

# Reframing Reproduction in Vernacular Periodicals: A Study of Contraception in Late Colonial Bengal

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## Abstract

With the emergence of the thriving literary public sphere around the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century across colonial India, the issue of birth control was being debated in various magazines by economists, sexologists, doctors and members of women's organizations. The discussions on reproductive rights of women and dissemination of contraceptive information published in various vernacular periodicals can be situated within a network of other contemporary discourses on "economizing reproduction" that were gaining visibility around this time. The present paper would like to explore the perceptions of women's reproductive body at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that were being forged through coalescing narratives on bourgeois norms of obscenity (*asliḷatā*), biopolitical concerns of an emerging nation state in the last throes of anti-colonial struggle, and various takes on (heteronormative) interpersonal relationships between future citizens. It is within this specific context that I would like to examine articles on birth control published during the early 1930s in the 'self-styled' Bengali women's magazine *Jayasreē* launched by revolutionary leader Leela Nag. By situating the opinions voiced by the men and women writing in the pages of this literary periodical vis-à-vis contemporary intellectual trends of birth control movement in India, this paper seeks to study the interactive textual ecosystem within which the writers and readers (the implied future authors) of *Jayasreē* were functioning.

**Keywords:** birth control, reproductive politics, obscenity, bio-power, 'right' consciousness.

## 1. A nationalist re-fashioning of reproductive politics

It would be no exaggeration to say that in the history of straitjacketing the narrative of a nation's cultural politics, a gnarly issue like 'obscenity' has always been fallen under the censorious purview of disciplinarians. In colonial India, the 'obscene' subject of 'native' expressions of sexuality, held to be unregulated and spurious at best<sup>i</sup> and oppressive at worst<sup>ii</sup>, was a continuous source of distaste and controversy for the British officials and reformist elites alike. As far as the nationalist male bourgeoisie spear-heading the anti-colonial struggle was concerned, the colonial discourses around the sexually deviant and fertile native female body<sup>iii</sup> had to be swept under the proverbial rug of spiritual-aesthetic rhetoric of 'respectable' motherhood. Around the turn of the century the 'monogamous companionate marriage' (fashioned as the ideal unit of a 'Hindu nation') came to be seen as a crucial site of emergence of a healthy race of future citizens of a sovereign nation state. This eugenicist notion got increasingly tied up with Malthusian anxieties of overpopulation and economic underdevelopment through the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, more so with the publication of the 1931 census of India. It is against this backdrop that this paper would like to trace

the intellectual history of debates around birth control as a means for Indian women to contribute to national development, as reflected in the discussion on reproductive politics in Bengali periodicals like *Jayasree*,<sup>iv</sup> during the early 1930s. These vernacular articles published in a magazine run by Bengali women political activists can be read as part of the larger trajectory of discourses linking the Indian women's movement to the national project of 'modernizing' reproduction<sup>v</sup>. This paper will further explore the language of 'scientific' endorsement and a tone critical of existing double standards in Bengali society adopted by the (upper-middle class and upper caste Hindu or Brahmo) women writers, like Anindita Devi, Kamala Mukherjee, Sudhamoyee Devi. These journalistic interventions published in *Jayasree* during the years of its initial run, exemplify the textual (and socio-political) attempts of a handful of educated Indian women to extricate 'suspect' ideas like sex and the reproductive female body from the religio-moral clutches of Indian patriarchy.

The history of birth control in British India is entrenched in a complex nexus of epistemic borrowings from European eugenicists and ethnologists, efforts of transnational organizations, demographic analyses of British officials, famines in India and worldwide economic depression in the late 1920s, demands for sovereignty and visions of a new 'Indian' race. Neither was birth control a project of the colonial government, as it would become in the post-independence period through the state-sanctioned 'family planning' programs, nor was it a radical means of advocating bodily autonomy of Indian women or proactive choice to control their fertility. Indeed, the "polyvocality" and "ambivalence" characterizing the views of the Indian middle-class women's movement on contraception<sup>vi</sup> bear testimony to the complexities inherent in agendas of feminists working within a framework of anti-colonial struggle. In challenging the notion of the emasculated colonized subject, the nationalists had firmly ensconced their narratives in new modes of conjugality and romantic love around the early decades of the 20th century. In fact, since the 19<sup>th</sup> century itself, the relationship between woman and man (read upper-middle class, educated high caste) had been a site of contention for social thinkers, and traditional gender paradigms were being constantly re-imagined, although within the bounds of cultural permissibility. Within the Bengali literary-aesthetic sphere, 'unorthodox' unravellings of Hindu conjugality and literary explorations of women's (sexual) love outside marriage were being condemned as obscene (*asli*) by the sentinels of moral order.<sup>vii</sup>

On the other hand, with the establishment of the bilingual indigenous elite as social analysts, demographers, economists, sexologists, doctors, etc., certain new intellectual currents regarding the sexual health of the nation were entering the colonial narrative.<sup>viii</sup> The models of social progress that the indigenous elites suggested adopting were underscored by ideas of population explosion and the physical and racial decline of Indians. These narratives of 'modernization' existed in a tenuous balance with religio-moral misgivings about a frank public discussion of sexual practices of Indian masses. With the emergence of a mutually constitutive political modernity and an increasingly thriving literary public sphere during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century across the country (and especially in Bengal), periodical literature was increasingly taking a centre stage in shaping ideological nationalist concerns and public activism. Predictably, the various moral, scientific and literary discourses around obscenity and the sexual body (expressed in various platforms like biomedical journals, pamphlets, meetings, literary magazines) were deeply rooted in an underlying logic of the hetero-normative Hindu conjugal family, a microcosm of the social polity. Thus, the rationalizations of regulatory control hinged upon an 'anatomy-politics'<sup>ix</sup> of the

gendered body and informed by the very idea of female sexuality as ‘bio-power’<sup>x</sup>, remained crucial to the assessment of progress of Indian society.

Using Mytheli Sreenivas’s concept of “economizing reproduction”<sup>xi</sup> as a lens to understand the “dense entanglement of reproduction and economy” (2021, p. 12), this paper would like to briefly explore the alternative perspectives on contraception and women’s sexuality that found articulation within the vernacular periodical culture that was thriving across India in the 1930s. Although the concepts and opinions articulated by the Bengali women writers in periodicals like *Jayasree*<sup>̄</sup> were not completely free from the prevalent perceptions of reproductive motherhood and Neo-Malthusian ideas of biopolitical governance of women’s bodies, they do however act as interesting journalistic interventions in the largely male discourse of contraception. In tracing the connections between biological reproduction and its social connotations, i.e. “between bodies and the body politic” (Sreenivas, p. 33) through a close-reading of the articles in *Jayasree*<sup>̄</sup>, I would like to further examine the “role of female agency in population control” elaborated by Mausumi Manna in her interesting and informative 1998 article (p. 35). Manna draws upon discussions on contraception in various Indian magazines like the Bengali ‘liberal’ literary periodicals *Prabāsi*<sup>̄</sup> and *Bicitra*<sup>̄</sup>, the English *The Modern Review*, *Stri-Dharma* (published in English, Tamil, Telugu and Hindi), and *Jayasree*<sup>̄</sup> which consciously adopted a “language of ‘right’ consciousness” (p. 50), to examine the contemporary trends of debate on women’s reproductive health<sup>xii</sup>. In my paper I attempt to read the periodical *Jayasree*<sup>̄</sup> not simply as a unique platform of birth control advocacy, but rather as an interactive textual space in which writers and readers (the implied future authors) were being encouraged to enter into conversation with each other through individual and scholarly opinions on practices surrounding women’s social, legal and at times, sexual identity.<sup>xiii</sup> In a deliberate editorial attempt to generate further discussion and debate, these opinion pieces appearing in the periodical pages vis-à-vis fiction historical essays and the like would often feature opposing views. Before embarking on a discussion of the *Jayasree*<sup>̄</sup> articles, it would be useful to provide a backdrop of ensuing debates on contraception among social elites in India during the interwar period, against which these narrative voices gain prominence.

## 2. Various Strands of the birth control movement in colonial India

In the Madras session of AIWC (All India Women’s Congress), 1932, Renuka Ray<sup>xiv</sup> joined the debate on reproductive control within bourgeois feminist circles stating that Indian women “should tear the veil of false modesty and prejudice if they wanted the race to be full of vigor, health and happiness” (quoted in Ramusack, 1989, p. 42). Though Ray’s statement is couched in the rhetoric of eugenics and nationalist well-being, her argument reveals a nuanced understanding of hypocritical patriarchal codes like modesty and chastity inscribed onto a woman’s body. Ray’s endorsement of such a ‘controversial’ motion introduced in the January session by Rani Lakshmbai Rajwade<sup>xv</sup> indicates the need felt in certain liberal quarters to bring these discussions from within the politically oppressive and unmonitored confines of the ‘private’ sphere out into the open. Even before Margaret Sanger<sup>xvi</sup> arrived at Bombay port in November of 1935 the debate around birth-control had gained some momentum within British India.<sup>xvii</sup> The history of this discourse of reproductive politics of Indians gets woven into the economic spiraling of the country, in the aftermath of the massive famines that shook the country from the 1870s to the 1890s (Sreenivas, p. 33). The colonial government’s ineptitude coupled with unwillingness to shoulder responsibility for a plummeting economy due to dwindling revenues, led to economic failures being translated into

anxieties of overpopulation. The British administrators' attempt to explain famines in India using Malthusian ideas becomes apparent in a comment made by the then Viceroy Lord Lytton where he says that the Indian population "has a tendency to increase more rapidly than food can be raised from its soil" (quoted in Sreenivas, pp. 56).<sup>xviii</sup>

The question of management of a 'hypersexual' population of an economically underdeveloped colony was thus taken up by members of the native intelligentsia like reformers, historians, economists, public health officials<sup>xix</sup>, etc., at times in the spirit of anti-colonial critique. On one front, this process of "economizing reproduction" eventually coalesced into legal debates on child marriage, and on minimum marriageable age of Indian girls.<sup>xx</sup> On the other hand discourses of Malthusianism and eugenics initially found expression in campaigns led by upper-caste Indian men<sup>xxi</sup> in conjunction with Western (mostly British and later American) advocates and organizations (like the Neo-Malthusian League in Britain). The discussions around reproductive reforms increasingly gained public visibility during the 1920s and 30s with the increased participation of middle-class feminists and medical persons, alongside other factors<sup>xxii</sup>. The activists of the Indian women's movement associated the individual reproductive body of woman to the social polity of the motherland in a language of improvement of health and service to the nation. Sanjam Ahluwalia writes that the agendas of the various groups of advocates of contraception had, for the most part, little to do with safeguarding women's reproductive rights, and were mostly concerned with the surveillance of "subaltern sexuality" in the name of social welfare (p. 35). The insistence of some upper-class Hindu male proponents of birth control in perpetuating stereotypes of working classes, lower-caste Hindus, and Muslims as sexually irresponsible subjects can be read as an example of what Foucault has called 'biologized' 'racism'.<sup>xxiii</sup> Thus the decennial census data was often used by middle-class (male) Indian advocates of birth control to further their "hegemonic projects of nationalism and community-based politics" (Ahluwalia, p. 25).<sup>xxiv</sup>

The eugenicist argument critical of the irresponsible breeding of 'hypersexual' poor and marginal groups, often endorsed the deployment of contraceptive techniques for the control of social 'vices' like prostitution and incidence of venereal diseases.<sup>xxv</sup> Interestingly, since the usage of birth control in colonial India was cautiously tied to the strictures of the monogamous marriage, the threat of dissociation between sexual engagement and the procreative imperative facilitated by contraception caused much anxiety among orthodox circles regarding divorce and 'prostitution' of the wife in marriage. Sexual self-indulgence was seen as an 'immoral' fallout of birth control by critics like Sudhangshu Sekhar Gupta— whose conservative take on contraception was printed in *Jayasree* (Srabani, 1932)— and the proponents of the Gandhian ideal of self-control. Moreover, while most supporters of contraception argued in favor of the woman retaining some degree of control over her reproductive fertility, they continually perpetuated the stereotype of sexual pleasure being a primarily male domain within marriage. Besides, the assiduous execution of the social role of a 'healthy' and 'enlightened' mother was understood to be the lynchpin of an 'improved' race of future citizens. This project of motherhood was embedded in an 'anatomy-politics' of maximization of utility and docility<sup>xxvi</sup> with internalized codes of self-surveillance, insidiously imposed by traditional and reformist patriarchy on the colonized female subject. As 'guardians of the race' 'enlightened' mothers were seen as the decisive link between the 'anatomy-politics' of the body and the 'biopolitics' of the population.

The rhetoric of ‘social welfare’ employed by most of the activists endorsing birth control within the Indian women’s movement was not necessarily framed within a language of rights of sexual reform. Perhaps it can be reasoned that a radical vocabulary challenging the solely utilitarian function of sex by divorcing it from marriage, would have done more harm than good to the cause of advocacy of birth control by the women’s movement under the scrutinizing eyes of the colonial and native patriarchy. Since the views of many pro-contraception advocates were in line with eugenicist arguments, the adoption of a discourse of reproductive rights by more progressive proponents would probably have alienated their already marginalized voice within the women’s movement itself<sup>xxvii</sup>. When urban bourgeois Indian feminists like Rani Laxmibai Rajwade began mobilizing support for birth control around the 30s with the help of local and national women’s organizations, the major rationale cited by them was the improvement of the health of women and children in the face of rising infant mortality and poverty.<sup>xxviii</sup> Controlling poverty was a common aim for all the advocates of birth control, and the resolution passed in the 7th session of the AIWC called upon local and municipal bodies to open clinics to assist medical professionals in distributing contraceptive information (especially among non-elite clientele) (Ramusack, p.42).<sup>xxix</sup>

Barbara Ramusack has observed that, women’s groups and other single-issue associations that distributed information on contraception in public clinics in Bombay and Calcutta, had to often face strong opposition from Indian male members of the municipal councils (p. 2-53). In response to conservative backlash within the AIWC, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyaya, one of the very few voices critical of the classist nature of the Indian women’s movement, went on to emphasize the “inalienable right of *every woman* to possess the means to control her body” (emphasis mine) (quoted in Ramusack, p.53).<sup>xxx</sup> Chattopadhyaya’s radical intervention can be read as echoing rare articulations within the pro-contraception circles which were critical of birth control being used solely as an instrument of regulating subaltern sexuality. Adjacently, a myopic disregard for the implications of caste and socio-cultural particularities for Indian women’s reproductive bodies existed within the networks of transnational women’s activism associated with the Indian elite. Invocations of a spirit of universal sisterhood and altruistic designs towards ‘the brown woman’ to be ‘saved’ from unwanted pregnancies formed the basis of discourses of ‘imperial feminists’ like Edith How-Martyn and Eileen Palmer (British activists)<sup>xxxi</sup> and later, Sanger. However the ‘benevolence’ of the enfranchised white woman was counterpoised by a lack of sufficient understanding of existing power hierarchies in a complex structure between them as allies of the ‘progressive’ colonial patriarchy and the reproductive bodies of the colonized.<sup>xxxii</sup> However, throughout the early decades of the 20th century, elite Hindu and Muslim leaders of the women’s movement projected themselves as spokespersons of Indian womanhood and continued to debate the issue of reproductive control through various meetings, speeches in public forums. Their writings, meeting proceedings, and even advertisement of contraceptives were featured in the pages of national and regional women’s journals like *Strī-Dharma*, *Roshni*, *Strī-Darpan*, *Jayasree*, etc.<sup>xxxiii</sup>

### 3. Debating ‘Janma-Sashon’ in the pages of 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali periodicals

An editorial piece in the miscellaneous section (*Bibidha Prasanga*) of the ‘liberal’ high-brow Bengali periodical *Prabāsi* reads,

“... in various shops in India these [chemical and mechanical contraceptive] are openly sold and advertised in newspapers. This is not desirable.” (*Chaitra*, 1934, p. 897)

These few lines, vis-à-vis articles voicing Hindu chauvinist anxiety over “race degeneration of the Bengalee Hindu middle-class” (Manna, p. 45), typify the tone of conservative denouncement of contraception taken by magazines like *Prabāsi*, *Bicitra* and *The Modern Review*. In another instance,

Renuka Ray mentions an article in the Indian English daily *The Statesman*, which had denounced the endeavor of some women social activists to organize discussions in favor of birth control within the Calcutta circle on the eve of Sanger's trip to India (p. 82).<sup>xxxiv</sup> The prevalence of such a reactionary atmosphere in late colonial Bengal grants Anindita Devi's bold endorsement of contraception a singular import, when she writes in *Janma-niyantṛaṅ*:

“...needless to say that people of *all classes and communities* should adopt this method [of birth control] because of various reasons in a *more permanent or temporary* way in the private sphere of their lives” (Emphases mine) (*Jayasree*, *Baisakh*, 1934, p. 341).

At another point in this essay, Anindita Devi counters the views expressed in another slightly more conservative article printed in *Bicitra* to clearly state that “they” do not support the adoption of birth control as a national policy to manage populations. Devi's entire logic of espousal of contraception hinges on the ‘individual’ choices of mothers through a network of collective educational campaigns on this matter to overcome obstacles of taboo and misinformation. She critiques the usage of birth control for eugenicist purposes by re-iterating, “Our endeavor is *not provincial or communal*” (emphases mine) (p. 340). Though Bengali writers like Anindita Devi and Sudhamoyee Devi were endorsing contraception in the light of escalating deaths of infants and mothers in India as prompted by the 1931 census, they consciously distanced themselves from communal and classist narratives of biopolitical governance. What is noticeably interesting is how the Anindita Devi uses plural first person pronouns (like ‘our’ or ‘*āmāder*’) while strongly denouncing views of another author in a piece critically engaging with the various oppositions to contraception raised in the last session of the AIWC. One can only assume that besides increasing the weight of her personal opinion, Anindita Devi is also attempting to clarify the political position of the *Jayasree* group of birth control advocates, thus indicating the radical politics of this vernacular periodical run by women.<sup>xxxv</sup>

Impressively straddling both worlds of the ‘socio-political’ and the ‘literary’, *Jayasree* was founded in May 1931 (or *Baisakh*, 1338 B.S.) by Leela Nag, who was associated with women's political collectives active in the anti-colonial revolutionary resistance in Bengal. Sarmistha Dutta Gupta states that the (upper class, upper caste) Bengali Hindu and Brahmo women who edited and produced women's magazines like *Jayasree* and *Mandira* had different political affiliations, and their distinct positions resonated through their writings in the journal pages (2010, pp. 11-13).<sup>xxxvi</sup> Predictably, vernacular periodicals which exclusively conformed to the narrow nationalist perspective of viewing women as desexualized moral subjects, steered clear of any public debates around birth control or controversial legislations like the Suppression of Immoral Traffic Act (SITA) passed in 1932. While a ‘progressive’ periodical like *Prabasi*, at the very forefront of journalistic modernism in Bengali literary public sphere constantly expressed anxiety regarding the imagined sexual threat to the politically active woman's body, it fell to various women's magazines to discuss issues related to women's sexuality and public mobility.<sup>xxxvii</sup> Therefore, it was in the pages of a politically conscious periodical like *Jayasree* that articles voicing “the role of female agency in population control” (Manna, p.35) through a dialogue between opinions on reproductive politics situated across the political spectrum. During the period of its initial run (1931-1935)<sup>xxxviii</sup>, the magazine had taken a unique trajectory under the co-editorship of Leela Nag, Renu Sen and Shakuntala Choudhury, and later under the editorship of Binapani Roy and Usharani Roy, while serving non-partisan interests.<sup>xxxix</sup> *Jayasree* in its first phase was breaking new ground by serving as a politically conscious women's literary space which published radical pieces on women's public life, political activism and equal education, individual and legal rights, etc., under its banner. The periodical was conceived with the notion of being a magazine not just ‘for’, but ‘by’ women, and its

editorial policy was to visibilize women's socio-political emancipation alongside promoting a nationalist consciousness. The initial aim, as outlined in Sakuntala Chowdhury's editorial piece 'Meyeder Kagaj' (Women's Paper) in the first issue of *Jayasree*, was to go beyond superficial content focusing exclusively on patriarchal gender roles as featured in various columns on 'women's issues' in liberal-reformist magazines. It is worth noting that the various debates on birth control played out through writings of both women and men in *Jayasree*, were published at the time when a national women's associations like AIWC was campaigning across the countries to raise awareness about contraception and reproductive health of women.

The interactive textual space that was being forged in the pages of *Jayasree* was often characterized by notes at the end of pieces conveying slightly circumspect views encouraging the women readers of the magazines to respond with their own articles.<sup>xl</sup> For example, Sudhangshu Sekhar Gupta's essay (*Shrabāṇ*, 1932)<sup>xli</sup> alluding to the threat posed by contraception to the hetero-patriarchal institution of marriage was published with a concluding editorial note inviting more discussion on the articulated opinions by 'educated' women. In engaging with Gupta's controversial opinions, Jyotirmoyee Devi's article '*Janma-Shason Alochona*' (Discussion on birth control), in the *Pauṣ* issue of the same year, is evidently a response to the editorial request. She also refers to a very interesting piece by Jagath Mitra (a reprint from the periodical *Sadesh*), which included a discussion of trial marriage proposed by the American birth control advocate Judge Ben Lindsey, only to refute these progressive views in support of Gupta conservative ones. Jyotirmoyee Devi's article rather functions within a framework of traditional gender roles and feudal structure of the family in aligning with Gupta's anxieties over sexual overindulgence and moral laxity. She denounces Mitra's conception of heterosexual love (*prem*) forming the basis of marriage to emphasize motherhood as the binding force in marital relations for a woman. She concludes by implying that unlike 'masculine' European societies, an emasculated colonized race lacks the socio-cultural circumstances conducive to the 'proper' usage of birth control.

For the elite women advocating birth control around the time the Bengali educator and translator Sudhamoyee Devi was writing, the politics of selfhood had to be presented as complementary rather than being opposed to the nationalist citizen self. The language of the articles on contraception in *Jayasree* was mostly underscored by ideas of a responsible 'enlightened' motherhood as the ultimate contribution of the female citizen to the improvement of a struggling race. Thus, at first glance, Sudhamoyee Devi's '*Janma-Shason*' (published in the *Chaitra*, 1932 issue) appears to be one more endorsement of contraception as effective birth spacing grounded in the dominant ideology of the 'healthy' mother of 'healthy' future citizens. A clear endorsement of a (married) woman's control over her body comes almost at the end of Sudhamoyee's essay, only to be couched in the rhetoric of motherhood. She writes,

"It is true that procreation is the primary objective of marriage... [But] quite apart from procreation, a *physical relationship helps couples* to come closer to each other mentally. There is *no harm* in controlling birth *as necessary* for the purpose" (emphases mine) (translation from Dutta Gupta, p.115).

This allusion to conjugal sexuality is presented by the writer within a morally acceptable framework of birth spacing. Interestingly, the affirmation at the close of the above quoted passage comes veiled in the form of a negation, right after a discussion on the necessity of greater sexual harmony between couples to avert the socially undesirable outcome of divorce. This brief discussion of

conjugal sexual health ties Sudhamoyee Devi's 1932 article to Anindita Devi's '*Janma-niyantran*', which would appear in the pages of *Jayasree* in 1934 as a piece written to be presented at the Calcutta literary meet organized by Taltala Library.

Written in an inimitably caustic style, Anindita Devi's essay critically analyzes popular arguments (including the ones articulated by some AIWC members) against contraception like the 'undignified' (read *asli*) nature of public discussions on sex, regulating widow remarriage as a more effective means of population control rather than the controversial use of birth control for the purpose, etc. Criticizing the absurdity of the Gandian policy of *coitus interruptus*, she advocates the 'scientific' forms of birth control prescribed by doctors to combat economic constraints within families by restricting childbirth. However, while stressing on the importance of proper circulation of contraceptive information through clinics, Anindita Devi writes that care should be taken to discourage using techniques of reproductive control to avoid responsibilities of parenthood among married couples. In endorsing the usage of contraceptives by married couples she seems to towing the usual line of birth control advocates in India, until in the latter half of her essay she undercuts this moralistic assumption. Exhorting the double standards of society, Devi says that the man is never called out for his philandering and it is usually the woman who has to bear social rejection for bearing a child outside marriage. She further builds her argument by linking the idea of undesirability of an illegitimate child in the eyes of society with that of economic troubles faced by young couples forced to marry early to avoid scandal. Thus by ingeniously rounding up her point in suggesting that such mishaps can be avoided through the use of birth control, Anindita Devi seems to subtly imply certain degrees of toleration towards sexual relations outside the traditional constraints of conjugality. In turning ideas of obscenity and 'moral propriety' on their heads thorough decoupling marriage and sex, she espouses a broader scope of sexual autonomy for the Indian woman educated in the progressive 'science' of birth control. A few years later, another ardent supporter of contraception, Kamladevi Chattopadhyay, would take Anindita Devi's radical language of advocacy to a singular level by positing that women's economic independence is inextricably linked with her sexual independence.<sup>xlii</sup>

Anindita Devi's language of 'scientific' sanction and a progressive politics of reproductive autonomy hark back to Jagath Mitra's 1932 article which argues in favour of a revolutionary sexual politics. In a strikingly controversial move, Mitra begins '*Janma-Shason o matrityo*' with the caveat that people who understand sexual desire to be a sin should refrain from perusing his article. Like many others, he advocates of birth control not only for the prevention of unwanted pregnancies to control poverty, but also for rejuvenating the entire race. However, on a refreshing note he develops a gripping anti-patriarchal rhetoric throughout the essay to denounce the orthodox structure of Hindu monogamous (often loveless) marriage in which a woman lacks sufficient control over her fertility. Drawing upon a "language of 'right' consciousness" Mitra writes that a woman should "embrace motherhood as a *choice*, not as an obligation". Therefore, in re-printing a piece like Mitra's, a few months prior to the publication of Kamala Mukherjee's<sup>xliii</sup> articles on Margaret Sanger (in 1932 and 1933), *Jayasree* was making its stance on birth control and women's agency amply clear. Like the American activist Sanger, both Mitra and Mukherjee cite the fatal outcomes of risky abortion methods prevalent in contemporary times as another reason for adopting birth control to prevent undesired conception. In her 1933 article on the life and activism of Sanger in America<sup>xliiv</sup>, Kamala Mukherjee adopts the interesting term '*nari bali*' to refer to the unnecessary sacrifice of women's lives associated with unwanted pregnancies and abortion. Mukherjee extensively quotes Sanger in her articles to endorse the spread of contraceptive information in India. Arguing for birth



control as effective birth spacing and a woman's way of exercising control on her reproductive fertility, à la Sanger, Mukherjee concludes her *Kartik* 1932 article with the words of the American activist herself: "Tell the women of India, I keep myself informed with the news of all their movements and good works, and they have my full support in all their endeavors" (p. 554).<sup>xlv</sup> One can guess that for women reading this article in *Jayasree*, many of whom were probably associated with various (anti-colonial) political activities if not the women's movement itself in some capacity or the other, the words of the seasoned activist would have acted as a seal of approval for their future aspirations.

#### 4. Conclusion

The nexus of both unorthodox and cautiously conservative standpoints visibilized in the pages of *Jayasree* in the first half of the 1930s are instances of women writers from 'respectable' families wielding their pens to flout the norms of obscenity (*asliḷata*) within the Bengali literary public sphere. While Sudhamoyee Devi's understanding of ideal femininity is rooted in assumptions of domesticity, Anindita Devi proposes a non-hierarchical framework for the adoption of contraceptive technologies by all for improvement of quality of life in general. In her analysis, the generative potential of the female body and women's expressions of sexuality, gain legitimacy through a language of agency and 'right' consciousness. Kamala Mukherjee's articles on the struggles of Sanger in promoting reproductive rights of women in the face of the regressive Comstock Laws would have functioned as a potent prelude to Sanger's campaigning in India. Through various overlaps with and radical departures from the language of birth control advocacy prevalent within the movement, these Bengali periodical articles foster an alternative space of female agency and political consciousness. Although faint echoes of the logic of "economizing reproduction" can be discerned in some of these articles published in *Jayasree*, interesting critiques of conservative arguments in support and in opposition to birth control are articulated within this interactive literary space. Back in the 1930s, such a complex presentation of the birth control debate would have obviously appealed to a heterogeneous group of educated middle-class (women) readers of *Jayasree* possessing various political convictions. Rather tellingly, a contentious issue like contraception was being discussed in the periodical pages while it was under the editorship of young revolutionary women activists like Sakuntala Chowdhury, Bina Roy and Usharani Roy. Through their editorial decisions and interventions, these women succeeded in enriching the pages of a vernacular magazine with a potent discourse surrounding women's bodies which was often critical of nationalist and colonial patriarchal mores.

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<sup>i</sup>For a more detailed discussion on colonial notions of Indian sexuality, see Durba Mitra, *Indian Sex Life: Sexuality and the Colonial Origins of Modern Social Thought* (2020), henceforth abbreviated as *ISL*. The control and erasure of women's sexuality became critical to how the British colonial state intervened in everyday life, and "the prostitute was produced as social fact- repeated again and again... to comprehend diverse social and sexual practices" (p. 67).

<sup>ii</sup>Certain marriage norms prevalent, among the Hindus in pre-colonial and colonial India, like Sati, child marriage, polygamy, etc., were indeed oppressive and were eventually abolished through the efforts of Indian

social reformers. See Sreenivas (2021) for a discussion on the Age of Consent Act and early marriage in connection with increasing population.

<sup>iii</sup>Prof. Durba Mitra observes that through their scholarly interpretation of Sanskrit erotic texts (often read as prescriptions of controlling women's sexuality), Indologists like Richard Burton and H. H. Wilson, and native philologists had described Indian women's sexuality as deviant (2020, p. 30-31). Moreover, American journalist Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) controversially held the regressive reproductive and sexual practices of Indians responsible for their lack of political sovereignty.

<sup>iv</sup> Here I refer to the language spoken by the inhabitants of undivided Bengal, which would include present-day Bangladesh. *Jayasree* (in circulation since 1931, with some intervals) began as literary ventures actively engaging with contemporary political issues. *Jayasree*, edited by a group of women, started publication with a 'male-exclusionist' editorial policy, and consciously styled itself as a women's journal interested in the promotion of women writers. It was initially published from Dacca between 1931 and 35 and was re-launched from Calcutta in July 1938 after Leela Nag's release from prison in 1937.

<sup>v</sup> During the interwar years of 1920s and 1930s, a trend of what Sarah Hodges calls "contraceptive commercialism" was taking hold of markets in prosperous Indian cities like Madras, Bombay, Calcutta, Kanpur. Alongside marketing for traditional contraceptives in popular journals, pharmaceutical products for "sexual health" and "family hygiene" like pressaries, diaphragms, jellies, powders, condoms, etc. were being imported from European companies and retailed and sold by Indian farms in local markets (Desai, 2020, p. 45).

<sup>vi</sup> This ambivalence is exemplified by using the lens of national development to frame discussions around contraception by AIWC activists like Lakshmi Menon when they link women's health directly to population and economy. The terms have been used by Sanjham Ahluwalia in the context of the Indian women's movement (2008).

<sup>vii</sup>For more about an analysis of periodical culture in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengal, and a discussion on conservative literary criticism in magazines of this period, see Samarpita Mitra, *Periodicals, readers, and the making of a modern literary culture* (2020), and *The Literary Public Sphere in Bengal* (2011). She observes that, "Journals like *Sāhitya* and *Nārāyaṇa* showed a visible apprehension about modern notions of love, emotions and physical pleasure" (2011, p. 212).

<sup>viii</sup>Colonial presidencies like Bombay, Madras and Calcutta became important participants in such intellectual currents (D. Mitra, 2020, p. 40-41).

<sup>ix</sup>In *The History of Sexuality: 1*, trans. Robert Hurley (1976/1998), Foucault defines 'anatomo-politics' as an entire network of micro-power which sees the body as a machine and is concerned with the disciplining of an individual body, the optimization of its capabilities to render it useful and docile (pp.139).

<sup>x</sup>'Bio-power' in Foucault represents the process of regulation of the "species body" of the population (in terms of collective identities) by using "numerous and diverse techniques for achieving the subjugation of bodies and the control of populations" (1998, p.140).

<sup>xi</sup>Referring to Michelle Murphy's concept of economization of life, Sreenivas uses the term "economizing reproduction" to outline the process "whereby economic calculations saturated processes of biological reproduction, in the process of transforming bodies and lives, sexualities and sentiments" in late colonial India (2021, p. 12).

<sup>xii</sup>The eminent Bengali writer-editor Ramananda Chatterjee launched the highbrow literary monthly (*sachitra māṣik patrikā*) *Prabāsi* in 1901, and its English counterpart *The Modern Review* in 1907. Along with these two popular periodicals, Upendranath Gangopadhyay's *Bicitra* (pub. since 1927) was another illustrated 'family magazine' widely in circulation, which opposed mechanical contraceptive methods on the grounds of race degeneration (Manna, p. 45). *Strī-Dharma* was the journal of Women's Indian Association (WIA) in circulation since 1918, which that "cautiously endorsed birth control by passing resolutions to this effect from the mid-1930s onwards" (Hodges, 2016, p. 110).

<sup>xiii</sup> The articles that I discuss in this paper have been drawn from archival research, mainly at The Bangiya Sahitya Parishad and Rammohan Library in Kolkata. The translations from Bengali have been mostly done by me except for in cases otherwise mentioned.

<sup>xiv</sup> A Brahmo social activist from Calcutta, Ray was also a member of AIWC and Indian National Congress.

<sup>xv</sup> Rajwade was a practicing physician and a social activist, under whose leadership middle-class women joined the public discourse around contraception during the 1930s. Though Rajwade's resolution only attracted 7 votes and was defeated in the 6th AIWC session, the motion got passed in the Lucknow session of 1932 (Ramusack, p. 43).

<sup>xvi</sup> Margaret Higgins Sanger was an American birth control activist, sex educator, and nurse. She had popularized the term "birth control" and opened the first birth control clinic in the United States in 1916. During her visit to India she had travelled to cities like Calcutta, Bombay, Trivadrur, etc., while actively collaborating with Indian women and men to propagandize for birth control.

<sup>xvii</sup> Interestingly there was no legal prohibition against the distribution of contraception equipment and techniques in British India.

<sup>xviii</sup> Sreenivas clarifies that the population was stagnant in most parts of the subcontinent between 1970 and 1920. Although there was some growth after the 1880s with regional variations, the official claims of a sweeping increase in population seems to have been largely exaggerated to shift responsibility (p. 6).

<sup>xix</sup> It is noteworthy that Public health had been handed over to the Indians as part of the system of dyarchy under the Montague-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919. Rahul Nair suggests that the Indian public health officials often raised alarms about the 'quantity' and 'quality' of a burgeoning population of the fledgling nation state, and in some cases advocated birth control as a necessary reproductive reform (2011, p. 233-42).

<sup>xx</sup> These debates would ultimately culminate in the passing of the Age of Consent act of 1891 and later the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929.

<sup>xxi</sup> The first advocates of birth control included an group of South-Indian Brahmin elites who had formed the Hindu Madras Neo-Malthusian League in 1882. Dr. A.P. Pillay and R.D. Karve, who had opened clinics for the distribution of contraceptives in Madras and Bombay, were among the prominent male proponents of birth control during the later phase (1910-1947) (Ramusack, p. 55).

<sup>xxii</sup> Referring to the effects of global economic depression of 1929 on Indian economic dislocations, Sreenivas writes, "Reforming the nation's own "domestic affairs" by regulating the intimate biopolitics of reproduction and sexuality became the precondition of Indian entry into a global geopolitics" (p. 90). The controversy engendered with the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* (1927) which criticized the condition of Indian public health and raised anxieties about the "global colour line", propelled India into a the midst of a global geopolitics (p. 79-81).

<sup>xxiii</sup> In *Society Must be Defended* (2004) Foucault writes that since the 18<sup>th</sup> century problem groups which posed the threat of social harm were in fact biologized (racial or class) enemies rather than ethnic ones (pp. 255-56). This useful concept can also be extended to understand the implications of casteism and communalism on eugenicist thought in the Indian context.

<sup>xxiv</sup> Ahluwalia further says that brahmin advocates like Radhakamal Mukherjee and P.K. Wattal "raised the issue of high fertility among aboriginal tribes, lower castes, Muslims" to communalize the politics of demographic in their analysis of the population problem in India (p. 52).

<sup>xxv</sup> This was an argument put forth by Pillay, a sexologist who published the internationally acclaimed magazine *Marriage Hygiene* from Bombay, in support of contraception. Stephen Legg, in *Prostitution and the Ends of Empire*, states that the birth control movement had reached its peak during a time when the moral hygiene campaign was being carried out with renewed vigor in India through the intervention of 'imperial feminists' like Meliscent Shephard (representative of the London-based Association of Moral and Social Hygiene) (2014, p.179).

<sup>xxvi</sup> For example, one of the main arguments in favour of (a certain class of) women's education was that an educated woman would make a better mother. Limiting women's mobility by largely restricting them to the domestic sphere has always been a potent patriarchal ploy of securing women's docility through controlling their sexuality.

<sup>xxvii</sup> For example the AIWC towed the line of Gandhian politics, and many of the AIWC women did not want to join the Marriage Welfare and Child Guidance Association functional throughout the 1930s in Calcutta because they did not want to antagonize Gandhi on the issue of contraception (Ramusack, p. 47).

<sup>xxviii</sup> As indicated by the preliminary report of the recent 1931 census.

<sup>xxix</sup> The AIWC women remained vulnerable to the charge from Gandhi and others of not being representative of the non-elite, especially village women, on the issue of contraception (1989, 43).

<sup>xxx</sup> In the radical socialist understanding of Kamaladevi (the first organizing secretary of the AIWC), 'every woman' would probably refer to women of all classes and castes, although she does not go into the prevalent complications of caste hierarchies.

<sup>xxxi</sup> How-Martyn and Palmer, both important members of the Birth Control International Information Centre in London, were British advocates of birth control, and had made several trips to India between 1934 and 39 (Ahluwalia, pp. 68-69). During her 1936-37 tours, How-Martyn reported that there were 30 clinics and 40 other centers operational in colonial India where information on contraception could be obtained (Ramusack, p.51).

<sup>xxxii</sup> The agendas of these Euro-American women activists were often driven by intentions of accumulating cultural and economic capital, and exploring markets for new contraceptive technologies (Ahluwalia, p.69).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> *Strī-Dharma* was the WIA journal which ran from 1918 to 1936, while *Roshni* was a quarterly publication of AIWC launched in 1938. Among the vernacular periodicals, *Strī-Darpan* was a politically conscious Hindi women's magazine edited by women of the Nehru family, whereas *Jayasree* was an autonomous Bengali magazine founded by the revolutionary Leega Nag. The issue of contraception was also widely discussed in prestigious journals like *Marriage Hygiene* (started by Pillay) and *Madras Birth Control Bulletin*. Ahluwalia has observed that advertisements of contraceptives appeared in *Strī-Dharma* and other Hindi magazines like *Sudha*, *Madhuri*, and *Strī-Darpan* (p. 179-80).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> In *My Reminiscences: social development during Gandhian era and after* (1982) Ray further mentions that advocates from 'respectable families' like Mrs. S.N. Ray and she had to face much conservative backlash.

<sup>xxxv</sup> Sarmistha Dutta Gupta writes that the opinions and political affiliation of the women writers writing in *Jayasree*'s shows that there was "significant differences between social feminists in the first phase of the women's movement in India" (p. 116).

<sup>xxxvi</sup> *Mandira* an illustrated monthly periodical run by women writers, was published sporadically between 1938 and 1948.

<sup>xxxvii</sup> However, even women's magazines around the turn of the 1900s like *Bharat-Mahila*, *Antahpur*, *Suprabhat*, *Banga-Mahila*, etc. (all edited by Hindu and Brahmo women), mostly rallied for a limited freedom of women while emphasizing the need to fulfill traditional gender roles. However they were successful in engendering a space in which women could connect with each other (S. Mitra, 2020, 291).

<sup>xxxviii</sup> Both Leela Nag and Renu Sen were arrested due to their revolutionary activities in Dacca in the December of 1931. Binapani Roy and her cousin Usharani Roy (both related to Marxist leader Anil Roy), who were also associated with the revolutionary groups of *Deepali Sangha* and *Sree Sangha*, edited the periodical from the end of 1933 to 1935 till the British government banned its publication on grounds of sedition.

<sup>xxxix</sup> Since 1938, Leela Nag, and thus *Jayasree*, increasingly gravitated towards the liberal socialist politics of Forward Bloc and 'Subhasism' (Dutta Gupta, pp. 125-126).

<sup>xl</sup> Since the arena of literary periodicals was mostly the preserve of the upper-middle class, the subscribers of a magazine like *Jayasree* would have naturally belonged to these sections in which the percentage of educated

and politically conscious women were relatively higher in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. These women readers could access such publications at circulating libraries, other educational/political institutions, and of course at home.

<sup>xli</sup> The article in question is titled '*Janma-Shason o matrityo*' (Birth control and motherhood), same as Jagath Mitra's article in the *Chayan* (Selections) section of the *Jaiṣṭha* issue in response to which it was written.

<sup>xlii</sup> Refer to Chattopadhyay's 1936 article 'The Future of the Indian Women's Movement'.

<sup>xliii</sup> Kamala Mukherjee was a Bengali woman living in America, who was closely associated with the women's organizations for expatriate Indians. She was a frequent contributor to *Jayasree* and wrote about various aspects of the women's movement and progressive laws in America.

<sup>xliv</sup> Comstock laws

<sup>xlv</sup> Mukherjee begins her article, with the description of her conversation with the famous Sanger, whom she had approached with the proposition of writing an article on contraception in a woman's paper in India. She recounts that in response Sanger had handed her a 1916 self-authored pamphlet espousing ideas which Sanger believed should be common knowledge to women of all countries.

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