

CHAPTER -IV

WOMEN ASSOCIATIONS IN THE MAKING

Nineteenth century Bengal marked as a glorious chapter in the history of India. Although the beginning of the nineteenth century witnessed a spirit of revolution in the minds of the people, we find in the latter half of the nineteenth century the ushering in of a new life among the Bengalis. The wave of this resurgence or renaissance touched almost every sphere of Bengali life. The influence of this new spirit was fully noticeable in various fields of the society – education, literature, religion, politics and the like.¹ In our national life the nineteenth century can be compared with ‘siècle mirabilis’ of Latin language. This period was an astounding age. Unique transformation and various changes occurred in our national life during this period.²

Gradually, the Bengali youth got acquainted with the western trend of thought due to the introduction of new educational system. They performed various works together seriously for the welfare of our country and people. They realised that, collected effort is highly effective to get desired result within a short period.³ So, many examples can be cited in this connection. The welfare of our country is not possible by any individual initiative but it can be achieved through collective effort. Many welfare activities had been successfully implemented so far with the help of collective effort of the people. A great deal of activities can be performed by the *Sabhas* and the *Samitis* incurring less expenditure and labour. European *Sabhas* and *Samitis* can be cited as vivid examples in this connection. For example, *Asiatic Society*, Kolkata; *Society for Agriculture and Horticulture*; *A Seminar for Treatment (Medical) and Physics* etc. The newly educated people must have observed the activities of all these *Sabhas* and the *Samitis*.⁴ Collective effort of the people for a particular cause seldom leaves the work unfinished emerges when the knowledge, intellect and money of many people taken together a unique force emerges. Everybody becomes beneficial with this spirit.⁵ These words which have been told about the power of the association were applicable to all the *Sabhas* and *Samities* (Society or Institution).

The nineteenth century was the period of awakening for the Bengalis. The main feature of awakening was curiosity towards own self, society or towards the world and thereafter idealism emerged. The efforts of reformation mainly in the Hindu religion of nineteenth century caused tension in the community. Different communities were polarised. Different *Sabhas* and *Samitis* were formed for the propagation of ideologies of different groups. These groups published '*Sambad-Samayik Patra*' (contemporary periodicals) for the circulation of their ideologies. In the previous chapter there has already been a discussion on the role of '*Sambad-Samayik-Patra*' in respect of gender consciousness. Thus, *Sabha-Samiti* and *Sambad-Samayik Patrika* came forward with a purpose to transmit the intellectual quest initiated by the intellectuals of those days.⁶ In the colonial period the professionals or intelligentsia emphasized the importance of education as they knew that this could be considered as main agency for educational mobility. The newly educated people realised that education would uplift social prestige, wealth and power and they also realised that the female who consisted the other half of the population should not be marginalised any more. So, the *Sabha-Samitis* and the '*Sambad Samayik Patra*' run by the Hindu and the Muslim gave utmost importance to education.⁷

It is said that, in the nineteenth century Bengal there was at least a minimum relationship between *Sabha-Samitis* and contemporary periodicals. Most of the contemporary periodicals that were published throughout the nineteenth century, various *Sabha-Samitis* took the initiative to publish one-tenth of them. Therefore, it may be said that, there might be a connection between the origin and growth of contemporary Bengali periodicals and *Sabha-Samitis* or associations. The English word 'Association' is translated in Bengali as '*Sabha*, or '*Samiti*' or '*Sabha-Samiti*'. Moreover, in colloquial Bengali the word 'Association' could be understood as *Sabha-Samiti*. In the Western world, the social scientists also mentioned the *Sabha-Samiti* mainly as 'Voluntary Association'. In the nineteenth century not only in Bengal, but the whole India witnessed the growth of numerous *Sabha-Samitis* or associations. In brief, it may be said that, in the nineteenth century not only in Bengal, but throughout India for the organization of the middle-class views and enterprises of reformist activities which laid the foundation of such type of *Sabha-*

Samitis or associations. Increase of consciousness of a particular class in the society and as a result, for the reformist activity which played significant role to construct the mass opinion through the *Sabha-Samitis* and contemporary periodicals. As thought by many, *Sabha-Samiti* is said to be a feature of the modern society. Because, the societal conflicts were said to be the reason of its origin. Therefore, it may be pointed out that, the creation of the ‘modern’ society (Western oriented) in India founded in the nineteenth century. The basic principles of these *Sabha-Samitis* were “freedom, free self-expression and rights of union to each other”.⁸ In Europe, this type of the *Sabha-Samitis* or associations originated in the renaissance period. Towards the end of the eighteenth century, the Britishers took the enterprise for the establishment of *Sabha-Samitis* or associations in Bengal. After that, the western educated middle-class and wealthy people of India carried this further.

In the beginning of the nineteenth century women liberation movement in Bengal started by the initiative of the pioneer personalities of renaissance. Social and cultural discrimination towards woman and to develop consciousness against oppression and to take actions the exponents of renaissance came ahead for the establishment of *Sabha* and *Samiti* and the publication of magazine. From the beginning of nineteenth century to the six decade of that century many women welfare associations were formed with their initiative.⁹ Beginning with the *Atmiya Sabha* (1815) of Raja Rammohun Roy, innumerable organizations or associations were founded in Bengal in the nineteenth century. The most important associations such as *Brahmo Samaj* (1828), *Tattvabodhini Sabha* (1839), *Bidhaya Parinay Samiti* (1842),¹⁰ *Sarbasubhakari Sabha* (1850), *Samajonnati Bidhayini Suhrid Samiti* (1853), *Bal Subhakari Sabha* (1855), *Sangat Sabha* (1861), *Brahmo Bandhu Sabha* or *Society of Theistic Friends* (1863), *Bamabodhini Sabha* (1863), *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* (1863), *Bhagalpur Mahila Samiti* (1863) etc. were concerned about women issues like *Satidaha*, widow remarriage, polygamy, female infanticide, child marriage, women education and others.¹¹ These were mostly called *sabha* and *samiti* and the objects and activities of these associations reflected the great awakening of the period, characterized by energetic enterprise, enthusiasm and wide interest in various spheres of life. Some were purely cultural and literary associations, some were concerned with social reform and other aspects of public welfare, and others

combined both cultural and welfare activities. Though the century witnessed an ideological conflict between opposite ideas and religious differences, yet these associations generally provided the meeting place of people belonging to different schools of thought for a common objective. In most cases religion and politics were kept out of these associations and this made it possible for Europeans and enlightened Indians to meet, exchange views, and work for common welfare and benefit. In the first half of the nineteenth century the emphasis was on cultural activities and academic pursuits while in the second half more stress was laid on practical work of social reform, education and other welfare activities.¹² The magazines were published at the initiation of this *Sabhas* and *Samitis* and many activities were also done to the cause of women welfare. But there were no women members in these *Samitis*. They did not feel the necessity to get opinion of the women to do women welfare activities or there was no scope of opportunities at that period.¹³

So, an important area for the setting up *Sabha-Samiti* in Bengal and social reform process unveiled during the period of Rammohan when the *Atmiya Sabha* was set up and also the protest was launched against *Sati* system. In this *Sabha-Samiti* discussions were not only held on *Shastras*, *Vedas*, Brahmo song etc. but also on the caste problem, problem of child widow, problem of polygamy system and the problem of idolatry etc.¹⁴ On the other hand, though *Sati* was allowed to manifest in any way in ancient India yet in the eighteenth and nineteenth century Bengali society many reason behind the *Sati* system was the pressure of real situation then the eternal desire of women for reaching heaven. Solution of various complex questions - widows' strict life, oppressed life, familial non-cooperation on, question of distribution of wealth, social restrictions etc. were verified in the analysis of '*Sati*'. It was impossible to determine the exact figure of the women who died in the husband's corpses voluntarily or forcefully. But this became dangerous and inhuman problem during the nineteenth century.¹⁵

No contemporary documentary source of reference was available at that time in respect of mental reaction of the Bengali women against the Hindu practice of *Sati* system who were burnt along with her deceased husband. Because, it was an unthinkable matter for the Bengali women either to protest against these social evils

i.e. the Hindu practice of *Sati* system since the life and death of the women were dependent upon the mercy of the family and society. But in spite of this, the incident indirectly helped to bring about a change in the consciousness of the Bengali women. To protest against the *Sati* system Rammohan brought some issues to our attention. These issues were so far ignored for the Bengali women and thus led to social oppression of all this lack of education among the women to our country was the main important problem. Though Rammohan was not the active profounder of women education, he emphasized the importance of women education in order to establish justification regarding the question of rights of women over paternal property or to stop the practice of *Sati* system.¹⁶ To transform the then condition of the Bengali women two items got due importance in Rammohun's description: i) The necessity of women education and ii) to give due importance of women thinking and attitude in the matter pertaining to family and real life. These two factors helped the Bengali women to break their age long identity and the discipline of existence throughout the century. In this way, the women association came into being in Bengal giving primary importance to these two features. In this connection, one may recall that, the internal currents of the human society which has long been observed by F. Engels who sought the origin of the situation in the institutions of society like family, private property and the state.¹⁷ It is, however, unknown whether the women of Bengal were at all acquainted with the material interpretation of their condition but fact remains that they took up the cause of the age long injustice and raised voices in various forms. It is likely that, this situation had convicted the victimized women of Bengal to mobilize voices through some institutions and this may be the background leading to the rise of different associations with women concern in various parts of colonial Bengal.

In this respect, we may look back the history of Bengal in the first half of the nineteenth century specifically from 1830 onwards when a new era of women consciousness started through the activities of some associations. In 1829 the *Sati* custom was abolished at the initiative of Rammohan and after this, the next step was taken to develop the condition of the Hindu widows. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was very active in respect of developing the condition of the Hindu widows. Before Vidyasagar, a part of newly educated urban people was conscious regarding sorrows

and sufferings of the widows at the childhood stage. Rammohan Roy brought the attention of the members regarding the problem of child widows in the meeting of the *Atmiya Sabha*. In the reformatory speech of the Derozeans the problem of child widows got due importance. Thus, in 1842 the '*Vidhaba Parinay Samiti*' was organised. Ram Chandra Vidyabagis, the first *Acharya* of *Brahmo Samaj* opined in favour of widow re-marriage. In 1850, an essay of Vidyasagar on '*Bidhaba Bibaha*' (Widow Re-marriage) was published in the '*Sarbasubhakari*' Patrika. But the social consciousness got clear recognition as and when the initiative of Vidyasagar got legal recognition of the Government in 1856. Later, Keshab Chandra Sen, the leader of Brahmo movement staged one drama on '*Bidhaba Bibaha*' (Widow Remarriage) in 1859 and there severe criticisms were launched against the assigned rules on the Hindu widows. In 1861, he emphasised the importance of establishing mental and kith and kin (internalized) relations among the members of the *Sangat Sabha*. This *Sabha* supported Brahmo marriage for the first time in 1861 and side by side, it also supported inter-caste widow marriage in 1864.¹⁸

Another initiative of the social reformer of Bengal was to stop the tendency of existing customary practices of polygamy system among the Hindu *Kulin* Brahmin family. A protest against the customary practices of *Kulinism*, polygamy system also became firm with the emergence of social reform movement in the nineteenth century Bengal. Sreerampur Mission, *Atmiya Sabha* of Rammohan Roy, the Derozeans etc. tried to form public opinion against this practices. But the initiative of Vidyasagar in this affair was so far the best effort. According to his statements, if we want to make women lives tolerant then reformation of all practices relating to the interest of women were necessary. With the introduction of widow marriage he became active at the same time to ban polygamy system. With the active effort of Vidyasagar at last in 1871 and 1873 two judgements were passed against the practice of *Kulinism*. Besides Vidyasagar, the *Sanatan Dharma Rakshini Sabha* also played an important role to stop *Kulinism*. Since the problems of *Sati* custom and widows were not related to the people of all walks of life, its impact did not affect the thoughts and ideas of all the people. On the other hand, the practice of *Kulinism* was transformed into an incurable disease of social *Varna* system of Bengal. Though the Government did not take initiative in this matter yet a strong

resentment against this practice arose among the members of the society. Of course, women in Bengal did not participate directly to bring about social change at the primary level. But the newspaper and periodicals of that period reflected that they became conscious about this. In 1856 we came to know from the *Sambad Prabhakar* that, Rashmoni Devi submitted prayer to the *Byabasthapak Society* to stop the practices of polygamy system.¹⁹ Since the middle of the nineteenth century women though in lesser number interested to participate in the reform movement regarding the issue of women-interest.

In the nineteenth century on the one hand, Rammohun Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Keshab Chandra Sen took personal initiative and on the other, the process of social reform started in many cases at the group and organisational levels. We can refer some social organisations of nineteenth century run and influenced by the male members. These organisations held debates and discussions and chalk out plans regarding women related issues along with social problems. Derozio and its Young Bengal group inspired by western thought undertook programmes of social reforms along with women development. In 1828 they established *Academic Association*. They published their statement on the topic of the necessity of women education in *Gyananyesan*, the main organ of the Young Bengal group. Then on 6th October 1839, Maharshi Debendranath Tagore established *Tattvabodhini Sabha*. In the later period of Rammohun Roy the tendencies relating to religious and social reform of the *Brahmo Samaj* which took new shape emerged through this organisation. Essays relating to women education were published regularly in the *Tattvabodhini Patrika*, the organ of the *Tattvabodhini Sabha*. In 1852, an article on '*Manaber Sahit Bajhyabastur Sammandha Bichar*' was published in this magazine. The issues like inter-caste marriage, widow marriage, women education, to stop child marriage and polygamy system, prohibition of dowry system were raised there. As compared to Rammohun Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, the Brahmos took much more initiative to stop child marriage system. So, consciousness among the educated group for the development of the Bengali women emerged during third and fourth decades of the nineteenth century and it reached to higher degree at the end of that century. The effort towards women development and social reform was also observed at the enterprise of the ex-student of the Hindu college. An essay on '*Stree*

Siksha ('Women Education') by Madanmohan Tarkalankar was published in the second edition of '*Sarbasubhakari Patrika*'. With reference to '*Tattvabodhini Sabha*' '*Samajonnati Bidhayini Suhrid Sabha*' was formed on 16th October 1854. This organisation came into being to serve the purpose of social reform. Kishore Chand Mitra was the main exponent of this association. The main programme of this association was to remove strict adherence of caste system, stop polygamy and child marriage system, introduce widow marriage system, to take steps for women education etc.²⁰

Society of Theistic Friends (Brahmo Bandhu Sabha) was established in Calcutta on 1st April of 1863. The purpose of this association was to conscious the members about the religious and social reform. At the same time they established '*Antahpur Stree Siksha Sabha*' (Home Education for women or *Zenana Education*) to provide women education and one organisation was set up for the Brahmo women. Holding of examination were also arranged at the end of course curriculum. But there were only twenty to twenty five members of this organisation. As a result, at the initiative of Bijoy Krishna Goswami, Umesh Chandra Dutta and Basanta Kumar Ghosh '*Bamabodhini Sabha*' was formed in order to spread '*Antapura Siksha*' (home education).²¹ The objectives of this *Sabha* was to publish books and magazine, essay competition and distribution of prizes among educated women, arrangement of education for adult women of the Bengali family and to assist for the development of women of our country. *Bamabodhini Patrika* was a monthly and widely circulated magazine for the women of Bengal. This periodical was published with the editorship of principal Umesh Chandra Dutta, the Brahmo social reformer, mainly for the development of women related issues like life history of noble women, teaching about the principle of domestic life, to discuss about tourism, history and religious advice, novel, discussion on scientific issues, study of poetry, contemporary events and news, child marriage, *Kulinism*, movement against dowry system and so on. In 1872, *Bamarachanabali* was composed compiling the women essays published in *Bamabodhini Patrika*. Many of these writers achieved reputations later.²² A library named 'Female Circulating Library' founded by Sri Sashipada Bandopadhyay, the Brahmo social reformer, at Baranagar to extend the opportunities for the study of women. Side by side, he established one school for the

Hindu widows in 1864.²³ In 1887, this school was transformed into *Hindu Bidhaba Silpashram*.

Following the examples of *Bamabodhini Sabha* or *Society of Theistic Friends* many welfare institutions gradually played important role to spread women education through '*Antahpur Siksha*'. *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* can be cited as an important example in this field. Of all the organisations which undertook the programmes to spread women education in the second half of nineteenth century, the *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* (5th April, 1863) can be specifically referred to in respect of wide circulation and stability. In the contemporary period of *Bamabodhini Sabha* this village institution introduced examination system for the girls' students of the school in order to provide incentive towards the circulation of women education. In 1864, during autumn season this *Sabha* issued notice for holding examination for the girls' students of the Hooghly and Howrah districts and from 1865 started to take examination. The girls who secured high positions in the examination were distributed prizes and scholarships as per their qualities. This *Sabha* introduced necessary syllabus required for women.²⁴ The activities of this *Sabha* was not confined only to girls' school. It also introduced *Antahpur Stree Siksha* for the education of adult women. Following *Antahpur Stree Siksha* and its related examination system of *Brahmabandhu Sabha* and *Bamabodhini Sabha*; in 1868 *Hitakari Sabha* introduced their fourth examination on the basis of requirement and previous experience of conducting examinations. The girls' students would get scholarship in the last examination if they exercise *antahpurika* syllabus of one year from *antahpur*. This has been decided in the *Sabha* in order to encourage the girls' student, recipient of scholarship in the third or last examination, for purpose of studying more. Thus, special examinations were held for the secluded women during the period from 1868 to 1939 and eighty women passed in the *antahpurika* examination in different years.²⁵ To expedite the awakening of the nation and to build the country successfully the necessity of women education is not deniable. In this context, the Education Despatch of 1854 speaks with characteristic wisdom when it recorded that by the education of women a far greater impulse is imparted to the educational and moral tone of the people than the education of men.²⁶ Realising this truth the *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* played glorious role

successfully to spread women education during the end of the nineteenth century and in the first half of twentieth century in the Burdwan division and in some parts of 24 Parganas.

Establishing *Sabha-Samiti* at the initiative of male social reformer in order to spread women education, the sub-inspector of Nadia district made observations from the report of the then Director of Education in the academic year 1864-65. He comments from the report that, “In a country like this, education of girls in the zenana is highly desirable and the advantage of such institutions cannot be over-estimated. It is, therefore, within feelings of unfeigned satisfaction that I record the establishment of a zenana education club at Belladanga in the town of Krishnanagore. Fourteen pupils on an average age of seventeen years are thus receiving instructions through the agency of the association”.²⁷ In the next year Academic Report of the Director of Education informed that, nineteenth (19) organisations were engaged to implement *antahpur* women education planning. In almost all the districts of Bengal *sabha* and *samitis* were formed for the development of women. Among these *Barisal Female Improvement Association* (1871 or 1872), *Syhet Sammilan* (1877), *Madhyabangala Sammilani* (*The Central Bengal Union*), *Sreehatta Sammilani*, *Jessore-Khulna Sammilani*, *Bikrampur Hitasadhini* (organised by Dwarakanath Ganguli in 1879), *Faridpur Suhrid Sabha* (1880 or 1881), the *Paschim Dacca Hitakari Sabha*, *Taki Hitakari Sabha*, the *Sripur Hitasadhini* and many others were encouraging the women in respect of their education, art and craft, domestic principle and others.

In this way, at the impetus of male social reformer of our country the items ‘women progress’ got importance at the organisational level for the first time. Because, in the first half of the nineteenth century the development of self-consciousness among the Bengali women was not so firm that they could set up their own organisation for their existence or for their rights. Organisations relating to consciousness of women in Bengal came into being during later decades of 1860s. But a suitable environment and groundwork was created for the self-expression and thinking of the women in Bengal before arriving at organisational effort. These became the basis of thinking for the associational initiative. If the social reform of the nineteenth century is considered external indices of the development of

consciousness then the women education was undoubtedly its internal inspiration. In fact, various legal initiatives were taken to improve the conditions of women in Bengal but still then no other attempt could become so successful as women education which has a far-reaching impact. All these processes which were initiated by the male reformers were assigned reform on women. In this reform process women's active participation was not found in reality. With the influence of these reforms the thinking and consciousness developed indirectly among the Bengali women. But the women education is such an important thing that it helps to grow consciousness directly among the women. As a result, consciousness among them developed very clearly. The immediate outcome of the expansion of women education helped to develop the emergence of the educated Bengali women class. These women did not depend upon others to solve social problems or the problem of reform. They wanted to solve all these problems at their own initiative or responsibility. The women associations of the first phase of Bengal were the result of this trend.²⁸ So, there is a very sharp pivot moment and linking line between women awakening and movement. Women's consciousness about their rights developed in this period through organising the women on the one hand and writing and self-questioning on the other. But, it was very difficult to form *Sabha* and *Samiti* at the initial stage. It was not possible for the Bengali women to provide leadership openly for the formation of *Sabha* and *Samiti* because they lived under the social restriction of *pardah* and seclusion and also under the social backwardness. Hence, the progressive male members took enterprise to form the *mahila samiti* (ladies association) for the first time.²⁹

The Britishers on the one hand performed the imperialist duty in order to bring about a change in the 'backwardness' of the Bengali society with the women developmental issues associated with the process of nineteenth century social reform in Bengal. On the other hand, the Bengali urban intellectuals inspired by western education and ideology became more reform-oriented. Various changes occurred in the public life of Bengal with the joint initiative of this assemblage in which women interested issues got highest importance. As a result, Prohibition of *Sati* Act, 1829, Widow Re-marriage Act in 1856 and Brahmo Marriage Act in 1872 were passed and also women education was extended. The objectives of patriarchal society were

very much prevalent behind this women development. Hence, behind progressivism social restrictions were prevalent at every step of social reform of Bengal and women development. For example, the themes which were included for the purpose of home education of women in the second half of the nineteenth century opened the opportunities of exercise for the knowledge of spiritual analysis than the scientific exercise. It was found that, even in the nineteenth century an attempt was made through women education to make the women ideal, efficient in domestic work, to act as assistant for all the activities of husband and extension of social status nevertheless to develop the women sincerity towards social conventions. But in spite of this, the extension of education among the Bengali women helped to develop consciousness and a change noticed with this in the life of the Bengali urban women. The reflection of this could be observed in the personal behaviour of the Bengali women, dress materials, life style and the attitude towards society on all things.³⁰ Thus, one kind of new Bengali *bhadramahila*³¹ emerged in the urban society of Bengal. These Bengali *bhadramahila* came forward to give leadership towards social activities relating to women development. The attempt to self-expression and necessity of unified emergence of the Bengali women inspired to do associational activities.

In the first half of the nineteenth century in India especially in Bengal western based culture and its ethos became the criterion of signifying ‘modernity, progressiveness and supremacy’. In order to establish suitability and acceptability in respect of caste and their eligibility towards foreign ruling classes they selected transformation and reform of social life, group life and individual life. The British power as per their own requirement took active part primarily in the field of their initiation. As a result, transformations and reforms got importance in the social, cultural and civic life of Bengal. Hence, a special phase with reference to this began in respect of consciousness for women in Bengal during colonial period. Among the women consciousness and development the impact of nineteenth century Victorian culture³² and feminism was very much definite in this period. The *bhadramahila* emerged in Bengal from the middle half of the nineteenth century and a direct indication of westernized thinking is found into their family background and reform, education, behaviour, life style, formalities of the *bhadramahila*. Even, in order to

prove and maintain their modernity and nevertheless women like ‘flexibility and purity’ these *bhadramahila* were same kind of conscious and skilful. Of all the initiatives taken to prove women like characteristics, social responsibility, awareness and modernity, an attempt to form women organization and active participation of women in those organizations were the main important thing. In other words, the women organizations were an important instrument to focus newly acquired social introduction and gradually developed women consciousness. Most of the Bengali *bhadramahila* were urban Brahma group, converted Bengali family or in some cases educated Hindu family. Therefore, the familial, social, cultural ideas and the reflections of own realisations were observed in the women organizations which were initiated by them.³³ Because, the ancient Indian cultural thought always existed parallel with Western liberalism and the idea of western oriented women life in the development of consciousness for women in colonial Bengal. Among the so called progressive exceptional Bengali women both the features were available to a lesser or greater extent. In view of the fact that, the women organization emerged in regard to women related issues, hence those ideas relating to women thinking and consciousness were indispensable features for institutional expression in respect of women development in Bengal.³⁴

On the other hand, skills, knowledge and consciousness of social concerns that had been developed through education and contact to a wider public life needed and field of operation. Neither the *bhadralok* nor Hindu society was ready to allow women the same freedoms as men, but the energies that had been generated by social change could not be ignored. The *bhadramahila* began to follow the *bhadralok* in setting up organizations among themselves for social and benevolent purposes. The movement was encouraged by male reformers, who allowed the values of spending time useful and helping to uplift the less fortunate. The women’s associations of nineteenth century Bengal managed to break new ground in their creation and interests, without challenging the parameters of acceptable female concerns. The growth of women’s associations, their changing nature and their often different aims and methods, were closely incorporated with social developments in the world of the *bhadralok*.³⁵

For the first few decades of the existence of women's associations, only Brahma women were involved. As members of a new "sect", Brahmos had cut off themselves from involvement in the household and communal rituals of Hinduism. Instead of these, they celebrated their group consciousness through the ritual of congregational worship, and confirmed their usually held principles in formal discussion groups or voluntary associations. Brahma women would have experienced some of the same problems of separation from the Hindu community as their men folk, especially 1860s and 1870s. However, their customary mode of establishing social contact was through informal challenge and therefore, the enterprise for the establishment of formal women association came from men. Women may have welcomed the chance to make stronger their newly acquired identity as Brahmos that was thus presented, but this was not the primary aim of the men who established voluntary associations for women. They envisaged the broader social purpose of rising women above the state of oppression in which they were said to exist in Hindu society. Women's voluntary associations were discussion groups creating a sense of common purpose among the participants, as well as forums for moulding the consciousness of the "new women" and indicating directions for change in her position.

Formal meeting procedures followed these of men's associations, and thus furnished women with skills that were to be of use in breaking into formerly male domains such as politics and public administration. Brahma women soon became familiar with such formal procedures, thus moving into an ideal position for involvement in public affairs at a later date. In addition, women's associations, by their very existence, laid emphasis women's distinctness and separateness and introduced serious consideration of issues concerning the role and status of women. In some respects this was just a continuation of the "separate world" of the *pardah* system, but by the end of the nineteenth century, women's successful mastery over the form of the voluntary association had created among the confidence in their ability to understand and function within the public institutional structure of colonial India nay Bengal.³⁶

As a result, for the first time in India's history women began to communicate with women outside their families and local communities. There was a small group

of women who shared English as a common language. This made possible communication across language barriers. On the other hand, there were growing numbers of women literate in the vernaculars which enabled them to learn about women's issues in the new women's journals. Both groups being marginalised by more traditional society sought the companionship of women like themselves. Inspired by their male guardians to "*move with the times*" they joined the new clubs and associations formed particularly for women. These associations became the platform for the expression of "*women's opinion*". At the same time, they were a training ground for women who would later take up leadership roles in politic and social institutions. Those institutions, in turn, played an important role in the building of Indian nation. Their model was undoubtedly western: the view of women and of women's civic responsibility was adopted wholesale. Nonetheless, in the Indian context these organizations developed in harmony with a view of the "new women" as a companion and helpmate to man, an ideal mother, and a credit to her country.³⁷

While male-inspired and male-guided associations for women did important work in educating women and providing them with their first experience with public work, they also imposed boundaries. In particular, male reformers regarded the household as the main focus and fundamental arena of activity for women. They envisioned households run by modernized women who had imbibed scientific ideas about hygiene and child-rearing. These men wanted their wives to take part in activities outside the home such as social work to help the unfortunate and relief work when disaster struck. Their wives could support in nation-building not through political agitation but by building institutions to improve the most evil situations arising from social customs. Women's associations were also useful institutions to achieve the aim of transforming young brides into companions and help-mates. When young women attended these meetings they were temporarily removed from the influence and dominance of the older women of the household to a place where they could follow further education, develop friendships with other educated women, work together on benevolent schemes.³⁸

The limitations that accompanied male support and guidance were exposed whenever women wanted to strike out on their own. The religious-reform and

communal associations dealt with women's problems as defined by male leaders. But these patrons would not automatically extend their support to problems identified by women on their own.³⁹ In this connection, Janaki Nair comments on the "limited operation of the 'modernization' paradigm". She writes: "The agenda of 'modernization' to which both colonialist and nationalist discourse laid claim, did not, indeed could not, include the wider transformation of Indian society".⁴⁰ Nevertheless, the steps taken by these respectable and well-educated Indian men linked improving women's status with the modernization agenda. Their campaign set in motion further attempts to establish institutions that would be supportive of a new generation of women leaders.

In fine, in the second half of the nineteenth century many of the best-educated and influential men got involved gradually with nationalist politics and the "women question" was no longer a subject on which educated Indians and British rulers could agree. As a result, these issues were not left behind as the "new women" moved forward to set up their own associations and rearrange social reform priorities.⁴¹

The women's associations, thus initiated, were a part of the nineteenth century Social Reform Programme. These, however, in the first phase were largely isolated from political context. But the characters of the women's associations, however, were fundamentally changed from the last part of the nineteenth century and above all with the beginning of the twentieth century. Finally, it came to be liked up not only with the larger movement of political emancipation, but was also, in broader perspectives guided by women leaders themselves. As the freedom movement progressed and women participated in it, they thought of organizing their own association. From the early twentieth century, women political leaders strongly attempted this task. They received an increasing response from other women, who were becoming progressively conscious of the misery of women in society. Most of these associations were bothered mainly with issues of gender.⁴² So, participation in the freedom struggle which breaking of the exterior of traditional domestic life had widened their sphere. They had started, as their realization and writings indicate, slowly to understand the reasons for their oppression and to perceive the need to

organize their own associations as a source of strength. In short, they came out with a new personality of their own.

So, from the beginning of the nineteenth century, the ‘women problem’ had been defined in terms of upper-class and middle-class women. Confinement, lack of formal education and restriction on movement, were seen as the problems to be overcome; lectures, social associations and literature provided the method of attack.⁴³ But these were neither the problems of the lower class nor were these suitable ways to claim their attention. It was hoped though that, the women who took part in these associations would become conscious of the needs of their own class and feel confident in the world outside their homes so that they could play a part in social revitalization.

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28. Sarada Ghosh, *op.cit.* pp. 38-39.
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31. The new woman represented both the traditional image of womanhood capable of performing her household duties efficiently and the modern enlightened image capable of assuming responsibilities outside the four walls of her home. See Anup Taneja, *Gandhi, Women, and the National Movement, 1920-47*, Har-Anand Publications PVT. LTD., New Delhi, 2005, p.47.
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which the status of women has varied in different cultures and times; and changes taking place in women's family role, political rights, education and employment. See *The Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Micropaedia, Vol. X, 15th Edition, William Benton, Publisher, 1943-1973, pp. 421 and 731; only in comparatively modern times did the women of Great Britain emerge from a complex of legal disabilities within which they had remained for long centuries. The three main landmarks of their modern emancipation were the Married Women's Property act of 1882; their admission to the parliamentary electorate by the Representation of the People Act of 1918; and the Sex Disqualification (Removal) act of 1919, which opened public functions and many professions hitherto closed to them. See *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, Vol. 23, Vase to Zygote, William Benton, Publisher, 1963, p. 704.

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