

Ph. D Thesis

**Exploring Socio-Political Consciousness of Bengali Women: The Writings of the
Bhadramahila in the Early Twentieth Century**

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University**

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2023

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Exploring Socio-Political Consciousness of Bengali Women: The Writings of the Bhadramahila in the Early Twentieth Century, submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my work carried out under the Supervision of Dr. Maroona Murmu, Professor, Department of History, Jadavpur University. And that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree of diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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Acknowledgment

“A Thankful heart is not only the greatest virtue, but the parent of all the other virtues.”-Cicero

With an obliged heart I am taking this ideal opportunity to thank the numerous people and various institutions for helping me on my journey to accomplish my dissertation.

First and foremost, I want to convey my heartfelt gratitude and regards to my supervisor Professor Maroona Murmu for keeping faith in me and being patient. Despite her extremely hectic schedule as an academician and head of the department, she was always available and had been a constant support. It had been an indelible voyage together from my M.Phil to my doctoral. Thank you ma'am for the insightful guidance, care and motivation.

I am also obliged to the Department of History, Jadavpur University. I convey all my regards to my teachers Sudeshna Banerjee, Anuradha Ray, Mahua Sarkar, Tilottama Mukherjee, Amit Bhattacharya, Suchetana Chattopadhyay, Nupur Dasgupta and Rup Kumar Barman.

I thank the officials and staff of The National Library, Kolkata and Bangiya Sahitya Parisat Library, Kolkata where I spent most of my research days, the State Archives of West Bengal, Departmental Library, Department of History, Jadavpur University, Central Library, Jadavpur University, the library of Women's studies department, Jadavpur University.

I have been extremely lucky to have friends like Anwasha who was my backbone in this journey. She was there when I needed her the most. Sourav was always there being my pillar of strength and constant motivation. He was there whenever I needed him despite being in a different time zone. I am tremendously thankful to Amrita for coming to my rescue in the last hours. And thank you Ujaan for handling the technical issues so smoothly. Thank you all for everything.

I must not forget to mention my friends who have been loving and encouraging throughout the period- Pooja, Sunanda, Nilanjana, Lopamudra, Ananya, Rashmi, Arnab, Souvik, Saumen, Praskanva, Anupam, Saptarshi and Deep. Also thanks to my fellow scholars and dear friends Sanghamitra, Shilpa and Suman for all the love and support.

The dissertation would not have been possible without my best friend and husband Sujisnu. This journey must have been more depressing and intolerable, especially during COVID-19 and the traumatic phase of my life, without him. So thank you for always being there through thick and thin enduring all my tantrums. I also want to thank my parents-in-law for being so supportive and loving always. I thank my brother-in-law Sandhitsu for always helping me out with all the mechanical hazards during this phase.

My brother Sumalya, has been my support system. I acknowledge his shouldering so many responsibilities alone at home in troubled times and never let me be worried. I also thank my sister-in-law Priyanka and my nephew Preyan for all the love and care.

Lastly, I dedicate this work of love to my parents Nilina Ghosh and Pinaki Ranjan Ghosh, to say how deeply I love you both. My mother is my constant motivation. Both of them being my pillar of strength helped me to achieve my goal. Though the thesis is concluded but it would always remain restricted to me as I failed to share it with my father before he left us for good.

Abbreviation

CABE	Central Advisory Board of Education
BWEC	Bengal Women's Education Conference
WIA	Women's Indian Association
AIWC	All India Women's Conference
SCEF	Southern Conference Educational Fund

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Glossary

<i>abala</i>	powerless woman
<i>antahpur</i>	inner part/ separate women's quarter in the Bengali household
<i>atmashakti</i>	Self-reliance/ self-help, rely on Indigenous product to be Self sufficient
<i>antaranga</i>	intimate/familiar
<i>bhadralok</i>	a social group whose gentility was defined by their upper-caste status and abstention from manual labour; respectable people and culturally refined gentlemen
<i>bhadramahila</i>	reformed, refined, and upper class/caste women of the respectable household
<i>Bharat Mata</i>	sacred Motherland
<i>Birmata</i>	mother of a heroic son
<i>Bahir</i>	outside
<i>dhai</i>	<i>midwife</i>
<i>dhuti</i>	garment for the lower body
<i>dal</i>	a social faction chosen on the basis

<i>gamcha</i>	of kinship and neighbourhood ties towel
<i>ghar</i>	home
<i>jatra</i>	performance during procession
<i>karmakshetra</i>	field of work
<i>karta</i>	head of the household
<i>kula</i>	a clan in the sense of all male descendants of a common ancestral male, together with their wives and unmarried daughters
<i>kulin</i>	the highest rank among upper-caste ranking based on the possession of certain familial attributes
<i>meyeli shiksha</i>	feminine education
<i>meyeli kaj</i>	feminine work
<i>mohila samiti</i>	women's association
<i>memsahib</i>	European women
<i>mufassal</i>	small town
<i>Munshef</i>	Judge
<i>mela</i>	fair
<i>Mohila</i>	woman
<i>Mohol</i>	atmosphere
<i>nari siksha</i>	women's education

<i>patibrata</i>	a wife loyal and subservient to the husband
<i>patibratya</i>	unquestioning subservience to the husband as the woman's only means to salvation even after his death
<i>prochar</i>	propaganda
<i>pardah</i>	seclusion in a narrow sense, but comprehensively an all-encompassing ideology and code of conduct based on female modesty which determined women's lives
<i>pardanashin</i>	women maintained <i>pardah</i>
<i>pathshala</i>	popular village institution teach in vernacular languages, flourished late medieval and early modern period
<i>puja</i>	worship
<i>samaj</i>	broadly a socio-historical communitarian collectivity represented through upper-caste, middle-class kinship and neighbourhood linkages
<i>sumata</i>	<i>an ideal mother</i>
<i>sugrihini</i>	<i>an industrious housewife</i>
<i>samachar</i>	<i>news</i>
<i>sati</i>	virtuous and chaste woman; the practice in Hinduism of a wife

	burning herself in her husband's funeral pyre.
<i>satitva</i>	womanly virtue of willed chastity, the quality of being a sati
<i>tejarati</i>	usury
<i>upahar</i>	gift
<i>zamindar</i>	landlord
<i>zenana</i>	part of the household where women were secluded

Introduction

“Women were not educated at that time. When they got a little leisure time after wrapping up all the domestic chores, they had to attend to the male guardians' orders at home. The contemporaries believed women had nothing to do except domestic work. According to the convention women had to maintain a long veil even while working indoors, do not talk to anybody, then only she would be a good wife.”

-Rasasundari Devi's *Amar Jiban*(1876)

“Starting from your childhood you collect all rights in your own hands and womankind you just push in a dark corner far from the real world, shut up in purdah, frightened, sat on, dominated as if she was a female slave.”

-Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana* (1882)

“We have no hand or voice in the management of our social affairs. In India man is lord and master, he has taken to himself all powers and privileges and shut up the women in the zenana.”

-Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain's *Sultana's Dream* (1905)

The above-mentioned anecdotes are chosen to depict the women's condition in India on the eve of the twentieth century. To provide a background to the current study on women's perspectives on education, society, economy and politics in the first decades of the twentieth century, I resort to writings of three women—Rasasundari Debi's *Amar Jiban*, Tarabai Shinde's *Stree Purush Tulana*, and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's '*Sultana's Dream*' (1905). Rasasundari belonged to a conservative Hindu *zamindar* (landholder) family who wrote about the condition of women's education of the time. Tarabai came from an elite Maratha family and wrote about social stigmas that block women's journey to empowerment. Rokeya, a Muslim intellectual from a land-owning elite family advocated and worked for women's emancipation. Three women from different

places,¹ socio-cultural and educational background use a similar tone describing the subordinate position of women at the end of the nineteenth century. They can be considered to be the representatives of nineteenth-century Indian women writers. As this study is restrained to upper-middle class/caste Bengali women's writings, their works helped to bring out an integrated pan-Indian picture.

A remarkable personality Rasasundari's (b. 1809) *Amar Jiban* is considered to be the first Bengali autobiography published in 1876 when she was 67. In her account, she rejects any particular space of belonging and considers herself an Indian. However, any place on earth must be the same for her as ultimately it was the home she belonged to. Tanika Sarkar while explaining the metaphor 'Bharatbarsha' used by Rasasundari said she was unique in mentioning time and space. She did not resort to any contemporary popular developments or particular incidents or family events to portray her life. "She gives herself nothing less than a whole subcontinent and almost an entire century to live in".²

She called her married life a subservient (*paradhin*) one from the age of twelve (married probably in 1821). It is very surprising that in Rasasundari's time, when women considered their lives dedicated to their husbands and children, she considered herself the most important character of her autobiography, therefore the title *Amar Jiban* is apt. Her tone of writing expressed her disapproval of contemporary patriarchal norms such as wearing a long veil, following men's orders during leisure time, not talking to anybody etc that make her an ideal wife³ (above mentioned anecdote of *Amar Jiban*). Women's seclusion (*aborodh pratha*) was a common practice amongst upper caste/class Hindu women in nineteenth century India. In most cases the relationship between husband and wife was like master and slave at that time. Under colonial rule, influences of western culture and knowledge introduced changes in women's lives from the mid-nineteenth century.⁴

She considered her constant gestation from the age of 18 to 41 and child rearing days as real difficult times. She remembered the days of fasting and negligence of her health during those days of child bearing and rearing.⁵ At a time when becoming a mother (generally of a son)

¹ one from a distant village in Bengal, another from a small town of Maharashtra and other one from a village in Rangpur and later a city, Bhagalpur (after marriage)

² Tanika Sarkar, *Words to Win The Making of Amar Jiban: A Modern Autobiography*, (New Delhi: Zubaan, 2013), 8.

³ Rasasundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, (New Delhi: nbt.India, 2017), 26.

⁴ Sambuddha Chakravarty, *Andare Antare: Unish Shatoke Bangali Bhadramohila*, (Kolkata: Stree, 1998), 3-4.

⁵ Rasasundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, 30.

was contemplated as the fulfillment of a woman's life, she did not hesitate to mark motherhood as hard. Being a mother of eleven children she did not get permission to see her mother during her last days, a grief she possessed for the rest of her life.⁶

The most important contribution of her autobiography is the depiction of the deprivation of education of contemporary women. Along with the anxiety of widowhood associated with women's education, the older generation held the view that educated women were arbitrary in nature and refused to obey their in-laws and husbands.⁷ Also women's mental abilities were judged by men.⁸ More than that, there was the fear of educated women becoming westernised, neglecting traditional roots and impairing their womanly virtues. As a whole, contemporary women's behaviour towards widowed women with minimal education was harsh.⁹ Living in this atmosphere, Rasasundari urged for education and succeeded in acquiring it with great trouble.¹⁰ Having sustained all the traits of a 'good wife' all her life, the act of her secret effort to read ultimately dismantled the tag.¹¹

The third decade of the 19th century witnessed a change in society's attitude towards women's education. Being a colonised country, the spread of western thought about education was prevalent amongst the English educated middle class men.¹² Initiatives were taken to spread education among girls by missionaries as well. But the general idea was not to send the girls to the schools founded by missionaries as they allowed lower caste and prostitutes and promoted religious conversion.¹³ It was in 1840s that girls started joining schools. The *Zenana* (homeschooling) system became popular where group teaching was common. In exceptional cases, English governesses were hired as temporary residents for the purpose of teaching women of the house. They were appointed to make the women attain all-round training in womanly qualities like etiquette, deportment, table manners and so on.¹⁴ It was restricted to a very small percentage of urban population and did not reach a large percentage of women like Rasasundari

⁶ Rasasundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, 33.

⁷ G. Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905* (Rajshahi: SahityaSamsad, Rajshahi University, 1983), 24.

⁸ Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, 10.

⁹ Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, 15, 24.

¹⁰ Rasasundari Devi, *Amar Jiban*, 35-37.

¹¹ Sarkar, *Words to Win*, 3.

¹² Chakravarty, *Andare Antare*, 42. Also see Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, 7.

¹³ Chakravarty, *Andare Antare*, 44-45. Also see Swapan Basu, 'Unish Shatake Stree Shiksha', (Kolkata, BangiyoSahityaParisat, 2019), 32-33.

¹⁴ Karlekar, *Voices From Within*, 6.

who had a keen interest in learning. From the writing of *Rasasundari*, one could fathom such desires and regrets of women.

While writing her autobiography at a mature age she was delighted with the progress in women's education in the second half of the nineteenth century. So the ideal women's image in an upper-middle class family in early nineteenth century Bengal was quite different from the later period. The hardship of childbirth and upbringing, the deprivation of women from education, the destitution of her life reflect condition of women in her time. The cause for such a plight was vehemently questioned by Tarabai Shinde in 1882 and Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain in 1905.

The newly acquired consciousness of educated middle class *bhadralok* on compatible relationship between husband and wife and need to make women better mothers for facilitating better household management led to spread of women's education.¹⁵ But such changes achieved limited patriarchal satisfaction. Partha Chatterjee argued that a 'new patriarchy' would infuse orderliness, cleanliness, literacy, accounting, hygiene etc, in short, the basic needs to run a household properly.¹⁶ He shows how the nationalists created various dichotomies in the socio-political arena -home/world, spiritual / material, inner/outer and feminine/masculine to resolve the women's question.¹⁷

Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain challenged colonialism and patriarchy. She provided us an example of how a woman from a colonised country bravely fought against patriarchal subordination and imperialism through her creative and empowering writings.¹⁸ Born to a conservative upper class Muslim family, Rokeya was deprived of formal education. She had to maintain *pardah* from a very tender age. Rokeya's father while allowed his sons for western and higher education, did not encourage his daughters' education.¹⁹ Rokeya learnt to read and write under the instruction of her oldest brother. She experienced deprivation and discrimination from

¹⁵ Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, 12, 17, 27-28.

¹⁶ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press New Brunswick, 1999), 247.

¹⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution*, 233-253.

¹⁸ Barnita Bagchi, "Towards Ladyland: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain and the Movement for Women's Education in Bengal c1900- c1932," *Paedagogica Historica* 45, no. 6, (4th December, 2009), 743-44.

DOI: 10.1080/00309230903335652

<https://doi.org/10.1080/00309230903335652>

¹⁹ Bharati Ray, "A Feminist Critique of Patriarchy: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain (1880-1932)," *Asiatic*, 7, no. 2 (December, 2013), 70.

her childhood.²⁰ Her personal experiences from childhood made her realise the drawback of illiteracy, gender discrimination and *purdah* system especially in a Muslim community. Rokeya was fortunate as her husband Syed Sakhawat Hossain, supported and encouraged her reading, writing and mixing with the other women outside the inner circle of the home.²¹

Here I chose *Sultana's Dream* to provide a picture of a women writer's resistance against patriarchal norms and colonial rule by one who had been entangled with the nationalist project in late nineteenth century Bengal. In *Sultana's Dream*, Rokeya dreamt of a Ladyland where the roles of men and women were reversed. Sultana went to a place where 'she was shy and timid like men'.²² She witnessed a world where men used to be indoors (*mardana* which means masculinity)²³ like women in the real world. Sara, the protagonist opined that women are confined indoors because the outside world is not safe for women as women were 'naturally weak'.²⁴ So it was pointed out by Sakhawat that the internalisation of weakness made women powerless in the real world. Rokeya in 'Sultana's Dream' equipped women with everything that a woman lacked in reality—proper education, marriage at a mature age, decision-making rights, political participation, physical science, learning science and all other subjects so far been considered suited only to men in the actual world.²⁵ Rokeya expressed women's desire, zeal for her own identity and powerful position through a dream sequence that delineated women's poor condition in reality.

While nationalists' efforts to reform traditional culture divided the domain into material and spiritual, Rokeya captured the material world in her "self-consciously feminist" utopian story 'Sultana's Dream.'²⁶ However, the material reality was that the European countries used

²⁰ Ray, "A Feminist Critique of Patriarchy," 71.

²¹ Debali Mookherjea-Leonard, "Futuristic Technologies and Purdah in the Feminist Utopia: Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's 'Sultana's Dream,'" *Feminist Review*, No. 116, dystopias and utopias (2017), 145-46. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/44987318>

²² Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, in Roushan Jahan edited and translated *Sultana's Dream-A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, (New York City: The Feminist Press at the city University of New York, 1988), 8. <https://archive.org/details/roushan-jahan-sultanas-dream-and-selections-from-the-secluded-ones-feminist-press-at-cuny/page/9/mode/2up?view=theater>

²³ Also discussed by Bagchi in her article 'Speculating with human rights: two South Asian women writers and utopian mobilities' Sister Sara played a character that bore the connotation of sisterhood cutting across all the religions. With the mobile world of 'Ladyland', Rokeya deconstructed the seclusion and immobility of women in the real world. 72.

²⁴ Hossain, *Sultana's Dream*, 9.

²⁵ Mookherjea-Leonard, "Futuristic Technologies and Purdah," 146.

²⁶ Roushan Jahan, *Sultana's Dream-A Feminist Utopia and Selections from The Secluded Ones*, (New York City: The Feminist Press at the city University of New York, 1988), 1.

the power of science, technology, and modern methods of statecraft to conquer the non-European world. The nationalists to overcome the influence adopted western culture for rationalisation and reformation of traditional culture of their own.²⁷ But as a part of nationalist project women were deprived of this knowledge. But in Rokeya's world women are all powerful and furnished with all the material facilities that made the western world and Indian patriarchy superior. Md. Rezaul Haque rightly said that the adaptation of English language expanded the ground of Rokeya's fight against patriarchy. He added that Rokeya by writing in English generated a consciousness amongst the sisters of the other parts of the country.²⁸

In between Rasasundari's regrets and Rokeya's subtle indirect opposition to patriarchal subordination, the strongest voice that echoed against the discriminatory patriarchal double standard was of Tarabai Shinde in *Stree Purush Tulana* (1882). She clearly said that she was writing to show the differences and discrimination that existed in society between men and women. It was not regarding any particular caste and families but in general terms speaking for women as a whole.²⁹ Tarabai belonged to a prosperous Maratha family, counted in the social elites of Buldana in Maharashtra. Her father, Bapuji Hari Shinde worked as a head clerk in the office of deputy commissioner. It was assumed that his association with Jotirao Phule influenced him to educate Tarabai not only in Marathi, but also in English and Sanskrit.³⁰ Yet, Tarabai had to follow some form of seclusion as depicted in her writing.³¹

To voice her critical view of patriarchal oppression³², particularly the death sentence of a widow named Vijaylakshmi's in 1881 for infanticide, Tarabai wrote *Stree Purush Tulana*.³³ An article was published in Pune Vaibhab attacking Vijaylakshmi apparently and women in general for their modernistic approach and moral deterioration. According to O'Hanlon, Tarabai through her writing was the first woman in western India to protest directly and critically towards patriarchy. Here again O'Hanlon brings Chatterjee's 'new patriarchy' who were responsible for

²⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution*, 237.

²⁸ Md. Rezaul Haque, *Educating Women, (Not) Serving the Nation: The Interface of Feminism and Nationalism in the Works of Rokeya Sakhwat Hossain*, *Asiatic*, 7, No. 2 (December, 2013), 101.

²⁹ Tarabai Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men-An Essay to show Who's Really Wicked and Immoral, Women or Men?*, (Buldhana: ShriShivaji Press, 1882). in Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India*, 75.

³⁰ O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 5.

³¹ Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 77.

³² Vidyut Bhagwat, "Marathi Literature as a Source for Contemporary Feminism," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 30, No. 17 (Apr. 29, 1995), WS 27. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/4402687>

³³ O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 1.

“long-term loss in women’s access to power”.³⁴ Tarabai criticised oppressive behaviour and the bad fortune of a woman after being a widow as opposed to men who enjoyed the right to remarry.³⁵ She also criticised the concept of *Stridharma* which dictated that a woman had to remain a *pativrata* (loyal towards her husband)³⁶ and worship him like God irrespective of the husband’s oppressive or unfaithful traits.

Albeit all her harsh words against patriarchy, Tarabai internalised the patriarchal construction of “women being shy, delicate and foolish in their very nature” and men being naturally bold, courageous, strong and learned.³⁷ O’Hanlon also traced her repetitive ambivalence throughout the essay about traditional outdated concepts of women’s lives, their rights and duties.³⁸ Speaking on behalf of all women of the country Tarabai also made an effort to create a pan-Indian connection. Tharu and Lalita praise Tarabai’s essay as “the first full-fledged and extent feminist argument after the poetry of the bhakti period.” They further argue that Tarabai’s essay of immense importance as it expands the ground of discussion for ideologies of patriarchal society at a time when reformers themselves were showing growing concern of various social evils affecting women’s lives.³⁹

Thus, the writings of these women show their growing critique of patriarchy and internalisation of patriarchal norms across space and time. This ambiguity, continuity and change is the key thread of the current study.

Scope of the Study

This dissertation studies the dilemma, continuity and change in socio-political consciousness depicted in the writings of *bhadramahila* in early twentieth century Bengal. The chosen timeframe of the work is the early decades of the twentieth century for women were going through a transition period in their private and public lives socially, economically and politically

³⁴ O’Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 8.

³⁵ Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 88-89.

³⁶ Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 79-80.

³⁷ Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 87.

³⁸ O’Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 8.

³⁹ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India: 600B.C to the Present, Vol. I: 600 B.C to the Early Twentieth Century*, (New York, The Feminist Press, 1991), 222.

during this period. The territorial demarcation of this work is the Presidency of Bengal due to familiarity of the researcher with Bengali language. This work focused mainly on writings by upper and middle class Hindu Bengali *bhadramahila* who benefitted the most from the liberatory avenues that women's education permitted. Their Muslim counterparts in Bengal have not been dealt with since the political discourse of colonial rulers, the legislation around social reforms in the private sphere was mostly confined to Hindu women. This research work took a qualitative method to formulate the project by analysing numerous periodicals, autobiographies, novels and stories written by women which would be corroborated by government files and census reports.

This study is mainly based on women's literary writings as primary sources. To reconstruct the contemporary socio-political consciousness of women I turned to the vast writings they left behind in periodicals, numerous autobiographies, letters, novels, stories and articles that capture their changing attitudes towards society, social institutions, norms, independence, individuality, desires, etc. for tracing contemporary historical changes and incidents. Simultaneously, novels and stories can be seen as a mirror reflecting the desires and observations of literate women. Due to its abundance, I have set aside a huge number of poems available to us for the time. I chose the genre of prose writing as it was a comparatively new genre to the protagonists of this dissertation. Although by the second half of the 19th century, women had started expressing their observations and experiences in writing, the political climate in the first half of the 20th century became a catalyst to their more expressive and valiant narratives searching for their individuality, freedom, rights, and independence.

One of the important sources of this study is women's personal narratives. Malavika Karlekar in '*Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*' argued autobiographies, journals, letters and diaries as private and personal writings are a medium of expressing consciousness, self-perception, gender relations, social structure, political and social change etc.⁴⁰ According to her, writing about oneself is a conscious act as it proves the subject's choice to express desires through feelings and emotions, also events. Sometimes these writings lack chronology, time period of the events, and clarity but the creation becomes important as it expresses one's views, feelings and emotions about an incident he/she is witnessing.⁴¹

⁴⁰ Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*, (Delhi: OUP, 1991), 4.

⁴¹ Karlekar, *Voices From Within*, 15-16.

Shari Benstock in her edited book *'The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings'* said autobiography contains gaps between time and space, individual and social, and also manner and matter of the narrative. She argued autobiographical writing, though based on self-knowledge, ultimately culminated in fiction because of the way it has been constructed.⁴²

Antoinette Burton showed how women's memories of home can be used as an archive. It can be considered a convergence of private and public as well as personal and political. As women's lives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century revolved around their families, Burton discusses three such lives in her book, indicating that family histories and memories of home can be constructed as historical evidence for successive generations. She talked about the prospects of 'counter-histories of colonial modernity' acquired from those memories.⁴³

Aparna Bandyopadhyay granted immense significance to women's narratives—fiction, autobiographies and memoirs in tracing a woman's mind, emotions, desires, dilemmas and inner conflicts. These also provided an understanding of women's defiance even when they appear to conform to patriarchal norms. Although their personal narratives seem compliant, the fiction carried subversive characters.⁴⁴

As novels and stories reflect contemporary time and space, women's writings are essential archival sources of this thesis. Meenakshi Mukherjee in *Realism and Reality: the Novel and Society in India*, cited two theories about the rise of novels in the West. One is related to the growth of the bourgeoisie and modern capitalism. Therefore it incorporates the middle-class values replacing previous feudal values of epic or romance. The second theory linked the emergence of the idea of individualism and with the rise of novels. This idea of individualism is provided by new social mobility due to industrialisation. This mobility displaced man from his

⁴² Shari Benstock, *The Private Self: Theory and Practice of Women's Autobiographical Writings*, (London: Routledge, 1988), 11.

⁴³ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling In The Archive: Women writing House, home and History in late Colonial India*, (OUP, 2003), 4-5.

⁴⁴ Aparna Bandyopadhyay, 'Towards a History of Women in Love in Colonial Bengal', Paper Presented at the International Conference on *Shifting Contours, Widening Concerns: Women's History, Historiography and the Politics of Historical Representation* held at Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, 11—13 February 2015

secure traditional niche, making him realise the unique potential of each human being, including himself, outside the social hierarchy. Therefore these two theories are related.⁴⁵

Mukherjee questioned whether the features of western novels are suitable to the Indian context. She analysed that the structure of novels is more or less unified worldwide. According to her, a novelist's work is to project reality through realism in the proper time and space. The harmonious existence of geography and history is expected in novels. A novel is an original outcome of a novelist's sense of time and space in an exact historical timing and social space.⁴⁶ It should represent an individual whose activity is coordinated as per a given time and space.⁴⁷

I studied published autobiographies written by Priyobala Gupta, Shanta Devi, Renuka Ray, Ashoka Gupta, Bina Das, Manikuntala Sen, Prativa Basu and many more. This work included a number of articles, stories, novels published in various periodicals like *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Bangalakshmi*, *Utsaha*, *Prabartak*, *Mohila Mohol*, *Bharat Mohila*, *Sourav*, *Sachitra Sisir*, *Jayasree*, *Arani*, *Suprabhat*, *Bangalakshmi*, *Siksha Samachar*, *Sahitya Sangstha*, *Udayan*, *Purbasa*, *Archana*, *The Mukta*, *Uttara*, *Siksha Samachar*, *Punyo*, *Dipali*, *Arani*, *Swadesh* etc.

First two decades of the twentieth century women's writings mainly conveyed the message of being an ideal woman. So they themselves participated in marginalisation processes through the internalisation of patriarchal norms. *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Antahpur*, *Archana*, *Punyo*, *Bharat Mahila*, *Janhabi* etc mainly popularised the views opposing western influence on women's lives. They promulgated women's education but it was in a form that facilitated women's domestication. From the 1920s, women were no longer ready to accept disrespectful behavior and indifferent attitude towards them. *Bangalakshmi*, *Jayashree*, *Prabartak*, *Sachitra Sisir*, *Udayan*, *Mohila Mahal*, *Utsaho*, *Arani*, *Swadesh*, *Dipali* etc played crucial roles in putting forward different outlook of women in the third and fourth decades. Sometimes periodicals used to comprise exclusive sections for discussion of feminine issues like 'Narilok' in *Dipali*, 'Mohila Jagat' in *Swadesh*, 'Mohila Bibhag' in *Prabartak* and so on. Sometimes the entire periodical was dedicated to women like *Bangalakshmi*, *Jayashree* and *Mohila Mahal*. Sources indicate increased consciousness of women though it did not bring about major transformation in their perspective compared to the previous century. It was a slow process consisting of dilemma, continuity and change.

⁴⁵ Meenakshi Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality: the Novel and Society in India*, (Delhi: OUP, 1985), 4.

⁴⁶ Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, 4-5.

⁴⁷ Mukherjee, *Realism and Reality*, 6.

Review of Existing Literature

To gain a deeper understanding of women's changing consciousness in the chosen timeframe and to draw a rich conclusion, one has to delve with existing literature. The firsthand experience of Bengali women and their lives at home as witnessed by Margaret M. Urquhart has been observed in her book *'Women of Bengal'* (1925). She said in the preface of the book that her motive is "to give a picture of the Bengali Woman in her natural setting, the Bengali home." Her account covered a vast spectrum of women's lives related to the culture and customs of Bengal and provided a comprehensive picture of the time.⁴⁸

Dagmar Engels analyses the differences in gender ideology and social practices between the Bengalis and colonial rulers. His work also reciprocates various aspects dealing with women's identification to the domestic arena. It suggests the changing ideology and politicisation of the 'private sphere' with the changing political circumstances.⁴⁹

The anthology- *'Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History'*⁵⁰ by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid is an important book to understand the historical processes that facilitated the reconstruction of patriarchy in colonial India in relation to different class/caste. This study showed that the middle class initiative to social reform movement was gendered and it led to the separation of the public and private spheres. This patriarchal model was internalised by women and facilitated the emergence of *bhadramahila*. 'New patriarchy' was giving birth to 'new woman' –as argued by Chatterjee in the article 'the Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in the anthology.⁵¹

'Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present' written by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, draws a portrait of Indian women's lives over centuries. The anthology includes a large spectrum of writings by women from different socio-cultural backgrounds, writing in different languages, time and space. Therefore it provided a pan Indian background to construct the present work.⁵²

⁴⁸ Margaret M. Urquhart, *Women of Bengal*, (Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983).

⁴⁹ Dagmar Engels, "The Limits of Gender Ideology: Bengali Women, the Colonial State, and the Private Sphere, 1890-1930," *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 12, No. 4. (1989), 425-437.

⁵⁰ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

⁵¹ Partha Chatterjee, "the Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question, in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*" ed. by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

⁵² Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India; 600B.C to the Present, Vol. I: 600 B.C to the Early Twentieth Century*, (New York, The Feminist Press, 1991).

Bharati Ray's article 'Women in Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947,' is an important work for this study which explores the changes in urban middle class women's ideas and desires regarding education, marriage, motherhood, economic activities and organisational works.⁵³

Tanika Sarkar's *Hindu wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism* included nine valuable essays that provided essential ingredients to construct the background of this work. She highlighted the transition period from liberal reform tradition to the origin of revivalist nationalism, which is crucial to understanding politicisation of domestic sphere and women's issues -the basis of my study focusing on internalisation process of the patriarchal norms.⁵⁴

Despite providing a justification of archiving women's accounts structuring this work, Antoinette Burton's *Dwelling in the Archive: Women writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India* is also essential for analysing relationships between history and memory, public and private and the nation and home.⁵⁵

Citing eight women's personal narratives, memoirs, diaries and articles belonging to different regions and communities of India Aparna Basu and Malavika Karlekar's *In So Many Words: Women's Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India*, focused on evaluating the 'self', replicated in their writings. It helps to get an overall picture of upper middle class women's life experiences related to their socio-political backgrounds. This work helps to mould the present study as it is also based on various forms of women's writings.⁵⁶

Padma Anagol's article 'Agency, Periodisation and Change in the Gender and Women's History of Colonial India' helped this work to think beyond the nationalism-imperialism framework. Beyond the Gandhian era that facilitated women's participation in the public sphere, Anagol suggests articulation of different angles about women's agency. Her elaborate work on

⁵³ Bharati Ray, Women in Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947, *Social Scientist*, 19, no. 5/6, (May-June, 1991). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3517870>

⁵⁴ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

⁵⁵ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling In The Archive: Women writing House, home and History in late Colonial India*, (OUP, 2003).

⁵⁶ Aparna Basu and Malavika Karlekar, *In So Many Words: Women's Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India*, (London: Routledge, 2007).

vernacular literature of western India provides various ideas for this literature based study of Bengal.⁵⁷

Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta is another significant work to mention here. It explores how the gender identities of women over the four decades of the twentieth century are connected with their other identities like class, caste, community, and religion and how such identities were reinforced through the print culture. The author emphasises the power relationships through the sexual politics in everyday life between men and women in the family, in public institutions, and political parties.⁵⁸ As this work deals with journals of the twentieth century, it helps me to understand the gender politics of the time through the changes a journal went through.

Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi's edited book *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*, tried to mould a category 'literary history' of gender. They aim to show how this category has been constructed through beliefs, reason and emotion. The selected writings by women in periodicals from various fields show the interlinked activities that their writings echoed. These writings made one understand the changes in the life practices and beliefs of women.⁵⁹

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's book *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947*, attempted to construct an overall picture of Bengal in the twentieth century by gathering some fundamental elements of the life and mind of Bengal of the time. This work elaborates on the incidents from each decade that mould the history of Bengal. My study regarding the period has got its historical background from this valuable work.⁶⁰

Tim Allender's book 'Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932' is an essential reading to construct ideas of women's education in colonial India. Also, the interactions between the colonial state and British women in relation to the education of women in India portrayed in this is necessary in providing a gendered perspective of women's education in colonial India.⁶¹

⁵⁷ Padma Anagol, "Agency, Periodisation and Change in the Gender and Women's History of Colonial India," *Gender & History* 20 no.3 (November 2008), 603–627.

⁵⁸ Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, *Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal*, (Kolkata: Stree, 2010).

⁵⁹ Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*, (Kolkata: Stree and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2014).

⁶⁰ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2014).

⁶¹ Tim Allender, 'Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932', (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

Bharati Ray's book '*Prabasite Nari: 1901-1947*' carried related writings by men and articles written by women within the timeframe. She argues that the women's issues like their education, progress, and position in domestic space and society gradually became significant from the mid-nineteenth century, which increased day by day. She focused on this period and also *Prabasi*'s span of time is equated with it. Though my work excludes *Prabasi*, the articles written in the book helped me to understand the period better.⁶²

All the above mentioned works are significant and relevant for the discussion of the early twentieth century Bengal, the period I chose to study. All these works are a great help to construct my thesis. But none of the work talked about women's vast literary works that reflected their socio-political consciousness during the time. Many previously written articles talk about various aspects of my work but my objective is to construct a gendered perspective of the time through women's writings and how these perspectives reveal their consciousness regarding society and politics. Also, a comprehensive picture of changing social and political scenarios of the time in a sole work is missing from the platform.

A Sketch of Inside Story

The domestication of women by nationalists, continues unabated in the twentieth century right from the nineteenth century. In spite of some efforts and encouragement of colonisers to enhance women's educational prospects in Bengal, indigenous men and women's constant emphasis on feminine education (*meyeli shiksha*), overshadowed women's education (*nari shiksha*). It posed the central roadblock to women's education and enhanced a 'gendered' internalisation process in society. Though we often heard women's voices against such advocates of 'gender' roles, the internalisation of patriarchal norms persisted restricting women's all-round educational growth. Therefore, the dilemma, continuity and change regarding *meyeli shiksha* and *nari shiksha* are highlighted in the first chapter.

The second chapter regarding women's economic independence discusses the objective of women's education at this time—mainly limited to strengthening the household and bolstering nation building. There had been continuous discouragement for women to join male led workforce as paid jobs and steer them towards 'feminine' jobs or 'suitable' professions for them.

⁶² Bharati, Ray, *Prabasite Nari: 1900-1947*, (Kolkata: Ananda, 2016).

Most of the contemporary women's writings reinforced the idea of 'feminine' job or '*meyeli kaj*'. As women's designation of 'queen of the household' or 'mothers of the nation' had already been mainstreamed in society, their work as a caregiver was emphasised. So, the jobs like teaching, social service, nursing, medical practice, midwifery etc were advertised as suitable for women. The present discussion explains how it was reflected in women's writings.

The third chapter will concentrate on two influential factors that limited women's educational and economic prospects- marriage and childbirth. This discussion also focuses on different aspects related to those factors like free-mixing and the prospect of marriage choices among the younger generation, choice to remain unmarried, changing attitude towards dowry, widowhood, remarriage and getting rid of unfortunate and dissatisfactory married life. This chapter added some highly debated issues regarding changing lifestyle of women, choice of embracing motherhood, and birth control. Though contrary opinions persisted in society, contemporary women's writings in many cases echoed their right to marry at an advanced age and have fewer children to enable their participation in non-wifely and non-motherly activities in and outside home. So, this chapter provides the readers with transforming scenarios of women's viewpoints that were unique to them.

Gender politics is the basis of the last chapter. Women had to fight against patriarchal norms before entering mainstream politics. This chapter concentrates on different sides of gender politics within mainstream politics during the Swadeshi, Gandhian and the militant nationalist phase in the early period of the twentieth century. Fictions, replicating reality in the various phases of mainstream politics reflect the gendered perspectives. Therefore the internalisation of the political construction of gendered roles was also very clear in the women's writings.

Lastly, one might wonder as to why upper-middle class women's writings belonging to heterogeneous economic, political or social strata are considered as alternative archival sources. First of all, it is impossible to reconstruct contemporary mindset without their writings, these being sole representative sources to chart continuity and changes. The writings, left being by the few educated women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, help successive generations to recreate gendered politics and to map compelling social transformations of the time. As these women had access to political leaders of the time much more than the women of lower strata, one gets a nuanced understanding of the political activities of famous political leaders of the time and varied aspects of their lives, often contradictory. Moreover, these

educated few were in touch with rural and lower caste women. For example Renuka Ray and Ashoka Gupta's autobiography talked about the tribals and village people who suffered much during 1942-43 famine and their transit from villages to cities or towns. Renuka Ray largely talked about Santals and other tribal communities of Bankura and Jhargam. They both went there in connection to their respective husbands' transferable government jobs but left detailed records about their experiences. Writings like them helped to understand changes in different times and spaces, the social constructions and barriers that again and again tried to marginalise women.

Chapter 1

Nari Siksha or Meyeli Siksha: Dilemma, Continuity and Change

Introduction

This chapter surveys the writings on and of Bengali middle-class Hindu women to explore their educational journey through the first half of the twentieth century. The rigid and traditional social taboos of the nineteenth century hampered women's foray into educational fields, but it at least highlighted the need for women's education. Aside from the abundance of men writing on the women's question, the early twentieth century saw an impressive number of educated women writing down their experiences and desires through different literary conduits like periodicals, journals, as well as fiction.

In the first half of the nineteenth century, issues of concern like widowhood, ill health, lack of intelligence related to women's education led to non-opening of female schools with the intention to keep them away from bookish knowledge. But according to Chatterjee, the real reason was the fear of proselytisation and westernisation of women as the early schools and the learning system at home (*zenana* education)⁶³ were mostly initiated by Christian Missionaries.⁶⁴

The barrier was removed when around 1850s indigenous schools were opened for girls in different parts of the country mainly by social reformers. School education for women was in the vernacular language because English learning was assumed to be harmful and irrelevant because their place still was only at home.⁶⁵ But the issue of women's question which was the most discussed debate once in public forum, after the 1870s had been sidelined. Chatterjee argues the

⁶³ *Zenana* education meant education that imparted by missionary women at the inner part of the house (Antahpur) in the nineteenth century as women were not allowed outside and men were not allowed in antahpur. Antoinette Burton in his book, *Dwelling In The Archive: Women writing House, home and History in late Colonial India*, used women's memories of home (*zenana/ antahpur*) as archival source which they considered as basis of "their social identities and the cultural forms through which they experienced both family life and national belonging." House and home was central point of the modernizing debate where the European intervention was not allowed. As Burton mentioned the *zenana* or home provided an affirmation to male elites a confidence to govern their personal lives.

⁶⁴ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial histories*, (Delhi: OUP, 1994), 128.

⁶⁵ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128.

concept of the “ideal woman” originated in the last decades of the nineteenth century initiated by the revivalist nationalists to differentiate the indigenous culture from the West and focusing on traditional values. It situated women in the inner domain of the household.⁶⁶ Chatterjee observed that the nationalists divided social life into two spheres -spiritual and material, home and the world, feminine and masculine and inner and outer domain that restricted women’s mobility in late nineteenth century.⁶⁷ The woman’s question was situated in a ‘modern’ condition. As the old beliefs about women’s education faded away, numerous narratives on methods in which women from respectable families should engage themselves in education keeping their honour and dignity intact, poured in.⁶⁸ It was expected from an educated ‘ideal woman’ that she through cultural refinement will not jeopardize her place at home and refrain from becoming a *memsahib*.⁶⁹ So an ideal woman will be one who on the one hand, becomes modern and on the other, carries traditional values and customs as a result of which she was reduced to a passive agent. Taking up Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay,⁷⁰ Chatterjee modelled a ‘new woman’ concerning her dress, food, manners, education, home management skills and dealing with the outside world.⁷¹ This chapter traces the ways in which these ideas of an ideal woman, as ideal mother and a suitable wife evolved over the decades until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Further talking about ideal women’s education, the ‘female curriculum’ was a long-debated issue of the nineteenth century. It left a mark in the twentieth century in numerous writings. It became a fundamental task of the nationalist project to launch textbooks and new literature in the mother tongue. Education for women then was not for knowledge gaining but to inculcate the bourgeois virtues such as orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and proper household management. Added to this, she had to have some idea of the outside world also, retaining the feminine values intact.⁷² All the values they had to grasp were feminine (*‘meyeli’*) in nature. There was a difference between *‘nari siksha’* (woman’s education) and *‘meyeli shiksha’* (feminine education) bearing vastly different implications. The first is promoting the emancipation of women by way of

⁶⁶ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 116-117.

⁶⁷ Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Post Colonial histories*, (Delhi: OUP, 1994).

⁶⁸ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 124.

⁶⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128.

⁷⁰ He was a writer and intellectual of nineteenth century Bengal. The upper mentioned argument of him is from his essay- ‘Paribarik Prabandha’, written in 1882.

⁷¹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 127.

⁷² Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128-130.

education, the second is trying to reinforce gender stereotypes. These two connotations remain the most important issues of dilemma while the chapter takes up continuities and changes as the main focus of study.

This chapter will discuss the ways in which a change came about in women's consciousness regarding the necessity for education in the first half of the twentieth century. An analysis of women's writings belonging to the period helps us understand their point of view on different issues regarding education, contemporary social oppositions, and how women were dealing with those situations. The first section evaluates the scale of advancement in the field of women's education through the census and government reports in early twentieth-century Bengal. Section two discusses the European intervention and views held by *memsahibs* (western women) that provided opportunities for female education and criticism of women's condition that attracted native eyes respectively. The third section will be regarding women's internalisation and rejection of '*meyeli siksha*'. The initiatives of indigenous men and women in promoting women's education make an interesting case in point in the next section. It will also draw upon the critical views towards patriarchal bias regarding women's education. The last part discusses women's vision about the Wardha scheme of education proposed by Gandhi and other contemporary developments such as Tagore's plan of Shantiniketan modelled on a vision of students' all-round development. .

This work has extensively drawn from a variety of women's writings including articles, personal narratives, and fiction in a period ranging between 1900 and 1950. Articles (non-fiction) and autobiographies allow us to understand how Hindu middle class Bengali women navigated social realities in the first half of the twentieth century. On the other hand, fictions offer a glimpse into the desires and fantasies of women authors.

These materials help us picture the state of colonial Bengali society through a gendered lens. It also allows us to find answers to the following sets of questions: What were the attitudes of society toward women's education and how did they react? What kind of encouragement and inspiration did the movement for women's education receive at this time? What, according to the contemporary women's writings, were the taboos that constantly tried to restrict them to the domestic sphere? What were the new ideas and demands reflected in women's writings regarding their higher education? In what ways did the women engage with the educated men's demand for an educated and compatible wife? How did women handle the contradiction between

traditional and progressive values and beliefs in their writings? Was women's struggle against the traditional taboos, as depicted in the fictional writings, real? In answering these questions, this chapter seeks to illuminate the nature of women's educational consciousness in the period under review.

I

Censuses and Women's Education in the Early Twentieth Century

There were several obstacles to women's education in colonial India even around 1920. Conservative attitudes and prejudices, general indifference, and financial shortage etc. all contributed to opposing the progress of female education in India. The social stigma around women's education was reinforced by 1) the *purdah* system and 2) early marriage leading to annulment of education before gaining full literacy.⁷³ Despite all this, the desire for female education increased gradually amongst upper-class Hindus in India. However, the desire was not to try to achieve employability and financial independence for women. Rather, it arose from the urgency to marry them off to educated men who desired literate wives.⁷⁴

It was common practice amongst the Hindus and Muslims to seclude the girls as they reached puberty. Naturally, this prevented them from receiving education in schools or even at home. But the census of India, 1901, indicates that in some communities these prejudices had begun to gradually crumble, sometimes influenced by Christian missionaries and at other times because family members themselves were keen to provide *zenana* education.⁷⁵

The literacy rate of women in India around 1900 shows that wherever the society was free from prejudices, higher was the rate of female literacy and vice versa. Burma, Travancore, and Cochin recorded a well-educated female population largely because of the existence of a Christian population. In Madras the literacy rate amongst females was 11 per thousand. In Bombay, the rate was 9, 8 in Baroda and Mysore, 5 in the then whole Bengal province including Orissa and Assam, and in proper Bengal, the number rose to 8. The literacy rate was significantly lower in Assam (4) while in the case of Central India Agency, Berar, Punjab and Hyderabad the

⁷³ J.A. Richey, Eighth Quinquennial Review Vol.I, *Progress of Education in India 1917-1922*, (1928), 126.

⁷⁴ Eighth Quinquennial Review, 130.

⁷⁵ Risley and Gait, *Report on the Census of India*, Vol. I, 1901, 163-64.

number had been 3 each.⁷⁶ Since cities were the centre of higher education which attracted students from the villages and other parts of the country, inhabitants in large towns were generally better educated than those in rural areas.

The 1901 Census tells us that out of the total population in India, only 53 persons per thousand were literate. The comparative study was even more shocking: out of every 10 males, one male could read and write whereas the ratio was one out of every 144 in case of women. In other words, it meant for every 14 literate males there was only one literate female. The report, however, expresses a certain degree of doubt over the number of female literacy owing to routine suppression of women's qualifications.⁷⁷ But, it is safe to assume that the actual ratio of male to female literacy would not have drastically differed from what was being projected.

Table 1.1: Number of literate persons per 1000 of each sex as mentioned in Census report, 1901.

Province	Total Population		Cities	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
India	98	7	259	49
Bengal	104	5	276	63
Bombay	116	9	261	63
Madras	119	9	355	65

The above table shows the number of males educated compared to the females. They indicate the sustained social prejudices about women's education. Not only in Bengal but also in other presidencies across India, women had fallen far behind men. As this chapter searches for women's writings to map their socio-political consciousness with regard to education, this census signalled a visible lack of female writings in the last decade of the 19th century Bengal as compared to the early twentieth century.

As per record female literacy was really small. These were some statistics for understanding the overall condition of women's education of the country in the start of the twentieth century. However, there was an increase in the female literacy rate in Calcutta at this time.

⁷⁶ Risley and Gait, *Report on the Census of India*, Vol. I, 1901, 160.

⁷⁷ Risley and Gait, *Report on the Census of India*, Vol. I, 1901, 158.

In Calcutta, only 23.6 percent of people could read and write in 1901. Of that, the female literacy was only at 3.6 percent. Of the entire female population, the ratio was 11.5 percent in 1901 whereas in 1891 it was a negligible 4.8 per cent.⁷⁸ Overall increase was evident in almost all religious communities including Hindus, Muhammadans, Christians, and Jains but the only exception was the Brahmos. The education of Brahma females saw a sharp decrease from 65.4 percent in 1891 to 53.1 percent in 1901. The census blamed the inclusion of the less educated families as converts to Brahmoism for the decrease.⁷⁹ An anonymous woman expressed her concern for the decreasing number of educated Brahma women in *Bamabodhini Patrika* in 1903 as had been shown in the census since there was considerable growth in the number of Brahma women in the last decade.⁸⁰ But despite their decrease in number, Brahma women were still more progressive in comparison to the larger Hindu female population.

In Bengal province only one female in every 200 people was literate.⁸¹ On the whole women's literacy rate increased considerably in 1901 in comparison to 1891. North Bengal showed the greatest growth whereas West and East Bengal displayed reasonable progress. Only 6 females in 10,000 were familiar with English whereas in the case of males, the number was 89. The ratio was obviously higher in the city of Calcutta (it was 1323 males and 455 females). This was followed by Howrah, Hooghly, the 24 Parganas, Burdwan, Nadia and Dacca.⁸² Therefore, overall, the first decade of the twentieth century experienced a growth in female literacy rate in Bengal.

Technical and industrial education for girls was gaining importance at the time of Swadeshi movement of 1905 which instilled political consciousness in women. Schools like Central Lace School, Central Embroidery School, and Weaving School were established in and around 1906. Among other industrial schools, mention may be made of the Mahila Silpa Asram in Calcutta set up in 1906. An attempt was made by them to teach industrial work to middle or upper-class women from both Hindu and Muslim families so they could earn some money, while

⁷⁸ J.R. Blackwood, *Report(Statistical) on the Census of India, Calcutta Town and Suburbs* Vol. VII, Part IV, 1901, 56-57.

⁷⁹ Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India*, 1901, 58.

⁸⁰ 'Bangadeshe Stri Shiksha,' (April-May, 1903) in Bharati Ray Edited *Bamabodhini Patrika: Sekaler Nari Siksha 1270-1329 Bangabdho*, (Kolkata: Women's Studies Research Centre, CU, 1994), 241.

⁸¹ E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories*, Vol. VI, Part I, Calcutta, 1902, 297.

⁸² E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories*, 300.

being at home. It maintained the purdah system and taught silk weaving, lace work, stocking knitting, and needlework.⁸³

The influence of contemporary political development on the educational field was also recognized by women of the time as depicted in Nirjharini Ghosh's⁸⁴ novel *Pujar Upahar* (1908). The woman character Pravabati, in the novel, was aware of the restrictions on students and teachers participating in the boycott movement. She wanted to learn about the leaders who taught in schools and colleges and was not arrested despite disregarding the restriction. The school authority rejected the order and said they could not interfere in any individual's decision. Pravabati humorously jeered the government and said the school's names should have been removed from the list of the University. The male protagonist-a lawyer of the story said that this step cleared the way for the establishment of the national university.⁸⁵ So Nirjharini's writing shows how women were concerned about political and educational developments and their interest in the affairs outside the home was gradually increasing.

The census of 1911 showed that the growth of female literacy rate was low among women aged between 10 and 20. The reason for this inconsistency was that the progress of education for women was a new development and hence the largest number of educated females belonged below the age of 10. (Though proper comparison could not be done because of changes in the recording pattern of census return.) And the minimal education they got had been discontinued as soon as they left for their in-law's house after marriage. Central Bengal as included in the city of Calcutta was the most advanced region in terms of education.⁸⁶ In comparison to other provinces, Bengal was superior to Madras and Bombay.⁸⁷ The Brahmos seemed to be the most literate community according to the 1911 census though the Parsis from Bombay were not far behind.⁸⁸ So the problem of child marriage affecting women's education was still a vital point in Indian society as cited by the above census report.

⁸³ M. Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, *Progress of Education in Bengal 1907-08 to 1911-12*, Printed in Darjeeling Branch Press, 1913, 119-120.

⁸⁴ She was a regular contributor in women's magazines and periodicals that time, and especially wrote political fictional stories.

⁸⁵ Nirjharini Ghosh, "Pujar Upahar," *Suprabhat*, (November-December, 1908): 182. Another story of her was "Matripujar Dan," *Suprabhat*, (September-October 1908).

⁸⁶ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, Vol. V, Part I, 1911, 357.

⁸⁷ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, 365.

⁸⁸ L.S.S. O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, City of Calcutta*, Vol. VI, Part I, 1911, 52.

As per the 4th quinquennial review of 1907-1912, the number of girls engaged in education increased considerably. While on 31st March 1907, the number was 1,21,195, on 1912, 31st March the number increased to 1,85,816.⁸⁹ Inspector Miss Crawford remarked about subjects taught in Matriculation in girls' schools. She said that English was well taught in mission schools as they had European teachers, unlike the schools under Indian Management. For Bengali learning, vernacular schools run by Indians had an obvious advantage. The study of Geography underwent improvement but the importance of Mathematics in the female curriculum had been mostly ignored.⁹⁰ Shanta Devi in her autobiography talked about the subject of Mathematics. Shanta and her friend Mohitkumari were interested in the subject but they had to rely on private tuition to study the subject after Matriculation since it was not taught in girls' colleges like Bethune. She mentioned that during annual inspection in college, the students were asked about their interest in Mathematics but the concerned authority did not take any initiative to introduce the subject at the college level.⁹¹ So, subjects like English and Mathematics were largely ignored for women's learning. Here again the tracing on '*meyeli siksha*' can be observed. Also, from the nineteenth century to the first decades of the twentieth century the overall picture remained the same.

The primary schools for Hindu girls in districts were in really bad condition in terms of rules or girls' progress. The standard of these schools largely depended upon whether the District Board members or subordinate inspecting staff had any personal interest in female education. These primary schools were planned to be separately allotted for girls and boys but ended up being co-educational because of the general lack of interest in running girls schools. Given the circumstances, girls attending these co-ed schools were routinely cornered by the boys and ignored by the teachers. Given that the teachers were not properly trained, Miss Honeyburne, an Inspector, suggested the recruitment of only qualified teachers for raising the quality of these schools. Girls' schools were generally ignored as all the funds allotted for these schools were used for the overall maintenance and administration of the boys' schools.⁹²

Girls' schools in and near Calcutta were funded by the provincial Government while those outside Calcutta, were aided by district funds. The grants-in-aid were revised in 1904 and

⁸⁹ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 107.

⁹⁰ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 111.

⁹¹ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, (Kolkata: Thema, 2014), 65-66.

⁹² Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 115,117.

decided to estimate on members and their merit only.⁹³ Though the co-education system was discouraged by the Education Commission, sometimes it was the girls' only chance to receive minimal education. The Education Commission's emphasis on "feminine" methods of education such as needlework and domestic science meant a demand for trained women teachers since male teachers who were often obliged to teach in local girls' schools owing to scarcity of female teachers could not do the same.⁹⁴ So the emphasis on the need of trained women teachers proved the dominant nature of '*meyeli siksha*' in Bengal by the fourth quinquennial review (1907-08 to 1911-12).

The 1913 report on education shows that there were three girls' colleges in Bengal, (all located in Calcutta): Bethune College, Diocesan College, and the Collegiate Department of the Loreto House School for Girls. A report from 31st March, 1912 recorded the number of students in Bethune College as 40, out of which 31 were Brahma girls, 8 were Native Christians and 1 was Muhammadan. The report mentioned the existence of a girls' common room which carried books of general interest, a few newspapers and magazines.⁹⁵ This is an important observation, proving material efforts were being made to ensure women's general improvement and overall societal exposure. The Diocesan college included a total of 29 pupils of whom 2 were European, 19 native Christians, 3 Jews and 5 Brahmos.⁹⁶ The college however had no students from the Hindu community.

The fifth quinquennial review talked about a scheme adopted by Eastern Bengal and Assam known as Sadar School Scheme. The objective of the scheme was to set up a good secondary school for girls in each district headquarter town with proper building and accommodation for mistresses.⁹⁷ This quinquennial review talked about the social prejudice against the co-education system. They also mentioned the drawbacks of a pandit teaching at a girls' school since they could not teach "feminine subjects" like domestic science.⁹⁸

Zenana teaching was encouraged by the government. The Government recorded a total of 719 married girls and women under instruction in West Bengal in 1917. This system resorted to

⁹³ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 117.

⁹⁴ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 118.

⁹⁵ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 108 -109.

⁹⁶ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 110.

⁹⁷ W.W.Hornell, Fifth Quinquennial Review, *Progress of Education in Bengal 1912-13 to 1916-17*, Calcutta 1918, 102.

⁹⁸ Hornell, Fifth Quinquennial Review, 1918, 108.

two methods. One was to teach in a central gathering at one's house and another was by visiting each house separately.⁹⁹ *Zenana* education continued to remain in vogue even in 1916-17.

Bengal was showing a very low literacy rate in the 1921 census report. 181 and 21 per thousand were the male and female literacy rates respectively at the age of 5 and above. Burma was the most advanced in literacy rate at this time.¹⁰⁰ It is not difficult to trace the cause of the low literacy rate as it was the decade of the First World War followed by an economic distress. Also, Gandhi's call for non-cooperation added to the dropout rate in High schools and colleges. The movement caused Calcutta's Art College, government colleges at Hoogly, Krishnanagar, Chittagong and the private colleges at Bankura, Berhampore and Rangpur to shut down indefinitely. About 42 per cent of students in the first and third-year classes left their colleges. The Government soon realised that systematic changes had to be implemented to transform the educational system in Bengal.¹⁰¹

The sixth quinquennial review (1917-18 to 1921-22) shows a wide range of problems faced by secondary girls' schools. There were prescriptions for rules and syllabi for these schools both by local government bodies and the public. The scarcity of properly trained teachers created problems. But all agreed that the chief subject should be girls' own language and literature that teach them tradition because it would be helpful in the long run in managing married lives.¹⁰² Around this time women's education was an important concern for both Britishers and the Indians. A gradual increase in the number of girls attending schools speaks for the rising social consciousness among people to send their daughters to schools. Though an urge of breaking the barrier of the *zenana* education had been seen, constant efforts were made to restrict their educational knowledge to the domestic arena.

Keeping in line with the mandates of indigenous patriarchy, the Government's plan for women's educational curriculum reflected similar orthodox sensibilities. A resolution released by the Education Department in 1923 said that a survey should be conducted for girls to organize

⁹⁹ Hornell, Fifth Quinquennial Review, 1918, 110-111.

¹⁰⁰ W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India*, Bengal, Vol. V, Part I, 1921, 285.

¹⁰¹ Resolution No. 3346, Government of Bengal, Education Department, Calcutta, 20th November, 1923, 1-2.

¹⁰² J.W.Holme, Sixth quinquennial Review, *Progress of education in Bengal, 1917-18 to 1921-22*, Calcutta, 1923, 64.

their curriculum according to social usages of the country¹⁰³ keeping in mind their early drop out from schools. The government recommended elementary education including subjects like hygiene, nursing, needle work, cookery and domestic science. It also recommended that a committee comprising a large number of women should be instituted to draw up the curriculum.¹⁰⁴

Social customs like purdah and early marriage still disrupted women's educational progress in 1923. The Education Department regretted the low standard of girls' education and conservative mindset of people. The government also asked for help from other agencies to strengthen their own efforts. In this case, the only private organisation that came forward to cooperate with the government was Nari Siksha Samiti (set up in 1919) and was granted rupees 6500 annually by the Bengal Government for their work. Grants were also provided to some colleges and schools for the same purpose like Diocesan College, United Missionary Girls' High School, the Brahmo Balika Vidyalaya, the Victoria School and Gokhale Memorial Girls' School. The Eden Female School in Dacca was conferred with the status of second-grade college and also affiliated several subjects to Bethune College.¹⁰⁵

A news article of 1929 comparing India's literacy rate with other countries showed India's low percentage of literacy standing only at 5.2 per cent, whereas England was at 93.5 per cent, America at 95.5 per cent, while Japan scored 97.8 per cent.¹⁰⁶ Abinash Chandra Gupta edited weekly *Siksha Samachar* carried a news article in that very year about the decreasing number of students in Bengal's colleges compared to the previous years. Another news article in *Shiksha Samachar* in 1929 discussed how the director of the Education Department in Bengal, Mr. Steplotton had suggested legalizing the Primary Education Bill to make education mandatory everywhere in Bengal as a way to remove illiteracy in the next ten years.¹⁰⁷ Among many things, the economic crisis of the 1920s was one of the crucial factors behind the decrease in student enrolment at this time. The next census in 1931 showed how the economic distress of

¹⁰³ Women have to imparted knowledge within the minimum time they got for gaining rudimentary knowledge before marriage, about becoming an compatible wife and a ideal mother, able to raise a heroic son for the nation's cause.

¹⁰⁴ Resolution No. 3346, 7.

¹⁰⁵ Resolution No. 3346, 7.

¹⁰⁶ *Shiksha Samachar*, (July-August, 1929), 7.

¹⁰⁷ *Shiksha Samachar*, (September-October, 1929), 3.

the 1920s had discouraged parents from upper middle-class households from sending their sons to schools thus causing a dip in male literacy rates around this time as well.¹⁰⁸

Table 1.2. Number of literate males and females in the city of Calcutta and Bengal as a whole in four census years 1901 to 1931

Year	Area	Male	Female	Total Literate
1901	City of Calcutta	1,77,687	32,755	2,10,442
	Bengal province	40,97,574	2,09,900	43,07,474
1911	City of Calcutta	2,40,432	47,435	2,87,867
	Bengal Province	33,23,195	2,52,036	35,75,231
1921	City of Calcutta	NA	NA	NA
	Bengal Province	39,14,814	4,07,831	53,22,845
1931	City of Calcutta	3,62,558	1,11,031	4,73,589
	Bengal Province	19,08,828	2,23,783	21,32,611

Though most of the writings of the period by nationalist male and older generation women advised to stick to tradition, there had been a gradual increase in the number of educated women over the years. The section ‘Mohila Samachar’ in *Bangalakshmi* in 1933 wrote about the growth of women’s education under the heading of ‘Banglar Panchobarsher Nari Shikshar Prochar’ (Announcement about Women’s education in the Past Five Years). Five-year report of the Government of Bengal showed an increase in female students in primary, middle, and higher education and a decrease in boys’ number in educational institutes. The comparative list showed the number of female students in colleges and universities had doubled in the last five years.¹⁰⁹

The decennial review from 1937-38 to 1946-47 witnessed an increase in the number of English Middle Schools rather than the vernacular.¹¹⁰ These schools operated on minimal expectations from its teachers – an educational qualification up to middle school and a training certificate was all that was required.¹¹¹ The lack of trained teachers led to the opening of various

¹⁰⁸ A.E.Porter, *Census of India 1931, Report on Bengal and Sikkim*, Calcutta 1933, 319.

¹⁰⁹ Mohila Samachar, Banglar Panchobarsher Nari Shikshar Prochar, , *Bangalakshmi*, (November-December,1933), 56.

¹¹⁰ John Sargent, Decennial Review, 1937-38 to 1946-47, *Progress of education in Bengal*, Calcutta , 79

¹¹¹ Decennial Review, 85.

training institutes like temporary training centres and training classes attached to ordinary schools and colleges. Despite of all these efforts the number of untrained teachers in the schools remained very high.¹¹² It indicated the scarcity of trained teachers in spite of the setting up of various training schools and centres.

Table 1.3 Education, Trained and Untrained Teachers in the Primary, Middle and High schools from 1937-47

Year	School Type	Category			
		Trained Teachers		Untrained Teachers	
		Men	Women	Men	Women
1937-38	Primary	29,366	790	58,321	4,807
	Middle	3,330	266	7,837	241
	High	2,435	551	14,091	570
1941-42	Primary	37,352	781	56,295	3,246
	Middle	3,623	361	8,094	533
	High	2,873	608	14,689	651
1946-47	Primary	41,467	838	52,334	2,868
	Middle	4,038	423	9,185	751
	High	3,533	756	17,922	912

Over time, training for primary school teachers brought about a marked improvement in terms of the quality and standard of school curriculum. During 1945-46, 3,666 teachers were estimated to undergo training in 129 primary schools and centres. The First-Class Training Schools or the Normal Training Schools of higher grades were for middle school teachers' training.¹¹³ The increasing unemployment problem of the time paved the path for practical and vocational education. Consequently, the importance of schools and colleges for technical,

¹¹² Decennial Review, 127.

¹¹³ Decennial Review, 133.

agricultural, commercial, industrial, engineering and other vocational education also increased considerably.¹¹⁴

The greatest example of such vocational education was Gandhi's Wardha Scheme of Education, a model that has been discussed in detail in the fifth section of this chapter. Incidents like the outbreak of two world wars, the Non-Cooperation Movement, the Great Depression, the Civil Disobedience movement, the Quit India movement, the famine, and finally the Partition, spanning across the first half of the twentieth century also impacted the literacy rate of Bengal quite badly.

Another noticeable phenomenon during the period was forced co-education system. Indian society was always discouraging the co-education learning process. The debate regarding it continued throughout the period. But there were women writers who between 1920 and 1930 made effort to normalise the co-education system for their own good.

Sudhamoyi Devi engaged in a debate in 1928 if co-education was beneficial or not. According to her, to develop proper aesthetic sense in boys and girls the root should be strong. Firstly, the parents should take the responsibility. They should be in a friendly relationship with their children. Secondly in co-education school, girls and boys had friendly relations and men saw various sides and qualities of a woman's life and respect prevailed. Women had not only been the object of desire to men but also respectable.¹¹⁵ Moreover, women became independent, experienced that ensured their own safety in society.¹¹⁶

One can sense gradual acceptance of the co-education system. Anindita Devi (1871-1947), belonging to an educated family and married an educated man, was a famous essay writer of the time. She possessed a determined voice regarding women's issues and favoured the system in 1933. According to her, co-education should be started from the field of education and should have been followed by other fields automatically. Men and women should work together to remove the defects of the education system.¹¹⁷ She was of the opinion that since boys and girls grow up together as siblings and live afterward as husband-wife, then women should not be taught separately as that would deprive them of familiarity. She doubted if there is any difference

¹¹⁴ Decennial Review, 171.

¹¹⁵ Sudhamoyi Devi, "Swa-adhayan," *Bangalakshmi*, (February-March, 1929), 325-326.

¹¹⁶ Sudhamoyi Devi, "Swa-adhayan," 326.

¹¹⁷ Anindita Devi, "Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha," *Jayashree*, (March-April, 1933), 1054-55.

at all or if it is totally a cultural and social construction. She opined that women should be allowed to choose their subject according to their liking and ability.¹¹⁸

In the 1930s itself, Purnoshashi Devi saw the harmful side of the co-education system but also recognized the beneficial side for women. She said the harm would be reduced if women took cautious steps. With changing times, women should also change their attitude but retain the kindness, modesty and humility intact, she thought.¹¹⁹ Anima Majumdar also discussed the issue of equality between men and women. She said without equality at the workplace no nation can progress. She preferred women to join men in every field equally. She argued in favour of a co-education system from the beginning to develop a comfortable workplace in the future.¹²⁰ Henceforth, all of them pointed out the necessity of co-education system from the primary school. There was dilemma regarding it among them all, but they recognized it as a fundamental need to be addressed in the future. The continual writings regarding this points out that the system had not been normalised even at the end of 1930s.

Post-independence, the periodical *Mohila Mohol* (1952) talked about the 1951 census report which showed how during the past two decades the literacy rate increased by more than 13%. While the 1931 census reported a literacy rate of 11.42, the 1951 census showed a rate of 24.58. One who can read and write a letter was considered as literate. West Bengal's population was mentioned as 2,47,86,683. It also gave a district-wise literacy rate list.¹²¹

Table 1.4 Literacy rate in the districts of west Bengal as mentioned in *Mohila Mohol* (1952).

District	Literacy rate (%)
24 Parganas	29.00
Hooghly	25.00
Medinipur	23.00
Darjeeling	21.00
Burdwan	21.00
Nadia	21.00

¹¹⁸ Anindita Devi, "Meyeder Shiksha," *Jayashree*, (August-September, 1932), 378.

¹¹⁹ Purnoshoshi Devi, "Meyeder Shikshar Katha," *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1937), 607-08.

¹²⁰ Anima Majumdar, "Narir Shiksha o Jati Gothon," *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1937), 607.

¹²¹ Paschim banglar Shikshiter Har, *Mohila-Mohol*, (April-May, 1952), 84.

Birbhum	18.00
Bankura	17.00
Kuchbihar	15.00
Paschim Dinajpur	15.00
Jalpaiguri	14.00
Murshidabad	13.00
Malda	9.57

Women's journal like *Mohila Mahal* interested in the literacy rate of women after independence, followed the census and discussed it to inspire women for education. The analysis of the census reports and government reports on the progress of education in Bengal in the first half of the twentieth century provides a picture of the educational growth of women. While this section shows the scarcities and negligence regarding female education, the discussions about women's education in the pages of contemporary periodicals and other fiction and non-fiction works reminded one to appreciate women's constant effort for better tomorrow.

After getting an idea about the progress of female education now it will be apt to discuss the British interventions in the field of education and its significant impact on policies.

II

British Initiatives to Enhance Women's Education in Bengal

Starting in the nineteenth century, colonial states relied on Western education to 'civilize' the Indians. The ideological justification of British rule in India was to civilize the degraded and barbaric people of the country who observed superstitious social customs like Sati etc.¹²² The central issue in this debate revolved around syllabus, method, and reception of Western education amongst the native population.

For administrative requirements of its own, the colonial state needed to organize the education system in India. William Adam first thought about mass education in Bengal in 1835.

¹²² Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 118.

But his proposal was criticized by Thomas Babington Macaulay and eventually rejected.¹²³ Instead of it, Macaulay initiated another plan popularly known as ‘the Macaulay’s Minute’. He wanted to mould an educated class of native people who would be English in taste, opinion, morals and intellect. Macaulay wanted English-knowing urban bureaucrats, loyal to their ruling masters, and played as interpreters between them and the native people to make the administration smoother. Also, they would help to educate the masses which is called ‘filtration theory’.¹²⁴ In 1845 the Northwestern province of Bengal experienced some expansion of elementary education under James Thompson.¹²⁵ The Government first thought about female education in the Wood’s Despatch of 1854. Prior to this, some initiatives were taken by the Calcutta School Society and the British Foreign School Society in the 1820s to educate a few heathen daughters of elite indigenous families and some girls of poorer families in the western line.¹²⁶ But it was marginalised for its failure to adjust to the indigenous schools.¹²⁷

In 1882, the Hunter Commission included Indian educationalists as members of the commission and proposed an Indianisation of the colonial education system. It emphasized primary education in vernacular form. This commission instigated the spread of higher education in the next two decades which needed a rearrangement of the education system in Bengal.¹²⁸ It was the impact of the commission which paved the path for a number of colleges and various institutions for higher learning.¹²⁹

The Education Commission appreciated missionary attempts of *zenana* teaching which was most successful especially after women left schools. Special grants-in-aid by the government were recommended by Sir Alexander Pedler to ten missionary schools in 1901-02 to continue their work.¹³⁰

¹²³ Anish Vanaik, Colonial Education Policy and the Decline of Colonial Education, Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Delhi.

¹²⁴ N.Krishnaswamy and Lalitha Krishnaswamy, The Story of English in India, (New Delhi: Foundation Books, 2006), 31-32.

¹²⁵ Devasis Chakma, Some Major Education Commission During Colonial period, Online Note Bank, 2021, <https://onlinenotebank.wordpress.com/2021/02/25/some-major-education-commission-during-colonial-period/>

¹²⁶ Tim Allender, Colonial Anxieties: The State Embodiment of the Female Teacher-’Trainer’, 1808-1931, in Education in Colonial India: Historical Insights ed. Deepak Kumar, Joseph Bara, Nandita Khadria, Ch. Radha Gayathri, (New Dehi: Manohar, 2013), 326, 328.

¹²⁷ Colonial Education Policy, Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Delhi.

¹²⁸ Chakma, Some Major Education Commission.

¹²⁹ Colonial Education Policy, Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Delhi.

¹³⁰ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 121.

In 1902 Lord Curzon appointed University Commission. It recommended that university's courses be taught in the mode of under graduation and post-graduation education. On its recommendation, the Indian University Act of 1904¹³¹ was introduced.¹³² This Act recommended centralized education at both primary and secondary levels. It extended the power of the university to oversee the operation of affiliated colleges.¹³³ Curzon then announced the plan to partition Bengal in 1905.

Carlyle's¹³⁴ circular of 10th October 1905 asked government-funded schools and colleges to prohibit students from participating in the protest. It said the school and college authorities and teachers must prevent their pupils from taking public action in connection with political questions or in connection with boycotting, picketing and other abuses associated with the so-called Swadeshi movement. Where they loyally desire to prevent such conduct on the part of their pupils and are unable to do so, they must immediately submit a report to the District Magistrate, giving a list of boys who have disregarded their authority, and stating the disciplinary action taken to punish them.¹³⁵

In response, leaders like Abdul Rasul, Bipin Chandra Pal, and Shyamsundar Chakrabarty advocated for setting up a national university. During that time student rallies were a regular phenomenon.¹³⁶ Anti-circular society was formed by Sachindraprasad Basu, Krishnakumar Mitra, and Ramakanta Ray on 4th November 1905. The first national school was set up in Rangpur for the expelled students. The society also started a school at Krishnakumar Mitra's place for the dismissed students. Fund for the national university was also gathered.¹³⁷

In 1905-06 two inspection committees were appointed, one for *Mufassal* and another for Calcutta colleges to invigilate on the management and finance of the colleges.¹³⁸ Overall, it standardized the method of learning and pedagogy under a centralized university scheme.

¹³¹ The discussions in the educational conference of 1901 at Simla and the recommendations provided by the Universities Commission of 1902 resulted in the Universities Act of 1904. The Act focuses on the needs of higher education. It consolidated universities' power to deliver instructions to their students. Banglapedia: National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, [https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Universities Act, 1904](https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Universities_Act,_1904)

¹³² Chakma, Some Major Education Commission.

¹³³ Colonial Education Policy, Institute of Lifelong Learning, University of Delhi.

¹³⁴ He was the chief secretary of Bengal.

¹³⁵ Amiya K. Samanta, *Terrorism in Bengal: A Collection of Documents*, vol. II, Government of West Bengal, 1995, 526.

¹³⁶ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, (New Delhi :people's publishing House,1973), 161.

¹³⁷ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 162.

¹³⁸ Prothero, *Fourth Quinquennial Review*, 16.

Training of female teachers had already started by 1908. The fourth quinquennial report talked about a female training centre in Bakul Bagan, Bhawanipur headed by Mrs. Surabala Mitter who had been sent to England to receive training for two years. It was completely a *parda* institute where the number of students in 1912 was 7. It was a provisional arrangement in the place of the residential training college projected by Sir Archdale Earle.¹³⁹ Indeed, colonial initiatives towards women's education took on a new zeal from the very start of the twentieth century.

Aside from standardizing university education and offering specialized training to teachers, many prizes and scholarships were introduced to encourage female pupils towards higher education. A scholarship named the Duff scholarship was instituted to appreciate outstanding women learners in the field of education. Miss Satya Priya Ghosh was a recipient of the Duff scholarship for standing first in languages at the Intermediate Examination in 1908. Miss Mrinalini Basu for passing the B.A. examination with distinction and Miss Nirmala Nayak for achieving first place in philosophy among female candidates in 1911 were both awarded Ganga Mani Devi Gold Medal.¹⁴⁰

In 1917 Government of India appointed the Calcutta University Commission or the Sadler Commission to survey the whole education system of Bengal from school to university education. It recommended the improvement of secondary education as a way to secure a robust transition to higher studies. It proposed more funding for secondary education. It also highlighted the importance of women's education and professional courses. With the Indianisation of the Education Service in 1919, girls' schools and colleges witnessed an expansion from 1921 to 1931 even though the expansion was mainly limited to urban schools with private funding. The removal of racial discrimination also led to an increasing number of Indian girls attending European Schools.¹⁴¹

The Hartog Committee of 1929 emphasized on the elevated standard of teachers at the primary and secondary education levels. The committee saw the primary level educational problems as more a rural problem rather than an urban one and identified the unwillingness of the poor villagers to send their children to schools as the basic problem. The committee wanted to bring in a more diverse and liberal curriculum at the secondary and primary levels. At the

¹³⁹ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 77.

¹⁴⁰ Prothero, Fourth Quinquennial Review, 110.

¹⁴¹ Allender, Colonial Anxieties, 343.

university level, the committee recommended affiliated, unitary, residential and teaching universities.¹⁴²

In 1926, Mr. E.F Oaten, the director of Public Instruction advised women to be free from the contemporary education system that was totally planned and controlled by men. He also suggested women take the responsibility of their education in their own hands.¹⁴³ He, in a prize distribution ceremony of Bethune College questioned women:

You have asserted yourselves in the field of politics. How long is it before you assert yourselves in the field of secondary and higher education? How long are you going to tolerate a man-made syllabus, a man-made system, a man-made examination and a controlling authority in which women have no influence as dominating arbiters of your educational destinies?”¹⁴⁴

Oaten’s inflammatory speech inspired many, including Anindita Devi. Anindita Devi got respect in her in-law’s house and also time to indulge in writing. But her daughter Amala died due to excessive housework.¹⁴⁵ She realised that the cause of women’s misery was the lack of highly educated women. Women had to depend on fellow men who had a “grave dislike and a distrust” about women’s higher education just as Mr. Oaten had observed in his speech. She agreed with Mr. Oaten that women had to take charge of their own education. She was sure about women’s contribution in this field once they acquired more knowledge.¹⁴⁶ In many ways it may be speculated that Mr. Oaten’s inspirational speech led to the formation of the Bengal Women’s Education League in the late 1920s.

The Central Advisory Board of Education (CABE), which came into existence in the inter-war period, played an important role in moulding India’s education policies. CABE was abolished in 1923 and reconstructed in 1935.¹⁴⁷ CABE’s most significant contribution was the Sargent Scheme of 1944 that sought to solve educational problems in the post-war period. The

¹⁴² Chakma, Some Major Education Commission.

¹⁴³ Anindita Devi, “Meyeder Shiksha,” 375.

¹⁴⁴ Bharati Ray & Aparna Basu, *Women’s Struggle: A history of the All India Women’s Conference 1927-1990*, (New Delhi: Manohar, 1990), 4.

¹⁴⁵ Anindita Devi’s *Rachona Sankolon*, (Kolkata: Dey’s Publishing, 2019). <https://www.deyspublishing.com/product/anindita-devir-rachana---samkalan-hbt15>

¹⁴⁶ Anindita Devi, “Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha,” 1049-50.

¹⁴⁷ Sushil Prasad, ‘Advising Indian Education: Central Advisory Board of Education 1920-1947’, in Deepak Kumar, Joseph Bara, Nandita Khadria, Ch. Radha Gayathri edited *Education in Colonial India: Historical Insights* (New Dehi: Manohar, 2013), 306-307.

board recommended that physical fitness, intelligence and integrity of character of the younger generation should be the focal point of the educational curriculum.

The British educational policies left a deep impact on the development of India but radical nationalist ideas criticized it. The criticism about the colonial system of education and encouraging words for indigenous traditional education were echoed.¹⁴⁸

Perception of *Memsahibs* on Women's Education in Bengal

English women living in Indian territory noticed indigenous resistance to female literacy. Many of them described their observations and experiences during their work among Indian women in various writings. Mrs. E.F. (Georgina) Chapman and Mrs. Marcus Fuller, while writing about female education, focused mainly on missionary efforts. They talked about high class/caste families' restriction to send their girls to school because of which the venture of setting up a girls' school in Calcutta failed. They ignored other initiatives for girls' education in India by secular women like Mary Carpenter and Annette Akroyd around the 1860s and 1870s.¹⁴⁹

Jenny (Mrs Marcus) Fuller (1851-1900) was born in Ohio and worked in India as a missionary with the Christian and Missionary Alliance. She and her missionary husband worked in Bombay and the surrounding region. Her book was published in 1900 named 'The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood'.¹⁵⁰ Mrs. Fuller observed that only nautch girls were taught to read and sing in public. This meant that girls from respectable families could not receive education lest they be associated with dancing girls and bring dishonour to their families.¹⁵¹ Bethune College was established in 1879 as an affiliate from the Bethune Institutions, which were set up in 1850. It was the only college in Bengal supporting women's higher education. She observed that the girl students were either Bengali Christians or the Hindus of Brahma Samaj.¹⁵² In 1895, 29 out of 44 girls attending Bethune College were progressive Brahmos and only 4 were orthodox Hindus. At the beginning of the twentieth century, the picture was almost the same. It was only in 1937 the

¹⁴⁸ Joseph Bara, "Colonialism and Educational Fragmentation in India", in *The Contested Terrain: Perspectives on Education in India* edited by Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 1998), 126-27.

¹⁴⁹ Indrani Sen, *Memsahibs' Writings: Colonial narratives on Indian Women*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008), 180.

¹⁵⁰ Sen, 'Memsahibs' Writings,' 293.

¹⁵¹ Sen, 'Memsahibs' Writings,' 184.

¹⁵² Sen, 'Memsahibs' Writings,' 195-96.

orthodox Hindus outnumbered others at the college.¹⁵³ Patriarchal norms were continuously influencing women's educational progress till the first decades of the twentieth century. There was a constant male effort to keep away women from political developments in Bengal. It was only in 1920s that women started participating in Gandhian mass movement which also propelled them towards education. By 1930s women were much more open to the public space and their revolutionary activities confirmed that. Hence, it was a long journey for orthodox Hindu women to outnumber others in Bethune college.

Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933) worked for trade unions, education and women's franchise. She visited India in 1893 after connecting to theosophy and settled down in India after two years. She was active in the field of women's education and set up the Central Hindu College Girls' School at Benaras in 1904. She believed in ancient ideals in the modern lives of Indian women. Two important writings of hers are 'The Education of Indian Girls' (1904) and 'The Birth of New India' (1917).¹⁵⁴ She thought that Western female education was not suitable for Indian girls. In her opinion, the national movement for girls' education in India must include the Hindu concept of ancient ideals. India preferred perfect wives and mothers, wise queens for the household who would manage everything, be educated teachers for children, be compatible partners of their better halves, be skilled nurses of the sick and good in learned professions (though learned professions involved extensive academic learning like theology, medicine or law). One can assume that Besant wanted to say Indian women were to be equipped with learning suitable to the domestic space.¹⁵⁵ Besant talked about religious, moral and literary education for girls.

Even as Indian society gradually became progressive, life continued to be difficult for a professional woman engaged in independent wage earning. Professionals like women doctors, school inspector or teachers were discriminated and ostracised in society. They were often seen as suspects. Girls' staying away from home created an image of disrespect amongst the reputed villagers. According to Margaret M. Urquhart, the little education given in schools of rural

¹⁵³ Barbara Southard, "Bengal Women's Education league: Pressure Group and professional Association," *Modern Asian Studies* 18, no. 1 (1984): 64. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/312383>

¹⁵⁴ Sen, 'Memsahibs' Writings,' 290.

¹⁵⁵ Sen, 'Memsahibs' Writings,' 199.

districts was valueless. These schools lacked suitable infrastructure, did not stock up on adequate reading material and the education thus received left little impact.^{156*}

Jessie Duncan Westbrook's¹⁵⁷ writing deserves special mention. Westbrook realised the fault with the rules and norms of Indian society and the gender-based segregated spheres.¹⁵⁸ Like Westbrook, Tarabai Shinde too observed inequalities in every sphere between men and women in her book 'A Comparison Between Women and Men-An Essay to show Who's Really Wicked and Immoral, Women or Men?' (1882). In the introduction of the book, she justified her writing for the good of her sisters and expected a better treatment and justice for them.¹⁵⁹ Shinde's book reveals that even after three decades since Westbrook's book, the gendered constructions of male superiority, inequalities, and injustices prevailed in society.

To Westbrook, India appeared to be a country that belonged to men and where women's education was ignored. She expressed her astonishment that a country otherwise full of peace and beauty was exclusively doubtful and antagonistic towards its women.¹⁶⁰ She noticed the ways in which women had been removed from different spheres of life and living – in matters of education, sports, celebrations, festivities, women were largely absent. Women did not enjoy any economic independence and were burdened with responsibilities at home and conjugal life from an early age.¹⁶¹ Westbrook was convinced of the nature of this discrimination when she accompanied her male Indian friends to their locale and witnessed all their achievements. Her scholar friends showed her their colleges, schools, houses, teachers' training colleges with pride. But they never mentioned women's education and empowerment. Westbrook repented that even as accomplished men, no one realised the necessity of women's education and mental growth for the nation's progress.¹⁶²

Even when male counterparts theoretically agreed to the necessity of women's education, in reality they were still hesitant to support women in their various activities, and desire for

¹⁵⁶ Margaret M. Urquhart, 'Women of Bengal', (Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983), 148.

*As Priyobala Gupta's initiative in her village Madhabdi, she had no infrastructure, 'Smritimanjusha' 86.

¹⁵⁷ The writing of the periodical Suprabhat by Jessi dancan Westbrook did not provided her identity, she may be a famous writer from early twentieth century dealing with Ghazals, Lyrics and songs of the Mughal period. <https://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Westbrook%2C%20Jessie%20Duncan>

¹⁵⁸ Ingrej Ramanir Bharater Abhigyata, *Supravat*, (March-April, 1910), 397-403.

¹⁵⁹ Tarabai Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men-An Essay to show Who's Really Wicked and Immoral, Women or Men?*, (Buldhana: Shri Shivaji Press, 1882).

¹⁶⁰ Ingrej Ramanir Bharater Abhigyata, 397.

¹⁶¹ Ingrej Ramanir Bharater Abhigyata, 397-403.

¹⁶² Ingrej Ramanir Bharater Abhigyata, 398.

independence and mobility. Indian men believed women should be well educated not for economic independence but so that they could run the house systematically and efficiently.¹⁶³ Jessi Westbrook wanted women's progress in India at least for their domestic well-being if not for economic independence. She noticed the actual problem lay in the stringent norms of Indian society that tightened women's progress. Being an outsider, she had unbiased observations of contemporary society.

This section, thereby, puts forward European opinion on the female education system. In many ways they constantly tried to encourage women for education sometimes by giving encouraging speeches, sometimes by their scholarships, prizes etc. Memsahib's criticism of the poor condition of native women was of great significance too. Having discussed Europeans' outlook, the next section brings forth the agency of indigenous population in the same sphere. Not only men but also many women carried the same viewpoint about education, representing patriarchal tradition.

III

'Meyeli Siksha': Internalisation and Rejection by Women

The question of education was intimately linked with the cultural upliftment of the indigenous population. Intervention in 'culture' was inevitable in colonial India as a result of civilisational interactions.¹⁶⁴ Upper caste Hindu elites in three Presidencies were quite agreeable with the colonial vision of India's educational reform and administration. Therefore, they received the 'benefit' of colonial Western education as the pioneers. In Bengal, middle-class Hindus expected better opportunities in terms of profession after acquiring Western education. However, they experienced its limitations soon and preferred the mixing of the two worlds.¹⁶⁵ Educated *bhadralok* though in dilemma about the filtered Western impact on Bengali women, they favoured educated wives.

¹⁶³ Ingrej Ramanir Bharater Abhigyata,,402-3.

¹⁶⁴ Deepak Kumar, Joseph Bara, Nandita Khadria and Ch. Radha Gayathri, *Education in Colonial India-Historical Insights*, (New Delhi, Manohar, 2013), 11.

¹⁶⁵ Kumar et. al.*Education in Colonial India*,19.

The last decades of the 19th century and the first decades of the 20th century held women's education as a project for their social and moral amelioration and the betterment of the family. According to Himani Bannerji, the contemporary magazines showed that the private acquirement was the purpose of women's education. Social needs like personality development, managing familial social relations, managing households, child-rearing, and maintaining perfect conjugal life, especially amongst '*bhadrolok*' classes had to be fulfilled by education.¹⁶⁶

Western education facilitated the intellectual enrichment of the educated middle class *bhadraloks* who came to believe in the importance of compatible and companionate marriages. It made them think about women's social position and propose changes in social institutions like marriage and domesticity. They also realised that such marriages could only be achieved when women received education to understand and support their husbands. These thoughts were mainly reflected in the writings of Brahmos at that time as they were better educated community.¹⁶⁷ Many writings in contemporary periodicals warned women about the perils of Western education, culture and way of life. Interestingly most of the critiques were from women themselves. The debate regarding women's education never considered women's desire, problems or necessity in the purview of discussions. Instead, the conjugal necessity of educated husbands, and child rearing was presented as the main reasons for promoting women's educational needs.¹⁶⁸

Issues like the ideal way to educate girls and the purpose of such education were subjects of long-lasting debates. Later, the debate shifted to the impact of modern, western education on women. In various writings by contemporary women writers, women's educational purpose was considered only to serve domestic interests (*meyeli siksha*). Women were typically hailed as queens of the household or mothers of the nation. Naturally, their education had to prepare them for such roles — as devoted caregivers to the family and the nation. The demand of the time for women was to become a '*sumata-sugrihini*' — a good wife and a good mother. For a long time becoming a perfect wife and a perfect mother were the only two purposes of women's education.

Given that the most dominant voices of the time spoke about imparting a specific kind of feminine education to women to enable them to become better wives and mothers, it would be

¹⁶⁶ Himani Bannerji, "Fashioning a Self: Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal," *Economic and Political Weekly* 26, no. 43 (Oct. 26, 1991): WS 51.

¹⁶⁷ Sambuddha Chakravarty, *Andare Antare: Unish Shatoke Bangali Bhadromohila*, (Kolkata: Stree, 1998) 47.

¹⁶⁸ Chakravarty, *Andare Antare*, 49.

important to amplify those voices who advocated for an all-round education for women and even made bold suggestions about teaching men some of these “feminine” tasks. In 1928, an article by Hemlata Devi emphasised the need for women's progress as a way to usher social transformation in Bengali society.¹⁶⁹ She was interested in the progress of the collectivity—the race and the country. Her suggestions were refreshing since it identified women as human beings with access to the outside world and not merely as creatures tied to their domestic responsibilities.

Anindita Devi's '*Meyeder Shiksha*' suggested that men should have the facility to learn about home science, singing, and art too. She argued that expecting women to be experts in domestic duties only perpetuated the gender stereotype. Instead, before marriage, they should be educated in Mathematics, Physics, Science, Geography etc which they would not have scope to learn in the future.¹⁷⁰ She also suggested sending women abroad for education to get rid of their stagnancy and inertia. This, she argued, would help them to adopt new knowledge and gain exposure. Anindita Devi's suggestion appears bold for one important reason – It was typically believed that highly educated women became luxurious and imitated Western culture.

Shanti Sudha, a Mathematician by training and occupation, provided her counterargument about these notions. As a Mathematician, Shanti Sudha in an article '*Meyeder Shiksha*' supported learning Logic and Science. She strongly believed in the power of scientific Western knowledge such as Sex Education, Obstetrics, and Child Psychology to be beneficial to women's lives as they embraced the roles of wives and mothers. Shanti Sudha's suggestions were practical and definitely path breaking – it exceeded societal understanding of a good wife and a mother that was limited to child rearing, domestic duties, and commitment towards her husband.¹⁷¹ She questioned why stitching, drawing, painting, and fine arts were in the list of optional subjects for women and not for men. Since higher education is meant for building civilized persons, a university's goal is to make logical human beings. So according to Shanti Sudha, there should not be any difference between men's and women's education.¹⁷²

So, these radical thoughts in the women's writings confirmed women's constant struggle to overcome the taboos relating to feminine education and Western influences. These pieces

¹⁶⁹ Hemlata Devi, "Meyeder Baire Asha," *Bangalakshmi*, (April-May, 1928), 469.

¹⁷⁰ Anindita Devi, "Meyeder Shiksha," 377.

¹⁷¹ Shanti Sudha Ghosh, 'Meyeder Shiksha', *Jayasree*, (June-July, 1938), in *Nirbachita Rachana-Samkalan* edited by Abhijit Sen & Anindita Bhaduri, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing & School of women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2008), 52.

¹⁷² Sen & Bhaduri, *Nirbachita Rachana*, 51.

were of immense significance in terms of the efforts to erase the differences of male and female education.

As opposed to a few real-life women countering of the patriarchal concept of *meyeli siksha* that prevailed in the twentieth century, we find fictional women characters succumbing to male desires.

Saroj Kumari Devi's story 'Aristo' (1900) was about a newly married couple who had been separated by circumstances after a day of marriage.¹⁷³ The wife, Manorama was supported by her husband Narendra, who out of his desire for a compatible wife, continuously encouraged her to acquire knowledge. Narendra desiring companionate marriage regularly wrote letters to Manorama in order to inspire her to read more and practice writing. Narendra asked: "It is my dearest desire to see you properly educated. Would not you do it to make me happy? Education makes women intelligent."¹⁷⁴ The choice of Narendra's books signalled the desire to live with like-minded and intelligent wife. He sent her books like 'Swarnalata', 'Sushilar Upakkhyan',¹⁷⁵ and 'Nabonari'¹⁷⁶ by post and asked her what she had been reading in his letters.

The desire for intelligent and compatible partner was expressed by male writers too. Prakash Chandra Ray's article in *Bharat Mahila* titled 'Adarsho Dampatya Jibon' (1905) discussed the significance of an ideal conjugal life. Ray was extremely interested in educating his wife Aghorkamini Devi.¹⁷⁷ His article demonstrates how the equation between men and women was gradually changing in upper middle-class Bengali society.

Giribala Devi's story 'Chalana'¹⁷⁸ published in *Manasi O Marmobani*¹⁷⁹ (1919) reflected how the demand for a *sugrihini* or an ideal wife topped the priority of all educated men around this time. Like the protagonist of the story Kamala, Giribala too came from a village until she married in 1903. Her educated husband belonged to the new class of middle-class *bhadraloks*.¹⁸⁰

¹⁷³ Saroj Kumari Devi, "Aristo," *Punya*, (February-March, 1901), 248-49.

¹⁷⁴ Saroj Kumari Devi, *Aristo*, 250. (translation is mine)

¹⁷⁵ Sushilar Upakkhyan was a rule book by Madhusudan mukhopadhyay for women to read.

¹⁷⁶ It is about the new woman as expected by the newly emerged educated middle class men.

¹⁷⁷ Prakash Chandra Ray, 'Adarsho Dampatya Jibon', *Bharat Mahila*, (September-October, 1905), 43.

¹⁷⁸ At the age of twenty Giribala Devi published *Chalana* in *Manasi o Marmobani*. The editor of the periodical Jagadindranath Ray and writer Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay encouraged Giribala to write more. Giribala Devi, *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmalā, Ekabingsho Khanda*, 8.

¹⁷⁹ *Manasi o Marmabani* was a very important journal to publish reviews on art and literature, news of literary activities and criticism. Hitesranjan Sanyal Memorial Collection, Digital Archive, CSSSC, <https://www.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/Englisch/fachinfo/suedasien/zeitschriften/bengali/manasi.html>

¹⁸⁰ Jyotirmoyee Devi, Giribala Devi, *Sahitya Sadhak Charitmalā, Ekabingsho Khanda*, (Kolkata: Bangiyo Sahitya Parishad, November-December, 2004), 4, 9.

Kamala had an unfortunate childhood. She had to take care of her household but she secretly wrote poetry to cope with hardship.¹⁸¹ After marriage, Kamala had to leave the village of her childhood behind and embrace an unimpressive city life in Calcutta.¹⁸² Kamala's husband continuously chastised her for being illiterate which generated a sense of self apathy and inferiority complex in her.¹⁸³ In the story, Kamala's childhood friend Usha criticized her husband's misbehaviour. However, having internalised the desire of the 'new patriarchy' Kamala claimed that she preferred death over the life of an incompatible wife.¹⁸⁴ Despite all this negligence and chastisement, she longed for her husband's love and affection till the end of the story. It showed how the pursuit of the husband's love became the sole objective of a wife. It also showed that conjugal love and blissfulness rested on the attainment of suitable female education.

The story of Kamala was neither fictional nor an isolated instance. In many ways, Giribala Devi's 'Chalana' exemplified the obsessions of Hindu male reformers for creating a compatible companion out of 'traditional' women – an obsession that dates back to the late nineteenth century. As if male expectations were not enough, which constantly tried to connect women to traditional roots, many women of the time also became barriers of female educational progress. The next part discusses some examples of how women themselves reproduced patriarchal orthodoxy to hinder the movement for women's education and liberation.

Journals like *Utsaha*¹⁸⁵ championed the view that women were the queen of the domestic world. Similar ideas about women's education and their role in organizing the domestic world were put forward in Nagendrabala Mustafi Saraswati's (1878-1906) article 'Ramani Hriday' in 1900. Daughter of Nrityagopal Sarkar, Nagendrabala married at the age of ten.¹⁸⁶ In a Hindu family, it was the norm to marry early and take the reins of domestic duties. 'Ramani Hriday' discussed the kind of education that would make the new woman a good fit for performing domestic duties and satisfying the needs of the family. What was a better place to gain that education other than from the elders in the household? Indeed, she was required to learn some

¹⁸¹ Giribala Devi, "Chalana," *Manashi o Marmabani*, (June-July 1919): 518.

¹⁸² Giribala Devi, "Chalana," 518.

¹⁸³ Giribala Devi, "Chalana," 519.

¹⁸⁴ Giribala Devi, "Chalana," 519-20.

¹⁸⁵ Besides publishing fiction literature and literary criticism, the monthly journal *Utsaha* also published essays on the history of Hindu religion, politics and astrology. Editors: Surendrachandra Saha and Brajasundar Sanyal

¹⁸⁶ Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, *Bangasahitye Nari*, (Kolkata, Viswabharati Granthalaya, 1950), 22.

literature, philosophy, and science. All of these were deemed necessary qualities to turn her into a perfect homemaker. Nagendrabala compared women's domestic arena to a prosperous kingdom only if women successfully performed their domestic duties.¹⁸⁷ Nagendrabala also believed that the impact of modern education on women often led them to neglect domestic duties and turned women selfish. In contrast, she cited an instance from the 'Mahabharata' to exemplify how women should practice selfless sacrifices for the good of her family.¹⁸⁸ She mentioned the story of 'Bakasur Badh' by Bhim in Mahabharata (killing Bakasur). As a selfless mother, Kunti sent her son Bhim to Bakasur, the demon in the city of Panchal to save the lives of innocent villagers.¹⁸⁹

Thus, irrespective of the gender of the author, discriminatory view on women's education and status in society continued to be produced and nurtured by the educated middle class in early twentieth-century Bengal. The figure of the sacrificial *sumata-sugrihini*, perfect in domestic chores featured regularly in public writings. Like Nagendrabala, writers often resorted to *Puranic* and Hindu mythological stories to preach how contemporary women could preserve their rich culture and heritage. The responsibility of honouring and preserving the traditions and cultures of indigenous Hindu society of course was placed squarely on the shoulders of women.

Indira Debi Choudhurani, belonging to the affluent and progressive Tagore family, was brought up in a foreign country and studied French in Loreto House. Though a Brahmo, she advocated traditional education for women of the nation falling prey to unfounded beliefs. Three and a half decades later, in 1936, in a section called 'Mohila Bibhag' in the periodical '*Prabartak*', Debi Choudhurani talked about a young girl's natural instinct that should be aligned towards becoming a good wife and later a good mother. Her education therefore should be '*meyeli*' or feminine in nature comprising knowledge about health, proper nutrition, first aid, nursing, cooking, stitching, accountancy, frugality, and child rearing. She suggested some suitable subjects for women's education like religion, culture, language, literature, history, geography, mythology, and art¹⁹⁰ Despite being raised on a staple of Western education herself, it is surprising that she herself was wary of the Western impact on women, much like her contemporaries hailing from orthodox backgrounds. She believed in the merits of a university

¹⁸⁷ Nagendrabala Mustafi Saraswati, "Ramani Hriday," *Utsaha* (1900-1901), 69-70.

¹⁸⁸ Saraswati, "Ramani Hriday," 70-72.

¹⁸⁹ Saraswati, "Ramani Hriday," 71-72.

¹⁹⁰ Indira Debi Choudhurani, "Narir Shiksha o Jati Gothon," *Prabartak*, (November-December, 1936), 198.

education for women same as for men, but not in the professional field. She believed higher education had adverse effects (like an unhealthy body and a weak physique) on those who were preparing to get married and enter domestic life.¹⁹¹ Here, it will be useful to mention Anindita Devi who spent her life fighting against common misconceptions that associated women's higher education with unhealthy lifestyles and weak bodies. In 1932, she regretted the prevailing misconception, and compared notes with those who did not go to school and did not have a healthy life either.¹⁹² Like other conservative patriarchal figures, Choudhurani too talked extensively about home education which she considered important for the personality development of future wives and mothers. This testifies to the co-existence of contradictory views on women's education contemporaneously by a Brahmo and a Hindu woman.

In the consecutive issues of *Prabartak's* 'Mohila Bibhag' section, the same topic as Indira Devi Choudurani article had been discussed by Suruchibala Ray and Pratibha Choudhury in which both echoed Indira Devi's opinion of the necessity of being a good wife and good mother for nation building.¹⁹³

Annapurna Goswami in 1939 while discussing women's responsibility in constructing the race (Hindu Jati) she pointed out the drawbacks of following Western patterns for educating Indian women. As a result, they were becoming fashionable, luxurious and undisciplined which was unacceptable behaviour for a Bengali woman. According to Goswami, women have to be appropriately educated to become the ideal wives, ideal mothers, ideal daughters and ideal companions to their better halves for constructing a civilized nation. Their education should be domesticity oriented, unlike men who were engaged in the outside world. The writer thought the current educational pattern for women following the West made them competitor of men, not the companion. And that was harmful to the nation.¹⁹⁴

Not only did women's writings in articles and autobiographies demonstrate such patriarchal notions about women's education, these ideas found their way in literary writings as

¹⁹¹ Choudhurani, "Narir Shiksha," 199.

¹⁹² Anindita Devi, "Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha," 1056.

¹⁹³ Suruchibalai Ray, "Narir Shiksha o Jati Gothon," *Prabartak*, (December-January, 1936-37), 306-08. Pratibha Choudhury, "Nari Shiksha o Jati Gothon," *Prabartak*, (January- February, 1937), 392-393.

¹⁹⁴ Annapurna Goswami, "Jati Gathone Narir Sthan," *Prabartak*, (December January, 1939-1940), 240. Same attitude was portrayed in Purnoshoshi Devi's "Meyeder Shikshar Katha," *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1937), 607-08, and Usharani Devi's "Adhunik Siksha Paddhotite Dharmobhaber Abhab," *Dipali*, (October, 1939), 135.

well. Prafullomoyee Devi in her story titled ‘Agati’ (1940) wrote about a sixteen-year-old girl called Uma. Uma was routinely criticized by her grandmother for studying, for freely moving about, and even for wearing “fashionable clothes”. As a woman from an older generation, Uma’s grandmother Katyayani believed that Uma was old enough to be married and to become a mother. Thankfully for Uma, her father Tarak consented to continue her education but he believed women should be educated just so that they could perform domestic work with greater efficiency – not because they could step out into the outside world and compete with men. Even her brother’s friend Pradosh also agreed with Tarak. Prafullomoyee’s writing brought to life the real crises women faced in order to persuade family and larger society to agree to their simple demand for a basic education. The story’s title Agati is a gentle reference to Katyayani who had mistaken ‘pragati’ (progress) as ‘agati’, or the lack of inertia. The writing not only highlighted the social evils surrounding the movement for women’s education but the title itself highlighted that the so-called movement itself was frequently in a state of stasis or a-gati (motion).¹⁹⁵

Written in 1948, Santi Devi’s story ‘Nikashito Hem’¹⁹⁶ about the plight of an educated *mejo bou* (middle daughter-in-law) in a well-to-do Hindu family drew on similar concerns. Similar stories about women’s struggle in a middle-class family continued as depicted in this story.

These writings – both fiction and non-fiction – from the late 1940s and even 1950s signal that the movement for women’s education was still struggling to find a strong foundation. Writing in 1950, Hanna Sen, educator from Lady Irwin College and President of the All India Women’s Association, mentioned a University Education Commission report where family planning, child bearing and rearing were mentioned as the woman’s primary profession. The commission’s report about the rapid rate of girls dropping out of school and the small number of girl students enrolled in colleges, suggests that despite the efforts of many men and women for half a century, the goal of achieving women’s literacy and wholesome education was still a distant dream.¹⁹⁷ One ought to address positive attitudes amongst men towards female education.

¹⁹⁵ Prafullomoyee Devi, “Agati,” *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1940), 593-99.

¹⁹⁶ Shanti Devi, “Nikashito Hem,” *Arani-Saradiya Sankhya*, (1948), 75-76.

¹⁹⁷ Hanna Sen, “Samaj Sebabrotinir Chokhe-Ganotantrik Bharate Narir Sthan,” *Mohila Mohol* (December-February, 1950-51), 362.

IV

Initiatives by Indigenous Men towards Equal Education to Women

In the 19th century, much of the progress in women's education in Bengal was the result of male initiative.¹⁹⁸ Brahma Samaj, an indigenous society interested in religious and social reform took the initiative for fostering women's education in Bengal. They considered women's deteriorating condition the biggest obstruction to the progress of Indian society and culture. Though Brahma initiatives for women's education faced many obstructions, at the end of the 19th century even educated conservative Hindu elites started realizing the necessity of female education.¹⁹⁹

Many inspirational pieces came from men in favour of women's education. Ramakanta Ray's article 'Japaner Stri Viswavidyalaya' (Women's University of Japan) (1905) cited the news of women's progress in other countries of the world in the periodical *Bharat Mahila*. Propagating the cause for equally educated women for the welfare of the country, he repented that Indians failed to understand the need for women's progress. He also expressed his disappointment with women performing less important roles in the country.²⁰⁰

Like the last decades of the 19th century, the first decades of the 20th century were also a tough time for women's education. Though the *zenana* system of education was initially preferred, few male guardians were liberal enough to send their daughters to schools and even colleges. One of those examples had been cited in the pages of the journal '*Sourav*' under the title 'Bangomohilar Ucchoshiksha'. It contained letters and articles from 1907 by a man to his niece, Sonar Komol. Sonar Komol sent those writings to the editor of the journal who though possessing conservative views about women's domestic duties, also showed support towards her higher education. In fact, Sonar Komol's uncle had sent her to Calcutta to receive higher education.²⁰¹ In the first letter to Calcutta, her uncle described how he hoped education and higher learning would help Sonar Komol to grow metaphorical wings to gain knowledge of the world outside her immediate environs. He advised her to acknowledge the contribution of Mr. Bethune in women's education and show gratitude towards her teachers.²⁰²

¹⁹⁸ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education league," 56.

¹⁹⁹ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education league," 56-57.

²⁰⁰ Ramakanta Ray, "Japaner Stri Viswavidyalaya," *Bharat Mahila*, (August-September, 1905), 2.

²⁰¹ Sonar Komol Ray, "Bangomohilar Ucchoshiksha," *Sourav*, (December-January, 1913-14), 85.

²⁰² Ray, "Bangomohilar Ucchoshiksha," 88.

Priyobala Gupta's autobiography 'Smritimanjusha' speaks of the kind of support she found in her grandfather (father's uncle), Girish Chandra Sen even though her own father was not quite supportive himself. Priyobala had an avid liking for learning and sought Girish Chandra's help in educating herself when she visited Calcutta during vacations. When she expressed her desire for further education, Girish Chandra enrolled her in a girls' school in Mechuabazar.²⁰³ Priyobala Gupta also mentions men like Girish Chandra Sen, editor of the monthly journal '*Mohila*', who not only advocated women's education but also taught his wife in secret.²⁰⁴

Another initiative came from Motilal Roy, a revolutionary, later inspired by the spiritual path of Aurobindo. Motilal founded 'Prabartak Sangha' in 1920 at Chandannagar, then a French possession. 'Prabartak Sangha' was a charitable institution known for its social works. 'Prabartak Nari Mandir', associated with the Sangha, started its journey in 1920 with one girl child. Later many women - married, unmarried, widows came here looking for shelter. The Sangha took responsibility of their education, and spiritual development. The aim of the institution was to inculcate Indian spirituality and tradition to those women. Dedicated to the residents' overall development, the Sangha routinely arranged excursions to museums, zoos, and other places of recovery and wellness.²⁰⁵

Prativa Basu remembered the school named 'Donovan Balika Vidyalaya' in Madaripur, Bangladesh where she was first admitted around 1921 at the age of six. She talked about the headmaster Lalit Babu (Mr. Lalit) who made a lot of effort to establish the school at a time when the parents of the village were not ready to educate their daughters. But his constant attempt to convince the parents about the necessity of girls' education, won him the title of a 'mad master'. But despite all odds he did not give up and went from door to door to bring the girls to the school. He also made accommodation for four teachers to teach in the school.²⁰⁶

These are the scanty examples of male's supports for women's education that were reflected in women's autobiographies and articles. In fiction too, female authors often introduced

²⁰³ Priyabala Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1999), 35-37.

²⁰⁴ Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, 31.

²⁰⁵ Prabartak nari Mandir, *Nari Mandirer Adorsho o Uddeshyo*, Amiyaprasun Dutta Byakaran Tirtha, (May-June, 1935), 210.

²⁰⁶ Prativa Basu, *Jiboner Jolchobi*, (Kolkata: Ananda, 1993), 13.

male characters who were supportive of their education such as Pravabati Devi Saraswati's novel 'Ahuti',²⁰⁷ Prafullomoyee Devi's story 'Agati'.²⁰⁸

Critique of Patriarchal Bias towards Women's Education

Kamini Ray²⁰⁹ (1864-1933), a progressive Brahmo woman realised the real nature and implications of patriarchal hindrances to women's education. In an article 'Gyanbrikker fol' (Fruit of the knowledge tree) in 1905 she pointed out that the monopoly of *bhadralok* over knowledge, deprived women and the lower-class from the benefits of education.²¹⁰ She also noted that due to domestic work, women had less opportunity for education contrary to men.²¹¹ Ray exclaimed that the education system structurally favoured men over women. *Bhadralok* were indifferent towards women's higher education because they wanted to avoid competition from the women. Indifference also came from a place of fear and anxiety - "pache ora amader moto hae" (*What if they become like us?*).²¹² Women could disprove all allegations of being the inferior sex if they had similar access to education as men and that is what terrified men, Ray added.²¹³ This was indeed a radical critique that found a space in *Bharat Mahila*. She had been perceptive enough to reflect reality.

In 1907 Hemlata Sarkar cited a valid point in her article 'Nari Jatir Shiksha' (Education of women folk). Though women's education was more or less an accepted fact by then, the old debate about the nature of women's education continued.²¹⁴ The gender difference was at the very heart of this debate. Hemlata opined that the differences increased because historically women lacked access to education. And the gap could only be bridged by giving access to higher

²⁰⁷ Suruchibala Ray, "Ahuti," *Sachitra Sisir*, (May-June, 1924). *In this novel the woman protagonist is a child widow, who was sent to boarding school for study by her uncle.

²⁰⁸ Prafullomoyee Devi, *Agati*, *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1940), *in this story also the woman protagonist's father was supporting her for her interest in education, going against his mother's will to marry her off.

²⁰⁹ She was a Bengali poet, social worker and feminist. Also, the first honours Graduate girl student in British India. She was born in Bakerganj District, now in Bangladesh, and joined Bethune School in 1883. Acquired B.A. degree in Sanskrit from Bethune College in 1886. She took her feminist zeal from Abala Bose.

²¹⁰ Kamini Ray, "Gyanbrikker fol," *Bharat Mahila*, (September-October, 1905) in Abhijit Sen & Anindita Bhaduri edited Kamini Ray er Agranthita Gadyarachona, (Kolkata: Bharbi, 2002), 22.

²¹¹ Sen & Bhaduri, Kamini Ray, 22.

²¹² Sen & Bhaduri, Kamini Ray, 23.

²¹³ Sen & Bhaduri, Kamini Ray, 23.

²¹⁴ Hemlata Sarkar, "Nari Jatir Shiksha," *Bharat Mahila*, (April-May, 1907), 1.

education for girls.²¹⁵ Tim Allender clearly said the educational reformers for girls in colonial India, ignored the strong pre-colonial educational tradition. The characteristics of contemporary girls' education in India were totally gendered and aimed to fulfil the cultural deficits of Indians. As a result, one could hardly find successful careers of girls under the Raj.²¹⁶

Priyabala repented in almost every page of her autobiography about her incomplete education. Though a good student her education was discontinued after her father's transfer from Cuttack. Since he declined the school's proposal of letting her continue her education in Cuttack, she called him out for his gender biases for her brother was sent abroad for higher education.²¹⁷ This indeed was a moment of resistance on her part against the patriarchal authority, personified by her father. This made her stance towards women's education radical.

'Katha Prasanga' -a section in *Bangalakshmi* attracts our attention to an article titled 'Sikshita Bondini' (Educated Captive) written by an anonymous author. The title itself expressed the pain of a woman's confinement. As the title used the word '*Bondini*', it could be assumed that it was written by a woman because the word '*Bondini*' is a feminine version of the word '*Bondi*' (captive) in Bengali.²¹⁸ The article talked about the ways in which educated men had the opportunity to communicate with others and apply their acquired knowledge. However, in the case of educated women, they lacked a similar access to verify their knowledge because of their confinement to households. The writer demanded equal opportunity for versatile experiences for women like men. Otherwise, the problem and failure in women's education would remain the same.²¹⁹

Likewise, Anindita Devi too noticed the obstacles that women faced around the early decades of the twentieth century. Male members of society were indifferent to women's education and did not consider it as important as a boy's education. This general indifference meant that there was hardly ever money to build proper institutions for women.²²⁰ Anindita Devi was particularly critical of educated men because they entered the modern world before women and despite enjoying its privileges, confined women at home for their own good. She felt that

²¹⁵ Sarkar, "Nari Jatir Shiksha," 4.

²¹⁶ Tim Allender, *Learning femininity in colonial India, 1820-1932*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 6.

²¹⁷ Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, 62.

²¹⁸ Anonymous, "Shikshita Bondini," *Bangalakshmi*, (February-March, 1927), 96-97.

²¹⁹ Anonymous, "Shikshita Bondini," 98.

²²⁰ Anindita Devi, "Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha," 1054.

men should not have the right to decide a women's destiny or repress her at home. She wished that instead of suppressing women, men should enable women as partners to make their own choices and save each other from the hazards of life.²²¹ The struggle for women's education had been largely consumed in finding suitable subjects that would enrich a woman to maintain a more efficient household. But Anindita Devi suggested that education would make women economically independent and eventually allow them to choose like-minded men as their companion.²²²

She did not want women to follow their male counterparts, but rather experience and experiment with life together, as equals.²²³ Men generally preferred women's higher education to be limited to the Bengali language. Patriarchal justification for this was that the little English education the girls have got in school was of no use. But Anindita Devi thought that the scant knowledge women got in school could be bettered in future. She felt that if women learnt Bengali alone, they would have to depend on translations for further knowledge owing to the dearth of Bengali books in higher education. Anindita Devi found it ironic that men who advocated Bengali education for women were themselves educated in the Western systems.

Shanta Devi's account depicted instances of the obstacles she and her sister had to face. Instead of explicitly criticizing her family's intervention on her career, she expressed her inability to land a job in a school. She mentioned how even after completing her B.A. degree she had to help her mother manage the household, whereas her brother travelled abroad for higher education. Despite being a progressive man of his time, Shanta Devi's father micromanaged her career and took decisions on her behalf. This was not an unusual occurrence, but one expected self-proclaimed cultural and elitist families of the time to be a little more liberal in their thoughts and practices. Even though Shanta had not written anything about the gender discrimination between the siblings in her household, but the mere mention of her brother's overseas travel for higher education while she was consumed in domestic chores, suggests that she was aware of the unequal power relation that structured her life.²²⁴ She also mentions how an anonymous person chastised her father for not allowing her to work after graduation. When she and her sister translated something for the journal '*Probashi*' they took a pen name of an ostensible male

²²¹ Anindita Devi, "Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha," 1050-51.

²²² Anindita Devi, "Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha," 1056.

²²³ Anindita Devi, "Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha," 1051.

²²⁴ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 70.

person 'Jagatdurlav Bhattacharya'. When Shanta's sister Sita earned her B.A. degree, they started teaching at 'Brahmabalika Shikshalaya' as unpaid teachers.²²⁵ Shanta also mentioned a novel named 'Uddanlata' published in *Probashi* that she along with her sister wrote under the pen name of 'Sanjukta Devi'.²²⁶ These instances reflect the conservative side of contemporary society where women had to use pseudonym to express their ideas. She concluded that women's mental ability is no less than men's. As a Mathematician, she argued that access to equal knowledge and education for men and women led to parity in the socio-political field. Shanti Sudha's apprehension in searching the root cause of reforming women's education system led to women's growing power and position in society.²²⁷

Writings of women -- covertly or otherwise -- thus reflected the real picture of Hindu conservative society at the time. Women realised how patriarchal machinations were increasingly bringing barriers to their progress.

Women's Initiative to Change

Rather than being restricted to critical writings alone, gradually women tried to overcome the hindrances on the path to education by forming women's associations, and institutional foundations to promote women's education. Women's associations played a crucial role to inspire women to be involved in activities outside home. Through these associations women interacted with one another and gained knowledge about the world outside their domesticity. Additionally, the books, periodicals and newspapers they got to read in those gatherings inspired them in many ways.

Saroj Kumari Devi, a Brahma woman, visited 'Ranchi Nari Samiti' in 1913. The periodical '*Suprabhat*' carried the encouraging speech that Saroj Kumari gave to the women of the Samiti. In her speech, she supported the need for women's associations.²²⁸ She focused on the differences between old and new customs that women followed. Like many of her contemporaries, she also advocated for women's education that would help women run their

²²⁵ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 71.

²²⁶ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 74.

²²⁷ Sen & Bhaduri, *Nirbachita Rachana*, 52.

²²⁸ Saroj Kumari Devi, "Bartaman Juge Stree Jatir Unnotir Upae," *Suprabhat*, (March-April 1913): 405-412.

households properly under the instruction of the husbands. To quote her- "*Amra antahpurbasini-antahpurke swarga koribar je sakal upae ache amra sei guli abalamban korite chai*" (We, the dwellers of the inner quarters, wish to resort to every possible way for the upkeep and well-being of the household to make a heaven out of it).²²⁹ Overall, her focus was to foreground the case that a compatible wife was the need of the hour for a healthy conjugal life. She must be educated, efficient in singing, conversant in social gatherings, and accompany her husband in travels. In short, Saroj Kumari's descriptions sat well with the qualities a 'new woman' was supposed to have.²³⁰ She proposed that Indian women should adopt the best from the British domestic culture in order to make Indian domestic life systematic and neat.²³¹ As a Brahmo woman her idea of women's education exclusively channelled towards the better management of domestic lives was no doubt a conservative view but her advocacy for women's associations was crucial for women's unity and empowerment.

Sarat Kumari Ray from the 'Rajshahi Mohila Samiti' in 1925 also cited the positive effect of the association's gathering at 'Pramathanath Balika Vidyalaya'. Earlier, girls were confined at home by their parents once they had received the basic education. But after seeing women's gatherings and meetings at the school, parents also started taking further interest in the girl's education.²³²

In this context, the role of the Bengal Women's Education League is deemed important for discussion. In 1919 Calcutta University Commission surveyed women's higher education in Bengal for the first time and suggested two different types of women's education -one was *zenana* education, for those who maintained *purdah* and another for those minorities who wanted to earn their own livelihood. Especially after Montague Chelmsford reforms when education became a transferred subject under the control of the provincial government, women took extra interest in forming organisation.²³³ In 1926 Mr. Oaten, the Director of Public Instruction asked women to provide their organized views and opinions about the education system they wanted for themselves. His fiery speech at Bethune College was a catalyst to inspire women to form Bengal Women's Education League in 1927.²³⁴

²²⁹ Saroj Kumari Devi, "Bartaman Juge," 407.

²³⁰ Saroj Kumari Devi, "Bartaman Juge," 408.

²³¹ Saroj Kumari Devi, "Bartaman Juge," 409.

²³² Sarat Kumari Ray, "Rajshahi Mohila Samiti," *Bangalaksmi*, (January-February 1925): 23.

²³³ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education League," 59.

²³⁴ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education League," 59.

In 1927, the first Bengal Women's Education Conference (BWEC) was held in Calcutta. The second conference was held in February 1928 that saw the participation of almost 300 women. BWEC was moderate and less political in character, unlike the All India Women's Education Conference which in 1929 changed its path by adding, besides promotion of women's education, reforms like the elimination of child marriage to its agenda. It took the name All India Women's Conference.²³⁵

It was very obvious that by the time the league was formed, the daughters of the first wave of Brahma reformers were already of mature age and took the lead.²³⁶ Two famous Brahma sisters, daughters of Durga Mohan Das, Abala Das and Sarala Das initiated the formation of this league.²³⁷ The league was involved in activities like efforts to include girls in provincial schemes of compulsory education, classes for adult women, and activities for women's arts and crafts including fairs, exhibits, and demonstrations. Improvement of professional teachers was also an agenda of the league. They arranged regular meetings and lectures for teachers' benefit. Subjects like arithmetic, child psychology, and vernacular teaching were also discussed. The league provided suggestions for women's scholarships, syllabi for women's schools, and organisation of a women's Teacher Training College, among other things.²³⁸

Abala Basu,²³⁹ (1865-1951) a Brahma lady, famous in the field of social work for women's education, talked about 'Nari Siksha Samiti' on the occasion of the foundation of 'Vidyasagar Banibhaban' in 1922. The association supervised the establishment of almost fifty schools in and outside Calcutta which achieved the literacy of 5000 girls. It was set up to train young Hindu widows in literature and handicrafts and as a way to tackle the scarcity of female teachers in the girls' schools. Though every trained widow could not join a teaching job, they became the earning members of the family by practicing handicrafts at home during the time of economic distress. As a way to offer economic independence to women and help them support

²³⁵ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education League," 60-61.

²³⁶ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education League," 64.

²³⁷ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education League," 65.

²³⁸ Southard, "Bengal Women's Education League," 62-63.

²³⁹ was one of the first lady doctors from Bengal, married to scientist Jagadish Chandra Bose. As a Brahma lady she took those brave steps at a time when women were being deprived of proper education.

their families through economic precarities, in 1926 the association opened ‘Mohila Shilpobhaban’ to teach them stitching, weaving, colouring clothes, and printing.²⁴⁰

Anindita Devi wrote about the necessity of financial aid from the rich sections of society to the cause of proper women’s education. Instead of contributing all the money for religious purposes, she suggested that rich women contribute to the field of education. The lack of renowned schools might have caused women’s imperfect and often incomplete education. Otherwise, many preferred to send their girls to schools.²⁴¹ Women, therefore, was expected to be cautious about socially conservative views. And at the same time, primarily by taking help from their male counterparts, they had to decide on their own education.²⁴²

Shyammohini Devi extended her contribution to the field of education by founding a school named ‘Banipith’ in January 1934 to apply her own idea of teaching. ‘Banipith’ taught girls basic knowledge for the duration of 7 or 8 months up to class VI. They were then sent to various teachers’ training schools for the entrance tests. About 30 girls got the chance. Some of them were unable to take admission for lack of money. The training included stitching, drawing, chalk drawing, paper cutting, mud work, first aid, home nursing, singing, and teaching Sanskrit hymns. There were demands for this kind of trained teachers in the villages also. But the number of trainees was very limited because of the lack of money. She appealed to the Calcutta Corporation for grants to the trainees.²⁴³

The above-discussed examples of different kinds of women’s associations and their activities give an overview of women’s contributions in the field of education. The growing consciousness about financial independence and the need for suitable living conditions for themselves propelled them to gain awareness towards new developments in educational fields in the country. Following this, a short discussion on Gandhi’s Wardha Scheme of Education and Tagore’s idea of Shantiniketan would further amplify the chapter and to complete the arc of women’s educational trajectory in the period.

²⁴⁰ Abala Basu, “Nari Siksha Samiti,” *Jayashree*, (October- November, 1932), 582-83.

²⁴¹ Anindita Devi, “Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha,” 1053.

²⁴² Anindita Devi, “Meyeli o Purushali Shiksha,” 1054.

²⁴³ Shyammohini Debi, “Stri Shikshar Samasya o Tar Protikar,” *Bangalakshmi*, (February-March, 1935): 197-98.

V

Women's Views Regarding Educational Ideals of Gandhi and Rabindranath

Gandhi's Wardha scheme of education left a huge impact on people all over the country. It dealt with the education of children aged between 7 and 14 years. For Gandhi, education meant an all-round development of the mind, body and soul.²⁴⁴ According to him "true education is that which draws out and stimulates the spiritual, intellectual and physical faculties". In the inaugural speech at All India National Education Conference, Wardha on October 22, 1937, Gandhi argued the basis of primary education in India is vocational and manual training.²⁴⁵ He said "I would therefore begin the child's education by teaching it a useful handicraft and enabling it to produce from the moment it begins its training.....I hold that the highest development of the mind and the soul is possible under such a system of education. Only every handicraft has to be taught not merely mechanically as is done today, but scientifically i.e. the child should know the why and the wherefore of every process". This way of education led to a certain degree of proficiency unlike the factory style education usually peddled to school students.²⁴⁶ The model also promised to resolve the pressing problem of unemployment that had plagued Indian society following the economic crisis. The handicraft training ensured that students would be able to support themselves after graduation.

A story written in 1940 by Ashalata Singh raised an important debate over the advantages and disadvantages of the Wardha Scheme of Education. The story has two women characters, Sami and Dipti. While Dipti was fond of reading newspapers and was opinionated, Sami was portrayed as an ignorant woman who could not read and thus had no idea of the outside world. When both of them began discussing Gandhiji's educational plan on Dipti's suggestion, two different opinions emerged from their conversation. Dipti understood the practical benefits of an education but at the same time, she appreciated the other side of education that allowed her to indulge in the literary works of Rabindranath and Saratchandra. Sami however was in support of the Gandhian way of education where he stressed on learning a handicraft along with education. For her, the appeal of education lay in learning about restraint, frugality and life's other practicalities. She thought as an impoverished country India would benefit from the Gandhian

²⁴⁴ Harijan 31/7/37, M.S. Patel, *The Educational Philosophy of Mahatma Gandhi*, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing Home, 1953), 17.

²⁴⁵ Harijan 11/9/37, Patel, *The Educational Philosophy*, 18.

²⁴⁶ Harijan 31/7/37, Patel, *The Educational Philosophy*, 19.

system.²⁴⁷ Ashalata's story pointed to two things. One, it dispelled the myth that women were only interested in "pleasure" reading farces and dramas. Two, in writing about two women debating the advantages and disadvantages of Gandhian educational model, it showed that the twentieth century woman was just as interested in current affairs and developments in the field of national education.

Rabindranath Tagore established a school in Santiniketan in 1901. He chose rural Bengal as the location for his institution to keep distance from the Congress-led nationalist movement. He named it Visva Bharati, which can be translated as world learning or world culture. Rabindranath wanted his institution to be free of politics. His only goal was nation-building through development of personalities. Uma Dasgupta has argued that Rabindranath wanted to spread Indian sensibilities and practices to the modern world through his work in Santiniketan and Sriniketan. It clarified that Tagore was open to western knowledge systems, his disagreement and opposition was limited to the nature and impact of aggressive imperialist rule.²⁴⁸

Shanta Devi, had always been interested in different subjects and was inspired by many of her teachers in school and college. She gave a detailed description of her educational inspirations in her account. At that time when women had limited exposure to academic institutions, she went to Santiniketan along with her father and other friends to experience the system and of course to meet Rabindranath Tagore.²⁴⁹ She wrote in her autobiography that the characters like Sucharita and Gora in the novel 'Gora' by Rabindranath inspired her to study there and meet Tagore. The other reason she mentioned was the new idea of an educational institution that Shantiniketan represented.²⁵⁰ Overwhelmed by Tagore's personality she writes: "*Je prithibite amra bas kortam tar theke natun ekta loka jano ese porlam*" (We arrived at a new place from the world we inhabited).²⁵¹

In 1915, while writing on the subject of women's education, Tagore mentioned a letter from Lila Mitra where she regretted that no one asked women for their opinion on education. It

²⁴⁷ Ashalata Singh, "Sabjanta," *Uttara*, (June-July, 1940), 175-76.

²⁴⁸ Uma Das Gupta, "Tagore's Educational Experiments at Santiniketan and Sriniketan," in *The Contested Terrain: Perspectives in Education in India*, ed. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Limited, 1998), 265-266.

²⁴⁹ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 69.

²⁵⁰ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 69.

²⁵¹ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 69.

was always patriarchal imposition. Mitra wrote that it was high time that women took a step forward to secure their own freedom and wellness for education was everyone's birthright. Women were not to consider domesticity and motherhood the goal of her life or hide behind her male counterpart but emerge as a companion in their shared crises, happiness, and sadness.²⁵² Tagore agreed with Mitra for he, too, believed there should not be any difference between men and women when it came to learning and knowledge. However, Tagore believed that given that the structure of women's bodies is different from men, it meant that the application of knowledge too would be different. Understandably, for women who believed Tagore to be an ally for their feminist cause, this opinion was rather disheartening. Some excerpts of Tagore's writing on this issue were later reprinted in 1950 in a periodical called '*Mohila Mahol*'²⁵³ proving that the concept of women's education remained largely unchanged at least till the first half of the twentieth century. The words written in 1915 remained relevant even in 1950.

Conclusion

The first few years of women's writings in the twentieth century was largely dominated by the bold and progressive opinions of the women from Brahma community. The 1920s and 1930s were the two most crucial decades which witnessed flourishing of women's writings, especially in the pages of periodicals. These were also the decades which witnessed a large number of women participate in political struggles, in struggles for greater economic independence, and struggle for socio-cultural reform. These two decades were, therefore, undoubtedly the most significant for women's advancement. This chapter will finally conclude with a piece from 1950 that fits perfectly with the subject under discussion. Written by Sabita Sen, the story, 'Adhunik Meyer Proti Poura Mayer Bhason' (Elderly mother's advice to modern daughter) captured the mindset of four generations. Kamala Devi, the daughter of a vanguard of women's education at that time, talked to her daughter Anubha about her constant struggle against traditional values and ideas to be educated during 1910s. Kamala's grandmother belonged to an older generation who believed only Christians or untouchables could go to school. Caught between her

²⁵² Rabindranath Tagore, *Bichitra*, 261-62.

²⁵³ *Mohila Mohol* was a periodical conducted and edited by women. The editor was Gita Basu. The issue which reprinted Rabindranath Tagore's article in September-October, 1950, 1.

grandmother and mother's outrage on one side and her father's encouragement on the other, Kamala Devi found herself in a challenging position where she was forced to balance school work with domestic duties leaving her no time to play and enjoy the simple joys of childhood. She started conversations around growth in the field of women's education in Calcutta and other parts of Bengal but regretted that small districts like Hooghly were left behind. Some missionary schools were set up but attracted very few girl students.²⁵⁴

At 15 years of age, Kamala was married off to a person who wanted an educated wife. Her mother-in-law on the other hand was apprehensive about the ways of an educated daughter-in-law. Once again, Kamala found herself caught between her husband's ambitions and her mother-in-law's suspicions.²⁵⁵ Kamala called women in her generation '*yugantarer shahid*' – martyrs of the transition period – those who sacrificed everything to receive public education and yet faced the indignation of the earlier generation at home. Anubha's generation was lucky to have an educated generation of mothers, aunts, and mothers-in-law which made their living easy and comfortable.²⁵⁶

The story of Kamala and Anubha wonderfully captures the struggles of a trailblazing generation of women who paved the path for a new generation for whom women's education and liberation were relatively made easier and enabled achievable goals. This chapter, thus, demonstrates that the issue of women's education covered expansive themes, addressed diverse concerns rooted in the socio-economic scenario of the period and generated a whole range of debates. The question of education exposed the overlaps between traditionalist and modernist ideas and illuminated that women as a category was neither homogenous nor did they bear the same values or opinions.

²⁵⁴ Sabita Sen, 'Adhunik Meyer Proti Poura Mayer Bhason', *Mohila Mahol*, (August-September-October, 1950), 168-169.

²⁵⁵ Sen, 'Adhunik Meyer Proti', 171.

²⁵⁶ Sen, 'Adhunik Meyer Proti', 168.

Chapter 2

Debating Women's Economic Independence: An Overview

Introduction

After discussing women's educational consciousness in the early 20th century, the most pertinent question that strikes us is related to women's economic independence. While the normative social expectation for men was to acquire education to attain economic independence, it was a debatable issue when it came to women. The purpose of their education has been discussed in the previous chapter. There was silence about women's financial independence. In this chapter, this aspect of women's lives will be explored. There was clear discrimination in terms of economic independence of men and women respectively. It was believed that women's education should be for the strengthening of the household and the building of the nation. The sole purpose was therefore social and not economic in nature.

This chapter deals with census data to assess women's participation rate in the economy. As this study is limited to the educated middle-class *bhadramahila*, the reading of the census would be limited to the jobs that this class usually resorted to such as teaching, medical service, midwifery, and to a limited extent, public administration. Further, the historiography regarding the paid work of women of the time would be included in the present analysis in order to understand contemporary women's writings better.

The chapter will also discuss women's initiatives for their economic independence and the social composition that facilitated their independent earnings in the next section. The fourth section will discuss the obstacles for women. Also, women's opinions of the suitable work reflected in their writings in reality and fiction will be delved into in the section.

This chapter will seek to find answers to the following questions: what was the condition of women's economic independence in Bengal in the early twentieth century and what did women have to say about it? Was the middle-class *bhadramahila* conscious about the situation of women situated lower in social hierarchy and their living conditions in rural or urban spaces? Were women conscious enough about the country's economic condition beyond their immediate

surroundings? Did their writings depict the contemporary economic conditions and its impact on them? What kind of problems were women speaking of? What were the practical options available to women who wished to be wage earners?

I

Census: Reflection of Women's Economic Condition

To begin with, it is important to know the situation of Bengal as a province in the early years of the 20th century to understand and analyze women's writings comprehensively. Women's lives went through a transition in this period. The chapter will begin with an analysis of census records to realise the actual economic condition of the period under consideration. This section also help to understand the obstacles women had to face due to contemporary changes in the economy and polity. The chapter seeks to find out changes that made it easy for women to participate in the job market.

India had only 450 female workers against every 1000 male workers in 1901. The number rose to 466 in 1911.²⁵⁷ In every census report it was evident that most of the occupations were dominated by male workers. Only homegrown or less intensive activities like field labour, rice pounding, cotton spinning, flour grinding, silkworm rearing, cocoon gathering, rope and net making, midwifery, tattooing, and sex work saw women outnumbering male workers.²⁵⁸ This picture was common throughout the first half of the 20th century. But these women are not the subject of this thesis which focuses on *bhadramahila* or educated middle class women. However, there is no denying that it is important to know the lower-class participation percentage in the economy to understand the actual sharing of the percentage of *bhadramahila* in economy of Bengal in the early twentieth century.

Women's participatory role in the paid job market was reflected in the census reports on the urban area of the Bengal Presidency, specifically Calcutta. The middle class *bhadramahila* gradually penetrated the male job market over the course of the early twentieth century. The 1901 census report showed educated women being employed as clerks in government offices.²⁵⁹

²⁵⁷ Risley and Gait, *Report on the Census of India*, Vol. I, 1901, 201. Gait, *Report on the Census of India*, Vol. I, 1911. 411.

²⁵⁸ H.H. Risley and E.A. Gait, *Report on Census of India*, Vol. I, 1901, 201.

²⁵⁹ J.R. Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India, Calcutta Town and Suburbs* Vol. VII, Part IV, 1901, 84.

Roles such as editors and journalists, medical practitioner (with or without license), compounders and nurses, teachers, principals, and professors, albeit in lesser numbers than male workers. The women practising medicine comprised 30.4% as shown in 1901 census (this percentage included all religions). And the compounder and nursing jobs were more evenly distributed with 678 females and 831 males. The number of women employed as principals, professors and teachers shot up drastically between 1891 (214 women) and 1901 (579 women). So educated middle-class women were increasingly participating in paid jobs by the turn of the twentieth century.²⁶⁰

The data available from census reports offer a partial picture of the actual economic conditions of the time. The number of female teachers employed across the Bengal province was not specifically mentioned in the census. The medical practitioners with or without a diploma were not recorded properly. The number of midwives or *dhais* mentioned is 33,000 but in reality, the number must be higher. Because they usually were the wives of village Chamar, Hari or Dom (lower-class / castes) and returned under their husband's occupation. Under such circumstances, males became the actual workers and women the dependents. Hence, an error can be ascertained in the entry of the record.²⁶¹

1901 census shows a huge number of untrained midwives from lower class and caste backgrounds. Alongside, this study would show women from upper class families like Priyobala Gupta who took an interest in midwifery, not as a profession but as social service. Priyobala Gupta was one such woman who was involved in the work of a midwife in her village Madhabdi. Many bitter experiences in her past made her interested in this work. She bought some books on this subject and read them extensively. She also mentioned some of the names like – '*Briddda Dhattrir Rojnamcha*' by Dr Sundarimohon Das, '*Paribarik Griha Chikitsa*' by Dr Mahesh Bhattacharya, and '*Prosuti Paricharjya*' by Dr Bamandas Mukhopadhyay to name a few. To gain experience in this field, she sought help from the *zamindar*'s wife. Despite much opposition, she continued her good work and succeeded in removing natal death from Madhabdi. The years of her activities is not clear from her autobiography.²⁶² It is also not clear whether Priyobala did this as part of social work or got paid for her service. Census report of 1901

²⁶⁰ J.R. Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India, Calcutta Town and Suburbs* Vol. VII, Part IV, 1901, 90-91.

²⁶¹ E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their Feudatories*, Vol. VI, Part I, Calcutta, 1902, 478.

²⁶² Priyobala Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1999), 94-95.

showed this work was confined mainly to the lower castes like *Chamar*, *Hari* or *Dom*.²⁶³ The middle-class women were restricted to '*meyeli shiksha*' (feminine education) and in these field of professional employment that was 'suitable for women'.

The 1901 census also mentions that lower-class women were mostly engaged in informal services like cooking and domestic work in Calcutta.²⁶⁴ The 1911 Census of Calcutta showed a large number of lower-class women's participation in domestic industries like rice pounding, rice-husking, parching of grain and domestic services – services that were rarely performed by men.²⁶⁵ The 1911 census report on Calcutta also indicated a rise in women's participation in jobs such as nursing, midwifery and vaccination support. Women at this time were also engaged in a diverse range of occupations as fish vendors, religious mendicants, stenographers, and typists.²⁶⁶ In all, the census reports of Calcutta till 1911 showed a significant presence of lower-class women workers. Middle-class women were largely inconspicuous in these economic indexes. They appeared in the job market in the city space, only where education was needed. Otherwise, in the Bengal province and in Calcutta the lower class and caste women's participation in works like rice pounding, rice-husking, parching of grain and domestic services were visible.

The census report of the Bengal province more or less told the same story as the city of Calcutta in 1911. It added that as Bengal was a richer province than Bihar and Orissa, the *bhadralok* middle-class women – mostly bound to the *zenana* system -- did not have any pressing necessity to participate in the job market.²⁶⁷ The First World War resulted in the fall in jute prices in 1914. Owing to the war situation, the mills and the export firms refused to buy jute from cultivators. Though the loss had to be borne by the cultivators, their situation did not deteriorate drastically. Otherwise, 1914 was a good year. In 1915, floods ruined the winter crops in some parts of Tippera and Mymensingh, and famine in Bankura caused the huge failure of crops in 1915-16. The jute price rose by 1917. The real effect of the war showed in the last years of the decade. By September 1919, the price of rice rose considerably. The impact, therefore, was fierce on the middle classes as they depended on a small fixed amount of income.²⁶⁸ Added to this, the Influenza epidemic loomed large in Bengal in 1918. It continued in 1919 also. The

²⁶³ E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories*, 478.

²⁶⁴ J.R. Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India, Calcutta Town and Suburbs* Vol. VII, Part IV, 1901, 84.

²⁶⁵ L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, City of Calcutta*, Vol. VI, Part I, 1911, 65.

²⁶⁶ L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, City of Calcutta*, 65.

²⁶⁷ L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, Vol. V, Part I, 1911, 549.

²⁶⁸ W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal*, Vol. V, Part I, 1921, 29-30.

population was affected by a low birth rate and loss of lives due to epidemic situations and migration.²⁶⁹ Therefore, after the First World War the economic problem of the middle-class *bhadralok* worsened. One also witnesses a slight increase of women's participation in paid jobs. A sudden rise in women's participation in teaching jobs was also clear from the census report of 1921 (Table 2.3).

In the second decade of the twentieth century the proportion of female workers who earned their own living was only 18.3 percent of the total female population in the city. This translated into 111 working females for every 1000 employed men while the number was 145 and 125 females in suburbs like 24-Parganas and Howrah respectively. The number stood at 157 females in all of Bengal province.²⁷⁰ Also the readers have to keep in mind that these numbers comprise all classes and castes of women. Therefore, the number of the educated middle class had to be miniscule.

Though the Calcutta University Commission of 1917-1919 reported no unemployment problem among the middle classes, the census report is doubtful about the questionnaire. The commission itself was in doubt. They observed employment in the profession of law comprised a good number but apart from that, the problem of unemployment persisted among the young educated classes. The commission realised the lack of adaptation of the new requirements like technical education for industries and commerce by Bengal's education system. The committee appointed to investigate the unemployment problem among the educated middle classes recommended that *bhadraloks* should consider entry into industry.²⁷¹ It also suggested development of schemes that will train and upskill workers. The changed mindset amongst the *bhadralok* class is reflected in the volume of middle-class enrolment in technical education in various training institutes over this time.²⁷² The previous chapter also saw women's engagement in technical education from 1905 onwards.

The agricultural market had faced a fall in the price of agricultural products except for cotton by the 1920s. This would become one of the main reasons for the Great Depression in 1929-32.²⁷³ The agrarian population suffered throughout the 1920s and 1930s. Little public

²⁶⁹ Thompson, *Report on the Census of India*, Bengal, 33,35.

²⁷⁰ W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India, City of Calcutta*, Vol. VI, Part I, 1921, 109.

²⁷¹ A.E. Porter, *Census of India, Calcutta, 1931*, Vol. VI, Part I and II, 287-88.

²⁷² Porter, *Census of India, Calcutta, 1931*, 289.

²⁷³ Tirthankar Ray, *The Economic History of India*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 64.

investment in land and infrastructure, scarcity of good arable land because of population growth and the worldwide depression all came together to upset the economic condition.²⁷⁴ 1927-1929 witnessed crop failure and rapid erosion of the river Padma in the southern parts of the Dacca district. 1929-30 also witnessed the fall of jute and food crops. Through the last years of the decade, despite decent harvest, it failed to generate profits because of global depression with tobacco and jute cultivators facing the most loss.²⁷⁵

Depression caused deindustrialisation of village handicrafts compelling the rural elite to migrate to the city. Unemployment was now followed with a serious case of urban overpopulation. Lower-class people from rural Bengal failed to compete with physically strong migrant labourers from Bihar, Odisha and North India.²⁷⁶ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya opined that the deteriorating village economy, what Nairoji called the 'Internal Drain of Wealth' caused the city's prosperity. The industrialists, business class, shared owners of companies, and merchants were the beneficiaries.²⁷⁷ From 1928 onwards Civil Disobedience started shifting its focus from urban to rural areas. The Great Depression had exposed India to global price fluctuations, especially causing havoc in rice and jute prices. The economic catastrophe hit hard on village life.²⁷⁸ The professional urban middle class with fixed incomes, on the other hand, enjoyed the falling market prices. Urban men and women of Bengal considered the 1930s as the years of plenty and prosperity and not of crisis and depression. The archival sources witnessed support for women's independent earning more from this time onwards.

In 1900-1901, the city's economy was three times better than the rural areas. In 1946-47, it expanded to six times. The disparity of village and towns or cities became clear. And from the second half of the 1920s, purchasing power of towns and cities increased considerably as a result of a fall in the prices of agricultural products.²⁷⁹

In this context, mention may be made of an advertisement for a woman teacher. In 1929, the 'Karmakhali' (vacancy) section of '*Siksha Samachar*' published an advertisement for a senior female teacher for a girls' school in Durgapur. It also gave details on providing

²⁷⁴ Ray, *The Economic History of India*, 80.

²⁷⁵ Porter, *Census of India, Calcutta, 1931*, 11.

²⁷⁶ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 10, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198098942.001.0001.

²⁷⁷ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *Ouponibeshik Bharater Arthaniti 1850-1947*, (Kolkata: Ananda Publishers Pvt. Lmt. 1989), 128.

²⁷⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934: The Politics of Protest*, (Delhi: OUP, 1987), 1-2.

²⁷⁹ Bhattacharya, *Ouponibeshik Bharater Arthaniti*, 127-28.

accommodation and salary. In case of a married teacher, options were also made available for the husband to teach in a nearby English medium school. Quite interestingly, the advertisement expressly sought applications from upper caste Hindu women, specifically those belonging to Hindu Baidya or Kayastha communities.²⁸⁰ Caste consciousness was pervasive in Bengali Hindu society but its direct reference in a recruitment advertisement suggests the general contempt towards educated people from lower-caste backgrounds. Jyotirao Phule in 1882 while addressing the Education Commission (Hunter Commission) expressed his anxiety about monopoly of knowledge by higher classes. Phule argued that most of the revenue in colonial India came from the working class's labour, who were to be ignored the most. Instead, he advocated for mass education.²⁸¹ So in these fifty years the scenario had not changed much.

Additionally interesting was the requirement for detailed past teaching experiences. It signalled that teaching as a profession for women was in vogue by then. Finally, the additional benefits available for the husband point to two overlapping possibilities – one, it assumes the improbability of a woman staying alone in a place exclusively for employment reasons and two, it presupposes the likelihood of a woman in such circumstances being eventually compelled (by family members and societal pressure) to quit her job to attend to her domestic and wifely responsibilities. Offering a job to the husband was thus a masterstroke to ensure the “safety” of the working woman as well as her undivided attention and commitment to her professional duties.

The 1931 Bengal census recorded only 8,000 women working as clerks, cashiers and accountants. Public administration (Table 2.2) employed less than 4,000 women while the corresponding figures for men employed in similar professions were about 2 lakhs and 50 thousand.²⁸² The stark disparity in male-female ratio in these professions was evidently noticed. To that end, in the same year, the ‘Karmakhali’ section of the weekly called *The Mukta* put up an advertisement for women commissioners in return of generous remunerations.²⁸³ The advertisement was circulated with a view to encourage unemployed women workers to join the public offices in order to help the government reach the *purdah* women.

²⁸⁰ ‘Karmakhali’, *Shiksha Samachar*, (December-January, 1929), 5.

²⁸¹ Memorial Addressed To The Education Commission, A statement for the information of the Education commission (Education Commission, Bombay, Vol. II. Calcutta, 1884), 140-145. <http://ghalibana.blogspot.com>
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jyotirao_Phule

²⁸² A.E.Porter, *Report on Census of India, Bengal and Sikkim Report 1931*, 236-37.

²⁸³ ‘Karmakhali,’ *The Mukta*, (March: 1931), 6.

The 1931 census pointed out causes for joining the industry during the depression, recession of overloaded clerical workers with high salaries, rise in the standard of living as well as the cost of living, income remaining the same, absorption of more people to the ranks of educated middle class, migration of village people towards towns and cities, and lastly, the unemployment problem in the province.²⁸⁴ From the beginning of the 20th century, the city of Calcutta became a city of migrants because of its employment opportunities. The educated middle classes from *mufassil* towns and the lower-class labourers from Bengal's villages or from other states like Bihar, the Eastern United Provinces and Orissa all emigrated to Calcutta for better work opportunities.²⁸⁵ Lower-class labourers constituted a bulk proportion of the city's population while the rest consisted of the Bengali middle-class *bhadraloks* primarily engaged in clerical professions in banks, courts, schools, and colleges.²⁸⁶ This class migrated in large numbers from villages and towns to the city for professional or educational purposes but was nevertheless continuously connected to their respective homelands for most of them left their wives and children back in their village homes.²⁸⁷ Given the exodus from villages and widespread migration to cities, this decade witnessed a remarkable change in both the village and city populations.²⁸⁸ So it could be understood that the competition in the job market increased around this time in the city space.

The next census was scheduled to be conducted in 1941 but got cancelled because of the Second World War. In 1939, a national register was created in Britain to officially record names, dates of birth, and occupations of all civilians.²⁸⁹ In India, too, data had been collected but the tabulation could not be done.²⁹⁰ Office record file on 1941's Calcutta revealed increasing unemployment problems. The table was divided into two age groups who were unemployed. The two categories were those aged between 16 and 25 and the other with those aged between 26 and 41. In the first age group, about 7,137 people had been unemployed for less than a year and 14,

²⁸⁴ Porter, *Census of India 1931*, 288.

²⁸⁵ J.H.Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth- Century Bengal*, (Kolkata, Jadavpur University Press, 2018/California, University of California Press, 1968), 1, 3.

²⁸⁶ Broomfield, *Elite Conflict*, 3-4.

²⁸⁷ Broomfield, *Elite Conflict*, 10. Anurupa Devi's novel '*Chakra*', (Calcutta: Mitra o Ghosh, 1922) and Maya Basu's novel '*Dhup*' (Bangalakhmi, 1933-34) carried such examples.

²⁸⁸ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal*, 2.

²⁸⁹ Story of the Census, (20th June ,2022) ,<https://www.ons.gov.uk/visualisations/storyofthecensus/>

²⁹⁰ Dilip Mandal, "Decade Without Data: Why India is delaying Census When US, UK, China went ahead during covid", The Print, (May 13, 2022), <https://theprint.in/opinion/decade-without-data-why-india-is-delaying-census-when-us-uk-china-went-ahead-during-covid/954383/>

214 people for more than a year. In the second age group, 3777 people had suffered unemployment for under a year and 6,307 for one or more years. The list also contained details about their level of education including information on the nature of degrees received including other Indian degrees, British degrees, and other foreign degrees. The record was drawn exclusively from male sections of the unemployed population but it made evident the serious nature of the situation.²⁹¹

The impact of the Second World War was somewhat similar to World War I. Excess demand and fewer imports led to further diversification than in 1914. Due to huge demands for industrial production in India the new and old firms both expanded their sales in a ready market for England and her allies. The prices of agricultural commodities were low compared to the industrial products till 1943. Shortage of food grain, lack of agricultural surplus and cutting off rice supply from Burma²⁹² led to massive scarcity of food. During this time the cost of living increased excessively which resulted in struggle in daily life. Despite such economic crises, Indian society continued to discourage women from joining the men led work force as paid workers.²⁹³

In the last two decades of British rule some efforts were seen to protect Indian industries by taking tariff protection policy. This benefitted the industrialists from 1930s.²⁹⁴ The worldwide depression of 1929 and World War II brought massive changes in the Indian economy. Apart from a temporary shock after the Great Depression overall industrial growth was evident in the period except in the jute industry.²⁹⁵ So, one can frame the period as good in the beginning but economically hard 1920s onwards with unemployment problem remaining constant. As a consequence, since 1920s women participated in independent ventures for making an earning by mostly being involved in feminine work or in works 'suitable' to them as suggested by their contemporaries.

Sunil Sen notices a high rate of participation amongst higher caste women in white-collar jobs as clerks, typists, receptionists, doctors, nurses, teachers, social workers and academics during late colonial rule. Manufacturing industries like cotton textiles, leather and leather

²⁹¹ Office Record File, *Census of India, 1941*, India Part II, tables.

²⁹² In 1942 Burma was invaded by the Japanese Army. It was then a part of British territory. The Japanese invasion led to a stop in the supply of rice from Burma to India.

²⁹³ Ray, *The Economic History of India*, 302.

²⁹⁴ Bhattacharya, *Ouponibeshik Bharater Arthaniti*, 138.

²⁹⁵ Bhattacharya, *Ouponibeshik Bharater Arthaniti*, 143-44.

products, silk textiles, non-metallic mineral products, etc. however witnessed a decline in female employment over the years.²⁹⁶

Table 2.1: Number of Women Participants in Public Administration

Year	Occupation	Classified by area and gender					
		Calcutta		Suburbs		British Territory of Bengal	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	Public Administration	13,984	213	845	8	1,76,885	231
1911	Public Administration	12,926	176	1,257	43	NA	NA
1921	Public Administration	15,351	178	2,551	64	45,772	404
1931	Public Administration	20,261	116	1,055	60	48,887	358

Source: J.R. Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India, 1901, Calcutta, Town and Suburbs, Part III, Tabular Statistics, Calcutta, 1902, 93.* E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, Vol. V, Part II, Calcutta, 1902, 310.* Census of India 1911, Vol. VI, *City of Calcutta, Part I Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, 71.* Census of India 1911, Vol. V, *Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I, Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, 120-121.* Census of India 1921, Vol. VI, *City of Calcutta, Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta, 1923, 120-121.* Census of India 1921, Vol. V, *Bengal Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta 1923, 62-63.* Census of India 1931, Vol. VI, *Calcutta Parts I and II, A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933, 62-63.* Census of India 1931, *Bengal and Sikkim Report A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933.*

The above table (Table 2.1) shows that women were taking jobs in public administration. Though the numbers were very few compared to the male clerks, the trend of women coming into administrative jobs was itself a remarkable change. Drawing from the previous chapter on education, it may be surmised that the progress in the women's education movement directly contributed to this growth in employment numbers. Also decreasing number of women participation in later years reveals that they were constantly pressurised to take part in womanly jobs instead of this.

²⁹⁶ Sunil Sen, *The Working Women and Popular Movements in Bengal: From the Gandhi era to the Present Day*, (Calcutta: K P Bagchi & Company, 1985), 13.

Table 2.2 Actual Workers including Male and Female as Licensed Medical practitioners, Midwives, Nurses, Vaccinators and Compounders. (Note: Table Excluding the number of midwives in 1901 Calcutta)

Year	Occupation	Classified by area and gender					
		Calcutta		Suburbs		British Territory of Bengal	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	Licensed Medical Practitioners,	1277	124	97	1	4096	170
	Midwives, Nurses, vaccinators, compounders	831	676	27	14	3231	21929
1911	Licensed Medical Practitioners,	2433	50	213	3	NA	NA
	Midwives, Nurses, vaccinators, compounders	670	723	69	30	NA	NA
1921	Licensed Medical Practitioners,	2863	70	585	17	41,550	1036
	Midwives, Nurses, vaccinators, compounders	1123	1101	437	142	4502	9421
1931	Licensed Medical Practitioners,	2516	137	360	27	28,706	544
	Midwives, Nurses, vaccinators, compounders	1389	1026	154	81	4369	9412

Source: J.R. Blackwood, Report on the Census of India, 1901, Calcutta, Town and Suburbs, Part III, Tabular Statistics, Calcutta, 1902, 93. E.A. Gait, Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, Vol. V, Part II, Calcutta, 1902, 310. Census of India 1911, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, 71. Census of India 1911, Vol. V, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I, Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, Census of India 1921, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta, 1923, 120-121. Census of India 1921, Vol. V, Bengal Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta 1923, Census of India 1931, Vol. VI, Calcutta Parts I and II, A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933, 62-63, Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim Report A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933.

Table 2.2 shows women's participation in professions of medicine and other works related to it, in fields like midwifery and nursing. These jobs were 'feminine' according to the contemporary mindset because serving people was considered as women's responsibility. The care-giving roles associated with nursing and midwifery suggests that even feminine education,

originally designed to develop wifely and motherly instincts in women, were in fact also leading to employment opportunities.

Table 2.3 Number of Male and Female in the Occupation of Professors and Teachers of all kinds, Clerks and servants connected to education (Note: on many occasions the number of clerks and servants connected to education were not available in the census, 1921 census did not recorded the numbers specifically. Here it was returned under the category Professions and liberal arts).

Year	Occupation	Classified by area and gender					
		Calcutta		Suburbs		British Territory of Bengal	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	Professors and Teachers of all kinds	2,345	579	142	8	46,375	1,544
	Clerks and servants connected to Education	114	13	3	0	997	37
1911	Professors and Teachers of all kinds	2,603	497	211	5	NA	NA
	Clerks and servants connected to Education	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA
1921	Professors and Teachers of all kinds	25,063	2,353	4,485	295	46,146	2,593
	Clerks and servants connected to Education	NA	NA	NA	NA	980	46
1931	Professors and Teachers of all kinds	4,334	841	884	76	67,026	4,783
	Clerks and servants connected to Education	115	27	9	0	903	46

Source: J.R. Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India, 1901, Calcutta, Town and Suburbs, Part III, Tabular Statistics, Calcutta, 1902, 93.* E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, Vol. V, Part II, Calcutta, 1902, 310.* *Census of India 1911, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, 71.* *Census of India 1911, Vol. V, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I, Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, 71.* *Census of India 1921, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta, 1923, 120-121.* *Census of India 1921, Vol. V, Bengal Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta 1923, 120-121.* *Census of India 1931, Vol. VI, Calcutta Parts I and II, A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933, 62-63, Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim Report A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933.*

Table 2.3 gives an overall picture of women's participation as teachers in the job market. It was observed more in the city area than the suburbs. As the previous chapter indicated, the dearth of female teachers created obstacles in the smooth functioning of girls' schools and colleges. These statistics indicate that these problems were getting gradually resolved by the third decade of the twentieth century. A sudden extraordinary rise in the number of women teachers in 1921 may be explained by the economic distress in the middle-class families because of the war period which instigated more women's participation in paid jobs.

Table 2.4 (Actual Workers of the Occupations -Agriculture and Pasture, Textile Industry and Domestic Service)

Year	Occupation	Classified by area and gender					
		Calcutta		Suburbs		British territory of Bengal	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	Agriculture and Pasture	19,413	1,379	2,308	77	1,68,09,787	36,40,472
	Textile Industry	27,556	2,066	12,370	1,820	5,78,550	2,38,620
	Domestic Service	73,269	21,219	3,777	1,567	5,47,522	3,09,978
1911	Agriculture and Pasture	13,965	1,438	2,702	303	NA	NA
	Textile Industry	10,104	1,744	13,692	2,311	NA	NA
	Domestic Service	58,553	21,011	3,937	1,398	NA	NA
1921	Agriculture and Pasture	18,977	2,401	14,090	898	1,04,25,388	11,99,729
	Textile Industry	7,890	712	38,788	2,913	4,08,520	1,10,380
	Domestic Service	51,919	11,205	8,414	3,773	3,34,348	1,15,784
1931	Agriculture and Pasture	11,714	1,232	6,309	705	86,38,122	7,49,490
	Textile Industry	13,906	1,441	16,736	1,896	3,69,836	69,790
	Domestic Service	83,851	14,250	6,986	1,893	5,58,045	1,55,343

Source: J.R. Blackwood, *Report on the Census of India, 1901, Calcutta, Town and Suburbs, Part III, Tabular Statistics, Calcutta, 1902, 93.* E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of*

Bengal and their feudatories, Vol. V, Part II, Calcutta, 1902, 310. Census of India 1911, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, 71. Census of India 1911, Vol. V, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I, Report, L.S.S. O'Malley, Calcutta, 1913, Census of India 1921, Vol. VI, City of Calcutta, Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta, 1923, 120-121. Census of India 1921, Vol. V, Bengal Part I Report, W.H. Thompson, Calcutta 1923, Census of India 1931, Vol. VI, Calcutta Parts I and II, A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933, 62-63, Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim Report A.E. Porter, Calcutta 1933.

Though table 2.4 is not the concern of this current study but it would help us understand the whole picture better. It shows female participation in the agricultural field, textile industry and domestic service which mostly involved the lower-class women. And the huge number participating in those industries supported the calculation of actual middle-class women earners when estimating the percentage of total women workers. It also facilitates the understanding of the non-literate portion of women population.

The 1952 census which carried records of 1940s focused on a decade when the nation was going through so many changes—the, the Quit India movement, the famine of 1943, communal disturbances, political upheavals, the Tebhaga movement, the impact of World War II, and the partition following India's independence. Women's participation was prominent in every field; nonetheless, their presence in well-paying professions was surprisingly small as compared to the men. The census included the districts of West Bengal except the city of Calcutta which showed a really small number of women participating in jobs like money lending, banking, other business, medical practitioners, midwives, vaccinators, compounders, nurses, teachers, clerks and servants related to education, etc. Amongst these participants, midwives and teachers or professors were the only ones in good numbers but disappointing compared to males.²⁹⁷

From the above census-analysis, it is conceivable that women's participation in paid works especially in jobs predominated by middle-class men was limited. Various issues and contemporary developments contributed to women's meagre participation. An overview of the economic conditions in the Bengal province, the impact of worldwide activities and the reason of the contemporary unemployment problem which created hindrances for women to join male dominated works as repeatedly mentioned by women writers are validated.

²⁹⁷A. Mitra, *Census 1951, West Bengal, District Handbooks*, West Bengal 1953/54.

II

Debating Women's Paid Work

In 19th century Bengal, very few women participated in the industrial and service sectors compared to those involved in domestic service. Because of the predominance of a village-based economy, women joined the agricultural sector in large numbers.²⁹⁸ Women's movement was restricted further due to their traditionally allocated role in society.

Mukul Mukherjee in her article tried to explore an overall picture of women's work participation and employment pattern in Bengal from 1880 to 1930. She noticed a political and social transition during this period as a result of huge opposition to British rule. She argued that gradually women were exposed to the outside world and in economic terms, new employment opportunities were opening to them.²⁹⁹

From 1920s onwards, a number of journal editors and contributors began to show a positive attitude toward the economic independence of middle-class women.³⁰⁰ Given the ongoing economic crisis and a change in the socio-political scenario, emphasis was given on earnings of widows, the deserted and the spinsters in the pages of journals and periodicals. The concept of separate spheres of work for men and women however continued as earlier. Women were trained to work as teachers in primary schools, nurses, midwives, producers and sellers of handicrafts, etc. Also, the economic impoverishment of middle-class families especially caused by the breakdown of the Hindu joint family was another reason for the increase in demand for women's paid jobs.³⁰¹

While discussing the Brahma Samaj periodical from the 19th century called *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Bharati Ray observed that the periodical did not support women's education as the way to economic independence from beginning. In the 1860s-80s, *Bamabodhini* initiated support for women becoming teachers, midwives, and nurses. It also supported needy or widowed women who made earnings from handicrafts. So as a Brahma Samaj periodical it was quite progressive

²⁹⁸ Nirmala Banerjee, "Working Women in Colonial Bengal: Modernisation and *Marginalisation*" in *Recasting Women-Essays in Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), 269-70.

²⁹⁹ Mukul Mukherjee, "Women's Work in Bengal, 1880-1930: A Historical Analysis," in *From the Seams of History: Essays on Indian Women* ed. Bharati Ray, (Delhi: OUP, 1995), 220-21.

³⁰⁰ Ishita Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila and the 'Endangered Race: Changing Discourse on Women's Work in Bengal,'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 32 (August 2022): 66.

³⁰¹ Chakravarty, 'The Earning Bhadramahila, 67.

for its time. However, the writings by women indicate their inclination towards jobs of a motherly nature or care-giving professions like nursing, medicine, teaching or midwifery. In other words, it reinforced the notion that the women's job was supposed to be "feminine" in nature and primarily in the form of care services.³⁰²

From the 20th century, the percentage of women domestic workers increased considerably. Between 1921 and 1931 the percentage rose from 26 to 52 whereas the percentage of male domestic workers came down from 72 to 48. There was a clear picture of the 'feminisation' of domestic service in Bengal that led to their less participation in industries and mines. Domestic service became one of the most important sectors of women's work in urban West Bengal where almost 57 percent of working women were employed in 1911.³⁰³

In the 1930s women were seen in paid work. In 1929, Evelyn C. Gedge and Mithan Choksi edited a book called *Women in Modern India* with a foreword by Sarojini Naidu. Naidu appreciated the book as an "authentic voice of modern Indian womanhood." The book included articles on medical work, social work, and women and law but remained silent about those women who worked in factories, mines, and plantations. In the book's introduction, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay criticized men for restricting women through years of rigid rules and customs. In 1930, Sarojini Naidu in the All India Women's Conference said women's work causes a spiritual reform of the world. She also argued that since women are psychologically and spiritually different from men, they should join politics.³⁰⁴ While Kamaladevi was critical of men's conveniences, Naidu was showing her displeasure at women's minimal involvement in the political and social fields.

Naidu was greatly influenced by Gandhi's ideals. Like Gandhi, Naidu also believed in women's spiritual side. Neither Gandhi nor women leaders of the time recognized women as paid workers.³⁰⁵ With the decline of small-scale enterprises like processing food grains, oil seeds, bread, shoes, pottery, nets and ropes, and repairing various things, women became unemployed. Geraldine Forbes mentioned women leaders often ignored poor women's employment in exploitative industries. Rather they gave importance to education, women's suffrage, and legal

³⁰² Bharati Ray, *Bamabodhini Patrika: Sekaler Nari Siksha 1270-1329*, (Kolkata: Women's Studies Research Centre, CU, 1994), 36.

³⁰³ Samita Sen, *Domestic Days: Women, Work, and Politics in Contemporary Kolkata* (New Delhi: OUP, 2016), 34-35.

³⁰⁴ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, (New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 158.

³⁰⁵ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 160.

rights. The lower-class women were ignored by them.³⁰⁶ Census figures gesture towards a similar sentiment. There was silence about lower-class women's work throughout the period. They talked about social work as ideal for women or sought respectable employment for higher-caste/class widows and spinsters.

The late 19th and the early 20th century saw increasing demands for medical professionals. But for girls, it was tough to acquire medical degrees. They had to face several problems like facing traditional taboos, attending men's medical college in the absence of women's separate college, avoiding unnecessary travels, facing gender discrimination, etc. The Lady Hardinge Medical College for women was established in Delhi in 1916. After the First World War, following the huge demand for doctors more medical colleges started accepting women candidates. By 1929 men's medical schools and colleges started admitting women. There was only one medical college and four medical schools for women during this time.³⁰⁷ Women in the teaching and law profession also faced hurdles. In most cases, because of their segregated education, women lacked the required training or certificate necessary for employment. Women-married, unmarried, and widow, all had their own problems in the outside world.³⁰⁸ Despite various attempts to restrict women at home they started participating in the job market, albeit in limited numbers. Samita Sen has observed that women in the late 19th century aspired to be doctors and teachers. The culture and politics of gender seclusion helped women doctors and teachers gain ground as women patients were uncomfortable in a male doctor's presence and girl students needed female teachers. From 1930 onwards, middle-class women started participating in the paid jobs more as the rising number of educated male unemployment affected households. Widows were predominant in the job market. Later, married women also joined as wage earners.³⁰⁹

In 1929, the Whitley Committee asked women's organisations in India to present a report regarding their activities among workers. The Bombay Provincial Women's Council (BPWC) took the initiative to work in this field. After the publication of the Whitley Committee's report, BPWC held a three-day conference on women and labour. The National Council of Women in India also formed a study committee on labour. Even the All India Women's Conference

³⁰⁶ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 159.

³⁰⁷ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 164-65.

³⁰⁸ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 167.

³⁰⁹ Samita Sen, "Gendered Exclusion: Domesticity and Dependence in Bengal," *International Review of Social History* 42, Supplement 5: The Rise and Decline of the Male Breadwinner Family? (1997): 81.

(AIWC) established a sub-committee on labour in 1931. They voiced many issues concerning working women like reduction in working hours, maternity benefits, and prohibition of women working underground in the mines.³¹⁰

Thus, women's role in petty commodity production or trade or retail had been always ignored. They could be the wives, mothers, daughters, and sisters of male industrial workers. The uneducated, poor and working-class women unable to leave their own written records were invariably neglected by historians.³¹¹

The anxiety around and the prospect of the '*bhadramahila*' entering the public domain of new professions and services led to concern for working hours and suitability of factory conditions for women in the face of economic changes. Two separate developments took place — one, the amending of Factories Act in 1890-91 and two, the Age of Consent debate (fixing the minimum age of marriage for girls). Despite being separate issues they both sought to bring all 'Indian' women under a unitary 'nationalist construction of womanhood'. This construction at the turning of the 20th century faced the question of gender inequalities within marriage and they shifted their arguments from complex conjugal relationship to the safer mother-son relationship³¹² and moulded the working women's issues within the fold of motherhood.

In the first factory act in 1881, women and children were the focal point of discussion in the public and government sphere. A rich literary work on women's working conditions and about social and gendered division of labour had been produced by both the Governments of India and Britain. In this period women workers were in demand as planters in the tea gardens in India and in the overseas colonies also. The employers of tea garden had their policies regarding women's capacity as a worker- the hours of work, period of rest, the prohibition of night work or handling of machinery. These laws were specially made for women keeping in mind women's reproductive roles which made their work restricted and to obtain the state's protection to secure their interests.³¹³

In Bengal, Dwarkanath Ganguly and Ramkumar Vidyaratna were two noteworthy labour reformers of this time. In this regard, mention must also be made of the efforts of Mary

³¹⁰ Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 171-72.

³¹¹ Samita Sen, "Gender and Class: Women in Indian Industry, 1890-1990," *Modern Asian Studies* 42, no.1 Indian Labour (Jan. 2008): 75-76.

³¹² Sen, "Gender and Class, 80.

³¹³ Sen, "Gender and Class, 78.

Carpenter.³¹⁴ To initiate the first Factory Act (1881), she worked with Sasipada Banerjee, who was engaged in labour welfare.³¹⁵

Since 1920s, a large corpus of writings on women as a social issue were published. Most of the writers were foreigners. Women writers like Kelman, G.M. Broughton, Margaret Red, C.M. Matheson wrote continuously from 1923 to 1934. In India, male writers like R.K. Das, P.S. Loknathan, S.G. Panandikar, B. Shiva Rao, Radhakamal Mukherjee joined them later on.³¹⁶ The writings of upper and middle-class *bhadramahilas* themselves, were, hardly concerned with the class of working women either in urban areas or in the villages. In the later period, women who accompanied their husbands in their transferable jobs to villages or *mufassil* towns sometimes mentioned about them.

III

Is *Stree Swadhinata* Equivalent to Economic Independence?

Women's associations across Bengal helped women understand the importance of their engagement in the outside world, interactions with each other and their economic independence. Every issue of *Bangalakhmi* talked about different *mahila samities* (women's organisations) across Bengal like *Bankura Mohila Samiti*, *Bishnupur Mohila Samiti*, *Tala Mohila Samiti*, *Rampurhat Mohila Samiti*, *Barasat Mohila Samiti*, etc. and their activities regarding developments and earnings. They shared their experiences of running an association related to women who were previously restricted to the inner domains of the household. Indeed, it was a challenge to bring them out into the public sphere. Nevertheless, these associations played a vital role in the cause of women's liberation.

At that time Dacca's only women's association was *Deepali Sangha*. The director of the association, Lila Nag, wrote in *Bangalaksmi* that women's empowerment was a top priority for social progress. Nag further added that as women's lives revolved around domestic duties, it was unhappy and devoid of knowledge. *Deepali Sangha* was keen on reviving knowledge and

³¹⁴ English Educational and social reformer, extensively worked for improving women's conditions in India especially in the field of education.

³¹⁵ Sen, "Gender and Class, 79.

³¹⁶ Sen, "Gender and Class, 81.

involvement in constructive works, became popular amongst Dacca women. It admitted over 100 members in two years in different social works like teaching handicrafts to earn money, health and childcare, and increasing awareness regarding regressive social customs and corruption.³¹⁷

Kashipur Nari Kalyan Samiti (Kashipur women welfare association) connected with All India Women's Association and worked for women's empowerment. They mentioned that Sumati Devi, the wife of famous poet Jyananjan Chattopadhyay, had taken the responsibility to teach tailoring and art to the women of Antahpur (inner part of the house). Two other women, Binodini and Indumati took charge of teaching painting to them and Binapani Devi became the music teacher.³¹⁸ These novel initiatives helped women understand their self.

These kinds of initiatives also were visible in educational field like Nari Shiksha Samiti, Vidyasagar Banibhaban etc. Despite these institutions teaching women handicrafts etc, associations like Mohila Shilpo bhaban prepared women to be an earning member of their families as depicted in the previous chapter.

A women's meeting in Kotulpur, Bankura witnessed the president of the meeting Sushama Rashi Palit spreading awareness among women that aside from their domestic duties, women also had to participate in the nation's cause. More than five hundred women gathered on this occasion.³¹⁹ So it is noticeable that the women's associations too inclined towards women's engagement in feminine work. As portrayed in the previous chapter that '*meyeli shiksha*'/ feminine education was preferable for women, here also '*meyeli kaj*'/ feminine work was preferred for them. As it was internalised in society that women tended to be the queen of the household or mothers of the nation so their work orientation should be a caregiver. So the jobs like a medical practitioner, midwifery, nurse, teacher, social services etc had been appreciated as suitable works for them.

The Red Cross Society, a welfare association included lady doctors and trained nurses.³²⁰ Women joining Red Cross Societies was common in war-time Bengal. As per records in Rumer Godden book, in 1939 a meeting at the Lighthouse Cinema in Calcutta had been organised to enroll volunteers. It was attended by many including Europeans, Domiciled and some from Indian communities. Many Indian women voluntarily registered as well. The chairman of a small

³¹⁷ Lila Nag, "Dhaka Deepali Sangha," *Bangalakshmi*, (December-January, 1925-26): 18.

³¹⁸ Kashipur Nari Kalyan Samiti, Nikhil Bharat Nari Mahasabha, *The Mukta*, (March: 1931), 6.

³¹⁹ Nari jagoran, *The Mukta*, (May: 1931), 4.

³²⁰ Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin Byabshaye Khetro," *Bangalakshmi*, (January-February, 1935), 140.

band of women-wing of the Red Cross called a meeting of all existing women's organisations in Calcutta. Though these societies were led by Europeans, Indian women joined in large numbers.³²¹ So in a province where women's public service was restricted for a long time, the Second World War witnessed them joining welfare services. This raised the question as to why women joined this service even though it was unpaid. Did the traditional construct of women primarily being mothers, encourage them to serve the nation at the time of crisis and become caregivers for their countrymen? Or did the women at the time just want to break free from life-long domesticity and the welfare services provided to them with the right opportunity?

Women's associations did instill the necessity of women's economic independence but whether education should be utilized to earn money in the job market remained a matter of debate. An article named 'Stree Siksha' (women's education) in *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1903) by Sri Ma, said although the education of men was for earning money, for women it is not.³²² Ushaprava Devi in 1912 suggested stitching, tailoring, painting, singing, cooking, etc. to decorate and beautify the house as well as means for exercising frugal domesticity. Ushaprava added that these skills would come handy in case of dire economic need. Even in 1917, the concept had not changed. Amala Devi in the article 'Stree Siksha o Stree Swadhinata' (Women's education and Freedom) explained that women's education is not for their economic independence. She added that women's education was not for earning money but rather for moral and religious progress.³²³ In 1922, Charushila Mitra condemned parents of women for not providing them education that would prepare them to be financially independent, if necessary, in future.³²⁴ She said women should be educated in a way so she can earn her livelihood by resorting to respectable teaching jobs. Besides that, stitching, singing, painting, etc. would be also helpful for her to earn in need.³²⁵

In 1926, an article based on the conversation between Binoy Kumar Sarkar³²⁶ and Abala Basu³²⁷ on the financial problem of Bengali women showed different opinions on why women

³²¹ Rumer Godden, *Bengal Journey: a story of the part played by Women in the Province 1939-1945*, (Longmans, Green & Co., Ltd., 1945), 2.

³²² Ray, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 249.

³²³ Ray, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 320.

³²⁴ Ray, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 341.

³²⁵ Ray, *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 342.

³²⁶ Sarkar was an social scientist, professor and nationalist.

³²⁷ Basu was the daughter of Brahmo reformer Durga Mohan Das and Brahmamoyee Devi, her family faced hostile attitude in society for their advocacy towards widow remarriage. 'The Resolute Abala Bose: Educationist,

should have financial independence. They have a father, brother, and husband as their protectors. But in their absence women could face many problems if they did not have financial support and stood to lose their self-respect. It was agreed that women's financial independence would win her respect from her male counterparts.³²⁸ The corpus of contemporary articles show that women's economic independence was only a necessity if they had no alternative and no in the absence of male support in their lives. Otherwise, her primary goal in life is child bearing and rearing, and immersing herself in domesticity.

In the article '*Bali Mohila Shilpo Prodorshonite Sabhanetrir Abhibhasan*' (The Speech of the President, women's art exhibition, Bali) (1926) Hemangini Sen, the president of the meeting in Bali named '*Bali Mohila Shilpo Prodorshoni*', talked about housewives making money. Sen supported women earning on their own. She said to free the country from poverty, women should step out of their kitchen. She denounced the false sense of pride among upper-class Bengali men who refused to accept women's monetary contribution in the family even in times of dire need.³²⁹ Hemangini went on to say if women from the upper class did not feel ashamed of earning for themselves then poor women would become more comfortable in doing their jobs.³³⁰ A special note regarding the presidential address attached in the periodical clearly said that Nari Mongol Samiti's mouthpiece *Bangalakshmi* did not agree with the presidential speech. They thought that cooking is also an art, and the kitchen is included in women's workspace.³³¹ Hemangini's speech was no doubt revolutionary that found little acceptance amongst women from upper and middle-class backgrounds.

Kanika Devi also advocates women's economic liberation in times of "necessity" in 1931 in an article called "*Bangali Meyer Arthik Swadhinata*" (Economic Independence of Bengali Girls).³³² She believed that a mother's touch in child rearing is important in Bengali culture

Suffragist, Philanthropist? Indian liberals: an online archive of Indian liberal works,

[https://indianliberals.in/content/the-resolute-abalabose/#:~:text=Abala%20Bose%20\(1865%2D1951\),shelter%2C%20in%20her%20short%20lifetime.](https://indianliberals.in/content/the-resolute-abalabose/#:~:text=Abala%20Bose%20(1865%2D1951),shelter%2C%20in%20her%20short%20lifetime.)

³²⁸ "Bangaranir Arthik Samasya"- Srijukto Binoy kumar Sarkarer Sahit Srijukto Abola Basur Kathopokathon Abolambone", *Bangalakshmi*, (August-September, 1926): 295.

³²⁹ Hemangini Sen, "Bali Mohila Shilpo Prodorshonite Sabhanetrir Abhibhasan," *Bangalakshmi*, (December-January, 1926-27): 59-60.

³³⁰ Sen, "Bali Mohila," 60.

³³¹ Sen, "Bali Mohila," 60.

³³² Kanika Devi, "Bangali Meyer Arthik Swadhinata," *Jayashree*, (August-September, 1931), 395.

unlike in foreign countries. The larger goal of achieving women's equal exposure to public life and autonomy was not yet a serious concern.³³³

Kanika Devi wondered if their economic subjugation was the sole reason for women's dependency on their male counterparts. But at the same time, she was also thinking about the indifference towards domestic life that would follow if women stepped out of their homes. The fear of Western influence was another issue that captured the contemporary minds while discussing women's education towards greater economic independence.³³⁴

In 1931, Shanta Devi witnessed women's participation in different workspaces shared by men. Apart from being doctors and teachers they also showed interest in jobs at banks, insurance offices, post offices, rail stations, etc. Also, many of them managed newspaper editing, shops, medicine factories, institutes of handicrafts, and taught science or became practitioners of law. Shanta Devi appreciated women participating in politics which allayed their fear of entering workspaces they had been avoiding for years. Now they understood that the male-dominated works were not as difficult as they were made to believe. The participation was expected to grow in the near future.³³⁵ Though she talked about the "bravery" of these working women, personally Shanta Devi was still a strong proponent of gendered division of labour and preferred women working in households alone.

Another very important reason for women's economic independence, according to Kanika Devi, was the gradual increase in the problem of dowry. An educated and employed woman could escape the dowry demands made by the groom's family for her maintenance and upkeep. Besides, Kanika reasoned that the bride's father would not have to accept all the inappropriate demands of the groom's side if his daughter had her own earning.³³⁶ Kanika Devi's reasoning was accurate – as Nirmala Banerjee has noted, women in India were typically considered an economic burden by society because of their economic dependence.³³⁷ If they earned their own living, one hoped it would put an end to domestic abuses and women's subjugation in the hands of her in-law's.

³³³ Sen, "Gendered Exclusion," 82.

³³⁴ Kanika Devi, "Bangali Meyer", 395-98.

³³⁵ Shanta Devi, "Meyeder Kaj," *Jayashree*, (September-October, 1931), 429-30.

³³⁶ Kanika Devi, "Bangali Meyer," 396.

³³⁷ Nirmala Banerjee, "Sexual Division of Labour: Myths and Reality in the Indian Context" in *Indian Women: Myth and Reality* ed. Jasodhara Bagchi, (Kolkata: Sangam Books, 1995), 76-77.

Women's Economic Independence: How to Preserve Chastity?

In the 1920s and 1930s, the issue of a widow's chastity was under the scanner. Many stories, novels, articles and books focused on this issue. The issue became communalised when the rumour of Muslims abducting Hindu widows started circulating in newspapers. It was common to describe the voluntary desertion of a widow as "abduction".³³⁸ From 1923, news of Muslim *goondas* oppressing Hindu women, especially in eastern Bengal, was replete in newspapers. The 'abduction' theory was further fueled by an anxious Hindu nationalist consciousness about the declining number of Hindus and the increasing population of Muslims and a common belief in the physical stamina and virility of Muslim men. In 1924, some prominent members of Bengali Hindu society came together to set up the Women's Protection League to save Hindu women from Muslim abductions. This campaign of abduction worked as a catalyst to spread communal animosity in the *mufassil*.³³⁹ Increasing communalisation of newspapers like *Amrita Bazar Patrika* and *Basumati* was the reason behind growing hostility. They routinely published news headlines related to abductions worsening Hindu-Muslim relations.³⁴⁰ The connection of Hindu Mahasabha activity in Eastern Bengal added sparks to the campaign. The Kshatriya Samiti also propagated against abductions. Taking advantage of the time, Hindu Mahasabha connected various regional issues related to women's oppression to national level politics.³⁴¹ The Arya Samaj propaganda of Hindu widow abduction by Muslims intensified the anxiety.³⁴² The difficult life of a Hindu widow in casteist households was common knowledge. Now with the fear of abduction, Hindu men in a bid to "save Hindu widows" agreed to two prospects – one, the possibility of widow remarriage and two, allowing widows to join the workforce.³⁴³

It was at the time of the 1940s famine that Ashoka Gupta shared her experience of Noakhali where she was serving people. She took charge of rescuing the abducted girls. She

³³⁸ Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal*, 50.

³³⁹ Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal*, (New Delhi: OUP, 1999), 148-49.

³⁴⁰ Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 151.

³⁴¹ Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 164.

³⁴² Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 199-200.

³⁴³ Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila," 68.

thought it was unjust to blame only Muslims when Hindus treated their own women badly. She sympathised with the abducted girls who must have been traumatised.³⁴⁴

Ishita Chakravarty also cited the success of Vidyasagar Bani Bhaban in arranging vocational training as mentioned by Abala Bose in the 1939 issue of *Jayashree*. Vidyasagar Bani Bhaban successfully gave training to some dependent Hindu Bengali women of the age group of 15-30 who were in miserable conditions. They joined as primary school teachers, nurses and handicraft producers after their training. Chakravarty draws special focus on the Bhaban's engagements with women at their reproductive age. Her observations suggest that rather than alleviating the misery of these widows, Bani Bhaban was much more concerned with the preservation of these widows' chastity. The "training" sessions were perhaps a ruse to keep them from disgracing Hindu society.³⁴⁵

Contemporary women's writings also showed women's zeal to earn on their own. The minute analysis and backdrop clearly explain the writer's motive to make their women protagonists economically independent.

In 1924, Sushama Sen-Gupta, who in all probability was the daughter of Nares Chandra Sen-Gupta, a professor of law and a writer who contributed to Bengali literature, wrote the story 'Gauri'. Sushama was an educationist and established a girls' school in Calcutta called Lake School for Girls. *Gauri* is about a girl with extreme zeal to become independent. Gauri resided at her uncle, Jadunath's place in Calcutta.³⁴⁶ Her aunt (Jadunath's wife) Annadasundari was hostile towards her and overburdened her with domestic chores. Luckily a good match was found for Gauri and her husband proved to be a supportive partner. He inspired Gauri by telling her of women stories from different countries. As an exceptional man, he also helped her with daily chores and domestic duties. As the husband breathed his last, he asked Gauri to become independent. Now widowed, Gauri returned to her uncle's place and Annadasundari started oppressing her again.³⁴⁷ Acting upon her husband's last wish, she thought of earning money by stitching her neighbours' clothes. This worsened her relationship with Annadasundari.³⁴⁸ One day Gauri found an advertisement in a newspaper, seeking a matron for an English-medium

³⁴⁴ Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, (Kolkata, Stree, 2005),90.

³⁴⁵ Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila," 72.

³⁴⁶ Sushama Sen Gupta, "Gauri," *Sachitra Sisir*, (July-August, 1924): 1224-1225.

³⁴⁷ Sen Gupta, "Gauri," 1226-1227.

³⁴⁸ Sen Gupta, "Gauri," 1228

boarding school. Ultimately Gauri's ambition to be free from domestic oppression led her to take up the job in the girls' boarding school and live an independent and happy life of her own. The story ended with Gauri passing the B.A. examination and becoming a teacher at the school and the Superintendent of the boarding. She became very popular amongst the students and colleagues. Eventually, she found out that her uncle had to shift to Jalpaiguri with his family after a rumour had spread that Gauri eloped with her lover.³⁴⁹ Gauri's story depicts the state of widows in contemporary Bengali society. Not only was it difficult to become financially independent as a widow; a liberated widow was often slandered in society.

Contemporary periodicals carried many pieces by Suruchibala Ray, but not much is known about her background and personal life. Being an educated woman, her novel 'Ahuti' (1924) depicted women's financial independence. *Ahuti* depicted how the *zamindar* of a village wanted his widowed niece, Malati to live an independent life. He suggested that she should be educated at a boarding school in Calcutta and become independent. Malati's uncle knew that society would not take this kindly, but he told her to ignore all and simply focus on her goal to become independent.³⁵⁰

In the same year 'Natun Jug' by Pravabati Devi Saraswati revolves around the life of Dipika who was educated and a trained singer following in her musician father's footsteps. Dipika was married to an uneducated rich man named Radhikanath. Radhikanath's alcoholism and abusive behaviour forced Dipika to leave her marriage and travel with her aunt to Calcutta. Dipika's aunt Bindubasini was not well-off, so Dipika took up a job as private tutor to support their new life.³⁵¹ Though Pravabati was a school teacher in Calcutta, Dipika's character is shown to be a home tutor. Why did Pravabati restrict Dipika from teaching in a school? Though influenced by Gandhian ideology, it is intriguing that she was in favour of *zenana* education in 1924 when there had already been a mass Gandhian movement in which women participated in large numbers.

When Gandhi was asked whether granting property rights to women would lead to the spread of immorality and disruption of domestic life, he had answered that if it was true in the case of men then it was true in the case of women as well. For morality did not depend upon any

³⁴⁹ Sen Gupta, "Gauri," 1230.

³⁵⁰ Suruchibala Ray, "Ahuti," *Sachitra Sisir*, (May-June, 1924): 992-93.

³⁵¹ Pravabati Devi Saraswati, "Nutan Jug," *Sachitra Sisir*, (August-september, 1924), 1390.

rights; rather it was the purity of one's heart that proves morality.³⁵² Centering the discussion around morality and preservation of domestic "values" meant that the economic security inherited in property rights was still unreachable to women.

Gandhi's opinion of an oppressed wife like Dipika was published in '*Young India*', in 1929. Gandhi replied to a letter written by a brother who raised his voice against the cruelty of Hinduism that a woman had to face in her married life as his sister was facing. In his response, Gandhi said it was not Hinduism, rather human nature of the husband who treated his wife cruelly that was worthy of blame in this case. Gandhi suggested that instead of mourning for his sister it was time to take some brave steps. They should protect her and bring her back home. She should have enough education to live her life like an independent woman. At the same time, he said the woman should not break the legal tie with her husband.³⁵³ Gandhi's emphasis on human nature and individual sense of morality may have been an attempt to redeem Hindu society which were in fact responsible for perpetrating these structural inequalities. Nonetheless, it certainly found subscribers amongst contemporary intellectual minds. Pravabati's character, Dipika too did not break her legal marriage even though she was abused and chose to leave her husband.

IV

Gendered Division of Labour and Separate Workspace: Reflections of Women Writers

Even those who advocated for women's employment suffered from the anxiety of competition between the sexes in the work field. Efforts were thus made to ensure women's jobs did not challenge the men's job market. Married women were advised to refrain from taking paid jobs and unmarried educated women were guided to a career that would not challenge men's sphere of work.³⁵⁴ The rising fear of women snatching "male" jobs led to renewed debates about the feasibility of women working outside of home.

In an article in *Bangalakshmi* titled 'Jagrihi' (1931), the writer Ila Devi argued that women should have the right to choose any profession. They should indulge in the medical

³⁵² M.K Gandhi, *Gandhi on Women (collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches On Women)*, compiled by Pushpa Joshi, (Ahmedabad: Navajivan Publishing House, 1988): 318.

³⁵³ Mahatma Gandhi, *To The Women*. Ed. Ananad T. Hingorani, (Karachi: Published by Ananad T. Hingorani, 1946), 2.

³⁵⁴ Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila," 67.

profession, law, acting, agriculture, peacekeeping as well as engineering too.³⁵⁵ Dipti Devi in an article 'Narir Sthan' (1933) elaborated some women's views about the type of work women could do (taken from Indian Ladies Magazine).³⁵⁶ As the magazine showed its significance in Indian cultural thoughts, women's periodical, *Bangalakshmi*, made it a point to extract an article from Indian Ladies Magazine and translate in Bengali to increase awareness among Bengali women.

The article, as pointed out by Dipti Devi, talked about the viewpoint of Indians in yesteryears that women's actual workplace was home. It was said that women's foremost responsibility is their home. Ms. Bloom opined that women caused unemployment among men by participating in works earlier done only by men. It also decreases the number of suitable grooms for themselves. She also agreed with the fact that though women started competing with men, they never acquired proficiency in jobs of politicians, advocates, economists, and doctors. So, to marry a suitable and well earning man she must stop participating in the job market. She also cited Mussolini's view that women could not be experts in the field of business. In India women should do what they do the best, which is social work. Mrs. P.K Ray, a fellow of Calcutta University, recommended some important social work for women, like girls' training between the age of 14-20 about how to retain their tradition, working amongst the poor people, prisoners, as nurses and health workers in towns, teaching the uneducated amongst untouchables, uneducated workers of the age of 24-25.³⁵⁷ Thus Ms. Bloom and Mrs. Ray recommended women to refrain from the job market so that they get a suitable groom as less competition helped men get a better job. In other words, she preferred women being dependent on men. In this regard Bengali women were introduced to the writings of an English magazine in Madras, that also echoed the same views as some Bengali periodicals. It reflects trans-regional ideas on women's economic independence.

Ashapura Devi in a story 'Tomar Jobonika' (1934) portrayed a character named Nabina, reflecting the contemporary changing attitude towards life. She preferred to be unmarried and economically independent. She defied her parents and decided to study law. At a time when her

³⁵⁵ Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila," 70.

³⁵⁶ It was a monthly English journal written by women for women in Madras. The editor was Kamala Sathianadhan. It continued from 1901 to 1938 with a break of nine years in between. It contains both modern and traditional literary works and culture. Issues like social reforms, identity politics in India, female education debates, cultural exchange during travel to foreign countries etc had been highlighted in the content.

³⁵⁷ Dipti Devi, "Narirsthan," *Bangalakshmi*, (October-November, 1933): 81-84.

female friends were either married or in a relationship, Navina said - “*ami toder moto ato handa noi je jibonke dekhbar, janbar, upobhog karbar agei sakol sambhabana ghuchiye goratei jiboner goraye ekta kop mere bosbo. Biyeta kore fyala maneito sesh hoye jawa. Ami ekkhuni o fande pa dicchina.*” (I am not as stupid as you to get married this early and put an end to all of life’s enjoyment. Getting married is practically a trap; I am not ready to get caught up in that yet). In the end after many hurdles, Navina’s parents started feeling proud of their daughter. They realised that it was more respectable to talk about their daughter’s successful career – that she was practising in the High Court – than saying that their daughter got married and went to her in-law’s place.³⁵⁸ The writer thought that amongst all the girls of her age only Navina brought novelty to her thought and work.³⁵⁹ So the writer’s desire to portray a character like Navina expressed her social consciousness and the changing attitude of the time. Maybe that is why she named the character Navina. This kind of consciousness among girls was also a clear sign of evolving social thoughts.

Sita Devi’s female character Chandra, in the story ‘*Sawambar*’ (1933/1934), was again a modern-day woman living in a village outside Kolkata. Her father Lalmohan was the *zamindar* of the village. Being the only child of the *zamindar* family, Chandramukhi got all the love and affection. Her every desire was being fulfilled by her grandmother. From her perambulator to her attire, everything was bought from Calcutta. Her mother Pratima was very upset with her upbringing since a girl in a Bengali family never lived this luxurious life. She spent her first five years in luxury.³⁶⁰ Trained for a few years under a village master, her father appointed a female governess from Calcutta to teach her English, singing, etiquette and an all-round education. Sarojini - a B.A, B.T. qualified Hindu girl of about twenty-five was appointed as Chandra’s teacher. She breathed some fresh air in the *antahpur* (inner precincts) and won all hearts despite her modern etiquette and attire. Pratima, Chandra’s mother, expressed her fear that Chandra was becoming independent like Sarojini. With Sarojini coming to this house, Chandra’s birthday began to be celebrated in a very grand way. Sarojini introduced a new way of celebrating birthdays including the gifting of expensive presents like motorcars.³⁶¹ Sarojini’s character showed that teaching as a profession was increasingly gaining popularity and considered

³⁵⁸ Ashapura Devi, “Tomar Jabonika,” *Sahitya sangstha*, (1934): 20-21.

³⁵⁹ Ashapura Devi, “Tomar Jabonika,” 21.

³⁶⁰ Sita Devi, “Sawambar,” *Udayan*, (1933-1934): 30-31.

³⁶¹ Sita Devi, “Sawambar,” 32-33.

respectable. As home tutors, these women were living away from their homes and that too was not an objectionable issue anymore. Sarojini had been appointed to impart all-round education. In those days, it was not enough to teach girls basic education; they also had to master relevant social etiquette so that they would be considered as eligible brides by contemporary English educated men.

Falguni Mukhopadhyaya's story 'Asha' (1933/1934), showed the female protagonist rejecting a marriage proposal from Salukha's *zamindar* family. Instead, she asked her father to give her the amount fixed for her marriage. She wanted to establish a cowshed which would provide indigenous people with milk, butter, and other dairy products. She also questioned her father about why he wanted her to marry? She could live without being married. Her father agreed.³⁶²

Hemangini Choudhurani in 1933 put forward her point of view about women's own workspace. In the article - 'Narir Nijossyo Karmakhetra Nei Ki?' (Do women do not have their own workplace?). She accepted men's superiority in the outside world and that women had no competition with men. She agreed that women should be educated for any future crisis in life.³⁶³ Like others, she also accepted that home is the most valuable place for her. Women could be midwives or gain expertise in the handicraft industry but should not engage in a public job outside.³⁶⁴

On the question of equal rights, Indira Devi Choudhurani, preferred equality in the workplace and salary in the same job for both men and women. But she supported the theory of division of labour according to capability. She recommended married life for women and refraining from competition in the job market unless there is any obligation. That would be tough for men financially especially at the time when the unemployment problem was concentrating.³⁶⁵

As mentioned before, the dissemination of Gandhian views was extensive. In 1939's *Harijan*, he said that "equality of sexes does not mean equality of occupations. There may be no legal bar against women hunting or wielding a lance. But she instinctively recoils from a

³⁶² Falguni Mukhopadhyay, "Asha," *Udayan*, (1933-1934): 1011-13.

³⁶³ Lady Rani Hemangini Choudhurani, "Narir Nijesshyo Karmokhetra Nei Ki?," *Bangalakshmi*, (February-March, 1934): 237.

³⁶⁴ Choudhurani, "Narir Nijesshyo Karmokhetra," 239.

³⁶⁵ Indira Devi Choudhurani, "Narir Shiksha o Jati Gothon," *Prabartak*, (November-December, 1936), 199-200. As a Brahmo lady Indira Devi Choudhurani's viewpoint was expected to be somewhat liberating. But she echoed Hemangini exactly.

function that belongs to man. Nature has created sexes as complements to each other, their functions are defined as forms.”³⁶⁶ So many contemporary women’s writings echoed Gandhian views. They supported the gendered division of labour, home and child rearing being women’s priority.

While recommending suitable professions that women could take up for her economic independence, Bina Devi also alerted on gender division of labour based on biological distinction. Though in the 20th century, the competition between men and women was evident everywhere, women were expected to join “suitable” gendered jobs. Bina Devi opined, that jobs like factory management, shop keeping publicly, or the job of an agent were not suitable for women.³⁶⁷ If one focuses on the discussion of *Mandira*, a periodical that was edited by revolutionary women,³⁶⁸ it also supported the idea of a separate workplace for men and women. In this respect she cited Supriti Sanyal’s write up which advocated gender-based choices of jobs even in 1943.³⁶⁹

Another issue that plagued the *bhadralok* was whether a married woman should work or leave her job after marriage. If not, who was going to take charge of her child’s upbringing? As a Brahma woman, Priyambada Devi talked about women’s independence in 1927 where she expressed her regret that in the name of work women had to manage everything from domesticity, society, and even nation building. As they were titled ‘the better half’ of men, most of the work had to be done by them. But at the same time, in order to suit the purpose, they were often recognized as *abala*, meaning the weaker sex, and restricted to the domestic arena.³⁷⁰ Being the daughter of famous writer Prasannamoyee Devi, her statement does not surprise us. In 1915 she began teaching in Brahma Girls’ School. She was a social worker and headed Bharat Stri Mahamandal for a long time.³⁷¹ She was also associated with a number of women’s educational institutions and for a considerable period of time headed the Bharat Stri-Mahamandal.

³⁶⁶ Harijan 12/2/ 1939, in Renu Pandey, *Revisiting Gandhian Thought on Gender Issues*, (Delhi: Meena Book Publications, 2015), 60.

³⁶⁷ Bina Devi, “Narir Swadhin,” 139.

³⁶⁸ First editor was Kamala Mukherjee.

³⁶⁹ Chakravarty, “The Earning Bhadramahila,” 72.

³⁷⁰ Priyambada Devi, *Stree-swadhinata Banam Purushadhinata Barjan*, *Bangalakshmi*, (March-April, 1927), 348.

³⁷¹ Devi, priyanbada, *Banglapedia*, National Encyclopedia of Bangladesh, https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Devi,_Priyamvada

Anindita Devi discussed the widely debated issue of married women joining the teaching profession in an article ‘Meyeder Kaj’ in 1931’s *Jayashree*. In the article she supported women as teachers irrespective of marital status and pointed out the pros and cons of the profession. In case of married women teachers, Anindita Devi thought the positive. They would continue in the job as they were bound to the domestic responsibilities and would be balanced and affectionate personalities. It was likely that unmarried women could quit the job anytime as they were free from any responsibility. Also, distant workplaces and staying in women’s hostels were reasons why unmarried girls discontinued their jobs.³⁷² She added that it was really unfair to restrict the teaching job to only unmarried women where this was the only job considered to be reputable for women in society. Most parents did not prioritise on educating their daughters since they would be ultimately married off. Those who received education and became economically independent found it difficult to get marriage prospects. The market value of women’s work was therefore low; it barred them from matrimony while restricting them to low paying jobs with low salary.³⁷³

Anindita Devi’s thoughts regarding women’s leisure time, rest, mental wellness and household management are really appreciable. She recommended a house help for women’s wellness. She also opined that women’s earning would be helpful to run a household smoothly. For mothers who went out to work, she recommended professional help for child rearing and house management. She reminded her readers that it was the state’s responsibility to educate the people of the country. She also advocated the necessity of trained and experienced teachers for children’s playhouses and schools for the progressive future citizens of the nation.³⁷⁴ This would be helpful to both children and mothers. Children would be under appropriate care and guidance, and mothers would find time for exerting economic choice of embracing a job. Besides there was an urgent need for money in many women’s lives, especially divorcees, widows, or those abandoned with or without children.³⁷⁵ The defamation that educated and economically independent women are often hesitant about marriage had been challenged by Anindita Devi. She questioned why the same slander was not applicable to our male counterparts. Why would women sacrifice all their education, work, freedom, and possibilities for marriage? She strongly stated that this dilemma should be removed from women’s lives. Women should not be forced to

³⁷² Anindita Devi, “Meyeder Kaj,” *Jayashree*, (May-June, 1931): 116.

³⁷³ Anindita Devi, “Meyeder Kaj,” 117.

³⁷⁴ Anindita Devi, “Meyeder Kaj,” 118-19.

³⁷⁵ Anindita Devi, “Meyeder Kaj,” 119-20.

make choices between marriage and education and freedom.³⁷⁶ Anindita Devi refused the idea of discrimination between married or unmarried in the workplace. According to her, marriage could not be a criterion of one's ability.³⁷⁷ Anindita Devi's article was much more progressive compared to the contemporary mindset. She supported women's economic independence not only for their families' economic necessity but also for themselves and their wellness.

The preference for "honourable" and "respectable" jobs applied even more to the upper and middle-class Bengali women. Bina Devi in her article 'Narir Swadhin Babshyekhetro' (1935) suggested some suitable professions for women. She thought that the teaching profession is the most suitable for them. Here Bina Devi suggested establishing institutions where the aged and widowed women were helped to be educated in less time to teach in schools basically like teachers' training. Besides that, they taught various handicrafts for earning money. She cited instances like *Narishiksha-pratisthan*, *Banipith*, *Rajbala Vidyalaya*, etc in this connection.³⁷⁸ Some suitable occupations that Bina Devi suggested for women were connected to women's health as in the contemporary period women were uncomfortable having their bodies examined by a male doctor. She recommended medical practice as a suitable job for women as this was in huge demand. During this period, untrained midwives had flooded the countryside in large numbers. So, there was a huge demand and market for trained midwives.³⁷⁹

Another respectful job, according to Bina Devi, was that of a music teacher. She also suggested that women could publish books or edit periodicals in which they were not so much engaged till then. In the field of writing, she cited Anurupa and Nirupama as examples who had made a name for themselves and were earning well. The idea of a library run by women was also suggested by her. She felt that as many women at that time had started going abroad for higher education, anybody who could acquire a degree in this field could help in opening a library.³⁸⁰ This last example specifically shows that Bina Devi's suggestions were exclusively catered to women of a certain entitled upbringing and would find little utility for women hailing from lower ranks. Other than this, she preferred handicrafts for women like *charkha*, cane-works, *jori-salma-chumki* (some crafting with sequin work in lady's garments to enhance gorgeousness)

³⁷⁶ Anindita Devi, "Meyeder Kaj," 120.

³⁷⁷ Anindita Devi, "Meyeder Kaj," 121.

³⁷⁸ Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin," 140.

³⁷⁹ Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin," 140.

³⁸⁰ Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin," 140.

work, leather work, stitching, knitting wools, carpet work, (*kagojbashalpatarthonga, toale, satranchi, ashon, bori, achar* etc.)³⁸¹

She cited *tejarati* (usury) business. She talked about many rich women who by mortgaging their ornaments thrived in the business. Now they also learnt banking to carry on with their business.³⁸² She encouraged women to establish their place in the professional sphere. Widowed women should not have to depend on anybody. They could earn on their own.³⁸³ As is evident, every article and writing expressed special concern for widows.

Renowned social reformer Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay's granddaughter Anurupa Devi (1882-1958) expressed her viewpoint in the article 'Narir Shiksha o Jati Gathon' (1936). Influenced by Ramayana and Mahabharata since her childhood 'Sita' is her idol. About economic independence, she opined that in this deplorable economic situation of the country, it would be helpful if women also earn.³⁸⁴ Thus the question of 'necessity' surfaces yet again. According to her, women should indulge themselves in making those things that were being imported from foreign countries, causing a drain of money from the country, like toys. She focused on traditional handicrafts like spinning, clay-made dolls, kantha stitching, tailoring, toy-making for earning. But she opposed works predominantly done by men outside the home for women such as advocacy, administrative jobs, engineering, management, and stewardship. According to her, women should refrain from doing 'masculine work' as motherhood was the ultimate goal of a woman's life.³⁸⁵ Anurupa Devi's recommendation that women work for the cause of the nation to reduce the drain of wealth is unique.

In the 1936 issue of *Prabartak*, Indira Devi Choudhurani suggested skills like literary practice, journalistic work, stitching, typing, proof checking, gardening, handicrafts, singing, drawing, etc. for women that could earn her money staying at home.³⁸⁶ Being the daughter of Satyendranath and Jyanandanandini and belonging to the Tagore family, her opinions hardly reflect the crises of 1936 – a time just after a worldwide depression when the Indian economy was trying to recover.

³⁸¹ Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin," 140.

³⁸² Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin," 142.

³⁸³ Bina Devi, "Narir Swadhin," 142.

³⁸⁴ Anurupa Devi, "Narir Shiksha o Jati Gathon," *Prabartak*, (October-November, 1936): 32.

³⁸⁵ Anurupa Devi, "Narir Shiksha," 32.

³⁸⁶ Choudhurani, "Narir Shiksha," 199.

An author named Anima Majumdar also shared some newly developed ideas for women's earning from home like making toys from wood or mud, stitching, brass engraving work, light wooden useful sophisticated things, leather works, painting teapots and cups, making soaps, essence, perfumes, oils, jam and jelly. She was hopeful that women would be able to contribute to domestic expenses as the unemployment problem was on the rise in Bengal. Moreover, clerkship with a small amount of salary was the most common job in a middle-class Bengali family then.³⁸⁷ Though she was in favour of equality of both the sexes in the work field, at the end she felt that women's primary work was child rearing.³⁸⁸ Through her contribution to the series 'Narir Siksha o Jatigothon' to which she was the third writer after Anurupa Devi and Indira Devi Choudhurani, it was clear that she also belonged to some reputed family of the time.

Priyobala Gupta in her autobiography depicted the real picture of contemporary village life in twentieth century Bengal. She had grown up during the national movement and witnessed all the Gandhian mass movements. But her activities and desire clearly showed her disagreement with Gandhian ideologies. Her lifelong interest in education and desire to do something new for society's progress brought her out of the home. She was married in a village called Madhabdi where education for women was negligible. Priyobala in her childhood had to leave her education halfway, witnessed superstitious activities all her married life and tried to bring some changes there with her little contributions. She had always been interested in doing something related to education. But the conservative atmosphere of the village restrained her from taking any steps. Later she initiated a girls' school at Madhabdi. Her efforts went in vain when villagers did not agree to send their girls to the school. She failed to bring the light of knowledge to the village at that time. This was before 1940.³⁸⁹

Around 1940 she was approached to open a school. This time she decided to go for a tuitioned school. The tuition for the school was nominal but Priyobala thought if villagers were spending money for their daughter's education, they would be a little more invested in it. The name of the school was *Madhabdi Sishu Vidyaniketan*. Though the school was primarily established for girl students, boys also came in.³⁹⁰ At the age of 38, Priyobala had finally

³⁸⁷ Anima Majumdar, "Narir Shiksha o Jati Gothon," *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1937): 607.

³⁸⁸ Majumdar, "Narir Shiksha," 607.

³⁸⁹ Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, 80-81.

³⁹⁰ Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, 84-85.

accomplished all that she had set out to do. She added that the number of students increased considerably.³⁹¹

Though there were very few exceptional Brahmo women at the time, Sushama Singh from Behrampore is an exception. A Brahmo woman, Sushama educated herself after her marriage. She also used to play the organ and teach others as well. She became the principal of a school in 1928 and in all likeness, did this as social service.³⁹²

Shanta Devi, her sister and some other educated girls took initiative to teach the children of maids by setting up a night school in the neighbourhood. Shanta Devi and her sister got a chance to teach at a university (Calcutta). Ashutosh Mukhopadhyay offered them to teach Bengali in the university. This was a very prestigious offer. But it placed them in an awkward situation. It appeared too good to be true to them since they were merely college graduates back then. In retrospect, it indeed was a lost opportunity for them.³⁹³ Belonging to a Brahmo family, they had grown up in conservative atmosphere.

Aside from teaching as social service, some women also did their jobs for a monthly salary. Ashoka Gupta's sister-in-law (brother's wife) Suhasini Dutt, for instance, taught at Ramesh Mitra Girls' High school. Suhasini stayed in a hostel and was associated with a revolutionary student's organisation. Ashoka's other sister-in-law (husband's sister) Himani also got a teaching job in 1939.³⁹⁴

Most of these writers suggested jobs like teaching, medicine, midwifery, handicraft making, or any social work for women to engage in. The trend of avoiding male job market was in vogue all throughout the first half of the 20th century. There was a constant attempt to chain women to traditional ideas and practices.

Conclusion

My academic career ended after my graduation, and I was never able to hide my disappointment about it. In those days, we were not concerned about our individual

³⁹¹ Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, 89.

³⁹² Chitrarekha Gupta, *Nirupama Devi: Jibone o Sahitye*, (Kolkata: Signet press, 2011), 168,171.

³⁹³ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, (Kolkata: Thema, 2014), 64.

³⁹⁴ Gupta, *In the Path of Service*, 62.

*careers. We thought that women took up jobs out of financial constraints. Even I had never realised, taking up a job could give one's life a sort of fulfillment.*³⁹⁵

These words by Ashoka Gupta represent women's voices from the early years of the 20th century who desired an independent life and a fulfilling career. Priyobala Gupta and Sita Devi echo the same regrets in their autobiographies *Smritimanjusha* and *Purbasmriti* respectively. Most of the time autobiographies are written as a reflection of bygone days. They contain episodes that the author deemed important for the reader. For women's autobiographies, tales of conjugal life feature the least. In other words, the autobiographies involve careful selection. In this case, since all the authors were from upper-caste and upper-class families, their autobiographies are not removed from their socio-cultural milieu. Therefore, they should not be representative of *all* women's experiences from this time. Same can be attributed to the articles and essays that they wrote. Such writings often reflect notions and ideas that were not limited to the individual's opinion on a said matter but were a mere echo of contemporary trends.

Fiction does essay women's will or desires. Ashapura Devi's '*Tomar Jabonika*' is a case in point. While Ashapura did not get sufficient academic opportunities, her fictional characters are well-educated, ambitious and working women. One might contend that she crafted such characters either from women from her everyday life or by creating progressive and educated protagonists, she realised her unfulfilled dream of attaining the desired education.

In doing so, fictions by women author challenge women's personal narratives and articles. Women were often of the opinion that they should be restricted to home, paving the path for the male members to succeed in the job market. We see that only the male members frequented the courtrooms as law remained a prosperous profession. The report of the 1921 census showed only male participation in this coveted job market. But Ashapura portrayed an unmarried woman character who earned a degree in law and practised in the High Court. This was almost contrary to the ground realities as the chapter has demonstrated so far. Together, such exemplary characters must have touched the lives of women readers. Maybe, Ashapura wrote such characters to inspire other women. In reality there was a very thin line between women's real-life experiences, their views, desires, and their fictional writings.

³⁹⁵ Gupta, *In the Path of Service*, 51.

Chapter-3

Women's Socio-Cultural Consciousness: Searching for Individual Voice

Introduction

In the first two chapters, the readers came across women's consciousness regarding education and economic independence in early twentieth century Bengal. These two activities were most influenced by circumstances like marriage, domesticity and childbirth. Marriage was the most important part of a woman's life during the period under discussion followed by motherhood. Early marriage often hampered women's education. However, with the emergence of an educated middle-class of *bhadraloks* and their demand for educated wives, women's learning continued after marriage too. Yet, motherhood did not allow them further knowledge of the outside world. With the increase in domestic responsibilities including child rearing, women's lives were confined within the four walls of her household. These two influential factors that potentially limited women's lives would be the matter of discussion in this chapter.

The proverb, '*putrarthē kriyate bharya*', meaning a man had to accept a wife to father a son is worthy of mention here. The cause of this necessity derived from the Hindu religious belief that only a son can do the rituals after the death of his parents. Given this condition, a wife's status in her in-law's house depended on whether she was capable of birthing a son. It was also a major criterion that decided if she would be valuable to her husband. If she failed to have a son, her husband would get married to another woman.³⁹⁶

Marriage was not an option for a Hindu woman, rather, it was an imposition on her. Her marriage was decided by her parents well before puberty, along with a dowry. Tanika Sarkar notes "out of entire gamut of household relations, conjugality was found to be ideally relevant to this project. Conjugality was based on the apparent absolutism of one partner and the total subordination of the other. As such, it was the one relationship that seemed more precisely to replicate colonial arrangements."³⁹⁷ This power relation of a conjugal life started changing under

³⁹⁶ Tapan Raychaudhuri, "Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, Sex and Romance in Nineteenth Century Bengal," *Modern Asian Studies* 34, no. 2 (May, 2000), 350-51. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/313067>

³⁹⁷ Tanika sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 39.

reformist and colonial interventions with the introduction of the Brahma Marriage Act of 1873, the proposal to introduce divorce in the 1880s, and the Age of Consent Act of 1891.

During the last decades of the nineteenth century, women began to educate themselves. As discussed in chapter one, women primarily got educated so that they could become compatible wives to their future husbands and good mothers to their future sons. But education also expanded their horizon so they could start questioning the nature of patriarchal relation and various taboos attached to married life. The nineteenth century literary works offered guidelines on how one could become a perfect wife and mother. The next century saw the proliferation of a huge number of women's writings opposing those traditional concepts. Of course, the nineteenth century was not entirely devoid of strong women's voices but that voice certainly grew louder by the next century. Hence, this chapter will focus on hearing women's voices that spoke of issues related to marriage and childbirth in early twentieth-century Bengal.

The chapter is divided into two major sections. The first one will deal with the transformation in women's marriage considering all legal and social aspects. Also, the other related gradients like dowry, choices in relationships, divorce, widowhood and remarriage are to be discussed. The next section will talk about choices in lifestyle and motherhood along with the crucial debate over birth control.

This chapter deals with questions like- how did the women respond to these social practices and institutions? In what ways did the new ideas regarding marriage and choice of motherhood impact women's lives? Were there any individual voice of women's own in the patriarchy-dominated personal space? How did their writings depict their experiences and desires that reflected reality?

I

Mapping the Social Condition of Women

Marriage: Legal and Social Transformation

The educated Bengali middle class in the mid-nineteenth century were interested in initiating widow remarriage, supporting women's education, and abolishing child marriage, polygamy,

‘kulinism’, and the ‘*pardah*’ system. While describing the general rules regarding marriage, the census report of 1901 was conscious of the Hindu public’s inclination towards religion. It observed that in the last decade of the nineteenth century and at the turning of the twentieth century, Hindus and other castes complied to the Shastras quite diligently.³⁹⁸ Early marriage, early widowhood, and prohibition to remarriage were quite common among women in Bengal. The number of male widows was low compared to females.³⁹⁹ Remarriage among men, too, found many takers. Calcutta was no exception; here too the number of female widows exceeded the males. But over three consecutive censuses – that of 1872, 1881 and 1891, the number of unmarried and married women increased as the number of widowed women in the city reduced drastically.

Table 3.1 Marital Status of Hindu Males and Females per 1000

Year	Location	Unmarried Persons		Married Persons		Widowed Persons	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	Calcutta	312	230	642	448	46	322
	Bengal	477	318	482	483	41	199
1911	Calcutta	335	261	627	453	38	286
	Bengal	487	292	464	451	49	257
1921	Calcutta	369	302	596	475	35	223
	Bengal	490	336	462	473	48	191
1931	Calcutta	362	324	609	478	20	203
	Bengal	469	310	498	514	33	176

Sources: *Census of India, 1901, Volume VII, Calcutta, Town and Suburbs, Part IV-Report (Statistical)*, J.R. Blackwood, Calcutta, 1902, E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, Part I, Vol. VI, Calcutta, 1902*, L.S.S.O’Malley, *Report on the Census of India, City of Calcutta, Vol. VI, Part I, 1911, Calcutta, 1913*, L.S.S.O’Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I, Vol. V, 1911, Calcutta, 1913*, W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India, 1921, Volume VI, Part I, Calcutta, 1923*, W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Vol. V, Part I, 1921, Calcutta, 1923*, *Census of India 1931, Calcutta, Part I & II, Vol. VI, A.E.Porter, Calcutta 1933*, *Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim Report A.E.Porter, Calcutta 1933*.

The high proportion of married males in 1921 Calcutta was due to uneven age distribution. There were a tiny proportion of children and old people compared to adult males under the age of 50. It was also true in the case of females.

³⁹⁸ It means scripture that included rules and norms, manual. Every religion has its own scriptures.

³⁹⁹ E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, Part I, Vol. VI, Calcutta, 1902*, 247.

Table 3.2 Early marriage in Calcutta and Bengal among Hindus per 1000

Year	Location	0-5 years of age		5-10 years of age	
		Male	Female	Male	Female
1901	Calcutta	5	7	32	78
	Bengal	15	30	85	197
1911	Calcutta	5	5	20	50
	Bengal	2	5	11	120
1921	Calcutta	13	9	22	35
	Bengal	3	9	7	85
1931	Calcutta	17	16	75	107
	Bengal	16	26	44	260

Sources: *Census of India, 1901, Volume VII, Calcutta, Town and Suburbs, Part IV-Report (Statistical)*, J.R. Blackwood, Calcutta, 1902, E.A. Gait, *Report on the Census of India, Lower Provinces of Bengal and their feudatories, Part I, Vol. VI, Calcutta, 1902*, L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, City of Calcutta, Vol. VI, Part I, 1911, Calcutta, 1913*, L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim, Part I, Vol. V, 1911, Calcutta, 1913*, W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India, 1921, Volume VI, Part I, Calcutta, 1923*, W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Vol. V, Part I, 1921, Calcutta, 1923*, *Census of India 1931, Calcutta, Part I & II, Vol. VI, A.E.Porter, Calcutta 1933*, *Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim Report A.E.Porter, Calcutta 1933*.

Regardless of L. S. S. O'Malley's theory, the age of marriage did increase among upper caste Hindus, gradually breaking the norm of early marriage in Bengal. This may not have been entirely due to growth of social consciousness; it had other aspects too. The demand for high dowry was one of the significant reasons. Added to this the practice of Kulinism⁴⁰⁰ which prevailed in society was responsible for increasing the age of marriage among Kulin families.⁴⁰¹ Given the pressure of dowry demand, enlightened Hindus sought to fix a token amount as bride or bridegroom price citing the Shastras. Hindu gentlemen from Calcutta also founded a society named Hindu Marriage Reform League with the objective of raising the age of marriage for girls to 16 years.⁴⁰²

The age of marriage for both males and females were much lower in Bengal, than Bihar and Orissa. The 1921 census of Bengal noticed that the marriage age steadily increased in the

⁴⁰⁰ was a practice where to maintain the purity of a good and respectable family from Brahmin caste had to marry their girls to a kulin man of same class and caste. <https://en.banglapedia.org/index.php/Kulinism>

⁴⁰¹ L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, Part I, Vol. V, 1911, Calcutta, 1913, 318-19.

⁴⁰² L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, 319.

last decade (1911-1921). Also, the norm of Hindu society which mandated girls to marry before puberty was gradually going out of vogue. The rise in the age of marriage during this decade was owing to the economic hardship caused by the First world war. The scarcity of money for dowry, bridal ornaments, and other miscellaneous expenses of the ceremony were some major reasons behind this development. Majority of Brahmans and Baidyas postponed marriages for both the sexes. Thus, if not for social-consciousness, practical financial consciousness certainly impacted the various norms of marriage in Hindu society.⁴⁰³

In the 1931 census, the proportion of married males increased in Calcutta while the number of widowed males and females plummeted.⁴⁰⁴ Under this census the most remarkable event was the passing of the Child Marriage Restraint Act (XIX of 1929). The Act came into force on 1st April 1930. By this act, marriage of a male under 18 and a female under 14 years of age became illegal.⁴⁰⁵ The Child Marriage Restraint Act did not pass smoothly; protests poured in from every corner opposing the bill. In fact, the census confirms a noticeable rise in the number of child marriages just before the Act came into force. The 30's decade was therefore not witness to any social consciousness with regard to women's freedom and empowerment but it did bear witness to a social anxiety among families desperate to marry off their daughters before it became illegal.⁴⁰⁶

Insofar as the census reports are concerned, it is thus clear that there was very little consciousness regarding ideal marriage age among Bengali Hindus throughout the first half of the twentieth century. From the 1880's, the notion of sacramental, non-consensual, infant marriage faced two major challenges. The first was the case of restitution of conjugal rights filed by Dadaji Bhikaji in the Bombay High Court in March 1884 against the decision of Rukmabai of not staying with her husband.⁴⁰⁷ In 1887 she was ordered by the court to either live with him or accept six months imprisonment. She refused and ultimately Dadaji agreed to a settlement at the cost of 2000 rupees. The staunchest supporter of Rukmabai's position was Behramji Malabari, a Parsi reformer and journalist, who wrote 'Notes on Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood' (1884) and went to Britain asking for government's active intervention in deciding the fate of

⁴⁰³ W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India*, Bengal, Vol. V, Part I, 1921, Calcutta, 1923, 272.

⁴⁰⁴ A.E. Porter, *Report on Census of India 1931*, Calcutta, Vol. VI, Part I & II, Calcutta 1933, 29.

⁴⁰⁵ A.E. Porter, *Report on Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim*, Calcutta 1933, 202.

⁴⁰⁶ A.E. Porter, *Report on Census of India 1931, Bengal and Sikkim*, 202.

⁴⁰⁷ Antoinette Burton, "From Child Bride to "Hindoo Lady": Rukmabai and the Debate on Sexual Respectability in Imperial Britain," *The American Historical Review* 103, No. 4 (1998): 1119. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2651200>

child brides in India.⁴⁰⁸ Another case was of the death of an eleven-year-old Bengali girl named Phulmoni Dasi following forced penetrative intercourse by her 35-year-old husband Hari Mohan Maiti, in 1889. Hari Mohan got a clean chit with a light punishment as Phulmoni was of ten, a proper age according to law for intercourse.⁴⁰⁹ So this was another case that instigated the law, as it was a painful incident where the guilty could not be punished legally.

These two cases acted as catalyst to the Age of Consent Act of 1891 which raised the legal age of sexual intercourse from ten to twelve. Cases concerning inviolable conjugal life came to the forefront for the first time and the fixing of a proper age for marriage became a socio-legal necessity. However, the Age of Consent Act of 1891 was tremendously criticized by the orthodox section of Hindu society who saw it as the British intervening in their religious matters. Not only did the act interfere with the “Hindu” way of life, it sought the advice of medical practitioners to determine the earliest age for safe sexual intercourse thus delegitimizing child marriage on scientific grounds.⁴¹⁰

Since there was a lot of backlashes in Hindu society over the Age of Consent Bill of 1891, the colonial authorities were wary of passing another law when the debate over child marriage resurfaced in the 1920s. The Montagu-Chelmsford reform of 1919 had provided some power and limited franchise to elite and educated Indians in the Legislative Assembly created in 1921. The 1920s debate over child marriage thus acquired a significant place among Indian politicians who saw in it an opportunity to not only abolish an “evil” practice but also prove to the world that they were indeed capable of self-government.⁴¹¹

The 1920s also brought other significant matters to the forefront. Most significantly, the effects of early marriage, the lack of an enjoyable childhood, and the physical and mental stress of early childbirth became matters of utmost concern.⁴¹²

A team of fifty-five lady doctors appealed to the court to raise the age of consent to avoid the extreme physical trauma typically experienced by child brides. The report contained many cases where child wives had faced extreme bleeding (often leading to death), dislocation of the

⁴⁰⁸ Burton, “From Child Bride to “Hindoo Lady”, 1120-21.

⁴⁰⁹ Ishita Pande, “Coming of Age: Law, Sex and Childhood in Late Colonial India,” *Gender & History*, 24, No.1 (April 2012), 206–209.

⁴¹⁰ Pande, “Coming of Age,” 206-209.

⁴¹¹ Sumita Mukherjee, “Using the Legislative Assembly for Social Reform: The Sarada Act of 1929,” *South Asia Research* 26, no. 3 (2006), 221.

⁴¹² Mukherjee, Using the Legislative Assembly, 220.

public arch, and inability to maintain firm posture and many other conditions. Their appeal was widely circulated. In 1927, American historian Katherine Mayo published ‘Mother India’ highlighting the mistreatment of Indian women and calling India an uncivilised country.⁴¹³ Not surprisingly, Mayo’s book immediately came under the fire of severe criticism. Despite the controversy, Mayo’s emphasis on the “loss of childhood” indicated a clear relation between child abuse and mistreatment of women.⁴¹⁴

Many proposals came in throughout the decade of 1920s regarding raising the age of consent of marriage including favourable and opposing arguments. Rai Harbilas Sarda proposed a bill in 1927 for the reduction of child widows as widows in Hindu society were mistreated. Sarda’s recommendation was to increase the marital age from 12 to 16 years for girls. A committee of 13 members headed by Sir Moropant Joshi was appointed to look into the matter. The committee proposed that the suitable marital age for girls and boys should be 14 and 18 respectively.⁴¹⁵ Those who supported the act did so citing the need for older brides to manage a joint household. It was agreed that the bride had to be sufficiently mature so she could understand religious obligations and marital responsibilities. Amidst both approvals and oppositions, the Child Marriage Restraint Act of 1929 (also known as the Sarda Act) came into force on 1st April 1930.

Just before the passing of the Sarda Act, Suramasundari Ghosh wrote an article named ‘Balyabibaha o Stree Swadhinata’ (Child Marriage and Women’s Freedom). She pointed out the positive aspect of child marriages. According to her, child marriage led to a happy family life. The in-laws accepted the child bride as their own more easily than an older one. Ghosh also argued that child marriage could lead to good compatibility between the husband and wife. Ghosh also knew that with the popularity in women’s education, child marriage would decrease considerably. Rather than passing an act for the prohibition of child marriage, Ghosh therefore believed that it should be prohibited gradually through education.⁴¹⁶

Indira Devi Choudhurani also wrote a relevant article- ‘Meyeder Poribartane Desher Amul Poribartan’ (Women’s development leads to country’s transformation) in 1930. In this piece, she made some suggestions that would bring about such transformation. First, legal reform

⁴¹³ Pande, “Coming of Age,” 211.

⁴¹⁴ Pande, “Coming of Age,” 211-12.

⁴¹⁵ Mukherjee, “Using the Legislative Assembly,” 221.

⁴¹⁶ Suramasundari Ghosh, “Balyabibaha o Stree Swadhinata,” *Bangalakshmi*, (March-April 1930), 367.

in the field of succession law and marriage law. Second, social reform like women's education, widow remarriage, economic independence and the abolition of the *pardah* and dowry system. Third, reforms in family structures that honoured a woman's right to her own money, own time, right to opinion, and overall respectability.⁴¹⁷ Indira Devi Choudhurani's article released just as the Sarda Act was about to come into force. It highlighted that raising the legal age for marriage was certainly the first step but it had to be supplemented by greater responsibility on the part of family and society in respecting women.

Despite common consensus regarding marital reforms, most considered marriage the most desired objective in a person's life. Ambujasundari in an article 'Bango Narir Durdasa' (1911-12), expressed her frustration about the misery of Bengali women. Lack of education was the reason behind their deterioration. Parents ignored the girl's education. Had these girls studied under their father, brother or in the *Pathshala*, the situation would be different. Ambujasundari held the view that if girls received proper education, then the problem of dowry, child marriage, premature aging, and premature death could be avoided.⁴¹⁸

In 1930, Giribala Devi's 'Atasir Katha' showed the harmful sides of child marriage. Being a widow after marriage at the age of ten, prohibited by in-laws, led to her mother's death due to negative thoughts of Atasi's destiny. Incidents of becoming widow at an early age were quite common during this period confirming once again that social stigma and abuse prevailed even in the 30s.⁴¹⁹ Giribala Ray (like Indira Devi Choudhurani from the previous section) wrote at a time when the Sarda bill was embroiled in controversy. Both mentioned the problem of child marriage in their writings.

By the twentieth century, compatibility became a social necessity for married couples. Educated middle class men, and sometimes even women, increasingly preferred compatible partners. Since the number of educated women in the first decades of the century was significantly lower compared to English-educated men, naturally, the desire for compatibility was more prominent among men than women at the time.

In 1934, Sarajubala Ray's story 'Bhuler Pathe' (Towards making a mistake) portrayed the issue of compatibility among contemporary couples contrasting it with an image of the ideal

⁴¹⁷ Indira Devi Choudhurani, "Meyeder Poribartane Desher Amul Poribartan," *Bangalakshmi*, (March-April, 1930), 333-35.

⁴¹⁸ Ambujasundari Dasgupta, "Bango Narir Durdasa," *Janhabi* (July-August 1911-June-July 1912), 311.

⁴¹⁹ Giribala Ray, "Atasir Katha," *Bangalakshmi*, (March-April 1930): 392-94.

Hindu woman. Ray's story revolved around Oxford-returned Prafulla who having returned to his native village was dissatisfied with his conventional and shy wife Bibhabati. After he failed to mould her in his way of life he gave up and joined as a professor at St. Paul College in Calcutta. Following a month of incommunicado from Prafulla's side, Bibhabati's apprehensive in-laws sent Bibhabati to Calcutta to live with Prafulla to mend their deteriorating conjugality. With Prafulla's encouragement, Bibha took admission at Vishwa Bharati in Santiniketan. In two years, she passed Matriculation and acquired efficiency in stitching and eastern dance. Even though pregnancy put a pause on her further education, Bibha picked up social skills and etiquette from a family friend, Mrs. Ray during her trimesters.⁴²⁰ Very soon, Bibha became the centre of attention at all the parties she attended or hosted. Bibha was extremely sociable but Mrs Ray's brother, Mr Bose's constant overtures irritated her; so, she started avoiding them. Despite Bibha's disinclination, her increasing intimacy with Mr Bose displeased Prafulla immensely. An angry Prafulla decided to join Patna University, asking Bibha to stay back in Calcutta instead of accompanying him. Bibha, for her part, blamed Prafulla, for changing her from an orthodox Brahmin woman to a 'modern' woman. After all, she was doing everything as per her husband's will.⁴²¹

Ray's story clearly showed a western educated man's desire for a compatible wife who also displayed traditional qualities. The story's title may signal the writer's intention of alerting society about the negative impact of Western culture on women. Bibha's character however underlined that women's participation in the outside world had increased in different spheres, **however, it** was still intimately tied to her husband's desires.

Written in 1939, Mamata Ghosh's article 'Adhunik Narir Shiksha o Bibaho Samasya' blamed women's higher education for all the corruption of society. She denounced the dowry system but also found the root cause of this social evil in women's higher education. She added that the modern grooms' desire for educated wives was the main reason behind an unhappy married life.⁴²² Earlier when women used to marry at tender ages their in-laws moulded them as per their desire. But in the present situation, an educated bride had a mind of her own and no longer obeyed customs and rituals.⁴²³ So after analysing the problem of contemporary unhealthy

⁴²⁰ Sarajubala Ray, "Bhuler Pathe," *Bnagalakshmi*, (February-March 1934): 200.

⁴²¹ Ray, "Bhuler Pathe," 203.

⁴²² Mamata (Mitra) Ghosh, "Adhunik Narir Shiksha o Bibaho Samasya," *Prabartak*, (June-July 1939), 301.

⁴²³ Ghosh, "Adhunik Narir Shiksha," 300.

married life she suggested less education and age for an ideal bride.⁴²⁴ Ghosh's article echoed the nationalist sentiment that privileged Hindu modes of the traditional conjugal life over western concept of courtship culture between same-age couples.

Another dilemma in contemporary marriages constituted the obligations of shouldering responsibilities of elderly family members. Hindu households found themselves torn between western aspirations and traditional values of joint family structures.⁴²⁵ Ashoka Gupta's 'In the Path of Service' discusses the woes of her husband's transferable job which attracted a steady inflow of family members who came in to stay with them for various educational or health purposes.⁴²⁶

Dowry: The Social Malice

The issue of dowry was closely integrated with marriage. The changing mindsets of modern educated men and women, their thoughts regarding the evil practice, their desire for a compatible partner, and changing perspectives on the social evil are all reflected in contemporary women's writings.

Rochona Majumdar has denied dowry as a timeless tradition with any mention in the religious scriptures. To be sure, there did exist a ritual of the bride's family presenting a token sum to the groom, but by the 1870s it became a serious economic practice, particularly in Bengal.⁴²⁷ The development of education in Bengal has an intimate connection to this sudden rise in dowry demands. By the mid-nineteenth century, education and employment became the key markers of *bhadralok* society.⁴²⁸ This led to a competition among the families of eligible brides who were all looking for suitable grooms with university degrees and holding government jobs. There was also a significant demand for grooms who were employed in other respectable professions.⁴²⁹ While fathers of brides went looking for the best grooms for their daughters,

⁴²⁴ Ghosh, "Adhunik Narir Shiksha," 301.

⁴²⁵ Bharati Ray, "Women of Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947," *Social Scientist* 19, no. 5/6, (May-June, 1999), 15.

⁴²⁶ Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, (Kolkata, Stree, 2005).

⁴²⁷ Rochona Majumdar, "Snehalata's Death: Dowry and Women's Agency in Colonial Bengal," *The Indian Economic and Social History Review* 41, no. 4 (2004), 436.

⁴²⁸ Majumdar, "Snehalata's Death," 437.

⁴²⁹ Majumdar, "Snehalata's Death," 437-38.

eligible grooms in the marriage market started demanding higher and higher dowries on the basis of their educational qualification and handsome incomes.

Not all grooms earned decent salaries though. As Majumdar has noted, Bengal was hit by a serious unemployment problem from 1870-1940. In such circumstances, too, dowry became a necessary income for the groom's family.⁴³⁰ Fathers of brides, desperate to see their daughters happy, would often give in to these ransom claims at the cost of extreme economic distress. The dowry system drove families to deep mental distress and deeper economic destitution. On 29th January 1914, Snehalata Mukhopadhyay, died by suicide at the age of barely 14 or 15 to save her father from the pressure of dowry. This was the first reported suicide in twentieth century Bengal that raised questions about women's position in society and became a hotly debated issue of the time.⁴³¹

Nirupama Devi's novel 'Sarbani' reflected a case of dowry. Sarbani refused to marry when the groom's father demanded a dowry. In response, the groom's father proposed to marry off his son to Sarbani's cousin. The groom, however, disagreed to this proposal since he found in Sarbani a far more compatible partner. Many young adults praised Sarbani for her self-respect and courage to turn down a proposal on the grounds of dowry payment. But many others criticised her as well. It illustrated the changing views of society.⁴³² On the day of the wedding, when the groom's father insulted the bride's family for the bride's lightweight jewellery, Sarbani decided to run away.⁴³³ The story shows that even if contemporary women were not necessarily taking bold steps like Sarbani, they were concerned about insults their family faced in the name of marriage. They preferred to be unmarried to save their family from the inevitable disrespect. Also, they started to value their self-esteem.

Snehashila Choudhury was one of those strong women voices who supported the Sarda Act in 1929.⁴³⁴ An article by Choudhury in 1934 talked about the concept of independence. She thought that the actual meaning of independence had to be understood. Whimsical and arbitrary behaviour is not independence. According to her, abandoning religious bonds or social bonds is not independence but accepting it heartily to take it to its excellence defines true independence.

⁴³⁰ Majumdar, "Snehalata's Death," 439.

⁴³¹ Majumdar, "Snehalata's Death," 435.

⁴³² Nirupama Devi, "Sarabani," *Udayan*, (October-November 1933): 839.

⁴³³ Nirupama Devi, "Sarabani," (January-February, 1934), 458-59.

⁴³⁴ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947*, (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2014), 61, DOI: 10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198098942.001.0001.

She added that an independent woman would never be commoditized for marriage. Choudhury believed that an ideal marriage was as necessary to the groom as it was to the bride. Women, thereby, were expected to be patient but at the same time be aware of their power and true importance.⁴³⁵

Choosing Non-Marriage and Romantic Relationships: Deviant Women

Despite dilemmas about conjugal life, there emerged a more liberal concept of free-mixing between both the sex and the marriage choices of their own. As the need for women's education was realised by society and women themselves, it naturally reduced the importance of marriage as a primary necessity. Women wanted to remain unmarried for a longer time to finish their education. Longer period of remaining unmarried gave women a few more years of relative freedom at her own home, helped articulate their own ideas and desires regarding marriage, marital life, and husband. They were introduced to ideas of love and romance as the basis of a relationship between men and women through education. New literary works of the twentieth century certainly educated them about romantic relationships.⁴³⁶

Many incidents of elopement were there at that time. A woman after eloping with her lover was tagged as '*kulatyagini*' (who stepped outside her *kula*⁴³⁷). The responsibility of *kula*'s purity lay with the women of the *Kula*- her chastity before marriage, after marriage and a loyalty towards her alive or dead husband. *Kulatyag* was an irreversible act. A woman who left home with her lover could not be accepted again by her family. If they did, they would also have to face the threat of being outcaste like the woman who eloped. The act of elopement can be interpreted as her resistance against the patriarchal norm of a non-opinionated marriage and her desire to live her life according to her own. Most of the time the patriarchy denied her agency to choose and run away at her own will. Generally, the woman's family complained to the police that their ward had been kidnapped, abducted, raped or tempted by the woman's lover. Such cases accused the male participants of the incident and denied the women's active consent in the act. Media's exaggeration of these kinds of news added pressure on the women's families. Also,

⁴³⁵ Snehashila Choudhury, "Bartaman Nari Jibon -Samasya o Banglae Nari Nigraha," *Prabartak*, (December-January 1934): 280.

⁴³⁶ Ray, "Women of Bengal," 13.

⁴³⁷ The term *kula* referred to all the male descendants of a common ancestral male together with their wives and daughters.

women themselves in their testimony to the court generally refused to accept their part in the incident due to familial, societal and media pressure and men had to be the victims.⁴³⁸ This confirms the internalisation of patriarchal norms.

Bandyopadhyay studied two cases of elopement in 1929. One was the Hindu extramarital relationship of Leelabati Dasgupta and Akshay Das, and the other was an interfaith relationship between a Hindu girl Sovana Ray and a Muslim boy Mahiuddin Ahmed. Perhaps, in both cases women's willing involvement was evident, but their denial led to men's punishment according to the Indian Penal Code.⁴³⁹ The 1920s and 1930s saw many such cases of inter-community marriages in Bengal. Famous personalities like Kazi Najrul Islam, barrister Asaf Ali, Humayun Kabir all married to Hindu women. The increasing incidents like these in 1929, facilitated the proliferation of voices against the Sarada Act (the Child Marriage Retrain Act of 1929), tracing the result of delayed age of marriage.⁴⁴⁰

A significant feature of the 1911 census was that it accounted for a large number of unmarried females aged 20 and above. L. S. S. O'Malley who conducted the census however had his own observation regarding this development. O'Malley noted that a large number of these unmarried women were sex workers, thus can be concluded that women hailing from middle class *bhadralok* families hardly stayed unmarried past twenty.

Since arranged marriage had been the norm in society, there were limited opportunities for free mixing of sexes in society. This might be the reason why women writers of the time reflected their desires for free mixing and marriage choices in their stories and novels. In her autobiography, Shanta Devi mentioned socialisation across gender divisions around 1909-10. Generally, girls from her socio-cultural background were not allowed to talk to the boys even in the neighbourhood. Shanta Devi and her sister however had limited exposure in this regard; they used to talk to their brother's friends at home, and sometimes they met at familial settings. On rare occasions, girls were introduced to suitable boys before marriage in the presence of family. Yet, there were instances where romantic relationships between girls and boys flourished.⁴⁴¹

⁴³⁸ Aparna Bandyopadhyay, 'Of Sin, Crime and Punishment: Elopements in Bengal, 1929'. *This paper was published in a slightly revised format in *Intimate Others: Marriage and Sexualities in India*, edited by Samita Sen, Nandita Dhawan and Ranjita Biswas, published by School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, and Stree, Kolkata, 2011. (Pages not mentioned)

⁴³⁹ Bandyopadhyay, 'Of Sin, Crime and Punishment.'

⁴⁴⁰ Bandyopadhyay, 'Of Sin, Crime and Punishment.'

⁴⁴¹ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, (Kolkata: Thema, 2014), 64-65.

Even in families with ‘liberal’ background, due to demands of social etiquette this was more or less the true picture of society around that time.

Bharati Ray writes that in very rare cases, and especially in some liberal families, co-education sometimes provided the scope of free mixing before marriage.⁴⁴² Here the instance of Ashoka Gupta can be cited. Ashoka was introduced to her future husband Saibal Kumar Gupta before marriage. Her mother allowed her to mix freely and talk to him. They used to write letters to each other. Ashoka was then 20 (in 1932) and Saibal 30. Although Ashoka’s uncles did not approve, Ashoka’s mother was really progressive in her thinking.⁴⁴³

Falguni Mukhopadhyay’s story ‘Asha’ (1933) demonstrated the free mixing and easy-going relationships between a man and a woman. After she turned sixteen, Asha’s family chose Sushil, her brother’s friend as her life partner. Asha asked her brother why he wanted her to be a puppet in the hands of a worthless rich family. Asha was not ready to marry a man who lived on his father’s money.⁴⁴⁴ By rejecting a marriage proposal from a *zamindar* family Asha showed that she would remain unmarried rather than marrying someone she did not approve. Asha echoed an independent female voice that seemed to be gradually growing in society around this time.

Nirupama Devi⁴⁴⁵ showed free mixing in society and the attitude of the older generation in the novel ‘Sarvani’ (1933). Sarvani’s story brings into picture a conversation between Suranjan (Sarvani’s father) and Golapsundari (her aunt) about what they thought about their next generation’s mind-set. Golapsundari disagreed with Sarvani’s decision to dedicate her life taking care of her father by remaining unmarried. She also disapproved of the prevalent trend in society that supported the marriage of boys and girls as grown-ups. She feared that Rabindranath’s poetic lines “*Ihar cheye hotem jodi Arab bedouin*” (If only I could be a nomad or vagabond) would come true in every household.⁴⁴⁶ Golapsundari’s views revealed the older generation’s

⁴⁴² Ray, “Women of bengal,” 14.

⁴⁴³ Ashoka Gupta, *In the Path of Service: Memories of a Changing Century*, (Kolkata, Stree, 2005), 37-40.

⁴⁴⁴ Falguni Mukhopadhyay, “Asha,” *Udayan*, (1933-1934): 1006-07.

⁴⁴⁵ There were at least four Nirupama Devi at that time engaged in literary works. So identifying the exact Nirupama Devi as writer of the story is quite impossible. Also as Gupta researched detail of her life and works, she did not mention the novel ‘*Sarvani*’ amongst Nirupama’s works. According to Gupta, Nirupama was becoming indifferent in writing during 1930s when this novel was written. See Chitrankha Gupta, *Nirupama Devi: Jibone o Sahitye*, Signet Press, 2011, 10.

⁴⁴⁶ Nirupama Devi, “Sarvani,” 1235.

disappointment with the practices of the time which saw women acting on their free will, mixing freely with men, remaining unmarried for life, and desiring financial independence.

In 1934, Ashapura Devi's 'Tomar Jabonika' portrayed a character named Nabina who, unlike her friends, remained unmarried to pursue her career.⁴⁴⁷ Although Ashapura Devi had no conventional education and grew up in a very conservative family, her mother's encouragement for learning and reading helped her develop a progressive mindset as evident in the portrayal of characters. The story began with a description of a group of young adults indulging in unhindered conversation in a University's common room. Co-educational arrangements became common at least among students hailing from upper-class and upper-middle-class educated families. Love affairs, too, were becoming common as depicted by Ashapura Devi in the story. Characters like Ila, Jayati and Nayana were in romantic relationships and chose their life partners themselves. Women were also becoming career oriented.⁴⁴⁸

Sita Devi⁴⁴⁹ in the story 'Sawambar' (1934) portrayed an educated and confident female character, Chandramukhi. Chandramukhi's parents Pratima and Lalmohan subscribed to different worldviews. While Pratima was anxious to get Chandra married off, Lalmohan was approving of his daughter's independence and opinionated personality. On the day of her wedding, Chandra realised that she did not like the appearance of her to-be husband and desired to call off the wedding. When the groom's friend Srish came to see her disguised as a doctor, she told him she had agreed to the marriage thinking the groom would be handsome like Srish. Sita Devi's story revealed contemporary women's courage and autonomy – both to voice their opinions and choose their life partners.⁴⁵⁰

The 1930s saw many such instances of strong, independent, and courageous women characters in literary fiction. Given that most of these stories were inspired from real life experiences, one can conclude that the question of women's empowerment was no longer the stuff of fantasy. In 1937, the journal, *Dipali* invited women to discuss their opinions about reluctance to marriage. Annapurna De from Lucknow wrote that such reluctance was mainly limited to the highly educated section of women. She cited some reasons including frigidity

⁴⁴⁷ Ashapura Devi, "Tomar Jabonika," *Sahitya sangstha*, (March-April, 1934).

⁴⁴⁸ Ashapura Devi, "Tomar Jabonika," 20-23.

⁴⁴⁹ Though Sita Devi, Ramananda Chattopadhyay's daughter and Shanta Devi's sister was a contemporary famous writer, it is doubtful whether the writer Sita Devi of the above story was the same or not. Because there was no mention of the above story in the list of her published work.

⁴⁵⁰ Sita Devi, "Sawambar," *Udayan* (April-May, 1934), 34-37.

towards men, failed love, lesbianism, love for one's independence, dedication to the nation's cause, witnessing bad marriages, and general hesitation to embrace responsibilities in life.⁴⁵¹ It showcased the many anxieties that women perhaps had for a really long time but were only comfortable expressing now in this changing social circumstances.

Divorce: The Non-Sacrificial Women

Divorce, in a legal sense of the term, did not exist in colonial Bengal. Though not in legal terms, women writers of the time often built women characters who abandoned their oppressive and unethical husbands – something close to what we call divorce today. Though marriage had always been considered a sacred bond in Hindu society, women sometimes chose not to be so sacrificial in a relationship that they could not continue anymore. Interestingly, the census of 1911 entered divorced persons as widowed.⁴⁵² Given that the Indian Divorce Act of 1869 was enacted primarily for Christians, it is possible that those mentioned as widowed may have refused conjugal relationship. In any case, the number of divorcees in the widowed list must have been minimal.

'*Satitva*' (chastity of a woman) and '*patibratya*' (loyalty towards husband) were two essential ingredients of conjugality in colonial Bengal, especially for *bhadralok* class. Loyalty was expected from a woman even if the husband was alive or dead. The late nineteenth century Bengal saw a major dilemma between the Hindu law of inheritance and the unchaste widows. The Dayabhaga School of Law opined that a sonless widow would inherit her dead husband's property. But most of the times she was deprived of the limited rights on the ground of 'unchastity'. The British judiciary supported widows' inheritance to deceased husbands' properties on the basis of her unchastity preceding or succeeding the husband's death without complicating the 'shastric' position. This was largely opposed by Hindu revivalist position on the allegation of colonial intervention. There had been a great hue and cry about two cases - Jaykalee Dabea vs. Matunginee Dabea case in 1869 and Kerry Kolutani vs. Moniram Koluta case in 1873

⁴⁵¹ Annapurna De, "Meyeder Bibahe Anicchar Karon," *Dipali*, (August- September, 1937): 14. *two more letters came to Dipali office one from khardaha and another from Bhabanipur, Kolkata. So women by the time were thinking about marriage as a choice/option.

⁴⁵² L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, Part I, Vol. V, 1911, Calcutta, 1913, 314.

regarding the dispossession of property on the charge of unchastity.⁴⁵³ This law seemed to be discriminatory as there was no such obligation for men. Through this law patriarchy tried to tie up women to their 'kula'. Many voices were raised against such unequal and discriminatory positions of women in India.

Bharati Ray cited some examples of women's writings to establish society's male-female discrimination and the benefit of male supremacy. She pointed to Banganari/Anindita Devi's question to society in 1931-32 which asked why men always subordinated women in a conjugal relationship. She added that in such unequal relationships, it was unjust to expect women to be 'ideal' wives while men did anything they desired.⁴⁵⁴ This was not a new complaint; the same hypocrisy had been spelt out fifty years ago by Tarabai Shinde in 'A Comparison between Women and Men'. Shinde had questioned the concept of 'Stridhatma' which supported the worship of a husband like God. The husband could be oppressive, unfaithful, and even indulge in excessive drinking or gambling and other criminal activities, but his wife had to be a '*Patibrata*' (loyal towards her husband).⁴⁵⁵ Bharati Ray's piece showed that the double standards in Hindu society were still very much alive in the new century.

Pravabati Devi Saraswati too wrote out of concern about women's social and domestic issues. Her novel 'Nutan Jug' (New Era), (1924) lamented the ill luck of Bengali women whose opinion was inconsequential and would not be heard most of the times. Dipika, sick of domestic and marital abuse, decided to leave her husband's house. A product of bigoted thinking that expected women to be sacrificial and endure all oppression, her conservative husband cursed her education. Pravabati suggested that with the changing times, women should raise their voices to be heard.⁴⁵⁶ Through Dipika's character, Pravabati painted an image of a strong girl who could stand for herself, cared for her self-esteem, and respected her independent thoughts. She was an educated girl who rejected her oppressive husband's house and led an independent life supporting herself with her own earnings.⁴⁵⁷

⁴⁵³ Aparna Bandyopadhyay, "Hindu Revivalism and 'Unchaste' Widows in Colonial Bengal," *Gendered Asia: Special Issue of Asian Studies*, XXXVI, No. 1 and 2, (January 2018- December 2018).

⁴⁵⁴ Ray, "Women of Bengal," 16.

⁴⁵⁵ Tarabai Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men-An Essay to show Who's Really Wicked and Immoral, Women or Men?*, (Buldhana: Shri Shivaji Press, 1882). In the book by Rosalind O'Hanlon, *A Comparison Between Women and Men: Tarabai Shinde and the Critique of Gender Relations in Colonial India*, 79-80.

⁴⁵⁶ Pravabati Devi Saraswati, "Nutan Jug," *Sachitra Sisir*, (August-september, 1924), 1293.

⁴⁵⁷ Saraswati, "Nutan Jug" 1391.

Widowhood and Remarriage

The 1911 Census shows that the Brahma Marriage Act of 1872⁴⁵⁸ did not facilitate widow remarriage in Bengal. Only 335 widow remarriages took place in a decade (1901-1910) out of which two-thirds happened in Calcutta, not to mention that 301 of those remarriages were of widowed males. Thus, it was elderly men's marriage and widowers who could marry a number of times.⁴⁵⁹ Census of 1921 noticed a high proportion of female widows in the city of Calcutta as well as in the whole country.⁴⁶⁰ There was a sharp increase in widow remarriage in this decade as signalled by the decreasing number of widows in the cities like Calcutta, Howrah and Dacca.⁴⁶¹ The rise in age of marriage or remarriage of (mostly male) widows happened more out of financial duress and not because of any sense of evolved social or moral consciousness. Women's early marriages to elderly men, 'kulinism', and inhibition to widow remarriage were some of the possible reasons behind this sharp rise.

Many criticisms about ill-treatment to widows also poured in during this time. Despite the efforts of the Widow Remarriage Act enacted about seventy years back, the prospect of widow remarriage was still a social taboo in the 1920s and 1930s. And not surprisingly, even in this matter men and women were treated differently. In 1882, Tarabai Shinde of Maharashtra had highlighted the double standard of society in treating widowed males and females. She said no woman could marry again after losing her husband. A widow had to hide her face as if she had committed a crime. Shinde cried that men have all the freedom to bring another wife as soon as the previous one dies. She asked why men could have such rights when widowhood meant the end of happiness for womenfolk.⁴⁶² Forty years since Shinde, it was quite apparent that the condition of Bengali widows had not improved at all.

In Bengal, Brahma men initiated many widow remarriages and also considered it their duty to marry widows themselves also. For instance, Durgamohan Das arranged the remarriage of his young stepmother in 1909. Rabindranath arranged his son's marriage to a child widow, Pratima Devi. Widowed poet Radharani Devi, married Narendra Dev, a poet and intellectual in

⁴⁵⁸ This law fixed the minimum age for a girl's marriage would be fourteen.

⁴⁵⁹ L.S.S.O'Malley, *Report on the Census of India, Bengal, Bihar and Orissa and Sikkim*, 336.

⁴⁶⁰ W.H. Thompson, *Report on the Census of India*, 1921, Volume VI, Part I, Calcutta, 1923, 57.

⁴⁶¹ A.E. Porter, *Report on Census of India 1931, Calcutta*, 209.

⁴⁶² Shinde, *A Comparison Between Women and Men*, 88-89.

1931. Radharani's essay 'Satitva ki Manushyatver Sankochak na Prasarak' (Does chastity Enhance Humanity or Detract from it?) in 1924 created controversy among the public, arguing that women should listen to her heart and fulfill her desire. She should not step back because of social stigma.⁴⁶³

The novel 'Ahuti' (1924) by Suruchibala Ray tells the story of a widow Malati, who also lost her father. With no relatives to turn to, Malati's mother Annapurna went to her childhood friend, the *zamindar's* wife. Malati was unaware about her marital status because it had happened to her at a very tender age. The *zamindar's* son Nalin and Malati both liked each other. He finally got to know about her widowhood and Malati realised that she could never be with Nalin. Nalin however comforted Malati citing the example of a widow remarriage in the next village. The novel does not reveal their future and leaves readers to assume the reunion of the lovers.⁴⁶⁴ Though widow remarriage was not a norm in the society then (or even today), Suruchibala's depiction was far ahead of her times.

The discussion on marriage innately and simultaneously initiated conversations around the aligned issues of childbirth, reproduction, child bearing, and child rearing etc and brought them under socio-political scrutiny. In the twentieth century, a healthy body, healthy lifestyle of women, choice of motherhood, birth control were new issues that emerged in this social. The next section will be dealing with all the above-mentioned topics.

II

Choice of Motherhood and Birth Control

This section shows some strong women's voices from the period under discussion that demanded basic rights for themselves, proper education, and equal position in society. They demanded their own time at home as well as in the outside world. They also showed their desire to be independent and free from all bondage by remaining unmarried and sometimes even resorting to birth control. The issue of birth control quite predictably became a major topic of debate in contemporary society.

⁴⁶³ Aparna Bandyopadhyay, *Desire and Defiance: A study of Bengali Women in Love 1850-1930*, (New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2016), 69-72.

⁴⁶⁴ Suruchibala Ray, "Ahuti," *Sachitra Sisir*, (May-June, 1924), 1114.

Healthy Lifestyle for Women

Western-educated women from 1860s onwards started identifying the ‘oriental’ *zenana* or inner part of the house, as abnormally dark and unhygienic. They criticized it as the marker of backwardness and their responsibility towards “solving it” as “civilized” members of Indian society.⁴⁶⁵

Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyay, a Brahma educationist and feminist⁴⁶⁶ wrote an incisive piece in 1925 demanding women’s basic rights. She inspired women to be vocal about their right to good health and a well-deserved lifestyle.⁴⁶⁷ She advocated for proper nutrition, exercise, and properly lit and ventilated homes. She suggested picnic or travelling to bring some change in the lives of women for enjoyment and pleasure. Jyotirmoyee’s reasoning was practical – the only mode of travelling prevalent in average Hindu families happened amongst elderly people who visited religious sites on pilgrimage. Jyotirmoyee believed that traveling for pleasure and devoid of any religious purpose would breathe new life and meaning in the life of women who were otherwise bound within the four walls of domesticity.⁴⁶⁸

An article by Banganari (the pseudonym of contemporary famous writer Anindita Devi) echoed Jyotirmoyee and also added that women of well-to-do families engaged themselves in gossiping and reading nonsense. Rather than engaging in feminine (“*meyeli*”) activities – a subject elaborated in chapter 1 -- Anindita believed that women should instead be introduced to artistic works, educational activities, and gardening which would expose them to the outside world. She thought about women’s need to be in the open air outside the ‘*antahpur*’ (inner part of the house) and mix with different people in this large world.⁴⁶⁹ It pained Anindita Devi to see western women work out, play, and do outdoor activities which made them healthier and more progressive, while women in her country were confined at home all the time.⁴⁷⁰ In order to address the current crisis, Anindita made a vital point to enable women’s education. She suggested child care facilities that allowed women to bring children to their

⁴⁶⁵ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling In The Archive: Women writing House, home and History in late Colonial India*, (OUP, 2003), 8.

⁴⁶⁶ She was the daughter of Dwarakanath Gangopadhyay (1844-1898), a Brahma reformer of Bengal.

⁴⁶⁷ Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyay, “Jatir Jibone Narir Sthan,” *Sachitra Sisir*, (July-August, 1925): 1148-1149.

⁴⁶⁸ Gangopadhyay, “Jatir Jibone,” 1147.

⁴⁶⁹ Banganari, “Meyeder Kaj,” *Bangalakshmi*, (April-May, 1928): 398-99.

⁴⁷⁰ Banganari, “Meyeder Kaj,” 399.

colleges/institutions/workplaces so their work did not suffer and children too were well looked after.⁴⁷¹

‘Samaje Narir Satya Adhikar’ by Indira Devi Choudhurani too made similar suggestions. Like the other previously-mentioned authors, Indira Devi too demanded healthy life for women, airy and well-lit homes, right to free movement and travel, education, financial independence, less domestic pressure including the choice to have fewer children, and compatibility between husband and wife. For widows, she recommended strong characteristics, right to remarry, dedication towards the cause of the nation, proper education, and employment opportunities.⁴⁷²

Altered Motherhood: Diversion from ‘Putrarthe Kriyate Bharya’

The definition of motherhood was changing as reflected in the contemporary women’s writings. Not only were women marrying later, they were also bearing fewer children to attend to other non-wifely and motherly duties. Rigid opinions of course still persisted but they were no longer the only voices in society.

Jyotirmoyee Devi was the biographer of Giribala Devi and argues that Giribala’s writings were all a reflection of her experiences.⁴⁷³ Giribala Devi lamented that women were not allowed to grow to their full potential. She underwent child marriage in 1903 at the age of twelve. Her husband Purnachandra was a nationalist. At the age of 19-20 she came to her husband's workplace in Calcutta. In an article about femininity and motherhood, Giribala grieved that women were not realising their potential as integral voices in clinching their rights.⁴⁷⁴ She asserted that the absence of femininity was the main cause for women’s loss of power and importance in society and that motherhood was among many attributes of a woman. It seemed there was no other purpose to their education besides managing domestic duties properly. She opined that women were made into goddesses of the house which decreased their importance.⁴⁷⁵ She asked women to be successful before being a mother and a wife. Firstly, women should engage themselves in work, learn poetry and lessons, and get proper education before becoming

⁴⁷¹ Banganari, “Meyeder Kaj,” 401.

⁴⁷² Devi Choudhurani, “Meyeder,” 333-35.

⁴⁷³ Jyotirmoyee Devi, “Giribala Devi,” in *Sahitya Sadhok Charitmala-Ekabingsho Khando*, ed. Manjushree Sinha (Kolkata, Bangiyo Sahitya Parisat, 2004), 2-9.

⁴⁷⁴ Giribala Ray, “Narittwo o Matrittwo,” *Bangalakshmi*, (december-January 1926): 37.

⁴⁷⁵ Ray, “Narittwo o Matrittwo,” 37.

a mother. This way, a woman explored different sides to her life and personality and did not reduce herself to childbearing responsibilities alone.⁴⁷⁶

Snehashila Choudhury's opinion in the article 'Matritwo o Patnitwo' (Motherhood and wifehood) stood in sharp contrast to Giribala's views. Snehashila denied the value of womanhood and glorified motherhood as the sole goal of a woman's life. Choudhury listed the following attributes for defining and criticising women seeking individual rights. She addressed three issues that were the main concern of contemporary men and women, one, questioning the traditional concept of satiety of a woman who becomes a mother; two, rejecting the Puranic view that "Putrarthe kriyote Bharja" (a wife exists to reproduce sons) and considered it a matter of disgrace; three, longed for her own identity instead of being recognised by her father, brother or husband's identities.⁴⁷⁷ She blamed 'new trends' in Hindu society such as widow remarriage. She denounced women who, after becoming mothers, wished to marry again for chastity of a wife was her greatest virtue. Snehashila thought she insulted her existence as a wife and a mother by such acts and felt pity for them.⁴⁷⁸

Though a supporter of Sarda Bill, Snehashila's views about motherhood exposed the ambiguity that women bore in them. Apparently, as a liberal minded lady who openly talked about women's self-respect (see early parts of this chapter) in support of the Sarda Bill, she at the same time was rigid in her mind-set about women's independence and motherhood. One wonders if Snehashila's insistence on motherhood had any connection with the Hindu nationalist fear regarding the decreasing number of Hindus around this time – a phenomena which will be discussed in the latter part of this chapter.

Birth Control Debate

With the rise in general awareness, spread of education, and economic independence, twentieth century women realised that they could do more than just be good wives and mothers. The demand for better lifestyle, growing interest in different non-domestic and public activities led them to delay motherhood or even have fewer children. The need for birth control was not only sexual liberation but a necessity for women under the changing circumstances.

⁴⁷⁶ Ray, "Narittwo o Matrittwo," 39.

⁴⁷⁷ Snehashila Coudhury, "Matritwo o Patnitwo," *Prabartak*, (July-August 1934): 397.

⁴⁷⁸ Coudhury, "Matritwo o Patnitwo," 397.

The advocates of birth control in colonial India restricted their arguments only to the over-population in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Advocates like A.P. Pillay, Narayan Sitaram Phadke, Pyare Krishan Wattal, Gopaljee Ahluwalia and Radhakamal Mukherjee were interested in connecting nation building with birth-control in colonial India. They put forward their ideas and activities based on Francis Galton's idea of eugenics.⁴⁷⁹ Phadke wanted birth control to protect Indians from foreigners who were allegedly "using" them for imperialistic purposes.⁴⁸⁰ This nationalistic view was also popularised by Gandhi. When the medical board blamed India's overpopulation for famine, Gandhi argued that famine was not a natural calamity, it was a problem manufactured by British Government.⁴⁸¹

Pillay supported the multiplication of more 'fit' and useful citizens replacing the 'unfit'. By 'unfit' he meant physically and morally depraved people who were careless, foolish, feeble, inefficient, and insane.⁴⁸² Basically the political strategy for nationalist empowerment in late colonial India led to a strict surveillance of reproductive functions, especially of those considered undesirable like the working class, lower caste, and Muslim populations.⁴⁸³ During this time, international propagators came to India to promote their contraceptive technologies. That instigated new thoughts regarding birth control and the use of contraception in India. This is why most of the writings and debates regarding birth control are reflected in the pages of periodicals from the 1930s.

Indian middle-class women were late in addressing the issue of birth control than the male advocates. That might be because of the late formation of women's organisations like the Women's Indian Association (WIA) in 1917 and the All India Women's Conference (AIWC) in 1927. Being novices in the field the public association, women took some time to satisfactorily address the controversial issue of birth control and female sexual freedom. Even the initial resolution on the subject was rejected by the members of AIWC who did not consider this "a

⁴⁷⁹ Galton's eugenics is an idea and an artificial practice to produce a genetically better human race through controlling procreation in marriages. He talked about "positive eugenics" where a physically and mentally superior person chooses a similar partner and thus creates a superior human being.

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/19602363/>.

⁴⁸⁰ By saying imperialistic purpose here Phadke meant Indians working under British administration, like a slave. And multiplication of population means multiplication of slave under colonial rule. Sanjam Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India, 1877-1947*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 35.

⁴⁸¹ Sanjam Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints: Birth Control in India, 1877-1947*, (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 80.

⁴⁸² Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 31-32.

⁴⁸³ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 35.

women's issue". It was only in 1932 that the resolution was finally passed after a huge debate, even though many were not in agreement.⁴⁸⁴ Nonetheless, the passing of this resolution was of great significance because it passed despite Gandhi's opposition to birth control.

Birth control was increasingly becoming the main theme of discussion in the 1920s-30s. The periodical *Jayashree* took the initiative to discuss the matter and invited men and women to express their views on this issue. When *Jayashree* appeared for the first time in 1931, with Leela Roy as editor, many women were already active in the anti-colonial nationalist movement.⁴⁸⁵ The national awakening had already occurred amongst the new generation of women. Regarding *Jayashree*'s birth Leela Roy said, in an anarchic time in Bengal- "we launched *Jayashree* to help us stay focussed ideologically and generate empathy and camaraderie for our cause."⁴⁸⁶ While other contemporary nationalist journals like *Probasi* tried to connect women to social issues only, *Jayashree* reflected on economic and political causes also. *Jayashree*'s motive was to inculcate patriotic fervour among women and ease their participation in public life.⁴⁸⁷ Considered a taboo for respectable women from liberal families, public discussion on the issue of birth control and contraception was a brave step.⁴⁸⁸ At the face of negative reactions, *Jayashree* supported the discourse on birth control and highlighted the issue.⁴⁸⁹

The 1932 issue of *Jayashree* is crucial in this context. It collated the writings of men on this issue since birth control was a decision that should be jointly taken by a couple. Jagat Mitra in his article on the necessity of birth control expressed his concern about the social pressure on women. Irrespective of the nature of the relationship between the husband and wife, women had to face the consequence of child bearing and raising. Mitra thought that women had to accept the subjugation of men to achieve the "bliss" of having a child. Mitra opined that such maternal expectations made her weak and was the root cause of her societal oppression. Most importantly, Mitra advocated that while motherhood is natural to a female body, it should not be forced upon

⁴⁸⁴ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 91.

⁴⁸⁵ Sarmistha Datta Gupta, *Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal*, (Kolkata, Stree, 2010) 106.

⁴⁸⁶ Gupta, *Identities and Histories*, 107.

⁴⁸⁷ Gupta, *Identities and Histories*, 108,110.

⁴⁸⁸ Gupta, *Identities and Histories*, 115.

⁴⁸⁹ Gupta, *Identities and Histories*, 115.

any woman. Women should have a choice regarding every aspect of motherhood. Women's motherhood would only be worthwhile when men realised its value.⁴⁹⁰

While Jagat Mitra stood for women's freedom to choose motherhood, Shudhansu Shekhar Gupta disagreed and considered birth control as a catalyst that only worsened conjugal relationship.⁴⁹¹ Shudhansu Gupta invoked the ethical side of India's culture and condemned the pre-marital socialisation across gender.⁴⁹² Though Gupta agreed with Jagat Mitra about the inherent link between early marriages and unhealthy conjugalities, he differed from Mitra on the issue of scientific birth control as a way of reducing the burden of unhappy marriages.⁴⁹³

Jagat Mitra cited two books written by a Judge named Lindsey, 'Revolt of Modern Youth' and 'Companionate Marriage' to establish his opinion. Along with Lindsey, he agreed that contemporary youths were becoming disinterested in marriage as a way to shy away from taking on responsibilities. Birth control, he argued, could solve the problem to some extent and make marriages more bearable and easier. Further, he added that the health of youths would be better as there will be no need of self-control. Marital relations would improve if women became mothers at their own will.⁴⁹⁴

Jayashree invited women to participate in this debate as they were not so vocal about their personal problems in marriages until then. Shudhamoyi Devi and Jyotirmoyee Devi furthered Jagat Mitra and Shudhansu Gupta's debate in the next two consecutive issues of *Jayashree*. Having studied in Shantiniketan, Sudhamoyee had close contact with Tagore and his education system. She completed her B.A degree from Bethune College. She was the founder of Bolpur Girls' High School where she remained the principal for a long time.⁴⁹⁵ Her education under Tagore and work experience thereafter made her realise the importance of introducing sex education among adolescent students. Shudhamoyee Devi discussed the issue from the perspectives of health, education and the economy. According to her, giving consecutive births was harmful for both the mother and her children. She also cited the nature of health care in India which paid little attention to women's health during and after pregnancy. A mother had to

⁴⁹⁰ Jagat Mitra, "Janmoshason o Matritwo," *Jayashree* (May-June 1932): 125-26.

⁴⁹¹ Shudhansu Shekhar Gupta, "Janmoshason o Matritwo," *Jayashree* (July-August 1932): 328.

⁴⁹² Gupta, "Janmoshason," 329.

⁴⁹³ Gupta, "Janmoshason," 327-28.

⁴⁹⁴ Mitra, "Janmoshason," 129.

⁴⁹⁵ Ipsita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*, (Kolkata, School of Women's Studies, JU and *Stree*, 2014) 336.

nurture the new-born and undertake family responsibilities including tending to her older children. As a result, children could not get the care they needed, and mothers and babies remained unhealthy.⁴⁹⁶ Financial strength to bring up a child was also crucial. Their mothers had to work for a long time, as they could not afford domestic help. This problem, according to Shudhamoyee, led to reluctance towards marriage among the educated young generation, across both genders.⁴⁹⁷

The negative impact of birth control was also widely discussed in these debates. It was feared that contraceptives would make the youth licentious. Sudhamoyee talked about intellectual engagement and dedication toward their work that would divert people's minds from committing adultery. She recommended parental discussion with adolescents on the importance of the practice of sexual restraint and the beauty of sexual union.⁴⁹⁸

Becoming a widow at the age of twenty-five was certainly a setback in Jyotirmoyee Devi's life. What made it tougher was the prospect of raising six children under the rigid orthodox norms of her in-laws. She returned to her father's place and immersed herself in the literary world. She read John Stuart Mill's 'On the Subjection of Women' which made her think about women's rights in society. Though she could not free herself fully from the conservative trappings of society, she always treated her sons and daughters equally.⁴⁹⁹

In her discussion on the topic of childbirth, she balanced both Jagat Mitra's and Shudhansu Gupta's opinions in her article. She agreed with Jagat Mitra on the necessity of divorce in India but also supported Gupta on the downside of having a very flexible marriage. She praised the bond of a child with their mother even though it was the reason for women's subjugation. According to her, women should find a way out from an unhealthy, unwanted marriage and remarry. But at the same time, she denounced birth control and premarital courtship.

Around this time the most illuminating event was the Gandhi-Sanger debate regarding birth control. There had been constant negotiations between western and Indian advocates on the issue of birth control. Western advocates like Marie Stopes, Margaret Sanger, Edith How-Martyn and Eileen Palmer had been promoting contraceptive usage in colonial India from the mid-1930s.

⁴⁹⁶ Sudhamoyee Devi, "Janmoshason," Jayashree, (November-December, 1932) 667-68.

⁴⁹⁷ Sudhamoyee Devi, "Janmoshason," 668-69.

⁴⁹⁸ Sudhamoyee Devi, "Janmoshason," 670-71.

⁴⁹⁹ Gupta, *In the Path of Servic.*

Stopes and Sanger being rivals to each other approached prominent Indian personalities to garner support towards their cause. One of them was Rabindranath Tagore. Rabindranath provided his support for birth control from 1925 onwards with a view to decreasing the population and resolving the scramble for food and space. He also advocated for the redemption of women from undesirable maternity and encouraged women to exercise control over their own bodies.⁵⁰⁰

Gandhi on the other hand was opposed to the use of contraceptives. He considered *brahmacharya* (control of all senses including sexuality) more suitable to the Indian environment. He believed that women were capable of exercising self-restraint more than men and addressed men to control their urges. Rather than using contraception, he relied on proper education for women to teach them “the art of saying no even to her husband.”⁵⁰¹

Given Gandhi’s capability to sway public opinion, Sanger and How-Martyn were in conversation with Gandhi in 1935 trying to convince him about the potential marvels of contraception in India. Unlike Sanger and How-Martyn, Stopes was critical towards Gandhi’s opposition to birth control. She accused Gandhi of ignoring the scientific opinion on birth control and therefore being directly responsible for India’s increasing population. While Stopes believed in female sexual autonomy, Gandhi regarded women as sexually passive.⁵⁰² Sanger also expressed her disappointment through an article called ‘Does Gandhi Know Women? What He Told Me at Wardha.’ Sanger claimed that she knew Indian women’s desires, which Gandhi did not. Sanger claimed further that in twenty years she came to know their experiences and aspirations.⁵⁰³ While highlighting ‘universal sisterhood’, Sanger failed to recognise the complexity of gender identities resulting from social stratification like class, caste, community, and race. She also forgot the power differentiation between herself, being an enfranchised western elite woman and the colonised Indian woman on whose behalf she was talking.⁵⁰⁴ According to Sanger, Gandhian emphasis on sexual control in marriage or an emotionless relationship would lead to the breakdown of the Indian family structure. There would not be any healthy relationship or a happy home. Here, Sanger was tactful in expressing her ideas in terms of Indian men’s sexual rights rather than arguing in favour of women’s sexual desire without the

⁵⁰⁰ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 61.

⁵⁰¹ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 71.

⁵⁰² Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 73-74.

⁵⁰³ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 75.

⁵⁰⁴ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 76.

burden of unwanted pregnancy.⁵⁰⁵ Sanger was a product of “new morality” of the early twentieth century. By that time, questioning Victorian values about sexuality was becoming more prominent among middle class and elite women. Like Stopes, Sanger also was a liberal feminist who argued that control over one’s own body was the most basic and inviolable fundamental right of an individual. She argued that “no woman can call herself free who does not own and control her own body. No woman can call herself free until she can choose consciously whether she will or will not be a mother.”⁵⁰⁶

Sanger and Stopes were accepted by the Indian middle-class as the propagator of birth control and sex reforms. Indian men and women wrote to them regarding the suitable methods of contraceptives and their private sexual problems. Added to that, Indian men wrote to Stopes with a view to improving their marital sexual lives. These letters are utmost proof that marital sex as a way of achieving marital bliss was vitally important to the educated middle-class Indians. In contrast to the demand for intellectual compatibility in 19th century India, in early 20th century conjugal compatibility (sexual compatibility) became important.⁵⁰⁷

Discussions in *Jayashree* were limited to health issues, economic issues, healthy married life etc. *Prabartak*, a Bengali periodical based on nationalist ideas added a new perspective related to contemporary growing Hindutva politics. The editor of the journal was Matilal Ray who was the founder of Prabartak Sangha at Chandannagar, Hoogly. The journal campaigned for Gandhian politics.⁵⁰⁸

An article in *Prabartak* in 1934 by Kalyani Ray helps to understand how the contemporary modern educated women’s thoughts were changing about the figure of the “ideal woman”. Ray also highlighted a communal perspective of the birth control issue that had found popularity amongst educated Hindu women. She thought birth control would be harmful to Indian culture that way.⁵⁰⁹ Since Hindus were considered the conveyor and successor of Indian culture by nationalists, she expressed alarm that the continuous use of birth control among upper caste Hindus would lead to an overall decrease in the class of educated Hindus, finally leading to cultural degradation. She also mentioned four consecutive census reports where it was evident

⁵⁰⁵ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 76.

⁵⁰⁶ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 76-77.

⁵⁰⁷ Ahluwalia, *Reproductive Restraints*, 81.

⁵⁰⁸ Prabartak, British Library, Endangered archive programme, <https://eap.bl.uk/archive-file/EAP781-1-5-80>

⁵⁰⁹ Kalyani Ray, “Sikshita Narir Samasya,” *Prabartak*, (March-April, 1935), 647.

that the population growth of uneducated Muslims and lower-caste Hindus was higher than the number of upper-class educated Hindus. She feared that educated modern women's birth control makes them the mother of one or two or no children and would pass on such ideas to the later generation leading to a decreased Hindu population.⁵¹⁰

Kalyani Ray also feared that by following western propaganda and not becoming mothers, women would become masculine and outspoken. She also talked about the complications in pregnancy of aged women. According to her, Hindu women have to make sacrifices to save the culture of the nation.⁵¹¹ Kalyani was of the opinion that between 21 and 35 years, a woman of a well-to-do family should have at least four children. If educated families had children and uneducated lower classes resorted to birth control, the contemporary problem could be solved to some extent.⁵¹²

Pradip Kumar Datta in his book talks about a fear of decreasing Hindu population compared to Muslims. He mentioned an incident of Swami Shraddhanand who was a Suddhi movement activist, declaring his fear about the imminent extinction of Hindus after reading a book by U.N. Mukherji entitled 'Hindus-A Dying Race' (1909) while giving a speech in Patna in 1925. Bearing Hindu nationalist communal ideas, the objective was to produce a collective upper caste Hindu self. Apparently, as the census reports were indicating the decreasing number of Hindus, it alerted the Hindu society in order to unify it. The need of the hour was to establish a single collective body of Hindus to increase the Hindu population and bring social empowerment.⁵¹³ The census reports under the British government played an essential role in shaping communal ideas.⁵¹⁴ Unsurprisingly it was supposed to be a part of the divide and rule policy of the government. Not only did they divide Hindus and Muslims but also caused further ruptures between upper-class Hindu Brahmins and lower castes. In the 1911 census, E. A Gait, the census commissioner, issued a circular proposing 'tests' to establish Hindu identity, which included questionnaires that validated the upper caste and lower caste discrimination.⁵¹⁵

⁵¹⁰ Ray, "Sikshita Narir," 647-48.

⁵¹¹ Ray, "Sikshita Narir," 649.

⁵¹² Ray, "Sikshita Narir," 649.

⁵¹³ Pradip Kumar Datta, *Carving Blocs: Communal Ideology in Early Twentieth-Century Bengal*, (New Delhi, OUP 1999) 22-23.

⁵¹⁴ Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 23.

⁵¹⁵ Datta, *Carving Blocs*, 24.

Conclusion

Contemporary women's writings especially in the 1920s and 1930s reflected a positive societal change towards women's independent thinking regarding their existence, choice of lifestyle, choice of life partners, and motherhood. Simultaneously, their writings reflected a deep understanding of women's position in society, the importance of their existence, a sense of self-awareness, and the significance of feminine identity. After analysing contemporary women's writings, it can be said that they were remarkably aware of the contemporary social developments and the real condition of women.

Chapter 4

Political Consciousness in Women's writings: Understanding Gendered Politics

Introduction

Before entering mainstream politics in the twentieth century women started fighting patriarchy's constant effort to restrict them to the household. Women started pushing back against the nationalist moulding of the ideal wife and mother. The constant emphasis on '*meyeli siksha*' (feminine education as mentioned in chapter one) was also pushing into '*meyeli kaj*' (feminine work discussed in chapter two). Women continued the fight to be educated and be financially independent. They also fought for their choices and rights concerning their life, their body and mind. Women were fighting for their right to use contraception, to exercise their choice of life-partner, and even on the decision of getting married or staying unmarried. A woman's constant fight in her personal space could be perceived from a gendered perspective of politics. In other words, this could be read as their political articulation as well as struggle for gaining agency and rights in the twentieth century.

Partha Chatterjee argued that home was the spiritual, traditional, inner domain that had to be shielded from external influence from the material world that was typically the male domain. This led to the gendered politics of *ghar* (home) and *bahir* (world) with the separation of social space in nineteenth century Bengal.⁵¹⁶ Men tried to confine their female counterparts at home (*antahpur*) by involving them into spiritual and religious endeavour, which came to be explained as "women's sphere" and did not appreciate growing socio-political consciousness of women. Women, as a result, had to face many inhibitions before coming out of her personal space into the outside world (*bahir*).

Second wave feminism gave rise to the theory of 'the personal is political' coined in 1969 by Carol Hanisch during her working days with a group called the Southern Conference Educational Fund (SCEF). Many women staff of the group came together as a consciousness

⁵¹⁶ Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonized women: The contest in India," *American Ethnologist*, 16, No.4 (Nov., 1989):624. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/645113>

raising group to discuss their personal issues. They fought mainly against the system for their equal pay for equal work and other rights. Afterwards their personal problems with their individual men were brought out in public as a ‘collective’ problem related to women’s lives like sex, appearance, abortion, demands of sharing domestic work and childcare by male counterparts equally etc. There were oppositions within the group but the movement carried on along pro-women lines.⁵¹⁷

From this struggle Hanisch said they realised that personal problems are political problems. They found collective solutions to collective or political problems because there were no personal solutions to those problems.⁵¹⁸ Hanisch also argued that even women who claimed themselves as ‘apolitical’ and refused to join the movement possessed as much ‘political’ consciousness as those who declared themselves as political.⁵¹⁹ Thus, women’s associations and women as individuals even if they were professing ‘apolitical’, ‘personal’ ideas, they expressed ‘political’ consciousness. Feminist historians use the theory ‘personal is political’ to include the home, the family and the various aspects of domesticity as subjects of historical research.⁵²⁰

In the introduction of her book, Sharmistha Dutta Gupta expressed her astonishment that women who worked for the country in colonial and post-colonial period preferred to call themselves ‘apolitical’, and only a handful of them identified themselves as political. For Dutta Gupta, this was related to the social differences between the private and the public world which expected upper and middle-class women to play the role of supporters in their male counterpart’s growing political career.⁵²¹ This also reflected in the intellectual pursuits of men and women—typically, men dabbled in the serious world of non-fiction writing while women indulged in the world of fiction. It indicated that the fictional writings of women were based on their ‘private’ experiences and considered “social”, while the ‘public’ experience of men reflected in non-

⁵¹⁷ Carol Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” 1969, 1. truthtellers@hvi.net

⁵¹⁸ Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” 4.

⁵¹⁹ Hanisch, “The Personal is Political,” 5.

⁵²⁰ Aparna Bandyopadhyay, “Towards a History of Women in Love in Colonial Bengal,” Paper Presented at the International Conference on *Shifting Contours, Widening Concerns: Women’s History, Historiography and the Politics of Historical Representation* held at Research Centre for Women’s Studies, SNDT Women’s University, Mumbai, 11—13 February 2015

⁵²¹ Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, *Identities and Histories-women’s writings and politics in Bengal*, (Kolkata: Stree, 2010), 2-3.

fictional writing, dubbed as “political.”⁵²² Occasionally, when women’s intellectual writings broke these barriers, it would receive brickbats from the male critics.

This chapter will explore women’s political identities and consciousness through their writings which at times dealt with personal issues. It will focus on gendered politics in inner and outer domain. It will be discussed in three sections with different aspects of Swadeshi period, Gandhian movement and militant nationalism as portrayed by women both in reality and in fiction.

I

Different Aspects of the Swadeshi Period

1905 could be considered as a new beginning in many ways. Till then politics was a part time affair for some acknowledged political leaders and social reformers. Since 1905 the press and the vernacular made its presence felt. Radical politics was on the cards. Politically, before the partition of Bengal multiple changes had happened in the boundaries of the Bengal Presidency on the ground of administrative convenience.⁵²³ Though the issue of readjustment in the Bengal border was first revived in 1901, it went through several ideas of adding and removing different places to/from the Bengal province before reaching the final decision of the partition in 1905.⁵²⁴ Finally on 19th July 1905, the government of India announced its plan to set up a new province called ‘Eastern Bengal and Assam’ comprising Chittagong, Dacca, Rajshahi, Hill Tippera, Malda and Assam. On 16th October, Bengal was divided by Lord Curzon.⁵²⁵ According to the government of India the partition was necessary for the distribution of administrative burden and industrial growth. But on the other hand, nationalist eyes observed this as a ‘deep imperialist design of divide and rule’.⁵²⁶ This could be verified by Minto's memorandum dated 5th February 1906. It expressed the anxiety of the government that the effeminate Bengali intelligentsia would influence public opinion at large. In this context, Minto thought that political reason is also very important along with the administrative one to curb the growing power of Bengali agitators.⁵²⁷

⁵²² Dutta Gupta, *Identities and Histories*, 8- 9.

⁵²³ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1973), 9.

⁵²⁴ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 10-11.

⁵²⁵ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 11-12.

⁵²⁶ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 12.

⁵²⁷ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 20.

Organisationally, 1905 ushered in a new beginning. In the place of the previous practice of few influentials passively handling politics in the villages, *samiti* or ‘national volunteers’ came up. There was also a growing undercurrent of revolutionary groups. Attempts were made to shake the roots of the nation—the villages. Social works like arranging songs, plays and *jatras*, patriotic festivals, traditional gatherings like *mela* or fairs and Rakhi Bandhan rites etc were organised in the countryside to influence the illiterate masses there.⁵²⁸ During this time, women’s involvement in a political movement was restricted to observing a non-cooking day spent at home.⁵²⁹

Even though women in the first decades of the twentieth century did not take part in politics directly, given the nature of gender relations in society, women faced obstacles which can be viewed as political struggles.⁵³⁰ The changes in political scenarios were evident from the end of the 19th century. 1905 was significant especially for women who took part more actively than earlier in the Swadeshi movement. Women of nationalist elite families, thanks to their male guardians, had already been taking part in different meetings of the Congress. Afterwards they started organising their own association and meets such as ‘Bharat Mahila Parisad’ (Indian Women’s Conference) in 1904, ‘Bharat Stree Mahamandal’ in 1910 (The Great Circle of Indian Women) etc. Though they faced male opposition, they defended themselves successfully. Further two more important organisations made their presence felt –Women’s Indian Association in 1917 and All India Women’s Conference in 1927.⁵³¹ At the time of the Swadeshi movement that mandated the use of indigenous goods in place of foreign (British) goods, women actively participated in it. But the prevailing idea was that educated women were sophisticated in nature and refused to use indigenous goods.

Bharat Mata and her sons and daughters

From the late nineteenth century nationalists’ continuous efforts was to glorify motherhood as the most suitable image for a woman. In Bengal the connotation of motherhood became unique because through this imagery the religious, cultural and aesthetic domain had been politicised.

⁵²⁸ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 254.

⁵²⁹ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Colonial India: Essays on Politics, Medicine, And Historiography*, (New Delhi, Chronicle Books, 2005), 32.

⁵³⁰ Dutta Gupta, *Identities and Histories*, 4.

⁵³¹ Forbes, *Women in Colonial India*, 14-17.

By focusing on the ideological aspect of motherhood, it had taken away the actual power of women and at the same time imposed a mythical strength and power on women. The revivalists of late nineteenth century Bengal, did not suffer much in their search for an ‘icon’ to domesticate women. ‘Motherhood’ was already there as a ready ‘icon’ which according to Jasodhara Bagchi was ‘a culturally privileged concept in Bengal’. And this was the domain which colonised could claim as their own.⁵³²

With the growth of nationalism one can trace the emergence of the mother Goddess. This mother figure was derived from religious practice of Hindu pantheon in Bengal. And here lies the connection of religion and the nation which propagated mother Goddess Shakti, known in various forms like—Durga, Chandi or Kali. It led to wider mass contact during the Swadeshi period.⁵³³ Sarkar traced the emergence of Mother Goddess in Bankimchandra’s ‘*Anandamath*’. With the coming of Mother Goddess and Mother Land, her brave sons - ‘*santans*’ were also created and evoked to save their Mother Land.⁵³⁴ The most famous instance -Swadeshi brought with it is the idea of ‘*Bharatmata*’. Originally painted by Abanindranath Tagore, as the image of ‘*Bangamata*’ in response to Curzon’s plan of partitioning Bengal, ‘*Bangamata*’ later became the image of the entire nation and took on the name of *Bharatmata*. ‘*Bangamata*’ had missed out the nationalistic traits and primarily embodied local or Bengali traits. It was Sister Nivedita who, largely impressed by the painting, took it to the national level.⁵³⁵ In popular pan-Indian images, Mother India or ‘*Bharatmata*’ looks different. Most of the time she was surrounded by ferocious beasts mostly lions, she possessed arms including her sons, and most importantly what Sumathi Ramaswamy observed and argued that she depicted cartographed structure associated with maps of the nation.⁵³⁶ And the tricolour was integral to this association.

⁵³² Jasodhara Bagchi, “Representing Nationalism: Ideology of Motherhood in Colonial Bengal,” *Economic and Political weekly* 25, No. 42/43 (October, 1990), WS66.

⁵³³ Bagchi, “Representing Nationalism,” WS66.

⁵³⁴ Tanika Sarkar, “The Birth of Goddess, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath*” in *Rebels, Wives, saints: Designing Selves and Nations in Colonial Time*, (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2009), 217. For more detail see Tanika Sarkar, “Nationalist Iconography- The Image of Women in Nineteenth Century Bengali Literature,” in *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001). Also see Jasodhara Bagchi, “Positivism and Nationalism: Womanhood and Crisis in Nationalist Fiction Bankimchandra’s *Anandamath*,” *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, no. 43 (October 26, 1985), WS58-WS62.

⁵³⁵ Sumathi Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation: Mapping Mother India*, (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010), 15-16.

⁵³⁶ Ramaswamy, *The Goddess and the Nation*, 17.

If the Indian woman was deified as ‘*Bharatmata*’, Sarala Devi likened her to another kind of motherhood and maternal duty – that of ‘*Birmata*’. Sarala Devi took charge of the periodical *Bharati* and wrote articles as a way to encourage young men to practice physical exercises. From her autobiography we come to know that she laid a lot of importance on the physical resilience of young boys. She instigated the mothers of the country to encourage their sons to be brave and sacrificial for their country, calling them ‘*Birmata*’, that is, mothers of the heroic sons.⁵³⁷

Though the nation was conceived as the Mother, the necessity to create heroic sons led to the introduction of a healthy physical culture in Bengal. This compelled Sarala Devi to visit Solapur on ‘*dasera*’ (celebration on the tenth day of Durgapuja) where she was introduced to stick and sword games, an exhibition of physique, and inspiring speeches of heroes. Sarala regretted Bengali culture of nautch girls, singing, and drinking, in short- the ‘*Babu*’ culture, which stood in sharp contrast to those traditions prevalent in Western India. She even wrote about the contrasting culture of Bengalis and Marathis in *Bharati*. She also invited writings regarding women’s molestations by British soldiers for *Bharati* in the hope to remove fear of Indians. She succeeded in inspiring many and established *antaranga dal* to save their women. They used to take oath on the map of the nation to sacrifice their lives for the country’s freedom.⁵³⁸

Sarala Devi’s zeal to inspire fellow men to become physically strong was also evident in her urge to change ‘*Bhabanipur Sahitya Samiti*’s annual function to the celebration of ‘*Pratapaditya Utsab*’. She agreed to chair the programme in exchange of celebrating physical culture. She ordered a search for young bloods in Calcutta who were experts in wrestling, stick and sword game, and boxing and who would exhibit their talent on this occasion. The function was successfully organised and appreciated by contemporary print media like *Sanjibani* and *Bangabasi*.⁵³⁹ She also started ‘*Birastami*’ celebration in which the heroes of the nation would be celebrated.⁵⁴⁰ The thought of celebrating physical culture in Bengal was also associated with another case of misrepresentation. The colonial rulers used to call Bengali men weak and ‘effeminate’. Sarala most likely introduced the idea of strong physical strength and hero worship culture in Bengal to confront this defamation of Bengali men by the British. While one could see

⁵³⁷ Sarala Devi Chowdhurani, *Jibaner Jharapata*, (Calcutta: Dey’s Publishing, 2009), 132-133.

⁵³⁸ Chowdhurani, *Jibaner Jharapata*, 120.

⁵³⁹ Chowdhurani, *Jibaner Jharapata*, 121.

⁵⁴⁰ Chowdhurani, *Jibaner Jharapata*, 133-34.

society's constant emphasis on the importance of women acquiring feminine virtues and feminine skill sets, men were being trained to not become feminine. This was because in case of men, femininity was looked upon as a weakness. The question to ask here is if Sarala Devi reinforced the stereotype by training men in physical activities? This is all the more relevant since she did not take any initiative to train women in physical culture.

From the late nineteenth century middle class Bengali Hindus started to be recognised as 'effeminate babus' by the 'manly Englishmen'.⁵⁴¹ By the beginning of the twentieth century, the *bhadralok* class began to consider administrative services or clerkship as ideal jobs. In the previous century the concept of 'manhood' was related to propertied class. Bengali elite class faced a decline in property holding due to changing economic structure of the colonial rule after 1857 as the power shifted to the crown.⁵⁴² Bengali educated middle class did not prefer business which was already monopolised by the Europeans and Marwaris. Moreover, *bhadraloks* chose the certainty of ten to five jobs over the uncertainty of business. The so-called "masculine" hence risky challenges of business were avoided by them. As Pravabati Devi Saraswati has shown, even Bengali families preferred grooms with government jobs, be it a low post or a high one. The unemployment problem also challenged their masculinity because a jobless groom was not only chastised as being 'effeminate' but did not luck out in marriage prospects either. Thus, in the face of massive unemployment, Bengalis started doing their own business again and became entrepreneurs.⁵⁴³ This insecurity led to Bengali *bhadralok's* emphasis on the concept of feminine education and feminine work for women repeatedly. This is also why women were barred from participating in the 'male' job market lest they took away the few jobs left for Bengali men – a subject discussed in some detail in Chapter two.

Sarala Devi challenged the 'effeminacy' of her fellow Bengali men by taking inspiration from west India where men were considered adequately masculine. Shanta Devi also observed the 'masculine' Santal women of Bankura who worked as coolies.⁵⁴⁴ Santal women did not fit into the conception of an ideal woman constructed by the educated middle class. Santal women were therefore free to take up jobs that were typically considered masculine.

⁵⁴¹ Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: the 'manly Englishman' and the 'effeminate Bengali' in the late nineteenth century*, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1997), 2-3.

⁵⁴² Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity*, 5-6.

⁵⁴³ Pravabati Devi Saraswati, "Charkha o Khaddar," *Sachitra Sisir*, (August-September, 1925), 1278-79.

⁵⁴⁴ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, (Kolkata: Thema, 2014), 16.

Manly nationalist sons designed specific nationalist duties that women could participate in without having to step out of her domesticity. Priyabala Gupta in her autobiography talked about the day of the partition of Bengal, 16th October, 1905, when all women across Bengal observed *arandhan* (non-cooking day) as a mark of protest. Gupta remembered a conversation between her mother and a neighbour. The neighbour asked her mother if she was not even cooking for the children. Priyabala's mother replied "*Hyan, Babu to tai bole gelen*" (Yes, that's what Babu instructed before leaving the house). Women were expected to carry out orders given to them by the patriarch of the family, mentioned here as "Babu". They would have no idea of outside world.⁵⁴⁵ The nationalist men thus managed to hold on to the sanctity of the 'home' and the 'world' without most women having any idea about the implication of their activities.

Shanta Devi (1893-1984) in her autobiography mentioned that her mother used to wear Swadeshi sarees because of her father's affiliation to the Swadeshi movement. Shanta's mother had only a couple of "fancy" sarees besides all the coarse sarees made in Swadeshi mills.⁵⁴⁶ It is not known if Shanta's mother had any say in such matters. The fact that her father decided on behalf of the family explains that women in most cases internalised the patriarch's wishes as their own.

One of the main features of the Swadeshi movement was '*Atmashakti*' or self-help. It promoted self-reliance and constructive works like the establishment of Swadeshi enterprises and organisation of indigenous education in the villages. Self-help could be fruitful with the use of vernacular languages, popular customs and institutions like *melas* or fairs to bring the masses into the folds of the national movement.⁵⁴⁷ Rabindranath Tagore in 'Swadeshi Samaj' (1904) gave a call to revive the traditional *samaj*. He expected the volunteers to go to the countryside spreading socio-political consciousness among the people.⁵⁴⁸

Sarala Devi wrote in her autobiography about her Swadeshi initiative before the partition of Bengal in 1905. She opened 'Lakshmir Bhandar' which collected different goods from different districts of Bengal in one store for women. She employed a Brahmo woman as its seller. She got a medal for her effort when she sent some of the stuffs from 'Lakshmir Bhandar' for an exhibition associated with the Bombay Congress. She also initiated 'Swadeshi store', a

⁵⁴⁵ Priyabala Gupta, *Smritimanjusha*, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing, 1999), 9.

⁵⁴⁶ Shanta Devi, *Purvasmriti*, 6.

⁵⁴⁷ Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, (New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1973), 47.

⁵⁴⁸ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 54.

shop selling Swadeshi goods in Boubazar, Calcutta.⁵⁴⁹ These were some limited efforts from the women's end. Limited, because women were generally restricted at home and did not have suitable opportunities to contribute actively to the Swadeshi movement. Unlike them, Sarala Devi belonging to Tagore family, had fewer restrictions and could initiate such efforts.

The number of people attending exhibitions of Swadeshi products increased drastically since the late nineteenth century. Apart from the Congress-organised exhibitions, many local exhibitions like 'Deshi Dhutie Hat' (indigenous cloth fair) were held in different corners of Bengal.⁵⁵⁰ Apart from the occasional *mela* or fair or occasional showcasing of Swadeshi products there were permanent stores like Swadeshi Emporium (1891) run by Nilambar Mukherji, Bireswar Chatterji, Akshoychandra Sarkar and the Bangabasi staff; Rabindranath Tagore started 'Swadeshi Bhandar' in 1897. The other two major establishments of Swadeshi products were located in Bowbazar and Burrabazar.⁵⁵¹ Calcutta and district towns faced major changes regarding the expansion of the market of Swadeshi products from 1905.⁵⁵² Swarnakumari Debi after establishing 'Sakhi Samiti', started 'Mohila Shilpomela' where handicrafts made by women were sold. It was a great step to popularize Swadeshi and *Atmashakti*.⁵⁵³

Manikuntala Sen during this time experienced the influence of Swadeshi. She talked about the Balladist Mukunda Das in Barishal. He popularised Kaji Nazrul Islam's Swadeshi songs. His operas were so influential that the local people used to call it 'Swadeshi *jatra*'. The themes of those operas were most of the time concerning social oppressions. His impact was so large that it worked against social superstitions and helped raising national consciousness. Women became emotional during those operas, broke the imported glass bangles and sometimes they even contributed their gold jewelries for Swadeshi cause. Most would return home and reject their fancy foreign sarees and embrace indigenous 'bangalakshmi' mill's sarees in no time.⁵⁵⁴

Fictional Depiction of Swadeshi Period

Both male and female writers dealt with contribution of women to the Swadeshi movement. Amritalal Gupta's Story in *Bharat Mahila* named 'Devi' (Goddess) (1905) showed women's

⁵⁴⁹ Chowdhurani, *Jibaner Jharapata*, 142-43.

⁵⁵⁰ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 115-116.

⁵⁵¹ Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 116.

⁵⁵² Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement*, 117.

⁵⁵³ Kumar, *The History of Doing*, 37-38.

⁵⁵⁴ Manikuntala Sen, *Janojagorane Narijagorane*, (Kolkata: Thema, 2010), 22.

honest participation in the Swadeshi movement. The male protagonist Narendra, the husband of Shailabala, was a government lawyer and loyal to the foreign rulers. He was against Swadeshi and desired *Ray Bahadur* title which was an honourable title bestowed by British authority as an award of their loyal service to the empire. When Narendra told Shailabala that she should be proud as the wife of *Ray Bahadur*, Shailabala answered that she would be ashamed of him.⁵⁵⁵ Men like Narendra in the outside world justified themselves by blaming women, who were used to luxurious foreign goods creating obstacles in the way of Swadeshi.⁵⁵⁶ This was a different kind of political struggle that women had to perform in a British loyalist's home. Amritalal Gupta named the story 'Devi' to exalt Shailabala as an ideal woman, almost like a goddess, who sacrificed every imaginable luxury for the sake of her country. Amritalal's acknowledgement of Shailabala's sacrifices was perhaps a rare gesture.

Saralabala Sarkar in her article called 'Swadeshsebaye Bangoramoni' (Bengali Women in the worship of the country) (1908) complained that men hardly appreciated women's education, breadth of knowledge, or silent contributions to the nationalist struggle. This meant that for Bengali women it would never be easy to participate in the worship of the nation.⁵⁵⁷

Nirjharini Devi's story depicted a similar instance of what was expected of mothers of the nation. The story 'Matripujar Dan' (1908) depicted an image of a perfect mother to a patriotic son who dedicated his life for the nation's cause. Labonyomoyee was depicted as a sacrificial mother who sent off her son to fight for the nation despite having no one but her son to look after her.⁵⁵⁸

The author, Nirjharini Ghosh was deeply influenced by the Swadeshi movement. Her stories clearly reflected the political trends of early twentieth century Bengal.⁵⁵⁹ The story 'Pujar Upohar' (1908) showed how the youngsters of the village established an exercise committee and enlisted one strong person from each household as a committee member as a part of the larger goal of fighting for the nation.⁵⁶⁰ In the beginning of the story the male protagonist, an acclaimed lawyer, was recalling a case of a fourteen year old boy accused of beating a policeman during the

⁵⁵⁵ Amritalal Gupta, "Devi," *Bharat Mahila*, (November-December, 1905), 79-80.

⁵⁵⁶ Gupta, "Devi," 81-82.

⁵⁵⁷ Sharmistha Dutta Gupta, *Pather Ingit: Nirbachito Sangbad Samayikpatre Bangali Meyer Samajbhabna 1927-1967*. (Kolkata: Stree, 2007), Satash-Athash.

⁵⁵⁸ Nirjharini Ghosh, "Matripujar Dan," *Suprabhat*, (September-October 1908): 119.

⁵⁵⁹ Only woman prose writer /story writer of the periodical *Suprabhat* of 1908, other woman writer's were Anupama Devi wrote a poem.

⁵⁶⁰ Nirjharini Ghosh, "Pujar Upohar," *Suprabhat*, (November-December, 1908), 183.

Swadeshi movement. The charge against him was that he threw away foreign-made salt from a shop and when a policeman tried to stop him, the latter was beaten by the accused. The accused said with conviction that he did not force the shopkeeper, rather he convinced him and paid full price for his salt and only after that he threw away the salt. On another occasion the police tried to stop activists protesting against selling foreign goods in the fair. The police had also beaten up a little boy to which the protagonist opposed.⁵⁶¹ He served three months imprisonment as punishment. The mention of such instances suggests that the author had an avid interest in political events. The writer drew a picture of a village where educated youths joined illiterate villagers to work for their motherland. Disregarding their university degrees, they became the sons of poor Mother India.⁵⁶²

Her 'Matripujar Dan'⁵⁶³ maintained the fervour of the Swadeshi movement. The youths of the story Abdullah and Nagen after completing their studies started editing a monthly called 'Matripuja' (worship of the mother). The author's engagement with the mainstream critique of consumption becomes obvious when the character Nagen suggested that the advertisements of perfumes and colognes should be removed from their monthly as these were luxuries for the worshippers of the motherland.⁵⁶⁴ Nirjharini remarked that the word 'babu' (gentleman) should be removed from their periodical because it was an invention of the British colonisers. She further blamed the laid back and luxurious 'babu' culture for the miseries of the 'motherland'.⁵⁶⁵ These narrative tropes can be read as evidence of the writer's knowledge of patriotic literature and her familiarity with Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay's work in particular.

II

Different Aspects of Gandhian Era: Reality and Fiction

Gandhi's contribution in the awakening of socio-political consciousness among Indian women is undeniable. Women's participation in the nationalist movement was limited to the privileged class until Gandhi entered the scene. Gandhi broke the class barriers and managed to engage

⁵⁶¹ Ghosh, "Pujar Upahar," 181.

⁵⁶² Ghosh, "Pujar Upahar," 183.

⁵⁶³ Nirjharini Ghosh, "Matripujar Dan," *Suprabhat*, (September-October 1908).

⁵⁶⁴ Ghosh, "Matripujar Dan," 115-120.

⁵⁶⁵ Ghosh, "Matripujar Dan," 117

women from all backgrounds in his non-violent movements. He included women for fighting against social regulations and domestic constraints to register their protest against the British rule.⁵⁶⁶

Being aware of the traditional roots of Indian women, Gandhi devised a perfect balance between their traditional role in the domestic sphere and political participation in the Swadeshi movement. Though Gandhi supported women's equal rights within the precincts of the home beyond which he believed in gender division. By this political mechanism, his ideology provided empowered position to women in the family and conjugality.⁵⁶⁷ There was constant domestication and marginalisation of women which reaffirmed women's gendered roles inside and outside home. Not every woman was satisfied with their passive participation in the movement and there were growing undercurrents that led to divergences in women's political thoughts, as discussed in a later section of this chapter.

The Non-Cooperation Movement called for boycott of government institutions—both educational and administrative departments and even law courts and legislatures. Swadeshi included boycott of British goods, embracing indigenous goods by spinning yarns and wearing khadi. This work could be easily undertaken without disrupting the general order of the household and yet, women staying at home could contribute to the nation's cause. Suresht R. Bald argued that Gandhi's support towards women's involvement in the national movement was a part of his political strategy for the success of non-violence. Women were the significant participants for the promotion of khadi (homespun), picketing in liquor and foreign cloth shops, and gathering of funds for his campaigns. Even when Gandhi facilitated women's engagement in politics and entry into public sphere, he believed women's actual place is at home as mothers and wives.⁵⁶⁸ Gandhi's idea of connecting women to domesticity is explicated by the incidence when Gandhi reminded Satyen, the fiancé of Renuka, in Calcutta that her first priority would be the country's welfare. He assured Satyen that Renuka would be assigned such work that allowed

⁵⁶⁶ Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences -social Development during the Gandhian Era and After*, (Kolkata: Stree,2005), 72.

⁵⁶⁷ Sujata Patel, "Construction and Reconstruction of Woman in Gandhi," *Economic and Political Weekly* 23, no. 8. (February 20, 1988), 386. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4378142>

⁵⁶⁸ Suresht R. Bald, "The Politics of Gandhi's "Feminism" Constructing "Sitas" for Swaraj' in *Women, States and Nationalism: at Home in the Nation?*," ed. Sita Ranchod Nilsson and Mary-Ann Tretreault, (London: Routledge, 2000), 84.

them to stay together.⁵⁶⁹ For Gandhi, the place of women was strictly indoors and one that was constantly surrounded by family duties.

Sujata Patel's focuses on the reconstruction of women's new image based on Gandhian ideology which included bolstering qualities like strength, courage, patience and suffering to symbolise the motto of non-violence for universal unification of women across class/caste.⁵⁷⁰ S.R Bald is doubtful about Patel's claim of Gandhi's motive of unification of women from different class/caste division as Gandhi never clarified the reason of this act.⁵⁷¹ Madhu Kishwar's criticism is relevant here as she focused on Gandhi's failure of recognition of production relation, responsible for women's subjugation under patriarchal oppression. For their emancipation one has to concentrate on the changes regarding women's material condition rather than the 'moral'.⁵⁷²

Women's Participation in the Gandhian Movements

Unlike the earlier decades, especially in the late nineteenth century, it is easier to gauge women's participation based on the government records found during this period. Women's desire and enthusiasm being a part of the nationwide independence movement was remarkable. Women who had been caged for so long were interested to take part in these movements, be it through contribution of money or jewellerys or any other form of active participation including courting arrests and imprisonment. During a speech at a women's meeting, Gandhi said he would be pleased when all women spun and wore Khaddar following Sita, an idol of purity unlike wearing impure foreign cloth, on their pure body. He also advocated for yarn-spun on Charkha which he believed would decrease poverty.⁵⁷³

Following the arrest of Basanti Devi Das, Urmila Devi Sen, and Suniti Devi in 1921, Gandhi said that an important part of women's participation in the agitation was to experience

⁵⁶⁹ Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences -social Development during the Gandhian Era and After*, (Kolkata: Stree,2005), 41.

⁵⁷⁰ Patel, "Construction and Reconstruction of Woman," 386.

⁵⁷¹ Bald, *The Politics of Gandhi*, 86.

⁵⁷² Madhu Kiswar, *Gandhi on Women*, *Economic and Political Weekly* 20, no. 40 (October 5, 1985), 1699. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4374897>

⁵⁷³ Speech at Women's Meeting, *Amrita Bazar Patrika*, (17 MAy, 1925), CWMG, Vol. XXVII, in Pushpa Joshi, *Gandhi on Women (Collection of Mahatma Gandhi's Writings and Speeches on Women)*, (Ahmedabad: Navajiban Publishing House, 1988), 125.

the hardship of jail life. Likening them to the mythical figure of Draupadi, Gandhi also said they are well-equipped to protect themselves and their honour as they are superior in religious devotion compared to men.⁵⁷⁴

‘India Tomorrow’ of 16th June 1921 saw women’s arrest in the freedom struggle as a focal point which would attract international attention. ‘India Tomorrow’ congratulated Sarojini Naidu, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, and Rukmini Lakshmi pati for their imprisonment.⁵⁷⁵ Regarding the conviction of Indumati Goenka, Urmila Devi and others, ‘India Tomorrow’ of 4th July, 1930 declared they are proud of their mothers and sisters whose enthusiasm exceeded that of men.⁵⁷⁶

‘Advance’ of 21st July 1921 observed that the most remarkable phenomenon of the time was the rejection of purdah by the Indian women to join the turmoil of the outside world. It was unimaginable that the timid and shy Indian women would embrace the troubled life of a prison-cell. ‘Advance’ praised their spirit has broken the shackles of long-term customs and traditions.

In this year, a Confidential Government Report came out on patriotism and genuine nationalism amongst women. The meeting they recorded was of a congregation of 4000 Marwari women at Bara Bazar on 28th January 1921. When Gandhi appealed for funds for the attainment of Swaraj, the women assembled there started donating their gold bangles, anklets, wristlets etc. to help the cause. Jewellery continued to be possibly the only source of wealth available to women which is why they were known as ‘Stree-Dhan’. In all, jewellery worth almost 18000 rupees was collected in very little time.⁵⁷⁷ Many such instances reflected women’s zeal to contribute to the nation’s cause. Renuka Ray’s autobiography mentions that women responded with a lot of enthusiasm to the nation’s cause and often donated their jewellery if they did not have enough money on them. Renuka mentioned Gandhiji’s regulation of keeping all the records of donation and issue of receipts according to the value of the ornaments.⁵⁷⁸ In the women’s meeting, Gandhi appealed to the women for the donation in Tilak Swaraj Fund, which was for

⁵⁷⁴ Women’s Part, *Young India*, CWMG Vol. XXII, (15 Dec, 1921), Joshi, *Gandhi on Women*, 93.

⁵⁷⁵ Women Civil Resisters Admired, *India Tomorrow* (Calcutta), Political Propaganda, Confidential No-27 of 1930, *Reports on Newspapers and Periodicals in Bengal for the week ending Saturday*, 5th July 1930, 584.

⁵⁷⁶ Part Taken by Ladies in the Civil Disobedience Movement, *India Tomorrow* (Calcutta), Political Propaganda, Confidential No. 29 of 1930, *Report on Newspapers and Periodicals in Bengal for the week ending Saturday* 19th July 1930, 635.

⁵⁷⁷ Mr. Gandhi’s Propaganda work amongst Indian women, Constitutional Reforms and Political Propaganda, *The Telegraph*, 5th February 1921, RNP 1921, January to June, Confidential No. 6 of 1921, *Report part II, on English papers in Bengal for the week ending, Saturday*, 12th February, 1921, 81.

⁵⁷⁸ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 25

those who suffered from social disabilities. Women came with their ornaments to donate and Gandhi said women of Bengal would lead the nation and set a fitting example for the rest of the country.⁵⁷⁹

Many instances were found that depicted mass reaction to Gandhi's call for Non-Cooperation Movement. Instances also can be traced in chapter one where the census talked about students leaving schools and colleges. Renuka and her friend Latika Ghosh were the first two girls in Calcutta who left the college in the first year at Diocesan College for Women to join the Non-Cooperation Movement.⁵⁸⁰

A 1930's Confidential Government File showed women's interest to take part in ongoing agitation. Miss Amia Devi, Secretary of the women's association of Kushtia said in the general meeting of the association that the nationwide freedom struggle also influenced the youths of Kushtia. A large number of youths went to jail for agitating against the government's declaration of section 144. The only fault of these boys was that they appealed to people to stop consuming wine, *ganja* and opium. This would ruin the trade monopoly of the foreign merchants. They were imprisoned for six months for picketing. Miss Amia appealed to the women of Kushtia to take some responsibilities for agitation which needed courage, diligence and sincerity.⁵⁸¹

The 'Kurukhetra' issue of 1931 showed women's sacrifices and desire to be a part of the contemporary political struggle. Not only were they engaged in various domestic duties they also vowed to achieve equal rights as men in the fields of politics, administration and society. They raised their voice with the cry of "Vande Mataram" and the prison became their holy pilgrimage.⁵⁸² The 'Panchajanya' of 24th April, 1931 wrote that the last ten months of Civil Disobedience Movement had effectively proven that Indian women were not afraid of suffering for the nation. They fought for the country valiantly alongside their sons and husbands.⁵⁸³

Amidst the ongoing Civil Disobedience Movement, a separate Women's Congress was convened in Calcutta in 1931. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani presided over this Congress and explained why a separate Congress for women was necessary. Women were treated as separate

⁵⁷⁹ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 27-28.

⁵⁸⁰ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 14.

⁵⁸¹ Ladies asked to join the present agitation, *Jaganan* (Kushtia), Confidential No-27 of 1930, *Reports on Newspapers and Periodicals in Bengal for the week ending Saturday*, 5th July 1930, II Political Propaganda, 583-584.

⁵⁸² Women and the Political Struggle, *The Kurukshetra* (Calcutta), RNP 13th June 1931, No. 24 of 1931, 669.

⁵⁸³ Indian Women and the Civil Disobedience Movement, *The Panchajanya* (Chittagong), RNP for the week ending *Saturday* 9th May 1931, Confidential No. 19 of 1931, 582.

and inferior than men. They were never given appointment to Congress sub-committees or councils. They could at most be law-breakers but not law-makers. Congress picketed liquor shops but not brothels, which were harmful for women alone. She marked out specific demands for women like equal right to inheritance, guardianship of children, fair wages, punishment of sex-related crimes, etc. But her radicalism was not shared even by the women in the audience.⁵⁸⁴

Bimal Prativa Devi, who was involved in revolutionary activities, became a member of 'Naujawan Bharat Sangha' and the Congress party⁵⁸⁵ wrote about women's work for nation building in 1931. She encouraged women to be prepared for future agitations that involved mainly organisational work. This kind of work needed determination, patience, and hard work. Despite her personal involvement and political awareness, she possessed gendered vision on political participation and did not support women's daily picketing work in the streets after the Satyagraha agitation of 1931.⁵⁸⁶ Instead, she recommended a women's organisation which would work for generating interest and responsibility in women to participate in nationalist movements. She also suggested setting up women's clubs for practicing healthy physical culture.⁵⁸⁷

When Gandhi learnt that Renuka Ray and Latika Ghosh left college to take part in the nationalist movement, he told them that they should have proper training and chalked out a routine for studying, Charkha spinning, and learning Hindi. They were also tasked with house visits to rouse national consciousness amongst women and collect aids for Tilak Swaraj Fund.⁵⁸⁸ Renuka wrote about the 1920 Congress session which she (and Latika) attended at the young age of sixteen for it left a long-lasting impression on their youthful minds.⁵⁸⁹ She and Lalita were doubtful about Congress's acceptance of Gandhi's Satyagraha proposal since many of the leaders were opposed to it. But when Gandhi came to speak, his inimitable personality captured everyone's attention. She was struck by Gandhi's simple and lucid style of talking which impressed people easily.⁵⁹⁰ Renuka and a few others had the responsibility of organising the women's meeting after the conclusion of the Congress session. They went from door to door in

⁵⁸⁴ Forbes, *Women in Colonial India*, 57.

⁵⁸⁵ "Bimalprativa devi (1901-1978)," Marxist Indiana: An Encyclopedia of Freedom Fighters of India in Alphabetic Order, May 11, 2014, <http://radhikaranjan.blogspot.com/2014/05/463bimalprativa-devi-1901-1978-464.html>

⁵⁸⁶ Bimal Prativa Devi, Kajer Katha, *Swadesh*, (July 1931), 137-38.

⁵⁸⁷ Bimal Prativa Devi, Kajer Katha, 139.

⁵⁸⁸ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 25.

⁵⁸⁹ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 20.

⁵⁹⁰ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 21.

order to encourage women to attend the meeting.⁵⁹¹ Sometimes they had to face difficulties for being the followers of Gandhi and C.R. Das as many associated them with being rabble-rousing agitators. Very interestingly, women of some families came out of the backdoor of the house and asked them to come back at a specific time when they would be alone at home.⁵⁹² It displayed the courage and enthusiasm of women, otherwise stuck in domesticity, to be in touch with the political world.

She remembered a women's meeting during the Non-Cooperation Movement which was attended by many who had joined the meeting abandoning the purdah for the first time. For Renuka, that meeting was the start of a crucial social change – a change that brought in thousands of women from remote villages and also *pardanashin* women out into the open. Renuka thought Gandhi's method to free women was unique because it symbolised freedom from social bondage.⁵⁹³ Renuka had the opportunity to observe two most noteworthy contemporary educational institutions—Gandhi's Sevagram near Wardha and Rabindranath Tagore's Santiniketan. She found that both of them believed in constructive work and practiced it.⁵⁹⁴

Renuka was an ardent supporter of Gandhi's village reconstruction project. She followed his non-violent revolution which was not only a political one but also introduced the idea of social and economic revolution. She wrote about how Gandhi's idea of the village reconstruction program was implemented. Renuka's husband was a surveyor whose transferable job took them to several villages. During her visits to these villages, Renuka worked towards reviving some dying handicrafts industries.⁵⁹⁵ During Civil Disobedience Movement, Gandhi assigned Renuka with the rural reconstruction programme in Tipperah district where her husband was posted at the time. Gandhi's plan centred on awakening a sense of self-reliance and self-respect amongst villagers and the works of the village were equally distributed amongst males and females. These included repairing small bridges, channeling canals to agricultural fields to improve irrigation, keeping the environment clean, cleaning up tanks and ditches, repairing pathways and other works. To make the villages self-sufficient the villagers had to be trained in spinning and other useful handicrafts which used local resources and were prepared for local purchase and

⁵⁹¹ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 25-26.

⁵⁹² Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 25

⁵⁹³ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 27.

⁵⁹⁴ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 49-50.

⁵⁹⁵ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 43.

consumption.⁵⁹⁶ Renuka also worked in the small villages near Sandeshkhali and Mainamati. She used to send a fortnightly report to Gandhi and proceeded based on his feedback and suggestions.⁵⁹⁷

On one occasion when Renuka failed to involve the villages in constructive work she wrote to Gandhi with her problems. To this, Gandhi suggested involving the women to cook delicious food for the men as a way to encourage them to come to work. The idea yielded magical results. Men came forward to do the work of Gandhian reconstruction.⁵⁹⁸ Since Gandhi's idea of women's work always revolved around domesticity, the gender roles were, unavoidably, reinforced under his leadership. In other words, even though Gandhi was responsible for the political participation of women, it was articulated following conventional gender norms.

Renuka gave some hints in her writing about what she would do in towns during her stay in different districts. Renuka with the help of Maharani of Burdwan gradually succeeded in bringing women out of their purdahs. She also established a Mahila Samiti where she included programmes like maternity and child care among poorer women, schooling for the poor children and women, and crèches for the children of working mothers.⁵⁹⁹ At that time Renuka realised the need for inclusion of the tribes, Harijans and other backward classes.⁶⁰⁰ She thought women of Midnapore and North Bengal were much more progressive than the adjacent areas of Calcutta.⁶⁰¹ She wanted to work for them instead of living a luxurious and idle life at home.

Manikuntala Sen, who later became a Communist party leader, also shared her early experiences of working under Gandhi's guidance. Manikuntala along with her mother and sister attended the Barishal Congress session of 1923 where Gandhi came. Given that there were close to three hundred sex workers in this town Gandhi especially sought their presence in the meeting. A special seating arrangement was made for them close to the stage from where Gandhi spoke. Gandhi recognised sex workers as women first and spoke to them without any prejudice. He asked them to dedicate themselves in the nation's cause while still earning. Many of them joined

⁵⁹⁶ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 46-47.

⁵⁹⁷ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 47.

⁵⁹⁸ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 47.

⁵⁹⁹ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 44.

⁶⁰⁰ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 42.

⁶⁰¹ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 44.

him as Congress workers. They were recruited in the ‘*shilpasram*’ (a residential place of men and women where the artisanal works/ handicrafts had been done) of Charkha and Khadi.⁶⁰²

Saroj Nalini was yet another woman who, influenced by Gandhi’s words and actions, decided to convince women to spin. She went door to door requesting everyone to adopt the Charkha. She bought Charkha with her own money and distributed it amongst young girls, poor women and also amongst members of well-to-do families. To popularise Charkha and Khaddar, she gave out lessons on spinning and weaving at the fair of Bali, Kalyaneswar, Thakurtala. She also arranged women’s meetings of Congress. She was even selected as the Vice-President of the Howrah Zilla Congress committee.⁶⁰³

While writing about Charkha and Khaddar in 1925, Pravabati Devi Saraswati expressed regret that her countrymen did not take the production and use of these indigenous goods seriously. She was particularly exasperated seeing people who wore Khaddar giving in to wearing foreign made clothes. The Swadeshi and Charkha movement had posed one major challenge as colonised people did not have the prosperity to throw away their old foreign goods and buy new Khaddar. Many people also felt daunted to participate in such “anti-British” activities fearing arrest and imprisonment. There were other pressing economic necessities as well. Many people who had left their job in the name of Swadeshi earlier, returned to their older jobs out of sheer need. The Charkha which had once been used by people as a mark of anti-colonial political resistance was now used as a cooking fuel. Khaddar also did not gain popularity amongst people who were used to certain forms of luxury and refused to wear coarse material for the sake of the country. Of course, their laziness towards weaving their own clothing also added to this predicament.⁶⁰⁴

Women were also critical about methods that Gandhi adopted to promote his non-violent movements. Sailabala Devi, a Calcutta born Bengali woman, was later adopted by the Odia nationalist, Madhusudan Das.⁶⁰⁵ When Gandhi visited Cuttack in 1927, he stayed at Madhusudan Das’s house. On her father’s request, Sailabala escorted Gandhi around. It was during those interactions that Gandhi asked Sailabala to adopt Charkha and popularise it amongst the women of Odisha. Sailabala thought that the Charkha could not be the solution to the country's economic

⁶⁰² Manikuntala Sen, *Janojagorane Narijagorane*, (Kolkata: Thema, 2010), 30-31.

⁶⁰³ Indira Devi, “Amader Mohila Kormi,” *Bangalakshmi*, (August-September, 1929): 769.

⁶⁰⁴ Pravabati Devi Saraswati, “Charkha O Khaddar.” *Sachitra Sisir*, (August-September, 1925): 1275-76.

⁶⁰⁵ Aparna Basu and Malabika Karlekar, *In so Many Words, Women’s Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India*, (New Delhi: Routledge Taylor and francis Group, 2008), 15.

problems. She said Charkha would be good for the farmers who could grow cotton for spinning in their own fields. It would be easy for them to make their own sarees, *dhotis* and *gamchas*, but it did not make sense for the middle and upper class. She argued that if boycotting of foreign goods was so practicable, motorcars and watches etc., should also be discarded. But practically that was not possible.⁶⁰⁶

Lila Roy Nag, who became an active member of the revolutionary party afterwards, appreciated Gandhian Non-Cooperation Movement. After the freedom movements of Ireland and Russia, she was convinced that the plan of non-cooperation would help India achieve Swaraj. But she did not think that students leaving schools and colleges to join the national movement were an option.⁶⁰⁷ After twenty years she expressed her dissatisfaction with the idea of Individual Satyagraha programme by Gandhi.⁶⁰⁸ Even C.R. Das and Motilal Nehru were against the idea of boycotting schools and colleges as was Rabindranath Tagore.⁶⁰⁹ Shanti Shudha Ghosh in 1950 reflected upon the cause of the withdrawal of Bengalis from the field of politics and especially leadership positions in Congress after dominating the scene for almost 30 years since the birth of Congress. In her opinion, the downfall started after 1919, when the method of doing politics changed from prayer and petition to activism. In Santi Shudha's opinion, Gandhi's political method of Satyagraha and non-violent non-cooperation did not match with the characteristics of Bengali intelligentsia. Typically luxurious and idle by nature, comfortable with western lifestyle, and habituated to disparage manual labour, the Bengalis did not find any logic behind the introduction of the handloom or Charkha entirely run on manual power in an era of heavy and efficient and labour-saving machines.⁶¹⁰

While Gandhi was truly an inspiring figure when it came to mobilising women's participation in the Swadeshi movement, he was also instrumental in limiting them to chiefly wifely, motherly, and most importantly "feminine" responsibilities. It was also becoming increasingly clear why Swadeshi with its promotion of indigenous skills and production systems was going to be challenged by foreign produced goods which were both cheaply produced and of finer quality. For the poor, loyalty to Swadeshi programs was economically unreasonable. To the

⁶⁰⁶ Basu and Karlekar, *In so Many Words*, 17.

⁶⁰⁷ Letter to her father by Leela Ray (22/2/21) in Leela Ray Janmabarshiki Sankhya, *Jayashree*, (August-September, 1968): 259.

⁶⁰⁸ Leela Ray, Satyagraha Andalaner Swarup, *Jayashree*, (December-January, 1940-41), 594-596.

⁶⁰⁹ Ray, *My Reminiscences*, 22.

⁶¹⁰ Shanti Shudha Ghosh, "Bangalir Abhijan," *Mohila Mahal*, (December -February, 1950): 330-331.

rich, Swadeshi posed a great compromise on taste, preference, and luxury. All this provoked many to pursue other political paths to attaining national freedom.

Fictional Depiction

A story named ‘Aiswarhyer Aborane Sri Usharani Devi’ (1930) reflected upon Gandhian influence that made them contribute their ‘Stree-Dhan’ for the cause of Swaraj and for the nation. In this story the Maharani of Paharpur Gauri Devi was impressed by a drama set in the backdrop of a famine where a *zamindar*’s wife (which was played by a queen) helping the poor people. The Maharani was surprised that a queen acted in a play. Seeing her surprised Shyاملata, her sister-in-law, said if she had the talent and training for acting, there was nothing wrong in it. For Shyاملata, a queen did not have to hold back her desire for acting just because she was a part of the royalty. In the end, Gauri Devi secretly donated her expensive ornament valued at 50000 rupees. Gandhi’s call for donation of Stree-Dhan for the cause of the nation evidently received positive response from women from a range of backgrounds (from queens to regular women) as it gave them a sense of importance and responsibility which they lacked before.⁶¹¹

Pravabati Devi Saraswati’s story ‘AndherDristi’ (1925) showed how contemporary youths were influenced by Gandhi and C.R. Das. Pravabati witnessed contemporary political situation closely and her stories drew extensively from real-life incidents. Pravabati’s stories had one objective: to influence youths of Bengal to participate in Swadeshi, Charkha, and Khaddar movements.⁶¹²

‘Andher Drishti’ showed the generational gap between a father and a son who held onto two very opposing political ideologies. While the son, Pranab believed in Gandhian view of non-cooperation, his father, the *zamindar* Rakhhal Banerjee grovelled before the British Latsaheb Mr. Hardy to make his son Deputy Magistrate after passing the B. Sc examination. However, Pranab became a ‘Swadeshi’ and a disciple of Gandhi. ‘Vande-Mataram’ and ‘Mahatma Gandhi ki Jay’ became his life’s mantra. He started using Khaddar and walking barefoot.⁶¹³ He even sold all his treasured possessions including all the expensive furniture and fancy cars to contribute to

⁶¹¹ Anonymous, “Aiswarjyer Aborane Sri Usharani Devi,” *Bangalakshmi*, (April-May, 1930): 486-490.

⁶¹² Pravabati Devi Saraswati, “Andher Drishti,” *Sachitra Sisir*, (September-October, 1925): 1430.

⁶¹³ Saraswati, “Andher Drishti,” 1433.

the Swadeshi fund. When Rakhai Banerjee came to know about Pranab's arrest in a sedition case, he expected that Mr. Hardy would not take any action against his son.⁶¹⁴ But his insult by Mr. Hardy made Rakhai Banerjee realise his folly in supporting the British. By writing this story, Pravabati Devi Saraswati demonstrated the weakness of indigenous elites who believed that supporting British rule would guarantee a life of luxury and prestige. She also exposed the delusion of the aristocracy who thought "friendship" with the British would save them from becoming victims of colonial atrocities.

It will be apt to mention a political piece written by a politically conscious woman of the time under discussion - Shanti Shudha Ghosh's story 'Pather Ingit' (1931). The story is about a discussion among some upper middle-class educated youths regarding the need for a separate Women's Congress. Amiya and Debjani went to a get-together where they met Hena, Bibhuti and Promod. Bibhuti expressed his disagreement with the need for a separate congress for women fearing confrontation with men. Debjani was surprised that women's fights to acquire equal rights were criticised by society. Bibhuti was apprehensive about women's efforts to pass the divorce bill that affected European countries negatively. Debjani said if the divorce system would be responsible for the social trouble, then, Indian society should be in quietude and felt that the calmness of Indian society is more destructive in nature. Bibhuti disapproved women's mentality of fighting with patriarchal norms and felt that it was time for women's support to men for the cause of freedom of the country. Debjani was disappointed by the ambition of men to achieve freedom even at the cost of subjugation of women. Hena also added that the nation's freedom is immaterial to them as long as women were chained at home. Bibhuti regretted the fate of the country where women wanted to descend from the coveted position of Goddess and hit the dusty streets. Hena retorted that women could no longer be contained by such lofty ideals for they want equal rights.⁶¹⁵ Shanti Shudha's piece revealed contemporary women's socio-political consciousness and the nationalist efforts in restricting them to the domestic space.

The depiction of gender politics was not rare in stories and novels of the time. Maitreyi Devi's story 'Bahirer Ahawan' (The Call from Outside) (1931) was one such story that rightly depicts contemporary trends of the Gandhian period where women went door to door to convince

⁶¹⁴ Saraswati, "Andher Drishti," 1440.

⁶¹⁵ Shanti Shudha Ghosh, Pather Ingit, *Jayashree* (June-July, 1931), in Abhijit Sen and Anindita Bhaduri ed. *Shanti Shudha Ghosh: Nirbachito Rachona-Sankolan*, (Kolkata: Dey's Publishing & School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2008), 93-97.

female members to take part in picketing. It also expressed women's feeling of pride towards their arrest during the movement as the chapter cited earlier. This story depicts women's fight against patriarchal norms of society, a mother's dilemma, alongside the change.⁶¹⁶ In one instance, Bina attended a meeting in a nearby park influenced by few women.⁶¹⁷ Her willingness for participation was rejected by her husband who felt that women would be harassed by policemen if chaos broke out.⁶¹⁸ While her husband believes that politics and family cannot go hand in hand, Bina's logic was that other women did get permission from their families.⁶¹⁹ Bina aggressively asserted that for the fear of harassment women should not be caged at home.⁶²⁰

Few days later women participants in the movement came to Bina asking her to join them in the picketing of foreign clothes' shop as they needed more women in number. Bina agreed to join them the next day. She said: "*Ekbarei oder kache katha diye fellam. Swamir mot-sasurir nishedh, khokar katha sab bismito hoegelam, muktir anande mon chanchol hoyeuthlo.*" (I promised them that I would join the picketing, forgetting about my husband's permission, my mother-in-law's disapproval, and the obligation to my baby. My heart became restless thinking about freedom.)⁶²¹ To Bina, freedom was synonymous with joining the movement outside the inner quarters clearly indicating the path to larger freedom in the coming days.

Next day in the picketing, Bina observed how others convinced purchasers not to buy foreign made clothes. She was also anxious but fearless seeing the foreign sergeants and voiced slogans along with others.⁶²² Bina was arrested during the agitation and did not accept it heartily but to her surprise, others were enthusiastic and proud.⁶²³ So the dilemma of a woman participant like her (a housewife who came outside home for the first time) was also clear from Bina's anxiety in jail. Thus, the using of various aspects of the mother image by the nationalists to restrict women to domesticity in the Swadeshi era, ebbed from the 1930s, when women became determined to take part in nationalist movements.

Sarasibala Basu's novel 'Charkar Utsab' (1920) portrayed Gandhi's village reconstruction programme. The *Munshaf* of the village, Satyalal took interest in spreading

⁶¹⁶ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," *Jayashree*, (April-May, 1931): 103.

⁶¹⁷ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 103.

⁶¹⁸ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 104.

⁶¹⁹ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 104.

⁶²⁰ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 104-05.

⁶²¹ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 105-06.

⁶²² Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 107.

⁶²³ Maitryi Devi, "Bahirer Ahawan," 108-09.

Charkha and encouraging women to take it up. This included Satyalal's mother Jayabati, *Munshef's* wife Sunanda, and his daughters.⁶²⁴ Sunanda learned Charkha as she thought that it would free them from the dependence on foreign-made clothes.⁶²⁵ She approached other women like the village magistrate's wife Dolly and her sister Sujala to support her endeavour. These women were doubtful about the reactivation of Charkha in the village since it did not become popular amongst villagers the first time it was introduced.⁶²⁶ Sunanda considered the present deficiency of foreign cloth a golden opportunity for the successful reactivation of the Charkha. Sunanda was even talking about the 'drain of wealth' as a way to generate support for the production of indigenous products.⁶²⁷ Sunanda wanted to establish a women's association in the village and popularise Charkha and homespun clothes. Sunanda even reminded Dolly, the magistrate's wife about her responsibility as educated women to lead the rest of women of the village.⁶²⁸ Taking advantage of her husband's transferable job, much like Renuka from real life, Sunanda too, spread the use of Charkha and propagated its merits wherever she went.⁶²⁹ 'Charkhar Utsab' thus depicted how Gandhian village reconstruction programme was embraced by women in different corners of the country as they took a solemn vow to turn his idea into reality.

III

The Political Undercurrent: Militant Nationalism

Women's involvement in the armed revolution had a completely different connotation from that of their involvement in the nonviolent Non-Cooperation Movement under Gandhi's encouragement and leadership. In case of the armed struggle, there was neither leadership advice nor any encouragement. For the most part, women played passive or supportive roles to the male revolutionaries. They transferred secret coded messages, offered food and shelter to the

⁶²⁴ Sarasibala Basu, *Charkar Utsab*, (Calcutta: Kamalini Sahitya Mandir, 1920), 11-16.

⁶²⁵ Basu, *Charkar Utsab*, 31.

⁶²⁶ Basu, *Charkar Utsab*, 48.

⁶²⁷ Basu, *Charkar Utsab*, 49-50.

⁶²⁸ Basu, *Charkar Utsab*, 51-52.

⁶²⁹ Basu, *Charkar Utsab*, 53.

absconding revolutionaries, smuggled and hid weapons, wrote and delivered banned literature, and sometimes even provided financial assistance.

But women participating in these activities were not satisfied with the assignments they got; they wanted to be involved in more serious projects. Used to women's traditional roles, male revolutionaries were not able to accept their involvement in revolutionary activities. They also feared that women would get easily caught and arrested during these activities and expose the whole mission. There were additional fears of women being subject to physical abuse in the hands of colonial police forces.

As women were attested with several familial identities for which they were well-known in the society such as someone's daughter, mother, sister, and wife, the colonial authority always alerted the male 'guardians' whenever they suspected women's involvement in any revolutionary movements. The rulers had initially viewed 'terrorist activities' as an exclusively masculine domain. But from 1919, the Intelligence Branch started recording women's revolutionary activities, filed separately under confidential reports.⁶³⁰ Saratchandra Chattopadhyay's 'Pather Dabi' which was a controversial book in the 1920s, illustrated a dilemma among the middle class *bhadralok* about the rights and wrongs of terrorist activities. The character Apurba portrayed the ideological dilemma of these political orientations quite well.

Middle-class Bengali society still suffered from a sense of disbelief that women from respectable families could fight for the country's independence. This was also the case with official representations as well. Sudhangshubala Sarkar, a medical student, who was linked to revolutionary activities of the 1908 Alipore Bomb Case⁶³¹ was in fact described in the police file as 'a lady of immoral character', even though she came from a respectable family. Somehow, in the official mind of the colonial administrator, calling a woman 'immoral' made more sense than describing her as a 'revolutionary terrorist'.⁶³²

In most of the cases, revolutionary activities attracted young women. Majority of them belonged to middle and lower middle-class. They were mainly from Brahmin, Kayastha, and

⁶³⁰ Madhurima Sen, *Women in the War of Freedom Unveiled: Bengal 1919-1947 Glimpses from Archival Records*, (Kolkata: Hyphen, 2022), 9.

⁶³¹ an court trial (1908-09), involved more than 37 suspects, following a bomb attack incident on 30th April, 1908 by Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki attempted to kill Magistrate Kingsford. It was held in Alipore Session Court, Calcutta.

⁶³² Sen, *Women in the War of Freedom*, 10.

Vaidya caste and belonged to the *bhadralok* class of Bengal.⁶³³ Mandal by analysing educational background of women involved in revolutionary activist⁶³⁴ showed that most of them were highly educated at a time when primary education for women was considered good enough in a Hindu middle class family.⁶³⁵ Thus these politically aware women took a conscious decision to participate in the revolutionary movement of this, unlike in the case of Swadeshi and Gandhian Movements⁶³⁶. In their autobiographies, women like Manikuntala Sen, Renuka Ray, or Prativa Basu wrote about their appreciation for militant nationalism. Talking of the revolutionaries, Renuka Ray added that she was particularly awed by those women who diverted from their family's political ideology of observing constitutional methods to oppose colonial rule as did the Indian National Congress.⁶³⁷

Manikuntala shared her experience of the Yugantar party that operated from Barishal. She used to go to Shankar Math, established by Prajnananda Saraswati for it was the centre of the Yugantar party. Manikuntala was interested in bookshelves in the library. She assumed those were the places where revolutionaries could hide their revolvers behind the books. Police raids also happened and they recovered some arms there, arrested the librarian. She saw this concoction of religion and revolution as a unique trait of the place.⁶³⁸

Her mother also played a crucial role in developing her attraction to revolutionaries for she was concerned about death sentences being awarded to revolutionaries. Manikuntala got some pictures of revolutionaries including that of Preetilata Waddedar.⁶³⁹ A colleague in the school where Manikuntala taught provided her with revolutionary books. After meeting Shanti Shudha Ghosh, Manikuntala's interest gravitated towards the Yugantar party. But after her arrest, Manikuntala detached herself from the idea.⁶⁴⁰

Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay's novel 'Pather Dabi', based on revolutionaries and activities of secret societies, was banned in 1920s. The characters Sumitra, Bharati and Sabyasachi became ideals for revolutionary aspirants. Bina Das in her autobiography wrote

⁶³³ Tirtha Mandal, *The Women Revolutionaries of Bengal 1905-1939*, (Calcutta: Minerva Associates Publications, 1991), 28-29.

⁶³⁴ For detail discussion see Tirtha Mandal, *The Women Revolutionaries*, 28-33.

⁶³⁵ Mandal, *The Women Revolutionaries*, 33.

⁶³⁶ Mandal, *The Women Revolutionaries*, 134.

⁶³⁷ Renuka Ray, *My Reminiscences -social Development during the Gandhian Era and After*, (Kolkata, Stree,2005), 12-13.

⁶³⁸ Sen, *JanojagoraneNarijagorane*, 27.

⁶³⁹ Sen, *JanojagoraneNarijagorane*, 29.

⁶⁴⁰ Sen, *JanojagoraneNarijagorane*, 31.

about the influence of ‘*Pather Dabi*’ on her and how she wrote on it when asked to discuss her favourite novel in the English examination. While her teacher said her paper could be dismissed as the novel was proscribed, Manikuntala was attracted to the book especially when she came to know that it had been banned. She read the book many times until she had it memorised by heart and discussed it with her peer group. Other books of revolutionaries like ‘*Nirbashiter Atmakatha*’, ‘*Kara-Kahini*’, ‘*Banglae Biplobbad*’ etc also attracted her in her college days.⁶⁴¹ Another classic fiction that played a vital role in mould revolutionary thoughts was Bankimchandra’s *Anandamath*. The *Santans* (heroic sons of the Mother Land) believed more in power and violence rather than only love for the country’s glorious past.⁶⁴²

Few activities of women, even though crucial to revolutionary movements, like sheltering terrorist activists, are often considered as the feminine role of caregiver that come naturally to them. Sarkar contemplated December 1931 - a time of huge exit from the above-mentioned role when the incident of the assassination of the District Magistrate of Comilla by two young girls Shanti and Suniti occurred. Gandhian era did not rupture the notion of women’s feminine role as did revolutionary terrorism. Incidents like assassinations by women hinted a radical break with the traditional patriarchal norms.⁶⁴³ Bina attempted to assassinate the Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson during Calcutta University’s convocation programme in 1932. But the five shots failed to assassinate Mr. Jackson and she was arrested. She explained that the hardest part of being a member of the secret society was hiding the truth from her parents. It was tough to see her helpless parents after her arrest.⁶⁴⁴ She faced further hardships in jail. Her sacrifice was no less than the revolutionary heroes, Binoy, Badol, and Dinesh. But her contribution has not been much appreciated in the history of nationalist struggle since she did not succeed in her assassination mission.

Bina’s example is crucial in understanding historians’ perspectives towards militant nationalism in Bengal which is primarily conceived to be a male domain even by the female writers of the time. Indeed, Binoy-Badal- Dinesh have been immortalised in the pages of history books as ‘the’ face of Bengal’s militant nationalism. Though Bina did not shed much light on in her personal narrative about the gendered dynamics of secret societies, her regret speaks a

⁶⁴¹ Bina Das, *Srinkhal Jhankar*, (Kolkata: Radical Impression, 2015), 18.

⁶⁴² Leonard A. Gordon, ‘Portrait of a Bengal Revolutionary,’ *The Journal of Asian Studies* 27, no. 2 (February 1968), 197-216.

⁶⁴³ Tanika Sarkar, *Bengal 1928-1934 -The Politics of Protest*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1987), 123.

⁶⁴⁴ Das, *Srinkhal Jhankar*, 34.

volume: “*takhon ki jani “BinoyBasu” ar “Bina Das” e tafat kato khani*” (Little did I know that there existed an unbridgeable gap difference between Binoy Basu and Bina Das).⁶⁴⁵ Before she attempted the assassination, Bina wanted to practice shooting with the revolver. This being impossible, the friend who supplied the revolver reassured her that she could do without practice like Binoy Basu. Bina would often recall the moment of failure to assassinate Mr. Jackson that landed her in prison. Was this regret just about missed opportunities and bad luck or did Bina actually come to believe that hardcore revolutionary projects were best suited to the male members in society?

The other one who sacrificed her life for the cause of the nation was the most famous revolutionary Pritilata Waddedar. Her last testament is important to cite in this context:

I wonder why there should be any distinction between males and females in the fight for the cause of the country’s freedom. If our brothers can join a fight for the cause of the motherland why cannot the sisters? Instances are not rare that the Rajput ladies of hallowed memory fought bravely in the battlefields and did not hesitate to kill their country’s enemies. The pages of history are replete with high admiration for the historic exploits of these distinguished ladies. Then why should we, the modern Indian women, be deprived of joining this noble fight to redeem our country from foreign domination? If sisters can stand side by side with the brothers in a satyagraha movement, why are they not so entitled in a revolutionary movement?⁶⁴⁶

If history has been kind to the likes of Binoy-Badal-Dinesh who escaped arrest and committed suicide, Pritilata too did something similar even though she was a woman. Her courageous act showed that she too was capable of the same bravery as men. Even Masterda Surya Sen admitted that Pritilata sacrificed her life to prove women are no less than men.⁶⁴⁷

Fictional vision

Pravabati Devi Swaraswati’s story ‘Kheya’ (1936) portrayed a young man Ananda’s life who went to Kolkata for further study leaving his only guardian grandfather and her widowed sister at

⁶⁴⁵ Das, *Srinkhal Jhankar*, 32-33.

⁶⁴⁶ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1966), 141.

⁶⁴⁷ Kalpana Dutt (Joshi), *Chittagong Armory Raiders Reminiscences*, (New Delhi: People’s Publishing House, 1945), 44, 46.

the village home with the zeal to earn good. Like most of the young blood of the time, Ananda also engaged himself to the nation's cause. It was heard that he was caught in the matter of Swadeshi dacoity⁶⁴⁸ and jailed for five years. But within one year he escaped and it was only once that he visited his family with rupees thousand. His grandfather was unaware of the overall circumstances. Thereby, when the police came to search for him after he left, his grandfather accepted that he had visited on a certain day. Consequently, his grandfather became the witness and grandson the convict. Ananda came at night to save himself from British police. One could observe in contemporary stories often this type of character of revolutionaries were depicted. They reflected the hardships of revolutionaries, their sacrifices, and also the sufferings of their families.⁶⁴⁹

Chitrita Devi's 'Ar kato din?' (How many more days?) paints a loyal picture of the gendered division of labour in underground revolutionary movements. Though the story was written in 1948, it was premised a decade or two earlier, a time known as the heyday of Bengal's militant nationalism. The character Sumitra regrets that she failed to become Somnath's comrade even though she was always keen to be one. Sumitra truly believed that the work of revolutionary nationalism would ultimately bring independence to the nation. Though she contributed passively, Sumitra hoped for more challenging assignments in the future. She secretly started writing out pamphlets at night when everyone was asleep. As she was good at painting, she would paint different images of *Bharatmata* and include revolutionary poetries beneath those drawings. Though she was dissatisfied with these passive contributions, Somnath refused to give her any more responsibility. This was because Somnath worried about her and feared that she would expose the entire operation if she was arrested by the police. Sumitra's only consolation was that Somnath let her hide his revolvers.⁶⁵⁰ The calculation in Somnath's mind was pretty simple – as the daughter of a famous barrister, Sumitra was above all suspicion – the police would never suspect Sumitra of being involved in extra-legal terrorist activities!⁶⁵¹

⁶⁴⁸ The revolutionaries often looted government treasuries to gather funds for their activities.

⁶⁴⁹ Pravabati Devi Saraswati, "Kheya," *Prabartak*, (April-May, 1936): 77-82. Another story of Pravabati Devi Saraswati can be mentioned here about the hardship of revolutionaries' lives. Pravabati Devi Saraswati, "sahid," *Archana*, (August- September, 1947). Another story Shanti Shudha Ghosh's 'Bhaiphonta' is also important to mention here. Shanti Shudha Ghosh, "Bhaiphonta," *Jayashree*, (October-November, 1931): 571.

⁶⁵⁰ Chitrita Devi, "Arkato Din?," 217-218.

⁶⁵¹ Chitrita Devi, "Arkato Din?," 219.

Sumitra was a devoted worker and optimistic that she too would one day contribute more directly to this movement. But the period of waiting was so long that the fire burning inside her heart ultimately died out. She reluctantly accepted her good, materialistic, and luxurious life surrounded by her loved ones.⁶⁵² But even then, she fondly remembered that part of her life when she was engaged with revolutionary activities. Chitrita Devi's story thus depicted societal challenges to women's participation in revolutionary activities at this time. Even when they wanted to give their fullest, their male "comrades" either doubted their commitment or constrained them to typical care-giving gendered responsibilities.

Conclusion

Manikuntala Sen discussed the fault of women leaders of the nationalist movement who failed to engage women across classes. She recognised the problem of women participating in the national movement directly. The middle and lower-middle-class women who had been historically relegated to the *antahpur* did not get enough time to pull them out of their domestic spaces. Those who eventually joined the movement, did so only after receiving their family's "permission". This was of course a very rare occurrence. Often while they were asked about their participation in the national movement, women were heard saying that their hands were tied since they did not have the permission of their husbands or the patriarch to join these causes. At other times, women could not find time outside of their family duties or were not in the habit of going out in the streets without any male accompaniment.⁶⁵³

Women's ability to go from one's home to another's was considered as a revolutionary change by Manikuntala Sen. She witnessed huge female participation during the Non-Cooperation movement. But except for some zealous participants, the rest withdrew their active participation after the movement was over and furthermore, many lost interest in organisational work.⁶⁵⁴

Another experience of Manikuntala is pertinent. The attitude of uneducated village women towards women leaders can be assumed from an experience shared by her. She once went to the village Banaripara with the party to join a meeting. Arrangements were made for her

⁶⁵² Chitrita Devi, "Arkato Din?," 216.

⁶⁵³ Manikuntala Sen, "Banglar Mohila Andolan," *Arani*, Sarodiya Sankhya, (September-October, 1942): 34.

⁶⁵⁴ Sen, "Banglar Mohila Andolan," 35.

and a comrade Viswanath in a house where there were two separate small beds at the *verandah* (balcony). No other women were there to talk to and their house was locked from inside. After Viswanath left, Manikuntala was confused about whom to ask about her bath and change of dress. Despite being a leader herself, she could not talk to the women of the house and felt a gap with them similar to that of the man in the house.⁶⁵⁵ At night also she had to sleep in the *verandah*. In the morning Manikuntala forcefully conversed with them and removed their veils. They said that they could not talk to her because she was educated. Manikuntala later eased them by telling stories of Kolkata and Barishal. She regretted the condition of women in the underdeveloped villages like Banaripara.⁶⁵⁶

Manikuntala personified and represented the real cause of women's absence from the political field.⁶⁵⁷ The continuous push back of society towards the domestication of women led to their diminished representation in the field of politics. The nationalists' moulding of mother image, constant pressure of becoming an ideal mother of a heroic son and presenting women as '*Deshmata*' for whom the brave sons would sacrifice their lives—contributed to the women's space moulded by nationalists as '*Debi*'. Further the Gandhian strategy of involving women in the nationalist politics too was restrictive and further confined them within home or realms of social work. The gendered character of militant nationalism also hindered their direct and large-scale involvement. Manikuntala's writing shows how the educated middle-class participation in the fields of politics was visible rather than the lower class/caste. Education itself created a gap between the leaders and the lower-class people. This gap, to a considerable extent, could be bridged by Gandhi's mobilisation politics and by Charkha, Khaddar and village reconstruction programmes. However, women's participation remained limited elsewhere.

⁶⁵⁵ Sen, *Janojagorane Narijagorane*, 48.

⁶⁵⁶ Sen, *Janojagorane Narijagorane*, 50.

⁶⁵⁷ Sujata Mukhopadhyay in 1941 also see the gaps between women's progress and women's participation in the Nationalist movement and evaluated the reasons of women's absence from the ground. See Sujata Mukhopadhyay, *Nari Pragatir Rup*, *Arani*, (October, 1941): 11-14.

Conclusion

Internalisation and marginalisation were two significant factors of this study, interlinked with each other. These two continuous processes slowed down women's rising consciousness in socio-political issues, discussed in this study. Throughout the colonial period patriarchal norms and gender construction facilitated marginalisation of Indian women at home and outside. It is apt to point out that in every field there was a constant effort by patriarchy to restrict women's movement. Be it the educational sphere where patriarchy harped on '*meyeli shiksha*', '*meyeli kaj*' in case of economic activities, women's choices of marriage, lifestyle and childbirth or political participation, male domination always marginalised women's roles. Unfortunately, women of the time with very few exceptions, internalised this hard fact, unknowingly mirroring it in their writings which further reinforced the above-mentioned processes.

This study is limited to the analysis of educated upper-middle class/caste women's writings, which constituted a very significant number in the early decades of twentieth century. Their writings are the sole source to construct an idea about the dilemmas, contradictions and transformations of women's mentality of the time. Periodical '*Punnyo*' around 1913 witnessed that women writers mostly contributed poetry while prose was absent or translated from other languages by women. Though the periodical was edited by a woman Pragyasundari Devi, it contained only 'cooking' as women's domain. '*Archana*' during the first decade of the twentieth century did not include women's prose writings. The periodical '*Sourav*' from 1912 to 1924 does not carry any important piece of prose writing regarding women's progress except a few like on education by Kulada Devi⁶⁵⁸ in 1913 and Suramasundari Ghosh's travel writing⁶⁵⁹ et al. Though there was some poetry published, but the number was much less compared to the long span of its publication period. '*Dhaka Review O Sammilan*' around 1911, 1914, 1916, 1917 was silent about women's writings.

'*Arthik Unnoti*' (1934-35 and 1945-46) a periodical related to agriculture, art and trade, economics etc did translate articles from many foreign magazines related to business but had been silent on economic issues pertaining to women and their economic independence. Even political periodicals like '*Yugantar*' during 1939-40 carried women's writings related to

⁶⁵⁸ Kulada Devi, "Stree Siksha," *Sourav*, (August -september, 1913), 343-346.

⁶⁵⁹ Suramasundari Ghosh, "Chunar Bhraman," *Sourav*, (February-march, 1912), 161-166.

domestic issues and other social issues. For example, it carried stories by Ashalata Sinha on domestic issues, Shanti Sudha Ghosh's article on sex related women's problems, and Bina Das's article on "*Amar Chata niye Samasya*" (Problem with my umbrella). Thus, even writings by politically aware women did not deal with political issues. Thus, internalisation of the patriarchal and societal norms continues to hold sway.

The nationalists' project to confine women to the domestic arena seemed to be a constant so far as societal acceptance was concerned. This was regretted by Rokeya in 'Sultana's Dream' (1905) in the beginning of the century. The dilemma is manifested in Saratchandra's '*Pather Dabi*', when Sabyasachi said "*Eder baad diyee kaj chalena, nileo gandogol badhe*" ("It does not work even if exclude them, if you take them it causes a mess.").⁶⁶⁰ So men included women in this long journey of freedom but according to their own conveniences. Later on, women realised the patriarchal construction of the gender roles attributed to them, though very few in numbers.

Yet, the constructed mother image of women somehow started to break down from 1920s onwards. One can notice women's discerning voices regarding reading subjects like mathematics, demanding their independent earnings, craving for leisure time and life-style change and healthy bodies to engage in women's associations and political movements. Having realised the disadvantages of illiteracy, early marriage, constant child bearing and rearing, women fought for late marriage, higher education, choices in marriage and fewer children in their life. So, the imagery of mother that restricted them to the domestic arena was losing ground in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century.

As this study included the early decades of the twentieth century, the more conscious opinions that started coming in 1940s remain outside the purview of this discussion. Though direct participatory role of women can be traced in the Quit India movement and Tebhaga movement in the 1940s, the consciousness was unevenly spread in society. Even during the midnight speech of India's independence by Nehru, the historic visual of the crowd included miniscule women population. For women, the struggle for freedom is still not over almost a century later.

⁶⁶⁰ Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, *Pather Dabi*, (Calcutta: Kamala Printing Works, 1958 9th edition), 108.

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