

CHAPTER-VIII

CONCLUSION

The present dissertation is an attempt to examine some women issues of colonial Bengal through associations (1865-1943) which has been dealt with six chapters excluding introduction and conclusion. In this dissertation not only highlighted the background, origin, growth and changing attitude of Bengali women associations but also has been enquired the contemporary social, political and cultural circumstances of colonial Bengal and in this light, here has an attempt chronologically to focus the historical evolution of women associations. Because the making of women associations in colonial Bengal was not a suddenly occurred incident, it was an effect of long process. In brief, it may be said that, the establishment of women association was a matured form of human consciousness or gender consciousness.

In the early nineteenth century, women enjoyed a very low status in Bengali society. Customs such as *Sati*, child marriage, infanticide, polygamy and others were broadly prevalent. A woman's place was strictly within the family and she was ruled over by her husband, elders and in-laws with an iron hand. Denied education, vocation and social, economic and political rights, she was wholly confined to the four walls of the house. There was limited scope for self-expression apart from cooking and sewing and in well-to-do families. Women from the middle and upper classes faced greater social constraints upon their personal freedom. However, the process of their modernization was so strong that they seemed reconciled to this state of affairs and silently accepted their 'fate'.

The first man to speak out publicly against the injustice perpetrated on women in the name of tradition and religion vis-a-vis *Shastras* was Raja Rammohun Roy who, in 1818, wrote a tract condemning *Sati*. He also attacked *Kulin* polygamy and spoke in favour of the property rights of women. Rammohun Roy was deeply concerned about the deteriorate state of Indian society and held the miserable condition of women as one of the main causes responsible for this. Taking the lead from Raja Rammohun Roy, social reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Henry Louis Vivian Derozio, Keshab Chandra Sen, Swami Vivekananda and others in the

nineteenth century embarked upon the task of improving the condition of women, particularly those from the urban, upper caste families' by started belonging to the middle strata of society. Their usually mediocre status, imposed seclusion, early marriage and lack of education were facts well-documented by reformers all over the country and they started resorting to legislation of tackle them. Rammohun Roy's mobilization of Hindu reformist opinion against *Sati* created an atmosphere that made it possible for Lord William Bentinck to pass a law banning it in 1829. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar took up the cause of widows which led to the passing of the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. The issue of child marriage was taken up by a number of reformers. The Indian Penal Code of 1861 had a clause that declared sexual intercourse with a girl less than 10 years as constituting rape. Despite the storm of protest, the Age of Consent (from 10 years to 12) of Marriage Act as proposed by Behramji Malabari, a Parsi reformer of Bombay, was passed in 1891.

Education was measured the most important means of improving the status of women. Christian missionaries were pioneer in the field and they set-up several schools. After that, Hindus, especially Brahma Samaj and later Muslim social reformers also followed suit, partly driven by the need to resist convertization. In this way, efforts by social reformers regarding 'women question' during nineteenth century Bengal, for raising the status of Bengali women, influenced the women of upper castes and among them consciousness towards the interests of women, got created.

The introduction and growth of western education was perhaps the most important single factor for gender consciousness. The landmark in the history of the growth of western education are the foundation of Asiatic Society in Calcutta (1774), Calcutta Madrasa (1781), Sanskrit College at Benaras (1802), Fort William College (1800), Hindu College (1817) and so on. Hence, it has been discussed the growth of western education in Bengal where it first spread among the middle class people and the newly educated youths largely moulded their every sphere of life and thought.

On the other hand, the second half of the nineteenth century is important in Bengal, for it saw the appearance of women's writings for the first time reflecting

their responses to the changing social scenario. Periodicals like *Masik Patrika* (1854), *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1865), *Abalabandhab Patrika* (1869) and the like had an impact on women's consciousness. Most of these early women writers stressed on the need for education among women. Some even did not hesitate to accuse the males for their painful conditions. Not only that, they also became conscious about their conjugal relation, health, motherhood, child rearing etc. As education blossomed, many middle-class women used it to participate and became visible in the public-realm, such as publishing in magazines and journals, attending meetings, political demonstrations and singing songs at literary and political functions. Even when cast in a reformist mould and accepting some of the structures of male reformers, women's journal's created endless opportunities for women to argue for a voice of their own in family and educational life. Letters and essays written by women in various women's magazines stressed their right to feel and allowed a space for solidarity in a change and tentative way.

However, nineteenth century Bengal saw the rise of elites who took advantage of opportunities presented by British rule to acquire education, land and jobs in government service and the professions. These elites tended to be high caste Hindus who formed associations concerned with cultural, social, economic and political issues. The most important aspect of associational politics was a variety of social reform activities undertaken by the elites. Many of these activities focused on women such as providing education, propagandizing against child marriage and for widow remarriage and starting associations for women. These activities were motivated by a desire to impress the British with the progressive thinking of the Bengali elites and to link the gap between English-educated men and their female relatives.

There was a legacy of male direction as the earliest women's associations were started by men. The concept of balancing sex roles deeply surrounded in Bengali culture was reflected in the goals of the early women's associations – to enable women to serve their families and community in a helpful manner as women. The popularity of Hindu revivalism led women leaders to utilize traditional ideals of Indian womanhood to justify women's demands and not to directly attack the Hindu

religion. Since the early women's associations was very small in size and elite in composition.

It has been highlighted that, women's associations in the nineteenth century were mostly organized by men. But from the six and seven decades of the nineteenth century perception of the need to organize emerged and this was reflected in the creation of women's associations under the leadership of women. As a result, they signified the transfer of leadership of women's movement from men to women. In the first phase (1865-1896) of the women associations sought their power and authority from a votive force i.e. from the patriarchal barriers. After 1880, under the female leadership, many associations were established which started their work from arranging of debates on education and establishing institutions for the protection of destitute women, along with other sections; and later on, achieved their objects of opening these institutions in the society to provide facilities to them. But none of these associations challenged various rigid customs, more so, the patrilineal structure under the social system. In fact, they wanted that the roles of wife and mother should be performed more efficiently by women. But in the second phase (1897-1943) they began to strike on the issues on socio-political rights and empowerment. In fact, reforms and nationalism did signal new opportunity for women, however, limited they proved to be. But, there was a growing consciousness of women's roles and rights and their increasing communication in the national-political field.

It has been discussed that, from the beginning of the twentieth century *Swadeshi* movement and later the freedom movement had considerable impact on the 'women question' in the nineteenth century. The goals and activities of organized women were transformed completely by political compulsions. For long women belonging to upper and middle strata of Bengali society concentrated on the needs like education, rights of women and social reform; but now the movement against foreign control over the country roped in women from all walks of life. This political connection undermined the 'artificial division of the "male" world of the public and "female" world of the domestic sphere'. The freedom movement was, thus, intended to change the self-image of women, inspire them with self-confidence and give them courage to challenge gender inequalities. Quite a number of women

began to dream of a new role for them, to not only challenge the establishment patriarchal norms but also to redefine their position in society through various means of women associations.

Another important factor which deals with that, the nineteenth century reform movements had limited their efforts to improving the position of women within the traditional family structure. The turn of the century, however, saw gradually women participating voluntarily in social welfare activities outside their homes, particularly in the cause of women's education, welfare of the weaker sections in society and relief to distressed persons. A still smaller group participated in the revolutionary movement. As a result, the early twentieth century saw the birth of various types of women's associations and the beginnings of the demand for political rights of women.

Side by side, women activities became critical about the imperialist effort to utilize the 'women question' to justify their rule. Woven into the national issue, women realized that, political freedom was an absolute requirement to transform the old mindset. Thus, women's world was gradually widening and when Gandhi appeared on the scene, the women's movement had already crystallized and proliferated to include several hundreds. The first spark was noticed in the *Swadeshi* movement and a decade later, Subhas Bose's appeal had a boosting effect on it. The ground was ready for Gandhi to mobilize this force towards achieving the Indian women's dream for political as well as social and economic liberation.

The women's movement under Gandhi's leadership took a new turn in the sense that it includes women of all shades and colours, both rural and urban women, who stepped out of their homes into the domain of power and politics. The movement spread its wings beyond the elite, urban educated class as Gandhi emphasized on the feminine quality of service, self-sacrifice, modesty as distinct from the male ego and self-centredness. He advocated the transfer of this feminine paradigm to the masculine realm of public and political sphere, which had fantastic appeal to Indian women. Thus, Gandhi's effort to break the traditional stereotype about women by involving them in the country's struggle for freedom was crowned with success.

Both in the provinces and districts, participation of women in the Salt *Satyagraha*, Civil Disobedience movement and Quit India movement revealed their great organizational capacity. Stepped in self-confidence these courageous and outstanding women personalities were about to conduct in a new era of promises and aspirations. The Non-Cooperation movement saw many women students taking part in it. Violating all demarcations as well as the accepted norms of womanly conduct these fearless and dedicated band of women, like the male students, built up the female youth force. The *Deepali Sangha*, *Chhatri Sangha* (1928) or the Female Students' Organizations had activities like Bina Das, Kalpana Dutta, Kamala Dasgupta and so on. It has also been highlighted that, there was a definite link between the political participation of women and gender consciousness and also it definitely progressed towards their socio-political rights and empowerment.

An important landmark in the history of women's participation in politics was their campaign for women's franchise. Under the guidance of the *Women's Indian Association* (1917), a delegation of fourteen women from different parts of the country met the Secretary of States for India, Edwin Montague to demand equal franchise for women and later the *All India Women's Conference* (1927) this movement gathered strength. This was indeed an epoch-making demand from Indian women and an important advancement of the suffrage movement in the country where the enlightened sections of Bengali women constituted a vital part through associations. It reflected their growing consciousness of rights, dignity, self-esteem and empowerment.

As a result, a close interaction and link was soon established between the women associations of Bengal and other sister associations of India. In this respect, from the first decade of the twentieth century women formed their own associations. In 1910, *Bharat Stree Mahamandal* was founded by Sarala Debi Choudhurani, *Women's Indian Association* (1917), *All India Women's Conference* (1927) and so on. Springing up in different corners of the country they provided a common unifying factor to discuss women's issues. These had branches all over the country to organize women on an all-India basis and expressed matters, such as education, inhibiting social institutions, legal disabilities and political empowerment and the like. It may thus be clear that, women leaders of these associations established ideals

for other women, especially for those who were keen to take part in outside activities. First characteristics of these associations were that, although it wanted equality between the men and women but still it was not against the men. Secondly, in these associations the interests of women and country both were considered as interrelated with each other. However, the basic limitation of these women's associations was that they were urban-based middle class associations. Women of rural India were yet to come into the picture. Nevertheless, these associations showed strong evidences of women's potential to organize and provide leadership to movements, which had previously been the preserve of men.

The period of colonial rule and the freedom struggle marked the beginnings of a political consciousness among women. The different stream within the anti-imperialist struggle posited different, even contentious images of identities for women. But they all shared a concern for women and so a consensus emerged at the time of the making of the new India, which postulated freedom, justice, dignity, equality and self-identity for women as a stated goal within the Constitution.

Finally, the history of the Bengali women's movement has, from the start, been intertwined with these socio-political developments. Any gaps that may exist from the subject of numerous studies by future generation, whose scholarship might be, open several new dimensions of old as well as forgotten struggles by our outstanding women over the centuries. The tendency of women's associations or individuals who believe in gender equality to be associated with movements for social change within their respective country is today a well-established historical fact. But the realization that is creeping in, even among those who have shied away from it earlier, is that sisterhood cannot be based on just biological premises. It has to be based on an ideological commitment to certain basic human values and notions derived from struggles for social progress of oppressed sections through history.
