

Chapter - V

**SOCIO-CULTURAL BACKGROUND
OF THE MODERN BENGALI
WOMAN**

SOCIO - CULTURAL BACKGROUND OF THE MODERN BENGALI WOMAN*

This chapter is intended to present a cultural profile of the metropolis of Calcutta in the wake of a renaissance that is said to have occurred in the city. Sociologically, the cultural study is important in view of the fact that the renascent Bengali women emerged as individuals, after having groped for their identity as individuals for centuries and ages. Without appreciating their emergence as individuals, much of the crises attending their connubial status would go unappreciated.

Social reforms and the men of letters have been instrumental in bringing about a changed consciousness and urge for freedom in the Bengali women. We should take into account the portrayal of women in the novels and short stories of Bankimchandra and Rabindranath. A study of the changing face of the woman was undertaken by B.B.Mazumdar in his *Tagore's heroines*. That was a remarkable study. What we propose to do in this chapter is to present a whole gamut of influences - ideological, social and cultural - that permeated the atmosphere of modern Bengal in which the women of today were born and breathed. The phenomenon of modernity

* This Chapter is based on a study of and reflection on a paper of Dr. P. Roy entitled 'Variations on the Theme of Individuality'. I am very thankful to Dr. Roy for allowing me to take a free use of the paper.

- Author.

in Bengal is the result of a cluster of influence as ideologies, Western as well as Indian. The individual woman was always there, but she had become self-conscious in the fresh air that blew in the renaissance endeavours. Hence it seems imperative that in order to understand the modern Bengali woman, we should have an idea of her not too distant past.

I

The growth and attainment of individuality by women has been highlighted by Tagore in his literary works, particularly during the last few decades of his life. Hence, the theme would be focussed in a way, if we consider it in the context of Tagore's view of the individual, taking note of the background and certain influences in the development of that view.

The traditional Hindu view of the individual has two distinctive sides to it. One is the metaphysical idea of the individual as free, eternal, transcendent and blissful being. The other is the conception of the individual as an embodied being, variously conditioned by sex, cast, vocation, desires, duties etc. The relation between the individual self and cosmic infinite Reality has been conceived in different ways in the Indian tradition. For Advaita or monistic Vedanta, it ultimately is non-difference or essential identity, to be realised in mystic intuition. Other schools of Vedanta regard the relation variously as part-and-whole, identity-in-difference, difference etc. Sāṅkhya-Yoga admits innumerable individual souls, each capable of attaining liberation by

realising its pure conscious nature as distinguished from Prakriti or material Nature.

Apart from such metaphysical theories, the worldly life of the individual is bound by multifarious rules and regulations, prescriptions and prohibitions pertaining to his station in life. This station is determined by sex, caste, stage of life etc. Broadly, there are four castes (varnas) : Brahmana (one who is fit for religious and intellectual pursuits), Kshatriya (the warrior and administrative class), Vaishya (the traders and farmers) and **Shudra** (those others who serve). There are also four stages of life : **brahmacharya** (the first stage of learning or studentship), **gārhastha** (the stage of the householder), **vānaprastha** (the third stage of gradual dissociation from worldly pursuits) and **sannyāsa** (the last stage of giving up worldly duties). There are elaborate duties ordained for the individual as related to his **varna** and **āshrama**, as also general duties. These constitute his **dharma** (sustaining moral code) consonant with his nature.

In the traditional Hindu scheme, women were regarded as perpetually dependent and protectible. This is blatantly evident in the following statement of **Manusmṛiti**, one of the celebrated texts on **dharma** : "In childhood a female must be subject to her father, in youth to her husband; and when the husband is dead, to her sons; a woman must never be independent".¹ Prescriptions such as these, formulated in social conditions of old times, seem to be very rigid and harsh

- and at times quite unjust — in the changed circumstances of modern age.

Obviously, there is marked contrast between the two views about the individual - the transcendent - metaphysical and the empirical-pragmatic. Even so, neither is totally rejected or abandoned in favour of the other. On the contrary, it has been held that living a dutiful and virtuous life here result in progressive spiritual advancement, leading ultimately to realisation of the true nature of the self which is liberation. It is held that **dharma** conduces to **moksha** (salvation). Further, apart from the paths of action (**karma**) and understanding (**jñāna**), there is the path of devotion (**bhakti**). In fact, the path of devotional surrender has been extolled over the other paths. For example, in the Gita it has been said, "It is only by steadfast devotion can I (the Divine) be realised, intuited and merged into" (Gita, 11/54). "By devotion one understands me as what and who I am in truth; then, having realised me truly, one enters into the supreme" (Gita, 18/55).

The overall point to note is that inspite of a radical difference between the status of liberation and the state of life in the world, a harmony and continuity has been endorsed rather than opposition and conflict. The way to the Ideal is through the Actual; the Eternal has to be sought through the ephemeral; Liberation has to be attained through the eradication of bondage. The inclusive or comprehensive view

is thus bifocal or bipolar, admitting both the ultimate goal and the prevailing circumstances - and the two are connected by means of right action, right understanding or right feeling (unwavering devotion).

II

This traditional picture of harmony and resolution between aspiration and actuality came under severe strain following British domination over India. Under the system of education introduced by the foreign rulers, the traditional transcendent values came to be questioned. The spirit of individualism, which had flourished in the West with European renaissance were inculcated in the minds of young people in India, Who were influenced in the new educational set-up. Most of these people came from the upper castes of urban middle-class Hindu society. They began to doubt the reality of transcendent freedom as stated in metaphysics, and voiced the urge for (secular) freedom in society and the need for change in social conditions, They were not in majority, but their attitude was informed and insistent. They were the harbingers of Indian renaissance. In clamouring for radical social change, they came into conflict with their families, caste and community.

The foremost among such persons was Rammohan Roy (1774 - 1833) - an erudite man with inner vision and farsight, committed to social and religious reform. Alienated from his

family and kinsmen, and opposed to orthodoxy, he carried on his campaign for freedom in different areas of life. Rammohan's insistence on individualism was continued by a group of students of the newly founded Hindu College (Calcutta) under the inspiration of the young Eurasian teacher-poet Derozio, who taught free thinking and conscientious living. His students, who came to be known as 'Young Bengal' were very active. They rejected the authority of customs, scriptures, rituals and of conservative elders — and sought to mould their lives and society on the basis of reason and individual freedom.

Another eminent reformer, whose name must be mentioned in this connection, was Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar. He was a liberal-minded Brahmin with a secular outlook. He undertook wide-ranging reform-work, the most well-known of which was his successful campaign in 1850's for legalising Hindu widow-marriage. Another remarkable person was Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824 - 73) who, though not a social reformer, espoused Christianity rejecting the Hindu tradition. He introduced great change in Bengali poetry, introducing new verse forms and techniques - and made very unorthodox treatment of traditional Hindu themes and values.

III

Rabindranath Tagore was born at Calcutta on May 7, 1861. In the decades following Tagore's birth, an opposition

against the new spirit of individualism was setting in. Western education and its resultant spirit of freethinking was confined, in any case, to a section of the urban middle class – the vast majority of tradition-bound rural people remaining outside its influence. In support of their point-of-view and aspiration, a search began for strengthening social cohesion on the basis of indigenous roots. This trend led to and was nourished by an emerging ideal of nationalism.

In Bengal, this phase of Indian renaissance was concurrent with the cultivation of the Bengali language, in which the supportive urban intelligensia saw a potent tool of collective unity and identity. Bankim Chandra Chatterji (1838 – 1894) emerged to be its most powerful proponent and practitioner. He is ‘Bengal’s first major novelist and great prose writer before Tagore’. Through his numerous writings, Bankim Chandra put up the ideal of nationalism or patriotism before the Bengalis. He sought to revive the message inherent in the old saying : “Mother and the mother-country are even higher than heaven.” (*janani janmabhūmischa svargādapi gariyāsi*).

The tradition on which this patriotic fervour was based was noticeably Hindu. It fostered a collective identity no doubt, but it also had the unintended consequence of alienation of Bengali muslims from Bengali Hindus. The foreign rulers took advantage of this sad development, and in 1905 they partitioned Bengal into two provinces – one

predominantly Hindu and the other predominantly Muslim. Although the partition was annulled in 1911 because of mass-agitation, it was re-effected at the time of division of the country into India and Pakistan in 1947, with its deleterious consequences continuing to plague the region.

IV

Tagore's grandfather, Dwarkanath, was a person of extraordinary enterprise. His eldest son, Devendranath (Rabindranath's father, 1842 - 1923) was also an exceptional personality. He was greatly influenced by Rammohan's religious ideas. In 1843 he revived the Brahma Samaj (which had been founded by Rammohan in 1828), and became the principal exponent of the monotheistic faith. His second son, Satyendranath (who became the first ICS-member among Indians) was very liberal-minded, and was an ardent supporter of women's emancipation. Devendranath's fifth son, Jyotirindranath (1849 - 1925), a gifted painter, musician and playwright, was an advocate of gender equality. His wife, Kadambari, had great influence on Tagore during his formative years. One of Devendranath's daughters, Swarnakumar (1856 - 1932) was the first woman writer of modern fiction in an Indian language. Young Rabindranath grew up in such a family in the atmosphere of freedom and creativity.

He thus learnt to value Freedom quite early in his life. His father had introduced him to the **Upanishads**. From that ancient source as borne out by his intuition, he came to visualise the total harmony between the individual (as **atman** or pure self) and the cosmic reality. At the same time, the conviction deepened in him that the self was multi-faceted. He was aware of the empirical-pragmatic dimension of the individual, where it related to nature, to other individuals and to various institutions. He saw that on this plane harmony was threatened by blind selfishness and external restrictive pressures. He meant to seek harmony in this dimension also, on the basis of mutual regard and spontaneous cooperation. "But what he saw around him made him increasingly conscious of the forces of dissension and conflict, in particular of the ways in which the individual was sought to be suppressed by taboo-ridden traditions, freedom-denying customs and mores, collective ideologies", and stated-sponsored suppression. With his deep commitment of freedom, his opposition to these restrictive and repressive forces became more pronounced. All-through, however, he had the sustaining conviction of cosmic harmony, of the individual's loving relationship with God and nature, and transcendent freedom beyond the powers of society or government. In his life and works, he pursued a bifocal view of his own which would bring the two planes together - never losing sight of metaphysical freedom and peace, and ever engaging in resolution of conflicts and achievement of harmony in social life.

V

A central theme of many of Tagore's stories, novels, plays and essays is alienation of the conscientious individual from his family, prevalent traditions and society. Tagore's recoil from militant Nationalism is represented in the development of the character of Gora in the novel of the same name. Gora, the young hero of this novel, is a passionate advocate of Hindu revivalist nationalism.... In the end, ... he discovers himself as an individual whose commitment is not a particular community or tradition but to his own sense of right and wrong."

Tagore had deep love and passion for his country. He composed many patriotic songs, one of which has become the national anthem of India and another that of Bangladesh. The country for him was not mere **mrinmaya** (territorial), but **chinmaya** (Ideational) in essence. He characteristically calls narrow obstinate nationalism **bhoulalik apadevata** (a geographic demon), capable of great harm. His solution of India's problem of plurality of races and religions is : unity through acknowledgement of differences - not intolerant nationalism. Freedom of the individual, he would hold, could not be brought about State-power. "Nationalism", to him, was an ideology of collective selfishness; its central pursuit was power at any price; it set people against people, and organised individuals by destroying their reason, conscience and creativity."

A portrayal of an Indian ideal womanhood, we find in the character of Anandamayī in the novel *Gora*. She is a free, simple, natural and transparent person – with an empathetic heart and compassionate insight – not bound by any social conditioning (*samaskāra*). She has great sensitivity, deep experience and sharp rationality – which are evident in her way of life and conduct. Tagore found the source of this liberal, opinion-free, sympathetic, friend-of-all, tolerant personality in her motherly love for Gora. “Anandamayī has freed herself of taboos and conventions, and ... embodies the ideal which Gora discovers only towards the end.”

“Nowhere possibly were Tagore’s libertarian values more unambiguously spelt out than in his characterisation of women ... Tagore not only undertook a sustained exposure of the degradation of women in Hindu society; he also offered many striking portrayals of women who had found their individuality or struggling towards it.” Such a transformed personality is the heroine of the verse-play ‘*Chitrangada*’. Her conviction based on self-assessment is expressed thus :

“ I am Chitranganda.

Not a goddess, nor an insignificant woman.

Nor am I one to be worshipped and placed on the head,

Nor even one to be neglected and placed behind.

If you have me by your side while on a perilous path,

If you let me to share your intricate thoughts,

If you allow me to help you in difficult vows,
If you consider me a friend in weal and woe,
Only then will you know me truly."

Not only that "She makes her lover, Arjuna, realise that only when their love is founded on a free and equal companionship will he be able to discover his own fullness."

In this context may be mentioned the figure of Mrinal in the short story *Strir Patra* (1914), written in the form of a letter from a housewife, who has set herself free. She leaves her husband and home after fifteen years of married life, when she is no longer able to endure the cruelty and cowardice ingrained in family life. This short story caused great stir in Bengal's literary circle at the time of its publication. "With this story", writes a well-known Tagore-biographer⁺, "began women's revolt in Bengali literature."

Tagore started the readers by depicting the character of Sohini in the story *Laboratory* (1940), written towards the end of his life. A self-assured forceful woman, she exhibits a rare tenacity of purpose in pursuing her chosen objective – continuance of scientific research, which was the life's mission of her late husband. She engages in animal welfare, is ready to support deserving persons of humane qualities and other good works. But she has no compunction in utilising the female tricks of charm, pretense etc. and in indulging in extra-

⁺ Prabhat Kumar Mukherji

marital affairs without regret in fulfilling her purpose. Her creator (Tagore) makes her break the codes of norms held sacrosanct by Hindu society.

The character of Damini, a young beautiful widow, in the novel **Chaturanga** is as courageous as it is unique. She goes through extreme vicissitudes of life, sees through the deceptions and revolts. Her fieriness mellows by the depth of her love for a dreamy person, who refuses to marry her in search of realisation of a higher value. Damini appreciates his point, but keeps her love for him alight, though she decides to marry another person. Thus she tries to find her true individuality, ignoring social conventions.

The near-devastating effect of bestowal of freedom on Bimala, the heroine in **Ghare Baire**, shows that imposed liberty on unprepared minds is risky and precarious. Freedom has to be deserved, earned - not merely given. Bimala was habituated to the role of a home-bound housewife in a traditional family. Sudden granting of freedom by her liberal-minded husband, and consequent exposure to the turbulent and greedy forces of the outside world, turned her head and exposed the family to extreme danger. It is only at the last moment that she realised her mistake of misusing freedom and saw sanity. Her story reminds us that freedom is primarily internal and that it is not being carried away by emotion or sentiment.

A return to family-life, though of a different type, is also there in the plight of Kumudini, the heroine in *Yogayog*. She was tender, sweet, self-enquiring and full of grace. But she was married to a man of coarse, possessive and vengeful nature. She tried to bring about a change in him by her tolerance and faithfulness to an ideal --but in vain. On occasions, her tolerance and self-effacement apparently made him to relent and surrender - whereupon, inspite of her disgust, she submitted to his carnal desire. But being fed up with domination and brutality, she revolted and left him. However, in the end she had to return when she realised that she bore him child in her womb and had no independent income of her own. The pathos in this story brings poignantly to our notice women's struggle for freedom, as also their pathetic circumstances and helplessness.

Kumudini's story is one of pragmatic adjustment amid protest. However, there are other depictions, where Tagore presents cases of no-compromise with evil. For example "In one of his finest psychological novels, *Chokher Bali* (1902), the principal character, Binodini, is a talented and lively young widow who rebels against the role of privation and servitude to which Hindu society seeks to condemn her, and claims her right to a life of love, happiness and freedom." It has to be remembered that in a story or novel, only aspects of the life of individuals of family-life or social life can be presented - not total individuality or perfect society.

However, there is no uncertainty about where Tagore's sympathy lies in regard to the question of the role and status of women. He is insistent and emphatic on the equality and independence of women in the sphere of human relationship. "The spirit of struggle, of the search for personal identity on the part of women in Hindu society, finds powerful expression in many of Tagore's poems in *Palātāka* (1918), *Mohuā* (1929), *Punashcha* (1932) and *Shyāmali* (1936)". Here is a typical cry of woman's anguish :

O Lord of Destiny!

Why should a woman not have

the right to win over her own fate ?

Why should she be waiting on the road side

With head bowed and tolerance tired

For fulfilment of her desire

in uncertain days to come ?

Why should she look at blankness with eyes vacant ?

Why shouldn't she find out her own path of success ?*

VII

Tagore's works, a glimpse of some of which has been given above, give enough indication that he had a bifocal view of individuality and freedom — comprising the metaphysical dimension of self as one with the universe and

* *Sabala* in *Mohua*.

the empirical – pragmatic dimension of realising this unity in the panorama of life. Tagore does not favour the ascetic's way of denial and the mortification of the flesh. Nor does he favour the total surrender to the way of all-flesh. He visualised development of personality and realisation of individuality through sensitive involvement in life-in-the-world in all its aspects. Women's liberation for him, though urgent, is part of human liberation; for if women are kept subjugated and oppressed, humanity suffers.

The truth of harmony between man and universe Tagore learnt not only from the Upanishads, but also from his own marvellous poetic intuition. He appreciated very much the faith behind the (mystical) Baul songs of Bengal that God has to be searched and found within one's heart. Between the cosmic spring "and the individual self Tagore saw an endless love-game which gave to what was finite the significance of the Infinite. In innumerable songs and lyrics he gave expression to this experience of love which based freedom on inalienable interdependence." The following excerpt expresses the core of his faith : "I say from what I feel that my innermost God has joy in expressing Himself through me - this joy, this love pervades every part of my being, suffusing... this entire universe... I exist — and along with me everything else exists Only through what is called 'limited', what is 'visible', does the Infinite manifests itself."²

The bifocality of this relatedness of the limited and the unlimited Tagore elaborates in the interactive lives of the characters of his literary works — in various hues and shades. In Pareshbabu and Anandamayi of *Gora*, their sane and dignified conduct suggests that an inner harmony had been achieved. Nikhil in *Ghare Baire* seems to acting as implementing his faith in harmony. In *Strir Patra*, the wife Mrinal expresses the realisation of free individuality when she says, “After fifteen years I stand on the seashore and realise that I have a different relationship with my world and God.... Before me now stretches the blue sea.... I was shut in by the darkness of your customs.... Now I have stepped out, and I see that there is no longer anything anywhere which can shut in my worth.”

Tagore’s holistic view of life came under severe opposition and criticism in the last two decades of his life. This saddened him, but he held on to what he felt to be Truth until the last. In two of his last poems he says,

“I recognise myself through injuries and agonies :
Truth is difficult indeed,
and I am in love with the difficult - it never deceives.
This life is a penance of suffering unto death,”
To realise the priceless value of Truth.” (Sesh Lekha-14).
“ ‘Troubled’ he is called by people.
He realises Truth in his inner being,
Bathed in his own light....
Nothing can deceive him any more...

One who has borne deception with ease,
Earns the imperishable right to Peace." (Sesh Lekha-15).

Notes and References :

1. Sacred Books of the East, Vol. 25, *The Laws of Manu*, p. 195.
2. Indu Dutta (Ed. And trans.) *A Tagore Testament*, Bombay, 1969; pp. 11, 15, 16. The original essay is entitled **Atma-parichay**.