Nationalism, Modernity, and the “Woman Question” in India and China

Sanjay Seth

The Journal of Asian Studies / Volume 72 / Issue 02 / May 2013, pp 273 - 297
DOI: 10.1017/S0021911812002215, Published online: 28 May 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0021911812002215

How to cite this article:

Request Permissions : Click here
Nationalism, Modernity, and the “Woman Question” in India and China

SANJAY SETH

The nationalist struggle to bring about the end of colonial rule in India, and the Republican and communist struggles to arrest and reverse the humiliation and the “carve-up” of China by foreign powers, were both closely allied to the struggle to become modern. Indeed, the two goals were usually seen to be so closely related as to be indistinguishable: a people had to start becoming modern if they were ever to be free of foreign domination, and they had to gain sovereignty and state power in order to undertake the laborious but necessary task of building a strong, prosperous, and modern nation. Thus in India, as in China, political movements from the latter nineteenth century sought to found a sovereign nation free from domination by a Western power or powers, and also sought to make this putative nation and its people “modern,” both as a necessary means towards the nationalist end and as an end in itself.

The interconnectedness of the aspiration to independent nationhood, and the desire to be modern, was not however an uncomplicated one. It was necessary to acquire many of the qualities of the colonizer, for how else could he be made to leave, and how else could the independent nation that would replace him be able to take its rightful place amongst the powerful countries of the West? But at the same time, the goal could not be to become exactly like the Western foreigner, for then there could be no rationale for the nationalist project. Sun Yat-sen asked, “Suppose that England should subjugate China and our people become English—would that be good for us?” (quoted in Fitzgerald 1996, 106). The question was of course a rhetorical one, for as John Fitzgerald (1996, 106) goes on to observe, Sun Yat-sen urged that the Chinese reform their ways “not so that they might become English but so that they might become more authentically Chinese.” The Indian nationalist and educationalist Lajpat Rai (1920, 75) glossed the aim of Indian nationalism thus: “We do not want to be English or German or American or Japanese . . . we want to be Indians, but modern, up-to-date, progressive Indians.”

But when the very notion of “modern” was derived from the West, indeed was seen to be embodied by Europe, how was one to become modern and yet remain Indian, or Chinese? Or rather, and to complicate matters further, it was, of course, not a question of how to “remain” Indian or Chinese; nationalism in India and China claimed that it was underwritten by the existence of a national identity but in fact it was a project to forge such a nationality and identity. How then to make India or China modern, and in that

Sanjay Seth (s.seth@gold.ac.uk) is Professor of Politics and Director of the Centre for Postcolonial Studies at Goldsmiths, University of London.
regard similar to the West and able to overthrow its domination, while at the same time making the people recognize or remake themselves as Indians, or Chinese?

In this essay I trace how the relations between nationalism and modernity were discursively elaborated and imagined in India and China, with reference to the “woman question.” “Imagined,” because just as I treat Chineseness and Indianness as projects rather than facts that can constitute the point of departure for analysis, I also treat modernity as part of a social imaginary; the modernity referred to in this essay is not the modernity of modernization theory (something that is known, such that societies can be classified as being or not being modern, or else in the process of “modernizing”), but rather something desired and imagined. With reference to the “woman question” because, as I argue below, this became an important, indeed privileged, site where the imaginings and pursuit of nationhood and modernity were elaborated.

As with another recent essay in this journal (Ocko and Gilmartin 2009), I seek to compare India and China. I am not, however, a historian of China,1 which means not only and obviously that any claims I may have to “expertise” are limited to India, but also that my comparison takes one element as the point of reference. I foreground aspects and moments of China’s history because they strike me as noteworthy in comparison with India, even where these would not be foregrounded in the same way by a historian of China. Where historians of China feel I have erred, their emendations may prove the beginning of a more sustained exercise in comparison between two histories that are often implicitly being compared, even if scholars are usually hesitant to make such comparisons explicit and to pursue them systematically.

Gender is one of the most important ways of marking and organizing “difference” in a society. It has often been observed that as a consequence, it becomes a site of both activity and anxiety in societies seeking to transform themselves. This was certainly so in colonial and semicolonial countries, where the “normal” investments in gender relations were, additionally, overdetermined by the fact that in the eyes of their rulers, the social position of women in these countries was a sign of “backwardness.” The notion that there was a “ladder” of social development, and that the position of women was a key indicator of what rung a society occupied on that ladder, was one of the legacies of Scottish Enlightenment thinkers. John Millar, for instance, argued that as societies progressed “from ignorance to knowledge, and from rude to civilized manners,” the position of women improved accordingly, from being virtual slaves of men to being their “friends and companions” (Millar [1806] 1990). In his immensely influential The History of British India, James Mill drew upon the writings of Millar and others to claim that the condition of the women was an index of the degree of civilization a people had attained: “among rude people, the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted.” By this test India ranked low on the civilizational scale, for “a state of dependence more strict and humiliating than that which is ordained for the weaker sex among the Hindus cannot easily be conceived” (Mill [1817] 1990,1:280, 281). A few years before Mill penned his observations on the

1And thus I have drawn upon the advice of those who are. Please see the acknowledgments at the end of the article.
“degraded” condition of Indian womanhood, John Barrow, in his memoirs of his travels with Macartney’s mission, observed that “the condition of the female part of society” provided “criterion of the degree of civilization to which that nation has arrived,” by which criteria he found the Chinese to be worse than the ancient Greeks, or Europe during the Dark Ages (quoted in Fitzgerald 1996, 133). Thus by the nineteenth century, the “degraded condition” of Indian women, exemplified in customs like sati, prohibitions against widow remarriage, purdah, child marriage, and so on, was a truism among colonial officials, a “fact” that testified to India’s low status on the civilizational scale, and thus also as proof for why India needed to be ruled by a more advanced country; and in China foot-binding, concubinage, and the like functioned as proofs of why the Chinese were one of those nations “that cannot govern themselves, but must have a master” (Gilbert 1926, 14).

In this political and discursive setting, many reformers and nationalists in China and India—the overwhelming majority of them male—sought to challenge and change the condition of their women. Often, their concerns had less to do with flesh-and-blood women (Gipoulon 1989/90; Mani 1998) than with the perception that becoming modern required a change in the condition of women, including an end to practices now deemed “traditional” or “backward” or “oppressive.” The quest for independent nationhood and for modernity became intimately tied with the “woman question.” In China, Gail Hershatter observes, “the modernity sought by a heterogeneous lot of reformers and revolutionaries . . . encompassed economic and military strength but would also, many felt, require a thorough overhaul of cultural practices . . . that could irrevocably consign semicolonialism to the past” (Hershatter 1997, 7–8); and “women were figures through which national modernity was imagined” (Hershatter 2007, 79). And in India, reformers and nationalists engaged in what one historian has termed a project of “ideological-aesthetic meddlesomeness” (H. Banerji 1995, 71), striving to improve, refashion, and emancipate their women as part of a more general effort to render them, and thus the nation, modern.

In the first two parts of this essay I examine how the woman question came to be thematized, and how it played out, in India and China. This allows me, in the third section, to note the most significant differences. Here I argue that in the first two decades of the twentieth century, there was a significant change in how the woman question was posed and pursued in nationalist thought in India and China. In both cases, there was a “radicalization,” in that a significant section of nationalist opinion came to urge not only that women become modern wives and mothers, but that they be active participants in anticolonial resistance, and future citizens of the nation, on more-or-less equal terms with men. However, this shift was much more pronounced in China, where the New Culture and May Fourth movements offered critiques of conjugal relations and the family in a way that Indian nationalism did not. In India, nationalist thought required women to fulfill the role of signifying and guaranteeing national essence or specificity, and thus the woman question could not be answered in the manner that the New Culture, May Fourth, and communist movements came to answer it.

Why was this so—why was the Indian version of national modernity one in which women were still required to signify Indianness, whereas in China this did not function as a constraint or limit on the ways in which rendering women modern was imagined? And what does this tell us about how anticolonial thought in India and China sought to combine nationhood and modernity? In the fourth and last section of this essay, I
engage with Prasenjit Duara, Shuh-mei Shih, and others, who argue that the differences stem, above all else, from the fact that India was colonized while China was a semicolonial country. In doing so, I make the theoretical or historiographical point that such an explanation cannot legitimately treat colonialism and semicolonialism as material or structural constraints that determined or delimited discursive outcomes (from the “outside,” as it were), because to have discursive “effects,” even the most brute material reality has to be thematized, has to appear “in” discourse. The explanation I offer does not treat discursive outcomes as a consequence of structural conditions, but rather rests upon how colonialism figured in anticolonial thought, and with what implications and consequences. My argument concludes by suggesting that the long duration and the depth of Indian elites’ engagement with the West, and the centrality accorded to it in nationalist imaginings, made it all but impossible to unreservedly embrace or completely reject the West and the modernity that it signified.

I. THE WOMAN QUESTION IN INDIA

Many members of the new elite who were brought into being by colonial rule—often educated in the knowledge of the colonizer, and that too usually in English—concurred that the status of women in India was low, and that this reflected badly upon their society. An eminent Indian convert to Christianity, the Reverend K. M. Banerjea, wrote in 1841 that Bengali women “drag on lives of the utmost wretchedness and degradation, and are regarded only as servants of the household, and ministers of carnal gratification to their husbands” (Banerjea 1841, 41–42). While he was a student in Hindu College, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, later to become one of Bengal’s greatest poets, wrote in answer to an exam question on the status of women, “In India, I may say in all Oriental countries, women are looked upon as created merely to contribute to the gratification of the animal appetites of men. . . . The people of this country do not know the pleasures of domestic life, and indeed they cannot know, until civilization shows them the way to attain it” (Appendix K to General Report on Public Instruction in the Bengal Presidency for 1842–43 1843, xcvi). Critics of the condition of women sought to improve it. Sati was outlawed in 1829, largely due to Rammohan Roy’s efforts, and legislation in 1856 legalizing the remarriage of Hindu widows was principally the fruit of Vidyasagar’s labors. Those who pursued such reforms usually saw British rule as a providential means to India’s “regeneration,” and thus were more inclined to apply to their rulers to use their power to outlaw oppressive customs, rather than demand that they surrender their power and depart. By the 1880s this tendency had been institutionalized and had a press; the Indian Social Conference was established in 1887, two years after the founding of the Indian National Congress, with which it coordinated its annual congress, and the Indian Social Reformer began publishing from Bombay in 1890.

There were always those who felt that condemnation of Indian customs was overdone. When K. M. Banerjea repeated his comments on the “wretchedness and degradation” of Hindu women in a talk to the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, Peary Chand Mitra replied with a rebuke: “There are some persons,” he observed, “who are ready at all times to find fault with everything relating to the Hindu,” and to pass “sweeping condemnations on our institutions respecting females”
Mitra [1842] 1965, 294). According to Mitra, the condition of women in Europe had not always been, nor was it currently, an exalted one; and while the lot of women in contemporary India was indeed a poor one in many respects, it had not always been so in the past. Significantly, this rebuke was delivered to a body that included some of those radicals and iconoclasts of the 1830s and 1840s whom historiography has often described as the most advanced and rationalist vanguard of the “Bengal Renaissance.”

Subsequent years were to see many more such reactions, as well as a more general defense of Indian (or Hindu) customs and practices, in what some contemporaries and historians since have characterized as “revivalist nationalism,” “an explicitly nationalist rhetoric against any form of colonial intervention within the Hindu domestic sphere” (Sarkar 2008, 259). The nationalists and social reformers who were willing to acknowledge that Hindu and Muslim customs needed extensive reform, and that one of the legitimate means to this end included legislative and other forms of intervention by a government of foreigners, was now joined by those who explicitly rejected the second conclusion, and sometimes also denied the first. When the Age of Consent Bill was mooted in 1891, raising the age at which sexual intercourse could take place with a child bride from ten to twelve (but without proscribing the custom of child marriage itself), it created a veritable firestorm. When in 1860 the age had been prescribed as ten, there had been little controversy; but now opposition came not only from the “orthodox” Hindu community, but from large sections of the new elite, Western educated and often employed in government offices, courts, newspapers, and the like. The campaign against the Age of Consent Bill used the recognizably modern techniques of public meetings, petitions, and protests. Newspapers opposed to the legislation gained large increases in circulation, in part because the rhetoric was virulent: Bangabasi wrote, “India is going to be converted into a most unholy hell. . . . The Hindu family is ruined” (quoted in Sarkar 2008, 276). The protagonists in this controversy did not line up neatly, with reactionaries rooted in “tradition” opposing the reform, and modernizers and nationalists supporting it (Sen 1993). Many of those who opposed the bill did not do so because they held conservative views on women; their principal objection was not to reform as such, but to a foreign government legislating reform of indigenous customs, especially those pertaining to women and to family matters. As one of the leading “revivalists” (the word used at the time was “Extremist,” in contrast to “Moderate”), Bal Gangadhar Tilak, quipped in another context, he would happily arrange the remarriage of a thousand widows the day India became independent (Chakravarti 1990, 73).

Although the legislation was passed, the colonial government, alarmed at the opposition it had generated, seldom sought to prosecute the terms of the bill, and thereafter avoided seeking to reform conjugal and gender relations through its own interventions. Nationalist ranks saw the rise of a more militant nationalism, one of the marks of its militancy being its unwillingness to accept that native customs were backward and in need of reform, and more especially, its unwillingness to countenance a government of foreigners legislating such reform. This “Extremist” nationalism now challenged the “Moderate” leadership of the Congress, condemning its tactics as “mendicancy,” challenging its reluctance to reach out to the lower classes to enlist them in nationalist agitation, and disputing the idea that political reform needed to be accompanied by reform of oppressive native institutions and customs. Directing himself against the Indian Social Reformer, Aurobindo Ghose laid out his version of this case, at the same time implying that those who
harped on about the need for social reform were logically bound to desire a continuation of British rule: “If social reform means the destruction of everything old or Hindu because it is old or Hindu, the continuance of the present political dependence on England and English ideals is much to be desired by the social reformers; for it is gradually destroying all that was good as well as much that was defective in the old society. With the programme of becoming a nation by denationalization we have no sympathy. But if a social development be aimed at, it is more likely to occur in a free India” (Ghosh [1907] 2003, 98). The year this was written was the year the Congress split between the “Moderates” who had hitherto dominated it and the “Extremists” who were challenging this domination; by then, the Social Conference had been debarred from holding its annual sessions alongside the Congress, as it had hitherto done.

Why was there such unprecedented and fervid opposition from the ranks of those who had been shaped by the changes that had come in the wake of foreign rule, many of whom had adapted to and benefited from the economic and political changes that were consequent on colonial rule, and many of whom were not averse to reform under all circumstances? The answer is tied up with the changing political scene in the second half of the nineteenth century, and with the increased symbolic importance accorded to women. In an illuminating and influential analysis, Partha Chatterjee has argued that anticolonial nationalism in India came to divide the world of social institutions and practices into two domains, the “spiritual” and the “material,” which corresponded to a distinction between that which was integral to national identity and that which was extrinsic to it. In Chatterjee’s summation of the position Indian nationalism arrived at in the course of the second half of the nineteenth century,

The material is the domain of the ‘outside’, of the economy and of statecraft, of science and technology, a domain where the West had proved its superiority and the East had succumbed. In this domain, then, Western superiority had to be acknowledged and its accomplishments carefully studied and replicated. The spiritual, on the other hand, is an ‘inner’ domain bearing the ‘essential’ marks of cultural identity. The greater one’s success in imitating Western skills in the material domain, therefore, the greater the need to preserve the distinctness of one’s spiritual culture. (Chatterjee 1995, 6)

Starting in the second half of the nineteenth century, Indian womanhood and the home that she was seen to embody came to be seen as one of the most important sites where the “essential marks of cultural identity” were located and reproduced. This woman and this home were upper caste and middle class, and were to be distinguished not only from Western women and homes, but also from the lower castes and classes, whose women and homes were seen as vulgar and promiscuous. The middle-class Indian male had perforce to engage with the colonial civil sphere in order to make a living, and the nationalist had to engage with it in order to acquire the scientific and technological skills needed if India were to liberate itself from foreign rule. In the process, cultural compromises were necessitated. All the more necessary then that the Indian woman, through her religious devotion and her “traditional” dress and demeanor, function as emblem and repository of an identity that was pure and unsullied. Annie Besant urged female education as a patriotic necessity, but did so on the grounds that women
were the anchor of Hindu identity: “Hinduism needs the support of educated Hindu women, reproducing in modern days the Brahma Vadinis of old, and saving English-educated men from the scepticism which they imbibe from their secular or missionary education. The future of Hinduism depends largely on women” (quoted in Raman 1996, 170). Women signified an Indianess that had to be retained and preserved, even as the nation-to-be sought to acquire the material and technological resources that were necessary to prepare to fight for national independence, and to build a modern nation thereafter.

Indian womanhood now assumed a privileged status in nationalist discourse. Numerous speakers and writers waxed lyrical on the special qualities of the Indian (or Hindu) woman, whose “clean innocence . . . simple faith . . . sweetness and geniality of temper . . . [and] natural courtesy . . . are unsurpassed” (N. C. Banerji 1921, 29). Tanika Sarkar (2001, 120) describes how “woman” was produced as a potent signifier in the course of the elaboration of this discourse: “An icon was constructed of the patriotic subject, the good Hindu woman with her simple dress, her ritually pure conchshell bangles and red vermilion mark, her happy surrender and self immersion in the sansar [domesticity], and her endless bounty and nurture expressed by cooking and feeding. She was charged with an immense aesthetic, cultural and religious load in nationalist writings.”

It did not follow that the condition of women and conjugal relations were not to change. On the contrary, strengthening the nation and preparing for the struggles ahead required that middle-class Indian women also had to change; they had to become “modern” and yet remain quintessentially Indian. As Chatterjee argues, the division between spiritual and material, inside and outside, essential and inessential, did not entail a rejection of the West or of modernity: “the nationalist paradigm in fact supplied an ideological principle of selection . . . not a dismissal of modernity but an attempt to make modernity consistent with the nationalist project” (Chatterjee 1995, 121). What did follow, if remaking women and domesticity required recapturing and preserving some essential Hinduness or Indianess, was that reforms could not entail modeling Indian women on their Western counterparts, and relatedly, that this project of preservation-cum-transformation could only be undertaken by Indians, not by the colonial state. The seeming contradiction between reforming women’s condition and yet maintaining women as markers of an Indian essence was in part bridged—though only in part, a point I will return to in the third section of this essay—by a discursive move that allowed every change to be labeled a “return” to an originary essence. We have already encountered this in Peary Chand Mitra’s claim that women in India had once occupied an exalted position. By the latter nineteenth century and into the twentieth, this had become commonplace: from pamphlet and in press, in English and in the vernaculars, in prose and sometimes in poetry, people with otherwise differing views on issues to do with women regularly cited historical and mythical figures from the ancient past as examples of how once women in India had been “learned, free and highly cultured” (Chakravarti 1990). Where reform of the condition of Indian women was required, it was thus often urged as a return to traditions and customs that had been forsaken. It was not the “Hindu religion” or “native customs” that were the source and cause of women’s plight, but rather the decline of these: as Annie Besant (1913, 54) put it in the course of urging reform of the practice of child marriage, “I
am pleading . . . for a restoration to women in India of the place that was theirs when India was greatest.”

Having laid claim to sovereignty over “its” women, the nationalist movement could now contemplate changes in their condition. Their education was foremost among these. By the latter nineteenth century there was a chorus of voices urging female education, voices that made themselves heard through a raft of journals and magazines directed at women; through public debates in newspapers, magazines, and pamphlets, which urged upon Western-educated men the importance of educating their womenfolk; through didactic pamphlets directed at women and seeking to persuade them of the merits of education; and through native efforts to establish girls’ schools. The actual numbers of girls who received any sort of education was pitifully small, and the principal rationale for urging women’s education—as in Qing and early Republican China, as we shall see—was that it would produce better wives and mothers. An essayist in the Calcutta Review summed up the nationalist position: “Intelligently educated mothers, and sisters, and wives . . . [are] essential to the training of a race of intelligent and high-spirited sons, and brothers, and husbands” (quoted in M. Borthwick 1984, 65).

If the period from the latter nineteenth century was dominated by a strand of nationalism that claimed sovereignty over its women, and made them signify Indianess, the rise of Gandhian nationalism marked a change. Gandhi’s views on the proper role of women were deeply conservative, though not always “traditional.” Characteristically, where views sanctioned by custom and religious injunction were at odds with his moral understanding, he dismissed the former. Nonetheless, he repeatedly expressed the view that the management of the home was women’s domain and breadwinning was that of men, and his views on sexuality were conservative, where they were not outright eccentric. In a much discussed essay, Madhu Kishwar has however argued that by facilitating women’s active involvement in the nationalist struggle, Gandhi was more of a force for change than an earlier generation of liberal reformers who treated women as objects in need of protection and improvement. “Gandhi is one of the few leaders,” Kishwar suggests, “whose practice was far more radical than the words he used to describe it,” and thus the consequences of Gandhian nationalism go “far beyond his own views and pronouncements on women’s role and place in society” (Kishwar 1986, 12, 56).

The all-India mass political agitations, which are a defining feature of Gandhian nationalism, did see women actively involved in an unprecedented way, including standing in picket lines and courting arrest. The sight of women being arrested and carted off to jail did not cover the colonial authorities in glory, and caused disquiet in official circles (Taneja 2005, 151). But even Kishwar (1986, 28) concedes that Gandhi “tried to change women’s position without transforming their relation to either the outer world of production or the inner world of family, sexuality and reproduction.” In fact, it can and has been argued that securing the involvement of women by appealing to their role as mothers and wives of future Indian citizens, and (in Gandhi’s case) by reference to their natural inclination for nonviolence, simultaneously confirmed and reinforced

their iconic status as emblems of Indian identity, and militated against any challenge to familial and conjugal relations (Patel 1988; Sarkar 1984).

The 1920s saw a change in the position of women, and also a change in nationalist thinking on the subject of women. Female education, which had long been championed in words but without any corresponding change in its provision, now began to be provided and taken up in increasing numbers. Middle-class women began to appear in professional roles, if still in small numbers. The “defensiveness” of the earlier phase of nationalism was much less evident. Nationalist thought could now contemplate changes in conjugal relations, even legislative change of a type that it had abjured and resisted after 1892. It is telling that when Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India*—an exposé of the true condition of Indian women, and through this also a critique of nationalist demands for greater self-rule—was published in 1927, the furious responses it occasioned in India included a purely defensive denial of all its charges, but also, and more consequentially, condemnations of the book which nevertheless also urged that the best response to it was to proceed with a reform of women’s conditions (see Sinha 2006 and Seth 2007, 147–58). Gandhi’s response, entitled “Drain Inspector’s Report,” denounced Mayo’s book but also declared, “Overdrawn her picture of our insanitation, child-marriages etc undoubtedly are. But let them serve as a spur to much greater effort than we have hitherto put forth in order to rid society of all causes of reproach. . . . Our indignation which we are bound to express against the slanderous book must not blind us to our obvious limitations” (Gandhi [1927] 1981, 9:310–11). This was the response adopted by the women’s organizations that had begun to emerge in the early twentieth century. At a large protest meeting called by these organizations in Tripplicane in Madras, Jayalakshmi Kumar declared, “We want political freedom so that we may compel social improvement. . . . Let us endeavour to change the really bad social customs [in India] and let that be our protest against all such books” (quoted in Sinha 1998, 45). A resolution passed at this meeting denounced the book while urging the need for legislation against child marriage and enforced widowhood. One of the results of this furor was the passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Bill in 1929; those who had been pressing for it long before Mayo’s book appeared now received strong support from nationalist ranks, and were able to pass it over the timidity of the colonial authorities.

More generally, the principle that women were to be legally and politically equal to men had now been established and accepted in nationalist thought. It was, of course, far from being a reality on the ground, but that was one of the tasks that the Congress declared would be achieved after independence. The Karachi Resolution adopted by the Congress in 1931 declared that in independent India all adults would have the vote, and that there was to be no discrimination in employment on account of sex (or religion or caste). The constitution adopted by the newly independent nation in 1950 enfranchised all adult women. However, while the principle of legal and political equality in “public” matters was established in law, even the law was bifurcated, with “personal law” (covering marriage, divorce, inheritance, and adoption) continuing to prevail for the Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and Parsi communities. These laws accord women a different, and almost invariably lesser, status. This is of course in part the legacy of colonial rule, but the failure to change it, or even to substantially and effectively change Hindu and Muslim personal law so that it does not discriminate against women, has everything to do with the legacy of the nationalist movement. For in the course of all the changes...
that marked nationalist treatments of the woman question, one constant was that women
continued to be seen as the guardians, icons, and markers of a space that was variously
designated as “home,” “personal,” or familial/conjugal. In the struggle against colonial-
ism, that was the space where an indigenous identity resided, and it required protection.
In the postcolonial period, that has become the space where communal or communitarian
identities are seen to reside.

II. …AND IN CHINA

By the late Qing period, the “woman question” had become a much discussed topic,
with the need for a change in women’s conditions becoming closely sutured to the issue of
national survival and regeneration. Liang Qichao’s famous essays on women at the end of
the nineteenth century yoked the weakness of China, subject to the depredations of the
West, to its unproductive, cloistered, and uneducated women, and “the linkage he made
between women, the health of the civilization, and the viability of the state was taken up
enthusiastically by others” (Hershatter 2007, 79). Two themes were especially important:
the need for women’s education, and an end to the practice of footbinding. Despite the
fact that missionaries initially took the lead in opposing footbinding, this does not seem to
have produced a defensive reaction; instead, by the 1890s anti-footbinding societies flour-
ished in different parts of China, and at the turn of the century Kang Youwei petitioned
the throne to end the practice. The Republican government issued a proclamation
against footbinding immediately after the fall of the Qing, and during the warlord
period a number of warlords sought to eradicate the practice through the use of state
power (Ko 2005, 50). There were very few public defenders of the practice; the fascinat-
ing if eccentric figure of Gu Hongming was one, but as Dorothy Ko (2005, 36) notes,
“When footbinding found its sole defender in such an odd character, we can only con-
clude that it had ceased to be a prestigious or even relevant practice during the first
two decades of the twentieth century.”

Even more important symbolically was the issue of female education, which by the
late Qing was being urged by almost everyone, including the imperial regime, which in
1907 issued regulations authorizing formal schooling for girls. For Qing reformers as
well as many anti-imperialist intellectuals, “the sense of national peril” was inextricably
linked to “the imperative of female education” (Judge 2008, 189). Qing reformers had
no desire to upend gender and conjugal hierarchies, and to “emancipate” women; they
principally desired educated, healthy women who would be better mothers, capable of
bearing and rearing the sort of subjects who would contribute to “self-strengthening.”
The regulations prescribed a curriculum heavy on “household affairs,” specified that
girl students were not to come into contact with boys, prescribed the modest dress that
they should wear to school, and warned that girls should not become involved in “external
matters” or in forming “important opinions.” Sally Borthwick (1985, 78) describes these
regulations as “a reluctant blend of Confucian conservatism and timid modernism,
united in defence against the twin bogeys of social and political radicalization.”

While 1911 marked a caesura in political terms, it did not usher in any dramatic
change in the discourse around the woman question, or in the debates around
women’s education. The January 1912 guidelines on schooling issued by Cai Yuanpei
in the newly established post of education minister sanctioned secondary education for girls, and the new schooling system promulgated later that year additionally authorized vocational and higher normal schools for girls; but there was still a heavy emphasis on “household management” in the curriculum (Bailey 2007, 68), and the Republic clearly still saw changing women’s conditions, including through education, as desirable principally because they would make better mothers, and wives, of Republican male citizens. The Provisional Constitution adopted in 1912 declared the equality of “the people” irrespective of race, class, and religion, but not gender; it did not enfranchise women.

There were, of course, more radical voices, ones that contested the notion that the goal of reforms should be to make women better wives and mothers. These were often heard from offstage, as it were, from Chinese students (including women) studying abroad, usually in Japan, some of whom called for a radical transformation in women’s conditions. At the end of the Qing period and the beginning of the Republic, women’s groups sprang up, some of which demanded equal citizenship and suffrage; members of the Women’s Suffrage Alliance stormed the meetings of the National Assembly in Nanjing on three occasions, demanding (unsuccessfully) that it enfranchise women. Such voices were in a minority, but they were a portent of what was to come.

Historians today are unlikely to wholeheartedly endorse Chow Tse-tsung’s (1960, 361) description of the May Fourth Movement as “a dividing line in the intellectual, cultural, and sociopolitical history of modern China,” or Lin Yusheng’s (1979, 7, 6) description of it as “a movement of totalistic iconoclasm,” the scope and depth of which “was probably unique in modern history.” Some scholars contest the depiction of May Fourth as determinedly and consistently anti-traditional (X. Chen 2007); others point out that the “vernacular” of the new literature movement was incomprehensible to the masses (Link 1981, 18), and still others claim that there is little to suggest that May Fourth penetrated popular consciousness in rural areas (Schwartz 1971). Scholars are also less likely than in the past to characterize the New Culture Movement and May Fourth in the borrowed clothes of a “renaissance” or an “enlightenment,” analogies that signal (or betray) an underlying conviction that all societies move from unreflective tradition to modernity, as the West allegedly did, and thus that the study of others requires mining their history for their (belated and invariably unsatisfactory) versions of such transitions.

Salutary as such corrections and amendments no doubt are, they would exceed their value if they blinded us to the fact that May Fourth did signal something new, which changed the discursive boundaries of debate. For a student of Indian history, the attack on Chinese “traditions”; the valorization of the individual, possessed of interiority, free will, and the desire for autonomy; and the more-or-less unambiguous identification of these desirable qualities with the West are truly astonishing. Chen Duxiu exhorted, “Destroy! Destroy idols! . . . All the fantasies handed down from ancient times, religious, political, and ethical, and other false and unreasonable beliefs are idols which should be destroyed!” (quoted in Chow 1960, 297). The New Tide manifesto declared, “The fundamental point is that our people don’t realize the richness of Western culture and the impoverishment of Chinese culture” (quoted in Schwarz 1986, 119). The invocation of Western ways as “modern” and desirable was ubiquitous. In an essay published in New Youth in 1916, Chen Duxiu ([1916] 1999, 6–7) offered a condemnation of
Chinese practices through the following contrasts: “In the West some widows choose to remain single . . . [but] they have nothing to do with what is called the chastity of widowhood. . . . Western women make their own living in various professions. . . . In the West, parents and children usually do not live together, and daughter-in-laws, particularly, have no obligation to serve parents-in-law. . . . According to Western customs, fathers do not discipline grown-up sons.” The contrasts build up to the following verdict on Confucian ethics: “Confucius lived in a feudal age. The ethics he promoted is the ethics of the feudal age.”

Family and gender relations, along with Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy, were at the heart of the concerns and the critiques of the New Culture Movement. Reform of the condition of women was still usually linked to national salvation, and thus the obvious radicalism of the movement obscured a less obvious but significant continuity, namely that the establishment and maintenance of a strong society was still linked to the proper ordering of familial relations (Glosser 2003). However, national salvation was now seen to require emancipating women from Chinese tradition rather than producing better wives and mothers, and this project of emancipation was pursued with a new intensity; as Ono Kazuko (1989, 101) puts it, “the youth of the May Fourth generation made the woman question their own personal question.” Or in the words of Zheng Wang (1999, 12), “Footbinding, concubinage, arranged marriage, female chastity, sexual segregation, and so on were cited frequently by New Culturalists to demonstrate what they viewed as the ‘cruelty, irrationality, backwardness and stupidity’ of the Chinese cultural tradition. Women, therefore, became a quintessential symbol of the Confucian feiren (inhuman) system. . . . New Culturalists loudly identified women’s oppression as symptomatic of a Confucian culture built on patriarchy.”

With the May Fourth demonstrations and then the May 1925 and the March 1926 demonstrations and killings in Shanghai and Beijing respectively, the intellectual ferment represented by the New Culture Movement had been joined by a political ferment, one that went beyond intellectuals and students. In communist discourse in particular, “tradition” figured not as that which had to be both transcended and yet preserved, as in India, but more or less unambiguously as the “feudalism” and “Confucianism” that had to be overthrown; women figured, in the writings of Mao Zedong, Li Dazhao, Chen Duxiu, Xiang Jingyu, Yun Daiying, and others, not as the site and sign of a national essence, but as one of the sites and anchors of feudal inequalities and Confucian hierarchies that also oppressed peasants and the working class (Gilmartin 1995, 24–30). Nor was the insistence that women were the equals of men, and that their contribution to society and the salvation of the nation did not lie in marriage and maternity, confined to those who were, or soon after became, members of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Elements of the Guomindang (GMD), not least the Guomindang Women’s Department led by He Xiangning, played an active and significant role, as did many not aligned with a party women’s organization.3 The short, fractious, but intense period of alliance and joint government by the GMD and the CCP saw all manner of

3After the break with the CCP, the GMD nonetheless also continued to combat (aspects of) Chinese “tradition,” as through the “Superstition Destruction Movement” of 1928–29, and government-sponsored organizations demolished temples and idols in Guangzhou (Harrison 2000, 199–200; Hung 1985, 160).
criticisms and reforms aired and sometimes legislated, in part because women were organized and mobilized through party women's organizations. In Gilmartin's (1994, 196) words, this period saw “the most radical political effort to overcome women's subordination and transform gender relations in the family, society, the economy and the polity.”

The period after May Fourth is not a continuous development of the energies unleashed by it. After the massacre of 1927, the GMD not only sought to partially reinstate Confucius, it also used the charge of sexual immorality to persecute CCP female cadres, as well as some of the more radical women in its own ranks (Diamond 1975, 6–7). Strands of conservatism, usually marked less by their “traditionalism”—for there were few who denied the need for change—but rather by their cautions against wholesale imitation of the West, continued to survive in figures like Liang Shuming and later amongst GMD figures such as Tao Xisheng and Lifu Chen, and in the New Life movement, which reasserted the importance of female domesticity and chastity. The CCP was later to condemn many of the enthusiasms of the New Culture and May Fourth movements for failing to distinguish between a commendable anti-imperialism and uncritical imitation of bourgeois liberalism. And while the CCP continued to champion equal rights for women, questions to do with the emancipation of women were less central than they had been during the 1920s, especially after Yan’an became the main base area. All this notwithstanding, the New Culture Movement and May Fourth effected a profound discursive shift; the “discursive space” had been created for broad acceptance of women's citizenship rights, and none of the major political actors fully resiled from it. By the early 1920s, women's suffrage was being enshrined in a number of provincial constitutions, albeit with literacy qualifications that restricted the franchise to a small number of women (Edwards 2008, 111–12). The Civil Code enacted by the Guomindang government in 1929 and 1930 contained provisions for women's suffrage, divorce initiated by women, free-choice marriage, and equal inheritance. The Marriage Regulations enacted by the Jiangxi Soviet shortly after, in 1931, went further and formed the basis of the radical 1950 Marriage Law of the PRC.

III. THE WOMAN QUESTION IN INDIA AND CHINA

I have suggested that the woman question came to loom so large in India and China starting in the latter nineteenth century because women came to be seen as one of the prime sites of backwardness, and thus as an impediment to the achievement of modernity, and with it, national sovereignty. In both countries a consensus emerged among nationalists that a change in women's conditions was required if the nations were to be saved, or liberated. In the nineteenth and into the twentieth century, nationalists in both countries sought to effect such changes without, however, overturning patriarchal relations and fundamentally transforming gender and conjugal relations. This changed with the advent of the May Fourth Movement and with the emergence of Gandhian mass nationalism, but the changes were of a completely different order, both in terms of their extent and their content. As before, Chinese women continued to be seen as a site of national backwardness, urgently in need of changing. But whereas some earlier reformers and others had sought to modernize aspects of Chinese society, including its women, while retaining a Chinese “essence,” such attempts were largely abandoned by
the New Culture and May Fourth movements. Indeed, the cause of women’s condition, and of national backwardness, was seen to lie in Chinese “tradition,” now characterized as “feudalism” or “Confucianism.” To emancipate women from tradition was therefore also to emancipate the nation, and the liberation of the nation could not take place without emancipating its women from tradition. The rise of Gandhian mass politics also signaled a change, such that controversies about the propriety of women venturing outside the home, being involved in politics, and courting public exposure were rendered partly irrelevant. But nationalism in the era of mass Gandhian protest did not, discursively or in practice, seek to reformulate family relations—there was no critique of chastity, no championing of divorce, no urging of free-choice marriage or, as it was known in India, “love marriage.” Women were to be educated, to participate in politics and appear in the public realm, even to compete with men where unavoidable; but they were at the same time to continue to be demure and chaste, to be religious, and to play their required part in the material and emotional economy of the joint or extended family.

It is not that more radical positions on the woman question were wholly absent in India, but they were largely absent from nationalist discourse, and were sometimes to be found instead in low-caste movements. For instance, the Self-Respect Movement of non-Brahman, lower-caste groups, organized by E. V. Ramasamy in 1926, developed a wide-ranging critique of the oppressive features of Tamil and Indian society. In 1928 Ramasamy announced that Indian society could not simply be reformed, but required “radical reconstructive work which would destroy the traditional structures” (quoted in Anandhi 2008, 389). Among the things that needed “destroying” was the patriarchal character of Brahmanism, Hinduism, or the Indian nation, terms that Ramasamy used more or less interchangeably. Ramasamy and his comrades, who came to include a number of women leaders, did not simply advocate women’s education, widow remarriage, and an end to child marriage; they additionally argued that women’s education was needed to prepare them for economic independence rather than to make them eligible brides, criticized the valorization of women’s chastity, championed marriage based on free choice by the two people concerned, demanded equal property rights, and advocated birth control as necessary for women’s health and independence. Ramasamy thought that marriage and monogamy were innately problematic, but the movement arranged “Self-Respect” marriages, marriages without Brahman priests or traditional rites, often arranged to coincide with days that were inauspicious according to the Hindu calendar, and ones where Sanskrit shlokas would be translated into Tamil and examined and criticized for the way in which they positioned women as subordinate to men. Some 8,000 such marriages were conducted between 1929 and 1932 (Anandhi 2008; Pandian 2007). In all this, Ramasamy—who described the idol at the Vaikkom temple as “a mere piece of stone fit only to wash dirty linen with,” and who after independence, in 1955, advocated the burning of the Indian flag (Pandian 2007, 197, 208)—was every bit as iconoclastic as, say, Lu Xun. The difference lies not in the “extent” of radicalism, but in the fact that it took place outside of nationalist ranks. The critique of patriarchy advanced by the Self-Respect Movement was one element in a more far-reaching critique of what it labeled as Brahmanism, Hinduism, or the Indian nation and the nationalism it had produced. It included a withering critique of the evasions of Gandhian or Congress nationalism, and an acknowledgment that some limited but worthy social reforms had been effected by the colonial government, reforms that would not have been effected had Hindu
leaders, rather than the British, ruled India. The movement and its critique were cer-
tainly not “pro-British,” or anti-nationalist, but the movement was at a tangent to nation-
alisim: the fundamental opposition to which it pointed was that between Hinduism/
Brahmanism and the non-Brahmans. The difference between India and China did not
lie in the existence or otherwise of radical critiques of “tradition,” but in the fact that
these were never an important element in Indian nationalism, which, in identifying
woman and the home as the location of national identity or essence, effectively precluded
critiques and changes that could be seen as undermining that essence.

Why was this so? Why was there greater radicalism around the woman question in
Chinese nationalism than Indian? The answer cannot be that patriarchal resistance to
the full emancipation of women was greater in India than in China. This resistance
was present in both countries, and indeed, was to be found in abundance in “the
West” when some European countries began to encourage and then mandate the edu-
cation of women. In China fears were expressed that educated women might come to,
or had come to, disdain household tasks and the responsibilities of motherhood, that
they had become obsessed with being fashionable, that their heads had become filled
with ideas of competing with men, and so on (Bailey 2004, 234–38). Such fears were
expressed in India too. But in the case of Indian nationalism, this anxiety was overdeter-
dined; if women became “desexed,” they might also become—a favored word of the
time—“denationalized.” To the very degree that woman had become an icon, the
symbol and guardian of all that was Indian, for her to lose her feminine attributes
would mean that she would no longer be able to signify and embody Indianess. This
anxiety was widely expressed, even in the process of advocating or effecting changes to
women’s conditions. The headmaster of a high school wrote, “The effect of this indiscri-
minate imparting of high Western education to our girls has had the unfortunate result of
unsexing our educated women and of denationalising them—a result bad enough in the
case of boys, but infinitely worse in the case of future mothers” (Calcutta University
Commission Report 1919, 12:426). Annie Besant, as we have seen, urged female edu-
cation as a patriotic necessity. However, she also sounded a warning: “It is bad enough
to denationalize your men. It would be a thousand times worse to denationalize your
girls” (Besant 1913, 219). Why was it “infinitely” or a “thousand times” worse to denatio-
nalize women than men? Because then they could no longer perform the function that
had been assigned to them, as icons and guardians of national identity—for as Besant
immediately went on to warn, the denationalizing of girls “would be the death-knell of
India” (219). Or as the author of Bharatlakshmi (1931) put it, “If, like the so-called
enlightened, Westernized Indian man, the Indian woman also takes its Western edu-
cation and changes her own nature and religion then our subjection would be extended
from the outside to our innermost core” (quoted in Sarkar 2001, 265).

I am suggesting, then, that woman became the signifier of national essence and tra-
dition in Indian but not in Chinese nationalism, and hence the different trajectories of the
“woman question” in each country. The question then becomes, why did Indian nation-
alisim have a notion of identity that militated against a more open-armed embrace of what
it imagined as modernity? Or rather, because this formulation posits identity and moder-
nity as if they were “things” that logically were incompatible, such that the advance of one
necessitated a diminution of the other, as if in some zero-sum game, why was the mod-
ernity Indian nationalism imagined one that threatened to efface identity, so that
modernity functioned as both object of desire and of anxiety, as both necessary to the achievement of nationhood and yet as undermining of it? The woman question leads us to a bigger question, that with which we began—a question about how modernity was imagined, and related to national identity.

IV. THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN INDIA AND CHINA

I have for a long time been curious, in an idle and rather unscholarly way, about why modern Chinese history is replete with denunciations of aspects of the past and anticipations of a modern future—as seen not only in the May Fourth Movement, but also the campaign against the four olds, for the four modernizations, and so on—in a manner and to a degree for which there is no equivalent in India. And I wondered whether the reasons why Indian but not Chinese intellectuals had been important contributors to the critiques of modernity and enlightenment that have characterized the intellectual scene for some time went beyond the obvious ones (the advantage Indian intellectuals have of operating in English, as well as the considerably greater intellectual and political freedom they possess) to something “deeper.” In short, I was curious as to why Chinese nationalism, compared to Indian nationalism, seemed to have embraced modernity as a desired state more wholeheartedly, and with fewer reservations, ambiguities, and caveats, and as to why when contemporary Chinese intellectuals “worried about China,” that worry, again in (partial) contrast to India, seemed to be almost wholly a concern about how China could be made truly and fully modern.4

When the editor of this journal approached me to write for it, I decided to use the opportunity to pose a properly scholarly question, of manageable proportions, which, however, was designed to shed light on these more general questions. After experimenting with a number of possibilities, I settled on the question of women, which, as I have shown, became one of the prime sites where debates to do with modernity, identity, and nationhood were played out. That some scholars of China were giving voice to not dissimilar questions reassured me that my musings were not altogether naïve ones, borne of a sketchy knowledge of Chinese history. Prasenjit Duara (1997, 216), for instance, asks how it was that Gandhism occupied such an important place in Indian nationalism, observing, “It is most unusual to find the general acceptability of and prestige accorded such anti-modern ideas among people educated in modern society in other parts of the world. The contrast is particularly striking in the comparison with China.” Making a similar point from the other direction, in noting the ubiquity of the desire for the new in twentieth-century China (xin wenxue, xin wenhua, xinmin, and so on) Leo Ou-Fan Lee (1999, 312) argues that in China, unlike India and Africa, writers “were able to embrace Western modernity openly, without fear of colonization” (see also Finnane 2008). Shuh-mei Shih (2001, 373) notes that whereas in colonial India “one finds sustained critiques of Western modernity, from both antimodern and nonmodern positions,” in China in the same period one finds a “more open . . . cultural attitude . . . to the West.”

4As during the New Enlightenment intellectual movement of the 1980s, which in treating the failures of “socialist modernization” usually concluded that the problem lay in socialism, but not in modernization, the desirability of which was affirmed (see H. Wang 1998).
I have not posed the question in quite the same way as it is posed by the scholars of China I have quoted above. I do not concur with Duara that Gandhian nationalism was anti-modern or non-modern. Gandhi simultaneously led a movement that sought that most modern of goals, the nation-state, through eminently modern means of mass mobilization, issuing programs and demands, utilizing the press, and so on, and yet also (inconsistently) imagined that nation in ways that can accurately be described as non-modern. He was, quite simply, too complex and rich a figure to be characterized as “pro” or “anti” modern. Nor do I conclude, as Shih does, that Indian nationalism was less “open” or receptive to the West than Chinese nationalism; as shall become clear below, the issue of how the West and modernity were imagined does not seem to me to be one that can be fruitfully posed in terms of “openness” or “receptivity.” But there are certainly family resemblances between my questions and those of distinguished scholars of China, and given this fact, I will proceed by first examining their explanations for the differences between India and China.

One explanation stands out in almost all cases, namely the different consequences that followed from being colonized, versus being semicolonized (on semicolonialism see also Goodman 2000; Osterhammel 1986). The fact that China was not directly colonized, suggests Duara (1997, 224), “meant that colonial ideology was not entrenched among both colonizer and colonized in the same way as it was in India and other colonized countries.” Chinese anticolonialism could focus on political and economic issues; Indian anticolonialism had additionally to contend with the fact or fear of a colonization of the self, resulting in either craven deference and imitation, or else defensive and nativist exaltation of “tradition.” Where the possibilities were so sharply polarized, Gandhi offered an alternative—a rejection of colonial claims to superiority and a will to nationhood, but through a nationalism that was a critique of modernity as well as colonial rule, rather than a critique of colonialism as an impediment to the achievement of modernity. This was an attractive position, one that “provide[d] a psychologically valid alternative . . . especially for a middle class caught awkwardly between two worlds,” and thus a major stream of Indian nationalism remained ambiguous and even critical about the desirability of the modern (Duara 1997, 224).

Taking the Chinese rather than the Indian case as her point of reference, Shih offers a similar explanation, albeit one couched more in cultural and discursive than in psychological terms. Semicolonialism in China is best understood, she suggests, not as “half of something,” but rather as denoting “the fractured, informal and indirect character of [this] colonialism” (Shih 2001, 34). The fractured nature of this form of domination arose from subjection to multiple Western powers, and later Japan. The informal and indirect nature of it stemmed from the fact that while European countries, the United States, and Japan had appropriated some territory, had designs on more, hemmed in the freedom for action of the Qing empire and later the Republic, and had established a novel system of quasi-sovereignty over treaty ports through extraterritoriality, this was still something other than direct colonial rule. The combination of these two characteristics meant an “absence of high-handed intervention by colonial powers in local culture,” and this in turn “made Western modernity less an object of resistance” (Shih 2001, 157). In particular, cultural and epistemological contestation in China was not Manichean, and thus more varied ideological, cultural and political positions were available to Chinese intellectuals. Also important, Shih notes, was the availability of the Japanese
example, which had mediated China’s encounter with modernity, and which could be seen as providing proof that it was possible to become modern without becoming a pale imitation of the West (see also Rogaski 2004, 303).

In other words—my words now—the difference between colonialism and semicolonialism had real consequences. In India, the choices were posed either between an avid embrace of Western modernity (but with a consequent loss of national identity) or a “traditionalist” or “nativist” rejection of it. In China, the absence of direct colonial rule meant that the choices were not starkly posed, and it became possible for many nationalists to embrace Western modernity with this being seen not as a rejection of “Chineseness,” but rather as a rejection of feudalism and Confucianism, an embrace that was further facilitated by the availability of a model of modernity that was closer to home culturally, that of Japan.

With the caveats outlined earlier, I will embrace this explanation, but in a substantially recast form. What makes positing the differences between colonialism and semicolonialism as the explanation for the differences between Indian and Chinese nationalism attractive for the historian—the fact that it traces ideas and debates “back” to what are posited as their “material” or “structural” origins and causes, thus equating “providing an explanation” with “finding a cause”—is precisely what I think needs to be problematized. As some have come to recognize, what materialist historians (and almost all historians are resolutely materialist) regard as “brute facts” must nonetheless enter the discursive domain in order to become historically effective. Gender, an undeniably real and even universal form of difference, cannot explain the meanings that come to be attached to “woman,” for meanings are a feature and function of language and discourse (Scott 1999). Class, as some historians have come to recognize, refers to inequalities and relations that are “real,” but for these to become “class relations” is something that occurs in the discursive realm; this is why “class” itself came to have different meanings at different times (Cabrera 2005; Jones 1984; Joyce 1994). Similarly, “Manichean” does not serve to characterize a structural position that is the concomitant of colonial rule, but rather how a structural position came (sometimes) to be “seen” and staged. Even nationalism is not “caused” by colonialism; not everyone in India or China made the fact of a foreign presence or foreign rule a central and organizing motif of their concerns. There were those—we have encountered the example of the Self-Respect Movement—for whom colonialism was not a major issue. Such groups do not belong to the history of nationalism, but that only goes to show that it is not colonialism that caused nationalism, but rather that nationalism is that discourse that makes foreign rule central to its outlook. In short, terms like “gender,” “class,” “Manichean,” and the like, even where they are valid descriptions of states of being or of relations, are also the names of how states of being and relations were being characterized and interpreted, and there is no causal link or deduction from the former to the latter.

I am suggesting, then, that if it is to function as an explanation of a discursive outcome, colonialism had to be an element in discourse, not something that determined or delimited discourse from the outside. This does not mean that “everything is discourse”; it means, rather, that while British rule in India, and extraterritoriality and the like in China, were no doubt extradiscursive or real, they did not “determine” or “shape” nationalist discourse from the outside, but rather shaped it inasmuch as they were present “in” this discourse, part of a chain of terms in which (usually) colonialism
If this is so, then in arguing that the differences between colonialism and semicolonialism are central to explaining the differences between Indian and Chinese nationalism, we must distinguish “explanation” from “finding a material cause.” We are examining how colonialism figured in Indian nationalist discourse, and semicolonialism in Chinese nationalist thought; inquiring into why the manner in which Indian nationalism conceived and thematized colonial rule entailed a notion of national identity that militated against a more open-armed embrace of what was imagined as modernity; and inquiring into why this made a dramatic shift or recalibration of the discursive terrain, as happened in China starting in the second decade of the twentieth century, exceedingly difficult in India. The short answer, I suggest below, has to do with the centrality of colonialism to Indian nationalist discourse, and with what I will call the “intimate” nature of that centrality.

At the time when the Mughal empire was in decline, the British were already a presence in India, one of a number of adventurers, along with the French, the Dutch, the Maharattas, and others, seeking loot, tribute, and trade. By the late eighteenth century they had become a territorial power in the subcontinent, ruling over a large landmass and a population bigger than that of Britain. They exercised their power, amongst other things, to dramatically change agrarian relations in the Bengal Presidency, and in doing so began the process of mapping and enumerating the land, its people, and its produce. By the early decades of the nineteenth century they established effective control over most of India, and as the century proceeded, the colonial state established schools and universities to teach Western knowledge, codified the law to which Indians were subject, and created “a whole apparatus of specialized technical services . . . in order to scientifically survey, classify, and enumerate the geographical, geological, botanical, zoological, and meteorological properties of the natural environment and the archaeological, historical, anthropological, linguistic, economic, demographic and epidemiological characteristics of the people” (Chatterjee 1995, 19–20).

The length of colonial rule in India, the extent of the knowledge it produced, and the reach of its intrusions and transformations, meant, in Ashis Nandy’s (1983, 2) words, that in India, colonialism was, or produced, a “shared culture,” at least among the elite classes, many of whom themselves were products of British rule and the transformations it wrought, often employed in the courts, offices, schools, and universities that were part of a colonial society. This was, moreover, a shared culture of some depth. As Tapan Raychaudhuri (1988, ix) has pointed out, “the Bengali intelligentsia was the first Asian social group of any size whose mental world was transformed through its interactions with the West.” This intelligentsia displayed “an almost obsessive preoccupation with the West”; the West, or Britain (which often stood in for “the West”) was its “continual referent” (332, xi) on an extraordinarily wide variety of subjects, including family relations and gender, hygiene, punctuality, and so on and so forth, long before Liang Qichao or Sun Yat-sen began, in similar fashion, to assess the Chinese in relation to the West. The fact that these elites were excluded from government facilitated that engagement; debarred from the exercise of political power, they speculated endlessly on the sources of that power. Positivism, utilitarianism, Thomas Paine, Robinson Crusoe, Shakespeare, and much else were read and discussed, well before Social Darwinism, the works of
John Dewey, and Mr. Science and Mr. Democracy became popular subjects for discussion in China. What began in Bengal soon became a more generalized phenomenon, as elites in other parts of India engaged in similar speculations and discussion (Chandra 1992).

When recognizably modern forms of political association began to emerge in India in the second half of the nineteenth century, including nationalist associations, they were always concerned with defining their attitude to the colonial political order. Their response was invariably an affirming one. Encomiums to the beneficial effects and providential character of British rule were a frequent feature of early nationalist discourse, and the annual sessions of the Indian National Congress were a regular platform for such effusions. The speeches made by early nationalist leaders were moreover often addressed to their British overlords, even if their audience was composed of Indians, and “public meetings were means of presenting a case to the colonial rulers rather than a method of stirring popular enthusiasm” (Haynes 1991, 221). Even when criticizing aspects of British rule, it was a common rhetorical strategy to reproach the British for failing to live up to their historic mission as the bearers of liberal and modern values and institutions in India, and urge them to do so (Seth 1999).

Alongside the modernity that was desired by this nationalism arose a notion of tradition, or indigenous custom, centered around the home and women in particular, which was coproduced by the colonizer and by Indian elites. This emerged over a long period, one stretching from the recognition and institutionalization of “personal law” in the latter eighteenth century to the debates over sati in the 1820s, and to the frequent subsequent controversies around women. When the earlier phase of “Moderate” nationalism was challenged by “Extremism,” and then overtaken by the mass nationalism of the Gandhian period, colonial rule came to be seen as an impediment to the achievement of modernity; this tradition was repeatedly invoked as the seat and site of that “Indianness” that rendered the project of founding a modern nation intelligible, and the anchor that guaranteed that this nation would be “modern but different.” But through all these permutations and shifts in nationalist thought, colonialism remained a central point of reference, indeed, functioned as the master signifier in relation to which all other terms—modernity, tradition, women—had to be thought. Whether it was seen as a providential aid to making India modern or an impediment to this, as a force enabling the modernization and emancipation of women or as a threat to one of the sole remaining sites of national autonomy, there came to be no way of thinking these and other issues other than in and through colonialism. Where they were thought without direct reference to colonialism and to the necessity for its overthrow, as in the Self-Respect Movement, they were also thereby thought outside of nationalist discourse.

There was no equivalent to this in China; even where semicolonialism was regarded as a wake-up call, as a catalyst for modernizing and saving the nation, it was also regarded by all shades of nationalist opinion as an impediment to modernization and national salvation, rather than a cause of it. The West was an external presence, a cause and source of “humiliation,” rather than an everyday part of the discursive landscape, a fixed element that provided the necessary point of orientation around which other elements could be organized and defined. Semicolonialism, in short, was not central to Chinese nationalist discourse in the way that colonialism was to Indian nationalism. Chinese patriots also
worried about how to combine the pursuit of the modern with remaining Chinese. However, because semicolonialism was not central to the nationalist imaginary in the same way or to the same degree as colonialism was to the nationalist imaginary in India, and because it was not, in Ashis Nandy’s evocative phrase, an “intimate enemy,” the discursive terrain was not organized around it, and dramatic shifts and realignments were more possible. Hence in China concerns about the loss of national essence, exemplified in the ti-yong distinction, dissipated in the heat and fervor of May Fourth. National pride and independence, young students and intellectuals declared, were to be achieved rather than undermined by making China modern; tradition was not an anchor, but an obstacle. The terms in which the debate had earlier been framed were fundamentally displaced, in a way that they were not in India, where the centrality and intimacy of colonialism precluded, or at any rate made much more difficult, both an outright rejection or unreserved embrace of Western modernity.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to Michael Dutton for conversation and for the loan of books, and to Harriet Evans, Tanika Sarkar, Antonia Finnane, Jeff Wasserstrom, Rajyashree Pandey, and Suman Seth for reading and commenting upon an earlier draft of this essay.

List of References


BORTHWICK, SALLY. 1985. “Changing Concepts of the Role of Women from the Late Qing to the May Fourth Period.” In Ideal and Reality: Social and Political Change in


