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## **Writing Educational Spaces in Twentieth -Century Reformist Indian Discourse**

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# Writing Educational Spaces in Twentieth -Century Reformist Indian Discourse

Barnita Bagchi

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## **Abstract**

This paper analyses discourse and practice around educational spaces in twentieth-century India, with attention to notions of region, nation, and the international, and a concurrent focus on the gendering of such spaces. My focus is 1920-1960. The actors and writings examined were important shaping presences in the reformist/ progressive educational field of that time and place. By reformist or progressive education, we refer to theories and practices of education that sought to radically change prevalent official or formal systems of education, with a valence of achieving progress in society. We examine the (very different) contours of the village community-based school and a renovated, internationalist ashram-like space found in the educational practice and thought of M.K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, both of whom formulated influential models of education. We consider also notions of educational space found in the writing and practice of women educationists such as Rokeya Hossain, Marjorie Sykes, and Jyotirmoyee Devi. Tagore, Gandhi, Hossain, Devi or Sykes were grappling with formulating educational practices and concepts in a country which, under the rule of Britain, experienced a highly entangled and complex educational arena, where competing deprivations, demands, practices, and institutions subsisted. Educational space and spaces embodied such contradictions, entanglements, and deprivations.

**Keywords:** educational spaces, India, gender, Tagore, Gandhi, nation, region, international

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## **Introduction**

My article analyses educational spaces in reformist and progressive educational writing in twentieth-century India. While this article in no way claims to be comprehensive (the educational ideas and practices circulating in the first half of 20th century India were plural and diverse), the actors and writings examined here were very important, active, and influential shaping presences in the reformist/ progressive educational field of that time and place. By reformist or progressive education, we refer to theories and practices of education that sought to radically change prevalent official or formal systems of education, often with a valence of achieving progress in society. The actors and writers I discuss were negotiating a highly complex set of positions We examine in this article the (very different) contours of the village community-based school and a renovated, internationalist ashram-like space found in the educational practice and thought of M.K. Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore, both of whom formulated influential models of education. We consider also how such space was analysed by women educationists such as Marjorie Sykes, who worked with both Tagore and Gandhi, and writer-activists such as Rokeya Hossain and Jyotirmoyee Devi. My focus will be 1920-1961: these were years in which anti-colonial movements for independence from Britain were in full swing, followed by India being partitioned and granted independence in 1947, and the years just following that granting of sovereignty.

The King called the nephew and asked, "Dear nephew, what is this that I hear?"

The nephew said, "Your Majesty, the bird's education is now complete."

The King asked, "Does it still jump?"

The nephew said, "God forbid."

"Does it still fly?"

"No."

"Does it sing any more?"

"No."

"Does it scream if it doesn't get food?"

“No.”

The King said, “Bring the bird in. I would like to see it.”

The bird was brought in. With it came the administrator, the guards, the horsemen. The King felt the bird. It didn't open its mouth and didn't utter a word. Only the pages of books, stuffed inside its stomach, raised a ruffling sound.

Outside, where the gentle south wind and the blossoming woods were heralding spring, the young green leaves filled the sky with a deep and heavy sigh. (Tagore, 2004)

This radical critique of arid, institutionalized education by Rabindranath Tagore, in ‘The Parrot’s Tale’ (Tagore, 2004), is also spatialized: a world of green, natural woods and attendant freedom is contrasted to the stifling world of the court where parrots get stuffed with paper and are murdered in the name of teaching. Rabindranath Tagore, M.K. Gandhi, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, Jyotirmoyee Devi, and Marjorie Sykes, figures whose writing I analyse in this article, were grappling with formulating educational practices and concepts in India, a country which, under the rule of Britain, experienced a highly entangled, complex, and messy educational arena, where competing deprivations, demands, practices, and institutions subsisted, a country in which literacy remained abysmally low. Educational space and spaces embodied such contradictions, entanglements, and deprivations, then even more than now. The village school; the school at home; the formal classroom with desks and benches; the classroom under the trees; the urban, cramped slum school; the clay cottage housing a school; a classroom which is also a crafts workshop; the high-ceilinged college classroom where boys and/ or girls sit; a school housed in a grocer’s: numerous and diverse kinds of spaces around education, both elementary and higher, point to how multifarious educational spaces and spatialization were in colonial India. Bibhutibhushan Bandopadhyay’s Bengali novel *The Song of the Road* (Bandopadhyay, 1969), for example, offers vivid representations of these different kinds of educational spaces, from the indigenous private basic school housed in a grocery, to the formal educational spaces of colonial India. The pre-colonial past of Indian education and its colonial presence both served as norms, positive or negative, for future development; the spaces

thereof, such as the forest school, the ashram, the *tapovana* (both of these last being spaces, originally associated with Vedic Hinduism, often housed in forests, where teachers and students constituted integral parts of the community), the formal schools and colleges set up on partly British models by British and Indian men and women, all interconnect and overlap in Indian education.

As we are increasingly coming to recognize, it is a falsity to contrast in simple terms the indigenous pre-colonial educational space or practice with the imported colonial British-formulated formal educational space: the work of Jana Tschurenev (2010) and others shows that such key elements in nineteenth-century British educational practice as the monitorial system owed much to Indian practices, for example, in the Malabar region of southern India. One often sees nineteenth-century pictures of proper British boys and girls, one of whom is taking the lead as a monitor, teaching her peers; however, behind the picture is one of children in south India who had learnt, using such methods, for centuries. Thus modernity and tradition, the hybrid and the indigenous are always imbricated and mutually intertangled, a point which it is vital to remember: traditions are often reinvented, and modernities are often rooted in the past, in educational spaces in twentieth-century India.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was himself a drop-out from school, and found the formal school environment constricting. His travels in rural Bengal and India before the onset of the twentieth century left a deep mark on him, so that he eventually decided to found a new educational and creative community in Shantiniketan in the Birbhum district of Bengal in present-day India: this place had been used as a meditative and contemplative space by his father Debendranath Tagore. Rabindranath Tagore focused on a rural area, engaged in practices that promoted local rural development, worked with the tribal Santhals of the surrounding villages, and supported their aesthetics and way of life. He also brought in crafts such as batik from Indonesia, sent his son and a son-in-law to study agriculture in the USA, and welcomed visitors and teachers from all over India and the world. The Japanese painter Okakura Kakuzo (Tenshin), who visited Calcutta in 1902, was an inspiration for teaching the Japanese style of painting to the future art teachers of the university that Tagore founded.

Tagore's educational space was envisioned as a roomy, open space where cultures of the world would connect and dialogue. His commitment to the local, to the composite Indian, to the Asian, and to the global space made his educational practice particularly intriguing in the overlaps and connections between the local, the regional, the national, and the international. Tagore wrote,

I well remember the surprise and annoyance of an experienced headmaster, reputed to be a successful disciplinarian, when he saw one of the boys of my school climbing a tree and choosing a fork of the branches for settling down to his studies. I had to say to him in explanation that 'childhood is the only period of life when a civilized man can exercise his choice between the branches of a tree and his drawing-room chair, and should I deprive this boy of that privilege because I, as a grown-up man, am barred from it?' What is surprising is to notice the same headmaster's approbation of the boys' studying botany. He believes in an impersonal knowledge of the tree because that is science, but not in a personal experience of it. This growth of experience leads to forming instinct, which is the result of nature's own method of instruction. The boys of my school have acquired instinctive knowledge of the physiognomy of the tree. By the least touch they know where they can find a foothold upon an apparently inhospitable trunk; they know how far they can take liberty with the branches, how to distribute their bodies' weight so as to make themselves least burdensome to branchlets. My boys are able to make the best possible use of the tree in the matter of gathering fruits, taking rest and hiding from undesirable pursuers. I myself was brought up in a cultured home in a town, and as far as my personal behaviour goes, I have been obliged to act all through my life as if I were born in a world where there are no trees. Therefore I consider it as a part of education for my boys to let them fully realize that they are in a scheme of existence where trees are a substantial fact, not merely as generating chlorophyll and taking carbon from the air, but as living trees. (Tagore, 1933)

The living, useful, spreading tree's space thus becomes a vital site of education in Tagore's school. This is part of his articulation that the

mere artifice and crampedness of the human-built classroom is inferior to the unbounded space of the natural environment, including dirt and dust. He aimed that the space of the school should take students into 'personal experience' of the 'completeness of the world.'

In my school, much to the disgust of the people of expensive habits, I had to provide for this great teacher — this bareness of furniture and materials — not because it is poverty, but because it leads to personal experience of the world. What tortured me in my school-days was the fact that the school had not the completeness of the world. It was a special arrangement for giving lessons. It could only be suitable for grown-up people who were conscious of the special need of such places and therefore ready to accept their teaching at the cost of dissociation from life. But children are in love with life, and it is their first love. All its colour and movement attract their eager attention. And are we quite sure of our wisdom in stifling this love? Children are not born ascetics, fit to enter at once into the monastic discipline of acquiring knowledge. At first they must gather knowledge through their life, and then they will renounce their lives to gain knowledge, and then again they will come back to their fuller lives with ripened wisdom. But society has made its own arrangements for manipulating men's minds to fit its special patterns. (Tagore, 1933)

This is a surprising rationale for an educational space bare of the special paraphernalia of usual formal classes. Left to the largeness and multitudinousness of the natural world, the children's senses and love of beauty will be satisfied. The normal classroom, quite the contrary, is held to be specialised and ascetic. All his life, again and again, Tagore argued for creativity and experience, and against asceticism, in education. To that extent, the fact that he spoke positively about the ancient Indian *tapovana* or *ashram* (the 'forest colonies of great teachers' in the following passage) as a possible model for his educational practice does not imply that he wanted some kind of ascetic experience for his students: rather, song, exuberant colour,

dance, and all the plastic and performing arts were valued in Shantiniketan.

In India we still cherish in our memory the tradition of the forest colonies of great teachers. These places were neither schools nor monasteries in the modern sense of the word. They consisted of homes where with their families lived men whose object was to see the world in God and to realize their own life in Him....Thus in the ancient India the school was there where was the life itself. There the students were brought up, not in the academic atmosphere of scholarship and learning, or in the maimed life of monastic seclusion, but in the atmosphere of living aspiration. They took the cattle to pasture, collected firewood, gathered fruit, cultivated kindness to all creatures, and grew in their spirit with their own teachers' spiritual growth...That this traditional relationship of the masters and disciples is not a mere romantic fiction is proved by the relic we still possess of the indigenous system of education. These *chatuspathis*, which is the Sanskrit name for the university, have not the savour of the school about them. The students live in their master's home like the children of the house, without having to pay for their board and lodging or tuition. The teacher prosecutes his own study, living a life of simplicity, and helping the students in their lessons as a part of his life and not of his profession. (Tagore, 1933)

Again, we have a sense of education as part of the totality of life, and not artificially divorced and specialised from the round of human activities. Here too the field, the pasture, the forest and suchlike spaces, which are also used for humanity to gather and produce food, become an integral part of the process of education.

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869-1948) started his educational experiments on Phoenix Farm and Tolstoy Farm in South Africa at nearly the same time as Tagore started Shantiniketan, and in 1915 he and his Phoenix Farm students visited Shantiniketan. Tagore's and Gandhi's notions of educational space have much in common, but also major differences. The two men, as has been movingly documented (Bhattacharya, 1999), remained reverent friends and acute mutual



critics until Tagore died, seven years earlier than Gandhi. Gandhi's educational space was deliberately framed to be more austere, stark, and manual-work-based than Tagore's. While Tagore favoured creativity in education, Gandhi favoured productive work and moral, social, and economic self-sufficiency. Both believed in rural educational spaces, and, at the same time, the transnational, the cosmopolitan, and the international constantly collided creatively with the local and the indigenous in their educational spaces and practices.

Women were important actors in Tagore's and Gandhi's educational spaces. In this article, I shall be reading Gandhi's notion and practice of education through the words of a remarkable actor in the field of education in India in the twentieth century, and a vital female presence: the British Quaker educator Marjorie Sykes, who worked both in Shantiniketan, and then for long years in Gandhi's Sevagram (meaning the village of service), in Wardha in western India. Marjorie Sykes (1905-1995) analysed and described Gandhi's 'Nai Talim' or Basic Education at Wardha, which started in 1937. Sykes was educated at Newnham College, Cambridge, took a teacher's diploma, and opted for overseas service in India. She came to Madras in 1928 as a teacher in a local school, the Bentinck School. She lived and worked on in India till 1991. She worked in Shantiniketan in the last three years of Tagore's life, later translated some of Tagore's works, and wrote a biography of him. She was a close and sympathetic observer of the early years in Sevagram, Wardha, and, invited by Gandhi to be a key member of his Basic Education team, became, after Gandhi's death, Principal of his Basic Education Scheme in Wardha.

Sykes writes,

My excitement about Gandhiji's ideas had not arisen in a vacuum. It was the natural result of a great deal that had gone before, right back to my own childhood. We children were expected to help in all the daily chores, the cooking and cleaning of a very simple home. My father drew a modest salary as head-master of the village school in a poor coal-mining community in northern England. It was an "ordinary" school, but he was not an "ordinary" teacher. He knew that children learn by making and

doing things, and he spent long hours at home in the evening preparing things for them to make and do, while I, his own eldest child, watched and helped. He showed the school children how to make cardboard models that really worked - railway signals that moved up and down, a water-wheel that turned when one poured fine sand upon it to simulate the water. Real water would not do for a cardboard wheel, but the principle was the same. So maths and science were learned, and also manual skill and accuracy. Geography and history, poetry, music, were linked up with the children's own experience. Once an assistant teacher came who had lived in Canada and knew how to make fire by striking a spark in tinder. Father at once arranged a demonstration and then let all the children try it for themselves. (Sykes, 1988)

As we see, spaces in progressive education were resonant and interlinked across countries and social classes; thus Sykes's sympathy for an Indian radical educationist's emphasis on learning by doing and by using one's hands owes its genesis to observing similar methods used by her father, teaching in a poor community thousands of miles away in coal-mining northern England.

This is utterly unsurprising: though to most people Gandhi and the village community in India remain inextricably linked, his earliest experiments took place in a transnational community in South Africa. Inspired by Ruskin and Tolstoy, his closest collaborators included the German Jew, Hermann Kallenbach. By the time he wrote *Hind Swaraj*, Gandhi formulated powerfully the notion of the village republic, and schools that would combine education with productive, manual, often craft-based work. Suspicious of state interference, Gandhi aimed to make his schools as far as possible self-supporting financially, and in a continuum with home. Both Tagore and Gandhi used the resonant metaphor of the *ashram* as a partial model for their highly innovative, radically modern schooling: a spiritualised, renovative community.

About Segaon (Sevagram), the village where the Wardha Basic Education activities started, Asha Devi, one of the key members of the founding team wrote,

It is a most obscure little village of about 700 people, more than half of whom are Harijans. For four or five months in the year its fields are green, there is work for all, and a brief illusion of beauty and plenty. But for the rest of the year it lies like a speck of dust in the midst of the bare plains of the Central Provinces, hands idle in every house. There is no water except from the few dirty wells jealously guarded by each little caste and sub-caste. There are no hills, no trees, no natural playground for children. About 20 of the families have land, the rest are landless labourers, and most of them cannot afford to eat even the equivalent of the "C" class diet-provided in the Government jails.(Sykes, 1988)

As a result of the implementation of the Government of India Act, 1935, Indian National Congress ministries (that is, belonging to Gandhi's party) came to power in 1937 in several provinces. In April 1938 the Hindustani Talimi Sangh opened a training school at Wardha. The Congress government of the Central Provinces, of which the Wardha District was then a part, was sympathetic, and the old village school was closed down in order to give the new experiment the fullest scope. Sykes quotes Gandhiji:

Gandhiji wrote his seminal article in Harijan of the 31st July 1937:

"By education I mean an all-round drawing out of the best in child and man-body, mind and spirit. Literacy is not the end of education nor even the beginning. It is only one of the means by which man and woman can be educated. Literacy in itself is no education. I would therefore begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training. Thus every school can be made self-supporting, the condition being that the State takes over the manufactures of these schools."(Sykes, 1988)

Sykes writes that by 1961, the Sevagram experiment stagnated:

Why was it that during the next ten years the Sevagram story seemed to some of its best friends to have come to an end? Why

did they feel that after about 1961 a period of "stagnation" had begun, rather than a new and exciting phase of "non-violent revolution"? While the Kothari Commission in 1966 paid tribute to the creative ideas embodied in Nai Talim. and, spoke strongly of the need for its ethical and spiritual ideals to be incorporated in the education of the nation, nothing significant actually happened. Travesties of the "work-experience" recommended by the report soon became as common as, at an earlier period, the travesties of basic craft-education had been. (Sykes, 1988)

Gandhi was greatly admired by another innovative educator-writer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932), who did accept grants from the British government for the school she founded and ran. Educational spaces are multifariously inflected in her work too. As a Bengali Muslim woman advocating girls' and women's education, and an educator-administrator running a school for girls, Rokeya's writing navigates multiple channels in which her identities as woman, as Bengali, as Muslim, and as Indian come together with those of teacher, campaigner, and writer, to build up a compelling case for popular education for girls; she voices sympathy for emerging national movements, while at the same time giving women's education the dignity of a distinct sphere.

In her essay 'Bolgarto' ('The Sacrificial Hole') Rokeya presents an anatomy of unfree, corrupt, feudal Indian ruling classes who are sycophantic to colonialism; in contrast to this are posited in positive terms women active in rural educational work, sympathetic to the Indian National Congress's strategy of anti-colonial activism based on rural regeneration and reform.

'Bolgarto' begins thus:

The college was closed for the summer. I was sitting in the veranda. Suddenly I noticed Kamala Didi coming up the stairs, panting, and accompanied by a Muslim woman called Jaheda Bibi. Kamala Devi is a dedicated Congress worker whose mission was to propagate khadi and the spinning wheel. She pulled up a chair at once and sitting down, she said, 'I have won

over a lot of territory... Now let us go to Boligarto.'

'And where can that be?' I asked.

'My maternal uncle's home is there. He is no more, so it's the bastion of my cousins,' said Jaheda.

'O fine! Then it'll be easy to spread the message of the spinning wheel,' I said.

'O no! It's not as easy as you think. The village is quite out of bounds. Moreover Jaheda is banned from entering it.'

'Why? What has she done?'

'Because she goes about with me and has some education, wears khadi and takes vegetarian food.'

'Then why go to Boligarto? Since it's the home of Jaheda's cousins, and she herself is banned entry?'

'How can that be? I am Kamala for whom all doors are open. Besides because entry is forbidden, all the more I must enter there. And you have to go with us.' (Hossain, 1920)

The feudal lord of the sacrificial hole of Boligarto is Khan Bahadur Khatkhate, and his brother Farfare, who are exposed, through devastating satire, as sycophants of the British rulers, oppressors of women and peasants, corrupt, and greedy. Khatkhate and Farfare are satirical, connotative names; 'Khatkhate' suggests both 'dry as a stick' and 'staccato'; Farfare suggests 'one who talks too much' as well as 'shallow and evanescent'. These men are cousins of Jaheda, who insists on visiting the benighted village. The purpose of the women's visit is to lay the groundwork for a movement of awakening there. They find that Farfare and Khatkhate pretend to be devout Muslims, yet eschew the liberal practices of that religion and borrow illiberal ones from other religions when it suits them: thus, they will not allow the remarriage of a young widowed sister, contrary to the sanction that Islam gives to such remarriage. They will not permit the women in their family to go out even in a covered car without them performing penance. They embezzle money from orphanages they run. They are against human beings being photographed and yet have no problems if a photo is taken with British colonial officials. They, of course, oppose female education.

Published in 1927, *Boligarto* clearly shows Rokeya's sympathy with Gandhi's project of regeneration of spinning, weaving, and other artisanal trades. Spinning coarse cotton cloth, called 'khadi' or 'khaddar' on the spinning-wheel became a powerful emblem and practice in Gandhi's educational as much as moral and political space. In popular perception a pursuit associated with women and the lower classes, spinning indigenous cloth was the most important in the array of trades and schemes that Gandhi favoured for regenerating village India. Earlier, when the Indian cotton textile industry dominated the textile trades of the world, before deindustrialization in the nineteenth century, one major source of earnings of upper-class women in India was spinning (Tilly, 1994; Bagchi, 2010). In *Boligarto*, the hell-hole of a village ruled by despotic, pro-colonial landlords, is the antithesis of the regenerated, radical, innovative rural educational space of Gandhi and Tagore. Rokeya's own educational and welfarist institutions were located in urban India, in Calcutta: she represented the contours of her own educational community and space with great élan in her semi-autobiographical novella *Padmarag* or *The Ruby*.

Rokeya first started a school for girls in Bhagalpur in the province of Bihar, in October 1909, five months after her husband's death. When she was forced to leave Bhagalpur, she re-started the school in 1910 in Calcutta. Slowly the school grew, so that by the time of her death in 1932, it was a full-fledged high school where 75% of the students passed the matriculation examination. In 1935, the school began to receive government aid, and even today it is a well-functioning government school in Calcutta, and the most lasting testimony to Rokeya's competence as educationist.

In her novella *Padmarag* ([1924] 2005), Rokeya creates a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia, complementing her futuristic dream-vision or utopia, *Sultana's Dream*, 1905. *Padmarag* describes a female-founded and female-administered community set in contemporary Bengal, where women from diverse religions, regions, and ethnicities, with unhappy histories of patriarchal and familial oppression, band together with an educative and philanthropic project. Their set of activities ranges from formal education to propagating crafts and caring for the sick and the destitute. It offers a series of personal narratives of the women working in the institution. These tales

recount and indict familial and marital oppression, to redress which the institution Tarini Bhavan is founded. Rokeya's community is inhabited by Hindus, Brahmos, Muslims, and Christians, black women and white women, all suffering from patriarchal oppression, and all needing to receive and impart refuge and education.

The philanthropic institution 'Tarini Bhavan' is named after its founder Dina-Tarini Sen, a Brahmo woman. The name is connotative: 'Dina-tarini' means saviour of the distressed'. Literally, 'tarini' is a boatsman, who in the metaphorical sense rows the distressed out of danger. It is a name infused with the spiritual and the religious, and many Bengali songs are addressed to God imaged as Dina-tarini. There is a distinctive plangency to the term: quite often, old women would pray to God to steer them across the sea of life to a haven beyond.

Tarini is the second wife and then a very young widow of a much older barrister. She founds the institution at the age of twenty-one in the bloom of youth, resolving to go against the wishes of relatives by her act. Rokeya too founded her school after her husband's death, when she was still in her twenties, using money which her husband had bequeathed her explicitly for the purpose of setting up a girls' school.

Tarini Bhavan has a school, a workshop or training institute for adult women, a home for widows, and a home for the sick and distressed. The school has both day-scholars and boarders. It is a Society for the Alleviation of Female Suffering that forms the moral, ideological, and institutional core of the project. Some of the inhabitants of Tarini Bhavan are called 'sisters', short for 'sisters of the poor', wear a uniform of saffron or blue, and have no separate rooms: the monastic ideal of service and renunciation is thus as present in the institution as it is in its founder's life. The space that is created in Tarini Bhavan is indeed somewhat like a nunnery or ashram, secluded from the mainstream social and familial space that most women occupy, even though the workers of Tarini Bhavan, by virtue of their improving activities, come into constant contact with the established social milieu. One cannot compartmentalize Tarini Bhavan to any one religion: Christian nunneries, Hindu ashrams, Islamic ideals of the welfarist and godly community are all synthesized to create a secularized space. The space is also both very local, grounded in Calcutta and an urban milieu, while also drawing in women from other races and nationalities, such

as the British. We are shown that law and custom oppress white women in Britain, just as they oppress Hindu, Brahmo, or Muslim women in India. Thus, in a sweeping vista on women's global oppression, the space of Britain and the space of India, as well as the capacity of women from many such global spaces to work together in educating themselves, are collocated.

In the workshop or training institute in Tarini Bhavan, women are taught bookbinding, spinning, typing, and sewing are taught, sweets are made to be sold, teacher training is given, is taught, as is nursing: we get a veritable compendium of the various marketable skills for women in Rokeya's time. The women also set out to deliver relief in kind, including through nursing, to places struck by disasters such as famine or floods. Some of the trainees help in running the home for the sick and distressed, where refugeless poor and handicapped people receive medical attention.

The school does not take government grants or sponsorship. Nor does it accept donations or help from native states pledging allegiance to the British government. Nor are the students in the school taught the kind of colonial history that teaches them to despise their own past and culture. Rokeya's nationalist and regenerative agenda becomes clear through such prescriptions. The pupils are also given an education in all standard subjects, such as mathematics, geography, physical and life sciences. They are taught to be self-sufficient, and not 'wooden dolls'. In real life, as we have said, the Sakhawat Hossain Memorial School did accept government aid.

I come now to the chronologically latest among my writers, Jyotirmoyee Devi (1894-1988), and her post-Partition, post-1947 writings. As India and Pakistan came into being as sovereign entities after partition of British India, writer-activist Jyotirmoyee Devi wrote about spaces and practices of education, and the agency of women in this sphere, in Punjab and Bengal. Chronicler of the trauma of the Partition of India, chronicler of feudal Rajasthan (a province in the west of India, where the Thar desert lies), polemical feminist writer, deeply sympathetic to genuine spirituality, Jyotirmoyee Devi is at once a rational and empathetic writer. She was born in Jaipur, one of India's many princely states, in 1894. Jyotirmoyee's writing career started



after she returned as a widow, at the age of 25, with six small children, to her parents' house in Calcutta. She also knew Delhi well. In her writings, her knowledge of highly semi-feudal Rajasthan, urban Bengal, and the city of Delhi gave her work a wide geographical, transregional sweep. She wrote in a whole variety of prose genres. She is famous in particular for her short stories, as piercing as they are luminous. In recent years, she has been receiving much recognition as a writer on the Partition of India (Bagchi and Dasgupta, 2003; Mookerjee-Leonard, 2003).

In today's article, I focus on the educational space Devi delineates in her fictional works, *Harijan Unnayan Katha*, 'Tales of Development of Harijans', and *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga* ('The River Churning'). *Harijan Unnayan Katha*, the author states in her preface, is set against the backdrop of Delhi in 1949-53, though it was originally published in the periodical *Prabasi* in 1971-72. It offers sketches of life in a community of lower-caste, Dalit, or Harijan Indians, in particular the subcaste of Bhangis, who were primarily sweepers and cleaners. The node is the Gandhian institution of Balmiki Bhavan, which holds classes for adults and children from the Harijan or Dalit community. Traces of Gandhi's own life are to be found in Jyotirmoyee's name for the institution in her work. In 1946, Gandhi decided, to express his solidarity with 'untouchables', to move to a colony of sweepers and cleaners, named the Balmiki Colony, on Reading Road in Delhi. (Gandhi, 2010, pp. 518-519).

Balmiki was the writer of the Indian Hindu epic, the Ramayana: having been a lowly hunter before becoming a poet, he has been claimed as the common ancestor of the 'Untouchables': hence the name Balmiki Bhavan. 'Harijan', meaning people of god, was the term Gandhi used to designate India's lower castes, or so-called untouchables. The term has now come into disuse, with Dalit, meaning the downtrodden ones, gaining ascendancy in popularity; Bahujan, meaning the majority, is also popular, as is 'Dalit Bahujan'.

Jyotirmoyee takes us into the everyday life of welfarist institutions in recently independent India. In Balmiki Bhavan, she shows, in the morning, little girls and boys studying their primers and multiplication tables. The older ones come with their small brothers and sisters in

their laps, dressed in tattered clothes. Their mothers, many of whom are sweepers and cleaners, come to the Adult Education Centre in the afternoon. The ages of the girls and women range from the teens to the seventies. In the evening, adult education classes are held for men, most of whom are Dalit sweepers and cleaners.

Jyotirmoyee tells the story of some of the students, and teachers. She chronicles the shattering of many of Gandhi's ideals in the hands of his successors. She also holds out a cautiously optimistic message, despite her anatomizing of discriminatory practices. Such discrimination is blatant, for example, when a few of the Balmiki Bhavan boy students go to a nearby school, and are denied admission, on the pretext that there are not enough places, though under the Constitution of the newly independent Republic of India they cannot be denied entry. The boys find space in a Christian missionary school through the help of a sympathetic teacher. Meanwhile, two girls from the Bhangi community studying in the Balmiki Bhavan centre are prepared by the teachers there privately for the matriculation examination, and succeed. Sukhmatiya, one of the girls, trains and works as a nurse. Her role model is Sant Kaur, one of the Balmiki Bhavan teachers, who one day divulges that she is also Bhangi and Dalit, though she and her family had converted to Sikhism, a religion founded by Nanak which had protested against the caste discrimination practiced in Hinduism; however, Sikhism could not keep itself free of caste prejudices or discrimination, as Sant Kaur's life-story will alert us to.

Sant Kaur tells the story of how, in her teens, on hearing her beautiful singing, an established, prosperous, handsome Sikh man had nearly wanted to marry her: but on learning that Sant Kaur was lower-caste in origin, matters did not progress. Sant Kaur finds empowerment, however, through the education she gets in a Gandhian study centre in Delhi. She becomes a teacher herself. And she discusses with her upper-caste colleagues, after divulging her caste origins, whether religions can truly level differences and hierarchies between human beings: their prognosis is somewhat pessimistic. In particular, they speak about the great Dalit leader and constitution-maker of India, B.R. Ambedkar, who, with family and followers, converted to Buddhism in 1956, finding Hinduism too oppressive.

Gandhi and Ambedkar both worked against untouchability and caste discrimination; however, Gandhi was far more paternalist than the militant Ambedkar, who was himself a Dalit, unlike the middle, trading-caste Gandhi. Ambedkar was also far more critical and skeptical of the capacity of Hinduism to deliver justice to ‘untouchables’, unlike Gandhi. But Gandhi, while aware of his differences with Ambedkar, also had enough sense of justice to demand a key role for Ambedkar in framing the Indian constitution. It was out of a tussle and negotiation between Ambedkar and Gandhi in the early 1930s (with Ambedkar wanting separate electorates for ‘untouchables’, and Gandhi seeing them as an integral part of Hindus) that the ‘untouchables’ secured reservation of seats in government posts and institutions, something which was re-written and expanded into the Indian constitution.

Sukhmatiya, while she works as a trained nurse, finds that it is no longer possible for her to marry Ramsukh, with whom her marriage had been informally fixed by the families since birth. Ramsukh, also one of Balmiki Bhavan’s students, had to drop out of school due to his father’s illness and death. He in turn goes on his own journey, as he finds space in the Ramakrishna Mission, one of the reformist groups in Hinduism, founded by Swami Vivekananda, which tried to eschew caste discrimination. Sukhmatiya, through Sant Kaur’s efforts, eventually marries the latter’s Sikh brother—this despite opposition from some sections of Sukhmatiya’s Delhi community.

Sant Kaur’s own life narrative forms part of Jyotirmoyee’s belief in India as a vibrantly multireligious space, and her faith, like that of many others, that a school and college education would play a key role in harnessing this diverse, tolerant ethos into a new democracy and citizenry that would nonetheless be based on the strands of openness and tolerance. But this faith is enunciated against a wider context of bitter denunciation of all those who are strangling the abilities and aspirations of ordinary Indians:

India, independent thanks to British alms and courtesy, has on the one hand opened its eyes through power-loving, consumption-loving peddlers of rhetoric, while on the other hand tens of millions of Indians... such as the adivasis and pariahs and

farmers and labourers... are spending their days in pain.... And with them have gathered the refugees of Partition. (Devi, 1994, p. 87)

Perhaps the most famous such refugee in Jyotirmoyee's fiction is Sutara Dutta, lecturer in Yajnaseni College, Delhi, in the 1950s, heroine of *Epar Ganga Opar Ganga*, (*The River Churning*, 1966). Her education and her role as educator enable her to find a space of her own in a stifling existence. Sutara had been rescued by a Muslim family in East Bengal during riots; this adoptive family cared for her when her own family was killed. Once returned to her 'own', that is, natal Hindu family in West Bengal, Sutara is viewed as a defiled pariah, particularly by the older women in her extended family. She too is sent off to a Christian missionary school, then to college, and then moves to Delhi to teach history.

Jyotirmoyee criticizes masculinist, patriarchal chronicling of stories and histories, of wars recounted as victories or defeat by men and powers that be, who try to erase the gutwrenching loss of lives, trauma, women's experience of sexual violence, displacement, and the loss of loved ones. It is in Sutara's classroom, in a formal, degree-granting, government-aided college, that groups of lively young women, described as being from diverse regions of India, critically discuss what gets passed down and taught. Sutara's students only get to learn the history of national movements in India till 1888. The students clamour for more recent history, from their own regions such as Gujarat, Bengal, Punjab, and Madras. Jyotirmoyee says, 'They find it unbelievable that the history of (Indian) independence would not include the names of people from their regions.' (Devi, 2001, p. 98). The word I have translated as 'region' is 'desh', which we could also translate as 'land' 'country' or even 'nation'. India is a vastly composite nation in Jyotirmoyee's oeuvre. Sutara then says to her students:

'History is no small matter. It is not written by one person. All of you should study well, and then write the history of your own nation. How about that? And history doesn't get written only on pages of paper; victors blacken the histories of their vanquished

enemies; they keep such histories in the darkness of truth. And where do we find written in history the annals of those who are weak and in difficulty?'... And...Sutara Dutta did not finish...With bright eyes, several students asked, 'And what were you going to say?' Sutara remained silent for a little while and said, 'You are not yet old enough to understand the matter I was going to speak of. Alright, now finish the task set for the class today.' (Devi, 2001, p. 98)

What follows is the novel, which offers us the story of Sutara's life. Fiction steps in where official history cannot tread. It is noteworthy, though, that it is precisely the space offered by formal education, by a college where citizens from all parts of India come, that offers a locus for women to reflect on history and think critically about it.

### **Conclusion**

Rokeya and Jyotirmoyee all wrote and believed in formal education as a means of empowerment; they wrote imaginatively about educational spaces encompassing the local, regional, the national, and the global. Rokeya and Jyotirmoyee did not receive any formal education, yet the former devoted her life to building up a school for girls, while the latter repeatedly in her writings stressed the value of girls and women receiving an education in schools and colleges. They also believed in non-formal and informal processes of education. They did not wholly subscribe to Gandhi's views on education: while Gandhi was a bold and radical thinker on education, he advocated a crafts-based, village-based, model of education; and advocated Indians boycotting and withdrawing from the government schools and colleges in British India. Rokeya or Jyotirmoyee, and indeed Tagore did not adhere to these views of Gandhi. He wrote, when Gandhi asked students to boycott government-sponsored educational institutions in the early 1920s, 'The idea of non-cooperation is political asceticism. Our students are bringing their offering of sacrifices to what? Not to a fuller education but to non-education. It has at its back a fierce joy of annihilation which at its best is asceticism, and at its worst is that orgy

of frightfulness in which human nature, losing faith in the basic reality of normal life, finds a disinterested delight in an unmeaning devastation as has been shown in the late war...' (Bhattacharya, 1999, p. 57). That is to say, while seeing the positive empowering role of radical, progressive, anti-colonial educational spaces for women's lives, they nonetheless believed that the space of formal education, including the state-supported one, could open up to all, in a way that could empower hitherto deprived sections such as women and lower castes.

Trees, *ashrams* and *tapovans* (forest communities), formal schools and colleges, rural and urban spaces, connections between faraway countries such as Britain and South Africa, women and men as actors: the diversities and heterogeneities of educational spaces in twentieth-century India do not constitute a simple, linear, or reductionist narrative of educational 'forward momentum': they are writings that show the simultaneous unfolding of ideas around the local, the regional, the national, the transnational, and the international, with complex valorization of each of these axes.

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