INTRODUCTION

The 19th century woman evolved through the strict traditional bindings of many centuries. The change of the woman from being a recognised entity in society to that of a slave is not an accidental phenomenon. In the long history of India, on the one hand we see the rise of the Brahmanical religion, on the other the fall of woman's status to that of the Sudras.

Western culture and education had a great impact on the society of 19th century Bengal. This century was one of wide ranging reforms. These were all linked to the question of women's liberation. Some of these were removal of 'Sati', Child Marriage' Casteism' introducing 'Widow Marriage', removal of 'Polygamy', intercaste marriage and illiteracy. The 19th century educated Bengal realised that both men and women should have equal rights and duties to build a healthy society.

In the RigVedic age both the sexes enjoyed equal status. Clan identities paved the way for the consciousness of the social sense. This in turn discouraged narrow traditional practices which could interfere in the progress of society. Man-woman relationship was treated in a natural way as a means of increasing progeny. As the society expanded, men were found to be busy fighting wars. Women took part in house-hold duties. They also engaged themselves in outside duties like agriculture, animal husbandry, production of ammunitions etc. 'Usha Strota' of Rig Veda depicts the woman as the dual head of the family. Ramesh Ch. Dutta quotes from the Rig Veda saying that "Though the mention is there of two wives but polygamy was not Ideal widow-remarriage was also in vogue".*1

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The 'suktas' (verses) created by women in Rig Vedic age differ from those of men. Dr. Rama Choudhury in her book 'Sanskrita O Prakritra Kabiganer Rachanabali' says that, "Though the verses were less refined, they were clear and free from emotion. They expressed their thoughts without fear"*2

The present writer thinks that the woman in that period valued mostly the husband's love and the happiness of married life. Waber made a critical comment on this, "As regards love, its tender, ideal element is not very conspicuous, it rather bears throughout the stamp of an undisguised natural sensuality. Marriage is however, held sacred, husband wife are both rulers of the house (damapati) and approach the Gods in united prayer."*3

During the age of the Atharvaveda, the picture of the woman found was completely different. The place of the woman was relegated to the home. For production of various things, society was in need of slaves. The patriarchal society turned down women into reproductive machines, who had no rights even over their own children. Bearing daughter was not welcome. But during the Rig Vedic period a contrasting picture was seen. Sons were preferred but daughters were not unwanted. All ritualistic rites and practices were open for women also.

In the next Upanishadic age, women were found to enjoy equal rights with men in areas of education and acquisition of higher knowledge. But any disobedience to their husbands was not tolerated and it led to punishment by even physical humiliation. In the Uttarkanda of the Ramayana and in the Mahabharata the girl child was seen to be weak. In those epics women characters like Sita,
Sabitri, Mandodari, Kaushalya, Urmila - all were very much devoted to their husbands. But there were exceptions like Gargi and Maitrayee, who showed equal expertise in literature, mathematics and astronomy. Debjani and Sharmistha in Mahabharata stand out in their own right. The former can be considered to be the oldest example of the role model of a modern woman in contrast with Sita and Sabitri. In Debjani we find the first expression of the 'individuality' which separates her from the ideal woman character of that period. She was the first woman who did never hesitate to give her own opinion against that of man. Compared to Debjani though Sharmistha was more devoted to her husband but she never compromised with her individuality. This characteristic was also present in 'Gandhari'. She obeyed her husband but never failed to remind him of his wrong doings and advised him to follow the right path.

The picture of the Bengali woman found in ancient, middle and in the 19th century is different. On the one hand the woman Goddess was worshiped with full honour and respect, but on the other hand the ordinary woman was subjugated to strict social bindings. Their opinion had no value. Women in vain prayed for the well-being of their husbands and children and not to be insulted and getting no importance.

In ancient literature there was a clear expectation from a woman. The picture that was painted is that of a 'Lakshmi', 'Mother Earth' and the devoted wife all in one. They were supposed to be faithful, kind-hearted and always the picture of happiness. 'Sati' was prevalent in those days. Polygamy was a curse for women in general.
This picture change for the better in the 19th century. In educated society due recognition was given to the mother and the wife. But their ambition was not very high. The maximum they wished for was the well-being of their family, visiting some holy places, 'daan', 'observation of fasting' etc. But to maintain the dignity of their class 'Purdah' system was strictly maintained in both higher and middle classes of society.

With the advent of the Vaishnavite movement in the 16th century Bengal, a shift was seen in the position of women. Among the followers of Vaishnavism, women were given the status of spiritual Gurus of which mention may be made of Sita Devi (wife of Adwaita), Jahnavi Devi (wife of Nityananda) and Hemalata (daughter of Srinibas Acharya). They were not only respected in Vaishnava society but a large section also followed their spiritual advice. According to Jnanesh Maitra, "The Vaishnava society denied the need of the purdah system" They rather valued women-liberation. Women took part in discourses on the 'Shastras'. The Vaishnava society thus created a link between those days and the start of women education in the 20th century.

Muslim literature of that time also had its impact on the progress of women. The picture of the woman found in that literature mainly centres around love and faithfulness towards the husband, humanity, sacrifice for the defence of one's religion.

Poet Bharatchandra in his literature linked up his age with that of the later age. In his poetry a contrasting picture is found. The characters mostly centre round women kept in Purdah, inside the palaces, their rich attire and their womanly interests. But the stress
is on characters having the qualities of Goddess Durga. At the same time, they are everyday practical beings.

Introduction of English education and social reforms brought about a change in the values given to women in society. Raja Rammoham Roy protested against the system of 'Sati'; introduced women-education and legal rights for women on property reforms continued in society. We have the example of Sri Ramkrishna, the saint of Dakshineshwar, who offered the highest recognition to women. He showed a new path by offering all his life long prayers and devotion at the feet of his wife as Goddess. This was in contrast to the actual picture of deprivation of women in society.

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Srish Chandra Vidyaratna, Durgamohan Das and many others tried for a strong law to introduce widow marriage. The call for women's education received momentum from the social reformers like Vidyasagar, Brajasundar Mitra and others.

Kali Prasanna Ghosh's 'Nari Jati Vishayak Prastab' Bamabodhini paper published by Nabin Brahma Society and 'Abalabandhab' by Dwarakanath - all present a mirror of the movement for women's education in those days. "Nabin Brahma Society introduced a separate prayer group for women called 'Brahma Samaj'. Brahma women dressed in new dresses came out openly from "Purdah".

The changes discussed above were reflected in the Bengali literature of 19th century. But nowhere do we find the basic pattern of ideal womanhood getting changed. These women were both traditional and open to change.
The European Renaissance brought a change in the value system of the society. This change manifested itself in the literature of the century. The women were more vocal about their opinions. In the plays of Michael Madhusudan Dutta the women are depicted as independent and outspoken. The type of example is found in his 'Sarmistha' and 'KrishnaKumari'. In his poem 'Birangana', the strong personality of woman is highlighted. Though the story was taken from the Puranic literature, the women characters are influenced by western values of individualism. "Meghnadabadh Kavya' the famous epic poem of Michael depicts 'Pramila' as having a say in her husband's activities. She is the best example of the progressive modern women. Women emancipation received encouragement from these characters who were socially conscious, practical and forward looking.

Another group of poets of the same period established the women as romantic ideals as opposed to their drudgery of daily life. They were regarded as epitomes of love, beauty and goodness. The names of Nabin Ch. Sen, Biharilal Chakraborty, Surendranath Majumdar, Akshay Kr. Boral, and others can be mentioned in this context. Debendra Nath Sen has romanticised the roles of his wife and daughter as women.

Biharilal Chakraborty's poems express strong feeling for change in the Purdah system.

In his poem 'Bangasundar' the woman is given a position of respect. In the poem 'Bandhubiyog' an attempt is made to reform the condition of neglected women of the society.
With the change of times there was a simultaneous change in the way men perceived his environment, society and values. These changes are the outcome of two factors. One is the cultural heritage borne through the self-conscious mind and the other is the current changes being brought about in society with the change of times, through heredity and environment. Man is not only rooted in empiricism but evolves through the different stages of the unconscious, conscious, to the super-conscious.

The underlying consciousness of the entire gamut of Rabindranath's literature is a combination of some of the above elements. His family started the 'Brahmasamaj' movement. This movement rejected the narrow ritualistic Hinduism, accepted scientific changes and showed respect to cultural values. The women of Tagore family were different from those of the general society in their use of language, education, dress and general outlook to life. Mention of this is found in 'Prabashi' - a monthly magazine. Swarnakumari Devi speaks about the visit of a 'vaishnavi teacher' to the household. "She had access to the women's private chambers. She was tutor to the newly married girls and other women. But the unmarried girls received their lessons with the boys from the Gurus in the house itself."

All women remained busy with studies along with their other activities. Whenever the book-seller Malini entered with collection of books there was excitement among the women. They loved to read all types of books like Ramayana, Mahabharata, cheap novels, fairy tales etc. with great interest. We come to know from Rabindranath's elder brother Satyendranath Tagore, about his
childhood experiences. He along with his brothers got their first taste of literature from their mothers and other female relatives. So, it was the women of the household who took the responsibility of the primary education of their children.

Satyendranath was at the forefront of women's emancipation in 19th century Bengal. He supported his wife Jnanadanandini Devi in her efforts to educate the Indian women. The Tagore family had always been strong advocates of women's education. This received momentum in the 19th century. "Women from the Tagore family attended functions centred round the subject of female education. Jnanadanandini even contributed to the family magazine 'Bharati' writing on the same issue. This is commented upon by Dr. Dipti Chakraborty." 7

Rabindranath was extremely disturbed by the picture of women being given no right whatsoever by the patriarchal society in the feudal age. They were forced to maintain Purdah. He has given a very sensitive description of his childhood days. He was born in that ancient Calcutta where women went out of the house in closed 'Palkis' with doors. If they happened to be of aristocratic women, here was an additional cover over the 'Palki'. It looked like a moving tomb. Women were shy of going out of the house in open carriages. Rabindranath protested against the age old bindings which women had taken for granted. He wanted to liberate them. So, he wrote -

"এসো ছেড়ে এসো, সখী কুসুমশয়ন
বাজুক কাঠি মাতি চরণের তলে ......." 8
In his deeply sensitive writing he has highlighted women's woes. 'Palataka', 'Phanki', 'Nishkriti', 'Mayer Samman', 'Kalo Meye', 'Chhinna Patra', Chirodiner Daag etc. all carry pictures of the suffering women. The plight of women in joint families has been shown in 'Mukti' but Binu, in the poem shows a sparkling novelty by not accepting subjugation but declaring her womanhood. This is how Rabindranath wanted to see the women characters like Binu who have evolved from the liberal mind of the poet rather than from real life. The women in his poems have always been an inspiration for him in his personal life.
References:

1. Ramesh Ch. Dutta, *Rig Veda* [From Rigveda], P. 243.

2. Rama Choudhury 'Sanskrita O Prakrita Kabiganer Rachanabali', P. 175.


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