



Soondarbai Powar, c. 1890s

A close friend and companion of Pandita Ramabai - one of India's first women social reformers and probably among the most controversial women of her times - Soondarbai was her right hand at Mukti Sadan, initially an overtly Christian institution. Ramabai's focus on lower-caste victims alienated her further from caste society. Sharada Sadan, the first residential school for widows in Bombay (Mumbai) was started by her in 1889 and after it moved to Poona (Pune), Mukti Sadan was merged with it. The new institution now projected a progressive, secular image. Ramabai expanded activities of this `kingdom of women' to include a school, income-generating activities such as classes for teachers and nurses, a weaving centre and even a printing press.

Riding in a small bullock cart, Soondarbai Powar visited the women of Poona in their homes and soon became known in Britain for her protests against the deadly opium traffic.

From Helen S. Dyer's Pandita Ramabai: Her Vision, Her Mission and Triumph of Faith

Cover Image:

Mylapore Gowri Ammal, c. 1930s

The revival of Bharata Natyam brought outstanding dancers among *devadasis* - girls who were dedicated to deities - into the limelight. Mylapore Gowri Ammal, who lived during the early twentieth century, was among them. She came from a family of singers and dancers and was a student of Nelluru Munuswamy Nattuvanar as well as of her mother from whom she received elaborate training in *abhinaya*. Her command over Sanskrit, Telugu and Tamil enabled her to quote from the Shastras while demonstrating aspects of aesthetics relevant to dance. *Padams* and *javalis* were Gowri Ammal's speciality, and outstanding amongst her pupils were Balasaraswathi and Rukmini Devi Arundale.

Courtesy: Samudri Archives, Chennai

PHOTOGRAPHS

From Centre for Women's Development Studies Re-presenting Indian Women 1875-1947 A Visual Documentary. It can be viewed at http://www.cwds.ac.in

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CENTRE FOR WOMEN'S DEVELOPMENT STUDIES' EXHIBITION AND CALENDAR PROJECT Malavika Karlekar, Leela Kasturi, Indrani Majumdar, Ravinder Pillai, Swapna Guha, Sundaresh and Kavan Guruswamy

Worlds Beyond

With dress reform, education and paid employment, worlds beyond the home became possible for middle-class women who started travelling and experiencing life outside by the last decades of the nineteenth century; for some, a visit to the photo studio was of momentous significance, an occasion that not only meant going out of the house but also being recorded for posterity, often with men in the family. However, for the large majority for whom working for a wage was a way of life, the private/ public dichotomy had never really existed. As agricultural labourers, workers in cotton mills, tea and coffee plantations, factories and in the service sector, women were visible and hard-working members of many households. From the nineteenth century onwards, diligent anthropologists with early cameras, framed women as objects of study. In the next century, the new box camera memorialised picnics, the arrival of the first car, train journeys, excursions and changing roles and contexts. Women became teachers, doctors, nurses and lawyers. Their creative and artistic talents found expression in aesthetic forms; by the 1930s, taboos were broken and upper-caste girls from prominent families were encouraged to train as dancers and singers. While the indigenous proscenium theatre in both Bombay and Calcutta introduced women as actors from the 1870s onwards, it was to take several years before this trend caught on in other parts of the country. By this time too, the national movement and women's organisations became spaces for legitimate participation by girls and women from families who earlier could never have conceived of any activity outside the home. This calendar records contributions of some of these early pioneers - women who traversed the boundaries of the home often under quite extraordinary circumstances - and of those for whom such parameters had never existed.

Urban middle-class women's increasing visibility and activities were linked to their physical mobility; while the closed palanguin (palki/doli) that conformed to the requirements of parda was a common form of conveyance for middle-and upper-class women till well into the nineteenth century, later the more exclusive broughams and landaus with curtains were used as well. In parts of north India, particularly among the Muslim community, the palki was used till the 1940s. Over here, broadly speaking, parda (literally translated to mean curtain in Hindustani) refers both to the ideology of seclusion as well as protection provided by the veil or secluded environment, from the male gaze that could also include family members in some communities. In 1874, the horse-drawn tram car was introduced in Bombay followed

by similar ones in Madras and Calcutta. For most, however, it was the familiar bullock cart that used to transport goods and belongings and in the absence of other modes, parda women as well. Thus, bullock carts, horse-drawn carriages (ekkas) with boxlike curtained and caparisoned sitting areas, and later trams with curtains were devised. A few used the rickshaw and even an elephant! Sister Subbalaskhmi who was to become the first widow graduate of Madras, went to Presidency College in a rickshaw with its hood pulled right down. In addition, she would open her large, black umbrella and hold it in front of her like a protective shield. All that could be seen of her was the brightly-coloured border of her sari. While she did not observe parda, decorum required that Subbalakshmi should remain `invisible' to curious eves.

It is hardly surprising then that rules of parda were relaxed as girls and women became more visible. The bicycle liberated many, as young girls cycled to college and even school. By the nineteen thirties and the forties, the numbers of reputed women political leaders, revolutionaries, actors and photographers grew. Some more progressive ones took to driving cars, using firearms and a few flew aeroplanes!

K. Saradamoni rides a bike to college c. 1940s

She is a well-known Women's Studies scholar and activist of the women's movement.

Courtesy: K.Saradamoni, Thiruvananthapuram





Binodini Dasi as Motibibi in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's Kapalakundala, 1877

Binodini Dasi or Nati (actress) Binodini (1862-1941) is remembered today not only because she was among the earliest women on the Indian proscenium stage but also for her sensitive and forthright autobiographical writings. Her Atma Katha (My Story), written "at the request of my guru, the late Girishchandra Ghosh mahashoy", is perhaps among the first accounts of a single woman who worked for her living. For someone who had only a few years' of formal schooling, hard work, commitment and guidance enabled Binodini to excel in a wide variety of roles as well as to write lucidly and with a certain endearing frankness. During her alltoo-brief career, she acted in fifty productions - operas, farces and tragedies. Adept at playing male roles as well, Binodini was at the height of her fame and brilliance when she suddenly retired in 1887. Though she wrote that "I retired when the time was ripe", her autobiography is silent on details; she does however cite "deceptions that were practised on me" as the primary reason.

Courtesy: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, private collection of the late Siddhartha Ghosh, Kolkata

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Sarah Massey atop Kishan Piyari c. 1910?

When, in the early 1900s, Sarah Massey, a committed teacher-cum-social worker, and her friend Dr. Vrooman, started a school for hill boys, travel for women was not easy. At Bhogpur, in the heart of the Rishikesh jungle, training thirty or so boisterous boys to become model Indians was exhilarating for Sarah and her friend who had been the lady doctor for the Maharaja of Tehri Garhwal's household. Civilisation was across the unpredictable Song River, and the ponderous elephant, Kishan Piyari, the Maharaja's gift, their only transport! Here, while Sarah steadies herself atop Kishan Piyari, she has to ensure that her sari is in place, and her head modestly covered. The mahout, who appears to be carefully watching the proceedings, is probably chipping in with bits of advice. A man wearing a *sola topee* is standing at the extreme left of the frame with his right hand to his cheek a gesture that may be one of concentration or even slight anxiety!

Courtesy: Jamila Verghese, New Delhi

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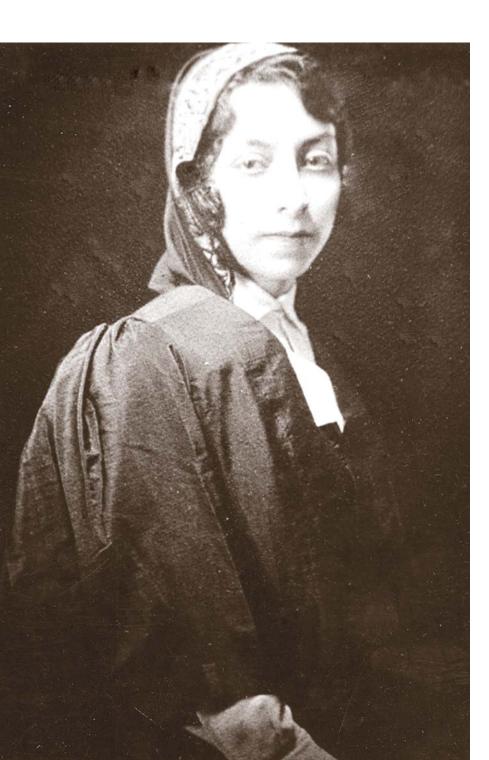
'Tatya' Vinayak Trimbak Joshi and family, Daund (near Poona), 1924

By the early twentieth century, the group photograph to commemorate important occasions had become increasingly common. This is a wedding photograph of 'Tatya' Vinayak Trimbak Joshi following his second marriage (his first wife had died) with his bride and other members of his family including brother Purushottam. It is of a typical Chitpavan Brahmin family that had moved from agriculture to the professions. Apart from furniture, the only prop is an enormous tome: as a headmaster, Purushottam chose to be photographed with a substantial symbol of his calling - an ascribed respectability that his policeman-brother obviously approved of. All pose - some more awkardly than others - and of particular interest is the placement of arms and hands. The older women had clearly been instructed to rest their hands on the handles of their husbands' chairs, and their discomfiture in having been asked to do so is clearly evident. Purushottam's somewhat contrived pose is of a man at ease with his life, a not insignificant statement from a member of an upwardly-mobile family.

Courtesy: Ramabai Joshi, Pune

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Mithan Bai Lam c. 1920s

After being schooled at home, Mithan went on to do a B.A. (Hons.) in History and Economics from Elphinstone College at the University of Bombay in 1919. She was the first woman to receive the Cobden Club Medal for the highest marks in Economics at the university, and was a Fellow of her college. In 1923, she qualified as a Barrister at Law (Lincoln's Inn, London), being one of the first women in England to do so, and in 1926, became the first woman to be allowed to practice law in Bombay High Court. Mithan also became a part-time lecturer in Jurisprudence and Torts at the Government Law College. In 1934, by then a lecturer in Social Legislation, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Bombay, Mithan was made a member of a committee to amend the Parsi marriage and divorce law. In 1937 she gave up law to do voluntary social work with the All-India Women's Conference, Bombay Women's Council and so on.

Courtesy: Mithan Lam collection, Geraldine Forbes, Syracuse, USA

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Travelling medical aid tent c. 1920s

From the late nineteenth century onwards, there was a demand for women doctors from both private patients as well the public health care systems. In part this was due to *parda* as well as women's preference to be attended to by female professionals. As yet, most babies were born at home, often in special rooms set aside for the expectant mother and later, for her and the new baby.

This unusual post card from the nineteen twenties is of a peripatetic missionary group of doctors and medical staff, perhaps in a town in south India. Three women - two European and one Indian - are the professionals and as all the patients are women, it is possibly a pre- and post-natal camp. The Indian appears to be a nurse, her body language suggesting a subordinate position in the hierarchy. All the patients are women in the child-bearing age group and there is even a young girl seated in the front.

Courtesy: Rekha Wazir, The Hague

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Fourth session of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), Bombay, 1930

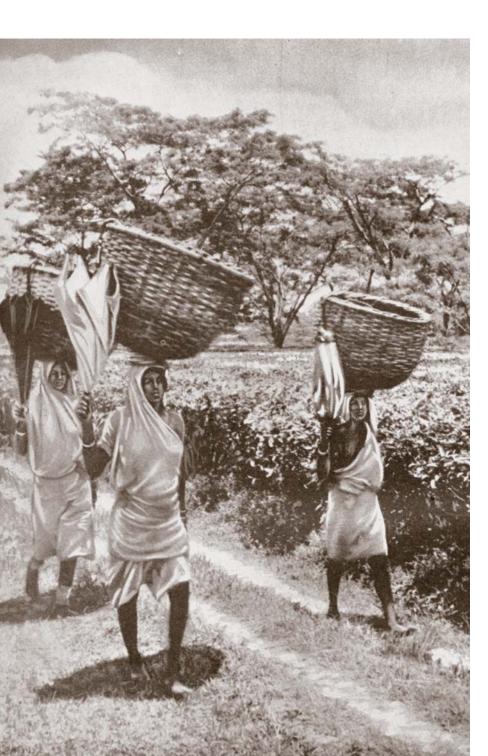
In this photograph, Sarojini Naidu, then President of AIWC, is sitting in the second row, 10th from the right (in what is undoubtedly a brightly-coloured sari). To her left is Lady Vidyagauri Nilkanth Bhadra. In the same row, to the extreme right (the woman with a hat) is Margaret E. Cousins, an Irish suffragette, Theosophist, associate of Annie Besant and founder-member of the AIWC. In this session she was one of the Vice-Presidents of the organisation. The AIWC was set up in 1920 and was involved in the freedom struggle and addressed issues of women's education and their right to vote.

In 1902, nationalist Congressman Gopal Krishna Gokhale had asked the twenty three-year-old Sarojini to work for the country. Soon, this "wonderfully attractive woman" was able to write soulful, somewhat florid poetry and in a trice, switch idioms and metaphors for her next political speech. A "social favourite", she revived silk-weaving in Hyderabad and delighted in wearing the brightest of colours. Sarojini was elected as the first Indian woman President of the Indian National Congress in 1925, and in the decades that followed, was active in the national movement and went to jail more than once. On August 15, 1947, with the independence of India, Naidu became the Governor of the United Provinces (present-day Uttar Pradesh), the first woman to hold the post. She died shortly afterwards.

Courtesy: Aparna Basu, New Delhi

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Tea garden workers c. 1930s

In 1882, two Muslim women, Bibi Meherunessa and Bibi Gulabjan, were known to have bought several acres of land in Assam to start a tea company. Not unexpectedly, the enterprise - an unwelcome intrusion into an area dominated by the white male entrepreneur - soon folded up but the numbers of women workers in tea plantations continued to grow. In 1905, forty per cent of the labour force in the Assam valley tea gardens was female. Historically, planters and colonial administrators encouraged family recruitment of migrants: the presence of women was not only regarded as stabilising but also they were soon indispensable for the dextrous plucking of the delicate `two leaves and a bud'. This photograph of three barefoot women pluckers with tea bushes to the right shows how umbrellas were used to balance the enormous collection baskets. The angle of these seems to indicate that they are empty and the women were probably on their way to work. Saris are hitched up to facilitate easy movement and the woman in front appears to have pulled hers between the legs, a style of draping usual in western India and Madras Presidency.

From Wonderful India and Three of her Beautiful Neighbours

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Sister Subbalakshmi (5th from left) with Muthulakshmi Reddi to her right c. 1930s

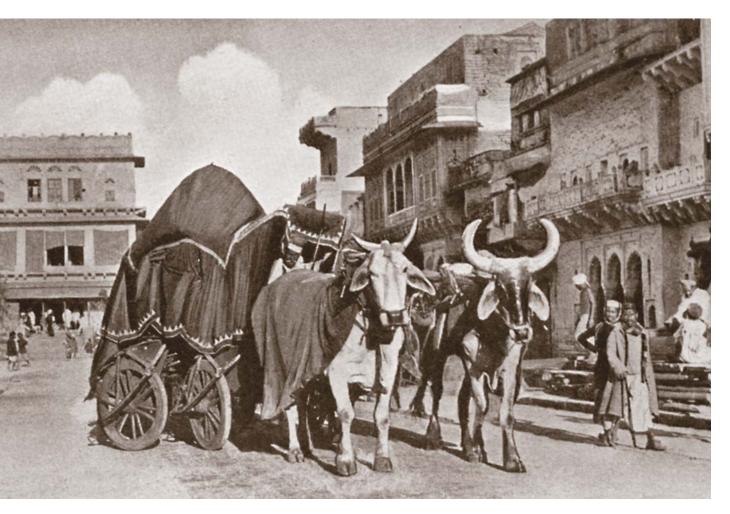
In 1911, when Subbalakshmi graduated with a B.A. degree from Presidency College, Madras, she was the first Brahmin widow in the city to do so. The following year, encouraged by her father and the Inspectress of girls' schools in Coimbatore, Subbalakshmi (now known as *akka* or sister) started a home for young widows in her house. Later, the Widows' Home moved to its own premises (known as Ice House) and many of its residents became teachers.

Muthulakshmi was born in the same year (1886) as Subbalakshmi and her father too was committed to her education. The first Hindu girl to be admitted to the Pudukottah State Boys' College, she went on to join Madras Medical College in 1907. When, in 1926 Muthulakshmi became the first woman nominated to the Madras Legislative Council, one of her aims was to reform the *devadasi* system. She even asked Sister Subbalakshmi to admit some girls from the community to her home but was refused as the Sister was alarmed at the thought of the daughters of `D.Gs' (dancing girls) rubbing shoulders with Brahmin widows.

Courtesy: Vidya Shankar, Chennai

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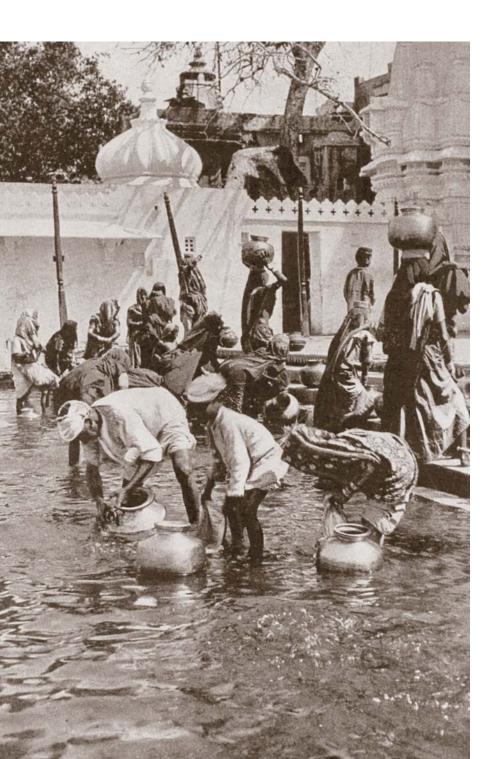
The parda bullock cart c.1930s

While seclusion and *parda* were not relevant for the majority of Indian women who worked in the fields and later plantations and mines, appropriate dress and modes of transportation were very important for the few who considered venturing out of the middle-class home. Nevertheless, the onerous requirements of *parda* had remained; this single image of the shrouded bullock cart in a town in central India does more to bring home its import more effectively than many wordy descriptions. Seated beneath the dome fabricated from wood and bamboo that is then shrouded with a heavy canvas-like material, girls and women are completely concealed from view,. In the heat of summer, it must surely have been suffocating.

From Wonderful India and Three of her Beautiful Neighbours

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Fetching water at Gangaur Ghat, on the shores of Pichola lake, Udaipur c. 1930s

Fetching water, often from long distances continues to be a major preoccupation for a substantial number of women in India. While it is not unusual for young girls to help too, it is not so usual for men to participate in the onerous task. In this photograph however, a couple of men appear to be filling brass vessels that they would then place on the women's heads. Interestingly, women in the back are doing both. It is significant that the photographer - in all probability a man - chose to concentrate on the men on the job though there is much more `action' and activity by several women in the background.

From Wonderful India and three of her Beautiful Neighbours

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A still from Achhut Kanya starring Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani, 1936

Among the early super-hits of the Bombay film industry, the film is the love story between a Brahmin (Ashok Kumar) and a Dalit girl (Devika Rani). The tragic Acchut Kanya was a big hit and started the trend of socially-committed films, making the lead couple the most famous screen pair of the times. Devika Rani who dominated the first decade of Indian sound films was a grand niece of poet Rabindranath Tagore. She had studied drama at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Art (RADA) and the Royal Academy of Music in London, UK, where she won more than one scholarship.

In 1929, Devika Rani married producer Himanshu Rai and together the couple established Bombay Talkies in 1935. Known as the "First Lady of the Indian screen", among Devika Rani's best-known films were *Karma*, *Achhut Kanya* and *Savitri*. After Rai's death in 1941, she became Bombay's first woman studio chief, taking responsibility for the management and business interests of Bombay Talkies. She later married the expatriate Russian painter Svetoslav Roerich and lived in Bangalore until her death.

Courtesy: National Film Archive of India, Pune

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Self-portrait by Annapurna Dutta c. 1940s?

Better known as Artist Mashima among her younger contemporaries, Annapurna became a leading professional photographer during the first half of the twentieth century. Married at twelve to Upendranath Dutta, Annapurna learned photography and painting, and took up photography as a profession when she was twenty five. Though she did not own a separate studio establishment, and ran her business from home, she supported herself and her children by earnings from photography. Annapurna had a preference for outdoor assignments and single-handedly did all the developing and printing. Her commissions for photography came mainly from both Hindu and Muslim households of pardanashins (women who observed parda). In this self-portrait, Annapurna has positioned herself comfortably and looks, with some concentration, straight at the camera. Though family sources have given the date of the photograph as 1930, she looks clearly older and it is possible that she was in her forties, if not early fifties at the time.

Courtesy: Centre for Studies in Social Sciences, Calcutta, Kolkata

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Binodini Dasi as Motibibi in Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay's *Kapalakundala*, 1877



Sarah Massey atop Kishan Piyari c. 1910?



"Tatya' Vinayak Trimbak Joshi and family, Daund (near Poona), 1924



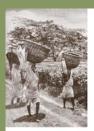
Mithan Bai Lam c. 1920s



Travelling medical aid tent c. 1920s



Fourth session of the All-India Women's Conference (AIWC), Bombay, 1930



Tea garden workers c. 1930s



Sister Subbalakshmi (5th from left) with Muthulakshmi Reddi to her right



The *parda* bullock cart c.1930s



Fetching water at Gangaur Ghat, on the shores of Pichola lake, Udaipur c. 1930s



A still from Achhut Kanya starring Ashok Kumar and Devika Rani, 1936



Self-portrait by Annapurna Dutta c. 1940s?



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