WEARING IDENTITY : READING WOMEN'S ATTIRE IN NINETEENTH AND TWENTIETH CENTURY BENGAL

A thesis submitted towards partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

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Certified that the thesis entitled, **A Sociological Study of the Educational Status of Toto Tribe in Alipurduar District of West Bengal**, submitted by me towards the partial fulfilment of the degree of Master of Philosophy (Arts) in Sociology of Jadavpur University, is based upon my own original work and there is no plagiarism. This is also to certify that the work has not been submitted by me in part or in whole for the award of any other degree/diploma of the same Institution where the work is being carried out, or to any other Institution. A paper out of this dissertation has also been presented by me at a seminar/conference at **All India Sociological Conference, Mysore**, thereby fulfilling the criteria for submission, as per the M.Phil Regulation (2017) of Jadavpur University.

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This foregoing thesis is hereby approved as a credible study of a social science/humanities subject carried out and presented in a manner satisfactorily to warranty its acceptance as a pre-requisite to the degree for which it has been submitted. It is understood that by this approval the undersigned do not endorse or approve any statement made or opinion expressed or conclusion drawn therein but approve the thesis only for purpose for which it has been submitted.

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I hereby declare that this thesis contains literature survey and original research work by the undersigned candidate, as a part of my M Phil in Women's Studies degree during academic session 2019.

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constant source of strength. It was the image of my mother, dressed in her cherished collection of beautiful *saris*, which attracted me to the field of dressing. I first came to realise how a simple piece of clothing is not only about its colour, texture or shape, but also has multiple meanings associated with it for every individual, thanks to her. My grandmother, Mrs. Bharati Ghosh, had been the earliest recipient of my first childish engagement with her old *saris*. Dr. Kanad Sinha, of the Sanskrit College and University, pointed out to me the importance of critical historical study of particular sources, supported me in every stage of this research and helped me in the gigantic amount of editing the thesis had needed. The valuable comments of Prof. Uttara Chakraborty, my teacher from the Presidency College, have been of great help in rethinking my work in new ways. I sincerely thanks Jayita Das for sharing her enormous amount of knowledge on this field with me, and patiently answering all my queries regarding sources and their interpretation.

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PREFACE

My interest in women's fashion and the changes occurring in the fashion industry is a major reason for taking up the issue of women's dressing style as the topic of my M. Phil dissertation. Being trained as a student of History, I had gradually understood that every socio-cultural change has a historical context. As I went through the writings of Bengali women of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, in their memoirs and women's magazines, I gradually got an idea of how the story of the changes in the way Bengali women dressed is also a story of changing identity-formation. Clothes are not mere coverings, but a major component of the creation of a self. The nature of that self of the Bengali women has been influenced by a variety of ideas from colonialism to nationalism, traditionalism to globalization, all of which are also gendered. Therefore, it became my objective to seriously integrate my personal interest with my academic training. The interdisciplinary field of Women's Studies has particularly helped me as I had come to realise the difference between mainstream historical sources coming out of the largely male-dominated archives or the phallogocentric nature of constructing the discourses and the sources revealing the voices of women. Therefore, I thought of addressing a gendered subject through gender questions. Thus, this work applies the interdisciplinary methods of Women's Studies to understand the transitions in women's dressing in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal.

Whereas the question of women's 'self' or 'identity' has been crucial to many feminist discourses, general occidocentric theories sometimes overlook the historical specificities of the third world countries. This becomes more of an issue for a country like India that encountered the notions related to colonial modernity with a long historical lineage of a multicultural civilization. Therefore, the formation of the 'self' of the modern Indian woman is a complex process that needs further attention. This dissertation is a small step towards that goal.

Contents

Introduction

This dissertation is a study of the changes in the dressing style of the Bengali women in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, in the context of the emergence of the 'modern' educated Bengali gentlewoman (*bhadramahila*), primarily in the light of women's own writings. The significance of this period in Indian history can hardly be overstressed. The social experience of colonialism had produced diverse effects on gender and class relations in India. On the one hand, the Orientalists tried to recover India's glorious but exotic past. On the other, Western education had brought about a reforming zeal within the Indian society. While the anglicised section tried to ape the social markers of their colonial masters, rise of nationalism fostered a search for an alternative *swadeshi* model, embedded in traditional national identity. These contesting trends often resulted in lasting changes in various spheres of Indian social life, from education to food. Clothes were no exception, as what one wears is often an extremely important marker of one's self-perception and self-representation. For instance, in colonial India, the Western educated Indian often tried to adapt the Western dress as a marker of an elite socio-educational status. When the famous Bengali poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt attended a *raja's* party in full European dress, he half-jokingly defended his choice of clothes by saying that had he come wearing the customary *dhoti* and *chadar*, he would have to help in carrying pitchers and napkins![1] Similarly, Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919), an educated woman who made a journey to England, crossing the forbidden *kalapani* (dark waters), to accompany her husband, wore gowns.[2] She said that no one at the Bombay station dared to stare at her because of the power of her western attire.[3] On the contrary, the

[1] Emma Tarlo, *Clothing Matters: Dress and Identity in India*, C. Hurts and Co. Publishers, London, 1996, p.23.
[2] The editors of *Andarer Itihas*, Vol. I, think that her journey started in 1882, on the basis of the poem 'Shudhu Mama Katha' by Tilottama, daughter of Krishnabhabini Das. See Krishnabhabini Das, 'Englande Bangamahila', in Ahana Bishwas and, Prasun Ghosh eds.,*Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 1*,Gangchil, Kolkata, 2016, p. 482.

[3] Krishnabhabini Das, 'Englande Bangamahila', p. 236.

Gandhian reform movements would be hardly imaginable without the importance of the homespun *khadi*.

The British rule in India brought significant changes that affected the lives of ordinary people drastically. They introduced new relationships and explained their actions within a view of the world that was 'clear, instrumentalist, scientific, and above all beneficial to all who came into contact with it'.[4] As Tapan Raychaudhuri points out, the encounter between the East and the West meant a change. The changes occurred not just through influence and/or adaptation of cultural artefacts, like specific elements of Western lifestyle, habits and belief system, but the contact was also a catalyst which induced mutations in inherited ways.[5] Fundamental social formations, involving social identity and political subjectivity, were shaped in this period of encounter. Apart from the characterization of the political condition of India preceding British conquest as a state of anarchy, and arbitrary despotism, a central element in the ideological justification of British colonialism was the criticism of the 'degenerate and barbaric' social customs of the Indian people, sanctioned, or so it was believed, by the religious tradition.[6] Colonialism also saw itself as performing a 'civilizing mission'.[7] In identifying the barbarism in Indian religious traditions, colonialist critics invariably repeated a long list of atrocities perpetrated on Indian women by an entire body of scriptural canons and customs which, they claimed, made women appear to be perpetrators and sufferers alike, as the necessary vehicles of right conduct, by rationalizing such atrocities. So, by assuming a position of sympathy with the 'unfree' and 'oppressed' womanhood of India, the colonial mind was able to transform this figure of the Indian woman into a sign of the inherently

[4] Geraldine Forbes, *The New Cambridge History Of India (IV.2) : Women in modern India*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, p. 12
[5] Tapan Raychaudhuri, *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988, pp. IX-X.
[6] Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Women' in *The Nation and Its Fragments : Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Princeton University Press, Princeton New Jersey, 1993, pp.117 – 118.
[7] Ibid., p. 118.

oppressive nature of the entire cultural tradition of India.[8] Indian disunity and military weakness were linked with the low status of women. Positivist and social Darwinian theories developed rankings of religions and cultures, showing India lower in the evolutionary scale than the countries of the Middle East and Western Europe. So, the colonial ideologues concluded that, if there were any hope for India, it would follow from the introduction of Western ideas and institutions.[9]

Within this discourse there was much debate and controversy about the specific ways in which to carry out this civilizing project. The options ranged from proselytization by Christian missionaries to legislative and administrative action by the colonial state to a gradual spread of enlightened Western knowledge.[10] It is argued that colonial rule introduced a capitalist regime into India and produced a modern but dependent bourgeoisie. This class recast its women and its gender practices to align itself more closely with the domesticity of the colonial masters and the ways of modern capitalists. A 'new patriarchy'[11] was thus evolved, which provided the rationale for reforms, not seriously questioning, but merely 'recasting' male domination.[12] Indian nationalism, in demarcating a political position opposed to colonial rule and its legitimacy, took up the women's question as a problem already constituted for it, namely 'the problem of Indian tradition'.[13] Not all agreed that women needed any change. Those who accepted the idea that society's ill could be traced to the oppressed condition of Indian womenfolk, saw female education and subsequent female

[8] Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Women' p. 118.
[9] Forbes, p. 13.
[10] Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Women', p. 119.
[11] For detailed discussion see Partha Chatterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Zubaan, New Delhi, 2003, pp. 306-333.

[12] See the introduction of Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, Zooban, New Delhi, 1989, 2003, pp. 1-34.

[13] Chatterjee, 'The Nation and Its Women', p. 119.

emancipation as the first step towards progress.[14] Bengal was the heart of this modernizing endeavour and, from early nineteenth century onwards, Bengali reformers had been instrumental in abolishing sati, legalising widow remarriage, facilitating female education, raising the age of consent and several other reforms which enabled women to be more visible in the public sphere.

New colonial education, purveyed through the state and Christian missionaries, altered and modernized 'traditional' social perceptions; new religious movements revived and consolidated older humanitarian impulses; and the sudden availability of a pool of human greatness, made the nineteenth century a period of a new zeal in social and religious reforms in Bengal.[15] The spirit of rationalism and individualism, the newly established printing press, educational institutions, and improved means of transport and communication also inspired the reforming zeal. The nineteenth century reforms were often directed towards upper-caste Hindu women, because the men of their community were the first to come into contact with Western liberal ideologies. The feudal political structure gave way to a colonial administration, creating conditions for the emergence of a new middle class who were the first to accept employment in British institutions and join the new professions as lawyers, doctors, teachers, and journalists. The social and religious movements initiated by the new middle class Brahmo and Hindu males sought to educate women, bring them out of seclusion, and ameliorate the conditions of the widows. The leaders of these movements wished to refashion their personal and domestic relationships, to break away from the joint family, to bring about a radical change in the relations between husbands and wives, and to make their wives more suitable partners. Women's education was important for creating the ideal match for the *Bhadralok* , the 'modern' Bengali gentry, and for uplifting the Bengali

[14] David Kopf, *The Brahmo Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind*, Princeton University Press, N.J., Princeton, 1979.
[15] Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, eds., *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, Vol. 1, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2016, p. 1.

society. It had little to do with the recognition of women as autonomous agents. However, education was one of the items on the reform agenda that contributed to the 'emancipation' of women. The element of serendipity in education made many educated women acknowledge and define their own problems. Women writers or *lekhika* emerged as a new category. They took a substantial role in fashioning their own identities. The process was slow and it was often initiated with the help of the male reformers. To trace the emergence of the *bhadramahila* or the gentlewomen, and their dressing, hence, we need to know first about what triggered them to come out of the seclusion of the familial social space designated as *andarmahal*/*antahpur* (inner quarters of the house) – a separate physical 'domain' – an architectural correlate of women's social location within a general patriarchal mansion.[16]

The new form of education and the united efforts of Brahmo reformers created a space outside the confines of the four walls for the women of early nineteenth century Bengal. Sartorial modifications were integral to this process. Throughout the century, we will be able to find voices of numerous women who negotiated with this change and the discourses around the necessity of women's education, newly acquired freedom, and reforms in women's sartorial representations. As the female body is often a major locus of identity formation, how women managed their appearance became an important question when women's public appearance kept on increasing. Women's attire itself became a terrain of contest among various competing ideologies. Out of these debates, emerged the 'modern' Indian woman's dress. This dress became a marker of the civilised and reformed society. The process of the reforms in dressing, loaded with caste, class and gender implications, developed alongside the social reforms and the nationalist movements.

Time And Space

[16] Himani Bannerji, "Fashioning a Self: Educational Proposals for and by Women in Popular Magazines in Colonial Bengal", *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 26, No. 43, October 26, 1991, p. WS-55.

If the sociological analysis of a specific period in history is not only a means of understanding the past, but also a way of communication to the present, then few historical periods can better illuminate the cultural complexities of modern Bengali life than the nineteenth and twentieth century. The genesis of what is perceived as the 'modern' Bengali high culture – of which dressing is an important part – can be traced back to this period.

Since my study tries to perceive the history of this period through the evolution of the dress as a marker of the *bhadramahila* identity, with women's own accounts as my principal source, my starting point is the first known autobiography of a woman – Rassundari Debi (also the first autobiography written in Bengali). This book has to be regarded as a turning point, rather than as a definite moment of rupture from the past. Women's own narratives in constructing a historical past represent a process of gradual change which cannot be clearly marked by public events or specific dates. Only a handful of women were writing in the time of Rassundari, but literacy and education were the most important developments affecting women in the nineteenth century. Her book was one of the first illustrations of the lifelong journey of a woman's education and how her confined state was changed because of the introduction of 'modern' modes of education. Starting with her, this study limits its scope up to the political independence of India from colonial rule, as the ideological conventions and priorities changed drastically after that, and the geographical unit named Bengal – the focus of my study – also witnessed a historical disjuncture with its political partition.

This study also has a global and contemporary relevance for a place like Bengal which has produced some of the most popular faces of internationally reputed Indian fashion houses dealing mainly with the *sari* and claiming its 'traditional' Bengali heritage and identity. Such trends can be seen as continuity of processes which can be traced back to the nineteenth century urban culture. The historical background of this cultural development does not only

relate to the economic growth of present day Bengal or India, but also gives us an idea about what made this happen.

I chose the Bengali *bhadramahila*as as the focus of my study on women's sartorial choice because they are the class of women to have left their own written records. My choice of subject immediately confronted me with one of the central problems of women's history – that of categorization. It is impossible to give a precise description of the *bhadramahila* without reference to their menfolk. Their social status was linked with the social and economic position of their fathers, husbands and sons – the *bhadraloks* – and cannot be judged by separate indicators relating to their own autonomous pursuits at least as late as the second half of the twentieth century. The Bengali educated Muslim women have not been represented adequately, because the writings of only a few could be found. The use of the term 'Hindu', as a religious category, also contains within itself several contradictions beyond the scope of this work. Also, the importance of religion in a woman's life has only been touched upon in some contexts, and not deeply explored.

In this study, the term 'modernity' has to be used with some qualifications. It is not equated with progress, nor is 'tradition' seen as a wholly negative term placed in opposition to the former. In the context of the current study, modernity includes changes such as rapid urbanization, the increasing incursion of public institutions into domestic life, and the exposure to an alien culture itself undergoing an industrial and technological revolution and producing new patriarchal ideas. 'Tradition' and 'modernity' are to be seen as a continuum in constant flux, rather than as separate states of existence.

Among the vast literature reflecting the social life and culture of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal, I have focussed only on the Bengali and English texts for my better understanding of these two languages. Studying a conceptual process from these texts, we

need to be careful of the ideological negotiations and moral syncretism, which involve various adaptive, exclusionary and co-optive strategies of analysis. This will help us to differentiate the collaboration from resistance, and to look for the values and symbols, interpretive devices and epistemologies, which share gendered patriarchal class terms and are fashioned through an inner struggle against the patriarchies within the same class space.

As Himani Bannerji says, "The ideological agenda, or the hegemonic agenda is invariably an agenda of morality, of values expressed through both ideas and practices… It is through the creation, re-creation and the diffusion of a set of norms and forms, that the necessary 'consent' can be built which is essential for hegemony's fullest expression."[17] I am examining a part of the social group who held a subordinated and/or collaborative position under English colonialism, specifically the ruling propertied elites. I look at the sartorial representation of women in constructing an ideal Indian womanhood, which was also one of the ideological tools of the identity formation of this class. The construction becomes explicit as we unravel that the concept of shame or its repertoire. The body of the 'ideal Indian woman', as an idea, was not static or natural.

Methodology of Research

Methodologically, this study pertains to historical research in the field of social relations, namely the directed search for an evaluation of relevant data, and the construction from these scattered images of a story of transformation of the socio-cultural and gender norms and values associated with women's attire in the recorded period. The interdisciplinary approach makes it easier to grasp the idea about both the changing social structure and processes those helped to make those changes and the changes in the notion of identity formation. The new trends were accepted or rejected by contemporary patrons and the masses, following the

[17] Bannerji,, 'Fashioning a Self', p. WS-51.

changing standards of aesthetic evaluation of existing trends. These ideologies were formed in a specific time, originating from the interactions of different ideas, changing class relations, and structural fissures of the society. The empirical areas of investigation in this regard are the socio-economic status of the female writers, their relations with the intelligentsia and their perspective on the changing society around them, the nature of the new trends and their impact on the production of a consumer culture, and the role of the critics whose views were reflected in the newspaper articles.

Himani Bannerji has argued that analysis of the women's texts must be attentive to the two-way relationship between common sense and ideology, which is central to hegemony. Ideology (as a conscious, unified and organised system of ideas) results from attempts at a conscious and coherent discursive construction, through selectively interpreting and putting together elements from common sense and articulating it to "ontological and epistemological premises of a particular and historical form of social order" and social class or classes. But its articulated unity is continuously fractured in the process of social circulation among other relations of everyday life, and crumbles or diffuses into common sense. This fracturing itself is provided by multiple significational nature of common sense and prevailing contradictions in social relations. The social location of the significational aspect of ideology supplies multiplicity of meanings, fissures, openings and closures (always semiotically signalling out), which even the most thought out ideological formulation cannot escape. This process of continuous widening (drawing into common sense) and narrowing (being 'shaped' into 'ideology') has been marked by all scholars dealing with history of consciousness.[18] While tracing the determinate direction of the ideological proposal, we need to remember the continuous process of negotiation – between different aspects of common sense and the tension between the ideology within (fractured or whole) and lived experience. It is the

[18] Bannerji, 'Fashioning a Self', p. WS-52.

ability to mediate, manage and contain these divergent elements which makes or mars the success of an ideology and charts the direction and the political cultural form of hegemony. This fluidity in ideological formation indicates the difficulty of demarcating forms of consciousness as residual, dominant and emergent with any precision and exposes the fallacy in a reflective or constructive view of culture.[19] The writers of the chosen texts were preoccupied in dealing with shifts and slides, liminality and so on – pointing towards the multidimensionality within one ideological position or its class articulation. In the middle of such fluidity, we can speak of a contested claim by certain ideological positions as candidates for hegemonic ascendency.

Choice of sources

In this study, I have tried to concentrate on women's sartorial choices and their locational politics, problematising it by situating these within their educational changes or changes in social life, rather than on theoretical debates conducted by men about these issues of women. The key to these would be the accounts of women themselves, especially after the emergence of the *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) as also *lekhika* (female author) in the crucial socio-political juncture of nineteenth century Bengal. I focus on women's self-representation through their non-fictional compositions: autobiographical works, women's magazines, contemporary newspapers articles, and private letters.

I have focussed on women's writing alone, trying to go beyond the more readily accessible male accounts of events to see how women's interests were articulated by themselves. Looking closely at their writings, the details of their lives, and the options open to them, rather, was a way of gaining insight into how they perceived their own situation. This helped me to see the position of the *bhadramahila* in their own terms – their strengths and the

[19]Bannerji, "Fashioning a Self", p. WS-52.

acknowledged hardships – before making my own assessment with the benefit of distance and hindsight, rather avoiding the view of the bird's eye. Alongside the autobiographical reminiscences of women, major source materials used for this dissertation are the journals which had provided space for writing for and by women in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal, like *Bamabodhini, Antahpur, Mahila, Bangamahila* etc. The purpose of these journals was to instruct, so their content is often normative rather than factual. But, they were certainly crucial in propagating the *bhadramahila* ideal. These were widely read, and thus provided an important means of communication among women. They also performed a mediating function with the outside world. Autobiographical writings are my principal sources. These provide information about lifestyle, emotions, and situations of these women, and may enable us to question the narratological closures that give our perceived 'modernity', or its 'history', a semblance of homogeneous unity. Official government records like census reports and the reports on public instruction as well as theatrical farces provide interesting evidence on the changes taking place in the position of women. But, within the limited scope of this dissertation, these have not been explored.

Literature Survey

There is little secondary literature directly related to the history of the sartorial choices of the *bhadramahila*. Bernard Cohn has extensively discussed how clothes became one of the major markers of colonialism, since the colonisers used it as a major determinant to differentiate themselves from the colonised and to 'orientalise' and classify the latter. However, he focuses mainly on the male attire, from the Sikh turban to the army uniform, from the Mughal *khilat* to the British mantle, with just a passing glance at the notions of women's modesty in the breast-cloth controversy in South India.[20] Emma Tarlo's anthropological work

[20] Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1996, pp. 106-162.

limits itself to the transitions in men's attire in the colonial period, and when it moves towards women's attire after independence, its scope is narrowed down to the Gujarati village of the author's fieldwork.[21] However, there are works which help us to have a glimpse of the life of the Bengali women in the colonial period, including the aspect of their dress.

Chitra Deb, for instance, portrays the evolution of Bengali women's thought process through the illustrations of the life of the women, born in nineteenth century Bengal, as depicted in their writings, in her *Antapurer Atmakatha*. Though clothes are not in the focus of this work, anecdotal representations have often touched upon the issues of women being educated and coming out in the public domain, and the subsequent changes in their dress.[22] In *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, she talks about the accomplished women of the famous Tagore family and how they moulded Bengal's cultural ethos. This work portrays several generations of women who were flourished in one of the most influential as well as progressive families of Bengal. Naturally, this study also discusses the sartorial reforms brought about by Jnanadanandini Debi, as well as the dressing patterns of the women of the Tagore family in social gatherings.[23]

An invaluable collection of information on the women's dress in colonial Bengal is Jayita Das's book *Sajmahal: Oupanibeshik Banglay Meyeder Sajgoj*, even though it contains little critical analysis of the information collected. Das has extensively dealt with the changes in women's attire, jewellery, hair-dressing, cosmetics and footwear in nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. Especially, she has discussed how women's dressing style was influenced by the social reform movements of nineteenth century Bengal, the coming of the the nationalist ideology, and the Swadeshi Movement.[24] In this context, she has extensively

[21] Tarlo, pp. 1-22.
[22] Chitra Deb, *Antapurer Atmakatha*, Ananda, Calcutta, 2017.
[23] Chitra Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, Ananda, Calcutta, 2018.

[24] Jayita Das, *Sajmahal: Oupanibeshik Banglay Meyeder Sajgoj*, Gangchil, Kolkata, 2015.

discussed the changes in Bengali women's attire – mainly the way of wearing the *sari*. She has mentioned how the 'traditional' Bengali silk *saris* were being replaced by new kinds of clothes and how the contemporary socio-cultural events and movements were affecting Bengali women'dressing styles.[25] She has also noted the various cultural meanings associated with women using footwear, particularly the Western-style high heels.[26]

Nirad C. Chaudhuri has dealt with the matter of clothing as a form of art and as an element in personal relations. His work offers a morphological, functional and ecological study of Indian clothing and adornment. He has talked about the involution of *sari* – changes in length, changes in the patterns of wearing it and so on,[27]but did not engage with the question of women's role in that evolution.

Ghulam Murshid's article 'Bangali Mahilader Poshak' (Bengali Women's Clothing) in his book *Nari Pragati: Adhunikatar Abhighate Banga Ramani*, has treated the discourse on the changes in women's clothing (as well as the entire project of women's modernity) as a reaction to the efforts of their male counterparts.[28]

Arnab Saha has dealt with the idea of clothing the nineteenth century Bengali women, and observes that usually women are always in the epicentre in the discourse regarding the rules on clothing because, in the patriarchal society, any social opinion is gendered. That's why the responsibilities of modest/immodest clothing rest on women's shoulders. So, self-fashioning was seen as an inevitable moral code of modernity. As the artisan and entrepreneur of this modernity were the men of the colonised society, the discourse regarding the appropriate attire of the *bhadramahila* started from the male perspective. He talks about how Victorian puritanism affected the debate on the appropriate decorum of the *bhadramahila* and its

[25] Jayita Das, pp. 29-124.
[26] Ibid., pp. 203-217.
[27] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Culture in the Vanity Bag*, Jaico Publishing House, Bombay, 1976.
[28] Ghulam Murshid, 'Bangali Mahilader Poshak', *Nari Pragati : AdhunikatarAbhighate Banga Ramani*, Naya Udyog, Kolkata, 2014.

effects on curbing their sexuality.[29] But, the whole discourse is seen through the repeatitive ideas of Victorian morality, its reception by the male intelligentsia, and women's reaction to these ideas being mimicry of the reaction of their male counterparts.

Tapasi Bhattacharya discusses the changes in Bengali women's dressing from nineteenth century to the current times, looking at how the whole discourse regarding women's dressing was controlled or guided and dominated by patriarchal norms and ideas, completely ignoring women's active participation in this debate and without connecting the discourse with the newly acquired agency or dressing sense among a particular class of women.[30]

A major intervention in the sartorial politics of the *bhadramahila* definitely came from nationalism. Charu Gupta has shown how Hindu nationalists introduced new changes and invented new norms of dress for women, which became 'traditional' or 'indigenous'. The qualities attached with the prior notion of modest clothing were changed in the nationalist light.[31] Simonetta Casci, in 'Nationalism and Gender Ideology In Bengali Literature', focuses on nationalism in Bengal as depicted in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengali literature, in which the gender issue emerges in the construction of a new ideal women.[32] However, I shall try to show that women had a complex negotiatory relationship with nationalism, which was not unilinear and needs further critical attention.

In 'Crossing the Threshold: Women in Colonial City Space', Sanchayita Paul Chakraborty has discussed women's interaction with the colonial city through women's education,

[29] Arnab Saha, 'Unish Shatak : Bangali Meyer Poshak Bhabna', *Unish Shatak: Bangali Meyer Jounota*, Pratibhas, Kolkata, 2017.
[30] Tapasi Bhattacharya, 'Poshake Purushtantrikata : BanganarirAngasajjyay', in Mahaswata Mukyopadhyay and Aparna Bandyopadhyay, eds., *NahiSamanyaNari : Itihase, Samaje O Chintay*, Setu, Kolkata, 2018, pp. 698-707.

[31] Charu Gupta, ''Fashioning' Swadeshi: Clothing Women in Colonial North India', Economic and Political Weekly, Vol. 47, No. 42, October 20, 2012, pp. 76-84.

[32] Simonetta Casci, 'Nationalism And Gender Ideology In Bengali Literature', *Il Politico*, Vol. 64, No. 2 (189), Aprile-Giugno 1999, pp. 277-291.

women's attire, women's committees, and women's travels – all of which shaped women's intervention into the public sphere. These categories are connected with the emergence of a new phenomenon in the mid-nineteenth century: the *lekhika* or the woman writer. The paper probes into these categories in the light of the essays, travel accounts and memoirs, penned by early women writers in Bengali, such as Krishnabhabini Das, Jnanadanandini Debi, Sarala Debi and others.[33]

Meredith Borthwick's study has been a landmark in countering the view that the male-dominated social reform movements led to the emancipation of women. It concentrates on the changes in the lives of the Bengali *bhadramahila* between the establishment of the Bethune School in 1849 and the partition of Bengal in 1905. The situation of the *bhadramahila* has been analysed in the context of colonial rule and its impact on the social, economic and political life of Bengal. The process of change through institutional and public means such as education, voluntary associations, employment, and political activity have also been discussed in the book. She has shown that, even though there were many positive gains for women – steps towards equality, increased physical freedom, expanded horizons through the acquisition of literacy, and limited entry into the area of non-domestic work, these changes often brought unforeseen negative consequences in their wake, such as reduction in autonomy and power within the household, and subordinate status while entering the public world. Even such a comprehensive and pathbreaking study ignores how colonial modernity or the Bengali Victoriana affected the dressing style of the *bhadramahilas*.[34]

On the other hand, Jayita Das's book is a descriptive work that does not engage with the theoretical possibilities and does not handle the question of women's role in their sartorial

[33] Sanchayita Paul Chakraborty, 'Crossing the Threshold: Women in Colonial City Space', *Sanglap*, 3.2, March 2017, pp. 127-165.

[34] Meredith Borthwick, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 1984.

changes. Therefore, the works of Himani Bannerji have been the most important major interventions regarding women's own engagement with their sartorial choices, understood within a theoretical framework.[35] However, even Bannerji has seen women's response mainly as a reflection of predominant patriarchal tendencies, and has given little attention to the possibility of women's agency coming out through their works. This study, therefore, attempts to explore women's self-representation further to search for the question of their agency in shaping and managing their own public appearance.

Chapertisation

In the first chapter, an attempt has been made to throw light on the origins of the cultural hegemony which can be traced from the clash of two cultures in the colonial framework of nineteenth century Bengal, through the gradual rise of some ideas regarding shame, the changing meaning of the embodiment of the 'traditional' notions of shame or *lajja*, the appropriation of some foreign notions and making them Indianized, and the creation of the educated *bhadramahila* wearing reformed or modernised clothes, invading the public domain, and creating anxieties regarding her unbridled sexuality. The discourse was about moral vs immoral and sexual vs social (the social being represented as the absolute opposite of the sexual). Civility or civil propriety was situated against sexual morality, almost following the model of the 'privatisation of sexuality' proposed by Michel Foucault.[36]

In the second chapter I have linked the discourse of modesty and clothing to the categorical models given to women, such as the *grihalakshmi* or *sugrihini* (the model housewife) and its

[35] Himani Bannerji, 'Textile Prison: Discourse on Shame (*lajja*) in the Attire of the Gentlewoman (*bhadramahila*) in Colonial Bengal', *The Canadian Journal of Sociology*, Vol. 19, No. 2, Special Issue on Moral Regulation (Spring, 1994), pp. 169-193; Bannerji, 'Fashioning a Self'.

[36] Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1 : An Introduction*, Vintage, New York, 1980, p. 11.

reverses, the *alakshmi* (inauspicious), the *bibi* (foreign women living in luxury), the *dandy* (the feminine counterpart of the extravagant *babu*), the *memsahib* (European woman), and the *beshya* (whore). The sartorial choice of an ideal Bengali housewife – *sugrihini* or *grihalakshmi* – was often set against that of the *memsahib.* We shall see how women clothed themselves often in a conscious effort to construct a specific identity through the outward appearance. I will try to find if there was any heterogeneity in the identity of the *bhadramahila*, by looking at their sartorial realities at a time when nationalism was dominating the public discourse of the class they belonged to.

The third chapter looks at the footwear and the evolution of the discourse around it, and tries to see whether the debate regarding women's footwear followed a singular line of modernity with a teleological end. I will explore how there was a gradual change in the way footwear was seen by the society and whether women played any role in that change. I will be looking into the discourse regarding footwear and into the significance of shoes in women's lives in helping them to come out in the public.

To Be Clothed in 'Modesty' :

Coming of the *Bhadramahila* and Dressing the Self

1

Women have often been perceived as the embodiment of communal identity and women's dress has often been seen as a symbol of colonial modernity. The process of 'modernisation' had brought substantial changes in the notion of *lajja* (shame/modesty) and this in turn changed how Bengali women dressed themselves. This transformation was mitigated and shaped by the gradual change in female education and the subsequent presence of women in the 'public' arena. The direction of the change in their attire was towards the adaptation of 'foreign' clothes, including both North Indian and European clothes, from the earlier style of draping only one *sari*. Later, the 'foreign' element was reworked to make it suitable for the body of the ideal Indian woman, an important locus of the larger politics of nationalism.

Lajja was one of the earliest notions highlighted in relation to women's clothes, during India's encounter with British colonialism. Bernard Cohn has shown how the notion became essential in South India where lower caste women, converted to Christianity, demanded to cover their breasts, which was against the local caste practices.[1] Bengal did not have such strong caste injunction about women's attire. However, the notions of modesty and decency became central to the discussions about women's attire, when English-educated Bengalis assessed the dressing of the Bengali women. Since women were expected mainly to stay in the inner quarters where men, apart from the husband, would not be allowed, Bengali women at that time had little care or concern about covering themselves. They would usually be dressed in just a *sari* covering them inadequately, without any blouse, petticoat, and undergarments. Moreover, the *sari* would often be of fine base, such as very fine silk. The

[1] Cohn, pp. 136-141.

Bengal silk textile, which was extremely popular in the international market, was more or less transparent. Wearing this kind of clothes, the Bengali women sometimes failed to cover themselves adequately in certain public places, for instance in the bathing *ghat*. With the Victorian morality embedded in the Western education received by the Bengali reformers of the nineteenth century, this became a troublesome affair. This can be seen in the vigorous criticism of the obscenity of Bengali women's attire in the various contemporary newspapers, like *Samvad Purnachandrodaya,*[2] *Samachar Darpan*[3] and *Bamabodhini Patrika* (the earliest women's magazine in Asia)[4].

For the women of early nineteenth century, wearing only a *sari* of fine base – made mostly in Dhaka, Chandrakona and Shantipur regions – was the 'traditional' thing to do. Such *saris* included *baluchari*, *begambahar*, *ashmantara*, *nayantara*, *nilambari*, *dhakai jamdani*, *dhakai maslin*, Chandrakona's *sari*, etc, As only the women from propertied and elite families could afford the fine based *sari*, this was the marker of their elite status in the society. Hemantakumari Chowdhury, the editor of *Antahpur*, writes that fine clothes were used by women of the propertied or elite families, while lower class women wore thick coarse clothes.[5]

From the vast literature of the contemporary society, we can perceive the general contempt regarding this kind of dress of the Bengali women of upper/middle class background. Fanny Parks, who came to Calcutta in 1822 and got the chance to be friends with the women of the *antahpur*, has said in her *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of Picturesque* that the base of Bengali women's *sari* was so fine that it could be called almost transparent. Hence "it was

[2] Jayita Das, *Sajmahal*, p. 15.
[3] Ibid., pp. 35-36
[4] Ibid, pp. 41-42.
[5] Hemantakumari Chowdhury, 'Mahilar Parichchhad', *Antahpur*, Vol. IV, No. VI, June, 1901, pp. 137-139.

useless as a cover", as one could see the curves of the body and skin colour through it.[6] Soon after this the puritanical outcry began. In 1835 the Bengali newspaper *Samachar Darpan*[7] published a letter on this subject from a Hindu who made an impassioned appeal to the Bengali Hindus to put their women in more adequate and opaque clothing, as was customary with the Muslims and Hindus of upper India.[8] Women's transparent clothing was being mocked as *'ulangabahar* (naked beauty) *sari'*.[9] In 1863, Rajkumar Chandra in 'Dekhe Shune Akkel Gudum' complained that after women bathed in the *ghats*, whether they wore anything could not be ascertained because of the nature of their clothes.[10] Nirad C. Chaudhuri has informed us that at that time many women wore *alta* (scarlet dye of lac) on their buttocks to cover them.[11] This produced the effect of a pink petticoat.[12] The women of the propertied classes usually stayed inside the *antahpur*/*andarmahal*, with some exceptions like going to bathe in the Ganga or going on pilgrimages. But the women of the rural areas had to get out of the house for many reasons, and, to cover their hips, they would wear *saris* with a few twists around their waist. That would cover much of the buttocks even when the body would be wet. But it was not decent enough to the tasteful Brahmo reformers.[13] Considering all these issues, the rural elite started to make bathing arrangements in or near the compound of their homes for their womenfolk. From 1851 onwards, the demand of the fine sari from Dhaka-Shantipur-Chandrakona started reducing gradually.[14] Sumanta Banerjee has explained how the new English educated Bengalis of the nineteenth century saw the uncovered parts of their women's bodies through the new perspective given by their colonial masters/educators.

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[6] Jayita Das, p. 36.
[7] It was edited by the missionaries of Serampore.
[8] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *Culture in the Vanity Bag*, Jaico Publishing House, Bombay, 1976, pp. 62-63.
[9] Jayita Das, p. 40.
[10] Ibid., pp. 43-44. In 1869, an article titled 'Strilokder Snan Pranali' expressed similar concern about the sexual implication of the exposure of the female body in prevalent bathing practices. See 'Strilokder Snan Pranali', *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Shrabon BS 1276; also see Sripantha, 'Poshaki Oiponibeshikata', *Aitihasik Anaitihasik*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2015. pp. 211-212.
[11] Jayita Das, pp. 35-37.

[12] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, p. 62.
[13] Sripantha, pp. 211-212.
[14] Jayita Das, p. 38.

"Till now, the uncovered parts of the female body which were never censured as obscene (shoulders, hands, feet, waistline), the small but adequate *sari* that used to cover that body – in all of these things, the new outlook had discovered a sexual overtone, and it became determined to bring them under moral control."[15]

There was a new conception of culture with intense conviction and fanaticism, which initiated the process of bringing lasting changes in the dressing habits of women. This conception came up through the idea of decorum or propriety as well as the Brahmo movement of religious and moral reform which began to make its influence felt from 1860 onwards. The newly perceived gentlewoman (*bhadramahila*) needed to have an integral sense of shame/modesty/decency (lajja). Himani Bannerji has shown the colonial context of the construction of this idea, and the Victorian-patriarchal lens which degraded and delegitimised the display of women's sexuality. She also shows how female writers such as Kumari Saudamini and Hemantakumari Chowdhury themselves imbibed this notion of *lajja* and viewed themselves through a colonial-patriarchal lens. Hemantakumari, in an article published in the *Anthapur* 1901, wrote that, in ancient India, there was a similarity between how men and women dressed. The Aryan women moved in public places such as the battlefield and the royal court. In many cases, the wife or the sister had to accompany the husband or the brother on horseback. During those days, when women moved out of their homes, thick and long clothes were necessary, which no longer remained so inside the houses of modern times, away from the gaze of men. Since the time of Muslim occupation, Indian women had to be confined inside their houses to protect their chastity. Indian women started using very fine clothes in imitation of the wives of the Muslim rulers of medieval times. As a result of that, even Bengali women did not feel ashamed even to appear in front of many

[15] Sumanta Banerjee, 'Ashlilata Shabda Mora Age Shuni Nai : Oipanibeshik Banglay Ashlilatar Swarup Nirnoy', *Unish Shataker Kolkata O Saraswatir Itar Santan*, Anushtup, Kolkata, 2013, p. 276.

people to bathe in the Ganga or to accept an invitation wearing only one fine *sari*.[16] Another women in "Lajjashilata" wrote, "It is a matter of regret that the women of the inner quarters are not always able to perform a noble duty like entertaining the guests because of erroneous prejudices about shame or the lack of real knowledge about that."[17] She expressed similar sentiments regarding the glorified past of the Aryan women of India.[18]

However, what Bannerji neglects is the emergence of a new 'dressing sense' in women, out of this discourse, creating a ground for women's more frequent public appearance and women's autonomous agency in the discourse around women's emancipation from the confined state of the *antahpur*. How women, through their small and otherwise negligible endeavours, resisted the prevailing conditions which regulated the movement and presence of their bodies also has not received attention. The evolution of the articulation of *lajja* from the veiling of the face of the married women or painting the buttocks of the women red to hide the curves, or the coming of new styles of *saris* including *pachhapere sari (*the one with a broad border of 12 inches covering the buttocks*)*[19] to the coming of new fashions including the use of blouses, petticoats and undergarments – has not been adequately explored. In this chapter, we will try to understand women's agency in the overall transformation of women's attire, and try to trace whether the change in their attire and subsequent change of their location in society was influenced or shaped by the gradual development of female education.

2

The first generation of literate women were mostly self-taught or home educated in the inner quarters of the house, sometimes secretly like Rassundari Debi (1809-1900) and sometimes with the help of their fathers or husbands, like Kailasbasini Debi (b. 1837). Even though they

[16] Hemantakumari Chowdhuri, pp. 137-139.
[17] Janaika Hindu Ramani, 'Lajjashilata', *Antahpur*, Vol. VI, No. III, July, 1903, p. 56.
[18] Ibid., pp. 56.
[19] Jayita Das, p. 119.

stayed in the purview of moral guardianship of the *antahpur* and never broke free from that seclusion, we will find moments of resistance which will reveal their general attitude towards the prevalent notions of *lajja* and women's confinement. The second generation of women who received their formal education from the new schools established by the Brahmo or Hindu reformers and Christian Missionaries, not only resisted the overarching patriarchy with their own writings and life-style, but also participated in the remaking of a new class of women – '*bhadramahila*'. The next generation of women, like Kadambini Ganguly, contributed to the reshaping and readjustment of this *bhadramahila* concept in the later part of the nineteenth century by creating an 'individualized' sartorial enterprise. This marks the culmination of a process, starting from the time when a Bengali housewife, telling her life story, would say, "My eyes never looked out from within that cloth enclosure, as though [I was] blindfolded like the bullocks of the oilpresser. Sight did not travel further than [my] feet"[20] to the time when India's first female doctor, Kadambini Ganduly (1861-1923), filed a defamation case against the editor of the periodical *Banganibasi*, Mahendrachandra Pal, who tried to spread scandalous rumours about Kadambini's character, calling her 'a disgusting specimen of the Brahmo Samaj' and a whore because she would comfortably move around and work in the society, wearing the *saris*, shirts and shoes of the most modern fashion of the time.[21]

The rapid process of colonization and new class formations in Bengal gave rise to a radical sense of disjunction. Questions ranging from religious to everyday life, inclusive of sexuality, gender relations, and the family, erupted in endless public discussions, debates and discourses. Persistent and vigorous attempts at social legislation and institutionalization, for example of education, accompanied these intellectual efforts at reorganizing and

[20] Rassundari Debi, *Amar Jiban*, p. 147.
[21] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 96.

reconceptualizing the new social relations, values and their practical demands.[22] Whether the topic was the female body or female education, they put forward a coherent proposal for a feminine class ethics, always working within a general discourse of shame governing any consideration of the female body and sexuality. So, here, first, we will look into the projected lives of the women of the early nineteenth century who were still in the *andarmahal* and could only 'emerge' in the outer domain (conceptually) through the enabling hands of the newly established print culture of India and the Bengali intelligentsia. From their life stories or the articles written by them, we will be able to see how education helped them to change their ideas about shame and, in turn, how it influenced their dressing style. Only then, we will be able to understand how Rassundari or many others like her fought the rigidities of customs and traditions of the overarching patriarchy and negotiated with it through what I like to call the 'pockets of dissent'. These pockets, in a way, speak volumes about how women handled the notions regarding sexuality, gender roles, and the notions of *lajja*.

Earliest efforts for basic formal education of women were taken up seriously by Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar and his associates, as well as by the Brahmo reformers like Keshub Chandra Sen who sought to make women suitable for the new definitions of their 'traditional' roles through schools, prayer meetings and experiments in the sphere of personal relationships. Before that, women in general were not allowed any kind of basic formal education and very few had a chance of learning even at home. When reformers just started their endeavours regarding female education, which was largely regarded a typical feature of the '*kalikal'* (modern decadent age), women from different socio-economic backgrounds started self-learning how to read and write and some among them even dared to publish their own works. One of them was Rassundari Debi. At the time when she was trying to find ways to learn to read, the Missionaries began the first girls' schools and their efforts were soon

[22] Bannerji, 'Fashioning a Self', pp. WS50-WS62.

rivalled by the Indian reformers. Despite these efforts, there were no advances in female education until the second half of the nineteenth century when the government offered financial support.[23]

Traditionally, education meant learning to read sacred literature for most upper class or middle class women in Bengal. Women from upper-class Vaishnavite families learned to read Puranic literature, Muslim girls were expected to learn the Quran and some accounting skills, but the strict seclusion observed by upper class families prohibited their daughters from formal education. Whatever they learned about these religious texts, they learned at home, either from their families or from their tutors. Female education was informal and largely limited to matters related to successfully running the household. Women from respectable families often studied classical or vernacular literature as 'a pious recreation', but all of them learned household arts. The missionaries were interested in female education and schools for girls because they thought that women needed to be brought into the fold to make conversions permanent. But, since men made the final calls, female education was ancillary. Unmarried female missionaries arrived in India in the 1840s and these women gained entry to households as teachers where they read stories, taught needlework, and attempted to bring their charges to Christ. When it became apparent that this 'zenana projects' were unproductive, the mission authorities substituted girls' schools with other endeavours. Missionary women continued to teach and their students, the Indian women from Christian families, became teachers in a number of the new girls' schools. The opening of the Hindu College in 1817 was closely followed by the founding of the Calcutta School Society to promote female education. Radha Kanta Dev, the secretary of this society, was a patron of female education and assisted in the formation of the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society in 1819. The Church Missionary Society employed Miss Mary Anne Cooke and opened thirty

[23] Forbes, pp. 33-35.

schools for 'respectable' Hindu girls. These schools enjoyed the patronage of Hindu gentlemen and were stuffed by brahmin pundits, but they failed to attract girls from higher castes. The religious instruction deterred prestigious families while pupils from lower classes or Christian families were lured to the schools by the gifts of clothing and other items.[24]

When Rassundari learned to read manuscripts and could recite the *Chaitanyabhagavat* rhythmically, one of the important schools for girls was the Hindu Balika Vidyalaya opened in 1849 in Calcutta by J. E. Drinkwater Bethune, Legal Member of the Governor-General's Council and the President of the Council of Education.[25] The school was secular. Instruction was in Bengali. The girls were transported in a carriage emblazoned with a Sanskrit verse declaring that a daughter's education was a father's religious duty. Ishwarchandra was its secretary and Bethune persuaded many prominent families of that time to endorse this experiment. [26]

This journey of women's education from self-learning at home, learning with the help of their progressive male guardians, and learning from Christian missionaries, to getting enrolled in the girls' schools, can be seen in the writings of the first generation of women who attended the schools or received formal education.

One of the first people who availed the enabling hands of the new print media to claim a space of her own from the obscurity of being an confined upper caste/class woman was Rassundari Debi, a widow of a wealthy landlord of the village Ramadiya. Her autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, first published in 1876,[27] is the oldest autobiography written in Bengali. In 1817, when she was about eight years old, her paternal uncle had taken her to a school run by a

[24] Forbes, pp. 35-39.
[25] Deb, p. 44.; Forbes, p. 39.
[26] Forbes, p. 39.
[27] *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 1*, , Gangchil, Kolkata, 2013, p. 470; according to Bharati Roy, Rassundari started studying with her son when she was twenty five years old, and, she learned to write when she was fifty. After this, in 1868, she published her autobiography *Amar Jiban*. See Bharati Roy, ed., *Nari O Paribar: Bamabodhini Patrika*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, p. 293.

European female. Ramesh Chandra Majumdar, in *Bangla Gadyer Suchana o Bharater Nari Pragati*, said that it can be gathered from Miss Adams's Report that, at early nineteenth century, there was no *pathshala* for women in Bengal, and very few women knew how to read and write. The main reasons behind this were child marriage, the system of living behind the veil, and a firmly entrenched superstition that educated women would become widows. Yet, at the same time, Rassundari would sit near the European woman who would teach in an informal Bengali medium school at the outer section of a house in a village of the Pabna district.[28] Her passion for learning was probably inscribed at this very early stage of her life and, after her marriage, against all odds, Rassundari taught herself to read by stealing moments from her household works and the responsibility of caring for twelve children.

If we can read the specificities of women's utterances into and through the objective conditions of patriarchy, then each life-story will represent something different, as even in a single text there can be a polyvalence of different perspectives. Talking about the Bengali women contemporary to her young age, Rassundari said that in women were really unfortunate at that time and were treated like animals.[29] Rassundari was a devoted Vaishnava. The wish to read the *Chaitanyabhagavat* was the driving force in her desire to learn to read. Learning to read under the confines of her *ghomta* (the drooping cover of a *sari*), against the odds of a social taboo regarding women's education which she herself stated as *'biruddha dharma'*[30] (sacrilege), she never gave in to the thoughts that the prevailing lack of women's education was because of her God's own will. Rather, whenever she got a chance to learn or to read, she interpreted that chance as the designs of a playful God. It speaks about the ethos – the structure of feeling, which is culture in the making, in the sense of a fluid and ever-changing formation, posited against a system of belief which can be called the prevailing

[28] *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 1*, pp. 479-80.
[29] Rassundari Debi, 'Amar Jiban' in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 1*, p. 155.
[30] Ibid., p. 155.

cultural ethos. The *bhakta* (devotee) Rassundari could transgress the social norms, as all her wants belonged to the God she worshipped.

Bhakti, of course, could be as patriarchal as the mainstream Brahmanism, but the freedom of action that Rassundari attained, even though only in perception, bulged in from the total submission to the *bhakti* mindset. A hidden autonomous endeavour to act on her own will marks the uniqueness of her voice. The uniqueness of her *Amar Jiban* did not lead her to a physical/architectural public place, but she joined the anonymous readership of her contemporary 'Bharatabarsha' (India). Even though she was mainly interested to learn to read for her own wish to read a religious text and to know her God, she published her work, that, too, not anonymously, unlike many other women of that time. This marks the first step of women's partial emancipation in terms of writing. It marked the woman's emergenc/exposure in the *bahir* (here understood particularly in terms of a public presence, intellectual-moral effectiveness in a predominantly male domain), from a conceptual state of 'confinement/enclosure' (*andar*) where she disavowed the prevailing notions of women's modesty, where confinement and segregation from the 'public'/'male' sphere was regarded as one important factor of ideal behaviour.

In *Amar Jiban*, there is a general sense of contempt regarding the prevailing custom of veiling of the face and the confined state of the contemporary womenfolk. This gets clear when she says, "Especially at that time, the custom was that the wife will work inside the house with her face covered by a hand-long covering (by a part of her *sari*) and will not talk to anyone. That made a good wife. At that time, there were no fine clothes like recent times, but much thicker clothes. I used to do all works wearing such cloth and cover my face by pulling a part of it up to my breasts, and would not talk to any of the men present there. I could not see anything outside, being covered by that cloth. It was as if my eyes were covered

like those of the oil-presser's bull. There was no view of anything but my own feet."[31] This locked up condition made the women shy or at least gave them an idea of shame, which was an impediment to their unrestricted movement. Therefore, comparing her twelve years old self to her twenty five years old self, Rassundari stated that initially she felt ashamed to go even in front of her husband's horse, fearing that it would see her, but later realised it as a meritless act and laughed at her concept of shame.[32] Around this time, she stopped veiling her face and head by the drooping cover of her *sari*, and started talking with the maidservants and the sisters of her husband. Running the works of her '*sangsar'* (household) effectively was put forward as the reason behind these acts.[33]

Around this time, another educated upper class Hindu woman, Soudamini Khastagiri (a.k.a. Kumari Soudamini) wrote many articles in the *Bamabodhini*. In these, we can get the example of how Victorian puritanism affected the general consciousness of the contemporary Bengali minds. It is apparent in her article "Lajja" where a reprehensible tone can be sensed about Bengali women's dressing.[34] Soudamini was married to a zamindar, became a Brahmo around 1865, and led many movements on widow remarriage and women's education in Barishal district.[35] Still, she repudiated female physical exposure and offered instead a proposal for hiding the female body in a textile enclosure. The note of revulsion in her lines expresses the direction of her thought where the *bhadramahila* must dress herself differently, behave differently, embody a distinct morality and a specific aesthetic. She must signify something other than the accustomed 'vulgarity' of female body unselfconsciously draped in a semi-transparent piece of cloth. The reality-morality of her appearance is based on the

[31] Rassundari Debi, p. 147.

[32] Ibid., pp. 162-163.
[33] Ibid., pp. 162-163.

[34] Soudamini Khastagiri, "Lajja,", *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 7 (95), BS Ashadh 1278, pp. 99-100. 'Women's Clothes', *Bamabodhini Patrika*, 8 (97), BS Bhadra 1278, pp. 148-52.

[35] Roy, p. 295.

latent social-moral assumptions which both encode and embody the aspired-to appropriate feminine 'gentility' of a certain section of the colonial gentry of Bengal. As pointed out by Himani Bannerji, this 'gentility' is viewed through the lens of social reform, exploring reform projects for women and the family in terms of the developing common sense of class, as well as of the consolidation of hegemonic assumptions.[36]

In the above-mentioned article, Soudamini connects body with class by making it clear that the female body of the propertied classes is different from that of the labouring classes. It is not to be seen directly in terms of its potential for reproduction or productive labour. The body and social reproductive activities of middle-class women are primarily viewed through the lens of ideologically class-gendered notions of 'appropriate' behaviour or decorum projected as morality. The main moral terms are *sabhyata* (civility), *shobhanata* (decorum/ propriety/decency), and *lajja* (shame/modesty). The first two concepts are applicable to both males and females of the middle classes, implying a moral unity for the 'civilized' classes as a whole, but the most morally loaded of the terms, *lajja*, governs or underlies all references to civilized or 'proper' behaviour appropriate to women only. For Soudamini, shame is an internal quality, linked with innocence. She distinguishes it from hypocrisy and 'savagery', i.e., uncivil or impolite behaviour, and sees it as an essence of the femininity of the *bhadramahila*. In 'Women's Clothes', she firmly establishes this sense of shame in the heart of male-female relations, as a way of undercutting female sexuality and of avoiding any provocation to the male sexual urge. In 'Lajja', her concern about the sexual implication of the exposed female body and the uncensored behaviour becomes explicit when she offers a 'civilising' suggestion to counteract women's current bathing practices. Sexuality permeates

[36] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', pp. 170-71.

the social atmosphere she creates where possibilities of 'indecencies' are always present. Thus, for women, everything from clothes to conversation must be ruled by *lajja*.[37]

The idea of 'civilisation' was a product of Eurpoean thought which, as Lucien Febvre has shown, started to perceive the world as both united as well as hierarchical from the 1760s. The hierarchy was defined by dividing the world into more and less civilised countries.[38] Clothing was linked to the civilizational progress and the idea of improvement. In 'Women's Clothes', Soudamini said, "In no civilized country is there a custom of this kind of clothing…Any civilized nation is against the kind of clothing in use in the present time among women [literally, "weak ones"] of our country. Indeed, it is a sign of shamelessness. Educated men [literally, those who have mastered knowledge] have been greatly agitated about it. Almost everyone wishes for another kind of civilized clothing."[39]

Kailasbasini Debi, who was married at the age of 12 and was taught in reading and writing under her husband Durgacharan Gupta[40], wrote books like *Hindu Mahilaganer Durabastha* (The Pathetic Condition of the Hindu Females), *Hindu Abalakuler Bidyabhyas O Tahar Samunnati* (Educartion of the Hindu Women and its Development) and *Bishwashobha* (Beauty of the World).[41] In her writing, we can find a point of view which was in contrast to Soudamini Khastagiri's. She gave priority to women's 'natural' role in the family and, according to her, imitating the western culture would be suitable for Indian women only if the women could maintain the traditional essence of Indian womanhood. In a section titled 'Bangadeshiya Anganaganer Swadhinata' in *Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha*, she writes:

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[37] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', pp. 175-77.

[38] Lucien Febvre, 'Civilisation: Evolution of a Word and a Group of Ideas' in Peter Burke (ed.) *A New Kind of History: From the Writings of Febvre*, trans. K. Folca, Harper & Row, New York, 1973, pp. 219-57.

[39] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', p. 179.
[40] He was the founder of the Gupta Press Panjika, still in vogue in Bengali society.
[41] Deb, *Antapurer Atmakatha*, pp. 45, 134.

"How do you want to dress the women to bring them out in public? Given the kind of clothes and ornaments the women of our country use, if they are taken to the societies dressed like that, the beauty of the meeting is enhanced hundredfold, because, with the appearance of the attractive, learned and dressed up women, the meeting takes verily the form of the court of Brihaspati (the learned teacher of all deities). Therefore, the women cannot be taken out in public, dressed up like dancing girls. However, if they are taken out, wearing clothes like the European women, that is not that bad. But, if they totally transform into ladies of the European high society, by wearing fancy English clothes, then what will the condition of the common middle class householder be?… But if both men and women go to see it, who will take care of the house? Who will cook the food? If you say that, at that time, everyone will be quite powerful because of their learning, and will be able to earn a lot of money because of that power, and everyone will get all works done by their financial power, that will be amazing!...But will everyone be so powerful? That is never possible. And even if it is, how does that matter? The people of our country don't like to stay alone like the Europeans, so they cannot behave like them. They have to live with several relatives, and their income is not like that of the Europeans. So, their women can never be as civilized as the Europeans. But, it will be good for us if it can happen that the women will both clean the floor with cow-dung and eat at the societies."[42]

Thus the colonial notion of civilization, to which only the new propertied classes aspired, with propriety, gentility, and shame as corollaries, can itself be seen as deeply censuring of female sexuality in the first place as suggested by the writings of Soudamini Khastagiri. This gives a particular twist to the custom of enclosure for females prevalent among the pre-British aristocracy based on the notion of family honour rather than individual morality. But for the late-nineteenth century gentry, to be civilized was to have a female population imbued

[42] Kailasbasini Debi, "Hindu Mahiladiger Hinabastha," *Andarer Itihas I*, pp. 51-102.

with a sense of personal shame – which was linked to the community and in a larger scenario to the nation – and indicating this shame in terms of clothing which regulated the degree of exposure of the body. The clothes conferred the status of a fetish and moral object to the female body in the new morality of the propertied classes of colonial Bengal. In the overall discourse on shame, misogyny blended with a rejection of the natural or the physical in any form. The female body and sexuality are read through the notions of nature, the primitive and the savage. In essays such as '*Sindur*' (Vermillion), all ornaments and colour decorations on the body are despised as savage and sexual, and women are portrayed as savages within 'civilization'. 'Exposure' or physicality thus provides the hinge on which the themes of 'civilization', 'savagery' and 'barbarism' turned. This contained a significant degree of social Darwinism, marking an ascendance from primitive to civilized, from the body to the mind, from nature to morality and intellect, and from the female to the male.[43]

Shame or decency, as a characteristic trait of the *bhadramahila*, reified and ideologized the everyday life of these women and their bodily functions. The *bhadramahila*, organized as a sign around the concept of shame, was thus not a person but an ideologically interpreting device for articulating middle-class women as particular gender-class ideologies and relations of their time. Thus, shame as an adornment of women both displaces the upper class woman from her body, as well as solely identifies her with it. The concept of *lajja* incorporates both a keen awareness of the body and its sexual possibilities, as well as a denial of them, infusing an element of forbiddenness and guilt within female sexuality. It subsumes all physical and social needs, functions within a sexual discourse, and encloses them in a general imperative of self-censorship, as suggested by Soudamini Khastagiri. Opinions vary as to whether as an emotion *lajja* is learned or innate, but all the writers consider it a desirable social ethic of

[43] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', p. 177.

morality and civilization rather than of denial and repression. An example of this social ethic is seen in essays on public bathing by women. Denying its long existence as a daily practice in the villages, or on ritual occasions, the writers emphasize it as a form of sexual transgression. Shame thus becomes a way of defining and institutionalizing virtue and vice through segregation and self-surveillance. Virtue is shown to be a non-physical quality and thus non-female, and also not the prerogative of those who engage in physical or menial labour. It is wholly non-productive and intellectual. This theme of segregation or conditional presence of women in the public life or particularly in front of the male gaze, draws attention to the fact that, in the agenda of moral regulation, the female body is invested in different ways in private and public spaces and in terms of the onlooker. These differences are to be expressed by clothes. A woman's clothes and presence thus possess a set of architectural and social correlates coded as *andarmahal* (inner quarters) and *bahir* (the outside/world). This socio-spatial organization is also imbued with moral imperatives coded as *griha* (home/hearth), which is a particular form of social reproduction entailing its own kind of sexual division of labour. With the proposal for social reform or change in the organization and ideology of social reproduction, in which the separate 'outer' and 'inner' domains become the notion of 'home/hearth' (the household as a mixed social enterprise of men and women), there arose the idea of women's 'emergence' and 'freedom'. The necessity and the origin of the sartorial innovations and renovations are always referred back to these notions, the fusion of the 'inner' and 'outer' social spaces, and a renovation in the sexual division of labour.[44]

This discourse and the principle at work in the designing of women's clothes are both obsessively centred on control through the obscuring of female sexuality, and the obstruction of movement of the female body unless dressed 'properly'. But as we also saw, some women

[44] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', pp. 178-9.

did not follow the prescribed norms blindly. Rassundari prioritized her *bhakti* for her God to learn to read, and used household work or running the household successfully – the 'main' role of early nineteenth century *bhadramahila* – to come out of the muteness and blindness of her *ghomta*; Kailasbasini Debi wrote against the customs of the overarching patriarchal structure and its toll on women and spoke for a middle path where, without neglecting the 'traditional' roles, women could maintain a space in the society, or, without shedding their Indianness, they could be western. So, on the one hand, the scholarly or literary articles written by women have a more stereotyped normative approach, as shown by Soudamini Khastagiri's notions regarding women's dress. On the other, the daily struggles of these women displaced them from an inactive receiving end and placed them in the heart of the discourse regarding their clothing, as shown by their autobiographical writings.

3

Between 1850 and the beginning of the World War I in 1914, we know of almost 400 literary works by Bengali women, ranging from poetry to novels and autobiographical works. As many as twenty one journals published women's writings.[45] Through these platforms, they communicated with and for each other. But all these women were still speaking from behind the veil of tradition. What they wore were, for many women of that time, still unsuitable to get out in front of anyone or in public. The next generation of women who were formally educated in schools and at a later stage in colleges, stepped out from the inner quarters. From their writings we can see how the new *bhadramahila* was getting constructed by them, simultaneously constructing their lives accordingly.

[45] Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1991, p. 11.

Female educational institutions proliferated in the second half of the nineteenth century when the government offered financial support.[46] Lord Dalhousie, the then Governor General of India (1848-1856), declared that no single change was likely to produce more important and beneficial consequences than female education. Charles Wood's (President of Board of Control) Despatch, in 1854, advocated for a new system of education which would include both sexes.[47] Even then, efforts to organize girls' schools languished until the urban professional elite joined the reformers in support of formal female education. In the last quarter of the nineteenth century, the number of educated women grew steadily. The debate then turned to what was the most suitable type of education for women and what those women would do after receiving such education. Before the century was over, women came forward themselves to articulate their ideas about female education. Some women were designing curriculum and setting up schools for girls themselves.[48] However, there was always apprehension about women's education. An article published in the *Samachar Chandrika* even said that, "There is the fear of much frivolity taking place if girls are sent to school. It is because dishonest men will rape them, without sparing them because of their tender age, if the girls come under the gaze of the lustful men, as the relationship (between men and women) is of the eater and the eaten." Nilkantha Majumdar said that education reduced women's power to reproduce sons, made them flat-chested, and made their breasts almost milkless.[49]

This journey of women's education from learning from the private Vaishnavites and Christian missionaries to enrolling to girls schools and the subsequent change of their dressing can be seen in the writings of the first generation of women who got formal education in the private sphere of their homes or attended the schools, and eventually got out

[46] Forbes, pp. 33-35.
[47] Ibid., pp. 39-40.
[48] Ibid., pp. 33-35.
[49] Deb, Antahpurer Atmakatha, p. 44.

of the house to pursue education or for other professional purposes. The wealthy Brahmo reformer Debendranath Tagore's eldest daughter Soudamini Debi (1847-1920) was among them. In *Pitrismriti*, she writes that women's education was not common in her childhood. Some Vaishnavite women studied Bengali and Sanskrit. Being able to learn to read the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata* and some books were counted as enough education. Her mother and aunts were educated in this manner. But, after her father came back from Shimla, he had appointed the same Christian missionaries for their education, who would come to teach at the inner quarters of the house of another Brahmo religious leader, Keshuvchandra Sen. After the Bethune School was established for girls in Calcutta, it was difficult to find students. So Debendranath had sent Soudamini and her sister there. Soon, other progressive families started to send their daughters to study at Bethune.[50]

One of the first successful women novelists of Bengal, Swarnakumari Debi (1855-1932) was the fourth daughter of Debendranath. After her marriage with Janakinath Ghoshal, she continued her literary practice. She edited *Bharati* for many years and established Sakhi Samiti to educate the needy and distressed women, so that they could earn a living. She was the first woman to receive the Jagattarini Gold Medal from Calcutta University.[51] She credits Debendranath for reforming the condition of women in the Tagore family:

"One by one, he stopped forever within his inner quarters many disgraceful feminine rituals prevalent for a long time all over India. He decided an age for giving the girls into marriage, even though they were not to be married in a mature age as it happens now, and created a new system of marriage… He appointed a pundit for us. After finishing the second part (of a

[50] Soudamini Devi, 'Pitrismriti', in Ahana Bishwas and Prasun Ghosh, eds., *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, , Gangchil, Kolkata, 2013, pp. 57-58.
[51] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 136.

book of Bengali grammar), we started learning Sanskrit alongside Bengali. A foreign woman started to come to the inner quarters."[52]

Swarnakumari informs us about Debendranath's distate of Bengali women's attire, and his desire to reform it: "In those days, the youngest children in our household wore clothes similar to the girls and boys of Muslim aristocratic families. After we grew up a little, we wore a new type of everyday cloth. My father looked at a large number of paintings and ordered new designs. The tailor attended him every day and so did we."[53]

Acharya Ayodhyanath Pakrashi was appointed as their teacher and Debendranath gave Keshuvchandra Sen and his family shelter around his home. So, for the first time, two unrelated male came into the inner quarters of the Tagore house.[54] This occasioned an 'improvement' in clothing appropriate to the notion of feminine civility. As several women and girls were to study with Pakrashi, the dress of the women of the inner quarters also got reformed on the pretext that it was not possible to come out in front of the unrelated male outsiders in only a *sari*. Swarnakumari writes: "My elder sister, maternal aunt and sisters-in-law used to come to the study in a kind of civil and refined outfit of a *peshawaj* [outfit of aristocratic Muslim women] and a shawl."[55] In the writings of Soudamini and Swarnakumari, we can find an example of the gradually vanishing *antahpur* being replaced by modern customs and ways of life. We can see the male reformer's involvement with women's daily lives and rituals, and a new relationship between the women and the *bahir* coming inside the *griha* as adult kin and non-kin family members and white women.[56]

[52] Swarnakumari Debi, 'Sekele Katha', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, pp. 130-131.
[53] Ibid., pp. 131-132.
[54] Ibid., p. 131.
[55] Ibid., p. 131.
[56] Bannerji, 'Fashioning a Self', p. WS-54.

Himani Bannerji has pointed out that drawing on notions such as 'containment/enclosure' (*andar*) and 'emergence/exposure' (*bahir*), these proposals regarding re-dressing women or refashioning their educational changes were attempts to negotiate trade-offs, so that 'propriety', i.e., patriarchal-class agenda as a whole, may be maintained while women obtain more room in general social terms. Swarnakumari Debi, in *Sekele Katha*, explicitly connects the attempts of this refashioning of the *bhadramahila* with education understood as both a freeing of the mind and the presence of non-kin men as teachers of women. The goal of social reform now not only consisted of women coming out of the 'inner quarters' (*andarmahal*), but of men going into the same space.[57]

From nineteenth century onwards, small girls of the elite families in Bengal mostly started to wear English frocks when going out, easers (bloomers/drawers/knickers) at home, and *saris* on special occasions.[58] In rural areas, small girls used to wear *tyana* – wrapping and tying long *gamchhas* (cheap clothes for wiping the body) around their waist like a *sari*. Women of the elite families used to wear *sari*, and at night they would wear a small dhoti *sari*, *bachkana*, as nightdress.[59] Jnanadanandini Debi (we shall discuss about her in details below), in her childhood, would wear only a *sari* like most of the Bengali women. In winter, a wrapper would be wrapped over the head and tied at the back near the neck.[60]

Men like Debendranath were the first ones to make a move which facilitated women's mobility by enabling them to go to schools or come in front of male teachers with changed sartorial representation. Both in the writings of Soudamini and her sister Swarnakumari, we are told that Debendranath was the first man to think about women's clothes in the Tagore house of Jorasanko. Soudamini said that he did not like women, of his house, wearing only

[57] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', p. 172.
[58] Jayita Das, p. 54.
[59] Ibid., p. 39.
[60] Jnanadanandini Debi, 'Amar Jibankatha', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3,* p. 76.

one fine *sari*. In *Pitrismriti*, she wrote that, even in the winter, women of her family used to wear thin clothes only. Realising the painful condition of the women in the winter, Debendranath had got made quilts of silk and *jamiyars* of shawls for them to wear. But the women of the Tagore household did not wear them as they were unaccustomed to wear warm clothes in the winter. For this purpose, Debendranath had got warm shirts made for them, so that they could wear it with the *sari* and stay warm.[61]

During the course of the nineteenth century, the concept of the ideal wife or the real *sahadharmini* was being redefined. There were modifications in the appropriate activities of a woman in different stages of her life. The appropriate arena for female action was expanded and there was a growing approval of individualism among these women. There were men who wanted more than merely 'educated wives or mothers'.

India's first Civilian Satyendranath Tagore, was among them. He was concerned about the appalling condition of Bengali women in comparison to the women of the West.[62] In a letter from London, he wrote to his wife Jnanadanandini ((1850-1941), "As long as you are not an adult, educated and developed in all spheres, we shall not enter conjugal relationship."[63] For a man of early nineteenth century, whose father was still producing progenies, this statement was not an easy one to make.[64] Satyendranath break the age old layers of tradition in Jnanadanandini, through various culture shocks.[65] The woman who used to open one eye and

[61] Jayita Das, pp. 52-53.
[62] From London, he wrote, "… The good fortune of the women is at the root of all the good fortune, all the progress, all that is noble, beautiful and praiseworthy here. When will our country be so fortunate?" See *Jnanadanandini Debi : Rachanasankalan*, edited by Parthajit Gangopadhyay, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2011, p. 212.
[63] Ibid., p. 214.
[64] In a letter of 16th November, 1863, Satyendranath wrote to Jnanadanandini about their conjugal relationship, women's appalling condition in India, and Indian customs, and asked about the name of his newborn brother, see ibid., pp. 212-213.
[65] Satyendranath arranged a meeting of his friend Manmohan Ghosh and Jnanadanandini in their bedroom inside the mosquito net, see Ibid., p. 84.

look at the sky for a little while during lunar eclipse and would lower her head in fear of scandal, in her childhood, would eventually go to England alone later in her life.[66]

Satyendranath started materialising his cherished goal of women's reform after coming back from England in 1864.[67] In Swarnakumari's words, "At that time, if the women had to move from one house to another, guards would run alongside the covered palanquins. Even then, if my mother could secure permission to bathe in the Ganga after much coaxing, the palanquin-bearers would just dip her along with the palanquin in the water."[68] It was only on the Vijaya Dashami that the women of the house had the freedom to go to the roof on the second floor.[69] Men were not allowed in the inner quarters of the house. Married men could only come to their own respective rooms for sleeping at night. Even the male servants could not enter the inner quarters of an elite household. They moved around on the ground floor and the men's quarter. They could not go to the first or the second floor. The daughters and wives of the house would not come in front of them, and would cover their heads with a long part of their *saris* if they saw them. If they needed to give them something, they would send it through the hands of the maidservants.[70] Soudamini Debi said that it was considered a matter of great shame for women to ride a car. In the Jorasanko Tagore house, it was Satyedranath who reversed all of these practices and customs. Debendranath Tagore's cousin Chandrababu, came to tell Debendranath one day, "Daughters of your house roam around on the open roof at the outer side, we can see them; we feel ashamed. Why don't you discipline them?" "The times have changed… Why would I stop them?"[71] Debendranath replied. The times were indeed changing inside and outside the Tagore house. The next generation of men wanted wives who would read with them, pray with them, and, be with them not only under the

[66] Jnanadanandini Debi, "Amar Jibankatha", p. 78.
[67] Swarnakumari Debi, p. 132.
[68] Ibid., p. 133.
[69] Chitra Deb, *Antapurer Atmakatha*, p. 23.
[70] Ibid., p. 25.
[71] Soudamini Debi, p. 60.

night's sky but in broad daylight, in the parks, or in the social parties in the houses of the British, as the modernized *sahadharminis*.

After getting to know the European society from up close, Satyendranath was worried by the lack of decency in the clothes of the Bengali women and had started writing to Jnanadanandini to ask her to mentally prepare to change her dressing habits from that time, "If your clothing has to be changed, then don't disagree. To tell the truth, it would not make any difference if our women wore no clothes from the kind of clothes they wear. One cannot go to a civilized society in such dress."[72] When for the first time Satyendranath took Jnanadanandini with him to Bombay (Mumbai), Jnanadanandini was taken inside the ship in a palanquin only. In Swarnakumari's words, "My second eldest brother is taking his wife to Bombay – crossing the sea, yet he could not make her walk out of the inner quarters to ride a car."[73] Prior to this incident, Jnanadanandini usually used to wear only a *sari*.[74] For going to Bombay, Satyendranath got her Oriental-style dresses made by ordering in a French shop. "It was so difficult to wear that he needed to help me wear it. I would not be able to wear it by myself" said Jnanadanandini.[75] In Bombay, she stayed first in the house of Manekjee Karsedjee. Her sense of shame was going away after learning to eat using spoons and forks, and going out to social gatherings in public.[76] Jnanadanandini's daughter Indira Debi Chaudhurani (1873-1960) said, "In that house, my mother was introduced to the foreign customs such as mixing with the English society and eating with forks and spoons."[77] Jnanadanandini stated, "By leaving that weird dress (oriental-style dress) I started wearing clothes like them. They wear *sari* by keeping the end on the right shoulder. Later, changing that style I started keeping the end of the *sari* on my left shoulder. I started wearing

[72] Jnanadanandini Debi, *Puratani*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2012, p. 21.
[73] Swarnakumari Debi, p. 133.
[74] Jnanadanandini Debi, "Amar Jibankatha,", p. 84.
[75] Ibid., p. 87.
[76] Ibid., p. 88.
[77] *Andarer Itihas : Narir Jabanbandi 3*, p. 504.

petticoat."[78] So the new way of wearing the *sari* was an adaptation of the Parsi manner with the addition of European adjuncts. According to Nirad C. Chaudhuri, this new fashion of wearing the *sari* was a revival of the 'Aryan' manner, which had fallen into disuse in Bengal, though it does not mean that it was not challenged by the old school in the province.[79]

Swarnakumari has described that when they returned two years after going to Bombay, then nobody in the house could ask Jnanadanadini to enter the house by riding a palanquin and the housewife came out of the car near the gate like a foreign woman. The dramatic grief of the family members for that was beyond description. The other women of the house were scared to unhesitatingly eat or interact with Jnanadanandini. But, when Satyendranath returned to the house for the second time, the restrictions were much relaxed. Swarnakumari's husband, left her with their girl child Hiranmayi at Bombay for Swarnakumari's education in 1873. When all of them returned together after a year, Satyendranath was no longer in isolation. Apparently, the atmosphere of the house had changed completely. Women's education in the house was in full flow, moving in cars was no longer a shameful act, and the use of palanquins nearly stopped. Looking back at that time when it all started, Swarnakumari states:

"It is nearly fifty years now that my second eldest brother has returned from England. In these years, his example and efforts have made a hell and heaven difference in our inner quarters… His example has influenced entire Bengal. It is no longer that new or that shameful for any elite woman of this country to come out in public. There are no more worries about decent clothes for going out in public. Now, women's education and the freedom of women have spread much… Studying seriously, behaving like a daughter in front

[78] Jnanadanandini Debi, 'Amar Jibankatha', p. 88.
[79] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, p. 64.

of the in-laws, travelling in a car, wearing clothes following the fashion of Bombay – all these are now parts of Hindu social customs."[80]

What is striking in this description of changing times is that the sole responsibility of this change in women's dressing, their education and freedom is given to the male members of the family, even though Jnanadanandini's name came up several times as well. Debendranath or Satyendranath's sartorial experiments, a combination of 'shame' and a patriarchal nationalist aesthetic, had indeed provided the context for new designs to be tried on in the confined households where women's clothes now received more attention. But, it was Jnanadanandini who was instrumental in bringing out the pathbreaking changes in women's clothing.

Jnanadanandini was only eight when she was married to Satyendranath. After her marriage, she started studying under her husband's brother Hemendranath Tagore and Ayodhyanath Pakrashi. She did not pursue further education in any school or college. Talking about the changes brought by Jnanadanandini, Prafullamayi Debi (1852-1941)[81] states:

"She (Jnanadanandini) at first, after returning from Bombay, introduced wearing *pyjama* under the *sari*, petticoat, shirt and Bombay-style *sari* within our family. Seeing this, the other people outside our family started to imitate these. None but the servants of the house, not even the outsiders like the tailor and the goldsmith, were allowed to enter the inner quarters. It was the wife of my second eldest brother-in-law who gradually broke these rules and called a photographer to get the photographs of the wife of my eldest brother-in-law, my mother-in-law and other members of the family clicked."[82]

[80] Swarnakumari Debi, pp. 133-34.
[81] She was married to Debendranath Tagore's fourth son Birendranath Tagore. Her *Amader Katha* was orally dictated while Rama Debi (daughter of Sudhindranath Tagore) wrote it down. See Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 136; *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, pp. 506-512.
[82] Prafullamayi Debi, 'Amader Katha,' in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, pp. 110-111.

Indira Debi has written in her memoir *Smritisamput*, "I have heard that when my mother, after slightly changing the way Parsi women of Bombay wear the *sari* and making it suitable for wearing for our women, issued an advertisement that she would teach anyone who would want to learn it and would come to Jorasanko."[83] Satyendranath's friend Mr. Bihari (Lal) Gupta's wife Soudamini Gupta was the first woman who came to learn it. Wearing the sari in the *brahmika* style, Rajlakshmi Sen (Maitreya) was praised by the then Governor General in the annual programme (March, 1865) of the Bethune School.[84] Bose & Company – a garment seller of Calcutta – gave an advertisement in the *Bamabodhini* about selling this kind of modest and progressive clothes for Bengali women.[85]

On 27th December of 1866, Jnanadanandini went to the assembly at the house of the Governor Lord Lawrence, as Satyendranath was unwell and had sent his wife in his place. About this day, Jnanadanandini says, "I have heard that some people had mistaken me as the Begum of Bhopal, since she was the only woman who used to come out in public at that time." After this, she went to the house of the Governor many more times.[86] What was the reaction to this incident in the contemporary society? This news was published in the periodical named *Somprakash*: "The wife of Babu Satyendranath Tagore was present, wearing our national dress. Before this, no Hindu woman had visited the house of any Government official."[87] On the other hand, seeing a wife of the family in a public place, Prasannakumar Tagore of Pathuriaghata Tagore family fled from there out of shame.[88] In 1877, a pregnant Jnanadanandini went to England by ship, with her three small children, to learn English and the English etiquettes.[89]

[83] *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, p. 499.
[84] Jayita Das, p. 62.
[85] Bhattacharya, p. 701.
[86] Jnanadanandini Debi, 'Amar Jibankatha', pp. 90, 499.
[87] *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, p. 504.
[88] Jnanadanandini Debi, 'Amar Jibankatha', pp. 90, 499.
[89] Ibid., p. 94.

Jnanadanandini is considered the creator of this new style of wearing the *sari*, which she fashioned around 1865. In the decoration of the Pratapeshwar temple of Kalna, built in 1849, there is an image of Sita wearing the *sari* tied in front to her waist. Referring to this image, Amiyakumar Bandyopadhyay denies her foundational contribution in creating the modern way of wearing the *sari*.[90] But, if we look into the descriptions of these two styles, we will be able to understand that the style of draping the *sari* in these two cases are completely different and Jnanadanandini indeed created a new form of wearing the traditional Indian-wear for the Bengali women. She contributed in making a women's society or *'mahila samaj'* by creating new dressing styles and new social practices and by supporting women's free movement outside the house, which eventually broke the sexual segregation of women. The new dressing style 'covered' the potent sexuality of the woman's body (as suggested by Soudamini Khastagiri) and made it permissible for her to walk in public places, it helped many women to claim a public identity outside the *'griha'*.

When several women and girls of the Tagore house of Jorasanko were to study under Ayodhyanath Pakrashi or when Jnanadanandini had to go to Bombay for the first time, both events occasioned an 'improvement' in clothing appropriate to the notion of feminine civility. Even though the vagaries of style and morality implicit in these reforming projects elicited ridicule from the anti-reformist male section of middle-class Hindus, the women themselves – like Swarnakumari and Jnanadanandini – approved of their father's and husband's projects. As their autobiographies suggest, they saw themselves as fit performers for 're-casting' women through further modifications of their lifestyle and attire suitable to the definition of the *bhadramahila*.

[90] Jayita Das, pp. 60-61.

Himani Bannerji points out that Debendranath Tagore's moral-sartorial dream was finally fulfilled by a woman, his daughter-in-law, Jnanandanandini Debi. These women shared with the male reformers the criteria for reform, which were framed within the colonial class discourses of 'civilization', 'improvement', and 'progress'. 'Spirituality', 'rationality', 'civility' and 'decency' were contrasted with 'savagery', 'irrationality', barbarism', 'indecency', 'physicality' and 'beastliness'.[91] The first set of qualities were the markers of the more 'developed' consciousness regarding the clothes, which were to counter the loathsome taste represented by the inferior qualities of the second set. This shows the social and anthropological connection between the concepts of civilizational progress and attire. Some women could not go beyond the patriarchal framework of this dominant discourse of decency and obscenity, which got reflected in their writings, specially the articles they wrote. But women's dressing did not quite follow mechanically the dictates of a colonial Victorian notion of modesty. They internalized the idea and interacted with that in their own way, creating new fashion statements which enabled Bengali women to come out in public more frequently and in greater numbers.

4

The notion of an appropriately reformed female subject was conceived by the educated women themselves with reference to gender, class and family relations. Appearance, in the sense of body-self presentation, was particularly important. The morality of the *bhadramahila* was to be translucent in the self-composition through clothes. Through notions of morality, of virtue and vice as connected to the body and sexuality, and by conflating respectability and virtue with asexuality or non-sexuality, some women themselves

[91] Bannerji, 'Textile Prison', pp. 173-174.

substantially inflected the sign of the *bhadramahila,* the hegemonic moral/aesthetic/erotic configuration of the women of the propertied classes in Bengal. The social was posed as asexual and therefore virtuous. The sexual and the social were seen as antithetical. This was a process and a project of profound privatization of sexuality which, as the essays demonstrate, was publicly and discursively constructed.[92]

For example, the custom of veiling the face or covering the head of the women was prevalent almost everywhere, including the Tagore house. Earlier, unlike the aged women, the young wives of the house had to move by covering their faces by a part of their *sari* pulled down up to half of an arm's length. By the joint endeavours of Satyendranath and Jnanadanandini, this old tradition of veiling was slowly changed.[93] After Jnanadanandini's efforts in inventing a modern way of draping the *sari*, and many other experiments on Bengali women's attire, women would not cover their head. Many women wore short headdresses with the new kind of clothes. The front part of this headdress was like a hat but a piece of cloth hung like a wrapper at the back. Women also started to wear turbans like the men, with *sari*. Many women wore a *pagri* (turban) or cap with a long tail while coming out in public places.[94] Dwijendralal Ray, the famous poet and dramatist, criticised this and said that *pagri* did not look good with *sari*. Though the women of the Tagore house initially wrapped an *urni* around their heads, nobody used it later. We hardly see Jnanadanandini or Kadambari wearing *urni* in the pictures. On the other hand, we can see a picture of Sushama Debi[95] wearing a hat with the *sari*.[96] Indira Debi had added a new dimension to the concepts of dressing of the Bengali

[92] Bannerji, 'Tesxtile Prison', pp. 173-174.
[93] Jayita Das, pp. 46-47.
[94] "Mahilader Bhojyo O Parichchhad," *Mahila,* Vol. 9, No. 5, December, 1903, p. 128.
[95] Sushmasundari was Hemendranath Tagore (Debendranath Tagore's third son) and Nipamoyee Debi 's daughter.
[96] Jayita Das, pp. 63-64.

women by starting to make a small covering on the head with the end of the *sari*, instead of using a *chadar*.[97]

In 1871, the Bamahitaishini Sabha had arranged a seminar on women's clothing. A description of that discussion was published in the *Bamabodhini*. In that discussion, many members of the Bamahitaishini Sabha supported the notion of Bengali women accepting the European clothes. But, as it was not possible for the Bengali women of the poor families to pay for such expensive European clothes, the idea was rejected. Rajlakshmi Sen, Soudamini Khastagiri and many others expressed similar notions regarding this. In the writings on this subject, three things were most common – they all agreed on the expensive nature of the European clothes and its unaffordability for most of the Bengali people, they all wanted something Indian (mainly the *sari*) to be the attire of the Bengali *bhadramahila*, and, they wanted the clothes to be a marker of class identity. Rajlakshmi Sen said:

"It is necessary to wear such clothes which preserve the indigenous ideas, covers the body, and makes it possible for everyone to recognize by the clothes, without asking, the Bengali women of good families, …The kind of chemise, jacket, *sari* and shoes worn now by many is good. But, in this country, many bad women also wear such clothes. So, after wearing such dresses one should use a cloth as a *chadar* covering from the head to the feet, so that others can recognise the women of the respectable families."

By 'bad women', probably Rajlakshmi Sen meant the prostitutes of this time, as, even before the housewives of Bengali elite, they started wearing the reformed clothes. So, it was natural that the educated *bhadramahila* would want to look especially different from the women who were the 'other' lacking in all the values the *bhadramahila* stood for: family, motherhood, an embodiment of 'real' shame and 'real modesty'. These elite women, by the practice of

[97] Jayita Das, p. 66.

sartorial modifications and experimentations, provided a semiology and an ideology of culture and class in a concretely embodied and engendered fashion.

Considering all the opinions , the editor of the *Bamabodhini* proposed that in home women should wear easers or *piran* (a short-sleeved tunic) and *sari*, or long *piran* and sari. But, when going out, women's attire should consist of easer, *piran*, *sari*, *chadar*, pyjama and shoes, though shoes were not mandatory. The editor had welcomed further suggestions. To this, Jnanadanandini Debi responded:

"These goals (maintaining indigenous ideas and the identities of the women of good families, etc.) can be fulfilled to some extent by the kind of dress the people of our house wear. It not only covers the body, but it is also good looking and quite suitable for both summer and winter… If seen separately, parts of this may seem similar to the clothes of various races such as the Bengalis, the Muslims, the English, but it is not a mere imitation of any of these. If these dresses are introduced among the masses of Bengal, there will be no possibility of a foreigner confusing the Bengali women as women of their own countries. In fact, even though there is not much difference between the kind of clothes women of many respectable families of Calcutta wear nowadays and the method of wearing clothes as you have described in the *Bamabodhini*, and the above mentioned dresses, the latter looks better. We wear shoes, socks, *angias* (indigenous type of undergarment), breast-clothes, shirts and easers or *ghagra*, wear the *sari* over these, and cover our heads in the mentioned manner, if we have to go outside."[98]

From this we can see another kind of 'othering', where the look of the Bengali *bhadramahila* was needed to be different from the western women's. Through the attire, a 'new' kind of

[98] Jayita Das, pp. 73-4.

women was being created. This new way of wearing the *sari* was still in vogue as late as in the twentieth century, as documented by Lila Majumder:

"In 1924, we still wore the inner-wears of her (Jnanadanandini's) times. The term 'underwear' was still not in use. Probably it would seem a little obscene to hear. Now let me tell what we would wear white going to the college. At first, there would be an easer coming down up to the knees, then a long chemise of white long-cloth from the Adam's apple in the throat to the ankles. Over and above that a petticoat of long cloth from the waist up to the heels. On the upper part, over the chemise, there would be an elbow-length blouse high up to the Adam's apple, over a short-sleeved tight bodice, and over everything, a *sari* pinned to the right shoulder in the Brahmo fashion."[99]

We can also see that the *brahmika* way of wearing the *sari* was not only about the *sari*, but it consisted of inner-wears. This made the *brahmika* style popular among the new educated women like Rajlakshmi Sen and others, as this sartorial choice facilitated them in moving freely in the so called public or male space.

Around this time, wearing a jacket with the *sari* became so popular that the wives of the wealthy farmers used to wear jacket over the *sari*. Dwijendralal Ray also noticed that this trend of wearing jackets over the sari *had* invaded the *antahpur* of rural Bengal, though few of the wives of the farmers would wear them, and proclaimed that the fashion of wearing jackets was much more common in the respected families of the cities than in the rural areas. The jackets of Saha and Mullick houses were very popular among the women. In the discussion on women's clothing, arranged by the Bamahitaishini Sabha, many women came wearing jackets.[100]

[99] Lila Majumder, *Pakdandi*, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2010, p. 165.
[100] Jayita Das, pp. 72-73.

A picture of the untold stories of women's lives can be constructed by adding up fragments found from the crowd of autobiographies and memoirs. The autobiographical texts take us through the internal conflicts and the practices of their daily personal lives. Where the essays written by the women writers suggest something that was being prescribed by them as the appropriate decorum for the *bhadramahila*, women's life stories tell us about how they lived their lives – the performance in this is of course present, but the utterances are *somewhat* different.

For example, draping a *chadar* or wearing the jacket is not something significant if we look at them as individual practices of the women of our times, but to understand these phenomenon as a significant act in the lives of these women, we need to understand the purpose or usages of these items. As women started to go out for the public gatherings, women's parties or for other professional purposes, wearing a jacket, or draping a *chadar* over the *sari* was a must for the urban women of propertied families. And, in the essays, their mention might happen because of their appropriateness or desirability, but in a memoir or autobiography the women will talk about her *chadar* or *sari* in a personal way. So, we can see the interpersonal relationship between clothing and the woman's body.

Gradually, other women also started to dress up like Jnanadanandini and move out of their houses in cars. At that time, In Calcutta, elite women, except for the Christian women, did not walk outside the houses. Soudamini has written, "It is difficult to imagine now the kind of condemnation we faced from all quarters when we started to move out of the house in cars, wearing chemises, shirts, shocks and shoes."[101] Jnanadanandini started the system of going out in the afternoon among the Bengali women. At some time, there would be a gathering in someone's house and the others would come there. Sharatkumari Chaudhurani (1861-1920), who was known as 'Lahorini' in the Tagore house, would often come to the Tagore house.

[101] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 54.

She would also come with her husband, the famous poet Akshaychandra Chaudhury, to participate in the circle of the editorial discussions of the magazine *Bharati*.[102] Many women went to Swarnakumari's place at Kashiabagan.[103] Swarnakumari went to a unique party which was arranged by the wife of the Chief Justice Jenkins. This party was hosted in a ship called Rodus, on the river Ganges. Several notable women, from the queen of Bhopal and women of the Bengali royal families to women of the respected Muslim families, were present here. The purdah was maintained in the strictest possible way so that the inner section of the Rodus could not be seen from any other ship or boat on the Ganga.[104] Pratibha Debi. (1865-1922) together with her husband Ashutosh Chowdhury, a Judge of the Calcutta High Court, also hosted parties at their house, and women from the Tagore house of Jorasanko would flock to these parties.[105]

Often invitations for *purdah*-parties would come from the Governor's house to the inner quarters of the elite houses. Such *purdah*-parties would be held on different days in different houses which had special arrangement of the *purdah*.[106] Many propertied elite houses of Calcutta like that of Sir Rajendra Nath Mukherjee hosted these *purdah*-parties.[107] So, women started to meet and talk, and created an atmosphere where ideas were exchanged. Gradually, they hosted tea parties and formed organizations.

5

[102] Even though she did not write any memoir or autobiography, she wrote articles on the contemporary women's society of Calcutta – 'Kalikatar Strisamaj,' 'Ekal O Ekaler Meye,' 'Adarer Na Anadarer' – in the magazine *Bharati*. As compositions carrying the fragrance of memory, these articles have earned the merit of autobiographical writings. See Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 137-38.
[103] Ibid., p. 55.
[104] Jayita Das, pp. 96-97.
[105] Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, p. 172.
[106] Jayita Das, p. 95.
[107] Das, p. 96.

If we shift our attention from Calcutta to rural Bengal, the *Purbakatha* of the poet Prasannamayi Debi[108] (1857-1939), who came from the *zamindar* family of a village named Haripur, is a major source. There, she describes how, in her childhood, she would often go to the office in boys' clothes to study, and how there was no system of going to the *pathshala*. They were taught household works like making arrangements for worshipping deities, cooking and serving, handicrafts.[109]

We also can get an idea about the difference in customs regarding sexual segregation between urban and rural areas. On the one hand, Prasannamayi said, "Boys and girls always play together in the villages. All people are their own – such as brothers and uncles. There is nobody in front of whom one would be ashamed." and "Every one of the village come to watch the amusement together when kites are flied."[110] On the other hand, we also get to know that "The civil women cannot go to see the Kali image at daytime. On the last day of the public festival, after all invited gentlemen are taken to other places, all women would go to see the image at the second quarter of the night. Servants, guards and captains would stay with them as bodyguards. Other men could not go there."[111] But, among all the descriptions of women in a public space, the incident regarding her mother strikes us the most. Prasannamayi writes that her mother, being a housewife, would always cover her head by a part of her *sari*, and did not speak to anyone. Once, while going across the forest to the capital at Natore, Prasannyamayi fell from her mother's lap. Still, her mother did not say anything out of shame. Later, she started crying and Prasannamayi was saved by the guards.[112] It is also interesting that, after her marriage, while staying at her father's place,

[108] Her father was the landlord of the village of Haripur and her brothers included the High Court judge Ashutosh Chowdhuri, Colonel Manmath Chowdhuri, and Pramatha Chowdhuri, the Editor of *Sabujpatra*. Her father's sisters were all learned women. Following her family custom, she got married at the age of ten. But, soon after the marriage her husband was diagnosed with insanity. So, she lived with her parents and with her daughter Priyambada who was also a famous poet just like her mother.
[109] Prasannamayi Debi, 'Purbakatha' in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 2*, pp. 208-209.
[110] Ibid., p. 210.
[111] Ibid., p. 211.
[112] Ibid., p. 213.

Prasannamayi would run around with her brothers and sisters in the inner quarters as well as at the parties held at the meeting room of the outer house. But, her father's sisters had seen a play by standing by the window at their house at Jashohar (Jessore).[113] Prasannamayi says that, after her marriage, a European lady would come to teach her English and handicrafts. With the help of the teacher, the studies might or might not have progressed, but the foreign fashion was adopted well. she did not stop short of imitating it to the fullest extent and felt quite ashamed and hesitant to remember this.[114] An eminent poet of her times, when Prasannamayi Debi went to the house of her in-laws after marriage, she was wearing 'copied clothes' (chemise, jacket) and she became an object to watch when the news of the arrival of the educated newly married wife was spread throughout the village. She said that she did not understand then that it was 'shamelessness'. She was unable to cover her face properly. As she played the concertina and stayed away often, it was spread across the village that she was a "*mem bou*" (wife like a foreign woman).[115] But, when, after the birth of her only daughter, she went to her in-laws' house, she was a full-fledged shameful housewife and a small mistress of the household.[116]

From this scattered information we get an idea about the prevailing customs regarding women's confinement, their education and how these were different for every woman according to her location in the family. Girl child, married, widow – these identities defined their mobility inside a generally progressive household. We get to know how educated women or the women who were acquiring the new skills were viewed in the rural areas where the elitist culture creating and appropriating the concept of *bhadramahila* was absent or limited to certain propertied families. Also, the model of the ideal '*sugrihini'* (the mistress of the home or home-maker) which emerges from the periodicals of this time, to which the

[113] Prasannamayi Debi, p. 229.
[114] Ibid., p. 227.
[115] Ibid., p. 231.
[116] Ibid., pp. 236-237.

concept of the *bhadramahila* is integrally connected, offers a critical insight into the changes in conceptual and actual organisation of the new social space acquired by these women. *Antahpur* – the constant habitat of women, children, domestic servants, and the nocturnal habitat of adult males – can be understood in its specificity when contrasted to *griha* (home/hearth). The modern woman was not to be a *bibi* – the caricature of the educated modernized woman, but a self-consciously fashioned figure with all the benefits of the endeavours of the reformers – education, cultural exposure, inclusion in public or civil institutions etc. Hence, in the voice of Prasannamayi, we can get a tone of regret about her acts which, according to her, made her a '*mem bou*' and she needed to learn how to behave 'properly' to suit the model of an ideal Bengali wife.

6

Sudakshina Sen (1859-1934), after her father's untimely demise, used to live with her maternal uncles in Sohagdal, until her mother took shelter in the Brahmo Samaj with Sudakshina and her other children because of the prevailing torturous tradition of *kulinism* in her family. From her memoir *Jibansmriti*, we can see how the united efforts of the Brahmos made education and public space more accessible to the women from this time, though it was not same for all of them. Sudakshina mentioned that, with the help of some elite *bhadraloks*, Adult Female School was established in Dhaka for the education of women – both married and unmarried – who had come into the fold of the Brahmo Samaj.[117] The students of this school were picked up from their homes by a school car.[118] When Sudakshina came to Kolkata, for the first time, she attended the prayer meeting of *Bharatbarshiya Brahmosamaj* (The Brahmo Samaj of India) with other men and women.[119] Now, coming back from Dhaka, Sudakshina went to Bharatashram in 1873 and lived with Keshuvchandra

[117] Sudakshina Sen, 'Jibansmriti', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 2*, p. 341.
[118] Ibid., p. 341.
[119] Ibid., p. 334.

and his family for sometimes.[120] During this period, she went to the garden party of the Government House. Remembering that day, she says that, from her childhood, she was a free spirited girl who never felt hesitant to go out in public and never stayed behind the *purdah*.[121] After her marriage with Ambikacharan Sen, Sudakshina went to the house of her in-laws at Mattagram without covering her face.[122] It can be gathered from Sudakshina's writing that Ambikacharan knew Sudakshina's family beforehand and, even before the marriage, he had gone to Sudakshina's house and stayed there at night.[123] Still, Sudakshina could study in the school only until her marriage to the educationist Ambikacharan,[124] and always regretted that she could not continue her formal studies (like going to educational institutions) after the marriage.[125]

With the spread of basic female education in many Brahmo and upper class households, the groom's family started to ask the potential bride about her education during matchmaking arrangements. They would want to hear her prose and poetry compositions from her and see her handwriting.[126] Most of the newly educated men did not want uneducated wives. They asked their in-laws to educate the girls. According to Chitra Deb, there was not much scope of women's education in Dhaka and other parts of Eastern Bengal at the latter half of the eighteen or early nineteenth century. The Eden School of Dhaka was founded much later. For the purpose of Sushila Niyogi's (1862-1943) education, her father Dinanath Sen had established it. An anonymous housewife of Burdwan district, whose husband's surname was Chattopadhyay, has written that there was no scope of education in her paternal house at Eastern Bengal and she could learn to read and write only because she was married in

[120] Sudakshina Sen, pp. 343-344.
[121] Ibid., p. 349.
[122] Ibid., p. 364.
[123] Ibid., p. 589.
[124] Ibid., p. 362.
[125] Ibid., p. 364.
[126] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 82.

Western Bengal. Her husband not only taught his wife to read and write, he brought her *Bamabodhini* and asked her to write herself. She wrote, though anonymously.[127]

Similarly, Mankumari Basu (1863-1943), who was one of the noted female poets of Bengal, wrote that there was the practice of book-reading in the inner quarters at her father's house and she went to school because of her father's wish. Mankumari explained that, at this time, seeing the other women of her family, she also wanted to compose something. She started writing when she was not more than seven years old.[128] In the house of her in-laws, there was a girls' school in the balcony of the house and a relative of good character was the teacher there.[129] One of her in-laws, Rasbihari Basu, was interested in women's education and it was because of his efforts that the clothes of women improved and the standard of education at home for women was better than in other families.[130] Mankumari's husband Bibudhashankar Basu would give examples of the eminent women writers like Prasannamayi Debi to inspire her to learn English, and motivated her to write. Mankumari said, "Following the wish of my husband, I would write a poem a day amidst thousands of household works, to gift that to him at night. This was done with much secrecy. Because, at that time, such acts were considered utterly 'shameful', 'daring' and 'irritating'. However, my husband would be much delighted by this and would read it with his friends the next morning." When she was fourteen, she gifted a poem called 'Purandarer Prati Indubala' to her husband. This was Mankumari's first published work.[131]

At first, education for girls would end with some elementary learning. But, there was a gradual demand for higher studies and formal education. On the other hand, many were suspicious about men and women receiving the same education. Keshvchandra did not want

[127] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 93-94.
[128] Mankumari Basu, 'Amar Atit Jiban', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, pp. 45-46.
[129] Ibid., p.51.
[130] Ibid., p. 52.
[131] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 52-4.

university-style education in the girls' school of the *Bharatbarshiya Ashram*.[132] He took the side of orally teaching the girls only the elementary principles of science.[133] An article titled 'Striloker Sima Atikram', written in 1907, stated that the education which helped men develop, would cause physical and mental degeneration in women, because "Men and women have their specific provinces and spheres of work."[134] The writer of 'Nari Ki Narer Samakaksha' expressed similar feelings and said that the physically weak and soft-natured woman had her place at home as a good mother, good wife and good homemaker. So, hard education similar to men's was not right for them. Because of the system of school and college education, women's weak brains were being damaged, many were dying young, being affected by incurable consumptive diseases.[135]

On the other hand, few men like Shibnath Shastri wanted arrangements to teach geometry, logic and metaphysics to women. According to him, the real capacity to think would not grow in women unless these were taught.[136] So, he taught logic and mental science verbally to his three favourite female students. One of them was Radharani Lahiri (1853-1925) who later taught in the Bethune School.[137] There was also the Banga Mahila Vidyalaya apart from the Bharatashram under the Brahmo Samaj, where Dwarakanath Ganguly would encourage a student of that school named Kadambini Bose (1861-1923) in her education. Later, she became the first South Asian female physician trained in western medicine, in 1886. Kadambini was one of the few women who, even after her marriage, continued her studies full-fledgedly.[138] Times were changing for some women, rather some women were changing

[132] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha* p. 81.
[133] Ibid., 81.
[134] G. P. M., 'Streeloker Seema Atikram', *Mahila*, Vol. 12, No. 11, June, 1907, pp. 282-284.
[135] This article was written against an article titled 'Ardhangi' where Mrs. R. S. Hosein wrote against women's confined state and women's inferior condition in society. About the writer of 'Ardhangi', it is written that the writer is Mrs. R. S. Hosein, See 'Nari Ki Narer Samakaksha', *Mahila*, Vol. 9, No. 2, September, 1903, pp. 42-52. *E Desher Nari Jatir Unnati*', and many other articles written at this time, expressed similar feelings regarding women's higher education. See 'E Desher Nari Jatir Unnati', *Mahila*, Vol. 14, No. 5, December, 1908, pp. 106-110.
[136] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 81.
[137] Ibid., p. 93.
[138] Ibid., p. 95.

the time. Kadambini had filed a defamation case against the Editor of the periodical *Banganibasi*, Mahendrachandra Pal, who tried to create scandals about Kadambini's character and called her 'a disgusting specimen of the Brahmo Samaj' and 'a whore' because she would roam around the city as a professional Doctor, and she had won the case. From the writings of Punyalata Chkraborty[139] (1889-1974), we get to know how, "She (Kadambini) would comfortably move around and work in the society outside, wearing the *saris*, shirts and shoes of the most modern fashion of the time."[140]

7

In her college life, Kadambini sat in the exam alongside Chandramukhi Basu (1860-1944), who passed the M.A. exam and remained unmarried as long as she was the Principal of the Bethune College.[141] Born in a Bengali Christian family, She was one of the first two graduates of the sub-continent and she was also one of the first two woman to use their education for independent earning. Her father Bhuvanmohan Basu was an enthusiastic supporter of women's education. All his daughters were not only highly educated, they successfully carved out for themselves a niche in the professional world – a predominantly male-dominated region at that time.[142] Chandramukhi's younger sister Bidhumukhi Basu was one of the first two female M.B. doctors of the Calcutta Medical College,[143] and the youngest Rajkumari went abroad for higher studies and later followed Chandramukhi's footsteps to

[139] Punyalata Chakraborty was the second daughter of Upendrakishore Ray Chowdhury (1863-1915) – a writer of children's literature, musician, artist, and a pioneer of Bengali printing industry. A Brahmo household fostered her literary talents. Together with her brother Sukumar Ray (1887-1933) and sister Sukhalata Rao (1886-1969), she left a permanent mark in the field of literature. *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo* and *Chhelebelar Dinguli* are her works from which we get to know about her life as well as the lives of other contemporary women who did not write about themselves. For example, as Punyalata's father was married to Dwarkanath Ganguly's daughter from his first marriage, Bidhumukhi, we get to know about Kadambini Ganguly from her writings. Kadambini never wrote anything. It is from Punyalata's writings that we can get a glimpse of the life of this enigmatic person.

[140] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 96.

[141] Ibid., p. 95, She had to cross many hurdles to become the role model for her sisters or other contemporary women. For details see Shyamali Sarkar, 'Chandramukhi Basu : Pratham Pathik', *, In the Footsteps of Chandramukhi,* Bethune College, Kolkata, 2004, pp. 45-62.

[142] Shyamali Sarkar, 'The Pathdinder : Chandramukhi Basu', *In the Footsteps of Chandramukhi*, Bethune College, Kolkata, 2004, p. 43.

[143] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 96-97.

become the Principal of the Bethune College.[144] While she was the Principal of the Bethune School, Chandramukhi had prepared a list of things and clothes needed by the students to stay at the boarding. It included eight *saris*, eight jackets, sixteen petticoats, eight chemises, eight pairs of socks, two pairs of shoes, one pair of sandals and one pair of rubber shoes etc. The winter clothes additionally included two shawls or wrappers, two flannel jackets, two flannel petticoats, two pairs of socks, etc. This was the first list indicating the kind of clothes worn by the upper class Bengali girl students.[145] Shri Shashibhushan Dasgupta questioned this list in the *Indian Mirror* in 1890: "What is to be the fate of these poor girls after they have become used to such costly habits of living? When they are married, how could they make their husbands happy, who may be, at best, men with an income of Rs. 50 a month?"[146] Shashibhushan indeed expressed the hidden anxiety of the guardians who had sent their daughters to the Bethune, being encouraged by the spread of women's education. This expressed the concern regarding the new dressing style of educated women, since wearing jackets, petticoats and shoes was still considered luxury which would make the women ineligible for making a happy married life in a family of modest income. Shashibhushan also claimed that the Christian Chandramukhi had made such mistakes in preparing this list because she did not know the culture of the Hindu *andarmahal*. Chandramukhi replied in the same newspaper that a boarding institution like the Bethune College could not possibly be managed in the style of a Hindu *Zenana*.[147] She said, "…I venture to think that the maintenance of discipline and several other considerations require that the boarders should dress not in a costly, but in a decent, respectable and lady-like manner, considering they have to appear daily in front of the male professors, teachers and visitors.[148] There was a difference

[144] Shyamali Sarkar, 'The Pathdinder : Chandramukhi Basu', p. 43.
[145] Shyamali Basu, 'Bangali Meyer Saj Badaler Pala Ebong Bethune College : Prak Swadhinata Parba', *In the Footsteps of Chandramukhi*, Bethune College, Kolkata, 2004, p. 344.
[146] Shyamali Sarkar, 'Chandramukhi Basu : Pratham Pathik', p. 52
[147] Shyamali Sarkar, 'Chandramukhi Basu : Pratham Pathik', p. 53.
[148] Shyamali Sarkar, 'Chandramukhi Basu : Pratham Pathik', p. 53-54.

between the life of Hindu girls in the *andarmahals* of the conservative and affluent Hindu families and that of the educated women. The latter was to communicate with the outside world. They would have to interact in public with many unknown men and women. Them, those girls would be able to prove themselves as persons of gentle, controlled and disciplined personality through decent clothes suitable for women. Punyalata Chakraborty has described the dress of the teachers of the Bethune school and professors of the Bethune College in the early days of these institutions. They wore white *saris* and full-sleeve close-necked shirts. A small knot was tied at the back of the head by stretching the hair tightly to the back of the head. There would be no ornament or make up, rather "the common make over was also to be kept as much devoid of beauty as possible".[149] Thus, making the educated woman respectable often meant desexualizing her body.

Education not only took women out of their secluded condition and placed them in the public domain – which was a male preserve in the previous times, it also gave them a voice and a sense of propriety. This sense of autonomous agency was a crucial element in shaping their sartorial representation as educated women would often choose to wear particular things, rejecting some prevailing practices, like wearing a *brahmika* style sari (as Rajlakshmi Sen did) or wearing fashionable saris (as in the case of Kadambini). Education helped them to decide what to wear and this was contributing to the concept of the *bhadramahila* as these women were women of the propertied elite families, for whom this concept was an aspired model to work on.

8

As Himani Bannerji said, from 1880 to 1910, the main public utility of women's education was phrased in terms of social and moral betterment. The totality of this betterment was

[149] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2018, p. 24.

constantly expressed as the welfare of the family – proper child raising, character building of the future generation of the nation and better conjugal life. These notions legitimized a non-institutional, home-based education at first among the women of urban propertied households, the households of the professionals, and that of the bureaucrats. Essays written by men or women around this time tied their arguments about women's right to education with women's obligation to perform traditional roles and serve the needs of the family.[150]

Another noteworthy woman of this time was Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919), who made her journey to England crossing the forbidden sea or *kalapani* (dark waters) to accompany her husband Debendranath Das, leaving their only girl child Tilottama in India, around 1882.[151] She was taught by her husband. In 1885, she published *Englande Bangamahila* under the pseudonym Bangamahila. It was banned in India because she boldly expressed her feelings regarding women's freedom in this travelogue.[152] While going to England, she noticed in Bombay station that none was looking at her and explained, "Had I been standing in this station, covering my face with a part of my *sari*, many people would have looked at me. But what a glory English dresses have in our country! None dares to stare, everyone is scared."[153] She noticed that the Parsi women were not locked up in cages like her sisters in Bengal and she had seen Parsi women moving around everywhere in very decent clothes.[154] To Krishnabhabini, it was not modesty just to cover the body with nice clothes. Modesty was the internal sense of decency. When this decency of the heart was reflected on the face of the woman, she was considered a modest woman by the people.[155] She said that the English women had almost no proper sense of shame.[156] But, what she loved most about England was

[150] Himani Bannerji, 'Fashioning a Self', p. WS-51.
[151] The editors of *Andarer Itihas I* think that her journey started in 1882, on the basis of the poem 'Shudhu Mama Katha' by Tilottama, daughter of Krishnabhabini Das. See Krishnabhabini Das, p. 482
[152] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 139-140.
[153] Krishnabhabini Das, p. 236.
[154] Ibid., p. 237.
[155] Ibid., p. 315.
[156] Ibid., p. 315.

that, "…I love to see these scenes more – a meeting including men and women, men and women playing together, adult women lining up and going to school. All of them are walking, playing, laughing together like brothers and sisters…the more I notice the picture of freedom on the faces of the English women, the higher the pale fatigue of the lowered faces of the subjugated Indian women rises in my heart."[157] She wrote that "The educated Bengali young men are busy in accepting degrees and searching for their own pleasures. The silent tears of the caged Bengali women are unable to attract their notice."[158] It does not get any clearer why this book was not amongst the favourite in her contemporary circle, as even though she distinguished the Indian kind of internal shame in a particular way from the western kind of external shame, the leaning was towards women's freedom and she vehemently opposed how the 'weak' Bengali men treated their women.

Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain (1880-1932) was a great supporter of female education and a critic of women's confinement prevalent in the upper/middle class families, be it among the Muslims or the Hindus. Through her writings, she spoke about the difficulties she faced in her childhood because of the *purdah* system. In her own words, "We will do whatever we need to do to become equal to men."[159] Rokeya founded the 'Nikhil Banga Muslim Mahila Samiti' or 'Anjumane Khawatine Islam' in 1916 for making the Muslims aware about the country and the nation.[160] She founded the Shakhawat Memorial Girls' School at a rented place at 13, Waliullah Lane, in 1911. This school for Muslim girls started with four Muslim girls who lived behind the *purdah* (veil) as students. Apart from the bookish learning, the value of the independence of women and freedom of women were taught here.[161] As late as in 1926 and 1928, when she bought two motor buses for

[157] Krishnabhabini Das, p. 403.
[158] Ibid., p. 402.
[159] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 45-46.
[160] This organisation became famous as 'Calcutta Mohammedan Ladies' Association.
[161] *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 4*, p. 387.

transporting the pupils of her school, Rokeya received letters from the Brother-in-Islam and many named and anonymous sources complaining about the *purdah* system not being maintained properly for the girls when the motorbuses were used for transporting students. While another group complained that the same motorbus, which was covered from all the sides and was dark, was a 'moving black hole' unfit for the health of the girls.[162]

Unlike education for the males, education for the females did not enhance prestige and/or financial standing of the family at that time. In fact, the opposite may have been true in most cases. Indian traditional norms and customs made the new mode of schooling very much difficult for women. Apart from the deeply ingrained notion of sexual segregation and, in some cases, complete seclusion – which meant that the girls had to have female teachers and study in separate institutions – the widely accepted ideal of marrying young limited a girl's school-going years.[163] There was also a notion that 'if educated, women will become widows'. This idea was preserved in the villages for a long time.[164] This problem in the villages did not go away easily. For a long time, old norms were strictly followed. But, women like Rassundari, Kailasbasini simply did not follow the dictates of the normative ideologies and started to question them. Kailasbasini did not know how to read and write till the age of 12. The result of 15 years of training in reading and writing under her husband Durgacharan made her dismiss all arguments against women's education and she asked, "Alas! Will women become widows by getting educated? Does education have a power to kill husbands that it will deprive women of their husbands?... Where is the proof that if

[162] Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, 'Abarodhbasini', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 4*, pp. 289-90.
[163] Forbes, p. 40.
[164] Bharati Roy has explained the reasons behind this Bengali saying. She stated that, in the villages, especially in the houses of the *zamindars*, women were taught to read, write and keep accounts. It was not done out of interest in female education, but to ensure that there would not be any problem in running the *zamindari* even in cases of untimely widowhood or that nobody would be able to destroy the property by cheating the uneducated women. This created the superstition that women would become widows if they became educated, see Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 42.

women are educated they will be unfaithful to their husbands and will neglect household duties?"[165]

9

So, with education, the 'modernity' of the colonisers touched upon the sphere of dressing as well. We can see from the essays and autobiographical texts that the women of the propertied classes, mostly the urban elite, of the early part of the nineteenth century were influenced by the dresses of the Victorian Age. Punyalata Chakraborty said, "The girls wore somewhat Parsi-style clothes (this way of wearing the *sari* was called '*Brahmika* fashion') over jackets with manifold frills and outer-hangings of laces like English girls of the Victorian Age. They did not pull the end of the cloth over their head, but the cloth would be pinned so that the cloth over their head could not get displaced…, some would use veils as headdress. There dress more or less maintained decency and modesty."[166] Swarnakumari informed us that, at that time, going out wearing a jacket with *sari* would make someone a laughing stock, but if a Bengali woman went out wearing gown like foreign women then none would mind.[167] Krishnabhabini also expressed similar feelings regarding the superiority of western dress in her travelogue. Many women from Brahmo and Hindu upper /middle class families wore gowns instead of *sari* or Indian traditional wears, including Manmohan Ghosh's wife, Soudamini Debi's daughter (Indumati Debi) and many others.

However, women did not discard the *sari*. More changes came in wearing the *sari*. The queen of Coochbehar, Maharani Suniti Debi (1864-1932), and her sister Maharani Sucharu Debi (1874-1967), the queen of Mayurbhanj, contributed immensely to the fashioning of the selves of the nineteenth century Bengali women. Saraladebi, in *Jibaner Jharapata*, said:

[165] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 45.
[166] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, pp. 21-22.
[167] Ibid., p. 56.

"The second evolution in the Bengali way of putting on *saris* was ushered in after the Delhi Durbar,…The Maharani of Coochbehar Suniti Debi and the Maharani of Mayurbhanj Sucharu Debi, who were also present at the Durbar, affected the new mode by wearing their *saris* in conformity with the other princely ladies. These two *maharanis* retained this new style when they returned home. It was claimed that the new style was, in any case, already in vogue in both Coochbehar and Mayurbhanj – their in-laws' places – but in their pride as Bengalis, they had forsworn this new trend till then…With the adoption of the graceful style, found very attractive by Bengali women, it progressively became universal among them, and in the process led to a uniform trend throughout India – another element of national unity."[168]

Now these ways of wearing the *sari* were acceptable to some extent as it was not western but a reformed form of Indian attire, and, thus, in accordance to the changing role of women in the politics of Indian nationalism. Swarnakumari saw Jnanadanandini's civil and elegant attire as 'an integral combination of indigenousness, decorum, and modesty'.[169] This attitude was foundational to the discourse around Bengali women's attire at the end of the nineteenth century. The attire had to be 'modern' to meet the needs of the time, but had to be free of western imitation to situate itself in indigenity.

10

When women were slowly coming out of the *purdah*, the custom of seeing the potential bride before the marriage and love marriages were gaining acceptance, mostly in the Brahmo Samaj but not limited to it. The bride and groom would meet each other, which never happened in earlier times. Earlier, in most cases, a maidservant would come and see the girl or the relatives would fix the match. But Priyanath Shastri went to see Indira Debi[170] (1863-

[168] Sarala Debi, "Jibaner Jharapata", in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 3*, p. 256.
[169] Swarnakumari Debi, p. 132.
[170] Indira Debi, 'Amar Khata', *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 3*, pp. 158-159.

1939); Pramathanath Basu took the disguise of a friend of his father to see Kamala Basu (1866-1939).[171] The marriage of Kamala Basu, daughter of the famous historian Ramesh Chandra Dutt, and the geologist, social scientist and a pioneer industrialist Pramathanath Basu was out of love.[172] She said that the first interaction with Pramathanath was hesitant, as they had not seen any other man before that.[173] Kamala Basu did not belong from a Brahmo background. Even though Rameshchandra was ostracised because of his foreign trip, he never left Hinduism.[174]

Many actions for women's welfare were being undertaken in the Brahmo society, alongside the abolition of child marriage and polygamy. The Adi Brahmo Samaj was not much different from the Hindu society. They wore the sacred thread, there was no inter-caste marriage or widow remarriage. The followers of Keshuvchandra did not like this conservatism of Debendranath, so they discarded the thread, propagated women's freedom, performed widow remarriage and inter-caste marriage. The practice of the whole family worshipping together started. In Sylhet, there were only three families of formal Brahmos and Rajlakshmi Debi (1865-?) was the first Brahmo woman to join the Brahmo temple at Sylhet. In some families, women were becoming interested to worship in public in the Brahmo temple. One day, Dwarakanath Ganguly, Durgamohan Dash, and many others came to the Bharatbarshiya Brahmo Samaj and informed that the women of their families wanted to sit outside the *purdah*. Keshuvchandra, who had himself had gone with Brahmo women to accept the invitation to a tea party in Reverend Borson's house, might not have been against it. But, before he could give his opinion, the women of one or two families came outside the *purdah* and sat. Till then, women did not join public assemblies and in most cases they sat

[171] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 70.
[172] In Kamala Basu's *Atmacharit*, many letters written by her husband have been collected. These letters clearly prove that the marriage was performed in full consent of the bride and the groom, Kamala Basu, 'Atmakatha', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 4*, p. 372.
[173] Ibid., p. 166.
[174] Ibid., pp. 164-5.

under the cover of *purdah*. At the same time, in Dhaka, women went from one place to another in horse-drawn carriages. In the city of Dhaka, when women got down from a carriage to enter a house, the servants would hold clothes on the two sides to create a *purdah*-like cover.[175] So the distribution of the new wave of women's emergence in the public or the normalcy of their public presence was not equal throughout the whole of Bengal. Some places were still sceptical about women appearing in public, while, in Calcutta, remarkable women were reaching new heights and were extremely conscious about their attire.

For example, Abala Basu (1865-1951), who had passed F.A. from the Bethune School and, even before Kadambini, went to Madras with a monthly scholarship of Rs. 20 for medical education, went to Europe with her husband Jagadishchandra Basu, and attended a social gathering of scientists wearing neatly a gold-embroidered *sari* and a light golden blouse.[176] She was associated with many works for women's welfare and thought women's education should make one capable of earning.[177] A little younger than her, Hemlata Sarkar (1868-1943) – daughter of Prasannamayi Debi and Shibnath Shastri, who married at twenty five after the completion of her studies in Bethune College and established Maharani Girls School in Darjeeling, was the first woman Commissioner of Darjeeling Municipality and the first female member of Calcutta Corporation.[178] She wore white silk sari and veil on her head, inspired by the wedding dress of the West, on her wedding with Dr. Bipinbihari Sarkar.

11

Saraladebi Chaudhurani (1872-1945), the daughter of the famous Bengali novelist Swarnakumari Debi, was part of an extraordinary family in terms of wealth, prestige and involvement in the major cultural activities of the day. She was among the second generation

[175] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, pp. 80-81.
[176] Ibid., pp. 107-08.
[177] Ibid., p. 110.
[178] Ibid., p. 144.

of women in Tagore family who went to the Bethune College and graduated with honours in English in 1890. She studied music, wrote songs, and wrote for her mother's journal. Then she did something that no women in Tagore family dared to do. She left the home and became a teacher in Maharani School in Mysore, in Kumudini Khastagir's () (later Bose) place.

The first rays of Swadeshi ideology came through her writings. As she stated in *Jibaner Jharapata*, she turned *Bharati* into a combative organ through her writings – 'Mrityucharcha,'(The Practice of Death) 'Byayamcharcha' (Physical Exercise), 'Biliti Ghushi Banam Deshi Kil' (British Punch versus Indian Nudge) etc. – to awaken the 'coward' and 'weak' Bengalis. She created a select group and indoctrinated them by making the members salute a map of India and then taking a pledge to serve the motherland. She tied a *rakhi* round their wrists, binding them to their oath of dedication and sacrifice in the cause of service to the motherland. Few years later, when Bengal was partitioned, this custom of tying the *rakhi* spread throughout Bengal under the leadership of Rabindranath Tagore.[179]. Around the end of the nineteenth century she turned a literary event into the commemoration of the legendary Bengali hero Pratapaditya. Thinking about her experience of that event, Sarala stated that even though in her life she had been intrepid enough to travel alone to many distant places away from home, the thought of presiding over a literary event, consisting of men only, in the heart of Calcutta, felt daunting.[180] Then she commemorated Udayaditya – the son of Pratapaditya. The reason behind all of this, according to Sarala, was to inform the Bengalis about a Bengali hero who laid down his life fighting the Mughals in the cause of defending Bengal's freedom.[181]

[179] Saraladebi, pp. 321-323.
[180] Ibid., pp. 323-324.
[181] Ibid., pp. 325-329.

She founded a club with a body of Bengali youths under Professor Murtaza to acquire skills in the use of a number of weapons and similar clubs sprang up in many other locations. She helped in funding and assisted many groups like the Anushilan Samiti of Dhaka[182] and Suhrid Samiti of Mymensingh.[183] She started to organise Birashtami festival for the Hindu Bengalis on the second day of the Durga Puja to pay homage to the brave and the valiant and to indoctrinate the Bengali mothers with the ideals of motherhood that produced and nurtured.[184] On this day, Saraladebi persuaded her good friend – a married daughter of the dowager Begum of Murshidabad – to distribute the prizes, which she did by extending her arm through the curtain, remaining otherwise invisible. She sat with her mother and aunts on a dias screened by a lace curtain.[185] When the Gaekwad of Baroda, on to his visit to Saraladebi's house, compared her to the goddess Kali,[186] it was because she was giving the example of divine inspiration if not divine intercession to rule in the public place, to 'lead men' in events or organizations, and to still be the respected Brahmin girl of an esteemed house. She herself never explicitly used the imagery of the goddess Kali herself. Rather, through her works and gestures, the educating mother often got represented. The reason behind this can be explained through what she said about women's political life:

"Politics is an arena where no man would be prepared to sacrifice his 'seat' in favour of a woman candidate. The men are all for themselves, and that is why starting from the All India Congress Committee to the Legislative Assemblies/Councils there are just limited reserved seats for women… There are no reserved seats for aldermen and councillors in the Municipal

[182] Saraladebi, pp. 330-331.
[183] Ibid., pp. 334-335.
[184] Ibid., pp. 335-336.
[185] Ibid., p. 336.
[186] Ibid., p. 338.

Corporation of Calcutta, and it is almost impossible for any woman to aspire to penetrate that protected bastion."[187]

She knew very well about the male concern of preserving the male domination and she used the garb of a *bhadramahila* to be in that male political domain without overcomplicating it with the image of the rampant Kali or Debi Chaudhurani of Bankimchandra, images often linked to her name. Hence she tied the *rakhi* as the sister or the mother. The sword was never officially in her own tender hands,[188] her medal became the broach to be worn in her Indian attire.[189] She wrote that, "I was also not greatly inclined to go out as many modern women are." When she was invited to deliver a talk in Sadharan Brahmo Samaj on Harrison road, she sent her written speech instead of going because she "never felt comfortable addressing a public meeting."[190] Sarala, who together with her mother and her maternal uncle Satyendranath, attended a fancy dress ball of the Bombay Presidency civilians in Poona, where Swarnakumri went as a female ascetic and Saraladebi went dressed as the goddess Saraswati. They were the only Indians present at that ball. The woman who had travelled to distant places many times all alone had to ask someone to escort her to meet Swami Vivekananda at Belur Math.[191] Even though she stated that she was not a *'devi'* (goddess) the disciples of Swami Vivekananda perceived in her,[192] she was embodying the divinity of Indian womanhood with an esteemed lineage, a perfect education and an exemplary life – both politically and personally – adding new meanings of modesty in the time of emerging Indian nationalism.

[187] Saraladebi, pp. 351.
[188] Describing the function commemorating the Bengali hero Pratapaditya, the *Bangabasi* wrote, "What a wonderful sight it was! A meeting with no speeches, no table thumping, only evocative of a past hero of Bengal, demonstration of martial arts by youths of Bengal, and their leader is just a young Bengali lass – a Brahmin lady from whose tender hands the boys received their prizes."; Saraladebi, p. 324.
[189] Saraladebi, p. 347.
[190] Ibid., p. 362.
[191] Ibid., p. 355.
[192] Ibid., p. 356.

All of these women were educated and pursued a career in writing or were engaged in social developmental activities, which was new. As I have mentioned in the beginning of this chapter, from the early nineteenth century onwards, Bengali reformers had been instrumental in numerous reform projects which facilitated women's public appearance. With the increase of women's presence in the public domain, the issue of dressing, the right conduct in public space for those 'emancipated' women, and the appropriate ways of life for them became matters of further debate. In the earlier times, male protagonists played the main roles of reformers and in most cases women's own voices were somewhat missing from the debates regarding the issues related to their bodies and familial and social status. As we can see in the discussion above, in the debate on appropriate female education for the class of the *bhadramahila* and their sartorial representation, the women of the upper/middle class urban families were very much active with their male counterparts and soon they were the main protagonists of these reform projects. This marks a change from the earlier reforms of early nineteenth century Bengal.

After the 'emergence' of these modern educated women, the sartorial representational politics and the concept of *bhadramahila* were gradually changing along with the other social and political movements. Unlike the other reform projects, these did not entail any legal change facilitated by the male reformers, but the upper/middle class women, through their lifestyle, at times created new stereotypes by breaking the prevailing norms, at times appropriated the old stereotypes, contributing overall to a slow but gradual process of reform all along the nineteenth to the early twentieth century. If we read between the lines in all these discussions of change and continuity, tradition and modernity, the dilemmas regarding adopting foreign norms or retaining local/regional/national norms of consciousness and values – educational and the sartorial – was about social identity and political subjectivity. From the 1860s onwards, regional patriotism was gradually turning into nationalism in many

parts of Bengal and was being linked to the larger politics of Indian nationalism. Women also played a significant role in this process, thanks to their newfound place in the public sphere, re-creating and re-forming meanings of shame and problematizing the prevailing notions regarding the *bhadramahila*.

12

The Age of Consent Act of 1891 has often been considered a watershed in the reformist project. As the educated influential modern men were gradually being drawn towards the emergent nationalist politics, projects of social reforms – backed by laws implemented by the colonial government – were losing their appeal. In fact, the Age of Consent Act had faced a huge resistance from the orthodox section, as Tanika Sarkar has shown, primarily because it was perceived as intrusion of the colonial state and its legal apparatus in the most private sphere of the Hindu society.[193] The question of national honour embedded in the 'tradition' might have tempered the zeal of a section of the society in reforming the traditional ways with external intervention of the colonial state. According to Partha Chatterjee, the abeyance of the women's question was not a failure of liberal thought, or was not censored from the reformer's agenda, but "nationalism had in fact resolved 'the women's question' in complete accordance with its preferred goals".[194]

But, through the discussion in this chapter, we can also suggest that, a new space was created, new institutions were established, a new generation of educated women emerged. They attended schools, meetings, and social and public gatherings and wrote vociferously about 'what women want'. These women were partners themselves in the schemes initiated by their

[193] Tanika Sarkar, "Conjugality and Hindu Nationalism: Resisting Colonial Reason and the Death of a Child-Wife", *Women and Social Reform in Modern Indi*a, Volume 1, Permanent Black, Ranikhet, 2016, pp. 385-419.

[194] Partha Chaterjee, 'The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question', in Kumkum Sangari and Suresh Vaid (eds.), *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, Kali, New Delhi, 1989, p. 237.

husbands and fathers. There were significant changes in what women could do now – often characterized as a movement from the private to the public. This premise oversimplifies the Indian context and creates a binary of *andar* or *bahir* (inside or outside) or *baddha* and *mukta* (confined or free). But the shift was neither abrupt nor general. There were still many women who briefly attended educational institutions or were released from the *purdah* to attend a mixed gathering, but returned home to traditional or customary fashions of life. But, what is significant here is how the transition from Soudamini to Saraladebi took place. Soudamini was sent to Bethune as an exemplary act to be followed by other respectable families. She saw herself as the suitable candidate of her father's educational and sartorial experiments, and glorified the contribution of the male members of her family, mentioning herself as someone belonging to the bygone days. On the other hand, Saraladebi took a job in an unknown city, married when she was 33 and participated in the nationalist politics in a way that was unheard of to most of her contemporary women.

In the 'reformed clothes', women gained more control in terms of freedom and mobility in the public domain and got involved in nationalist politics. The twists and turns were not similar for each and every woman of this time, as the notions regarding *lajja* or shame and decency were also changing. But, the newly formed national consciousness was present in those women who dealt with the 'women's question' in their own way.

During the nationalist movement, the discourse around the *bhadramahila*'s clothes tried to create an image of the modest, asexual, sanitised Bengali woman. The old system of veiled existence was no longer desirable. The interaction of men and women was an inevitable phenomenon of the 'modernised' Bengali society. But, the women needed to be sober. Krishnabhabini Das had shown *lajja* as the central quality of femininity. The notion of *lajja* was connected with civilizational progress. This is how a metanarrative of morality was constructed about women's clothes, ranging from the society of the ancient Aryans to the

modern western-influenced Bengali society.[195] The author of the article 'Mahilar Parichchhad', published in the *Antahpur* in 1308 (1901 CE)[196] said that women's clothes suitable for the modern age had also to be in tandem with Bengali 'nationhood'. Both the value judgment regarding dress and its practical similarities have been discussed. This was the main line of reasoning in the debate about Bengali women's clothes in late nineteenth and early twentieth century, as also shown by Rajlakshmi Sen's article in the *Bamabodhini*.[197]

13

Ghulam Murshid emphasises on how women were modernized by the male reformers of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century – from Rammohan Roy to Satyendranath Tagore – and what was women's reaction to modernization.[198] But we need to remember that the movement for 'liberation' of Bengali women was not a movement for complete liberation of the Bengali women from patriarchal control. Rather, the men of modern mindset, under the influence of western civilization and culture, considered the illiterate and unsophisticated women of their class unfit to share the glories and successes of the social and religious lives of their husbands. They reformed some social customs and attempted to create better wives, educated mothers and, above all, modern companions, by arranging for women's education. A change in their dress was extremely needed to bring women out of the veil, as the bare parts of the women's bodies created a sense of guilt, among the western educated elite, who saw their women through the Victorian patriarchal lens. But with education, women started raising questions about their roles and honour in the family and the society, and the subsequent changes in their dressing were shaped by their own accord. Men believing in traditionalist values opposed such changes and started criticizing women. Gradually a section

[195] Saha, p. 67.
[196] Ipid., p. 68.
[197] Ibid., pp. 70-71.
[198] See the introduction in Ghulam Murshid, *Nari Pragati: Adhunikatar Abhighate Banga Ramani,* Naya Udyog, Kolkata, 2014.

of the westernized 'progressive' Brahmo men, who had taken initiatives for women's development, had expressed their disapproval of the unorthodox, non-traditional behaviours of the 'emancipated' women.[199]

Murshid suggested that the emergence of nationalism had changed the attitude of the *bhadralok* class towards both modernisation and westernisation, because the process of modernization started to be considered as a process imposed from outside. As a result, the social reform movement, including the liberation of women, was affected. Murshid stated that this change took place, alongside the nationalist men, and among the politically active women as well. This class of women also viewed the tradition with much respect. He presented Sarala as an example of his argument. Saraladebi, a person of well-developed individuality and revolutionary mindset, who had once refused to marry a groom chosen by her parents and relatives, accepted to marry a middle-aged widower, whom she had not even seen before marriage, as she was impressed by the groom being a Punjabi Brahmin. She had also advocated in favour of Indian system of polygamy. Despite being a daughter of a monotheistic household, she had agreed to follow the rituals of idolatry in the family of her in-laws.[200] But what Murshid failed to notice is how Sarala was influenced by Swami Vivekananda and how, even after her marriage with Rambhuj Dutta Chaudhuri and adaptation of traditional Hindu ways, she was very much active in the political field of Indian nationalism. As mentioned before, she was well aware of the male concern of preserving the male domination in the political arena and she used the garb of a *bhadramahila* with her chasteness entrenched with the spirituality of Indian tradition to be in the male/political

[199] Murshid, pp. 140-144.
[200] She was the daughter of Taraknath Palit, see Murshid, p. 141-42.

domain. Finding solace in the Hindu Puranic scriptures, and deciding to marry at the age of thirty three, [201] could be both her choice and her politics.

These women not only reacted to the modernization but also themselves took forward the charge from their husbands or fathers and negotiated with the meanings of modernization. Satyendranath had inspired Jnanada to change her dressing style, but the *brahmika* style was her own invention. It was Dwarakanath Ganguly who immensely helped Kadambini to continue her studies, but practising medicine after her marriage, along with the responsibility of running the household, and dressing in a fashionable way, were her own decisions. Rokeya's husband Sayyad Sakhawat Hossain always supported her activism.[202] But it was Rokeya herself who despite all the odds established herself as a propagator of Muslim women's education and broke the norms of tradition by 'un-veiling' herself and being in the public domain. It was the socio-cultural milieu which helped Sarala's learning and facilitated her unrestricted movement in the outer domain, but it was her own active decision to transform *Bharati* into a combative machinery, to contribute in the development of female education, and – as we shall see in the next chapter – adopt *swadeshi* clothes as marker of her nationalistic politics.

Reading these women's own accounts of their lives reveals a narrative where we are able to see how women themselves took forward the reform projects, regarding women's education and appropriate behavioural and sartorial representation, which was eventually linked with the larger politics of nationalism. The reforming zeal of the 'Bengal Renaissance,' did not really put a halt to the urge for social reform including a search for the solution of the women's question. 'Reform', 'revival,' 'enlightenment' and 'nationalism' sought exclusive

[201] Saraladebi, p. 305.
[202] See the introduction in Sudakshina Ghosh ed., *Roquiah Rachana Samagra*, Viswakos, Kolkata, 2001, pp. viii-ix.

or negotiatory paths with each other in the voices of women who spoke with a difference from the vantage point of gender inhabited by the upper/middle class women.

The metanarrative often masked voices and histories that had the power to change the ways in which we thought of period, culture, and history. Negative or positive valorisations of women's active role in public domain, concern with the semiotics of femininity, furious debates on women's education – all were taken up seriously by these new class of educated women dressed in 'modernity'. The utterances in the autobiographical texts or the essays written by the contemporary upper/middle class women most certainly give a different narrative of the same history. We must remember that social reform is not specifically a male preserve, or that it is not logical to treat only the male-directed project as reform. From the middle of the nineteenth century onwards, the modern women who received the new education had established several organizations and institutions to develop their status in the family and in the society. They were now themselves reforming their dressing style. Women had continuously been a part of a discourse regarding their role in the nationalist movement. None of these activities fall within the ambit of any prescriptive or legal reform. This was a slow, gradual reform. But the existence of this variety of reform and the role of women in it must be acknowledged.

Embodying the Nation, Exercising Choice:
Women's Sartorial Politics in Early Twentieth Century Bengal

1

Identity has many aspects. Bengali Women's identity is fractured not only by class, caste and familial status, but also by how they perceive and carry themselves. As I have discussed in the first chapter, the female body is often a major locus of identity formation. How women manage their appearance became an even more important question when women's public appearance kept on increasing with the various movements for the emancipation of women. Women's attire itself became a terrain of contest among various competing ideologies, out of which evolved Bengali women's dressing sense and different forms of styles of wearing the *sari* or gown. In the making of the concept of the *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) within the discourse around shame or *lajja*, there was a cultural hegemony emerging out of the clash of two cultures, the changing meaning of the embodiment of the 'traditional' notions of shame, the appropriation and indigenization of 'foreign' notions, and the modernization of the old rural notion of '*grihalakshmi*. The process of 'modernization' brought substantial changes in the notion of shame; this in turn changed Bengali women's dressing style. This transformation was mitigated and shaped by the gradual change in female education and the subsequent presence of women in the 'public' space.

While the first generation of literate women stayed inside the inner quarters and offered only moments of resistance to the prevalent prejudices, the next generation participated in remaking the concept of the '*bhadramahila'* by creating women's societies, new social practices and new dressing styles, and by supporting women's free movement outside the house. As we looked into the first-hand accounts of these women, the nineteenth century upper/middle class Bengali women's dressing did not follow mechanically the dictates of

colonial Victorian notion of modesty. They internalized the idea of shame and interacted with that in their own way in creating new fashion statements enabling Bengali women to come out in public more frequently and in greater numbers.

With the rise of nationalism, particularly the Swadeshi movement, decency alone was no longer enough. As women were often considered the embodiment of the nation's honour, their cloth had to be modern yet national'. There was a gradual transformation in women's clothes, within the framework of 'tradition'. These transitions were not mere changes in fashion, these were the various attempts to dress the 'self' in various roles expected of women in this period of transition: sometimes the role of a decent, 'modernized' gentlewoman (*bhadramahila*); sometimes the role of a traditional yet educated housewife, whom Dipesh Chakrabarty would describe as *grihalakshmi*; sometimes the embodiment of ideal Indian womanhood. In this chapter, through women's own writings, we will be able to see that these roles were not really decided for the women by the overarching patriarchies. The 'Bengali women' of a particular class background had a role in deciding how their selves would be fashioned to address the demands of the changing times. In this chapter I will discuss how the educated 'modernised' Bengali women of the 'respected' families were now in a position where they not only actively participated and negotiated their place within the male-dominated sphere of public discourse, but also played the key role of inventing and reinventing 'tradition' and 'traditional' connotations of the terms like *sugrihini*, *grihalaskshmi* and *bhadramahila*. This chapter explores how, even after the male interest in the women's question (also a male construct) receded with the upsurge of nationalist politics, women continued their educational and sartorial reform projects – in their private life as well as in the new social space they entered – and also carved out their own place within the discourse of nationalism.

2

Nagendrabala Mustofi (1878-1906), who had learned Sanskrit, Odiya, Bengali and English all by herself, wrote numerous articles in journals like *Bamabodhini* and *Nabyabharat*,[1] presented the sentiment of pain of the Bengali women living their lives like caged birds in the essay 'Abarodhe Hinabastha' (1866). Interestingly, such words cannot be heard in her later essay 'Nari Dharma' (1900). Here, she has asked women to become real Hindu women by becoming efficient in household works, mothers of sons and ideal wives.[2] To her, female education was important but that education would be good education by the cultivation of the female virtue, normative texts and didactic lessons.[3] It is interesting to note the tone of revulsion against the reforms in her voice.[4] She stated that the new kind of education system was bringing arrogance in women's character.[5]

Prasannatara Gupta writes that, many women ruined their health for higher studies and their urge to earn was making them unsuitable to be good housewives and good mothers. "That way, women will increase the hardships of the family by producing short-lived and sick children, and thus will gradually become the reason of the destruction of the entire community."[6]

The author of an article named 'Samaje Ramanir Prakrita Sthan' expresses similar feelings regarding women's role as wife and mother, and says that women will contribute to social development by supporting the loved ones and being good wives.[7] The author suggests that the woman must be thoroughly educated, without leaving her natural softness and without acquiring the man's nature.[8] Criticising the imitation of foreign luxuries, she says, "May the decent foreign dress help us keep our modesty, and may the dutifulness of the educated

[1] Bharati Roy, p. 292.
[2] Nagendrabala Dasi, 'Nari Dharma', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 1*, p. 489.
[3] Ibid., p. 460.
[4] Ibid., p. 460.
[5] Ibid., p. 461.
[6] Srimati Prasannatara Gupta, '(Stree) Shiksha O Swadhinata' (quoted from her book *Paribarik Jiban*), *Mahila*, Vol. 9, No. 5, September, 1903, p. 137.
[7] Srimati Ka, 'Samaje Ramanir Prakrita Sthan', *Mahila*, Vol. 10, No. 2, September, 1904, p. 50.
[8] Ibid., 1904, p. 51.

foreign women be totally followed by us. May our needlessly distorted modesty not hinder our efficiency."[9]

In another article named 'Stri Shikshar Phal', the writer says that women personify Lakshmi (the goddess of fortune). They become praiseworthy by observing the right way in everything – modesty, simplicity, faithfulness to the husband, practice of learning, religious practices, and discipline of the household. That woman is ideal who has learned household works alongside receiving education, because she can perform the household tasks in an orderly manner.[10] She remarks that "Nowadays, luxury has drastically increased…Nowadays, women are adorned only in clothes and ornaments." However, she argues, that the only adornment of women is not in mere clothes and ornaments. Qualities such as righteousness, modesty, decency, lack of interest in material pleasure and luxury, selflessness, etc. are the only imperishable and priceless adornment of the women.[11] She concludes that education did not develop any other faculty but increased luxury in women.[12]

Many of these authors' definition of a modernised Bengali woman reflects a general body of ideals – that moral sentiments and feelings of benevolence could generate a harmonic society, where women would happily accept their subjection to an enlightened patriarchy, but would never give up their feminine virtues such as patience and devotion or the role of a dependent wife and of a nurturing mother within the ambit of modesty. She was supposed to be the quintessence of femininity – dedicating her life to the moral improvement of her sons, spending her time in the *antahpur*, and performing rituals for the wellbeing of her 'real workplace' – the household. Carrying the reformist tradition, most of them accept the need for female education. But it was only necessary to provide the rudimentary skills in reading

[9] Srimati Ka, p. 52.
[10] It is said to be written by a young female student, see 'Stree Shikshar Phal', *Mahila*, Vol. 10, No. 8, Phalgun, B. S. 1311/ March, 1905, p. 221.
[11] Ibid., p. 222.
[12] Ibid., p. 223.

and writing, a superficial knowledge of Puranic literature through home tuition, and training in the domestic chores would be necessary for the creation of the perfect middle class wife. This education would transform the ignorant woman into the new *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman), supportive but still dependent on the westernised man. As, women's independence would only generate vulgarity and distortion of the divine state of Indian womanhood. The transmission of values from the mother to the nation has been constantly highlighted in the writings of most of the women of this period, such as Srimati Prasannatara Gupta, or Rokeya Sakhawat Hossein. Rokeya, in 'Sugrihini', has said that it is important to be educated to be a good mother.[13] But what made Rokeya and many others like her different was that they represented a different voice in the practices of their daily lives. They used the same symbols of familial relationships and feminine virtues to counter the oppression of patriarchy. That's why Rokeya needed to maintain the *purdah* system in the motorbuses for the female students, even though she wrote vociferously against the system of veiling.

When women came out of the *purdah* and joined the public places – educational institutions, women's organizations, and the nationalist movements, their appearance was linked to the notion of what they represented first as an individual and later as a representative of the honour of her nation. But the overarching patriarchies of nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengali society could not entirely co-opt the women into their reforming endeavours and their construction of the new women. Of course women shared some of the patriarchal consciousness of their male counterparts. But, at the same time, women were speaking themselves, if not for themselves. They chose to wear what they thought would be most suitable at that changing time. I seek to locate these women's sartorial proposals within a larger problematic of mediatory and constitutive relations between the social relations and cultural forms of gender, class and nationalism.

[13] Mrs. R. S. Hossein, 'Sugrihini', *Mahila*, Vol. 9, No. 8, Phalgun 1310/8, March, 1904, p. 220.

With the rise of nationalism, decency alone was no longer enough. On the one hand, many women present in the Bamahitaishini Sabha had vehemently opposed the use of foreign dresses. Brahmo women, tried to refashion the *sari* in a 'modern' way, rather than imitating typical Western clothes such as gowns or skirts. Jnanadanandini initiated the '*Brahmika'* style of draping the *sari*, with chemise and petticoat underneath and without veiling the face. Suniti Debi and Sucharu Debi also introduced new fashions of wearing the *sari* in the Delhi Darbar. Women of the royal family of Krishnanagar wore Peshwari style of clothes.[14]

On the other, Krishnabhabini went to England wearing a gown. Swarnalata Debi[15], Swarnalata Ghosh[16] and many others wore gowns and practiced horse-riding. Indumati Debi[17], wore corset and she used to go to the club, wearing gowns, to play tennis.[18] Many Brahmo women gradually started to wear gowns and attached a drape with it to go out in public with their husbands.[19] Gurucharan Mahalanabish made gowns, boots and veils for his wife after seeing the wife of his friend Umeshchandra Mukhopadhyay in such clothes.[20] Until the time of the Swadeshi movement, many women of the Brahmo families would wear white silk *saris* in their weddings as an imitation of the western style of the white wedding gown, together with a veil with 'orange blossom' flowers attached to it. Jyotirindranath Tagore's wife Kadambari Debi used to wear tight-fitting dress, accompanying her husband to the Maidan for fresh air, riding an Arabian horse on the main road. Hemendranath Tagore's daughter Sushama Debi used to go to places riding horses, too. A dress similar to that of the

[14] Jayita Das, p. 48.
[15] The daughter of Rajnarayan Bose, Swarnalata Debi was the mother of the extremist leader Aurobindo Ghosh.
[16] She was the wife of barrister Manomohan Ghosh and one of the earliest students of the Loreto House.
[17] The grand-daughter of Debendranath. I think 1st chapter e soudaminir meye indumati bole bkichhu ekta ache already. So ekhane ki abar dear proyojon ache?
[18] Shyamali Basu, 'Bangali Meyer Saj Bodoler Pala Ebong Bethune College : Prak Swadhinata Parba', in Uttara Chakraborty and Banimanjari Das, eds., *In the Footsteps of Chandramukhi*, Bethune College, Kolkata, 2004, p. 336.
[19] Jayita Das, pp. 50-51.
[20] Shyamali Basu, p. 336.

jockey was made for this purpose specially for her.[21] Even in the early twentieth century, when Bengali women had a specific kind of dressing style available to them, some women used to wear western clothes.[22]

However, there was much opposition to the Bengali women wearing gowns and shoes in the contemporary Bengali society. In several essays published in various journals and magazines, the women who wore such clothes were being mocked at as *bibis* or *memsahibs* (foreign women). Experimentations on how to modernize the Indian clothes, especially the *sari*, were preferred to wearing 'foreign clothes. Most women chose the *Brahmika* style of *sari* with blouse-chemise-petticoat over the Western clothes.

However, right from the emergence of nationalism in Bengal, the participation of the Bengali women in different phases of the nationalist movement did not move in any fixed singular direction. We shall see below how the part played by some Bengali women in the political movements of early twentieth century – from the Movement against the Partition of Bengal to the Non Co-operation Movement – had been integral to their sartorial politics. Some other women were so engrossed in their day to day struggles that they did not play any role in the nationalist movements, yet their sartorial choices were influenced by nationalism. On the other hand, some educated modern women actively participated in revolutionary organizations, and their dresses were shaped accordingly.

4

As physical appearance is important in political-cultural representation, Indian cultural nationalism also aspired to codify the appropriate morality regarding women's life and sexuality, and projected appropriate attire for the *bhadramahila*. *Lajja* was integral to this

[21] Jayita Das, p. 51.
[22] Ibid., p. 52.

construct of nationalist femininity, and thus the sartorial project was also a typology of nationalism, its visual form. As nationalism gained momentum from the 1860s onward, there was a tension between Bengali and European women's clothes. Whereas Bengali women were seen as little less than nude as by women like Soudamini Khastagiri, European clothes were seen as 'foreign' and, therefore, 'shameful' in the nationalist context. As we have seen in the first chapter, Soudamini shows a connection between 'proper' female sexual morality and national apparel. She states that European clothes are a betrayal of national identity and advocates what is culturally appropriate femininity for the Indians. To her, it is hypocritical and artificial for Indians to wear western clothes, and by doing so, they become marginalized in both the societies. The 'old' concepts such as *sabhyata* (appropriate-ness/decorum/civility), *shobhonata* (decency) or *shalinata* (courtesy) were the moral underpinnings of the fashion design of nationalism. This 'national' and sexually moral apparel also marked out the 'good' from the 'bad' woman, and advocated total sexual repression and appropriate sartorial demarcation for widows. In 'Striloker Parichchhad' Soudamini Khastagiri said:

"Nowadays some women wear chemise [a type of long shirt with long sleeves], jacket, *sari* and shoes. That is fine, but even some bad/loose women of this country wear them. For this reason, one should use a shawl covering from head to toe, which especially hides the upper body. This will indicate a daughter of a respectable family… And one should also adopt a way of distinguishing married women from widows."[23]

Similarly, orthodox Hindus advised the women to wrap a *chadar* over the *sari* in order to maintain their dignity and modesty. An article titled 'Mahilader Bhojyo O Parichchhad'

[23] Himani Bannerji, 'Textile Prison' pp. 74-75.

suggested than an *urni* was needed over the clothes, to go to any open place, for covering the head with a part of that *urni*.[24]

So, while during the first half of the nineteenth century, the female image reflected the middle class attempt to modernise, in the second half of the century, the representation of women was embedded within a more radical nationalism which asserted the superiority of Hindu culture in revivalist terms. It mirrored the Bengali effort to build a stronger identity through a new interpretation of gender roles. Various experiments were going on with conscious effort to construct the image of the *bhadramahila* clad in decent, aesthetically appealing, nationalist dresses. The outcome was the intertwining of feminine modesty and *deshiyata* (indigenousness). This provided the required nationalist cultural authenticity which emphasized a restrained female sexuality. In this way, women's body became a 'negative signifier'through which the new indigenous patriarchy made the female body an 'enclosure of modernity'.[25]

Even when male writers were advocating a model behaviour for Indian women, often they derived their ideas from the activities of contemporary educated female role-models. Motilal Goswami Vidyavinod said that women's educational institution and workplace wa at home. He gave the example of the writer Anurupa Devi (1882-1958) who never went outside for formal education, but was taught at home, as an ideal educated woman.[26]

In an article titled 'A Few Words on Female Education', published in 1921, Anurupa Debi writes that no other words express a woman's rights more strongly than '*sahadharmini*' – co-traveller in her husband's path – and '*ardhangini*' – better half of a man. She states that a woman's education and training should be chosen in such a way so as to make her efficient in playing the roles of mothers and housewives. To her, the field of activity cannot be the same

[24] 'Mahilader Bhojyo O Parichchhad', *Mahila*, Vol. 9, No. 5, Agrahayan, 1310/December, 1903, p. 128.
[25] Saha, pp. 74-75.
[26] Sri Motilal Goswami Vidyavinod, 'Nari Pragati', *Grihasthamangal,* Vol. 5, No. 4, Srabon, 1338, p. 58.

for men and women and the syllabi should be in accordance with the difference in their physical structures and mental faculties. In the western style of exposing women to a 'manly' education, with incomplete training in duties befitting domestic life, the modern urban girl passes a few exams, and picks up fashionable taste at school from interaction with friends.[27]

The very act of writing was part of becoming the new woman that the ideal of citizen-subject demanded. Women whose writings circulated in the public sphere were often those who had indeed experienced some measure of 'companionship' with their husbands, a 'friendship' that permitted this diffusion of knowledge between the sexes. Literacy itself was part of their experience of a new-found individuality and, in the context of the families structured by the patriarchal principle of family life, this was never achieved without struggle and pain. Yet the ideology of the patriarchy drips out of every word of what many of these educated women wrote.

5

So, all women were not fighting together for the cause of female education or women's freedom. The traditional system was running parallel to the modern system. Now, by this time, Jnanadanandini had returned from Britain – crossing the sea, Swarnakumari had written books. Yet, at that time, Mohitkumari Debi's mother Priyasundari Debi had to spend her days like an exiled prisoner. Her small girl was the witness. Mohitkumari Debi, the daughter of Atindramohan Tagore of Pathuriaghata Tagore family, says, "The girls and wives nowadays practice music, move around so freely; but my mother could not go out to the verandah of her room…One day my grandmother went to the house of her maternal aunt, and my mother came out to see the courtyard at once. There was the daughter of a maidservant. She (my mother) was sitting and chatting with her, and was getting up to have another look at the

[27] Anurupa Debi, 'A Few Words on Female Education', Sutapa Bhattacharjee, ed., *Reflective Prose: Writings by Bengali Women of the Nineteenth Century*, Sahitya Academi, New Delhi, 2011, pp. 296-299.

courtyard and the well after a while. At that time, my grandmother returned. If my mother stood then, she would be visible from below. As there was no other alternative, she sat down immediately. Then she lay on the ground and rolled back inside the room."[28]

No woman in the house of her in-laws could go for bathing in the Ganga or ride horse-drawn carriages or train. Women dressed up according to the wishes of the grandfather-in-law and the husband.[29] We get a glimpse of the orthodoxy of Mohitkumari Debi's in-law's house from Gaganendranath Tagore's second daughter Purnima Debi's writing about the marriage between Prabhatkumar, the son of Mohitkumari and Priyanath Chattopadhyay, and Sunandini, the eldest daughter of Gaganendranath Tagore:

"When my father was going to offer his daughter, then the elder brother of the father-in-law of my sister, Amarendrababu (Amarendranath Chattopadhyay), came and said, 'A daughter wearing sewn clothes cannot be offered.' My father said, 'You may see that my daughter is not wearing any sewn cloth'. She was dressed up in such manner that none could realise that there was no shirt on her body."[30] When it was checked, it could be seen that the girl was wearing clothes attached by adhesives. At that time, it was against the custom and it was considered unscriptural to wear sewn clothes in any auspicious occasion.[31] Nirad C. Chaudhari has suggested that the sewn bodice for the women was taken over from the costumes of the nomadic peoples.[32] Muslim rule in India took the adoption of sewn clothes a step further. However, it was during the British rule that sewn clothes were finally incorporated in the normal Hindu dress of everyday wear.[33]

[28] Mohitkumari Debi, 'Sadhumar Katha', in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 3*, pp. 428-29.
[29] Ibid., p. 472.
[30] Ibid., p. 556.
[31] Jayita Das, p. 68.; to know in details, see Chandi Lahiri, 'Banga Ramanir Poshak', in Sudhir Chakraborty, ed., *Meyeder Kathakalpa*, Akshar Prakashani, Calcutta, p. 246.
[32] Nirad C. Chaudhuri, p. 28.
[33] Ibid., p. 29.

Even though the customs regarding dressing was reformed, Jayita Das says that it took almost 100 years for men and women to actually do away with the tradition of not wearing sewn clothes while performing religious rituals. So, they wrapped a *chadar* wearing simply a *sari* or *dhoti*, instead of wearing stitched or sewn clothes. In common middle-class houses, it almost took the same time for women to wear blouse instead of chemise. Before the advent of the twentieth century, we could hardly see old women wearing blouse. As buttons were first imported in India by the Portuguese, the orthodox brahmins avoided wearing them, and the women did not wear blouses with buttons until the beginning of the twentieth century.[34]

6

Despite the gradual increase in women's public presence from the middle of the nineteenth century, they still would not venture out of the house on feet alone in Calcutta even in the beginning of the twentieth century. Punyalata Chakraborty (1889-1974) has informed that, in her childhood, they used the palanquin more than the cars in visiting the houses of others.[35] She writes:

"Women were not allowed to go out alone or to walk on foot, everyone travelled in cars. The only difference was that those who followed the *purdah* system would cover their heads with *ghomta* and would close the windows of the car, while the modern women would keep the windows open. Even though they would not be seen driving cars to have fresh air in the Maidan, sometimes they would be visible in open Phaeton or Landau cars. Still, the public opinion in the country was not in favour of women's freedom. So, the modern women of that time would always be accompanied by some male guardian…"[36]

Even though the process of the liberation of women was continuing, when Punyalata grew up, it cannot be said that the appearance of the female body in public places or the idea of

[34] Jayita Das, p. 68.
[35] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, p. 22.
[36] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2018, p. 22.

women's freedom was well-established in public perception. Even as late as in 1902, when the electric tram was introduced in Calcutta, Punyalata and her two sisters went to travel by the tram for amusement with their father. The new tram was an object to see then, but everybody started to look at them when they saw three well-dressed young girls riding the tram.[37] Even those women who did not have their own car or did not have the capacity to spend much to hire cars would have to take the hardship of paying for hired cars to protect their 'honour', or they would not be able to go out at all. Therefore, some women had decided that they would not use cars for going to nearby places but would walk with the men of their families, so that women's coming out in public on foot could become normalized with their lead. Punylata was in this team.[38] Incidentally, forty years before this, the Brahmo housewives had once ignored the *purdah* and came out on the streets – following the wish of their reformist husbands – in gowns, *urnis* and shoes.[39]

Punyalata was the second daughter of Bidhumukhi Raychaudhuri and Upendrakishore Raychaudhuri. A Brahmo household fostered her and her siblings' literary talents.[40] All the girls of this house studied in Bethune School. 13 Cornwallis Street[41] (Bidhan Sarani), the building in which they lived, housed a series of schools – National School, Calcutta Training Academy[42] and Brahmo Balika Shikshalaya.[43] Her writings indicate that the joint participation of the boys and girls on special occasions was gradually starting in the Brahmo families of the city. She describes a 'convention of boys and girls' which was a particular day in the year when, after the prayer during the Maghotsava (a Brahmo festival), hundreds of

[37] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 31; Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 55.
[38] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, pp. 30-31
[39] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 54.
[40] Jayita Bagchi,'Smriticharon O Punyalata Chakraborty' in Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 13.
[41] This legendary house was known as '*Lahababuder bari'*, the area was known as 'Samajpara'. See Jayita Bagchi, p. 13.
[42] Recent research has proven that Rabindranath Tagore's school life started in this academy. See Jayita Bagchi, pp. 12-13.
[43] *Scripting the Nation: Bengali Women's Writing, 1870s to 1960s*, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, June, 2009, p. 74.

boys and girls would cross the roads from the nearby Brahmo Samaj temple and come to their house to enjoy a meal served on their rooftop.[44]

From her writings, we get the picture of an elite educated Brahmo household. We also get to see the contrast in the lifestyles of her 'modern'[45] maternal grandmother Kadambini Ganguly (who, according to Punyalata, was 'a person of the new era'[46]) and her paternal grand-aunt (Dwarakanath Ganguly's sister).[47] Her maternal aunt, Surama,[48] was a 'stylish' person who used to teach her and her siblings proper table manners and dressing.[49] Punyalata's mother Bidhumukhi belonged to the first generation of women who chose to wear the reformed clothes and normalized the reformed state of Bengali women's attire.[50]

The title of her reminiscence, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, suggests the beginning of a new age. Here, she views the twentieth century as a rupture from the earlier century. She has presented colourful images of the changes in women's society in Bengal that she has herself witnessed from the meeting point of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She has given an example of how the main stream of this change was slowly entering the rural life from the city, which she had heard from her mother. When Bidhumukhi had first gone to the village of her in-laws after her marriage, she had sewn a beautiful pink chemise for an 8-9 years old girl who was a close relative and who had wanted to wear a chemise after seeing her. When the girl was utterly delighted wearing that chemise, her elder brother slapped her and said, "Now you have even worn a chemise! Do you want to become a Brahmo?" When that elder brother got married after a few years, the box of her newly wed wife had "chemise, jacket, petticoat, socks and shoes." The sister who had been slapped could now challenge her brother, "Go,

[44] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, pp. 13-14.
[45] Jayita Bagchi, p. 20.
[46] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, p. 124;
[47] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, pp. 20.
[48] Surama-masi is Surama Bhattacharya who was married to Pramadaranjan Ray. The celebrated writer Lila Majumder was their daughter; see Punyalata Chakraborty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, p. 144.
[49] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, pp. 91-92.
[50] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 21.

now, beat up your wife if you dare to!" After this, it did not take long for all the women of that house to wear shirts.[51]

People's perception about the goals, methodology and nature of women's education had changed. Punyalata informs that the number of students in the lower classes of the Bethune School would exceed capacity, but not even half of those girls would reach the upper classes. It was difficult to get the girls married without a little education. So, the girls were nominally sent to the school.[52] Some exceptional girls would have broken the pattern. Punyalata had seen a wife of eighteen years to sit hesitantly with the younger girls of the lower class in the back bench. She had studied till the second part with her own efforts and learned only the English alphabets after much struggle. After a few years, she left the school for her husband's ailment, and later became a widow. But, breaking the pattern, when Punyalata met her again after 20 years, that girl had by then become a doctor after passing out from the Campbell Medical School (present day Nail Ratan Sarkar Medical College and Hospital), had gone to Britain twice to earn two diplomas, and was preparing to go to Germany.[53]

Punyalata says that teaching was the most preferred job option for the women. However, she informs that, among her contemporary students, five girls became doctors and two girls passed the law exam, one of whom had become a female Magistrate in Calcutta. Some of them had contributed remarkably also in the fields of literature, social welfare and nationalist works.[54] It is a new development that a female writer of this time mentions so many women from her friend circle, who had taken up professions apart from teaching after the end of their studies. The number of girls' schools was increasing in the city and the mofussils. There were even arrangements for teaching the aged married women in the inner quarters.[55] Thus,

[51] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 21.
[52] Ibid., p. 24.
[53] Ibid., pp. 24-25
[54] Ibid., p. 27.
[55] Ibid., p. 32.

women's public appearance was increasing. With this change, their sartorial choices were gradually becoming crucial.

Punyalata's writings tell us about the influence of nationalism on the women of the inner quarters, as well as on the emancipated womenfolk. Many native Christian girls wore gowns. Punyalata writes, "almost all of them had one Bengali name and one English 'Christian name'. Those who wanted to remain Bengalis would give primacy to their Bengali names, while those who wanted to become *memsahibs* would consider their English name more important."[56] However, the following instance clearly shows that dress was also a major part of establishing and expressing a person's identity. "A calm, *sari*-clad girl, whose name, say, is Tarubala Esther Halder, would write it as Tarubala E Halder. She had failed in the exam and left the College. After a couple of years, he had returned wearing a gown. Then her name had become Esther T Holder – and her attitude also changed to match the *memsahibs*."[57]

We also get to know about the spontaneous participation of these women in the discourse of nationalism: There were women's meetings in every locality - even those who would never come out of the house, they also flocked to join these meetings. Hundreds of *purdah*-abiding women crowded the public meetings at Samajpara and Greer park (present day Sadhona Sarkar Mahila Udyan) or the huge public meeting on the day of the Partition of Bengal, on the Upper Circular Road.[58] "Then the Swadeshi Movement started – women also devoted their lives to the movement… Many women made threads in the *charkha* in their houses, and had spun clothes out of those threads which they wore and made their near ones wear."[59] They adopted the 'coarse clothes given by the mother' in place of the British clothes of fine threads. Many women wove clothes and made handicrafts themselves and sold them, and

[56] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*., p. 26.
[57] Ibid., p. 26.
[58] Ibid., p. 33.
[59] Ibid., pp. 33-34.

donated that money for works for some patriotic cause.[60] Punyalata also supported Swadeshi and opined in favour of using 'corase' and 'not so good-looking indigenous' products in place of 'fancy foreign products' as much as possible.[61] She writes about the changes in women's clothes and tastes during the Swadeshi Movement:

"Much of our modern dresses were imitated from the British, because, before that, women's clothes in Bengal meant only a *sari*. Our shirts and shoes all came up in British fashion… Beautiful British silk, chiffon and laced *saris* and shirts of various colours were admired. After the rise of nationalism in the heart, the indigenous fashion won admiration again – the modern women started wearing again the clothes and ornaments of their grandmothers, which they did not wear because of their datedness, but which they had carefully kept as memorabilia. Many of the Christian friends whom we mocked for wearing gowns, now adopted the *sari* instead of gowns."[62]

In 1906, during the Calcutta Session of the Congress, the Nikhil Bharat Nari Sammelan (All India Women's Convention) was arranged under the leadership of the Queen of Baroda. It was held in the Bethune College. Punyalata was a volunteer in it. Women of all the communities gathered from all the provinces of India. They had diverse dresses and various languages, but all of them were Indian women. Punyalata notes, "there was a crowd of women even on the other days apart from the day earmarked for women. They no longer had the shy, scared, *ghomta*-covered demeanour. They were moving around and looking at everything confidently, half-covering their faces. Seeing it, we realized that the end of the *ghomta* and the *purdah* was imminent."[63]

[60] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*., p. 34.
[61] Ibid., pp. 138-39.
[62] Ibid., p. 34.
[63] Ibid., *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 34.

Of course, the situation was not the same everywhere. After her marriage with Arunnath Chakraborty, a Deputy Magistrate in the Bihar Civil Service cadre, in 1908, much of Punyalata's life was spent outside Bengal.[64] Punyalata informs that a woman like her – not veiled by the *purdah*, college-educated, a Brahmo – was 'a weird thing' or a *mem* (foreign woman) to the women of Bihar, as *purdah* was rigidly maintained there and superstitions were rampant among the women.[65] When Punyalata returned to Calcutta from Bihar - the 'land of *purdah*', she could feel a free and lively atmosphere among the womenfolk of this place:

"Women now move freely without covering their heads. Almost all girls study at least till 14-15 years of age; the cultivation of music and fine arts has increased among them. Higher education is consistently spreading. Two more women's colleges have come up in Kolkata in these ten years… With the increasing number of educated women, mostly women were taking up the teaching responsibilities in the educational institutions for women. They were also coming forward for various other activities for women's welfare."[66]

Though many women had to spend their lives under the veil even after Punyalata's time and the impact of this freedom of women did not spread everywhere equally, still it cannot be denied that 'traditional' and 'modern' women of various social and familial statuses were associated with the political sphere of the Indian freedom movement from this time onwards. This makes the binary of modernism and traditionalism seem oversimplified.

Right from the start of the nationalist movement, some exceptional women were associated with it. For instance, there were two Bengali women among the earliest Indian women to join the National Congress after its foundation in 1885 – Swarnakumari Debi and Kadambini

[64] Jayita Bagchi, p. 14.
[65] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, pp. 37-41.
[66] Ibid., p. 49.

Ganguly.[67] However, we can notice an unprecedented change in the number and degree of women's participation in various movements and social and political events from Punyalata's time. In the Calcutta Session of the Congress in 1917, Punyalata heard the lecture of Sarojini Naidu (1879-1949), for the first time. Punyalata said that there was no sign of bengali-ness in her appearance.[68] The new educated Bengali women of that time wore the *sari* either in the Bangla style or in the *Brahmika* style introduced by Jnanadanandini. But Sarojini wore the *sari* in the Deccani manner. The Bengali women of that time mostly wore white clothes.[69] But, in the clothes of Sarojini, a resident of the Deccan, "the magnificence of beautiful colours could be seen. All the folds of the cloth would flawlessly rise, encircling her body. It would seem as if the cloth was polished by someone on her body." Her mother, poet Baradasundari Debi, would wear Deccani clothes but would cover her head with the *ghomta.*[70]

Reformed clothes and new modes of education were part of Bengali and Indian civilization and its culture now. The imitation of modern ways of dressing was considered harmful only when Bengali women shed their bengaliness in order to be 'modern'. We can see from Punyalata's writing that women also started to understand entire India, not just Bengal, by the word '*desh*' (country) in her time. She writes, "When I was a student, the British style was noticeable prominently among the fellow Christian girls. Now all of them became women of this country in their names and indigenous clothes."[71] In the new post-Swadeshi phase of the nationalist movement, "As a result of the generation of a sense of unity among all the women who interacted with the women of different provinces of their own country, they adopted all the elements they found beautiful and convenient in the dressing style of the women of

[67] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 51.
[68] Ibid., p. 51.
[69] Probably, the white *sari* was quite popular among the women of Bengal at that time. The wife of Krishnakumar Mitra always used to wear white *saris*. See Shanta Debi, *Purvasmriti*, Thima, Kolkata, 2014, pp. 59, 62.
[70] Ibid., pp. 62-63.
[71] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 56.

various provinces. This created a 'national' effect in their shirts and shoes, the style of wearing the *sari* or dressing the hair. Even many of those who were much fond of British fashion now showed the 'latest fashion' of 'Indian style' by wearing a *tip*[72] and hanging a *tikli*[73] on their foreheads where artificial 'arch-brows' were drawn, hanging the *jhumko*[74] on their ears covered by 'bob-cut' hair, or setting a comb or a thorn in their British top-knot."[75] Thus women were propagating modernization of their selves but not at the cost of losing their Indianness, retaining the *deshiyata* in their dressing and appearance.

7

All the things whose lack was felt in Punyalata's student life – libraries, laboratories, facilities for sports or physical exercise – were now becoming available. Even co-education started in the University and in some colleges. Several women joined the Swadeshi Movement in the first decade of the twentieth century, the Non Co-operation Movement in the end of the second decade and the Satyagraha at the end of the third decade. Women started filling up the vacant places when male leaders were imprisoned one after another, ignoring the fear of the police's *lathi* or of molestation. Women were carving out their own space in the nationalist movement, sometimes on their own terms. Tanika Sarkar has shown that Gandhi did not want women to take explicit roles in the Non Co-operation Movement. Women ignored his dictum and created an open, explicit and remarkable place for them in both the movement and the Congress. In this history, Jyotirmoyee Ganguly (1889-1945), daughter of Kadambini, was an important figure.[76] She remained unmarried and took up teaching jobs at the Bethune School, the Ravenshaw College (Cuttack), the Jalandhar Kanya

[72] A decorative mark/dot or jewel worn on the middle of the forehead by Indian women.
[73] This Bengali jewellery is used on the parting of women's hair. This forehead ornament is usually worn in occasions like a wedding and usually considered an important adornment of a Bengali bride's wedding attire.
[74] Heavy, hanging earrings.
[75] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, p. 57.
[76] See the introduction by Tanika Sarkar in *Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyayer Rachana Samkalan*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2007, pp. 8-9.

Mahavidyalaya and the Buddhist Girls College (Colombo). But she had returned from Colombo to Bengal to join the Congress. Incidentally, her father Dwarakanath was a great advocate of including women as members in the Congress. His movement was successful when, in 1890, Kadambini attended the Bombay Session as the leader of the team of the female members and delivered a speech. In 1920, Jyotirmoyee came to Calcutta to found a female volunteer corps for the session of Congress.[77] During the Civil Disobedience Movement, she was the Vice President of the Nari Satyagraha Samiti and had organized women's picketing in front of the shops selling foreign clothes at Burrabazar, with Urmila Debi.[78]

Regarding sartorial choices, we must remember that most of the early advocates of women's freddom, irrespective of their gender, used to wear foreign clothes neither because of any fondness for such dress nor because they considered the foreign clothes to be an inseparable part of their education and freedom. Rather, they adopted foreign clothes as an external expression or a 'symbol' of their ideology. Many women would consider the *sari* as decent, but would come out wearing foreign clothes because they would not be able to protect their modesty wearing the *sari*. Jyotirmoyee writes, even in 1330 B.S. (1923 CE), "Those of us who do not wear gown, but wear blouse and shoes alongside the *sari*, can testify about the pathetic experience of moving on the streets with our compatriot men."[79] She said that it could be dangerous if women simply and transparently interact in their work place with the Bengali men who are still in a subhuman stage. So, women need to be aggressive with them.[80] "Coming too close to the girl walking on the street, slightly touching her, blowing the smoke of the pipe on her face when she travels by the tram, forcing her gaze from some other

[77] Tanika Sarkar, 'Introduction', in *Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyayer Rachana Samkalan*, p. 8.
[78] Ibid., p. 9.
[79] 'Gown-Sari', in *Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyayer Rachana Samkalan*, p. 59.
[80] Ibid., p. 59

direction towards him by shouting obnoxiously, showing disrespect to her by various gestures and attitude – these are seen in the behaviour of many notorious young Bengali men."[81]

In colonial times, the city was not used to witnessing upper/ middle class Bengali women on streets, unveiled and open to the scrutiny of public gaze. So, claiming this space, even partially, was not easy for a woman at that time. The different spaces in the city — its streets, markets and the public domains of education and work, constituted a male preserve which women were entering. The educated outgoing *bhadramahila* transformed herself in her dress, appearance and behavior and made her foray into professions entirely dominated by men. Therefore, she negotiated her space in the dominant patriarchal structure of the city through the constant process of contestations and compliance. Even after the advent of the twentieth century, some of the new Bengali women dressed in foreign clothes to foray into places that were entirely dominated by men – the public domain of urban city space. The western attire helped them cope up with rampant sexual threats coming from their own men. It reminds us the words of Krishnabhabini about wearing gown. Wearing foreign clothes was a part of women negotiating their space into the public. Thus, Jyotirmoyee was not mimicking conventional nationalism. Even though she participated in picketing against the foreign clothes, she explained the reasons for Bengali women to choose western dress. Upon closer reading, it tells us a different story, where women's sartorial experimentations or representational choices are replete with struggles and unresolved attempts at compromise regarding the content of their education or their role in the society.

During the Non Co-operation Movement, the popularity of *khadi* was also a result of treating sartorial choices as a symbol of a particular ideology. Uma Debi (1892-1978), the eldest daughter of Suhasini Debi and Abanindranath Tagore, informs that, during the time of the Swadeshi, the *charkha* entered even the rooms of the Jorasanko Tagore family. Loom was

[81] 'Gown-Sari', in *Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyayer Rachana Samkalan*, p. 59.

brought from Pabna and Jessore. All the women spun threads. Many designer *saris* and *dhotis* were woven in the loom.[82] Thus, a process of nationalization of women's sartorial choices was going on. It can be seen also in the dressing of Pratima Debi (1863-1969), the daughter of Binayini Debi and Snehendrabhushan Chattopadhyay, who had become the first widow to be married in the Tagore family when she married Rathindranath, the eldest son of Rabindranath, in 1910, after the death of her first husband.[83]

Pratima remembers how the women of the Tagore family used to wear different kinds of dresses on different occasions. They would wear black-bordered *sari* dyed in golden colour on the Vasanta Panchami (Saraswati Puja) and light *muslins* on the Dolpurnima (Holi).[84] Amita Sen[85] (1895-1941) writes about her dressing, "How decent was that traditional indigenous dress! It was untouched by artificiality. She used to wear shirts of nice cuts with indigenous *saris* of various colours. Her ornaments were of the older designs."[86] Amita also reports about her own experience that, during the Swadeshi, the older fashion of Jaipuri *mina* designs and the old *dhakai*, *baluchari* and *cheli* returned as favourite choices of the women of the house.[87]

However, the difference between Calcutta and other areas still remained. Shanta Debi (1893-1984), the elder daughter of Manorama Debi and the eminent journalist Ramananda Chattopadhyay (who edited the *Prabasi*), had to live behind the *purdah*, when her family stayed in Allahabad, from the age of 12. Ramananda arranged for her education in the house.[88] Despite staying at Allahabad, her family had participated in meetings, marches, hunger strikes, *rakhibandhan* and all such activities during the Partition of Bengal. Her younger sister Sita Debi could go to the marches wearing *pyjama* and long *kurta*. The slightly

[82] Uma Debi, *Babar Katha*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 2010, p. 27.
[83] Pratima Debi, *Smritichitra*, *Rabindranath O Anyanya*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, June 2016, p. 47.
[84] Ibid., pp. 20-21.
[85] She was the daughter of Kshitimohan Sen and Kiranbala Sen, and a resident of the Shantiniketan ashram.
[86] Amita Sen, *Ananda Sarbakaje*, Tagore Research Institute, Kolkata, June 2017, p. 121.
[87] Pratima Debi, p. 42.
[88] Ibid., p. 23.

older Shanta – who started to wear the *sari* – was not allowed to go, as according to her mother, she looked like a grown up.[89] But, when Ramananda became a delegate from Allahabad in the Kashi Congress of 1905, Shanta went with him, wearing a good *sari* of her mother with the help of a Brahmo woman. In this session, she witnessed women like the newly wed Saraladebi, Hemantakumari Chaudhuri and Sudakshina Debi who delivered speeches while holding her son on her lap.[90]

But, the condition of Shanta Debi's paternal house at Pathakpara in Bankura shows that the puritan *purdah* system was still continuing in the mofussils and in rural Bengal. Shanta Debi had seen in her childhood that the daughter-in-law of her father's eldest brother would pull down her *ghomta* up to her throat if her husband walked in front of her at day time, but would uncover her head and talk to him in her own room at night.[91] Shanta, coming from outside Bengal, could not mix well with the orthodox Bengali cousins who lived at Pathakpara. The fashion of girls tying their hair with ribbons did not enter Bankura yet. Interestingly, Shanta says, "Even we did not learn that fashion as we stayed outside Bengal. When I was ten or eleven, a Brahmo friend of my mother had brought me a ribbon of yellow silk from Kolkata."[92] The new fashions were yet to spread beyond Calcutta to the other towns or to rural Bengal. Girls in Bankura would still go to the ghats around big ponds to bathe. Small girls did not wear *sari* or frock, but wore *tyana* or *lungi*.[93]

After returning to Samajpara in Kolkata, Shanta Debi found the dress of the part-time maidservants – who wore a *sari* with just one twist over the bare body – weird, because "At Allahabad, even the poorest maidservant would wear long *saris* with two layers of fold, and

[89] Pratima Debi, 2014, p. 37.
[90] Ibid., 2014, pp. 27-28.
[91] Shanta Debi, pp. 4, 6, 14,
[92] Ibid., p. 18.
[93] Ibid., p. 19.

would have shirts or *angiyas* on their bodies."[94] The school life of Shanta and Sita started after coming to Samajpara, in the Bethune School.[95] The students of the Bethune College wore small and medium length frocks and *saris*. Nobody had a bag then. Even the older girls would go to the college, with their long hair left free after bath. They would not be scolded for not knotting or braiding their hair. One or two girls would wear black ribbons on the head.[96] Shanta Debi's reminiscence shows that the antagonism between the style of dressing initiated by Chandramukhi Bose, the first Principal of the Bethune College (see chapter one), and the dressing style prevalent among the students of general households was still existent even after 20-25 years. Shanta has noticed much conflict regarding the dress of the girls of the Bethune School and College.[97] She informs that there was no uniform at that time. Girls would wear various kinds of clothes while going to school. Shanta would often wear *sari* made in mills to school. Some girls would always wear *saris* made in loom (*tant*). Most girls would wear white *saris*.[98] However, two girls from the house of Reverend Kalicharan Bandyopadhyaya would dress differently – "One girl had a hair-cut like foreign women and wore frocks, the other knotted her hair, wore an anklet and was dressed in *sari.*"[99] Two small girls from the house of a famous gentleman had worn just a *sari* over a blouse on the day of their admission. Then, the female teachers had told them to wear petticoat with the *sari*.[100] This shows that wearing shirts, blouses and petticoats alongside the *sari* was still not very common among the women who went to school. The daughters of Sir Rajendra wore *saris*, but used foreign cosmetics.[101] Mary Banerjee, a Bengali girl four batches senior to Shanta

[94] Shanta Debi, p. 41.
[95] Ibid., p. 43.
[96] Ibid., p. 42.
[97] Shyamali Basu, pp. 344-345.
[98] Shanta Debi, p. 47.
[99] Ibid., pp. 47-48.
[100] Ibid., p. 48.
[101] Ibid., p. 46.

Debi at the Bethune School, would dress up like foreign women. Again, in the College, some completely Bengali women wearing *sari* would also behave like foreign women.[102]

The female teachers at the Bethune School, who taught mostly in the lower classes, would wear white long-sleeve shirts and white *saris.* "Even among them, Nagendidi who taught needle-work, would be well-dressed and decked up in short-sleeve lacy clothes."[103] When Jyotirmoyee Ganguly taught English to Shanta's batch in the Matric class at the Bethune School, her dress was much different and bold in comparison to other female teachers. She was the first to break the dress-code by wearing *dure*, *choukhupi* and many other varieties of clolourful *saris*. She would even be scolded by her mother, Kadambini Ganguly, for wearing shirts with broad neckline.[104] Shanta Debi informs that Prasannamayi Debi and her daughter Priyambada Debi[105] (1871-1935) would be dressed up in white in the Convention of the Bethune College.[106] A Christian teacher used to tie up a separate piece of cloth with a broach attached to the shoulder over skirt and blouse. When Shanta Debi appeared for the matriculation examination, she noticed a girl of a famous Bengali family to appear in the exam in such dress.[107]

Thus, the girls who received school and college education started their public life amidst a chaotic variety and differences in clothes. There was no complete consensus about how to dress till the 1940s. The modern clothes worn by Brahmo and Christian women, like chemise and jacket, took a long time to be accepted by girls coming from conservative social background. There was no uniformity in dressing even among the Brahmo and Christian girls who adopted modern clothes. The variety of clothes had of course been reduced with the

[102] Shanta Debi, p. 66.
[103] Ibid., p. 44.
[104] Ibid., p. 44.
[105] Ibid., p. 163.
[106] Ibid., p. 46.
[107] Ibid., p. 48.

expansion of the nationalist movement in the later years, but the difference in styles of women's clothing continued for a long time.

Alongside the earlier yardsticks of decency, civility and propriety, a new word had entered the world of women's dressing – 'fashion'. The sartorial choices of women show a gradual 'fashion-consciousness' from this period onwards. Two Brahmo women would sell *saris* from house to house. Some cloth-merchants would come to the boarding of the Bethune College, too. One of them, Nadir Shah, used to joke with the girls. He would throw good clothes on the bodies of the fair-skinned girls and say, "I can't even describe how beautiful you will look in this." Gurdians would sometimes complain when some girls would buy as many clothes as they wished in extremely high price.[108] Even a few years back or even in the villages of Bengal in this time, it would be a rare scene that young unmarried women of respected or elite families would come in front of a man like Nadir, and buy clothes from him directly.

Her mother would always wear clothes made in indigenous mills, because her husband was in favour of Swadeshi. Shanta's childhood memories of her mother's formal *saris* include a sky blue Parsi *sari* and a purple merino *sari*. Shanta's maternal grandfather had gifted Manorama a *choukhupi sari* of Chandrakona.[109] Therefore, still the old traditional *saris* of Bengal were valued, but *saris* from other provinces – such as the Parsi *sari* – had also entered the wardrobe of upper and middle class Bengali women. As Swadeshi silk clothes were not available in much variety initially, Ramananda would bring *garad* and *tussar saris* for his daughters. Hemlata Sarkar, an aunt of Shanta Debi, would be offended if they went out in

[108] Shanta Debi, p. 68.
[109] Ibid., pp. 6, 159.

cotton clothes and say that, "people will think that you are *ayas* (matrons)." She always wore *garad saris* to go out.[110] Clothes were thus a prominent marker of social status.

As the reminiscences of the women show, there was a lot of contradictions even among the Brahmos. For instance, Shanta has seen that women used to go out to chit-chat in the evening at Samajpara.[111] Again, even among the Brahmos, a groom's party had created much ruccous during a marriage because the bride was dressed in a black *sari*.[112] As no other science subject but Botany was taught at Bethune, Nalini and Suriti, the daughters of Nirmala Sircar and Dr. Nilratan Sircar, got admitted to the City College[113] alongside boys.[114] On the other hand, after Shanta passed the B.A. examination, Ramananda did not allow her to work after that.[115] However, she could teach without remuneration for a few days in the Brahmo Balika Shikshalaya.[116]

Gradually women were coming out of their houses, though not without difficulties. Shanta's house at Samajpara was not far from the Bethune College, yet, they would have to wait for two hours for the car to pick them up from school. Therefore, one day, they, with some other girls led by Shantimayi Dutta, decided that they would return home by walking. Shanta writes, "The surprised spectators stopped on the road. Some of them started to call us by our names… Some of them came forward saying, 'I have a prayer.'" The students of Bethune were forced to leave this plan of returning home by walking.[117] Probably, Hindu women did not walk out on the paths till the 1930s.[118]

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[110] Shanta Debi, p. 51.
[111] Ibid., pp. 53-54.
[112] Ibid., p. 60.
[113] Established in 1881, it is one of the City group colleges administered by Brahmo Samaj Education Society constituted by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Kolkata.
[114] Shanta Debi, p. 65
[115] Ibid., p. 70.
[116] Ibid., p. 71.
[117] Ibid., 2014, p. 53.
[118] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 55.

Women were indeed becoming much more comfortable about their movements. In March 1912, when Rabindranath was to read an essay in the Overton Hall, there was no separate arrangement for women to sit. So, they sat on the chairs of the front row.[119] Women were ready to claim the spaces. In a meeting at Shantiniketan, there was separate seating arrangement for women. But, many women preferred to sit in the open meeting place, rather than within the enclosure, for getting a better view.[120] In 1917, while going to Shantiniketan in a train, Sita Debi and her companions got down from the overcrowded ladies compartment in a station on the way and boarded the general compartment.[121] She did the same thing in 1918 while coming from Shantiniketan to Calcutta. In her words, "After being much irritated by the uncivilized behaviour of the co-passengers and sitting stiffly, somehow we reached the Howrah station."[122]

Sita Debi's (1895-1974) reminiscence *Punyasmriti* shows that women's dress included a wristwatch from this time onwards.[123] With the changes in women's clothes and approach, the rules of the Brahmo Samaj were also being relaxed. In 1917, Sita Debi noticed after going to the temple, "The seating arrangement for women was right in front of the Acharya's seat. Till now, it would have been at the back".[124] Women of respectable families started singing in public.[125] In 1915, Sita Debi noticed that the number of female guests was increasing in the Ashrama at Shantiniketan.[126] Blouse and frock were still considered modern, but these were no longer 'non-Bengali' dress to the Brahmos or even to the elite Hindus. Sita Debi had seen a tailor of Calcutta to make blouses and frocks and sell them in

[119] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*., p. 52.
[120] Ibid., p. 64.
[121] Ibid., p. 95.
[122] Ibid., p. 161.
[123] Sita Debi, *Punyasmriti*, Maitreyi, Kalikata, 1964, p. 29.
[124] Ibid., p. 138.
[125] Indira Debi, Nalini Debi, Sahana Gupta and other women sang at night, in the festival of Magha 11, at Jorasanko in 1914. Suprabha Ray and some other young women sang on February 1, 1914, in a meeting in the Rammohun Library. For details see Ibid., pp. 68-71, 163-164, 226.
[126] Ibid., p. 72.

the Anandabazar fair of Poush 7, in 1918.[127] After seeing this, she, together with Shanta Debi and Sukeshi Debi, had opened a shop of blouse, frock, etc. on Poush 9, during women's Anandabazar.[128] In 1921, at Samajpara, a joint club of men and women, named the Social Fraternity, was established with Sita Debi as its Secretary.[129] Yet, a progressive woman like Sita Debi had internal conflict about being 'modern', as she says, "We, the women of that time, were less talkative than 'modern' young women."[130]

8

This inner conflict of women did not stay long. The binary of orthodoxy and modernity in assessing the mentality of the Bengali upper/middle class society of nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems unstable if we look at the writings of Hemantabala Debi (1894-1976), the daughter of Anantabala Debi and Brajendrakishore Raychoudhuri, born in the elite Gouripur family, and married to a grandson of the Natore royal household.[131] Hemantabala Debi's (1894-1976) maternal grandmother Mokshadasundari was a 'modern, progressive woman,' who wrote poems and could hum her own compositions.[132] Hemantabala claims to have inherited her grandmother's traits. According to her, initially she disliked her mother, since Anantabala did not approve of using *attar* or essence, playing cards, reading novels, wearing fancy clothes, or listening to recorded music,[133] even though she used to write poems, could understand English words and could read Devnagari.[134]

Even though belonging to a *zamindar* family of eastern Bengal, Hemantabala was born in Calcutta and spread a good part of her life there. She used to remain behind the curtain in her

[127] Sita Debi, pp. 198-199.
[128] Ibid., p. 200.
[129] Ibid., p. 230.
[130] Ibid., p. 87.
[131] Jasodhara Bagchi, 'Sampadakiya', in Jasodhara Bagchi and Abhijit Sen, eds., *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, Dey's Publishing, Kolkata, 1992, p. 5
[132] Ibid., p. 6.
[133] Ibid., p. 64.
[134] Ibid., pp. 10-11.

infancy and childhood, and was not introduced to even the neighbours. Even during her occasional visits to the Maidan with her father, she remained inside the car and did not get down.[135] Her mother and sister also lived behind the veil.[136] However, Hemantabala's daughter, Basanti Bagchi, writes that Hemantabala could move around almost like the boys, without following the traditional rules, being the first child of her parents.[137] She was taught at home under male tutors.[138] In Calcutta, she went to many places with her father.[139] Also, the otherwise conservative family was modern in their dresses. When they visited Darjeeling, Hemantabala's two and half years old sister Basantabala wore a blue dress like that of the Chinese women, while Hemantabala wore a grey British-style frock. There, her mother would sit in the afternoon beside the sloping road, with Hemantabala's paternal aunt Kadambini Devya, covering her head a little, wearing a red *kastapere sari* of Farasdanga and wearing either a black jacket over a white chemise or just a black jacket.[140] Hemantabala used to like the dresses, conversations and education of the Brahmos. Her mother's simple attire did not attract her.[141] On the *Dol* (Holi), black-bordered *saris* dyed in blue colour would come from Krishnapur to the house of Hemantabala. Once, the Puja *sari* of Golokpur was the yellow 'airy *sari*' – one would not be able to wear it without wearing a shirt."[142] From Gouripur, she used to receive green-bordered orange *saris* of Bombay silk, pink Parsi *saris* with loose ribboned borders sewed to the surface, Gulbahar *saris* with white floral designs of wool on black base, and white Shantipuri *guldar sari*. *Dure* and *choukhupi saris* would come from Krishnapur.[143]

[135] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*., p. 115.
[136] Ibid., p. 118.
[137] Basanti Bagchi, 'Amar Ma', in *Hemantabala Devir Rachana-Sankalan*, p. 9.
[138] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, pp. 18, 43, 45.
[139] Ibid., p. 28.
[140] Ibid., pp. 31-32.
[141] Ibid., p. 33-34.
[142] Ibid., p. 69.
[143] Ibid., p. 70.

But, after her marriage with Brajendrakanta Raychaudhuri in 1311 B.S. (1905 CE), Hemantabala really got confined behind the veil.[144] In the maternal uncle's house of her husband, the Natore royal family, women's education was nearly prohibited. There was a prevalent idea that wives and daughters would be of bad character if they studied. Still, some women secretly learned to read the scriptures.[145] Brajendrakanta was apparently a modern man who liked music and theatre, went to clubs, and had interactions with both the Indian and the British elite.[146] Yet, he did not incorporate his wife in his world of modernity.[147] Rabindranath and Chittaranjan Dash were close friends of the Maharaja of Natore, the maternal uncle of Hemantabala's husband.[148] But, unlike the women of the families of those men, Hemantabala had to remain behind the veil.[149] Hemantabala, who once moved freely in front of people, started to hesitate to come in front of unknown men after living in strict confinement after her marriage. The girl who used to wear frocks in her childhood had also changed her dressing style – "A cloth measuring twelve hands was wrapped all over the body with two twists in double folds. The head was covered and the corner (*anchal*) of the *sari* was used to cover half of the face."[150] As Hemantabala had received education before her marriage, it was enough for her to read books of moral lessons for women, such as *Lakshmi Meye*, *Lakshmi Bou* and *Lakshi Ma*.[151]

Thus, 'modernity' and 'orthodoxy' could co-exist in the same family. It was not enough to be the wife of a seemingly modern man to receive the benefits of modernity. This brings us back to the issue of women's relationship with modernity, and associated sartorial changes, as patriarchy often restricted the flow of progress for women, even though they themselves were

[144] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, p. 20; Basanti Bagchi, p. 10.
[145] The scenario of eastern Bengal was different from that of Calcutta. In the first chapter, we have seen that even a city like Dhaka did not have adequate facility for women's education.
[146] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, p. 78.
[147] Ibid., pp. 78-79.
[148] Ibid., p. 115.
[149] Ibid., pp. 78-79.
[150] Ibid., pp. 91-92.
[151] Ibid., p. 55.

taking part in it. It also brings us to the question of women's agency in the overall change in their condition.

Coming back to the question of Hemantabala's agency, we get to know that whenever Hemantabala came to Gouripur after her marriage, she took active part in various cultural functions. Her daughter Basanti also composed plays and directed music for such performances.[152] In one such function, Basanti had dressed up a male actor in the 'Shantiniketani style' of *sari*, ornaments and *urni*.[153] In fact, in the preceding decades, a new style of women's dress emerged with epoch-making experiments regarding women's appearance on the stage for singing, dancing and acting, with active initiative from Rabindranath, in both Calcutta and Shantiniketan. It seems that the influence of these changes did not take long to reach the mofussils of eastern Bengal. It was Hemantabala's own agency and initiative that eventually facilitated the meeting between this lady, confined in the inner quarters of Natore, and Rabindranath.

She started communicating with him through letters, first under a pseudonym and then on her own name.[154] Initially she met him with her son and brother, without telling the guardians who might forbid her saying that she did not have the qualities such as learning, intelligence, culture, manners, dresses and behaviour required fot meeting the great poet. Later, she took other aged women of her house with her.[155] She often used to meet him on the way to going to bathe in the Ganga.[156] On one such occasion, she describes her dress for bathing in the Ganga – "a red-bordered mill-made *sari* over a dirty white chemise."[157] We do not get any reference of her wearing chemise before this. After marriage, when she came to her father's house, she still used to wear the twelve-hand long *sari* with two twists. Did the change occur

[152] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan.,* pp. 73-74.
[153] Ibid., pp. 73-74.
[154] Ibid., pp. 117, 162.
[155] Ibid., p. 162.
[156] Ibid., p. 117.
[157] Ibid., p. 128.

because of the influence of the urban and 'modern' world of Calcutta, or was she wearing chemise specifically because she was going out in public? There is no definite answer. However, an interesting insight about how women were transforming their dressing according to their choice and context can be seen from the description of Hemantabala's visit to Tagore at Chowringhee, along with her father's sister (*pisima*) and the wife of her father's elder brother (*jethima*). Her head was covered. But, understanding the time and place, she reduced the length of the *ghomta* a bit. Both of them (*pisima* and *jethima*) had covered their heads with a long *ghomta*, bowed their heads, and paid their respect to the poet with folded palms.[158]

9

Rabindranath was instrumental in making a new style of costume for women of respectable families on stage, which was first adopted by the women of the Tagore family and of the Ashram at Shantiniketan. Amita Sen's *Ananda Sarbakaje* is a testimony to these changes in Shantiniketan.[159] From her writing, we can trace the development of the 'Shantiniketani style' of costume. It was Kamala Debi who dressed them up for theatrical performances with her own *saris* and ornaments. In *Valmiki Pratibha*, she dressed up the little girl in a very common red-bordered *sari* which she made her wear quite high, and tied up the corner (*anchal*) of the *sari* very tightly around her waist. The girl playing 'Saraswati' would wear a white silk *sari* with the corner decorated with golden strings and a white *benarasi* blouse. This was a white silk *sari* with floral designs and gold-decorated border, which Rabindranath had brought from Japan. Kamala Debi would dress the woman playing the role of Lakshmi in her own granderous red *benarasi* with golden decoration and ornaments. Girls playing the forest-nymphs would wear *saris* dyed in yellow color, along with flower ornaments and would

[158] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, pp. 162-63.
[159] Amita Sen, p. 91.

apply red paint on both the palms.[160] Kamala Debi used to supply all the maetrials for stage decoration and costume till Pratima Debi came to Shantiniketan permanently.[161] Amita informs that they transcended the preliminary stage of dancing in the play *Sharadotsab*, and their dress also changed accordingly. "Colourful *urnis* were introduced then…boys tied it around their waist, we girls either tied it around the waist or loosely kept it hanging from the two sides of our shoulders. These *urnis* were made particularly for this play. *Urnis* of fine clothes of various colours – green, yellow, blue, red – covered with mica dusts, had gold and silver ribbons on the two corners. Kamala *bouthan* had tied our hair in top-knot and wrapped flower garlands around it. It was from then that the use of gold ornaments stopped. Wearing flower garlands around the throat and hands, and decorating the head with flowers started then."[162] In 1921, the Barshamangal festival took place in the open ground behind Bichitra at Jorasanko. Girls wore white *saris*, and wore bunches of white monsoon flowers around their buns and braids.[163]

The casual dresses befitting the atmosphere of the Ashram would be a mismatch in the urban atmosphere. So, while going from Shantiniketan to Jorasanko, Amita and other girls would take one or two Parsi silk *saris* from the boxes of their mothers who had got those as marriage gifts. During their stay in Calcutta, they would try to be carefully decked up in silk *saris* and well-dressed hair.[164] In 1923, *Basanta* was performed in the Madan Theatre of Calcutta, for collecting funds for running the school at Shantiniketan. Rabindranath had dedicated this play to the poet Nazrul Islam who had been imprisoned during the Non Co-operation Movement. In 1925, *Sheshbarshan* was staged in Calcutta to collect funds for the Pearson Hospital. Two girls of the Ashram, Mamata Sen and Amita (senior), were in tears because of the costume of this play. They finally wore the rented dress with much reluctance.

[160] Amita Sen, p. 42.
[161] Ibid., pp. 42-43.
[162] Ibid., p. 47.
[163] Ibid., pp. 48, 50.
[164] Ibid., p. 53.

Mamata had to wear an ankle-length dress of golden brocade, similar to a chemise, with no proper cutting. Amita wore a snuff-coloured ankle length silk cloth. "Mamata's dress hardly moved, as if it was made of paste board, while Amita's dress seemed to swell if she moved."[165]

Rabindranath was deeply impressed by the decent dress and music of the women of Java. He had brought a dance costume from Java – a dark green dress with gold decoration on it, reaching under the heels. After making a few changes to it to make it more decent, Amita had worn this dress in the performance of the play *Rituranga* at Calcutta. Javanese women wore such dress without covering their throat, shoulder and hands. Amita says, "With that dress, *Bouthan* (Pratima Debi) had made me wear a matching golden shirt befitting our tradition. But did not give any covering of *urni* over it. At that time, performing bare-bodied was unimaginable, coming out without the covering of an *urni* was also impossible. But, the whole dress was very decent."[166] Still, Mamata, Amita's sister, had objection to even this 'decent' dress, since everyone from her husband's family would have been present among the spectators. So, Mamata had suggested her sister to wrap a piece of cloth over the shirt, to avoid criticism from her in-laws. But, Amita refused to change the beautiful costume prepared by Pratima Debi just to please her sister's in-laws. Finally, the beautiful dress had impressed even the in-laws of Mamata.[167] Even after her marriage in Dhaka, Amita spread a small stream of *Rabindranritya* in eastern Bengal, despite much oposition.[168]

That way, the girls of the Shantiniketan Ashram were gradually spreading *Rabindranritya* and the dressing style associated with it, which evolved from the combination of the imagination of Rabindranath and the joint efforts of Kamala Debi, Pratima Debi and other women of the Ashram. Many women of respectable families had to oppose the prevalent

[165] Amita Sen, p. 73.
[166] Ibid., p. 90.
[167] Ibid., p. 90.
[168] Ibid., p. 117-118.

social norms to create the 'Shantiniketani style'. Amita Sen was among the first group of respectable women who, after receiving formal training in dancing, performed in front of the public who bought tickets, ignoring the social obstacles, in public theatre halls like New Empire.[169] Amita and other women of Shantiniketan Ashram were also formally trained under male dance teachers, such as Buddhimant Singh and Nabakumar Singh of Manipur.[170] These women used to dance out of their spontaneous volition, despite harsh criticism from the society. The struggle for the manifestation of their artistic sensibilities, despite maintaining decency and propriety, helped the women of later generation to dance wearing the *sari* and the *urni* in the Shantiniketani style.

Amita's account also shows how clothes were becoming a marker of community feeling or of belonging to a particular ritual. Women were stressing on wearing similar dresses on a particular occasion. The red-bordered white *sari* was the most prominent dress in the Ashram. The girls of the Ashram would wear this *sari* on the *Briksharopan* (tree plantation) festival.[171] Women dressed up with much care for the festival of 7th Poush. They would prepare for the day by getting their blouses embroidered with threads of various colours, sitting in front of Sukumari Debi, and would wear red *saris* with embroidered borders with those blouses.[172] Rabindranath would ask everyone to be dressed up for the festivals. Once, on the Vasanta Utsab (Spring Festival), he did not like the white *sari* of a girl named Kiranbala, and she had to go back and return wearing a coloured *sari*.[173] But, the choice of dress was not always dictated by Rabindranath. For example, when one girl wanted to wear red-bordered white *sari* on 7th Poush, but could not get one, her fellow students managed to get some white *dhotis* and red borders of torn *saris* with much difficulty, and fulfilled her

[169] Amita Sen, p. 102.
[170] Ibid, p. 67.
[171] Ibid., p. 35.
[172] Ibid., pp. 16-17.
[173] Ibid., p. 36.

desire by stitching those red borders on the *dhoti*.[174] On the day before the *Dol* (Holi), all of them gathered in one place to prepare the golden colour by mixing tamarind with turmeric paste, and to dye the *saris* of the girls and the *dhotis* of the boys in that. After the *vaitalika* of the Vasanta Utsab, all the girls would gather in the ground, wearing those dyed clothes. Dyeing the clothes was a part of the festivity.[175]

Women used to wear the *sari* majorly in two ways at this time. One was the *Brahmika* style of Jnanadanandini Debi – pleating the *sari* in front and putting the end of it crosswise on the shoulder, and the other was pleating the *sari* a little at the back, putting one end of the *sari* in near the waist and placing the other end on the left shoulder, sometimes with keys hanging from it. The *Brahmika* style was for going out, as Amita Sen informs that they would go to the festivals by wearing the *sari* in this style, and would go to marriage parties similarly after they got married. Wearing the *sari* with pleats on the back was a domestic wear. This was the housewife's style. But, Maitryeyi Debi[176] (1914-1990) went to marriage parties, dressed in that style, to express the uniqueness of her dressing.[177] Thus, fashion was now a matter of personalized style for two women of the same time and similar background. That's why even the loom-made fine red-bordered *saris* and *dhotis* of coarse thread, made for the Santals, would be sold in the fair during the festival of 7th Poush. This kind of cloth was also sold for the Santals in the *haat* of Bolpur. But, such good-looking *saris* were now bought even by the elite 'respectable' women like Amita Sen.[178] Personalization of fashion statement made it possible for the elite upper class women to wear clothes meant for the Santals, probably unthinkable in earlier times.

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[174] Amita Sen, pp. 17-18.
[175] Ibid., p. 60.
[176] Maitreyi Debi was the daughter of the famous philosopher Surendranath Dasgupta and Himani Madhuri Rai. She is the author of books like *Na Hanyate* and *Mangpute Rabindranath*.
[177] Amita Sen, p. 143.
[178] Ibid., p. 19.

Of course, women's sartorial choices were directly influenced by nationalism, but the change in women's fashion was multidimensional. After Gandhi declared the Non Co-operation Movement in the Calcutta Session of the Congress in 1920, women like Sahana Debi (1897-1990), a leading female singer from a respectable Bengali family of that time, started cutting threads in the *charkha* and wearing *khadi*.[179] Basanti Debi (1880-1974), the wife of the renowned lawyer and politician Chittaranjan Das, used to wear white *Shantipuri* or *Dhakai sari* of fine threads.[180] She now started wearing *saris* of *khadi,* even though she disliked coarse or heavy *saris*. Also, on the marriage ceremony of their younger daughter Kalyani Mukhopadhyay, Sahana Debi and other women of Chittaranjan's family wore *saris* of *khadi*. Even in the gifts to the groom's family, on the occasion of the bridal night were mostly *saris* of *khadi*.[181]

The participation of Bengali women in nationalist politics also led towards many Bengali girls joining the revolutionary groups, such as like Bina Das (1911-1986), Kalpana Dutta (1913-1995) and Pritilata Waddedar (1911-1932).[182] All three of them were students of the Bethune College. Pritilata Waddedar's political engagement made her question male dictates in the realm of revolutionary movements.[183] Bina fired at Stanely Jackson, the Governor of Bengal, in 1932, and went to prison for it.[184] While a prisoner in Lalbazar, she went to the court from the jail in a *sari* of *khadi* sent fom her home and a dot of *kumkum* on her forehead

[179] Sahana Debi, *Smritir Kheya*, Prima Publications, Kolkata, July 2011, p. 85.
[180] Ibid., p. 11.
[181] Ibid., pp. 85-86.
[182] Pritilata Waddedar was a meritorious student. She graduated in Philosophy with distinction from Bethune College, Calcutta. But, along with her studies, she was engaged in political activitism since she was a student at the Eden College. There, she had become a member of the Sree Sangha under the banner of Dipali Sangha. Coming to Calcutta, she became a member of the Chhatri Sangha. In the 1930s, there were many revolutionary groups all over Bengal. Chittagong was a major centre of revolutionary activities. One of Pritilata's brothers, who was already involved in these activities, introduced her to the famous revolutionary activist Masterda Surya Sen. Although it was very rare for a woman to join revolutionary politics at that time, he accepted Pritilata as a woman member of his revolutionary group. Pritilata, dressed as a man, led a team that attacked the Pahartali European Club on 23rd September, 1932, in her last operation. Injured, she committed suicide to avoid being arrested.

[183] Uttara Chakraborty, *The Rattling Chains. Bina Das, A Woman in Revolution*, School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, Kolkata, 2017, pp. 1-2.
[184] Ibid., pp. 5-7.

like Gujarati women.[185] When she was transferred to the Midnapore Jail, she met Shanti Ghosh and Suniti Chaudhuri – who had killed Stevens, the district magistrate of Kumilla.[186] When Suniti was shifted to the third division, and her dress was changed accordingly, Bina protested against it. Suniti's clothes were taken away, and she was given thick loose *kurtas* and coarse striped *saris* to wear in the jail. Bina, unwilling to give in easily, had cut that *kurta* with the scissors given for stitching and made it look like a blouse. After knowing this, the jail authority had wanted it back, on the ground that "it was too fashionable!"[187] Even though the jailor would often come to the female ward and 'abuse' the women in various ways, a blouse was considered too fashionable for prison in comparison to a loose dress.[188]

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Such attempt to desexualize the female body was not limited to the space of the prison. The society kept on judging women's sartorial choices, be it in the public space or inside the prison cell, be it the clothes of the schoolteacher or of college students, with the conventional yardsticks of morality and decency, luxury and excess. The nationalist leadership was no less active than the colonial prison-warden to draw limits for the growing fashion-consciousness of the women.

With the rise of nationalism, western clothes brought a sense of alienation and discomfort. So, the call for preservation of the Indian 'tradition' went hand in hand with the condemnation of the western lifestyle. In this quest of chiselling out a distinct *swadeshi* identity, the immoral hedonist *memsahib* was a model to be avoided. Women's sexuality had to be suppressed in their sartorial choices. Wasteful ornamentation and western fashion, especially the fancy or tight clothes or the clothes which left the head or the body exposed,

[185] Bina Das, *Shrinkhal Jhankar*, Signet Press, Kolkata, 1948, pp. 39-40
[186] Uttara Chakraborty, p. 8.
[187] Bina Das, pp. 43-44.
[188] Ibid., p. 46.

characterized 'bad housewifves'. All of this was a marker of potent pleasure, passion and desire.[189] Thus, alongside modern clothes, an *urni* or a *chadar* was recommended to cover the head. Amiya Chaudhurani, (1909-1994) in *Didimar Yug O Jiban* (The Life and Time of My Grandmother), reports that, in her mother's times, there was the practice of wrapping around a *chadar*, of fine white cloth with lace all around it, while going out of the house. Her grandmother also had one lacy *chadar*. When Amiya Chaudhurani came to Calcutta from Shillong to study, she saw many Hindu women of respected background wrap a *chadar* before going out of the house.[190] Women would wear a *chadar* made of cotton or *garad*, when going to another neighbourhood, as late as in the first half of the twentieth century.

In the third decade of the twentieth century, Ushatalika Halder, the caretaker of the hostel of the Brahmo Girls' School, made new rules regarding dressing for the students. It was mandatory to wear the *sari* in *Brahmika* style. Leaving the hair open was not allowed anymore. Girls of the lower classes had to make two braids, while the girls of the upper classes would make one. All students were asked to wear shoes when going for the classes.[191] Narmada Bishwas, an Odiya classmate of Shanta Debi at Bethune College, was a rare student who had some coloured *saris*. The white *sari* was the common one. Narmada also noticed that even the unmarried girls would cover their heads while coming out on the road. Coming out in public in uncovered head was considered indecent.[192]

Western way of dressing and western way of living – going to public places to eat and drink wearing shoes, eating using forks and knives – became markers of unbridled sexual liscentiousness of women. Women, who did these things, came to be regarded shameless and dangerous. The writer of 'Mahiladiger Bhojyo O Parichchhad', expressed her/his doubt

[189] Charu Gupta, 'Fashioning' Swadeshi: Clothing Women in Colonial North India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 47, No. 42, OCTOBER 20, 2012, pp. 78-9.
[190] Amiya Chaudhurani, *Didimar Yug O Jiban*, Mitra O Ghosh Publishers, Calcutta, 2002, p. 84.
[191] Jayita Das, p. 76.
[192] Shyamali Basu, p. 349.

clearly, "Though food and clothes are material goods, ethics and virtue depend more on them."[193] She/he remarks, "Can patience and composure be there in the mind of a woman sitting to worship wearing gold-plaited lace, gold-plaited jacket, *kamiz* and Bombay *sari* and adorned in many ornaments?"[194] The writer remarked that the new class of women overspent for dresses. But, the good thing was that almost none of the new women was willing to dress like foreign women by wearing gowns, as the new Bengali young men imitated the dress of the Europeans. The writer remarked, "We find Bengalis wearing foreign clothes very unnatural. The body-hugging thick clothes of the cold countries is not suitable for the people of a hot country like ours…Secondly the dress of the foreign women shows shamelessness and vulgarity."[195] In another article titled 'Grihhalakshmi', published in 1904, the author said that the wife decorated in clothes and ornaments and proud of her beauty, or the one who is indifferent about household works, or the quarrel-loving wife who seeks only her own pleasure in luxuries and entertainments, is not a *grihalakshmi*.[196] In another article named 'Parichchhad O Bilas', the writer says, "However, just one piece of *sari*, as it was prevalent earlier, cannot be called a good dress in any way. But, if the women become fond of luxury while adopting the changed and more developed dresses, it will be a matter of great regret. The horror of luxurious dressing is gradually coming among the educated women of this country, and is terrifying the gentlemen with low income."[197] Similar sentiments can be seen in other articles, such as 'Bharatmahila O Dharma'[198] and 'Naricharitra'.[199]

Interestingly, the whole debate around appropriate dressing of the *bhadramahila* clad in aesthetically Indian attire was hardly in the name of beauty and magnificence of Indian dressing in comparison to European clothing style. Rather people who were against the

[193] 'Mahilader Bhojyo O Parichchhad', p. 126.
[194] Ibid., p. 127.
[195] Ibid., p. 128.
[196] 'Grihalakshmi', in *Mahila*, Vol. 10, No. 3, October, 1904, pp. 58-59.
[197] 'Parichchhad O Bilas', *Mahila*, Vol. 16, No. 8, June, 1911, pp. 189-192.
[198] 'Bharatmahila O Dharma', *Mahila,* Vol. 16, No. 9, July, 1911, pp. 197-200.
[199] 'Naricharitra', *Mahila*, Vol. 16, No. 9, July, 1911, pp. 204-206.

western type of clothing condemned it because the debased Westernization added to the degradation of the different types and forms of indigenous arts and products. Indian climate and weather, and the expense of European clothes, were put forward as counter-logics. The impulse to wear western clothes was equated with snobbery, not with taste.

Amidst this controversy, some women like Punyalata suggested that women should take the good qualities of the western civilization, while retaining their traditional Indian nature. The author of 'E Desher Nari Jatir Unnati' suggested that the real development of Indian women could not happen unless the good qualities of the older women of India was combined with the pure superstition-free knowledge and civilization of Europe. The author complained about the modern women, "We can notice a fondness for own pleasure and luxury in the lives of many. Where is the sacrifice for others, for the country?"[200]

As we can see from these articles, there was a new discourse geared towards economic self-sufficiency, spirituality and domestic bliss, which also touched upon the issue of women's clothing. The reformers and nationalists attempted to organise the wardrobe of middle class Hindu women, reworking the 'right' clothes, make-up and accessories for them, also revealing their moralising tones and anxieties. The unviolated 'chaste space' – women's bodies – were no longer confined and western influence was encroaching into that 'last refuge'. At this stage, women's clothing became representative of both 'traditional' culture and of national identity of India.

The people who were against the trend of imitating western style of dressing suggested taking pride in India's ancient culture and said that its loss was the cause of the condition of enslavement and the prevalent situation of unhappiness – this state would need to be improved through the careful and restricted modernization of the *bhadramahila*. This can be

[200] 'Edesher Nari Jatir Unnati', *Mahila*, Vol. 14, No. 5, Agrahayan, 1315/December, 1908, p. 106.

situated against the earlier notion, where the improvement in clothes was directly related to civilizational progress.

Women were now thought to be succumbing to false flattery without having a strong economically independent state. So, wearing traditional clothes made in India by Indians themselves became a national duty, as it was a sign of freedom in the time of dependency. This was linked to the clarion call for *swadeshi*, which was geared towards economic self-sufficiency, spirituality, domestic bliss and a new language of beauty, morality and ideal womanhood. Swadeshi ideologues took on the mantle of code-enforcers through internalised mechanisms of self-discipline and threats of social ostracism and public ridicule for dress deviations.

Swadeshi clothing was shown to be not only economically more feasible but also signifying a return to past glory and freedom through the bodies of Hindu women. Charu Gupta has shown how Hindu nationalists introduced new changes and invented new norms of dress for women, which became 'traditional' or 'indigenous'. The qualities attached with the prior notion of modest clothing was changed in the nationalist light. The moralism of dress and fashion reform was an attempt to prevent the growing influence of 'fashion' itself, as Swadeshi was symbolised by *khadi* or *garad*, which were not just types of clothes, but a principle, an ideal, a symbol of purity. Such clothes represented a form of social control, effacing, rather than enhancing, the sexual body. So wherein the voice of Soudamnini Khastagiri we could trace a sense of enclosure of the sexual body of the *bhadramahila* in the garb of modesty, it was transformed into effacing the sexuality of the body with the growth of nationalism. At the later part of the nationalist movement, the Swadeshi was a clarion call for the principles of concealment and sexless propriety. Dressed simply and modestly, the

educative mother could ensure the regeneration of the home and, by extension. of the nation.[201]

The continued attention to bodily adornment was not simply a rehabilitation of femininity, it was also related to local sartorial styles, standards of beauty, appropriate expenditure and women's moral and sexual rectitude. Typically the knack of women to desist from taking on the *swadeshi mantra* was shown by writers as women's refusal to give up their self-indulgence. There was thus a complex interplay between *swadeshi* clothing, patriarchy, fashionable desires, carving of one's spaces, and yearning for a good life. Women's agency to choose their sartorial style in colonial India can provide us further ground for debates over both extravagant consumption practices and potential sexual excesses lurking in women's bodies.[202] Women who were wearing western clothes were seen as if they were giving away their "sartorial *dharma*"[203] as they were embodying the impure western style of clothing and sacrificing the Indian sartorial morality.

Women themselves were not immune to this line of argument. In *Sekele Katha*, Nistarini Debi said that the modern British kind of sense of shame was a customary thing.[204] But Indian women had to be the repertoire of Indian prestige and honour, their location needed to be higher than those of the Western culture and western women. Nagendrabala Mustofi wrote, "Modern women have lost their eternally desirable divine nature and have become affected by distorted ideas…"[205] She opined, "A woman must always endeavour to turn her character into a divine character… I don't know when again the Hindu women will make

[201] Charu Gupta, p. 78.
[202] Ibid., p. 81.
[203] See, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, p. 8
[204] Nistarini Debi, *Sekele Katha*, in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 2*, p. 154.
[205] Nagendrabala Dasi, 'Nari Dharma', p. 459.

India proud by becoming 'Hindu women' as good times will rise at the end of these bad times."[206]

So, Indian women's divinity and spirituality were being presented as the saving grace for the prevalent pathetic condition of the Indian society. The 'respectable' woman could be in the public or participate in the national cause, as long as she could maintain her Indian/divine character, which was in a higher ground than that of the Western or 'foreign' woman. Hence, she needed to drape the *khadi* or *garad* and wear her nationalism instead of wearing foreign clothes which were inferior in morality and unsuitable for the bodies holding Indian honour. The writer of 'Rakshanshila O Unnatishila Nari' said that pro-development women dressed up in a different manner – they used shoes, socks, frocks and jackets, and decorated themselves with sufficient ornaments. The author suggested that real development could never come by deserting all ancient traditional customs of the nation, imitating the habits of the European women in all matters, and developing only the external neatness of civilization, like food habit and dress.[207] In these articles, written by both men and women, the attire and behaviour of the *bhadramahila* were linked with the superior kind of Indian womanhood embodying divinity. Even her participation in the nationalist movement or other social causes was appropriated by her embodying spiritual prowess which did not let the western influence pollute her chasteness. Women like Hemantakumari Debi and Nagendrabala Mustofi reflected the prevailing notions regarding Indian womanhood, in which wearing western clothes or imitating western lifestyle was 'shameful', as, with the rise of nationalism, only covering oneself properly was not enough and new meanings were attached to the bodies of women.

[206] Nagendrabala Dasi, p. 441.
[207] 'Rakshanshila O Unnatishila Nari', in *Mahila*, Vol. 12, No. 6, Poush, 1313/January, 1907, p. 141.

In 1907, an article named 'Bangamahilar Swadeshi-Priyata' remarked that one could not imbibe Swadeshi merely by not eating British salt or not wearing British clothes, as proper boycott of British things would happen only by discarding the bad customs of the British and the distorted forms of luxury that had come with the flow of the British civilization.[208] So rejecting the western – ways of life and dressing – in all spheres of life was needed in order to practice *swadeshi*. These articles equated women's fashion with enslavement to western values, leading to endless displays of conspicuous consumption, sexual promiscuity and the break-up of joint families. They stated that such women endlessly pushed their husbands to purchase ostentatious items. Some equated luxury and laziness with it. They lampooned the spendthrift housewife who wiled away her time, indulged herself in the allurements of luxury items and brought financial ruins to the family. Remorse was expressed over the loss of women's divine selves, and true morals, following the influence of western manners.

The fashionable woman who spent inordinate amount of time dressing up was now presented the *charkha* as a symbol of the prescribed ideal: prolonged, dilligent labour in the home and for the nation. Swadeshi created a new language of distinction. The opulent 'bad' housewife or the westernised Indian *memsahib* signified *alakshmi*, a contrast to the dependable, modest, educated *grihalakshmi* that the nation required and tried to fashion.

According to Dipesh Chakrabarty, in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century Bengali tracts supporting women's education and the idea of companionate marriage, the ideal of the 'modern', educated housewife was almost always tied to the older Hindu patriarchal imagination of the mythical divine figure of the goddess Lakshmi. In Puranic Hinduism, Lakshmi signified the model wife, united in complete harmony with her husband in a spirit that combined submission and loyalty, devotion and fidelity. She personified fertility, as the goddess of wealth, beauty and prosperity. Lakshmi, however, had a reverse named Alakshmi

[208] 'Bangamahilar Swadeshi-Priyata', *Mahila,* Vol. 12, No. 11, Jaishthya, 1314/June, 1907, p. 281.

(Non-Lakshmi), her dark and malevolent 'Other'.[209] Alakshmi came to embody a gendered conception of inauspiciousness and the opposite of all that the Hindu law-givers upheld as the dharma (proper moral conduct) of the householder.[210] Dipesh Chakrabarty has argued that the symbolism of *swadeshi* epitomised Hindu ideas of purity, simplicity, poverty, and renunciation of material well-being, all for the service of the nation. Cultivation of a new nationalist womanhood marked an intricate link between citizenship, nationalism, new gender roles and clothing. Codes of dressing the self was not merely something personal now, it was not only a form of social control and social organization. It became a vehicle to maintain a social identity and a method of social class formation through a mechanism of inclusion and exclusion, a marker to differentiate among the Hindus, Non-Hindus and Europeans and the marginalized section of the society.

As we have shown above, the 'modern' educated Lakshmi was an indispensable part of a nationalist search for domestic happiness.[211] But, education could produce its own variety of Alakshmis, women who were allegedly arrogant, lazy, immodest, defiant of authority, and neglectful of domestic duties. Several negative terms were used to describe such women or their behaviour – *bibi* or a *dandy* (the feminine form for *babu*), *memsahib* (European womean), *boubabu* (a housewife who behaves like a babu), and a *beshya* (whore).[212] Thus, Chakrabarty has shown how the idea of the 'new woman' came to be written into the techniques of the self that nationalism evolved, which looked on the domestic as an inseparable part of the national. The public sphere could not be designed without reconstructing the private. The interchangeable use of words such as *beshya*, *memsahib*, *alakshmi*, *boubabu*, etc. suggests a nationalist insistence on cultural stereotypes to create and

[209] Dipesh Chakrabarty, 'The Difference: Deferral of (A) Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal', *History Workshop*, No. 36, Colonial and Post-Colonial History (Autumn, 1993), p. 7.
[210] Ibid., pp. 7-8.
[211] Chakrabarty, p. 8.
[212] Ibid., p. 9.

maintain boundaries.[213] Hence, the discourse of *sugrihini*/*grihalakshmi* versus the *memsahib* was also a debate of the measure of women's freedom.[214]

The nationalist male, in fact, could achieve a degree of peace with colonialism by associating women with promiscuity and lust for foreign goods and lifestyle. This dystopic woman sign stood for the other aspects of 'modern woman' who wasted money in luxury. Their clothing was shown as an excess in contrast to the *swadeshi* ideal of simplicity. Choosing extravagant dressing was equated with unrestrained lust, wilfulness, arrogance. The heart of moral purity in this context was the sacrifice of the woman for the family, the religious community, and the nation. For a woman to be otherwise was to be the bad westernized woman – Alakshmi. The hatred for female sexuality stemmed from the recognition that wearing expensive or fashionable clothes represented a search for pleasure which could make women self-oriented. Thus, 'patriarchal nationalism' equated women's sexuality with promiscuity and prostitution. Women of the nation were thus permitted to be sexed beings only to serve their husbands and patriarchal lineage by being mothers of the nation and national heroes.

Manu Goswami, too, states that *swadeshi* invoked a mythical sense of historical time and religious imaginaries, with a particularised space of Bharat as a pure container of national culture and economy, constructing a nostalgic golden past. A Hindu and upper-caste vocabulary was often deployed for shaping *swadeshi* sartorial decisions, and, in rare instances, an anti-Muslim rhetoric accompanied this.[215] Addressing the women, Gandhi said:

"Boycott is impossible unless you will surrender the whole of your foreign clothing. So long as the taste persists, so long is complete renunciation impossible… And boycott means complete renunciation. We must be prepared to be satisfied with such cloth as India can produce, even as we are thankfully content with such children God gives us. I have not

[213] Chakrabarty, p. 11
[214] Ibid., p. 12
[215] Charu Gupta, p. 80.

known a mother throwing away her baby even though it may appear ugly to an outsider. So should it be with the patriotic women of India about Indian manufacturers…The spinning-wheel... is presented as a duty, as dharma".[216]

Hence, wearing *swadeshi* was a pious duty of the women of India for the liberation of the nation. *Swadeshi* clothing carried an edifying tone for women because they were not only asked to dress in specific way if they wished to participate in the nationalist project, but also to ensure reform of male members of the family to *swadeshi* ways. Many poems, stories and novels of this time entrusted daughters, wives and mothers with the responsibility of persuading their fathers, husbands and sons to wear *swadeshi*.[217]

Swadeshi fashion also became an arena to negotiate and articulate exclusive religious identities. As Sarkar argues, extremist nationalism often merged with Hindu revivalism.[218] In terms of sartorial preferences, Tarlo labours to show how and why Gandhi's ambitious vision of a simplified, shared, sacred national costume was only ever partially achieved, as Indian clothing practices were highly diversified according to caste, religion, occupation, education and region as well as politics.[219] Women's contradictory responses to *swadeshi* fashion in Bengal strengthen such arguments.

Much before the advent of *swadeshi*, members of the Tagore house started propagating the use of indigenous products. Abanindranath Tagore's mother Soudamini Debi used to cut threads in the *charkha* to weave clothes.[220] Swarnakumari Debi's Sakhi Samiti preached *swadeshi* and had started the women's trade fair (*mahila-shilpamela*) in 1888. This fair was held by women and only women could enter it.[221] Saraladebi opened Lakshmir Bhandar on

[216] Charu Gupta, p. 79.
[217] Ibid., pp. 78-9.
[218] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908*, Permanent Black, Delhi, 2010, pp. 344-94.
[219] Charu Gupta, p. 81.
[220] Jayita Das, p. 102.
[221] Ibid., p. 105.

Cornwallis Street for the uplift of indigenous handlooms and handicrafts.[222] She herself always used to wear *swadeshi* clothes. She believed that it was possible to show an epitome of fashion and good taste only through *swadeshi*, without contact with any foreign cloth.[223] During the Non-Cooperation Movement, women of the Tagore house started to use the *charkha*. Apart from Swarnakumari and her daughters, Mrinalini Debi, Bidhumukhi Roy, Prasannamayi Debi, Baradasundari Ghosh, Chandramukhi Bose, Girindramohini Debi, and others helped in the promotion of the *swadeshi* industry. Sarala had equated nationalistic clothes with women's decency and modesty in her essay 'Swadeshi Poshak'. This is a classic case of nationalist morality creating the binary of 'good women' and 'bad women' and repressing female sexuality by desexing the female body.[224] On the other hand, Pritilata Waddedar's clothes expressed her political standpoint and she would not wear anything but *khadi*. But, her individualistic dressing style made her always wear blouses matching the colour of either the *sari* or the border.[225] Many women practised *swadeshi* because they saw their parents following it. Shanta and Sita Debi wore *garad* or *khadi* mainly because of their father's influence and choice.

However, there were many women who did not wear *swadeshi* clothes or did not continue to wear it because of their discomfort. There were many educated fashionable modern women who did not like the new wave of rejecting the foreign clothes. For example, Amiya Chaudhurani, in her autobiography *Didimar Yug O Jiban*, says:

"At that time, we heard that Mahatma Gandhi has come to Calcutta. He will burn the British clothes given by all at Mirzapur Park with the slogan of boycotting British things. Some girls of the hostel started collecting and gathering British clothes from all students. They also

[222] Saraladebi, p. 347.
[223] Ibid., p. 348.
[224] Saha, p. 75.
[225] Shyamali Basu, p. 350.

asked me to give my *saris* and blouses. I said, 'All my clothes are British. Indigenous clothes are not available where I stay and I shall not be able to wear those thick *saris* and shirts of *khadi* in this heat. You may take any one item from my box to console your mind, if you must. But I shall not give it on my own. If I give it myself, that will mean a resolution from my side not to wear British clothes, which I cannot do by any means.'"[226]

In the 1928 session of the Congress, held at Calcutta, women from the hostel of the Brahmo Samaj were recruited as volunteers. Amiya Debi was one among them. The quality of the *saris* which were given to the female volunteers after collecting Rs. 2 from each girl for giving them *saris* of *khadi* as uniforms, had annoyed Amiya Debi a lot.[227]

The proliferation of *swadeshi* ideals, while spontaneously supported by many women, also revealed a tense relationship in terms of the *swadeshi* definition of fashion aesthetics. Women were not just passive victims of the *swadeshi* fever, they negotiated meanings of *swadeshi* fashion, embodying and contesting its ideals through their clothing practices.

Mostly what we see in the journal articles informs us about the dominant voices and trends – predominantly male or phallogocentic. But, in the writings of women's daily lives, the apparently 'insignificant' little details of how they went to a place wearing something they thought was appropriate, or how the women dressed themselves, talk about the other side of the story. Apparently, the dictates of the nationalists were followed by many reformist and nationalist women. Articles in women's magazines, for example in *Bangalakshmi*, *Grihalakshmi* or *Mahila*, took up the imageries of *swadeshi*, service and sacrifice, and opposed any kind of fashionable dressing. Women were crucial to the nation but co-option of women's agency symbolically and otherwise also provided spaces for women to transgress

[226] Amiya Chaudhurani, p. 95.
[227] Ibid., p. 88.

certain boundaries. Hence, Amita Sen could perform on an open stage in front of the acknowledged male gaze, wearing different kind of clothings. Subtly fighting against attempts to police their dress, women reproduced and adopted certain modes of clothing to suit their present needs. Still, they could go back to be an ideal *grihalakshmi*, as they were aestheticizing their sexual presence in the public for many national and social causes linked with culture.

The changes in the dressing of the *bhadramahila* were, therefore, diverse, not unilinear. Shanta Debi's writing shows that both indigenous and foreign clothes were popular among the students even in the early part of the twentieth century. Such changes in women's clothes, in relation to nationalism, can be seen through the changes in the clothes of the teachers of the Bethune College. Akhtar Imam (1917-2009), an alumni of the Bethune College, had seen Rajkumari Das[228] (b. 1878), an alumni of the Bethune College and later its Principal, wear the *sari* with its end kept in the front.[229] Tatini Das (neé Gupta)[230] (1895-1953), who had been a student, a teacher and finally the Principal of the Bethune College, would wear broad-bordered loom-made *saris*. Hamida Khanam, a student of that time, says about Tatini's dress, "The cloth was attached on the top of her head with small broaches on both the sides. She would wear half-sleeve white blouses, with a *sari* with its long ending kept in front."[231] Hamida says that aged Brahmo women mostly dressed like that at that time. Mrinalini Emmerson (Bonnerjee)[232], who taught English and had later become the Principal, used to

[228] Rajkumari Das was the younger sister of Chandramukhi Bose and daughter of Bhuvanmohan Bose. Her father was one of the pioneers in the propagation of women's education in India. All his daughters were educated and empowered women. Rajkumari was the Principal of Bethune College from 1928 to 1934.
[229] Shyamali Basu, p. 346
[230] She joined Bethune College as a Senior Lecturer of Philosophy. In 1934, she became the Principal of the College and remained in office till 1950.
[231] Shyamali Basu, p. 346.
[232] Daughter of R. C. Bonnerjee and Amiya Bonnerjee, Mrinalini studied in Scottish Church College and secured a 1st class M.A. Degree in English Literature from the Calcutta University in 1933. In 1936, she completed a Law Degree and was the first Bengali lady to get a flying licence; for details see Rachana Chakraborty, 'Mrinalini Emmerson', in *In The Footsteps Of Chandramukhi*, pp. 219-232.

wear nothing but unicolour borderless chiffon or georgette *saris*.[233] Amiya Banerjee, another teacher of English, wore light cream coloured silk *saris*, with the long endings left free, and blouses with medium sleeves. The other English teacher, Stella Bose, would wear the *sari* high, wrapping it thrice, making it look like a tight skirt, with sleeveless blouse.[234] Thus, we can see that *swadeshi* did not necessarily affect the diversity of dresses of the successful educated women.

Therefore, clothing was more a matter of personalized choice than of norm for the modern educated women. Fashion was as much important in such choice as ideology. Hamida has said about the popularity of middle sleeve blouses, shoes with middle-length heel, muton sleeve Hungarian blouses etc., among the students of her time. Most students would still wear *saris* of white base.[235] A college uniform was there as well. If they went out of the college, they would have to wear white and blue *sari* with skirt-like border, half-sleeve shirt, collared blouse, and blue tie. But, it was not mandatory to wear the college uniform except on special occasions.[236]

Alongside nationalism, class identity was a major question related to sartorial choices of women. The *bhadramahila* had to look distinctly different from the women of lower classes and the public women. Draping a *chadar* or *urni*, as suggested by Amiya Chaudhurani[237] and others, was a marker of the distinctive 'Bengaliness' combined with the propriety and decorum of a *bhadramahila*. Yet, women did not follow this norm blindly. Even As late as in the 1920s, the City College had faced a resistance from its female students for trying to make draping a shawl over the *sari* mandatory. But, many women would wear a *chadar* made of

[233] Shyamali Basu, pp. 346-347.
[234] Ibid., p. 348.
[235] Ibid., p. 348.
[236] Ibid., pp. 348-349.
[237] Amiya Chaudhurani, p. 84.

cotton or *garad*, when going to another neighbourhood, as late as in the first half of the twentieth century.

It is interesting to know that, at the same time, Bengali women from elite or propertied families used to imitate the dressing style of Gauhar Jaan – the famous nautch girl of Calcutta. Agni Roy, in an article published in the *Anandabazar Patrika*, wrote that the basics of the fashion of Calcutta would start with the dresses ordered by Gauhar. Yet, the public women were consciously otherised. Shanta Debi describes how, during the Hindu Mela, many women of the 'respected' families fled from the fair ground after receiving the news that Gauhar Jaan was there.[238]

While the elite Brahmo and Hindu women were often consciously distinguishing themselves from the women of other communities and social stature, the Bengali Muslim women were at times attempting to be integrated with the mainstream high culture, especially during the Movement against the Partition of Bengal. Saiyada Manoara Khatun (1909-1981)[239] writes in her autobiography *Smritir Pata*, "We stopped wearing British clothes. *Charkhas* of three-four varieties were bought in our house: Kamala *charkha*, Bangalakshmi *charkha* and the *charkha* from Ahmedabad…We stopped eating roasted beef in our house to show our unity with the Hindus. We sacrificed our luxury. We stopped even buying the glass bangles. We resolved not to wear good clothes or shoes as long as the country was not independent."[240]

On the other hand, the prevailing condition of Indian textile industry, apart from the famous fine *saris*, was in such a state that many women despised *swadeshi*. Kalyani Dutta says that the housewives would be irritated in their attempts to join three pieces of *khadi* to make it

[238] Jayita Das, 70-72.; Shanta Debi, p. 54.
[239] She was a woman of a zamindar family of Jessore district. Married in 1924, she became a widow after ten years. After that, she taught in schools and worked as a matron in hospitals. After the Partition, she worked as a matron in a women's hostel; see Soumitra Chattopadhyaya and Ashrukumar Sikdar, eds., *Ekshan 3, Akhyan O Smritikatha*, Saptarshi Prakashan, April, 2001, p. 620.
[240] Sayyad Manoara Khatun, 'Smritir Pata', in Soumitra Chattopadhyaya, Ashrukumar Sikdar, eds. *Ekshan 3, Akhyan O Smritikatha*, Saptarshi Prakashan, April, 2011, p. 401.

suitable for wearing.[241] In 1879, there were 56 textile mills in India, but none in Calcutta.[242] In a meeting of a women's organisation in 1906, which was presided over by the queen of Natore, Manisha Tagore[243] said, "We have no mills. So, indigenous clothes cannot be cheaper than the British clothes. The big *babus* are whimsically going out to have fresh air in fancy foreign cars, and telling inside the house to stop the use of British products and to start using indigenous products. Let the indigenous clothes be as cheap as the British clothes. Then, the masses will happily be able to use indigenous products, whuch now only a few of us can afford to do."[244] Lila Majumder's mother Surama Debi had said to her daughters that, instead of burning the foreign clothes, probably it would have been better to donate them to the poor people shivering in cold on the streets.[245] Thus, women like Manisha were standing in a ground completely opposite to the emotionally charged thinkings of women like Sarala promoting a frenzy of boycotting British goods, and were representing a view based on the socio-economic context of the time.

Women refurbished their selves as they responded to the requirements of changing times to retain, modify, and indeed forsake the way they dressed. The 'gendering of the national subject' remained a contentious project.[246] This can be seen in the autobiography of Lila Majumder (1908-2007). In her early youth, Hall and Anderson in Park Street, Whiteway Leddle, Army and Navy Store, and Hogg's Market were some notable shopping places for the girls who wore western dresses.[247] Lila Majumder and her sister Sulekha used to wear western clothes – frocks, petticoats, easer – bought from these stores. She has expressed how, after coming to Calcutta from Shilong in 1918, she was very fond of the dressing style of the girls of her age. Around 1922, she started to wear *sari*. Her father used to take them to the

[241] Kalyani Dutta, *Thor Bori Khara*, Thema, Kolkata, 2011, p. 115.
[242] Jayita Das, p. 108.
[243] She was the daughter of Hemendranath Tagore and Nipamoyee Debi, and was married to Dipendranath Chatterjee.
[244] Jayita Das, p. 110.
[245] Ibid., pp. 110-111.
[246] Charu Gupta, p. 81.
[247] Jayita Das, p. 101.

New Market to buy clothes for making the shirts to be worn like blouses.[248] But, with the approaching of the Non-Cooperation movement, they started to wear indigenous clothes. She stated that, at that time, good indigenous cotton clothes were not available. Hot and silky clothes were there. They used to go to the scool wearing coarse *saris* of Bangalakshmi. These were 46 inches long and 10 hands broad. It was comfortable for her but it did not suit her sister and mother who were taller. So, they would buy loom-made *saris* of a length 48 inches and breadth of 11 hands for Rs. 5 each. Lila Majumder says that even if the *sari* was not a problem, the recently introduced shirts of indigenous mills used rough and thick clothes. So, they started wearing *khadi* shirts from the Khadi Pratishthan, and had never worn 'foreign' clothes since then.[249]

So the change in the dressing or adaptation of nationalist signifiers in women's dressing did not follow a linear teleology of modernity. The heterogeneity is undeniable and even in the adaptation of nationalism and *swadeshi* the identity of the *bhadramahila* was fractured. There were fissures from within and a degree of acrimony between the *swadeshi* reformers and the women. Even while advocating *swadeshi*, women did it in ways that undermined the univocality of its discourse. Many women faced the incongruity of defending the drab *swadeshi* attire while also finding it uncomfortable and undesirable. This led to selective adaptation and subtle changes. An element of coercion, often required on the part of the nationalists, to make women accept the new rules of clothing, also hints at subtle resistances.[250] The relationship among women's education, her public presence, the notions regarding shame, the *swadeshi* dress codes and sartorial styles for women, was a complex one, with no linearity. What appeared was an ambiguous mixture.

[248] Lila Majumder, *Pakdandi*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, 2017 pP. 127-8.
[249] Ibid., p. 145.
[250] Charu Gupta, reference 20.

The addition of blouse-esear-petticoat to the Bengali women's attire made the clothes less transparent and enabled them to appear in public. This made even the use of the indigenous *saris* of fine base, earlier considered obscene, possible. Bina Dey (b. 1906) writes that, in December 1932, her husband, the famous artist Mukul Dey (1895-1989), had gifted her a '*begambahar sari* of Tangail of a base as thin as air and of dark purple colour' for going to an exhibition at the Government Art College, Calcutta. Even though she was reluctant to wear it, she wore the *sari* with a sartin blouse of lavender colour and deep blue petticoat, following the advice of Indira Debi Chaudhurani and to honour her husband's wish.[251] Even Jnanadanandini herself wore a silk *sari* of fine base in England, while enjoying the first snowfall of her life, which made her sick afterwards.[252]

In the nationalist reformulation of the Indian/Western, feminine/masculine, spiritual/material and home/world binaries, the West or the foreign was the representative of the external-artificial-material realm, which was also the territory of the males. On the other hand, the Indian tradition asserted its spiritual supremacy, which, as the nationalist reformers claimed, was preserved in the 'home' – through the domesticated bodies of the Bengali women. The belief in the esteemed status of traditional roles of Bengali women in their rightful place called 'home' was typically a product of the anxiety over the westernization of Bengali women. This concerned the educated urban middle class men who were themselves imitating the western models of education and behaviour to raise their social status in the colonial 'modern' world. But the serendipity of western style of education and women's emancipation from '*griha'* to the '*bahir'* influenced the women in uncontrolable ways. They became self-conscious about their appearances, images and identities. On the one hand, the elites were anxious to guard their women from the low-browed, popular, native cultural forms and expressions, performed by male/female practitioners who did not share the 'refined' taste. On

[251] Bina Dey, 'Parichay', in *Ekshan 3, Akhyan O Smritikatha*, p. 534.
[252] Jayita Das, p. 95.

the other hand, the 'new patriarchy', under the threat of the westernization of their women, felt it necessary to construct a 'new womanhood' which would fit into their nationalist project.

Just as women's educational institutions opened by the Bengali urban elites were a kind of response to the inherent threat of westernization and proselytization in the educational institutions earlier established by the Christian missionaries, the retorts about women's foreign dressing styles and appearance was a general condemnation of western ethics and values dominating the bodies of Indian women. But women had their own ways of dealing with this issue. Women like Jnanadanandini Debi and Suniti Debi, in the nineteenth century, made the attire of the new Indian women suiltable for the body of the *bhadramahila*. As, it facilitated their movement outside the moral enclosure of the *griha* into new spaces hitherto unexplored. By the turn of the century, with the rise of Extremist nationalism, women were doing unusual things, which kept them out of the control of kinship networks, giving them a public identity beyond the familial. They were admitted in educational institutions, receiving degrees in sciences and arts, much earlier than the English women were allowed those in Britain. They were creating women's organizations and societies, and participated in politics. The next generation of women like Kamala Debi and Pratima Debi added new styles of clothes to the wardrobe of the *bhadramahila*. These new styles of clothing were till now unnecessary as women of their class background could not even think of getting on the open stage and performing. That was the 'job' of the 'other' kind of women who were always outside the patriarchal structure called family. These women not only pervaded spaces of performance, they sanitized the stage with their female performing bodies draped with neutral coloured bodices or *urnis*. Though there was still a great amount of agitation and condemnation from the society, women like Amita Sen or Sahana Debi could inhabit the

space confronting the directed male gaze, attired in new, experimental clothes, because they were a part of the same class which controlled the dominant socio-cultural values and ethos.

12

According to Ashis Nandy, masculinity allowed Indians to emulate the colonizers adopting a violent ideology, which reflected the virile westernised nationalism and obliterated Indian androgynous tradition.[253] In this process women were again relegated to subordination. Women's gradual detachment from household and the traditional social responsibilities were condemned. If women were to escape the griha and to start journey towards their own spiritual fulfilment, they were asked to assert their identity through selfless love, devotion and sacrifice. There was an ethical approach of self-improvement which allowed this strand of thinkers to articulate an androgynous discourse, where both female and male characters strived for their best-self. It did not aim at challenging the colonial power or the desire which evolved around a piece of land, but reflected the constant desire for moral self-improvement. Search for woman's true identity moved her towards a deeper self-awareness. This mirrored the power of Indian women's divine inner energy. This sympathy for the improvement of women's lives does not suggest a radical challenge to the patriarchal system. This was the result of a deep suspicion of the disorganised, irrational and radical element of the previous reformist endeavours because of the supposedly appalling conditions of the moral standards of the reformed or emancipated modern women. Thus individual evolution dissolved in an aesthetic reconciliation which accepted a return to the acceptance of sanctity of home and hearth and renouncement of the worldly things like luxury and extravagance.

[253] Ashis Nandy, 'The Psychology of Colonialism: Sex, Age and Ideology in British India', in *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and Recovery of Self under Colonialism*, Delhi, 1992, pp. 1-63.

Joya Chatterji argues that culture is a unifying symbol of the Hindu identity of the *bhadralok*.[254] Within this construction of the *bhadralok'* s cultural identity, nationalism is viewed as an intrinsic Hindu virtue. As we can see through the personal accounts of these women, they were actually borrowing from or imitating the image of 'traditional' Hindu women knowingly or unknowingly, when the wave of *swadeshi* hit their closet. Women were seen as a divisive element within Hinduism and women's backwardness as an obstacle to a successful nationalist struggle. So, some women acknowledged a benevolent Hinduism. Sarala or Punyalata condemned obscurantist social practices thanks to their superior education and social status. They stressed on their conformist logic of the ideal female characters, reenacting the myths of Sita and Savitri and respecting the boundaries imposed upon them by patriarchal norms.

In the following decades, the support for terrorism increased with the recruitment of women by revolutionary associations and with their sporadic participation in terrorist actions. In Bengal, women's militant participation in the national cause started with the involvement in the armed struggle launched by the Extremists during the Swadeshi Movement. Nevertheless, stressing the superiority of Hinduism and championing the cause of an aggressive nationalism, they were trapped in the hypermasculinity of communal ideology, where they had to wear clothes not only suitable to their class status, but what would eventually curb their sexuality.

In the years following the Swadeshi Movement, Gandhi's ideology refused an aggressive concept of nation and stressed the importance of feminine values in his ethical discourse. Indian/Bengali women's increasing participation in the public and political arena with their sexual bodies was facilitated by Gandhi's valorisation of feminine virtues – the sacrifice of Indian women and her capacity of enduring the pain. Women both accepted and rejected the

[254] Joya Chatterji, *Bengal Divided: Hindu Communalism and Partition*, Cambridge 1994, pp. 164-173.

clarion call of Swadeshi or spinning the *charkha*, though most of them could not avoid the *khadi* or *garad* to be a part of their fashion-culture.

In the process of creating a nationalist identity in India, the definition of Indian manhood and womanhood rendered the ideology of gender vital to the nationalist discourse. In the vast literature of the period I have chosen, the gender issue emerges in the construction of a new ideal woman – never a settled definition, always changing, and full of contradictions. In this scattered portrayal, the answer of Bengali women to the dominant discourse was not singular. Class, caste and religious locations generated different answers. The elite society sought to inculcate lessons in self-fashioning for women whose patriarchally dictated seclusion was paradoxically an index of their social privilege. These lessons had their own motivated trajectories.

But women did not simply accept these gendered ideologies intrinsically weaved in their sartorial styles. There was not always a clear demarcation between the broadening of the liberal and reformist politics and the growth of rigid and closed nationalism in their thoughts and practices. Even though their clothing was greatly influenced by their familial setting or political standpoint, some women prioritized their individual standpoints regarding their choice of clothing, self-consciously accepted or rejected the prescribed modes of appearance, and created an alternative 'image' of themselves through their clothes.

While during the first half of the nineteenth century the female image reflected the middle class attempt to modernise, in the second half the representation of women was embedded within a more radical nationalism which opposed the rulers' interference within the home and which asserted the superiority of Hindu culture in revivalist terms. It mirrors the Bengali effort to build a stronger identity through a new interpretation of gender roles. But at this juncture, the already educated outgoing women were not mere passive receivers of the ideals

handed out to them by their male counterparts. Through their pathbreaking choices, they created a space in the public and ventured in the public institutions unapologetically, which eventually normalized the presence of the female body in the public.

Thus, clothes are to be seen as forms of moral and social investiture. For example, for Hemantakumari Chaudhuri, clothes were to be seen as a sign of progress, marking moments in moral/cultural advancement from the primitive to the civilized, differentially for men and women. For Ushalatika Halder, it was mandatory to wear the *sari* in *Brahmika* style to embody modesty and maintain proper decorum as a female student. These perspectives need to be understood in the context of class, in the broadest and original sense of social relations created by mental and manual division of labour, inclusive of a sexual division.

Himani Bannerjee rightly points out that the claim to resolution of the 'women's question' in early twentieth century was made by theorists like Partha Chatterjee and Dipesh Chakrabarty who project a seamless image of social hegemony of cultural nationalism. The nationalists themselves recognized the unresolved nature of the 'women's question', which prompted them to maintain vigilance over the discursive field regarding women and moral education.[255] This masculinist discourse of community allows for a false empowerment of women – the creation of the woman as a goddess figure.[256] But the anarchy of women's sartorial representation shows the actualities of women's lives where they are both accepting and rejecting the deified figure of womanhood, latent with the violence of patriarchies.

Through this study, we can find out the complexities and contradictions to be found in the social consciousness of the time, specially the role played by socio-economic status and

[255] These issues regarding morality are discussed in length in Tapan Raychoudhury, Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in Nineteenth Century Bengal, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988.

[256] Himani, Bannerji, 'Pygmalion Nation: Towards a Critique of Subaltern Studies and the 'Resolution of the Women's Question'', in Himani Bannerji, Shahrzad Mojab, and Judith Whitehead eds., *Of Property and Propriety : The Role of Gender and Class in Imperialism and Nationalsim*, University of Toronto Press, Toronto, 2001, p. 71.

gender identity in class formation. The fact that many Hindu women chose to wear the *Brahmika sari* without their families giving up Hinduism, or that the intermittent negotiations were struck between academic or domestic life for women, cannot obliterate struggles that underpinned women's educational and sartorial reformulations. Issues of the *bhadramahila's* economic status and her legal and political personhood were forged along with her attired self. This state was of ideological disharmonies, rather than one of a resolutionary synthesis. Women's sartorial choices and the culture of their dressing point out to the problem of separating culture and discourse from economy and social organization and constructing a national community upon a unifying cultural essence. This type of nationalism erases history, social relations and ideologies of difference.

Considered in this way, the notion of class extends into both areas of social production and reproduction, and nothing physical lies outside of its boundary. The periodicals and tracts connect bodies with class by making it clear that the female body of the propertied classes is different from that of the labouring classes, and from the 'other' section of women – the prostitutes, the westernized *memsahibs* or the liscentious *mem bou*. The bodies of the women of the propertied classes, who were coming out of the *purdah* and taking part in the social milieu of nineteenth and twentieth century nationalist politics, could only be approved when it was not to be seen directly in terms of its potential for reproduction or productive labour.

On the other hand, the numerous lifestories we have seen point out to a state of departure – from the apologetic and the confessional voices of Rassundari or Kailasbasini Debi to the state of celebration of self-identity by Amita Sen or Bina Das. Bina Das's *Shrinkhal Jhankar* shows an instance of the politics of self-expression through clothes. After she joined a secret society, she received a command, "If you become such a stamped *swadeshi* externally, it will be a problem. Reduce wearing so much *khadi*. It will not do if people understand (your

affiliation) from external appearance."[257] Through a sartorial ideogocial outlook the concepts of shame-modesty-ideal-national all were simultaneously changing and women were embodying 'identities' which were also transforming their lives.

In conclusion, we need to remember that there was no monolithic character of the dressing style of the *bhadramahilas* as described by many scholars who create a false sense of homogeneity where all consciousnesses lose their differences in a singular line of progress/change/improvement. If we look beyond the small set of selected anti-modernist binary politics, we will be able to see how women placed themselves into the nationalist thought without subsuming their differences and how they created identities for themselves. Arnab Saha has argued that the heterogenous character of clothing in the Bengali society in the beginning of the nineteenth century was transformed into a homogenous normative character at the end of the century, which would be continued till the *swadeshi* era to form a unidimensional dresscode.[258] But, as we have seen, there was no uniformity in the dressing style of the *bhadramahila* and, even though certain elements were common to their sartorial choices, these were fractured by many categories of identities. Wearing these new 'identities', 'women' wrote, they took part in a social life that was hitherto unavailable for them, joined public institutions, entered into professional and entrepreneurial services, sang, danced, took part in the national movement, and became self-conscious about their sartorial representation and its political nature. The clothes of the *bhadramahila* were a site of empowerment, representing not a singular identity but embodying multiple identities.

[257] Bina Das, p. 23.
[258] Saha, p. 75.

Stepping Out in Public: The 'Modern' Women and Their Footwear

When Bengali upper/middle class women crossed the threshold of *antahpur* and stepped out into the 'public' world in the early nineteenth century, that was a pivotal moment of rupture, breaking away from the earlier 'traditions' of those women's daily lives. Their life, till that period, was primarily confined to the inner quarters of the sprawling household of the upper caste homes. The women even lacked the freedom to move unrestrained in the outer parts of the house or *bahirmahal* or to be in the "*angina*" which was the outer domain of the house where male visitors were received and entertained. Women were the "caged birds", as described by Nagendrabala Mustafi in her essay 'Abarodhe Hinabastha'. [1] The first flutters of this caged bird into her 'emancipated' existence introduced her to the unknown world of *bahir* or outside – a space inhabited by men, the women of lower class and lower castes, and the 'public women'.

How women should manage their appearance became an important question when women's public appearance kept on increasing with the various liberal and reformist movements for the emancipation of women from nineteentinth century onwards. With the increase in those women's public appearance, the issue of dressing became an important question. Women's attire itself became a terrain of contest among various competing ideologies. Out of these debates, emerged the 'modern' Indian woman's dress. Shoe was a major part of this new dressing of 'modern' women.

In 1850, the poet Ishwarchandra Gupta published a poem which expressed the anxieties of the conservatives :

Age meyegulo chhilo bhalo, brata-dharma karto sabe.

[1] Nagendrabala Dasi, p. 489.

Eka 'Bethune' ese shesh korechhe, ar ki tader temon pabe.

Joto chhurigulo turi mere, ketab hate nichchhe jobe.

Tokhon 'a b' shikhe, bibi seje, bilati bol kobei kobe.

Sob kanta chamoche dhorbe sheshe, piri pete ar ki khabe….

Bujhi 'hut' bole 'boot' paye, cheroot fuke swarge jabe.[2]

(women were good in olden days, absorbed in rites and rituals/

Bethune alone has destroyed everything, women will never be the same.

When the young girls, without care, will now take up books in their hands,

They are bound to learn A B C D, dress up like foreign women, and speak in English.

At the end, they will eat with forks and spoons; will anybody eat sitting on a *piri*?[3]

They will whimsically stroll around in boots, and will go to heaven smoking the cheroot.")

However, all of Gupta's fears came true by the turn of the century. As we saw in the first two chapters, the first generation of women who came out of the *purdah* and claimed a space in the public was mostly from the urban upper/middle class families. The fashion of wearing the shoes also started among this group of urban women, mainly from the Brahmo households.

To connect the issues of colonial modernity, women's dress and their public appearance, one major pointer is the reception of the footwear. Bengali women, traditionally not expected to step out of the house, were supposed not to use footwear. However, when the Western-

[2] Tapasi Bhattacharya, p. 703.
[3] A small, low wooden platform inches above the ground, for standing or sitting crosslegged on.

educated elite imbibed the Western notion of female emancipation, they expected their wives to be attired suitably for public appearances. This of course included footwear. Jayita Das has shown the various cultural meanings associated with women's footwear, particularly the Western-style high heels.[4] But what she neglects is how there was a gradual change in the way footwear was seen by the society and whether women played any role in that change. So, in this chapter I will be looking into the discourse regarding women wearing footwear and its significance in women's lives, how it helped them to be in the public, and, most importantly, how women located themselves in this debate.

Shoe was a major marker of modern dressing. When some Indian men started to enter the rooms of the foreigners, wearing footwear, it startled the British. Sir John Shore had written that no Indian should be allowed to come in front of the foreigners in footwear, because every nation had their own customs, and taking off shoes before entering a room was a marker of courtesy and respect for Indians. It was like taking off the hat for the Europeans. In 1836, following a request of the Indians, Lord George Eden, the Governor General of India (1836-1842), permitted Indians to wear shoes in the Governor's House. Many Bengali men started wearing socks and shoes in Calcutta by the middle of the nineteenth century. The Governor General, therefore, had to propose to his Council that the Indians who would come to the representatives of the Government for official or semi-official works would be allowed to wear socks and shoes. This rule was extended to all of India after twenty years. Shoes and socks could be freely used since then except in the private chambers of the judges of the courts.[5] It must have been difficult to wear the tight-fitting shoes in the feet which was used to wearing wooden sandals, or sandals of Taltala with a curvy front and, rarely, the *nagra* of

[4] Jayita Das, pp. 203-217.
[5] Sripantha, Ananda, pp. 201-202.

Lucknow. But, providing foreign shoes for the bare feet of women was an even more difficult challenge for the elite educated young men.[6]

Initially, the footwear worn by women were mostly *nagra*, the indigenous shoes made of *makhmal*, and shoes made of carpet. For example, Sri Kumudini Roy, in an article titled 'Hindu Narir Garhasthya Dharma' (Household Duties of a Hindu Woman) published in the *Bamabodhini*, suggested that Hindu women must learn to make shoes of carpet in order to save money.[7] But, by the nineteenth century itself, the urban modern women, especially the Brahmos, started to wear various kinds of British-style high heel shoes. In the Bamahitaishini Sabha's seminar on women's clothing (1871), many members supported adoption of European clothes by Bengali women. From Rajlakshmi Sen's description of women's attire we get to know that shoe was a part of the new clothing style of the contemporary womenfolk.[8] Many Brahmo women attended this discussion of the Bamahitaishini Sabha, wearing shoes.[9] Considering all the opinions, the editor of the *Bamabodhini* proposed that, when going outside, women's attire should consist of shoes, even though shoes were not considered mandatory. In the list of the prescribed items to wear at home, there was no mention of the shoes. The editor had invited suggestions for the betterment of dressing. Jnanadanandini Debi, under the pseudonym 'Shree…Debi', wrote a response from the Bombai Presidency. She said, "We wear shoes, socks, *angia*, breastcloth, shirt and easer (knickers) or *ghagra* and wear the *sari* over these and cover our heads in the mentioned manner if we have to go outside."[10] Replying to the editor's opinion of shoes not being mandatory for those who did not like it, Jnanada wrote that, "I don't like your opinion regarding the use of socks and shoes, because, socks may not be essential but shoes are

[6] Jayita Das, p. 206.
[7] Sri Kumudini Roy, 'Hindu Narir Garhasthya Dharma', *Bamabodhini,* Agrahayan BS 1301 (1894 CE) quoted in Bharati Roy, pp. 179-180.
[8] Jayita Das, pp. 70-71.
[9] Ibid., 2015, p. 72.
[10] Sripantha, pp. 215-216.

almost mandatory in order to stay clean."[11] The editor of the *Bamabodhini* had replied, "We are not against wearing shoes. However, many women express greater aversion towards leather shoes than for other elements of the dress. It (the aversion) will gradually go away. We do not intend to force women to adopt any habit."[12] In 1864, Satyendranath requested Jnanadanandini to come to meet him in England and told her that she would have to change some of the rules and customs. He asked, "Do you feel any difficulty in wearing socks and shoes?"[13] At first Jnanadanandini did not want to wear the new clothes, shoes and socks, which Satyendranath would give her.[14] But Jnanda eventually not only adopted shoes after leaving Calcutta, but also argued strongly in its favour.[15]

It was indeed the new form of education and the united efforts of Brahmo reformers of Calcutta, Dhaka and other places which created a space outside the confines of the four walls for the women. Earlier, the Brahmo women were influenced by the Victorian Sartorial fashion. This western style of clothing consisted of western styled footwears. Punyalata Chakraborty (1889-1974) informs that some Brahmo housewives ignored the *purdah* and came out on the streets in gowns, *urnis* and shoes on request of their husbands even forty years before she, together with her sisters or friends, decided to walk in public. Those women had found walking difficult, as none of them was accustomed with shoes. One woman, being unable to walk like that further, had tied up the shoes with a rope to her feet. A pedestrian cracked jokes, "Look at the country *mem* walking". The Brahmo woman had taken this mockery as a compliment.[16] Still, it took a lot of time for women of the upper/middle class families to venture alone on the streets without any male companion. But, from the writings

[11] Sripantha, p. 216.
[12] Ibid., p. 216.
[13] Letter written by Satyendranath to Jnanadanandini number 5, in *Jnanadanandini Debi : Rachana Sankalan*, p. 218.
[14] Letter Letter written by Satyendranath to Jnanadanandini number 4 in ibid., p. 215.
[15] Tapasi Bhattacharya.
[16] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 54.

of the women of the early twentieth century, such as Punyalata and Shanta Debi, we can see that the shoe was a part of their attire.[17]

Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923), the first South Asian female physician trained in western medicine, travelled the city as a professional doctor, wearing *saris*, shirts and shoes of the latest fashion.[18] Bidhumukhi Raychaudhuri, Dwarkanath Ganguly's daughter from his first marriage, also belonged to the first generation of women who chose to wear the reformed clothes. When Bidhumukhi went to the ancestral house of her husband for the first time after marriage, her mother-in-law had told the urban, Brahmo bride, "You are not accustomed to walk bare-footed. You will fall sick. You may wear shoes. It won't harm."[19] Often the mothers-in-law would accept that their daughters-in-law should dress up according to the choice of their modern-minded sons. They would even force the choices of the sons on the daughters-in-law. However, even though the urban Brahmo culture naturalised women wearing shoes and chemise, it took a while for women to wear shoes in rural Bengal. Indira Debi (1871-1939), the daughter of Srinath Tagore and Hemangini Debi, was a Theosophist educated at home. She was married to a Brahmo.[20] When she was going to her in-laws' house at Hridaypur, she was mocked by some village boys because she was wearing shoes. When the palanquin came near a village, some village boys hearing the sound of the palanquin-bearers, rushed to see them. "They checked me out from head to toe, and – seeing my red clothes – said, 'here is the bride going'. Another boy looked at the shoes in my feet and said, 'No no, this is not the bride. Can't you see the shoes in his feet? He is the groom!'"[21] This

[17] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Ekal Jokhon Shuru Holo*, pp. 21-22.
[18] Deb, *Antahpurer Atmakatha*, p. 96.
[19] Punyalata Chakraborty, *Chhelebelar Dinguli*, p. 120.
[20] Her father Srinath Tagore was the Vice President of Bengal Theosophical Society for sometimes. So, it can be said that he was ideologically a theosophist. Debendranath initiated Priyanath into the fold of Brahmonism; see *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbandi 3*, p. 517.
[21] Indira Debi, 'Amar Khata', p. 165.

incident took place around 1883 or 1884.[22] Shoe still had a gendered meaning. It was a sign of masculinity. Shoe had a visible stamp of westernization much like the stitched or sewn clothes or blouses on women's bodies.

Western style had been added to the Indian style of shoes, and there have been mutations of the Indian styles on western lines. At first the western style footwear or even the habit of wearing footwear was in vogue within a limited group of Brahmos, Eurasians, Indian Christians and progressive Hindus.

Shoes were important to the women's dress in the Tagore family. Pratibha Debi (1865-1922) and her husband Ashutosh Chaudhuri, a judge in the Calcutta High Court, used to throw lavish parties at their place. Dwijendranath Tagore's daughter Sarojasundari Chattopadhyay[23] attended these parties. Her grand-daughter Surabhi[24] gives us a glimpse of the dresses and accessories used in these parties. She says, since sandals were forbidden in parties attended by the Governor's wife, ladies wore stockings and high-heel shoes.[25] On the other hand, Saraladebi Chaudhurani chose to wear Indian style footwear, as she practised *swadeshi* all her life and her clothes bore out her nationalist mentality. In *Jibaner Jharapata*, she stated that her friends who disliked her Indian style *nagra*s, eventually converted to *swadeshi* and adopted the same kind of footwear.[26]

Indira Debi Chaudhurani, the daughter of Jnanadanandini and Satyendranath, appears to be fashion-conscious from her childhood.[27] The premarital gifts she received from her fiancé

[22] Indira was married to Priyanath Shastri when she was thirteen years old. According to Chitra Deb, Indira Debi's birth year was 1863. But I have followed Ahana Biswas and Prasun Ghosh's note on Indira Devi in *Andarer Itihas: Narir Jabanbondi 3*, pp. 516-517.
[23] She was married to Mohinimohan Chattopadhyay, see Deb, *Thakurbarir Andarmahal*, p. 170.
[24] Ibid., 2018.

[25] Ibid., pp. 171-172.
[26] Saraladebi, , p. 348.
[27] Indira Devi Chaudhurani, *Smritisamput* 1, Viswabharati, Shantiniketan, p. 82.

Pramathanath Chaudhuri included a pair of white buckskin *nagras*, with their sides decorated by black *makhmal* strips, made by his favourite cobbler Srinibas. The shoes were unique.[28] Her cousin Satya had also experimented with new designs of footwear. He had gifted Indira a pair of sandals, with silver circles imprinted on them, on the occasion of her marriage in 1899.[29] Being a progressive Brahmo woman who had also visited many places, Indira had a taste for such gifts.

Even though we have heard about the conservatism and rigidities of the family Mohitkumari Debi (d. 1931)[30] was married in, her pre-wedding gifts from the groom's house included a shoe of *firoza* (a shade of blue) coloured wool decorated with grapevine designs made of white beads.[31] So we can say that shoes were gradually being accepted as an important part of the women's dress. The modernity of women's clothes was being accepted even in the conservative families which were against the other aspects of women's modernisation and had supported the *purdah*. Still, women wearing shoes were not very common even in the beginning of the twentieth century. In an article titled "Ingraji o Bangala Poshak", published in BS 1302 (1895 CE), the poet and dramatist Dwijendralal Ray said:

"Only a few women who have returned from Britain and the Brahmo women wear socks and shoes. I do not see much need for women to wear shoes, as they do not need to walk that much. It is better to wear shoes if one has to walk outside. Otherwise, the feet can be hurt and the soles get hardened by walking."[32]

[28] Indira Debi Chaudhurani, , p. 88.
[29] Ibid., pp. 88-89.
[30] In 'Sadhumar Katha' Mohitkumari has stated that she has witnessed it when Edward VII had come to Calcutta. Soon after this, she got married. Edward VII came to Calcutta on 23rd December 1875. So, she must have been born before 1875. For details see, Mohitkumari Debi, p. 557.
[31] Ibid., pp. 451-452.
[32] Sripantha, pp. 212-213.

Thus, the use of footwear had a connection with women walking around in public. In a long article published in BS 1308 (1901 CE) in the *Bamabodhini*, a woman using the pseudonym 'D' informed us about the Bengali families who were seen roaming on the streets of Madhupur and Giridi in the morning and in the afternoon, and had noticed the changes in the clothes and attitude of the women. She noted, "Apart from the changes in the dress for travelling, as already mentioned, another change is essential – wearing shoes and socks. It seems that women must wear shoes and socks if they have to move around, be it from the perspective of health or of beauty or of civility."[33] Therefore, initially, the argument in favour of women wearing shoes included the aspect of health as well as its inclusion as a part of the new set of clothes designed for going out. We have seen how Jnanadanandini had connected going out and wearing shoes with the angle of health.

Chandramukhi Bose, the first Principal of the Bethune College, had made a list of dress and other materials needed by the students for staying in the boarding. In this list, Chandramukhi had enlisted, alongside jackets, chemises and petticoats, two pairs of shoes, one pair of sandals, and a pair of rubber shoes. This list gives some indication about how the upper class Bengali girls who were participating in the of public life and were a part of institutionalised education were prescribed to dress at that time. However, a disaffected guardian had raised some questions in the *Indian Mirror* in 1890. "Will the girls be able to make their husbands happy in their married life later, if they get accustomed in such a high standard of living? Is the Bethune College meant for a particular class?"[34] Chandramukhi had responded in the same journal, "I think that this boarding, attached to an institution like the Bethune College,

[33]Sripantha, pp. 213-214.
[34] Shyamali Basu, p. 344.

is mainly meant for the girls of the upper middle class. Such an institution cannot run with little expenditure or following the rules of the common Hindu *antahpur*."[35]

However, at that time, many women of Hindu families desired to wear shoes like the Brahmo girls. A woman named Jagadishwari Debi wrote in Chaitra BS 1316 (1910 CE) that, in her childhood, whenever she accompanied her aunt to a site of the Durga puja, she would always find some typical articles including wooden slippers and a pair of shoes. One day she asked her aunt what had those items been kept for. Her aunt said that those were for the goddess Bhagavati (Durga). Jagadishwari replied, "But Bhagavati is a woman. If she can wear shoes, then why can't we?"[36] Jagadishwari was not satisfied with her aunt's reply that the rules were different for the goddesses. She was a woman clever enough to defend her argument in favour of wearing shoes, in front of her "great male companion", by arguing how it was not prohibited for women of the *Kali* era to wear shoes, though women were being deprived of wearing footwear.[37] Even though he laughed and said that the debate was pointless, as she was free to wear shoes, we can gather from her article that it was not the case. She writes, "It was possibly after this that he (her companion) bought me a pair of shoes in Kurseong. It wouldn't be considered blasphemous to wear shoes in this lonely, desolate mountain land, but fearing that using shoes for two months might turn into an addiction which would induce me to wear them even on my return to the crowded city, I did not wear them because of the fear of being ostracized."[38] Here, we can see that even in her urban daily life she was not allowed to wear shoes. What is very interesting is her analysis of this problem. She concluded that Bengali women kept their feet bare to preserve their erotic charm, just like European women kept their cleavage exposed in spite of the very cold weather: "Otherwise men would not

[35] Shyamali Basu, p. 344.
[36] Jagadishwari Debi, 'The Use of Shoes by Women in Ancient Times', Sutapa Bhattacharjee, edited, *Reflective Prose: Writings by Bengali Women of the Nineteenth Century*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 2011, p. 108.
[37] Ibid, pp. 108-109.
[38] Ibid., p. 109.

have derived such delight in watching these dainty, rose-hued female feet and lain down their ardent love for them."[39] Many other women also told about the men's fondness for the beauty of the female feet. However, probably this fetish was not the main reason of the lateness of the regular use of shoes by the women of the 'respectable' families.

From Hariprabha Takeda's (1892-1978) writings, we can see that women of the Brahmo society in eastern Bengal also started wearing shoes. She had ignored the strict social conventions to marry Wemon Takeda and to go to Japan with him.[40] In 1912, when Hariprabha went to buy things in Calcutta before going to Japan, she bought two pairs of shoes, one pair of slippers, socks and gloves for her journey.[41]

Hemantabala Debi (1894-1976), a girl of a *zamindar* family of eastern Bengal, has informed about the disagreements between her parents regarding wearing shoes while travelling to Darjeeling. Her mother Anantabala[42], who lived behind the veil, would not want to wear the high heel white leather shoes:

"She slipped and fell after taking barely two steps, when she wore them once because of my grandmother's order. My father started to sulk saying that the money had been wasted for nothing. Then came a pair of shoes which had a twist of ropes in the soles. That means that the structure of the shoes was made with ropes, and then it had a layer of jute, and above that of clothes. It was brown in colour. My mother was bound to wear those shoes made of rope. Probably there was a pair of socks, too."[43]

[39] Jagadishwari Devi, pp. 108-109.
[40] Her mother Nagendrabala Mallik was a worker in the Uddhar Ashram directed by the Brahmo Samaj of Dhaka, see Hariprava Takeda, *Bangamahilar Japan Jatra*, Pratibhaash, Kolkata, August, 2016, pp. 20-21.
[41] Hariprava Takeda, p. 31.
[42] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, p. 118.
[43] Ibid., p. 32.

In her childhood, Hemantabala wore boots and her two and half years old sister Basantabala wore children's shoes.[44] Hemantabala has informed that the wife of the eldest of his father's younger brothers was subservient. She would sit with folded legs to eat, wearing shoes and socks. But the wife of her father's second younger brother was free-minded. She would remove the shoes while eating. That would create conflicts between Hemantabala's grandmother and the wife of her father's second younger brother. Hemantabala points out the bias of her grandmother in favour of the wife of her father's eldest younger brother and says, "Indeed, why should a Bengali wife eat wearing shoes? My grandmother acted like a *memsahib*!" [45] Women, especially married women, wearing shoes – as well as the kind of shoes they wore – was often a decision of the males of the house. Thus, one may wonder, if these mothers-in-law who supported the choices of their 'modern' sons, ever wore even indigenous shoes themselves.

Sudhangshubala Sarkar (1895-1987) was married to Nirmalchandra Sarkar – the grandson of Tarakchandra Sarkar, who established Kar-Tarak & Company.[46] When her husband's elder brother invited an English couple to a tea party in relation to their family business, Nirmalchandra and his other brothers – along with their wives – were also invited. At that time women used to cover their head with *ghomta* in front of the elder brothers of the husband. Thus, Sudhangshubala was embarrassed to sit with her head uncovered, to walk wearing socks and shoes, and to drink tea in front of the elder brothers of her husband.[47] Sudhangshubala informs us about one particular incident, when she and two of her sisters-in-law were invited to the *purdah*-party at the Governor's house. They did not have clothes suitable for going there. These clothes included *benarasi saris*, shirts, shoes, socks and

[44] *Hemantabala Debir Rachana-Sankalan*, pp. 31-32.
[45] Ibid., p. 33.
[46] Sudhangshubala Sarkar, 'Smritir Malika', Soumitra Chattopadhyay and Ashrukumar Sikdar eds., *Nirbachita Ekshan 3: Akhyan O Smriti*,., Saptarshi Prakashan, 2011, p. 410.
[47] Ibid., p. 413.

gloves. Sudhangshubala and others went to the Municipal Market in a car to buy the last three things. Nagenkaka, the cousin of her father-in-law, was sitting next to the coachman. "He (Nagenkaka) would bring white shoes of different sizes and the shoe-sellers there (near the car). The most embarrassing and hilarious scenario was that we were wearing one shoe after another, and returning the ones which were not fitting to the feet to the hands of our uncle-in-law. He was asking, 'This one does not fit? Do you want smaller or bigger? Should the opening be thinner or wider?' We were replying to him by moving our heads inside the veil." At last, Sudhangshubala and others went to the *purdah*-party, wearing white shoes, full length socks of silk, and white elbow-length gloves.[48]

It was indeed a matter of great significance as women at that time usually would not go to buy shoes for themselves. The women who wore shoes would keep their right foot on a piece of paper and the men of the house would take its measurements with a pencil to bring shoes for them from the shops. Therefore, Parulbala (b. 1897) – who had changed her own name from Tarakdasi and had been an active social worker, art collector, writer, and badminton and bridge player – was criticized by many, as she used to go to the shops and buy the shoes of her own choice.[49]

Thus, women's footwear was a contested terrain. The conservative Hindus of Calcutta at times made their women wear shoes for appeasing the British, facilitating their business, and keeping in tandem with the acknowledged high fashion. But they were very scrupulous in making sure that the women of their families would not put their shoes on in their daily lives. The businessmen understood that if the wives of their houses wore shoes and had tea and cake in front of the English guests, that would symbolise their modernity and high status. Sudhangshubala herself says that the house of her in-laws' kept women under more cover than the family of the elder brother of her father-in-law, who was a businessman. When she

[48] Sudhangshubala Sarkar, p. 414.
[49] Kalyani Dutta, p. 111.

lived in the house of her father-in-law, named 'The Rees', at Shimultala, it was considered a serious offence to wear shoes in front of the elders. "When we travelled, the wives of my husband's cousins wore shoes. I and the wife of my brother's second eldest brother would remain barefooted. It was very painful, the sole would be injured. At last, both of us started to carry the shoes and socks in our hands to wear them outside the house. Again, after removing the shoes outside, we would hide them inside our clothes and enter the house."[50] It is clear that the conservative families still did not consider the shoes as part of the daily-wear of the women of the house. Western footwear was a part of the formal party-wear. It was yet to receive the status of an item absolutely necessary for going out in everyday life in all the upper and middle class Bengali families.

At the start of the twentieth century, the shoes were not common to the dress of the school and college girls. Shanta Debi, who did not like the cold, preferred to sleep in frock, overcoat, socks and shoes in winter nights in her childhood.[51] She informs that, even in early twentieth century, all the girls of the Bethune School did not wear shoes.[52] There was no fixed school uniform at that time.[53] Shanta's writing shows that the confrontation between the dress prescribed by Chandramukhi for the girls of upper middle class families and the dress of the common girls, or between the Brahmo Samaj and the traditionalists, was very much there even when Shanta joined the Bethune College around 1910.

Many women, not habituated in wearing shoes, preferred to remain barefooted in the twentieth century. Mukul Dey, a pioneer of dry paint etching in India, used to bring shoes of his choice for his wife Bina Dey[54] (1906-1991), but Bina would not even look at them. Even

[50] Sudhangshubala Sarkar, pp. 414-15.
[51] Shanta Debi, p. 3.
[52] Ibid., p. 42.
[53] Ibid., p. 47.
[54] Bina belonged to the family of the Roys of Khanakul in Bengal. She was married to Sharadindu Chattopadhyay – a distinguished district-level Congress worker – at the tender age of eleven. After his death, Bina married the artist Mukul Dey in 1932.

when she wore the *begumbahar sari* of fine base, of her husband's choice, unwillingly for an exhibition at the Government Art School in 1932, her feet were bare. After returning home, Mukul Dey had complained to Indira Debi Chaudhurani that he had bought so many nice shoes for her, but Bina would not wear them. Indira Debi Chaudhurani had replied, "Mukul, your beautiful wife was looking even more beautiful because she was feeling shy wearing the fine *sari*. But had she got her feet pinched by wearing shoes, which she is not habituated in, she would rather look bad with the lines of pain on her face."[55] Bina was not habituated in wearing shoes. During 1932-33, when noserings went out of fashion in the elite, civilized, "fashionable society", Mukul Dey had made for her an emerald nosering, without bothering about the prevalent conventions, because Bina had her nose pierced. He would also buy high heel shoes made of skin from the famous Cuthbertson and Harper shop, and made her practise walking wearing them. Many people would consider her a Muslim woman from U.P. and Bina would also feel quite uncomfortable wearing nosering and high heel.[56] Thus, Bina's fashion statements, including shoes, were very much dictated by Mukul's preferences.

In her memoir, *Smritimanjusha* (A Basketful of Memories), Priyabala Gupta (1899[57]-1971), a remarkable self-taught intellectual despite her early marriage, said, "Me and my sisters did not have the fortune of wearing shoes from our childhood. We knew it to be a luxury."[58] Actually, her father was anxious that her daughters might be rebuked after their marriage if they were habituated in wearing shoes. The two younger sisters of Priyabala went to school. Even they would remain barefooted.[59] Her father, despite being close to a very successful branch of the family that had converted to the Brahmo sect, had himself remained a Hindu.

[55] Bina Dey, 'Parichoy', *Nirbachita Ekshan 3: Akhyan O Smriti*, pp. 533-534.
[56] Ibid., p. 521.
[57] Priyabala Gupta did not know which year she was born in. Her son has reconstructed the year roughly as 1899, but we do not know the exact date. She lived in present day India until her marriage at the age of thirteen, when she started living in her marital village in present day Bangladesh (then East Pakistan). She then moved to West Bengal in today's India, for details see Barnita Bagchi, 'Two Lives: voices, resources, and networks in the history of female education in Bengal and South Asia', *Women's History Review*, Vol. 19, No. 1, February 2010, pp. 59-60.
[58] Shyamali Basu, p. 341.
[59] Ibid., p. 341.

He did not oppose the modernization of his daughters' appearance, as we can see that Priyabala would go to the missionary school in Bhagalpur in a *sari*, with chemise underneath, when she was a little girl.[60] Still, shoes were forbidden for them as it was seen as a sign of luxury. The author of 'Bangiya Hindu Mahilar Parichchhad' discussed about the difference in the dressing between the modern Brahmo women and 'traditional' Hindu women, and said that, even though walking without the shoes was really uncomfortable, the Bengali Hindu traditionalist women walked in the roads barefooted. Naturally, the pedestrians laughed seeing them walk like that.[61]

When Sudhira Gupta (b. 1907) was married to Chunilal Gupta, a member of the Arya Samaj[62], in Decembr 1924,[63] her husband had taken her to the Hogg Market for shopping. The things her husband bought for Sudhira on that day included a pair of high-heel shoes.[64] Brought up in a Vaishnava family,[65] Sudhira narrates her experience of that day, "I was twisting my feet and falling repeatedly. But I was not in a position to say anything. After he saw my miserable condition, he had to buy me another pair of sandals. I started walking with him, wearing that, by dragging my feet."[66] The newly wed Sudhira walked like that, covering her head, despite her husband forbidding it, as she was very shy and was habituated in following the orthodox customs in her house. She says, "We could not even dream of wearing shoes then."[67] Even after her marriage, when her fourth eldest uncle had saw her wearing sandals, he had told her, "See, don't come to our house, wearing shoes like a whore."[68] However, when his daughters started to come to Sudhira's house, they had also started wearing shoes.[69] Thus, the meanings of the shoes and the feet wearing the shoes were

[60] Barnita Bagchi, p. 60.
[61] Murshid, p. 173.
[62] A reformist Hindu group founded by Dayanand Saraswati.
[63] Sudhira Gupta, 'Amar Sediner Kotha', *Nirbachita Ekshan 3: Akhyan O Smriti*, pp. 365, 619.
[64] Ibid., pp. 368-369.
[65] Ibid., p. 353.
[66] Ibid., p. 369.
[67] Ibid., p. 369.
[68] Ibid., p. 370.
[69] Sudhira Gupta, p. 370.

changing, albeit slowly. On one hand, there were the modern husbands whose aesthetic sense would want their wives to wear the high heel shoes of western fashion, even though it was difficult for them. On the other hand, the shoe-wearing women were often seen as whores by the orthodox, because the prostitutes had adopted the modern dress, including the shoes, even before the *bhadramahilas* accepted it. Moreover, the shoes had a meaning directly antagonistic to the age old custom of the women not venturing out of the house. Nirad C. Chaudhuri has commented on this orthodox mindset about women wearing footwear:

"Even though the attire was not different in the modern educated Brahmo and Hindu families, there was a difference regarding shoes and socks. Till 1920, the modern educated women of the Hindu families would not wear shoes. On the other hand, in the Brahmo families, not only shoes but socks were also worn. My mother would wear sandals at home and pump shoes to go out from her young age."[70]

The other women of the family would call his mother "not a Brahmo, but a whore."[71]

Nirad C. Chaudhuri's wife, Amiya Chaudhurani (1909-1994) liked to wear high heel shoes from her childhood. When she came to Calcutta and got admitted to College, most of her classmates belonged to the Brahmo background. They were moved by Amiya's fashionable dressing.[72] Boys also started discussing about her, "Is she a Christian? Why does she wear socks and shoes?"[73] Looking at her high heel shoes, many girls also warned her that she might slip and twist her ankle by taking the stairs in such shoes. Amiya herself realised that it was dangerous to move around in high heel shoes on the slippery cement floors of the college. So she started to wear *nagra* shoes instead of high heel shoes to the college.[74]

[70] Shyamali Basu, , p. 341.
[71] Ibid., p. 341.
[72] Jayita Das, p. 212.
[73] Ibid., pp. 212-213.
[74] Ibid., pp. 212-213.

Incidentally, the Bangali Muslim women were probably habituated in wearing shoes. Saiyada Manoara Khatun (1909-1981) and Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain mention shoes casually in their writings, without providing any details about the nature of the footwear.[75] We have already mentioned that the family of Saiyada Manoara Khatun, a *zamindar* family of the Jessore district, had resolved not to wear clothes and shoes of good quality till the country was independent, during the Movement against the Partition of Bengal.

What we can glean from the discussion above is that the western style of footwear was first accepted by the upper class women of the urban Brahmo families. Though, even in the early twentieth century, when there were many women inhabiting the public domain with their choice of reformed clothes, there was no consensus regarding the question of footwear. Amiya Debi was still mocked as a Christian woman for wearing high heel shoes. Probably, it was also because of the influence of *swadeshi* that the western style shoe was considered contrary to the signifiers of nationalism. Hence, many modern educated women wore Indian style *nagra* shoes instead of western style footwear and saw Indian style clothing as aesthetically and morally superior in comparison to the foreign styles – some of them by their own choice, like Saraladebi, and some of them, like Amiya, because of the public opinion.

The varied notions regarding footwear as an adornment hanged together in a very complex system of affinities and oppositions – with similarities and dissimilarities coexisting in the practice of wearing footwear – which organized the world of clothing culture. The lines of evolution did not follow a linear or general pattern.

The rigidities of the orthodoxy regarding Bengali women's western style footwear were going away, but slowly and without uniformity. The Ghosh family of Pathuriaghata was orthodox Hindus.[76] But, in the early part of the twentieth century, the women of the Pathuriaghata Ghosh family also started to wear shoes. In the room outside the Ghosh family

[75] Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, 'Abarodhbasini', p. 274.
[76] Smriti Mitra, *Bodo Badir Chhoto Smriti*, Thima, Kolkata, 2011, p. 82.

house, many salesmen would come and show their collections. The famous shoe-sellers of that time, the Young Company, would show small samples of leather, suade and other materials there, and would sew them as per order. They would draw the measurements of the feet on a paper to make the shoes.[77] Wearing leather high heel shoes was slowly becoming a sign of modernity and elite status. Hence, the women of the Pathuriaghata Ghosh family, who were not even allowed to go to out to see the public theatre but would enjoy the entertainments arrangemed by the men of the family within the house, would now get specially ordered shoes to be worn.[78] But, when Smriti Mitra was married into another propertied family of equal status, which was more or less similar in orthodoxy regarding women's freedom,[79] the women were not allowed to go out anywhere except for family rituals. Even on such occasions, they would need to go out covering the whole body in *benarasi sari* and ornaments and without footwear.[80]

Even in the third decade of the twentieth century, the use of shoes was not universal even among the educated women. The change was coming through some exceptional women who dared to dress according to their own choice. Ushalatika Halder had included shoes in the list of dress materials for the girls in the hostel of the Brahmo Girls School in this time. Shoes were made a mandatory part of the dress.[81] But, that was in a Brahmo institution. Many educated women of course adopted the shoes. Shobha Ghosh, the wife of Professor Debaprasad Ghosh, got admitted to the Bethune College after matriculating from eastern Bengal in 1920. Neighbours would look at her curiously when the newly married wife would dress up and go to the college in horse-drawn bus. Her dress included a *sari* of white body, pinned up to the shoulder, blouse, and ladies shoes.[82] Hamida Khanam, the famous

[77] Smriti Mitra, p. 36.
[78] Ibid., p. 24.
[79] Ibid., pp. 96-103.
[80] Ibid., p. 102.
[81] Jayita Das, p. 76.
[82] Shyamali Basu, p. 350.

educationist of eastern Bengal, who studied in the Bethune college between 1936 and 1940, mentions that Mrinalini Emmerson (Bonnerjee), Professor of English and later the Principal, used to wear high-heel shoes with unicolour chiffon or georgette *sari* and half-sleeve high collar blouse.[83] Another Professor of English and the oldest teacher of the college, Miss Stella Bose, also wore high heel shoes. Most of the students wore shoes with middle-length heels.[84] However, even though there was a uniform for the students in Hamida's time, which they had to wear while going out or on special occasions, shoes were not mentioned in that list. It is not clear whether it was because the shoes were still not an integral part of women's clothes or because it was left as a free choice. But it shows that the use of footwear might not have been universal even among the students of the Bethune College at the fourth decade of the twentieth century.[85]

The role of men in initiating the debate around women's dress in the nineteenth century was crucial. But women's education and their gradual increase in the public domain from the *antahpur*, transformed the shy hesitant girls gradually into smart women experimenting with their own clothes and developing their own dressing sense. These 'emancipated' women intervened in the politics of sartorial representation and the right to wear foortwear, especially the western style shoes, was a part of this process.

Of course, their sartorial experiments were influenced by the contemporary social and political events. Some women did not want to wear shoes spontaneously, be it indigenous shoes or foreign shoes, because of the habit they had developed since their birth, such as Hemantabala Debi's mother who had troublesome experiences with high-heel shoes her educated husband wanted her to wear. Some women perceived shoes as a part of the modern

[83] Shyamali Basu, pp. 346-347.
[84] Ibid., p. 348.
[85] Ibid., pp. 348-349.

dress of the *bhadramahila*. And, in many Hindu families, wearing shoes was considered against the culture even in the twentieth century, as we can see from the comment of Sudhira Gupta's uncle, equating wearing shoes with prostitution.

Thus, the footwear was a major marker of women's emancipation, a tool to facilitate their public appearance. It was very much a symbol around which two sets of men or ideologies – progressive and orthodox – contested over the idea of women desirable in two different varieties of patriarchy. Thus, the women of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries had little agency in the choice to wear (or not wear) footwear, even when they developed a greater agency in the choice of their overall attire. But, after a point, some women negotiated their ways of wearing the shoes of their choice. Sometimes they argued like Bina Dey. Sometimes they changed their choice of shoes for societal pressure in order to be in the public institutions, as Amiya Chaudhurani did. And, sometimes they chose to wear the shoes of their choice fearlessly like Mrinalini or Shobha Ghosh did.

Still, the footwear had a difficult journey than the reformed clothes of women. Even till the third or fourth decade of the twentieth century, women wearing shoes were often judged, though the number of such women was increasing. Women of rural Bengal, of the common middle class families, or from the high class conservative urban Hindu families, still remained barefooted. Women's footwear took a long time to be associated with the Bengali *bhadralok* culture permanently. Even in such a situation, some women of upper/middle class family continued to wear western style leather shoes of middle-length or high heel, despite all kinds of social opposition, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While this choice was forced on some women by their husbands, some of them chose it out of their own volition. It took a long time for such footwear to be normalized among the common women. The western style shoes were the last addition to the attire of 'modern' Bengali women, and remained a distinct style even by the middle of the twentieth century. Therefore, the

contemporary Bengali women, freely wearing a variety of shoes made by foreign companies, owe a lot to the Brahmo women who had walked the open street in footwear in early twentieth century, definitely following the wish of their modernist husbands, as well as to women like Mrinalini Bonnerji (Emmerson) and Amiya Debi who daringly chose to wear their preferred footwear in the twentieth century.

Conclusion

This is a study of the evolution of women's dress in nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal and its social dimensions, seen through women's own writings. We have seen how the social reform projects of the colonial period led to the increased public appearance of women, and how their attire became a terrain of contest among various competing ideologies. Out of these debates, emerged the 'modern' Bengali woman's dress. In this process, the making of the new educated and 'modestly' attired educated 'modern' woman or the *bhadramahila*, the concept of *lajja* was immensely important. The process of 'modernization' brought substantial changes in the notion of shame, and the traditional attire of the Bengali women hardly matched the new standard. Thus, Bengali women's dressing style was gradually transformed. This transformation was mitigated and shaped by the gradual change in female education and the subsequent presence of women in the 'public' space. While the first generation of literate women stayed inside the inner quarters and offered only moments of resistance to the prevalent prejudices, the next generation participated in remaking the concept of the '*bhadramahila'* by creating women's societies, new social practices and new dressing styles, and by supporting women's free movement outside the house. The first-hand accounts of these women reveal that the nineteenth century upper class/caste Bengali women's dressing did not follow mechanically the dictates of colonial Victorian notion of modesty. Rather, they internalized the idea of shame and interacted with that in their own ways, to create new fashion statements enabling Bengali women to come out in public more frequently and in greater numbers. We have also noted the difference of attitude between their autobiographical texts about their life experiences and the prescriptive essays they wrote in various periodicals with a normative content, which shows how women strategically

negotiated their place within the male-dominated sphere of public discourse, and how they participated in creating a hegemonic cultural idea through the silencing of some ideas, the changing meaning of the embodiment of the 'traditional' notions of shame, and the appropriation and indigenization of 'foreign' notions.

I have discussed how all of this was linked to the modernization of the old rural notion of *grihalakshmi*. We have seen that with the rise of nationalism, particularly the Swadeshi movement, decency alone was no longer enough in defining women's sartorial choices. As women were often considered the embodiment of the nation's honour, their cloth had to be 'modern' yet 'national' and 'traditional'. The ambiguities of these multifaceted changes and contestations over clothes as markers of social identity were addressed by women themselves in their writings. These transitions were not mere changes in fashion, but the various attempts to dress the 'self' in various roles expected of women in this period of transition: sometimes the role of a decent 'modernized' *bhadramahila,* sometimes the role of a traditional yet educated *grihalakshmi*, and sometimes the embodiment of ideal Indian womanhood. But the ambiguities in the dressing style of these women explain that these roles were not always decided for the women by the *bhadraloks* or by the overarching patriarchies. The women played a major role in deciding how their selves would be fashioned in the changing times. As a result, the account of the women shows a variety of sartorial choices emerging out of different considerations, rather than a unilinear evolution in dressing dictated by male-dominated notions of modernism, traditionalism or nationalism.

One major issue, in the interaction between women's growing public appearance and the transformation in dressing, was the reception of the footwear. Bengali women, traditionally not expected to step out of the house, were supposed not to use footwear. However, when the

western-educated elite imbibed the western notion of female emancipation, they expected their wives to be attired suitably for public appearance. This of course included footwear. I have shown the various cultural meanings associated with women using footwear, specially the Western-style high heels. Initially, the footwear was a tool to facilitate women's public life, hence a major marker of women's emancipation. At this early stage, footwear was a symbol around which two sets of men contested over the idea of women desirable in two different varieties of patriarchy, the women having little agency in the choice to wear footwear. As a result, even till the third or fourth decade of the twentieth century, women wearing shoes were still judged. On the one hand, the number of women choosing to wear footwear was increasing. On the other, women of rural Bengal, of the common middle-class families, and from the high class conservative urban Hindu families still, often, remained barefooted. However, some women of upper/middle class families wore western style leather shoes with high or middle-length heel, despite all kinds of social opposition. While wearing these types of shoes was forced on some women by their husbands, some of them chose it out of their own volition. The adoption of footwear had a more complicated journey than the adoption of western clothes. However, still there were some women who were asserting their agency and carving out a space for their choice regarding footwear. It took a long time for such footwear to be normalized among the common Bengali women. The western style shoes were the last addition to the attire of the *bhadramahila*, and remained a distinct style even by the middle of the twentieth century.

This study shows that the changes in women's clothing had major political consequences, which can facilitate our theorization of hegemony and subalternity. This is manifested in the derivative character of social subjectivity and the agency of women. Through their own narratives, we can see how women did not always succumb to the prescriptive authority of cultural nationalism which implicitly tried to dominate women's sartorial choices. This study

shows that the relationship between these women and modernity was complex and in some cases liberating. Their approach towards dressing did not always follow the male-dominated agenda of nation-building. Rather, their approaches were often resisting the patriarchal control over women's sexuality and motherhood. Their autobiographical writings reflect a desire for much more than the roles of chaste wives and good mothers, even though their normative writings, at times, valorized the 'new patriarchy' of nationalism. We need to understand that women's acquiescence to nationalist patriarchy may also be seen as women's desexualisation. The nuanced look into their relationship with their attire reveals a distinct propensity to flout both old and new patriarchy. Their agency for resistance is visible through their counter-discourse of self-fashioning, which is invincible in the male-dominated representation of the *bhadramahilas.*

In conclusion we need to remember that there was no monolithic character of the dressing style of the *bhadramahila* as described by many male authors who created a false sense of homogeneity where all consciousness lost their differences in a singular line of progress/change/improvement. If we look beyond the small set of selected anti-modernist binary politics, we will be able to see how women placed themselves into the nationalist thought without subsuming their differences and how these women created identities for themselves. These changes provided the context for further complexities and innovations in women's sartorial representational politics in the post-independence period. However, that development is beyond the scope of this work. This work thus limits itself to adding a new perspective to view the changes in Bengali women's sartorial experience with the coming of 'modernity' that itself, as I have tried to show, was not one or uniform.