



## **The Indian Female Pupil-Teacher: Social Technologies of Education and Gender in the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century**

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'How many poor little widows do you think there are in India, between six and sixteen years old?' / 'I haven't a notion,' said Ruth. / 'Eighty thousand.' / 'Nonsense, Ada. You are romancing.' (Giberne 1878: 91).

Throughout the nineteenth century, female mass schooling was a contested issue in Europe and beyond. Over the course of the century, plans for establishing the figure of a female teacher were widely resisted by many conservatives. Even though Pestalozzi (Pestalozzi 1801; Pestalozzi 1803) designated mothers as being the best natural teachers for their children, the resistance of male teachers fearing the competition of less-paid women, the traditional views of the role of women, the invention of a new bourgeois domesticity and other forces all worked together to curb the pace of the institutionalisation of both higher female education and female teacher training. In sum, not only in India (Allender 2016), but also in Britain and in continental Europe, female teaching professionals had to struggle to be accepted.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, educational policy in England introduced a graded system of teacher education for elementary schools—the pupil-teacher system—in order to systematise education. This system consisted first of an on-site practical training in schools, where the most advanced pupils— both



girls and boys—were selected as potential teachers. This was the core pupil-teacher time, where the teaching duties of these advanced pupils were performed under the control of an adult (in the best case, trained) teacher. A more systematic course of studies in a Teachers' College followed. Until the early twentieth century, this system of teachers' training was the most important path to educational professionalisation in England and in several of its colonial territories such as Australia, New Zealand, South Africa and Jamaica. This system was envisioned as being a key element in facilitating trained teachers and strengthening the small body of teaching staff in all elementary schools. The very young pupil-teachers, often only 14 years old, transitioning from being a pupil to an intermediate status as pupil-teacher, could help in running bigger schools with the active support of the head teacher. Of course, this model of professionalisation attracted the attention of English colonial officials in the middle of the century.

In this article, we will address the highly controversial question of female teacher training in India, and particularly the transitional figure of the pupil-teacher, as a case study of the disrupting power of Western social technologies in colonial settings. We argue that the clear failure of the pupil-teacher-system in India as a "system" may have overseen the social and educational openings that this design meant for some women. A purely quantitative perspective on the implementation of the pupil-teacher-system in India cannot analyse the complicated entanglements related to the highly controversial issue of educating female adolescents and preparing them for a professional future that collided with their marital status.

Although the historiography of female modern education in India is enormous and varied, specific social technologies have rarely been addressed and pupil-teachers have not been particularly analysed (Nayeem 2010/11; Ahmed 2012; Rao 2013; Paik 2014; Bhattacharya et al. 2015; Allender 2016; Tschurenev 2018). We will present our argument in four steps. Firstly, we briefly describe the pupil-teacher system as a social technology of education in a double sense: as streamlining educational biographies and as producing the personnel for modern mass schooling. Secondly, we trace the difficult story of the introduction of the system in India, particularly through the introduction of female "normal schools", as Teacher's Colleges in India were called. Thirdly, we discuss particular groups of women targeted by colonial educational officers and Hindu reformers, above all the large group of high-caste widows, who developed their own strategies for dealing with the design of pupil-teacherships. Fourthly, we assess the effects of the pupil-teacher system and differentiate between the systematic aspect of social technologies and their individual, tactical use. In a concluding section, we discuss the disrupting force of Western social technologies



confronted with traditional schemes about female agency in the colonial setting of India.

Evidence from official and missionary sources represents the bulk of our material. Since works about the professionalisation of female teaching are rare, a general analysis of the pupil-teacher system is in focus with no regional or local focus. Following Tanika Sarkar's periodisation of the integration of women in the collective imagination of the Indian nation, this article will focus on the social reform era in the second half of the nineteenth century, right before the nationalist movement and its particular cultural program decisively altered the terms of Indian cultural politics (Sarkar 2001). Although the pupil-teacher system was still in force as a central form of teacher training in the first decades of the twentieth century, this article restricts itself to the formative decades of an Indian female teacher staff.

### **1 The pupil-teacher system as a social technology**

For a long time, teacher-training in Britain—for elementary and primary schools—preserved the features of an apprenticeship. The big normal schools established around 1810 by school associations of divergent religious affiliations functioned on the basis of such a scheme (Ressler 2010: 174-9). The training of elementary schoolteachers here primarily consisted of a time as an observer of the dynamics of the classroom. Step by step, candidates practised the different roles involved in classroom work—managing, instructing, giving commands, keeping an eye on the discipline (Park 1882)—until routines were sufficiently stabilised. It was not a long training and it did not entail any kind of systematic instruction in concepts and methods of education. There was widespread reluctance for a longer and costlier programme of teacher training that would address more sophisticated matters of concept and method.

This radically changed with the introduction of the pupil-teacher-system in 1846. During a time when the English government wanted to improve mass education, this system was widely expected to amend the problems of the old apprentice system, which was considered too elementary and too short, only focusing on the imitation of routines and procedures. Now, following a pattern found in the Netherlands, young boys and girls, having acted as instructors or pupil-teachers of small groups of schoolmates during their school time, were selected as formal apprentices. For a period of around five years, they assumed a series of responsibilities as pupil teachers. They were also instructed separately by the head teacher. After an examination, they could apply for a stipend called the Queen's scholarship, so that they may continue their studies in a public college for teacher education. Only in these colleges could students obtain a teachers' certificate. The English state financially supported the system. In turn,



the state demanded that school inspectors examine pupil-teachers before authorising these expenses (Larsen 2011: 122). Moreover, schools that employed certified teachers received a financial contribution to the payment of their salaries. This financial involvement represented a major shift in the role of the state in regulating the teaching profession.

Since its inception, the pupil-teacher-system had suffered from a number of alterations. The revised English code of education in 1861 reduced the number of pupil-teachers by limiting the available funds for their payment. From 1870 onwards, the additional instruction of pupil-teachers took place in special centres, where young women and men received a supplementary course of studies together (Robinson 2003). Finally, regulations in 1877 and 1882 tried to limit the payment and number of pupil-teachers (Committee on the Pupil-Teacher System 1898: 2). All of these alterations decisively changed the original idea behind the pupil-teacher system.

Some differences in classroom work shaped the concrete composition of the teaching staff: Sometimes a staff of junior pupil-teachers, sometimes known as 'paid monitors', alluding to the older idea of a monitor as helper in the monitorial system of education, also assisted the head teacher in the crowded classrooms. For the sake of clarity, we will subsume all the categories between ordinary pupils and the head, trained, adult teacher as 'pupil-teachers' insofar as all of them were a part of a general scheme of education and training. Pupil-teachers were under considerable pressure. They had to attend not only their own classes, but also to work as a paid assistant in his or her school for 20 hours a week or, in the best cases, in special practising schools. Pupil-teachers, being adolescents between 13 and 18 years-old, experienced a combination of a further education and the beginning of a professional training with a very clear career path. Although moral concerns about female pupil-teachers in England existed, at the end of the century more than 80 per cent of all English pupil-teachers were young women (Robinson 1997). Similar middle positions between the ordinary pupils and adult teachers were common in Europe until the end of the nineteenth century (Caruso 2015b), although the connection between these occupations and a prospective professional training was especially close in England.

We address the transitional figure of the pupil-teacher as a soft social technology in the field of education. Social technologies are about the planning of society and its change over time. They are organised towards a rather clear scheme and combine different particular technologies in a more comprehensive design for stability and transformation. Far from the forceful planning typical of modern social engineering, social technologies describe the rational deployment of techniques that are not necessarily science-based, yet similarly try to standardise fields of action. Social technologies are not about the mere



application of technological devices to the social field; rather they estimate the possible decisions of the members of a given society that help to render a particular desirable behaviour more probable (Luhmann & Schorr 1982). Social technologies offer clear paths for taking decisions and streamlining formative experiences. In this wider sense of rendering improbable things more probable, loosely following a formulation by Niklas Luhmann, the pupil-teacher system can be considered a social technology.

First, it offers a particular trajectory for the training of teachers. The elements of this trajectory are not interchangeable and are combined in a clear path. Second, it standardises the biographies of the future agents of education. In particular, it offered a mix of education and work for adolescents and, in so doing, deploys a particular combination of agency and dependency. Third, the pupil-teacher system as a social technology actually used specific technologies related to classroom management and instruction: paper technologies; systems of writing (on blackboards, for instance); the use of objects for lessons and terrestrial globes; at some point Fröbel's materials and machines for learning to read and to operate. These were just some examples of the devices that programmed behaviour and actions in elementary classrooms in the second half of the nineteenth century. For discussing the status of female pupil-teachers in Indian society, the first two dimensions of the pupil-teacher system as a social technology for educating future teachers and reinforcing a school's teaching staff are in focus. The dimension of technologies and materials would point at other questions like the financing of educational institutions and the modernisation of the curriculum that are not at the core of this contribution.

## **2 Ambivalence and consolidation: female education and normal schools**

Pioneering advocates of integral teacher training in India imagined a whole system of normal schools, including some preparatory years, like in England, Prussia and Holland ("Normal Institutions in Europe and India" 1847). This idea developed further, and the pupil-teacher system became the preferred pattern for teachers' education. The example of the metropolis, where the transformation of the old apprenticeship system into a two-phase path of practical and theoretical education, remained unquestioned. With the Wood Despatch in 1854, both female education and teacher training followed the model of the pupil-teacher system and it finally became the official policy.

From the very beginning some officials considered the pupil-teacher system 'inapplicable' to India (Allender 2006: 114). Certainly, documents are full of complaints and critical reports of its sluggish progress and consequently its poor results. There is no specific account of the extension and characteristics of male teachers' education, which regardless of all difficulties consolidated itself during



these decades. A common problem, however, had already arisen for male and female teacher training in the first years of implementation: financial expenses. In a despatch to the government of Bombay dated 4 November 1858, arrangements were characterised 'as being a combination of the monitorial and pupil-teacher systems'. Authorities displayed a remarkable flexibility with these arrangements, which could 'at any time be altered' as far as this occurred 'in a manner not to entail any additional expense' (East India (education) 1859: 21). Patterns of institutionalisation were allowed to vary as long as expenses were contained.

In addition to these general problems, the specificity of female teacher training has to be addressed. A nascent field of female education existed in many parts of the country in the second half of the nineteenth century. Female education maintained certain characteristics for a long time. On the whole, it remained a very marginal endeavour compared to the number of girls of school age. Within the expenditures for education, the costs of female schools, for instance for the years of the general review on the subject through the Hunter Commission (1881-82), amounted to only 4.6 per cent of the total government education budget. As a consequence, non-governmental sources represented 57.5 per cent of the total expenses for female schools, an exception when compared to the financing of male schools (Bhattacharya 2015: xiii).

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Certainly, the ambiguous approach of the colonial state, particularly the expectation of big results from poor investment, was a major factor in the slow pace of progress in female schools. Nonetheless, local resistance and changing views on female education also played a part. Much has been written about the challenge which female education posed for male upper-class elites. Reformist and moderately modernist groups of the elites who favoured a limited educational experience for women attracted much attention at the time. Repeatedly, urban elites facing English modernity suggested that female education in India was not new but—conveniently—had been degraded after Muslim invasion (Krishna 1863: 1-3). Beyond these small reformist groups in Hindu and Muslim communities, acceptance of female education was by no means general (Rao 2013; Rao 2002).

A symptom of this enduring discomfort with formal female education was the flourishing of the Zenana teaching system. It was a system of home teaching, sometimes used by aristocratic and upper-caste families for the instruction of their female offspring. It was used by missionary and government agencies in order to provide some selected circles of women with a more systematic instruction. Despite all the practical difficulties, this system was more suited to local customs, so that progress could be reported



Another fact which the Committee regard as indicative of the same progress in native opinion is this, that while but a few years ago, so far from a fee being paid by Hindoo girls at school they were actually paid for attending, now on the contrary the Babus are willing to contribute a fair proportion of the expenses incurred in the work of visiting their Zenanas. (Calcutta Female Normal 1865: 6)

The advantage of the zenana system over female schools was clear: as soon as girls had to go through the city's streets and attend neighbourhood schools, native reticence prevailed. In this way, families had control over what was taught to girls and over their socialisation.

Yet it was not only the question of locating women in public spaces that counteracted the patchy efforts of promoting female education. Local prejudices, repeated in Western sources, seemed to be widespread. Reverend Adam in his famous reports on education from the 1830s referred to the negative attitude towards female education:

A superstitious feeling is alleged to exist in the majority of Hindu families, principally cherished by the women and not discouraged by the men, that a girl taught to write and read will soon after marriage become a widow, an event which is regarded as nearly the worst misfortune that can befall the sex; and the belief is also generally entertained in native society that intrigue is facilitated by a knowledge of letters on the part of females. (Adam 1868: 131)

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At the end of the century the Christian convert and pioneer feminist Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922) provided her missionary-friendly readership with a picture of the same myth:

Girls of nine and ten when recently out of school and given in marriage are wholly cut off from reading or writing, because it is a shame for a young woman or girl to hold a paper or book in her hand, or to read in the presence of others in her husband's house. It is a popular belief among high-caste women that their husbands will die if they should read or should hold a pen in their fingers. (Ramabai Sarasvati 1888: 103)

Changes in local opinion are recorded, but they were extremely local in their reach (Gandotra 2018). Consequently, not only the Indian reformers but also the colonial government approached the matter very cautiously.

If the general subject of female education remained controversial throughout these decades, the specific question of a female teaching staff was particularly delicate. Teaching women were not completely unknown in India. Female teaching pandits, of course of high-caste origin, are recorded. In one particular case in the early nineteenth century, Hati Vidyalkar, herself the daughter of a Brahmin pandit, opened her own school of philosophy in Benares. Other cases in the nine-



teenth century, although rare, showed women studying under pandits and helping in the schools of their fathers (Borthwick 1984: 22). Yet these highly special circumstances were negotiated within their respective households while the question of teachers' training and female pupil-teachers belonged to the public and institutional domain. Even in the relatively small reformist Hindu groups, different opinions about female education existed. Whereas many among the *Brahmo Samaj* approved of these initiatives because they conducted these women into a teaching career (Allender 2006: 260), other members of the various reformist groups rejected the idea of female teacher training together with the transitional role as a pupil-teacher. A case in point was Ischwarchandra Vidyasagar's (1820-91) support for female elementary schools, a support that he did not transfer to the establishment of normal schools, the name these Teachers' Colleges were given in India (Amin 1996: 146).

In a setting full of uncoordinated initiatives and setbacks from a variety of actors, a reconstruction of the advancement of female teacher education is everything but simple. A first female 'normal' school was founded in Calcutta with local support in 1851 (Stock 1917: 81f.). Other institutions followed, none of them particularly successful. Even normal schools in the hands of reformist native groups failed. In 1871, the *Brahmo Samaj* established a 'Native Ladies' Normal School' attended almost exclusively by Brahmo girls (Borthwick 1984: 86). Normal schools in other cities of Bengal proved to be a failure as well. In the case of Dhaka, Mr. Martin, Inspector of Schools in Bengal promoted the set-up of the female normal school in 1862/63. This institution was closed down in 1872 after having produced only 17 female teaching graduates (Amin 1996: 148). After ten years in operation, the Director of Public Instruction in Bengal reported that no trainees were available (Nayeem 2010/11: 55). These discouraging developments existed all over India.

Into this disheartening situation entered the English reformer and educationist Mary Carpenter (1807-77). Ignoring previous experiences completely, Carpenter suggested that there was no proper institution for female teacher training in the whole country (Carpenter 1868: 158-65). Carpenter toured India, visited many of the existing normal schools, and helped to establish new ones. Due to her close connections to influential policy-makers in England, her proposals for establishing truly professional normal institutions for female training found wide audiences. As Tim Allender sharply analysed, Carpenter's success did no favours for the cause of female schooling in India (Allender, 2016: 104-9). The implementation of her scheme in the Bombay presidency led to the end of government funding of the existing female elementary schools. Officials channelled the sums towards the projected normal schools. Moreover, Carpenter's emphasis on the 'little things' for future teachers such as modulating the pupils' voices, sitting them in an 'upright and energetic attitude' and asking them to give up wearing





bangles were, in the view of some officials, 'the most dangerous', since all these aimed at 'changing the manners of the women of this country.'<sup>2</sup>

Only the normal school in Madras, opened in 1868 seemed to be promising. From the very beginning, the school stood out for its still limited but noticeable reach. About 30 scholars attended the normal classes, among them Tamil and Telugu-speaking women. The practise school had about 80 pupils enrolled and had three departments with Tamil, Telugu and English as the languages of instruction. In December 1873, this school became controlled by the Educational Department of the Presidency and it seems that at least a few of the graduates from this school actually worked as teachers in Madras and Tanjavur ("Female Normal School Madras" 1874: 243-6). In addition to the somewhat better enrolment figures, the direct involvement of the colonial government in the field of female education is an indicator of some success (Raman 1996: 39). The normal schools in Madras, Pune and Ahmedabad formed a relatively successful institutional trio of government institutions in the field of female education and teacher training.

When the Education Commission—under the direction of its head the statistician William Wilson Hunter (1840-1900)—reported, the pupil-teacher system was still the preferred option for advancing the consistent training of female teachers: 'In order to induce girls to look forward to teaching as a profession, it seems desirable to encourage pupil-teachers wherever the system is practicable. The pupil-teachers should furnish material for Normal schools, and for Normal classes in connection with ordinary schools where there is sufficient teaching power' (Education Commission 1883b: 547). On the whole, the commission was sceptical about rapid changes, yet it still 'seems desirable to encourage pupil-teachers wherever the system is practicable' (ibd.: 548). For this, the Commission recommended the extension of financial aid to normal schools under private management (ibd.: 549).

This was a crucial point because of the multiplication of missionary normal schools during these decades. These schools were relatively successful endeavours, particularly because they catered to Christian populations that did not fundamentally object the idea of women working as teachers. A case in point was the normal school in Tirunelveli in the Madras Presidency. The school was located in a region of intensive missionary activity where a discernible part of the population were Christians. It was a relatively efficient institution, having graduated more than 50 mistresses in its first eight years in operation after 1865 ("The Sarah Tucker Institution Tinnevelly" 1875: 257). In addition, it offered a relatively broad curriculum, for instance it included geography (Ramaswamy 2017: 189), which expanded the goals of the institution beyond the narrow field of teachers' education. In spite of many positive reports, at least when compared



to the continuous official complaints, the role of missionary normal schools should not be quantitatively overestimated ("Our Work during the Past Year" 1878: 101).

After 30 years of oscillating developments, the number of female students attending normal schools was still negligible. In 1886, a total of 865 women were being trained in 28 schools in all over India (Croft 1888: 74). Yet, following the regional reports, only a small portion of the attendees completed their training, which significantly diminished the impact of these institutions. In view of these results, the establishment of normal schools on Indian soil appears to have been a big failure. Colonial administrators, Hindu reformers, missionaries: all of them tried different versions of normal training over decades and could only consolidate a handful of working institutions. Yet this does not mean that pupil-teachers are absent in historical records.

### **3 Widows, wives, daughters: female pupil-teachers in Indian schools**

'Oh, yes, we are not purdah women.'

(Report of the Annual Meeting of Ramabai Association held March 11 1893: 16)

To discuss the transitional figure of an adolescent pupil-teacher by looking only at the development of normal school attendance, would be too limited. The goal of pupil-teachers was indeed to someday attend one of the normal schools and become certified teachers. However, pupil-teachers represented key-actors in the organisation of governmental and missionary regular schools as well. Pupil-teachers were senior school pupils working as teaching assistants, independent of their ulterior studies. Already in England, the pupil-teacher system represented the simultaneous solution to two urgent problems: the creation of a professionalised teaching corps and the provision of help in the precarious situation of elementary schools. The organisation of teaching in elementary schools intensified during the nineteenth century not just in England but also in its colonies. The simple provision of schooling, however, was not sufficient. Only orderly and well-arranged schooling would guarantee the educational effect on qualifications and social discipline that elites imagined (Caruso 2015a). Within this framework, the transitional figure of the pupil-teacher was one of the many forms of intermediary positions and functions in classrooms that combined the instruction of big groups with systematic and disciplined routines enabled by the multiplication of the teaching staff. In India too, pupil-teachers worked not only in normal schools where teachers' training took place, but in regular local day schools as well.

Pupil-teachers in normal schools were expected '[...] to remain until they are sixteen or seventeen years of age. The training of those suitable for teachers



should begin at about thirteen' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education among the Heathen in connexion with the Missions of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1877: 14). Simple activities as senior pupils or instructing monitors could begin at an earlier age. Female pupil-teachers, similar to their male fellows, instructed and practised within a timetable and a framework set by the head teacher. Normally, these teaching girls were in charge of the lower classes of the school, for instance in the mission station of Ahmednagar: '[...] We have three pupil teachers who teach the Infant Class and Standards One, Two, Three; the Fourth and Fifth Standards are taught by Anandrai, a Christian master educated in the Mission School, who has so far proved quite satisfactory [...].' (ibid.: 1892: 18) This was by no means an exception. Although the nomenclature of the classes may be confusing, the same arrangement was in operation in the Delhi Zenana Mission:

The Normal School students assemble daily in a large room in the Mission Compound, they sit on the floor according to their Classes, and are kept in order by a native Christian woman named Miriam. The Munshi Sujjad Mirza teaches the first, second, and third Classes; the fourth and fifth are taught by a woman named Hydri, whom I have made a pupil teacher. (ibid.: 1872: 6)

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Other arrangements such as those reported by Isabel Bain, the director of the Madras Female Normal School, existed. There, little children from a neighbouring school came once a week to be taught by the pupil-teachers (Bain 1873: 333). Beyond these cases in normal schools, the Tanjore Caste Girls' School, employed pupil teachers. For instance, a 'bright' girl, who after having attended the classes for four years was now a pupil-teacher 'in one of the classes of very young ones' (Bain 1875: 10). In these regular schools, pupil-teachers often translated between the English female missionary and the local pupils ("Letters on the Sarah Tucker Institution" 1874: 80f.), until the teacher has acquired the vernacular.<sup>3</sup>

These young women not only collaborated in the arrangement of the classroom and in the teaching of the younger pupils, they also had to go through a special course of enhanced studies, as in the Zenana Mission School in Bombay, where four 'Normal girls' were in charge of the elementary classes one hour every day under the superintendence of the missionary 'and the remainder of the time in the morning is spent with their own studies' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1879: 17). In many cases, like in the Anglican mission station in Delhi (Allender 2006: 201), this upper primary education was in the hands of male pandits. In the Anglican Mission Station at Kolapore there was a class for pupil-teachers: 'Our Pundit teaches them for half-an-hour every day, in addition to their own female teacher' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1893: 19).



In the Anglican mission station in Kanpur, the pandit was the tutor of a girl. The only girl being trained as a future teacher 'takes lessons with the pundit and teaches the younger girls as well in some subjects' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1882: 12). If the normal school was separated from regular schools, timetables should be so arranged 'that each student should in turn have practice in teaching a class in the Practising School' (Lee-Warner 1884: 382), as an official of the Director of Public Instruction in Pune remarked. In many cities, from Tiruchirapalli in the South (Lee-Warner 1883: 17) to Ramabai's Sharada Sadana School in Western India (Ramabai Association 1896: 14), schools functioned with the help of pupil-teachers.

The spectacle of girls attending school was shocking for some or, at least, they still needed to get used to it. The very idea of young girls and adolescents conducting school hours or being responsible for some classroom work caused some anxiety. In Europe, educationists had already discussed whether this kind of help in classrooms would not ruin the character of girls, who, clearly against 'nature', would first learn to command rather than to obey (Caruso 2009). Sources are unfortunately silent about the degree of autonomy and authority these girls may have enjoyed in India. Moreover, the still dominant role expectation had nothing to do with commanding and arranging in a public space, but rather with domesticity. Early marriage was a social norm, particularly, but not exclusively among Brahmins and upper caste Hindus (Prasad 2007).

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Additionally, especially in Bengal, the system of purdah, being the social practice of female seclusion, was practiced both by Muslim and Hindu communities. But even in Western India, where seclusion was less practiced, working women beyond the sphere of husbands and other male relatives caused widespread suspicion. Finally, as the Education Commission summarily confirmed, long school attendance was even rarer than within boys: '[...] Only a small proportion of girls continue at school beyond the age of ten. Here and there a Brahman girl may be seen as old as twelve, and occasionally a Parsi or a Brahmo girl will remain up to the age of sixteen' (Education Commission 1883a: 150). Under these adverse conditions: who were these girls and young women? What was their attitude towards the design of pupil-teachership and normal education? Available sources give some hints for addressing these questions.

As the recruitment of upper-caste Hindu and Muslim girls as pupil-teachers and future teachers turned out to be very difficult, other groups were targeted. Thus, in the early 1890s 60 per cent of all normal school girls were Christians. This, of course, limited the outreach of the normal schools considerably (Nash 1893: 215). English officials therefore attempted to recruit women from specific communities. They assumed that some features of these groups of women would enable the pupil-teacher system to function and, in the long run, provide for a



teaching staff. In at least two local cases, these women had shown a stronger interest for education.

The first group was that of the *bairagi* women in Bengal: itinerant mendicant Vaishnavas (Bhatia 2017: 85-8), especially those of higher caste. These women did not have to observe Purdah and in some cases literate bairagi women worked as tutors. Some officials interpreted their mobility and activities as making them suitable for being recruited as teachers. When the government normal school in Dhaka opened its doors, the local school inspector organised a group of bairagi women already employed as tutors in the zenanas with the help of a local zamindar. This local and precise knowledge while recruiting was urgently needed since not all bairagi women were considered suitable to become teachers. Only a subgroup that took vows of purity and chastity was targeted (Sengupta 2011: 108f.).

Undoubtedly, mendicant itinerant women working as teachers were a tough sell. Already in Sanskrit the expression 'mendicant' ambiguously included both the meaning 'to move from one place to another' and 'from one sexual partner to another' (Doniger 2015: 184). This interpretation effected the public in Dhaka as well. The prejudices of the elite "respectable" Bhadra classes, who accused these women of having a deviant or at least non-conventional sexual behaviour, became a major obstacle for the flourishing of the school (Sengupta 2011: 107). On the whole, these women remained 'forever marginal' in the sense that, even in the case of their successful training as teachers, their low social status hindered the female teachers from becoming legitimate figures (ibid.: 104f.). The Bengal committee of the education commission proposed, nonetheless, to continue to try to recruit these women. Yet '[...] it was open to grave doubt whether prejudices might not arise against their employment, quite as strong as those felt towards native converts [...]' (Education Commission 1884b: 111).

In a similar vein, a second group of women attracted the attention of educationalists and officials in South India. They targeted the temple women called *devadasis*, who traditionally needed some systematic education for performing their duties as dancers. Some traditional Tamil and Telugu schools accepted them as pupils. They were generally respected, although in the nineteenth century the imputation of prostitution increased (Soneji 2012). In fact, devadasis often showed a particular interest for ample education, albeit for one focused on the Sanskrit tradition (Sreenivas 2011: 81).

This acquaintance with written culture motivated the interest of Europeans. Yet their life style, particularly the sexual conventions, their power position and their very active role in temple administration strongly contradicted Victorian representations of womanhood and marriage (McCarthy 2014). In sum, bairagis and devadasis, although suitable for education generally because of their



independence from marriage and seclusion, did not deliver the solution to the problem of teaching Hindu women because of their dubious moral status. It was not only local opinion that emphasised morality. Already in England moral integrity was a prerequisite for the position of a pupil-teacher as a good example for other pupils. For James Kay-Shuttleworth, as a former poor student's teacher, and Mary Carpenter, who engaged in convicts' education, moral education was a crucial issue.

Apart from Christian girls and individual bairagi and devadasi women, options for the recruitment of pupil-teachers remained limited. There was, however, a group of women that was still more promising for envisioning an Indian female teaching staff: upper caste widows. Widows had been at the heart of cultural controversies since the 1820s. The debates about the ritual of *sati* had already caused frayed tempers on all sides (Tschurennev 2002; Mani 1998; Chakravarti 2013). Young Hindu female widows and their tragic fate were addressed in English narratives on the Indian colony for the whole century (Marston 1883: 78-83). In the open streets, widows could be easily identified through their white clothes and, in some regions, through their rather humiliating shaven heads. Brahman and upper-caste widows were confined to a marginal place in family life and were not allowed to marry again. Even contemporary local complaints about the status of the widow characterised her as a 'female slave' (Shinde 2007: 87). Widowhood became a central tenet in the programme of reforming Hinduism as well. The colonial government passed the *Widow Remarriage Act* in July 1856, at the dawn of the big Indian rebellion, potentially limiting the number of potential female teachers.

Adam's report on native education in Bengal had already recorded the employment of 'young Christian widows' (Adam 1868: 45) as teachers in village schools. Specific features of Indian female widowhood are important to be able to understand the attraction of this group of women. First, they made up a sizeable portion of the total female population. Second, due to early marriage, a considerable number of widows were school-age girls, adolescents and young adults.



**Percentage of widows among the total female population in different religious groups (1881-1911)**

	Hindu	Muslim	Christian	Buddhist	'Animistic'	Total
1881	19,7	17,0	15,2	9,4	10,8	18,7
1891	18,6	16,0	12,4	11,8	11,1	17,6
1901	19,4	15,3	12,6	11,1	11,1	18,0
1911	18,8	14,8	11,8	10,6	10,6	17,3

Note: Based on: (Gait 1913: 275f.).

Regionally, the presence of widows was uneven. Whereas in the North-Western-Provinces 11,2 per cent of the female population were widows, these represented up to 20,1 per cent in Bengal. Here, Hindu widows were 25,7 per cent of the female population. This certainly represented large numbers. Aside from the 185,000 widows between 10 and 15 years old in the country, there were 385,000 widows between 15 and 20 years old and 5,211,000 widows between 20 and 40 years old (Gait 1913: 277f.).

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Actually, widows had a remarkable presence in regular and normal schools, although 'the conditions of Hindu society are not such that she could go off to a strange place to undertake the charge of a school' (Education Commission 1884b: 112). Mrs Mitchell, the director of the Normal Female School in Pune highlighted the advantages of widows as trainees:

I have found in my own experience that so far from married women being the best sort of women to be trained as teachers, I would here say just one word. I have found in my own experience [...] the reverse, as the husband has been as often a hindrance as not; the best women I have had have been widows or single women. (Lee-Warner 1884: 385)

Native reformists supported this approach. Gokuldas Parekh (ca. 1840-ca. 1925), a lawyer, who later served in the Bombay High Court, declared before the Education Commission:

Teachers for girls' schools should, as far as practicable, be chosen out of these pupil teachers. In making such selection, preference should ordinarily be given to poor Hindu girls over all others, since there are considerably superior chances of their continuing in service longer than others, and doomed as they are to a life of perpetual celibacy there is no fear of breaks of service from the illness of confinement or of division of attention consequent on the cares of maternity. (Lee-Warner 1884: 414)



Accordingly, widows as pupil-teachers are recorded often in these schools. Taking Calcutta as a case in point, Dr. Duff's school for high caste girls, where 90 pupils were classified into five classes, showed that only '[...] two young widows, the oldest of them have not completed their *tenth* year' were promising pupil-teachers. '[...] Their really remarkable aptitude for learning, when properly trained and taught, must be very conspicuous' (Female Society of the Free Church of Scotland for Promoting the Christian Education of the Females of India 1863: 61). Similarly, in 1872, two married women and two widows, all Brahmins, formed the training department of the Bethune School in Calcutta. 'In two years there had been no admissions, the only applicant being a Brahmo widow of 35, wholly uninstructed' (Education Commission 1884b: 111). And in one missionary Female Normal School in Calcutta the native training class, 'which is intended to prepare assistants for the Normal School teachers, and teachers for our Hindu Girls' Schools, has now six pupils (a larger number than ever before). Of these, five are widows' ("Our Work during the Past Year" 1878: 103). Even the Normal Mahometan School in Calcutta focused on widows: 'The Normal School consists of women, principally widows of good social position, who when they have passed our Inspector's examination in the various branches of study, are employed as teachers to our Zenana Schools, or are allowed to take service of the same kind under Government' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1875: 6).

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In one case, the situation of widows was specifically focussed on. The Ramabai Mission, established in Pune 1889, put a strong emphasis on the situation and improvement of high-caste Hindu widows. The exclusive admission of child-widows to the school of the new mission puzzled its American supporters. Yet in Pune and Bombay the discussions of the local groups had showed that 'while some of the gentlemen deprecate it, the majority feel that it was the wisest and the only course Ramabai could pursue at the opening of the school' (Ramabai Association 1890: 25). The schools of the Ramabai mission proved, however, to appeal a larger group of women. As soon as 1894, 14 out of 57 pupils were non-widows (Ramabai Association 1895: 29).

This situation was, however, far from ideal: 'The general complaint is that widows and unmarried girls are not trusted, while married women are rarely allowed to take part in the work', remarked an official report (Croft 1888: 76). The Hunter Commission saw that 'in some places the wives of schoolmasters are almost the only class available as schoolmistresses, and it is expedient to attract as many of them as possible to the work.' (Education Commission 1883b: 547) Indeed, officials and reformers intended to induce the wives of schoolmasters to adopt the profession (Croft 1888: 76). In the Bombay Presidency, the Director of Public Instruction looked at the wife of 'any normal student or schoolmaster' of 14 years or older as being ideal candidates for a stipend in a Training College,





whom 'shall be guaranteed an appointment as schoolmistress in the village where her husband is schoolmaster on not less than half her husband's salary [...]' (Department of Public Instruction in the Bombay Presidency 1870: 108f.).

This arrangement worked particularly well in the Christian missions. At the Ahmednagar mission station, 'the eldest girl was married last month to the second master in the Boys' School, which pleased me very much, as she is really a superior, nice-minded girl, and she will come as a teacher in this school in the place of one I have now from the American Mission' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1881: 16). Some years later, in the same mission station, similar possibilities were open: 'During the last eight months five of our elder girls have married, amongst them Hindi Bai, who was my chief pupil teacher at Sonai. She has gone back there to live, and when we see our way to open Sonai School again I think she would make a trustworthy matron [...]' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1892: 18).

Teachers' wives may have provided a solution for individual situations in specific settings, but they did not represent a general solution to the familial duties of young women's lives. Moreover, the provision of female teachers through teachers' wives did not avoid the complex decision making of Hindu households: 'In the first place they cannot leave their homes until they are married, and then there is the husband to be considered and provided for. If the wife is suitable, and she and her husband are willing to come, the head of the family objects' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education among the Heathen in connexion with the Missions of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel 1874: 9). In some cases, the family bonds added unwanted complexity to the situation. A female school inspector in the Punjab lamented that

[...] even in the case of branches of a Central School, there is difficulty. The school must be in the teacher's own house, which is usually the residence of numerous other members of the family. If a teacher dies, or is dismissed, it is not possible simply to instal (sic) a better qualified person in her place. It is found necessary to close the school and open another. (Nash 1893: 208)

For one government normal school, complete information is available about the groups attending it:



**Distribution of pupils sent out from the Female Training College in Pune, 1872-1882 by caste/groups and marital status**

	Brahmin	Kunbi	Sunar	Pardeshi	Jewish	Muslim	Total
Unmarried	3	-	-	1	-	-	4
Married	7	10	-	-	1	1	19
Widow	7	2	2	-	-	-	11
Total	17	12	2	1	1	1	34

Note: Based on (Lee-Warner 1884: 386f.).

Five out from 19 married women were the wives of trained teachers, almost all of them Brahmins. In the case of the Madras normal school, out from 18 students listed in the report 1870-71 five were married, five unmarried and three widowed. Yet there were five women, whose additional status was 'unknown', who 'were probably widows or discarded wives without family care' (Raman 1996: 37). Interestingly, four of the unmarried women were Christians. Christians, teachers' wives and widows represented the bulk of the normal school pupil-teachers.

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It was indeed a very complex situation for those girls and young women. Their situation and perspectives depended upon a number of factors, including household gossip, husband's opinions and ritual rules. Yet even in this situation, there are numerous traces of the opportunities the pupil-teacher system brought to their lives. Some of these women negotiated the course of their education and their prospects as paid teachers within their households. The case of the Christian girl Dulabai at the Kolapore Mission Station in 1888 illustrates the new possibilities of the social technology of the pupil-teacher system. Dulabai,

[...] who rose to be pupil teacher, and one of the Catechumen Class went about a year ago to live with her husband at his village, Varsin, about seven miles from Kolapore. At the time, I wanted to open a school at this village and gave Dulabai charge of it, but her husband said he would not allow her to teach, and the villagers said they did not want the women and girls to be taught. After a few months, Dulabai told me her husband was willing for her to teach, and could obtain a good room for the school. A week after I paid an unexpected visit and found the school in such good order. (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1889: 18)

We are advised to take this and other sources with a grain of salt, as missionary reports like this contained a good deal of propaganda and self-righteousness. Yet the source does not depict the change of heart of Dulabai's husband as having anything to do with missionary intervention and influence.



Beyond the negative reports about Hindu opposition and government failure, sources definitely show that some of these girls and young women were able to operate with the new possibilities opened by the pupil-teacher system. Sometimes this occurred unexpectedly. In the girls school of the Church Missionary Association in Benares, one of the six newly-married girls 'lost her husband 10 days after her marriage, and has since been admitted as a scholar in the Normal School' (Benares Church Missionary Association 1864: 9). In the Zenana Mission in Kolhapur, Ms. Shepherd reported about the training school: 'I have Hindu teachers, I cannot get Christians. One of these native teachers is a young Brahmin widow who attended one of the other schools. Her father, with whom she lived, died lately; this caused a great change in the circumstances of the family, and she asked me to employ her in one of the schools, which I was very glad to do' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1883: 23).

It was not only family tragedies that provided for educational openings. Some Christians and reform-minded Hindus were changing their mind, reported Mrs. Mitchell, director of the Normal Female School in Pune, in 1882. Although early marriage remained a major obstacle for training young women as teachers, 'there is some appearance of change in this matter. A few most respectable gentlemen are allowing their girls to grow up before marriage; some girls attend school after their marriage, though time is lost in visits to the mothers-in-law [...]' (Lee-Warner 1884: 385). Ten years earlier the missionary normal school in Calcutta similarly reported that:

The Hindoo School is making great progress under Miss Hurford's able management. By the last accounts it numbered upwards of 70 scholars, all members of high-caste families. It is the only school in Calcutta for children of this class, and another most interesting and encouraging fact is, that one of the pupils has, with the consent of her parents, offered herself as a sort of Pupil Teacher, and in this capacity renders Miss Hurford very efficient assistance. (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1871: 6)

In some instances, women pursued their own goals by managing to influence their relatives. In one case in Madras, in 1873, two girls acting as pupil-teachers had been withdrawn from school as they were soon to be married: 'One will not return; the other has obtained a promise from her future husband that he will allow her to remain at School' ("Female Normal School Madras" 1874: 246). A women's agency was not always recorded, like the case of another pupil-teacher from the mission station in Kanpur shows: Drusilla, 'being a bright, intelligent girl', had a mother 'whose one aim seems to get Drusilla married'. 'To save the child', Mrs. Archer, the school director, sent her to the Christian Missionary Society Training School in Benares. Surprisingly, the mother was happy with this decision and allowed her daughter to stay there until 16 (Ladies' Association for



the Promotion of Female Education 1882: 14). In this case, something happened to the husband in Madras and to Drusilla's mother in Kanpur. These women convinced their close relatives of the value of attending and working in schools.

In contrast to these developments and individual stories was the systematic view of the Hunter Commission on the subject of female teachers and their training. The education commission agreed that the most important hindrance to the extension of female schooling was the supply of 'trained female teachers'. At the same time, the commission observed that 'a feeling exists in many parts of India against the employment of men as teachers and inspectors in girls' schools'. The mostly older men in charge of such schools were unpleasant contacts. Yet female teacher training was relatively successful only among Christians (Education Commission 1883b: 538). Because of this situation, 'our particular attention has been given to suggestions which have been made with regard to the more extended employment of native widows as teachers'. Apart from single model institutions, several ten thousands of widows working as teachers still had to overcome considerable obstacles. 'Unfriendly comment' and dependence upon relatives still worked against it (Education Commission 1883b: 540).

Female Indian pupil-teachers were more numerous than the poor attendance of normal schools suggests. Pupil-teachers as assistants were a key resource for providing schooling, at least for those schools that were 'more than informal household gatherings' (Allender 2006: 73). In general, women outside of legitimate family positions were targeted for this task. With the exception of teachers' wives, Christians, widows, mendicant women and temple dancers stood beyond the core of female respectability that came from being a wife and mother. Nonetheless, employment as a pupil-teacher was not only a financial possibility for Indian Christian women, but also an opportunity for some widows and a few wives to attempt a career as a teacher, otherwise an almost unheard-of opportunity. Moreover, paid pupil-teacherships opened up new opportunities for some poor families by providing a weak, but constant source of income. It is possible that the change of heart demonstrated by some Hindu men was an answer to the needs of the household, particularly after the death of a husband. In some cases, the limited possibilities opened up by the system prompted women to influence their husbands and relatives.

#### **4 Gender and social technologies of education: failure and success**

The pupil-teacher system as a system did not help to ease the continuous want for female trained teachers working in girls' schools in India in the early twentieth century. The difficulties started early enough in the educational career of these women. The quality of elementary female instruction was everything but satisfactory. This made the entrance to normal schools very difficult. As the



Reverend J. Cooling, from the Wesleyan Mission in Madras, told the provincial Education Commission, the clearest advantage to be gained by the introduction of the pupil-teacher-system was 'chiefly that of providing a supply of better candidates for admission into Normal institutions' (Education Commission 1884c: 146). Even if widows were available, most of them were not educated enough, a report from Tanjore affirmed: 'Those who are widows and free from these ties would be best, but none have yet been found sufficiently educated; and the she ought to be a Christian, and originally of good caste, such as the higher caste ladies would have pleasure in associating with [...]' (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1874: 9). The complaints were repeated all over India. At the government normal school in Pune 'at first most of the women admitted did not know their letters. Up to April 1878 there was no entrance standard' (Lee-Warner 1884: 383).

Once in training, other educational prospects seemed to be more promising. For instance, many of the trained teachers found employment not in schools, but in the zenanas. The relative success of the missionary Delhi Normal School relied on its focus on zenana education. Even as this normal school became associated with 23 schools in 1877 (Allender 2016: 142), the perspective of becoming a zenana missionary was promising (Ladies' Association for the Promotion of Female Education 1882: 24). In Calcutta as well, the collaboration between zenana teaching and female training schools channelled the certificated teachers as pupil-teachers into the more domestic setting of a zenana (1863: 60). The Education Commission in Bengal considered this step an opportunity for stronger female involvement (Education Commission 1884b: 112). Zenanas overcame the rejection of female education in both the Hindu and the Muslim communities. They created a space of almost sole female education subordinated to the dominant notions of respectability and decency (Allender 2016: 154).

An additional competing institution was the nascent field of academic education for women. The missionary normal schools merged two functions, namely 'the training of schoolmistresses and the higher education of girls' ("Letters on the Sarah Tucker Institution" 1874: 78). Tellingly, in Bengal, significantly more Indian women were engaged in high schools than in normal schools. In all other provinces, normal school trainees outnumbered the few young women in high schools (Allender 2013: 338). The only institutions successful in the field of higher female education, like the Bethune School in Calcutta, offered an alternative, non-professional but general curriculum similar to that followed in boys' schools at the time (Borthwick 1984: 81). Since females were allowed to attend secondary schools, educational statistics show that, for the time between 1881 and 1897, the pace of growth of female secondary education was much stronger than the attendance of primary schools. Whereas girls in primary schools more than doubled during these years, the number of



girls in secondary schools grew more than 17 times. This certainly was a general trend, but showed its strongest dynamic in the Madras Presidency (Bhattacharya 2015: xvii).

Even if some of these trained women did not follow an academic education at the secondary and tertiary level, some of them took the courses of the normal school rather as an extension of their general education than as a professional training. For instance, Parsi girls in Bombay, a minority with a remarkable openness towards female education, did not even think of becoming teachers. Yet this problem was general in the Bombay Presidency. Women did not keep agreements and had no intention of accepting employment in Bombay, although they had successfully completed their training: 'I should go further than this and say that they evidently had no intention of accepting employment at all, and that they have merely been playing at learning, in order to gain a Government allowance and to vary the monotony of home life' (Letter from DPI in Poona to C. Gonne, Secretary of the Government, Education Department, Bombay, 14 December 1874, MSA, Education, 1874, vol. VII).

When the pupil-teacher Chunrabai decided to study and gave up teaching, this was not surprising for the people of the Ramabai mission (Ramabai Association 1892: 26). This diversification of careers and educational paths was even part of the programme of the Sharada Sadana School: 'The majority of these pupils, with more than ordinary intelligence, eager and quick to learn, will in time go out from the Sadan to take the places of teachers, nurses, physicians, lawyers it may be, and into homes of their own as companionable wives, intelligent mothers and thrifty housekeepers' (Ramabai Association 1895: 29f.). The fact that some of the normal schools offered an advanced curriculum in Western knowledge (Ramaswamy 2017: 178) conspired against the actual purpose of the institution. On the whole, '[...] the various missionary normal schools shared a system of education and training that demonstrated a clear continuum between the skills of domestic service, marriage, and teaching' (Sengupta 2011: 118).

The pupil-teacher system, at least in its female manifestation, represented a clear failure of colonial educational policies. Trapped between the cultural compatibility of the zenana mission and the more promising educational path of academic education for a few high caste and reformist women, the field of teaching as a profession for women did not progress sufficiently. In order to legitimise this outcome, colonial sources repeatedly pointed at the obstacles posed by local custom and tradition. Nonetheless, as sources show, the success and failure of these institutions depended not only upon the mood and decision of Hindu parents and in-laws. European women's own marital and religious paths were another hindrance to the outcome of these schools. In the case of the first Calcutta Normal School, the second, third and fourth superintendents of the



school married men quite quickly after their appointment and dropped out. Similarly, women acting as second teachers of the institution married as well. 'All these changes have necessarily proved detrimental in many ways to the progress and efficiency of the School [...]' (Calcutta Female Normal School 1865: 8). In other missionary settings, similar problems emerged (Ramabai Association 1890: 29).

Whereas the pupil-teacher system yielded poor results as a system, it opened new possibilities for individual women in the colonial situation. A case describing the recruitment for a normal school shows the many ways women became teachers without following the path defined by the pupil-teacher system. In Calcutta, one 'high-caste lady' had been taught scripture and Bengali reading by her husband. He died shortly after she had completed the first Bengali reading book. Determined to become a Christian, the widow stayed with a Christian family at a school house where she continued to learn and worked in the Zenana system as a pupil-teacher. At the end, '[...] arrangements were made by the Free Church Scotch Mission with the Normal School Committee, who gladly agreed to receive her and give her a suitable education which would fit her to become an efficient teacher for the high-caste Bengali ladies' (E. F. M. 1878: 9).

Similarly, the case of Vithabai Sakharam Chowdari, the Head Mistress of the Bhavnagar School, one of the female schools established by the Student's Literary and Scientific Society in Bombay, is illustrative of the relative success of the pupil-teacher as a figure, and the failure of the pupil-teacher system. Chowdari had a discontinuous education and her father had oscillated between promoting the school attendance of his intelligent daughter and following the conservative condemnation of female education. Yet when 'a few pupil-teacherships' were established in Pune in 1865, when she was 15 years old, her father had changed his mind and allowed her to go to school and engaged a tutor for additional instruction at home. Later she was appointed head teacher and had 'for my assistance a girl who had been my fellow-student'. She attended the male normal training in Pune with a special permission and 'was provided with a separate bench'. Then she worked as a head mistress and only entered the Female Normal School in Bombay in 1874, where she passed the examinations after three years (Education Commission 1884a: 85).

It seems that the social technology envisioned for the recruitment of a larger working force did not function according to the plan. If pupil-teachers populated elementary classrooms and kept alive the costly and small normal schools, the biographical design associated with the system was grossly missed. What are the reasons for the failure of the system that, at the same time and at a low level, allowed the figures of female pupil-teachers to multiply? How can we interpret



these contradictory findings? In the last section, we briefly discuss the intersection of gender and social technologies in the Indian colonial setting.

### **5 Outlook: Indian women and the disrupting function of social technologies**

In the second half of the nineteenth century, hundreds of enthusiastic European and North American Christian female missionaries helped to build a stable and prestigious Christian educational segment. But the general challenge was to organise a local female teaching staff, since the huge difference between the salaries of European and indigenous female teachers was unsustainable (Allender 2013: 232f.). Connoisseurs of the Indian educational situation, like John Murdoch in Madras, were outspoken about the limitations of European agency: 'Foreign ladies can do little more than superintend; the burden of the work must fall upon their assistants. Their training is therefore of great importance' (Murdoch 1891: 49). Consequently, the Ramabai mission considered that neither foreign women and nor men could carry out the project of female education: '*The one thing needful, therefore, for the general diffusion of education among women in India is a body of persons from among themselves who shall make it their life-work to teach by precept and example their fellow-countrywomen*' (Ramabai Sarasvati 1888: 106, italics in original). In retrospect, pupil-teacherships helped to advance the cause of female education by women despite the whole system never becoming fully implemented in India.

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'The main agency for the education of females in this country consists of the educated male members of the families to which they belong' (Education Commission 1884b: 108). This was no longer valid at the end of the century. Teaching women formed a small, but active group of practitioners. In spite of the systemic failure of the pupil-teacher system, the several widows, wives and daughters that acted as pupil-teachers in schools built the core of a nascent field of female teaching. In the transition from native traditions of learning to modern—and Westernised—education (Bellenoit 2012), a transition that affected teacher training as well (Bhattacharya 2005: 167-73), individual women and some female-led communities left a footprint of their own.

There was a specific female path in this transition. If we take the example of the widows, they were, according to Nita Kumar, an ambiguous presence in the field of education. As the main path to obtaining merit, the service to a husband, was not open to them and they still searched for merit (Kumar 2007: 161). Middle class girls increasingly attended different branches of professional education. In many cases, their professional careers merged with the idea of female *seva* that enjoyed higher legitimation than other educational options. And, in some cases, these women helped to compensate for the precarious





status of their husband's occupations (Anagol 2005: 83). In this sense, a switch of service was possible, a service to others, that could include the service of teaching (Kumar 2007: 167). This idea, instrumental for the mobilisation of women within the nascent national movement, did not completely erase the normative ideas of widows as being inauspicious. Yet other possible associations like those of austerity and asceticism could be activated, delivering a legitimising idea of the teaching widow (Kumar 2007: 168).

The gender separatism of female educational initiatives at the end of the century was also a strategy in order to have all-female organisations (Anagol 2005: 66). And these attempts at organising acceptable *seva* are not simply understood by assuming the divide between the traditional and the modern. For this reason, Ramabai's initiative could be interpreted differently, sometimes posing a rupture with established practices (Anagol 2005: 47f.), sometimes continuing traditional lines of differentiation (Tschurennev 2018). To associate traditionalism only with Hindu actors is in any case misleading. The more moderate positions of Hindu reformers like Keshub Chunder Sen towards female education, often considered as Hindu reaction, resulted from the influence of Victorian representations of female education introduced to India (Midgley 2013). Similarly, some Europeans advanced strong traditionalist conceptions of female education, like in the case of Annie Besant's establishment of a girl school in Benares in 1906 (Singh 2018).

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Beyond the technological design, numerous anonymous Indian female pupil-teachers may have contributed to the emergence of a separate field of female education led by women. It was a stony path, full of side roads and difficult junctures. Officials targeted many groups in order to win promising groups of young women for the field of education: local Christians, *bairagi* and *devadasi* women, widows, and teachers' wives (Savage 1997: 203). The fact that each of these groups alone did not deliver the expected solution for forming a female teaching workforce does not mean that the social technology of the pupil-teacher system did not open unimagined, albeit demanding, possibilities for pioneering women. Again, some exclusively female initiatives consciously adopted traditionalist positions like portraying the educated woman as a better and pious wife (Anagol 2005: 67). In view of the fact of extended patriarchal domination through controlled female education (Kosambi 2000), this traditionalism not only represented a pragmatic strategy while maintaining female assertiveness, but also a major way of constructing agency within the fragmentary transition from old Hindu to new nationalist patriarchy (Walsh 1997; Nayeem 2014).

The intersection between the Western technological design of pupil-teacher work and training and colonial realities showed more tensions and possibilities of action. Unintentionally, pupil-teacherships gave some women the possibility of



reinventing specific forms of seva. Though direct causal relationships are difficult to assess, and much more research work has to be carried out, the small group of influential teaching widows that Nita Kumar found in the city of Benares in the 1920s and 1930s, a critical group within the nationalist movement (Kumar 2007), may have grown out of the dusty, ineffective and conflicting normal schools of the late nineteenth century or, at least, of the highly-contingent paths of education associated with them. Social technologies worked in India as well. However, their specific intersections with gender, caste, and class ensured that the results were far away from the simple reproduction of Western modernity.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>2</sup> Letter from W. Wedderburn, Secretary to Government in Bombay, to A. Grant, Director of Public Instruction, 22 February 1867, in National Archive of India, Home Department, Education, Proceedings, October 1867, p. 823).

<sup>3</sup> Letter of the Director of Public Instruction in Poona to the Secretary to the Government Educational Department in Bombay, 22 July 1869, Maharashtra State Archives, Education, vol. 4, 1869.

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