

## The Crusade of the Veiled Professionals

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Throughout the course of history, gender and law have been envisioned as two diametrically opposed concepts. The former has been associated with the stereotypical domestic or private sphere and the latter has been known to dominate the actions of people with respect to the State<sup>1</sup>. This distinction thereby eliminates women from the public sphere and consequently law, altogether.

In this essay, I seek to allow consideration for one section of women who were able to bridge the gender-law distinction and make a material contribution to society, breaking the stereotype. I disintegrate the ingredients of a profession and compare the qualities of social work to conclude that it is a profession. Further, I justify that the Indian purdahnashin women working for the League of Social Service were social workers and thereby professionals. I analyze that their enterprise was fruitful because it was backed by an Indian Civil Servant herself. Simultaneously, I draw attention to the fact that the British sympathized with their venture while it was due to fellow Indians that it was substantially truncated in action. I also briefly comment on the legacy the League initiated by Sorabji left behind. I conclude questioning the possibility of their success if it were not backed by Cornelia Sorabji- female Indian official.

What essentially is professionalism or having an occupation? In a 1915 paper, Abraham Flexner<sup>2</sup> suggests that professions have a demarcated criterion. He adopts the trait model<sup>3</sup> to determine a definition for the term. According to him, professions “engage in intellectual operations involving individual responsibility, derive their material from science and learning, work this material up to a practical end, apply it using techniques that are educationally communicable, are self-organized, and are motivated by altruism<sup>4</sup>.” Greenwood<sup>5</sup> lists a similar category: “Succulently put<sup>6</sup>”, a profession possesses: systematic theory, authority, community sanction, ethical codes and a culture. This approach has evolved further in establishing a background to the very requirement of professions, giving the phrase a new connotation. This holistic view<sup>7</sup> envisages that professions are born out of ‘domains’ or social assignments i.e., needs of society post which they develop into specialized groups that possess ‘cognitive exclusivity’. The legitimacy of establishing this background is appreciated by Talcott Parsons when he says, “It seems evident that many of the most important features of our society are to a considerable extent dependent on the smooth functioning of the professions<sup>8</sup>,” establishing a demand-supply pattern between professions and society.

Social service has developed in terms of the background requirement raised by society, thereby fulfilling the requirement of ‘domain’. “The common thread tying all social workers together is, therefore, not a shared body of knowledge and skill but a common social assignment-dealing with dependency<sup>9</sup>.” The demand for a profession like social work is generated when the State fails in fulfilling a certain welfare objective. A body of persons takes over that objective since it concerns the well-being of society as a whole (which is the objective). This requirement for such a profession escalates when there is a repeated breach by the State to fulfill its objectives and there is recognition of the fact that there is an alternative group that seeks to attain welfare for the masses.

Secondly, social work fulfills the second category of ‘cognitive exclusivity’. The work done by social workers cannot be envisaged by any other professional group because of the differentia in objective- welfare maximization and not profit expansion. It is a vast ambit of services that an organization renders to society as a whole. It includes working towards the alleviation of downtrodden classes, exposing people to rationality and

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<sup>1</sup>Bartlett, Katharine T., and Deborah L. Rhode. *Gender and law: Theory, doctrine, commentary*. Aspen Publishers, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> Abraham Flexner, "Is Social Work a Profession?" in *Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction*, 1915 (Chicago: Hildmann Printing Co., 1915), pp. 576-90.

<sup>3</sup> See, e.g., Wilbert E. Moore, *The Professions: Rules and Roles* (New York: Russell Sage Foundation, 1970); E. Turner and N. M. Hodge, "Occupations and Professions," in *Professions and Professionalization*, ed. J. A. Jackson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970), pp. 19-50; Howard M. Vollmer and Donald Mills, *Professionalization* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1966).

<sup>4</sup> Popple, Philip R. "The social work profession: A reconceptualization." *The Social Service Review* (1985): 560-577.

<sup>5</sup> Greenwood, Ernest. "Attributes of a profession." *Social work* 2.3 (1957): 45-55.

<sup>6</sup>Id.

<sup>7</sup> John B. Cullen, *The Structure of Professionalism--a Quantitative Examination* (New York: Petrocelli Books, 1978).

<sup>8</sup> Talcott Parsons, "The Professions and Social Structure," *Social Forces* 17 (May 1939): 457-67.

<sup>9</sup> Rita Childe Dorr, "A New Profession," *Current Literature* 34 (March 1903): 293-

94; William Tolman, "The Social Secretary: A New Profession," *Outlook* 77 (July 1904): 594-98; Anna L. Dawes, "The Need of Training Schools for a New Profession," *Lend-A-Hand* 11 (1893): 90-97, cited in Walter I. Trattner, *From Poor Law to Welfare State*, 3d ed. (New York: Free Press, 1984), p. 237

away from superstition, educating them, clothing and sheltering refugees and poor people, giving work to women and lesser privileged people and even working for the environment<sup>10</sup>.

Social work does have a systematic theory when observed in terms of perspective and methods of achievement. Social work aims to achieve well-being and communal change for the betterment of a certain section of people and the means of achieving these may be through monetary collection, field work, volunteer-ship programs, education etc. Thus, the systems can be determined and are limited<sup>11</sup>. Furthermore, these organizations have authority when the State does not oppose their existence or tasks. They need not be State-representatives or sanctioned. Their existence is appreciated by Society because of the very nature of their objectives and services. They work for the benefit of the community, fulfilling the altruism requirement. A demand is created based on a recurring need for education, health sanitation, food and other basic requirements. Ethically, the very nature of social work- helping the backward social segments of the State- makes it apolitical and just. Lastly, the cultural requirement is fulfilled depending on the way they conduct their tasks. The process by itself-education, money, awareness- and reaction to achievements-celebration with the downtrodden groups or distribution of essentials-creates a culture. Therefore, social service is a profession<sup>12</sup>.

Firstly, cognizance must be taken of the fact that Indian women were generally treated as objects of the private sphere and had no independent existence Indian society was highly superstitious and conservative, not allowing widows to remarry, women to work or daughters to remain single. The practice of sati, dowry deaths and infanticide were common. However, with the advent of social enlightenment and initiation of organizations by Raja Rammohan Roy and Vidyasagar, there was a remote agitation for Indian women's rights<sup>13</sup>. Later in the century, subtle voices of feminists were heard. Unlike Cady Stanton<sup>14</sup>'s argument of trying to be at par with men as equal citizens, they raised their voices to free women from the chains of custom.

Cornelia Sorabji identified the solution to the problem of superstitious and barbaric practices the Indian masses – “Base the enlightenment which you would bring upon the superstition; not to flout the superstition<sup>15</sup>.” She adds, “You have to create recognition for a need for help, next a desire for help, and for help from you<sup>16</sup>.” This statement fulfills the prerequisite of a profession- finding a domain and then specializing in that field. She thus instituted the League of Social Service. This had two types of “workers”- the first type would accompany a peripatetic clinic to speak to villagers “under a tree” regarding child care, infant health and diet plans. These visits were to be followed by specialized workers who were “desired” by the villagers regarding each aspect the former group intimated them with. There was a central training institute where “Practicing Schools” for training of social work were established. Thus, workers would be trained vocationally with the sole objective of benefiting humankind- which is the aim of any other social work organization (altruism).

“My purdahnashins<sup>17</sup>” were thrilled with the idea. Sorabji contemplated them to be pioneers in this cause as they knew of all the superstitions and wished to combat them with an eager willingness to learn. These were women of culture who had been pushed away from society. There were in desperation to breathe by releasing society from the rigid chains of custom. Since they were moneyed, they contributed heavily to the network. They travelled in hot weather in their purdah-edvehicles, spreading the message all across Calcutta. On Saturdays, they would drive to the villages around a 20-mile radius from the epicenter. Here, they worked as forerunners, enlightening 150-200 women on child care and maternal care within the veil. They were informed of a fixed procedure that was to be followed and an order of proceedings that was diligently obeyed- creating technique and specialization. They held demonstrations with the help of local women in the lands of wealthy zamindars. Sorabji exclaims that the men of the villages gave them immense support and were sensitive to the need of these women, crying “shabaash<sup>18</sup>” at intervals. This initiative saw women who were otherwise invisible to society, coming out and educating masses within social barriers they were subjected to. A first of its kind, the League run by veiled women created a niche for itself in a dogmatic society. Their main purpose was, like subtle feminists, to breathe through custom, which they achieved. They worked within the designated hierarchy and organization of the League, answerable to Sorabji herself. The support they received from the villagers, especially landed men, is testimony to the social sanction required. Ethically, their purpose was only to evaporate superstition from society and use vocational methods to educate villagers of the evils of barbaric practices such as burning the stomach of a woman who had just conceived, or relying solely on a pundit to cure

<sup>10</sup>Barker, Robert L. "The social work dictionary." (2003).

<sup>11</sup>Compton, Beulah Roberts, Burt Galaway, and Barry Cournoyer. Social work processes. Home-wood, IL: Dorsey Press, 1984.

<sup>12</sup>Segal, Elizabeth A., Karen E. Gerdes, and Sue Steiner. An introduction to the profession of social work: Becoming a change agent. CengageBrain.com, 2010.

<sup>13</sup>Chatterjee, Partha. "Colonialism, nationalism, and colonized women: The contest in India." American ethnologist 16.4 (1989): 622-633.

<sup>14</sup>Sangari, Kumkum, and SudeshVaid, eds. Recasting women: Essays in Indian colonial history. Rutgers University Press, 1990.

<sup>15</sup>Id. Sorabji, Cornelia. India Calling, 238

<sup>16</sup>Id.

<sup>17</sup>Id. at 240

<sup>18</sup>Id. at 241

a child suffering from high fever, and denying medication to household help due to caste barriers<sup>19</sup>. Therefore, it may be concluded that their work fulfilled all the goals of social service and subsequently met the criteria of a profession- organization, authority, social sanction and ethical codes along with creation of a domain through education and healthcare provisions, and specialization in a dogmatic era.

All Indians were essentially treated as 'subjects' of the colonizer. This was officially ratified by the Queen's Proclamation of 1858<sup>20</sup> ("We hereby call upon Our Subjects within the said Territories to be faithful, and to bear true Allegiance to Us, Our Heirs, and Successors, and to submit themselves to the authority..."). However, some subjects attained a class of prominence as compared to others. Membership to this elite club was attributed to one's profession or official designation in most cases<sup>21</sup>. It was the lawyer, doctor, government official, barrister or teacher who could rise up from the shambles of Indian society and climb to the heights of the British social circles by virtue of the fact that they had specialized knowledge as compared to others and supported imperialism to retain their elitist position in society<sup>22</sup>. The British could trust these officials as they bore allegiance to the Crown due to the economic and social privileges that were extended to them. They were mostly educated abroad and exposed to Western theories that segregated them from their locally educated or non-educated counterparts, making them closer to the British than fellow Indians<sup>23</sup>. Therefore, this symbiotic relationship allowed Indian professionals or officers to take certain liberties that were backed by the colonizers to keep them placated.

Cornelia Sorabji was one such professional. As described in *India Calling*, she was one of the very few Indian women who exercised considerable weight in the administration as well as within Indian society. She was handed over immense responsibilities including the post of Lady Assistant to the Court of Wards of Bengal<sup>24</sup>. As an official holding that post, she witnessed several barbaric practices of Indian society and sought to change them. One of her aims was to bring restitution to Indian widows and *purdah*nashins as she thought life had been exceptionally unfair on them. The best possible method to achieve this was to allow them to be torch bearers of the social change she envisaged. Her post as an official of the State benefited them in giving them respect from both the Indian landed classes as well as British officials. Her affinity to their cause gave them the sanction they required- every village they visited or official they met would see them as subjects of Sorabji and respect them on that account<sup>25</sup>. The reason for this stems from the very nature of their status in society as examined earlier- that of a voiceless and subaltern character, insignificant in the larger scheme of things<sup>26</sup>.

Ironically, the "Crusade of the Veiled Women"<sup>27</sup> was supported by the British and threatened by Indians themselves. The former congratulated them on several accounts since they lowered the burden on the administration. Wives of Viceroy's such as Lady Minto established personal contacts with the *purdah*nashins. She would hold exclusive banquets for them and they loved her in return<sup>28</sup>. When Queen Alexandra was widowed, Indian widows felt a new bond with the colonizers. They wrote messages to her such as "We know how it feels: we want to say that to our Maharani Bahadurni." These were graciously transported to the Queen by Lady Minto who replied within a few weeks with a touching message to the *purdah*nashins.

Conversely, a major impediment to the League was the Bengal Congress Workers. The organization was unable to function due to the repeated threats rendered to the President of the *purdah*nashinwomen by members of the Bengal Congress ("terrorists we believed them to be"<sup>29</sup>). They demanded money from the widows to fund their political purpose and in case they didn't abide by their wants and sought help from the police, they would "do them in"<sup>30</sup> with the entire family.

This observation itself proves that it wasn't the British who sabotaged the growth of the Indian social evolution but Indians themselves who let political motives sabotage their growth<sup>31</sup>.

However, the work of the *purdah*nashins did not go in vain. Several organizations came up for the betterment of women and villagers, inspired by their cause including one by Madame Cama<sup>32</sup>. Their efforts gave

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<sup>19</sup>Id.

<sup>20</sup> Available at: <http://www.csas.ed.ac.uk/mutiny/confpapers/Queen'sProclamation.pdf>

<sup>21</sup> Chandra, Bipan. *Nationalism and colonialism in modern India*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1979.

<sup>22</sup> Bayly, Christopher Alan. *Rulers, townsmen and bazaars: North Indian society in the age of British expansion, 1770-1870*. Vol. 28. CUP Archive, 1988.

<sup>23</sup>Id.

<sup>24</sup> Sorabji, Cornelia. *India Calling: The Memories of Cornelia Sorabji, India's First Woman Barrister*. Ed. Chandani Lokugé. Oxford University Press, 2001.

<sup>25</sup> Banerjee, Sukanya. "Empire, Nation, and the Professional Citizen: Reading Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling*." *Prose Studies* 28.3 (2006): 291-317.

<sup>26</sup> Nilsen, Alf Gunvald. "Adivasis in and against the state: Subaltern politics and state power in contemporary India." *Critical Asian Studies* 44.2 (2012): 251-282.

<sup>27</sup>Id. at 242

<sup>28</sup>Id. at 248

<sup>29</sup>Id. at 242

<sup>30</sup>Id.

<sup>31</sup> Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and its forms of knowledge: The British in India*. Princeton University Press, 1996, 3.

<sup>32</sup>Id. at 243

hope to several other women who were uneducated and domestically inclined to come forth and support a cause. Simultaneously, it also gave rise to feminists within India who used the struggle of the veiled women to mobilize others and successfully advocate for women's rights in front of the government<sup>33</sup>.

Thus, purdahnashin women were indeed professionals in as much as they were social workers. Their crusade was supported by the government and used as a tool by fellow women of the era to emancipate the subaltern woman whose role was limited to the private. However, India Calling has an underlying tone of obligation that the purdahnashin women owe to Sorabji. As has been examined, this venture was immensely successful because it was motivated and instigated by an official herself. Therefore, after examination, it may be reasonably ascertained that their endeavor may not have been as much a success had Sorabji not actively promote it. This is because of the characterization of women in India at that time in history- their cause would never have had an organization or respect unless society knew it was sanctioned by an individual in authority.

Hence, India Calling achieved the objective of educating people on the role of purdahnashins, especially the feminists and officials of the time. It highlighted that women were not only subaltern but could raise a voice if they were given enough support and backing. Therefore, the crusade of the veiled women has successfully proved that even the most stereotypically quiet, disassociated member of society who is mandated to lead a life of suffering has the power to emancipate thousands like her and bridge the gap between gender and law.

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<sup>33</sup> Kumar, Radha. *The history of doing: an illustrated account of movements for women's rights and feminism in India 1800-1990*. Zubaan, 1997.