

Title—Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of Empire

Author—Mrinalini Sinha

Year—2006

Categories: Gender, Empire, Politics

Place: India (British Raj)

Time: 1919-1935

Argument Synopsis:

Mrinalini Sinha's *Specters of Mother India: The Global Restructuring of an Empire* is focused on the massive international controversy that was spurred by the publication of Katherine Mayo's *Mother India*. Mayo's book was an attempt to justify the continuation of British colonial rule in India, due to the social "backwardness" of Indian culture. It provided details of social ills in India, especially regarding the position of women. Mayo used "facts" about Indian society to claim that they were unfit for self-government. Sinha claims that this **public crisis** was essential to dominant understandings of the relationship between the political and the social spheres in colonial India.

According to Sinha, a world historical lens is the best suited to studying the controversy spurred by this book. In addition to utilizing a global perspective, she is focused on how this controversy served to create a **collective political identity** for Indian women. She claims that the Mayo controversy represented a short moment when Indian women emerged as a model for new Indian citizens. Sinha opts for a global perspective because it demonstrates the controversy over *Mother India* marked a significant change in the dominant colonial understanding of Indian society.

Sinha identifies a concrete end to the controversy over *Mother India*: the passage of the Child Marriage Restraint Act, also known as the Sarda Act, in October 1929. The public support for the act within India provided empirical support for Mayo's critics' new understanding of the relationship between the social and political spheres. The passage of the act was heralded as the arrival of modern India, ready to take its place alongside other modern nations of the world. Sinha argues that the biggest contribution of the Sarda act was in its implications for the mobilization of a collective identity by and for women in the public realm.

The crux of the controversy over *Mother India* was about the explanatory framework Mayo used that strove to legitimize British rule, rather than debate over the facts themselves. Sinha shows how critics would use these facts to reconfigure the understanding of the relationship between the political and the social, or the state and society in colonial India. The debate was centered around how these facts were utilized. Mayo articulated that the explanation for all of India's problems was purely social, and unrelated to the political conditions of colonial rule. Sinha posits that the real challenge to the book came in the use of its own facts to repudiate the basic conceptual paradigm of the relationship between social and political.

Key Themes and Concepts:

- The debate allowed for the construction of a collective agency of women that challenged the separation of social and political
- All imperial proposals for new constitutional frameworks acknowledged a place for Indian women post-controversy
- Significance of book was in its ability to generate massive controversy