Essays in colonial history, 1989.
21. Many ladies have told me of the radical departure from custom that wearing chappals in public constituted; it seems to have been symbolic of an assertion of freedom comparable to not covering the head. Leela Sharma, October 1990; Swati Rakshit, great niece of Durga Charan Rakshit, August 1991.
22. Shubhabhinda patra (An auspicious welcome address), 14 December 1986, from the members of the Arya Mahila family to Vidya Devi.

23. Kumar in Nigel Crook, ed. (forthcoming) Education and transmission of knowledge.
24. Ibid.
25. Aiya Mahila 1941.
26. Arya Mahila 1945.
27. Ibid.
28. Kumar 1991b.
29. Interview with Amitabh Bhattacharya, social activist and journalist, August 1991.
30. A short history of the Durga Charan Girls' School, Banaras, from the Manager's Returns file, 1945.
31. Arghya, Durga Charan Girls' School Magazine 1985.
32. Ibid.
33. A short history of the Durga Charan School.
34. Arghya 1985.
35. Interview with Swati Rakshit, August 1991.
36. Manager's Returns file, 1945.
37. Arghya 1985.
38. Arghya 1972-73, p. 17.
39. Ram Dular Singh, Bengal and Varanasi; A study in cultural syntliesis and national integration, 1986.
40. Kumar in Nigel Crook, ed. (forthcoming) Education and the transmission of knowledge.