



**“ RE-WRITING WOMEN’S
HISTORY :
19TH CENTURY BENGAL ”**

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WOMEN'S QUESTION IN 19TH CENTURY INDIA



1. A Site of Contesting Discourses on Tradition and Modernity ?
2. An index of civilization and progress?
3. A tussle between the Colonizers and Colonized?



NINETEENTH CENTURY REFORM

- ▶ Nineteenth-century Bengal was understood within the framework of ‘renaissance’ and ‘social reform’.
- ▶ Was it ‘a radical break with the past’? Or ‘a mode of classicism’, employed towards ‘reinvigorating indigenous traditions’?
- ▶ How did the middle class refashioning of the gender question fit into the meta-narrative of cultural nationalism?

SUBALTERN CRITIQUE:

- ▶ a ‘kind of false consciousness’, embedded in the ‘so-called’ Renaissance (Sumit Sarkar)
- ▶ handiwork of prophets, patriarchs, and other inspirational leaders alone’. (Dipesh Chakrabarty)

THE SUBALTERN COLLECTIVE SAID:

- ▶ The reform was a ‘purported awakening’ of the elite and an attempt at a hegemony over the masses. The Renaissance discourses were an ‘elitist form of mobilizing discourse.’ (Guha, Chatterjee, Chakrabarty)
- ▶ The reform failed to challenge the established power structure of brahminic patriarchy.
- ▶ The reform lacked the spirit of radical and rational modernization.

EMERGENCE OF OF WOMEN'S HISTORY

- ▶ The development of women's history during the 1980s has brought forth a new range of analyses on social reform.
- ▶ The 'unusual concentration' on the 'women's questions' in middle-class male circles in nineteenth century Bengal 'needs to be problematized'.
- ▶ The reformist process, however, gave birth to an extremely limited and restricted female emancipation, remodelled and refurbished by a *new* patriarchy (Sumit Sarkar)

FEMINIST CRITIQUE OF THE COLONIAL SOCIAL REFORM

- ▶ Both 'tradition' and 'modernity' were carriers of patriarchal ideologies (Sangari and Vaid) .
- ▶ Women were 'neither subject nor object', but the 'site' of the colonial agenda on social reform. (Mani)

AND YET,

- ▶ ‘projects of gender reform that emerged under colonialism and were occasionally enabled by colonial laws does not indicate that the idea of reform was a gift from the colonial masters’ (Tanika Sarkar)

LANDMARK REFORMS



▶ ABOLITION OF
SATI (1829)

▶ WIDOW
REMARriage ACT
(1856)

Did the reform contain, at all, a spirit of radical and rational modernization? Was the reformers' search for Shastric sanctions an act of surrender to the prevalent obsession with a re-articulation of 'tradition'?

SACRAMENTAL RIGIDIFICATION OF HINDU MARRIAGE

- ▶ How did Colonial ethnology and Bengali intellectual endeavours homogenize a pluralistic marriage system?
- ▶ Marriage was rendered a pivotal role in kin-formation, caste ranking, and ritual status
- ▶ Reinvention of Marriage as a Samaskara or Sacrament

MARRIAGE AS CONTRACT ?

CIVIL MARRIAGE ACT (ACT III) OF 1872

- ▶ Brahma Marriage Movement, the first Legal attempt to bring marriage under civil law and promote a contractual rather than sacramental marriage.
- ▶ Introduction of a radical notion of ‘consent’ (*sammati*) vis-à-vis ‘gift’ (*sampradan*) of the bride.
- ▶ Enabling women’s subjectivity posing a challenge to infant non-consensual Marriage

RESTITUTION OF CONJUGAL RIGHTS

- ▶ Rukhmabai Case of Maharashtra (1884-1886)
- ▶ Campaign of Behramji Malabari against Infant Marriage and Enforced Widowhood
- ▶ Seeking state legislation to increase the marriageable age of women.

RAPE WITHIN MARRIAGE (1890-91)

- ▶ The Phulmani Case leading to The Age of Consent Act
- ▶ But to defenders of tradition legalizing ‘consent’ within marriage would compromise the fundamental principles of the sacrament.

NATIONALIST 'RESOLUTION' OF THE 'WOMEN'S QUESTION'.

- ▶ The 'new patriarchy', advocated by nationalists, conferred upon women the honour of a new social responsibility, associating female emancipation with the historic goal of sovereign nationhood. (Chatterjee)
- ▶ Separation between the material (public) and the spiritual (private) was radicalized by the nationalist ideology. (Chatterjee)

NO LASTING RESOLUTION POSSIBLE

- ▶ Far from bringing about a ‘resolution’ of the woman’s question Indian nationalists actually opened up the ‘myth’ of Indian womanhood as a terrain of renewed contestation (Bagchi)
- ▶ Rather, issues relating to women, family, and conjugality had acquired a particular immediacy and urgency within the nationalist discourse (Sarkar)

SPIRITUAL AND MYSTIC DEFENCE OF HINDU MARRIAGE AND WIDOWHOOD UNDER NATIONALISM

- ▶ Women emerged as a new cultural project under nationalism. The post 1890s witnessed a gradual imposition of the hegemonic brahminic hold over conjugal norms.
- ▶ A *pativrata wife* and *brahmacharini* widow were hailed as 'living deities' of the Hindu nation.
- ▶ Nationalism closed the possibility of a radical opening up of the woman's question.

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