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EXPLORING THE NATIONALISTIC IDEALS OF FEMININITY IN 19TH CENTURY BENGAL: AN ANALYSIS OF BHUDEV MUKHOPADHYAY'S *LAJJASILATA*

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RESEARCH ARTICLE

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Abstract

A central issue of debate during the mid-19th-century Bengal Renaissance was the 'Woman's Question'. Facing a conundrum between balancing the advent of Western education and reforms, and the preservation of traditions, the nationalist intelligentsia had to establish a role for Indian women in light of this new era. Colonial representatives condemned the treatment of Indian women by juxtaposing their social situation with that of the women in Western societies. The nationalists' response was to construct a reformed tradition of gender roles and defend it on the grounds of modernity. An important work in this trajectory was an essay titled '*Lajjasilata*' (modesty) by Bhudev Mukhopadhyay, one of the pioneer nationalist thinkers of 19th-century Bengal. In it, Bhudev prescribed the eponymous doctrine of modesty as the ideal standard by which the women of the 'Hindu household' should conduct themselves. This research is qualitative and interpretative in nature, primarily involving the literary analysis of Bhudev's works that highlight the doctrine of modesty as the ideal form of femininity. Through historical analysis, the research paper seeks to explore how the principle of modesty played a key role in the women's rights and duties in 19th-century colonial Bengal. This article also intends to understand how nationalism in 19th-century Bengal helped create a credo of the 'New Woman', who was considered superior to the Westernised *memsahib*. This research seeks to understand the gendered discrepancy between the acceptance and implementation of Western reforms and education amongst the Bengali population. Finally, the research paper ends by analysing the influence that the ideal of '*lajjasilata*' had upon the subsequent social perception of women in colonial Bengal and thereafter.

Keywords: *Colonial Bengal, Nationalism, Women's Rights, Femininity, Social Reforms*

Introduction

The rights and social position of women were key issues of debate in the early and mid-19th century Bengal which witnessed a series of social reforms: Rammohan Roy's campaign against the practice of Sati, Vidyasagar's attempts to legalise widow remarriage, the abolition of the Kulin tradition of polygamy and the 'age of consent' bills of 1860 and 1891 respectively.[1] However, Partha Chatterjee states that these debates started disappearing from the public discourse towards the closing of the century.[2] Questions about the position of women only arose as an auxiliary to the greater nationalist discourse that dominated the public sphere from then on. This research intends to explore how the nationalist Bengali intellectual, educator, and social thinker Bhudev Mukhopadhyay (1827–1894) sought to answer this question through his doctrine of *'Lajjasilata'* or feminine modesty.

Ghulam Murshid opines that these aforementioned women's reforms were, in essence, a derivation of Western values of liberalism, rationalism, and egalitarianism. These were, in effect, attempts to modernise the condition of Indian women.[3] The initial strata of social reformers, educators, and literary figures such as Rammohan Roy, Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, David Hare, John Drinkwater Bethune and Michael Madhusudan Dutta, were, by varying degrees, admirers of certain aspects of English culture, in particular the English values of secularism, humanism, and adherence to rational and scientific norms of social organisation which they sought to implement in Indian society. Influenced by their English education, these figures were appalled by what they considered social dogmas of a 'moribund culture' standing in the way of progress.[4]

Against the backdrop of such liberal reforms, the nascent nationalist discourse that arose in late 19th-century Bengal attempted to align the idea of modernisation with 'westernisation', but also interpreted modernisation of Bengal society as a perversion of the Indian culture and traditions. This 'new politics of nationalism' that followed the initial period of reform, states Partha Chatterjee, 'glorified India's past' and everything that it perceived to be 'traditional'.[5] Thus, women's social reforms, initiated

along the lines of Western values, were seen as an attempt to dilute and pervert the traditional social structure. Subsequently, nationalism adopted a more conservative attitude towards the question of social customs and beliefs.

The aforementioned nationalist reaction emerged after the British established themselves as the undisputed power in all forms of social and cultural expression. Thus, the conservative nationalists, it can be surmised, emerged as a voice of traditions that were exclusively Indian in form and essence.[6] Sumit Sarkar opines that the ambivalence in the dichotomy between conservation and reform concerning women's issues was visible even amongst the 19th-century Bengali liberal reformists. In fact, many Renaissance reformers were highly selective in their adaptation of liberal ideas from Europe, especially concerning the maintenance of patriarchal forms of authority in the family.[7] Leela Kasturi and Vina Mazumdar aptly substantiated this fact by pointing out that most of the social reformers in the early 19th century were products of the new system of 'English' education, who were mostly elites and male.[8]

The Doctrine of Modesty

In this social milieu, Bengali nationalist author Bhudev Mukhopadhyay pens an essay entitled 'Lajjashilata' (modesty), where he supplies the characteristic nationalist answer.[9] Bhudev extols the virtue of modesty as the essential basis of femininity. In this essay, Bhudev opines that modesty or decorum in conduct is a trait that separates humans from their coarse animal nature. Through this aspect, the human mind seeks to cultivate itself beyond its base animal instincts and into the higher, more spiritual state of being. This helped illustrate the dichotomy between the animal and the godlike, as well as the material and the spiritual. Bhudev aligned patriarchy with Indian nationalism, identifying the Hindu home as the most sanctified area.[10] He opined that due to the cultural intrusion caused by the mindless imitativeness of the liberal Bengalis, the very institutions of home and family were threatened by the peculiar and anachronistic conditions of colonial rule.[11] Bhudev asserted that while in the Western social system, the wife is a partner and companion, this notion is actually far inferior to the position that the traditional Hindu society lavishes upon the woman. According to Bhudev, in the Aryan system, the woman is the goddess.[12] In the 'Paribarik Prabandha' (1882), Bhudev further goes on to prescribe that Hindu parents ought to select their daughter-in-law through the benchmark of their capacity to become *kulalakshmis* (Goddess of the family).[13] Bhudev hails the role of the *grihalakshmi* (synonymous with *kulalakshmi*) as the fundamental node of unity in the *kula* (clan or family lineage). Bhudev asserts that the vitality of the *kula*[14] is the key to ensuring the vitality of the nation.[15] Thus, Bhudev's purity of nationalism becomes synonymous with the purity of the Hindu clan culture, which he in turn ties to the purity of the woman through her capacity as a housekeeper. In the performance of this task, Bhudev places the primordial barometer of a woman's strength of character, the virtue most fundamentally desirable in any Hindu woman.

Bhudev then turns this discourse into the difference between the *kulastree*, the ideal woman who strengthens the clan she marries into, and a *kulata*, a woman who has lost her clan, vis-à-vis her virtue and thus becomes the equivalent of a *vessha,* i.e., a prostitute.[15] This dichotomy becomes the prime axis around which his arguments against the Western education of women are based. According to Bhudev, the *kulastree* is calm and composed in her movements, measured in speech, eyes downcast, avoids men, covers up her body, is devoid of lust, and dresses simply while the *kulata* is restless, garrulous, looks everywhere, seeks male company, keeps parts of her body exposed, is lustful and dresses up ostentatiously.[16] Suffice it to say, Bhudev's benchmarks of an ideal woman maintaining her virtues are closely attached to the controlling of her sexuality and displays of modesty. Thus, the Hindu system, as is highlighted here through the controlling of a woman's sexual agency through the means of deification, according to Kasturi and Mazumdar, 'retained the maximum ambivalence between patriarchy and matriarchy', expressed through the deification of the female essence.[17]

Dipesh Chakraborty opines that the conservative 19th-century Bengali nationalists like Ishwarchandra Bose, Shibchandra Jana, and Bhudev himself sought to modify the pace of women's educational reforms to make it better conform to their ideals of Hindu domesticity. These ideals combined the bourgeois distinction of public and private, of domestic and national, with the idea of maintenance of the family lineage, more expressly the purity of male lineage by glorifying the virtues of *kula*. The use of goddesses to draw upon ethical barometers for the social conduct of women produces some enduring markers of contemporary Bengali nationalist identity.[18] The prudent use of the word *grihalakshmi* summed up the ascetic yet homely figure of the ideal housewife by associating the woman with the beauty of the goddess *Lakshmi*. Excerpts of Hindu mythology were carefully cropped out and modified sufficiently so that they could be used as a more convenient instrument to appeal to the modern imagination of an ideal housewife. Sunita Peacock and Danette Dimarco opine that this ploy served to produce a subservient body of women through the lure of an empowered, godlike image. This suited the palate of both the liberal modernist as well as the traditional nationalist viewpoints.[19] The veneration of Goddess *Lakshmi*, her auspicious nature, and her divine portfolio of fertility, luck, beauty, wealth, prosperity, and well-being seemed to appeal to the devotees from both rural and urban Bengal.

Bhudev notes that due to our hankering for the external glitter and ostentation of the English way of life, Westernisation and modernity have brought an upheaval in the Hindu household. He laments the deterioration of the virtues of housewives, where they, following the whims and arrogance of the *Menshahibs* (Western ladies), no longer cook, sweep, or make the bed. Everything is done by the servants; the wives only read books and play cards. It is essentially the plague of the Hindu housewife refusing to partake in her God-given duties that the vitality of Hindu society is detreated.[20]

Despite the apparent reactionary nature of the prose, Partha Chatterjee is prudent in pointing out that Bhudev's opinions on the matter were not an anachronistic anomaly. Rather, his writings represented a sense of crisis that was felt by the newly emergent middle class of 19th-century Bengal, who felt that the very institutions of home, family, and matrimony were threatened by the

tidal wave of liberal reforms.[21] This section, while not entirely opposed to the colonial reforms, unlike the conservative ideologues of the previous generation, felt that the tempo was too quick for their comfort. The Bengali conservatives felt that an unprecedented external condition had been thrust upon them, that they were being forced to adjust to a situation upon which they had no control, and upon the completion of which the very minimum power and prestige that they enjoyed as the undisputed figure of authority in their households would soon erode. A definitive degree of what seemed to be apprehension towards an alien culture now seemed unavoidable. This idea sowed in them a fear: a fear of destruction of their inner identity. The integrity of the household, formerly considered the sanctum, utterly immune to public discourse, now became a forum where the purity of Hindu nationalist identity was fervently bargained with. The idea of a lazy, incompetent, Westernised woman as an ungodly parasite was manufactured, therefore, to lampoon the exaggerated paranoia of a supposed social breakdown that this section feared. The *Memshahib* thus became the convenient straw man in this discourse. Yet it was clear that a mere restatement of the old norms of family life would not be sufficient to halt this tidal wave. The conventions were breaking down because of an inexorable force of circumstance.[22]

Since new norms were needed to revitalise the traditional Bengali Hindu society, conservative scholars like Bhudev supplied the characteristic nationalist answer. In 'Lajjasilata', he opined that those seers who laid down our religious codes discovered the inner spirituality that resides within even the most animal pursuits that humans must perform, and thus removed the animal qualities from those actions. This has not happened in Europe. Such animalistic and base transgressions are the hallmarks of European debauchery and ought not to tarnish the purity of Aryan society.[23]

Thus, the material-spiritual dichotomy that the conservative ideologues attached to the social sphere corresponds to Animal-God-like qualities that are, in turn, correlated to masculine-feminine virtues. It must be noted that this was an era where the Bengali middle class was opposing the dominant European notion of native men being effeminate.[24] Since their outburst at demonstrating their masculinity would prove counter-productive against the British, they instead found an outlet in the women of the household. So as not to appear overtly coarse or to antagonise their own spouses on the home front, the narrative of the Bengali man reclaiming his pride vis-à-vis his masculinity metamorphosed into new dictums and dogmas of social education for the women of the household.[25]

The Material–Spiritual Dichotomy

Bhudev opined in 'Lajjasilata' that in societies 'where men and women meet together, talk together at all times in public and private, eat and drink together, and travel together, the manners of women in such societies were likely to be more coarse', devoid of such spiritual qualities deemed essentially for the vitality of a pious society and become relatively prominent in animal traits.[26] Thus, based on this line of argument, the conservative thinkers started prescribing new norms for organizing family life and determining the right conduct for women in the conditions of the modern world. Adjustments were to be made in the external world of material activity. The family, once a private institution, would now become entangled in the wider social relations. The organization and way of life at home would also be modified. The crucial requirement was to retain the inner spirituality of indigenous social life.[27] The household thus became the principal site for expressing the spiritual quality of the national culture, and as such, the women of the house had to take up the main responsibility of protecting and nurturing this quality. While the men were to strive tirelessly to change the world outside as the nationalist struggle progressed, the women must not lose their essentially spiritual and feminine virtues. They must not, in other words, become Westernised.

The simple criterion for judging the desirability of any reform hinged on its ability to maintain the essential distinction between the social roles of men and women in terms of material and spiritual values. Despite the faulty nature of this barometer, which proved inconsistent and porous since its very inception, this would later lead to a marked difference in the degree and manner of Westernisation of women as opposed to the men during the nascent years of 20th-century Bengal.[28] These differences were seen in the acceptance of the adaptation of formal education (pioneered by the missionary institutions), the Western forms of apparel (such as gowns, petticoats, and blouses), and the freedom to socialise in the public sphere.

If one were to follow the trail of thought that governed the behaviour of women during the Swadeshi phase of Indian nationalism (1905 – 1911), one would note that this conservative notion of spiritual purity of women continued to hold a tacit degree of popular acceptance. Early 20th-century Bengali intellectuals like Dinabandhu Mitra, Upendranath Das, Amritalal Bose, Jyotiranda Tagore, and even Michael Madhusudan Dutt can be regarded as exemplars of such conservative contemplations.[29]

These axioms, as prescribed by Bhudev and adopted by the conservative nationalists of the 19th century, filtered the image of the nationalist woman through the sieve of 'new patriarchy.'[30] Motherhood as an ideal was carefully extracted from the private domain of the household and projected as a national ideal. These axioms served a part in a grander neo-conservative paradigm. The new woman that this movement sought to forge in this emerging system was utilized as an emblem of sexual purity. They were used in a supposedly anti-imperial plot against the British. Thus, the reform movement found in itself a self-sustaining lease against any adventurism that it did not find to its liking. Women like Kundamal Debi propelled the new patriarchy's philosophy by advising educated Bengali women: 'If you have acquired real knowledge, then give no place in your heart to memsahib-like behaviour. That is not becoming of a Bengali housewife. See how an educated woman can do housework thoughtfully and systematically in a way unknown to an ignorant, uneducated woman. And see how if God had not appointed us to this place in the home, how unhappy a place the world would be.'[31]

Neluka Silva opines that the philosophies of 19th-century Bengali writers have inscribed the images of home and country upon women in India. In the iconography of a nation, the practice of nationalism is reserved for the male, while the cultural codes and

the ethnic and national differences are ascribed to the female. This tradition attempted to co-opt women into the front lines of the nationalist struggle by interpellating them as national actors and foisting the nationalist label on them as mothers, daughters, and sisters. Instead of empowering them, it merely reaffirms the boundaries of culturally acceptable feminine conduct, of the self-sacrificing, chaste housewife, and exerts pressure upon them to articulate their reference set by the nationalist discourse.[32] In Silva's work[33], we see how Bhudev's initial notions of *Adorsho Hindu Samaj* (ideal Hindu society) correspond to the axiom of *Ahorsho Naari* (ideal woman) and finally, that axiom then precipitates into the grander ideal of the *Bhadramahila* that the 19th-century Bengali nationalist sought to forge. It also served as an 'ideological justification for the selective appropriation of Western modernity'[34] in Indian society, especially with regard to the question of women's reforms.

Shifting Modes of Control

A good portion of the Bengali literature in the 19th century concerned itself with the threat of Westernisation of the Brahmin household. This theme was taken up in virtually all forms of written, oral, visual, and anecdotal communication. The central principle by which nationalism resolved the women's question was to reform, or rather strategically modify certain social norms, yet essentially preserve the traits that the conservative clique found most appealing in the traditional family system. Dress, food, manners, education, the role of each member in organizing the family structure, and their passionate and unquestionable adherence to it, required the new middle-class family to forge specific solutions from a variety of sources. This highlights the cause behind the aforementioned inconsistency of this dictum. Classical traditions had to be reconstructed in such a manner that they retained their 'traditional-ness' while still being able to cohesively fit into the urban landscape. Nevertheless, this dilemma turned out to be a minor one as the drive for cultural solidarity marched forth with each progressive stage in the nationalist movement.[35]

The more concrete problems arose out of the rapidly changing situation where these reconstructed traditional households soon found themselves contending against the utilitarian logic of bureaucratic and industrial practices. The middle-class Bengalis who were previously indignant about their inability to rise up the ranks of the bureaucracy now started to witness a slow but steady rise in that hierarchy.[36] Native entrepreneurs such as Jalan, Birla, and Hukumchand were gaining a nascent foothold in establishing indigenous business houses. The Congress was no longer a hollow echo chamber of British loyalists; their demands started finding some ground on the administrative front, though lukewarm in magnitude. The latter half of the 19th century witnessed a remarkable rise in the establishment of modern schools by the Indians themselves, which spread western education amongst the middle-class Bengali Hindu women.[37] The content of this development was neither predetermined nor unchanging, but its form had to be consistent with the system of dichotomies that shaped and contained the nationalist project and consequently, the social position of women in this said project. Questions started to arise on whether or not the *Bhadramahilas* ought to take to the streets to bear the burden of the nationalist struggle, standing shoulder-to-shoulder with their male counterparts.

Finally, it becomes imperative to trace the other side of this ideal of the 'new woman'. The 'new patriarchy' that helped shape this nationalist ideation of virtuous femininity juxtaposed the Bengali *bhadramahila* to not only the Westernised *memsahibs* but also the crass, vulgar 'common women' of the lower classes.[38] Since the main fulcrum behind the differentiation of reforms with regards to men and women was exclusion, it was only natural that the less privileged sections of the society would find themselves excluded from this august category. The 'new woman' was, in essence, the middle-class, upper-caste, urban woman. The 'respectable' (Bhadra) decorum became a bulwark that prevented women of rural backgrounds and women belonging to the lower castes from claiming the nationalist spaces. The standard of emancipation prescribed through this form of empowerment was inherently elitist and divisive. When faced with the herculean challenge of emancipating women across a vast and heterogenous society, the nationalist discourse deftly sidestepped this responsibility by characterising the social milieu of the maidservants, washerwomen, barbers, midwives, pedlars, procuresses and prostitutes as degenerates who were loud, quarrelsome, devoid of sagacity or moral sense, sexually promiscuous, and otherwise subjected to brutal physical oppression by males.[39]

Conclusion

In effect, the ideal of the new woman was a product of the new patriarchy, which incorporated clever use of social persuasion with traditional modes of oppression. It was a hegemonic exercise of dominance which, Partha Chatterjee opines, incorporated old forms of coercive authority with the subtle force of persuasion by using the notion of revival and 'national' rebirth as its ideological justification.[40] By associating the task of female emancipation with the historical goal of sovereign nationhood it was able to create a new and legitimate means of binding women to the role of subordination.[41] Just as the colonial urban man found himself more and more outside the sphere of homely tradition, he saddled the duties of religious ritualism and the maintenance of the cohesiveness of the traditional family upon the 'new woman', thereby absolving himself of both blame and burden.[42] The parabolic character of the *Lajjashilata* became more and more dominant in the popular imagination through the more modern tools of theatre, song, and literature. Thus, Kasturi and Mazumdar rightly point out that the women's reforms of the 19th century, while 'neither unanimous nor homogenous in their inspiration or objectives', were in essence reforms from above.[43]

In conclusion, it can be deduced that the initiatives for women's reform in 19th-century Bengal were usurped by the elite, upper caste Bengali intellectuals who were the archetype of patriarchal modes of social control. Even in contemporary times, as women of India make strides to reclaim their basic human rights, sections of the conservative social echelons feel threatened by women's display of agency. These conservative elements prop up the sanctity of the traditional family structure, marriage, and gender

roles to restrain and control the flow and trajectory of these reforms.[44] Since the patriarchal family system lies at the fulcrum of the traditional masculine power, any attempts at reforming it are seen as an attempt to subvert the masculine authority.[45] Instead of being silent allies and allowing women to raise their voices for their own emancipation, men tend to make it all about themselves and the sanctity of the family. This highlights the nature of 'reforms from above' to be yet another subtle form of social dominance, a paternal attempt at infantilising and mollifying the real subjects of these reforms, the women, to being relegated to the position of docile recipients.

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