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EDUCATION AND EMERGENCE OF SOCIO-POLITICAL CONSCIOUSNESS OF BENGALI WOMEN DURING THE COLONIAL RULE: A GLIMPSE

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ABSTRACT:

Nineteenth century Bengal witnessed an immense changing scenario in case of women emancipation. Despite of harsh criticism of the conservatives, education of Bengali women continued to progress in the second half of the nineteenth century. The Bengali 'Bhadraloks' (gentlemen) belonging to upper and middle class enlightened with the influence of so called renaissance felt the urge to impart education to their females either in formal schools or in 'Antahpur' (the inner quarter). As a result emergence of 'new woman' began to be exposed. Experiences of newly educated women gradually reflected in their writings in contemporary periodicals, autobiographical writings, memoirs etc. They began to criticize social norms and prejudices. In this way they found self identity and self consciousness. Some of them deeply affected with nationalist ideology and involved themselves in national movement.



KEYWORDS: Education, women emancipation, self identity, middle class, colonial power.

INTRODUCTION:

At the beginning of Nineteenth century introduction of modern education gave a new impetus to review position and status of Bengali women in the eyes of western outlook. Initially, Missionary women took initiatives to impart education to Bengali females. But it was not effective to the upper class females because of their parents' apathy to modern education. They were sceptic about the motifs of the Missionaries for the fear of proselytization. But the in

fluence of colonial rule and ideology began to be reflected soon. Lots of educated 'Bhadraloks' (gentlemen) started to rethink about imparting education to their daughters, sisters and wives in modern lines recognizing the demand of new age. The newly educated women started to reflect their feelings about their status in family and society and gradually they became self conscious.

PLATFORMS OF WOMEN'S EXPOSURE:

In the quest of women's exposition the Brahmo Samaj took a leading role. In 1863, the

Brahmos established 'Antahpur Strisiksha Sabha' to impart education to females within houses. They also encouraged their females to attend social gatherings and religious ceremonies. The 'Bamabodhini Patrika' began to be published from 1863 to give inspiration to literary works. The next year 'Brahmika Samaj' was formed to bring women together to discuss several topics for self improvement of females. Overcoming initial hesitation and contradictions educated Bengali women began to expose themselves gradually. Several organizations began to grow to

discuss about women issues.

Social consciousness as reflected in women's writing:

There were several autobiographical writings in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century where social consciousness has been explicitly exposed. In this context Rassundari Devi's (1809-1900) 'Amar Jiban' (My Life) published in 1868 may be cited here. She was born in village Potajiya and was married at village Ramdiya at the age of twelve years. After marriage she gradually absorbed herself in executing family responsibility. Even she could not go to see her mother in her death bed. She was educated with her own effort. She lamented in this way:

"Why was I born a member of the female sex?.....had I been a boy, and had news of my mother's condition, then no matter where I had been, like a bird I would have flown to her side. What am I to do now! I am a caged bird." (Karlekar, 1991)

She also recalls the situation while she was going to her father's in law's house as stated below:

"If I am asked to describe my state of mind, I would say that it was very much like the sacrificial goat being dragged to the altar, the same hopeless situation, and the same agonized screams."

In this context Kailashbasini Devi's (born in 1837) narratives may be quoted here. Her two books were 'Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha' (The Woeful plight of Hindu Women) published in 1863 and 'Hindu Mahilakuler Bidyabhyash O Tahar Samunnati'. She harshly criticized the system of kulinism, child marriage and treachery of ancient customs that inform us about freedom of women. The agony of widowhood has been vividly described. She raised a pertinent question like this:

"Why is a woman known as 'abala'? because like an animal, she cannot speak for herself and is dominated by us, as are animals. Thus, there is no difference between a woman and an animal. 'Why pray, is a woman called 'bama'? for her lop-sided thinking, of course.' Alas! The unspeakable woe!" ['Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha' (The Woeful plight of Hindu Women)]. It should be mentioned here that the 'Bamabodhini Patrika' and 'Sambad Prabhakar' highly appreciated the book.

Rassundari used a metaphor to make understand the conditions of women as 'caged bird' in 'Amar Jiban' and Kailash basini compared it as 'caged creature'. But she advocated imparting girls education which is 'women like education', likewise the Brahmos.

In the writing of Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919), we get a insightful observation regarding the conditions of Bengali women at that time. She was married at the age of nine and was educated by her husband at home. She went to England with her husband and spent there fourteen years. Seeing the liberated women in England she was very much impressed and inspired by this and wrote the first Bengali travelogue by Bengali woman namely - 'Englande Banga Mahila' in 1885. Her citable essays are 'Swadhin O Paradhini Nari Jiban' (Independent and dependent woman life), 'Sikkhita Nari' (Educated Woman) etc.

Krishnabhabini strongly advocated in favour of imparting girls education for breaking the seclusion of purdah. In this regard her comprehension as reflected in 'Englande Banga Mohila' (Bengali Woman in England):

"Sisters! Come out of your 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.

There aren't any tears in their eyes!

Look! Men here do not ignore women as good for nothing.

Men do not treat them as their pets and lock them up in the Zenana.

How long sisters, do you want to remain as Prisoners?" (cited in Murshid, 1983)

Lots of educated women expressed their views against gender discrimination, age old beliefs and practices and advocated for imparting education to females to get rid from their suffering and humiliation.

Bengali Women and socio-political consciousness in the Beginning of Nineteenth Century:

By the end of the nineteenth century 'Purdah system' gradually eroded or modified through the interactions with Western influence. The educated women began to think to do something for their fellow sisters. As a result different organizations were set up.

To help indigent widows and helpless women Swarnakumari Debi founded 'Sakhi Samiti' in 1886. Its aim was to educate Hindu zenana, to arrange vocational training for unmarried females and destitute widows. 'Bharat Stri Mahamandal' was founded by Sarala Devi Chaudhurani in 1910. The responsibility of Bengal branch was handed over to Krishnabhabini Das. Bengali, English, Arithmetic, Geography, Music, sewing and handicrafts were instructed here.

In 1919, 'Nari Siksha Samiti' started its work aiming at establish primary schools in rural areas. In 1911, Begum Rokeya opened the Sakhawat Memorial School in Calcutta to educate Muslim women. Keshabchandra founded 'The Arya Nari Samaj' in 1879. Gurusaday Dutt founded the 'Saroj Nalini Dutt Memorial Association' for upliftment of women.

Despite lots of problems, some women like Sarala Devi Chaudhurani, Lilabati Mitra, Hemangini Das, Nirmala Sarkar, Hemanta kumara Choudhuri, Snehashila Choudhury came forward to take part in national movement. In 1901, Sarala sang a chorus,---'Utho go Bharata Lakshmi' at a national exhibition. She also sang the inaugural song during the Congress session in 1901. She inspired the youths with her literary works like 'Bilati Ghushi Banam Deshi Kil'. She also introduced 'Birasthami' and set up 'Lakshmir Bhandar' to collect Swadeshi goods. Women came forward to participate in the Swadeshi movement and it got a great impetus during Gandhian movements.

Several organizations were established like 'Deepali Sangha', 'Mahila Rashtriya Sangha' to arouse self confidence and imparting education to women. In this field contribution of Lila Nag and Latika Ghose is to be specially mentioned.

Lots of women were attracted in revolutionary movements. In this context Preetilata Waddadar, one of the active members of Chitagong Armoury Raid remarked in the testament found after her death as stated below:

"If our brothers can join a fight for the cause of mother land, why can't the sisters?"

Lastly, the spectrum of self consciousness began to be reflected in greater social canvas and participation in political movements of women was gradually articulating the women's issues from their own part, instead of male counterparts, in their own voices.

CONCLUSION:

we can realize the actual conditions of Bengali women during the colonial rule from the early personal narratives of educated women. Position of women in society, conjugal relations and voice of power in family had been articulated in artistic way in their literary works. The urge to come out from the 'prison-like' homely atmosphere which was mostly dominated by the patriarchal norms mildly felt to be questioned by the liberal minded people. Lots of women began to join in national movement overcoming initial hesitation. They also raised their voices against social injustice against women folk.

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