



Age of Consent Act of 1891: Unheard Voices from Colonial Bengal

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Abstract

The Age of Consent Act passed by the British government in India in 1891 raised the age of consent of women, both married and unmarried, from ten to twelve. This Act raised a furore in contemporary Indian society. Opposition to the Act was reportedly the most vehement and aggressive in Bengal. The Bengali intelligentsia, hitherto a champion of reform, resented this act, influenced by the ideology of revivalist Hindu nationalism. Hindu revivalist nationalism, a cultural and ideological movement that burgeoned in Bengal in the 1880s, supposedly reached its climax in 1891 with the backlash against the Age of Consent Act. The torch bearers of this movement took pride in Hindu tradition and culture and opposed colonial intervention in these respects. This paper does not question the historicity or magnitude of the Hindu revivalist opposition to the Act but seeks to point out that the historical discussions on the Age of Consent controversy in the context of Bengal have tended to focus predominantly on the hostility of the Hindu male population. Historians have overlooked the multiple arenas in which the issue of consent was debated in the Bengali milieu. The voices of Bengal Muslim men and Bengali women of diverse communities have remained largely unrecorded in existing historiography. While the majority of Muslims opposed this Act, a small section of the literati welcomed it. Bengali women, it was argued, were passive, and had little to say about this Act, compared to their Maharashtrian counterparts who were more vocal in their demand for a higher age of consent. Despite stereotypes of passivity, the voices of Bengali women did resonate in the public sphere in support of the Act. Moreover, evidence reveals that a few Bengali Muslim women availed this legal instrument to redress the wrongs done to themselves or their daughters. The proposed paper will question the notion of passivity of Bengali women, and bring to light their public articulations and actions with regard to the consent issue. The paper seeks to redress the politics of exclusion and marginalization underpinning Indian historiography and calls for a more nuanced understanding of the age of consent issue in colonial India.

Keywords: consent, revivalism, passivity, marginalization