CHAPTER 1

ARRIVAL AND INTRODUCTION

This book is the story of an American woman's journey into what for her was an unknown world, the lives of the women of India. It lasted almost four years, took me to most states in the country and forced me thousands of years back in history. I met and interviewed hundreds of women, although I am not sure that this number means anything. I learned the most from the handful of Indian women I counted as friends, and from the larger truths that came from the exploration of individual lives. Many of the Indian women I encountered led miserable existences, little better than those of beasts of burden. Others were among the most formidable people I have ever met. Almost all of them were inspiring. The story of Indian women is ancient, but it is also the story of the profound change, and contradictions, of the present day.

My husband and I first landed in New Delhi in the middle of a January night in 1985, and at the time it seemed as if we had flown the nineteen hours from our home in Washington, D.C., to a country
that could not be part of the same planet. One of New Delhi’s sodden winter fogs hung heavy over the runway, obscuring what little there was to see other than scrub and rocky soil. Later, I always thought it fitting that my first view of India should have extended no more than twenty-five feet in front of me.

I was twenty-eight years old and had traveled no farther from the United States than Europe. To prepare myself for India, I had dutifully read the recommended books and talked to numerous old India hands. The Jewel in the Crown, the public television series based on Paul Scott’s Raj Quartet, was bringing magical scenes of Kashmir’s Dal Lake and the golden desert of Rajasthan into American living rooms at the time; I had been moved by the film Gandhi a few years before. None of that seemed to have anything to do with the India I first encountered, and no book or person could have described the physical sensation of simply breathing the air. This was before the completion of the modern Indira Gandhi International Airport, so our arrival was not sanitized by a sealed walkway into a brightly lit terminal. Instead, we stepped out of the plane and were instantly assaulted by the overpowering smell of a Delhi winter night—smoky and sweet and overtire and utterly foreign, with a promise of adventures to come. Later I discovered the odor was from the smoke of the cow-dung fires that people built to cook food and keep warm.

I was shaking as I walked down the steps and onto the tarmac, feeling like an innocent unworthy of what was before me. As we waited under the belly of the plane for a rattletrap bus to take us to the terminal, I stared through the mist at the Arabic letters on a parked 747 that had arrived that night from the Gulf. We had flown over Saudi Arabia on our way, and it took me a moment to readjust to my new place in the world; the Middle East was now west. The fog and my fatigue gave everything an amorphous, dreamlike quality, as if India had no edges and no point of penetration. It was the first of many times I would feel as if I were free-falling in space, with nothing to hang on to and no point of reference.

I had come to India because of my husband. I still don’t like to say it that way, but it is one reason, I think, that I wrote this particular book about India instead of another. For the past five and a half years, I had been a reporter for the Style section of The Washington Post, and Steve, my husband, had covered the White House for The New York Times. We were married in 1983. A little more than a year later, Steve joined the foreign staff of the Times and accepted New Delhi as his first assignment.

I knew almost nothing about India. My father had spent three months there in 1956, while making a film about traveling by jeep around the world, and the image I had of the country, to the extent that I even thought about it, had come chiefly from one scene in that film that had stayed with me for years. It was of Hindu worshipers on the bathing ghats, or steps, leading into the waters of the Ganges at Benares, one of the holy cities of India. People swarmed into the river, gulped mouthfuls of fetid brown water, and stood knee-deep in silent meditation as they cupped their hands in prayer toward the sun. The shot had a beautiful amber light, which I now recognize as the color of dawn on the Ganges. But it all looked so inaccessible to my world.

Yet I had always wanted to report from overseas, and once I got used to the idea of India, I developed, along with my nervousness, a lot of romantic notions about the passage ahead. Our first day in Delhi, however, did not distinguish us as intrepid travelers. We were cooed several centuries away from Benares at Delhi’s Taj Mahal Hotel, a luxury high rise with a white marble lobby filled with the scent of fresh tuberoses and a powerful disinfectant. We had checked in at five in the morning but were awake at eight. Steve, with great trepidation, parted the heavy curtains to peer out at India. Beneath us lay a mist-shrouded expanse of trees and foliage that looked like an ominous South Asian Sherwood Forest. Above it, floating languidly on the morning breeze, were enormous birds reminiscent of pterodactyls. “I’m supposed to cover this country,” Steve said, only half joking, “but I’m afraid to go outside.” I later learned that we had been gazing down on cabinet ministers’ gardens, which make up some of the most expensive real estate in the country.

New Delhi at eye level later the same day presented other surprises. The city had been described to me as a gracious capital of broad streets lined with mango trees and gardens bursting with dahlias in the cooler months. That is true, especially on a clear day in early spring, but what my new eyes first focused on is also true: a rundown metropolis in various stages of urban expansion and decay. The fog gave everything a gray, gritty cast. There had been fifteen different cities built on and around New Delhi, spanning the eleventh to twentieth centuries, but this last one looked as if it hadn’t been finished. Graceful white-columned “bungalows” sat behind big brick walls, but outside there were no sidewalks, just rubble and dust. Many of the bungalows were streaked with black water stains from the years of monsoons. A few glass-and-steel skyscrapers rose assertively out of the small business area.
of central New Delhi, but everything else was in dire need of maintenance, or at least a fresh coat of paint. And that was the “new” Delhi built by the British. When we drove to the markets of the old city, we were hit by a rock-video kind of intensity: hawkers, jostling crowds, blaring Hindi film music, pigs, cows, goats, chickens, parrots, diseased dogs, bicycle rickshaws, one-armed lepers, legless beggars, ragged children. On the streets surrounding Jama Masjid, the largest mosque in India, the smells of incense, jasmine and sewage mingled with the delicious aroma of Indian bread puffing up in the oil of a frying pan. Photographs and films cannot completely capture the sensory overload. Until then, I had always been slightly disappointed to find the foreign countries I visited in some way shadows of what I had imagined. In India that first day I was incredulous.

Trying to establish a bit of my old Washington routine, I went for a run that first morning in Lodi Garden, a lovely park of well-worn lawns and crumbling fifteenth-century tombs left by one of the city’s invading dynasties. There I came upon one of my first Indian women. She was following a bullock across the grass and collecting the animal’s warm steaming dung with her hands. She put it in a basket and headed home, I later learned, so she could mix it with straw to make little cakes for cooking fuel.

The first week we moved into a house on Prithvi Raj Road, an address that sounds as lyrical to me now as it did then, in the heart of the “forest” we had seen from our hotel room. Among our neighbors were diplomats, Prime Minister Rajiv Gandhi’s cabinet members and Indian industrialists. Our house, which the Times had rented for a dozen years, was an undistinguished one-story white stucco with a pretty garden and four bedrooms. All of the rooms had ceiling fans and most opened onto a central veranda where I later hung a big brass birdcage with two noisy green parrots. I put grass mats and dhurrie rugs on the floors and re-covered the furniture in Indian handloom. The house came with a cook and a housekeeper and a part-time gardener and laundryman, an absurd infrastructure for people to inherit, but standard help for affluent Indian families. Toheed, the cook, had worked for the Times for more than a dozen years. Mohinder, the driver at the Times office, had been there for twenty.

As the days passed, a pattern of relative normalcy began to assert itself. I took Hindi lessons in the mornings, then settled into work. The Washington Post already had a Delhi correspondent, but I had made arrangements with my editors to write longer feature stories about social issues and culture. I also thought I would try to write a book, although I was not sure about what. Several people had suggested it should be about Indian women, but I resisted the idea because it seemed a marginal concern compared with the more important problems—poverty, overpopulation, threats to national unity and religious violence—facing India. Besides that, I was already sensitive about my status as “the wife” who had followed her husband halfway around the world. I certainly didn’t want to write the predictable “woman’s book.”

This is not to say that I didn’t consider myself a feminist, but my feminism, such as it was, consisted of an unformed, conventional belief in equal rights and the self-absorbed determination to have a career. I was born in 1956 in Denmark—my mother is Danish and my father, an American, met her on a ferry to Copenhagen during his round-the-world jeep trip—but I came of age in Cincinnati in the mid-1970s. The women’s movement had fought many of my battles for me, and to a large extent I reaped the benefits. My family naturally assumed I would have a profession. I went to Northwestern University’s journalism school, then to the Graduate School of Journalism at Columbia, and at neither place did I encounter any overt discrimination. My first year at Northwestern I had taken a course in women’s history that included Betty Friedan’s The Feminine Mystique and Simone de Beauvoir’s The Second Sex, but I had never joined a women’s organization or written exclusively about women’s issues. Washington is a town run and dominated by men, but there my most impassioned feminist emotions centered on the kitchen, in arguments with my husband over who should cook dinner and clear the table.

Before moving to India I had had little exposure to poor people. I had written stories about migrant farm workers on the Gulf Coast of Florida when I worked for The Miami Herald for one year in the late seventies, and I had delivered meals to the homeless every other week the last two years that we lived in Washington. These activities served chiefly to relieve my conscience. I was a registered Democrat with vague concerns about the poor and the homeless, but I had never confronted poverty on a massive scale and had never been forced to think about the system that creates it. In truth I had spent considerably more time writing about the rich than about the poor. When I started at the Post, I covered Washington parties—political fund-raisers, art openings and the occasional White House state dinner—and also interviewed such swells as Cornelia Guest, the debutante turned aspiring
actress. When Ronald Reagan became president I graduated to writing profiles of a number of the staff people who ran his administration and chronicling some of the first-term excesses of Nancy Reagan and the new California money that had arrived in town. The truth is, I was hesitant to write a book about Indian women because I was intimidated by the subject.

So for my first two years in India, I did not pursue “women’s issues” in particular. I wrote instead about Calcutta’s writers, painters and filmmakers, and how their work reflected one of the most ruinous but creative cities on earth. I wrote about the legacy of the British Raj, focusing on a group of Indians who belonged to a curious anachronism, the Royal Bombay Yacht Club. Later that year, I went to the fiftieth anniversary of Rajiv Gandhi’s prep school in the foothills of the Himalayas, using the event to explore the sensibilities of Rajiv’s affluent school chums, the “computer boys” who had joined his government and were advising him how to haul India into the next century.

And yet, it was the stories I wrote about women that touched me the deepest. At the beginning of my second year I met a bride, the wife of a scooter-cab driver, who said her husband had set her on fire because she had not brought enough dowry to the marriage. She had spent three months in a hospital and had been discharged with scars over 60 percent of her body. Rippled, splotched skin was still visible on her hands and neck, and later she showed me the horrible scars on her stomach and calves. She was one of the lucky ones. There are more than 600 bride burnings, as these attempted murders for dowry are called, in New Delhi each year. Most of the women die.

I had also spent the previous summer listening in amazement as college girls informed me they would be happy to marry a stranger of their parents’ choice. I remember asking a twenty-year-old student in economics at Delhi University, Meeta Sawnhney, if she loved the childhood friend her parents had decided she should marry. “That’s a very difficult question,” she answered. “I don’t know. This whole concept of love is very alien to us. We’re more practical. I don’t see stars, I don’t hear little bells. But he’s a very nice guy, and I think I’m going to enjoy spending my life with him. Is that love?” She shrugged.

Women, I was beginning to realize, were my window into the Indian interior world, and into the issues of family, culture, history, religion, poverty, overpopulation, national unity—indeed, the very problems I had earlier thought were unrelated to the concerns of women. By this time, too, I had begun to make friends with several Indian women. One was an academic, working on her doctorate. Another was a journalist, and a third designed Indian clothes. They had seemed, at first, so much like me. I soon learned that they were but they weren’t, and the differences opened the window a little bit more. There are many ways “in” for an outsider in India, of course. I knew Americans who studied Moghol water gardens, classical Indian dance or the cult of the god Krishna. I knew other Americans who wrote reports on the government’s health care system or raised chickens. I knew reporters who covered political developments in Delhi and terrorist attacks in Punjab. All are ways of illuminating at least a pocket of a seemingly unfathomable civilization, and I am not sure that raising chickens is much less revealing than an interview with a member of Rajiv Gandhi’s opposition. Women were my way “in,” in part because they were the most natural, familiar path.

I cannot pretend to have included every kind of Indian woman in this book, nor can I claim that the women I have chosen are a representative sampling in a country as diverse as India. Most of the women in this book are Hindus, representing the country’s majority religion, although I have included Muslims, Sikhs and Christians as well. I selected the women because they interested me, like Aparna Sen, the Calcutta director who made a beautiful and controversial film about an upper-middle-class housewife who commits the unforgivable sin of having an affair. Others are here because they inspired me, like Ela Bhatt, the quiet revolutionary who organized thousands of illiterate women vegetable vendors, quilt makers and trash pickers into powerful trade unions, changing the definition of work and also the way a woman looked at herself. Some are here because their lives illustrate important issues, like A. P. Christian, a village health worker who worried that her pay would be docked if she didn’t produce her yearly quota of couples for sterilization operations. Many are here because their stories need to be told. In the state of Rajasthan, in September 1987, an eighteen-year-old widow named Roop Kanwar was burned alive on her husband’s funeral pyre. No one will ever know whether an educated young woman committed sati willingly, or was pushed. In south India, I met Muthayee and her husband, Mohanasundaram, poor farm workers who said they had been forced to kill their day-old infant daughter because they couldn’t afford the cost of her dowry. In their part of the country, it was something that people did, although no one liked to talk about it. In Bombay, I met Assumpta...
D’Sylva, a middle-class Roman Catholic woman who was undergoing a test, called a chorionic villus sampling, to determine whether the baby she was carrying was a boy or a girl. She already had two daughters, and if this child was a girl, she would have her aborted. The state government made testing for this purpose illegal a year later, but at the time Assumpta D’Sylva was relieved she could do it. It wasn’t that she and her husband didn’t have the money for a dowry. It was simply that India was a country where the birth of a girl was often viewed as a calamity, and where almost every woman had heard the Sanskrit saying “May you be the mother of a hundred sons.” It was a well-known blessing, given to a Hindu woman at the time of her wedding, which I eventually came to see as a curse. “Our society makes you feel so bad if you don’t have a son,” Assumpta D’Sylva explained. “Especially when I go out for parties, people say, ‘How many children?’ and I say, ‘Two girls, and they say, ‘Oh, too bad, no boy.’” It is often said of a country as complex as India that for any one statement made, the exact opposite is also true. Certainly most declarations of fact must take into account conflicting evidence. Economists in and out of the government, for example, believe that the gap between the rich and the poor is growing. But they also know that India has abolished the old specter of famine, and that most Indians are generally better off now than they were at the beginning of independence from the British four decades ago. Women are in an especially paradoxical situation. The country that is home to hundreds of millions of illiterate and impoverished village women is also the nation that produced Indira Gandhi, one of the most powerful women in the world. Most Indian women may belong to what one government report calls the country’s “single largest group of backward citizens,” who suffer double discrimination because they are both female and poor, but in the larger cities highly educated women are beginning to transform modern Indian society. Indian men may beat their wives, but they worship goddesses; some of the mightiest deities in the Hindu pantheon are women, like Durga and the especially monstrous Kali, who murdered her victims and then gorged herself on their flesh and blood. The condition of some Indian women is so wretched that if their plight received the attention given to that of ethnic and racial minorities in other parts of the world, their cause would be taken up by human rights groups. And yet, in the tradition of great visionaries like Mohandas K. Gandhi, the “Mahatma,” or “Great Soul,” whose principles of nonviolence inspired political change throughout the world, there are also Indian women who are doing such innovative work among the poor—especially women—that they are bringing about radical change in a peaceful way.

The “typical” Indian woman, representing about 75 percent of the four hundred million women and female children in India, lives in a village. She comes from a small peasant family that owns less than an acre of land, or from a landless family that depends on the whims of big farmers for sporadic work and wages. She can neither read nor write, although she would like to, and has rarely traveled more than twenty miles from her place of birth. In many cases she does not know who the prime minister of India is and cannot identify her country on a map. Sometimes she does not know about the existence of her own village panchayat, or governing council, but even if she does, she is rarely aware that there is a place reserved for a woman member, because only men attend the meetings. She does not own land in her own name, or even jointly with her husband. She believes that she catches colds and fevers from evil spirits that lurk in trees. Her occupation is field work, chiefly harvesting, planting and weeding, for which she often receives less than fifty cents a day—in many cases, half the wage that a man receives for the same amount of work.

She has to juggle this labor with her other full-time job, the care of the house and the children. Her husband does not help her; indeed, he does not even consider what she does at home as work. No American woman who struggles with family and career can completely imagine what this means in India. A village woman starts her life from scratch every day. Even a single chapati, the Indian flat bread, has behind it a chain of drudgery that has not changed in thousands of years. To make a chapati, a woman needs water, which is often several miles away by foot. She also needs wheat, which she must harvest by scythe, under a blazing sun, in a back-breaking bent-forward motion, and then grind by hand. To cook the bread she needs fuel, either firewood, which she collects herself, or cow-dung cakes, which she makes herself. To get the dung she must feed the cow, and to feed the cow she must walk several miles to collect suitable grasses. (This assumes that the family is lucky enough to even have a cow; many do not.) The bread is at last prepared over a small mud stove built into the dirt floor of her hut. While she cooks, she breast-feeds one child and watches three others. If she fails in any of these tasks, or performs them too slowly, her husband often feels it is his prerogative to beat her. And yet invariably she considers her husband a god and says that
she loves him. I used to ask village women exactly why they loved their husbands, a question that always confused them. "I love him because he gives me food and clothes" was the usual answer. My favorite response came from a thirty-year-old village woman named Malti Devi, who in a leap of logic explained that she loved her husband "because if I don’t, he will beat me."

Such a woman rarely has control over her own fertility, despite the Indian government’s commitment to the present five-year, three-billion-dollar family-planning program. At the time of her menstrual period she is considered impure, and in one isolated part of India I discovered that women were made to sleep outside their family homes until the bleeding was over. That was in the village of Malapatti, in the southern state of Tamil Nadu, where one night I met a thirty-year-old field laborer named Bommakka who was about to lie down in some clumps of dried tree roots and dirt, which had been designated as the spot where the women of the village should sleep during their periods. Bommakka was convinced that if she returned to her home she would go blind or eventually be punished—perhaps her husband or son would fall sick, or the harvest would fail. "Whoever comes to tell us that this is not true," she said, meaning me, "we will not listen."

A woman like this may begin producing babies as early as the age of fourteen. She delivers them on the floor of her hut, usually with the help of her mother-in-law or a dai, an untrained village midwife. There is a good chance the child will grow up malnourished, with iron and vitamin A deficiencies, and without basic inoculations to protect against polio, typhoid, diphtheria and tetanus. One in ten children in India will not live to be a year old. If the child is a girl, there is an even smaller chance that she will survive, even though girls are biologically stronger at birth than boys. This is because the girl will often be given less food and care than her brother. Assuming she lives, she may go, erratically, to a one-room village school but will be pulled out whenever her mother needs help with the other children and the chores in the house. Her education is over when she is married off as a teenager to a young man she has never met; from then on, she will begin a new life with her husband’s family as a virtual beast of burden. "I am like an animal," Phula, the forty-year-old wife of a farmer, told me in a village in India’s northern plains.

So pressing is the problem of women that the World Bank has now cited it as one of the most urgent tasks it must face. As Barber Conable, the president of the World Bank, said in his 1986 inaugural address in Washington: “Women do two-thirds of the world’s work. They produce 60 to 80 percent of Africa’s and Asia’s food, 40 percent of Latin America’s. Yet they earn only one-tenth of the world’s income and own less than one percent of the world’s property. They are among the poorest of the world’s poor.”

Steve and I spent some time living with a village family our last year in India, and not once do I remember seeing the woman of the house, Vindhya Devi, or Bhabhiji, as we called her, pause for a moment in a never-ending cycle of cooking and cleaning. She was awake long before I was up, getting the fire started in her mud stove at the first light of dawn, and she went to bed long after I was asleep. Her evenings were spent at the same stove as she waited for the men to finish gossiping under the big neem tree outside. Her husband and his friends liked to sit on string cots under the branches, talking about local politics as twilight arrived. In the winters, they built a small fire to keep warm. I loved sitting with them in its warmth, reveling in the sense of space and release I felt when I looked up at an entire galaxy of stars. Bhabhiji could never be part of this. As a woman of one of the village’s highest castes, she had to live in purdah, or seclusion. Although she was spared from field work, she never ventured farther from her front door than the wall that stood fifty feet away. Her husband finally came in to dinner late, but she did not eat until he had finished, and then only what was left. Most of her adult life had been spent entirely within the mud-and-brick walls of her home. Showing her face in the village would have hurt the reputation of her family. Her purdah was a mark of status for her husband; it proved that he was prosperous enough to provide for her and that he had a possession that had to be kept safe from the other men. At the end of my day in the village, when the worst of the heat was over, I used to look forward to walking to an old bathing pool at the edge of the fields and watching the sun go down. It was a five-minute walk from the house, but I don’t think Bhabhiji, in thirty-three years, had ever been there.

And yet, today, India has a scattered though vigorous women’s movement with the growing power to bring about some measure of reform. In 1988 in the Indian Parliament, women accounted for 10 percent of the members, whereas in the United States Congress, women represent 5 percent of the membership of both houses. In India, women have become doctors, lawyers, judges, scientists, business executives and airline pilots. Many married women with children have consum-
ing careers; their lives and problems are not radically different, on the surface at least, from those of their American counterparts. They receive master’s degrees, work in the offices of advertising agencies and worry about getting their children into the right schools. They go to the beauty parlor, follow national politics and resent it when their husbands’ friends ignore them at parties. The Indian Constitution guarantees them complete equality under the law. Hindu women may divorce; they may inherit nearly as much property as their brothers do. Indian women won the right to abortion, without a fight, in 1971, a year and a half before Roe v. Wade legalized abortion in America.

In New Delhi, the Indian government is investing millions of dollars in new programs aimed specifically at rural women. The results have been mixed. But most important, in a revolutionary change from a decade ago, these programs have shifted their approach from welfare to training. Feminists have lobbied the government to treat the poor village mother not as a passive beneficiary of a handout but as a potential resource who can be taught a skill, like raising cattle, that will help in the development of India itself. Studies in Indian villages have shown that raising a rural woman’s income will usually increase the household income, but raising her husband’s earnings generally will not. Women tend to spend all of their wages on their families, while men buy liquor, cigarettes and other treats for themselves. Increasingly, women are seen by development specialists as the real agents for change in rural India. As Gotz Schreiber, a senior economist in the World Bank’s Women in Development Office, explained to me, “If we’re serious about giving the next generation a better life than this one, it requires giving the mothers sufficient control over financial resources.”

Former prime minister Rajiv Gandhi, who infuriated feminists in 1986 by siding with Islamic fundamentalists on a bill that in effect prohibits divorced Muslim women from demanding alimony payments, nonetheless appointed more women to cabinet and sub-cabinet-level positions than did his own mother, Indira Gandhi. He was also the chairman of a national advisory committee on women. Women who worked for him, who admittedly had to be allowed a considerable degree of sycophancy and enthusiasm, used to say they had never seen another minister in the government, even a woman, who took such a personal interest in women’s programs. This simply may be because Gandhi reflected, as the forty-six-year-old product of elite English-language schools and Cambridge University, the evolution in thinking about women that has occurred among his generation and class. During an interview I had with Rajiv Gandhi in August 1988, he himself brought up the name of Germaine Greer, the feminist, although he admitted he did not have “a strong reaction either way” to her work. “Our society is still very much a male chauvinistic society,” he told me. “It comes out every day.” We were sitting in a conference room at the prime minister’s residence on Race Course Road, and although it was hardly an informal chat, Gandhi, as much as the situation allowed, became discursive. “I mean I have meetings with ministers, with very senior officials,” he said, “and suddenly, you know, they say something and I say, ‘Look, you’re being totally chauvinistic. How can you say that?’ ” He told me about a recent meeting in which he and several ministers were discussing employment for women in such fields as teaching, village work and the police. “And suddenly,” the prime minister complained, “they come out with, ‘Well, how can a woman do this sort of thing?’ Of course it’s not true, a woman can do it.”

Fifteen months after I left India, Rajiv Gandhi was defeated for reelection by a coalition led by his former finance minister, Vishwanath Pratap Singh, who had broken with Gandhi over the issue of government corruption. Singh’s party, the Janata Dal, or People’s Front, drew its base of support from the conservative “Hindi heartland” of the north, where women have had a more difficult time entering politics than in other regions of India. In the weeks after the election, Singh appointed no women to his senior cabinet; the highest-ranking woman in government was Mannat Gandhi, Rajiv Gandhi’s estranged sister-in-law, who became a minister of state for environment. Her biggest issue was not women’s rights but animal rights. In Parliament, the number of women was greatly reduced from the previous record level of 10 percent of the membership. The situation was hardly encouraging. And yet my feeling—and the feeling among people I spoke to in India—was that even if programs and policy for women did not make further progress under V. P. Singh, at least there would be no retreatment. The gains in the past decade had made it difficult to turn back.

Certainly the history of India’s women is not one of unrelieved misery. It is believed that the status of women deteriorated only in relatively recent times, the past two thousand years or so. Before this, some historians have theorized, there was an ancient “golden age,” sometime around 1000 B.C., in which Indian women were considered the equals of men, or at least had a higher status than they did in the later millennia. Scholars have based this belief on evidence left by the
Aryans, the seminomadic tribes who wandered into India from Central Europe around 1500 B.C., establishing the beginnings of Indian culture as it is known today. (Although the Aryans are thought to have been somewhat lighter-skinned than the indigenous tribes already living in India, “Aryan” is a linguistic rather than an ethnic term. The Aryan tribes spoke a language that was the ancestor of, among others, Latin, Greek, Persian, Sanskrit, English, German and Italian—all members of what scholars call the Indo-European or Aryan family of languages. The Aryan were determined to keep themselves separate from India’s indigenous tribes, and scholars believe this eventually led to the Hindu caste system, which segregated all Hindus into rigid hereditary social classes.)

It was the Aryans who left the first written record about life in the subcontinent, the Rig Veda, a collection of 1,017 Sanskrit poems that with later literature forms the basis of historical reconstruction of the era. The works describe a society in which women married relatively late, at sixteen or seventeen, and did not live in purdah. They took part in gatherings of the clan and had prominent positions at religious rites. Most important, they were in charge of cattle-raising, the chief occupation of the Aryans, and made bows, arrows and other weapons for the men when they went to battle.

No one is quite sure why, but over the next two thousand years, the position of women gradually eroded. Girls were married off at a younger age and were barred from religious rituals. Widows were not permitted to remarry. Sometime between the years B.C. and A.D. 200, the upper-caste law codifier known as Manu produced the first compilation of Hindu law, which assigned to women the status of chattel. “Woman is as foul as falsehood itself,” Manu wrote. “When creating them, the lord of creatures allotted to women a love of their beds, of their seat and ornaments; impure thoughts, wrath, dishonesty, malice and bad conduct.” A woman had no hope of an autonomous life. As Manu stated: “From the cradle to the grave a woman is dependent on a male: in childhood on her father, in youth on her husband, in old age on her son.”

Manu is seen by some feminists today as the chief culprit in the history of the subordination of Indian women, but Manu’s compilation of the law does not explain the steady decline in the status of women that had occurred before his time. Many historians have come to believe that what happened to women in India was what happens to all women as a society evolves from wandering, pastoral clans into sedentary groups that make their living by agriculture. In a tribal society, women are more involved in the means of production. In a settled society, where there is relatively more leisure and less fear of enemies, the roles of men and women become increasingly demarcated. Men tend to assume a superior position and women a secondary one. The “golden age” for women, a notion many historians believe was promoted by nineteenth-century Indian nationalists eager to find a utopian past, may have been nothing more than a stage in the development of Indian society. Manu may well have been a misogynist, but the society in general was probably motivated by other stresses. As the Aryans spread geographically, they came into contact with other cultures, particularly the darker-skinned Dravidian tribes of the south. In the opinion of Romila Thapar, a highly respected historian and a supporter of women’s causes in India, the oppression of women developed in hand in hand with the idea of preserving caste distinctions. Manu’s code of law, which first set down the rules of caste in India, is in her view an illustration “of the need to rigidly define caste society,” to create rules that keep the outsiders, the people viewed as “pollutants,” in their place. Consequently, there are elaborate rules in Manu’s code governing precisely who may marry whom. “To avoid pollution, you must control birth,” Romila Thapar explains. “But you lose control over birth if you lose control over women.”

The next historical decline in the status of women is popularly believed to have come at the time of the sixteenth-century Moghul invasions. Although there had been earlier Muslim invasions, the Moghuls brought Islam to India on a large scale, and with it, at least in the view of many Hindus, the regressive attitudes toward women that spread the practices of purdah and sati. Others are less sure of the Muslim role in the decline of women. Romila Thapar says there is evidence of the seclusion of upper-caste women and of sati before the Muslim invasions. Whatever the case, it was not until the nineteenth century, at a time when sati and purdah showed no signs of abating, that the first impetus for reform began among the middle class in Calcutta, at that time the capital of British India. The reformers were opposed to sati, purdah and child marriage. They promoted education for women, a right’s limited right to property and the right of widows to remarry. This movement, which later spread to the western states of Maharashtra and Gujarat, was inspired by far-thinking male reformers like Rammohan Roy, who founded the Brahmo Samaj, a reform sect of Hinduism, and other men genuinely troubled by the condition...
of women. Recent historians, however, have concluded that another major impetus for what is considered the first phase of the Indian women’s movement came from the desire of middle-class men to make themselves more socially acceptable to the British imperialists, who employed the men as junior administrators in the bureaucracy and as brokers in the East India Company. The woman in the Bengali middle-class household—unseen, uneducated, isolated—clearly did not conform to the English model of what, for the time, was considered a proper wife. She was not, for example, educated even to the extent of the colonial wives, who knew how to run competent households and assist at social functions in the furtherance of their husbands’ careers.

Yet the reform movement, at least in the early part of the century, was a theoretical reform falling far short of revolutionary change, “a safe issue,” as the scholar Meredith Borthwick has written, “that did not present a vision of imminent social chaos.” The women were to be educated only to enhance their roles as wives and mothers. While the men argued the issues of reform, the women stayed home, most of them unaware that they were the subjects of so much debate. It was not until the second half of the century that some of the reforms were made law—widows were allowed to remarry in 1856; sati was banned in 1859—and even then, the laws had limited impact. What did change was the standards by which Bengali middle-class women were judged. By the dawn of the twentieth century, a new woman had emerged, one who, in Borthwick’s words, “appeared in mixed social gatherings, and was a member of various philanthropic and social women’s organizations.” This woman “had received a basic education and read improving literature—domestic instruction manuals and ‘refined’ fiction.” The new woman represented the values of “cleanliness, orderliness, thrift, responsibility, intelligence,” and had “a moderate interest in and knowledge of the public world of men. These were added to, rather than substituted for, the traditional virtues of self-sacrifice, benevolence, devotion to the husband, respect for elders, and household competence.”

It was this new middle-class woman who responded to the upheavals that began in Indian life with the birth of the nationalist movement at the end of the nineteenth century. Women’s emancipation was one of the goals of the nationalists, and by 1905 the men were encouraging women to participate in the Swadeshi movement to boycott foreign goods. Within the next twenty-five years, three major women’s organiza-
women, regardless of qualifications. This was at a time when women in some European countries had not yet won the right to vote.

Gandhi did have his limitations as an emancipator. The role of women in the freedom struggle was for the most part supportive and auxiliary, limited to spinning, picketing, distributing literature and attending meetings. Gandhi himself saw women as long-suffering vessels of self-sacrifice, who should neither earn the principal wages in a family nor disrupt the balance at home. But he nonetheless moved a large step forward from the nineteenth-century reformers by seeing women as active participants in their own progress and not, in the words of the feminist Madhu Kishwar, “as helpless creatures deserving charitable concern.” Certainly Indian women responded to Gandhi in a way they never had to any other male leader, a phenomenon that has always interested Romila Thapar, who believes the psychological connection between Gandhi and the masses of women has not been adequately explored. “There’s something about him,” she told me, “that makes him very much like us.” Erik Erikson, in *Gandhi’s Truth*, the Pulitzer Prize–winning psychoanalytic study of the Indian leader, suggests what that might be. Gandhi, Erikson argues, believed in the “natural superiority” of the self-sacrificing woman but could not tolerate this notion “without a competitive attempt at becoming more maternal than the most motherly of mothers.” Gandhi thus saw himself as a “mother” to his mother, his father and India “herself.” (Erikson, in one of his most seductive meditations, also explains his belief that India is essentially feminine, or, more precisely, that “Father Time in India is a Mother.”) Indians, Erikson says, live in “a feminine space time,” a world in which they feel enveloped and carried along as participants in a larger continuum.

The next major development in the history of Indian women did not come until the mid-1970s, after the government released “Towards Equality,” an explosive, far-reaching report on the status of India’s women that revealed that conditions for many of them had actually regressed in significant ways since independence. It is this report which serves as a basis for the current women’s movement in India, although feminists prefer to categorize the present movement as the natural “third stage,” after the nineteenth-century reform in Calcutta and women’s participation in the freedom struggle. Historically this view is correct, but it is also a way for Indian feminists to distinguish themselves from the Western women’s movement and to emphasize their often-repeated point that feminism has a different context and set of goals in India.

Throughout my journey, I was always aware of an outsider’s limitations in a foreign country. I struggled daily with the problem of what standards to apply. There have been Western journalists who romanticized India, and there have been others who saw in it only those things that reinforced their own sense of cultural superiority. One member of the latter school was Katherine Mayo, a reform-minded American free-lance journalist who wrote a book called *Mother India*, which included many chapters on the condition of Indian women. It was published by Harcourt, Brace in 1927, to an explosion of criticism on the subcontinent, and it quickly became a best-seller in England and the United States. India was then struggling for independence from the British, but Mayo came to the conclusion that the Indians were not ready to rule their own country because, among other things, they overindulged in sex. She asserted that all of Indian’s woes—“poverty, sickness, ignorance, political minority, melancholy, ineffectiveness” and the “subconscious conviction of inferiority”—could be blamed on the effects of widespread child marriage. Mayo argued that men ineptly raised by child brides were physically feeble, given to unrestrained sexual appetites and of morally “bankrupt stock” at an age when “the Anglo-Saxon is just coming into full glory of manhood.”

Mayo reserved some of her most graphic prose for accounts of the methods used by dais, the village midwives, to deliver babies. She described the first dai she encountered as having a “Witch-of-Endor face,” “vermin-infested elves-locks” and “dirty claws.” Citing doctors’ reports, Mayo wrote that if a delivery is delayed, the dai “thrusts her long-unwashed hand, loaded with dirty rings and bracelets and encrusted with untold living contaminations, into the patient’s body, pulling and twisting at what she finds there.” If the delivery is difficult, “the child may be dragged forth in detached sections—a leg or an arm torn off at a time.”

Sixty years later, Indians still revile Katherine Mayo, although, interestingly, there has been an American radical feminist reinterpretation of her work. Mary Daly, in her 1978 book, *Gyn/Ecology*, wrote that Mayo “shows an understanding of the situation which more famous scholars entirely lack. Her work is, in the precise sense of the word, exceptional.” Mayo, in her own way, was a feminist, and although her observations often reveal more about her than about India, many of the conditions she reported still exist. Village dais,
though not nearly so malevolent as Mayo described, have helped to keep India’s maternal mortality rate one of the highest in the world, even though the Indian government has attempted, with mixed success, to train the dais to give up dangerous medical practices they have followed for thousands of years. When I went to a meeting of dais organized by government health workers in a tribal region of the western Indian state of Gujarat, I learned that many of them still push on the mother’s stomach during labor, risking rupture of the uterus, and cut the baby’s umbilical cord with an old knife or a stone. On the wound they sometimes put cow dung, which they believe is an antiseptic.

Katherine Mayo, as egregious as her views were, held a certain fascination for me. She had done, after all, what I was trying to do. There is little written about her, but one line in her entry in *Notable American Women 1609–1950* says a great deal: “Katherine Mayo’s moral indignation at the sexual exploitation of women had long been an unrecognized concern of her own life, an anxiety she could confront only in writing about distant places and alien cultures.” She came to India for only three months, relied extensively on British government statistics and met no women leaders of the nationalist movement. Her larger failure, of course, was the lack of balance she displayed in making judgments about a society that was less developed—and held different values—than her own.

But how does an outsider measure India? When one assesses the government’s village health care system, should India be admonished for inadequate facilities and the lack of medicines at its clinics, or should it be praised for at least creating an extensive rural health care network? Where does one strike the balance between criticism of a five-thousand-year-old civilization and forty-year-old nation always at risk of disintegrating into religious and ethnic violence, and admiration that it has at least remained a democracy, if only on its own terms, at a time when one neighbor, Pakistan, has mostly been a military dictatorship and another, Nepal, a monarchy? For Katherine Mayo, these questions were easy. She judged India by rigorous Western standards, dismissing those before who had “swathed the spot in euphemisms.”

I embarked on my own journey with open eyes, and in my encounters along the way I tried to understand before I judged. The first half of this book is an exploration, through the lives of certain women, of the problems that plague most other women in India. In the middle of the book is a chapter about the current feminist movement and how it is struggling to solve those problems. The last part of the book is a look at some successful Indian women: Indira Gandhi, women in the Indian Parliament, three creative women of Calcutta, the film actresses of Bombay, a policewoman and a New Delhi housewife. One of the last chapters considers India’s attempts to control its population. This is the nation’s biggest challenge, and women remain the key to the population-control program’s success.

Throughout my journey, I came upon some highly sensational and disturbing aspects of Indian society—female infanticide, for example—but the material in this book is not designed to shock. I have arranged the issues more or less in the order in which I encountered and understood them. One woman led me to another, and one topic drew me into the next. I often felt as if I were traveling from the most evident to the most elusive.

A journey like this suggests some kind of personal transformation, but I am not sure that people really change in their basic character. It is probably true that they simply become more intensely themselves, or what they were meant to be all along. But certainly the balance of a person’s views can change. Although I am still learning exactly what my experience in India meant to me, I do know that it transformed much of my thinking. It was in India that I had some of the most moving experiences of my life—seeing the birth of a baby in a village, or the quiet dignity of two young boys who waited outside a Calcutta crematorium with the body of their dead grandmother, her face shrunken but peaceful amid the tumult of the city.

At the very least, my journey forced me to question assumptions about mortality, religion, duty, fate, the way a society governs itself and the roles of men and women. It deepened my feminist convictions and made me realize how individual, yet universal, is each woman’s experience. In the beginning, there were times when I felt that what I was exploring had little consequence for the lives in the world from which I had come. But slowly I realized that the way Indian women live is the way the majority of women in the world spend their lives; it is Americans who are peculiar. Ultimately, I realized my journey to India was a privilege. Rather than going to the periphery, I had come to the center.