



Introduction

The Anatomy of an Event

This book tells a story with many twists and turns. It furnishes the narrative of a small episode that cascaded through a global network of social structures and public spheres to produce big effects: the “tipping point” for an important historical transformation in the period between the two world wars.¹ The episode at the center of this book is a massive international controversy that raged across three continents with great intensity in the 1920s. Even before Salman Rushdie’s *The Satanic Verses* (1988) or Richard J. Herrnstein and Charles Murray’s *The Bell Curve* (1994), there was Katherine Mayo’s *Mother India* (1927).² Mayo was an American journalist who with the help of British officials and powerful social groups in the United States wrote what became one of the most sensational exposés on India. *Mother India* provided graphic details of a variety of social ills in India, especially as they affected the position of women, whose roots Mayo traced to an inherently backward Hindu culture. The title of the book, which was meant to evoke popular nationalist representations of the nation as mother, signaled Mayo’s overtly political intervention. The social backwardness of India, according to Mayo, made Indians unfit for political self-government.³ The political case presented in *Mother India* contributed in making it an instant international cause célèbre. The controversy it generated drew in an impressive international cast of characters from legislators and leading political figures to social reformers, women activists, journalists, writers, artists, doctors, and several ordinary men and women who attended public debates and participated in public protests against the book.

The sheer scope of the controversy over *Mother India* provides a glimpse of its international ramifications. *Mother India* went into numerous reprints as well as multiple editions in the United States, Britain, and India. It was translated into German, French, Italian, Danish, Dutch, Swedish, and Hebrew, as well as into several Indian languages, including Hindi, Urdu, Marathi, Bengali, Tamil, and Telugu.⁴ By 1955, the original American publisher of *Mother India*, Harcourt Brace and Company, reported having sold 395,678 copies of the book.⁵ The book

was reviewed in almost all the major publications of the time on five continents. While the heart of the controversy over *Mother India* was located in the United States, Britain, and India, its ripples spread far and wide. For example, contemporaries could read about the book in *Excelsior* (Paris), *Vossische Zeitung* (Berlin), and *Tidevarvet* (Stockholm) in Europe; the *Argus* (Melbourne) in Australia; the *Daily Chronicle* (Georgetown) in British Guyana; the *Natal Advertiser* (Durban) and *Cape Times* (Cape Town) in South Africa; the *Times of Mesopotamia* (Basrah) in Iraq; and the *Shanghai Times* and *China Press* (Shanghai) in China.⁶ The reach of the book was phenomenal.

Many of the leading contemporary political and cultural figures around the world expressed an opinion about *Mother India*. In Britain, King George V himself was reported to have shown great interest in the book, as did his prime minister, Stanley Baldwin, and other members of the British cabinet.⁷ *Mother India* inspired Madame Nazimova's *India*, a play about a twelve-year-old mother with two daughters and a middle-aged husband, which had a brief but controversial debut in 1928 at the Palace Theatre on Broadway in New York City.⁸ There was also an abortive attempt in 1932 to make the book into a Hollywood movie.⁹ Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, as one contemporary observed with just a little exaggeration, Katherine Mayo shared the world's spotlight on India only with M. K. Gandhi, who had already emerged as the leading advocate for Indian nationalism.

The "legend of *Mother India*," as the *Times* of London called it, was sustained by the impassioned conflict between the supporters and critics of the book.¹⁰ While Mayo's admirers compared the significance of *Mother India* to Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) and Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species* (1859), Gandhi famously dubbed Mayo's book a "Drain-Inspector's Report."¹¹ *Mother India* spawned a veritable mini-industry with more than fifty books and pamphlets written in direct response to Mayo, of which at least one, K. L. Gauba's *tu quoque* book on the United States, *Uncle Sham: The Strange Tale of a Civilization Run Amok* (1929), came close to matching the phenomenal sales of *Mother India*.¹² *Mother India* was also hotly debated on a variety of public platforms in India, Britain, and the United States and was burned in protest outside Town Hall in New York City.¹³ Numerous public protest meetings were held against the book in various parts of the world, and several political careers were launched in connection with it. Except perhaps for Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*, few books have ever come close to matching *Mother India* in provoking such fury and such vehement support across several continents.¹⁴

The immediate context for the controversy was the future of the British policy



FIGURE 1. Abanindranath Tagore, *Bharat Mata* (Mother India), 1905. Watercolor on paper, 26.5 × 15 cm. Courtesy of Rabindra Bharati Society, Kolkata, India. This painting, which helped crystallize the nationalist iconography of India as Mother India, was made against the background of the Partition of Bengal (1905) that had enflamed nationalist passions. It offered a visual representation for Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's famous nationalist poem *Bande Mataram* (Hail to Thee, Mother) (1882). The ethereal female figure of the nation (portrayed here in a Bengali Hindu incarnation) bears in her four hands the objects of nationalist aspiration: food, clothing, secular learning, and spiritual knowledge.

of the devolution of political power by stages in colonial India. Yet from the outset the international contours of the debate were informed by a variety of post-First World War developments: the growing economic and political muscle of the United States on the world stage; the anxiety among the imperial powers about the spread of the so-called Bolshevik menace; the legal battle about citizenship rights provoked by the global movement of nonwhite peoples; the implications of the recent political enfranchisement of women in the United States, Britain, and India; the impact of the postwar restructuring of the political economy of late colonialism in India; and, not least, the future of the entire postwar experiment with colonial self-government outside the “white” Dominion colonies of the British Empire. The controversy linked debates about British policy in India with postwar U.S. policy in the Philippines, further revealing the increasingly internationalized arena in which British colonial rule in India and its future were debated after the Great War. My history of this contentious episode from

the 1920s is thus set against the background of a crucial imperial restructuring: that is, a shift from the “illusion of permanence” that characterized the high imperialism of the late nineteenth century to the recognition of the conspicuously altered state of metropolitan-colonial ties at the advent of what has been called the “American century.”

THE CONTROVERSY AS HISTORICAL EVENT

My argument about the significance of this episode proceeds from a densely historicized narrative of the controversy over *Mother India* as a global public “event.” To what extent, however, can the controversy surrounding a book qualify as an event? To be sure, this controversy qualifies as a dictionary definition of “event” — an important happening — in that it still occupies a place in the collective national memory in India. The name “Katherine Mayo,” at least for a certain generation of Indians, continues to stand as a byword for imperialist propaganda: the most egregious example, perhaps, of a purposeful imperialist calumny against India. The nationalist attempts to counter such British-inspired negative representations of India have provided the stuff for lingering popular memory of this episode from the colonial Indian past. The further question, of course, is what *kind* of event the controversy over *Mother India* was. Understood simply in terms of a nationalist struggle to counter negative imperialist representations of India, the controversy does not capture the break or rupture that contemporary theorists attribute to an “event.”¹⁵ As several scholars have recently demonstrated, both colonialist and cultural-nationalist arguments about India occupied a common discursive field; that is, cultural-nationalist defenses of Indian society typically proceeded by inverting the values attributed to it in colonial discourse.¹⁶ The shared imperialist-nationalist terms of the protest against *Mother India* would seemingly render it a “nonevent,” in that nationalist attempts to substitute Mayo’s negative with positive representations of India supposedly turn out to be continuations of a colonial understanding of India and do not decisively break from the normative and everyday logic of the colonial social context. Even all the passions and media hype surrounding the publication of *Mother India* in the 1920s, then, would make the controversy, at best, a relatively “banal event” in the sense that Wendy Brown speaks of contemporary media events that flare up, like transient fireworks, out of the everyday and are not part of “a larger historical force or movement.”¹⁷

However, the controversy over *Mother India* was much more than this. Its sensationalization in the media, pace Pierre Nora’s diagnoses of modern events,

does not alone exhaust the meaning of the controversy.¹⁸ The Mayo controversy manifested broader social transformations that make it a “creative event” (or, as Emmanuel Le Roy Ladurie puts it, an *événement matrice*).¹⁹ When the hitherto familiar imperialist-nationalist framework of the controversy is expanded, and the controversy is emplotted anew within a global narrative, the disruptive impact of the public debate over *Mother India* is revealed. Engendered by global historical networks that cut across and beyond various local contexts, nation-state formations, institutional organizations, and stable discursive contexts, the controversy over *Mother India* was far too dense to be captured within any simple logic of the existing social context.²⁰ The expanded global perspective marks the controversy as a limit — a break that signifies a before and an after — in the dominant colonial understanding of Indian society. The contagious and self-propagating waves of commentary on *Mother India* cascaded through the transnational system to produce an unpredictable event: a social epidemic comparable in its ramifications to the South Sea Bubble or to a catastrophic computer virus.

The snowballing effect of the controversy rendered the “facts” of *Mother India*, despite their enormous popularity, vulnerable to rearticulation in an alternative interpretive framework. The “facts” of *Mother India* had consisted of graphic details, frequently buttressed by numerical representations from hospital statistics, census data, police records, and a variety of official reports and findings, that purported to demonstrate the degeneracy of India in general, and of Hindu culture in particular.²¹ The particularized descriptions of the various indicators of social degeneration — most notably the alleged sexual obsession of the Hindus that was manifest in practices such as child marriage and premature maternity, as well as in rampant masturbation and homosexuality — were the basis for Mayo’s systematic claims in defense of British colonial rule in India. The point of these facts was to demonstrate that all the political, economic, and social problems of India had a single cause, and that cause — not to be found in the nature of the colonial state or its policies — was the very essence of the beliefs and practices of Hinduism. Mayo’s major contention, therefore, was that the manifestations and the causes of the backwardness of India were primarily and fundamentally “social” and so unrelated to the “political” context of colonial rule. As such, moreover, the social backwardness of India disqualified Indians from any further political advancement toward future self-government. This familiar and reified construction of the relationship between the domains of the political and the social, or the state and society respectively, had a long precedent in colonial knowledge about India. This dominant colonial understanding of the political and the social, the state and

society, succumbed suddenly and dramatically to the challenges thrown up by a global public event.

The controversy over *Mother India* consisted precisely in a decisive semantic struggle over competing conceptions of the relationship between the state (the domain of “high politics”) and society in colonial India. The controversy, which began with the publication of *Mother India* in the summer of 1927, came to an end in the closing months of 1929, when Mayo’s critics claimed public victory for a revised conception of the relationship between the “political” and the “social.” By October 1929, public pressure had prevailed on a reluctant colonial state to support the passage of an important piece of social reform legislation in India: the Child Marriage Restraint Act. The public campaign for this bill effectively identified the colonial state as an obstacle to the progressive social reforms in India, thereby reversing Mayo’s argument about the relationship between the “political” and the “social” in India. The crux of the controversy, indeed, was never just about the “facts” of *Mother India*. Mayo’s critics were not content simply to refute her “facts.” Instead, many of her leading critics appropriated Mayo’s “facts” only to reverse the basic interpretive grid of her book: the “social” backwardness of India, they now argued, was the result of the “political” condition of colonial rule. The colonial state had been revealed as a hurdle in the path toward social reform. This reversal of the conceptual schema of *Mother India* constituted a break with far-reaching implications for many of the founding assumptions of colonial Indian society.²²

Mayo’s critics had chosen support for a law against child marriage in India as the most fitting nationalist riposte to *Mother India*. The practice of child marriage was a major plank in Mayo’s critique of the social backwardness of India. The public campaign for a law against child marriage in India posed an ironic challenge: the colonial state, far from being absolved of responsibility for the social backwardness of India, was shown up for its timid and obstructionist response to modernizing social reform. The mounting public pressure for social legislation against child marriage rested precisely on an alignment of the state — the domain of “high politics” — with society in ways that eroded the legitimacy of the colonial state. It brought the very nature of the colonial state and its role as a force for progressive social change into question. Between the start of the Mayo controversy in 1927 and its end in 1929, a revised configuration of the relationship between the “political” and the “social” in India had gained wide public currency. Hence a media event — an intense struggle over rival appropriations of the “facts” of *Mother India* — was at the center of a broader global restructuring of colonial rule in India.

At the level of historiography, then, my book is about one of those rare and unstable moments that appear unexpectedly in public view as harbingers of broader social change. The rupture that is at the center of this book is precisely the public crisis in the hitherto dominant understanding of the relationship between the political and social spheres in colonial India.

The sweeping overview that I will go on to provide in this introduction is intended to supply a framework for gauging the significance of the detailed narrative that constitutes the remainder of this book. Those readers impatient with theoretical concepts—the “show-me” readers—will find the subsequent chapters suitably concrete: a pointedly archival reconstruction of a story that constantly exceeds the framework of familiar narratives. The logic of such a global story requires *both* empirical concreteness *and* philosophical reflection on the tools of historiography.

THE RUPTURE OF THE EVENT

The struggle over rival conceptions of the “political” and the “social” during the Mayo controversy had its roots in what various scholars have identified as the contours of a peculiar colonial sociology. This was manifest in India in the particular constitution of the relationship between state and society. In this, the colonial state differed from its metropolitan counterpart. To be sure, the colonial state in India by the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth had extended its reach deep into society. Yet the working of the colonial state was haunted by the persistent reminder of its “externality,” that is, the self-conscious view of the state as a graft from outside rather than a political instance of indigenous society.²³ Even the attachment of indigenous elites to the colonial state was largely a reflection of the state’s obsessive concern with its security. The nature of the colonial state in India serves as a reminder of what Gyan Prakash calls a particular “colonial genealogy of society”: an account of the political constitution of society under colonial conditions. This colonial genealogy starkly exposes the myth of the concept of society as a prepolitical category.²⁴

The pattern of state-society relations in India registered the particular imperatives of the colonial situation. The ideal of a liberal state that related to all its subjects as individuals even in imperial-metropolitan societies was seldom more than a normative vision of state-society relationship, but its limits became especially evident under colonial conditions. The concept of bourgeois civil society, an association of sovereign individual subjects based on laws and contracts, had a

precarious existence, at best, in colonial India.²⁵ In colonial India, therefore, there emerged an alternative framework for the constitution of society. Its building block was not so much the sovereign individual subjects of civil society, but “communities” constituted by castes, tribes, races, and religious groups. These were defined by “notions of collective interest and affiliation” and invoked “collective bonds and rights based on imagined ties of kinship, religion, culture, past, and sentiments.”²⁶ These supposedly primordial communities of ascription, while building on a precolonial past, were largely newly homogenized modern constructs. They were the products of the complex negotiation between indigenous processes of class formation and the bureaucratic categorizations of the colonial state that together produced a politics of community-based claims. For example, various caste and denominational communities were formed and reformed as colonial administrative categorizations became the preferred avenues for class mobility as well as for the retention of status and class power in India.²⁷ This vision of colonial India as a society constituted by supposedly timeless and particularistic communities was fueled, in turn, by the imperatives of a growing cultural nationalist politics in the second half of the nineteenth century. The belief in supposedly organic and ancient communities (each with a claim to cultural autonomy) provided the basis for nationalist demands for self-governance. The coalescence over several decades of this shared colonial sociology of India had underpinned Mayo’s argument about the separation of the political and the social as the foundation for her defense of British rule in India.

The peculiar colonial sociology of communities in India had consequences in gender terms. There were, of course, many different types of communities as well as diverse modes for the constitution of collective communal identities in India. Yet at the level of “high politics” and public debates, both colonial initiatives and nationalist apprehensions typically coalesced around certain dominant modes for the constitution of community-based identities. The community, in this view, was constituted through the symbolic identification of women with the “inner” essence of the community. In other words, communities constructed seemingly nongendered public and collective identities by asserting the right to define “their” own women: a process that implicitly marked the default identity of the community as male.²⁸ The predominant form of community in colonial India, of course, was the religious community. The gender norms that constituted religious communities were given institutional recognition by a dual colonial legal system. The colonial legal system consisted of uniform civil and criminal law, on the one hand, and, on the other, separate religious “personal laws” (laws govern-

ing marriage, inheritance, caste, and religious institutions).²⁹ The personal laws, while themselves the product of the colonial state's attempts to codify and homogenize religious laws and customary practices, were delegated as the site of the autonomy of discrete religious communities and, as such, subject to internal self-regulation.

Certainly the view of colonial Indian society as constituted by communities, each with an "inner" domain that was immune from the universally applicable laws of the state, was in practice considerably more complicated. Both the diverse modes of community formations in colonial India and the colonial state's own drive toward legal rationalization, whose brunt was borne more by marginalized social groups than by the elite, made for a far more contradictory relationship in practice between the state and society. More accurately, as scholars have begun to demonstrate, the contexts in which the state responded to its subjects primarily through collective identifications and those in which it imposed uniform legal obligations were the product of political struggles whose outcomes were shaped by both class and gender.³⁰ Still, the public mobilizations in defense of the collective identity of communities rested typically on the right to define and self-regulate "their" women. Women's relationship to the state thus came to be mediated typically through the collective interests of communities.

However, the Mayo controversy gave a surprising and unexpected twist to a metamorphosis already under way in India in the years following the First World War: the development of a new political nationalism. By challenging the colonial conception of the relationship between the state and society, the controversy had created an opening for an unprecedented development: the first universally applicable law regulating marriage for all communities in British India.³¹ The Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929, because it was framed as a penal measure, was able to bypass the various personal laws of separate religious communities to be universally applicable without consideration of religious differences. The act, as such, provided the potential for an alternative understanding of the relation between women and the state *independently* of the mediation of the collective identities of communities. Herein lay the rupture of the controversy over *Mother India*: the emergent reconfiguring of the hitherto dominant equation between women, community, and the state.

Women themselves were pivotal to this shift. Whereas previous social reform legislations, including those dealing with reforms for women, were justified typically on the basis of the collective interests of the community, the campaign for the Child Marriage Restraint Bill constituted women as themselves a collective public

identity and, as such, a rival to the community as the proper constituency for the law. The assertion of women and of women's organizations played a key role in the public campaign that brought the "inner" domain of the community—conjugal—within the purview of the intervention of the state. The associational politics of women acquired public legitimacy precisely in this critical moment of the reimagining of the relationship between the state and society in India.

The Dowager Begum of Bhopal captured the political implications of the novel construction of "women" as subjects in the campaign for the bill. In a speech before the largest gathering of women in India in 1928, she commended the support from women's organizations for a uniform law against child marriage in these politically evocative terms:

The mere fact of such a gathering of educated and broad minded ladies representing all the different creeds is an event unique even among the assemblies of the stronger sex. . . . It is indeed most gratifying to see that a noble cause has wiped out differences which are the natural outcome of ignorance and narrow-mindedness, the two chief causes of friction and disunion, now unhappily rampant among our brothers in India. Even if this conference were to fail in the fulfillment of its objects, the comradeship so much in evidence today will by itself be an achievement, the value of which cannot be easily estimated.³²

The celebration of an inclusive and broad-based identity of women was certainly premature and problematic, undermined by numerous material and political considerations. Nevertheless, the very act of imagining a collective identity for women on the basis of a shared cause that potentially bridged sectional and communal differences was an achievement worthy of note. The collective political identity of women was mobilized self-consciously during the campaign for the child marriage bill as both above, and separate from, the allegiances of other collectively constituted identities.

The contribution of women gave the controversy over *Mother India* a political significance that was twofold. Women offered a precarious universality constituted through a shared political agenda (crosscutting discrete communities) as the basis for a critical reimagining of the national polity.³³ In addition—and this point is widely neglected—the alignment of the social with the political, prizing women apart from the tight embrace of communities, legitimated a new language of individual rights (beyond simply the collective rights of communities). This nationalist refashioning briefly—but importantly—provided public legitimacy (even if more rhetorical than substantive) for an alternative construction of women: that is, as paradigmatic citizen-subjects of a nation-state-in-the-making.

However, our story does not end here. The controversy over *Mother India*, despite Mayo's attempt to turn the clock back on postwar political reforms, was followed by a major political overhaul of metropolitan-colonial ties in India. The proposals for a reform constitution for India in the 1930s acknowledged, in the wake of the Mayo controversy, women as a new political constituency. Hence the various proposals accorded a place for women in any future constitutional framework for India. However, this new political recognition also brought to a head conflicting views on the nature of the collectivity constituted by women and its relation to other collective identities in India. The ensuing debate about the terms for expanding women's franchise and political representation pitted individual rights for women versus the collective rights of differently constituted communities: issues that rested on competing conceptions of the nature of the revised national polity in India. Women's political agency under these conditions was recruited for reconstituting a collective identity that was premised once again on a renewed separation between the social and the political: an equilibrium with negative consequences for the citizenship of both women and of other disadvantaged groups. The consolidation of a new political orthodoxy in the aftermath of the Mayo controversy nipped in the bud the political possibilities created by the rhetorical mobilization of women as paradigmatic citizen-subjects. The rupture of the controversy was thus retrospectively neutralized in its ambiguous aftermath. Hence an ever-widening circle of ripple effects: appropriations, in effect, of the original rupture of the controversy over *Mother India* into the service of diverse and competing agendas.

The fraught outcome of the construction of women's collective agency was neither "natural" nor inevitable; it issued from the contingent outcome of the constitutional wrangling for a new political settlement in India. The conditions for the grouping of "women" as newly conceived political subjects, to paraphrase Denise Riley from a different context, were shaped by the ways in which women were articulated in advance of their spectacular public emergence.³⁴ To disentangle women from the symbolic "inside" of collective community identities, Indian feminists addressed, and so constituted, women as an identity apart from that of discrete communities. Yet the abstraction of women from their implication in other social identities also issued in a more paradoxical result: the *reconsolidation* by default of an apparently gender-neutral collective identity. The paradox of Indian feminism, as this book demonstrates, did *not* consist in the contradictory denial and assertion of sexual difference — in the political claims of women's equality with, and difference from, men — that Joan Scott has identified

for a French feminism arising out of the universalistic rhetoric of republicanism.³⁵ Rather, it consisted in another set of contradictory assumptions shaped by the peculiar constitution of colonial society: the simultaneous disavowal and constitution of communities in the political claims made for and by women. These contradictions came to the fore in the ambiguous aftermath of the Mayo controversy.

Ultimately, then, the Mayo controversy is precisely “about” a moment of ideological discontinuity when for a short period the Indian woman emerged as the model for the new Indian citizen. This particular outcome of the construction of women’s collective agency was possible precisely at a moment when the contours of the future nation-state formation were still being visibly and contingently put together, and fought over, in late colonial India. The far-reaching implications of the controversy were produced precisely in a brief moment of flux: a period when the cracks in the post–First World War British empire had not yet congealed into the new political settlement of the years just before the Second World War.

A NEW VOCABULARY OF RIGHTS

I am aware that scholars writing from various perspectives have demonstrated the limitations of a liberal conception of individual rights and citizenship. Feminist scholars, for example, have long demonstrated the implicitly male-centered construction that has underpinned the supposedly universal subject of political rights in liberal democracies.³⁶ Even when women acquire formal political rights in the public domain, therefore, their political equality continues to be undermined by women’s subordination in the private sphere. Furthermore, as others have argued, the universal political subject of liberal thought was marked by specific cultural attributes that issued in “liberal strategies of exclusion.”³⁷ Hence the withholding of political rights under colonialism was not an aberration of, but intrinsic to, the universalistic doctrines of liberalism. Against such formidable critiques of the liberal discourse of rights, my attempt to provide an alternative lineage for the language of rights and citizenship in India in the collective political agency of women might seem foolhardy.

Postcolonial critiques have certainly demonstrated the limits of the liberal conception of rights in the colonies; they have also pointed to the alternative foundations of society and of political subjectivity under colonial conditions.³⁸ These critiques, however, have not always been equally attentive to the different trajectories for the language of rights in the collective struggles of women and of

other marginalized social groups. The implications of their appropriation of the role of the state have not received the attention they deserve.³⁹ Feminist critiques, by the same token, manifest a comparable blind spot. They have made possible the insight that “men” and “women,” no less than masculinity and femininity, are relational categories: that is, they are historically and discursively constructed not just in relation to each other but also in relation to a variety of other categories, including dominant formulations of the political and social spheres, which are themselves subject to change.⁴⁰ Yet this insight has not been extended to the divergent conditions for, and implications of, the construction of a collectivity “women” in differently constituted societies. These overlapping lacunae of post-colonial and feminist critiques present an opening to explore anew an alternative lineage for the liberal conception of individual rights and of citizenship in colonial India: one that is traced through the political outcome of the collective agency of women qua women.

The liberal conception of civil rights, whose origins have been traced to the challenges in Europe to the arbitrary power of an absolutist state, had a different trajectory in its colonial reincarnation in India. The claims for protection and rights, as Tanika Sarkar has argued, had an alternative history in the intimate domains of elite and middle-class women’s lives in India. Here the claims emerged as a challenge to the arbitrary power of the community that identified women as the inner essence of its identity and thus subject to the internal self-regulation of the community. What looks like “dead-letter liberalism” in the public and political realm of colonial India, therefore, had hidden histories and possibilities in the lives of middle-class women. The language of social reform in nineteenth-century India, despite its many limitations, provided a means for mitigating the arbitrary mastery claimed by men, who had been denied rights in the public sphere, over women in the private sphere. This was the context in which new political values—a “fledgling notion of something like rights”—emerged in women’s private lives long before they came to be articulated in the public and political realms.⁴¹ In other words, the public debates about the reform of the intimate domain of women’s lives in the nineteenth century had laid the foundations for an agonistic or truly adversarial liberalism: a language of rights that developed both alongside and against classical European liberalism.⁴²

This alternative language of rights entered the public realm when the social and the political were brought into alignment in the controversy over *Mother India*. The associational politics of women, articulated as an agonistic liberalism, did crucial ideological work in this moment. It offered the new political subject-

tivity of women that potentially bridged the collective identities of discrete communities as the model for the individual citizen of a reformulated national polity. If the civic republican notion of the virtuous male citizen had served to underwrite the “individual” of liberal democracy in modern Western political culture, it was, in fact, the political identity of “women” as an alternative to the collective constitution of the community that provided the basis for the individual citizen at a crucially transitional moment in late colonial India.⁴³ This moment of transition—before the revised contours of a new political settlement had been established—created the rhetorical openings for the novel political vocabulary of the agonistic liberal universalism of women’s citizenship.

To be sure, once the semantic crisis of the Mayo controversy had been stabilized, the conditions quickly changed. The aftermath of the controversy saw the political agency of women recruited for the consolidation of a normative Indian citizen that was both defined as implicitly male and marked as having, by default, dominant community affiliations (upper-caste and Hindu). This outcome is familiar, but the reasons for it are not. Because the rupture of the Mayo controversy has been so poorly understood, the contradictory mediation of women’s collective political agency has remained obscured.

There are, of course, numerous developmental accounts of women’s associational politics in late colonial India. The social limitations of this movement of educated and privileged women are well known. However, these accounts too often assume a simple and unmediated relationship between the presumed material interests of the movement’s chief protagonists and the politics of women’s collective agency. The reading of ideology from material interests in simple and unmediated ways has tended to downplay the outcome of political processes and of the choices made. Furthermore, the emergence of organized women as a force in the public realm was itself not a “natural” development waiting to be realized in the fullness of time. The formation of the middle class in India relied precisely on constructing middle-class women as separate from lower social castes and classes. How, then, could the political imagination of a collectivity “women” become possible in colonial India? The relation between the contingent public emergence of a universalizing politics of women and the contingent political permutations of the time deserves more attention. The supposedly familiar episode of the Mayo controversy thus reveals a more unexpected and unfamiliar dimension: the contribution of women’s collective political agency, contradictory in its effects, to a new national imagining of the individual Indian citizen.

Much of the scholarship on women's organizations in the early twentieth century in India, including some feminist scholarship, has taken its cue from the subsequent marginalization of women's associational politics as a force in the "high politics" of late colonial India. The result, ironically enough, has been overly hasty assessments of the public contribution of the Indian women's movement: "Unlike the women's movement in nineteenth-and-twentieth-century Europe or America, the battle for the new idea of womanhood in the era of nationalism was waged in the home."⁴⁴ Easy dismissals of the collective politics of women in the public realm, however, obscure an important point: the contradictory and discontinuous role of women's collective agency in the rugged process of fashioning the citizen-subject of the future nation-state in India.

My attempt to trace an alternative genealogy of the vocabulary of rights and citizenship in India bears finally on the historiographical challenge of writing so-called Third World histories in the wake of European imperialism. The historian Dipesh Chakrabarty has most urgently addressed the legacy of imperialism for the project of Third World histories. He argues that the universal categories of modern European thought—including those of individual rights and citizenship—are both "indispensable" and also ultimately "inadequate" for the histories of the Third World.⁴⁵ He thus recommends a project of "provincializing Europe": that is, of confronting the parochial or provincial foundations of the supposedly general or universal categories of modern European political culture. This entails a dual strategy of critique that is directed, on the one hand, against historicist accounts that assimilate non-European histories in a developmental narrative whose teleology is set by the history of Europe, and, on the other, against nativist accounts that invoke the cultural authenticity of non-European traditions to claim autonomous paths of development for non-European histories. Clearly the pluralizing gesture of merely asserting multiple and alternative modernities is ultimately inadequate; it elides too easily the unequal and asymmetrical effects produced by the intertwined and interconnected history of the modern world. The strategy of provincializing Europe consists instead of foregrounding the "translational process" through which the supposedly generic concepts and practices of European modernity were both adopted and adapted in the colonial context. For Chakrabarty this has meant a salutary attention to the "fragmentary histories" of modernity in colonial India. Yet an emphasis on the small and fragmentary histories of modernity alone too readily concedes an exclusive and monolithic European provenance to the concept of universal rights and citizenship.⁴⁶ I offer a different route for addressing the simultaneous indis-

pensability and inadequacy of European concepts through an insistently global and intersecting history.

The insights afforded by a global account of intersecting histories, no less than “fragmentary histories,” have contributed to dethroning Europe as the implicit subject of Third World histories. Studied together, the combined histories of the “West-and-the-Rest” have already begun to demonstrate that several key aspects of modern European political culture—including the concept of universal rights—were forged either in the crucible of Europe’s relation with other parts of the world or outside Europe and *only then* retroactively internalized as the essence of a sui generis European/Western modernity and the basis for its difference from a supposedly premodern non-West.⁴⁷ They have also complicated the picture further by highlighting an internally contradictory history of modernity within Europe itself. I take these insights as the basis for a historiographical intervention whose starting point is not the purity of abstract concepts but the messiness of historical practices: that is, the actual processes of “translation” in particular sociohistorical spaces. The European provenance of the liberal citizen-subject is thus only one part of its history in India.⁴⁸ The other part of this history is its alternative genealogy in the mobilization of “women” as a collective political identity in late colonial India. The implication of such a combined history suggests that the language of citizenship-based individual rights in modern Europe, no less than its unfolding in India, was contextually shaped and hence equally partial and parochial in both places. By the same token, moreover, the entangled but differently inflected history in both places also suggests the potential universality of the rights of individuals. This is the double move that is enabled by a global narrative of intersecting histories: *both* the demonstration of generic European concepts as partial or parochial, *and* their simultaneous remaking as potentially universal.

THE FRAMEWORK OF THE IMPERIAL SOCIAL FORMATION

My argument about the surprising political significance of the Mayo controversy ultimately rests on the theoretical and methodological contribution afforded by a dense global narrative of intersecting histories. My exploration of the differing scales and interlocking networks of the debates over *Mother India*—as the controversy percolated through and across several sites in the United States, Britain, and India—is thus crucial to understanding the meaning of this event. The close narrative of the controversy provides a revised spatial unit—an expanded space

defined by the flow of historical forces above, below, and between nations and states—as well as a thickened density of historical analysis based on a recognition of the inherently messy and contingent pattern of historical developments. Herein lies the ambition of my particular approach to the writing of global history: a simultaneous widening and deepening of a multiply scaled mode of analysis. As the controversy snowballed, spilling over from one local cluster of intellectuals to another, the event jumped scales with unpredictable and unforeseen consequences.

I use the heuristic of the *imperial social formation* to analyze the different scales of this event. My choice requires some elaboration. I use it, building on my earlier introduction of the term in *Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly Englishman” and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* (1995), to refer most broadly to the imperial ordering of modern society.⁴⁹ The term “social formation” has been used broadly to refer to the character of particular societies (feudal, capitalist, and so on) as well as to specify individual societies (British, American, Indian, and so on).⁵⁰ To these usages I bring a transformative dimension. The *imperial social formation*, as a preferred term for describing the modern society that we have inherited around the world, is meant to reframe the traditional concept by drawing attention to the following points: (1) the historical role of imperialism in assembling different societies into a system of interdependencies and interconnections; and (2) the uneven effects produced by the simultaneous connections and distinctive constitution of societies in a globally articulated imperial system. My choice of terms is thus meant to emphasize the systemic operation of imperialism without reducing its effects to the static product of a central organizing element of society or the invariant manifestation of a fixed totality.⁵¹

Furthermore, my use of the term “imperial social formation” is also meant to acknowledge the irreducible and generative role of culture as a dynamic social process. I take for granted that we have absorbed salutary lessons from the so-called cultural turn in contemporary historiography, which attributes to “discourse” an active role in the production of meaning and in the articulation and mediation of social reality.⁵² The concept is designed, given these lessons learned, to suggest the interaction of the cultural, political, and economic elements within a social formation. Nevertheless, the contextual weight of the concept, by refusing to grant absolute autonomy to any one of the realms, emphasizes their combined articulation in an imperial “structure.”⁵³ As such, therefore, it also registers what is often neglected in certain current assertions of the omnipotence of discursive constructions: the limits, that is, that the choices of historical subjects

impose on the constructive power of discourse. For when subjects act in relation to the competing interests generated within society, their actions presuppose a choice between different sets of priorities. The conditions of possibility for the choice of one set of priorities over others themselves emerge out of historical struggles. This is the “double conditioning” at the discursive and material level that Robert Wess has in mind when he distinguishes the “rhetorical idealism” that he finds in much contemporary cultural theory from his elaboration, via Kenneth Burke, of a “rhetorical realism.” Rhetorical realism, in his words, “concedes that we can’t get outside the constructions of discourse, but it insists that neither can we construct our way outside the materiality of living.”⁵⁴ An emphasis, following Wess, on discourses as social phenomena that transform and change in historical practices brings renewed attention to the possibilities of *rhetorical invention* and of social change. The imperial *social* formation is thus meant to register this specifically social dimension of discourses.

Finally, I also use the term “imperial social formation” to foreground particular historical situations and the specificities of historical conjunctures within a globally articulated imperial structure. The term thus combines a focus on the particularity and contingency of specific historical *events* with a concept of structures.⁵⁵ The emphasis on the contingency of an event, apart from drawing attention to the fact that structures are constituted and reproduced through concrete practices, deliberately works against the illusion of autonomy and teleology often produced by a nation-centered historiography. It is misleading at best to collapse the ruptures produced in particular historical moments merely within a history of the imagined *longue durée* of the nation. The event-centered model of the imperial social formation thus works to restore the unpredictability of the twists and turns that make up the process of historical change.⁵⁶

The recognition of unexpected moments of rupture in this model draws attention to what Duncan J. Watts calls a nonlinear view of historical causality: that is, an understanding of causality that “renders the relationship between initial cause and ultimate effect deeply ambiguous.”⁵⁷ The recognition that relatively innocuous triggers may sometimes engender big social transformations serves to bring into focus the unexpected making and remaking of the imperial social *formation*: both its enduring stability and its unpredictable vulnerability. The multifaceted context of an imperial social formation, as I demonstrate in this book, foregrounds the unforeseen effects of the extraordinary, and yet richly illustrative, political event of the controversy over *Mother India*.

The unfolding of the controversy over *Mother India* touches precisely on such

questions as the dialectic between historical continuity and change. This has emerged as an especially vexed question in contemporary analyses of the impact and legacy of colonial knowledge and power. My approach signals an attempt beyond the determinisms of various kinds—whether material or discursive—to draw attention to the varied nature and processes of social change. The contingencies both large and small that engender historical events provide a useful model for thinking about those unexpected and unpredictable moments that bring the ongoing processes of rhetorical readjustment and realignment in society to a head in the public realm. As I hope to show in the controversy over *Mother India*, the intersection of multilayered and diffused historical forces, with outcomes seldom predictable in advance, created the conditions for the critical agencies that produced a rupture in the shared colonial and nationalist understanding of the relationship between the state and society in India.⁵⁸ This is the sense in which the debates surrounding *Mother India* represent the crossing of a critical threshold: the tipping point for a global realignment of historical forces that created the conditions for the crisis in the dominant colonial sociology of India.

The chapters in the book are organized thematically. Together, they foreground the controversy over *Mother India* as a transformative “historical event”: that is, in the sense that William H. Sewell Jr. defines any historical occurrence marked by “dislocations and transformative rearticulations of structures.”⁵⁹ The constellation of changes, which began in the summer of 1927 with the impassioned debates over competing conceptions of the relationship between the political and the social in India and culminated with the authoritative sanction for a revised conception of the state and society in the passage of a uniform law against child marriage in 1929, constituted a transitional moment in the remaking of the interwar British Empire. Furthermore, as Sewell suggests, a historical event is more than just a culmination of gradual and cumulative social changes; it “transforms social relations and practices in ways that could not be fully predicted from the gradual changes that may have made them possible.”⁶⁰ To be sure, the terms of the controversy over *Mother India* built on a variety of post-First World War changes. By bringing these changes to a dramatic crisis, however, it steered them in unforeseen directions. A network of multiple and overlapping social forces mediated the context of Mayo’s initial intervention; their discrepant agendas, however, produced the unpredictable trajectory of the event. Starting as a localized break in the understanding of the social “backwardness” of India, it escalated enormously, provoking a cascading series of effects that presaged an unforeseen political transformation.

THE SETTING

The chronological scope of my book covers the period starting with the Government of India Act of 1919 and leading up to the Government of India Act of 1935. The former, coming after the immediate economic dislocations and political pressures of the First World War, put into effect the first official declaration of the goal of British colonial policy in India. The declaration of 1917 had identified British policy in India with the “progressive realization of responsible government.” While some devolution of power was already under way long before this official declaration, the announcement of 1917 as a prelude to the constitutional changes of 1919 provided for a considerably expanded arena for Indian political activity in relation to the state. The biggest change was in the structure of provincial administrations, where a curious principle of “dyarchy” was introduced. This transferred certain less sensitive functions of the provincial governments, such as education, health, and local self-government, to Indian ministers responsible to the legislature, while leaving other more vital subjects as “reserved” to be directly under the governor and his executive council. The political changes of 1919 opened a new era for thinking about the relationship of the social and the political spheres in colonial India.

My book ends with the Government of India Act of 1935, which came in the aftermath of the impact of the worldwide Great Depression and of the nationalist revival in India of 1928–29. The essential features of the act included limited Indian responsibility at the center; greater autonomy in the provinces with the removal of “dyarchy”; an expanded franchise still based on property qualifications; and a provision for an All-India Federation that included British India and the areas left to be ruled by indigenous rulers (called “princes” under the British). These changes were hedged with numerous “safeguards” that ensured all essential tools of sovereignty remained exclusively in British hands: a proposed counterbalancing of any democratic tendencies through a federation in which a powerful nominated contingent of princes would enjoy considerable clout; the diversion of Indian political demands to the provincial arena that left the all-India arena as a British preserve; and a divide-and-rule strategy that pitted one community against another in India to put the brakes on a rapid advancement toward self-government. Even though the act itself was designed to be “both concessionary and pre-emptive in nature,” it was a symptom of the radical transformation by the end of the decade of the political and economic foundations of the British Raj (rule) in India.⁶¹

The chronology of my study dovetails with the British constitutional initiatives that dictated Mayo's various interventions in the controversy; but my point is emphatically not to endorse a view that reduces, too easily, all Indian politics to a mere reaction to imperial initiatives.⁶² There are, of course, alternative political landmarks to frame the narrative of the Mayo controversy. Even as the content and pace of political reforms for India became a heated subject of debate in Mayo's pro-imperialist circles, the Indian National Congress (founded in 1885), the official representative of the nationalist movement in India, was preparing for a major shift in its official demand: from Dominion status for India within the British Empire to complete independence. The resolution for complete independence was first entertained in the annual conference of the Congress in Madras in December 1927—at the height of the Mayo controversy. After much initial hesitation, the resolution was finally incorporated into the official platform of the Congress in Lahore in 1929, coincidentally on the heels of the passage of the first uniform law on marriage in India, which also brought a certain closure to the Mayo controversy. Yet, as the historian Sumit Sarkar reminds us, history “was not made by elite politicians alone, whether British or Indian.”⁶³ The moment of the controversy over *Mother India* was a critical phase in the development of a variety of social movements in colonial India not easily subsumed within the bilateral conflict between the Congress and the imperial state: for the political struggles of women, peasants, workers, and “tribals,” as well as for anti-Brahmin and radical anticaste movements. Equally significant were the changes in the politics of religious sectarianism or “communalism” (a term whose negative meaning as the disunifying “other” of political nationalism was emerging precisely during this period); these took an especially virulent form as new Hindu social movements and organizations were established, provoking their counterparts in similar Muslim responses.⁶⁴ The political equation between British India and princely India (the myriad of princely states under “native” rulers) also underwent important changes in the march up to the constitutional reform of the 1930s. All these developments bore on the semantic struggle over the redrawing of boundaries of the political and the social during the Mayo controversy and its aftermath.

My study, while framed by the high drama of constitutional reforms in colonial India, is informed by the combined historiographical contributions of social history and cultural history to what has loosely been called the “political turn” in contemporary historiography.⁶⁵ My focus is thus on making visible the contingent outcome of *political* choices made against the backdrop of the play of multiple social forces. This has meant a reliance on some familiar archives and

a juxtaposition of them alongside others less familiar. I attempt thus to reframe certain well-known constellations of events and explanations by demonstrating the sheer contingency of their seemingly inevitable outcomes. The substantive and methodological contribution of my argument depends on a narration of the controversy over *Mother India* by means of a detailed engagement with its zigs and zags, its convoluted twists and turns, in order to illuminate the pressurized context for the choices available in the controversy and its aftermath.

The rather ironic legacy of the controversy over *Mother India*, as my book demonstrates, lay in the remarkably heavy contribution of Indian feminism to the “normalization” of the project of a mainstream Indian nationalism: an elaboration of the political as a domain to be inhabited by a normative citizen-subject.⁶⁶ My title ultimately refers to this unintended outcome: the multilayered and much-haunted making of a transitional political event provoked by the exigencies and opportunities surrounding Katherine Mayo’s book, which was itself remade in ways unforeseen either by her or by her critics.