

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

By
Malini Ghosh
Resistration No: A00HI010081
Ph. D Research Scholar
Jadavpur University

Under the Supervision of
Professor Maroona Murmu
Department of History
Jadavpur University

Kolkata 700032

2023

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.

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.

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' 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.

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.