Chapter Three

THE BENGAL RENAISSANCE AND THE EMERGENCE OF ‘BHADRAMAHILA’

To begin with a historical account, let us admit that the notion of Bhadramahila played an important role in establishing the hegemonic identity of Bengali Bhadralok over other sections of the society. There are two aspects to which we have to pay serious attention in analyzing the social construction of Bhadramahila. The first one is the Bengal Renaissance as the backdrop of nineteenth century Bengali society and its nature. The second is the social reforms movement which attempted to make a change in the social outlook where the women’s question could be negotiated. And obviously to discuss about the reforms movement we cannot ignore the most prominent figure of the reforms movement, Vidyasagar. But Bengal Renaissance and social reforms movement were not two different experiences; on the contrary they constituted an integral part of the process which shaped nineteenth century Bengali society under the initiative of middle class Bhadralok.

The appearance of middle class in nineteenth century Bengal was a part of the greater transformation in society. Indeed the colonial rule not only affected the external fabric of our society, it also influenced the inner domain which produced an altogether a new family under the ‘new patriarchal’ system. The new patriarchy was different from its old indigenous patriarchal traditions because it allows women’s literacy and education, encouraging women to have modern attitude but maintained them in a dependent and subordinate status within society.1 Moreover the whole process of transformation sought to redefine the traditional gender relations within the Bengali society in general, and the middle class in particular. Still, the transformation in the socio-cultural sphere, propagated and supported by the middle class, had failed to bring about any effective emancipation of women. The surface changes like abolition of Sati or

---

Widow Remarriage to some extent enhanced her status in society as a part of restructuring the patriarchal system, but actually these changes in reality diverted the question of her individual identity by imposing new forms of restrictions. The construction of the notion of Bhadramahila (gentle-woman) was the product of this arrangement to maintain stability in gender relations under new circumstances. It is often argued that it was the failure of the reforms movement that kept the question of women’s self-emancipation limited to some surface changes and did not bring about any substantive changes in their life. So while discussing the social construction of Bhadramahila we have to interrogate the Renaissance project along with the reforms movement in nineteenth century Bengal.

**BENGAL RENAISSANCE: BREAKING WITH TRADITION OR CONTINUITY?**

Following the darkest ages of the eventful history of the eighteenth century, particularly the latter half of it, the nineteenth century was one of the most dynamic and formative periods in the history of the Bengal.² The impact of British rule and modern western culture was felt first in Bengal and produced an awakening.³ The role played by Bengal in the modern awakening of India is thus comparable to the position occupied by Italy in the story of the European Renaissance.⁴ While discussing Renaissance the important question was whether it marked a rupture with or continuation of the past tradition. In the case of Bengali Renaissance one should note certain unavoidable facts. The Renaissance project from the very beginning suffered from special and sectarian problems. As the Renaissance was mainly an urban based Hindu middle class project, it never extended beyond the metropolitan city of Calcutta. Other sections of the society, especially the lower strata were not part of this project. Except the upper caste Hindus,

---

² Nemai, Sadhan Bose (1960) *Indian Awakening And Bengal*, Firma Klm private Ltd, Calcutta. P. 01

³ Sushobhan Sarkar (1979) *On The Bengal Renaissance*, Papyrus, Calcutta. P. 01

⁴ Ibid.
other communities notably, Muslims, was largely excluded from it. They remained outside from the Renaissance programme of social reforms at least in the first half of nineteenth century. The Renaissance project did not reach beyond the small section of middle class Bhadralok.

Commenting on the Italian Renaissance, John Huizinga, the Dutch historian said, “The Renaissance cannot be considered as a pure contrast to medieval culture, not even as a frontier territory between medieval and modern times. Among the basic lines dividing the older and more modern intellectual culture of the people of the west there are some that run between the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, others between Renaissance and the sixteenth century, still others straight through the heart of the Renaissance and more than one as early as through the thirteenth century or as late as through the eighteenth…”.5 Put in simple words, it is very difficult to divide history into different periods, such as ancient, middle or modern ages. Ernst Cassirer writes, “Renaissance and Middle Ages are strictly speaking not names for historical periods at all, but they are concepts of ‘ideal types’ in Max Weber’s sense”.6 Indeed, to discuss Bengal Renaissance, we have to put our emphasis equally on historical continuity and historical change. In Carr’s language, “The tension between the opposed principles of continuity and change is the groundwork of history. Nothing in history that seems continuous is exempt from the subtle erosion of inner change, no change, however violent and abrupt in appearance wholly breaks the continuity between past and present”. Tradition may work in favour of social progress and various elements of tradition could be found in the overall project of modernity, sometimes they work together or bypass each other.7 It is also true that ‘modernity’ defies any concrete definition, as it is very difficult to assume the exact point of its arrival. Even one should not hold that tradition is static; it changes because of political, economic or cultural challenges and if those challenges are coming from the outside and by another greater culture, then it is quite difficult for tradition to assimilate.


6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.
In nineteenth century Bengal because of the encounter with an alien culture, a tension between the inherited matrix and imported impulse was quite obvious, though both were important. N. C. Chowdhury here comments that whatever ideas we learn from Europe, we shape them according to our own indigenous tradition as it is evident in case of Brahmo reformation movement which actually practiced Christian monotheism but its form was determined by the Upanishadic concept of Brohmo. The latter is obviously different from the first at least in spiritual sense. By this example, it is now quite clear that the whole approach of the Bengal Renaissance was to bring ‘modernization through tradition’. In case of the Italian Renaissance, the historians, dealing with middle age Europe provide a very useful thesis which turns our attention towards ‘Humanism’ as an important aspect of Renaissance, inspired by the middle age tradition. The scholastics of middle age Europe made a great contribution to develop the idea. Although, ‘Humanism’ as a concept can be interpreted in so many ways, even the humanist movement was divided into many parts. The influences of Aristotle and Christian mysticism on humanist thought cannot be denied. The thesis of ‘continuity’ was overshadowed by the thesis of ‘change’ which found a rupture in the Middle Age tradition with Renaissance.

Arguing on the ‘change’, historian Plum points out “not even the most prejudiced medievalist…can deny the astonishing vigour and originality of the fifteenth century Italy in painting, sculpture and architecture…By their explanation of perspective of landscape, of the nude and of the human face; they opened up fresh dimensions in art.” The most important name in this respect is Jacob Burchardt who not only wrote the book ‘The

8 Ibid.  P. 37


10 Apparently, there seems to be a conflict between tradition and modernization. But in any case modernization cannot completely ignore the aspect of tradition. In Bengal renaissance it was tradition which played most important role to shape the modernization process in early nineteenth century. In other words Bengal renaissance was the outcome of modern liberal values mixed with ancient Indian tradition. In every country or nation modernization process took place in tune with tradition.


12 Ibid. Pp. 16-17
Civilization Of The Renaissance In Italy’ but provided a model which was, for many years, considered as the ideal framework about any discussion on European Renaissance. For Burchardt, Renaissance was a self-born process, detached from all other ages, developed in Italy. In his words, “In the middle ages both sides of human consciousness… lay dreaming or half awake beneath a veil. The veil was woven of faith, illusion and childish prepossession…In Italy this veil first melted into air…the ban laid upon human personality was dissolved…It is discovery of the world and of the man.” Burchardt points out the importance of some gifted personalities in Renaissance movement who at the same time belonged to the higher section of the society. No doubt, Italian Renaissance was an elitist movement where the common people had hardly any place.

Such understanding of the Burchardtian model inspired modern historians of nineteenth century Bengal Renaissance. Following the Burchardtian model the ‘normal paradigm’ was invented by these historians to emphasize on the central role played by individual reformers or great personalities as agents of change which is affirmed by a history of benighted, pre-colonial India from which a rebirth or awakening was required. And Renaissance was possible due to the contribution of a particular section – the English educated middle class which acted as the main support base for Bengali Renaissance. Even reformers like Rammohun or Vidyasagar represented middle class aspirations in their struggle for reform movement. What is significant is that the proponents of this paradigm made a radical break with the past. They did not concern themselves with the influence of tradition in the Renaissance project. Against this normal paradigm, historians like Partha Chatterjee and Rajat Kanta Ray tried to find out the elements of tradition within Renaissance.

In the age of colonialism, it was not possible for the colonized to accept Western modernity as a whole as it could be held to be a mere imitation of the west which our

13 Ibid. P. 15
English educated reformers realized from the very beginning. In 1874, Rajnarayan Bose, in a public address entitled ‘Then and Now’, had castigated the newly educated classes of Bengal for adopting English manners and life-style. This was only one of a whole series of attacks on overt Westernization which in the nineteenth century was the staple of social satire in the popular literature and the visual and performing arts of Bengal. Since the colonial power structure did not allow natives to become the creator of their own Renaissance but reduced them to passive receptors of the western knowledge, it was necessary to reject it for making an alternative project. Here, tradition was the only source which could provide an alternative model of Renaissance. Our social reformers always acknowledged the fact that a sense of belonging could be the motive force for all forms of social change. But does it imply that we totally rejected western influences in shaping our Renaissance project? Quite on the contrary, as tradition supplied an ideological principle of selection. It was not a dismissal of the western form of Renaissance but an attempt was made to project Renaissance in consistency with our tradition. The synthesis between modernity and tradition was best manifested in reform movement as a part of the greater project of Bengal Renaissance.

RENAISSANCE AND SOCIAL REFORMATION

In the European context, following the characteristics of Renaissance, common people was largely excluded also in the Reformation movement, even women were not included at any level. On the contrary, reform movement in nineteenth century Bengal paid sufficient attention to the women’s question. Another point to be noted is that in the West, the Reformation movement ultimately produced a secular, rational outlook in their

18 ibid. P. 184
society but from the very beginning reformers of nineteenth century Bengal accepted the fact that religion was the soul of the Indian society, so what was needed was to rediscover the true spirit of monistic understanding of religion which could help man to find his ultimate aim in life. Besides the moderate approach to reforms, there were other elements which wanted to usher in radical changes in society in early nineteenth century Bengal. The Young Bengal movement sought to infuse secular and rational-individual outlook and wholly rejected tradition. Radicalism of the type professed by the Derozians hardly stood a chance of survival in contemporary Bengal. Even in Europe, rationalism and individualism were ill-defined and little appreciated at that time. A major predicament of the Young Bengal was described as ‘identity crises’. Elucidating the nature of the problem faced by the Young intellectuals, Kopf writes that “having acquired alien emotional and intellectual traits”, the Anglicized Youngman found himself “estranged from his own cultural milieu”. The Young Bengal movement faded away by the middle of the nineteenth century and proved ‘something ephemeral and unsubstantial’. They failed to develop any movement outside their own charmed circle and the circle itself could hardly keep any significant form. The real failure of the Derozians was that their ideas and schemes failed to pass beyond the pales of theory and they never really combined to realize their dream of national uplift and advancement. Instead of any radical programme like Derozians, the middle class intelligentsia chose the path of synthesis between modernity and tradition, which was not based on equal terms because in early nineteenth century we find the domination of liberal views over tradition but after 1870s onwards, tradition became the dominant mode of thinking due to the growing sense of nationalism.

In Europe the reformation movement was primarily a reaction against the corruption and disorder within the Catholic Church. The nineteenth century reform movement similarly reacted against the mists of ignorance and superstition. In other words the so called social reform in reality was religious reform. Rammohun who took

20 Nemai, Sadhan Bose (1960) *Indian Awakening And Bengal*, P. 88
21 Ibid. P. 89
22 Ibid. Pp. 87-89
the initiative in this regard pronounced a scathing criticism of priest-craft which inculcated a vulgar religion of superstitions idol-worship for the masses. He pointed out that unthinking idolatry had brought about degradation in the character of the common people. He referred to common sense and the practice of other peoples. He advocated the rationality and the perfect feasibility of theism and exposed the logical absurdities of idol-worship which “destroys the texture of society” and Hindu’s moral reformation. Any particular scripture was liable to error and there was an inherent human right to depart from tradition, especially if tradition was “leading directly to immortality and destruction of social comforts”. He proposed for a universal religion to be based on the best traditions of Hindu theism. In his humble suggestions (1823), he declared that all believers in one God were his brethren in religion and emphasis on wide toleration in his tract on ‘Different Modes of Worship’, published in 1825. With this kind of spiritual commitment, Rammuhun and his Brahmo Samaj started movements on issues like ‘Satidaha’, ‘Child Marriage’, ‘Widow Marriage’ etc. Even those who did not belong to Brahmo Samaj – for example Vidyasagar – could not overlook these issues in their reform programmes.

The monotheism of Brahmo Samaj failed to satisfy the quest of the common people. From 1870s, traditional Hindu outlook began to dominate, even some Brahmo leaders, like Keshab Chandra Sen incorporated certain Hindu rituals in Brahmo religious functions. The reaction against monotheism came from none other than Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay. For Bankim, Hinduism is a complete religion in terms of faith, rituals and morality. He says, the basis worship is the duality of nature and soul, and Hinduism is the perfect synthesis of this two. The image-worship created a sense of divinity within human being just as the embodiment of beauty through art. The revival of Hinduism actually marginalized the reform movement and issues like widow remarriage or polygamy. Now, emphasis was given on certain other qualities of women, in keeping with the tradition. As to Vivekananda, we find that he could not support the nature of

23 Susobhan Sarkar (1979) *On The Bengal Renaissance*, P. 13
such movement which was totally confined to a particular section of the society. He called for substantial changes and regarding women’s question, he called for social and spiritual improvements, he was against of confining it in programmes like widow remarriage. Though, corresponding to the traditional notion, women got the highest position in society, at the same time the old traditions and customs were reinvented. The liberal atmosphere of early nineteenth century faded away and society became more conscious about their women as the symbol of national culture. To know how this shift was reflected in the lives of middle class women, we have to go through the social construction of ‘Bhadramahila’ in nineteenth century Bengal.

NEW IMAGE OF MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN

The Renaissance project for women in nineteenth century Bengal was determined by new kinds of needs of the English educated Bengali middle class in changing society. As a progressive section of society, to uphold their class status, it felt that the condition of Bengali women should be improved while maintaining the essence of existing gender relations. That is in the name of progress and decency, new forms of restriction were imposed on them. As Himani Bannerji observes, “this was to be a moral or discursive portrait of the ideal feminine, known as Bhadramahila (the gentlewoman)”. She further adds, “The moral-cultural configuration of this discursive image was embedded in and endowed with, duties pleasures and graces appropriate to the cultural common sense of the ‘westernized’ section of the middle class”. Tanika Sarkar has commented that the “Bengali male intelligentsia’s interest in women’s ‘improvement’ bordered on the obsessive”. Discussing the image of middle class women, one may find the influence of the Victorian age of England which is considered as the glorious moment of her history. In Bengal Victorian age was known in terms of the spread of western education, the

26 Ibid. P. 103


28 Ibid. P. 100
emergence of colonial middle class and their programme of social reform. The most important was the Victorian morality which was exercised to define the image of nineteenth century English women, especially of propertied classes. This Victorian morality also influenced the Bengali middle class in a major way towards the social construction of the image of Bhadramahila.

**Bhadramahila: The Social Construction**

Amelioration of the living conditions of Bengali women signified a concern for the uplift of Bengali society as a whole. It was felt that women’s social conditions needed a serious ‘recasting’ so that they could be brought into the fold of ‘civilization’. In shaping the image of middle class women, the notion of civilization was used both by the enlightened or westernized middle class Hindus and their reformed non-idolatrous counterparts, the Brahmos. As formulated by James Mill on indigenous societies, ‘civilization’ was held against ‘tradition’. The adjective ‘traditional’ seems to synthesize disparate cultural characteristics to the satisfaction of the west. Associated with the stereotypes of mysticism and spirituality, dowry, wife-burning, female infanticide, India in particular had been projected as a ‘traditional’ society. The ‘traditional’ referred as a binary relationship to the west’s self-representation, ramified through its package of science and rationality, technological-economic development, ‘open society’ and political freedom. So that, the concept of ‘tradition’ when deployed in the ‘otherisation’ of India, entailed the related notions of ‘civilization’ and ‘antiquity’. While concepts such as ‘tradition’, ‘antiquity’ and civilization were invested with positive connotations for the colonial conservatives of the eighteenth century, they also served as conduits for varying moral judgments about colonized societies at each stage. Thus the attitude towards civilization and traditionality decided whether a country was ‘civilized’ or ‘barbaric’ or ‘savage’. And those who had power and the need to define the ‘truth of India’ had decided that it was a traditional country.29

---

29 Ibid. P. 63
Therefore, the noble duty of the colonizers was to civilize the natives which was willingly shared by our westernized section of middle class, admitting the barbaric or savage character of tradition. In their attempt to civilize their own society, it was found that some sections in society had been living in more savage condition than others and through the lens of colonial masters women’s conditions were held to be the most underdeveloped and savage. The emergence of middle class women as ‘Bhadramahila’ can be viewed as against the men ‘Bhadralok’ in colonial Bengal. The middle class project of civilizing women largely concerned her physical appearance in public.

Women’s appearance in the sense of body-self presentation through clothing was a particularly important theme. Even in contemporary England, the issue of women’s dress code was subject to intense debate and discussion. A historian comments, “In the fifties the well dressed lady wore from four to six petticoats of cambric. The crinoline on its wire forty eight yards of material in one gown burtles and half burtles, corsets which were almost chastity belts and combinations made of chamois leather”. In one word, the dress of Victorian lady was something ‘Nights’ of middle age England.30 It should be noted that dress is fundamentally a normal phenomenon, as dress is taken-for-granted aspect of social life that illustrates the centrality of dress to our experience of embodiment and to the moral order of the social world.31 In case of the Bhadramahila, the question of morality was to be translucent in the self-composition, along with that kind of the body provided the discursive organization for the women’s texts.32 Since the attempt by ‘enlightened’ Hindu and Brahmo men were to re-dress the women of their own classes by inventing new form of attires, the image was to simultaneously express and construct their overall class culture.33


32 Himani Bannerji (2001) Inventing Subject : Studies In Hegemony, Patriarchy And Colonialism, P. 104

33 Ibid. P. 101
Considering women’s clothing as historical and ideological constructs or signs, there is a particular relationship between bodies of women and their clothes, aims at to locate women bodies in particular spatio-social terms. To understand the relationship between dress and the body, one must acknowledge the very private and very visceral nature of dress which imposes itself on our experience of the body, expressing or constraining it. The dressed body, shaped by techniques, attitudes, aesthetics and so on, that are socially and historically located. The social world demands that we appear dressed and there is no example of any culture that leaves the body undressed, although what constitutes ‘dress’ varies from culture to culture. Bryan Turner argues that all societies however large and small, have to control, contain and manage bodies and the mechanisms and techniques for coordinating bodies are many and varied. Since Bhadramahila was a male-projected notion, the situation as a whole revealed the general male pre-occupation with the question of appropriate image of women. They saw her clothing not only as moral signifier of her social role, but also it expressed her outer self.

The point is that the covering or uncovering of her body, the particular parts which were to be hidden or disclosed and the style/manner in which this was done, were contested grounds for moral and aesthetic visions among males. In early nineteenth century Bengal women wore fine and transparent clothing which revealed the whole body. Such ‘shameless’ attire, in no way, allowed one to frequent civilized company. If it happened that there was wise counsel being offered about religion/proper conduct, it might so happen that they could not attend to those wise words because of the clothes around. This was the perfect picture how such clothes could stand in the way of their moral improvement. It does not imply that Bengali women should totally imitate the Victorian dress code as it was quite impossible due to different environments. The progressive sections of middle class wanted that women’s attire, at one level, would lead

---

36 Himani Bannerji (2001) Inventing Subjects: Studies In Hegemony, patriarchy And Colonialism, P. 103

93
to her moral elevation, and on the other hand, maintain her modesty. *Brahmo*
intellectuals, like Debendranath Tagore were particularly interested in inventing such
dress. Through various journals and magazines, the nascent female intelligentsia
participated in this debate and fashioned their subjectivities as expressed in the sign
called *Bhadramahila*. The moral-sartorial dream of Debendranath Tagore was fulfilled by
his daughter-in-law, Gyanadanandini Debi. When she returned from Bombay, dressed in
civil and elegant attire in imitation of Persi women, symbolized an integral combination
of indigenousness, decorum and modesty exactly what he had wanted.\(^38\) It suited what he
desired and removed a fundamental deprivation of the daughters of Bengal. The negative
revelation of the female body as an absent signifier through explicit forms of prohibition,
and thus the covert allusion to its sexual potentialities was publicized and made central to
the sartorial project for the gentlewoman.\(^39\)

The notion of *Bhadramahila* could not be properly grasped unless we can relate
her inner essence with the outer image. It was argued that every civilized being should
maintain three kinds of behaviour, such as *Sabhyata* or civility, *Shobhonata* or decency
and *Laija* or shame. Of the three, the first two are applicable for both male and female
members of middle class but the concept of *Laija*, which is also a judgemental term and
should translate more as ‘shame’ than ‘shyness’ governs all references to civilized
‘proper’ behaviour when applied to girls and women.\(^40\) In *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Kumari
Soudamini writes that shame is of two types, one that restricts human beings from sinful
deeds and the other is peculiar to women. There is hardly any race or people who could
deny that women should have a sense of shame or modesty. It resides in women of the
country; the only difference is that some have more of it in their hearts than others. But
one cannot be truly modest simply by veiling one’s face and not speaking to anyone. In
fact not speaking to people might express pride. Those who are truly modest cannot have
hearts which contain pride or insolence, they are adorned by gentleness, politeness, good

\(^38\) Ibid. P. 170


\(^40\) Ibid. P. 107
manners, tranquillity etc.\textsuperscript{41} Evidences suggest that in Victorian England ‘shame’ was considered to be the characteristic trait of white middle class women. It was held that women, especially the women of propertied classes, were not human beings, combining flesh and blood, rather they are something like \textit{Goddess}, without any sexual desire. The popular belief was that ‘shame’ was a precious ornament of every woman and much more important than her own life. Surprisingly this popular belief was part of the constructed image of middle class women in colonial Bengal.\textsuperscript{42}

Here Himani Bannerji argues the overall discourse on/of shame or \textit{Lajja} is a curious blend of indigenous and colonial values regarding women, nature and the body.\textsuperscript{43} Going beyond the common social decency, \textit{Lajja}, as applied to women, a keen awareness of sexual possibilities, infusing elements of denial, forbiddenness and guilt within female sexuality, enclosed in a general imperative of self-censorship, images of both desexualisation and dephysicalization, created a social ethics of denial and repression.\textsuperscript{44} She points out that the moral mechanism of \textit{Lajja} was centred on control of the female body through the segregation, obscuration and obstruction of her movement.\textsuperscript{45}

\textbf{THE IMAGE OF MIDDLE CLASS WOMEN IN THE NATIONALIST ERA}

There are three different traditions to which we have to pay attention to discuss Indian nationalism. The first is liberal tradition which propagated the reorganization of Indian society in terms of modern rational understanding. The greatest contribution of liberal nationalism was to create a social space where intense public debate and various


\textsuperscript{43} Himani Bannerji (2001) \textit{Inventing Subjects : Studies In Hegemony, patriarchy And Colonialism}, P. 109

\textsuperscript{44} Ibid. P. 111

\textsuperscript{45} Ibid. Pp. 115-116
social movements took place in nineteenth century Bengal. The second tradition is that of cultural nationalism which emphasized on the ancient Indian tradition and sought to revive the classical understanding of social and political institutions. But to bring back the golden era, cultural nationalism opposed the reforms movement as a colonial conspiracy to undermine our morale. The third was the radical tradition which drew inspiration from the French and Russian revolutionary activities. Later many of them embraced Marxist political ideology and advocated total transformation of Indian society through socialist revolution. But the cultural nationalism gathered greater momentum and after 1870 it turned into the dominant version of Indian nationalism. The other two traditions remained marginalized.

Actually in the age of modernization in early nineteenth century the outer image of middle class women projected by the Bhadralok was constructed in a way which practically denied the question of appearing beyond the private or inner domain. But after 1870 the growing nationalist discourse shows that the material/spiritual distinction was condensed into an analogous, but ideologically far more powerful, dichotomy: that between the outer and inner. The outer domain was the domain of material world and the inner domain was that of spiritualism and it was argued that as long as we took care of retaining the spiritual distinctiveness of our culture, we could make all the compromises and adjustments necessary to adapt ourselves to the requirements of the modern material world without losing our identity. As the dominant mode of thought, tradition was emphasized over modernization in the age of nationalism. In day to day living this outer/inner distinction was represented by that of world/home separation. The world is the treacherous terrain of the pursuit of material interests, represented by men, from which home, represented by women, must be kept unaffected. It was an identification of social roles by gender to correspond with the separation of the ‘Ghar/Bahir’. A passage from ‘GORA’, a novel of Rabindranath Tagore, provides a clear expression of rigid public-private dichotomy in terms of gender relationship in the


era of nationalism. For *Gora*, “Men and women are two distinct parts of society, as day and night are of time, when society is in good health, the women are not publicly visible… she comforts us in the privacy of our times of rest, contributes to our well-being… If we drag women in to the public arena the health and peace of society gets disrupted, a madness enters social life”. 48 The separation between *ghar* and *bahir* was maintained during the entire phase of the national struggle, the crucial need was to protect, preserve and strengthen the inner core of the national culture, its spiritual essence. No encroachments by the colonizer were allowed in that inner sanctum.

Even the sartorial project at that moment consisted of designing a ‘national visual form’. In nineteenth century, a minuscule section among the elite wore gowns while Saris were being experimented with. It is interesting to note that Saris won the day. 49 As Jyotirmayee Gangopadhyay states, educated men and women did not wish to wear western clothes since they conveyed an anti-national mentality. Most educated women did not consider gowns as tasteful as saris. 50 The same sentiments had been expressed by Soudamini Khastagir: “It is the duty to keep characteristics or signs of one’s nation/culture in people’s clothing or manners. Therefore it is not proper to imitate other nations wholly, for that expresses a lowly status. We will accept the good things about religion and conduct of other countries but there is no need to imitate them in matters of appearance. Even when the female attires of other countries may be beautiful, Bengali women should not wear them. Their duty consists in wearing clothes which shows one’s national culture, which indicates instantly that one is a woman of Bengal”. She and others suggested a recipe for dressing in ways signifying respectability. 51

‘Lajja’ or ‘sense of shame’ was integral to the construction of middle class women which influenced the definition of femininity in nationalist terms. Because there was elision between feminine shame and nationalist cultural authenticity to restrain

---


50 Ibid. P. 120

51 Ibid. P. 121
female sexuality. For instance, the nationalist writer Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, while arguing in favour of the nationalist trait in Bengali women says that women represent these qualities far more than men. The material/spiritual dichotomy corresponds to masculine/feminine virtues.\textsuperscript{52} In an essay on modesty, ‘Lajjashilata’, Bhudev echoed the Aryan social order marked by a preponderance of spiritualism with the wife seen as a goddess.\textsuperscript{53} Therefore, it is not surprising that in search of direct agency and strength for dynamism and clothing designed for public and open spaces many women turned to the colonial-nationalist myth of Aryan woman or nation of the mother goddess.\textsuperscript{54} In Bankim’s ‘Anandamath’, this nationalist construction of mother goddess finds expression through the emotional hymn ‘Bandemataram’ (Hail to the Mother). The whole novel portrayed revolutionaries, sacrificing their lives for the motherhood.\textsuperscript{55} According to Partha Chatterjee, the adulation of women as goddesses or as mothers was wholly a product of the development of a dominant middle-class culture coeval with the era of nationalism and it served to emphasize the dominant characteristic of femininity of new women like the spiritual qualities of self-sacrifice benevolence, devotion, religiosity etc.\textsuperscript{56} So that, by the end of nineteenth century, the women’s question disappeared from the public debate. The various movements like abolition of Kulin Polygamy, which sought to reform our social system and customs became less interested in the circle of western educated middle class.

The reason why the issue of ‘female emancipation’ seems to disappear from the public debate in the late nineteenth century is not because it was overtaken by the more emotive issues concerning political power. The reason lies in the inner contradictions of the reforms movement. The reformers’ attempts to modernise the society was far away to bring radical changes in existing social relations. To understand such nature of reforms

\textsuperscript{52} Partha Chatterjee (1989) ‘The Nationalist Resolution Of The Women’s Question’  P. 242

\textsuperscript{53} Ibid. P. 243

\textsuperscript{54} Himani Bannerji (2001) *Inventing Subjects : Studies In Hegemony, patriarchy And Colonial*, P. 124


\textsuperscript{56} Partha Chatterjee (1989) ‘The Nationalist Resolution Of The Women’s Question’ P. 249
movement we should pay attention to the work of Vidyasagar, as one of the central figures of the movement. The first reason is that essentially all his reform programmes represented modern humanist values but in form they remained traditional because he sought the support scriptural exegesis to carry them forward. Secondly, his movement for social reforms was in the nature of affirmative actions unlike Raja Rammuhun Roy whose attempts were much more preventive in nature. The abolition of sati was a preventive law but the tract of widow remarriage was the affirmative law. Thirdly, he was representing the most crucial period when middle class liberal values were rapidly getting converted into national values.

VIDYASAGAR AND SOCIAL REFORMS

For achieving his goal in social reforms, Vidyasagar always sought the support of the members of the English educated middle class but one must remember that he was a poor person, who came from a village of Midnapore. Most of Vidyasagar’s teachers in the Sanskrit college seem to have been first generation migrants to Calcutta from villages or small towns. These surrounding areas, particularly the Nadia belt from Nabadwip to Bhatpara had been the heartland of Vedic scholarship and training in Smritis, Nyaya etc. 57 Even Vidyasagar’s own village Birsingha was quite famous as a seat of learning at that time. 58 The expanding colonial metropolis of Calcutta in the nineteenth century Bengal appeared as a zone of new opportunities in relation to the company’s judicial administration because the scriptural doctrines were accepted for civil and personal matters for different communities of India. ‘Judge pandits’ therefore had to be appointed to assist Englishmen in civil courts of the company and they were appointed chiefly from amongst Sanskrit college students. 59 But very soon, the practice of having ‘judge-pandits’ for each district court started withering away as English education became the only way.

to get respectability and employment for the middle class.\textsuperscript{60} This created a new English educated section within middle class. To capture such changes within the class, in 1823, Bhabanicharan Bandopadhyay distinguished within the world of middle class in colonial Bengal between \textit{madhyabitta} and \textit{daridra athacha Bhadralok}.\textsuperscript{61} How did this multilayered middle class in nineteenth century Bengal responded to Vidyasagar’s reforms movement?

The fruitful synthesis between tradition and modernity was cultivated very aptly, no doubt, in the works of Vidyasagar. Commenting on his struggle for social reforms, noted historian Amalesh Tripathi says, “He declined to accept either the position of Derozians or of orthodox Hindus”. For a modernizer, “the entire past of a nation cannot be significant but the true one chooses only the most rational, universal dynamic and humane segments of it. He would appeal to \textit{Shastras}, like the conservatives but because he knew a lot more about the \textit{Shastras} than they, he could distinguish between the genuine and the fake, the relevant and the archaic, the perennial and the parochial”.\textsuperscript{62} Vidyasagar’s attempts towards social reforms can be divided into education-related reform and marriage-related reform. For both cases he made the best use of scriptures as means to justify his cause. On the other hand, under these two broad programmes of social reform he addressed the women’s question for his contemporary society.

The Christian missionaries, of course, made the earliest effort towards introducing women’s education in Bengal, when Robert May founded in 1814 a girls’ school at Chinsurah. The School Book Society, founded in 1817, also discussed the question of female education. The Secretary of the Society, Raja Radhakanta Deb, though the leader of orthodox Hindus was a great patron of women’s education and encouraged it in various ways.\textsuperscript{63} But the real journey of female education began through the initiative of J. E. Drinkwater Bethune, when he established the ‘\textit{Hindu Balika Vidyalaya}’ where

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{60} Ibid. P. 226
\item \textsuperscript{61} Ibid. Pp. 227
\item \textsuperscript{62} Amalesh Tripathi (1974) \textit{Vidyasagar: The Traditional Modernizer}, Orient Longman, Calcutta. Pp. 02
\item \textsuperscript{63} Nemai, Sadhan Bose (1960) \textit{Indian Awakening And Bengal}, Pp. 220
\end{itemize}
Vidyasagar joined as the first secretary of the school. It was not easy for them to start a female school in a country which had been suffering from religious superstitions and dogmas for so many years. Most of the respected families of the middle class had declined to send their girls to school. The widespread belief was that if the wife received education, she would soon become a widow. True, daughters of high caste families could occasionally be imparted some lessons in their parental homes. But the idea to send their daughters out to school was deeply shocking even for these families, and a very early marriage was any way obligatory. Hence Vidyasagar had to arrange for transportation of the students for their safety and on the school carriage was written a Sanskrit ‘Sloka’ to the effect that it is the duty of a father to educate his daughter to justify women’s education in terms of Shastric interpretation. The school was started with eleven girls, but very soon the number came down to seven and even after fifteen years the number did not meet the expectations. A particular section of the middle class was not convinced about the secular nature of the school since the teachers were Christians and anglicized. The conservative section always raised opposition against the school for girls in the name of religion and social hierarchy. Yet one must accept that Bethune school was able to create a moral influence over the Hindu society.

“The peak of Vidyasagar’s educational reform campaign seems to have coincided in fact with a last flurry of enterprising landlordism and middle class entrepreneurship in Bengal.” Vidyasagar, while working as the Government Inspector of schools of Nadia, Hoogly, Burdwan and Midnapore, organized forty schools, including one in Birsingha, his place of birth. At the same time he established twenty model schools in the districts In one of his reports for the year of 1857-58 he wrote that the girls schools had succeeded in drawing the sympathy of the people of the interior areas who had come forward “with alacrity and sent their daughters to the new schools”. He added, “...thus, a change may be

64 Sumit Sarkar (1998) *Writing Social History*, P. 253
65 Bose, Nima, Sadhan (1960) *Indian Awakening And Bengal*, P. 222
67 Ibid. Pp. 54
68 Sumit Sarkar (1998) *Writing Social History*, P. 250
said to have come over the spirit of the times and this may be reckoned as a new era in the history of education in Bengal.”  

In these schools the medium of instruction was vernacular language. Like Hindu college, Vidyasagar did not use the English language as the medium of teaching. For this purpose, he developed the vernacular language and wrote several text books. But due to lack of governmental and local support, most of schools were closed down within a very short time. The irony is that when the Bethune school after its initial failure, gathered momentum in the metropolitan circle, the female schools of districts, after showing early success, were not able to survive. The whole exercise ultimately met with failure for which Vidyasagar spent time, money and energy.

Attempts to introduce marriage reforms were not altogether new in nineteenth century Bengal. Rammohun, we know, was sympathetic to the cause of widow remarriage and longed for the improvement of their conditions. But he is not known to have done anything concrete towards marriage reform. From the thirties of the nineteenth century the question of marriage reform gained importance. This was only natural as the movement was a logical consequence of the abolition of Sati in 1829. Marriage reform included important problems of contemporary Bengal including widow marriage related with child marriage and Kulin Polygamy.

The best use of tradition in social reform is exemplified in the issue of widow-marriage. But strangely enough, it was the Derozians who first came across the Sloka of ‘Parasara Samhita’, a variant of which Vidyasagar later used to bolster the case for widow-marriage. He realized that the widow marriage campaign, in order to have a general appeal to the people, must be backed by reference to authoritative Slokas or Verses in the Shastras. Since under British Indian law personal and family matters were supposed to be regulated in accordance with the Shastras for Hindus, reform through external state legislation and reform-from-within through scriptural exegesis were actually interdependent in Vidyasagar’s time. He had to find scriptural justifications for

---

69 Nimai Sadhan Bose (1960) *Indian Awakening And Bengal*, P. 223
70 Ibid. P. 209
72 Nimai Sadhan Bose (1960) *Indian Awakening And Bengal*, P. 212
widow marriage, if it was to become legal under ‘Anglo-Hindu’ law: reason and humanity alone would not be sufficient. In the *Sloka* it was said, ‘A second marriage is sanctioned for women in five situations: if their husbands be not heard of, if they die, retire from the world, prove to be impotent or become outcastes.’ In second ‘*Bidhaba-Bibaha*’ tract, he highlighted the sufferings of widows and the flood of immortality and abortion which is caused by male cruelty sanctioned by the customs.

Widow marriage was related to child marriage. Indeed, Vidyasagar initiated his reform movement with a tract titled ‘*Balyabibaher Dosh*’. It was marked by a total absence of textual exegesis; in that sense it was also his most radical statement on gender relations where he judged the existing institutions and practices against an ideal norm of companionate conjugality based on adult mutual love which could flow only from an ‘unity of minds’. But it is not possible if girls are married off at an early age – which happens because the *Smiti-Sastras* have promised some imagined other worldly boons from such actions. He traced the fact of increasing number of widows to child marriage and asked rhetorically: who had not witnessed firsthand the unbearable sufferings of widows? Surprisingly, these did not become part of his action programmes nor did he return to the interconnections he had worked out here between the need to raise the age of marriage, promotion of women’s education and improving the lot of widows. The pamphlet was not able to create any social debate on this particular issue. If the movement against child marriage was successful, the condition of those women for whom Vidyasagar initiated the movement of widow remarriage would be less severe.

In case of *Kulin* polygamy, his first tract on the subject was published in 1871, followed by another in 1872, to demonstrate the illegitimacy of polygamy according to

---

74 Nimai, Sadhan Bose (1960) *Indian Awakening And Bengal*, P. 212
75 Sarkar, Sumit (1998) *Writing Social History*, P. 266
77 Ibid.
the *Shastras*. Finding scriptural support for rejection of polygamy seems to have been a more difficult task. With all his obvious enthusiasm for monogamous conjugality, Vidyasagar could not build a complete case for strict monogamy from the Hindu scriptures. All that he could establish was that, the texts had laid down a number of specific conditions under which a man could take more than one wife, there was no unlimited and arbitrary right to multiple wives. To prohibit *Kulin* Poligamy, Vidyasagar had petitioned once in 1855 and he did so again in 1866. As always he was practical; he was not crusading against polygamy as such but against a particularly abhorrent variation of it, prevalent among one section of Brahmins, known as *Kulins*. What he wanted was not blank prohibition but a legal restriction of wilful polygamy. For that Vidyasagar stressed the necessity for declaratory law which might be passed without interfering with that liberty which Hindus now by law, possessed in the matter of marriage. But no act was passed in response to his arguments and he failed to obtain statutory abolition of polygamy. Actually all his attempts were not able to create any social reactions beyond the small section of middle class *Bhadralok* who also, sometime later, lost interest in reform movement, especially after the arrival of the nationalist era in Bengal.

**THE NOTION OF BHADRAMAHILA IN REFORM MOVEMENT**

Criticizing the nature of the reform movement, Himani Bannerji argues that it incorporated ‘possibilities’ of women’s fuller subjectivities within a patriarchal class project. The reform movement to a large extent was a formal and ideological attempt at

---

78 Kulin Poligamy was the result of age old oppressive social practice in which girls had to be married with a particular man who enjoyed higher status among Brahmans. In Bengal this system was known as ‘Koulinya Pratha’ established in twelfth century by the king Ballal Sen of Sen dynasty. Later this system became a social evil where to maintain such kulin status in society the girls were married in early ages to kulin Brahman who had the license to marry more than one girls irrespective of his age. There are many instances where kulin Brahman took marriage as his profession and maintained his livelihood by visiting to different wives in different places. But in this situation the condition of women was intolerable. In most of the cases such kulin husbands did not take any responsibility towards their wives and if husband died his wife had to suffer in widowhood for the whole life in a very early age.

79 ibid. P. 268


reshaping of the social world of nineteenth century Bengal. Vidyasagar’s reform programmes knowingly or unknowingly shared the middle class project of Bhadramahila which is in a sense a reworked version of the older Bengali Sati (the chaste women-wife). In this project the direct physical control was imposed through moral code of a utilitarian Christian lady and confined them within the domesticity. The fundamental impulse, as in all nineteenth century Srtee-swadhinata initiatives undertaken by the menfolk was ‘protectionist’ rather than egalitarian. Like the middle class itself, Vidyasagar was not entirely free from a certain fear of over-independent women going beyond the bound of conjugality. To find the solution to the women’s question within the norms of marriage and the family system, he actually wanted to control female sexuality and precluded women from appearing in public sphere in search of their identity. Even women themselves, like English women, did not form any separate movement on their own, rather they followed the male project of social reform and remained passive.

In fact to accommodate tradition, the Bengal Renaissance failed to bring genuine transformation in social attitude. The elements of modernization of the Renaissance project turned into traditional mode of thought in the second half of the nineteenth century. The reforms movement, associated with Bengal Renaissance wanted to change the existing social relations, particularly for women, but was not able to do that because the movement itself remained confined to reorganizing the private sphere under the changing circumstances. In the overwhelming presence of tradition, the notion of Bhadramahila cannot be the image of an individual woman. The appearance of middle class women and her feminine shame/modesty in the era of modernization was part of Bhadralok identity. But in the second half of nineteenth century these became the main aspect of traditional cultural authenticity of the nation. Once the image of Bhadramahila was associated with nationalism, women’s issue lost its priority in the public space. In nationalist era, the women’s question disappeared from public debate. But the social construct of Bhadramahila was not just confined to the ideational plane. Once it was constructed socially, the notion was represented in various cultural form and different

82 Ibid. Pp. 124

artefacts which further reinforced the Bhadramahila image of middle class women. Next we have to examine that how the image of Bhadramahila was portrayed in various cultural forms. In the nineteenth century context the cultural domain was constituted by music, literature and above all the modern Bengali drama. Bengali drama not only replaced the traditional folk forms like Jatra or Kabi-songs but gradually became an instrument of representing social issues for the nineteenth century western educated Bengali Bhadralok. Though the Bengali theatre was inspired by the English tradition, it offered a discursive space and played an important role to spread nationalist ideals. Given this background it was quite obvious that the modern Bengali drama would influence the whole structure of Bengali cinema both in content as well as form which is visible even today. It will not be wrong to say that Bengali cinema is a direct offshoot of Bengali theatre.