

*BRIEF REPORT OF CONFERENCE funded by the  
Society for South Asian Studies:*

**Women in Colonial India: A Contour of  
Resistance,**

*University of Manchester, 19 and 20 August, 2004.*



***Anindita Ghosh*<sup>1</sup>**

Abstract:

The idea behind the conference was to bring together a team of experts working on the theme of everyday dissent and resistance among women in India in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries against contemporary dominant male discourses. Drawing on the legacy of scholarship in this field (Rosalind O’Hanlon, *Comparison Between Men and Women*; Rimli Bhattacharya, *My Life, My Story*, to name only a few) the conference aimed to provide a coherent all-India picture of this struggle. But significantly, the focus was on less spectacular figures, with participants trying to unearth a narrative of resistance in the daily lives of ordinary women. Songs and poetry, domestic norms and practices, family photographs and legal records, among others, will be examined for this purpose. The participants also, to a certain extent, tried to set up a working framework to theorise this ‘resistance’ in the historical context of colonial South Asia. Speakers included, Tanika Sarkar, Geraldine Forbes, Veena Oldenburg, Padma Anagol, Clare Anderson, Nita Verma Prasad, Amina Yaqin and Anindita Ghosh.

The papers were drawn from across the sub-continent, and provided both thematic focus and diversity. The presentations on widows threw this group, e.g. sharply into focus while at the same time highlighting the very different conditions of their struggle and existence, across various regions and class. A particular strength of the conference seemed to lie in the richness of the material unearthed. There was much heated discussion on the subject of ‘resistance’ itself. How far can we label these hardly visible struggles as ‘subversion’ or ‘resistance’, given that women not only continue to operate within dominant structures, often as collaborators, but also have no vision of an alternative social order? And finally, which women are we talking about? Is it right to treat ‘women’ as a homogeneous category, ignoring the trappings of power that come with wealth and status? But all participants agreed that the goal was to take the project forward from the extant histories of organised, ‘successful’ movements by women, and look into the overwhelming evidence available, of numerous writings, rituals, and symbols of deviance and subversion in women’s lives – acting as collectives or individuals.

A brief account of the contributory papers is given below:

---

<sup>1</sup> Anindita Ghosh is Lecturer at the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures, University of Manchester.  
Email: a.ghosh@man.ac.uk

### Contributors

- Padma Anagol, 'From the Symbolic to the Open: Women's Assertion and Resistance in Colonial Maharashtra'
- Clare Anderson, 'Gender, Subalternity and Silence: Recovering Convict Women's Experience from Histories of Transportation in Colonial South and South-east Asia, c. 1780-1857'
- Geraldine Forbes, 'Small Acts of Rebellion: Women Tell Their Photographs'
- Anindita Ghosh, 'A World of Their Very Own: Religion, Performance, Ritual and Subversion in Bengali Homes'
- Veena Oldenburg, 'Sexual and Emotional Deployments: Wives, Concubines and Courtesans'
- Nita Verma Prasad, 'The Litigious Widow: Inheritance Disputes In Colonial North India, 1875-1911'
- Tanika Sarkar, 'Wicked Widows: Reform Literature and Law on Widow Remarriage'
- Amina Yaqin, '*The Body Torn*: Gender and sexuality in women's poetry'

**Anagol's** study analysed the various forms of individual and collective assertion and resistance by women in late nineteenth and early twentieth-century colonial Maharashtra. These initiatives, it was argued, arose when they were caught up in negotiating with various kinds of power relations in an everyday context. The paper began by theorising the concepts of 'assertion' and 'resistance' and focused on three modes of resistance by women, from the symbolic to the open. It looked at a variety of contexts in which they were operative from literature and songs by women to female crime.

**Anderson** focussed on the recovery of non-elite women's histories, experiences and resistance. She considered this issue in relationship to the transportation of Indian convict women to colonial penal settlements across the Indian Ocean. Until the 1840s, these women were almost entirely absent from the archives. Then they suddenly appear as a 'disciplinary problem'. The paper tried to make sense of this shift by considering the meaning of female convicts' 'voices' and 'silences' in the colonial archives, among other things.

**Forbes'** paper was concerned with family photographs in Bengali homes and the stories they had to tell. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, families were creating photograph albums with controlled and categorized images of their members. While at first glance this project seems to reinforce patriarchy, photographs are not fixed items in terms of historical identity. When women (born c. 1899-1914) who took strong stands on political and social issues, showed the contributor family photographs, they often recalled "small acts of rebellion," instances when they defied authority and/ or social convention. In the paper, she focussed on these tellings, which frequently involved pointing out acts of rebellion that could not easily be seen in the images.

**Ghosh's** study looked at a world, hidden away in the inner courtyards of nineteenth century Bengali homes – of religion and ritual, resolute domesticity, and sisterhood – in which women held their own. Coupled with the apparent unruliness and raillery

prevailing in such spheres that allowed the practice of immodest and superstitious customs and beliefs, direct challenges - it was argued - were posed to the contemporary male reformist discourse. The paper attempted to thus render more complex the image of complying, submissive wives and daughters that forms the subject matter of much recent scholarship on the period.

**Oldenburg** explored the uncharted frontier of sexuality—its strategic deployment by women—to control men’s sexuality and the reproduction of families as a means of everyday resistance used by women in their relationships with men. Continuing the theme of her earlier study of courtesans obliquely subverting patriarchy in their interaction with male patrons, she discussed the multifarious means, particularly sexual means, consorts and wives use to gain property, freedom, a gender-targeted family and escape brutalities.

**Verma** brought to light the fight put up by widows to claim the property of their deceased husbands in the UP, by drawing on the court records of the Allahabad High Court from 1875 to 1911. We see startling pictures of widows suing their in-laws over their right to receive regular maintenance payments, their right to effectively manage their late husbands’ estates, and even challenging financial abuses such as the usurpation of property.

**Sarkar’s** paper also on widows, dealt with an Act that, in 1856, legalised the remarriage of Hindu widows. It argued that the nature of widowhood regulations suggest an awareness, among the Hindu legal authorities, about a profound fault line within discipline: on the one hand, the assumption of self denial and self flagellation that was enjoined upon widows assumed her willing consent, but, on the other hand, the discipline remained fundamentally coercive, doubting the widow's compliance at every step and policing her behaviour. The debates and the controversies that are produced as a result in the Bengali public sphere fractures older disciplinary discourses of widowhood and conjugality. It concluded with a brief speculation about the ways in which the limited and rather ineffective law generated discursive shifts in the ideology of gender relations, with conjugality emerging as a terrain for talking about rights and equality, female love and desire.

**Yaqin** looked at the complexities of female identity formation in Urdu poetry. She critically examined the significance of feminist poetry’s engagement with gendered social practices of the postcolonial nation, focussing specifically on two contemporary poets, Fahmida Riaz and Kishwar Naheed who disrupt the order of gendered power-relations by openly critiquing the status accorded to women in Pakistani society. Both poets challenged the accepted discourse of gender and sexuality in Pakistan with their political verse and in doing so they create a transgressive space for self-expression.