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Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader edited by Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, 560 pp., \$75.00 hardcover, \$29.95 paper.

Wives, Widows, and Concubines: The Conjugal Family Ideal in Colonial India by Mytheli Sreenivas. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008, 192 pp., \$55.00 hardcover, \$21.95 paper.

Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal by Rochona Majumdar. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009, 360 pp., \$94.95 hardcover, \$24.95 paper.

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The three books under review focus on “social reform”: nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial and Indian efforts to rid Indian society of its most illiberal practices, many of which—such as “sati” (widow immolation), child marriage, and strictures against widow remarriage—were directed toward women. Together, the three volumes destabilize some of the foundational definitions upon which the history of reform in India has been written and investigate how the family is idealized and contested at the critical intersection of colonialism and modernity. They provide excellent resources by which to consider the family as an historical institution and an arena of social inquiry in India and beyond.

Women and Social Reform in Modern India, edited by the distinguished historians Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, is a comprehensive collection of key essays and articles on social reform in India. It includes a broad range of recent essays by contemporary scholars and excerpts of original essays by men and women social reformers written in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—primary documents that students will now be able to read. In their introduction, Sarkar and Sarkar argue that social reform needs to be understood in the context of changing “gender norms and practices” informed by regional and material specificities, including the development of print cultures, to which the historical excerpts contributed. They question the utility of terms like the

“middle class,” arguing that it should not be treated as a fully formed identity and the presumed target and beneficiary of reform; instead, the process of the constitution of the middle class is worthy of exploration. This cautionary note applies to the contemporary moment when the burgeoning new middle classes in India and China are presumed to be a self-evident category. Similarly, the term “debate,” commonly used to refer to the contestations between colonial and Indian authorities over the antecedents, shapes, and forms of specific reforms, should be opened up to study how the public sphere came to be, in which debate was possible. In order to illuminate the social and cultural contexts obscured by such shortcuts, Sarkar and Sarkar suggest using nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century reform to analyze concurrent shifts in gendered systems of social regulation, especially through religious orthodox and revivalist movements, and gendered engagements with the state, especially through law. Women’s investments, agency, and political activism are central to the reforms, whether as women writers, itself a newly available identity, or as social activists and critics. The Sarkars’ project, however, is much larger than creating a more accurate narrative of social reform in late-colonial India. As they put it: “[W]e revision colonialism and modernity in the light of the broad discussion of social reforms” (5). This ambition is met in the two other books under review as well.

In her award-winning monograph *Wives, Widows, and Concubines*, Mytheli Sreenivas presents an in-depth analysis of social reform in one region—the Tamil region of South India—by focusing on “the tensions and displacements between the family as an ideal, as an embodied institution, and as a site of lived experience” (7).¹ Sreenivas demonstrates how a bourgeois, monogamous notion of conjugality that privileged the husband/wife relationship became the ideal among professional groups during the late-colonial period. We are now able to understand how the “conjugal family ideal” came to be, instead of simply assuming that it was available for Indian nationalist projects as the grounds upon which to assert difference from British colonial ideals. In the process, Sreenivas makes a significant contribution by widening the history of the family as a “transnational field”; she troubles the notion that Indian and other colonial domestic ideals were simply latecomers in comparison to European bourgeois models of domesticity.

Turning to the family as a site where women worked within colonial terms to redefine their own status, Sreenivas’s chapter titled “Colonizing the Family: Kinship, Household, and the State” draws upon surviving English transcriptions of legal disputes over inheritance and rights in large, landed, or zamindari estates.² Using records from three such protracted cases in the Madurai and Tirunelveli districts from the 1860s through the 1890s, Sreenivas reads the women’s testimonies as a “joint discursive project” (30) that was nevertheless unequal and tilted toward the colonial legal apparatus. Women had come into these families through various relationships, ranging from equal-status exchanges between landed families to more perfunctory ceremonies, in which

the groom's attendance was not required. These women, in the context of the colonial legal system, had to make a case for their own or their co-wives' positions as wives or concubines. To promote their aspirations to status and property, they described their experiences of domestic ritual and pleasure, childbirth, and household hierarchies in language intelligible to the courts. Judges typically ruled in favor of women who had come from families of equal ritual and caste status, ignoring the degree of mobility that had existed previously for lower-ranking wives to gain influence within the households as mothers of male heirs and savvy companions to their husbands.

Sreenivas highlights the way in which legal contests over these large, landed estates opened them up as sites of debate to reformers concerned with redefining conjugal and property relations in the latter half of the nineteenth century, even as they disavowed the feudal relationships of the supposedly decadent, nonmonogamous, landed zamindari elite. Sreenivas's discussion of the relationship between conjugality and capital in her second chapter could have been complicated by a greater exploration of the economics of the legal cases under scrutiny. She claims that "[m]en who were engaged in a developing mercantile and professional economy in the Tamil region advocated a smaller family, centered on the property and affective relations of a monogamous husband and wife, which they claimed would foster capitalist development and economic prosperity" (46–47). This argument contrasts with the evidence she provides showing that, during the same period, such a merchant funded one of the zamindari co-wives in a property case who had the least tenable claim to the newer conjugal, legal model. Presumably, this merchant, who was not related to the woman in question, stood to gain a substantial return if his side won the case. Even if his investment was made out of economic self-interest rather than altruism or conviction, this case still troubles the notion that the developing capitalist market was more suitably invested in monogamous, conjugal relations than the older zamindari model. Nevertheless, Sreenivas's discussion points to the importance for feminist scholarship of exploring the links among conjugality, kinship, and capitalisms both historically and today.

Rochona Majumdar's monograph also raises interesting questions about the relationship between wealthy landed families and aspiring urban professionals in Bengal. In *Marriage and Modernity: Family Values in Colonial Bengal*, she traces the history of Bengali Hindu arranged marriages to show how such marriages emerged as a contradictory form that drew upon both the *modern* logic of the market and the espousal of *traditional* gendered values, as an urbanizing professional class sought to rationalize the way marriages were arranged. Innovations, such as relying upon newspapers to contract intra-caste marriages that previously would have depended on the auspices of hereditary marriage-brokers, as well as the increased monetization of marriage negotiations and the use of the language of the market to describe these negotiations, marked some of the historical changes in Bengali marriages in the late-nineteenth and

early-twentieth centuries. Majumdar posits “a certain history of taste” developing around the marriage ceremony in Bengal that expressed much about the self-representation of the families involved (149). Wedding poems, for example, written by older family members to honor the occasion, as well as the spread of wedding photography, signaled the “democratization of refinement” (108). New features of the wedding, including more subdued dress, contrasted with that of the landed elite, whose tastes were seen as inappropriate for the development of a professional class sympathetic to nationalism. Thus Majumdar argues that the Bengali middle-class joint family (in which several generations and branches of the family might live together) became emblematic of “traditional” values, even as it “drew on past and contemporary resources in order to be a functioning element of Indian modernity” (4).

In the third part of her monograph, Majumdar considers the nationalization of the Hindu family through the Hindu Code debates—a set of laws proposed and later partially implemented to ensure uniformity in personal laws for all Hindus across castes and regions—which she argues revolved, to a large degree, around the issue of restricting the market in private landed property. Her discussion of the efforts to change the patriarchal bent of personal laws on marriage, divorce, inheritance, and maintenance highlights the intersection between the joint family as a holder of property and the nationalist concern for the development of the postcolonial economy. According to Majumdar, India’s pro-development leaders considered the fragmentation of property, especially landed property, among heirs of a family to be detrimental to economic growth. In the early years after British colonial rule, the debates over the Hindu Code, for example, prioritized maintaining family property as undivided property, rather than allowing women access to property through inheritance. Questioning historical understandings and delineations of arranged marriages, conjugality, and relationships, such as wives and the couple, for example, the books by Majumdar and Sreenivas reopen a chapter in history that the Sarkars indicate was closed a little too abruptly.

The Sarkars’ edited volume provides a different perspective on the scale of reform in colonial and postcolonial India in comparison to the region-specific studies of Majumdar and Sreenivas. The breadth of the selections underscores the Sarkars’ point that reform was crucially linked to colonialism and modernity across India, not just in select regions. The volume includes selections focusing on Muslim women and family reform—a topic that is sometimes sidelined in Indian gender history—with pieces by C. M. Naim, Gail Minault, Gregory Kozlowski, and Faisal Fatehali Devji. Tribal women and families, who were also prone to neglect in histories of social reform, are represented in articles by Saroj Parratt and John Parratt and Virginius Xaxa. Similarly, the three articles by, respectively, John Leonard and Karen Leonard, S. Anandhi, and G. Arunima bring South India into conversation with the historiography of social reform, which has often focused more on the North.

Even while highlighting the wide reach of family and social reform as a concern to Indians all over the map, the collection indicates the unevenness of the way similar, contentious topics were handled in different regions by colonial state and nonstate actors. For example, Lucy Carroll's article "Law, Custom and Statutory Social Reform: The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856" in *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* provides a fascinating discussion of how local high courts in cities as far flung as Allahabad, Calcutta, and Madras interpreted women's access to property rights quite differently. While the article delineates regional differences in colonial judicial structures and their consequences for women's lives, Carroll also argues that the law had a homogenizing function by spreading upper-caste Brahman ideals to large segments of the population who were of lower caste and often had less gender-discriminatory traditions, and by spreading caste-Hindu practices to tribal groups who were, like the so-called untouchable castes, outside the caste system. In a similar vein, Prem Chowdhry's article documents how particular high-caste customs that were detrimental to women though convenient for colonial authorities were abstracted and then promulgated to include all caste-Hindus by law. Her study is of forced "levirate"—widows being permitted to remarry, but only their husband's brothers—which was practiced by high-caste Jats in the Haryana region of North India and simultaneously kept the extraction of property taxes within a single family, thus making it easier to administer for British revenue collectors. Arunima's article "Multiple Meanings: Changing Conceptions of Matrilineal Kinship in Nineteenth- and Twentieth-Century Malabar" also contextualizes the new movement for legal conjugal units headed by males in a hitherto matrilineal polity within changing land relations, as well as intergenerational contestations over familial authority. The article demonstrates that the conjugal patriarchal family was established, not reformed, and it replaced a more fluid practice of sexual relations.

The articles selected by the Sarkars highlight not just the scale and scope of the reforms, but different methodological approaches as well. They also open up the possibility of reinterpreting the woman question in conversation with the primary materials. Two classic essays on sati that are familiar to South Asianists will now be available for a more general audience. In her article, Lata Mani treats the debate on sati as a discourse to argue that it was a site for both British colonial authorities and elite Indian men to debate *tradition* and *modernity*; the possibility of women's subjectivity in the context of widow burning was illegible in the struggle for cultural hegemony by elite men on both sides. The Sarkars include an excerpt from the reformer Rammohan Roy's writings to suggest that, while he did enter into textual exegesis, the writings also demonstrate a "powerful humanistic critique of the everyday conditions of women in Hindu society utterly remarkable for its times" (14). Anand Yang's article contextualizes sati within the agrarian economy of early-nineteenth-century northern India. Based on a careful scrutiny of colonial reports, Yang shows that the act

was more common among lower-caste and older women than has been previously acknowledged. The fact that many women committed sati several years after their husbands died complicates the question of women's agency, as does Gauri Vishwanathan's excellent article on Pandita Ramabai, a famous Brahmin woman. Vishwanathan interprets Ramabai's conversion to Christianity and her writings as a feminist attempt to resist both British colonialism and Hindu patriarchy. Through her close readings, the author sheds new light on a familiar figure, while questioning the limits of self-fashioning within colonial modernity.

To conclude, these volumes all point in the direction of new ways to think about the intersections of colonial modernity as a gendered formation, market networks, and reform of the family. They point to the need for more histories and ethnographies to be written that consider such linkages in precise transnational, national, and regional contexts. As Sreenivas suggests, the land settlement that the colonial administration effected with zamindars in the Tamil region often strengthened male dominance in families, along with a general masculinization of the economy during the nineteenth century (27).³ More generally, the volumes raise a fascinating set of questions: How do various family forms and imaginaries of the family relate to globalizing economies and colonial modernity on a local and regional scale, not just in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries in South Asia, but also today? How might an historical framework encompassing the masculinization of the economy during this period be conceived in relation to the feminization of the global assembly line and of development over a century later? Does this offer any analogies to the depoliticization of the zamindari family in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries, and the repoliticization of the nationalist family in the early twentieth? How can we historicize the recurrent anxieties about the commercialization and marketization of affective relationships that Sreenivas and Majumdar note in their studies, against the variety of economic imbrications in landed families that Sreenivas brings up, yet that we still know very little about?

The three volumes under review can be used in graduate seminars and upper-division undergraduate women's studies and history courses on colonialism, nationalism, and modernity, especially those that are taught in a comparative or transnational framework. Courses in South Asian feminist and historical studies will find in them comprehensive and rich materials for teaching. They are also recommended as resources to historicize courses on gender and contemporary globalization. Selections from both the scholarly essays and original sources in the comprehensive *Women and Social Reform in Modern India* can be productively combined with either the entire volume or chapters from the Sreenivas and Majumdar monographs. Written in easily accessible language, the three books under review are invaluable research and teaching texts that can be put to very good effect.

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Notes

1. For more on the family within the field of South Asian history, see the introduction to Chatterjee (2004).
2. A *zamindar* is an Indian landowner, especially one who leases land to tenant farmers.
3. See also Majumdar, p. 44.

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The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling by Rebecca Wanzo. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2009, 240 pp., \$70.00 hardcover, \$24.95 paper.

Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and the Embodiment of a Costly Performance by Tamara Beauboeuf-Lafontant. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2009, 194 pp., \$66.50 hardcover, \$24.95 paper.

Zenzele Isoke

It is with considerable pleasure and interest that I review *The Suffering Will Not Be Televised: African American Women and Sentimental Political Storytelling* by Rebecca Wanzo and *Behind the Mask of the Strong Black Woman: Voice and*