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# Gender and Respectability During the Famines That Ravaged Colonial India: A Social and Cultural Analysis

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**Abstract:** Historically and presently, non-western peoples will change the language and terminology they use while publicly speaking to appeal to a Western audience. Many non-Western works were orally passed down from generation to generation. When these works were written down, parts were whitewashed, rewritten, or parts were erased. While physical works were manually changed, non-Western speakers subconsciously alter their speech to be respected by Westerners. South Asian colonization forced South Asian leaders to reshape their arguments to be acceptable within the boundaries of white, Western standards. Women were largely excluded from speaking about issues, and centuries later, their labor and their work is being recognized and valued by Western and non-Western scholars alike. This project investigates how the impact of British colonization in South Asia impacted storytelling and language patterns of North Indian men and women. The paper further examines social and cultural analysis of the relationship between gender and labor, mostly focusing on the famines that ravaged South Asia throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s. The second question on inquiry is how the famine in South Asia affected women. By exploring the differences in gender perception by the West, more specifically the British, and the East, in this case, North India, during various famines in the late 1800s, scholars can better understand how gender was used a tool to divide South Asians alongside caste, class, and colorism.

*Key words:* colonization, respectability, non-Western communication, women's labor, storytelling, famine

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There is a stereotype that South Asian women need to be saved. This stereotype is because of South Asia's long history with British colonialism and the toxic masculinity embedded in South Asian culture. Stereotypes portray South Asian women as oppressed, serious, and studious. Historically, South Asians have been spoken over or silenced. This leads back to the concept of Western domination and Western populations deciding what stories should be told, how these stories should be told, and who should be telling the stories. When discussing the famine in India during World War II, the point of view of the British and the point of view of the Indians are in direct contrast with each other. A book outlining the Indian famine explains why this massive historical event is glossed over and overlooked in most history classes: "In 1947, Winston Churchill hired a team of researchers and ghostwriters to formulate the definitive history of World War II. Despite their distortions, the six massive volumes became the primary reference for a generation of historians— which may explain why the famine is almost totally absent from the tens of thousands of tomes since written about the war" (Mukerjee 2010). South Asian women were the backbone of society during the multiple famines that ravaged Colonial India (Jha 2019). Records of women's work and women's labor during this time are integral to understanding gender roles in North India during Western occupation. Without women, many of the famines would have continued for longer periods of time. Furthermore, women were the ones who suffered most from these famines (Jha 2019).

By examining social and cultural analysis of the relationship between gender and labor, mostly focusing on the famines that ravaged South Asia throughout the late 1800s and early 1900s, this paper explores whether this language was a product of circumstance, influenced by Western education, a choice, or a necessity. The paper also questions how the famines in South Asia affected women. As was

previously mentioned, women were largely excluded from publicly speaking about their experiences, however, records of their labor and other contributions are being analyzed as more of these records are being treated as valuable insight about the role of women in colonized societies. Still, there are not many sources that tell the stories of the many South Asian women who were the backbone of South Asian society during the multiple famines.

Women's work and women's labor are essential to understanding the famines that ravaged South Asia. Women farmers produced grain, one of the key exports to Britain. India was exporting 10 million grains annually to Britain by 1900, and the colony exported much more food than they imported (Mukerjee 2010). Without women joining the workforce and increasing food supply, many of the famines would have continued for longer periods of time (Jha 2019). Women were also affected by the famine at higher rates- they were given smaller amounts of rations due to the belief that women did not need to eat as much to survive (Jha 2019). They died of malnourishment at higher rates, and then were largely excluded from speaking about their experiences (Jha 2019). Records of their labor and other contributions were seen as worthless for much of history, and only recently are they being treated as valuable sources of insight. In contrast, the famine during wartime Britain continues to be taught in Western schools and the lives of the British who starved during the WWII famine were not erased from the history books. In the book *Churchill's Secret War : The British Empire and the Ravaging of India during World War II*, Madhusree Mukerjee outlines the power wielded over the Indians by the British. Mukerjee writes that "the imbalance of power inherent in the social Darwinian pyramid explains why famine could be tolerated in India while bread rationing was regarded as an intolerable deprivation in wartime Britain" (2010). Western scholars are finally taking interest, hundreds of years after exploiting the East, in investigating socially prescribed roles in colonized societies and exploring how these roles continue to be prescribed and perpetuated in Western societies.

By investigating the records of female labor during this time and the language used to describe their work, Westerners and Easterners alike can understand how gender relations in South Asia changed because of Western occupation. Non-Western people code switch, or change the language and terminology they use, when publicly speaking to appeal to a Western audience. Speech, communication, and linguistics are interesting factors to understand while looking at persuasive appeals from a non-Western lens. Many non-Western works were orally passed down from generation to generation. When these works were written down, many of them were whitewashed, rewritten, or erased. While physical works were manually changed, non-Western speakers subconsciously alter their speech to be respected by Westerners. South Asian colonization forced South Asian leaders to reshape their arguments to be acceptable within the boundaries of traditionally masculine, white, Western standards. Shilpa Dave, a scholar from the University of Illinois, outlines why South Asians strive so hard to speak like Westerners: “Word stress is a promising approach to the study of cultural communication because it does not ridicule the intelligence or aptitude of the speaker but rather comments on the process by which intelligibility is registered by prioritizing meaning. It asks not, “Why can’t you speak my language?” but “Why are you speaking it that way?” (2013).

Women were largely excluded from speaking about issues, and centuries later, their labor and their work is being recognized and valued by Western and non-Western scholars alike. By exploring the differences in gender perception by the West, more specifically the British, and the East, in this case North India, during various famines in the late 1800s, this paper argues that gender was used as a tool to divide South Asians alongside caste, class, and colorism.

### **Men’s Speech and Language**

A set of speeches were given at the World Parliament of Religion by Swami Viveknanda describing the need for fair food distribution. Viveknanda was a Hindu priest who went to this conference to teach

Westerners about Hinduism. He was a representative of the Indian subcontinent and its Hindu inhabitants. Swami Viveknanda was one of the first people to talk to Americans about Hinduism (Seager 1995). At the time, there were terrible famines going on in India. While under British rule, Indians did not control their own food supply (Mukerjee 2010). There were larger ration sizes for the British soldiers and then the rest of the rations were distributed by caste. The lower castes were given the least amount of food. With equal food distribution, millions of Indians would have survived (Mukerjee 2010). These famines could have been easily prevented by the British colonizers, but the British colonizers chose to redirect resources away from Indian people so they would starve on purpose (Mukerjee 2010). However, the British truly believed that Indians were lesser, and that poor Indians deserved to die from starvation. The British also worked many Indian farmers and laborers to death. The same people who produced the food were the ones suffering from a lack of it (Mukerjee 2010). Swami Viveknanda's primary purpose was to educate the West about Hinduism, but he had a secondary purpose to raise awareness about the widespread famine affecting his people (Seager 1995).

The parliament of religions included representatives from all around the world so Viveknanda was given a unique opportunity to appeal to a diverse audience. There were religious leaders from India, China, and Japan who were able to talk about their religions but had to change their framework to fit into a Christian mold. Because the parliament of religions was in Chicago and hosted by a Western country, everything was based on a Christian, Eurocentric, patriarchal standard of religion (Seager 1995). This hindered Westerners from having a complete understanding of non-Western religions because they viewed non-Western religions in the context of Christianity (Vieira 2019). Viveknanda's speeches, by extension, also had to be framed by Christianity.

His speeches are an example of a Non-Western person appealing to a Western audience. He mentions the famine and talks about his religion. Because his work emphasizes the difficulties with explaining Non-Western religion to a Western audience, this speech is an example of how South Asians

communicate and orient themselves towards Western and Christian cultural norms to appeal to them (Seager 1995). Masculinity is inherent to this type of communication because more men than women were educated, and only educated people were able to write and recite speeches. Since Indian men were writing the speeches, their perspective of how the famine affected them was pushed to the forefront, even though the famine was affecting women and children at higher rates. Educated men were the spokespeople for all Indians affected by the famine.

Another example of non-Western discourse during this period is the book *Indian Famines, Their Causes, and Prevention* (1901) by Romesh Chunder Dutt. Dutt started out as an Indian civil servant, so he had firsthand experience working with citizens. Later, he became a nationalist politician and economic historian. This book views the famines from an economic perspective. Once again, the labor of women is largely overlooked. Women were suffering the most from the famine and made up most of the food workers (Jha 2019). However, women were not able to converse with British soldiers and were not afforded the agency to speak about issues that disproportionately affected them, like food insecurity. As a politician, Romesh Chunder Dutt was well versed in dealing with British colonizers who controlled all the laws and decision making in the state. This book outlines the causes and prevention of Indian famines in the late 1800s (Dutt 1901). Dutt was passionate about acting in the interests of the South Asian people while also being able to be respected by British officials. He worked on the book during the worst years of the famines and published it after the worst of that round of famines were over. The book was published in 1901. Dutt wrote the book to talk about the causes and prevention of Indian famines in an academic way so that British officials would listen to the concerns of South Asians.

Dutt needed to appeal to a Western audience to be taken seriously. He was trying to prevent future famines from occurring, but looking back, he failed at that purpose. Many British people believed in the Malthusian theory that the famines were a way to control the large population of India (Jha 2019). British colonizers believed that the lack of equal food distribution was the same as the lack of food. If

the amount of food produced was given back to the farming villages, all the citizens would have enough to eat (Mukerjee 2010). Because the British soldiers stole most of the food produced by Indian farmers, the citizens starved. The Bengali famines during and after WWII were some of the worst famines in history and were directly caused by Winston Churchill, a man still revered by the West (Mukerjee 2010). Dutt's book does not blame Churchill's racism and thievery, but rather shifts the burden of producing more food to the farmers. This source exemplifies how South Asians orient themselves towards Western and Christian cultural norms to appeal to Western and Christian people. The source also showed that British officials were more likely to listen to an educated, wealthy man than anyone else. Dutt was "respectable" because of the way he spoke, dressed, and wrote. Many lower caste people were not afforded these privileges, and women did not have the tools nor the agency to communicate with the British in this way. Dutt was able to publish an entire book of solutions, yet many of the solutions were not adopted. The failure of a man with the utmost number of privileges speaks to the level of racism that the Indians faced as well as British ignorance. Many British men viewed all Indian men as lesser. The stereotype of Indian accents implying incompetence continues today through the overexaggerated Indian accents in comedy that encourage laughter and mimicry in the name of humor (Dave 2013). Dutt was able to overcome many barriers and occupied a high position in the Indian government, but he was still operating within a white Western governmental system that devalued his very existence. This white Western environment could have been why his propositions to resolve massive food insecurity were ignored. However, without Dutt in the position he was in, he would not have been able to propose any solutions at all.

Dutt and Viveknanda were both upper caste men and that largely contributed to why they were not completely ignored by the British officials. They both had a formal education and came from wealthy families. Neither Dutt nor Viveknanda suffered greatly from the many famines that ravaged India during

the British occupation. However, they used their caste and male privilege to argue for food and resources for the masses.

### **Women's Place and Agency**

In pre-colonial India, many tasks were divided by gender. For example, in Bengal, men would dig up dirt and women would carry dirt for building new structures (Jha 2019). In some cases, the gendered structure of work remained prevalent during colonial India. However, after famine struck multiple times, an urgent need for laborers, no matter their gender, was needed to keep villagers alive. During the famine, women took on the same tasks men used to do on top of their socially prescribed domestic duties like cooking and cleaning (Jha 2019). Women were doing much of the same work that men were, but they were paid lower wages. Justification for this included that women needed to eat less and therefore were not given the same amount of food or wages (Jha 2019).

During colonial India, the British took some of the Indian food and products for themselves, ten million tons of grain annually to be exact, therefore, Indians needed to produce more total goods (Mukerjee 2010). This increase in production led to a higher demand in labor. Many North Indian women entered the workforce to fulfill this demand. Furthermore, the British colonizers wanted to build modern transportation to connect various rapidly growing North Indian cities such as Delhi, Agra, and Goa (Mukerjee 2010). In contrast, South India's cities were more spread out, but contained many ports. During colonial rule, North Indian women were hired by the British to repair many public works, such as roads, railways, and canals to transfer goods from where they were manufactured in the North to where they were shipped from coastal ports in the South (Jha 2019).

Many of these North Indian women were young, poor, and employed by the state. These women were hired to build public infrastructure to transport goods. These women were not able to

communicate with the British like their male counterparts. In an article about intercultural communication, Professor Beth Haskell from University of Delaware writes that “language is framed by transcontextual networks and flows: When examining at sociohistorical contexts for language resources, such resources reflect uneven access to power” (Haskell 2020). These working women were underpaid and undervalued because of their gender. Wages were also divided by class. An upper-class woman would make more money than a lower-class man but less money than an upper-class man. The rations became more complicated over time as division of labor by gender became more nuanced. The British were determined to divide the North Indian laborers and therefore gave them rations by class, gender, and task. This chart shows the division of labor along with the corresponding rations each worker received:

Table 1. *Ration on famine public works in 1893.*<sup>56</sup>

	Male ( <i>chittaks</i> )	Female ( <i>chittaks</i> )
Class A	21	19
Class B	19	17
Class C	16	15
Class D (minimum wage)	14	13

Table 2. *Ration on famine public works in 1898.*<sup>57</sup>

	Class	Diet ( <i>chittaks</i> )
I	Diggers	20
II	Carriers	15
III	Working children	8
IV	Adult dependents/minimum wage	12
V	Non-working children (above 8 years)	7
	Non-working children (below 8 years)	5

55. Government of India, *Report of the Indian Famine Commission, 1901*, (Calcutta, 1901) [hereafter, FCR 1901], p. 39.

56. FCR, 1898, p. 260.

57. *Ibid.*, p. 273.

Digging, a task viewed as more masculine, was an activity worth more rations than carrying, a task viewed as “suitable” for women (Jha 2019). However, many women became diggers, and the gendered association of these tasks became more complicated. In 1900, one chief commissioner tried to ban women from becoming diggers (Jha 2019). However, the companies needed as many diggers as possible, and many times, women ended up being the best for that role. The state commissioners reconvened and decided only exceptionally strong and capable women could be employed as diggers (Jha 2019).

Because of Western colonization, there was an increase in demand for labor because the British were taking most of the Indian food and products (Mukerjee 2010). This rapidly growing demand for laborers pushed more women into the workforce. During the famines in the late 1800s, women were part of repairing many public works, which included roads, railways, and canals to transfer goods from where they were manufactured to coastal ports (Jha 2019). Even though the task itself might have been the same as the work men were doing, after women started doing it, the task became associated with weakness and lack of skill. There was a strong association with certain types of work being “natural” or “suitable” for women (Jha 2019). Younger, working women were viewed as a threat to the patriarchal society because of the agency they held compared to non-working women, but someone needed to fill the demand for laborers. Therefore, women in the workforce were necessary, but not well-liked or well-received by Indian nor British men.

### **The Intersection of Language and Gender**

The disdain for female laborers who were necessary for the country’s survival continues in today’s conversations about working women in the East. Are these women strong for defying patriarchal gender norms? In an article about gender roles in the workplaces, Professor Olsson from M.I.T. writes that “Gender stereotypes contribute to the maintenance of the status quo in occupational gender

segregation by serving system-justifying functions. Gender segregation is assumed to be natural because the gender overrepresented in an occupational domain is perceived to inherently possess the traits necessary to be successful in that domain” (2020). Non-Western women might feel the need to draw their strength from occupying traditionally masculine roles because of a lack of valuing their skills and their work (Olsson 2020). Women are forced to reject their femininity to feel strong. That practice continues today because many women who work in male dominated fields feel pressured to exhibit masculine associated traits like physical strength (Olsson 2020).

Growing up, women observe that men’s voices carry more value, even if what the men are saying makes no sense. This devaluing of voices is seen twofold and threefold when the women are not white women, not Western women, and not upper-class women. In a paper about intercultural communication, researcher Bonnie Beth Haskell states that “understanding sociohistorical contexts, such as colonialism, migration, and political oppression, is important because of their influences on power relations, culture and communication” (Haskell 2020).

There is still an expectation that women should carry themselves a certain way and if a woman carries herself like a man (read: she is confident, she is loud, she is honest) then she is not a “good woman.” Non- Western women who act like men are not seen as respectable because they are not men. Non-Western women who act like women are not seen as respectable because they are women, and according to patriarchal standards, that means they are not worthy of the same respect as a man.

Because of the abstract idea of respectability, non-Western women are not able to be respected by a variety of different groups of people, such as Western men, non- Western men, and Western women. Westerners will view South Asian women as more masculine and South Asian men as more feminine (Viera 2019). There can be no in-between area where South Asian women can be seen as beautiful, and therefore valuable and respectable. These restrictive gender roles not only re-enforce the Western obsession with the binary, but they also encourage South Asian men to be hypermasculine.

South Asian men who are not supported by the patriarchy to the same extent that white men will use their agency to degrade and control South Asian women. Being viewed as more feminine is seen as shameful by many South Asian men, and the toxic masculinity that rises from this assumption harms South Asian women.

The strict Western gender binary also does not leave room for those who identify outside of it. Being LGBTQ+ in India was criminalized until 2013 (Love Wins in India). LGBTQ+ people in India are still viewed with suspicion, especially if they live outside of the bounds of the binary. This is strange considering that Hinduism, the religion most largely practiced in South Asia, has deities, gods, and goddesses that are explicitly queer. In the West, religion is often used as a tactic to re-enforce a binary. However, when using that argument within the context of Hinduism, the religious argument falls apart.

Going back to the generalization of South Asian women being masculinized, the idea that South Asian women were less “woman-ly” was used to exclude them from being viewed as equal to Western women, South Asian women are less likely to uphold a Eurocentric, or Western beauty standard. Many versions of Western feminism hinge on women deserving equal rights or treatment by society because they are upholding a Eurocentric beauty standard and occupy traditionally feminine roles. Non-Western women are less likely to label themselves as feminists because of the previous exclusion of their values and voices from feminist movements. Western feminist or women’s movements have been focused on individual women gaining success within a larger patriarchal system, rather than envisioning a system that operated outside of the bounds of the patriarchy, challenging it rather than thriving despite of it. When interpreting a Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence and integrating non-Western and Western Communication, Haskell explains that “western models have an individual basis, and do not position the self as within a web of strongly interconnected relationships” (2020). One common criticism of Western feminism is the parallels it has with white feminism. Both exclude brown, Western

women, so nonwhite and non-Western women are less likely to benefit from white and Western feminism.

South Asian women are viewed as less innocent than white women because they do not meet a certain standard of fairness and therefore innocence (Viera 2019). South Asian female laborers during the famine were treated as “bodies” and the importance of their lives was equated to the importance of the work that they did and the wealth that they came from. South Asian women were the most likely to die from famine but were also relied on as being a source of production for public works by Western companies.

Versions of Western feminism heavily emphasize respecting women. Unfortunately, women’s respectability is inherently tied to the Western beauty standard, and beauty is equated to being white, thin, and possessing European features. Because of the Western obsession with the binary, there can be no in between area where South Asian women can be seen as beautiful, and therefore respectable. If South Asian women are not feminine in the eyes of the West, then they must be masculine in the eyes of the West (Viera 2019). This tactic continues to be used in Western feminism to exclude various groups that do not live within the constraints of Western femininity, especially non-Western women of color.

## **Conclusion**

This paper discusses how non-Western men are spoken over by Western men through whitewashing and oversimplifying non-Western issues and stories. Similarly, non-Western women are spoken for by non-Western men that prioritize themselves in issues that predominantly affect women and profit from women’s labor. South Asians were viewed as lesser than the British, and that is why the

British felt entitled to subjugate an entire group of people, steal their resources, and exploit them for their labor.

Non-Westerns are also more likely to change themselves to appeal to Western audiences. In the works by Dutt and Viveknanda, neither man used anger as an appeal to appeal to the British because angry non-Westerners are written off as hysterical and too emotional. The Western colonizers also oversimplified non-Western religions like Hinduism and Buddhism and compared religious practices to Christian religious practices that were nothing alike. By oversimplifying non-Western religions, British colonizers employed orientalist and racist attitudes towards all non-Western peoples. Westerners are more likely to respond with hostility when presented with something unfamiliar and that is why non-Westerns are more likely to frame their issues in a Western context. Non-Westerners are also spoken over and infantilized by Westerners.

South Asian women also changed their language when talking to men. These women are conditioned to feel like their ideas are smaller and less important than a man's ideas. Women, historically, have turned to less traditional ways to express their thoughts and ideas such as fables and poetry. However, methods of communication and storytelling that deviate from the norm are viewed as less professional, serious, and illegitimate. Non-Western women continue to struggle to have their stories heard because they are not seen as worthy of respect by the patriarchy or the West.

There are also many groups that were completely excluded from the records presented in this paper. Their modes of communication were deemed lesser and therefore their stories are excluded in this paper. Some examples of these people include small rural villagers, lower caste women, LGBTQ+ South Asians, people of lesser-known religions like Zoroastrians, and South Indian laborers.

I hope that this paper encourages people to allow non-Western norms to co-exist with Western culture without being altered beyond recognition. In future discussions about South Asia, communication should include non-Western women, especially in discussions about issues that

disproportionately affect them. Respectability politics and tone policing continue to police the limits of people of color, especially women of color, who communicate within the public sphere. People should be able to acknowledge that content is more important than delivery. Simply because Non-Western methods of communication differ from Western methods of communication does not make them any less respectable or important. Letting South Asians tell their own stories is essential to understanding how gender was used a tool to divide South Asians alongside caste, class, and colorism.

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