

Synopsis of Ph. D Thesis

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

**Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Introduction

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

The third decade of the 19th century witnessed a change in society's attitude towards women's education. Being a colonised country, the spread of western thought about education was prevalent amongst the English educated middle class men.¹ Initiatives were taken to spread education among girls by missionaries as well. But the general idea was not to send the girls to the schools founded by missionaries as they allowed lower caste and prostitutes and promoted religious conversion.² It was in 1840s that girls started joining schools. The *Zenana* (homeschooling) system became popular where group teaching was common. In exceptional cases, English governesses were hired as temporary residents for the purpose of teaching women of the house. They were appointed to make the women attain all-round training in womanly qualities like etiquette, deportment, table manners and so on.³ It was restricted to a very small percentage of urban population and did not reach a large percentage of women like Rasasundari who had a keen interest in learning. From the writing of Rasasundari, one could fathom such desires and regrets of women.

The newly acquired consciousness of educated middle class *bhadralok* on compatible relationship between husband and wife and need to make women better mothers for facilitating better household management led to spread of women's education.⁴ But such changes achieved limited patriarchal satisfaction. Partha Chatterjee argued that a 'new patriarchy' would infuse orderliness, cleanliness, literacy, accounting, hygiene etc, in short, the basic needs to run a

¹ Chakravarty, *Andare Antare*, 42. Also see Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, 7.

² Chakravarty, *Andare Antare*, 44-45. Also see Swapan Basu, 'Unish Shatake Stree Shiksha', (Kolkata, BangiyoSahityaParisat, 2019), 32-33.

³ Karlekar, *Voices From Within*, 6.

⁴ Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, 12, 17, 27-28.

household properly.⁵ He shows how the nationalists created various dichotomies in the socio-political arena -home/world, spiritual / material, inner/outer and feminine/masculine to resolve the women's question.⁶

But the issue of women's question which was the most discussed debate once in public forum, after the 1870s had been sidelined. Chatterjee argues the concept of the "ideal woman" originated in the last decades of the nineteenth century initiated by the revivalist nationalists to differentiate the indigenous culture from the West and focusing on traditional values. It situated women in the inner domain of the household.⁷ The woman's question was situated in a 'modern' condition. As the old beliefs about women's education faded away, numerous narratives on methods in which women from respectable families should engage themselves in education keeping their honour and dignity intact, poured in.⁸ It was expected from an educated 'ideal woman' that she through cultural refinement will not jeopardise her place at home and refrain from becoming a *memsahib*.⁹ So an ideal woman will be one who on the one hand, becomes modern and on the other, carries traditional values and customs as a result of which she was reduced to a passive agent. Taking up Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay,¹⁰ Chatterjee modelled a 'new woman' concerning her dress, food, manners, education, home management skills and dealing with the outside world.¹¹

The question of education was intimately linked with the cultural upliftment of the indigenous population. Intervention in 'culture' was inevitable in colonial India as a result of civilisational interactions.¹² Therefore, upper caste Hindu elites in three Presidencies received the 'benefit' of colonial western education as the pioneers. In Bengal, middle-class Hindus expected better opportunities in terms of profession after acquiring western education. However, they

⁵ Partha Chatterjee, "The Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Indian Colonial History*, ed. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Jersey: Rutgers University Press New Brunswick, 1999), 247.

⁶ Chatterjee, *The Nationalist Resolution*, 233-253.

⁷ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 116-117.

⁸ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 124.

⁹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128.

¹⁰ He was a writer and intellectual of nineteenth century Bengal. The upper mentioned argument of him is from his essay- 'Paribarik Prabandha', written in 1882.

¹¹ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 127.

¹² Deepak Kumar, Joseph Bara, Nandita Khadria and Ch. Radha Gayathri, *Education in Colonial India-Historical Insights*, (New Delhi, Manohar, 2013), 11.

experienced its limitations soon and preferred the mixing of the two worlds.¹³ Educated *bhadralok* though in dilemma about the filtered western impact on Bengali women, they favoured educated wives.

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

Further talking about ideal women's education, the 'female curriculum' was a long-debated issue of the nineteenth century. It left a mark in the twentieth century in numerous writings. It became a fundamental task of the nationalist project to launch textbooks and new literature in the mother tongue. Education for women then was not for knowledge gaining but to inculcate the bourgeois virtues such as orderliness, thrift, cleanliness, sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting, hygiene, and proper household management. Added to this, she had to have some idea of the outside world also, retaining the feminine values intact.¹⁴ All the values they had to grasp were feminine ('*meyeli*') in nature. There was a difference between '*nari siksha*' (woman's education) and '*meyeli shiksha*' (feminine education) bearing vastly different implications. The first is promoting the emancipation of women by way of education, the second is trying to reinforce gender stereotypes.

While the normative social expectation for men was to acquire education to attain economic independence, it was a debatable issue when it came to women. There was clear discrimination in terms of economic independence of men and women respectively. It was believed that women's education should be for the strengthening of the household and the building of the nation. The sole purpose was therefore social and not economic in nature.

Even those who advocated for women's employment suffered from the anxiety of competition between the sexes in the work field. Efforts were thus made to ensure women's jobs

¹³ Kumar et. al. *Education in Colonial India*, 19.

¹⁴ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 128-130.

did not challenge the men's job market. Married women were advised to refrain from taking paid jobs and unmarried educated women were guided to a career that would not challenge men's sphere of work.¹⁵ From 1920s onwards, a number of journal editors and contributors began to show a positive attitude toward the economic independence of middle-class women.¹⁶ Given the ongoing economic crisis and a change in the socio-political scenario, emphasis was given on earnings of widows, the deserted and the spinsters in the pages of journals and periodicals. The concept of separate spheres of work for men and women however continued as earlier. Women were trained to work as teachers in primary schools, nurses, midwives, producers and sellers of handicrafts, etc. Also, the economic impoverishment of middle-class families especially caused by the breakdown of the Hindu joint family was another reason for the increase in demand for women's paid jobs.¹⁷

Women's education and question of independent earning were most influenced by circumstances like marriage, domesticity and childbirth. Early marriage often hampered women's education. However, with the emergence of an educated middle-class of *bhadraloks* and their demand for educated wives, women's learning continued after marriage too. Yet, motherhood did not allow them further knowledge of the outside world. With the increase in domestic responsibilities including child rearing, women's lives were confined within the four walls of her household.

Talking about political arena, before entering mainstream politics in the twentieth century women started fighting patriarchy's constant effort to restrict them to the household. Women started pushing back against the nationalist moulding of the ideal wife and mother. The constant emphasis on '*meyeli siksha*' (feminine education as mentioned in chapter one) was also pushing into '*meyeli kaj*' (feminine work discussed in chapter two). Women continued the fight to be educated and be financially independent. They also fought for their choices and rights concerning their life, their body and mind. Women were fighting for their right to use contraception, to exercise their choice of life-partner, and even on the decision of getting married or staying unmarried. A woman's constant fight in her personal space could be perceived from a

¹⁵ Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila," 67.

¹⁶ Ishita Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila and the 'Endangered Race: Changing Discourse on Women's Work in Bengal,'" *Economic and Political Weekly* 57, no. 32 (August 2022): 66.

¹⁷ Chakravarty, "The Earning Bhadramahila, 67.

gendered perspective of politics. In other words, this could be read as their political articulation as well as struggle for gaining agency and rights in the twentieth century.

Sources

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

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

First two decades of the twentieth century women's writings mainly conveyed the message of being an ideal woman. So they themselves participated in marginalisation processes through the internalisation of patriarchal norms. *Bamabodhini Patrika*, *Antahpur*, *Archana*, *Punyo*, *Bharat Mahila*, *Janhabhi* etc mainly popularised the views opposing western influence on women's lives. They promulgated women's education but it was in a form that facilitated women's domestication. From the 1920s, women were no longer ready to accept disrespectful behavior and indifferent attitude towards them. *Bangalakshmi*, *Jayashree*, *Prabartak*, *Sachitra Sisir*, *Udayan*, *Mohila Mahal*, *Utsaho*, *Arani*, *Swadesh*, *Dipali* etc played crucial roles in putting

forward different outlook of women in the third and fourth decades. Sometimes periodicals used to comprise exclusive sections for discussion of feminine issues like ‘Narilok’ in *Dipali*, ‘Mohila Jagat’ in *Swadesh*, ‘Mohila Bibhag’ in *Prabartak* and so on. Sometimes the entire periodical was dedicated to women like *Bangalakshmi*, *Jayashree* and *Mohila Mahal*. Sources indicate increased consciousness of women though it did not bring about major transformation in their perspective compared to the previous century. It was a slow process consisting of dilemma, continuity and change.

One of the important sources of this study is women’s personal narratives. Malavika Karlekar in ‘*Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*’ argued autobiographies, journals, letters and diaries as private and personal writings are a medium of expressing consciousness, self-perception, gender relations, social structure, political and social change etc.¹⁸ According to her, writing about oneself is a conscious act as it proves the subject’s choice to express desires through feelings and emotions, also events. Sometimes these writings lack chronology, time period of the events, and clarity but the creation becomes important as it expresses one’s views, feelings and emotions about an incident he/she is witnessing.¹⁹

Antoinette Burton showed how women’s memories of home can be used as an archive. It can be considered a convergence of private and public as well as personal and political. As women’s lives in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century revolved around their families, Burton discusses three such lives in her book, indicating that family histories and memories of home can be constructed as historical evidence for successive generations. She talked about the prospects of ‘counter-histories of colonial modernity’ acquired from those memories.²⁰

Aparna Bandyopadhyay granted immense significance to women’s narratives—fiction, autobiographies and memoirs in tracing a woman’s mind, emotions, desires, dilemmas and inner conflicts. These also provided an understanding of women’s defiance even when they appear to conform to patriarchal norms. Although their personal narratives seem compliant, the fiction carried subversive characters.²¹

¹⁸ Malavika Karlekar, *Voices From Within: Early Personal Narratives of Bengali Women*, (Delhi: OUP, 1991), 4.

¹⁹ Karlekar, *Voices From Within*, 15-16.

²⁰ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling In The Archive: Women writing House, home and History in late Colonial India*, (OUP, 2003), 4-5.

²¹ Aparna Bandyopadhyay, ‘Towards a History of Women in Love in Colonial Bengal’, Paper Presented at the International Conference on *Shifting Contours, Widening Concerns: Women’s History, Historiography and the*

Review of Existing Literature

To gain a deeper understanding of women's changing consciousness in the chosen timeframe and to draw a rich conclusion, one has to delve with existing literature. The firsthand experience of Bengali women and their lives at home as witnessed by Margaret M. Urquhart has been observed in her book '*Women of Bengal*' (1925). She said in the preface of the book that her motive is "to give a picture of the Bengali Woman in her natural setting, the Bengali home." Her account covered a vast spectrum of women's lives related to the culture and customs of Bengal and provided a comprehensive picture of the time.²²

Dagmar Engels analyses the differences in gender ideology and social practices between the Bengalis and colonial rulers. His work also reciprocates various aspects dealing with women's identification to the domestic arena. It suggests the changing ideology and politicisation of the 'private sphere' with the changing political circumstances.²³

The anthology- '*Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*'²⁴ by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid is an important book to understand the historical processes that facilitated the reconstruction of patriarchy in colonial India in relation to different class/caste. This study showed that the middle class initiative to social reform movement was gendered and it led to the separation of the public and private spheres. This patriarchal model was internalised by women and facilitated the emergence of *bhadramahila*. 'New patriarchy' was giving birth to 'new woman' –as argued by Chatterjee in the article 'the Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question' in the anthology.²⁵

'*Women Writing in India: 600 B.C. to the Present*' written by Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, draws a portrait of Indian women's lives over centuries. The anthology includes a large spectrum

Politics of Historical Representation held at Research Centre for Women's Studies, SNDT Women's University, Mumbai, 11–13 February 2015

²² Margaret M. Urquhart, *Women of Bengal*, (Delhi: Cultural Publishing House, 1983).

²³ Dagmar Engels, "The Limits of Gender Ideology: Bengali Women, the Colonial State, and the Private Sphere, 1890-1930," *Women's Studies Int. Forum* 12, No. 4. (1989), 425-437.

²⁴ Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

²⁵ Partha Chatterjee, "the Nationalist Resolution of the Women's Question, in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*" ed. by Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid, (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1990).

of writings by women from different socio-cultural backgrounds, writing in different languages, time and space. Therefore it provided a pan Indian background to construct the present work.²⁶

Bharati Ray's article 'Women in Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947,' is an important work for this study which explores the changes in urban middle class women's ideas and desires regarding education, marriage, motherhood, economic activities and organisational works.²⁷

Tanika Sarkar's '*Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*' included nine valuable essays that provided essential ingredients to construct the background of this work. She highlighted the transition period from liberal reform tradition to the origin of revivalist nationalism, which is crucial to understanding politicisation of domestic sphere and women's issues -the basis of my study focusing on internalisation process of the patriarchal norms.²⁸

Despite providing a justification of archiving women's accounts structuring this work, Antoinette Burton's '*Dwelling in the Archive: Women writing House, Home and History in Late Colonial India*' is also essential for analysing relationships between history and memory, public and private and the nation and home.²⁹

Citing eight women's personal narratives, memoirs, diaries and articles belonging to different regions and communities of India Aparna Basu and Malavika Karlekar's '*In So Many Words: Women's Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India*', focused on evaluating the 'self', replicated in their writings. It helps to get an overall picture of upper middle class women's life experiences related to their socio-political backgrounds. This work helps to mould the present study as it is also based on various forms of women's writings.³⁰

Padma Anagol's article 'Agency, Periodisation and Change in the Gender and Women's History of Colonial India' helped this work to think beyond the nationalism-imperialism

²⁶ Susie Tharu and K. Lalita, *Women Writing in India; 600B.C to the Present*, Vol. I: 600 B.C to the Early Twentieth Century, (New York, The Feminist Press, 1991).

²⁷ Bharati Ray, *Women in Bengal: Transformation in Ideas and Ideals, 1900-1947*, *Social Scientist*, 19, no. 5/6, (May-June, 1991). <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3517870>

²⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu wife, Hindu Nation: Community, Religion and Cultural Nationalism*, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001).

²⁹ Antoinette Burton, *Dwelling In The Archive: Women writing House, home and History in late Colonial India*, (OUP, 2003).

³⁰ Aparna Basu and Malavika Karlekar, *In So Many Words: Women's Life Experiences from Western and Eastern India*, (London: Routledge, 2007).

framework. Beyond the Gandhian era that facilitated women's participation in the public sphere, Anagol suggests articulation of different angles about women's agency. Her elaborate work on vernacular literature of western India provides various ideas for this literature based study of Bengal.³¹

Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal by Sarmistha Dutta Gupta is another significant work to mention here. It explores how the gender identities of women over the four decades of the twentieth century are connected with their other identities like class, caste, community, and religion and how such identities were reinforced through the print culture. The author emphasises the power relationships through the sexual politics in everyday life between men and women in the family, in public institutions, and political parties.³² As this work deals with journals of the twentieth century, it helps me to understand the gender politics of the time through the changes a journal went through.

Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi's edited book *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*, tried to mould a category 'literary history' of gender. They aim to show how this category has been constructed through beliefs, reason and emotion. The selected writings by women in periodicals from various fields show the interlinked activities that their writings echoed. These writings made one understand the changes in the life practices and beliefs of women.³³

Sabyasachi Bhattacharya's book *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947*, attempted to construct an overall picture of Bengal in the twentieth century by gathering some fundamental elements of the life and mind of Bengal of the time. This work elaborates on the incidents from each decade that mould the history of Bengal. My study regarding the period has got its historical background from this valuable work.³⁴

Tim Allender's book 'Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932' is an essential reading to construct ideas of women's education in colonial India. Also, the interactions between

³¹ Padma Anagol, "Agency, Periodisation and Change in the Gender and Women's History of Colonial India," *Gender & History* 20 no.3 (November 2008), 603–627.

³² Sarmistha Dutta Gupta, *Identities and Histories: Women's Writing and Politics in Bengal*, (Kolkata: Stree, 2010).

³³ Ipshita Chanda and Jayeeta Bagchi, *Shaping the Discourse: Women's Writings in Bengali Periodicals 1865-1947*, (Kolkata: Stree and School of Women's Studies, Jadavpur University, 2014).

³⁴ Sabyasachi Bhattacharya, *The Defining Moments in Bengal: 1920-1947*, (New Delhi: OUP, 2014).

the colonial state and British women in relation to the education of women in India portrayed in this is necessary in providing a gendered perspective of women's education in colonial India.³⁵

Bharati Ray's book '*Prabasite Nari: 1901-1947*' carried related writings by men and articles written by women within the timeframe. She argues that the women's issues like their education, progress, and position in domestic space and society gradually became significant from the mid-nineteenth century, which increased day by day. She focused on this period and also *Prabasi*'s span of time is equated with it. Though my work excludes *Prabasi*, the articles written in the book helped me to understand the period better.³⁶

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

Chapterisation

The first chapter will discuss the ways in which a change came about in women's consciousness regarding the necessity for education in the first half of the twentieth century. An analysis of women's writings belonging to the period helps us understand their point of view on different issues regarding education, contemporary social oppositions, and how women were dealing with those situations.

The domestication of women by nationalists, continued unabated in the twentieth century right from the nineteenth century. In spite of some efforts and encouragement of colonisers to enhance women's educational prospects in Bengal, indigenous men and women's constant emphasis on feminine education (*meyeli shiksha*), overshadowed women's education (*nari shiksha*). It posed the central roadblock to women's education and enhanced a 'gendered'

³⁵ Tim Allender, 'Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932', (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016).

³⁶ Bharati, Ray, *Prabasite Nari: 1900-1947*, (Kolkata: Ananda, 2016).

internalisation process in society. Though we often heard women's voices against such advocates of 'gender' roles, the internalisation of patriarchal norms persisted restricting women's all-round educational growth. Therefore, the dilemma, continuity and change regarding *meyeli shiksha* and *nari shiksha* are highlighted in the first chapter.

The purpose of their education has been the topic of the first chapter. But there was a silence about women's financial independence. The second chapter regarding women's economic independence discusses the objective of women's education at this time—mainly limited to strengthening the household and bolstering nation building. There had been continuous discouragement for women to join male led workforce as paid jobs and steer them towards 'feminine' jobs or 'suitable' professions for them. Most of the contemporary women's writings reinforced the idea of 'feminine' job or '*meyeli kaj*'. As women's designation of 'queen of the household' or 'mothers of the nation' had already been mainstreamed in society, their work as a caregiver was emphasised. So, the jobs like teaching, social service, nursing, medical practice, midwifery etc were advertised as suitable for women. The present discussion explains how it was reflected in women's writings.

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

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

the political construction of gendered roles was also very clear in the women's writings. This chapter will explore women's political identities and consciousness through their writings which at times dealt with personal issues. It will focus on gendered politics in inner and outer domain.

Conclusion

The issue of women's education covered expansive themes, addressed diverse concerns rooted in the socio-economic scenario of the period and generated a whole range of debates. The question of education exposed the overlaps between traditionalist and modernist ideas and illuminated that women as a category was neither homogenous nor did they bear the same values or opinions. Contemporary women's writings especially in the 1920s and 1930s reflected a positive societal change towards women's independent thinking regarding their existence, choice of lifestyle, choice of life partners, and motherhood. Simultaneously, their writings reflected a deep understanding of women's position in society, the importance of their existence, a sense of self-awareness, and the significance of feminine identity. After analysing contemporary women's writings, it can be said that they were remarkably aware of the contemporary social developments and the real condition of women. The continuous push back of society towards the domestication of women led to their diminished representation in the field of politics. The nationalists' moulding of mother image, constant pressure of becoming an ideal mother of a heroic son and presenting women as '*Deshmata*' for whom the brave sons would sacrifice their lives—contributed to the women's space moulded by nationalists as '*Debi*'. Further the Gandhian strategy of involving women in the nationalist politics too was restrictive and further confined them within home or realms of social work. The gendered character of militant nationalism also hindered their direct and large-scale involvement.

Yet, the constructed mother image of women somehow started to break down from 1920s onwards. One can notice women's discerning voices regarding reading subjects like mathematics, demanding their independent earnings, craving for leisure time and life-style change and healthy bodies to engage in women's associations and political movements. Having realised the disadvantages of illiteracy, early marriage, constant child bearing and rearing, women fought for late marriage, higher education, choices in marriage and fewer children in

their life. So, the imagery of mother that restricted them to the domestic arena was losing ground in the third and fourth decades of the twentieth century.

Internalisation and marginalisation were two significant factors of this study, interlinked with each other. These two continuous processes slowed down women's rising consciousness in socio-political issues, discussed in this study. Throughout the colonial period patriarchal norms and gender construction facilitated marginalisation of Indian women at home and outside. It is apt to point out that in every field there was a constant effort by patriarchy to restrict women's movement. Be it the educational sphere where patriarchy harped on '*meyeli shiksha*', '*meyeli kaj*' in case of economic activities, women's choices of marriage, lifestyle and childbirth or political participation, male domination always marginalised women's roles. Unfortunately, women of the time with very few exceptions, internalised this hard fact, unknowingly mirroring it in their writings which further reinforced the above-mentioned processes.

Countersigned by the

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