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## WOMAN-AS-SYMBOL: THE INTERSECTIONS OF IDENTITY POLITICS, GENDER, AND INDIAN NATIONALISM

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**Synopsis** — The purpose of this article is to explore the connection between Indian nationalism and gender identity. I provide a critique of Radhakrishnan and Chatterjee's notion of the outer/inner dichotomy of Indian nationalism by stating that religion, in postcolonial India, has emerged as a discursive totality that has subsumed the politics of indigenous or inner identity more so than other rhetoric of caste, tribal, gender, and class. I provide a groundwork for this debate via the writings of Nehru and Gandhi. I conclude, through an analysis of the practices of amniocentesis and Sati, that women and their bodies have been used as representations of the conflicts surrounding national subjectivity. © 1999 Elsevier Science Ltd. All rights reserved.

The women's question in India has been a different one from the feminist struggles of the West (Chatterjee, 1990; Chatterjee, 1995; Liddle & Joshi, 1985; Nandy, 1987; Pillai, 1996; Sangari & Vaid, 1990; Shiva, 1989; Spivak, 1990). In India, during the independence movement, women were stepping out into a public world *only* for the nationalist cause, thereafter they were to return home to their roles as mothers, wives, and sisters. The English women leaving their homes to work in factories, on the other hand, had long-term effect, which would shake unequal sexual arrangements both within the home and outside of it. Chatterjee (1990, p. 233) points out that while women's social and political position was under much debate and scrutiny in early 19th-century India, by the end of that century it had disappeared completely from the public agenda. This occurred, he posits, because of the emergence of a competing, more seemingly fundamental, discourse of nationalism. The contextual rhetoric of the build-

ing and emergence of the Indian nation subsumed the location and identity politics of the "woman." Radhakrishnan (1992, p. 78) addresses the conjunction of the women's question and nationalism in his now classic essay, "Nationalism, Gender, and Narrative" by asking, "Why is it that nationalism achieves the ideological effect of an inclusive and putatively macropolitical discourse, whereas the women's question—unable to achieve its own autonomous macropolitical identity—remains ghettoized within its specific and regional space? In other words, by what natural or ideological imperative or historical exigency does the politics of nationalism become the binding and overarching umbrella that subsumes other and different political temporalities?"<sup>1</sup>

Drawing on Chatterjee (1990) and Sangari and Vaid's (1990) earlier work, Radhakrishnan arrives at the idea of Indian nationalism as having a dichotomous origin. "Nationalist rhetoric," he writes, "makes woman the pure and ahistorical signifier of inferiority" and the West—transcribed by its Enlightenment identity—remains the "outer other" (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 80). By creating this duality Indian nationalism fails on both fronts: its external history remains hostage to the Enlightenment identity

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of the West and its inner “true” and “pure” self resorts to a “schizophrenic” and “misogynist” essentialist indigeniety. It is this outer/inner problematic with which postcolonial nationalism constantly struggles: “the very mode in which nationalism identifies its inner identity privileges the externality of the West, and the so-called inner or true identity of the nation takes the form of a mere strategic reaction formation to or against interpellation by Western ideologies” (Radhakrishnan, 1992, pp. 84–85).

Chatterjee (1990, p. 238) argues that the outer/inner dichotomy of Indian nationalism has been establishing of a relationship between the spiritual (inner) and material (outer) worlds: one signifying the home and the East, the other world and the West. Like Radhakrishnan, Chatterjee, too, sees the distinction between the inner and outer India as one in which the spiritual India has historically positioned itself as a reaction to the material West. He writes,

The discourse of nationalism shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous dichotomy: that between the outer and the inner. The material domain lies outside us—a mere external, which influences us, conditions us, and to which we are forced to adjust. But ultimately it is unimportant. It is the spiritual which lies within, which is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential. (Chatterjee, 1990, p. 238)

This dichotomy and its explanatory development in both Chatterjee and Radhakrishnan’s writings limits the multifariousness of Indian political life today. While this dichotomy seems to have operated in the formation and development of 19th-century Indian nationalism, it cannot be used in explaining contemporary trends in Indian national politics and the women’s question.

I argue in this article that contemporary nationalism no more subsumes, as Radhakrishnan (1992) suggests, the many forms of “subspaces” such as “the ethnic, the religious, the communal” (p. 85). In this respect, the recent powerful impact of Hindu nationalism on Indian cultural politics cannot be ignored. What Radhakrishnan fails to acknowledge is that postcolonial nationalism reconfirms the “native sense of identity” (p. 85), or what he calls the inner self, through an affirmative reimagining of religious identity which is also at its es-

sence gendered. In this sense the collective discourse of nationalism, unable to subsume the religious, is confronted with an equally universalizing category of Hinduism. Radhakrishnan’s extrapolation of the inner self of India as merely a “reaction” against the Western ideologies denies the complexities of Indian political identity. India is no more conceived as merely a “modern” nation, as Radhakrishnan (1992) writes in his readings of Nehru’s autobiography, but also fundamentally a “Hindu” nation. The recent successes of the militant Hindu political organization Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) in national elections and the subsequent bulldozing of the mosque *Babri Masjid* has placed religion on the forefront of national identity politics.<sup>2</sup> By ignoring the significance of religion, not as a subspace but as a fully formed discursive totality that defines what he terms as the inner self of Indian nationalism, Radhakrishnan fails to address the women’s question within contemporary India. As I discuss later, it becomes impossible to apply Radhakrishnan’s analysis to an understanding of the resurgence of the practice of Sati unless one also introduces religion as a narrative structure within which the popularity of Sati can be best situated.

The centrality of the narrative of gender, thus, becomes doubly displaced: once by nationalism in its purpose to integrate and secularize India as a modern nation and again by religion in order to re-construct India as a traditional Hindu nation. Both present themselves as universalizing totalities and, therefore, are in constant conflict. It is the double displacement of the women’s question and two of its postcolonial representations—amniocentesis or sex-determination tests and Sati or widow burning—which I explore in this article. However, such an exploration also entails a closer analysis of the context within which this debate most often takes place. For Chatterjee and Radhakrishnan (and many other postcolonial writers<sup>3</sup>) the struggle to understand the inner/outer dichotomy that signifies Indian nationalism is best situated in Nehru and Gandhi’s writings. While Jawaharlal Nehru and his national legacy has been well-established through lineage (42 of the 50 years since India’s independence either Nehru, his daughter Indira Gandhi, or his grandson Rajiv Gandhi have been the Prime Minister), M. K. Gandhi has been revered as the “father of the nation.”

Both of them have impressed equally their influence on Indian nationalism in different ways. In order to understand the narrative of gender in postcolonial India, therefore, also requires a rereading of Nehru and Gandhi's national politics within the rhetorical parameters of gender and religious identity—an analysis that is largely absent from Chatterjee and Radhakrishnan's essays. In fact, both Chatterjee and Radhakrishnan, in their efforts to praise Gandhi (who Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 88 says could invigorate the “real India”) and critique Nehru, fail to accurately read either of the national leaders positions on gender or religion.

Anderson (1983) has most closely traced the roots of nationalism, nation, and nationness as a formation that has sociocultural meaning and a formal universality in the modern world. In this sense one must belong to a nation, as one belongs to a race or gender, where the particularity of identity is manifested in one's citizenship. Anderson emphasizes the idea of the nation as an “imagined” political community that creates a desire for solidarity among its members. He writes, “It is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nation will never know most of their fellow members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion” (Anderson, 1983, p. 63). If one is to take Anderson's working definition of nation as having sociocultural roots, one must also ask if this imagining is gendered. As Pratt (1991, p. 582) has pointed out, Anderson's use of the “language of fraternity and comradeship” to capture the idea of the modern nation as an imagined community “displays the androcentrism of modern national imagining.” The absence of gender in Anderson's speculation of the rise and growth of the modern nation cannot simply be explained by arguing that women “don't fit” the descriptors of the imagined community. Rather, the nation by definition situates or produces women in permanent instability with respect to the imagined community. Ray (1994) suggests that, “women inhabitants of nations were never invited to imagine themselves as part of the horizontal brotherhood” (p. 97).

Yet women were part of an active imagination in which they became symbolic representations of the nation. While “imagining” connotes an active verb, being “imagined” represents

a passive capacity in which one does not have the subjective power to cast oneself. While a nation could represent itself as woman, for example, in Nehru's (1946) constant reference to India as *Bharat Mata* or Mother India, women within the nation could not represent themselves, their own identity, or their Indianess. A comparable analysis is made by Gilroy (1987) who conceptualizes British society as imagining race as an agency through which national crises are effectively negotiated, but black people are never agents of these negotiations. The construction of women in terms of specified roles, models, images, and labels occurs in discourse in response to social imperatives in terms of the universal and abstract rhetoric of “Woman,” “Women,” or as in this case, the “Indian Woman.” As Sangari and Vaid (1990) have pointed out, “womanhood is often part of an asserted or desired, not an actual cultural continuity” (p. 2).

Representationally and alternately women become “passive” symbols of different totalities: within the discourse of tradition/religion they become the symbol of “sacrifice” (as a Sati, an unhappy widow voluntarily jumping into the funereal pyre of her deceased husband) and the symbol of “progress” within the discourse of modern nationalism (by adopting amniocentesis and having the power to control her reproductive rights through sex-determination tests and abortion). One signifies obedience and tradition, the other signifies liberation and modernity. These are passive symbols because they require the woman to remain voiceless, discourseless, and displaced from the constitutive processes of the symbol-making. It is her death and annihilation that makes her an active subject (after committing Sati she becomes the personification of a goddess who is feared for having acquired supernatural powers). This move from being a passive to an active representation requires the abandonment of the woman's body, suggesting a physical absence of the woman from the symbolizing process. One could be at the center of a discourse, as Pillai (1992, p. 11) describes in her critique of postcolonial writers' use of the word *center*, without having the power to define one's centrality within the borders of that narrative. Using the location politics of the Indian woman as an example, Pillai problematizes the politics of center: one could be at the center of a representation but yet not partici-

pate in the construction of that representation. Both discourses of nationalism use women as central symbols in their efforts at representing modern and Hindu identity. It is these two symbolic uses of women in the establishment of Indian national identity that I will later discuss. Here it is important to elaborate on the thoughts about the women's question and religion of two "great leaders of 20th century India" (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 88) who have had the most influence on how the debates about Indian nationalism have progressed. The following analysis will be confined to Gandhi and Nehru's understanding of the religious and women's question in India, and, subsequently to show how Radhakrishnan and others have failed to explore those elements.

### NEHRU AND GANDHI

While never addressing women's issues directly, Jawaharlal Nehru, the first Prime Minister of free India, wrote about both religion and nationalism. While acknowledging the role religion plays in culture and frequently wrestling with the question of "what is religion?" Nehru's sketchings of India reflect his deep dislike of religion. Raised in an upper caste wealthy family that sent him to Harrow and Cambridge for education, Nehru's outlook on life was vastly influenced by his 7 years in England. In his own words:

India must lessen her religiosity and turn to science. She must get rid of the exclusiveness in thought and social habit which has become life a prison for her, stunting her spirit and preventing growth. The day-to-day religion of the orthodox Hindu is more concerned with what to eat and what not to eat, who to eat with and from whom to keep away, than with spiritual values. This outlook has to change completely, for it is wholly opposed to modern conditions and the democratic ideal. (Nehru, 1946, p. 520)

Angered by Gandhi's constant references to religious discourse Nehru writes in his autobiography (1936, p. 176), "I felt angry with him [Gandhi] at his religious and sentimental approach to a political question, and his frequent references to God in connection with it. What a terrible example to set!" Nehru envisioned a nation whose foundations were rooted in mo-

ernity, technology, and progress. Particularly impressed with postwar developments in the Soviet Union, Nehru foresaw India's future in rapid industrialization and growth, strategies he later pursued during his tenure as Prime Minister. Committed to progress, Nehru saw the colonial period as a phase of "arrest" following which India was to reembark on the journey toward its "natural course" in which it would eventually "highly evolve as a nation" (Nehru, 1946, p. 521). Unable to comprehend the religious and gender elements in Indian politics—which Gandhi understood much more deeply—Nehru wished to establish a nationalism based on "equal opportunity" for people of every "backward groups [sic], race, and creed" (Nehru, 1946, p. 533). For him, technological advance inherently implied a notion of equality in which "adult men and women" would have equal access to the "fruits of progress" and "a sense of dignity and self reliance" (p. 531).

After independence, his belief in equality led Nehru to introduce and pass the controversial 1955 Hindu Marriage Act and 1956 Hindu Succession Act in Parliament. Both these laws allowed for the first time Hindu women to inherit property and to seek divorce or separation from their husbands (Raj, 1991; Shastri, 1990). By doing this, Nehru not only risked alienating a large section of male Hindu voters, but also seriously conflicted with the then Indian President Rajendra Prasad (Tully & Masani, 1990). For Nehru's vision of a Western-style democracy and modernization to succeed, gender equality seemed imminent and he himself sought paths for such opportunities.

Historically, many progressive gender laws have remained unimplemented in India where nationalism, and nationalist leaders like Nehru, had failed to take into account religious patriarchy as a departure point from the symbolic politics of nation-building. Unable to articulate the centrality of religion and gender, Nehru's vision of equality headed toward failure in postcolonial India. The material reality of culture absorbed the arrival of technology in India's move toward modernity, but this absorption was marked by disarray. As Radhakrishnan (1992) notes, "the nationalist subject marks the space of a constitutive representational debacle" when it is torn by modernity's vision to change and tradition's vision to remain static (p. 85). While Nehru helped pass laws that

would allow women latitude within the social and political structure, conversely, these laws remained unimplemented and separated from the social practices they were meant to change.

Unlike Nehru, Gandhi was much more attuned with religious nationalism where he identified the inevitable overlaps of the two narratives. Gandhi (1955) writes, "Politics divorced from religion has absolutely no meaning" (p. 122). A foremost visionary of his time, Gandhi saw women as central to the emerging discourse of *swaraj* or freedom. While Nehru thought that scientific and modern advancements would lead to equality for women, Gandhi reinvented specific mythological and religious female characters who embodied the virtues he thought necessary to fight for the nationalist cause. Katrak (1992, p. 398) convincingly argues that, "female sexuality was essentialized through Gandhi's appeals to the female virtues: chastity, purity, self-sacrifice, suffering. Gandhi's female strength was Draupadi, not the militant Rani of Jhansi who, dressed like a man led her troops in a battle against the British. Draupadi is the more appropriate, feminine courage which, in the face of imminent dishonor, calls upon Lord Krishna for help." Gandhi's *Satyagraha* and *Swadeshi* movements allowed women to participate in the public sphere, but it did not allow women to organize and transform the religious and social roots of their oppression. It is clear from Gandhi's writings that he was not able to see the use of his religious symbolizing of women as depoliticized agencies of national liberation. By using examples of mythical women such as Sita, Draupadi, and Savitri, Gandhi evoked a notion of nonviolent suffering with which he identified the Indian national movement. But he failed to see the paradoxical oppression of the religious symbols he was using: Sita and Savitri are controlled representations of female sexualities whose roles are predetermined through their associations with strong husbands. Katrak (1992) continues:

The subconscious hold of socialization patterns inculcated in girls through the popular mythological stories of the ever suffering Sita as virtuous wife, or the all-sacrificing Savitri who rescues her husband from death are all part of the preparation for suffering in the roles of wives and mothers. The domi-

nant message is that of suffering as purifying, even inevitable for a woman. (p. 398)

By naturalizing these symbols as part of Hindu religion and of Hindu tradition Gandhi fixes women's suffering as a symbolic condition through their overdetermined roles as mothers and wives (i.e., social roles instituted through marriage). The question of women's emancipation becomes irrelevant here, except in its symbolic use to achieve *swaraj*. Within the parameters of the traditional family, Gandhi failed to see women's emancipation. He writes:

I tried to show them [women] they were not slaves either to their husbands or parents. But the trouble was that some could not resist their husbands. The remedy is in the hands of women themselves. If they will only learn to say 'no' to their husbands when they approach them carnally all will be well. I have been able to teach women who have come in contact with me how to resist their husbands. The real problem is that many do not want to resist. (Gandhi, 1947, p. 23)

With no real sense of women's sexual lives, he makes their domesticity a matter of abstinence and noncooperation, themes he adopts for the national movement. Yet he does not recognize the limits of women's power within the family and the kinds of reprisals they face for saying "no." More than a little naively he muses, "If a wife says to her husband, 'no, I do not want it,' he will make no trouble" (Gandhi, 1947, p. 24).

Nehru and Gandhi's rhetoric present oppositional views of nationalism and women's emancipation. Nehru viewed Western modernity and technology as a way of achieving gender equality. But this path was problematic from its very inception: It ignored religion and gender as fundamental to social organization. In fact, Nehru hoped that technology would conquer these "dogmas and superstitions" that plagued the nation. Women would only benefit from the alluring capacity of progress to change their "historical condition" (Nehru, 1936, p. 81). The discourse of modernity and modern nation in Nehru's writings ignored other and competing discourses, such as religion, caste, and gender. For him technology and progress, in effect, would create the space for women and backward castes to achieve

equality but their condition did not, in and by themselves, deserve critical attention. Gandhi sought a different vision of freedom. For him, religion, caste, and gender were inseparable from nation-building and the success of the national movement was dependent on resistance through the deeply Hindu concept of *ahimsa* or nonviolence. He fully articulated the centrality of religion in Indian life by proclaiming several “vows,” many of which he derived from his close readings of Hindu scriptures, for example, his vows of celibacy, control of palate, and education through the vernaculars (Gandhi, 1938, 1939). Gandhi saw the base of the movement in India’s villages and, unlike Nehru, was able to energize them into unified rebellion. However, Gandhi’s championing of the subaltern valence (women, *Harijans*, peasants, tribals), while locating their politics as central to the narrativizing of the nation, did so in terms of the rhetoric of a traditional and mythologized Hinduism or the “pure Hindu” as he referred to it (Gandhi, 1954, p. 11). While strongly deriding the existing caste system Gandhi adopted the name *Harijans* (God’s people) for the untouchables. As some *Harijan* (or *Dalits* or oppressed as they like to refer to themselves today) leaders have argued in their criticisms of Gandhi, by giving them the name *Harijan*, he “. . . stood us apart even if the caste system were today dismantled” (Prakash, 1994, p. 33). Similarly dedicated to women’s emancipation Gandhi failed to locate their oppression within the family and religious structure, instead focusing his attention on the sacrifice of their lives—and particularly their sexuality—to the cause of the nation.

In critiquing Nehru, Radhakrishnan sees Gandhi’s vision of India as both different and radical. He writes:

Gandhi’s advocacy of the people carries with it their full moral force. His model of independent India makes the people the teachers, and leaders such as himself become the pupils. Hence Gandhi’s stern refusal of progress as an end in itself, and his rejection of all indices of growth and prosperity developed in the West. Hence, too, his insistence on decentralization, simple modes of production, the ethic of self-sufficiency, and his moral indictment of capital, accumulation, greed, and the systemic proliferation of want and desire. (Radhakrishnan, 1992, p. 89)

For Radhakrishnan (1992) the “subaltern valence” of Gandhi, along with its “moral force,” makes him a leader who wants to “. . . empower the people in a way that will enable him to lead themselves” (p. 89). In his efforts to arrive at the dichotomy of Indian nationalism, Radhakrishnan wants to provide a reading of Gandhi that disregards the influence of Hindu scriptures on Gandhi’s understanding of identity politics. In doing so, Radhakrishnan does not connect Gandhi, Nehru, or Indian nationalist politics to the women’s question. However, if Gandhi is to signify the “true leader” who experienced “real India” and could bring out the national consciousness of its masses, he cannot be positioned outside of the semantics of his religion, and, as an effect, gendered location. Gandhi, therefore, cannot be understood outside of his complete immersion within a Hindu religiosity.<sup>4</sup>

Hence, in one sense, Nehru and Gandhi shared a common ground: They both displaced women from the totality of women’s experiences at home and in the public sphere according them, instead, a voiceless but symbolic space. The outer/inner dichotomy is then signified by the outer as modern India (i.e., Nehru’s vision of nationalism) and inner as religious India (i.e., Gandhi’s vision). The conflict and choice in Third World nationalism was between, as Radhakrishnan (1992) explains, “being themselves” and “being modern nations” (p. 84). Neither Gandhi’s nor Nehru’s vision prevailed in postcolonial India: The construct of the inner India and Hinduism shifted from Gandhi’s nonviolent and androgynous vision to a more aggressive and masculine identity where women now, more than ever, embodied subordination through deeply essentialized and mythologized feminine qualities. Indigeneity as religiosity was in constant conflict with modernity and women were agencies of both these discourses. It is this double displacement of the women’s question and its symbolic representations that I now explore.

#### **AMNIOCENTESIS: SYMBOL OF MODERNITY/SATI: SYMBOL OF RELIGION**

In a newspaper interview, a Bombay obstetrician is recently cited as saying:

I am not saying female feticide should be practiced. I’m saying it is a decision to be

made by the woman. You are heaping on poor rural women even more problems by forbidding this. (Hale, 1994, p. 9)

The comments from this urban doctor come at a time when the Indian government is trying to curb an abortion epidemic of female fetuses. In many Indian cities, there are signs hanging from small, makeshift clinics that ask, "Beta or Beti (Son or Daughter)? Spend Rs. 500 now, save Rs. 500,000 later." These clinics provide amniocentesis or sex-determination and ultrasound tests that allow the doctor to determine the gender of the fetus. As Sarkar and Butalia (1995, pp. 8–9) point out, since the introduction of this technology in the early 1980s, the number of abortions have quadrupled and 99% of the abortions take place when the fetus is suspected to be female. The sign's crude claim "Spend Rs. 500 now, save Rs. 500,000 later," promises a quick abortion—often provided at the same location—and will save the family from large dowries when the daughter reaches a marriageable age (Crossette, 1991, p. 1). Most of the reported 150,000 abortions that have taken place between 1978 to 1993 have been performed on women who are from varied classes and backgrounds and often irrespective of their health conditions (Sarkar & Butalia, 1995, pp. 8–9). In July 1994, after pressures from various women's groups and an alarming drop in the gender ratio, the Indian government banned amniocentesis for sex-determination purposes. The law punishes both the woman taking the test and the doctor by imposing fines of up to \$320. The tests remain legal for women over the age of 35, while the law makes no provision, as some women's organizations had suggested, to develop a registry of the ultrasound equipment that would allow the government to keep track of these clinics. Like many other progressive laws, for example, the Sati Prevention Act and the Anti-Dowry Legislation, many feminists anticipate that this law, too, will remain unenforced (Karlekar, 1994). While making amniocentesis illegal for sex-determination purposes, the state acknowledges its use as a new and modern technology. Recently General Electric was approved by the government to become the largest U.S. investor in India and it is now targeting the market for diagnostic medical equipment, including a lightweight portable ultrasound unit especially designed for the

Indian market. This would make it possible for these clinics to go into even rural areas and provide female feticide as an option to poor families at a much lower cost: presently the test costs \$10 and the abortion \$5 (Hale, 1994, p. 3).

In some ways Nehru's vision had come true. Technology and population control have come to represent modernity and progress. Modern India has presented itself in the international scene as an industrialized power capable of outstanding contributions in the field of engineering and technology. With the passage of the liberal 1971 Medical Termination of Pregnancy Act, women gained the power to control their reproductive rights. This modernity, separated from the women's question and religion, fulfilled a narrow purpose. As amniocentesis has proven, technology recirculated a deeper crisis. Women continued to have higher death rate, lower life expectancy, lower literacy, and lower levels of employment (Karlekar, 1994; Mosse, 1993; Warren, 1985). Instead of social equality between men and women, as Nehru had hoped, technology in contrast re-established a materially unequal system embedded in the face of a "free" nation. As national subjects women became symbols of progress where they, like their Western compatriots, had the power and choice to control their reproductive rights and as progressive women they accepted new technologies of change. On the other hand, this choice became profoundly misogynist in its practice. Unlike in the modern nations of the West, which used the ultrasound tests to determine the mother and the child's health, in modern India amniocentesis and abortions were used primarily to destroy female fetuses. The Indian government admitted that surveys show that more than 80% of the ultrasound tests in India are conducted only for sex-determination purposes (Jeffrey & Jeffrey, 1993; Rothman, 1986; Sen & Grown, 1987). One must be very careful in using the term *choice* within the boundaries of this practice. The classical notion of choice implies the power of the woman, on her own free will, to decide to terminate her pregnancy. With amniocentesis, the woman becomes entangled in several subjective faces of choice: the most common scenario is one in which she may not have any other option or "choice" but to have the test and abort, since having one or another daughter may not allow her to return

home to her husband. As is also the case, her choice may be pretextually based on her own belief that women are less important or valuable to society, a belief that is, in turn, grounded in her subjective conditions, which have been oppressive. Thus, the act of choice becomes reflective of the woman's own repressive sociocultural experiences and fears that, if born, another woman would only suffer the way she has.

The nationalist discourse of progress could now safely—if not legally—eliminate the women's question by eliminating women themselves. One could go so far as to say that the umbrella rhetoric of nationalism not only subsumed the women's question but made an affirmative effort to transcend it. Women's acceptance of modern technology made them popular symbols of national progress, but women's roles were limited to representations and agencies of modernity. The symbolic reality of "women-as-agency" of modernity was vastly separate from the material reality of "women-as-modern" subjects. I bear in mind Rajan's (1992, p. 118) distinction between "real" and "imagined" women, one bearing the pain of patriarchy and the other deified for being the body that tragically and silently accepts pain. For women, as modern subjects, the choice of accepting this technology would not be as coercive as it is. As agencies of modernity, however, this technology simultaneously symbolized their liberation and shackling. Modernity allowed the woman, for the first time, the possibility of knowing her own and the baby's health and yet the modern technology forces her to kill the same fetus. The use of amniocentesis proved that the influence of religious patriarchy, which modernists like Nehru tried to avoid, cannot but enter an analysis of technology in postcolonial cultures. Women's emancipation in postcolonial India did not succeed because the modern state failed to critique the cultural grounds upon which technology was introduced, instead hoping that technology would change religiosity.

Accepting the tenets of a modern nation has led to a disjuncture between local, regional, and subaltern politics with national politics.<sup>5</sup> The marginalization of religion in the Indian nationalism of Nehru and especially his obsession with the liberal-elitist narrative of the West ignored religion's deep-rooted influence on Indian subjectivity. By the time Ne-

hru's grandson Rajiv Gandhi came to power in the Congress party and won the national elections, the BJP had established itself as a powerful political force with an overtly religious agenda. Congress subsequently banned the more militant branch of BJP, the Vishwa Hindu Parishad (VHP), whose rhetoric had become aggressively more anti-Muslim. Even though VHP and BJP were historically critical of Gandhi's philosophy of tolerance and non-violence (it was a member of a nationalist Hindu party, Nathuram Godse, who eventually assassinated Gandhi), the BJP and Gandhi probably shared the most common philosophies about the women's question. While most of Gandhi's ideas about religious nationalism (for example, the early calls of the first and moderate president of BJP, Atal Behari Vajpayee, to accept "Gandhian Socialism") have been abandoned, reinterpreting and relocating tradition remained an obsession for the Hindu nationalists as it did for Gandhi. The locus of their relocation is, however, radically different with the exception of the women's question. They both used women as central symbolic representations of particular religiosities and nationalisms by identifying the essential overlaps of the two discourses.<sup>6</sup>

While amniocentesis had been the symbol for women's progress in integrating technology and modernity to their lives, Sati had been the symbolic representation of women in religion. Strongly opposed to the practice of Sati, Gandhi viewed it as a needless sacrifice. If Sati was the embodiment of purity and virtue what good would it do, he wrote (Gandhi, 1955, p. 125), in the nationalist cause if it was achieved or realized by dying? While opposed to suicide—which is where pro-Sati advocates often situate their arguments—Gandhi failed to see the problematics of Satihood, which he himself advocated. He wrote, "Satihood is purity" (Gandhi, 1931, p. 3). Sita, Gandhi's favorite heroine from the epic *Ramayana*, was a chaste and virtuous woman who committed Sati at the end of the tale to prove her undying devotion for her husband Rama. While criticizing widow self-immolation on one hand, Gandhi embraced representations of heroic women as those who signified suffering and devotion through death and pain. His heroines were not those who resisted oppression and sought to escape the mutilation of burning. Sita, like the Sati, is a passive symbol of spectacle. A contra-

diction that emerges over and over again in Gandhi's nationalist and nonviolent strategy is about women's position within the patriarchal family structure where the performance of Sati takes place. It is often the woman's and the deceased husband's parents and family members who force the widow to enter into the pyre. While Karlekar (1995) suggests that for "him [Gandhi] women and not men were the more honorable and admirable sex is clear from his own efforts at becoming as much like a woman as he possibly could," (p. 60) Gandhi's emphasis on woman's capacity for suffering and his unproblematic assertion of woman's centrality within the domestic sphere suggests Gandhi's ambiguity toward the women's question.

Unlike Gandhi's tacit acceptance, several BJP leaders have actively supported Sati and some, joining hands with the Sankaracharya of Puri (who is also known as Swami Niranjan Dev Teerth and is a prominent Hindu leader), have supported its legalization.<sup>7</sup> For them Hindu nationalism could be established and made popular only if the iconography of Hinduism could be made visible, for example, the powerful image of the willing woman seated on the pyre next to her deceased husband ready for her sacrifice. In order for Hindu nationalists to reject the modernity of culture imposed by the secular state it must return or reconstruct the roots of a precolonial indigeneity where Sati was an act of glory. Several authors have argued that this historical construction of the "precolonial indigeneity" by the BJP/VHP is based on specific colonial experiences which privilege certain kinds of narratives, for example, Brahmanic and Male over others (Chatterjee, 1994; Gopal, 1991; Inden, 1990). Chatterjee (1995, p. 126) suggests that in fact the idea that Indian nationalism is synonymous with Hindu nationalism is not the vestige of some premodern religious conception but rather it is entirely, "modern, historicist, and political."

In September 1987, the death of 18-year-old Roop Kanwar in Deorala, Rajasthan, brought Sati back into the popular consciousness (Narasimhan, 1990). Describing Kanwar as Sati and explaining the reemergence of the phenomena, Rajan writes:

The issue of sati in India today resolved itself into a series of binary oppositions subsumed into the larger categories, 'tradition' and 'modernity.' Defenders or sympathizers with

sati are purportedly on the side of 'tradition': for them sati is a venerated ritual so that the ban on sati and its celebration pits the state against the community, the colonial or westernized rulers and elites against the 'native' Indian subject. The negative identity of 'modernity'—as an elite, high bourgeois and alienated 'westernization'—can be and is, by the same token, thrust upon those who take the stand of opposing sati. (Rajan, 1992, p. 17)

The conflict between modernity and traditionality makes the act of Sati the agency through which the postcolonial culture attempts to resolve the crisis of national identity. Radhakrishnan's outer/inner duality of nationalism or Rajan's problematized separation between modern/tradition must locate the popularity of Sati in a tradition specifically coded to reflect the patriarchal religiosity of Hinduism or Hindutva. The inner identity is not merely, as Radhakrishnan (1992) asserts, a reaction formation against the outer, but derives its validity from the reimagined, reconstructed, and rewritten pre-colonial and pre-modern (p. 85). The arguments in favor of Sati's legalization are often surrounded by the need to overturn a stipulation imposed upon "us" (Hindu women/Hindu people) by the colonialists, and also because Hindu scriptures and mythologies have always spoken favorably of this practice. The popularity of Sati then becomes manifested in a nativist revivalism that not only reacts against the Western subject of Enlightenment but also attempts to appropriate Hindu and Vedic teleology. Mani (1987, p. 56) has demonstrated for us that this reinvention of Hinduism is not new. In fact, Mani argues, colonial interpreters, progressive elites, and conservative natives had always focused their arguments about Sati not primarily on women's condition, but on what constitutes authentic cultural tradition. "Brahmanic scriptures," Mani (1987) writes, "were increasingly seen to be the locus of this authenticity so that, for example, the legislate prohibition of Sati becomes a question of scriptural interpretation" (p. 66). These specific texts were considered prescriptive texts that contained rules of social behavior even though, according to Mani (1987), the evidence of this assertion was problematic. Mazumdar (1994) adds, "For the better part of the history of the subcontinent there had been no uniform religious identity readily identifiable as Hindu" (p. 248). It was only with British co-

lonialism that the first formulation of national identity emerged. But in postindependence India, for BJP and other neoconservative forces, colonialism and its ban on Sati has become a momentary aberration that India must discard in order to reconstruct itself as a Hindu nation. The concept of nation, thus, becomes constructed not only as a strategic reaction against colonial oppression, but also as a method of reasserting an invented or imagined religiosity, that is, religion is no more a subspace that modern nationalism is able to subsume.

The high visibility of Roop Kanwar's Sati in the media and the ensuing discussion about widow self-immolation, mostly in English newspapers and journals in India and among Western academics, brought another issue to light. According to Nandy (1994), it was the clear disjuncture between rural (people of Deorala specifically) and urban India, in which the celebration of Sati by so many thousands seemed simply perplexing for the urban bourgeoisie and profoundly worrying to the extent that "it had to be simply and loudly rejected" (p. 132). The nonmodern sectors of Indian society who viewed Sati as a religious phenomena had been instinctively rejected by the upper bourgeoisie; for them Sati connoted everything that was irrational, backward, archaic, and corrupt.

The central question about women's subjectivity, however, remains problematic. Nandy's criticisms are fair to the extent that he finds the Westernized middle class in India as incomprehending to the religious elements that dictate the nonmodern Indian subject's response to the performance of Sati. On the other hand, the performance of amniocentesis/abortion, which is primarily an Indian middle-class phenomena, has evaded the kind of scrutiny Kanwar's Sati received. (Nandy, 1994, makes a similar comparison with the increasing dowry deaths in Delhi.) However, in his efforts to critique the varied responses of Indian intellectuals, Nandy falls into the classic binarism of modernism and religious traditionalism. Veena Talwar Oldenburg (1995) notes in her critique of Nandy that he mistakenly concludes that "Sati was an uncontested and timeless element in an equally timeless Indian culture" (p. 162). In that sense, Nandy, perhaps inadvertently, becomes one of the traditionalists who romanticizes an authentic Indianness. I think feminists like Talwar Oldenburg are trying to point to the gendering of the nation-

alist politics by reminding readers of the spectacle (Sati) or pain (amniocentesis/abortion) of women's bodies. In either of these cases, the disturbing implication is that the national debate about Indian culture (authentic/modern, traditional/modern, religious/secular, spiritual/material) make women, and primarily their bodies, the agency through which these debates are contested and resolved.

Finally, the essential dichotomies in which Indian national identity has been presented may not be sufficient to explain the rise of Hindu nationalism, Sati, and amniocentesis. The outer/inner dualism does not address other, often competing, ideological formations. Chatterjee (1990) himself acknowledges this when he writes, "A renewal of the struggle for the equality and freedom of women must include within it a struggle against the false essentialisms of home/world, spiritual/material, feminine/masculine propagated by nationalist ideology" (p. 252).

## CONCLUSION

My purpose in this article has been threefold. First, I provide a critique of Chatterjee and Radhakrishnan's notion of the outer/inner dichotomy of Indian nationalism. While the outer vision of India has remained hostage to Western factors of reason and coercion, the inner vision has not been simply a rejection of the outer, as Radhakrishnan (1992) claims, but also a deliberate construction of a pure indigeneity. This reconstruction has required and resulted in the cooptation of religiosity and Hinduism as a way to resist the secular, modern, and Western subjectivity. In fact, religion, in postcolonial India, has emerged as a discursive totality that has subsumed the politics of indigenous identity (more so than other rhetoric of caste, tribal, gender, class, etc). While the institutional agencies of modernity forces the Indian state to constantly play "catch-up" with the West, the inner India seeks religion as its route to resistance. The two are in constant struggle and create conditions of violence, coercion, and denaturalization in their efforts to control the politics of location. Unable to "speak" of its own condition, radically effected by colonialism, rapid industrialization, and growing changes in the environment, the national subjectivity develops a conflictual resolution to its identity: if the modern nation can

only repress the religious all will be well and if the religious can repress Western subjectivity, the contradictions will be smoothed. I also conclude that this dichotomy between inner/outer India might not be exhaustive enough to encapsulate the multitude of identity conflicts in postcolonial India.

Second, I provide a groundwork for this debate via the writings of Nehru and Gandhi (as have Appadurai, 1993; Chatterjee, 1990; Karlekar, 1995; Radhakrishnan, 1992, etc.), but have focused on how Nehru and Gandhi connected the religious and women's question to national politics. Radhakrishnan and others insists that Gandhi, unlike Nehru, understood the politics of Indian nationalism because he understood the primacy of the Indian masses (peasants, rural, poor, untouchables) in the making of the nation. However, my readings of Gandhi suggest that while he understood the religious elements of Indian political life well (it is in religious terms that he understood the masses), he was much more vague and ambiguous about women's cultural and social location.

Finally, in conclusion, I have tried to explore how the women's question has been displaced by all actors (BJP, Nehru, Gandhi) of the national debate who have failed to realize that each aspect of the conflictual national formation is gendered. The women's question is not "one" of the many perspectives that need attention or analysis, but, in contrast, no historical rethinking can take place without gender, or as Sangari and Vaid (1990, p. 2) suggest, there is no gender neutral method of criticism. I conclude that the practices of amniocentesis and Sati have merely pointed to the representational or symbolic use of women as the ground upon which to construct the rhetorical dualisms of modern versus tradition, change versus static, center versus periphery, or material versus spiritual.

## ENDNOTES

1. A slightly expanded version of this essay has since been reprinted in Radhakrishnan's (1995) own book, *Diasporic Mediations*.
2. On December 6, 1992, a large group of Hindus, at the incitement and encouragement of BJP leaders, razed a Muslim mosque called Babri Masjid to the ground in the city of Ayodhya. It set a series of violent riots across the country. BJP has claimed that the mosque had originally been God Rama's, a revered Hindu deity, birth place (*Rama Janmabhoomi*). To many people, and to the

Indian Supreme Court, which had banned any efforts of demolition of the mosque 2 years earlier, it seemed that this act was to create a sense of Hindu nationalism whose main purpose was to disenfranchise the minority Muslim population (Ahmad, 1994; Kothari, 1994). India's political landscape has vastly shifted since this event. In 1986, BJP had only two seats in Parliament. In the elections of 1991, they won 119, about 20% of the seats and in May 1996, BJP was allowed to form a coalition government after winning 161 house seats (Gargan, 1993; Jha, 1996).

3. For example, Appadurai (1993), Chatterjee (1995), Jayawardena (1986), Karlekar (1995), and Sarkar and Butalia (1995).
4. The centrality of Hinduism in Gandhi's own life is clearly explained by him in the essay title, "Why I am a Hindu" (Gandhi, 1939, p. 7).
5. One cannot find a better example than the 1993 elections in which several states and provinces were won by smaller coalitions, such as the one between Bahujan Samaj party-Samjwadi Party who represent the interests of the minority Muslims and lower castes than the national parties like Congress and BJP. In the 1996 general elections, for the first time in India's history, such a coalition of regional and minority parties, briefly formed a ruling government with a low-caste Prime Minister, H. D. Dev Gowda (Rettie, 1993; Lev, 1996).
6. In making this connection, I must cautiously point to the readers that the vision of religious politics of Gandhi was fundamentally different from that of the BJP's (see Karlekar, 1995).
7. I specifically mean Vijayraje Scindia, the *Maharani* or Queen of Gwalior in the state of Madhya Pradesh, who has emerged as a powerful BJP leader and a Hindu nationalist. After the passing of the Sati Prevention Act in 1987, Scindia said, "A voluntary act of self-immolation by a widow in dedication of her husband does not constitute an offense" (Crossette, 1991, p. 1).

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