

“Truly, modern women are more alone”:

Mahadevi Varma and the ‘Woman Question’ in British India

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Introduction

In a 1938 editorial, the Indian poet, educator, and activist Mahadevi Varma (1907-87) concluded with a striking remark: “**truly, modern women are more alone than old ones,**” cast aside by not only “**old-fashioned men,**” but also “**modern-minded men**” and “**radicals.**” [1]

What did she mean by this, and how does her perspective re-frame debates on Indian women’s rights reform in colonial India?

Background

Mahadevi was at the crux India’s **struggle for independence** from British colonial rule, and a **growing feminist movement** for women’s rights reform. [2] However, debates on Indian women’s rights reform largely excluded Indian women like Mahadevi, dominated instead by prominent men in the Indian nationalist movement and Western reformers. This research examines what is gained by acknowledging the voices of Indian women in these debates, taking a specific case study: **Mahadevi on the rights of women in Hindu marriages.**

Why this issue? Historically, marriage reform had been significant for both male nationalist and Western writers, while Indian women bore the material impact of child marriages, early pregnancies, and domestic abuse. [2]

Why this author? Mahadevi is an intriguing, under-studied historical “limit case”—an Indian woman who wrote prolifically at a time when only one percent of Indian women were literate, and yet, through her own personal experience, knew the visceral realities of married life for Hindu girls and women. [3] [4]

Methodology

I primarily studied a series of Hindi editorials Mahadevi published in the women’s journal *Chand* during the 1930s on the topic of women’s rights in marriage:

“Hindu Strī Kā Patnitvā [Condition of Hindu Wives],”
“Nāritva Kā Abhishap [Curse of Womanhood],”
“Ghar Aur Bāhar [The Home and the World],”
“Shrinkhalā Kī Kadiyan [Links in the Chain].”

To contextualize these works, I also drew on Mahadevi’s influential writings within *Chāyyavad* (the neo-romantic phase of Hindi poetry) and her memoirs in the essay “Mere Bachpan Ke Din [My Childhood Days]” and *Atit ke Chal-Chitra [Sketches from the Past]*.

Finally, these writings were placed in conversation with the writings of Mahadevi’s Western feminist and male Indian nationalist contemporaries, who had likewise opined on the rights of Hindu wives.

“But while we can show compassion to birds, beasts, and even to stones, we can give nothing to women except cruel orders...”

Original Artwork, based on photograph of Mahadevi from the 1930s

MSW

Investigation

The resulting investigation was in five sections:

1. **The “Woman Question” in Colonial India**

2. **Mahadevi and the Exclusion of Indian Women**

3. **Addressing Physical and Psychological Trauma: Mahadevi’s Western Interlocutors**

4. **Recalling India’s Pre-Colonial Past: Mahadevi’s Nationalist Interlocutors**

5. **Breaking the “Modern Woman’s” Isolation: Mahadevi Coming Into Her Own**

...If only we could recognize their humanity... then history today would be entirely different.”

— Mahadevi, “Nāritvā Kā Abhishap” (Anantharam, p. 68)

Conclusions

This investigation revealed gaps in the views of both groups, explicating why Mahadevi believed modern women were so “alone.” Her writings suggest that both sides reduced women in Hindu marriages to a symbol, whether the goddess “Mother India” or the pitiful child bride; critiquing this, Mahadevi offers an argument for honoring these women’s humanity instead.

Ultimately, this speaks to the need for scholarship on individuals like Mahadevi to understand intersections women’s rights and anticolonialism—in 20th Century British India and beyond.

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Selected References:

- [1] Francesca Orsini, *The Hindi Public Sphere 1920-1940: Language and Literature in the Age of Nationalism* (2009).
- [2] Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The ‘manly Englishman’ and the ‘effeminate Bengali’ in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1995) and *Specters of Mother India* (2006).
- [3] Anita Anantharam, *Mahadevi Varma: Political Essays on Women, Culture, and Nation* (2010).
- [4] Karine Schomer, *Mahadevi Varma and the Chhayavad Age of Modern Hindi Poetry* (1983).

Full Bibliography, Research Paper, and More Information:

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