

## PREFACE

The thesis is intended as a study of a most intriguing feature of our life in the metropolis of Kolkata. The city was once the cradle of renaissance in the eastern part of India. Social reforms and new religious movements, implementation of novel educational systems based upon the British model, establishment of a University, emergence of literature and poetry of a new age and consciousness were few of the path breaking events of consequence that marked the Capital City of the British Indian Empire. Of these, the most momentous was women's education, both at the school and college levels. Among social reforms, the Widow Remarriage Act and the Consent Bill were greeted with both enthusiasm and derision. There were women poets, painters, novelists and social activists even in the early years of the history of the metropolis. Many of them had encountered the existential issues of boredom and sought to escape into freedom, not by becoming working women as bread or wage earners either for themselves or for their family, but by an oblique and reified manner of their mode of creativity. The poet Kamini Roy is a case in point. She was a beautiful graduate Hindu widow and belonged to the cultural elite of the city of Kolkata. She met the Japanese artist, critic and writer Kazuo Okakura, and an affair developed between them. An exchange of letters followed for years. But Kamini never thought of leaving her hearth and home for the sake of her love for Okakura. Her

poetry ripened and glowed with her sadness. This might not have been the case today and the entire Kamini - Okakura episode seems outmodish to the contemporary sensibility, an waste of human existential values. Nor did Kamini ever think of taking up a job, what she could do, in order to have an escape or freedom from her tradition bound mourings of her family. There was no interpreter of her malady then.

After the Second World War the rate of inflation went up and that made life quite difficult, and the need and desirability of a subsidiary income gradually came to be felt. The concept of working - woman was not unknown to the society, for house-maids were there although they did not belong to the middle class segment of society. Euphemistically they were designated as 'jhi' in Bengali, meaning daughter. For quite sometime, with the spirit of urbanisation getting more hold on the metropolitan psyche, they have come to be designated as 'Kajer lok', not any more belonging to the family, but an outsider who, on payment, lends her hand in household chores like cooking, washing linen, dusting and sweeping, even baby-sitting. The chaste sanskrit word *dāsi* is no longer in usage. The members of the class of *dāsis* have often been abused by their male employers, if they were young. This prerogative of the employer male is now difficult to come by, nor is it taken for granted. House-maids today forms a distinct class, though an economically unorganized sector, but a self-conscious wage or bread earner for their own families. They negotiate the terms and conditions of employment, and demand for respectable working

atmosphere. The middle class working women in the metropolis have become in many ways dependent on their maids. They do much of the household chores that their mistresses earlier performed. No sociological study of these working women has yet been undertaken, though, a few sharp short-stories have been written and that too by recent women writers. House maids exist in parallel existence with the middle class working women. We are yet to discover 'humanity' in them.

With the partition of Bengal, the influx of the middle class people from across the border brought about a change in the composition of the population in the metropolis and its suburbs. In order just to survive women of the displaced middle class families went forth looking for jobs and help their families financially. Initially teaching in schools and colleges attracted the educated women. These were looked upon as "safe" and respectable. Even now educated women seem to have a priority choice for teaching jobs. In course of time more job opportunities became available, and employers also relaxed their preference for male employees. Today educated women can be seen working in almost every sector of job, fringed of course by a few self-employing jobs like running a cafeteria, or a beauty parlour or a garment store. Recently modeling has become most talked about and lucrative. It is an entirely novel world to be taken into account.

Our focus in the present study is a limited one. Working under the constraints of access and mobility I am obliged to confine myself to my cultural neighbourhood and have in view educated working married women from Bengali middle class families. They comprise a sensitive, self-conscious, often assertive, at times compromising, practical segment of the urban psyche of the city of Kolkata. Narendranath Mitra in a quite a few of his stories had portrayals of working women, sometime as a telephone operator (Durabhāsini) or an office employee (Mahanagar). Satyajit Ray made a film on the latter and it throws the problem of married working women vis-à-vis their conjugal life. It was a highly sensitive documentation of a delicate human situation. This study seeks to achieve a similar effect though in another mode.

The study is divided into two parts : Philosophical and Empirical. In the philosophical part I have ventured to understand the concepts related with the married working woman's existential crises, her means of escape and her decisions. A woman may opt to work or take up a job for diverse reasons. Pramila Kapoor's study of these reasons, and their outcome, pleasant and unpleasant, is worth mentioning. Kapoor's study is focussed on the women around Delhi and its suburbs. The present study differs from Kapoor's. She did not go in for understanding the predicament of the women in the light of generalities of the human condition, like boredom and freedom. I believe that a purely descriptive study tells us

nothing of moment. It simply shows, but does not say anything of significance. Sociology can not perhaps dispense with its philosophically reflective role. Nor did its founding fathers intend it.

Since culture is a historical process, in order to understand a social phenomenon requires it to be seen in the perspective of its historical development. Accordingly, the philosophical part of the thesis has a chapter on the formative forces that have been operative in the emergence of the modern middle class Bengali women.

The second part of the thesis is Empirical and much in tune with the mode and manner of sociological research. The data have been collected, put into the form of tables/diagrams, and then interpreted.

Finally, I have my observations taking both the philosophical and the empirical parts together. We have not taken the woman in abstraction, we have seen her as a member of a family. For our study the woman is a spouse of someone, a mother who stands in varied matrimonial relations. The relationships oblige her to play her game, either she plays it well to others' advantage or to her own advantage. In and through playing the game she comes to herself. At one pole of our being we are at the mercy of social and historical (including the economic) forces, at the other we are self conscious, thereby free beings. The problem that

remains is that how the married working woman succeeds in harmonizing the polarities, both for herself as well as for her daughters. Her creative handling of the predicament may have some important message for her spouse as well.