

An all-consuming subject? Women and consumption in late-nineteenth and early-twentieth-century western India.

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Abstract

This article examines the emergence of women as new consuming subjects in late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century western India. In a period of material and social change, elite women had new access to and new control over goods; reformers argued that it was the duty of the modern wife to manage the material comforts of household life. Examining writing by and for women, including memoirs, advice manuals, and popular journals, this article focuses on the central role goods played in negotiating new ideals of feminine behavior, whether through the emergence of consumption as women's work or in the way goods shaped women's new roles in society. In the end, it was the feminization of consumption that made the

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Women and Consumption in Late-Nineteenth- and Early-Twentieth-Century Western India

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For her first trip overseas in 1918—a journey to the United States to study English—Parvati Athavale packed carefully; as she notes in her autobiography, she brought four Gujarati silk saris, one overcoat, some nightgowns, six cotton petticoats, and two pairs of shoes. But, during the course of the voyage the prominent widow reformer found that “I had not provided myself with the right things, and as a consequence I had to suffer many inconveniences.”¹ One inconvenience was caused by the last item on the list, purchased specially for the trip: shoes. When her ship made its first stop in Colombo, Athavale wore her new shoes ashore: “That day I walked about in great agony, for my shoes hurt me. This was the first time in all my life that I had worn a pair of European shoes. They seemed so heavy to me. Professor Kosambi [her traveling companion] purchased another pair, but it was no better.... My feet were covered with blisters.” Returning to the boat she only found relief going barefoot, since “I could not endure the torture from my shoes.” In recounting the episode in her autobiography some ten years later, she closed with the following admonition: “My advice is that any Indian woman, about to go to a foreign country, should practice at least three months the wearing of European shoes before going aboard the steamer.”²

Athavale was an unusual woman for her era: widowed at twenty, she began her education at twenty-six and soon emerged as a public advocate for



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