

MAITRAYEE CHAUDHURI  
Jawaharlal Nehru University

## Indian “Modernity” and “Tradition”: A Gender Perspective

*Abstract:* This paper explores how the language of tradition and modernity has been the dominant idiom that has sought to capture the “essence” of both the Indian nation and the Indian woman. The salience of this discourse demands a critical enquiry to understand how this overarching and hegemonic idiom been accepted as an unproblematic given. India is often seen as a land of contrasts where tradition and modernity coexist—where Indian women are often showcased as emblematic of this coexistence. The paper seeks to look into the complex processes that lie beneath this easy description. It seeks to do so primarily: (i) by presenting a more historicized account of India’s modernity from the vantage point of gender, offering a feminist critique of the public private divide which forms the theoretical hub of the modernization framework, and; (ii) by drawing attention to the centrality of gender in the nation state’s political, developmental and cultural policies and its more recent shifts in a contemporary globalizing India.

*Keywords:* India, modernity, Indian women, national tradition, gender.

There is always some truth in stereotypes, however skewed, however exaggerated. The image of India as a land of contrasts is one such. There is probably no nation in the world which is marked by greater internal inequality, diversity and plurality. Great wealth coexists with abysmal poverty. There is no dearth of confident, assertive women in various facets of India’s public and corporate life.<sup>1</sup> There is no shortage of women who have never gone to school, who have been married as children, who have neither experienced nor likely to experience the basic requirements of nutrition, health care and education.<sup>2</sup> Newspaper headlines carry stories about “honour killings”<sup>3</sup> and sex trafficking with a depressing regularity, reflect-

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<sup>1</sup> The largest state in India Uttar Pradesh is governed by not just a woman chief minister who is single, but a woman coming from the most oppressed Dalit community. The list of powerful women CEOs of major corporations is long, and the media covers their achievements in a major fashion. Even as I write the media reports that Dr. Kiran Mazumdar-Shaw has entered the elite ranks of the Indian business world as India’s richest woman. She is the Chairman & Managing Director of Biocon Ltd. ([www.mapsofindia.com](http://www.mapsofindia.com) 6<sup>th</sup> May 2010)

<sup>2</sup> Female literacy was at a national average of 53.63% whereas the male literacy was 75.26 % in the 2001 census. India’s maternal mortality rate stands at 450 per 100,000 live births according to UNICEF (Dhar 2009).

<sup>3</sup> A young woman journalist working in Delhi was found dead in her native home. Her parents were opposing her desire to marry a young woman who belonged to a “lower caste” (Deo 2010). A number of honour killings, executed at the behest of khap panchayat, traditional village councils, to punish defiant young adults for marrying outside society’s norms, grab media headlines (Bharadwaj 2010).

ing the state of a large section of women in India. A large number of women are simply “missing” because of technology driven selective termination of female fetuses.<sup>4</sup>

This paper will however not delve into either the systematic cases of violence and discrimination of Indian woman nor of her many achievements. Instead it will explore how the language of tradition and modernity has been the dominant idiom that has sought to capture the “essence” of both the Indian nation and the Indian woman. Touristy brochures capture pictures of women in colourful, “traditional” attire alongside visuals of “modern,” professional women in western attire “manning” the various flourishing sectors of a globalizing India. I use the two terms “traditional” and “modern” with care.

The reasons why I use the terms in quotes is that both within common-sense everyday discourse as well as a reasonably influential intellectual current in Indian sociological literature on women there are some ready characteristics that tend to be associated with the idea of “traditional” or “modern” women. Though men are not always described as either “traditional” or “modern” it is significant that very often a man’s likelihood of being described as “modern” or “traditional” rests on his purported attitude towards women. A cursory examination of matrimonial advertisements in newspapers searching for brides would show a recurrent emphasis on desiring women with a blend of the “traditional” and “modern.” The ideal woman would be a judicious blend of traditional qualities of domestic skills, knowledge of religious rituals and practices and modern abilities acquired through education and employment opportunities. In more common parlance the perfect Indian woman ought to be smart but not too smart, traditional but not too much.

For most urban middle class Indians this is a discourse that they are a product of and reproduce in turn. Issues of inequality and exclusion, which I refer to in my introductory paragraph, appear to disappear within this overarching discourse of the modern and traditional woman. The salience of this discourse demands a critical enquiry to understand both its emergence and perpetuation. Unfortunately to a large extent these ideas have been accepted as unproblematic givens, the stock of knowledge with which we navigate ourselves in our society. Even within the dominant sociological tradition in India this has been largely taken as a given. Only the task of operationalizing the concepts with ready indicators was seen as the task for us to map just how modern, and just how traditional Indian women are. Many seminars have spent long hours through the 1970s therefore figuring out whether a sari clad woman who drives a car is modern or not? Or is she like Milton Singer’s Madras industrialists simply compartmentalizing different spheres of their life. Singer’s argument was that the Madras industrialists “ritually neutralized” their

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<sup>4</sup> The 2001 census showed 933 women for 1000 men. The sex ratio in more prosperous and developed states of Punjab, Haryana and Delhi were 874, 861 and 821 respectively.

work sphere, that is relatively free from customary norms and ritual restrictions. This made it easier to experiment with new experiences, processes and products (Singer 1972).

The examples of the sari wearing woman driver and Singer's idea of compartmentalization may help examine more carefully the Indian debate on the women's question and nature of Indian modernity. The *first* example indicates that the idea of the modern in India is deeply gendered. In other words the query whether a western suited Indian man is modern or traditional is unlikely to be either raised or decided by his clothes. The *second* example that Milton elaborates points out that modernity changes the functioning and meaning of the public and private spaces. Common to both examples however is the fact that the idea of the modern is necessarily entangled with the idea of the western. This of course is no surprise given the history of a modernity that emerged in the west and therefore was necessarily culturally constitutive of the western context. That a western modernity sought to speak in the universal mode, of a rationality that transcended all cultural specificities cannot however brush aside the defining fact that western modernity rested on the culture and legacy of the west. This association of the "modern" with the "western" was compounded by the fact that the "western" was inextricably linked with the "colonial." The "modern" Indian, a product of western education in a colonial context was therefore at once envious and critical of the west. This ambiguity defined the 19<sup>th</sup> century middle class social reform movement that emerged and was constitutive of the colonial context. Most importantly for this paper the women's question was central to the reform attempts. Any attempt to fully comprehend the making of the dominant discourse of the "modern" and "traditional" Indian women will have to return therefore to the past.

This colonial past was one wherein India witnessed a whole mix of ideological influences from the modern west and a return to the traditional but forever marked by an interpretative framework that was an unintended consequence of colonialism. This would be equally true of Orientalist celebration of ancient India as much as it would be that of an arrogant rational dismissal of India's past. This paper will attempt to present a synoptic account of these trends. A return to the past will also afford us a perspective to understand why in the matrimonial advertisements the desired Indian woman is a combination of the "traditional" and "modern."

It is in this context that this paper will look at the sources, the content of the ideas and their selective appropriation by the emergent Indian middle class in colonial India which led to a certain fashioning of the notions of the "traditional" and "modern" and also implied a certain making of the public and private—a theme that is linked crucially to the gender question. These lines of enquiry which this paper hopes to pursue will strengthen my broad contention that a history of the women's question offers us a vantage point to understand the story of Indian modernity.

### A Colonially Mediated Modernity and the Women's Question

Cultural representations are crucial in the making of modern nations. Central in the making of the national imaginary has been the figure of the woman.<sup>5</sup> India has been no exception (Chaudhuri 1996). Women are often projected as cultural emblems of the Indian nation and society. Changes in her attire and demeanor are therefore hastily condemned as threats to culture and tradition. Such responses have been witnessed in many parts of the world and at one level can be read as a response typical of patriarchal societies. At another level this essentially patriarchal response has to be conjoined with the specific historical experience of colonial societies. Changes to "tradition" had to be condemned on two grounds—*one*, that they ran counter to "natural" patriarchal norms and *two*, that they are alien and western. It is well known that India experienced a colonially mediated modernity. However so many years after the end of colonial rule, at a time when postcolonial presence within the western academia is overtly conspicuous, the actual trauma that a colonized people underwent has retreated perhaps from public awareness. The humiliation and denial that marked the colonial experience therefore needs reiteration to fully appreciate how a colonially mediated modernity paved an uneasy and contentious relationship to the west necessarily involved a difficult link to the modern. This ambiguous connection with both the modern and the west persists as a strong and deep feeling in the "modern" Indian mind.

The experience of western colonial rule left an indelible impression on the Indian consciousness and led to a set of paradoxical responses. For the emerging Indian western educated middle class that slowly made its presence felt in 19<sup>th</sup> century colonial India, the west was at once a world to be emulated and yet at once disparaged. India's long years of colonial rule in a very fundamental way shaped her present. Some of the first issues that were debated in the colonial public discourse were gender questions. Explanations for this were many. The more oft quoted ones were that the Christian missionaries scoffed at the dismal state of Indian women and zeroed in on practices like sati, child marriage and maltreatment of widows, in particular the large number of high caste child widows. Liberal views in Britain too were of the opinion that the status of women indicated the status of a nation. Sir Herbert Risley wrote that while education had produced a class of Indians interested in political advancement it was unlikely that they could attain it for:

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<sup>5</sup> Yuval-Davis and Anthias (1989) has summed up the ways in which women have tended to participate in ethnic and national processes and in relation to state practices. These are:

- (a) as biological reproducers of members of ethnic collectivities;
- (b) as reproducers of the boundaries of the ethnic/national groups;
- (c) as participating centrally in the ideological reproduction of the collectivity and as transmitters of its culture;
- (d) as signifiers of ethnic/national differences—as a focus and symbol in ideological discourses used in the construction, reproduction and transformation of ethnic/national categories;
- (e) as participants in national, economic, political and military struggles.

In practice these would tend to blur into each other.

A society which accepts intellectual inanition and moral stagnation as the natural condition of its womankind cannot hope to develop the higher qualities of courage, devotion and self sacrifice which go to the making of nations (cited in Chaudhuri 2011: 15).

Goaded by such attacks, the new Indian middle class sought to reinterpret traditional institutions and culture. Understanding this middle class is important for much of contemporary debates on gender and culture embody the tensions of this class that emerged under the aegis of colonialism. “On the one hand they...” were products of an English education introduced by the colonial masters and therefore victim to a Eurocentric view of modern society. On the other they were victim to the “feeling of historical denial” (ibid: 12–13).

While Hindus remembered the glories of an ancient Hindu past, Muslims recalled the might of pre-British Muslim India. Since the Muslim memories of the recent past were stronger, the Muslims had less of the new class in their ranks; so their sentimentality was mainly that of restoration (ibid: 13).

The point that is being sought to be made is that in this recasting of what constitutes “tradition” and “national culture,” colonialism had a significant role to play. There are two aspects to what one refers to as the making of the traditional and modern culture. The first pertains to women and its significance in the presentation of the “national” culture. The second relates to the fact that in a diverse and multicultural society like India this invocation of the “national” entails projection of the dominant cultural community and marginalization of the other communities who in turn tends to affirm sometimes discriminatory gender practices as cultural emblems of the community. Debates on practices such as *pardah* and child marriage in the 19<sup>th</sup> century suggest that once a custom was seen as belonging to the “other” community, there was greater willingness to relinquish it. For instance, some Muslim social reformers opined that *pardah* as was practiced in 19<sup>th</sup> century India was influenced by Hindu practices and that child marriage too was a Hindu custom. Reform in such a context was possible. Significantly some Hindu social reformers felt that *pardah* was an Islamic custom and could therefore be dispensed with.<sup>6</sup> More recently a rich body of writings on gender and caste has emerged contesting the exclusionary and discriminatory cultural notion of the traditional Indian woman which was constructed (Rege 1998).

What one is arguing is that a colonially mediated modernity of a society marked by diverse religious traditions, the gender question got doubly implicated. The women’s question became a site of many contesting processes. *One*, the status of women became one between “tradition” and “modernity.” *Two*, the process got compounded because the conception of “tradition” itself was contested. Central in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was an effort to critique, reinvent and valorize “tradition.” We shall see this in the debate on sati way back in the early 1800s. *Third*, since India has been marked by distinct religious, linguistic and ethnic communities, there was a contestation between the communities about whose tradition, whose culture ought to be the model on which the “national” Indian woman had to be imagined. The gender question thus became a potent site of conflict. We shall see this manifesting itself almost 160 years later

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<sup>6</sup> See Chaudhuri 2011 Chapters 2 and 3.

after the abolition of sati in 1829 in 1985 1986 with the Shah Bano Case and Deorala Sati case. We discuss this later in this paper. *Fourth*, models of the modern bourgeois domesticated woman and the modern normative family of the west also made its impact felt in the cultural reconstruction of what the Indian traditional woman was all about. The following paragraphs explicate these lines of confluence and contestation.

### **Culture, Tradition and the Re-casted Woman**

The manner that colonialism shaped the relationship between culture and women are deep and complex. The middle class desire to change the traditional family pattern stemmed not from an exposure to western liberal ideas alone but to the strains that developed in the families of the newly educated men. Modern education and urbanization introduced a new barrier between men and women such families. The common practice for men who came to study and stayed to work in the cities was to leave their families behind in the villages. The tremendous gap of experience became a formidable barrier for close companionship between husbands and wives, mothers and sons. The only class of women who could supply such companionship was the courtesans who were accomplished women, trained in the finer art of social interaction. With increased urbanization, sex work became more commercialized. The demand could not be met by daughters of the traditional courtesan castes alone. The large number of young high caste widows, helpless victims of family neglect and even torture was an obvious recruiting ground.

Middle class social reformers concerned with the threat posed by this for both the family and society, raised questions about the ill treatment of widows, the denial of remarriage, child marriage and polygamy in the newspapers and journals of the time. The women's question became a central issue in some of the most controversial debates over social reform arguing whether reform would strengthen or weaken the social structure. The advocates of reform argued that ameliorative measures would strengthen the family—the chief unit of Indian social organization. Education would not turn the women away from their traditional familial roles but improve the efficiency of wives and mothers, and strengthen the hold of traditional values on society, since women were better carriers of these values. Thus came about the curious mix of traditional and modern attributes of the normative Indian woman which the title of this paper alludes to. Herein we find an affirmation of the recast Aryan woman, of the Victorian faith in the sanctity of the family, of middle class propriety and respectability.

The process of nation making for India with its diverse communities, languages and religions was bound to be contentious. In the construction of “national” culture (however defined) women play a particularly important role as cultural emblems. Thus practices like *sati* or child marriage or prohibition of widow remarriage or *purdah* or denial of right to divorce could be read as cultural emblems. One has already alluded to this earlier in the paper. To find discriminatory practices against men portrayed as cultural emblems will not be easy.

Accompanying the process of recasting women as emblems of culture, was a process of refashioning of gender norms also in the name of "culture" and "refinement" by the new Indian middle class. Driven by the idea that Victorian upper class culture and gender norms were a desirable model to aspire to, efforts were made by reformers and nationalists later to "refine" Indian women. What it translated into often was imposition of codes of dressing and behaving that would "train, improve and nourish the gentler and nobler qualities of heart," "genteel norms" and "domestic virtues" (Chaudhuri 2011: 31–32). Various colonial laws were brought in place to decree various practices of Indians, particularly of the lower castes obscene. For instance performing women who danced and sang in traditional Bengal were legally banned from performing. A complex process thus got underway which created a new upper caste, middle class "culture" that defined norms for the typical Indian "woman." The new however became "traditional," the old an anomaly, inconsistent with true "tradition." I am tempted at this point to mention that the iconic sari worn by the modern middle class Indian women is a style, more "modern" than "traditional." Significantly it is worn along with a "blouse" and "petticoat," terms clearly originating elsewhere.<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s one often heard the use of the term "chemise" by middle class Bengali grandmothers. That of course offers another take on our complex social histories, which we cannot pursue here.

A quote from an early reformer captures both the paradox of tradition and modernity as well the divide between private and public realms, so central to modern western philosophy (Benhabib 1987). The desire of middle class Indian males to refashion conjugal life and "home" has often been seen as a propelling reason for the early reform attempts.

...(India's) need is to devise such a system of education for Hindu females as will make her an agreeable companion, a good mother, an intelligent and loving wife, and an excellent housewife. We want her to possess those mental accomplishments which enable the wife to serve as a solace to her husband in his bright and dark moments, the mothers to undertake, or at least to superintend the early instruction of her child, and the lady of the house to provide those sweet social comfort, *idealized in the English word-Home* (Chaudhuri 2011: 51 emphasis mine).

The paradox in the formulation is that while the idea of the "Home" English style is new, it soon acquires an invocation of timeless tradition to legitimize it. But that indeed is the style of nationalism itself, at once modern, at once invoking of traditions stretching to an immemorial past. We thus notice how colonially mediated modernity led to a rethinking of tradition and culture. Gender norms underwent change. This change was compounded by the fact that in a diverse and culturally plural India what constitutes traditional gender norms became a key site of contestation between

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<sup>7</sup> With the rise of Indian nationalism, self conscious attempts were made to fashion what would constitute visible signs of Indian tradition and culture. There were also attempts to develop a dress style that would draw on the tradition of different regions. In the late 1870s, Jnanadanandini Devi, wife of Satyendranath Tagore, the first Indian member of the ICS, returned from Bombay to Calcutta. She adopted the Parsi style of wearing the sari pinned to the left shoulder with a brooch, and worn with a blouse and shoes. This was quickly adopted by Brahma Samaji women and came to be known as the Brahmika sari. This style gained acceptance before long among Maharashtrian and Uttar Pradesh Brahmios, as well as non-Brahmios.

different communities. Both statements concealed more than they revealed. But importantly such gendered rhetoric became part of community identity discourse.

Indian nationalism has to be therefore understood also as a cultural critique of colonialism and an assertion of “national culture.” In this assertion the image of “Indian womanhood” was significant. And this has had serious long term implications. Many were detrimental to women’s democratic rights. Yet the assertion itself propelled an early visibility of the women’s question itself and a certain legitimacy of women in the public sphere. I cannot enter into this aspect but not mentioning it at all would not do justice to the long tradition of women in public life and a significantly a long “tradition” of debating “feminism” (Chaudhuri 2005).

### **Contesting Identities and Jurisdiction: Community, Gender, State**

To return to questions of culture, community identity and scriptural sanctions, they have been very much part of the manner in which the women’s question emerged in India. One of the first issues where this comes up is the sati dispute. While the Brahmo Samaj marshalled enormous *shastric* evidence to show that sati is not mandatory, the Dharma Sabha pleaded with the British to disallow those who nothing of their customs and religion to deter from speaking. It petitioned “that in a question so delicate as the interpretation of our sacred books, and the authority of our religious usages none but Pundits and Brahmins and teachers of holy lives, and known learning ought to be consulted—not men who have neither faith nor care for the memory of their ancestors or their religion” (Chaudhuri 2011: 20–22). The Age of Consent Bill that raged through India in the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century further argued that the natural and nationalist right of a community to decide when and how to reform, rejecting the right of an alien and unresponsive state to legislate on the private matters of Indians (*ibid*: 72–77).

While the establishment of an independent state in a way altered the terms of discourse, the problem of differing identification of communities to the state persist. The majority community “naturally” identifies with the “nation state” while degrees of discomfort persist with the other communities. That India attained independence with the partitioning of the country and unprecedented killings on “communal” grounds have marked the discourse of state and communities till date. So far as women are concerned the questions that persist are: Who decides who speaks legitimately for a “community”? Who decides what constitutes the “culture” of a community?

Western ideas had a great bearing on the manner that the ideas of early social reformers, nationalists, socialists and communists were shaped. As mentioned already these ideas entered India through a colonial encounter which meant an abiding paradoxical relationship with the west (and the modern)—at once admiring and envious, at once suspicious and superior. The harking back to the ancient Hindu past and the purported high status of women thereof which forms a necessary trope of modern Indian historiography has to be located within this colonial state. This eulogy of a Hindu past was an assertion both against the colonial west and the Muslim other. The Muslim community on the other hand likewise developed a narrative of a pristine



Koranic past that had got sullied by contamination with many suspect Hindu practices in India. This attempt by the two major communities to distinguish themselves from the "other" often rested on gendered practices. Indeed scholars have contended that the very construction of monolithic and apparently internally homogeneous communities, namely the Hindu and Muslim gave the lie to a longer tradition of syncretism and overlapping identities. In that sense the contemporary form of the communities themselves are modern, not traditional. The shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesselschaft* did not quite happen. An assertion of fixed bonded communities, a deeply gendered process, has had very severe and often tragic implications for South Asia. The next section seeks to capture a persisting pattern of contesting gender and community rights that has played out from the colonial period right into the contemporary present.

The unique historical account of India notwithstanding, western ideas had a great bearing on the manner that the ideas of early social reformers, nationalists, socialists and communists were shaped. But, and that is one of the key contentions of this paper is that these ideas entered India through a colonial encounter also meant an abiding paradoxical relationship with the west (and the modern)—at once admiring and envious, at once suspicious and superior. The harking back to the ancient Hindu past and the purported high status of women thereof which forms a necessary trope of modern Indian historiography has to be located within this colonial state. This eulogy of a Hindu past was an assertion both against the colonial west and the Muslim other. The Muslim community on the other hand likewise developed a narrative of a pristine Koranic past that had got sullied by contamination with many suspect Hindu practices in India. This attempt by the two major communities to distinguish themselves from the "other" often rested on gendered practices. Indeed scholars have contended that the very construction of monolithic and apparently internally homogeneous communities, namely the Hindu and Muslim gave the lie to a tradition of syncretism and overlapping identities. In that sense the contemporary form of the communities themselves are modern, not traditional. The shift from *gemeinschaft* to *gesselschaft* did not quite happen. An assertion of fixed bonded communities, a deeply gendered process, has had very severe and often tragic implications for South Asia. In the following paragraphs we seek to capture the persisting pattern of contesting gender and community rights that has played out from the colonial period right into the contemporary present.

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The Shah Bano case dramatically brought all these questions to the fore. On 23 April 1985 the Supreme Court of India passed a judgment granting maintenance to a divorced Muslim woman Shahbano (A.I.R. 1985). The court awarded Shah-

bano maintenance of Rs.179.20 per month from her husband and dismissed the husband's appeal against the award of maintenance. The judgment of the Supreme Court sparked of a nation-wide controversy. The principal argument put forward by conservative Muslim opinion was that the Muslim Personal Law was based on the *Shariat*, which is divine and immutable. Though sections from the Muslim community defended the judgment the state was more willing to listen to the voice of conservative spokespersons of the community. Shahbano herself was pressurised to such an extent that in an open letter she denounced the Supreme Court judgment:

...which is apparently in my favour; but since this judgement which is contrary to the Quran and the *hadith* and is an open interference in Muslim personal law, I, Shahbano, being a Muslim, reject it and dissociate myself from every judgement which is contrary to the Islamic shariat. I am aware of the agony and distress which this judgement has subjected the Muslims of India today. (*Inquilab* 1985).

The state passed the Muslim Women's Bill and the Hindu communal forces saw this move as an appeasement of the state to the minorities. The question that arose is who exactly the Bill was seeking to protect—community leaders, divorced husbands or women? (Pathak and Rajan 1986).

It is important to emphasis that the tendency for the conservative leadership of a community to affirm gender discriminatory practices as authentic culture is not confined to any one community. Soon after the Indian state passed the retrogressive Muslim Women's Bill on 4<sup>th</sup> September 1987 an eighteen year old widow Roop Kanwar was burnt alive on her husband's pyre in the full gaze of about 3000 spectators, accompanied by the full panoply of Rajput valour. Despite Rajasthan High Court's directives to the State Government to prevent the celebrations in honour of Roop Kanwar, it was celebrated in a very big way. About two lakh people assembled and paid obeisance to the place where the sati had taken place, the "sati-sthal." Many leading politicians participated in the celebrations. The women of the Rani Sewa Sangha, a voluntary social movement to preserve India's "ancient traditions" dressed as brides marched through the streets of Delhi to commemorate "the historic act of self-immolation." *Sati* was projected as the highest ideal of female spirituality and renunciation, the highest achievement of "*naridharma*" (the duty of women) and "*pativrata*" (devout wife). This was imbued with the aura of sacrifice associated with Rajput history. (Sangari 1998: 26) The sentiments expressed at the *sati* case were widely perceived in consonance with the "natural cultural" and "national" sentiments of the people. The "nation" perceived no threat while the Shah Bano case was widely projected as an instance of a minority community's disloyalty to the state and nation. Quite clearly women to be cultural emblems of the nation have to conform to a particular culture.

Most recently we have had a steep rise in "honour killings" of young men and women who chose to marry outside their caste and community, which once again are being defended in the name of tradition and culture of specific communities. Though it is increasingly becomes a public issue, we have to wait and see how this develops for major political parties have either kept a careful silence on this or are slowly veering around to a defense of the traditional *khap panchayats*, (the traditional village council), the moral police of the community that has been overriding the constitutional provisions of the state to assert their "traditional" patriarchal control. A young

modern industrialist Navin Jindal, also a Congress MP has come out in support of the *khap panchayat*, once again invoking “time immemorial” tradition. (Joshi and Naqshbandi 2010) Rhetoric apart, it is a straightforward defense of violent assertion of patriarchal control over women’s sexuality and a matter of control of power for “modern” political leaders rest their base and support on “traditional” village councils. This I argue is a break from the early years of Indian politics which did seek to break oppressive social practices whatever be their customary legitimacy. (Chaudhuri 2011) For national politics was imbued with the democratic vision of the nationalist movement. In such a context serious attempts to engage critically with “tradition” and “modernity” were attempted. This one would aver is no longer the case.

### **In Conclusion**

Today in a globalized era politics is emptied of its egalitarian content and disengaged with democratic aspirations of the ordinary woman and man. Politics is reduced to power blocks and smart moves, reflective of corporate deals rather than engagement with democratic ideals and practices. Tradition in such a context thus becomes a pawn to promote “consumption” or a ploy to win “electoral support.”

The new era has also seen dramatic transformations in the Indian media. A new public discourse in India began to be articulated from the 1990s with the new liberal economic policies. Accompanying this was also a marked change of the state and nation’s approach to the gender question (Chaudhuri 1996). In an earlier era the poor and dispossessed occupied an ideologically central place in the state vision. In the new globalized developmental frame, the state retreated from many of its welfare functions. The market increasingly occupied a central space. This was accompanied by a major ideological shift in public discourse in which an advertisement driven media has had a significant role to play (Chaudhuri 2001). In the images that the media projects the dispossessed classes have virtually disappeared. Significantly the domestic space, the private realm of women, has returned in a globalized India but with some changes. Thus just we have a redefining of middle class virtues at home, the household is actively redrawn as a site of consumption and the Indian woman learns that “thrift” is no longer a virtue and shopping a legitimate pleasure (Chaudhuri 1998). And Indian men learn that looking good is not only a woman’s privilege as new images of groomed Indian men flood the electronic and print media. Simultaneously “tradition” appears to become a key site for promoting consumption. Each traditional ritual, once a localized practice has now become potent forums for national celebration and conspicuous consumption. The “Big Indian Wedding” has become a site for conspicuous consumption and celebration of “traditions”—often very recently invented. The rhetoric of tradition and modernity now gets appropriated by a market keen to promote its goods and services.

In this new phase of globalization, even as dominant and visible sections of the Indian society move forward to what may appear as an unmarked consumer society, deep lines of contestation between the modern and traditional play themselves out

even as basic questions regarding what constitutes “tradition” and whose “tradition” remain unresolved. In the entire story of India’s modernity, a gendered perspective offers us a critical look into how patriarchal power whether of class or caste, of state or community plays out in issues pertaining to gender. As this paper sought to show the rhetoric of “tradition and modernity” within which the status and role of Indian women were sought to be understood hid more than it revealed.

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*Biographical Note:* Maitrayee Chaudhuri has been teaching sociology at the Centre for the Study of Social Systems, School of Social Sciences, Jawaharlal Nehru University, (JNU) New Delhi since 1990. She was

the Director of the Women’s Studies Programme, (WSP) JNU. (2006–2008) She has published widely in the area of gender, culture, media and pedagogy. Her work includes (ed.) *Sociology in India: Intellectual and Institutional*, *The Indian Women’s Movement: Reform and Revival*, (ed.), *The Practice of Sociology*, (ed.), *Feminism in India*.

She has been the Advisor and author for Sociology School Textbooks, National Council for Education, Research and Training, NCERT, India. She has been Visiting DAAD Guest Professor, Albert Ludwigs-University, Freiburg, Germany, 2003, Visiting Fellow, Committee on Degrees in Women’s Studies, Harvard University, Cambridge, USA. 1995–1996, Visiting Fellow, Institute of Asian American Studies, University of Massachusetts, Boston. 1995–1996. She has lectured widely both within India and outside.

*Address:* E-mail: maitrayeec@gmail.com