

## CHAPTER-VII

### WOMEN OF BENGAL IN THE ERA OF SELF IDENTITY

It is true that, over a period of time, patriarchy's iron grip and *Shastric* restriction over the lives of women seem to have somewhat slackened, even though men's superior position as bread winners and decision makers have also taken basis in public, family and personal matters in the process of new developments. These changes also created certain obstacles to Bengali women's achievement of rights and freedom even after the social reform movements. In spite of these probabilities, women of modern India fought for their rights and self-sufficiency as free individuals by breaking the barriers of social orthodoxies and superstitions, which is evident in their participation in anti-colonial movements and in many contemporary social and political movements through various women's associations for gender justice and equal rights.

In the beginning women were fairly unconscious about the hotly-debated women question. But despite of being rooted in the male-defined outline of social reform, the winds of change had started blowing; and the mid-nineteenth century movements for rescuing them from the world of superstition, ignorance and illiteracy reached a new chapter in the twentieth century. Even with the barriers, women had made some improvement in coming out of the personal attachment of home and family. But the changes have not taken place all on a sudden; rather it was a long and ongoing journey towards instituting the norms of good manners, equity and justice in the sphere of gender relations and for defining the position of women in Bengali society.<sup>1</sup>

In nineteenth century Bengal the separation among the female household world and the male public world was undoubtedly defined in spatial as well as ideological terms. The familial world of women and the family was actually delineated by the limitations of the *antahpur*. In compare, the entirely male public world was spatially unrestricted and apprehensive with broad matters, including the family. In this chapter, "era of self identity" covers the involvement of women in activities or issues outside the traditional sphere of the domestic world particularly in the areas of employment, political participation, rights and others.

From the second half of the nineteenth century the number of women took a significant part in economic activity outside the domestic world, particularly among the *bhadralok* class, started to increase. It is almost not possible to find out as to why the number of women were engaged in economic activities grew accurately at that period. It is likely that, both the spread of female education and social change resulting from growing economic pressure on the families encouraged women to allow salaried jobs in the last decade of that century.<sup>2</sup> This changing attitude of the society called for a new role and a new identity of Bengali women in the wider perspective beyond their traditional identity as a daughter, wife and mother within the four walls of the house. The provision of education for women and the continuous development of the upper limits of female education also raised women's own expectation for something more than marriage.<sup>3</sup> The admission of women to university degrees did not necessarily sidetrack them from the traditionally expected role of wife and mother, rather it gave them a chance to think that their lives should be changed from those of their mothers and grand-mothers and they should give others the benefit of their improvement through various forms of public services.

Initially, the *bhadramahila* were brought into contact with the economic world of wage labour based on formal deal. The phenomenon of independent earning power began to affect the lives of women by giving them a greater sense of individuality. It also extended the boundaries of their experience by bringing them into contact with the realities of the male world of colonial administration as it was experienced by the *bhadralok*.<sup>4</sup>

The increase in employment among the *bhadramahila* paralleled the growth in public institutions catering for women, basically in the fields of health and education. In order that, more women could take advantage of the new services obtainable, it was necessary to have females provide those services. While the limits of the separate world of *pardah* were widening, female officials were required to act as mediators between it and the expanded world of males.

From the Calcutta census of 1901<sup>5</sup>, it was reported that, 725 women registered themselves as employed in what could be termed "professional"

occupations. These included the categories of principals, professors and teachers (587), administrative and inspecting officials (6), qualified medical practitioners (124), photographers (4), and authors, editors and journalists (4). Some were engaged in part-time, semiformal or temporary job engagements and would not have been registered as employed. Nor do the statistics give any information on the religious, caste or marital background of professional working women. One can only guess from other available evidence that most would have been single or widowed Christian and Brahmo women.

It is said that, teaching was considered to be one of the most suitable professions for women, and it employed the biggest number of *bhadramahila*. In the earliest days of female education the services of male teachers were used, but that was supposed as a hindrance to its wider social recognition, and the increase of female education created a pressing demand for women teachers. Some of the first generations of educated women determined to extend the benefits of their knowledge to others by taking up teaching as an occupation, at least for some time.

The first recorded example of a *bhadramahila* taking up teaching was that of Bamasundari Debi of Pabna. From 1860s, many educated women slowly took the teaching as their profession namely, Monarama Mazumdar, the first woman preacher in the *Brahmo Samaj*, Radhamani Debi, ex-student of the Dacca Female Normal School, Srimati Krishnakamini Debi, educated at the Native Ladies Normal School, Chandramukhi Basu, a Bengali Christian and the first woman M. A. from Calcutta University, Radharani Lahiri, one of the outstanding graduates and so on. It is important to mention here that, Radharani Lahiri was one of the few Bengali *bhadramahila* not to marry but to follow a career. These women were appointed in the teaching profession on a monthly salary. Not only that, some women were ready to endeavour far afield in search of good teaching posts. For instance, in 1890 Miss Sarat Chakraborty at Amritsar, Kamini Basu, sister of Chandramukhi Basu at Dehra Dun, in 1891 Aghorkamini Ray at Lucknow, in 1893 Kumudini Khastagir at Mysore and so on.<sup>6</sup> They assumed in a women's right to earn their living. But it is a fact that, until the turn of the century very few Bengali *bhadramahila* would have been able to overcome traditional prejudices against female employment outside the home.

Medicine was, without doubt, one of the most essential professions where employment possibilities for educated women were improved because of the popularity of the *purdah* system. In cases of serious illnesses of women, there had been uncertainty in admitting a male *vaidya* or doctor to the *zenana*. Even if they were admitted, the indirect mode of treatment used by male doctors in case of serious illnesses yielded no positive results. The *purdah* system, with its codes of female modesty in speech, dress and behaviour was presented as creating ridiculous if not impossible conditions of practice for male doctors, hindering the medical look of the colonial female body.<sup>7</sup> In this situation, the need for women doctors was not uniformly accepted. But in 1884, the Countess of Dufferin's Fund materialized to grant scholarship for doctors, nurses, and midwives and set up *purdah* hospitals for Indian women. Architects of the Fund claimed that, Indian women sought western medicine but the 'oriental view of women', shared by Hindus and Muslims and disallowed treatment by males. For that reason, only women practitioners were acceptable. In this field, Kadambini Ganguly, wife of Dwarakanath Ganguly, passed the L. M. S. (Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery) successfully to become the first woman doctor in 1886, although she got plucked by one subject in her first attempt. In eastern India, Miss Bidhumukhi Bose and Miss Virginia Mary Mitter became first women graduates from Calcutta Medical College in 1889. By 1895, thirty-four women had graduated from Calcutta Medical College.<sup>8</sup> Jamini Sen,<sup>9</sup> niece of Kamini Roy and Haimabati Sen<sup>10</sup> were also prominent Lady doctors of Bengal in the last decades of the nineteenth century. It is necessary to mention that, Jamini Sen never married, but dedicated all her energies to her career. Even many less famous lady doctors took up practices in the *mofussils*. For instances, in 1901, Dr. Bidyulata Mallik at Rampur Boalia, in 1902, Dr. Pramilabala Debi at Malda and others.<sup>11</sup> But until the turn of the nineteenth century, the number of Bengali women coming forward to study medicine was still small. It may be said that, women who became doctors were rewarded for their efforts by the possibility of earning a considerable self-sufficient livelihood and they began to set up their self identity.

It was in this context that, schemes to train women as 'Hospital Assistants' (HA) surfaced. 'Hospital Assistants' held the Vernacular Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery (VLMS), awarded after a three year course in western medicine. The

Campbell Medical School opened its doors to women in 1887. The standard of entry was lower than for the Calcutta Medical College. The graduates of Campbell Medical School found jobs in newly created hospitals and dispensaries.<sup>12</sup>

Where medicine was a prestigious profession, for the lower ranks of the *bhadramahila* on the margins of society, such as widows, midwifery was a more feasible career. Educational requirements were less exacting, the training period was shorter and employment was easily obtainable. Midwifery courses were opened at Calcutta Medical College in 1870.<sup>13</sup> By 1880 there were about half a dozen trained midwives practicing in Calcutta. Their success was attracting others from the *moffusil* and development of the trained programme was suggested because of the growing supply of employees. *Brahmo Public Opinion* reported that, many “Hindoo widows of respectable families were prepared to take up midwifery.”<sup>14</sup> Brahmos inspired *bhadramahila* who had to earn their living to train as midwives. Government employers often felt that it was more useful and economical to employ midwives as an alternative of doctors.

Writing was also another important profession of educated *bhadramahila*. Krishnkamini Dasi wrote a first book of poem – *Chittabilasini* as early as 1856. It was printed and sold openly in the market. Bamasundari Debi of Pabna district and Harakumari Debi of Kalighat, Calcutta, wrote Bengali books in 1861. Kailashbasini Debi started her writer’s career from 1863 and wrote several books which sold well in the book-market. Many other women followed suit and some helped to maintain themselves with this new mode of earning. There were about 26 women journalists writing in 25 weekly or monthly journals during the period from 1870 to 1910, some of them earning well.<sup>15</sup>

Not only that, many occupations gained a few of adherents from among the Bengali *bhadramahila* such as, governess and companion,<sup>16</sup> lawyers, clerical, typewriting, photography<sup>17</sup> drawing and painting,<sup>18</sup> acting<sup>19</sup> and so on. It may be said that, their entry into employment and outside the four walls involved gradually a more pointed endeavour to break into the public sphere – to claim for themselves a new trained professional identity. Here lay the main contests and tensions for a

generation of women, whom we could today designate as the first of our ‘moderns’: ‘moderns’ both in the sense of era they developed and the self identity they wanted.

So, the increase of female employment in Bengal was a complex and ongoing development. The *purdah* system proved both a benefit and a connect to the educated *bhadramahila*. Because, it restricted the scope of occupations they could enter and repressed their freedom of movement, but its very continuation provided some of them with the chance to act as mediators with the outside world. Men were excluded from this role, so women had an open field in which they could rise to the highest positions. It is said that, from the second half of the nineteenth century to end of that century, most employed *bhadramila* were occupied in providing services to the separate female world of *purdah*.

It may be noted that, economic need was not the main reason in searching employment for the majority educated *bhadramahila*. Generally, the highly educated women and those who were most likely to find professional employment by and large came from economically affluent elite classes. They wanted employment in order to gain work skill, to put their knowledge to a socially constructive purpose and for own happiness. Yet, the era of self identity also began to open up opportunities for *bhadramahila* who required working for their living. It is true that, in this stage only a small number of women were employed, the example of their employment set trends for the future. The need for mediators between the *antahpur* and the ever-encroaching outside the four walls was recognized, as was the pattern of salaried financial independence for women.<sup>20</sup>

In the beginning of the twentieth century, the Bengali *bhadramahila* began to take an interest in the until then male world of nationalist politics. The Partition of Bengal (1905) witnessed women in growing numbers participating in the movement. Even though there was no broad mass awakening, the *Swadeshi* movement positively had an impact on Indian womanhood. After that, Gandhiji who succeeded in mobilizing women in huge numbers and attractive them to fight for the country’s freedom. In many provinces and districts, women became ‘dictators’ to run the Congress movement. All this went a long way in transforming the self-perception of women and “gave them a new sense of power, a new self-view.”<sup>21</sup>

As women emerged, they established several associations to voice protest socially constructed barriers. However, women's associations in the nineteenth century were mainly organized by men. The associations under male leadership also contributed towards educating women and giving them the first experience in public work as Geraldine Forbes affirm positively, but they also had limitations beyond which women's participation was not looked-for.<sup>22</sup> In the meantime, women's lives were affected by anti-imperialist wave that was gradually rolling onwards in India. A section of women within Bengali society began to consider the need for building up their own network to focus on women's degraded condition due to confinement in the household activities. In this way, the process once initiated began progressing. The first generation of women emphasized on their lives and conditions. The second generation thought of organizing their own platform from where the needs of women were to be expressed. They were keen to extend beyond the imposing boundaries, dreaming of their hopes and aspirations beyond the familial space. Their lives and new roles began to get modified and accepted.

Women's continuous struggle against abuses and social exclusion yielded some results in the succeeding years. The list of the untiring crusaders who worked in different fields for women's empowerment is countless and includes Jyotirmoyee Debi, Basanti Debi, Swarnakumari Debi, Sarala Debi Choudhurani, Ashalata Sen, Prabhavati Debi in Bengal and Pandita Ramabai, Ramabai Ranade, Sarojini Naidu and so on. All of them were tireless crusaders of women's rights and by and large were the products of the reform movements. Besides, many also shared a vision of independent India and had been involved in the freedom struggle to the nation building process.

To protect their own interests and identity, women formed powerful associations and demanded political rights for themselves from British Government. In 1917, WIA, a representative body under the leadership of Smt. Sarojini Naidu demanded franchise for women on the basis of equality with men. But the Reform Act of 1921 gave franchise for the election of State Governments only to those housewives who were educated and financially prosperous. This limited franchise was also an aspect of political identity. In 1925, Sarojini Naidu became President of Indian National Congress and provided leadership to the women liberating

movement. Not before 1926 did women get the right to entry into the Legislative Councils in the provinces of British India. Muthulakshmi Reddy was the first Vice-President of the Madras Legislature. In 1931, they got right of candidature in elections with certain conditions of eligibility.<sup>23</sup>

The Government of India Act, 1935 extended the range of women's enfranchisement. The reasons for not giving franchise to all the women were pointed out by Government as backwardness of women, unfavourable conditions and lack of united opinion of women associations on this issue. Nonetheless, franchise for women meant their recognition and responsibility in taking decisions regarding national life. It also meant that, they are not inferior to men and if they get liberty and opportunity, they can take and properly handle the challenging jobs and responsibilities of positions like ministers, governors' ambassadors etc.<sup>24</sup> Women, however, had something to clear about when the results of 1937 elections were declared. Eight women were elected from general constituencies and forty-two from the reserved constituencies. Six women became ministers when the provincial cabinets were formed. Vijaylakshmi Pandit became Minister for Local Self-Government and Public Health in UP, Anusuyabai Kale, Deputy Speaker in the Central Provinces, Sippi Milani, Deputy Speaker in Sind Assembly, Hansa Mehta and Begum Shah Nawaz took office as Parliamentary Secretaries in Bombay and Punjab respectively. Renuka Ray and Mrs. Radhabai Subbarayan became the Minister of Rehabilitation in Bengal and a member of the Round Table Conference during 1931-32 respectively.<sup>25</sup> This success deeply inspired women's associations and they recommended the nomination of women to commissions, boards and councils. They believed that, women were better placed to understand the problems faced by women and children.

It may be said that, women understood importance of their life, examined their capabilities, realized their duty of struggling themselves to uphold their interests, made associations more powerful and forwarded their demands. Now they had to achieve rights equal to men in every field of life which they received in 1947 with political right at central level. As a result, political equality of women was fulfilled after independence, when Constitution directed the nation to implement the principles of equality and the state to follow the policy of respecting the prestige of a

person and declared the basic rights of women regarding political and legal equality. In the new Constitution this was a big step for women's emancipation which recognized and established their self-identity. On these bases, it was obvious to get equal opportunities without any discrimination of sex and in other areas also. From this women got the right of influencing the parliament not only for their own interests but they could also get changed of formed policies connected with political, economic and cultural fields, affecting the whole country.<sup>26</sup>

But, what is the reality and impact of equal political rights received after independence? A plethora of legislation in recent years, amendments to several laws and judicial decisions are there in the Constitution but means to develop the conditions and status of women. Unfortunately, however, most women, whether rich or poor do not understand or have access to laws that govern them. Total lack of consciousness and legal illiteracy has kept in the dark about their rights. Legal literacy should be taken up as a full-fledged programme, if women are to benefit from the laws made for their protection.

On the other hand, women had gained the right to vote, even if initially it was women from elite families who benefited in this regard. However, even after the right to vote became a reality for all women, their representation in political and decision making bodies has remained low in all these years after independence. The quest for greater political participation of women is, therefore, still relevant.

The Indian Constitution guarantees to all women the fundamental right to equality. The Constitution is strongly grounded in the principles of liberty, fraternity, equality and justice and contains a number of provisions for the empowerment of women. Women's right to equality and non-discrimination are defined as justifiable fundamental rights and there is enough room for affirmative action programmes. Equality of opportunity in matters relating to employment or appointment to any office under the State, the right to an adequate means of livelihood for both men and women, equal pay for equal work for both men and women, provision for just and humane conditions of work and for maternity relief, and renouncing practices offensive to the dignity of women are all provided for in the Indian Constitution. The political rights of women are recognized without any

discrimination and they can participate in decision making at all levels equality with men. Constitutional equality has been supplemented by legal equality with the passage of a number of Acts through which the traditional inequalities inherent in marriage, divorce and property rights are sought to be eliminated. However, in spite of these constitutional and legal provisions, women have not obtained adequate and proportionate visibility in the legislative and other policy determining offices. The number of women engaged in politics and playing politically active roles is far from adequate. The average percentage of women in the Parliament, Assemblies and Council of Ministers taken together has been around 10%.<sup>27</sup>

It may be noted that, there is definitely a need for women to achieve a more effective role in decision-making, particularly in view of the obstacles in realizing or implementing the democratic and constitutional assurances of equal citizenship and rights. Citizenship participation and representation are correlated. Lack of ability to belong and exercise choice implies a lack of full membership in the system. For true equality to become a reality for women, the sharing of power on equal terms with men is essential. Surprisingly, various policies have a direct impact on them. There is still a great gap between constitutional guarantees and felt consequences on women's lives.

It may be argued that, like enfranchisement, participation in legislative bodies may not in itself be enough for women's political empowerment or to remedy the problems of discrimination faced by women. Equality with equity is a goal not easily achieved only by high representation in legislatures and others public bodies, but has to be buttressed by strong women's movement. As a result, the women's movement continued to focus on traditional practices, beliefs and institutions as the source of domination. It also discussed violence against women, the institutional framework for the maintenance of gender differences and the impact of economic situation on the day-to-day lives of women. The intention was to break the silence: the interpretation of the various categories of humiliation, violence, tortures and individual and mass attack to which women were subjected.<sup>28</sup> While it is necessary that by considering them only the means of achieving one big target of equality in every field, social system should be changed through their implementation. For women identity not reservation but motivation and more education is required.

## Notes and References

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2. Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905*, Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi, 1983, p. 26; see also Mousumi Bandyopadhyay, *Kadambini Ganguly- The Archetypal Women of Nineteenth Century Bengal*, The Women Press, Delhi, 2011, p.195.
3. Ghulam Murshid, *op.cit.* p.27; see also Gitashreebandana Sengupta, *Spandita Antarlok- Atmacharite Nari Pragatir Dhara* (in Bengali), Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, January, 1999, p.154.
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5. *Town and Suburbs Census Report*, 1901, Calcutta; also in Meredith Borthwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905*; Princeton University Press, New Jersey, 1984, p. 310; Maleka Begum, Saiyad Ajjjul Hoque, *Ami Nari- Tinsho Bacharer Bangali Narir Itihas*, The University Press Limited, Dhaka, First published 2001, Third Reprinted 2007, p.190.
6. Uhsa Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women Around The 2<sup>nd</sup> Half of The 19<sup>th</sup> Century*, Calcutta, 1963, pp. 92-93; also in Meredith Borthwick, *op.cit.* pp. 314-318; Gitashreebandana Sengupta, *op.cit.* pp. 154-155.
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8. Meredith Borthwick, *op.cit.* pp.323-324; see also 'No 'Science' for Lady Doctors- The Education and Medical Practice of Vernacular Women Doctors in Nineteenth Century Bengal', an article by Geraldine Forbes in *Women and Science in India- A Reader*, Neelam Kumar (ed.), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009, pp.5-6.

9. Jamini Sen passed her L. M. S. in 1897 and went to work in Nepal in 1899.
10. Haimabati Sen was widowed at ten, flouted social conventions and became one of the earliest women doctors. See in detail Haimabati Sen, Tapan Raychaudhuri (tr.), Geraldine Forbes and Tapan Raychaudhuri (eds.), *'Because I am a Woman': A Child Widow's Memoirs from Colonial India*, Chronicle Books, Delhi, 2010.
11. Meredith Borthwick, *op.cit.* p. 325.
12. 'No 'Science' for Lady Doctors- The Education and Medical Practice of Vernacular Women Doctors in Nineteenth Century Bengal', an article by Geraldine Forbes in *Women and Science in India- A Reader*, Neelam Kumar (ed.), Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2009, pp.6 and 12.
13. *Somprakas*, 24 January 1870 in Report on the Native Newspapers of Bengal, 29 January 1870.
14. *Brahmo Public Opinion*, 22 July, 1880.
15. Uhsa Chakraborty, *op.cit.* p. 94.
16. Mohini Khastagir was appointed as governess to the Maharani of Cooch Behar in 1878 on a salary of fifty rupees per month. Sarala Debi Ghoshal was appointed as private secretary to the Maharani of Boroda on the Princely Salary of 450 rupees per month.
17. Sarojini Ghosh at first took the photography as her occupation. On 10<sup>th</sup> January 1898, she established "Mahila Art Studio" at 32 Cornwallis Street, Calcutta. After that, Annapurna Dutta, Chanchalabala Dasi and others were skilled photographers. See Gitashreebandana Sengupta. *op.cit.* p.156; also in *Sarada Ghosh, Narichetana O Sangathan- Oupanibeshik Bangla 1829-1925*(in Bengali), Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, August 2013, p.210.
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19. Binodini, Prafullabala, Golap Sundari (Sukumari Dutta), Rajlakshmi, Saryubala, Prabha Debi, Tinkori, Tarasundari, Ketaki Dutt and others. For details see 'Theatre and Gender in Colonial India- Foregrounding Actresses' Question', an article by Lata Singh in *Gendering Colonial India- Reforms, Print, Caste and Communalism*, Charu Gupta (ed.), Orient BlackSwan, New Delhi, 2012, pp.188-214.
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22. Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India- Women in Modern India*, Cambridge University Press, New Delhi, 1998, Second Reprint 2000, p.68.
23. Saraswati Mishra, *Status of Indian Women*, Gyan Publishing House, New Delhi, 2002, pp.134-136.
24. Saraswati Mishra, *op.cit.* pp. 136 and 138.
25. *Women's Indian Association Report, 1936-38*, p.27; see also Neera Desai & Maithreyi Krishnaraj, *Women and Society in India*, Ajanta Publications, Delhi, First Published 1987, Second Revised Edition 1990, p. 272.
26. Saraswati Mishra, *op.cit.* pp. 137-138.
27. 'Women In Indian Politics- Participation and Representation', an article by Malathi Subramanian in *Women's Studies In India- Contours of Change*, Malashri Lal & Sukrita Paul Kumar (ed.), Indian Institute of Advanced Study, Rashtrapati Nivas, Shimla, 2002, pp.243-244; see also 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', an article by Partha Chertterjee in '*Recasting Women-Essays in Colonial History*', Kumkum Sanghari & Sudesh Vaid (Eds.), Kali for Women, New Delhi, 2006, p. 250.
28. 'Society and Politicization of Women', an article by Nabanita Datta in *The Study of Social History- Recent Trends*, Ratna Ghosh (ed.), Vol. I, Progressive Publishers, Kolkata, June, 2013, p.205.