

## **ECHOES OF EMPOWERMENT: UNVEILING GENDER DYNAMICS AND FEMINISM'S JOURNEY IN COLONIAL BENGAL**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The colonial period in India witnessed the rise of variety of movements and spread of liberal ideology throughout the country. The dawn of these movements came from the Bengal province in the eastern part of India where pioneers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, often termed as the 'father of Indian Renaissance' promoted liberal and feminist ideologies and movements in the eighteenth century. This paper aims to explore the gender dynamics and the emergence of feminist movements in Bengal during the colonial period. The period saw a complex patriarchal structure imposed by the colonial rulers as well the native societal structures. In spite of these dominating and oppressing structures, Bengal still witnessed the rise of feminism where women challenged their traditional gender roles and advocating their rights.

**Keywords:** Feminism, Colonialism, Bengali Women, Patriarchy, Nineteenth Century

### **INTRODUCTION**

Bengal, a hub for nationalist movement in the India's struggle for independence was also heart of feminist movements. The Bengali women in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century were subjected to the patriarchal domination in the society where their position in the society depended upon their male counterparts. They were dominated in the private sphere by their husbands and in-laws were expected to serve their 'masters' in the household. The colonial rule also dominated them in public sphere which ultimately led to the denial of basic rights to the women in public as well private life.

Feminism in Bengal as well as the whole of India has a distinguishing feature: it was started with the efforts of men. Eminent personalities like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sarat Chandra Chattopadhyay played an important role in fighting for the cause of women. However, the contribution of female feminist thinkers remains lesser known to the world till

date. The period saw the rise of eminent female personalities like Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain, Rassundari Devi, Krishnabhabini Das, Swarnakumari Devi.

This paper aims to explore the condition of women in colonial Bengal, the amount of rights or freedom they had, the rise of feminist ideology in Bengal and the contributions made by the female feminist figures in the emancipation of women in colonial Bengal.

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

In the field of Feminism especially in colonial Bengal, many academicians, research scholars, authors have made significant contributions to the field. This section of the paper contains review of some the contributing works made by the scholars in the field.

“Vision of women’s Empowerment: A Critical Feminist Study of “Sultana’s Dream” by Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hossain” by Md Najimuddin and Bilal Waziri analysed the repressive status of women in nineteenth century Bengal as described in the book by Begum Rokeya in “Sultana’s Dream” in a dream-like sequence where Sultana dreams of women’s emancipation from men and advocated education as the mode of emancipation. However, this paper does not take into account other feminist ideas and critiques of that time and does not delve deep into discussing the cultural and historical context of colonial Bengal which could have given a deeper insight into the life of women and gender dynamics of colonial Bengal.

The paper by Avinash Rai titled “Analysing the Passivity and Feminist Consciousness of Colonial Bengal's” gives an in-depth study on the condition of the women of the Muslim Community including their struggles. As little research is conducted in the life of Muslim women this paper aimed to fill the void of scholarly pursuits to analyse the conditions of the “minority within the minority”. However, this paper failed to address and analyse the condition of other minority communities within colonial Bengal such as the Bengali Christians, Bengali Buddhists, *Dhakayias*, *Sylhetis* and so on.

“Choreographing gender in Colonial Bengal: The dance work of Rabindranath Tagore and Pratima Devi” by Prarthana Purkayastha offers an insight of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century Bengali colonised women’s movements and performative gestures primarily focusing on the works of Nobel laureate poet Rabindranath Tagore and his daughter-in-law Pratima Devi giving an understanding of the development of dance and its rebellious repercussions on the patriarchal Indian nationalism. Despite being a notable work, this work fails to address the challenges faced by colonial Bengali women who struggled to negotiate a balance between patriarchy and colonialism.

The book by Bharati Ray titled “Early Feminists of Colonial India: Sarala Devi Chaudhurani and Rokeya Shakawat Hussain” aims to provide an insight into the lives, works and contributions of the two aforementioned early feminists in colonial Bengal and gives an understanding of the life and struggles faced by women in the region. However, it lacks a comprehensive analysis of the broader aspect of the women’s movement in the colonial Bengal and fails to take into account the experiences of the colonised women from marginalised communities in Bengal.

The article by Tanika Sarkar titled “Enfranchised selves: women, culture and rights in nineteenth-century Bengal” sheds lights on the entitlement of women to an intellectual life and rights against physical and sexual harm and the emergence of the female franchise, debates around controversial topics such as widow remarriage, sati, the age of consent and so on. However, this paper fails to analyse a connected history of women’s rights acquisition, limitations and impact of new reformist laws on the society at that time.

### **Research Gap:**

The above-mentioned papers, books, articles, journals have analysed and examined several aspects of feminism and gender inequality of Bengal in the colonial period. While the books and articles provided an insight about the gender inequality and feminism in Bengal, it failed to address gender inequality and feminism in colonial Bengal directly, thus, resulting in a few numbers of systematic study conducted in the field. This paper aims to explore and analyse such areas in a systematic way.

### **OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY**

The objective of this study is to explore the lifestyle of the Bengali women in colonial times in the light of the prevailing patriarchy, their rights before and after the rise of feminist movements in social, economic, cultural and political aspect. This paper also aims to analyse the factors that led to the rise of feminist movements in colonial Bengal specifically in the nineteenth century and some of the prominent female feminist figures of colonial Bengal while mentioning their contribution.

### **Research Question:**

While keeping in mind the objective of the study, the paper aims to answer the following questions: 1) How does the prevailing structure of patriarchy in colonial Bengal affected the life of Bengali women? 2) What were rights granted to the Bengali women before the rise of feminism in Bengal in the colonial period and how their lifestyle changed after the rise of feminism? 3) What were the factors that led to the rise of feminist movements in colonial

Bengal? 4) Who were the prominent female figures of feminism in Bengal and what were their contributions in addressing gender issues in colonial Bengal?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This paper aims to analyse the prevailing structure of gender inequality, patriarchy and the rise of feminism in the context of colonialism in Bengal in the nineteenth century. Hence, a qualitative methodology of research including historical and analytical methods has been conducted to gather a sequence of secondary data and details on gender dynamics and rise of feminism in Bengal when it was colonised.

## **LIFE IN COLONIAL BENGAL**

British colonial rule created the Bengali middle class as *bhadralok* (*Bhadra*- decent, *lok*- people), consisting the educated population including doctors, teachers and lawyers. These men were placed in the upper crust of the Bengali society and occupied a crucial juncture between the colonial masters and the colonised Bengalis and were central to the reform movements. Meredith Borthwick focused on the *Bhadramahila* of the Bengal, "in broad terms the mothers, wives and daughters of the many schoolmasters, lawyers, doctors, and government servants who made up the English educated professional Bengali 'middle class as *Bhadralok*'"(Borthwick, 1984).

The family structure in the colonial Bengal was predominantly a structure of joint family, following a patrilineal lineage akin to majority of families in India. The men of the family, '*karta*' dominated the life in the domestic household while their female counterparts; their wives, '*ginni*' were subservient. The lowest status of the household was given to a newly-wed girl who were dominated not only by the men but also the older *ginnis* of the household. The women of the upper caste Bengali households had to follow the custom of *parda* where they had to cover their faces in front of the men of the household. This system became a symbol of their high status in the society.

In a Bengali— in fact Indian—Hindu joint family, the birth of a daughter was traditionally considered a misfortune, aptly expressed by the Bengali proverb, "*Meye, meye, meye, tush karle kheye*" (she tortures us like slow fire) (Ray, 1991). This notion of a girl child being a bad omen to the family mainly arise due to the prevailing patriarchal structure and practices in India which was not uncommon to Bengal. The denial of the rights to education, the compulsion of the marriage of a girl before attending her puberty, demand for heavy dowry during marriage were some the practices which were responsible for the notion of a girl child being unfortunate to the family.

The practice of *Kanya-daan* during marriage was a common practice which led to physical and conceptual transfer of a bride to her in-laws after marriage resulting into an atmosphere of fear and anxiety for the newly-wed girl which has been beautifully articulated by Rassundari Devi's autobiography "Amar Jiban". She narrates about the day when she was departing for her husband's home, she begged to her mother, "Dear mother, Please don't give me away" (Devi, 1876). She also mentioned her life of continuous struggle and hard work after her marriage where she would be immersed in housework the whole day and the older women of the family despised her when she read books.

However, in the nineteenth century, Bengali women began to receive education which unfortunately was moulded under the Victorian model of education system for women, aimed to make women better at doing household jobs and being better wives. Education received by the Bengali Muslim women were mainly focused on the teachings of Quran. However, the education was confined to the *bhadraloks* of Bengal, leaving little to no scope to women of minority population such as the *Santhals*, *Lodhas*, *Bedias* etcetera.

### **RIGHTS OF BENGALI WOMEN UNDER COLONIAL RULE**

Bengal under the colonial rule was not subjected to demand for individual rights. Thus, women were unable to assert inalienable rights as they were seen as subservient to their husbands or their household and not as a separate identity. The women under colonial Bengal were mostly confined to the household. They strictly had to adhere to customs like the *parda* system, especially the upper caste Bengali women.

The Bengali girls were married off before attending puberty and their only job after marriage was to serve her husband or in-laws and had no right to earn a livelihood by working outside of their home. Education was seen as a taboo and the society despised educated women. Education was only confined to the women upper caste families in Bengal and there was little to no scope for the women of minority population to get access to elementary education. However, the education received by the women were mostly inspired by the Victorian education system which was meant to design women to become better housewives.

"According to the school of law which prevailed in Bengal, the right to inherit arose from the right to perform *shraddha*" (Ray, 1991), the ritual performed to honour a deceased antecedent. The women's right to inheritance, in rare scenarios was not absolute, however, she had rights over the gifts received in form of dowry and other presents received during her marriage. Unfortunately, in some cases the gifts received by the women during her marriage came into the possession of her mother-in-law or her sister-in-law.

The Britishers with their patriarchal mindset were determined to dominate their colonised subjects especially the female subjects which had an effect on every policy or administrative measure.”This dominant attitude became instrumental behind the negligent approach of the Raj towards the Indian women, Bengali women in particular.” (Goswami, 2014) The extreme dichotomisation between the public and the private sphere led women to adhere to their prescribed roles. Even if they had any individual grudges towards the system, they found little opportunity to formally rebel against it.

### **RISE OF FEMINIST MOVEMENTS IN BENGAL UNDER COLONIAL RULE**

Nineteenth century Bengal saw a dawn of feminist movements through the demand of reforms made by the educated middle class to the Britishers for the improvement of the condition of the women. These reforms were successful in abolishing evil practices like *sati* in 1828, legalisation of widow remarriage in 1856, passing of the age of consent bill in 1891 where intercourse with wives below the age of twelve was declared illegal. Institutions like the Brahma Sabha and Christian missionaries upheld the right to education for women.

First generation of feminist thinkers of Bengal began to publish their work during this period. Rassundari Devi’s autobiography- *Amar Jiban* (My Life) published as early as 1876 was considered as a historic event which was published even before Tarabai Shinde’s “Stri Purush Tulna” (1882) as well as Pandita Ramabai’s “The High Caste Hindu Women” (1887). The autobiography sheds light upon the patriarchal dominance in her times. Leading top tier journals for women like the *Bambodhini Patrika* and *Bharati* were published under women editors. Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) became the first women to practise medicine and Swarnakumari Devi established the *Sakhi Samiti* which became one of the first voluntary associations in Bengal for women.

“In the nineteenth century, the ‘woman’s question’ loomed large. This was not so much a question of what women wanted, but rather how they could be modernised. It became the central question in nineteenth-century British India, because the foreign rulers had focused their attention on this particular aspect of society” (Chakraborty, 2009) and “influential British writers condemned Indian religion, culture and society for their rules and customs regarding women” (Forbes, 1998). To claim their racial superiority, the imagery of “modern women” was inspired from the Victorian ideal. In the words of Bharati Ray “It has been argued that the leadership of this movement, the English-educated professional class, wanted not to make women independent or equal of men in the family or the public life. The aim was to make them better equipped as mothers/wives to lend their menfolk social support in the colonial setting.” (Ray, 1991).

## **PROMINENT FEMALE FEMINIST FIGURES OF BENGAL**

One of the significant characteristics of Indian feminism is that the feminist movement in India was started by the efforts of men. Pioneers of Bengal like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar played a prominent role to eradicate social evils like *sati* and child marriage while advocating education for women, upheld inheritance rights and promoted widow remarriage. While these thinkers made significant contribution, the names and contributions of prominent female feminist thinkers of Bengal remain lesser known.

Rassundari Devi was one of the first female autobiographers in India. Published in 1876, the book "*Amar Jiban*" (My Life) captures the essence of everyday life and struggles of a common Bengali woman in the nineteenth century where women who wanted to learn were stigmatised by the society. She explains in her book that she had immense desire to learn and contradictorily she used to curse herself for having these "evil" desires. She also added that on her wedding day she felt "very much like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, the same agonized screams." (Devi, 1876) Her book made a significant impact on the minds of the young women readers who failed to recognise their veil cage as imposed by the societal norms. As a result, the women became more aware of their submissive situation in the society and began demanding equal rights as their male counterparts.

Born in 1880, Begum Rokeya Shakawat Hussain was significant Bengali feminist thinker whose name was added in BBC's list of "Greatest Bengalis of All Time". Advocating gender equality her writings asserted and demanded equal rights and representation for men and women. In 1911 she started the first Muslim girls' school in Kolkata named Shakhawat Memorial Girls' School. Despite facing grave criticism, she went door-to-door to persuade the parents of young Muslim girls to allow them to receive education. Her most notable work in "*Sultana's Dream*" which in the words of Manchanda, is an "utopian fantasy" where "Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain creates 'Ladyland', a world where women run the affairs of a country and men are confined to the 'mardana'. War, crime and violence are unheard of in this highly educated society. Problems of drought and scarcity have been solved by means of scientific and technological research used in the service of people." (Manchanda, 2001)

The author of "*Englondey Bangamahila*" (A Bengali Lady in England), Krishnabhabini Das (1862-1919) was an early feminist of Bengal who never feared to break any taboos. Discarding the traditional saree, dressed in western attire, she crossed the ocean to travel to England (which was considered as a taboo in India) with her husband. She was a travel writer whose travelogue to England was banned by the Britisher Government in India as it contained one of the most comprehensive criticisms of the British rule. She continued to write in top-tier magazines like *Bharati*, *Sadhana* and *Prabasi* which introduced and influenced Bengali colonised as well as

patriarchally dominated women to fight for their rights. She quoted- “It is unjust to say that only men should cultivate that intelligence, that God has given both men and women. God could never have imparted such a great gift without a noble end in view.” (Das, 1891)

One of the most progressive and illustrious families in Bengal, the Tagore family was pre-eminent in the society and played a pivotal role in uplifting Bengal’s culture. Swarnakumari Devi, the daughter of Maharshi Devendranath Tagore and elder sister of Rabindranath Tagore was one of the many pioneers born in this family in 1855. She was the editor of the journal, *Bharati* and the founder of the first ever women’s association in Bengal, *Sakhi Samiti*. In spite of societal restrictions, she upheld scientific education for women and wrote numerous essays breaking down complex scientific topics in simple language which appealed to the masses. She became the first female delegate to the Indian National Congress in collaboration with Annie Besant. Madhumati Mandal refers to her as “a pathfinder in the tradition of women's writing in Bengal”. (Mandal, 2005)

## CONCLUSION

In colonial Bengal, women were dominated both in the public and private sphere by their colonial and household ‘masters’ respectively. The degree of autonomy given to the nineteenth century women was little where educated women were despised and the desire to learn was considered evil. The social evils like dowry, *sati*, *parda*, child marriage also prevailed in the society. The number of women who got access to basic education were very low and mostly they belong to the upper-class. Thus, the position of the upper-class Bengali women, the “*bhadramahilas*” were comparatively better than those of minority families who were denied entry in public places because of their lower status.

The first efforts towards the reforms for the women were made by the educated *bhadraloks* which gradually led Bengal to witness the rise of various female feminist figures like Begum Rokeya Shakhawat Hussain, Rassundari Devi, Swarnakumari Devi whose efforts made significant contribution in the emancipation of women. Their efforts led to the establishment of girls’ schools, eradication of various social evils and also developed a scientific temperament not only for the women but for every person in the region. This ultimately led to the grant of various rights to the women in Bengal in the colonial period but their struggle towards complete emancipation and upliftment continues till date.

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