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**Integrating Gender,  
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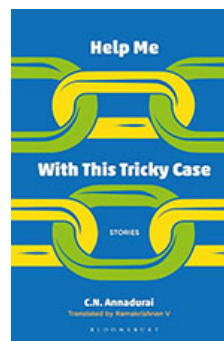


# Between the Ideal and the Real

**Editorial**

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This collection of ten essays explores the themes of domesticity, the body and modernity in colonial India, examining in the process the relationship between the ideal and the real with respect to gender ideologies in the colonial period. By the late nineteenth century, the home provided the space for the contestation of colonialism, the site where modernities were negotiated. How was the construction of



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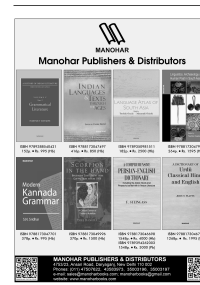
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modernity constituted by class? Swapna Banerjee in her exploration of the politics of mothering and domestic work, through domestic manuals and personal memoirs of the period, wonders whether aristocratic women who dared to live differently, in fact brought different behavioural standards for upper class women. Was the choice of living by different rules open to all women irrespective of class? Even within the aristocratic and relatively affluent classes, where change was not spontaneous, was there any way in which the colonial government could initiate change and chip away at female seclusion in barely perceptible ways? The questions raised by the Committee on Female Education in Bengal in 1908 whether it would be appropriate for purdanashin women, who had upto that point been educated within the household, to attend centres in each locality that drew women from different households together, introduced the peripatetic approach to zenana education, an idea that drew much support from the local intelligentsia. Asha Nayeem and Avril Powell trace the transformations in the constitution of the zenana through new ideas of female education in colonial Bengal.

There were other ways in which the family-community did not open up, but buried girls within instead. Debates on female infanticide in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries reveal for Veena Oldenberg, the collusion between imperial officers and Indian informants. Despite a skewed power equation, this collusion, she argued, opened out two possibilities for the native elders – first they were singled out and recognized as patriarchal authorities in their local context by the new rulers, and second, they were able to impute ancient religious or caste compulsions to the practice of infanticide to prevent it from being investigated on a case-by-case basis – the “barbarity plea” as Oldenberg calls it. Colonial officers for their part then, ignored the socio-economic causes of female infanticide, especially its relation to the agricultural distress of the late nineteenth century.

It was necessary to move away from barbarity towards civilization, in order that the project of nation building achieves fruition. For Dayananda Saraswati, inherent in this civilizing mission was the need to move towards the Aryavarta, the land of the ancient Aryans who demonstrated all the qualities that made the West sovereign in his time. Stringent dietary and commensal practices and complete discipline over sexual behaviour, for him, would preserve hierarchy and rank which were constitutive of western society. Through complex links between food, bodily substances and what the body inherits, Dayananda, in Sathyartha Prakash, posits the body, Anshu Malhotra argues, as a metaphor of the nation. The theme of sexual control and controlled human reproduction figures in a very different way in Ruth Compton Brouwer’s study of the role of medical missionaries in learning and teaching about birth control. Brouwer traces the emergence of birth control as a subject of public discussion,



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and maps several overlapping themes in the discussion – the support to birth control that included eugenics concerns; the condemnation of its use outside marriage; the medicalization of birth control and the tension with Gandhian principles of self control rather than external manipulation. Finally, of continuing relevance today the distancing of advocacy from commercialism. The spread of ideas of new medical practice saw the professionalization of nursing in Britain and America at the end of the Victorian era. Organized nursing began in this period to actively pursue the spirit of internationalism, culminating in the setting up of the International Council of Nurses in 1899. Rosemary Fitzgerald examines the divisions within and the exclusions from this imagined nursing community – the devaluation of indigenous nursing traditions, the presumptions of hierarchy based on race and language, and the imperial foundations of modern nursing. Straddling modern medicine and Indian modernity was Haimabati Sen – who travelled from being child widow to lady doctor. Her struggle for autonomy, against sexual harassment in an all male profession, and her insatiable urge to provide succour to her patients against all odds are moving. Geraldine Forbes, through a painstaking account of Haimabati's life, shows us how she held her own in difficult circumstances, how her methods differed depending on the situation and how she skillfully framed demands sometimes in the language of the Raj, sometimes acting outside their view and at other times openly defiant of orders.

In a primarily female missionary force that propagates egalitarian Quaker religious ideology, how do hierarchies based on gender, class, race and religion interrupt the rhetoric of egalitarianism? Siobhan Lambert-Hurley, in her study of the Quaker missionaries in Bhopal state, explores the ways in which these women navigated the contradictions they were confronted with, suggesting that this group of missionaries was indeed distinct from other missionaries both with respect to the egalitarian internal structure of their mission and with respect to their greater tolerance of local culture and political activities. Finally, the relationship between rhetoric and practice – rather the place of rhetoric in reform. This is a question that has come up time and again in assessments of prominent male social reformers in different regions – their inability to live the realities they propagated. And yet, unarguably, there is a value in rhetoric in that it enables a critical engagement with colonialism and provides a vision of a new world. Avril Powell's account of the place of Syed Ameer Ali, seems to suggest such a limited appreciation of his work.

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