

Breaking Boundaries: Socio-Cultural Transitions in the Lives and Clothing of Elite Bengali Women during the 19th Century

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Abstract: This research paper examines the transformative journey of elite Bengali (*bhadramahila*) women from the confined spaces of the innermost part of the house (*andarmahal*) to a more liberated existence during the 19th century. Prior to the mid-19th century, these women were relegated to the innermost parts of their homes, clad in fine, high yarn count translucent saris that symbolized their seclusion. Deprived of education and life beyond the *andarmahal*, their primary roles were limited to caring for their families. However, with the advent of social and educational reforms in the 19th century, a paradigm shift occurred. *Bhadramahila* ventured beyond the confines of their homes for education and other pursuits, heralding a profound change in both their lifestyles and clothing. This research delves into the intricate process of this transformation, exploring the factors that facilitated their emergence into society and the consequent alterations in their clothing. By scrutinizing the shifts in lifestyle the paper aims to elucidate how societal changes during the 19th century influenced the clothing of elite Bengali women, providing a nuanced understanding of their evolving roles and identities.

Keywords: Elite Bengali women, *bhadramahila*, *andarmahal*, 19th century, socio-cultural transitions, educational reforms, lifestyle changes, clothing evolution, women's emancipation

In colonial Bengal, the evolution of Hindu *bhadramahila*'s life during the period from 1864 to 1947 is a multifaceted phenomenon deeply intertwined with the social, cultural landscape of the time. During the mid-nineteenth century, India was under the British colonial rule, which influenced its socio cultural matrix and evidently changed the status of elite women to create a new identity of the *bhadramahila*.

The female members of the class in question predominantly devoted a substantial portion of their time to domestic affairs within the confines of their residences. It is crucial to acknowledge that they were predominantly relegated to the innermost domain of the household, commonly referred to as the *andarmahal*, where they cultivated their distinct sphere of influence. In adherence to prevailing social norms, this particular area was strictly reserved for the exclusive use of women, barring the entry of any male individuals, including husbands. Only during the nocturnal hours were husbands permitted to access the *andarmahal*. (Debi, 2017) A comprehensive exploration into the interiors of traditional Bengali households, particularly those classified as *bonedi bari* (elite houses), effectively elucidates the pronounced demarcation between the female realm and the external world. This practice offers profound insights into various facets of their lives, notably their clothing characterized by the presence of transparent saris, the conspicuous absence of footwear, and a general paucity of formal education. It is worth highlighting that within Bengali households, a prevailing custom dictates the exclusion of footwear from the interior spaces. This aspect of the tradition further underscores the notion that women were seldom expected to venture beyond the household premises. Consequently, the necessity for footwear was practically obviated within this context. The aforesaid practices and conventions collectively underscore the profound social and gender dynamics that prevailed within these traditional Bengali households. The meticulous separation of women from the

external world, the specific clothing they donned, and the absence of formal education were all emblematic of a paradigm that underscored their domestic role and their limited or no engagement with the public sphere. This, in turn, sheds light on the multifaceted intricacies of the historical and socio cultural fabric of Bengali society. According to Jasodhara Bagchi 'Women's exclusive confinement to reproductive function and the attendant emphasis on nurturance have rendered the domain of motherhood specially vulnerable to patriarchal control.' (Bagchi, 1990 p. WS 65) In the annals of historical documentation pertaining to elite Bengali women's clothing during this period, a salient account emanates from the pen of Fanny Parks, wife of Charles Crawford Parks, an officer affiliated with the East India Company who commenced his Indian sojourn in the year 1822. Mrs. Parks, during her brief sojourn in Calcutta, was afforded the unique privilege of delving into the inner sanctums of elite Bengali households. Her meticulous observations, chronicled in her literary work entitled 'Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of Picturesque,' serve as an illuminating discourse on the nuances inherent in Bengali women's attire. Of particular note in Fanny Parks' narrative is her commentary on the transparency inherent in the saris donned by these women. This discerning observation underscores a distinctive characteristic intrinsic to these garments. Mrs. Parks perceptively remarked that despite the elegant drapery of these saris, they did not bestow complete coverage, thereby permitting a nuanced revelation of the body's contours and the inherent natural hues of the skin. Such insight, articulated by Fanny Parks, affords contemporary scholars and enthusiasts a valuable lens through which to comprehend the quality and nature of the saris adorned by the *bhadramahila* of Bengal during the epoch she traversed. (Parks, 1850). An intriguing aspect arises concerning the absence of blouses and petticoats in the attire of these women. Personal accounts, including that of autobiography of Jnanadanandini Devi, Rabindranath

Tagore's sister-in-law, provide vivid portrayals of how women in Bengal adorned themselves solely with a sari, occasionally adding a shawl during colder seasons. (Debi, 2017 p. 21) The question of how these delicate and transparent garments were worn without structural assistance prompts examination. Since these women were initially secluded in the *andarmahal*, the decency never became a problem for them. Another possible solution was probably the extensive use of jewellery for coverage. According to some of the women authors of this period like Rassundari Devi (1876), women lived a miserable life devoid of education and freedom. They were married off at an early age of five to eight and many of them became widow even before they understood the meaning of marriage and conjugal lives. They were either burned alive (*sati*) or had to spend the rest of their lives as a widow devoid of any happiness.

During the 19th and 20th centuries, profound societal transformations took place, significantly impacting the lives of individuals, particularly women. The discernment derived from research underscores a series of pivotal developments aimed at advancing the status and well-being of women. One notable milestone was the abolition of the practice of *Sati*, achieved through the *Sati Abolition Act of 1829*, orchestrated by Governor General of India, William Bentinck. The driving force behind this monumental change was Raja Rammohan Roy, whose advocacy played a crucial role in eradicating the archaic custom of widows self-immolating on their husband's funeral pyres. Subsequently, the enactment of the *Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856*, designated as Act XV, marked another landmark moment in the legal landscape. Conceived by Lord Dalhousie and ratified under the governance of Lord Canning, this legislation effectively legalized the remarriage of widows across all jurisdictions in India under East India Company rule. This pivotal measure sought to ameliorate the plight of widows, providing them with the opportunity for a renewed marital life. The *Age of Consent Act, 1891*, recognized as Act X of 1891, stands as a significant piece of legislation within the historical legal framework of British India. Enacted on 19 March 1891, this law sought to address and amend the legal measure to establish a protective legal framework for vulnerable individuals, specifically young girls. The Act exemplifies the evolving societal perspectives on consent and the recognition of the imperative to safeguard the dignity and rights of minors in the realm of sexual relations. Furthermore, the *Child Marriage Restraint Act, passed on 29th September 1929*, reflected a progressive step towards curbing the prevalent practice of early marriages. This legislative intervention aimed to protect the rights and well-being of young girls, shielding them from the adverse consequences of premature matrimony. These legislative endeavours, championed by influential figures and implemented during a period of societal flux, collectively constitute a concerted effort towards the welfare of women. The culmination of these social reforms heralded a new era, progressively dismantling age-old norms and contributing to the empowerment and emancipation of women in the fabric of society.

Indeed, the transformative journey of Bengali women during the 19th century was significantly influenced by the

proactive involvement of men who played pivotal roles in reshaping societal norms. Recognizing the need for a comprehensive shift in perspectives, the focus on altering the mindset of young men emerged as a crucial imperative. A seminal event in this trajectory was the establishment of the Hindu College in the 19th century, marking a watershed moment in the history of Bengal. Driven by the eagerness shown by the elite Bengali men for English education, Philanthropist David Hare helped in establishing the Hindu college with support from Raja Radhakanta Deb and educationist Baidyanath Mukhopadhyaya. This educational institution emerged as a bastion of reform, spearheading the transformational agenda in West Bengal. It emerged as a locus of convergence for intellectual, pedagogical, and financial considerations, embodying the shared commitment of Indians and British officers alike towards the cultivation of knowledge and the pursuit of educational advancement. By shaping the thought processes of young men, these initiatives played a pivotal role in fostering a more egalitarian society and laying the groundwork for the empowerment of Bengali women in the unfolding chapters of history.

The collaborative efforts of individuals like them, both Indian and European, underscored a shared commitment to fostering positive change in society. Their advocacy for women's education, legal reforms, and social equality marked a paradigm shift, setting the stage for a more inclusive and progressive India. In concert, their contributions serve as a testament to the transcendent nature of the reformist spirit that transcended geographical and cultural boundaries during this transformative period.

In the formative years of education in India, particularly in the 19th century, the prevailing norm for the education of women was primarily centered on home-based instruction. This unique educational approach is elucidated in autobiographical writings of women like Jnanadanandini Devi (Devi, 2017) and Rassundari Devi (Devi, 1876). In 1863 a young Brahmo activist Umesh Chandra Dutta started *Bamabodhini Patrika*. Beside this he along with other Brahmo activists started an initiative called *Antahpur Shiksha* for women to study from the comfort of their home, which could be availed by even the married women. The issues of *Bamabodhini Patrika* provide a detailed exposition of the curriculum adopted in the *Antahpur Shiksha* system. Notably, this publication also included study material and test questions designed for assessment purposes, indicative of a structured and systematic approach to home-based education. Additionally, the publication offered the results of the exams and reports on prizes given to the achievers which inspired more students. The evolution of women's education in the latter half of the 19th century marked a significant departure from the exclusive reliance on home-based instruction. Calcutta, a hub of cultural and educational activity, witnessed the establishment of notable institutions during this period. Bethune School, a pioneer in women's education, was founded in 1849, followed by the establishment of Diocesan School in 1876. Mahakali Pathshala, founded in 1893 by Mataji Gangabai, further contributed to the burgeoning educational landscape for women in the region. The early 20th century saw the establishment of additional institutions dedicated to the

education of women. News published in different editions of Bamabodhini Patrika and Antahpur magazine published in 1901 and after, inform about the increasing number of schools and students in the rural areas.

But education without the suitable profession was of not much importance. "The utilitarian purpose of education did not apply to women as no professions were open to them." (Nayeem, 2015 p. 35) Over time, a discernible shift occurred in societal attitudes towards women's participation in the workforce, as their educational pursuits began to gain recognition. Historically, despite acquiring education, avenues for professional engagement were limited for women. However, this scenario underwent a gradual transformation, marked by an evolving acceptance of women in various professions. The progression in mindset towards recognizing the competence and qualifications of women has played a pivotal role in fostering inclusivity within the professional sphere. As societal norms evolved, barriers that once restricted women from pursuing careers began to dissipate, paving the way for increased opportunities and representation. This positive transformation signifies a departure from antiquated norms, emphasizing the importance of embracing diversity and gender equality within professional settings. As women gained acceptance and recognition in various professions, a more inclusive and equitable landscape emerged, contributing to the empowerment of individuals irrespective of gender. But as noted earlier by Fanny Parks, these elite women used to wear very fine saris which were not enough for maintaining decency.

But as they started venturing out they definitely needed a decent dress. Earlier the fine translucent saris were made by the weavers of Dhaka and Chandrakona but slowly as the women were going through the transformation in their lives, so was their clothing – the saris. Around the mid 19th century the popularity of these fine saris started declining and instead the more decent, not so translucent saris of *Dhonekhali*, *Phulia*, *Shantipur* and *Tangail* started becoming popular.

'After the middle of the 19th century, female dress reform became an issue, a "movement" (Karlekar, 2011 page 66). Satyendranath Tagore, the elder brother of Nobel Laureate Rabindranath Tagore, qualified for the Indian Civil Service in 1863. Expressing a desire for his wife, Jnanadanandini, to join him in England, Satyendranath faced initial resistance from his father. Upon his return to India in 1864, after securing his posting, Satyendranath persisted in his efforts to persuade his father, ultimately succeeding. Jnanadanandini accompanied her husband to Bombay in 1865 for his posting. However, her existing attire was deemed unsuitable for public appearances, prompting the need to fashion a more appropriate dress. According to her memoirs, Satyendranath crafted a dress reminiscent of Turkish attire for her journey, albeit challenging to wear. During their stay in Bombay with a Parsi family, Jnanadanandini adopted the Parsi dressing style.

Swarnakumari Devi, Debendranath Tagore's daughter, documented his interest in experimenting with the attire of the women in their family. According to her, he would have

different dresses tailored for the young girls in the household. However, a suitable dress was still needed for women to comfortably step out of the andarmahal. In Bombay, Satyendranath and his wife initially resided with the family of Manekji Karshedji. It was there that Jnanadanandini first encountered a distinct style of wearing the sari. (Devi, 2017 Puratani) According to Malavika Karlekar, Jnanadanandini instead of wearing European gowns preferred to create an identity of her own through her dress. (Karlekar, 2011) Through an examination of Satyendranath's writings and letters, it becomes evident that despite being a civil servant, he was a staunch advocate of Indian identity. His literary works encompassed titles such as '*Striswadhinata*' (Women's Independence) and Raja Rammohan Roy, demonstrating his intellectual engagement with themes of gender equality and the prominent historical figure. Moreover, he composed patriotic songs like 'Mile Sabe Bharat Santan, Ektan Gao Gaan' (All Sons of India Unite, Sing in Unison). This explains why while Satyendranath's friend, Manmohan Ghosh, took an interest in providing English education and attire for his wife, Satyendranath himself seemingly did not share the same inclination towards English dress for his own spouse. Both Satyendranath and Jnanadanandini sought a clothing style that would preserve the essence of Indian culture while being modest and suitable for public outings. Their shared aspiration was to develop an indigenous dress that would embody Indian values and aesthetics. During her residence with the Parsi family of Manekji Karshedji in Bombay, Jnanadanandini drew inspiration from the clothing of Parsi women and devised a distinct method of wearing the sari, incorporating a petticoat and blouse. Unlike the Parsis, she draped the palla (pallu) of the sari over her left shoulder. To fully comprehend this style, it is essential to comprehend the clothing practices of the Parsis. Parsis. According to the *Kisseh-i-Sanjan*, prior to permitting the Parsi refugees to disembark, the Raja stipulated five conditions for their acceptance. These conditions were as follows: (1) providing him with information about their religion, (2) relinquishing the Persian language and adopting an Indian language, (3) adopting clothing similar to Hindu women for their females, (4) discarding weapons and swords, and (5) conducting auspicious ceremonies such as marriages in the evening. Bahman informs us that the Parsis willingly accepted all of these conditions (Hodivala, 1920, Page – 69). Of significant relevance to this research is the third condition imposed on the Parsis, which sheds light on the topic at hand. Following their settlement along the western coast of India, particularly in Gujarat (then Bombay Presidency), the Parsis adhered to the prescribed conditions by adopting the local dress for their women. As such, their attire was inherently Indian, akin to the traditional sari draping style of Gujarati women. In 1865, Jnanadanandini returned to Calcutta wearing this new attire. The style became renowned as the 'Bombai Dostur' (since it originated from Bombay) and was alternatively referred to as the Brahmika Sari (associated with the Brahma Samaj) or Thakurbarir sari (due to its connection with the Tagore family). Although the more orthodox Hindu women took little loner to accept the new sartorial style, women of the Brahma families readily accepted it. Editor Hemanta Kumari Chaudhury in her editorial note of June 1901 edition of *Antahpur* magazine has written about this new clothing describing the

combination of sari, chemise, petticoat and blouse as a new decent clothing appropriate for the Bengali women and also agrees that it has an Indian essence in it.

According to Swarnakumari, their father Debendranath also appreciated the reformed clothing introduced by Jnanadanandini, marking the end of his quest for respectable attire for Bengali women. Jnanadanandini introduced the concept of pyjama, chemise, petticoat, blouse, and the Bombay style of sari draping to the Tagore household. Thus, she played a significant role in bringing about this change and giving Bengali women's clothing a new direction. According to many authors like Jayita Das, there was protest from the orthodox Hindu families against this. (Das, 2015)

Jnanadanandini, in addition to being influenced by the Parsi style of draping the sari, displayed a strong fondness for Parsi embroidered saris. These particular saris gained significant popularity during the latter part of the 19th century. Known for their Chinese embroidery executed in white or variegated silk threads, these became highly sought-after. The choice of other saris popular with elite women during this period included the *Baluchari*, *Dhakai Jamdani*, *Shantipuri*, *Tangail*, *Tassar*. This diversity of sari selections is well-documented in a 1923 advertisement published in the Bengali magazine 'Prabashi,' underscoring their popularity during that period. Another advertisement from the 1901 issue of the *Antahpur* magazine shows not only the popular saris of the period, but also the lengths of saris used during the period.

The evolution of clothing styles in the late 19th century among elite Hindu and Brahma women can be attributed to the discernible shift in societal norms and lifestyle preferences during that period. As these women sought to reconcile tradition with the changing dynamics of their daily lives, a new clothing style emerged, characterized by the incorporation of decent cotton saris accompanied by the chemise, blouse, and petticoat. The choice of the modest cotton sari, as opposed to sheer fabrics, reflected a conscious decision to blend cultural heritage with a pragmatic approach to dressing. This amalgamation of traditional attire with contemporary undergarments such as the chemise, blouse, and petticoat underscored a nuanced understanding of both aesthetic and functional requirements. The chemise, blouse, and petticoat served as essential components that not only provided a modern silhouette but also addressed the practicalities of the evolving lifestyle of the bhadramahila. These additions to the traditional sari not only afforded a heightened sense of modesty but also accommodated the demands of a society undergoing transformative changes. In essence, this new clothing style emerged as a sophisticated response to the intricate interplay between tradition and modernity, catering to the evolving sensibilities and lifestyle choices of the late 19th-century bhadramahila.

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