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Sex, Gender *and the* Sacred

Reconfiguring Religion in Gender History

WILEY Blackwell

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2 Liberal Religion and the ‘Woman Question’ between East and West: Perspectives from a Nineteenth-Century Bengali Women’s Journal

Clare Midgley

British and American Unitarians and members of the Brahma Samaj of India belonged to liberal religious groups that played leading roles in movements to improve women’s education and social position in Britain, the United States and colonial India.¹ Their engagements with the ‘woman question’ were informed by a shared conviction that human progress could be achieved through combining a rational or intuitive, rather than an authoritarian or dogmatic, approach to faith with a radical agenda of social reform. Unitarianism and Brahmoism did not develop in isolation from each other, but rather in the context of a long history of cross-cultural interchange and co-operation. This study, focused on analysis of articles published in the first Bengali women’s journal, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, presents new evidence about the nature of the inter-cultural liberal religious milieu within which debates on the ‘woman question’ were shaped in the nineteenth-century world. In the process, it offers a fresh perspective on the role of religious movements in the global development of modern feminism.

From their consolidation in the 1820s as distinctive liberal religious groupings, Unitarians and Brahmos identified each other as kindred spirits. Unitarians in Britain and America formed national organisations in 1825, which brought together heterodox Protestant congregations who questioned the Trinitarian belief in Christ’s divinity and rejected the Calvinist doctrine of original sin. United by a belief that ‘true religion’ was marked by good deeds rather than adherence to orthodox Christian dogma, they formed close-knit transatlantic networks promoting the abolition of slavery, social reform and women’s rights.² These Unitarian networks inter-meshed with transoceanic webs of connection with the Brahma Samaj (Society of Worshippers of the Supreme Being), founded in Calcutta in 1828 by Rammohun Roy to promote monotheistic religion and social reform among Hindus.³ Rammohun Roy engaged in extensive correspondence and exchange of tracts on religion and social reform with leading British and American Unitarians, and he cemented and extended these

personal connections during an extended visit to Britain prior to his death in Bristol in 1833.⁴ He impressed Unitarians as a religious thinker whose controversial pamphlet *Precepts of Jesus* provided external validation of their rejection of the doctrine of the Holy Trinity and whose Hindu monotheism might prove a stepping-stone to Unitarian Christianity. Unitarians were also keen to engage with Roy as a social reformer whose opposition to *sati* (widow-burning) and promotion of female education chimed with their own desire to improve the position of women. Indeed, Lyn Zastoupil has recently highlighted Roy's impact on the development of British feminism.⁵

The cross-cultural 'imagined community' that developed between Brahmos and Unitarians was sustained after Roy's death in Bristol in 1833 through transoceanic processes of commemoration, as I have explored in an earlier article.⁶ These laid the ground for renewed connections in the 1860s and 1870s, centred on English Unitarian social reformer Mary Carpenter's co-operation with the male leadership of the Brahma Samaj in an ambitious project of transnational social reform aimed at improving Indian women's education.⁷ This article seeks to broaden our understanding of Brahma-Unitarian interchange on the 'woman question' at this period beyond the existing scholarly focus on the figure of Mary Carpenter. In so doing, it offers a different perspective on the relationship between religion and the 'woman question' in the age of empire than that dominant in earlier postcolonial feminist scholarship on colonial India. This scholarship convincingly highlighted the way the figure of the Hindu woman became the ground for the struggle over authority between imperial and indigenous elites, evangelical Christian missionaries and orthodox Brahmin priests. However, in so doing, it placed an overriding emphasis on religious polarisation, coloniser-colonised conflict and the erasure of Indian women's own voices.⁸ The focus here is instead on exploring what I consider to be the equally significant history of cross-cultural inter-exchange among religious groups, co-operation between 'western' and 'eastern' activists and the resultant openings for Indian women's agency which resulted from Brahmos' creative, critical and constructive engagement with western debates on the 'woman question'.⁹

The Bengali-language journal, *Bambodhini Patrika* (Journal for the Enlightenment of Women), on which this discussion focuses, was a monthly journal for women that became the leading forum for debate on the 'woman question' in colonial India. The periodical was launched in 1863 by the Bambodhini Sabha (Committee for the Enlightenment of Women), as part of a series of initiatives through which a dynamic new leader of the Brahma Samaj, Keshub Chunder Sen, sought to reinvigorate the religious organisation. This revival was associated with a renewal of links with Unitarians, from whom the group had distanced itself in the 1840s and 1850s as it fought concerted attempts by Christian missionaries to gain converts among educated Bengali elites.¹⁰ Among Sen's key sources of inspiration were the writings of Theodore Parker, a leading American advocate of Transcendentalism. This intellectual and spiritual movement moved beyond mainstream Unitarian Christianity in advocating a universal religion rooted in personal intuition, while reinforcing the established Unitarian emphasis on the importance of social action over adherence to a specific creed.¹¹ Transcendentalism, itself drawing inspiration from 'eastern' spiritualities, influenced Sen in the development of a new universalist theism which moved beyond Hindu reformism.¹² Sen and his young followers split in 1866 with the Adi (original) Brahma Samaj to form the Brahma Samaj of India, and pursued an ambitious plan to regenerate the nation as a

whole through missionary activity throughout India. The group linked the promotion of theism with campaigns to abolish caste distinctions, to spread education to the masses and to improve the position of women through developing female education, attacking the custom of child marriage and encouraging widow remarriage. It was to help forward this agenda that Sen's followers persuaded Mary Carpenter to come to India to promote schools for girls independently of the Christian missionary societies who had led recent initiatives in female education. Sen extended his mission to Britain in 1870, seeking both to influence Unitarians to convert from Christianity to his brand of theism and to gain their support for his plans to improve female education in India. Unitarians themselves saw in Sen a worthy successor to Rammohun Roy: an inspiring religious leader who might fulfil their hopes that Indian religion and society could be reformed from within.¹³

Bamabodhini was founded only five years after the violent suppression of the Indian Rebellion and the establishment of Crown Rule, and Calcutta, the home of the journal, was the capital of Britain's Indian Empire. Brahma men were part of a wider group of western-educated Indians who, under the racist structures of colonialism, lacked the access to the economic and political power exercised by their middle-class Unitarian counterparts in Britain and America.¹⁴ This sense of powerlessness fuelled the rise of cultural nationalism, and among some Indians this took the form of preserving 'tradition', manifested as hostility to attempts by the colonial government and Christian missionaries to interfere in the domain of family life and gender relations. Others, however, notably Sen and his followers, responded to the challenges of colonialism by formulating ambitious plans to regenerate the Indian nation from *within* through pursuing their own agendas of religious and social reform, with a focus on female education as a key to wider social improvement.¹⁵

Bamabodhini, though it initially had a tiny print run of 100, increasing to some 450 in 1873, reached subscribers from influential Brahma families throughout Bengal and beyond, and was published continuously between 1863 and 1922. Rather than being a narrow sectarian publication, it was in the vanguard of debates on the 'woman question' in India, providing both men and women with 'a platform to think through the beliefs of an existing culture in the hopes of glimpsing a new horizon'.¹⁶ Brahma men sought to use the journal to engage Brahma women in their interlinked agenda of social and religious reform and, in order to achieve this, they opened up the first public forum for Bengali women themselves to contribute to literate culture.¹⁷ *Bamabodhini* has, not surprisingly, been used extensively as a source by researchers in Bengali women's history, and it is not my intention to reiterate the many insights into female agency that analysis of the separate sections devoted to women's own writings in *Bamabodhini* has already afforded.¹⁸ What has not yet been explored, and forms the focus of this article, is the journal's value as a source for illuminating the cross-cultural liberal religious milieu of reform within which debates on the 'woman question' took place at this period. Drawing on a set of new translations of articles published during the first decade of the journal's publication between 1863 and 1874, my aim here is to throw fresh light on this pivotal period in the development of debates on the 'woman question' in Britain, America and Bengal. It was a decade which not only saw the consolidation of organised movements for women's rights in Britain and America but also, in Bengal, strides forward in women's education and female participation in literate culture, the initiation of campaigns against child marriage and the creation of the first women's organisation.

Unitarian women activists as exemplars for Brahma women

Bamabodhini published articles articulating a range of approaches to the ‘woman question’ among Brahma supporters of Keshub Sen, ranging from the paternalist approach of Sen himself to the more emancipationist stance of the journal’s editor, Umesh Chandra Dutta. This diversity is evident in the first two articles that the journal published, and illustrates the limitations of earlier interpretations of social reform in colonial India as the ‘recasting’ of patriarchy along western lines.¹⁹ Its ‘Introduction’ stressed the ‘utmost importance’ of extending the ‘rays of education’ into the *antahpur* (the inner quarters of the joint family home where respectable Bengali women lived in seclusion) so that women could replace their ‘delusions and superstitions’ with ‘true knowledge’, and stop acting as an obstacle to ‘the country’s betterment and development’.²⁰ Here the main concern seems less about benefiting women themselves than about stopping them being blocks to national progress through encouraging them to adopt the enlightened Brahma approach to religion rather than continuing to adhere to traditional Hindu socio-cultural practices. However, the following article was much more woman-centred. It took the form of an imagined dialogue in which one Bengali woman seeks to persuade another of the benefits of female education. Education, she argues, would not only improve women’s relationships with their husbands, but also help them fulfil their own potential, and perhaps even lead them into wider social roles, including earning money by writing books and holding women’s meetings to develop their own ideas ‘for the betterment of the country’.²¹ The inclusion of a section of women’s writings in each issue of the journal encouraged this wider outlook, enabling women to begin to publish their own writings, including both poems and essays on women’s roles and education.

From the beginning, a decision was made by the editor to publish articles that encouraged Bengali women to widen their horizons through presenting as exemplary role models women from western liberal religious backgrounds in the vanguard of women’s entry into the public sphere. This decision was motivated in part by a belief that women lacked indigenous Indian female role models with whom they could identify. Trying to encourage Indian women to gain an education by pointing to the ‘many examples of educated women from our ancient times’, the author argued, would not be effective because these women ‘are taken as deities by popular belief’ rather than seen as role models by ordinary women. Instead, Harriet Martineau, ‘a very well known figure in the field of Sociology’ was presented as an ideal role model: a woman who, through her courage and persistence, had successfully overcome severe obstacles to her education and self-development caused by her frail health, deafness and family difficulties, and had gone on to write numerous learned books.²²

Underlying the choice of Martineau as exemplar was her Unitarian background, her history of personal links with the Brahma Samaj and her admiration for Rammohun Roy, whom she had met during his stay in England.²³ Brahmans’ sense of religious affinity with Unitarians also meant Martineau could be presented as an appropriate role model encouraging Brahma women to become writers on religion. Conveniently ignoring the fact that she had abandoned Unitarianism for free-thought by the early 1840s – she was described in *Bamabodhini* as a ‘monotheist’ who ‘belonged to a Christian sect’ – the biography began by praising her early religious writings and attributed her rise to fame after 1830 to her ability to write about religion with exceptional learning.

Her writings on religion are the starting point of her successful career as a leading sociologist, historian and novelist whose writings revolved around 'powerful subjects' including 'the betterment of women'. Asking rhetorically 'Do we see such brave women in our society?', the article went on to draw out 'important lessons' that could be learned by Bengali women from her life history: women could overcome obstacles to achieve education and self-development; they could become erudite and famous; education would enable women to become effective in both the domestic sphere and wider society; and a woman's adherence to principle was the mark of a 'great soul'.²⁴

Martineau's single status was perhaps the hardest thing to explain to Bengali women living in a society where custom dictated that all girls should marry by the age of puberty. The article, however, took care to explain Martineau's singleness in a positive way: 'Miss', it noted, was 'a title given to English women who dedicate their lives for the betterment of their country'. A few years later, reporting on Unitarian social reformer Mary Carpenter's visit to Calcutta to promote Indian women's education, the journal went further in presenting singleness as a positive choice for women keen to improve other women's lives, as the lack of a husband gave women freedom of movement and action. It described Carpenter as 'a woman of great deeds' who 'did not get married because that would have enchained her to a particular place and she would not have been able to pursue her dreams'.²⁵

Another exemplary single western woman featured in the same article in *Bamabodhini* was Frances Power Cobbe who, like Martineau, was praised for her religious writings: her work on religion and morality was described as 'so powerful that it would transform even the worst of the sinners'.²⁶ Like Keshub Sen, Cobbe had found religious inspiration in the writings of the American Unitarian Transcendentalist Theodore Parker, whose works she published as an edited collection in 1863.²⁷ Cobbe had become acquainted with the Brahma Samaj through her friendship with Mary Carpenter and participation in London Unitarian circles. In August 1866, she published in *Fraser's Magazine* an essay providing the first history of the Brahma Samaj for an English readership, which presented a highly positive picture of its leadership in social and religious reform in India.²⁸ In 1869, *Bamabodhini* was 'immensely happy' to retail the news that the Secretary of the Brahma Samaj had received a letter from 'a very learned English lady' – who can confidently be identified as Cobbe – asserting her sense of religious affinity to Brahmos. She explained that a Brahma is similar to what English people call a 'theist', and claimed to be a Brahmika herself 'since her religious sensibilities are similar to Brahmoism'.²⁹ Cobbe's religious affinities with Sen clearly made her an ideal western woman to present as a role model of the educated woman making a valuable contribution to the moral development of society, especially as she articulated an intercultural female religious identity through identifying herself as a Brahmika.

Bamabodhini also presented western Unitarian women's independent travel and public speaking by women in a positive way to its middle-class female readership. It praised Mary Carpenter for 'crossing the treacherous sea alone' in order to 'do some good for our women' and reported that she had attended several meetings organised by men at which she had 'delivered inspiring public speeches towards the progress of Indian women'.³⁰ Another news item reported on 'numerous women preachers in England who propagate religion through their speeches' and informed readers that Julia Ward Howe had recently delivered a 'brilliant speech' entitled 'Let there be

peace and friendship in the world', while Mary A. Livermore had delivered 'another inspiring speech'.³¹ Howe, an American Unitarian Transcendentalist, and her friend Mary A. Livermore, a Universalist (a member of an American religious group who, like Unitarians, believed in universal salvation and rejected the doctrine of original sin), were becoming renowned in the world of transatlantic reform as public lecturers.³² Such articles gave Bengali women information about a wider world in which some women played leading roles in the public sphere.

This sense of liberal religion as providing an avenue to wider roles for women was reinforced in other articles praising western women's international travel and active participation in organisations and debates. American and European women's intercontinental travel, 'especially for missionary work', was presented as evidence of 'how women are progressing in every aspect of society in America and Europe'.³³ 'Erudite' women's participation in debates about religious philosophy in 'the Independent Religious Society of Boston, USA' and the presence of women on its governing body, was also praised as a mark of social progress. This report almost certainly refers to the Radical Club of Boston, which was founded in 1867 to act as a debating society on liberal religion and social reform, and numbered prominent Unitarian and Transcendentalist women among its members.³⁴

In selecting prominent western Unitarian women activists as role models for their wives and daughters, the Brahma men involved in *Bamabodhini* thus encouraged Bengali women to envision wider social roles beyond becoming better educated wives and mothers who could exert good influence within reformed religious households. This was more than rhetoric, as reports in *Bamabodhini* reveal. By including a section on women's own writings, they opened up a space for women to publish and thus to have a voice in wider society, giving women an opportunity to articulate their own views on marriage and family life and on questions of education. Increased opportunities were also opened up for women to participate more actively and fully in Brahma religious life beyond the home when, in 1865, Sen founded the Brahmila Samaj to give women the opportunity to engage in a weekly discussion of spiritual issues under his oversight.³⁵ By 1874, the 'emancipationist' wing of his supporters had successfully put pressure on him to end the custom of women sitting behind screens at the main mixed religious meetings.³⁶ In 1870, a long article entitled 'Bongiyo Stree Samaj' (Bengali Women's Society) urged women to set up their own organisation to improve women's position in society rather than rely on men who 'cannot fully comprehend the general needs of the women, and hence they cannot fully sympathize with them', wishing rather 'to mould their women in line with their own taste'. Setting up the example of English and American women who 'gather together to work like their men' and thereby accomplish 'great tasks', the writer exhorted:

O sisters of Bengal! Be conscious of your own conditions! Exhibit your enthusiasm and courage. The grounds for work are spread in front of you, and the numerous doors leading to independence and happiness are open. Come together in unity and try improving your conditions.

Clearly the writer had hopes that Brahma women, like Unitarian women in the west, could become a vanguard in progressing the position of women: he presented 'Our Brahma sisters' as 'the foremost bearers of the torch of women's improvement in Bengal' and urged them 'to show their superior characters, and follow the ways of God through their own initiatives by forming a society for women'.³⁷ The article

laid the ground for the formation in 1871 of the Bama Hitaisini Sabha (Women's Welfare Committee) as a forum for debate among women on improving their social position.³⁸ While Sen acted as President of the organisation, placing it firmly under male oversight, women's writings now moved into the main part of *Bamabodhini*, which carried reports on the debates in Bama Hitaisini Sabha sent in by its female secretary, Saudamini Khastogir.³⁹

Closely linked to this new society was a Normal School for Girls, set up by Sen to educate middle-class Bengali girls and train women teachers. In fact the period between the mid-1860s and the 1880s witnessed an amazingly fast trajectory of developments in Brahma women's education. Brahma women were among the first female university graduates in India, and the first Indian women to qualify and practice as doctors and teachers.⁴⁰ Pioneering figures included Kadambini Ganguly (née Basu), who in 1883 became one of Calcutta University's first female university graduates and went on to become Bengal's first female doctor.⁴¹ These rapid developments say much about the courage of some Brahma women in breaking entrenched social taboos on female education and female independence. They also suggest the willingness of the more radical men associated with the Brahma of India – including Kadambini's husband Dwarkanath – to encourage and support new roles for women. Finally, they are indicative of the success of *Bamabodhini* in widening the horizons and aspirations of its Bengali female readers – not least through presenting as role models Unitarian women in the vanguard of the women's movement in Britain and America.

The 'new' Bengali woman and the spectre of the 'strong-minded' woman

Western influence on Bengali women was not, however, seen as unproblematic by members of the Brahma Samaj of India. Indeed, the appropriate relationship between approaches to the 'woman question' in 'east' and 'west' became increasingly contested within the organisation in the 1870s. A growing division between the 'emancipationist' wing, led by the journal's editor Umesh Chandra Dutta, and the 'paternalist' wing, led by Keshub Chunder Sen, developed in the context of the growth of cultural nationalism in Bengal, and attacks on western influence as leading to 'denationalisation'. Initially, this was articulated in *Bamabodhini* as a concern among Brahma women themselves about appropriate reformed styles of dress. In 1871, the journal published a report of a debate on dress reform among members of Bama Hitaisini Sabha, written by the society's secretary, Saudamini Khastogir. The women's group recognised that the traditional dress of semi-transparent sari worn without undergarments was a 'huge obstacle' to women's 'progress' and 'social improvement' because it prevented women from leaving the home to attend lectures on religion and philosophy and from 'achieving anything in our society'. However, they expressed their opposition to copying English women's dress and their desire to fashion a 'decent' form of dress that would 'suit our local condition' and 'give us a sense of identity'. Wearing western dress, they felt, would make them lose their self-respect as Indian women and become 'unwelcome in our own society', thus inhibiting their ability to influence 'debates and arguments about our country's progress'.⁴²

Enthusiastic discussions of the public work of western religious liberal women like Carpenter, Martineau, Cobbe, Howe and Livermore in the journal between 1867 and

1871 had avoided any direct mention of their involvement in the growing transatlantic women's rights movement. However, in 1872, an article on 'Social relations and rights of women' for the first time drew the attention of the journal's Bengali women readers to the 'different kinds of strong debates and revolutionary stances regarding society's relation to women and women's rights in most civilized contemporary Europe and America' and noted that debates on the rights of women were also beginning in India.⁴³ In this context, the question of the purpose of improved education for Bengali women was raised. An article entitled 'New Bengali Women', probably written by Sen, noted approvingly that over the past twelve years 'the new Bengali women have turned into strong characters and they have translated their words into practice and satiated their curiosity'. It recognised that Bengali women were no longer 'the former Hindu women of the *antahpur*'. They 'want to take on more responsibility', were 'happier to accompany their husbands to faraway places than to be in a joint family', and 'do not want to be uneducated and superstitious anymore', nor treated badly if they were widows. However, the writer went on to express concern about where this wave of change was leading, asking: 'Do our women really want to become Bibis?' – Bibi being the term used for Indian women living as companions to British men. While the author asserted that this was not the case, he acknowledged that 'it is not determined, yet, what they are becoming', for 'the only thing that is certain is the fact that they cannot be subjugated to ancient societal rules'. This current situation of flux and uncertainty, the writer suggested, was 'the perfect time to have talks about new Bengali women's present situation and what the future might hold for them'. Seeking to shape the agenda of these talks in a way that addressed his concern that women might begin to neglect their household duties, he questioned: 'women are becoming liberated and educated but how are they going to use this to care for the household, eradicate superstitions and embrace advanced religion?'⁴⁴

Sen's stress on the overriding importance of women's religious roles within the household led to a questioning of whether secular education along the lines promoted by his Unitarian collaborator Mary Carpenter was the right way forward for Indian women, or whether it would be better for Brahmos to set up their own schools which could educate girls in their own Brahmo religious beliefs. Secular education, the author of a 1873 article in *Bamabodhini* argued, was not appropriate for women: as mothers are responsible for the character-formation of their children, women needed to study religion so they were equipped to uphold the moral codes of Bengali society at a time when men were all going astray by adopting British culture and western norms of social behaviour, especially drinking.⁴⁵ Such concerns fuelled the conflict between Sen and English Unitarian educationalist Annette Akroyd. Akroyd, inspired by Sen's visit to England, arrived in Calcutta in 1873 determined to promote female education. *Bamabodhini*, expressing sadness in 1873 at hearing that Sen planned to resign from the position of honorary secretary of Annette Akroyd's school committee, laid the blame on Akroyd for proving herself unable to 'work with the real well-wishers of our nation'.⁴⁶ While they disliked Akroyd's high-handed approach, however, the journal's editor and other 'emancipationist' Brahmos disagreed with Sen's insistence on a separate domestic-focused educational syllabus for girls. As a result, they decided to support Akroyd's attempts to establish a more academically rigorous curriculum, and went on to take over the running of her school themselves following her marriage and withdrawal from educational work.⁴⁷

Concerned that 'new Bengali women' were moving too far from their traditional religious and domestic roles in the household, Sen's paternalist faction raised the spectre of the 'strong-minded woman'. In 1873, *Bamabodhini* published a long article entitled 'Women's Bizarre Advancement' that noted that there were women in England and America who are called 'strong-minded women', many of whom 'do not marry and thus their personalities become like men' and some of whom 'are strong atheists'. It quoted from an article in the English periodical *The Saturday Review* ridiculing such women who 'churn out fiery public speeches on women's advancement' but in fact 'want to trade their beauty to upper class men'.⁴⁸ The writer warned women readers in a patronising and paternalist tone of the current tendency to 'imitate the British in everything we do' and suggested that 'if we turn a blind eye towards our own judgements then many English transgressions would seep into Hindu women's society and destroy its innate purity'. Stressing that 'it is not respectable for women to lead a life without religious and moral regulations', the author claimed that 'our chaste Hindu women clearly are petrified' by the spectre of such strong-minded women.⁴⁹

Ironically, some of the western liberal religious women that *Bamabodhini* had singled out as exemplars for Bengali women in earlier issues of the journal were the very women who were being attacked as 'strong-minded' in the western press at this period.⁵⁰ The writer attempted to reconcile his misogynist attack on independent women with this earlier praise by distinguishing so-called 'poisonous' women from 'a few who could challenge men in their education and knowledge' and who 'choose to remain unmarried and childless so they can devote themselves to the betterment of society'. The latter, he asserted, are 'goddesses whose lives are exemplary!' However, by deifying these women, he undermined the earlier approach of the journal: that of presenting such western women as more effective everyday role models than deified women from the Indian past. He also asserted that applying 'the Western idea of women's education' to India would lead women to aspire to be 'ignorant and arrogant "strong-minded women"' who will 'always be mercilessly ridiculed in our society'.⁵¹

Clearly Sen and his 'paternalist' faction of the Brahmo Samaj of India feared that, in promoting women's education, they had let the genie out of the bottle. Having hoped to furnish themselves with companionable, well-educated and religiously liberal wives, they were in danger of creating independent women who were no longer content to remain under patriarchal control within the household, and who might even reject religion altogether. Indeed, the journal retailed news that 'a Bengali lady lately delivered a lecture, or rather read a paper, in which she went so far as to say that women must go quite as far in the road to knowledge and power as men', and raised this question: 'Are we going to have "strong-minded women" . . . in our midst?'⁵²

Communications between Unitarian and Brahmo women

Brahmo men's control over women's responses to debates on the 'woman question' was also undermined by the growth of direct communications between Brahmo and Unitarian women. Ironically, this was set in train by Sen himself, through his visit to England in 1870 to drum up support from English women for improving Indian women's education and to gain western converts to his brand of theist religious

universalism. *Bamabodhini* reported on the excitement generated by his visit, particularly among English women, and noted that at one of his meetings ‘women stood up to deliver inspiring speeches’ and ‘their oratory astounded many in the audience’.⁵³ His visit to Mary Carpenter in Bristol led to the formation of the National Indian Association to foster support among British women for women’s education in India. *Bamabodhini* also claimed that ‘many religious women want to leave their “dead” Christian religion and are praying to Keshub Babu to convert them to his “living” religion’, noting that he had delivered religious speeches in Unitarian chapels in London.⁵⁴ As a result, a committee headed by Unitarian social and political reformer William Shaen was set up to form a theistic society in London ‘as a means of uniting all those who believe in the Fatherhood of God and the brotherhood of man’, regardless of their religious backgrounds or national origins.⁵⁵ Sen’s religious mission in England is striking evidence of the way in which transoceanic networks of liberal religion could involve genuine cross-cultural interchange rather than simply a uni-directional flow of influence from ‘west’ to ‘east’.

On his return to Calcutta, Sen launched a number of new social reform initiatives, including the formation of the Bama Hitaishini Sabha (Women’s Welfare Committee), and acted as a conduit for the first exchanges of letters between Unitarian and Brahmo women. These developing contacts were reported with enthusiasm on the pages of *Bamabodhini*, which noted that Sen’s visit ‘has inspired many scholarly and compassionate women to lend their hands towards the advancement of their sisters in India’ and that some ‘had even started learning Bengali so that their communication could run smoothly with their Indian sisters.’⁵⁶

Bamabodhini began publishing translations of letters from English women to Brahmo women. ‘Letter from England’, described as from an English ‘enthusiast for women’s advancement’, was probably written by Elizabeth Sharpe, daughter of Samuel Sharpe, the President of the British and Foreign Unitarian Association, who had organised a formal welcome for Sen on his arrival in Britain. The letter thanked the Brahmo woman (who had apparently initiated the correspondence but whose name was also not published in *Bamabodhini*) for her letter and stressed their religious affinity: ‘we are the children of the same God’, even if we express this in different ways. The letter from Bengal had ‘made me feel deeply for my brothers and sisters who are so far away from me. It has brought me near to them’. Expressions of closeness across cultural and geographical divides combined with a positioning of English women as helpers to their less privileged Indian sisters. However, instead of positioning her Brahmo contact as a silent victim in need of saving – the classic evangelical missionary stance towards Indian women – Sharpe adopted an empowering tone, telling her not to underestimate her own sense of judgement and intelligence, stressing the value of her dedication to raising her children, urging her to gain further education and suggesting that she was ‘not as weak and helpless as you deem yourself to be’.⁵⁷ *Bamabodhini* also published letters to Brahmo women expressing enthusiasm about Sen’s visit to England from May Hickson and E. Spears, wife of the Revd Spears, the secretary of the Unitarian Association who had organised Sen’s lecture tour around Britain.⁵⁸

Bamabodhini also published part of a letter to a Brahmo woman from Sophia Dobson Collet, ‘a very erudite and religious woman’. A writer and feminist from a Unitarian family background, Collet had become fascinated by the Brahmo Samaj

in the 1860s. When Sen came to England in 1870, she and Frances Power Cobbe were the first two people he visited in London, and she became the leading English promoter of Sen's writings on religion and social reform.⁵⁹ Her 1871 letter expressed her sense of religious affinity with Brahmos, stating that 'Even if I am a Christian, I feel immense love and respect for the Brahmos', and conveyed her desire to help the cause of Indian women through her writings.⁶⁰ In 1873, *Bamabodhini* published another letter from Collet, and praised her work in supporting Sen and Brahmoism, and her diligent study of Indian culture, moral codes and the current revolution in social progress. The letter was one Collet had written to the new secretary of Bama Hitaisini Sabha, Radharani Lahiri. The editors of *Bamabodhini* expressed amazement that she had written this letter in 'perfect handwriting and in precise Bengali', having worked very hard to learn the language, primarily so that she would 'be able to write letters to her sisters in Bengal so that the channel of communication could be direct and easy'. In her letter, Collet explained that she had been reading *Bamabodhini* for a while – and had found out about Bama Hitaisini Sabha after reading Lahiri's article on it in the journal: she was making contact in order to find out more about its work. She expressed her 'appreciation and deep sympathy for all of you who are devoting their time and energy for women's advancement in Bengal' and her 'earnest wish' that they succeeded. She also asked a number of questions: do women write the articles for the committee and read their own writings out, and will the journal be publishing these, and which articles in *Bamabodhini* were written by girls from the Female Normal School set up by Sen?⁶¹ Collet was clearly keen to establish how much the Committee was under women's direction and to read women's own writings. Thus, in Collet's case at least, we see a genuine appreciation of Brahmo women's own efforts to improve Indian women's lives, a major effort to engage with Bengali women in their own language, and an approach to members of Bama Hitaisini Sabha as fellow activists rather than passive recipients of western women's direction and aid. Her correspondent, Radharani Lahiri, was a leading figure in Brahmo women's associations through the 1870s and 1880s. While little is known of her personal life, she appears to have remained single, like Collet herself. Leading a life at odds with Sen's ideal of the educated Brahmo housewife, and perhaps closer to that of the western Unitarian women presented as role models in early issues of *Bamabodhini*, she devoted her life to improving the position of women through her associational work, her paid teaching and her writing.⁶²

In 1873, *Bamabodhini* also launched an English-language section of the journal in the hope that it would 'draw enlightened Native ladies in different parts of India into closer intercourse with each other and with their English sisters'.⁶³ Copies of the journal began to be sent to the National Indian Association in England, enabling other English women to find out about the activities of Bengali women.⁶⁴ *Bamabodhini* also published a number of articles written especially for the journal by English women, including E. A. Manning, the Unitarian secretary of the London branch of the National Indian Association. These presented Bengali women with accounts of English family life and new developments in education and social welfare, including kindergartens and schools for the blind. Perhaps influenced by Sen, however, these articles cautiously avoided the issue of women's rights, despite the leading role Unitarian women were playing in the women's suffrage movement at this period.⁶⁵

Liberal religion and the 'woman question' between east and west

This study has highlighted the significance of transnational liberal religious networks in shaping debates on the 'woman question' in the nineteenth-century world. It has shown that debates on the position of women in colonial India cannot be reduced to a contest between evangelical Christian missionary and orthodox Hindu priest, or between westernised collaborator and cultural nationalist. Such interpretive frameworks close down the space for exploring the creative and constructive engagement with western religious liberals and social reformers by members of the Brahma Samaj, an organisation which played a pioneering and influential role in promoting improvements to Indian women's education and social position. Brahma connections with Unitarians were sustained outside official colonial channels and were based on the mutual perception of shared approaches to religion and social reform, and shared commitments to improving the position of women. As is evident in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, this led some Brahma men to present to Bengali women as role models, not the Victorian housewives idealised by evangelical Christian missionaries, but rather Unitarian women who were pioneering full female engagement in the public sphere in Britain and the USA.

Such cross-cultural engagement in the context of British imperial domination of India was of course always problematic. However, it is clear from articles published in *Bamabodhini* in the early 1870s that Keshub Chunder Sen's growing conservatism on the 'woman question' was influenced not only by cultural nationalist concerns about Bengali women becoming 'denationalised' through imitating western women but also by the misogynist backlash in the west against the 'strong-minded woman'. It was within this transnational context of heightened contestation over the 'woman question' in both east and west that Sen opted to promote a domestic-focused educational curriculum for women that stressed their religious duties as Brahma wives and mothers. As we have seen, other Brahmans, including *Bamabodhini*'s editor, engaged very differently with this ferment of debate, reaffirming an emancipatory agenda for women and promoting an academically rigorous secular education for girls which opened up avenues for women's entry into universities and professional employment.

Dissension over the form that female education should take marked the beginnings of a split within Sen's organisation around the 'woman question'. The final schism was to come in 1878 when, in violation of the Brahma Marriage Act of 1872 that abolished child marriage among Brahmans, Sen married off his thirteen-year-old daughter Suniti Devi to the maharajah of the princely state of Cooch Behar.⁶⁶ It was an action which sent shockwaves across the ocean: Sophia Dobson Collet, Frances Power Cobbe and other British feminists linked to Unitarian networks turned against Sen and allied themselves with the new organisation that emerged to represent the female emancipationist wing of Brahmaism, the Sadharan Brahma Samaj. This break with Sen, however, rather than marking an end of Brahma-Unitarian connections, opened up a new chapter of cross-cultural co-operation when Sophia Dobson Collet took on the role of official record-keeper for this new female emancipationist wing of Brahmaism, as the London-based compiler of its yearbooks.⁶⁷ The nature of interchanges on liberal religion and the 'woman question' in this succeeding phase of connection awaits further research.

Bamabodhini Patrika continued under male editorship until 1922; long before its demise, *Antahpur*, the first Bengali women's journal to be edited by a woman, had been launched. Founded in 1898, its first editor was Banalata Debi, the daughter of

Brahmo reformer and promoter of female education Sasipada Banerjee and his wife Rajkumari, who in 1871 had become the first Brahmo woman to travel overseas, staying with Mary Carpenter at Red Lodge in Bristol.⁶⁸ At about the same time that *Antaphur* was launched, Swarnakumari Debi (Ghosal), daughter of Brahmo leader Debendranath Tagore and a writer and campaigner for women's welfare, became editor of the leading Bengali literary magazine *Bharati*.⁶⁹ Along with Kadambini Ganguly, the pioneering Brahmo doctor mentioned earlier in this article, she was also one of the first women delegates to the Indian National Congress in 1889.⁷⁰ Further research is needed to explore the extent to which transnational networks of liberal religion and social reform and resulting east-west interchange on the 'woman question' remained significant to this new, increasingly politicised, generation of Brahmo women activists.

Notes

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3. David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Making of the Modern Indian Mind* (New Delhi: Atlantic, 1996); Sivanath Sastri, *History of the Brahmo Samaj* (1915; 2nd edn, Calcutta: Sabharan Brahmo Samaj, 1974).
4. Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*; Spencer Lavan, *Unitarians and India: A Study in Encounter and Response* (1977; 2nd edn, Boston: Skinner House, 1983); Dermot Killingley, *Rammohun Roy in Hindu and Christian Tradition: The Teape Lectures* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Grevatt & Grevatt, 1993).
5. Lyn Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy and the Making of Victorian Britain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).
6. Clare Midgley, 'Transoceanic Commemoration and Connections between Bengali Brahmos and British and American Unitarians', *Historical Journal* 54 (2011), pp. 773–96.

7. Zastoupil, *Rammohun Roy*, pp. 73–96; Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994); Antoinette Burton, 'Fearful Bodies into Disciplined Subjects: Pleasure, Romance, and the Family Drama of Colonial Reform in Mary Carpenter's "Six Months in India"', *Signs* 20 (1995), pp. 545–74; Clare Midgley, 'Mary Carpenter and the Brahma Samaj of India: a Transnational Perspective on Social Reform in the Age of Empire', *Women's History Review* 22 (2013), pp. 363–85. See also Ruth Watts, 'Breaking the Bounds of Victorian Imperialism or Extending a Reformed Paternalism? Mary Carpenter and India', *History of Education* 29 (2000), pp. 443–56.
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9. Ania Loomba, 'Dead Women Tell No Tales: Issues of Female Subjectivity, Subaltern Agency and Tradition in Colonial and Post-Colonial Writings on Widow Immolation in India', *History Workshop Journal* 36 (1993), pp. 209–27; Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850–1920* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005); Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar (eds), *Women and Social Reform in Modern India: A Reader* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 2008), Introduction, pp. 1–12; Tanika Sarkar, *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Times* (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 2009).
10. Lavan, *Unitarians and India*, pp. 73–4.
11. Anne. C. Rose, *Transcendentalism as a Social Movement, 1830–1850* (1981; 2nd edn, Yale University Press, 1986); Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2008).
12. Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993).
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16. Krishna Sen, 'Lessons in Self-Fashioning: *Bamabodhini Patrika* and the Education of Women in Colonial Bengal', *Victorian Periodicals Review* 37 (2004), pp. 176–91, esp. pp. 177, 189.
17. Malavika Karlekar, *Voices from Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1993), pp. 1–30.
18. Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*; Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*; Sen, 'Lessons in Self-Fashioning'.
19. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History* (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989).
20. *Bamabodhini Patrika (BP)* 1/1 (Sept.–Oct. 1863), pp. 1–2. Translated by S. Bajpaie Herrett from the scanned original located at <www.savifa.uni-hd.de/thematicportals/periodicals/bamabodhini.html>.
21. *BP* 1/1 (Sept.–Oct. 1863), pp. 2–7.
22. *BP* 1/2 (Oct.–Nov. 1863), pp. 17–20; *BP* 1/3 (Nov.–Dec. 1863), pp. 32–4.
23. Harriet Martineau, 'Rajah Rammohun Roy on the Government and Religion of India', *Monthly Repository*, new series, vol. 6 (1832), pp. 609–17; Gaby Weiner (ed.), *Harriet Martineau's Autobiography*, 2 vols (1877; reprint of 3rd edn of 1877, London: Virago Press, 1983), vol. 1, pp. 155, 243. For discussion of Martineau's religious beliefs and her engagement with India, see Ella Dzelzainis and Cora Kaplan, *Harriet Martineau: Authorship, Society and Empire* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010).
24. *BP* 1/2 (Oct.–Nov. 1863), pp. 17–20; *BP* 1/3 (Nov.–Dec. 1863), pp. 32–4.

25. *BP* 3/47 (June–July 1867), pp. 530–33.
26. *BP* 3/47 (June–July 1867), pp. 530–33.
27. Lori Williamson, *Power and Protest: Frances Power Cobbe and Victorian Society* (London: Rivers Oram Press, 2005), pp. 17–29. These included Frances Power Cobbe, *Essay on Intuitive Morals, Being an Attempt to Popularise Ethical Science* (London: Longman, Brown, Green and Longmans, 1855); Frances Power Cobbe, *Broken Lights: An Inquiry into the Present Condition and Future Prospects of Religious Faith* (London: Trubner & Co, 1864).
28. Frances Power Cobbe, 'The Brahma Samaj', *Fraser's Magazine for Town and Country* 76/440 (Aug. 1866), pp. 199–211; republished in Frances Power Cobbe, *Hours of Work and Play* (London: Trubner & Co, 1867), pp. 59–83.
29. *BP* 5/72 (Aug.–Sept. 1869), pp. 76–7.
30. *BP* 3/47 (June–July 1867), pp. 530–33.
31. *BP* 6/91 (Feb.–Mar. 1871), p. 334.
32. Mary Grant, *Private Woman, Public Person: An Account of the Life of Julia Ward Howe from 1819 to 1868* (Brooklyn, NY: Carlson, 1994); Wendy Hamand Venet, *A Strong-Minded Woman: The Life of Mary A. Livermore* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
33. *BP* 9/123 (Oct.–Nov. 1873), p. 241.
34. *BP* 5/80 (Mar.–Apr. 1870), p. 237. For the Radical Club of Boston, see Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, pp. 309–12.
35. Sastri, *History of the Brahma Samaj*, p. 105; *BP* 2/1 (Aug 1865), p. 24.
36. Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 35–6; *BP* 9/120 (July–Aug. 1873), p. 144.
37. *BP* 6/86 (Sept.–Oct. 1870), pp. 149–52.
38. Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, pp. 274–5; Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 17–18.
39. Saudamini was the daughter of Dr Ananda Charan Khastagir, a prominent member of the Brahma Samaj of India. See Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, p. 124; Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, p. 144.
40. For detailed discussions of these developments, much of it based on information culled from *BP*, see Sen, 'Lessons in Self-Fashioning', Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*; Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*.
41. Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, pp. 95, 242, 323–4, 341–2, 368.
42. *BP* 8/97 (Aug.–Sept. 1871), pp. 148–50. For fuller discussion of the issue of women and dress reform in Bengal, see Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, pp. 241–9; Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, pp. 245–56.
43. *BP* 8/112 (Nov.–Dec. 1872), pp. 239–42.
44. *BP* 8/115 (Feb.–Mar. 1873), pp. 351–6.
45. *BP* 9/117 (Apr.–May 1873), pp. 3–8.
46. *BP* 9/118 (May–June 1873), pp. 61–3.
47. Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 37–9.
48. Attacks on 'strong-minded' women became common in both Britain and America from the mid-1850s but, interestingly, are not reported in *Bambodhini* until the 1870s, suggesting selective appropriation of the discourse. See Elizabeth K. Helsinger, Robin Lautenbach Sheets and William Veeder, *The Woman Question: Society and Literature in Britain and America, 1837–1883*, 3 vols (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1983), vol. 3, pp. 89–94.
49. *BP* 9/119 (June–July 1873), pp. 69–72.
50. E.g., a series of articles appeared in the *Chicago Tribune* in 1869 attacking Mary A. Livermore as a 'selfish' and 'strong-minded' woman because of her public advocacy of women's legal and political rights; see Venet, *A Strong-Minded Woman*, p. 157.
51. *BP* 9/119 (June–July 1873), pp. 69–72.
52. *BP* 9/120 (July–Aug. 1873), p. 144. Unfortunately I have not yet been able to identify the woman who is being referred to here.
53. *BP* 5/79 (Feb.–Mar. 1870), p. 218; *BP* 5/81 (Apr.–May 1870), p. 54.
54. *BP* 5/81 (Apr.–May 1870), p. 54.
55. Collet (ed.), *Keshub Chunder Sen's English Visit*, esp. pp. 449–60: 'Speech at a general meeting to promote the Formation of a Theistic Society, July 20, 1870'.
56. *BP* 6/88 (Nov.–Dec. 1870), pp. 231–4.
57. *BP* 6/86 (Sept.–Oct. 1870), pp. 170–72. My attribution of this letter to Elizabeth Sharpe is based on a translated letter from Sophia Dobson Collet published in the following issue of *BP*, which talks of being shown a letter to 'Miss Sharpe' from a Brahma woman; *BP* 6/87 (Oct.–Nov. 1870), pp. 210–11. For Samuel

- Sharpe's formal welcome to Sen on his arrival in England, see Collet (ed.), *Keshub Chunder Sen's English Visit*, p. 3.
58. *BP* 6/88 (Nov.–Dec. 1870), pp. 236–7.
 59. Sophia Dobson Collet (ed.), *The Brahma Samaj: Lectures and Tracts by Keshub Chunder Sen*, 1st and 2nd series (London, 1870).
 60. *BP* 6/87 (Oct.–Nov. 1870), pp. 210–11.
 61. *BP* 9/124 (Nov.–Dec. 1873), pp. 258–60.
 62. For further information on Radharini Lahiri, see Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, p. 371.
 63. *BP* 9/117 (Apr.–May 1873), pp. 3–8.
 64. *Journal of the National Indian Association in Aid of Social Progress in India* 34 (Oct. 1873), pp. 447–8 published a review of *BP* by 'a Hindu contributor', and the following volume (35 (Nov. 1873), p. 293) reported receipt of the July number of *BP* and noted progress in women's education, quoting statistics on girls schools in Bengal.
 65. 'An English Family', *BP* 9/121 (Aug.–Sept. 1873), pp. 179–80; 'Education of the Blind', *BP* 9/126 (Jan.–Feb. 1874), pp. 339–40; 'Child-Life in England', *BP* 9/127–8 (Feb./Mar., Mar./Apr. 1874), pp. 398a–b; E. A. Manning, 'Kinder Gartens', *BP* 10/140 (Dec. 1874–Jan. 1875), pp. 387–8.
 66. Kopf, *Brahmo Samaj*, pp. 324–9.
 67. *The Brahma Year-Book for 1876 (–1882)*, nos 1–7 (London, 1876–83).
 68. Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, pp. 239–40.
 69. Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, p. 373.
 70. Borthwick, *Changing Role of Women in Bengal*, p. 341.