

What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice: Rewriting Patriarchy in Late- Nineteenth-Century Bengal

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WIFE: When you become a householder you have to look out for so many things . . . you have to try so hard to protect your husband, yourself, your offspring and your home from evil. At every step of the way you have to look after your husband's happiness; you have to work very hard to keep your husband's love. Is all this an easy task? On top of that there are all these other things to consider—family relations, male and female servants, guests and beggars, the cow and her young, society, the government and *dharmā*.

(Pal 1884b, 81)

The husband is a woman's only god and serving him her highest *dharmā*.

(Dasi 1900, 2)

Here are two passages chosen from a genre of Bengali domestic science/advice manuals for women in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. The first passage is from *Strir sahit kathopakathan* ["Conversations with the Wife"], one of the most popular of all advice manuals, first published in 1884 and reissued eight subsequent times, the last in 1909. Its author was Dhirendranath Pal, a prolific writer who published seven books in Bengali and eleven in English between the 1880s and the early twentieth

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century.¹ The second passage is from *Nari dharma* ["Woman's Dharma"], a manual of advice for women written by Nagendrabala (Mustaphi) Dasi in 1900, and one of only two advice manuals authored by women I have found in this period.² Its author was born in 1878, and, by her death in 1906 at the age of twenty-eight, she had published numerous collections of poetry, two books of advice for women, and one novel.³

This paper is about the rewriting of patriarchy within advice manuals for women, in particular within the manuals of these two authors, Dhirendranath Pal and Nagendrabala Dasi. Advice manuals are a good place to look for what Partha Chatterjee and others have called in recent years the "new patriarchy" of anticolonial nationalism: that is, a reconfiguration of extant patriarchal customs, rules, and prescriptions that was intended both to fit Bengali women for the changed conditions of life in British-ruled India and to create conditions and structures in the private sphere that would compensate Bengali men for their loss of power and position in public life. In the male-authored advice manuals of the late nineteenth-century, we see how Bengali men wished to reconfigure the patriarchal traditions of the past. Reading Nagendrabala's *Nari dharma* ["Woman's Dharma"] against this earlier advice literature, however, enables us to discuss not only what men wished for, but what Bengali women wanted as well. In her manual Nagendrabala invites us to set her ideas within a context defined by the Sanskrit texts of the Hindu tradition. She fills *Nari dharma* with citations from texts such as the *Laws of Manu* and the *Mahabharata*—often in the original Sanskrit. Although we know Nagendrabala had read at least one of Dhirendranath Pal's manuals and although his ideas provide the starting point for her own perspective on domestic life, she does not refer to his book nor to any other advice literature in her text. It is to *Nari dharma*, then, and its relationship to the

¹Dhirendranath's topics ranged from stories and biographies in Bengali to religion and travel literature in English. But among his eighteen works were five that focused on Hindu women and how they should live: *Strir sabit kathopakathan* ["Conversations with the Wife"], 1884; *Songini* ["Companion"], 1884, *The Hindu Wife*, 1888; *The Hindu Science of Marriage*, 1909; *Svami stri* ["Husband/Wife"] (published posthumously), 1926.

²Nagendrabala's husband's name was Mustaphi (or Mustafi) and in some bibliographies and libraries her work is listed under this name. The nineteenth-century convention for Bengali women's names was to append "Devi" [goddess] to a Brahmin name and "Dasi" [maid/servant] to a non-Brahmin name. Nagendrabala signed all her works, following this convention, as Nagendrabala Dasi, and in this article I have used Dasi in short citations to identify her works. Navinkali Dasi's *Kumari siksha* ["Education for Girls"], the only other advice manual by a woman I have found for this period, offers very short, general pronouncements on girls' education. A third text, *Ramanir kartavya* ["The Duties of Women"], is attributed to Jayakrishna Mitra, but the details of its advice on sock darning and pickle recipes suggest that a woman (perhaps Giribala Mitra, listed as the 'publisher') wrote substantial parts of it. I have discussed this text in Walsh 1995. In addition, journals such as *Bamabodhini patrika* and *Antahpur* also published essays by women on related domestic science topics in this period (Dasi 1883; Mitra 1890).

³The National Library's Bengali Catalogue lists five books of poetry and three prose works under Nagendrabala's name. The prose works are: *Nari dharma* in 1900; a sequel, *Garbasthya dharma* ["Household Dharma"] (Jamalpur 1904); and a novel, *Sati* (Jamalpur 1906). The poetry collections are: *Prema gatha* ["Poems of love"] (Calcutta 1898), *Marma gatha* ["Poems of the heart"] (Hoogli 1896), *Amiya gatha* ["Poems as sweet as nectar"] (Calcutta 1901), *Dhavaleswari* ["The shrine at Dhavaleswara"] (Calcutta 1903), and *Kusum gatha* ["Flower-like poems"] (Calcutta 1905). In addition, Nagendrabala published at least five essays in *Bamabodhini patrika* between 1894 and 1904, one of which was "*Prayojaniya prarthana*" ["An Urgent Prayer"], 1894. Usa Chakraborty also lists several additional volumes of poetry: *Broja gatha* ["Poems about Braj"] 1902, *Basanta gatha* ["Poems of spring"] 1905, and *Kana* 1906. (Borthwick 1984, 371; Chakraborty 1963, 40–41, 168–69; Dasi 1894; Murshid 1983, 262).

manuals and traditions that preceded it that I will turn in the last section of this paper.

The “Women’s Question” and “New Patriarchy”

In the nineteenth century, the dominance of British power in India imposed an alien culture on indigenous life-ways. By the last decades of the century the penetration of that foreign culture was so profound in urban centers like Calcutta that the entire world of Hindu domestic life and its most intimate relationships had become contested ground. What relationship should exist between a husband and a wife, how a mother should raise her children, even how kitchen spices should be arranged on a storeroom wall—all had become issues for debate and contestation. In the reformulation of Bengali Hindu women and their worlds that took place in this period—and that formed the substance of the domestic science manuals I am going to discuss—there is no area of domestic life so trivial that it is not addressed, no family relationship so intimate or spontaneous that its interactions are not the subject of rethinking and reformulation. Nowhere are these preoccupations clearer than in the print literature from late-nineteenth-century Bengal. In plays, novels, tracts and essays—as well as advice manuals—in both Bengali and English in this period, Bengali *bhadralok* writers demonstrated their concern with the related issues of women’s roles and relationships, the domestic world of the family, and the management of daily life⁴ (Sarkar 1992b, 217; Walsh 1995, 335).

Of the numerous ways to situate a discussion of the cultural preoccupations and redefinitions of this period, in recent years the most prominent—and perhaps the most persuasive—has been the identification of late-nineteenth-century discourse on domestic reformulations with that of prenascent Hindu nationalism. Excluded from the political power structures of the British Raj, this argument asserts, Hindu nationalists came to define the domestic world as their own; this was to be an area over which they could achieve some measure of mastery and autonomous self identification.⁵ Long before the nationalists began their political struggle with British imperialism, Partha Chatterjee has argued, they had produced a domain of sovereignty within colonial society itself, a domain which included the domestic world of women and the family (Chatterjee 1993, 6). Thus it was that the “women’s question” came to dominate late-nineteenth-century discourse in Bengal and its resolution to preoccupy so many Bengali writers of this period.

⁴The Bengali term *bhadralok* translates as “respectable people” and is generally taken to refer to families with a tradition of family literacy, wealthy enough to do no manual labor, and possibly able to employ a servant. In Calcutta and Bengal, the Western educated would have been considered part of this *bhadralok* class, but not all *bhadralok* families were necessarily Western educated. “Middle class” is another term often used to refer to either or both of these nineteenth-century groups. I have used these terms more or less interchangeably in referring to the (admittedly very loosely defined) class for whom the Bengali domestic science texts were written. Recent discussions of these terms may be found in Chatterjee 1993, 35; Ray 1984, 2, 29–35; Sarkar 1983, 65–70.

⁵The beginning points of this analysis may be found in Sumit Sarkar’s discussion of “The Women’s Question” in Nineteenth-century Bengal” and Partha Chatterjee’s essay on “The Nationalist Resolution of the Women’s Question.” Essays by Tanika Sarkar (“The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation”) and Dipesh Chakrabarty (“The Difference—Deferral of (a) Colonial Modernity”) have extended the discussion. See Sarkar 1985.

As part of this process of domestic redefinition, Chatterjee argues, anticolonial nationalists replaced older indigenous (Hindu) patriarchal traditions with a “new patriarchy” of their own creation. The ‘new woman’ of nationalist construction was to be free from some of the constraints of the older patriarchal tradition: she would be able to move outside her home and she would be educated. Her education would

inculcate in women the virtues—the typically bourgeois virtues characteristic of the new social norms of “disciplining”—of orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and the ability to run the household according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world.

(Chatterjee 1993, 129–30)

As this redefinition was prompted in part by nationalist needs for an arena of exclusive sovereignty, the nationalists’ ‘new woman’ would be constructed to allow that domain to come into existence. Therefore, Chatterjee argues, women had to be different both from men within their own society and from women of the West. Women’s “spirituality” was to be marked by their dress, eating habits, social demeanor, and religiosity, and their education was only permissible to the extent that these crucial differences could be maintained. “The need to adjust to the new conditions outside the home,” Chatterjee writes,

had forced upon men a whole series of changes in their dress, food habits, religious observances and social relations. Each of these capitulations now had to be compensated for by an assertion of spiritual purity on the part of women. They must not eat, drink or smoke in the same way as men; they must continue the observance of religious rituals that men were finding difficult to carry out; they must maintain the cohesiveness of family life and solidarity with the kin to which men could not now devote much attention.

(Chatterjee 1993, 130)

This “new patriarchy” defined women as essentially different from men; yet the difference still allowed for women’s reform through education and self-education, as long as it was possible for a woman to do this without “jeopardizing her place at home, that is, without becoming a memsaheb” (Chatterjee 1993, 128).

A Discourse of Devotion

There is a basic anomaly in the life stories of Bengali women that has been uncovered in the course of twentieth-century research into nineteenth-century Bengal’s “women’s question.” Women in this period often had extraordinary struggles to break free of indigenous customs such as *pardab* and the ban on literacy. Biographical and autobiographical literature testifies to the personal courage, energy, strength, and perseverance with which women faced these struggles (Borthwick 1984, 363–74; Chakraborty 1963, 111–46). Some women learned to read in secret nighttime tutorials with their husbands; others by memorizing the syllabary upside down as a brother was being taught or by stealing a sheet on which a child was

practicing his letters.⁶ Women defied conventions of dress and behavior to attend classes outside their family home and, on occasion, ran away from those same homes to marry or rejoin husbands whose religious convictions had made them an anathema to family elders.⁷

Yet alongside these narratives of bravery and energy, it is a commonplace of the period to find educated women—often the very same women whose lives have been marked by their struggles to free themselves from orthodox restrictions—speaking in the most extreme terms of their devotion to their husbands. Two brief biographical examples—taken together with the earlier quote from *Nari dharma*—will set the tone: one woman, Dayamayi Sen, was devoted to her daily practice of drinking the water in which her husband's feet had been washed. Another, Prabhavati Debi, "an educated woman," found that when she performed the Savitri *puja*, the image of her husband was replacing that of the goddess. She abandoned the *puja* and worshipped her husband instead (Borthwick 1984, 147).

These practices and the discursive style in which they are embedded have not been as fully addressed as they might be in studies of women of this period. Instead, discussions of women's "voices," such as Malavika Karlekar's interesting *Voices from Within*, have focused more on the relatively fewer nineteenth-century women whose consciousness and self-concept prefigure twentieth-century sensibilities and less on (what I suspect to be) the larger number who profess a subordinate and devotional demeanor.⁸ We have been interested in the recovery of women 'heroes' and have been unwilling or unable to identify a heroic aspect in the unambivalently submissive and subordinate language that dominates much of women's discourse in this period.

This omission has not gone unmarked by scholars of the period, three of whom have agreed in recent years that the problem lies more with twentieth-century than with nineteenth-century sensibilities. In 1983 Ghulam Murshid gave this position its most straightforward statement, when he asserted in *The Reluctant Debutante* that nineteenth-century Bengali women

were quite content with and eager to receive the kind of education that men arranged for them to turn them into better wives and better mothers, or, in other words, to play their traditional roles and to be exploited as wives and mothers by men.

(Murshid 1983, 62)

More recently, Dipesh Chakrabarty, interested in conceptions of colonial modernity and identity as these appear in the domestic science literature of late-nineteenth-century Bengal, has identified in the ideas/expressions of late-nineteenth-century Bengali women—indeed in much of the period's discourse on domestic life—"an irreducible category of 'beauty,' a non-secularized and non-universalistic sense of

⁶The story of husbands tutoring wives at night is a commonplace of nineteenth-century literature and is told about, among others, Brahmayi Das, Aghorekamini Roy, Kailash-bashini Devi, and Sharadasundari Devi. Shanta Nag learned to read upside down. The story of how Rasasundari Devi learned her letters from a copy sheet she stole from her son has been retold by both Tanika Sarkar and Malavika Karlekar (Borthwick 1984, 365; Chakrabarty 1963, 123; Karlekar 1993, 123–34, 118).

⁷Harasundari Datta's husband twice arranged for her escape from his family home; Bamasundari Canda, a widow, was helped by *Brahmo* relatives to escape her home in Mymensingh to be remarried (Borthwick 1984, 365).

⁸See also Bannerji 1991. The editors of *Women Writing in India* posed, as the "major principle" for selection, the question "what modes of resistance did they fashion?" (Tharu 1991, 36).

aesthetics” which cannot be adequately critiqued “from within secular-historicist narratives alone” or “through the categories of the European imperial-modern.”⁹ Finally, Partha Chatterjee, in the context of his discussion of late-nineteenth-century anticolonial nationalists’ new patriarchy, has suggested that it is the nationalist construction of “reform as a project of both emancipation and self-emancipation of women” that accounts for the enthusiasm with which late-nineteenth-century women took it up. “Recent historians of a liberal persuasion,” he writes,

have often been somewhat embarrassed by the profuse evidence of women writers of the nineteenth-century, including those at the forefront of the reform movements in middle-class homes, justifying the importance of the so-called feminine virtues . . . (such as housework), chastity, self-sacrifice, submission, devotion, kindness, patience, and the labors of love . . .

(Chatterjee 1993, 130)

This emphasis on the “so-called feminine virtues,” Chatterjee suggests, occurs because nineteenth-century Bengali women have accepted the new patriarchy of the nationalists and the resolution of the women’s question it implies.

I make extensive use of Chatterjee’s “new patriarchy” in this essay, using it to set a context for the advice manuals I discuss. But it is not, as he suggests, the simple reaffirmation of “feminine virtues” in women’s literature of this period that gives one pause. Nor is it the presence of “false consciousness” in women’s lives and writings of the period or the archaic structures in their texts that in my view makes this literature so hard to address. It is the particular combination of devotion and iconoclasm in the lives and writings of nineteenth-century Bengali women that strikes me as unlikely. One might accept (if not applaud) the degree of subordination and subjugation implied in the self-definitions of late-nineteenth-century Bengali women; these women’s willingness to identify with and immerse themselves in idioms of devotion to their husbands is not, in and of itself, unlikely. But to find such subordination paired with lives so full of challenges to older patriarchal structures—to find that quality of devotion claimed by women who are running away from home, stealing pages of copy books, and in innumerable other ways demonstrating their willingness to break with the rules and restrictions of the past—this seems implausible. At the least this combination of energy and devotion ought to invite our attention and investigation.

In the course of this essay, I hope to suggest an alternate reading for this discourse. I want to suggest that we read the hyperbole of Bengali women’s self-described devotion not as evidence of false consciousness, an aesthetic survival, or femininity, but rather as evidence of a choice. There were, after all, two patriarchal alternatives available to women in late-nineteenth-century Bengal—an older orthodoxy inscribed in Sanskritic texts which found its lived expression through the customs and hierarchies of extended family life, and a “new patriarchy,” inscribed in the nationalist discourse of (among others) advice manuals which was presented to women most

⁹For Chakrabarty this older ‘sense of aesthetics’ contributes images/concepts that are essential to the late-nineteenth-century redefinition of self—allowing the nationalist self to be “modern” but “different”—but, since these images/concepts originate in older, pre-Enlightenment structures, they cannot be easily merged with modern elements and are constantly destabilizing reconceptions of self and identity in this period. For Chakrabarty, then, the late-nineteenth-century hyperboles of devotion—as I describe them above—are simply part of the residue of these older (archaic?) images and concepts (Chakrabarty 1993, 28, 26, 30).

frequently through the teachings and person of their husbands. Devotion to one's husband as a god then, and the discursive forms such devotion took, marked Bengali women's efforts to use the concepts of the "new patriarchy" in ways that would allow them to gain greater freedom from an old patriarchy that had an equally powerful hold on their lives. To the degree that this was a choice and not a surrender, it was certainly a choice that operated within the very specific contingencies of late-nineteenth-century Bengali domestic life. But in the enthusiasm with which some Bengali women turned to new patriarchy in this period, we may read, if we wish, some indication of the degree to which it represented a preferred alternative to the old patriarchal system they left behind.

Old Patriarchy

Because so much of our discussion involves implicit and explicit references to the older traditions of Hinduism, before turning to the advice manuals we should briefly review the main features of what I call "old patriarchy" in this essay. By this I mean older beliefs and practices regarding women that, in the nineteenth century, had a textual point of origin in Sanskrit literature and a customary point of origin in everyday life. Both the critics and defenders of Hindu customs relating to women saw in them evidence of a single, ancient "orthodoxy" whose ideas and customs needed to be either overturned or upheld (Borthwick 1984, 27; Walsh 1995, 334–35). "Traditional" Hindu views on women's roles and relationships were drawn from the legends and law codes of the Sanskrit scriptures; "orthodox" views on women's conduct and behavior were widely assumed to include practices and beliefs centering around customs such as child marriage, the ban on widow remarriage, the practice of *pardah*, as well as the general prohibition against women's literacy.

Both the written and customary traditions applied to women in India and Bengal were well marked by a defining male perspective. In the Sanskrit literature as well as by custom, women were considered a separate (and inferior) class. The purpose of a woman's life was defined as childbearing, and she was constrained by a *dharma* which required her compliance within whatever family (her own or her husband's) she found herself. To repeat a much quoted verse from the *Laws of Manu*,

Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence.

(Manu 1991, 196)

Scriptures urged male family members to protect women from their own tendencies towards sexual promiscuity; custom decreed the restriction of women to the confines of a home's inner spaces (*pardah*). Among the wealthier Bengali *bhadralok*, old patriarchy found expression through the extended family, the central unit of domestic life, organized as a patrilinear and patrilocal institution under the authority of its eldest male member. Family wealth and decisions about its use were the province of this figure, the *kartik* (the "doer" or "master" of the family); household organization and management were the responsibility of his wife, the *grihini* ("housewife") or *ginni*. Women married into these families between the ages of eight and twelve, with twelve being seen as a dangerous outer limit. Within this family, a woman's husband was her god; her devotion to him was dependent on neither his character nor his behavior. Again from Manu:

A virtuous wife should constantly serve her husband like a god, even if he behaves badly, freely indulges his lust and is devoid of any good qualities.

(Manu 1991, 115)

Women were forbidden to learn to read but urged to become *pativratas* (faithful wives, wives devoted through their vows to their husbands). Among high-caste communities in Bengal, widow remarriage was forbidden. On the other hand, indigenous stories equated the good and virtuous wife—the one who through her good conduct brought happiness and prosperity to her husband's home—with a goddess. In Bengal such a woman was called a *grihalakshmi* ('a *Lakshmi* of the home'), after *Lakshmi*, the goddess of wealth and prosperity whose residence all men wished for in their homes.

The term used to encompass the totality of familial obligations, relationships, and duties was 'family *dharma*' (*griha dharma* or *sangsar dharma*).¹⁰ Traditionally, this *dharma* applied equally to men and women and demanded the subordination of an individual's desires to the demands and needs of the larger family unit. The many restrictions on both the husband and wife's conduct in the early years of their marriage—they could neither meet during the day nor speak to each other in front of family elders—have been seen in recent years as a means of ensuring the maintenance of family *dharma*; they helped ensure that a son's infatuation with his new bride would not override his continued devotion and loyalty to the family elders (most particularly his mother).¹¹

I. Advice Manuals and New Patriarchy

Within the enormous literature on the "women's question" produced in the latter part of the nineteenth century in Bengal is a substantial subset of works on domestic science—domestic economy in the language of the day. Whether published as separate books or within the pages of contemporary women's magazines, these works ranged in content from purely medical discussions concerned with hygiene and disease, to discussions of household management, housework, and cooking, to delineations of family relationships and discussions of child rearing practices.¹² Publication runs for such texts could be small; editions ranged from fifty to one or two thousand copies each. Between 1880 and 1891 at least twenty-six different domestic science texts were published, and copies in circulation exceeded twenty-five thousand. Since census figures indicate that by 1891 the number of "literate and learning" (Bengali) women

¹⁰*Dharma* is the Hindu term which identifies a Hindu's social and religious obligations within any of the multiple contexts of his or her life. One has a *dharma* defined by one's caste affiliation, for instance, by one's gender, by one's age. Crucial to the understanding of *dharma* is the idea that the fulfillment of any *dharmic* responsibility is always more important than the fulfillment of one's individual wishes. In the nineteenth century, *dharma* was also commonly used to translate the English word "religion."

¹¹With the exception of specific Bengali terms, the above statements would also apply generally to family roles and relationships throughout the Hindu areas of South Asia. See especially Borthwick 1984, 3–25; Jacobsen 1977, 65–66; Kakar 1978, 73–76.

¹²Aspects of this literature have been discussed in Chakrabarty 1993. Swapna Banerjee discusses the relations of servants and *bhadralok* women in advice manuals well into the 1930s (Banerjee 1996). In addition, references to the genre and/or to selected books in it have appeared in Borthwick 1984; Chakrabarti 1995; Sarkar 1992b.

in Calcutta had risen to 10,162, by that year there could have been more than two copies of domestic science manuals in print for every literate woman in the city.¹³

Advice for Women

The most interesting of the domestic science books, in my view, were those written for an audience of women. In these books the necessity of locating the author's 'advice' within a context recognizable to women had several consequences, not the least of which was the extent to which it forced these (mostly) male authors to reimagine and represent the domestic world and contextualize their concerns within it. These concerns were generally those of the Western-educated Bengali community of the period (Walsh 1983). Impacted by Western ideologies and reshaped by British presence and power in Bengal, the men of this community often worked in jobs that required them to live apart from their extended families or that forced them to negotiate work environments that either explicitly or implicitly demanded that they be hardworking, punctual, well organized, efficient, and clean (Sarkar 1992a; Walsh 1990; Walsh 1995). The reform project these manuals contemplate was designed, on the one hand, to address charges that Hindu women's conditions were degenerate while, on the other, ensuring a domestic world organized for the practical requirements of new working and living conditions under the Raj.

To present their concerns to women, manual authors had to enter the conceptual framework of the domestic world. In *Ramanir kartavya* ["The Duties of Women"], a popular book that saw at least two printings between 1888 and 1890, housework—and its related topics of order and efficiency—was organized around chapters on the various rooms of a Bengali home: "Bedroom," "Kitchen," "Storeroom," "Cowshed," and so forth (Mitra 1890; Walsh 1995, 347–55). Authors had to speak within a discourse framed by older sensibilities; they couched their modern advice in the older language of *sangsar dharma* ("household/worldly duties") and evoked images of the goddess Lakshmi and the *sati*, in the course of their advice. Where essayists of the period might write abstractly of the need for the "equality" of women, a manual writer would frame the issue somewhat differently: "We will show," wrote Dhirendranath Pal in the introduction to his book, how the husband

should educate the wife so that she, being well educated, can make her husband and family members happy.

(Pal 1884b, ii)

Texts intended for women were written in what authors imagined to be a simple, colloquial, Bengali, one, they frequently added, that was "suitable" for women. Aware that the Bengali written by men differed substantially from the language understood by women, authors worried that women would not be able to read their books. Reviewers praised the easy language of a book like *Ramanir kartavya* ["The Duties of Women"]—it was, one reviewer noted, so simple that

even the half educated housewives of this country will be able to read it easily and be helped.

(Mitra 1890, preface)

¹³These figures are based on my list of twenty-six different domestic science manuals compiled from the National Library's Bengali Catalogue and then checked against the publication listings in the *Catalogue of Printed Books* for Bengal for the last twenty years of the late nineteenth century. Census figures are quoted in Borthwick 1984, 108 (National Library 1963; Bengal Library 1887).

Authors also worried about suitability of content. “Up to now,” wrote one manual author,

very few books have been published of sufficient good taste to be suitable for women to read or for husbands to ask their wives to read.

(Biswas 1887, preface)

The concern that “women are still not getting the education they should” surfaced in a number of books, for the contentiousness of reform issues in Bengal meant that what seemed ‘suitable’ in one reform context could seem prurient in another (Pal 1884b, preface). This was the point of the author of *Bangali bau* [“The Bengali Wife”], who complained in his introduction that the books written to date had been written only “to teach about the love-affair of husband and wife.” There was hardly a line in them, he said, that would teach women how “to manage in their family life” (Gupta 1885, preface).

Finally, manuals written for women reveal—as essays, plays, and even novels addressed to an audience of male peers may not—how very problematic authors felt their project to be. It may be (as Partha Chatterjee has suggested) that in the discursive field of anticolonial nationalism, the new patriarchy resolved “the women’s question” so completely as to remove social reform as an issue from the discourse of nationalism in the early twentieth century (Chatterjee 1990, 243–52; Sarkar 1992b). But, contemplating their audience of women, manual authors clearly recognize the degree to which their reformulation of domestic life was contingent on women’s acquiescence and cooperation. Authors worried out loud that women found these advice manuals uninteresting—for if, as one author observes, “the books remain lying in Gurudas Babu’s bookstore, we do not believe that any benefit will come to the women of Bengal” (Raychaudhuri 1888, 1). A common device for piquing interest was to write the text as a dialogue in which a husband instructed his wife on proper conduct. The frame for such texts—which had names such as “Conversations with the Wife” or “A Husband’s Advice to His Wife”—was often a late night meeting of husband and wife, with voices hushed so as not to upset the “elders.” Still, reading alone was not enough; women also had to follow the advice. “Saroj,” says the husband in *Griha lakshmi*, “when I come, I say the same things over and over—you don’t pay any heed” (Raychaudhuri 1888, 13).

The New Patriarchy

A detailed survey of the way new patriarchal concerns find expression in manual literature would extend this essay beyond the patience of the most tolerant reader. We can, however, identify in general terms the characteristics of advice literature and the ways in which the ideology of the new patriarchy appears within it. The central concern of new patriarchal constructs was the reformulation of the domestic world, both to create a “new woman” more suited to contemporary life in British India and, simultaneously, to create within the ‘private’ space of the home an area of autonomous power and authority for men whose ‘public’ lives were spent under conditions of British domination and control. To achieve these ends manual authors were in agreement on the need for two aspects of the domestic reformulations they proposed: first, that Bengali women must be literate and educated, and second, that within the home, the authority of the husband must be supreme. The first proposition—the need for literacy—was advanced explicitly and argued fiercely in manual literature. The

second proposition—the authority of husbands—was agreed on by all manuals, was actually implicit in the dialogue structure itself, but found direct expression, most often, in the idea that husbands should be their wives' teachers. "From birth to marriage," writes Dhirendranath Pal, "women's teacher is their mother; after marriage, it is their husband" (Pal 1884b, i). As the author of *Bangali bau* ["The Bengali Wife"] points out, it was essential that wives be convinced on this point, that is, the authority of their husbands over their lives. Only after a wife completely understood that this was the nature of her relationship to her husband—"so that as a result she will act according to whatever he says"—was there any point in trying to teach her anything else (Gupta 1885, 17).

We might expect literacy to be a moot point in manuals explicitly written for women to read. Yet authors enter into this dispute with great energy, often striking a tone somewhere between contempt and despair. Here are the opening lines of the chapter on literacy from *Strir prati svamir upadesh* ("A Husband's Advice to His Wife"):

HUSBAND: I've told you over and over again, but you still won't read or write.

WIFE: What's the point? Am I going out to work or something?

HUSBAND: Ha, Ha, Ha—so, reading and writing is only for work, is it! Such is the intelligence of women that you talk like this.

(Mitra 1884, 1)

Since the old patriarchal traditions declared that the woman who learned to read would become a widow, arguments for literacy had to counter the idea, as the fictional wife in *Griha lakshmi* ["The *Lakshmi* of the Home"] puts it: "Auntie Kanto says 'Women shouldn't read. If a woman learns to read, won't she become a widow?'" (Raychaudhuri 1888, 13). In discussions of literacy, as in other areas where authors knew their teachings contradicted established custom, dialogues were constructed to allow the husband's teaching to collide with common practice and family authority. Should women learn to read, speak openly with their in-laws, visit and talk with their husbands during the day, give up the practice of veiling themselves in the presence of elders, or, even, swim for exercise at the time of their daily bath? (Mitra 1884, 161, 42; Pal 1884b, 42; Raychaudhuri 1888, 33). In all these cases, custom said no; advice manuals said yes. And then added,

if you're criticized for that, what can you do? If one is criticized for doing something good, let it be. There's no harm in that.

(Mitra 1884, 42)

The imagined critics were the elderly women of the family and neighborhood: the mother-in-law/head of the household [the *ginni*], older aunts, friendly neighbors. Although technically Bengali homes were under the authority of the *karta* ["master"], the eldest male, manuals present domestic life as a world of women. Men appear in this world, to the extent that they appear at all, as husbands and (sometimes) as sons. Manuals hesitate, however, to clearly identify mothers-in-law as among those anonymous (female) elders whose authority their advice is intended to subvert. They prefer to refer obliquely to "them" or "people" or even "aunties" and to attribute family problems more generally to the (degenerate) nature of "women as a race" and to women's well-known predilection for ignorant customs, superstitions, and quarrels. "You women nourish these kinds of hateful, low feelings in every mind and sow the seeds of unhappiness in the hearts of brothers for eternity," says the *Griha lakshmi* husband.

Just think—however estranged brothers have become from each other, is there usually anything else at the bottom of it other than the incitement of their wives? . . . Just see how much harm is caused by the envy and malice of womenfolk.

(Raychaudhuri 1888, 33)

Manuals conflate the practices they oppose and the authorities who support those practices into the single image of elderly aunties foisting their ignorant superstitions onto (equally ignorant) young wives. In *Strir prati svamir upadesh* ["A Husband's Advice to His Wife"], the wife objects to learning how to read on the grounds that "Ma, Grandma and Auntie" are illiterate. Do you want to hear, asks the husband, about "that same Auntie's intelligence"?

Auntie had a little boy. His name was Hari. When Hari fell ill, the doctor said to give him medicine one dose each hour from the medicine vial. But each time Hari had to take the medicine, he made a huge fuss, so Auntie had him take all the medicine at once. Because of that the boy died. . . . Later when I heard the news of Hari's death, I wondered why womenfolk don't learn to read and write.

(Mitra 1884, 5)

The conflation of practice and practitioner allows authors to use the past as the site for the reforms they seek. As is often the case in arguments for social reform in nineteenth-century Bengal, ancient India becomes both the loci of and the authority for the changes manuals seek. "Wake up, open your eyes," says the author of *Bangali bau* ["The Bengali Wife"], "and follow the customs and practices of ancient Aryan women" (Gupta 1885, 60).

Will the Educated Women Cook or Scour Plates?

Inherent in the new patriarchy of these manuals, however, is an implicit challenge to the family hierarchy established by older patriarchal traditions. If the husband becomes the wife's ultimate authority on conduct, behavior, and beliefs, then what of family life? This is the 'third rail' of advice literature and most authors refuse to touch it. While not averse to pointing out the incompatibilities inherent in other manuals' teachings, manual authors insisted their own advice would foster domestic harmony; as Dhirendranath Pal put it, his advice would educate the wife so that she "can make her husband and family members happy." How bleak a future apart from the extended family could appear can be seen in an image from *Griha lakshmi* ["The Lakshmi of the Home"], one manual that attempts not always successfully to resolve this dilemma. If husband and wife think only of themselves, if they place their happiness as a couple ahead of their *dharma* towards the family, says the author, it will destroy the family.

If the husband thinks 'My wife is my all' and the wife thinks, 'My husband is my all,' then, household *dharma* gets burnt to ashes. Family *dharma* gets burnt to ashes. Only two people, sitting face to face, night and day, pass their lives.

(Raychaudhuri 1888, 10–11)

But while manual authors turn away from some implications of their advice, they acknowledge others. Authors clearly see that the education of women has the potential to destroy domestic life as they have known it and this fear finds expression along the same lines as a question reported in the 1890 Burdwan press: "Will the woman who has obtained the B.A. degree, cook or scour plates?" (Borthwick 1984, 104). One response is to insist that women's education must be tied to domestic life. A common

trope of the period, as Tanika Sarkar has pointed out, identified the household as a kingdom (Sarkar 1992b, 224). In women's manuals this becomes the means of underlining the special importance of women's domestic work. "The family is a kingdom; woman its only ruler," begins *Ramanir kartavya* ["The Duties of Women"],

... And just as the people of a kingdom whose king is devoted to duty enjoy happiness and peace, so the family where the housewife is skillful and devoted to hard work, is a place of happiness and ease.

(Mitra 1890, 1)

The negative side of these fears appears in manuals' universal assertions (or predictions) that in some homes educated women were already (or would soon be) refusing to cook and feed their family, to sweep and clean house. According to *Bangali bau* ["The Bengali Wife"], the acquisition of B.A. degrees had for all intents and purposes already turned some Bengali women into men—"If a girl can become a 'bachelor', what else does she need to become a man?" (Gupta 1885, 23). As a result, college-educated women were routinely refusing to perform ordinary housework:

Well educated girls do not want to sit by the side of the oven fanning the flame so they rely on the scientific saying that the heat of the fire is bad for their health and sit down in a chair to break open the newspaper.

(Gupta 1885, 19)

Authors hardly knew how they could appeal to such women. "Who knows," says one manual,

whether women will just laugh outright at the mention of historical matters or of the *Puranas* so instead let me just say that even the daughters of our Empress, Victoria, were accustomed to doing work like cooking, now and then, with their own hands, and rather than being even a bit ashamed of this, they felt proud of themselves.

(Biswas 1887, 19)

Higher education (and wealth) is given much of the blame in advice manuals for the situation in some households where wealthy women sat like *bibis* ("foreign ladies") doing "wool work," while hired cooks prepared meals for their families and hired wet nurses suckled their babies (Mitra 1890, 100–1; Mitra 1884, 60–61).

"Saroj," pleads the husband in *Griha lakshmi*, "when I come, I say the same things over and over—you don't pay any attention." The outlines of a new patriarchy can be seen in advice manuals' redefinitions of the domestic world. Aware that their success depended on the willingness of Bengali women to listen to and follow their advice, manuals reformulated women's roles and relationships in an effort to lessen the influence of ignorant and superstitious elderly 'aunties' and to increase that of their 'husbands.' Authors are less willing to acknowledge, however, the degree to which their reconfiguration of patriarchy implicitly challenges the fundamental structure of Hindu domestic life: that is, the idea that women and men within the family will subordinate their own wishes and desires to the needs and demands of family *dharma*. Yet in the recurrent fear in these manuals that educated women will cease to cook and do housework, there is evidence that authors knew the project they had embarked on had moved them into unknown territory. If the reformulation of domestic life had the power to transform Bengali women into novel-loving, wool-knitting, goatish-smelling foreign *bibis*, then, in that transformation the domestic world they had attempted to reconfigure might be utterly destroyed.

II. Dhirendranath Pal and *Strir Sahit Kathopakathan*

Dhirendranath Pal's *Strir sahit kathopakathan* ["Conversations with the Wife"] was the most popular and long-lived of the books written to advise women in late-nineteenth-century Bengal. First issued in 1884, it was reissued eight times, the last in 1909.¹⁴ No other advice manual could equal this record. In *Strir sahit kathopakathan* ["Conversations with the Wife"], we find many of the same themes and inner conflicts that exist within the larger genre. Domestic life is reimagined with husband and wife at its center; obligations to family elders and the rest of the household become part of what husband and wife together must accomplish as "partners" in family life. Yet while this author may well have wished for the more 'nuclear' domestic world his manual hints at, this mild-mannered, nonconfrontational text spends more energy on teaching the details of hygiene, nursing, account keeping, and correct letter writing than on advancing a radical reformulation of domestic life. The fact that this manual lasted through more than twenty years and nine editions indicates the degree to which the choices Dhirendranath made in his particular articulation of advice manual issues struck a sympathetic note with his readers.

Brahmo Issues in (Proto-) Nationalist Clothing

We can locate Dhirendranath Pal's particular views on domestic roles and relations, as he does, within the context of the late-nineteenth-century Bengali reform society, the Brahmo Samaj. As this religious reform society, founded early in the nineteenth-century, developed, its members became known for their opposition to orthodox Hindu religious practices and for their support of social reform issues, in particular of issues relating to the conditions of women. In an 1884 dedication to a text called *Songini* ["The Female Companion"], Dhirendranath identifies his own allegiances within that often divided community: "You are a worthy daughter of your father—" he wrote in his dedication to the Maharani of Cooch Behar, daughter of Keshub Chunder Sen, a prominent Brahmo leader:

Should anything written for the race of women
Be given to anyone other than you?

(Pal 1884a, dedication)

By the 1880s, there were three Brahmo communities in Calcutta, all with somewhat varying positions on the social issues of the day.¹⁵ Nevertheless, there remained a

¹⁴The National Library's copy of the first edition of this text has a stamp in English on the title page: "Bengal Library 1880 Calcutta," but the Bengali date for the book, given on the same page, is 1290 or 1884. Events discussed in the text—such as the medical education of Ms. Kadambini Ganguly, which happened only after her graduation in 1883—confirm the later date. Dhirendranath seems to have died between 1909 and 1911; in an introduction to a reissue of *The Hindu Wife*, his nephew states that his uncle has died and he is reissuing the book in his memory. The same nephew may have been responsible for the publication of five later books listed in the National Library catalogue under Dhirendranath's name, in 1912, 1918, 1922, 1923, and 1926 (Pal 1911, preface).

¹⁵The Maharani of Cooch Behar's marriage, in 1878, caused the second schism in the Brahmo community. Keshub's decision to marry his thirteen-year-old daughter to the heir of Cooch Behar was seen by many Brahmos as a betrayal of Brahmo commitments setting the minimum marriage age for girls at fourteen (Borthwick 1984, 126–27; Murshid 1983, 173–74, 180–82).

general association of issues such as child marriage, widow remarriage, the breaking of *purdah*, and the education of women with the Brahmo Samaj as a whole throughout the late nineteenth century, and a writer advocating some or all of these ideas was likely to be labeled dismissively as a 'Brahmo.'

The author of *Strir sabit kathopakathan* ["Conversations with the Wife"], is, as we will see, at some pains to mute and deflect his own ideological convictions. In any case, labels that look to be sectarian or ideological—such as "Brahmo," "Babu," and the like—in this literature may function somewhat differently. Here Partha Chatterjee's suggestion that the late-nineteenth-century debate on the "women's question" be read within the context of the general discourse of anticolonial nationalism seems particularly helpful, for there is much in manual literature that can be linked to later nationalist views (Chatterjee 1993, 124–26). It is not insignificant, for instance, that no author—however influenced his concepts may seem to be by European ideologies or categories—identifies either his work or its goals as foreign. Rather, authors are at some pains to establish an indigenous context for terms and ideas and to attribute reforms themselves to older indigenous customs. Thus, in Dhirendranath's text, cleanliness is defended by the assertion that it is *not* a foreign concept. "Keeping clean is *not* the same as being a Babu," says the text's husband (Pal 1884b, 57). And ancient origins are suggested for the practice of keeping household accounts. "It wasn't as if," Dhirendranath's husband notes at the end of a discussion of accounting,

the girls of earlier times did nothing but serve their husbands well cooked meals, many would even help with the finances; husbands never gave a thought to the housekeeping.

(Pal 1884b, 57)

Within advice literature the accusations authors hurl at others—or imagine others hurling at them—such as "Brahmo," "Babu-like," "English," and so forth—tell us more what authors do not want to be identified with; they function more as markers of negative identity than they do as points in ideological positioning. "Oh fine—," the wife in *Griha lakshmi* says, "all your ideas are English." To which the husband is made to reply, no, no,

this isn't an English idea, this is our own native country's view.

(Raychaudhuri 1888, 32).

Dhirendranath is, in any case, a gentle ideologue, and one reason for his text's longevity may have been his reluctance to engage sectarian issues directly. Ideas for reform (usually suggested in the context of another more pragmatic subject) may be put forth, then withdrawn, then reopened, but never pursued too far. To give one example: while orthodox custom decreed that a wife who used her husband's name would become a widow, many in the late-nineteenth-century considered this prohibition inappropriate in the context of the intimate friendship increasingly viewed as desirable between husband and wife. So, in "A Few Letters," a chapter intended to instruct women on various aspects of letter writing, Dhirendranath takes the opportunity to have his husband suggest that the wife might use the husband's name when she writes to him. Initially, the suggestion is made obliquely: "It seems strange," the husband comments in response to the wife's first letter, "for you to write 'To Your Respected Lotus Feet' to your husband." To which the wife responds: "But why haven't

you written what I *should* write if I don't use 'To Your Respected Lotus Feet?'" And the husband in turn replies,

How can I tell you how to address me when you write! Write whatever you please.
Or if you can't, why not just use my name?

(Pal 1884b, 30–31)

But at the chapter's end, this 'wife' has still not used her husband's name.

The Education of the True Wife

Above all else, *Strir sahit kathopakathan* is a didactic text, interested in educating women across a wide range of subjects and ready to modify or even submerge ideological considerations in the interest of reaching a wider audience. Central to its message, however, is the unique role of husbands in the lives of their wives and to that extent this book is also addressed to men: "Our purpose," Dhirendranath writes,

is to give advice to wives, but we must also say one or two things to their husbands.
We ask them to read this little book of ours with care. If, they do, they will understand how it is essential for them to proceed.

(Pal 1884b, ii)

This education was to be of a special and separate kind. "Womenfolk have one task in this world," Dhirendranath wrote in the introduction to his text, "men another. So there is no possibility that a single type of education for both will produce anything but harm" (Pal 1884b, 1). Education, however, is equally central to the companionate marriage this author imagines existing between husband and wife. Women need education, he argued, to enable friendship to develop between husbands and wives. "If the husband is a *pundit* and the wife a dunce, when would it ever be possible for friendship to develop between them?" (Pal 1884b, 146–47). In the interest of this relationship and to create a fully developed human being, Dhirendranath wanted husbands to give their wives an education that was "not merely . . . all those things which are essential for a woman when she lives in a family" but that also would make her

a learned and cultured woman, a woman who is devoted to *dharmā* and one who is worthy to be called a true wife.

(Pal 1884b, i)

It was as a detailed explication of this "separate" yet complete type of education that Dhirendranath imagined his manual. It would present subjects "really essential for women to learn," he promised in the preface, in simple and easy to understand language. *Strir sahit kathopakathan's* content ranged from the relatively abstract discussions on "the relationship of a husband and a wife" and "the races of men and women" to much more specific and practical matters. To encourage women's interest in studying and learning, Dhirendranath retells the story of *Savitri* and the tales of three exemplary women—Padmini, Chand Bibi, and the Rani of Jhansi. "If you hear about these women's lives," the husband asks, "won't you want to be like them?" (Pal 1884b, 49). Dhirendranath's chapters cover numerous issues of daily life: letter writing, hygiene and health, nursing and medicine, child rearing and housework. "Rules for Domestic Life" and "Housewifery" discuss the importance of frugality and

order in running a family and offer a specific method for keeping household accounts: (“It’s very necessary to know how to do all this,” says the husband, “One really should keep an account of expenses on a daily basis. . . .” (Pal 1884b, 79). Chapters on nursing and medicine review the use of some foreign medical implements—a ‘syringe’ is one—as well as a large number of homeopathic medicines. (Inexpensive, the author says, easy to learn and safe.)

Little is left to chance. “The Care of Body and Mind” covers every aspect of diet, sleep, and cleanliness, including what time to go to bed, when to get up, how often to bathe, what to clean one’s teeth with. “How many times a day do you have a bowel movement?” the husband asks. “It’s necessary to be precise about the time of your bowel movements,” he continues over the wife’s protests,

If you’re not, it can often times cause you great difficulty. Suppose you’re going on a railway train and just at that moment you have to move your bowels—what a fearful business it becomes.

(Pal 1884b, 57)

Only in the area of cooking does this manual admit defeat. “Will you teach me to cook?” asks the wife.

HUSBAND: Everything is a joke to you.

WIFE: Was I joking?!

HUSBAND: Can *I* teach you to cook? What is there to teach about cooking? You can learn everything about cooking by watching and cooking yourself . . . you’ll follow Mother around and see how she does the housework. You’ll watch the cooking with her and you’ll learn how to cook.

(Pal 1884b, 65)

Husband and Wife: The Companionate Marriage

The second chapter of Dhirendranath’s book takes up the subject of “The Relationship of Husband and Wife.” This is the only family relationship to which Dhirendranath devotes an entire chapter and the only relationship explicated in detail in his manual. Husband and wife, Dhirendranath says, have four relationships:

First, the ‘partnership’ relationship, second the ‘wife’ relationship, third the ‘confidant’ relationship, and fourth the ‘metaphysical’ relationship.¹⁶

As ‘partners,’ husband and wife must work together to keep the family going. “Let’s first see,” says the husband,

what training the wife needs to be a ‘partner’. Almost everything a woman needs to know for family life comes from this relationship.

(Pal 1884b, 18)

In the “wife” relationship the couple has children. “People say this is a relationship which should be kept very secret and hidden,” says the husband. “But should we feel that way about the relationship which results in our birth?” (Pal 1884b, 19). As

¹⁶The Bengali terms Dhirendranath uses are *aṅgī* (“partner”); *stṛī* (“wife”); *sakhā* (“confidant”); *ādhyātmika* (“metaphysical”) (Pal 1884b, 11).

'confidants,' husband and wife become each other's friends and soul mates. "That kind of friendship is essential between a husband and wife," says the husband.

All of us wish in our hearts for someone who'll be our 'kindred spirit' our 'soul mate'.
If we don't get such a person, we suffer enormously in silence.

(Pal 1884b, 20)

Finally, in the "metaphysical" relationship, a spiritual bond ensures that husband and wife are never again separated, not even by death.

Through *this* relationship the husband is the wife's teacher, her god; the wife is the companion who gives the husband happiness, the goddess who makes his heart full.

(Pal 1884b, 27)

The heart of the couple's relationship is the companionate marriage. Husband and wife work together as partners to run the affairs of the household. They are everything to each other: partners, friends, lovers, and soulmates. The husband works outside to earn money for the family; the wife works in the home to make it a peaceful and happy place. All aspects of family life are subsumed under this relationship. Foreign notions of romantic love and companionate marriage were widely discussed and debated in late-nineteenth-century Bengal, and the more dyadic relationships these ideas implied—with their emphasis on what one author calls "the love affairs of husband and wife"—were often seen as a threat to family stability (Gupta 1885, preface; Borthwick 1984, 114–40). We have seen the way romantic love is treated in *Griha lakshmi*, a manual that flirts with the idea of romantic love but ultimately reasserts the authority of *dharma*. But in Dhirendranath's manual, the companionate marriage is imagined with no fear; its destructive capabilities and romantic love's potential for destabilizing family loyalties are dispersed and buried within the multiple contexts of a wife's relationship with her husband.

Dhirendranath does not so much reject the larger family context as subsume its roles and relationships within the four relationships of husband and wife. Thus household work and family responsibilities become part of the "partnership" relation. "Almost all the things a woman needs to know for family life," says the husband,

comes from this relationship. I'll go over them one by one. First, spending money according to a good policy, second, behaving well with people, third, keeping the house orderly and learning how to do the housework, fourth making the husband happy. Fifth—medicine.

(Pal 1884b, 18)

Little else is said about how a wife should get along with her in-laws—just as a daughter speaks to her parents, a daughter-in-law should speak to her in-laws. And if people criticize? "Let them criticize," says the husband (Pal 1884b, 42). As to how a wife should behave with her husband's relatives? "You should do whatever you have to to prevent quarreling or arguing with anyone," says the wife in a chapter on "Housewifery" (Pal 1884b, 87). As the "partnership" relation encapsulates family, the last two relationships—"confidant" and "metaphysical"—provide a context for the recapitulation of older images of devotion and eternal love. To become her husband's 'confidant', a wife must become exactly like her husband,

When neither husband nor wife have any special selfish concerns of their own, they become friends very easily. . . . Do you know how the husband and wife's friendship

grows? By the wife's learning to be like the husband. If she tries to do this, there's no limit to what she can accomplish. Look at *Savitri*—she brought her husband back from the dead, from the house of *Yama* himself. So if a person tried, couldn't she make another person her friend?

(Pal 1884b, 21)

To develop a 'metaphysical' relationship with her husband, the wife must make her husband "her all."

HUSBAND: Who do they call a *sati*?

WIFE: The one for whom the husband is all.

HUSBAND: 'For whom the husband is all'—how many people have a wife like that! That relationship—'for whom the husband is all'—I call that a 'metaphysical' relationship. . . . If this metaphysical relationship does not develop, there is no marriage in the eyes of religion.

(Pal 1884b, 26)

Strir sabit kathopakathan [Conversations with the Wife"] subsumes all family relationships under the multifaceted mantle of the relationship of husband and wife. The denigration of women and elderly female relatives found in other manuals is absent from this one.¹⁷ Far from positing a dyadic husband and wife relationship in *opposition* to the *dharmic* demands of the wider family, this manual makes the husband and wife relationship into the core of the family itself. Since the manual has no extensive discussions of subjects that might disrupt its view—such as a wife's relations with her in-laws—the author can simply assert the compatibility of the older idea of *dharmā* with his own views. "Can you tell me what is necessary not just for life but even after death?" Dhirendranath's husband asks in the context of how the wife can be her husband's "partner" in family life. The answer is *dharmā*.

Dharma is the foundation for everything. . . . If there is no *dharmā*, fame, respect and wealth cannot be won; if there is no *dharmā*, winning happiness is impossible. Consequently, both husband and wife need *dharmā* and both must earn it. It is our work as men to earn wealth, fame and respect and we must learn whatever is needed to do that. It is your work as women to earn happiness and I will gradually instruct you in whatever you need to know for that.

(Pal 1884b, 17)

In this reconstruction of domestic life there is no need to emphasize family *dharmā*. Wives do not owe the extended family their devotion and service in any separate sense in Dhirendranath's conceptualization; rather they serve the extended family only as one part of their relationship to their husbands. After marriage, it is the husband who becomes the wife's teacher, her *guru*, the one who teaches her how to act and behave, the superior authority. And where his advice contradicts that of "others," Dhirendranath echoes many manuals when he suggests whose advice should have the greater weight. "Don't be so shy during the day," says husband in an effort to convince the wife to speak freely with him during the day,

If they criticize you, let them—let it go. If people criticize you for doing something good, just let them

(Pal 1884b, 28)

¹⁷To the extent that elders exist in this book, they are imagined with respect and affection. The chapter on "Housewifery" ends with the mother-in-law summoning the daughter-in-law: "Mother is calling you," says the husband, "Go" (Pal 1884b, 90).

III. Nagendrabala Dasi and *Nari Dharma*

Reading these texts, one wonders what the women for whom they were written thought of them, what they learned from them. Nagendrabala Dasi's *Nari dharma* ("Woman's *Dharma*"), a manual of advice from 1900, suggests some answers to this question, although it raises a number of new questions in the process. Although *Nari dharma* is written within the advice manual genre of the past twenty years, it creates a domestic world that few earlier manual writers would have recognized as their own. Where earlier manuals proposed the husband as the wife's *guru*, *Nari dharma* reaches back into the ideology of old patriarchy to assert the husband as the wife's god. Where earlier manuals extolled the need to save the family from the envy and malice of quarreling women, *Nari dharma* locates the cause of such quarreling in the mother-in-law's "sins" of favoritism and malice and in the general ill-treatment of young wives in their husbands' families and villages. Nagendrabala's manual explicitly identifies itself as Hindu and nationalist and marshals numerous quotes (in Sanskrit) from texts such as the *Laws of Manu* and the *Mahabharata* in support of the old patriarchy it believes it is embracing. Elements of new and old patriarchy combine in a manual whose core is the linked issues of a woman's *dharmic* relation to her husband and the need for an "education in duties" to enable women to fulfill that role. While Nagendrabala's view of domestic relationships is not old patriarchy—given its extensions of the ideas of male manual writers, its explicit use of the language of old patriarchy, and its appeal for old patriarchy's sanction, it is not quite new patriarchy either.

Biography

Because Nagendrabala achieved some fame as a poet, we have more biographical detail on her than for most of the men who authored other manuals in this genre. This information suggests something of the family and personal context from which nineteenth-century Bengali women—or at least this Bengali woman—contemplated women's place in the domestic world. She was born in 1878, the daughter of Nrityagopal Sarkar, a Bengali Kayastha settled in Hooghly District, an area some twenty miles north of Calcutta. At the age of ten she was married to Khagendranath Mitra (Mustaphi) whose family also lived in Hooghly. From the age of thirteen Nagendrabala began to live with her husband's family, but only sporadically; from this time and for the next five years, she is said to have suffered from the pain and symptoms of a form of epilepsy. Because of this, her 1902 biographer states, although she lived "from time to time" with her in-laws, she often traveled with her father, with the idea of getting "a change of air," going on trips as far north as Murshidabad and as far south as Jajpur in Orissa (Ray 1902, 2). Although she had no formal education after her marriage, she is said to have taught herself to read Bengali, English, Sanskrit, and Orissi (Chakraborty 1963, 140). From the age of twelve she wrote poetry and was encouraged to write both prose and poetry by an uncle and, as well, by the editor of the women's magazine *Bamabodhini patrika*, who published a number of her pieces.

Nagendrabala's early life with her husband and in her in-laws' home was not happy. Her 1902 biographer noted that "she has endured many kinds of physical and mental pain" (Ray 1902, 5). He compared the beauty of her poetry to the sweet-

smelling smoke of the *aguru* wood when it is burnt in a fire: the perfume released by the burning flames. "In the world/household/family," he wrote,

every virtuous person has to endure the persecution of malicious and extremely superstitious people to a greater or lesser extent; it was Nagendrabala's fate that she had to endure this persecution to the fullest measure.

(Ray 1902, 6)

Nagendrabala's unhappiness found expression in prose as well as poetry. When she was sixteen and seventeen (1894 and 1895), she wrote two articles for *Bamabodhini patrika* criticizing the customs of child marriage and conditions of life in the *antahpur* [women's quarters]. The first of these, "An Urgent Prayer," questioned how husbands and wives were chosen for each other. "Shouldn't someone see once," she wrote, "the person on whom a weak woman's whole happiness, hope and expectations will depend for her entire life?" (Dasi 1894, 191). In asking that couples be allowed to select their own mates, Nagendrabala emphasized the difficulty of one person choosing for another:

The bride's elders may consider a groom suitable and give her to him, but she may not like him—unknown to all, her heart begins to be reduced to ashes. That's why I say each person's taste is different. Hearts, too, are not of one kind. Another person can not at all in any way understand your own heart as you can. Therefore the couple themselves should be entrusted with the responsibility of testing, before marriage, whether or not each of them can become the object of the other's love.

(Dasi 1894, 192)

She looked forward to the day when women would once again choose their own husbands—as "respectable Aryan ladies" like Savitri and Damayanti had in the past. For from that day, she wrote, "the mutual ill feelings of couples will no longer poison the world" (Dasi 1894, 192). A second article in 1895, "Wretched Conditions in Zenana Confinement," criticized the seclusion in which women were kept from childhood. Living like "caged birds," Nagendrabala wrote, women were unable to develop either their minds or their hearts through education.¹⁸

At some point in her marriage—the 1902 biographer does not give a date but it may have been a little before the turn of the century—Nagendrabala's relationship with her husband improved. A relative of hers, Amarnath Mitra, convinced her husband to convert from the family's traditional Saktoism to Vaisnavism (Ray 1902, 2–3). Exactly what this meant in religious terms is unclear, but the conversion, which involved both husband and wife, was done under the direction of one Nityasakha Mukhopadhyaya, who thereafter became the couple's spiritual advisor. Following the conversion, Nagendrabala's husband took her with him on a tour of pilgrimage sites in Orissa and Bengal. Through their guru's influence, the biographer notes, and "as a result of his good advice" the couple's relationship improved. Indeed, the biographer notes,

their commendable relationship with Mr. Mukhopadhyaya, like the union of precious gems and gold, has brought a new era into their lives.

(Ray 1902, 3)

¹⁸This passage is quoted by two authors from a 1895 article called "Abarodhe binabastha" in the April–May issue of *Bamabodhini patrika*, pp. 30–31 (Bannerji 1995, 86; Murshid 1983, 63).

Nityasakha Mukhopadhyaya also encouraged Nagendrabala's writing. Both she and her biographer tell us that she wrote *Nari dharma* (1900), and a volume of poems, *Braja gatha* ["Poems about Braj"] (1902), under his guidance (Ray 1902, 6–7). In the introduction to *Garbhashtya dharma* ["Household Dharma"], a "supplement" to *Nari dharma* written in 1904, Nagendrabala also recalls that she had composed the earlier book "on the orders of my elders and with their blessings" (Dasi 1904, preface). These elders almost certainly included her husband, for it is he who is listed as *Garbhashtya dharma's* publisher (Dasi 1904, title page).

Both Nagendrabala's poetry and prose received acclaim in her lifetime. She won a prize from the Hare Prize Fund for her second volume of poetry and was awarded the title "Sarasvati" by a literary society for the quality of her writing (Chakraborty 1963, 141). *Nari dharma* sold out as soon as it was published, Nagendrabala tells us, and subsequently it was approved for school libraries (Dasi 1904, preface). Reviews praising *Premagatha* are appended to *Nari dharma*, and tributes to her writing in general to *Garbhashtya dharma*. By the time of her death she had written more than eight volumes of poetry and three of prose. When she died at the age of twenty-eight in 1906, she was survived by her husband and two daughters (Chakraborty 1963, 142).

Advice Literature Reprised

If we can speak of a 'discourse of advice' extant in the last twenty years of Bengal's nineteenth century, then Nagendrabala's 1900 manual, *Nari dharma*, is certainly constructed within that discourse. Its author makes clear her familiarity with advice manual issues and debates; her comments on literacy, love, housework, and cooking often echo those of earlier books. This is especially clear in chapter 3, "General Education," where, in the course of almost sixty pages (more than half this book's length) Nagendrabala surveys the entire manual range: from hygiene to Aryurveda, from 'good order' to cooking, from servants to co-wives and from conjugal love to spiritual life. By chapter's end, we easily agree with her statement that she has discussed "in brief and in a general way, everything essential from the beginning to the end of life" (Dasi 1900, 78).

The key here is "in brief." While "General Education" reviews the subjects that are the staples of advice literature, it skips the detailed instructions on letter-writing, account keeping, and nursing that are so marked a feature of Dhirendranath Pal's manual.¹⁹ This is a manual with a message and a central theme: that a woman's relationship with her husband provides the core for her life, and women need an education that will enable them to fulfill the duties of this relationship. Of the book's five sections—"The Duties of the Race of Women," "The True Wife," "General Education," "Progress or Degradation"—and a conclusion—"Final Comments"—four address this central theme. In the process *Nari dharma* is much bolder than many of its predecessors. "Such thinking is not the result of good sense" Nagendrabala says at one point; "this kind of talk is only the report of a few fools who are ignorant of the heart of the matter," she says at another (Dasi 1900, 1). The pleas, the tact, the discretion of earlier manuals are largely missing from this one, several of whose chapters end with exhortatory messages written boldfaced in extra-large-sized type.

¹⁹The exception is a six-page discussion of empiric and Aryurvedic medicines for children's illnesses that Nagendrabala includes "for the edification of readers" in "General Education" (Dasi 1900, 59–65).

It is no surprise that Nagendrabala chose not to write in dialogue form; this is a lecture, not a discussion.

But if different in style, Nagendrabala, nevertheless, repeats a great deal of advice manual dicta. She agrees that the husband should be the wife's teacher, for, she says, "the advice of he who is loved with one's soul seems the sweetest of all the sweets" (Dasi 1900, 22). She denounces the childishness of romantic love, an idea whose exclusivity and individuality had attracted the ire of other authors. "Many women," she writes,

can be heard to complain "My husband doesn't understand my love, help and worship, so how can I love him?" This kind of talk is very immature. . . . The *husband* is a woman's god. You don't need to concern yourself with whether he does or doesn't love you—you simply do your duty and go!

(Dasi 1900, 3)

With statements such as "Household things should be properly arranged" and "A woman should always take special care that her husband's household is well ordered," she echoes the importance of order and efficiency in domestic life (Dasi 1900, 64, 24). And she joins the universal chorus of advice manual writers in denouncing the reluctance of modern women to do housework and cooking. "Cooking is not only work for the poor, it is the work of every Hindu woman" she writes, to which she adds the reminder that

The king's wife, Draupadi, and the great King Ramcandra's wife, Sita, used to cook with their own hands and feed their loved ones, husbands, sons, guests and visitors
...

(Dasi 1900, 23)

Two aspects of Nagendrabala's advice, however—her comments on education and her remarks about women—deserve closer scrutiny. Nagendrabala shares with the advice genre her sense of the necessity of literacy and the transforming power of education. "Reading and writing," she says, "is not just for 'holding a job'" (Dasi 1900, 52). Without education,

one cannot build a life nor can intelligence blossom. An ignorant person suffers terrible mental anguish at every step of the way and such a person often does great harm to society.

(Dasi 1900, 17)

Therefore everyone, men and women, should receive an education "suitable" to their own field of work. That women's education should be different from men's is as axiomatic for her as it was for earlier writers. (To the suggestion that men and women are equals—"the same"—in God's creation, she has a simple response: "What error!!!" (Dasi 1900, 83). But, unlike earlier writers, for Nagendrabala, education has a specific religious purpose: women should learn to read, she says, so they can study "our own religious texts" (Dasi 1900, 52). It was Manu himself, she points out, who enjoined fathers to educate their daughters "according to the *Shastras*." Women need a religious education to regain the "goddess-like character of ancient Hindu women" (Dasi 1900, 86–87).

What such an education might entail appears briefly in Nagendrabala's chapter on "General Education." Instead of wasting their rest hours on "worthless activities" such as naps, novel reading or gossip, women should dedicate that time to serious reading and reflection (Dasi 1900, 51). Nagendrabala's reading list includes: the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharata* (in Bengali), the life and teachings of the medieval Hindu saint Caitanya, Bhudev Mukhopadhyay's *Parivarik prabandha* ["Essays on the Family"], the books of Chandranath Basu, Shibnath Sastri's novel *Mej Bau* ["Middle Daughter-in-law"], and the novels of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay and Chandranath Basu both emphasized the importance of retaining Hindu social and religious values and practices, important to Nagendrabala, as we shall see. She does not say why she recommends Shibnath Sastri's novel—he was a famous Brahmo, his novel a well-known treatment of family life. But any and all of Bankim's novels are to be recommended, she says, because his works are "seriously educational."

Hidden in them, as in the *Puranas*, lie lessons on subjects very much worth learning.
(Dasi 1900, 52)

Missing entirely from this list is any mention of advice manual literature. Although she uses Dhirendranath Pal's language in several places in her manual, Nagendrabala does not mention his book or any other advice manual at any point in her text.

New patriarchal manuals had (discreetly) posed their own advice as a counter to the superstitious customs of elderly ladies in family and neighborhood. Nagendrabala also has a lot to say on the subject of "womenfolk," but she has no difficulty saying what she wants in language that is clear and unambiguous. This is most true of her discussions of the mother-in-law, as we will see, but there are other places in *Nari dharma* where the author speaks her mind. Thus, a discussion of the envious nature of village women becomes a denunciation of the mistreatment of young wives (Dasi 1900, 43–44). Similarly, the idea that a girl needs to be devoted to her in-laws metamorphoses into a description of the mistreatment of young girls in their husbands' homes:

If a bird is caught and brought from the forest, first it must be nurtured with care and affection, after that it becomes tame. If you separate an unknown, foolish, little girl from her own relatives and bring her home but you do not show her the proper care and affection, why would she become attached to you?

(Dasi 1900, 16–17)

Where earlier manuals attributed family problems to "women as a race," "people," "them," or anonymous village aunts, Nagendrabala's manual names names and points the finger of blame. Where male-authored manuals distribute the responsibility for family quarrels judiciously among *all* women in the household, this woman's manual leaves us in no doubt as to who the real villains are.

The Glories of Aryan Womanhood

Nagendrabala identifies her manual—and woman's *dharma* itself—with the patriarchy of an ancient Aryan tradition she believes can be found in what she calls "the *Shastras*," by which she means primarily the Sanskrit texts of the Hindu tradition. To reinforce her claims to this heritage, she quotes generously from these texts even as she asserts women's "dependence" on their husbands and their obligation to devote

themselves exclusively to their husband's good. In "General Education," Nagendrabala restates the theme of woman's *dharmā*:

Earlier we said that serving the husband is a Hindu woman's highest *dharmā*. The woman who serves her husband single-mindedly, whose husband is her one and only refuge—she is a true wife.

(Dasi 1900, 55)

Turning to consider the concept of women's "independence," she rejects it completely:

Adopting independence is dangerous for women as a race, for on their own women are weak. . . . Dependence is the duty of a woman's life.

(Dasi 1900, 57)

"The Hindu *Shāstras*," she points out, "also agree with this." A passage from the *Mahanirbana tantra* (a Tantric Hindu text) then follows, which Nagendrabala translates thus:

That is to say, in girlhood on the father, in youth on the husband, in old age on the son or husband, (a woman) should always be dependent on those who wish her well.

(Dasi 1900, 57)

In ninety pages of text, Nagendrabala uses more than thirty quotations to link her "woman's *dharmā*" to what she believes is the old patriarchy of the Hindu textual tradition. More than twenty of these passages are given in Sanskrit (written in Bengali script), followed by a paraphrase of their meaning. The textual authority Nagendrabala wishes to claim might be roughly defined by the sources she cites: the *Laws of Manu*, five times; the *Mahabharata*, four times; the *Mahanirbana tantra*, three times; the *Bhagavadgīta*, twice; *Shakuntala*, the *Parasara sambhita*, and the *Ramayana*, each once. Seven Sanskrit passages are identified only as "the *Shāstras*."²⁰ In addition, Nagendrabala quotes in Bengali from a modern translation of *Kashikbanda* (a Puranic text), from the medieval saints Caitanya and Mirabai, and from the *Lakṣmi caritra* (a *brata* text).²¹ And she retells, in various contexts, stories about the inspiring examples of "goddesses such as Sita, Savitri and Damayanti," the fame of ancient women such as Maitreyi, Gargi, and Lilabati, and the historical importance of Mirabai, the wife of Prithvi Raj, and "countless Rajput ladies" (Dasi 1900, 13, 84–85).

Would we recognize Nagendrabala's "woman's *dharmā*" as old patriarchy if she herself did not tell us so often it was, if she did not dress her ideas in all these Sanskrit quotations and traditional referents? One wonders. While her statements on devotion to the husband are drawn (more or less) directly from older texts, her explication of the relationship between husband and wife owes more (as we will see) to Dhirendranath Pal than to Manu. Her allusions to women of the past are often marshaled in support of contemporary issues, nor have these allusions sprung on their

²⁰For *Laws of Manu*, see Dasi 1900, 2, 4, 30, 82, 87; for the *Mahabharata*, see Dasi 1900, 2, 18, 71; for the *Mahanirbana Tantra*, see Dasi 1900, 55, 57; for the *Bhagavadgīta*, see Dasi 1900, 71, 75–76; for *Shakuntala*, the *Parasara sambhita*, and the *Ramayana*, see Dasi 1900, 68, 71, 80). For the seven other Sanskrit passages, see Dasi 1900, 12, 27, 29, 35, 48, 56, 78.

²¹See Dasi 1900, 4–6, 51, 14, 49. She also quotes two Bengali proverbs, two or three passages of Bengali poetry (one is from Navin Candra Sen), three passages from Bankim Candra Chatterji, and one from a gentleman identified only as "a great Englishman". See Dasi 1900, 15, 16, 13, 21, 28, 29, 31, 43, 54.

own unaided from the patriarchal tradition. “Who does not know,” Nagendrabala writes, “the name of Princes Mirabai!” (Dasi 1900, 88). Who, indeed. As Uma Chakravati has shown, texts such as the *Mahanirbana tantra* and historical figures such as Maitreyi, Gargi, and Lilabati were known in Nagendrabala’s day because of nineteenth-century efforts to reconstruct India’s past and to identify in ancient records a history that would be congenial to contemporary sensibilities.²²

Watching Nagendrabala pick her way through the Sanskrit texts she references, it is apparent that while not consciously rewriting them, she is putting her own gloss on what she finds. “The father is *dharmā*, the father is *svarg* [“heaven”], she quotes, using Manu’s demand for patrilineal loyalty—a son’s to a father—to identify the *dharmā* that women owe their parents (Dasi 1900, 55). What does that mean, then, for the daughter-in-law who steals from her in-laws to help those same parents? Very “improper and hateful” Nagendrabala says, repeating an advice manual axiom, but then adding, as no male manual writer ever had, that

if the father and mother have fallen into destitution and if the husband approves,
women as a race can aid them as far as they are able.

(Dasi 1900, 56)

If the *husband* approves—not the *ginni*, not the *karta*, not any other member of the in-laws’ family. From Nagendrabala’s perspective this is a logical extension of the authority a husband has over his wife. It was not an extension that had occurred to any male manual author. And why—to pick a second small point—does Nagendrabala choose the *Mahanirbana tantra* over Manu for her passage on women’s need for dependence? Here is Manu again:

Her father guards her in childhood, her husband guards her in youth, and her sons
guard her in old age. A woman is not fit for independence.

(Manu 1991, 115, 196)

Nagendrabala does not at all disagree with this. She is making precisely the same point: that women must be dependent. “If [women] accept independence,” she says, “they only drown in a bottomless pit of wantonness” (Dasi 1900, 57). Yet she chooses this in Manu’s place:

. . . in girlhood on the father, in youth on the husband, in old age on the son or
husband, [a woman] should always be dependent on those who wish her well.

(Dasi 1900, 57)

Is the Manu passage unavailable to her? Perhaps, still I prefer to believe that the passage she chooses is simply more congenial—one’s need to depend on friends and well-wishers being more appealing than Manu’s harsher assertion.

Such small revisionary moves, however, are hardly the issue. For Nagendrabala’s commitment to literacy and education has already and all on its own separated her and her text irrevocably from the older patriarchal tradition. By the time she wrote this manual, Nagendrabala had published two volumes of poetry and had several more in manuscript form. Her articles had been published in women’s magazines, and her

²²To give just two examples, Chakravati identifies Peary Chand Mitra’s writings as one source for information about the *Mahanirbana tantra*, Kalidasa, and Lilabati; and the nationalist acceptance of Mrs. Speier’s text as a source for the stories of Maitreyi, Gargi, Savitri, and Damayanti (Chakravati 1990, cf 38, 43–44).

poetry had been reviewed and praised in both the Bengali and the English press. Her commitment to literacy was complete, and she herself was aware of the degree to which this made her reassertion of older values problematic. Neither claims on the old values of the *pativrata* nor extensive referencing of the Sanskritic tradition could obscure the fact that, as she herself acknowledged, “many people say that in ancient times women’s education did not exist” (Dasi 1900, 17).

She cannot concede this point, but neither does she debate it. Rather, she argues that there was in the past a “special kind” of education for women, one which, nevertheless, allowed them to participate fully in society. “Whether in the field of government, on the battlefield or in household duty (*dharma*),” she writes,

the women of ancient times used to contribute as necessary both their own expertise in work and the heavenly feelings of a woman’s heart.

(Dasi 1900, 17)

Only in the more recent past, she insists, were women denied education and because of this their condition became degraded. In fact, she notes almost in passing, it is women’s lack of education in recent years that allowed “the mother-in-law’s undue exploitation of the daughter-in-law” to begin (Dasi 1900, 17).

Fundamental to Nagendrabala’s understanding of the traditions she is embracing is the idea of an ancient Aryan culture, free of the encrustations of modern superstitions and customs. This idea, implicit in earlier advice manuals and a commonplace in nineteenth-century discourse on social reform, enables Nagendrabala’s assertion that she is returning to the old Sanskritic tradition. That is the point of origin for her woman’s *dharma*—a glorious past of ancient India that had, for her, two defining features: it empowered women’s devotion to their husbands and it encouraged women’s education. It is this ancient tradition that produced (as Nagendrabala says in large, bold-faced type) “the goddess-like character of ancient Hindu woman.” It is this ancient tradition—from our perspective not quite old patriarchy and yet not new patriarchy either—to which she wishes to return.

Husband and Wife: The True Wife

While any of a number of advice manuals might have informed Nagendrabala’s general discussions in *Nari dharma*, only one could have been her source for the terms she uses to describe the four relationships of husband and wife. “A wife has four different relationships with her husband,” she writes in a passage that uses the same Bengali words as Dhirendranath Pal for three of the four relationships:

. . . The first relationship a wife has with her husband is that of a “partner”; the second is that of a “wife”; the third an “intimate friend” and the fourth is the “metaphysical” relationship.²³

Nagendrabala focuses, as Dhirendranath had, on the relationship of husband and wife. This relationship is the organizational center of her text; the chapter in which

²³Nagendrabala’s Bengali terms are: *aṅgī* (“partner”); *strī* (“wife”); *sauhṛdaya* (“intimate friend”); *ādhyātmika* (“metaphysical”). This compares with the Bengali terms Pal uses: *aṅgī* (“partner”); *strī* (“wife”); *sakhā* (“confidant”); *ādhyātmika* (“metaphysical”) (Dasi 1900, 11; Pal 1884b, 11). No other manual uses these terms, although Dhirendranath himself repeated them in *Songini* (written the same year as *Strir sabit kathopakathan*) and the anonymous author of *Ramani aisarya* (1900) included them within long quotes from *Songini*.

she explicates it is chapter 2, “The True Wife.” Here Nagendrabala uses both Dhirendranath’s new patriarchal terms and concepts and the old patriarchal language of the *pativrata*, to express the idea at the heart of her text: that the *dharmā* of women, the central purpose and meaning of their lives, is their devotion to their husbands. “In this world,” she writes,

the responsibility for our own husband has been placed in the hand of each one of us women. The task that is our duty is to make him happy and to work strenuously to achieve his well being. Is it a small responsibility to add responsibility for another life to our own little lives or an easy task to keep a constant watch for the peace and happiness of another person? Still, be it a hard task or an easy one, it is our essential duty.

(Dasi 1900, 7)

Women must watch over their husbands and work to ensure the happiness of their lives. A wife’s relationship to her husband, however, is not just a human relationship. Her husband is a woman’s god, says Nagendrabala.

The husband is the god a woman adores; therefore it is her duty to place her selfless love as an offering at his feet. Where the gods of Heaven are beyond human sight, the husband is a visible god.

(Dasi 1900, 8–9)

By devoting herself to her husband’s care and worship woman fulfills the purpose of her life: “Remember how the glory of Aryan women is linked to their love for their husbands and your soul will thrill with delight!” writes Nagendrabala,

You will want to throw yourself at their feet and worship them as goddesses! The true wife of this world *is* a goddess. Come Sisters! Let us also try to fulfill our life’s purpose by gaining a place at their side.

(Dasi 1900, 14)

Nagendrabala uses Dhirendranath Pal’s terms and definitions; she accepts his reformulation of a husband and wife’s relationship as the core relationship of family life but redefines the quality of that relationship to create something fundamentally different. For Dhirendranath the core of the husband/wife relationship was a companionate marriage. Through this relationship a woman cared for her family, created children, had deep friendship, and found happiness in the afterlife and for eternity. As their husband’s “helpmeet,” women brought comfort, happiness, and tranquility to their husbands’ lives. At the heart of the relationship Dhirendranath imagined was the friendship and “sameness” of husband and wife; each was to be the other’s “all.” Unquestionably, the husband would be the authority within this relationship and *one* aspect of it was the wife’s devotion to him. But the quality of the relationship would be defined by friendship and companionship. Husband and wife together would devote themselves to all the needs of their domestic world. Children, relatives, animals, *dharmā*—the whole panoply of domestic life—all were part of their world and would require the wife’s care and attention.

Nagendrabala accepts this definition to the extent that she also wants the husband and wife’s relationship to be the heart of domestic life. But this “heart” is defined not by companionship but by devotion and subordination.

Human beings can surrender themselves at the feet of an invisible god but we are so weak we cannot dedicate ourselves at the feet of our husband, a god whom we can

see! If we cannot do even *that*, what is the point of spending our lives so uselessly! A woman unable to bestow her whole hearted love on her own husband will never be able to love anything in the world.

(Dasi 1900, 14)

As devotion replaces friendship as the dominant mode of this relationship, almost nothing but the husband remains in the wife's moral and ethical universe. Family obligations and relationships are important to her only if they are important to her husband. It is this relationship, her relationship with her husband, that is paramount:

Women usually think of the husband . . . as if he were a relative. But, in general, the love given to the husband because he is thought to be the same as a blood relative can not be considered true love. And a woman can never become a true wife by offering her husband that kind of love. Only the woman who has been able to think of her husband as her "All" is a true wife.

(Dasi 1900, 11)

Conjugal love (the *bhalobhasa* of nineteenth-century discourse) lies at the heart of this husband/wife relationship; it is created by the conditions of child marriage and nurtured by the strength of the wife's dedication to her *dharmā*. Dhirendranath's husband and wife would be each other's "all" in the context of a spiritual and intimate friendship, the companionship and love of a couple who have become "the same." In contrast, through remarks such as "a woman should always be of one mind with her husband," or "you should serve your husband like a servant," or "a woman should never be insolent" and innumerable others, *Nari dharmā* celebrates the wife's subordination to her husband in language that is strong and unambiguous. The common advice manual trope of the wife as a kind of coeval ruler of the domestic world—the queen of the household—has been replaced here by the image of the wife as her husband's servant. Domestic life and the whole of a woman's relationship with her husband have been narrowed into a simple, central dictum: "The husband is a woman's only god and serving him her highest *dharmā*."

The Mother-in-Law's Sins

Missing from *Nari dharmā* (as it was from Dhirendranath's text) is the older Hindu orthodoxy that demanded the subordination of all individual relationships to the needs and demands of the family. In a traditional Hindu text, this would have been the very meaning of the word *dharmā*, a term whose meaning has been narrowed and constricted in Nagendrabala's text. Even in Dhirendranath's manual, *dharmā* is used to imply obligations that extend beyond husband and wife alone. But in Nagendrabala's reformulation a woman's *dharmā* is defined so exclusively by her husband that her obligations to and relations with her in-laws almost seem to disappear.

Almost—but not entirely. Nagendrabala's greater emphasis on a wife's devotion to her husband allows her to diminish the devotion this same wife owes elsewhere in the family: that is, to the mother-in-law. An interesting theme in *Nari dharmā* is the way its author uses the reconfiguration of the husband and wife relationship to make space for this new critique. The first eight pages of "The True Wife" define the devotion a wife owes to her husband; the last five pages describe the problems caused

in the family by the mother-in-law.²⁴ Beginning with the much-repeated idea that a daughter-in-law should be as devoted to her father- and mother-in-law as to her own parents, and commenting that unfortunately in modern times many joint families are destroyed by the inability of mothers-in-law and daughters-in-law to get along, Nagendrabala then opens a long critique of mothers-in-law. She starts with a statement about the essential truth to be found in proverbs and moves on to a proverb in which “the selfishness of the mother-in-law is clearly and brilliantly revealed”:

The daughter-in-law broke a small clay pot; the news spread from one to another;
The *ginni* broke an earthen vat—“*bey*, it’s nothing, brother!”²⁵

If the mother-in-law’s favoritism is unchecked, Nagendrabala writes,

... over time the golden family will be reduced to ashes. It is most essential for the mistress of the house to watch out for anything that might cause strife in the family or encourage disharmony. In the final analysis if she is not noble hearted and impartial, there is more reason to fear that the family will come to harm.

(Dasi 1900, 16)

In *Griha lakshmi*, the exclusive love relationship of husband and wife and their rejection of *dharmā* threatened to destroy both the couple and the larger family as well. That manual imagined a family reduced to ashes while husband and wife live out their lives in terrible isolation. Nagendrabala has a different point of view. In her *dharmic* universe, a wife’s devotion to her husband could never threaten the family. Only the mother-in-law’s selfishness, pettiness, and favoritism can do that. And, Nagendrabala tells us, there is even a proverb about that:

It’s the *ginni*’s sins that destroy the home.

(Dasi 1900, 16)

Nagendrabala problematizes women’s relations with the extended family and challenges the authority of family elders in ways only hinted at in earlier (male-authored) advice manuals. The new patriarchy of earlier manuals was conflicted in its portrait of extended family life. While certain that husbands should have ultimate authority over wives within families and convinced that the customs and practices of elderly female relatives needed reform, manual reformulations of domestic life refused to acknowledge the degree to which their new patriarchy contravened the family hierarchy sanctioned in older patriarchal traditions. While a Brahma like Dhirendranath Pal might solve the dilemma through an image of family life that was, at its core, nuclear and dyadic, the more common advice manual resolution combined an assertion of the need for family harmony with the insistence that if only women would stop their quarreling harmony could be achieved. Nagendrabala’s text, however, shares in neither the conflict nor its resolutions. It is her unhesitating acceptance of new patriarchy’s shift of authority to the husband which allows the beginnings of her

²⁴A further discussion of mothers-in-laws and extended family life occurs in “General Education,” with a long discussion of the importance of impartiality in family life and a number of critical comparisons of the difference between a mother-in-law’s treatment of her daughters-in-law and of her own daughters (Dasi 1900, 36–42).

²⁵More literally, “The *bau* broke a small bowl and the news is in every neighborhood. The *ginni* broke a huge jar, oh that’s nothing *dada*.” *Ginni* referred to the female head of the household and was a shortened form of *gribini*, a term frequently used for ‘housewife’ in advice manuals. Nagendrabala is using these two terms—*ginni* (“housewife”) and *svasuri* (“mother-in-law”) interchangeably in this discussion (Dasi 1900, 15).

defection from the family hierarchy sanctioned by old patriarchy. Wedding the old patriarchy's discourse of the *pativrata* to that new patriarchy's reformulations of domestic hierarchy, her text questions the dominion of family elders and gives unequivocal sanction only to the authority of the husband, "a woman's only visible god."

Whose Patriarchy Is This?

It is interesting to compare Nagendrabala's use of Dhirendranath Pal's language and concepts—completely unacknowledged—with the sources she does acknowledge in her manual. These are the texts of the old patriarchal Sanskrit tradition, and they are well represented in *Nari dharma* through quotes from Manu, the *Mahabharata*, and so forth. Yet poor Dhirendranath Pal, whose ideas on love and family are also reproduced in *Nari dharma*, receives no acknowledgment whatsoever in this text.

Why would Nagendrabala recognize Manu et al. but not Dhirendranath Pal? Perhaps to the more nationalized consciousness of the 1900s, the old Brahmo's text with its dedication to Keshub Sen's daughter was showing its age, or perhaps Dhirendranath's Brahmo sensibilities had no appeal to Nagendrabala's new Vaishnavite guru. These factors may well have played their part, but surely another explanation is equally obvious. Nagendrabala acknowledges Manu and company and not the earlier advice manuals because her manual was to be set not within the newer reform traditions of the nineteenth century but within the old patriarchal traditions of the past. The educated woman of her domestic world was to claim her ancestry from the old traditions of *pativrata* and *sati*. She was to be in a direct line of ancient Aryan heroines—Maitreyi, Sita, Savitri, Damayanti, and so forth, all of whom are mentioned in this text. Her *dharma*, as theirs, was to be defined by her devotion to her husband, sanctified as virtuous by centuries of patriarchal scriptures from the ancient Sanskrit texts to the current *bratakathas* of the day. To the extent that the *dharma* Nagendrabala recommends has any ancestry other than this, she does not wish to recognize it and she does not, in fact, acknowledge it within her text.

But how are we to consider *Nari dharma*? Surely it is not "old patriarchy." Leaving aside its enthusiasm for women's literacy and education, *Nari dharma* is marked in many ways with the new patriarchal vocabulary of efficiency, order, and cleanliness. Its participation in advice manual discourse is apparent throughout its "General Education" chapter, much of which closely follows both the language and the ideas of earlier manuals. In its reconceptualization of women's role in their homes—tutored by husbands and under their guidance, not the in-laws'—indeed, in its imaginative view of women as active and important participants in their own society, this manual declares its own participation in a reform discourse that had spanned the past twenty years.

Yet *Nari dharma* is not new patriarchy either. However much Nagendrabala may have borrowed from Dhirendranath Pal, she did not get her devotional eulogies from him. For these she had another source—the old patriarchal language of *pativrata* and *sati*—and this also marks her manual. Nor, for that matter, did Nagendrabala find her criticisms of the mother-in-law in Dhirendranath Pal's (or any other male-authored) manual. *Nari dharma* conceives of a domestic world ruled by husband and wife, where mothers-in-law appear only to behave badly and to threaten family solidarity, peace, and harmony. But while *Strir sabit kathopakathan* ["Conversations with the Wife"] also imagined a more dyadic domestic world—nothing in that manual could be taken to have sanctioned the hostility towards or criticism of family

elders and in-laws in *Nari dharma*. For that strand of Nagendrabala's work we would have to look elsewhere, outside the written patriarchal traditions (old or new) of Bengali life to the world of women's proverbs, songs, and sayings (Raheja 1994). This is a tradition that Nagendrabala herself explicitly recognizes and uses in her manual. Interestingly, she is more willing to acknowledge *that* source for her own domestic views than she is to acknowledge the works of Dhirendranath Pal or the other manual writers of the past.

In Defense of Hinduism and the Nation

In the concluding section of *Nari dharma*, Nagendrabala returns to the theme of modern education—or as she sees it modern mis-education. Let us return there with her, for in her union of the patriarchal traditions with a defense of Hinduism and nationalism in this last section of her book, we can watch as older nineteenth-century concerns transform themselves into those of the twentieth century.

According to Nagendrabala, it was modern education—education, that is, that taught a language or that led only to academic degrees—that had brought about the degraded conditions of women in modern times. Only an “education for duties,” similar to the education women in the ancient past received, would allow for women's progress in the future. Where ancient Aryan women had been devoted to their husbands, today modern women ignored theirs. “Ancient women used to act like goddesses in serving their husbands,” Nagendrabala writes,

When they saw their husbands coming from afar, they used to greet them; only after having drunk the water in which their husband's feet had been washed, did they themselves take any food.

And now? she asks,

The husband comes home having pushed the pen from ten to five and wants to rest and have something to eat; the housewife, without listening to what he says, turns on the harmonium and begins to practice the last section of the piece on which she is working.

(Dasi 1900, 89)

Although in 1894 and 1895 Nagendrabala had criticized Hindu social customs in “An Urgent Prayer” and “Wretched Conditions in Zenana Confinement,” by the time she came to write *Nari dharma* she had changed her mind. In chapter 4, “Progress or Degradation,” Nagendrabala defends conditions in the *zenana*, or women's quarters. “Was our condition like that of a prisoner shut in a jail?” Nagendrabala asks (appearing to forget that she had once suggested it was),

Was the *antahpur* a fearful place like a prison! That we are men's dependent slaves or that the state of Hindu women is so grievous—this kind of talk is only the report of a few fools who are ignorant of the heart of the matter and only see the surface.

(Dasi 1900, 83)

On the contrary, she insists, in the past a woman could live in seclusion and still exercise “with one word” her authority over everything—“be it the business of society, the ordinary work of the household or the serious work of politics” (Dasi 1900, 83). In the same way, although she had earlier pleaded for couples to be allowed to choose their own mates, Nagendrabala now argues passionately for the maintenance of child

marriage and against allowing girls or boys self-choice. “Child marriage is the root of devotion to the husband,” she says in the course of this argument. “Child marriage is especially conducive to conjugal love” (Dasi 1900, 80, 82). While “youth marriage” may at first glance seem appealing, she says, on further inspection it will be found to raise false expectations and to lead to hurt feelings, bitterness, and mistakes in judgment. The ancient *rishis*—whose “intelligence was keener than yours or mine”—invented this custom; for Nagendrabala, this is reason enough to let it be.

Why does Nagendrabala change her mind on these issues between the mid-1890s and 1900? In the light of biographical information, we might read these shifts as reflecting altered conditions and influences on her life—the “brahmo” influence of the *Bamabodhini patrika* editor giving way to the teachings of her Vaishnavite guru, an unhappy marriage relationship taking a more positive turn. But we might also want to set these changes into the wider social context. For Nagendrabala is not the only turn-of-the-century “nationalist” (or *Brahmo*, for that matter) to make the rhetorical move from an insistence on social reform to the defense of Hinduism and the “nation.” And that is the direction in which she definitely moves in the conclusion of *Nari dharma*, where the multiple themes of education, nationalism, and Hinduism come together in the course of a denunciation of the conditions of modern women. It is Nagendrabala’s belief that the cause of modern women’s “degradation” may be found in their society’s abandonment of Hinduism and its ancestral “rules and customs”—here specifically identified by Nagendrabala with nationalism (*jatiyata*). “The day that Indian offspring learned to sacrifice their own deep devotion to religion and abandon their own nationalism was the beginning of the present dilapidated state of things in India,” she writes:

The fault is not in learning a language, the fault is in abandoning the nation. Even if one learns English, ancestral customs and rules have to be carried on—who said that one had to deny the *Shastras*! One hears the claim that Sanskrit is studied a lot in Germany and that there are good teachers of the Sanskrit *Shastras* among the Germans. But are German Sanskritists going to wander about, without a hat and coat, wearing tree bark and eating nothing but boiled rice and *ghee*? Really the customs and rules of one society are not suitable to another. The kind of human progress that takes place when one’s own religious rules are cultivated and studied, does not take place by any other means at all. But we have now forgotten this completely.

(Dasi 1900, 88)

The prefiguring of nationalism in earlier manuals is fully realized in *Nari dharma*. Nagendrabala’s manual moves beyond the manuals of the 1880s, which located the degradation of women in the superstitious customs of elderly female relatives. Although she is almost equally critical of the malice and envy of women and of “modern educated women” who have lost their femininity and no longer care to look after their husbands, she now locates the “degradation” of all women in the abandonment of Hinduism and the customs and rules of the nation. With *Nari dharma*, then, we have turned the corner from nineteenth-century worries about the “women’s question” and entered the twentieth-century world of a fully articulated discourse on nationalism.

Conclusion: What Women Learned When Men Gave Them Advice

What did women learn when men gave them advice? *Nari dharma* echoes the anomaly I described earlier in the life stories of Bengali women from this period. This

text sanctions subordination and devotion to the husband in the strongest terms, yet, it is not itself very subordinate (or even devotional). Just as many late-nineteenth-century Bengali women proclaimed their subordination to their husbands as gods while living lives marked by heroism, energy, and courage, so *Nari dharma* proclaims its ideology of submission in language that is strong, active, and aggressive:

People say: "Women are weak and dependent. They rely on others for *everything*. So how can they be responsible for anything? . . ." This kind of thinking is not the result of good sense. God would *never* have created their race if women were to have no duty or purpose in their lives.

(Dasi 1900, 1)

That we are men's dependent slaves or that the state of Hindu women is so grievous—this kind of talk is only the report of a few fools who are ignorant of the heart of the matter and see only the surface.

(Dasi 1900, 83)

Setting aside for the moment the text's ideology, to read this text as abject and subjugated is, on some level, absurd.

Yet we cannot set aside the text's ideology, anymore than we ought to set aside its demeanor. They are what this manual is, bound together—in the same way that narratives of many nineteenth-century Bengali women's lives bind together deeds of action with assertions of devotion and subordination. Others have suggested that we understand these professions of devotion as false consciousness, aesthetic survivals, or as an affection for "feminine virtues." I hope that my delineation of Nagendrabala's manual has made clear why I find none of these explanations satisfying: for me they fail to capture the combination of strengths characteristic of Nagendrabala's manual, strength in her statements of subordination and devotion, strength in her articulation of these statements.

I do see a certain agency at work in Nagendrabala's *Nari dharma* (and by extension in the lives and writings of her devotionally minded women contemporaries). There was a choice available to some late-nineteenth-century Bengali women; a space opened up between two patriarchal alternatives—old and new—competing for their loyalties. For a certain period young women were offered a choice (to put it crudely) between their husbands and their mothers-in-law. Not a very difficult choice, given the dynamics of extended family life in Bengal or the traditions of love and romance that both the Bengali and Sanskritic tradition have long attached to the relations of husband and wife. That *we* see the choice these women made as a foregone conclusion, however, should not lead us to think nineteenth-century women or men saw it that way. Advice manuals show us how uncertain male authors were about how women would choose and how, in various ways, they attempted to encourage women, as it were, to "do the right thing."

The fact of a choice for (some, young, *bhadralok*) women is quite evident in this period, but how we interpret what women did with this choice is still very much a question. For me, it is significant that Nagendrabala does not simply rewrite Dhirendranath Pal's manual as her own; that she reaches back to an earlier tradition for themes of conjugal love and undying devotion (and subordination) and weds these to the more companionate relationship Dhirendranath's manual offers. In this, it seems to me, she does attempt to reshape her own life context to reflect something closer and more congenial to her own sensibilities than either of the two patriarchal traditions she has to draw on. That this reshaping is done only within very specific and limited contingencies is true. But it is also true—or at least so I would argue—

that neither does she become exactly the woman that either patriarchal tradition sanctions. She chooses her own path—or, more accurately, she does not quite choose either of the paths already offered to her.

But if I am willing then to read Nagendrabala's creation of *Nari dharma* as evidence of a limited agency, others will see both in the choices open to her and in her need to marshal her talents in support of one patriarchal hierarchy in order to escape the oppression of another, evidence of the fundamental conditions of women's lives and of the limited and contingent possibilities open to us. I agree that this is also part of the story Nagendrabala's manual tells—and also part of the life stories of many late-nineteenth-century Bengali women. Devotion to one's husband and acceptance of the new patriarchy those husbands represent becomes a tactic deployed along one patriarchal axis to deflect the customs, controls, and hierarchy of another.²⁶

Is this, then, what women learned when men gave them advice—the possibility of an alternative to the lives they had lived in the past, the possibility of reshaping even that alternative to create lives they could recognize as more fully their own? It is part of the answer, but not yet the most important part.

In the end it seems to me we come back to the question of education. For, in fact, what women learned when men gave them advice was simply this: they learned to read. No stories from the lives of nineteenth-century Bengali women are more moving than those that recount the efforts women made—in secret, upside down, through stealing—to claim this power as their own (Sarkar 1992b, 232). Nothing in Nagendrabala's writing is clearer than her commitment to living her life as a literate and educated woman. And at the heart of this most patriarchally inscribed advice manual, we see the power of literacy at work; for Nagendrabala's *Nari dharma* is no one else's manual other than her own. It is not Dhirendranath Pal's creation nor that of any other manual writer of his day; it is not even her husband or her guru's manual. It is her own creation and in it, I believe, we see the start of one woman's rewriting of both old and new patriarchal traditions. Thus, this story of what women learned in nineteenth-century Bengal does not conclude, in my opinion, with nationalism and the end of social reform in India. It concludes with a large number of "literate and learning" women reading the texts of their pasts, beginning to consider their options for the future. And so, at this conclusion, we can return finally to the question advice-manual authors seemed to ask themselves as they contemplated the possibility that their reformulations might destroy domestic life as they had known it: will the educated woman cook and scour pots? Perhaps. Perhaps not. Or perhaps this question will be moot in some future world where literacy and education are more widely shared and the beliefs and structures that shape all our lives reflect the points of view of more than one gender (and more than one class). Perhaps in such a world we will all learn to share burdens and pleasures in ways unknown and unimaginable from the viewpoints of our more restricted pasts.

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²⁶My thanks for this suggestion to an anonymous reviewer of this article.

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