

The Social Construction of Motherhood through the Iconography of *Devi Shasthi*: The Goddess of Fertility

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Abstract: *In Bengal, Shasthi-Broto (worship of Goddess Shasthi) is popularly practised by married women for long life and well-being of children. The Broto rites involve the ritual narrative (Broto-Katha) associated with the Broto, which defines motherhood by a set of normative social roles that are assigned to a woman. Motherhood is an idealized status given to a woman from time immemorial. A woman becomes a mother not only by the biological act of delivering a child but also by conforming to the expected role assigned by the society. Mothering may be viewed medically as giving birth to a new born baby nurtured in the womb but sociologically it refers to an expression of a culture which embodies a value system that society assigns to a woman. Thus, the concept of motherhood is a social construction. In this paper, I will explore this social construction of motherhood by analyzing the iconography and narratives of Devi Shasthi the goddess of fertility among the Hindus.*

Keywords: Motherhood, Iconography, worship of *Shasthi* in Bengal, Social construction of motherhood, narratives on *Shasthi*, Iconography of *Shasthi*.

Introduction

‘Motherhood’ as an idealized status associated with woman has been long established. A woman becomes a mother both biologically and socially. Women by conforming to the expected role assigned to a ‘mother’ gains social position in family and society. It is society that defines the concept of motherhood by a set of normative social roles framed by the members of society and reinforced by continual confirmation. The concept of motherhood is a social product and therefore is a social construction. It is based on the idea that in our everyday life through our consciousness,

thoughts, beliefs, ideas, knowledge and cognition we construct our social reality and this construction is a dynamic process.

Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann (1966) argued that man's self-production is always a social enterprise. According to them the 'universe of meaning' is socially derived. This universe of meaning is not only based on high level of philosophical ideas about the meaning of life, but also everyday knowledge which is 'taken for granted'. It includes constant legitimating, repeated reinforcement and justification. This universe of meaning is real, true and correct which is told and re-told to the members of society. Each universe of meaning has a social base (Haralombos 2013: 555-557). For the understanding of the social construction of motherhood it is important to understand the social meanings that are attributed to the normative and religious practices which are closely associated with it. In this study, I want to explore this social construction through analyzing the iconography and narratives of *Devi Shasthi* considered as the Goddess of fertility among Hindus.

Society, Culture and Religion

Culture can influence all facets of life, relationship, identities and response. The manner in which we acknowledge and respond to the outside world is governed to a large extent by cultural constructs. The values with which one grows are deeply rooted in traditional culture wherein myths and concepts are the reflection of ideas and aspirations of its practitioners (Jain 2011). Culture as the basis of our value system is largely constituted by religion. Ideologies that are developed by cultural constructs lead to morality and religion controls the meaning of this morals. Religion is often seen as an instrument which institutionalises and perpetuates patriarchy. Hindu texts present diverse and conflicting views on the position of women, ranging from feminine leadership at the highest as a goddess to limiting her role to an obedient daughter, homemaker and mother (Jain 2011).

Hindu religion has plurality of traditions, has several female deities along with male deities in contrast to the singular patriarchal god of the Christian tradition. Therefore, when a community's object of worship is a female it is logical to expect that women in general will be benefitting by sharing this belief. According to Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi (1986), the worship of the mother goddess does not constitute a matriarchy but it represents matriarchal culture that preserves the value of woman as a life-giver (mother) and acknowledges women's power by women and men in the culture. But here is an unresolved theoretical conundrum for feminism: Whether the

Hindu Goddess is a feminist? Can women really benefit by this belief? From time immemorial it has been seen that the archaic religious concepts promote and valorise the femininity in goddess figures as a conduit to positively construct the ideas of promoting women as the epitome of sacrificing mother, supportive wife and young virgin (Rajan 2004).

India's past is coloured in another stream which is outside the *Vedas* and the *Shastras*. This is the 'narrative' stream of practical advice imparted through fables and '*kathas*' (oral narratives), they represent everyday situations with the various facets of human desires, emotions, deceptions, failures, common man's moral values and social practices. These narratives are populated by different characters mired by all kinds of emotions and feelings revealing the interconnected web of life. These narratives might give examples of a strong woman— capable of looking after her husband and the family, and thus uphold the ideal of *pativrata*, which paves the aftermath in form of rewards or punishments accordingly (Jain 2011). Each aspect of a social life is important for understanding the entire social realm. Every society has its own moral, religious, cultural and social ideologies which are practiced by its' members and which satisfies the needs of the individuals from birth, throughout the entire life till death. These ideologies are the actual basis of social interaction which impregnate the moral and religious meanings, understandings and expressions to be shared by all its members and paves the way to formulate the social construction of reality.

Shasthi: The Goddess of Fertility

Religious rituals are important tenets of Bengali life. Among these, the 'rituals of vow' (*Broto*) are closely associated with our daily chores and nuances of everyday living. Festival of Vows (*Broto-Parban*) is a form of folk culture, a performance accomplished to fulfill the desires of people (Basak 1998). Generally, women are closely connected with *Broto-Parban*. This stems from the fact that women face several crises and unfulfilled domestic aspirations in their daily life, and these rituals serve as a cult instrument to mitigate them. The word '*Broto*' means some particular rules and moderations. Here women play the pivotal role, with Brahmin priest being a non-essential member. Performing these rituals eulogises the role of woman not only as a mother but also as a wife or sister seeking the welfare of her child, husband or brother and thus being a moral instrument to protect the male counterpart in the social system.

Shasthi the goddess of fertility is a Hindu folk goddess worshipped in almost every Bengali home usually by Bengali married woman who is a mother or wants to be a mother. Women can worship the goddess without the medium of a male priest. She has to follow the rules of the worship (*upachar*) and observe a *Broto*. The worship is called ‘observing the vows of *Shasthi*’ (*Shasthi-Broto*). The *Broto* is completed by reading *Shasthi-Broto-Katha* (narratives related to the Goddess) describing the importance and benefits of performing this *puja* (worship) in households. *Shasthi* is considered as the benefactor and protector of children. She is also the deity of vegetation and reproduction and believed to bestow women with children and assist during childbirth. She is often pictured as motherly figure, riding a cat and nursing one or more infants. Barren women desiring to conceive and mothers seeking to ensure to protection of their children worship *Shasthi* and seek her blessings and aid.

The hymn of meditation (*Dhyanamantra*)

describes the iconography of the deity. The *dhyan mantra* (hymn for contemplation/meditation) of *Shasthi* is—

Dwibhujangyubating Shasthingbarabhayayutangsmaret
Gourbarnangmahadevingnanalangkarbhusitam.
Dibyabastraparidhanangbamcroresuputtrakam
Prosannabadangnittyang Jagadhatriingsutapradam.
Sarbalonsampannangpinonnotopoyodhoram
Om Shasthai Namu (Bhramha 2014:340).

This description illustrates her with two hands, as a fair young woman with a pleasant appearance. She adorns divine garments and jewels with an auspicious son on her lap. According to Hindu culture mother of a son has an idealized position than a mother of a daughter (Geetha 2007). *Devi Shasthi* has two hands like an affectionate mother; she is young (the time between childhood and adulthood) because this period is the ideal childbearing age, the ideal time for a woman’s fertility among Hindus. She is fair because according to the Hindu tradition there are three qualities that are— *satya* (honesty) is associated with fair complexion, *rojjo* (royal quality) is associated with coppery complexion and *tomho* (evil quality) is associated with dark complexion, here the purity of affection of a mother is projected by her fair complexion (Bhramha 2014). Her divine garments and jewel portray that an ideal mother should not have any luxury. She has an auspicious son on her lap, the lap of a mother is most secure place in the world and the ideal mother is one who is the mother of a son. The last word

of the *Dhyanmantra* of *Devi Shasthi* entails that she has enhanced breasts signifying flow and abundance of milk ready to feed a child (*pinonnotopoyodhoram*). Breast milk is important for infant's nutrition so an ideal figure of a mother is portrayed by her enhanced breasts as well as breast is also considered as the significance of femininity. A she-cat (*marjara*) is the *vahana*(mount) upon which she rides. *Marjara* (she-cat) symbolizes an affectionate mother. After the birth of a kitten all the responsibilities of its upbringing is taken by the mother cat. As a human baby is fully dependent on his/her mother a kitten is also dependent on mother in its infant phase and not only that cats reproduce twice in a year representing a reproductive quality. Thus, with the divine blessing of *Devi Shasthi* her devotees also can reproduce and achieve the quality to become an ideal mother of a son (Bhramha 2014).

The worship of *Devi Shasthi* is prescribed to occur on the sixth day of each lunar month of the Hindu calendar as well as on the sixth day after a child's birth but in each month the rituals are practiced in different names which have some particular significance that are related with reproduction. The worship is associated with several narrative tales (*Broto-Katha*) in each month (Nashkar 2018). Although in Hindu calendar there are twelve months and one *Broto-Katha* is assigned to each. But only stories are popular among the Bengali married women (to which I will come later). In Bengal *Dhula Shasthi-Broto*, *Kora Shasthi-Broto* and *Mathani Shasthi-Broto* are not as popular among mothers for the protection of their children from dust. Mostly out of all the *Broto*-sonly nine are observed (Basak 1998). *Dhula Shasthi-Broto* is performed in the first month of Bengali calendar (*Boishakh*). *Kora Shasthi-Broto* is observed to receive a son with the blessings of *Devi Shasthi* in the third month of Bengali calendar (*Ashar*). *Mathani Shasthi-Broto* is performed by mothers for the economic profits and gains of her children in the fifth month of Bengali calendar (*Bhadra*) (Basak 1998).

The Rise of the Iconography of Shasthi

The literature has various representations about the origin of *Shasthi*. Among Hindus, both the ancient and folk traditions considered the epitome of the origin for the Goddess, but over the course of the early centuries BCE, the Vedic fertility goddess was Sri *Lakshmi*, the Vedic antecedent of Lakshmi, gradually fused with the folk-deity *Shasthi* where she is associated in various ways with *Skanda* (also known as *Kartikeya* or

Murugan). From her origins as a folk goddess, *Shasthi* gradually assimilated into the Brahmanical Hindu pantheon, and ultimately, known in Hinduism as the Great Mother of all. Since the Kushan era, all Hindus both in rural and urban areas (Mahanta 2018) have worshiped *Shasthi* on the sixth day after childbirth. The origin of the Goddess *Shasthi* in *Brahmavaivarta Purana* is as *Shasthi* where she introduces herself to king *Priyavrata* as daughter of Brahma and wife of *Kartikeya*. Later the king worshiped the goddess to bring his son back to life and undertook the task of establishing her worship in his kingdom. N.N. Bhattacharya (1999) describes *Shasthi* the sixth part of Prakriti and the wife of *Skanda* in the *Puranas*. She is fair and beautiful like champak flower, young and merciful mother (Bhattacharya 1999). An early textual reference dating to eight and ninth century BCE relates *Shasthi* to the six *Krittikas* who nurture and nurse *Skanda*. She is regarded sometimes as an aspect of the goddess *Durga* (identified with *Parvati* – the mother of *Skanda*); she is also called *Skandamata* (“*Skanda’s* mother”). The third to fifth century text *Yajnavalkya Smriti* describes *Shasthi* as the foster-mother and protector of *Skanda*. However, later texts identify her as *Devasena*, the consort of *Skanda*, including the epic Mahabharata describe *Shasthi* (as *Devasena*) – the daughter of *Prajapati* and wife of *Skanda*. She is identified with goddesses *Shri*, *Lakshmi*, *Sinivali*, and *Kuhu* in this text. The scripture *Padma Purana* also describe *Shasthi* as the wife of *Skanda*. In the Buddhist texts and belief, *Shasthi* has connections to the Buddhist goddess *Hariti* (Bhattacharjee 1997: 332-337). In Kushan era the goddess is represented as two-armed six headed figure. Several coins, sculpture and inscriptions produced from 500BCE to 1200 CE pictured this six-headed goddess and she is associated with *Skanda* (Mahanta 2018).

Broto ritual is a series of domestic rites that have become an integral part of Hindu ritual and in which women are the sole performers. There are different viewpoints developed by various social scientists on the relationship between women and *Broto* ritual. According to LeelaDube (1988), the ideology of Hindu rituals lead women to a subordinate position to their husbands and paternal relatives as those ideologies have a basis on the image of an ideal bride, wife or mother. Thus, these *Broto* rituals represent women’s ideological code of conduct and expected norms and values (Togawa 2001). Wadley (1984) on other hand discussed about some positive impact of *Broto* ritual on women’s life, for her (for Hindu women) the *Broto* rituals become the opportunity to transform their destiny that have been predetermined by the deeds in a past life. Wadly (1980) suggested *Broto* rituals can provide psychological support to the women which is

derived from their cooperative participation in the ritual (Togawa 2001). Pearson (1996) argued that the religious motivation of *Broto* ritual become source of empowerment for women which help them to gain self-reliance and confidence. She also claimed that the salvation of soul through asceticism was exclusively reserved for men, but through the practice of those *Broto* rituals women, could achieve the same heavenly blessings. However, she did not deny the androcentric gender ideologies of those rituals, all of which are performed by women for the peace, happiness and wellbeing for her husband and children (Togawa 2001).

Clifford Geertz (1966) argued that religion as a symbol system created by humans are derived from the social reality but later becomes the model of social reality and gradually integrated into human behaviour and become important reference point through which they start to identify their own position in society. Thus, they legitimize those symbol systems (Geertz 2017). In Indian context, the symbol of mother is a representation of special power. At the ideological level, it has a prominent place in the pantheon of mother goddess and in the practical level; it promotes the codifications that govern the lives of women. The basis of the construction of motherhood is on this codification of the symbolic system (Mahanta 2018).

In West Bengal Devi *Shasthi* is represented as the goddess of fertility as she helps childless women to become a mother specially a mother of a son (according to Hindu culture mother of a son has an idealized position than a mother of a daughter). She saves her devotees and their children from evil fortune but she become angry for carelessness of her devotees and punish them so that they learn to venerate her with proper ritual and dedication. The narratives of Devi *Shasthi* represent the ideal qualities of a good mother, which helps to define how an ideal mother should act (Mahanta 2018: 11-13).

The Vows, Stories and Festivals as worshipped in Bengal at present

Devi *Shasthi* is worshipped in different forms on the sixth day of each the twelve lunar months of the Hindu calendar and on the sixth day after childbirth in the lying-in chamber (*aturghar*) where the birth takes place. In North India, worship of *Shasthi* is observed during childbirth, at puberty, and at marriage. Traditionally when a pregnant woman is isolated for childbirth in the lying-in chamber, a cow-dung figure of the goddess adorns the room. Consequently, the birth of a living child is a blessing of *Shasthi*, while the birth of a still-born infant or the early death of a child is

manifestation of her wrath. *Shasthi* is worshipped before childbirth to protect the welfare of the expecting mother and her child (Mahanta 2018). *Shasthi* can be worshipped within house or worshipped outdoors in natural open space which is called as *Shasthitala*. In Bengal, a number of items are placed at the night of the sixth day after childbirth in the lying-in chamber (*aturghar*) with a belief (such as an earthen pitcher of water covered with a napkin, offerings of husked rice, cooked rice, bananas and sweets, bangles, and pieces of gold and silver, a pen and paper) that *Devi* might enter the room after everyone is asleep and to write the child's fortune on the paper in invisible ink. In Bihar, the sixth day ceremony called *Chhathi* or *Chhati* ("sixth") and *Shasthi* known as *Chhati Mata* ("Mother *Chhati*") will bless a childless woman with a baby if she can perform the *broto* (ritual) of *Devi Shasthi* (Mahanta 2018). At the end, the worshiper devotees must read the narrative of the goddess called as *Broto-Katha*.

Shasthi as an epitome of an ideal mother is believed to be kind hearted, a virgin, loving, caring, merciful, patient and self-denying: these qualities are essential for being a good mother and the narratives of *Devi* represent the normative code of conduct for becoming an ideal mother (Bhramha 2014). Here through the analysis of those narratives from feminist point of view I want to explore how the idea of motherhood is socially constructed. *Shasthi-Broto* those are popular among the Bengali married women have different names such as—

Aranya Shasthi-Broto is popular among the Bengali married women for well-being of children celebrated in the month of *Jayeshta* (second month of Bengali calendar). The narrative of *Aranya Shasthi* moves around the story of a greedy mother who *Shasthi* punishes for her sin. This *katha* actually tries to provide the normative code of conduct for being an ideal mother. In this narrative, the greedy mother had seven sons and one daughter but she lost her children for her greediness. She stole food and gave the blame on a black she-cat who was the mount of *Devi Shasthi*. Therefore, the Goddess punishes her. Later she goes to the forest, where *Shasthi* appears and with her divine blessing, gives back life to her children. *Devi* tells her about the ritual rites of *Aranya Shasthi* and the *Broto* ritual becomes popular among the married women for the longevity of their children's life. This ritual is also known as *Jamai-Shasthi* as in that day mothers should pray for the well-being of her children as well as son-in-law (*jamai*) (it is believed that the happiness of a woman is based on the well-being of her husband) (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 80-84). In every Bengali family, the mother-in-law teaches her daughter-in-law about the ritual rites

of *Aranya Shasthi*. Thus, the aim of the performance of the ritual is not for their benevolence rather performed by them (women) for the well-being of her children and family.

In India through the ideology of motherhood a woman justifies her existence only as a mother and especially as a mother of sons (Krishnaraj 1995). Her status is considered 'privileged' not for achieving some special rights but as an attribute without which a woman's life is useless. Women's existence is based on her biological capacity to bear a child and the society construct the ideology of motherhood as women's primary vocation through which she also becomes powerful because without this she cannot fulfill her existence, thus society tries to glorify the institution of motherhood through different normative practices (Krishnaraj 1995). Motherhood is one of the key institutions through which women are discriminated into an acceptable, cultural mode of thought and behavior. This view is based on a practice of strict dichotomy of public and private spheres and see woman as confined exclusively to the later (Krishnaraj 1995).

Lotan Shasthi-Broto is performed in the month of *Shravan* (fourth month of Bengali calendar) by the Bengali married women to prevent premature death of children. The *Broto-katha* centre around two women of opposite character, one is kind hearted, virgin, loving, caring, merciful and become the source of happiness of her in-law's family and another one is a cruel, greedy daughter who the Goddess eventually punishes. The daughter was married and had children. Once, she had stolen three *Lotan* (element used in the worship of Devi *Shasthi*) but she blamed the daughter-in-law. Later Devi punishes her as she had lost her children. The daughter-in-law was kind-hearted. The Devi was pleased with her for her prayers for the well-being and happiness of her family. With her divine blessing, she gave life back to the children (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 85-87).

Thus, the story represented how a woman should act as her very existence is for the happiness of her family. Sukumari Bhattacharji (1990) examined the role of women as mothers in ancient India as revealed in the various texts where 'motherhood' is glorified as compensation for an imposed reality. There are many rituals associated with marriage, childbirth and in the upbringing of child but all these represent women as a self-sacrificing mother and wife where the rituals observed are for the well-being of her husband and her sons (Bhattacharji 1990). There are numerous vows for women who wanted to be a mother of sons as the women who cannot bear a child specially a son are stigmatized but no stigma is ever attached to an impotent male as well as society sets no normative code conduct for a man who is a

father or wants to be a father. Different goddesses imagined so far in Hindu religion who had granted the boon of having children to women. However, in practice, there is not any ritual for the woman who becomes a mother. She immediately goes to the background after she gives birth at least until the next delivery. Thus, society constructs the normative conduct mostly prescriptive on how to become a good mother and a good wife.

Chapra Shasthi-Broto is performed in the month of *Bhadra* (fifth month of Bengali calendar). The narrative is based on the story of devotion of a merchant who had three sons and was affectionate of his grandsons. All the members of his family had great devotion for *Devi Shasthi*. Once to test his devotion *Devi Shasthi* asked him to give blood of his grandson in a pond where the merchant and his family had come for worshipping. Without any hesitation, he did that and at end of the narrative, *Devi* brought his grandson's life back. The narrative of *Chapra Shasthi-Broto* provides the message that if any devotee truly surrenders himself or herself to the goddess, She will take the responsibility of well-being of his family members (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 88-90).

In the narrative when the merchant decides to obey the order of the goddess, he does not even tell the mother (the merchant's daughter-in-law) of the son whose life he ordered to scarify so here it is clear that a mother has no right for taking any decision for her children. The male member of the family should take every major decision and a mother has no choice to oppose that. Leela Dube (1986) demonstrates how a patriarchal society symbolizes man as the 'seed giver', the woman as the 'field'. Thus, the reproduce belongs to the one who owns the 'seed' the field also must belong to him. This extends a man's rights over the woman, to a right over her sexuality and reproductive capacities. The actual extent and value of woman's contribution to reproduction is irrelevant. According to Sukumari Bhattacharji (1990) there are also different rituals that are associated with the upbringing of children like— *annaprasana* (rice eating-ceremony of the new born) *varsavardhana* (seeks long life for child), *vidyarambha* (child begins his schooling) in all that rituals the mother plays a passive role where the role of father is more active than a mother. Thus, the supervision and vocational education of a child is entirely controlled by the male members of a family (Bhattacharji 1990).

Durga Shasthi-Broto observed in *Ashwin* (sixth month of Bengali calendar), is the story of receiving a son by the worship of *Devi Shasthi*. There is a belief that *Devi Durga* also observed this *Broto* to become a mother of a son. On that auspicious day *Devi Durga* got her two sons

Kartikeya, Ganapati, and she came to her paternal home with her two sons. She told her mother *Menoka* that if a devotee (woman) performs the ritual of *Durga Shasthi* and read this *Katha* (narrative) she can have a son like her (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 91-93).

As a cultural idiom, the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering both have been highly glorified in ancient Indian religious texts, mythology, literature, popular art and discourse. The confinement of women to domestic tasks of mothering, feeding, nurturing and caring for the members of the household comes from the idea of motherhood as the primary destination for women. The conceptualization of motherhood as an ideal is based on socially constructed value system which dictates what they ought to do and what they ought to be. The *Dharmasatras* (religious texts) claimed that a woman apart from her motherly care she has no existence (Nandy 2017: 67). The author of the Hindu epics and ancient scriptures had created role models for self-sacrifice and domesticity in *Sita*, *Savitri* and *Sati*. In Hindu tradition, women are singlemindedly represented as — soft, serene, sweet, ever-smiling or as gentle in weeping but always at the service of her children (Nandy 2017: 68).

Mula Shasthi-Broto observed in *Agrahayan* month (eighth month of Bengali calendar) represents the importance of devotion in *Shasthi-Broto* performed for the welfare of children and other members of family as well as pets. The *katha* based on the story of married woman who secure the caste purity of her father-in-law and worship *Shasthi* with her devotion can save the life of a calf with the devine blessings of the Goddess . The ritual has become popular in this name as on that day women are expected to eat vegetable specially radish (*mula*) and worship goddess *Shasthi* (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 94-95).

Maithreyi Krishnaraj (2006) argued that in the realm of history and Indian mythology there are various literatures on the Indian version of ‘*Shakti*’, in many names and many forms in which Shakti worshipped even today. All of them represent the different aspects of fertility and nurturance as a dynamic virgin warrior, each mother goddess has her own weapon and mount, as she is the protector of the world. India is the only country in the world today where any goddess worshipped as Great Mother lives in both the ‘Great’ and ‘Little’ traditions (Krishnaraj 2006). All religious beliefs and Indian epics have developed the fundamental ideological aspect of female role as being kind-hearted, caring, moderate, politethus; women’s mothering has continued to be basic to women’s lives as well as for the organization of family (Krishnaraj 2006).

Patai Shasthi-Broto observed in *Poush* month (ninth month of Bengali calendar) represents the story of a greedy mother and her punishment (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 96-97). Mothers observe this *Broto* for the development of immunity of their children and every narrative of *Devi Shasthi* sets the ideal and normative code of conduct which is expected by society for women.

Sital Shasthi-Broto observed in *Magh* (tenth month of Bengali calendar) represent the importance of a moderate and 'ideal mother'. The *katha* tells the story of a Brahmin family had sixty sons with the divine blessing of the Devi. The narrative also entails the importance of marriage to ensure the continuation of the family's lineage. After achieving all the happiness with the blessings of the goddess in a day of *Sital Shasthi* the *Brahmani* (wife of Brahmin) lost all members of her family for ignoring the ritual vows of *Devi Shasthi*. At the end of the *katha* Devi brings back life of all members and forgives her when she realizes her fault and observes the ritual with her great devotion.

Thus, the narrative again emphasises on the fact that women are responsible for the happiness and prosperity of her family (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 98-101). Samita Sen (1993) claimed that the idealization of womanhood and the construction of domestic sphere as an actual domain of women were based on a general valorisation of motherhood—which legitimize the normative ideology that represents mother as the creator and protector of the sanctuary of the home, as a chaste wife. Here the idealization of womanhood becomes the key to social and cultural organization of the community (Sen 2007: 231). This ideology actually represented the home/family as the microcosm of the nation and women are firmly located within this domestic realm where housework and childbearing become their only legitimate concern. The assumption was that men and women's roles were complementary and actually justified the designation of home as the proper realm for women's activities (Sen 2007: 232-234).

Ashok Shasthi-Broto observed in *Chaitra* month (last month of Bengali calendar), is the story of vegetation and reproduction. The narrative moves around Ashoka, an infant found lying under Ashoka tree near a hermitage of a sage. Later Ashokamarried a prince and at the time of their marriage, the sage gave her some Ashoka flower and seeds and instructed her to drop the seeds on the way to her new home so that the row of Ashoka tree would link her marital home to the hermitage. He asked her to come back by using that path if she is ever in trouble, said to eat Ashoka flower on the day of Ashok Shasthi, and forbade her to eat rice on that day. With the

blessing of goddess *Shasthi* she had eight sons and one daughter. Once on that auspicious day unknowingly she ate rice and next day found entire family dead. She went back to the hermitage by following that path and there with the support of the sage Ashoka pleased goddess *Shasthi* and finally, Devi brought all members of her family back to life (Mukhopadhyay 2013: 102-104). In society, motherhood determines the social status of a woman, they are valued for their biological capacity to reproduce and here male offspring is valued more than the female. This *katha* of Devi *Shasthi* provides the code of behaviour for women through projecting negative reinforcement thus, if a woman breaks the moral code she receives punishment from the goddess and Devi can take away the status of a mother enjoyed by any woman.

Neel Shasthi-Broto, which is observed in the last month of Bengali calendar, represents the importance of the *Broto* for wellbeing and longevity of children. This *Katha* also represents motherhood as woman's primary vocation (Mukhopadhyay 2013). Maithreyi Krishnaraj (1995) claims motherhood is the central fact of feminine existence. Motherhood and mothering perceived as naturally related paradoxically becomes an instrument of subordination. Maternal responsibility leads to exclusion of a woman from power, authority, decision-making and a participatory role in public life. For her, mothering becomes a taken-for-granted act for the unique human need have care and nursing of infants. Thus, the sexual division of labour and sexual inequality within the family leads to women's subordination. It is not the mere fact that motherhood or mothering leads women to subordinate position but the social construction of the concepts itself, the meaning attached to motherhood and the terms and conditions under which it takes place are also important (Krishnaraj 1995).

Conclusion

The western feminist doctrine on motherhood was often gloomy and critical of women's choices. White feminists often were critical of their mothers whom they view as deceitful in their own alternatives. Compared to them the views of the women of colour on motherhood were more likely to respect their mothers' struggles and respectful of the price their mothers had to pay in order to survive. There was a sea change in the view-points of the feminists of the late nineteenth century where mothering instead of motherhood became focus of attention. 'Intensive mothering' as the concept was popular harped on the idea that mothering as an assumption requires

belief in an ideal that mothers are preferred care-takers for children, they are the expert-guide, the experience being emotionally absorbing and labour-intensive. It meant that motherhood ideologies typically require women to sacrifice themselves for their children where other alternatives are invisible and culpable. The gamut of feminist literature on motherhood and mothering focus on the political, economic and institutional features of motherhood and that would enable feminist social workers to see how their own values can be brought to bear on the question of mothering. They were critical of the patriarchal construct of motherhood and how it vests the entire responsibility on women. This patriarchal normative structure of which feminists are critical is woven through the narratives discussed above.

Besides, the normative structure, the social world that we experience is the social world, in which we live, are actually the construction of its participants. Life is meaningful because of the meaning its participants give to it. In our society, the sexual divisions between two sexes are biological phenomenon, but gender is socio-cultural construction. Motherhood is an identity intrinsically linked to women; it is the foundation of the biological difference between man and woman. The capacity to become a 'mother' or to bear a child is fully dependent on some biological factors but the idea of motherhood is based on this socio-cultural construction of roles qualities and characteristics ascribed to being 'feminine'. No area of family life is more laden with ideological baggage than those surrounding women's roles as mothers. It is true that the women have the specific biological capacity for childbearing and lactation but distinct from mothering 'motherhood' is a social construction, social norms of reproducing after marriage have played a fundamental role in stigmatization of women, and thus the commitment to motherhood considers children as a blessing whereas barrenness is a social stigma. Society emphasizes on the importance of motherhood as a major female role. Motherhood is thus a social determinant. The social position that a woman gains by becoming a mother is motherhood and it is society that defines the concept of motherhood by the set of normative code of conduct that are assigned to a woman. Thus, the concept of motherhood is a social construction.

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