



Literary Practice of Bengali Women during the Colonial Period

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Abstract

Women, bound by a web of social restrictions and conservatism, isolated themselves from the outside world and took their place in the inner city of the home. They did not get the same benefits as men. However, it is seen that in the colonial era, women continued to try to get out even after overcoming this obstacle. Literature became the strongest medium of their efforts and pens came into their hands as weapons. It was through their writings that they were able to express their thoughts and images of the lives of contemporary women. However, in the contemporary social context, women did not have a proper opportunity to express their views and independent thoughts. In some cases, women saw the face of education courtesy of an educated husband, but it was not possible to ignore the bloodshot eyes of the patriarchal society. However, the women of this period, though limited in scope, have been able to express their thoughts and attitudes towards the society in the light of extraordinary literary achievements. Through this research paper, my main objective is to highlight the different aspects of Bengali women's literary practice and its response during the colonial period.

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1. Introduction

During the colonial period, especially in the middle of the nineteenth century, when Bengali intellectuals supported women's education and established girls' schools started sending girls to their families, the life of girls began to change drastically. In this context, having educated women at home became a matter of social progress and respect. However, the educated girls who came forward in formal education, the home-educated women came forward to introduce their education through the practice of literature in Bengali language. It is worth mentioning that some women's books were published between 1856-1863. These women printed books under their own names and the books aroused a wide response in contemporary situations. Krishnakamini Dasi, Bamasundari Devi, Harkumari Devi and Kailasbasini Devi did not hesitate to reveal their names as writers. The reason behind this can be said to be the encouragement and support of their husbands, which gave them courage.

However, the desire to read books was not an easy task for contemporary women. Ordinary girls were horrified, society imposed restrictions on them saying that girls would become widows if the book said so. So the fear of being a widow and the life of a miserable widow could not remind the girls of the desire to read books. As a result, women could not easily think of fulfilling the desire to read books. We see that Durgacharan Gupta, the husband of the Kailasbasini, used to hide the book first out of fear of widowhood if he wanted to educate her.[1] Not only Kailasbasini Devi but some other contemporary women could not realize their desire to read books. It has been seen that even though she wanted to read Rassundari's book, she could not express her thoughts. He himself said, "Even if one day I saw a written paper, I would not look at it in front of people. Lest anyone say that I am watching to learn to read." [2]

The first Bengali woman to write was 'Chitta Bilasini', which was composed by Krishna Kamini Dasi. Krishna Kamini admits that one of the purposes of writing the book was to encourage women's education. He mentions, "One of the main purposes of my book, whether it is excellent or bad, is that a woman is only

knowledgeable when she finds an example. As soon as a woman becomes interested in learning, there will be no more glory for this country.”[3] Also, the first essay written by a girl in Bengali saying that what reforms can lead to prosperity in this country was published in 1861. Dr. Loknath Maitreya published it in book form after it was first published in a periodical. In the same year, Harkumari Devi's book of poetry was published, the name of the book was 'Vidyadaridradalani'. In 1863, her husband Durgacharan Gupta published Kailasabasini Devi's 'Hindu mahilagoner hinabasta'.

In this way, it is seen that the girls entered the arena of literature with the help of men in promoting women's education and for the betterment of the country. After getting this right of entry, they started writing according to their wishes and tastes. Their writings included poems, stories, essays, novels, biographies, autobiographies, travel stories, etc. Not only that, through all these writings, the girls' own voices began to go to gold, the practice of literature began to develop further with the gentle touch of women. But there are doubts as to how freely and impartially women could write under the conservative rules of patriarchal society under colonial rule. Because in patriarchal conservatism, women did not have the right to express their views freely, nor did they have the right to express anything with free eyes. The reason for this kind of question is that after the initial phase of encouraging girls to write, men saw their debut in girls' writing, and the conservative group began to criticize their writing, noting the tone of social rebellion in writing.

Women begin to interfere in writing primarily in the family sphere. In order for the girls not to be able to write anything of their own free will, the writing of the girls of the family has to be dragged. Although some educated husbands like Mankumari Basu encouraged this in the context of contemporary conservatism, the heartfelt support of the whole family was not forthcoming. In fact, at this time, many girls have had to secretly pursue literature in the air of freedom. Many women even wrote without their names or pseudonyms for fear of social rule. However, even if there was no name, women's speeches could have reached the society. Kamini Sundari Devi had to digest the negative criticism of the conservatism of the society for writing independently. His writing was accused of obscenity. In 1866, he published the play 'Urvashi' under the titles 'Dvijatanay' and 'Ashikshita o Abala'. Needless to say, in the eyes of the conservative society, it was a sign of adventure. The writer of 'Sahityamukur' wrote critically, "There is a huge outbreak in the country now. Girls are also expressing their power like men with pens.”[4]

The so-called progressive group on girls' writing is also in a rush. The famous contemporary 'Bamabodhini' magazine, which has been published since 1863, also wrote about women's education, Brahma Samaj-approved social reforms, and women's freedom. But towards the end of the nineteenth century, Saudamini Devi wrote the poem 'Matangini' and was reprimanded by the magazine 'Bamabodhini'. She was accused of drawing 'images of sin.' Through the poem 'Matangini', Saudamini told the story of a Matangini from Nabdwip, which was not acceptable to the contemporary conservative society. However, Saudamini Devi wanted to propagate Sati's ideals through this poem and treat her husband with the money earned from the sale of books. But the 'Bamabodhini' newspaper said, "Such horrible and heartbreaking incidents are unheard of. In fact, women are incapable of writing.”[5] In this way, male society interferes with women's writing and decides what girls will write and how. It is also said that girls need to write something that suits their sweet minds. They will write something about gods or nature, they will write mourning songs on the death of husband and relatives. But the murder case is unworthy of women writing. This is why many of us get the stories of female detective writers later.

It is also seen that the writer would be recognized by the society only if he wrote following the path directed by the patriarchy. In the eyes of society, they became the 'literary empress'. Bhudev Mukherjee can be cited as proof of how inferior men's vision and thinking was about girls' writing. Despite being a classmate of Madhusudan Dutt and Rajnarayan Basu in Hindu College, his ideas about girls' education were not very high. According to him, "Girls left Bibi without learning English. In the house where one hundred rupees a month came, the women of the house do not cook rice, do not sweep the house, do not dry the bed, do not make it, do not get the leaves, do not wash the utensils, just beat the knots, and all the servants work --- they read books, making carpet, playing cards.”[6]

Needless to say, in developing this notion of the character of English-educated girls, importance is given to the tradition of keeping the only corner of the home for girls in the workplace. From birth, Bhudev Mukherjee emphasized the difference between a son and a daughter. He did not realize that this resulted in the development of a different mentality in the children which created inequality in the society. He also preached that "it is unnatural, unnecessary, impossible and detrimental to try to establish equality in all such places." Parents, protect all those inequalities.”[7] But we see that Bhudev Mukherjee's granddaughter Anurupa and his sister Indira were educated in English, although they did not receive formal education, they were educated at home. Indira published two books titled 'Mantrashakti' and 'Ma', which embodied the teaching style of this home education and the ideals of her grandfather. The importance of this book is due to the fact that 'Mantrashakti' and 'Ma' were published in eight and seven editions respectively.

However, both these novels became more popular as they embodied the ideals of patriarchal society. That is to say, the two novels prove that the patriarchal social ideology did not change much even in the twentieth

century. It is said that women have expressed their thoughts only to men out of greed for social recognition and fear of social rule. This is supported by the statement of Golam Murshid. He said, "In fact, women were strongly influenced by men at that time and as a result they refrained from expressing opinions which were not supported by men."^[8] Such opinions can be substantiated. It has been shown that when the widow marriage law was enacted, women did not support it. Their support was not forthcoming even in the case of the 'Consensual Consent Bill'.

While acknowledging these limitations of women writers, it must be said that girls must have had their own contribution to the world of literature. Even in the nineteenth century, there is a hint of rebellion in the writings of some women. Later, twentieth century writers sought new light on spices from here. It was along this line of light that the women's liberation movement later gained momentum. But this path was not smooth either. The reason given is that during the Vidyasagar Widow Marriage Movement, Rani Swarnamoyee, who became a widow at the age of 16 in Cossimbazar, refused to help him financially Vidyasagar refused.^[9] So there is no hesitation in saying that the kind of fear that Vidyasagar himself was scared of, the widow marriage support of happy married husbands like Swarnakumari cannot be expected. Perhaps this is why Swarnakumari in her novel 'Snehalata' forbids widows to fall in love with their lovers.

Another famous contemporary writer was Girindramohini Dasi. The death of her husband Naresh Chandra in 1884 marked the end of her short married life. It was in this context that he composed 'Ashrukana'. Male poets like Debendranath Sen or Akshay Chowdhury were overwhelmed by the way Girindramohini showed her affection for her husband through this composition. Akshay Chowdhury imagined their newly happy marriage in the case of Ananta Bihar. The poet of 'Ashrukana' but despite her devotion and love for her husband, feared the widow. Annadasundari Dasi has highlighted the sexual problems of contemporary widows. In 1872, her book 'Abala Bilap' was published. In the introduction to this book, Annadasundari writes about her grieving life. Criticizing the book, 'Bangadarshan' wrote, "Readers never grieve over the author's grief. Therefore, a woman should keep her grief in mind. If they print books, it will be judged by the standards of literature. This book of poetry of Annadasundari was praised in this balance of justice."^[10]

Needless to say, writing against patriarchy, living within a patriarchal social structure, was not easy for nineteenth-century girls. Yet they have tried to write, to be defendants. One such protesting writer was Lakshmimani Devi. On May 4, 1885, Anandabazar Patrika reported that she had written the novels 'Chirasannyasini', published in 1872, 'Santapini', published in 1876, 'Vijayabasini', published in 1882, and 'Bidhba Bangallana', published in 1884. His essays have been featured in other books as well. Moreover, in his essay 'Paradhinar ki kasto', she generally speaks of the pain of subjugation, but it is not difficult to understand that girls were at the center of his thoughts. The helplessness of the girls seems to have been uttered from her mouth, "They can do nothing for their own betterment, for God's sake, for better or for worse. They are only suffering like a prisoner forever."^[11]

Critics have a lot to say about girls' literary pursuits. But no one bothered about the fact that literature has given girls? Or were the girls able to throw a new message to the society through literature? We know that every human being has some qualities of his own. Girls are no exception, if the development of that quality does not make possible the full development of human life, the path of proper development of humanity is blocked and the entity dies. So from time immemorial, people have composed melodies, painted pictures, and practiced literature in tandem with it. Girls have wanted to write since the nineteenth century with the same mental urge. But the task was not easy at all. Many times women have practiced literature keeping their names secret. Moreover, despite her literary pursuits, girls like Kusumakumari Devi never wanted to become famous and famous writers. Kusumakumari Devi did not give her name in any of the writings. In his own words, he wrote, "It was possible to stop the normal repetitive movement of the mind's intense interest or talent. How much writing has been lost due to lack of family support."^[12]

The fact is that in an age when the lives of girls were awkward, the mind was bound by restrictions, oppressed for various social reasons, then all the people were trying to keep their minds alive through the pen of the unaccompanied girls. So I see many writers praying to Bagdevi so that she does not become hostile towards women. Literary practice was the only consolation for the miserable life of women. In this context we can talk about Mrinalini Sen. She was married at the age of 13 to Indranarayan Singh, a zamindar of Paikpara. But she had to become a widow in just two years. Although special arrangements were made for education for the little-widowed widow of the zamindar's house. Taking advantage of this opportunity, Mrinalini Devi continued to publish 'Pratidhvani' (1894), 'Nirjharini' (1895), 'Kallolini' (1896) and 'Manobina' (1900). It is particularly noteworthy here that in her books of poetry, she paints a picture of an unbearable life without a partner. Poems rich in deep understanding are not found in her sad life. Because she had a literary life of a solitary life, where he did not have a partner to talk to.

But when literary pursuits could not bring happiness in her life, she married Nirmal Chandra Sen for the second time without heeding the social rules and regulations to enter the path of peace from a miserable life. Mrinalini, rich in new life, did not write poetry to spend time, but continued to write on various subjects,

joining various activities. She even became one of the partners in the women's liberation movement. However, it was not possible for everyone to become Mrinalini. Those who have not been able to break the shackles of society have at least been able to open their literary lives and exchange words and thoughts. An example is Nirupama Devi, who lost her husband at the age of 14 and became speechless. Later she found her new life in literature. Needless to say, this literary practice has brought the girls closer to each other, helped them to find like-minded friends.

When the institutional education of girls started, the conservative society said that there was no need for girls to learn education because they could not earn money. So even though the education system of the girls was prevalent, the parents had objections about giving them jobs for a long time. As can be seen in the case of BA pass Kamini Roy, his progressive father did not agree to give his daughter a job at all. He said, "I have taught my daughter to increase her knowledge and to enjoy the pure joy of knowledge. I will never let her do the job." [13] Later, however, he changed his mind in a different situation. Similarly, Sarala Devi Chowdhurani, the granddaughter of the Tagore family, did not have the full consent of her parents after she became a teacher in Mysore.

Therefore, in order to make the society aware, the writers have had to repeatedly talk about women's education, just as they have to be educated like men and take part in a wide field of work. Krishnabhavini Dasi has repeatedly written essays on this subject. She saw the educated women of Europe with her own eyes. In her article, *Women and Men*, she strongly protested, saying, "The female race is created only for men and there can be no purpose to life other than that purpose. This barbaric and hateful idea is the most dangerous and deadly obstacle for women to have equal knowledge and equal rights in the family." [14] Upon entering India, Krishnabhavini Devi understood that there was a correlation between the education of Bengali girls, earning money and gaining independence. So she emphasized on the earning power of educated girls in Europe in her essay 'Educated Women' and also got involved in a heated debate with Rabindranath on the issue. Rabindranath was against making money for women, he never wanted girls to make money by entering the field of men's work.

Many contemporary girls could not agree with Rabindranath's thoughts. Many protested. Begum Rokeya wrote in protest for the protection of women's rights and dignity, "We will do whatever we have to do to achieve equality with men. If you can make a living now, you can do that. Why not earn? Do we have no hands, no feet, no intellect? What's wrong? Can't we do independent business with the hard work we spend on our husband's housework? Educate the girls and leave them to work, let them earn their own food." [15] However, *Bamabodhini* magazine has been saying since the beginning of the institutional wife education that educated girls can earn at home even if they do not have a job. Many girls have learned to read and write good books, they have made money and how many people have benefited. How many girls can run a household with such grief. [16] For this reason, it has been seen since the nineteenth century that girls have tried to find a way of self-reliance through literary practice.

Conclusion:

Thus, the way in which the Bengali women, who went through various obstacles during the colonial period, pursued their literary pursuits through their writings is in one word perfect. The pursuit of becoming a 'Jitakshara' by Bengali girls since the nineteenth century and as a result they have been able to express their own words and thoughts in literature. It can be said by analyzing their spoken and unspoken words that it is possible to establish their overall rights and dignity only by presenting the words of women in the context of wider political and social history. In the light of this consciousness, the girls of the present age are also learning to think, to learn to write, to enrich the store of life and literature.

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