

The Rise of the Educated Women of Bengal and their contribution in the facilitating of an Indian version of Feminist Movement

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Prior to the 19th century a girl child was looked down upon as a burden to be married off and if lucky in a wealthy family. During 19th century Bengal some form of education for women began. This was only to make these young brides more eligible in the marriage market. However very soon the realization dawned that knowledge a little further than primary education would equip these women as efficient mothers and wives and they would be of great service to the household.

As women started gaining meaningful education nothing could hold them back. The natural consequence of all this was the rise of feminist thought in Bengal which later had much deeper and meaningful consequences in Bengali Society. This gave them a voice, liberated them from their home bound spaces and brought them financial independence. Girls during 20th century could think of the purpose of attainment of meaningful education. Even parents of modest means thought of their daughters education as a future investment.

With time the educational institutions became co-educational. Woman began questioning the distinctions between themselves and the men folk with regard to the sphere of work. Popular and scholarly journals expressed views of various women related to issues like marriage, so-called feminist virtues, refusing the knowledge of the scriptures.

In the 19th century only a handful of women mostly wealthy Brahmos and Christians sought employment in the public sphere and this number increased in the 20th century. Economic independence provided them with greater status and decision-making authority in their families. One the consequences of development was the politicization of these young women and their joining the freedom struggle. We even get instances of women revolutionaries. In this regard a few such organizations can be named like Diplai Sangha, Chatri Bhavan, The Mahila Rashtriya Shanga etc. However these activities should not be taken as something being associated with the entire women folk of Bengal, as marriage was still a coveted social status.

from the middle of the 20th Century women began to formulate ideas on marriage, husband, love and romance. As a consequence of all this writings of the women writers became more bold and the knowledge of a women's body and ideas regarding a woman's sexual desire began to emerge.

Radharani Devi a renowned female author writes a tale on the differences between a child bride and an adult woman. The former unaware of her sexuality than the latter. Authors like Shilabala Ghosh and Shanta Devi has brought to the fore has brought to the fore this inequality and raised

objections against dubious social standards. The sanctity of Hindu scriptures were questioned. Gradually discussions on women equality become more open and became a part of public forums and magazines. The awakening of such thoughts brought to the fore the fundamental concepts of feminism. The foundation for this lays in the pillars of education amongst women not to mention the contribution of great men like Raja Rammohan Roy and Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar.

Authors like Shatadalbasini Biswas, Shatasindhu Ghosh raised important feminist issues. These thoughts were much portrayed, discussed in women's journals served to make women more aware of their rights for those lucky ones who could venture out and fight for their rights and also for those unlucky ones who could not. This awareness made women to participate more openly and freely in the freedom struggle. They formed their own national, provincial and district associations with varied purposes. However the makers and the participants of these movements were from the urban and educated families and they did not attempt mass mobilization.

Sarala Roy and Abala Bose played pioneering role in establishing roles in Gokhale Memorial School and Brahmo Girls School. Women also formed pressure groups in the passing of legislations like the Child Marriage Prohibition Act, Hindu Code Bill. The Indian Women Charter of Rights formulated by All India Women's Conference demanded equal inheritance rights, right to divorce etc.

Thus during 20th century feminist ideas and perceptions have started taking shape with a section of women becoming more mobile and conscious of their rights. However a lot had to be attained in terms of woman's rights and gaining of equal footing and rights as of men. Bringing of social and political changes so that these rights would become more fruitful and sustainable. Woman needed to acquire greater control over their lives and their bodies.

The western educated men of Bengal preferred non institutional home based learning for their women folk. However with and greater awareness many women began demanding higher and institutional based education for the right to selfdetermination and economic independence.

Authors like Sarala Devi, Krishnabhabini Das, Joshodhara Bagchi raised questions about the role of women played in Colonial Bengal. A role defined through the lens of patriarchy.

Patriarchy defined women as creatures of instinct, emotions and institutions both having positive and negative connotations. This created an sense of women being both strong and weak. Women's feminine side associated with motherhood negated the need for any education. However the assumption that women that women might still have a rational side favored her education. Women reformers rooted for rationality as the general attribute of humanity.

Krishnabhabini Das in her essay Shikshita Nari counters the argument of a male centric logic that if women had education from the beginning and took part in intellectual pursuit then their brains would have developed equally as their male counterparts. Women writers have accused men of caging their women for their own selfish interest. Men have suppressed the emotional and rational faculties of women.

Authors like Swarnakumari Devi and Krishnabhabini Das supported same education for men and women. As knowledge of even management and accounting can help women in managing their households better. Hironmoyee Devi and Krishnabhabini Das also speaks of career development for women.

However these educated women who spoke of freedom, economic emancipation for women often drawing their inspiration from the West had been criticized for their dependence on the colonial.

However despite all criticisms and logic given against women liberation these handful of educated women successfully kick started a thought process which even though initially concentrated with the urban upper strata it gradually did spread among the various other sections of society.

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