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OUT OF THE ANTAHPUR?
GENDER SUBORDINATION AND SOCIAL REFORM IN NINETEENTH CENTURY BENGAL

Dolores F. Chew

A Thesis

in

The Department

of

History

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ABSTRACT

Out of the Antahpur? Gender Subordination and Social Reform in Nineteenth Century Bengal

Dolores F. Chew

The nineteenth century has been hailed as the century of emancipation of women in Bengal. During this time, debates over social reform raged very heatedly, and issues concerning women were the most dominant. However women themselves were rarely party to these exchanges; they merely provided the subject matter for a debate that in the main hovered around tradition and modernity. While practices emerging from gender subordination were perceived as issues crying for reform, and there was tremendous pressure for reform, there existed little concern with the real status of women. The proponents for changes in the status of women lacked an overall perception of gender subordination and so the reform efforts were directed at specific issues concerning women. Sati, widow marriage, female education and the age of consent were issues that appeared at the forefront of these debates. This segmented approach lacked an awareness of gender subordination being basic to the problems requiring reform, and meant that women's status in many respects remained virtually unchanged by the end of the nineteenth century. This despite the fact that many reforms affecting the status of women were realized in the nineteenth century. This thesis attempts to demonstrate that women were simply the yardstick for measuring what can be described as a tussle between tradition versus modernity and the concominant ramifications in a colonial society.

For Dulcie Fernandes,
my mother

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A thesis is rather like a film and the writer is the director, orchestrating a team towards completion of the final product. If any one component falters, the whole project suffers. Similarly with this thesis, however modest, many people and institutions assisted me at various stages, contributing towards its completion. Therefore at the risk of this section running on longer than the thesis I shall acknowledge some of the more prominent. It would be impossible to mention everyone, and I beg the pardon of those who contributed in various ways but do not find themselves mentioned here.

Although they usually come at the end of such sections, I would like to firstly thank my family. Rana Bose, my friend, companion and husband, has borne this particular lap of what must seem to him to be my never-ending voyage of discovery. Still, he epitomizes the man who recognizes the need and provides the space — emotional, intellectual and physical — for self-fulfilment of women, putting principle into practice. He has cheerfully borne the burden of providing the major portion of support for our family, all the while encouraging me to continue and to do a 'quality' job. He has also acted as the sounding board for many of the ideas discussed in this thesis. Siraj and Durga Chew-Bose have also borne with their mother's "work". Their understanding and patience have always been appreciated, and when their natural tendencies broke through and they demanded attention, taking me away from my ponderings, they made me swiftly realize that this was also what life was all about.

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

> Intellectual amusements and recreations are wholly unknown to them [women]; the only employment of which they are capable during moments of leisure, are preparations of pickles and confectionery — if sleeping or quarrelling can be avoided.
>
> (Rev. K.M. Banerjea, A Prize Essay on Native Female Education, p.43, Calcutta, 1848)

> Few things please them better than a conversation on this subject [jewellery] which, from the absence of mental culture, almost wholly monopolizes their mind. If not this spent time is frittered away in sundry petty frivolous enquiries of a purely domestic character. On matters of the most vital importance their notions are absurd and childish.
>
> (S.C. Bose, The Hindoos as They Are, p.5, Calcutta, 1883)

> ...What suffering women endure in ordinary house-holds! The husband accepts his wife as his better half at marriage but treats her worse than animals. Almost every wife works like a maidservant in her husband's house....All these the women put up with in fear of their religion.... It is a pity that the condition of poor and suffering women does not evoke your kindness and urge you to save them from their husband's funeral pyre."
>
> (Raja Rammohun Roy, "On Concremation: A Second Conference Between an Advocate and an Opponent of that Practice", 1819)

The nineteenth century has been hailed as the century of emancipation of women in Bengal.[1] During this time, debates over social reform raged very heatedly, and issues concerning women were the most dominant. However women themselves were rarely party to these exchanges; they merely provided the subject matter for a debate that in the main hovered around tradition and modernity. What this thesis attempts to demonstrate is that while practices emerging from gender subordination were perceived as issues crying for reform, and there was tremendous pressure for reform, there existed little concern with the real status of women. The proponents for changes in the status of women lacked an integrated approach and so the reform efforts were directed at

specific issues concerning women. For example, sati, widow marriage, female education and the age of consent were issues that appeared at the forefront of these debates. The fact that this segmented approach lacked an awareness of gender subordination as the basic ingredient in all the problems needing reform, meant that women's status in many respects remained virtually unchanged by the end of the nineteenth century, despite the many specific "reforms" affecting women which were achieved during that century. This may seem surprising when one considers how issues concerning women's status were the focal point of much of the discussion and lobbying for social reform, and it certainly raises questions about the motivations behind the reforms. While no doubt there were many men genuinely sympathetic and concerned with the status of women, it appears that these sentiments may not have been the sole or perhaps even the major motivating factor for reform. Other issues were also at stake. In the final analysis, women were simply the yardstick for measuring success in what can be described as the competition between tradition and modernity and its concomitant ramifications in a colonial society. Among the issues at stake was whether Indians were capable of greater responsibility and a share in government, or whether ambitious new classes would win that recognition and approval from a colonial power which they sought. Issues of status were prominent as well. The notion that a civilization is measured by the status of its women did not go unnoticed.

Amidst all this, fundamental issues of gender control got subsumed or were deliberately avoided and by-passed. The reforms were manipulated to maintain male dominance and control. Female sexuality as an abstract entity, figured largely in the reforms, and reformers who sought to ameliorate the situation of women seemed preoccupied with questions of conventional morality

and the control of female sexuality. Some reforms were instituted to prevent women deviating from the path of respectability or to 'improve' women's minds so they would not be preoccupied with licentiousness. That scant attention was paid to female seclusion and segregation among the issues earmarked for reform is a significant indicator of the actual concerns of the reformers. Segregation in the antahpur epitomized gender subordination and female inequality in nineteenth century Bengal, but the existence of the antahpur as the embodiment of female inequality was never dealt with in a concrete manner.

The hypothesis that is being discussed here evolved in the process of my research into the nature of the reform movement in nineteenth century Bengal as it pertained to women. Many of the questions being discussed in this thesis have never been raised before. Naturally, at this stage the discussion cannot be conclusive, but there is ample evidence to raise questions which cast considerable doubt on accepted notions regarding the nineteenth century social reform movement and women's issues. I have suggested answers to these questions wherever possible. This thesis falls within the parameters of the on-going discussion among South Asian feminist historians on the implications of male-generated and at times masculinist reforms on women's status.

Historiography

Much has been written about this period, which is popularly referred to as the 'Bengal Renaissance', and its various components have been dissected many times over. While individual interpretations have varied among

historians of different schools (colonialist, nationalist, revisionist), the general consensus has been very positive. The nineteenth century has been hailed as a period of great improvement in women's situation in Bengal, and when compared to Britain, brimming over with firsts -- women admitted to a university,[2] qualified women doctors and legislation regarding female inheritance.[3] Yet one should be cautious about such enthusiasm, for the changes were not as pervasive as claimed, nor were basic structures of sex inequality questioned. It has only been in the last several years, as a result of growing feminist consciousness among academics, and the questioning of inherent elite biases in Indian historiography[4] strengthened by knowledge of similar reevaluations of Western women's histories,[5] that the real nature of the nineteenth century reforms of women's status in Bengal has begun to be questioned[6].

There are numerous studies of nineteenth century social reform.[7] However most of them suffer from serious negative aspects including uneven distribution, a tendency to hagiography and a certain compartmentalization.[8] Besides this, historians of nineteenth century social reform too easily ascribe the intellectual strains current at the time to the liberalizing impact of British rule and English education. Too often the colonial context has been ignored.[9] Scant attention has been paid to the ideological hegemony of colonialism. Standard works on the status of women in India[10] all have their mandatory chapter on social reform and include sections on Pandita Ramabai, Vidyasagar and Rammohun Roy, implying that this was the beginning of their improved status and women ought to be indebted to these social reformers. They do not acknowledge that the improved status of women was a necessary segment of other more ambitious political and economic plans. Standard works on women in

the nationalist movement also trace the origins of womens' participation in the independence struggle to the nineteenth century[11] and the liberating influence of well-known reformers of the period.

This trend is slowly being reversed. Two excellent comprehrensive studies of women in Bengal have recently been published. Ghulam Murshid's Reluctant Debutante, concentrates on modernization and "how women responded to these male efforts".[12] Meredith Borthwick's book, The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, is a detailed description and analysis of the lives of Bengali women during a period of rapid change.[13]

Scope of Study

The question of gender subordination and reform in nineteenth century Bengal is too wide to be examined and discussed exhaustively within the scope of this thesis. Hence this study shall restrict itself to certain specific issues of gender control that emerged in the debates on issues concerning the condition of women in nineteenth century Bengal. The central focus of the thesis will be the duality of concerns of the proponents of reforms for women. Overall there existed the concerns with status enhancement and maintenance of the bhadrolok and the desire to create a favourable impression on the British. These motivations lurk behind the scenes of the nineteenth century reform movement, along with the bhadrolok preoccupation with acceptable notions of respectability and conventional morality that appear to have governed many of the activities for the reform of women's status. The bhadrolok concern with

threats to male dominance is a formative notion of the study. To better understand the main body of the thesis it was necessary to provide some discussion of the formative influences of modernization/Westernization on the mentality of the Bengali bhadrolok of the period.

Orientalist constructions of India have been responsible to a large extent for the self-image Indians had and have of themselves. The current discussions of Orientalism, and more specifically of Indology have been very useful in drastically revising notions of India and Bengal that for two centuries or more were accepted as objective reality. These constructs were important in shaping the economic and social structures of colonial Bengal, for they influenced both British administrators and policymakers and colonised Indians. For example, Orientalist and Indologist constructs had nurtured the notion of women as repositories of tradition. As the nineteenth century progressed, nationalism became a major force on the political scene in Bengal and an outgrowth of this was a traditionalist revival. For women viewed as they were, as guardians of tradition, this had a negative impact. Now women became the "currency" of debates in which the morality of colonial rule was confronted. The honour of the collective, religious or national, came to depend on women[14] and this strengthened the male demand that women conform to very specific and restrictive codes of conduct.

This thesis focusses on elements of gender subordination within the bhadrolok (gentleman) class in nineteenth century Bengal. The English equivalent of such a group would be the middle-class. The bhadrolok were born as a direct result of British colonial rule in Bengal. Assisted by new land-

holding opportunities, commerce, professions and affiliated occupations, they emerged and became very influential in the political and social life of Bengal. The female component of this class, the bhadramahila, were the focus of reform efforts for women. They, like their middle-class contemporaries elsewhere, were economically dependent on the male members of their families. (As a result of their economic independence, working-class women did not share most of these elements of gender subordination.) It was the bhadrolok who were the force behind the 'renaissance' in Bengal, and it was this class who were behind the changes in the status of the bhadramahila. Of course, as argued in the thesis, the motivations for these reforms were not uni-dimensional. Calcutta, the capital of British India, and the capital of Bengal Presidency, was a busy cosmopolitan city, and the centre of commerce and intellectual currents. Many of the bhadrolok, while maintaining rural family ties, either lived in this city or at least lived there during the week, spending the weekend in their villages in the mofussil (districts). Calcutta was thus the focal point of the social reform movement, and the continual exchanges between the metropolis and mofussil ensured an exchange of ideas and information between the two.

Sources

This thesis has depended heavily on autobiographies and biographies of persons who lived during the period in question, as well as contemporary accounts of European and Indian observers. Many of these observers were involved in aspects of social reform and amelioration of the status of women.

One of the results of modernization was the development of a press in both English and the vernacular. The bhadrolok who patronized these publications adopted the European style of debating issues via the pages of these papers. These published discussions on issues related to reforms on the status of women provide insight into the prevailing ideas of the time as well as the inherent biases and notions of respectability of the nineteenth century bhadrolok.

The nineteenth century also saw the birth of a new prose style, influenced by Western forms, and the works of writers like Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and Rabindranath Tagore lend insight, albeit male, to the inner world of the antahpur as well as to prevailing social norms. As mentioned above in the historiography section, there is no dearth of secondary works on nineteenth century Bengal. Many volumes of description, commentary and criticism have contributed to the development of the discussions in this thesis.[15]

In addition to the above, anthropological and psycho-sociological work by scholars such as Manisha Roy, Ashis Nandy, M.N. Srinivas and Hanna Papanek have contributed by introducing other dimensions to enrich this study.[16] Manisha Roy's rich anthropological study of Bengali women, despite its contemporary origins has great relevance for a study of the bhadramahila in the nineteenth century. In many respects, in spite of changes in family organization wrought by the changing socio-economic condition of Bengali society, fundamentally much remains the same. The identification of the female person with the family group, the roles she is expected to play throughout her life and the socialization process she undergoes is in essence not very different.

The psychological dimensions of reform, especially regarding Raja Rammohun Roy are uniquely analyzed by Ashis Nandy. He hints at subliminal motivations, which is also a concern of this thesis. M.N. Srinivas' work on Sanskritization is valuable in arriving at an understanding of possible reasons for the proponents of improvements of the status of women undertaking their reforms. Hanna Papanek's and her colleagues' relentless researches into purdah, its modus operandi and concomitant ramifications prove invaluable to an understanding of the notions of seclusion and the significance of the antahpur. They have shown beyond a doubt the inextricable connections between gender subordination, female seclusion and socio-economic considerations.

Methodology

The majority of women who form the basis of this study were in purdah and hence metaphorically and otherwise the ghare-baire (inner-outer) dichotomized framework developed by Partha Chatterjee is particularly relevant to this study. [17] It emanates from the domestic situation where the inner sanctum (antahpur) of the home was the preserve of the women, the guardians of the spirituality and traditions of the family. The outer apartments of the house were inhabited by the male family members and they mediated the outer world for the family. They went out for their business and social interactions. They were sullied by their contact with the outer (often westernized) influences of commerce and socialization and returned home to indigenous influences to be purified and rejuvenated. The dichotomy between European and Indian, tradition and modernity, outer and inner, epitomizes the intellectual and cultural dilemmas of the nineteenth century elite in Bengal and

exemplifies the currents swirling around the reform debates. The ghare-baire framework and its emphasis on the relationship between the inner and outer seems to parallel ideas propounded by feminist theoreticians of the private/public dichotomy.[18] The two systems are very suited to issues of the colonial situation and those of gender subordination as dealt with in this thesis.

The Gramscian concept of hegemony as developed by the Subaltern Studies School provides a further tool for analyzing the topic under consideration. It emphasizes fundamental relationships of power domination and subordination,[19] and differs from Gramsci in that he saw little evidence of autonomy in peasant movements.[20] The Subaltern framework also differs from Gramsci with respect to the concept of hegemony. Gramsci suggests total control, including political, cultural and ideological, by the elites of the subaltern groups. However this does not accomodate the autonomous culture of subaltern groups. It allows no room for the existing rituals, conventions and world-view of the latter.[21] In this notion of autonomy the Subalternists overlap with the analyses of E.P. Thompson and Raymond Williams.[22] The latter has stated that "[t]here are always non-hegemonic or counter-hegemonic values at work to resist, restrict and qualify the operations of the hegemonic order."[23] Based on this the Subalternists do not see hegemony as a rigid, automatic and all-determining structure of domination.

Though initially the Subaltern Studies School concentrated on peasant and working-class movements, we find that researchers working on South Asian women's history are applying some of the tools of the Subalternists in their analyses. This application is based on the premise of all women comprising a

subaltern group in a power relationship dominated by male economic, intellectual and cultural hegemony. The Subaltern Studies group's recognition of the dialectical nature of hegemony provides intellectual recognition of and hence scope for the study of autonomy and resistance. Recognition of this paradigm creates the need to deconstruct the debates and positions of the nineteenth century on women. The ideas of Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak on reworking our understanding of society and the "coining of new money"[24] to recognize the feminine in our collective experiences are generally acclaimed to be seminal in this area. Both because of her previous work as a literary critic and more recently because of her participation in the Subaltern Studies group,[25] Chakravarty Spivak's work proves useful to the thrust of this thesis. Thus, the Subaltern Studies framework helps us to understand both the Bengali bhadrolok in terms of their subaltern relationship to British domination, as well as the autonomous culture of the bhadramahila in a relationship of subordination and domination with the bhadrolok.

CHAPTER II

BACKGROUND TO THE REFORM MOVEMENT

> No man has a higher regard for our sacred Scriptures than I, but they were meant to guide and not to enchain us. And in these days, when all the world is moving onwards, we must move too. Trust me, Jagat Kishor, we Hindus are a practical nation in spite of all that has been said against us. We are not inert, but silently and curiously progressive; and few nations on earth have dared to remodel their customs according to the needs of these modern times as we have done, since the time of Ram Mohan Roy. We are Progressive Conservatives, if I may coin a phrase, in social matters.
>
> (Lala Sahib in R.C. Dutt's The Lake of Palms, p. 218)[1]

In order to situate the main discussion of the thesis this chapter shall dwell briefly on the historical background to the reforms and debates concerning women in nineteenth century Bengal. From this it will become evident that Bengal was subjected to processes that are referred to variously as Modernization or Westernization. In order to understand the raison d'etre of the reforms, the debates surrounding them, and their nature, it becomes essential to examine divergent and convergent views of the processes as well as the perceived results of the dialectical process of modernization/ Westernization. Lastly the chapter shall cover the question of Orientalism and what impact it had on the scrutiny of women's status in nineteenth century Bengal.

Historical Background

By 1793 the Permanent Settlement (of land revenue) had been introduced into Bengal and variously created or confirmed a land-holding class consisting in part of traditional gentry. British commercial interests also facilitated the

rise of a new class of entrepreneur. The latter benefitted from British rule and either through service or speculation in trade-related activities amassed sums of money which it used to puchase zamindari rights in land and with it both a traditionally-approved investment and enhanced status.[2] In fact, as pointed out by Stokes, during the Cornwallis (1786–1793) and Wellesley (1798–1805) periods of administration, property rights in the Western sense were defined and enforced.[3] Thus the opportunities afforded by the British either through land-holding or commerce led to the emergence of a new middle-class, the bhadrolok.[4] Lower in the social scale, but within the parameters of the bhadrolok, were a class of professionals whose birth was a direct result of colonial rule -- lawyers, teachers, clerks, newspaper writers, editors and publishers and later in the nineteenth century, civil servants as well.

One of the key elements identified in the Bengal 'renaissance' is the attraction of Western rationalist thought. Once English became the language officially supported by government funds and an English curriculum was adopted in Indian schools,[5] Western rationalism took an even greater hold of the Bengali intellectual of the era. Even prior to 1835 however, intellectuals like Raja Rammohun Roy were attracted to such ideas and were very influenced by them. A Western education now came to be recognized as essential for commerce as well as official dealings with the Government. As well, the emulation of the rulers by the ruled also ensured an eager quest for a Western education. These policies reflected changes in attitudes and intellectual trends among the British both in Britain and in India. In the eighteenth century there was a non-religious atmosphere, an emphasis on accumultion of wealth and romantic notions of the East. This was the age of the 'nabobs', epitomized by men like Clive and Hastings. Later in the first quarter of the nineteenth century the Evangelical

and Utilitarian influences took root in India along with the notion of reform, and practices that had been tolerated as traditional were questioned and in the case of sati and thuggee[6] abolished. The post-1857 'mutiny' sentiments were fear and suspicion with the introduction of greater distancing and formality between Europeans and Indians, leading to extreme rigidity and stiff protocol in British and Indian interaction.

Several intellectual currents of a religious and secular nature are evident in nineteenth century Bengal. Perhaps the most significant in terms of the status of women was the theistic religious movement founded by Raja Rammohun Roy, the Brahmo Samaj, which evolved and split twice before the end of the nineteenth century, once over an issue related to women.[7] Nevertheless, whatever the schism and whichever group of Brahmos one studies, some of the most obvious contributions to the improvement of women's status emanated from this group. In their efforts to ameliorate the conditon of women, the Brahmos met with reaction from orthodox Hindu society and faced scathing attacks from this quarter. The Dharma Sabha was established in opposition to the reform efforts of Raja Rammohun Roy and the Brahmos. They developed their opposition on narrow Shastric interpretations and Raja Radhakanta Deb was their most notable spokesperson.

Another intellectual current was that of Young Bengal, whose originator was a very young Eurasian schoolteacher, Henry Vivian Derozio. Although he died when he was only 23, he unleashed with a youthful exuberance, an extreme Westernized reaction to tradition. The Derozians, as his students and followers were called, were very much influenced by Thomas Paine and The Rights of Man. Before writing this, Paine had written a feminist tract An Occasional

Letter on the Female Sex (1775) in which he "expressed sympathy for women's degraded status, anger at their physical exploitation by men within marriage, and for the vulnerability to economic hardship, social ostracism, and legal harassment of unmarried women."[8] We do not know whether this piece was available to the Derozians. It is possible that it had not reached the shores of India in the early decades of the nineteenth century, for beyond the usual criticisms of the status of women common in nineteenth century Bengal, there was nothing unique emanating from Young Bengal in this regard. From their contemporaries the Derozians received ridicule for their attire (short breeches) and their public posturings.[9] But despite the fact that their extreme and often misplaced radicalism was short-lived, the legacy of Derozio and his followers as they grew older and matured was widely felt in nineteenth century Bengal.

Besides the above, some landmark events galvanized action, reaction and helped stimulate changes that occurred in the nineteenth century. In 1829 after a lot of indecision on the part of the British, Governor-General Bentinck abolished sati, the ritual immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre. Widow remarriage prohibited to Hindus was legalized in 1856. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's efforts were largely responsible for this. The Native Marriage Act was passed in 1872. It raised the marriage age to 14 for females and 18 for males. Monogamy was made obligatory and unorthodox inter-caste marriages were legalized largely due to the efforts of Keshub Chandra Sen. However the latter two acts remained on the statute books but were rarely implemented.

Initially, British India was closed to missionary activities. Then in large part due to efforts of evangelicals in Britain the policy changed and from 1814 missionaries were permitted in British India. Their impact was felt,

especially in the field of education. Zenana teachers went to the antahpur to instruct women who lived in purdah. The first schools were opened. The printing presses in Bengal pioneered by the Baptist missionaries at Serampore allowed for discusion and debate, including issues related to women. Although the missionaries were not as successful as they had hoped with Christian conversions, they did have an impact on nineteenth century Bengal. Their vociferous criticisms of practices like sati and infanticide raised the issues and made Hindus confront them. Of course there was also conversative reaction. Admittedly the missionaries tailored their reports for their audience in Britain who were also their financial sustainers and had to be impressed with the urgent need for missionary work in India.

Calcutta, a creation of British colonialism and the capital of British India introduced a new culture to Bengal. It was a busy port and a centre of commerce as well as intellectual and cultural develoments. All this facilitated the rise of the bhadrolok, and engendered discussion, debate and reform. However the bhadrolok still felt tied symbiotically to their native villages which they visited often, or at least once each year during Durga puja, the great Bengali festival. The continued rural ties ensured a lingering rural consciousness which had a bearing on reform activities. Urbanization did not necessarily mean a break with traditions. And so reforms that seemed to result from an interaction with Western norms had often to adapt or succumb to traditional dictates.

Thus the nineteenth century was a period of social dislocation. This provided a climate for change. It was possible for reformers to attempt to introduce changes. However, for reasons discussed in the following section

opportunities for reform were grasped at in a half-hearted manner. The changes that did occur in the status of women were superficial with basic inequalities remaining unchanged.

Modernization

Strenuous efforts were made by the Bengali bhadrolok to emulate their colonizers. This was motivated by a desire to achieve European levels of development in order to win recognition, to prove equality with the British, and later to claim their legitimate right to power.[10] The condition of women provided one of the means to this achievement, as it was one of the measures of attaining it. Bhadrolok society became aware of many contemporary Western societal norms because they were subjected to colonialism and consequently to a process which many social scientists call modernization. This is a term whose usage and meaning have been discussed extensively. We shall examine aspects of this debate in order to arrive at our own understanding of the phenomenon. This is essential if we are to grasp the impact of the 'modernization' process on women's status. When considering modernization we must also be cognizant of the other side of the coin — traditionalism. With reference to women in nineteenth century Bengal this often resulted in a tug-of-war between two ideological streams. Robert Crane succinctly describes the ramifications of the phenonema and the potential it holds for polarizing society.

> Innovation, modernization and allied change may call for radical departures from past practice or from older value systems. In such cases new sanctions are proposed as men [sic] face up to the new potentialities. Radical departures call, however, for a greater individual and institutional readiness to accept change. Radical departures also suggest

> sharp discontinuities and the latter may well bring in their train a host of additional problems that clamor for solutions. These circusmtances would raise issues concerning the viability of certain institutions, such as the administrative and political to aggregate these demands and cope with them.[11]

He points out that because change most often is born in the minds of the elites, values, attitudes and belief patterns are the most important aspects in the modernization process.[12] David Kopf, addressing the questions of revitalization and modernization with specific reference to the Brahmo Samaj, sees them as a response to Western intrusion, and not necessarily a uniquely elite phenomenon. To reinforce his claim, he refreshingly introduces Suresh Singh's monograph on the Munda revolt, a subaltern movement, because it parallels the Bengal 'renaissance'.[13] Kopf's thesis in this piece is that "intellectuals used tradition not to shape the present in their image of the past, but to discover historical guidelines in their heritage appropriate to a society in transition."[14] The gradual change that we witness in nineteenth century Bengal in all areas, including those affecting women's status, seems to bear this out. Except in rare cases there were no sudden disruptions.

The anthropologist M.N. Srinivas seems more comfortable with the term Westernization, but uses it in much the same way modernization is used by Crane and Kopf. The values he recognizes as introduced by this process are humanitarianism, which include egalitarianism and secularization. He differentiates between traditional concern for all sentient creatures expressed repeatedly in Sanskrit literature and the elements of egalitarianism as embodied in the legal, political, educational and social institutions of British India. For him the key words of British rule were 'rationality' and 'humanitarianism'. British justice introduced the principle of equality and created a consciousness of positive rights. This is especially important in our discussion on women's

status. Concomitant with rationality and humanitarianism, religious customs had to satisfy a test of reason and humanity if they were to be allowed to survive. In discussions on the abolition of sati and child marriage these sensibilities were active.[15]

Sanskritization, a theory developed by M.N. Srinivas serves as an addendum to this definition of Westernizaton. It is the process by which low caste Hindus aspiring to caste enhancement perform rituals, observe customs and change ideology to match that of the higher caste to which they aspire.[16] Dominance is very essential in enabling caste groups to increase status, and Westernization, which usually entailed a Western education and jobs created by colonialism which opened up hitherto unavailable income sources, all provided opportunities for caste enhancement and Sanskritization. Many Indians achieved affluence through mercantile ventures facilitated by the British presence. They invested in land, a traditional status enhancer. But this was not enough. The status of women changes when a caste group moves upwards. It usually means greater restrictions and more rigid seclusion. We see this occurring with regard to the bhadrolok, especially in their urban setting. In rural Bengal seclusion among upper-caste Hindus was minimally observed.

> As any caste or portion of a caste becomes wealthy or influential the seclusion and jealous appropriation of the weaker sex becomes stricter.... The upper classes of cultivators are introducing the purdah system more and more, and a low casteman, on becoming well-to-do, invariably builds his pucka (masonry) house, with a high brick wall surrounding it, constructs a private privy, and has a well dug in his yard, so that his women shall not have to go out... [17]

Ostentatious religious spending, building of temples and the performance of sati also increased social standing.[18] The process of Sanskritization can be applied

in our study, but instead of a traditional mechanism for upward movement of an entire caste group we have distinct bhadrolok families seeking upward mobility and caste enhancement. Bipan Chandra describes the phenomenon as "colonial modernization". An entire world was lost and the social fabric dissolved. Although a new framework was born it was incipiently stagnant and decaying.[19]

All these definitions collapse in the hands of contemporary Indian historians. Earlier Marxist historians viewed intellectual history of the nineteenth century as a struggle of traditional versus conservative forces and rational versus modernist ones.[20] Shorn to their roots these descriptors should read 'reactionary' versus 'progressive'. Historians of the same genre, researching in the 1970s reassessed the nineteenth century and provided a whole new critique of modernity. They failed to see modernity in massive deindustrialization, unbearable pressures on land, stagnation in productivity and general immiserization of the population. This went hand in hand with the crushing of peasant resistance and the growing social gulf between the Western-educated urban elite and the rest of the nation. These historians used a Marxian framework to critique earlier Marxist historians for presenting a false dichotomy between Westernization/modernization and tradition. They differed with the earlier Marxist historians who had viewed the Westernization/modernization model as progressive.[21] It is interesting to note here that M.N. Srinivas chooses to use 'Westernization' and not 'modernization' because he says there is an inherent ethical judgment in the latter term, whereas the former is "ethically neutral."[22]

From the above it becomes apparent that the process of modernization/Westernization gave rise to tensions in society. It benefitted a small section of

the population while working to disadvantage and disinherit the majority population so that no base was provided to build a modernized or Westernized society. Let us examine some of these tensions. One of the most discussed is the ambivalence that modernization/Westernization created within Indians towards their own society and the British. M.N. Srinivas posits that the extreme self-criticism resulted from the desire to do away with features and institutions like sati, thuggee, religious prostitution, female infanticide and purdah, child-marriage, and the traditional ban on divorce and widow remarriage. However there was also pride in one's country, and its rich culture, bolstered by growing Western interest in Indian history, prehistory, and culture. Feelings for the British were a mixture of admiration and envy. Contrasts between the rulers and the ruled often produced feelings of inferiority and led from "open self-debasement to bitter denunciation of everything Western."[23] In their conflicts with orthodoxy the new elites used the shastras to support their views.

Tapan Raychaudhuri in his recent work criticizes the use of the term 'ambivalence' as applied to the reaction of Indians to colonialism. He perceives admiration as well as revulsion and hostility but not in a polarized way. Selective admiration was natural given the situation in Bengal. Mazzini and Garibaldi were revered but Bismarck had no place. Bankim's preference for Shakespeare over Kalidasa was a result of his education. It was British dominance that provoked revulsion and hostility. Consequently, Raychaudhuri finds the explanation of ambivalence unconvincing.[24]

As Crane points out, modernization often calls for radical departures from older value systems. There is a breakdown of old loyalties and all this

results in "increasing social atomisation and anomie".[25] Interference with ritual practices like the abolition of sati were not universally popular. Criticism by foreigners caused new anxieties. The direct onslaught by Christian missionaries is a good example of this. It created a need to defend the Hindu identity from foreign and native attacks. Institutional form to this new anxiety in Bengal was given by the Dharma Sabha formed by Raja Radhakanta Deb and others. In continuation of this line of thought, Raychaudhuri denies that much of the hearkening back that occurred in the nineteenth century was Hindu revivalism, and refers to the three nineteenth century personalities he includes in his study. Bhudev Mukhopadhyay points to the "need to preserve inherited practices" for fear of "losing all sense of cultural identity". Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay interprets "certain elements in the old traditions as a viable basis for national regeneration". Vivekenanda was concerned with national regeneration and uplifting of the masses.[26]

Early modernization was cosmopolitan and met with little resistance from Calcutta's intellegentsia. Later modernization was more parochial, epitomized by Macaulayism. Under its unsubtle burden, the old value system collapsed and cultural barricades of nationalism went up.[27] The psychological ramification of this was a quest for a new identity resulting from the need to remain Hindu and modern.[28] Sarkar sees this being accommodated in the Hindu tradition which "had always combined a very considerable degree of abstract intellectual freedom with insistence upon rigid social conformity and Rammohun and the early Brahmos on the whole maintained this dichotomy."[29] This becomes especially significant in the writings on and reforms of the status of women. Relatively little changed and what did was stringently controlled.

To end this overview of modernization as it occurred in nineteenth century Bengal we shall consider the pessimistic observations of some modern historians. Barun De maintains that modernization in India was doomed to failure because though modernization of a kind took place it did not prepare India for the tasks of modernity, and did not play a role in forcing India out of the supposed rut she was in, that of "ignorance and superstition". When Barun De compares modernization in India with trends of modernity as they occurred in Europe, he finds none of the structural and intellectual develoments that existed in Europe. The destruction of a traditionalist feudal/religious orthodoxy, economic interdependence or growth of political statehood are just some of the missing elements he identifies. Modernity is identified with a "crystallization of bourgeois class-consciousness and in the early nineteenth century with working-class consciousness which was a reaction to the moral and utilitarian hardening of the bourgeoisie."[30]

Since De finds alien rule and modernity uncompatible, he describes the situation in nineteenth century Bengal as an "enclaved modernity". This occurs where all other components of modernity may be absent. It usually envelopes a coterie where class struggle is absent, for example, the Italian Renaissance, which was an enclave of court elites. This "enclaving" is typical of nineteenth century Bengal and the cultural enlightenment one finds there. England's work in India was not modernization in the sense of betterment of values. They killed small-scale artisanal economies and introduced limited social innovation to benefit administrative and technological practice.[31] Thus De and Chatterjee concur that the positive view of colonial modernization in early Marxist historiography of nineteenth century Bengal failed to question earlier assumptions. For instance, there is no recognition that Raja Rammohun

Roy's break with tradition was full of contradictions. The break was at the intellectual level and not at that of basic social transformation. He compromised with bourgeois elites and visualized a dependent bourgeois development in Bengal. "This was an utterly absurd illusion, because colonial subjection would never permit full-blooded bourgeois modernity but only a 'weak and distorted caricature'."[32] "Dependence on the foreign rulers and alienation from the masses were to remain for long the two cardinal limitations of our entire 'renaissance' intelligentsia."[33] The crux of this argument is that there existed no social class or force to substantiate individual reformers. They were voices in the wilderness and abstract phenomenon. "[T]he fundamental forces of transformation were absent in colonial society."[34]

Modernization lacked an economic base. Industrialization was minimal. Therfore when the Bengali intelligentsia schooled in Western rationalism tried desperately to implant these ideas, they did not work. It was hoped that education would be a vehicle for change, but in the absence of an economic base it became futile. Hence Vidyasagar's frantic attempts to find scriptural support for reforms aimed at modernizing religion and social practice. They in fact led to a revivalist backlash.

The issue of education for women is an excellent example of the result of the imposition of European ideas. There was no cultural base for it. Perhaps because of this, there was an unusual degree of freedom in certain areas, as compared with European women. For example, women were permitted to enter university and in some instances even attempt careers in medicine, whereas in Britain the avenues for upper-class women's employment were much more circumscribed.[35] Because of the stunted modernization in India, educated

women did not threaten male employment. The continuing feudal social system and economy in India also created a cheap domestic labour supply to replace middle-class women who might aspire to the teaching or medical professions.

However like so much else in modernizing Bengal, women's emancipation was an imported idea transplanted without much forethought. It lacked a conscious desire to improve women's status per se. Hence concern failed to go beyond the superficialities of obvious cruelty and inequality. The basis of these inequalities was never questioned, just as at the political level dependence on the British and resultant subservience to them remained unquestioned. At the personal level this was reflected in continued male dominance and female subordination.

This inability to proceed beyond a plateau of reasoning is well-illustrated in Dinabandhu's play Nil Darpan. Ranajit Guha deftly exposes how the new intelligentsia criticized the lawlessness of the indigo planter and anticipated intervention from British administrators on the side of the peasantry.[36] However they did not question colonialism, which was the economic basis of the plantation economy. Thus they were unable to forsesee the potential of the peasantry as anything but rebels against the planters. With the rise of nationalism in later nineteenth century Bengal, the bhadrolok did not perceive of the peasantry as a force for greater change and allies in an anti-colonial struggle. It was a classic example of identifying the symptom but not the cause.

The belief of reformers that they could embark on a process of modernization while maintaining cultural identity[37] reflected directly on their

reforms for women. Education was usually used to reinforce traditional roles of housewife and mother, rather than to introduce new dimensions to a woman's existence.

Orientalism

The third and last section of this chapter deals with Orientalism, especially with respect to orientalist constructions of India. It has been deemed necessary to recognize this phenomena and its implications because the resultant policy formations and actions by Europeans with respect to India both at the official and non-offical level, as well as the reactions to this phenomenon from various sections of Indian society and to some degree of British society often affected the status of women in India. Modernization/Westernization and Orientalism/Indology were formative influences on changes in the status of women in nineteenth century Bengal.

In his deconstructive work, Orientalism[38] Edward Said very eloquently examines this European phenomenon. Unsurprisingly it has taken a scholar with Third World roots and a consciousness of colonial domination to define it and describe it with such detail and efficiency. Several major points of his essay relate directly to our concerns in this thesis. Said defines Orientalism as "a Western style for dominating, restructuring and having authority over the Orient."[39] Perhaps the crux of Orientalism as resulting from an unequal power relationship is evidenced when Balfour, discussing the British presence in Egypt in the British Parliament insists on having knowledge of Egypt — "we know it".[40] Commenting on this Said says "[k]nowledge to Balfour means

surveying a civilization from its origins to its prime to its decline .... To have such knowledge of such a thing is to dominate it, to have authority over it." Authority for the Occident means denial of autonomy for the Orient. "British knowledge of Egypt is Egypt for Balfour." Aside from pragmatic, political Orientalists, there were also the Romantics. Karl Marx is a good example of the latter when he writes

> England has to fulfil a double mission in India: one destructive, the other regenerating—the annihilation of the Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia.[41]

Seen in this light the British had a progressive role to play in India. This perception was very apparent in the writings of a genre of radical historians of India to whom Marx gave the lead.

In an analogy of domination and subordination Said gives an example that is especially poignant for this thesis. He discusses the implications of Flaubert's encounter with the Egyptian courtesan Kuchuk Hanem. Because Flaubert was male, relatively wealthy and foreign, all facts of domination in that particular historical period, he was able not only to possess her physically but also to interpret her for his readers.[42] She never speaks for herself. Said sees this as resulting from the unequal relationship between East and West. Looking at the substantial literature on women in nineteenth century Bengal written by contemporary Europeans, we see some of the elements of Flaubert's interpretation of Kuckuk Hanem, and more surprisingly also in contemporary Indian writings by men on the same topic. Much of what we read about nineteenth century Bengali women comes from the pens of nineteenth century Bengali men. This in itself is very revealing and suggests unequal

power relationships, where women rarely represented themselves to an audience beyond the family. So within the constraints of colonial subjugation there also exists gender subordination.

The importance of recognizing Orientalism lies in the way these constructs affected colonial developments, the colonizers' attitudes to the colonies and the colonized, and lastly the way the colonized perceived themselves. It is of course natural that European standards affected the impressions of early explorers, missionaries, etc. However the Orientalist construct ensured that in their perception what they encountered in the Other was poverty, stagnation and corruption. What they missed was the comparative efficiency of Oriental societies and their ability to respond to external stimuli.[43] While Said's work has broken ground in this area it deals mainly with constructions related to the Middle East. It has remained for Ronald Inden to attempt a deconstruction of Indology.[44]

One of the first areas for Inden's attention is caste. He is extremely critical of what he calls a "fixation" on caste. He sees in constituting caste as the "essence of India" the committal of "Indology, largely descended from British empiricism and utilitarianism, to a curious and contradictory mixture of societalism, in which Indian actions are attributed to social groups - caste, village, linguistic region, religion and joint family - because there are no individuals in India, and individualism."[45]

The Indologists/Orientalists in the colonial era assisted in gaining trade concessions, conquering, colonizing, ruling and punishing the East. In the post-colonial period their role has been "to aid and advise, develop and

modernize, arm and stabilize the countries of the so-called Third World."[46] The irony of all this, as Inden points out, is that in "many respects the intellectual activities of the Orientalists have even produced in India the very Orient which it constructed in its discourse." Lata Mani describes a similar process which resulted in a 'colonial discourse' - a "mode of understanding Indian society that emerged alongside colonial rule and over time was shared to a greater or lesser extent by officials, missionaries and the indigenous elite."[47] Inden even suggests that if non-violence had not already been established as an indigenous trait in Orientalist discourse, it is doubtful how efficacious Gandhi's anti-colonial non-violence campaign would have been.[48]

Inden repeats the concept expressed in Said of the denial to Indians of self-representation and the appropriation of this power by "positivists" or "empiricists". This feat has been accomplished by converting Indian self-knowledge into "subjugated knowledge".[49] He sees all this emanating from the intrinsic belief in the "singularity of human nature",[50] without allowances and toleration for differences. It is this notion that contributed to beliefs such as the classic Macaulayisms expressed in the latter's defence of English education for India. Very clearly exposed are the Self and the Other. Macaulay counterposed "sound [European] philosophy and true history with "medical doctrines, which would disgrace an English farrier" and "astronomy, which would move laughter in the girls at an English boarding-School — history abounding with kings 30ft. high and reigns 30,000 years long — and geography made up of seas of treacle and seas of butter."[51] (Such comments arouse one's interest in what if anything Macaulay had to say about Creation in Genesis.) The fact that Macaulay used the long voyage out to India to read Greek classics

suggests a satisfaction with whatever knowledge he already possessed of India. He did not feel the need to know more.

James Mill's History of British India was required reading at Haileybury College, the training institute for civil servants for India, till aproximately 1835. His extreme views of the Other must have affected a whole generation of administrators.

> In point of manners and character, the manliness and courage of our ancestors, compared with the slavish and dastardly spirit of the Hindus, place them in an elevated rank. But they were inferior to that effeminate people in gentleness, and the winning arts of address. Our ancestors, however, though rough, were sincere; but under the glowing exterior of the Hindu, lies a general disposition to deceit and perfidy. In fine, it cannot be doubted that, upon the whole, the gothic nations, as soon as they became a settled people, exhibit the marks of a superior character and civilization to those of the Hindus.[52]

From the above, it will be seen how damning Indology was to the Indians and against what odds they had to struggle if they wished to achieve respect and recognition from the British.

We have discussed these attitudes in order to define and situate the existing mentality of nineteenth century Bengal. While there were changes throughout the period that affected society in differing ways, the constants of modernization and Orientalism/Indology as they shaped events and adapted to them had a profound impact on the perceptions of the bhadrolok.

CHAPTER III

SOCIAL REFORM AND GENDER SUBORDINATION

> All men [sic] have equal rights — this is the philosophy of egalitarianism....Women are also human beings, so they also should have equal rights with men.
>
> Were they born just for defending your honour, to be considered as your furniture and utensils? Your sense of honour and humiliation is everything, their happiness and sorrow are nothing?
>
> (Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, Samya, pp. 188, 195.)

This chapter deals with the focal point of the thesis, the relationship between gender subordination and social reform in nineteenth century Bengal. Rather than proceeding to examine a series of issues such as sati abolition, education for women and widow marriage, we shall deal with the different components of gender subordination as they surfaced in the reform movement, as both more interesting and more useful analytically. Utilizing this structure I sought to identify the implicit and explicit motivations underlying the male-generated social reforms of the nineteenth century. Ostensibly initiated to ameliorate the conditon of women, the reforms and the debates they engendered demonstrated how inextricably they were linked to contemporary issues related to modernization/Westernization and status-improvement. Sexual control and gender subordination were essential ingredients of the social changes that Bengal was undergoing, yet they have traditionally been ignored and their importance in the formative forces of the reform movement have been overlooked.

This chapter should not be construed as a relentless indictment of well-meaning individuals, who have traditionally been regarded as ardent supporters

of an improved status for women. Rather, the purpose of the following is to question the long-standing assumptions regarding the motivations of the Bengal reformers of the nineteenth century vis-a-vis the status of women. This is not to deny that often their motivations were altruistic. However, because the basis of gender inequalities were not dealt with by the reformers, much progress could not be achieved. The changes that were attempted were in the realm of amelioration. Nonetheless, the overt promptings of the reformers were genuine and this thesis does not take issue with them. For example, Sasipada Banerji was deeply affected when as a boy of eight or nine he became aware of the murder of a young widow in his joint family, who was accused of 'going astray'. She had left the house but was forcibly dragged back by young men of the family and after being subjected to beatings for three continuous days she died. The other relations, though aware of what was happening, did not come to her aid. It was said the widow committed suicide by hanging herself from the beams.[1] This brutal and violent incident made a lasting impression on the young Sasipada and in later life he devoted himself to improving the situation of widows.

Yet other considerations often subsumed or took precedence over the feminist concerns of reformers. In some instances, as with Keshub Chandra Sen, we shall see that the inherent contradictions in his views on social reform for women caused considerable divergence between principle and practise. Rammohun Roy was the earliest and perhaps the most articulate and sophisticated analyst of the position of women in nineteenth century Bengal. He was "clearly cognizant of the societal basis of female subjugation" and understood very clearly what we call 'male domination' ". However as Lata Mani reveals, even in the anti-sati writings of Rammohun Roy, shastric

evidence seems to take precedence over the actual cruelty of a woman burnt alive.[2] And in other instances, the status of women was definitely not the primary motivation of reformers. It has even been suggested that imbalances caused by the reduced numbers of women of child-bearing age among the high-caste Brahmans was a precipitating factor for reform. Sati, Kulin polygamy, pre-pubertal marriage and the ban on widow marriage were social institutions that were held responsible for the demographic decline.[3]

Much of what follows is related to tradition as it was perceived and as it was adapted to ever-changing situations in nineteenth century Bengal. Women, viewed as repositories of tradition were an integral part of these changes or efforts at conservation. Due to this the debates that occurred were often not primarily about women, but rather what constitutes cultural tradition. Women became "sites" where versions of scripture, tradition and law were elaborated and contested.[4] Underlying many of the debates that occurred in nineteenth century Bengal were sexual politics and the struggle by men to control female sexuality. The attempts by men to dominate women and the resultant gender subordination resulted from an implicit fear of female sexuality because of the threat it apparently posed to male vested interests and structures of power. When examined in this light much of what follows becomes comprehensible. For example, a male engendered popular notion was that of the spirituality of the Hindu wife. Yet the reality was different from the male ideal. The masculinist perpetuation of this ideal seems to indicate the wish to control female sexuality by discounting it. In reality, the bhadramahila had greater experience of sexuality than most women in nineteenth century Britain.[5] Among the women in the antahpur, sexual matters were often discussed and ribald humour was common. In fact in the traditional marriage, sex was a major component,

especially as the younger and newer brides were actually denied contact with their husbands during the day. If by chance their husbands came into the antahpur and other family members were present, the wives had to draw their saris over their faces. Such rigid social codes left couples free to meet only at night and with little time to develop relations of mutual friendship and respect.[6]

The question of the status of women shifted focus over the hundred years of the century. This has relevantce for our discussion. For instance, some historians see the rise of nationalism in the latter decades of the century as contributing to a re-emphasis on traditionalism. Also there were differences among the reformers between those who can be called domestic feminists or the philosophical feminists.[7] The former who were for an improvement in the status of women but a retention of women's activities in the home were in the majority in Bengal. In this circumscribed form of change lies one of the problems of the reform movement. Few reformers perceived that the status of women was a multidimensional problem.[8]

In the following sections, the central theme of the thesis shall be examined from several perspectives. Seminal to the notion of the antahpur and female seclusion is the notion of men protecting women and the concomitant ramifications of such shelter. The implication is one of dependence, of the possessing of an object and hence being concerned for its safety. An extension of protection is the control that results from such an unequal power relationship. So the price of protection was dominance and the loss of control. All this was symbolized in the antahpur in its architecture and all its physicality. But what were the bhadramahila to be protected from? Lower-

class women did not have the same restrictions imposed on them, and in many cases they were economically independent. The question seems to be status enhancement and respectability. These were bhadrolok issues, essential to the social standing of this class and hence the bhadramahila had to fall in with these ideals. There was a pre-occupation with notions of respectabilty, very middle-class in origin, and intrinsically linked to norms of acceptable sexuality of women. Respectbility had a very large bearing on the image that the bhadrolok wished to project. Image had consequences not just in terms of status, but also in material and political gains to be realized in a colonial situation. Thus social reform of women's status in nineteenth century Bengal was attempted with all these elements interacting with each other.

THE ANTAHPUR

The physical space in which the nineteenth century Bengali bhadramahila spent her days resulted from the situation of subordination she experienced in daily life and reflected its values. The outer apartments of a house, exclusively for the male members of the household were more or less commodious and airy "according to the means, taste and inclinations of the owner of the household." The antahpur or inner apartments where the female members of the family resided were constructed with "jealous scrupulousness."

> There must be as few windows as possible, and, where they cannot be altogether avoided, care is taken that they do not open on a public street, or on a neighbour's house — thereby keeping out the sunshine and the wind of heaven as much possible. Cooking-rooms without proper chimneys, and

> smoky outlets generally, form part of these dwelling apartments; in addition to which source of mischief is the aus takoor, or place for throwing the refuse of the cooking-house... There are also the odious privy-houses, one sufficing for a whole family.[9]

However there were exceptional indulgences by the affluent.

> There are also swings, whirligigs, and other amusements for the females of his family, but the strangest was a sort of "Montagne Russe" of masonry, very steep and covered with plaister, down which he said the ladies used to slide.[10]

It is significant that there was never very much criticism in the reformist literature of the antahpur per se and this is symbolic of the partial grasp of the condition of female subordination. There were a few exceptions. To a limited degree the question of sexual segregation in prayer meetings of the religious reform group the Brahmo Samaj met with opposition. Some of the younger more radical members like Durga Mohan Das wanted to change this policy and have women sitting together with men in the prayer-hall. They met with vigorous opposition from Keshub Chandra Sen and this was one of the reasons for the second split in the Brahmo movement.

When Satyendranath Tagore's wife, Jnanadanandini Debi attended an official reception at Government House, Calcutta, it was a very novel occurrence. In fact it was too innovative for her kinsman Prosanna Tagore who immediately left the function.[11]

Purdah

In fact the notion of sexual segregation and one of its variants, the system of purdah as practised in nineteenth century Bengal has ancient roots.

The practice stretches from the Iberian Peninsula, North Africa, the Middle-East, South Asia, the Mediterranean and the Balkans to parts of North-west Europe.[12] It is the supreme manifestiation of female subordination and comes about from the urge to dominate women. The element of protection is an important component of this system, and legitimacy for this protection is sought. Thus we find that the 'weaker sex' is a popular notion in many cultures. Germaine Tillion articulates this phenomenon very succinctly in her study of Mediterranean society.

> Debasement of the female condition is, in fact, a fairly general phenomenon in the world. Women are physically weaker than men, and it was both convenient and possible for a man to appropriate a woman, or even several women, and treat them as objects belonging to him.... There are, consequently, many societies in which women are treated as beings devoid of reason.
>
> ...Furthermore, they do not just degrade the individual who is their victim or who benefits from them. They also, since no society is totally female or totally male paralyse social evolution as a whole.[13]

It was and is a popular notion in Bengal that female seclusion and purdah are Islamic impositions. This is inaccurate for the phenomenon pre-dates Islam.[14] In Bengal, purdah was linked very closely to the concept of lajja (shame) and maan (honour).[15] As mentioned earlier, women were the repositories of tradition. They were also considered the vessels of family 'honour' and their vulnerability to assault by outsiders necessitated "constant vigilance over their virtue."[16] Even today, lajja is a crucial component of naritra (femininity).[17] Hence women were expected to stay home most of the time, avert their eyes in the company of males and non-family members, and not talk to strangers. In nineteenth century Bengal if women ever left the house they did so in covered palanquins and later in suitably covered

carriages. When Rabindranath Tagore's mother took her ritual bath in the Ganges (river) she was immersed while seated in her palanquin! Needless to say, economic position was an important consideration in purdah. Only the elite could practise rigid purdah and in urban areas it was most strict. Purdah signified economic dependence on males and this brought with it the prestige related to affluence and enhanced family status. It implied that unlike working-class women the bhadramahila was provided for by her male family members. The bhadramahila often upheld this principle because despite its severity it signified high status and affluence.

> I have even heard it said that Hindoo women prefer being shut up, and that they consider it as a proof of their husband's affection for them. To be kept in seclusion, apart from the outer world, is associated in their minds with ideas of wealth and rank....It is quite possible that, in these circumstances, it may be regarded rather in the light of a privilege than a punishment.[18]

So we see that women in purdah were ideologically conditioned to an acceptance of their own inferiority and unimportance. They were made to feel inadequate and in need of protection.

Where purdah becomes important for this thesis is the fact that it was a non-issue in nineteenth century reform debates. While individual men may have encouraged the women in their families to come out of seclusion, as a whole very little was done in this area — nothing that compares to the efforts related to sati, widow marriage, education and the age of consent debates. This can best be interpreted as a fundamental unawareness, and at worst as deliberate negligence of the epitomy of gender subordination. In fact purdah was not one of many ills but was all-pervasive and affected all aspects of

women's existence. Dominance and dependency were integral to its operation.[19] The "symbolic shelter" provided by purdah implied protection was required from real dangers of a segregated world as well as "strong impulses such as sexual desire and aggression which are clearly recognized as being part of the human condition."[20] The apprehension of female sexuality was ever-present in the nineteenth century reform movements. Various mechanisms were adopted to adapt the changing social order to continued curtailment and control of female sexuality. The fact that the social reformers of the nineteenth century in Bengal displayed (with a few notable exceptions) an inability to tackle the question of female seclusion as it related to female inequality seems to bear this out.

Purdah was a control mechanism and enforced women's subordination in the family. It implied a woman's inability to control her sexual impulses and emphasized her sexual vulnerability. Hence the need for external constraints. What was at stake was the family's (male-centred) social honour, that of the father, husband, brother and male in-laws. Male-female segregation was instituted due to the perceived threat of female sexuality and to maintain the status quo. The Hindu taboos related to ritual impurity while menstruating and the prohibitions on females interacting with males while in this state seem to bear this out. Physical and psychological subordination was implicit. In a traditional married relationship, it was ritually prohibited for husbands and wives to interact with each other during the day. Some sources even indicate it was not proper for couples to show their children [own emphasis] "even ordinary affection and pleasure". [21]

If one pursues this question further, it becomes apparent that concerns with property and inheritance were motivating factors in the societal preoccupation with mesalliances and adultery that were the unspoken but expected results of an unsegregated society. Hence the ritual seclusion of women, especially among those sections of society that had large property interests. Women's main function within the family was the bearing and raising of children. Seclusion and segregation were safeguards in ensuring proper paternity.[22] A legal case that received wide attention in nineteenth century Bengal centred on a High Court decision concerning the inheritance rights of a woman accused of committing adultery. The judge decided that the woman in question could retain her property rights. A furore erupted. "Everything is over! At last the Hindu women's Dharma of chastity has been obliterated! No one will preserve the Dharma of chastity!" [23] From this one can see where the concerns lay, and the inextricable linking of female sexuality and property concerns.

A woman who experienced the effects of rigid segregation and also commented on it was Annette Ackroyd Beveridge. In response to her efforts to start a school for girls in Calcutta there were several acrimonious attacks on her in the local press.

> We have seen that the wives of all Europeans who live here are utterly shameless. Where women cast off their modesty and associate with men, that which principally constitutes female virtue is destroyed.[24]

One can see that the preoccupation with female virtue and sexual segregation was uppermost in the minds of the critics of Annette Ackroyd's exertions in her service of bhadramahila education in Calcutta.

As mentioned above, sexually segregated seating was also maintained by the Brahmos in their prayer halls[25] and this eventually became a contentious issue among them and was abolished.

When women's education became an issue addressed by reformers, the barriers afforded by purdah had to be surmounted. The problem of finding female teachers to go into the antahpur arose. There was no tradition of female educators. The pundits were invariably male. Therefore one of the problems addressed by advocates of female education was to train women as teachers to provide an adequate supply for an increasing demand. In a letter dated 21 December 1866 written in Calcutta, Peary Chand Mitra stated

> The idea of educating females by pundits must be abandoned. I cordially subscribe to Miss Carpenter's sentiment that trained females must educate the females.[26]

Especially among the elite, girls were prevented from attending school by their families if the instructors were male. In fact it could almost be assumed that if the instructor was a man, only girls from low status families would be in attendance at that particular institution. Bishop Heber noted: "Some of the Hindoos objected to men at all interfering in the girls' school, or even that the school should be in the same building where men reside."[27] Even within the antahpur where it was not unusual to have male pundits instructing the women, female zenana teachers were preferred, especially for the married and post-pubertal girls and women. Very clearly the possibility of female sexual vulnerability was the underlying motivation for these concerns with possible violations of antahpur norms.

Dependence

The notion of female sexual vulnerability logically implied a dependent relationship. The whole construct of the antahpur rested on the dependent relationship that a woman had to the males in the family; before marriage dependence on the father, after-marriage dependence on the husband and in widowhood dependence either on sons or on in-laws if there were no sons. Even Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay, who was vociferous in his feminist arguments in Samya (Equality), upheld the traditional dependent relationship of women on their husbands, as illustrated in his novel Debi Chaudhurani. Dependence was fostered and encouraged and independent behaviour was considered unwomanly. For example the education that women received perpetuated dependence. As we have seen earlier, economic dependence of women was a status indicator and guaranteed male control of women. The predominant thinking among the proponents of women's education are well represented below.

> It is not my opinion that women should study English, Persian, Arabic, or Arithmetic, and acquire the desire of displaying their attainments, or of making money for their temporal support by them: but I merely wish (them to study) that by which their stupidity may be removed, and they may be able to distinguish between good and evil, holiness and unholiness.[28]

That such an education trivialized women and made them contemptible, a concern of eighteenth century philosophers in America and England [29] did not bother the proponents of a limited education for women in nineteenth century Bengal. With this philosophy dominating the mainstream reform movement, not unexpectedly any signs of women's emancipation were regarded with concern. Eventually women's education that promised to go beyond the prescribed norms met with

hostility. The reception that Annette Ackroyd met with in Calcutta from many of the bhadrolok was illustrative of such apprehensions. Ishwar Gupta was moved to write his poem "Durbhiksha", illustrating just such preoccupations.

> Most certainly they will themselves drive their carriage
> and go to Garer Math for an airing.
> Perhaps they will also wear boots and smoke cigars.[30]

Stress was laid on teaching skills that reinforced traditional roles, like needlework, spinning and painting. However, it must be admitted that sometimes this was deliberately imparted by individuals with foresight, with a view to providing vocational training to enable women to have some means of support in times of distress.[31] Yet these individuals were in the minority. A debate raged on the suitable curriculum for women between proponents for a domestic education and proponents for a public education. The emphasis on womanly arts — neatness in embroidery, [32] and needlework and knitting — dominated. Keshub Chandra Sen, a trailblazer in other areas, was unfortunatley among the traditionalists in the curriculum debates. What he did attempt met with success and those women who participated in his home education programme learned correct Bengali and good expression[33]. Yet his limited view of what women should study only reinforced traditional roles.

> ...he maintained that for a woman to be a good wife and a good mother is far better than to be able to write M.A. or B.A. after her name. Therefore, only things likely to be useful to them were taught.[34]

In fact one sees a gradual regression in his views on the subject over the years.

> It may be observed, however that no attempt is made towards the higher education of women, and that the general tone taken by Mr. Sen's party upon the whole question of female develoment has been gradually drifting backward, more and more, towards the Hindu type, ever since the Kuch Behar marriage.[35]

So we find that education for women was seen as essential for the bhadrolok who wished to keep pace with the Westernization processes in Bengal. Yet when it came to curriculum and the manner of instruction, traditional views on the status of women surfaced. Notions of dependence had to be fostered, and female seclusion had to be maintained. Education was seen as a means to better equip women for their prescribed roles of wife and mother. Thus education was segregated, and not just in terms of the physical space, but also with regard to the curriculum. Anything else was considered too radical because it threatened to disrupt the male-established order.

Control

Another aspect of female purdah was the control it personified. Besides the control over women's education to ensure continued dependence, there were other areas where men did not relish relinquishing power. Good examples of this were to be found in the very organizations and institutions established to effect reform on the status of women. The Women's Improvement Section of the Indian Reform Association's activities included the Native Ladies' Normal School. All the significant posts on the Board of Directors were held by men.[36] The office bearers of the Native Ladies' Normal School and Girls' School committee for 1875-76 were all male.[37] Even the Bamabodhini Patrika, a remarkably advanced progressive and Westernized women's journal, voiced concerns that a female Young Bengal[38] might be spawned by the changes being effected in women's status in nineteenth century Bengal. In its sixty year life, the journal was edited by men. True, the numbers of women capable or willing to serve were not great. However there were sufficient numbers of

women who were moving in public circles, writing in journals and participating in public service and other activities to indicate that if the men who controlled these organizations so desired, they could have had able Bengali women at the helm.

Male control also extended to other areas of reform. Men who wished the women in their families to leave traditions that they had themselves discarded were often successful, not because the women in their families wished to Westernize, but rather in deference to their father's or husband's wishes. Sudha Mazumdar ate meat cutlets (cooked by her father's Muslim chef) with her father, because he expected her to. There is a popular verse that goes:

> Pitha swarga, pitha dharma
> pithahi para mantapa
> pithri pritheema panne
> prianthe sarva decata
>
> (Heaven is father, religion is father,
> The gods are pleased by pleasing father)[39]

Similarly, when Jnanadanandini Debi stepped out of the antahpur it was in response to her husband's appeals and efforts to enable her to have a fuller life. When Keshub Chandra Sen was leaving his ancestral home, despite strong protests, to be initiated into the Brahmo Samaj, his wife was hesitant to follow him, fully cognizant of the implications of breaking the family connections. "Do not go against our customs", urged the antahpur ladies. "You are one of us. Your place is here. You must not renounce your caste. Imagine the results of such a dreadful sin." However she lived for her husband and his beliefs, so "she never seemed distressed by her loss of caste".[40]

In all these instances the women in question were only holding true to their upbringing. A girl was supposed to be totally obedient to her father and when she married she was to regard her husband as God (Thakur). Thus, far from demonstrating the progress of women and the denial of superstitions, all these examples show the large degree of control that male family members exercised over the women in their families. Eventually individuals, as in the case of Jnanadanandini, accepted the challenge and went far beyond the bounds of what was considered the norm, even in reform oriented families, but they were the exception.

Possession

For the majority of the bhadramahila, the social reforms of the nineteenth century Westernized their subordination. Their movements beyond the antahpur remained regulated and their personal development was controlled. The antahpur, besides symbolizing and reinforcing dependence and control also objectified women. They were reduced to possessions whose conduct enhanced or degraded family honour.

The commodification of women seems to have been prevalent to a certain degree in nineteenth century Britain as well, where contemporary conduct books for ladies referred to "his house, his children, his wife".[41] When Emily Eden was in India she overheard an Indian man say "We are the masters of ours [women]...".[42] Though supposedly enlightened the Maharaja of Cooch Behar expressed similar sentiments regarding his wife Sunity Devi. He was held up by his contemporaries as one of the new breed of native rulers with a Westernized

outlook who ended a family tradition of polygamy and supported social reform. Yet a picture emerges of how prescribed and narrow such posturings were. Very little changed in basic gender relations. The pre-reform notions of sexual segregation, of male control and female dependence continued to exist, although with a Westernized veneer to them.

The antahpur, the physical and mental space that symbolized purdah in all its implications separated the inner and spiritual world from the outer and material world. Ultimately the outer material world was unimportant. "It is the spiritual which lies within, which is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential....the home represents our inner spiritual self, our true identity."[43] The burden of identity was thus placed on the women in the antahpur. Under this crushing responsibility, the implications of gender subordination with respect to the antahpur got completely subsumed.

NOTIONS OF NINETEENTH CENTURY RESPECTABILITY AND SEXUALITY

The Westernization of gender subordination has been the constant thread running through the discussions on the preceding pages. It arose from the desire of the bhadrolok to adapt to the changing socio-economic and political circumstances as they evolved in nineteenth century Bengal. As such the amelioration of the status of women fell in with their strategy to meet the challenges that Westernization posed. In line with this it would be appropriate

to examine what the perceived notions of nineteenth century respectability were, as well as the notions of conventional morality that existed in nineteenth century Bengal. Current norms operative in Britain, played a pivotal role in the formative process of Bengali bhadrolok positions in these areas.

In an interesting comparison between notions of nineteenth century respectability in England and India, Dorothy Stein observes that women were divided into exalted or degraded classes on the basis of whether their behaviour was constantly supervised and controlled by men and "both societies" agreed to "disadvantage those women who could not obtain suitable male protection." Stein illustrates these observations with specific examples. "Pious widowhood" emobdied in Queen Victoria was common in England. The acceptance of the age for the onset of sexual activity was similar in both India and England, while books on deportment for young ladies in England advised seclusion bordering on purdah.[44]

The Victorians saw the body as a "trap" of the intellect and one needed only to control, clothe and forget it. Even the most radical feminists of the day held such views.[45] Victorian women's feelings towards sexuality have been discerned as a case of needs influencing psyche. Child-bearing was very dangerous for women, and passionlessness was an excellent form of birth control.[46] Eventually this became the norm and was possibly the reason for the notion of Victorian prudery with relation to sexual matters. However other scholars consider such notions of Victorian sexuality exaggerated. The introduction of anaesthetics such as chloroform, the discovery of improved birthing techniques, as well as the availability of medical intervention during

childbirth translated into a certain degree of control by middle-class women over their childbirth experiences which would negate the former argument.[47]

When one reads the brief essays of schoolgirls of the bhadramahila class in Calcutta it is easy to recognize the mirror image of European notions of respectability and sexuality. Both Radharani Lahiri and Mohini Khastagir, particularly the former in her essay entitled "Duties of an Unmarried Woman" describe a virtuous life of sacrifice. The emphasis is on inculcating secondary roles—comforting those in pain, being hospitable, development of mind and soul should not be at the detriment of domestic duties—and male dominance is implicit. Mohini Khastagir's essay "The People Whom I Like, and Whom I Don't Like" though less lofty and not as stilted as Radharani Lahiri's is also replete with contemporary virtues — cleanliness, obedience, truthfulness.[48]

'Help-Meet' and Mother

Along with the importation of various societal norms from England came that of the separation of home and work.[49] It generated a need for female companions competent to play the new roles that were expected of the bhadramahila. Much of the discussion on education for women focussed on preparing them for this aspect of their lives. In the reform literature one finds several references to the beauty and tranquility of the English home. It was hoped that after receiving a proper education, the bhadramahila would be able to replicate this model as best she could. One feels the glow of approval in the description of Sasipada Banerji's home by Mary Carpenter when she visited it and found it simply and tastefully decorated.[50]

The bhadramahila were also expected to inculcate in their children attitudes that would enable them to participate successfully in the new society that was emerging in Bengal. Child-rearing has been classified as status-production work, because it is an indicator of "the family's present status as well as its future aspirations." [51] In order to do this the mothers themselves needed to be schooled. Thus education for women did not emanate from altruistic notions of broadening women's horizons, but rather to better fit their roles of wife and mother as defined in Westernizing Bengal. In the wake of the French Revolution, Condorcet proposed that in order to create an egalitarian society, mothers, as the first teachers of children had to be educated. At the same time, the intellectual vigour of men could be retained if their wives were educated. In addition, with an equal education men and women could interact on an equal basis.[52] Women were no longer sex objects. In the America of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries church leaders wanted better education for women because they were the primary influence on children. These sentiments while echoed in later nineteenth century Bengal when nationalism was on the rise[53] did not get put into practice.

As a contemporary newspaper article states, there was a necessity for women's education not merely for their own improvement and status enhancement but for enhancement of their traditional service and nurturing functions.

> Women ought therefore to be educated equally as well as men. First, therefore the education of a man begins from his very infancy, and it is a grievous error [to think] that early impressions on the infant mind have no influence on the conduct of the man. The chief occupation of a child is the imitation of what he sees around him....
>
> Nature itself urges us on to this improvement, and mankind are instinctively progressing in the march of intellect. India has of late afforded a clear proof of this; her sons have rapidly advanced towards the temple of knowledge and the tide of

> improvement is set in with full force. In the midst of this how strange to contemplate that women who are designed by nature to be the companions of men, should by a fatal combination of events, be prevented from following the march of mind, and thus rendered unfit for their companions.[54]

Articulating these concerns, in his appeal to English ladies on his visit to Britain in 1870 Keshub Chandra Sen invited them to go to India to educate "their Indian sisters" to make "good wives, mothers, sisters and daughters".[55] Mary Carpenter, a strong advocate of education for women observed on her visit to India the need for women to be prepared to fulfil their destiny. She saw the education of women as a path to the improvement of "their race and their own emancipation from the thraldom of superstition".[56] However education should not result in women going beyond their prescribed place. "By giving them a liberal education it is not intended that they should take the place of the other sex, but that they should be better qualified than they would otherwise be, for discharging their own peculiar duties."[57] The Arya Nari Samaj, started by Jaganmohini Devi, wife of Keshub Chandra Sen, had as its object "to give facilities to Indian women to develop their spiritual, mental and intellectual knowledge and make them able mothers and good housewives."[58]

So as before, and with other aspects of the reform movement, we are left with the evidence pointing to a lack of concern with education for women as an end in itself. Women were not to be educated to facilitate their mental development and to expand their horizons, but rather to bolster their traditional roles, and equip them to play these roles in the changing environment in which they lived.

Conventional Sexual Morality

While notions of nineteenth century morality were very influential in dictating the concerns of the bhadrolok we cannot ignore traditional conventional sexual morality in any discussion of gender subordination and reform. Traditional norms made allowances for Westernization, but were limited to superficialities. The basic tenets remained in place and among these can be found the core of gender subordination and the protection of patriarchal rights.

For example the notions concerning the spirituality of women were reinforced, so that nineteenth century schoolgirls imbibed such values.

> ...she must be pure in mind and body. Her ideas must be clear, and her imaginations blameless....Such is the picture of the true virgin.

The pleasureless life of sacrifice was well-inculcated in Radharani Lahiri, who wrote these lines. She was considerd among the best in her class in the Native Ladies' Normal School and Girls School in the year 1875-6.[59]

Within the structures of conventional sexual morality, marriage was regarded as the basis of social relationships. Thus, all issues of social reform regarding women in nineteenth century Bengal were in some fashion linked to that inevitability in every girls' life -- her marriage.

> Of all institutions in Hindu society marriage is the most essential, and most complicated. It involves a number of other usages, each one of which is exceedingly important in itself. The questions of age, of creed, or rites and forms, of caste, of the degrees of consanguinity, of monogamy and polygamy, of widow celibacy, etc., are all inlcuded at one and the same time in the problem of marriage reform.[60]

The entire socialization and training process that a Bengali girl underwent was focussed on her future marriage.

> 'The father-in-law's home' assumed awesome proportions for young girls in Bengal; forever it was dinned into them what would be approved of there and what would not. To gain the approval of the revered elders of one's husband's family was an important item in the code of good conduct.
>
> The vocation of every girl was to be a wife and a mother and the ideal held up to her for her future life was seva, service to others....It was the pride and privilege of a bride to serve but if she failed, her parents were blamed for her shortcomings and the mother bore the slur of having failed in her duty towards her daughter.[61]

Buried in conventional morality was the belief that women's nature was primarily sexual. That is why there were the concerns with a girl's marriage. Her family could only relax after she was married, because they could not guarantee her chastity once she had reached puberty. This explains the large number of pre-pubertal marriages. They ensured that the girl was safely in her husband's home by the time she was physically capable of conception. These traditional notions were at odds with the thinking in Britain, where Burke and Malthus had said that it was the male who was sexually driven. [62]

Preoccupation with illicit sexual activity and sexuality outside marriage was a very influential factor in the widow marriage reform movement and was enshrined in the Widow Marriage Act of 1856 whose preamble reads:

> Whereas the marriage of Hindoo widows is by long-established custom and received opinion prohibited, and, whereas this prohibiton is not only a grievous hardship upon those whom it immediately affects, but also tends generally to depravation of morals, and the injury of society... [my emphasis][63]

A petition to the Legislative Council of India signed by a thousand persons in favour of widow marriage stated:

> That in the opinion and firm belief of your petitioners this custom cruel and unnatural in itself, is highly prejudicial to the interests of morality, [own emphasis] and is otherwise fraught iwth the most mischievous consequences to society.[64]

Such concerns were reiterated, when in introducing the Bill for Widow Marriage, J.P. Grant, a member of the Legislative Council stated:

> The Hindu practice of Brahmacharyya is an attempt to struggle against Nature and like all other attempts to struggle against Nature, is entirely unsuccessful. Every candid Hindu will admit that, in the majority of cases, young Hindu widows fall into vice; that in comparatively few cases, a licentious and profligate life is entered upon in secret; and that in many cases the wretched widows are impelled to desert their homes and to live a life that brings open disgrace upon their families.[65]

Conventional morality was so strong, that even Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay who had expressed very sympathies with the condition of women in nineteenth century Bengal succumbed to these norms. In his novel Krishnakanta's Will, while apearing to show sympathy for the young widow Rohini, it is very explicit that Brahmar, the young virtuous wife is the character to be emulated. His first description of Rohini in the novel is none too subtle.

> She [Rohini] had become a widow very young, but had some habits improper to a widow; she put on black-bordered cloths instead of the prescribed white or gray, she wore bracelets on her wrists, and she chewed betel, which gave her a forbidden pleasure and gave her lips a forbidden tinge of inviting redness.[66]

Flouting of conventional morality was cited as a reason to deny women an education. Criticizing elite society's denial of education to women, The Friend of India, a publication of the Serampore Mission carried these comments:

> Even the present system of excluding females from a knowledge of books and men, is found scarcely sufficient to restrain them [women] within the bounds of propriety. To what extent would not immorality be carried then, if greater facility for secret intrigue were afforded them, by a knowledge of reading and writing!... Ignorance is by them considered as the only safeguard of virtue, and women must not read, lest they should become more vicious.[67]

An adultery case in which letters were presented as part of the evidence was used to further malign the cause of women's education.[68]

To counter what were believed to be the harmful effects of a Westernized education, schools emphasizing orthodox Hinduism were established. In the curriculum were included Sansrkit, Bengali, a little arithmetic, cooking and housewifery. Memory work and relgious training were emphasized and an annual prize was awarded to the best performance of puja (worship).

Control of Female Sexuality

In 1864 Calcutta's health officer Fabre-Tonnere was asked to report on the problems of prostitution as it related to venereal disease among British soldiers and sailors. He reported that there were so many prostitutes in Chitpore Road, one of the main throughfares in the Indian section of the city, that he thought "no respectable native would allow his wife or daughter to pass through a street showing such degradation and debauchery." While this is a fairly predictable middle-class reaction, it raises some interesting questions. What would an elite Hindu male be protecting the female members of his family

from? There were the considerations of protection of the norms of conventional morality. But could it also be that prostitutes offered a threat to a system of rigid sexual control? Prostitutes were not 'free', but neither were they subject to the rigid controls of the antahpur. And in situtations of economic deprivation, prostitution presented a viable alternative. In fact many social reformers often pointed to the numbers of Kulin women who turned to prostitution as a means of economic survival as a reason for the necessity for reform of Kulin marriage customs. Though it can be assumed that the reformers' claims were exaggerated to gain the attention of concerned citizens, prostitution was definitely an alternative that certain elite women were willing to consider despite the heavy price of social ostracism it carried. The division between middle-class respectability and prostitution was perceived as a very fine demarcation and the possibility of a bhadramahila crossing the line and turning to prostitution as a method of survival seemed very real.

In his autobiographical work Motilal Roy describes a childhood voyeuristic fascination with prostitutes and sexuality, indicative of a bhadrolok preoccupation with the subject.

> Outside the house, one was to be greeted with all manner of suggestive gestures of the harlots; inside the building was none too safe. Even among the family-girls, depravity was not altogether absent....
>
> ...Outside the house wherever I turned my eyes, they met, and reflected back into my mind, ugly scenes of carnality ....Pairs of eyes instead of greeting me with affection, now began to pierce me with their sinister glances.[69]

Manisha Roy in her excellent anthropological work on Bengali women deals with the sexual ambivalence the Bengali man feels towards his wife. She sees this as having deep roots in the socio-cultural and religio-ideological history of Bengal. By the nineteenth century, procreation replaced sexual pleasure as the reason for sexual intercourse. The male Bengali's response to this was to separate sexual pleasure from marriage. During the nineteenth century Bengali males felt they could have sexual relationships with either their own wives, wives of other men or with prostitutes. By the end of the nineteenth century, with the decline in polygamy and landlordism, sexual pleasure could only be fulfilled by the second option. The wives of other men were usually poor, lower-class women, often domestic servants.[70] However it was not uncommon for men of the elite to have mistresses and concubines and to visit prostitutes. The moralizing literature of the late nineteenth century bears witness to this. They contain references to the prodigal husband returning to the virtuous wife after a life of debauchery and profligacy.[71] The question that these ideas raise is whether masculine concepts of female sexuality were not based on their own proclivities. Hence the need to control the sexuality of women seems to derive from the male awareness of their own ambivalent sexuality.

The efforts of reformers to change marriage arrangements among the Kulins can also be traced to a desire to ensure that the sexuality of Kulin women was channelled appropriately. Among the families of Kulin Brahmins, Kulin males could marry women from any caste even those below them in the caste hierarchy. Kulin women however could only marry Kulin males. Marrying into a Kulin family greatly increased social status for lower caste families, so alliances with Kulin males were eagerly sought by families of lower caste girls. The result was that some Kulin men had as many as three

hundred wives and some never saw their wives again after the marriage, or only on rare visits and that too, to demand money from their in-laws. The girls who married Kulins usually lived in their natal home. Meanwhile the numbers of marriageable women for lower-caste men decreased and the numbers of marriageable Kulin women increased. This resulted in gender imbalances in these castes. As Kulin girls, and brides of Kulin men, were often young and led the life of virtual widows while in their sexually active years, unwanted pregnancies were common. To save the family honour and destroy the evidence of extra-marital liaisons, infanticide and abortions were resorted to. Women from these groups also turned to prostitution.

> Now Coolin Polygamy, as we have already shewn is injurious to society, by increasing adultery among the wives of the Coolins and among those who are by this system deprived of wives, by demoralizing the nation.[72]

In his pamphlet advocating widow marriage, the well-respected and honourable social reformer, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar clearly quotes the shastras (Hindus scriptures) to illustrate that in the Kali Yug (the current era) Brahmacharya (celibacy) was hard for widows to maintain, therefore it was better for them to reenter the married state as it was sanctioned by the shastras.[73] Underlying this advice, one can discern concern for the maintenance of contemporary moral standards and the exercise of control over female sexuality.

Sunity Devi, Maharani of Cooch Behar and daughter of the Brahmo leader Keshub Chandra Sen recalls a ritual that usually followed the arrival of a jatra troupe in the field close to the family home. Jatras are traditional highly stylized plays, usually portraying sequences from the Hindu epics with a

measure of innovation and adaptation to current events. The humour is often bawdy and ribald with explicit sexuality. Usually male players perform all roles.

> The advent of the players was always the signal for my father's youngest brother to nail down the shutters on that side of the house if he thought the acting of the jatras not quite proper for the ladies to hear.[74]

The stage was considered beyong the pale for respectable women. Even when at the instance of Keshub Chandra Sen the Brahmos produced a play, men acted out the female roles. At one time, having men play female roles was a common theatrical tradition in the West, the origins probably being similar. However by this period in Europe, actresses appeared on stage. But in Bengal, despite the Westernization society was undergoing, theatre was still conceived as too bawdy for respectable women. In the latter half of the nineteenth century some prostitutes took to the stage in an experiment. The Bengal Theatre was chosen for the performance. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar was opposed to this and resigned from the Bengal Theatre's Committee, but others like Biharilal Chatterjee and Akshoy Kumar Majumdar remained. As it happened, the production of Michael Madhusudan Datta's, Sarmishta at the Bengal Theatre in 1873 was a great success as Jagattarini, Golap, Elokeshi and Shyama, (all prostitutes) took part in the play. This set the precedent for subsequent plays in which prostitutes took the female roles. Some prostitutes began to earn sizeable incomes as actresses.[75] While for some men having prostitutes play female roles on-stage was an extension of the notion that theatre and respectable femininity did not converge, it is surprising that Vidyasagar felt so strongly about the issue that he resigned.

Vidyasagar was a very humane individual who seemed to acutely feel the subordinate status of women and spent a major part of his life as a crusader for this cause. Yet his activities seem to indicate a lack of objectivity regarding the subordination of the entire female sex. What concerned him more was the morality of the women of his class. He opposed prostitutes taking to the stage most likely because if they did so it would indicate a certain societal acceptance of them and eventually, theatre with its 'popular' affiliations might become respectable, especially if patronized by the local elite as seemed to be the case. This would confer respectability on a profession that was beyond the bounds of acceptability for the bhadramahila. By prescribing the bounds of acceptability for the bhadramahila the reforming bhadrolok demonstrated the desire to control their sexuality, and ensure that it conformed to societal norms.

Double Standards

In the practice of conventional sexual morality there was a large gap between purported beliefs and actions. Or else there was backsliding when it came to implemention of closely-held beliefs. In Samya, Bankim very articulately expressed the double standards inherent in nineteenth century gender relations.

> Women's chastity should be safe-guarded by all means.... But why is there no restriction on men? A man may go to the prostitutes, may commit adultery with another man's wife, why is there no restriction on that? Many will say that in the Sastras there are many injunctions against such things; for men also such things are very bad; people blame

such men too -- but this far and no further. Men are not governed by the same type of hard and fast rules as the women are.[76] [own emphasis]

Yet Bankim seems to undergo a re-evaluation of his notions of women's sexuality. He makes Rohini in Krishnakanta's Will say

> If the hunter sees a deer off its guard, doesn't he shoot an arrow at it? If a woman, sees a vulnerable man, doesn't she wish to make a conquest?....Women conquer men solely for pride and pleasure of conquest.[77]

In the Sen family we can also observe disparities between principle and practice. Keshub Chandra Sen's wife seems to have remained very traditional. Annette Ackroyd remarked on these inconsistencies. She described Keshub Chandra's wife as illiterate and secluded as she played with her jewels "like a foolish petted child".[78] Vidyasagar's wife Dinamayi Devi was not literate[79] despite her husband being one of Bengal's foremost Sanskrit scholars and educators. Apparently Vidyasagar bemoaned this fact in a letter to her.[80] Yet for undisclosed reasons he did not attempt to teach her. This would not have been something very novel, for it was quite common for young husbands, especially Brahmos, to teach their child wives at night, after the day's work was complete. The only generous interpretation in both Keshub Chandra's and Vidyasagar's cases was that they did not wish to foist their own beliefs on unwilling wives.

In other areas men displayed differences in their own codes of behaviour and their expectations from the bhadramahila. Contemporary comments dismissed women's conversation as dealing with petty domestic affairs,

jewellery and culinary matters; or else as obscene and vulgar.[81] Yet when men gathered socially their

> Conversation is in general so grossly indecent that no female could listen to it for a moment without a sacrifice of her dignity....No native of respectability would permit his wife or his daughter to continue within the sound of that discourse which he himself sanctions with his personal assistance....so deep indeed does this national defilement descend, that no meeting seems to possess any zest, from which decorous allusions are exlcuded.[82]

While allowing for the moralising tone of this piece, coming as it does from the Serampore Mission, it does reveal the double standards practised by the bhadrolok.

The most celebrated instance of the disparity between principle and practice was the Cooch Behar Marriage affair. Keshub Chandra Sen and the Brahmo Samaj of India had been agitating for some time for a civil marriage act to be passed. They did not qualify as Hindus and their non-religious marriage ceremonies were not legally recognized, as all legal marriages were performed within a religion--Hinduism, Islam, Christianity, whatever the concerned parties' affiliation. In 1872 the Native Marriage Act was passed and it included various progressive elements related to the status of women. Monogamy was obligatory and inter-caste marriages were recognized in law. While campaigning for the legislation Keshub Chandra had circulated an enquiry among eminent physicians in India--Hindu, Muslim and Christian, soliciting their views on the most suitable marriageable age for girls. While eighteen or nineteen years was held to be the most proper, in deference to public opinion the minimum age of marriage under the Native Marriage Act was set at fourteen years for females and eighteen years for males. Passage of this legislation

did not imply that this then became general practice. The Act only applied to those married under its jurisdiction. People married under religious denominational principles did not have to obey this law. However it was hoped by supporters of the minimum marriageable age for girls that eventually these guidelines would be adopted by the rest of the population. That this did not occur is illustrated by the fact that the minimum age of marriage for girls remained a contentious issue well into the twentieth century.

On the 6 March 1878, the marriage took place between Keshub Chandra's eldest daughter Sunity Devi who was not yet fourteen, to the crown Prince of Cooch Behar who was also below the marriageable age prescribed in the act, as he was only fifteen. Expectedly this event created a big furore both within the Brahmo Samaj in India and among their supporters in Britain. Non-Brahmos concerned with the status of women also paid close attention to the developments as they unfolded. Keshub Chandra and his supporters attempted to dodge the criticisms with the excuse that the marriage ceremony was virtually an engagement because the day following the marriage the prince left for England to complete his education. Keshub Chandra's critics accused him of succumbing to the lure of prestige and wealth, and of forsaking his principles.

> A few years ago when you took the opinions of many distinguished medical men on this subject, most of them distinctly declared eighteen or nineteen to be the proper marriageable age for girls, but having regard to the general feeling and practice on this subject in the native community, fourteen was fixed as the minimum marriageable age in Act III of 1872. The fixing of this minimum had, at the time, your entire support; and we had hoped that in your case you would set a good example to the Brahmo Samaj by keeping your daughter unmarried to a still later age than the minimum of fourteen, recognized by the Act.[83]

While defenders of Keshub Chandra Sen's action argued that his agreement to the Cooch Behar marriage proposal emanated from the desire to reform a backward Hindu state through the postive influences of his daughter Sunity Devi, that the marriage was really an engagement, and finally, that his critics were motivated by personal jealousies and the quest for power within the Brahmo Samaj,[84] the impact was regressive to the cause of social reform for women. Keshub Chandra Sen was a highly-respected individual in India and England among Brahmos and non-Brahmos. His perceived regression could only strengthen the conservative forces who would interpret the Cooch Behar marriage as indicating that Keshub Chandra realized he had erred and now wished to revert to what he believed to be correct. The angst that this affair created within the Brahmo Samaj was tremendous.

> For the last few years the feeling against early marriage has been gaining ground in the Brahmo Samaj, but we very much fear that after this wedding many Brahmos may not, as before, hesitate to encourage early marriage, and may even bind their daughters in matrimony without waiting till they are thirteen years old. Under these circumstances, how a man as zealous as yourself in the cause of female education and female improvement could perform such an action, is what we are at a loss to comprehend.[85]

The Cooch Behar Marriage affair aptly illustrates the big gap between the public posturings and declamations of the reformers of the status of women, and how they lived their lives and dominated the lives of the women around them. This difference, identifies a central problem of the reform movement. While aspiring to a more rationalist lifestyle and adjusting to the Westernization of their society, the bhadrolok seemed unable to grapple with the contradictions that arose along this path.

Perhaps one more example will suffice to illustrate this problem. Widow marriage was one of the most important issues that the reformers took up. There were various reasons for this, as we have seen in preceding sections. However as perceptively noted by Stein, while widows constituted a social danger, widowhood was still a status symbol. After the Widow Remarriage Act was passed (26 July 1856) the numbers of widows who remarried was still very few. As long as there was a definite social stigma and social retaliation attached to marrying a widow, social reformers themselves very rarely married widows even if the opportunity presented itself.[86]

Some historians have even labelled such reformers "selfish" and "hypocritical".

> While these reformers would half approve of Westernization on the part of men, because possibly of its material value, they would never allow women to accept Western life style and ideas, possibly they wanted their women to be totally traditional. However they gave their women some eduation and did away with the purdah in order to turn them into 'better' women and thus to exploit them further. They had indeed two different standards—one for men and another for women.[87]

These distinctions sharpened towards the close of the nineteenth century when nationalism gripped the popular imagination. In cases there were also reversals in areas of improvement. Rabindranath Tagore, although acutely sensitive to the condition of women in the antahpur as becomes clear from many of his works, did not give his daughters any formal education and had them married early. His wife also did not enjoy half as much freedom as his sister-in-law, Jnanadanandini.

IMAGE

A principal motivation in the reforms discussed in this thesis was a concern with how Indians were perceived by Europeans. While popular Darwinism contributed to a subjective image of the Indian in the British mind,[88] the image of polygamous men whose wives after a life of seclusion were burned on their husband's funeral pyres was definitely reprehensible. Granted there was a degree of exaggeration and subjectivity in such accounts by missionaries and European travellers in India. Yet, as we would say today, the bhadrolok had an "image problem" and the bhadrolok colloquially speaking, had to "clean up their act". Indians were suspected of being lascivious. The Friend of India expressed concern that zenana teachers were "at the mercy of lascivious Hindu men".[89] In such circumstances the reformers' defence of monogamy can be seen as reactionary.

The bhadrolok wanted their women to make a favourable impression on the English. As Radhakanta Deb in conversation with Bishop Heber remarked, for Indian women to have the same liberty as European women "they must be better educated."[90] Bengali men were ashamed at the lack of Western sophistication of Bengali women. Besides, they expected their wives to add to their prestige and social standing. The Friend of India approvingly noted the piece they received written by Mohini Khastagir as an example of what Hindu women were capable of. This sort of recognition was much sought after.[91] Some scholars have also put forth the notion of positive racial/familial image deriving from appropriate behaviour by women.[92] In the race to meet the criterion of Westernization, the bhadrolok seemed unaware that the perceived and actual differences in the status of women in India and Britain as shown earlier were

not the same. For example, child-marriage was often viewed by outsiders as an uncivilized practice. In fact, age of consent was a contentious issue in Britain as well. The discussions over juvenile prostitution reveal that the age of consent in Britain was thirteen. Reformers who wanted it raised to sixteen in 1882 were unsuccessful. Meanwhile the Native Marriage Act in India had already established the age of consent at fourteen.

Status of Women as a Measure of the State of Civilization of the Country

The status of women in Bengal in the nineteenth century, seen as deplorable in popular English imagery, did not auger well for the bhadrolok in terms of their social, economic and political ambitions. Thus, part of the rationale for the social reform movement was to address these concerns. In a semi-humourous articulation of this need the Calcutta Review carried the following piece.

> ...we say that the advancement of natives to high posts of emolument or responsibility was simply impossible while such relics [sati] of dark ages and dark superstitions were fostered or endured....Imagine a native gentleman dying who was a member of the Governor-General's Council for making laws, and the Viceroy, on sending a message of condolence to his family, being quietly told that his wives had all burnt themselves the day before;....or a Bengalee member of the Civil Service, for such there may be, refusing to subscribe to the civil fund because he would, under the Shastras be only survived by his widow for the space of twelve hours!...The influence of a nation in the world's history depend even more on the refinement, the dignity and the character of the mothers, than on any acuteness of intellect and any range of acquirements displayed by men.[93]

Other reformers, comparing the situation in India to that in England saw in the extension of rights to women an indicator of the level of civilization in India. Satyendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's eldest brother and a champion of rights for women wrote to his wife from England:

> Whatever good fortune, progress, beauty and glory the people of this country have are due to the elevated position of their women. When will our country have this kind of good fortune? Progress is far away from a country where women have no freedom and have always to abide by the orders of their husbands and other superiors.[94]

Blended with the wistful desire for an improved status for women was the pragmatic wish for "progress" for the country. Likewise Vidyasagar's support for women's education stemmed from the belief that reform and revitalization of society could not proceed if this area was overlooked. This sentiment was reiterated throughout the literature of nineteenth century Bengal. Kishory Chand Mitra, addressing the Bethune Society in Calcutta after Mary Carpenter spoke on Female Education concluded with:

> I earnestly beg my educated fellow-countrymen to remember that the social and mental status held by the women of a country is the true test of its civilization. I would fervently impress on them the truth of what Tennyson has said:
>
> 'The woman's cause is man's—they rise or sink
> Together, dwarfed or godlike, bond or free.'[95]

The more superficially Westernized the bhadramahila became, the better for the bhadrolok. When Satyen Tagore's wife attended the drawing-room at the Viceroy's, marking the commencement of the Calcutta season, "Her demeanour and appearance were the objects of much admiration, and the event was considered an important one in social progress."[96] Mary Carpenter raptured over Sasipada Banerji's home in Baranagar.

> For the first and for the last time, during my whole visit, had I the happiness of being in a simple native dwelling, which had the domestic charms of an English home. The young wife came forward gracefully to welcome us to her pretty sitting-room, where well-chosen prints covered the otherwise bare walls, and a simple repast had been prepared for us.[97]

TRADITION AND MODERNITY

A notable aspect of reform was the constant efforts of reformers to seek shastric support for their ideas. The significance of this is that it limited reforms considerably, by circumscribing the boundaries within which they could proceed. Since Rammohun Roy was a deist and Vidyasagar was an unreformed Hindu it is plausible to argue that their reasons for seeking shastric support were different. However it illustrates the fact that nineteenth century Bengali society was socially and economically unprepared for change. A further consideration in this discussion was the probable unwillingness of male reformers to defy the shastras. They sought the legitimacy of the scriptures for their reforms, but if shastric support could not be identified then they did not proceed.

Vidyasagar only acted on widow marriage reform when he had convinced himself of adequate scriptural support. He indicated that despite his concerns with the plight of widows, he would not have taken up the case unless he himself was convinced that he was not acting against the shastras.[98] He disagreed with the legislation regarding the age of consent on the grounds that there were was no shastric basis for such legislation. He did not seem concerned with the state of physical development of the female child at the age of marriage, nor the possible consequences of very early marriage on her

health and development.[99] Similarly, reformers often hearkened back to Vedic times to show how women enjoyed far higher status in order to garner support for their reforms. It is interesting, however that they did not dwell on the economic basis for these ancient freedoms, nor the reasons for their decline.[100]

The pre-occupation with shastric sanctions for proposed reforms to the status of women in nineteenth century Bengal resulted in a shifting emphasis from the female person to the scriptures. The move to establish shastric authority to prevent sati and other forms of oppression on women tended to deflect from the issue itself. The "legislative prohibition of sati becomes a question of scriptural interpretation. Contrary to the popular notion that the British were compelled to outlaw sati because of its barbarity, the horror of the burning of a human is...a distinctly minor theme."[101] Lata Mani does concede however that in Raja Rammohun Roy's case the pivotal role of Shastric support in his anti-sati arguments resulted from colonial insistence on the centrality of scripture to Indian society.[102] Yet what we are left with is that despite Rammohun Roy's sophisticated analysis and understanding of women's status he did not base his arguments on the cruelty and inhumanity of the practice but rather on the scriptures. In the final analysis, the insistence on scriptural legitimacy is a measure of the degree of commitment of male reformers to improving the situation of the bhadramahila. While conscious of the injustice and cruelty of many of the practies that controlled women's lives, they did not wish to jeopardize their own status.

CHAPTER IV

CONSCIOUSNESS AND RESISTANCE

"Why do you allow yourselves to be shut up?"

"Because it cannot be helped as they are stronger than women."

"A lion is stronger than a man, but it does not enable him to dominate the human race. You have neglected the duty you owe to yourselves, and you have lost your natural rights by shutting your eyes to your own interests."

"But my dear Sister Sara, if we do everything by ourselves, what will the men do then?"

"They should not do anything, excuse me; they are fit for nothing. Only catch them and put them into the zenana."

(Sultana and Sister Sara in Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's Sultana's Dream, (1905)).

So far we have discussed the motivating factors for male-generated social reforms to improve the status of women. As a result of these social reforms we have seen the significant impact it had on some women's lives. Yet women have been portrayed as passive in the whole process. They did not seem to initiate change, but rather developed reforms instituted by men. Yet were appearances deceptive and was there a feminine consciousness in existence during the nineteenth century in Bengal?

The 1870s and 1880s was a period of fierce struggle for rights for women in Britain. Issues like voting, property rights and fair wages were dominant. The 1890s on both sides of the Atlantic saw a shift of focus from legal rights to a new female personality. The new woman was an "autonomous human being"

who went to college, was independent, had a career, rode a bicycle, played tennis, wore shortened skirts and played tennis.[1]

In India the situation was quite different. There were exceptions like Toru Dutt and Cornelia Sorabji. Often the notable women were 'wives of...', 'daughters of...' or had illustrious family connections. However they remained a small minority. This was not due to the lack of efforts of social reformers. However as illustrated, the basic questions of gender subordination were not raised and therefore attempts at change were stunted if not aborted. Besides the bastardized modernization that India experienced did not engender the kind of changes that women in Europe and America were experiencing. Yet within "a subaltern domain women were creating separate and problematic space for themselves".[2]

The socialization process that girls and women underwent made it very difficult for them to conceive of resistance or to conceptualize changes in their status. Initiative and choice were usually denied female family members. Girls were conditioned to passivity and acceptance. Motherhood was so revered that to imagine any other kind of life was almost impossible.[3] Societal pressures were so strong that protest, if it did develop became very difficult to implement.[4] Yet despite this, some protests by women did occur.

CONSCIOUSNESS

There were several levels of consciousness among women during the period under study. While some women chafed under the restrictions imposed on

them and others accepted their lot, there was a pervasive consciousness about their expected roles.

> So you have Kumo, the heroine of Tagore's short story "Vision" lamenting
>
> Oh! what lies we women have to tell! When we are mothers, we tell lies to pacify our children; and when we are wives, we tell lies to pacify the fathers of our children. We are never free from this necessity.[5]

While Mrinalini Sen who was widowed at age thirteen wrote that she "wanted to get away from that prison and go out and travel and see the outside world." She remarried when she was about twenty-six.[6]

Nirad Chaudhuri has documented his mother's most vocal complaint about her in-laws' house as the general lack of freedom there and the treatment she received during her second confinement when the baby died. It was traditional in Bengali Hindu households to erect a hut (sutikaghar or aturghar) in the central courtyard of the house for the laying-in during childbirth. Usually the structure was without windows, contained only a curtained entrance, and a fire was kept burning constantly in the room. The atmosphere must have been suffocating. Added to the labour of childbirth and all the potential complications was the lack of oxygen and fresh air in the room. Nirad Chaudhuri's mother believed her baby was asphyxiated. She made sure her other children did not get born in her in-law's home.[7]

Female writers contributed to the consciousness of their sex, at least those who had learned to read. Krishnabhabini Das called on Bengali women:

Sisters! Come out of our cages by breaking them open,
Or convince your men to unchain you.
Come out and see how happy the women of Germany, France and England are.[8]

Many women after receiving an education did not get married till they were thirty years old and over.[9] Their writings reveal changing notions of husband-wife relationships and opportunities for developing careers outside the traditional role of mother and wife. Though falling outside the purview of this thesis in terms of time frame and religion, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain was a remarkable feminist by any standards. Her short story "Sultana's Dream", a utopian feminist tale about reverse purdah in Ladyland and advanced technology (solar energy and air travel), was written in 1905, almost a decade before Charlotte Perkins Gilman's Herland. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain made the link between economic independence and women's liberation.[10]

Naturally with awareness comes frustration,[11] for often due to the rigidness of societal constraints and the lack of economic independence women could not live independent lives. It has been sugggested that this may have been a cause for suicide. In the second half of the nineteenth century the suicide rate in Bengal increased and unlike the Presidencies of Bombay and Madras, in Bengal more women than men committed suicide. Again in Bengal, suicide was more common among married women.[12] And awareness did not always imply a questioning of traditional practices. Toru Dutt whose immediate family was Christian and who lived for several years in England and France, unquestioningly accepted the polygamy of her uncle, while finding the "moral" of Jane Eyre "not very high (for the authoress favours bigamy)".[13]

The last quarter of the nineteenth century was the period when changing consciousness became most articulated and visible. This was not surprising as earlier efforts for women's education and earlier reforms and efforts at bringing women more into public life were bearing fruit. Still there were older women who must have found all this quite unbearable and jealously clung to tradition, as the woman who told Cornelia Sorabji

> Would you like to run down the street in your skin? To run round the courtyard would seem to us, even clothed as we are, what running down the street in your skin would seem to you.[14]

STRATEGIES OF RESISTANCE

Autonomy

In this environment opposition to male dominance took many forms as alternatives to open protest. What were the strategies of resistance available to these women? In traditional bhadrolok households the antahpur was the female preserve. The head of the female hierarchy was the mother of the eldest male, or if for reasons of age, health or choice she relinquished her position it fell to the wife of her eldest son to take her place. In such positions women wielded great power over the other family members, including the males. Understandably the woman's power rested on her relationship to the eldest male in the household. Her power though circumscribed facilitated the adaptation of tradition to forms of resistance. Women in such positions were

able to transgress the bounds of acceptable behaviour. Nirad Chaudhuri recounts a story handed down in his family of his grandmother who had a "notoriously sharp tongue" and spared nobody, not even her husband. But she maintained the forms, rebuking him from behind the screen.[15] A British observer noted:

> If we come down to the present times and look at what is passing around us, we shall find that the condition of the Hindoo wife is more independent than might be supposed. She has often much influence over her husband. In cases not a few she disputes his authority and domineers over hm. So far from the wife not daring to lift up her eyes to her husband, she often rebukes him sharply, and when a dispute arises between them she has generally the last word.[16]

Proponents of female education often cited how women, due to their ignorance, indulged in gossip and petty conversations dealing with mundane matters of domestic and housekeeping concern. Female conversations were often peppered with bawdiness and sexuality. Women used the afternoons after their midday meal and before the work for the second half of the day resumed, to congregate and socialize. There were occasions when conversations were ritually-licensed, as at marriage ceremonies when the women of the bride's family teased the groom mercilessly with explicit sexual jokes. Within the bounds of this socially accepted ribaldry, one can perceive the elements of an autonomous female culture. One scholar has identified such behaviour as a psychological safety valve.[17] Another has commented: "women gain power and a sense of value when they are able to transcend domestic limits, either by entering the men's world by creating a society unto themselves."[17] In the Vidya-Sundara, an epic tale of mediaeval Bengal still popular in the nineteenth century, the heroine, Vidya, displays independence and refuses to have a traditional marriage. She chooses her own husband.[18] Middle Bengali mangal

poetry often includes passages described as pati ninda (husband abuse). Their length ranges from a few couplets to over forty. Pati ninda is directed by women at their husbands in a stylized form, and concentrates on the husband's physical defects. It is suggested that it originated in the abusive verse recited at weddings. The development of Calcutta as an urban centre and the birth of other literary styles saw the demise of pati ninda. However it is illustrative of a strong, legitimate tradition of women's autonomous culture.[19]

In a feature one witnesses in many cultures, women often overcame some of the restrictions of economic dependence by accumulating savings built-up on a regular basis from housekeeping money. These amounts were usually hoarded in secret.

Tradition as Resistance

In an ironic twist it is possible to discern the clinging to tradition by some women as a form of resistance. Stubborn resistance to change can also be interpreted as resistance. There may be scholars who would label this conservatism. However within the subaltern framework, 'conservatism' also denotes rebellion and a challenge to authority and dominance. Accordingly, women who persisted with idol worship, despite the strong protests of their reformed deist spouses, could be seen as utilizing a strategy of resistance to male domination. One of the criticisms of Debendranath Tagore from among the Brahmo Samaj was that he permitted the women in his family to continue with idol worship. Perhaps he had unsuccessfully attempted to put a stop to this.

There was the instance of a young Hindu woman who did not join her husband who had converted to Christianity and left his family home. So while she retained her own religion, she 'disobeyed' her husband by not following him. And further, she interpreted Vidyasagar's writings on widow remarriage to be applicable in her case[20] for the shastras do permit remarriage by a woman if her husband is still alive, if he is insane, impotent, or suffering from an incurable or contagious disease.[21]

In India there is a recognized and accepted tradition of women escaping traditional roles by resorting to religion. It has been common practice for women who are widows, even those who remained heads of households, to go on pilgrimage to Benares or Puri or other holy cities and shrines. Some widows retired at Benares because of a belief that if one died in that city the soul got released from the cycle of karma. By departing on pilgrimage, or retiring in Benares, women were relinquishing power over the household, but simultaneously freeing themselves of traditional norms of behaviour. Seclusion could not be as strictly maintained and one was freed from domestic chores. Women vaishnavis were quite commonly mentioned in nineteenth century literature and writings. There was an aura of autonomous sexuality that has always been associated with Vaishnavism.

Deviance

This term is being used to describe mechanisms by which women left societal confines and entered a realm of inexpicable or fantastic behaviour. At

times it seemed to coincide with religious chanting as in the case of a relative of Sitanath Tattvabhushan.

> A female cousin of mine...a very devout woman....sat in a veranda listening to a very touching sankirtan which narrated the incarnation of Krshna as Chaitanya. The words sung were as follows:
>
> 'There came to Nadia
> To fulfil the wishes of the poor,
> The son of Sri-Nanda.
> Pouring liquid gold on his body,
> He hid his dark colour;
> But he could not hide his attractive eyes.'
>
> The lady was consciously shaking her head in time with the sankirtan music, but the moment she heard the last line of the song, she fell down unconscious....she rolled on and on, unconscious....As soon as the lady became conscious, she covered her body and hastened back to the female quarters. This was a case of real dasa, affecting more or less all who were present and making them forget the distinctions of sex and caste and disregard the rules of etiquette.[22]

There are many theories that can attempt to explain behaviour such as this which manifests in other traditions of spiritism and vaudanism. However for purposes of this thesis, what is important are the implications of controlled sexuality seeking release which appear apparent in such instances. In a society with seclusion and rigid sexual controls the invocation of Krishna and the evocation of images related to his sexual licentiousness seemed enough to generate the trance-like behaviour in Tattvabhushan's cousin. The exact psychological ramifications have not been analyzed but there is sufficient evidence to suggest this as a form of resisting traditional strictures.

Nirad Chaudhuri describes how his childhood and youth were clouded by a "malady" which his mother suffered from all her life -- "hysteria". He says that "at one time" hysteria

> used to be quite common, almost fashionable, among Bengali women. But while others were able after a period of flirtation to get rid of it either through the coming of children, or assumption of household responsibilities, or some other change in the way of life, in my mother's case it became a psychologically well-organized, insane state running parallel to her normal life.[22]

While Nirad Chaudhuri in cavalier fashion dismisses hysteria as a disease that disappeared once women got busy with their traditional roles, an almost Victorian concept, a researcher probing for forms of female resistance to gender subordination sees the glimmerings of a desire to confront a rigidly prescribed life with periodical escape. There does not appear to exist any overt sexual factor, but there does seem to be a craving for attention and care. Chaudhuri notes that only his father's constant ministrations to his mother could calm her.

> ... he had always to sit by her side either stroking her hair or her hand, neglecting everything else, including his clients and his cases.[24]

Instrumentality

In a remarkable case the Bamabodhini Patrika (1870) reported how a Kulin woman took her husband to court for maintenance and won her case. The husband had to pay her Rs.15 per month.

When the Cooch Behar marriage controversy took place Keshub Chandra Sen received a letter of protest from some Brahmicas protesting the marriage. Of course in many ways by their very existence the Brahmos were already rebels, so their action could be seen as maintaining a tradition of change. Yet, as we

have seen, the Brahmo heritage did not automatically preclude conservatism and gender subordination.

Young women, especially widows or in some cases women whose families wished them to marry much older Kulin men who already had many wives sometimes ran away from home and took shelter with local branches of the Brahmo Samaj. Sometimes as a result violence ensued and attempts were made by the families of the women to abduct them. However many of these women because of their independent actions were able to receive an education, marry men of their choice at a later age and pursue careers.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

Over the course of the nineteenth century one can distinguish certain changes in the status of women. The early nineteenth century was the bleakest. The middling years of the century saw some improvements in terms of legislative changes -- abolition of sati, legalization of widow marriage, and progress made in the area of female education. The last quarter saw some remarkable advances. Women were becoming prominent in society and entering careers in medicine, journalism, writing and teaching. However by the late nineteenth century the rise of nationalism, and its dependence on revived traditionalism adversely affected the progress that had been made. Improvements in the status of women were interpreted as Western and reviled. Individuals who had been pioneers, including women seemed to succumb to these pressures.

This thesis has attempted to demonstrate that the generally-held notion that the nineteenth century was a period of great improvements in the status of women is greatly inflated. It has attempted to show that relationships between the sexes is related to preservation of vested interests and structures of power. There were changes that affected the status of women, so that by the second half of the nineteenth century and more so in the last quarter of the century many improvements had become evident and many remarkable women articulately raised questions related to their position in society. However, as

repeatedly reiterated, the question of gender subordination, as basic to female inequality was never raised. Due to the lack of a multi-dimensional approach, whatever changes were attempted were restricted to particular areas of concern.

There are many possible explanations for this. It has been suggested that modernization as implanted in Bengal lacked the ingredients necessary to catalyze societal changes similar to those experienced in Europe. The colonized economy lacked the infrastructure necessary to modernize, and this resulted in skewed development. Thus while seeking to adopt the forms of Westernization/modernization, including those related to the status of women, the changes were mostly symbolic. Philosophical feminism never made strong inroads into the reform movement. Most changes addressed were in the realm of domestic feminism. Any modernization process, however unbalanced, creates tensions, and the reforms to women's status in nineteenth century Bengal were no exception. Women were caught between old and new. While some were able to successfully accept the challenge others found the pressures overwhelming.

The 'renaissance' reformers of Bengal were highly selective in their acceptance of European liberal ideas and chose to maintain the basic structures of patriarchal hierarchy and caste differentiation. Traditional features remained almost intact and flourished in the new contexts. It becomes apparent that the bhadrolok advocated equality not exclusively to improve the situation of their wives, mothers and sisters, but for their own benefit as well. Educated women with a veneer of Westernization were better suited for the role of 'help-meet' and companion for the emergent Westernized Bengali gentlemen. A mother who could inculcate the new value system in her children was an asset.

Native men were not uncivilized and lascivious and wished to impress this on their colonizers by distancing themselves from sati and polygamy. But the logical extension of these reforms, full equality for women, would have threatened male dominance. Most importantly, however, economic dependence of the bhadramahila was preserved. It is this factor, perhaps more than any other that ensured her subordinate position in her gender relationship to the bhadrolok.

END NOTES

CHAPTER I

1 Jadunath Sarkar, "Foreword", in J.C. Bagal, Women's Education in Eastern India, (Calcutta: The World Press Pvt Ltd., 1956), p. ix.

2 Calcutta University admitted women even before British universities did.

3 Again, even before women in Britain had such legal safeguards.

4 To a large degree the subaltern Studies Group is responsible for this.

5 Representative studies are P. Branca, Silent Sisterhood: Middle-class Women in the Victorian Home. (Pittsburgh: Carnegie-Mellon Press), 1975, 170pp and Clio Collection, Quebec Women's History, (Toronto: Women's Press), 1986, 396pp.

6 Sudesh Vaid and Kumkum Sangari, eds. Reconstructing Woman: Essays in Colonial History, (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1988) forthcoming, is perhaps one of the first serious academic collections besides a few articles in Subaltern Studies. Also using a feminist analysis to explain women's status and raising some historical questions is Joanna Liddle and Rama Joshi's, Daughters of Independence, (London: Zed Press, 1986), 264pp.

7 Charles Heimsath, Indian Nationalism and Hindu Social Reform, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1964), 379pp., is perhaps the best.

8 Sumit Sarkar, Bibliographic Survey of Social Reform Movements in Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries. (New Delhi :Indian Council of Historical Research, 1975), p. 51.

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CHAPTER II

1 This conversation in R.C. Dutt's novel epitomizes a trend of thought among the Bengali elite and reflects a smug satisfaction with the degree of 'modernization' and reform that had occurred. It will not be incorrect to state that Dutt has used his characters in this instance to reveal his own predilections.

2 For details on whether the Permanent Settlement created a land-holding class of zamindars or whether the class of smaller land-holders, (jotedars) who emerged with the Permanent Settlement were inherent in the Mughal agricultural system that predated the Permanent Settlement, see Rajat and Ratna Ray, "Zamindars and Jotedars: a Study of Rural Politics in Bengal," Modern Asian Studies 9:1 (1975), pp. 81-102.

3 Eric Stokes, The English Utilitarians and India. (Oxford: Clarendon Press), 1959, p.8.

4 While the term literally means gentleman, it is also used to denote a whole class. On the other hand, the female complement to bhadrolok, bhadramahila or gentlewoman signifies only the feminine gender.

5 This policy was defined in Macaulay's famous Minute on Education, dated 7 March 1835, but only after very heated and impassioned debate among the Orientalists and the Anglicists. The former wished to maintain the classical languages, Persian and Sanskrit as the language of government, while the latter felt a switch to English would facilitate the advancement of Indian civilization. Stokes' English Utilitarians covers this issue very well.

6 Ritualized robbery and murder of unsuspecting travellers by individuals who had committed themselves to such a lifestyle. However, in popular literature thugs have been romanticized as a cult who murdered for ritualistic reasons.

7 The first split was when the young Keshub Chandra Sen broke away from Maharshi Debendranath Tagore over issues related to forms of worship. This also reflected generational differences and a tussle over a more internalized religion as observed by the Maharshi, coupled with his tolerance of idol worship among his relatives and a bent to activism and proselytizing as well as stringent aversion to idol worship by Keshub Chandra Sen and his followers. The second break occurred when Keshub Chandra Sen overrode his own principles and had his daughter Sunity Devi married at age 13 to the Maharajah of Cooch Behar. Great controversy surrounded the case with claims that the marriage was really an engagement and not consummated as the Maharaja left immediately for England and that enemies of K.C. Sen just used it as an excuse to break away. From the other side there were allegations of compromise and succumbing to worldly concerns.

8 Sylvia Strauss, "Traitors to the Masculine Cause", The Men's Campaign for Women's Rights. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p. 9.

9 Consuming alcoholic beverages themselves and throwing beef into the rooms of orthodox Hindus were some of their more celebrated activities.

10 For a good discussion of this see Asok Sen, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and His Elusive Milestones. (Calcutta: Riddhi-India), 1977, pp. 84-7.

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17 Ghulam Murshid, Reluctant Debutante, p.64.

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30 Barun De, "The Colonial Context of the Bengal Renaissance." In C.H. Philips and Wainwright, eds. Indian Society and the Beginnings of Modernization c. 1830-1850. (London: School of Oriental and African Studies), 1976, pp. 119, 121-3.

31 Ibid., pp. 123-5.

32 P. Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought..., p. 24.

33 Sumit Sarkar, "The Complexities of Young Bengal," p. 510.

34 P. Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought..., p. 24.

35 One reason is perhaps that the industrial base of society made the possibility of women actively competing with men for jobs more of a reality in Britain than in India. Women in this instance were potential rivals with men for professional employment and were seen as posing a threat. Florence Nightingale for example, opposed women becoming physicians. She felt they were better suited to nursing, and medicine was too male-dominated a profession for women to try to break into.

36 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought, p.26. He refers to Ranajit Guha, "Neel-Darpan: the Image of a Peasant Revolt in a Liberal Mirror," The Journal of Peasant Studies 2:1 (October 1974), pp.1-46.

37 Partha Chatterjee, Nationalist Thought..., p. 30.

38 Edward Said, Orientalism, (New York: Vintage Books), 1978, 368pp.

39 Said, p.3.

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5 Meredith Borthwick, "The Bhadramahila and Changing Conjugal Relations in Bengal 1850-1900." In Allen and Mukherjee, p. 119.

6 It has been suggested that this practice was instituted to maintain the joint family and prevent atomisation into nuclear families. Thus the couple existed within an interdependent larger goup. M. Cormack, The Hindu Woman, (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1953), p. 188 writes that women as individuals have no place in where the group is preeminent and the individual subsumed. The female has no hope of individual recognition. Women's identity relates to family relationships or is seen relation to men, that is as a daughter, or wife or mother. Women also, as a result have a very limited view of the self.

7 Sylvia Strauss, "Traitors to the Masculine Cause". The Man's Campaigns for Women's Rights. (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1982), p.xi.

8 Sylvia Strauss, p. 145.

9 Kanai Lal Dey, sub-assistant Surgeon in an address to the Bengal Branch of the British Medical Association, March 1866. In Mary Carpenter, Six Months in India II. (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1868), p.62.

10 Bishop Heber describing some of the facilities in the country home of Babu Hari Mohan Thakur. Reginald Heber, Narrative of a Journey Through the Upper Provinces of India 1824-5. II (London: Jhn Murray, 1829), p. 235.

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GLOSSARY

antahpur	Bengali word synonymous with zenana, literally meaning the inner apartments of a house in which female family nmembers lived. At the intellectual level, however it symbolizes both the physial and mental secludion of women and the resulting apartness of their existence.
aturghar	laying-in room for labour, childbirth and after. Also called sutikaghar.
bhadramahila	gentlewoman
bhadrolok	gentleman, also middle-class
Brahmicas	female members of the Brahmo Samaj
Durga puja	An annual Bengali Hindu festival celebrated in early autumn in celebration of the female deity Durga, symbolizing creation and motherhood. Over the years, beginning especialy in the nineteenth century the celebration of this festival has become a time of family reunions and festivities. Similar social significance as Christmas in Christian countries.
izzat	honour
jatra	popular theatre with stylized acting forms
lajja	shame, bashfulness, shyness, modesty
maan	honour
mofussil	district
naritra	femininity
puja	worship
pundit	scholar and teacher usually of the Hindu classics
samya	equality
shastras	religious texts
sutikaghar	see aturghar.
vaishnavis	female itinerant mendicants who worship the Supreme Being in the personification of Vishnu

zenana — in traditional homes the section of the house where the female family members live. Urdu word, almost similar in meaning to antahpur, except became used in everyday conversation. Women who visited homes to teach the female family members were called "zenana teachers".

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