



## Bengal Women's Social Status and Indentity: In the Light of Bengali Literature in Pre-Colonial India

Saroj Mahata

State Aided College Teacher, Department of History, Gourav Guin Memorial College, C.K.Road, Paschim Medinipur, West Bengal, India.

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PH.D Research Scholar, Dept of History, RKDF University, Ranchi, Jharkhand, India.

[sar83mahata@gmail.com](mailto:sar83mahata@gmail.com)

**Abstract:** *Human civilization is built on the joint efforts of men and women. The primitive stage of this civilization was matriarchal social system. But at a particular level of the production system, patriarchal society collapses and with it the status of women is a noun in nation reader. As the term is multi-dimensional and due to this it is not easy to highlight the overall social position of women in any- particular phase of a country. When we think of mughal period women, two different images of women from two different communities, mainly Hindus and Muslims, come to mind. Again, the position of women in each community is different due to Caste. Race, Religion, Class and family and regional differences. In this case socio- economic and Cultural differences act as important dimensions. There is no holistic picture of Indian women in the Mughal Period. Mughal Women's images are a collection of different fragmentary images. Sociologists Judge the progress and backwardness of the society by looking at the value and status of women. It should be noted as an object of male pleasure. Society did not give any importance to his independent and independent opinion etc. The article discusses how the social status and position of Bengali women during the days of mughal rule in the 18<sup>th</sup> century has been revealed through literature.*

**Keywords:** *Society of Bengal, Bengali women, Patriarchy, Kaulinya Tradition, Sati Pratha, Women's Education.*

### Introduction:

Mughal Period Bengal is roughly "A peaceful and prosperous Suba". Due to political stability flow and economic life of mughal Bengal and Bengalis were neutral and aimless. Contemporary mughal Court literature and Bengali literature, especially *Mangalkavya* literature, highlight the socio- economic life flow of Bengal. Apart from this, there is also information on this subject in contemporary European traveler's accounts and European trade records. According to social scientists, the social structure of Bengal at the time of discussion was pyramid- like. At the apex of this structure was the Suba administration of the subadar ( Nawabs) and at the lowest level was the common man. And the layer between these two was in two-(i). Aristocracy, ii) Merchant moneylenders and lower class civil servants. It should be noted that this kind of division of Bengalis plural society formed with many castes and tribes is an oversimplification. In fact apart from Hindus and Muslims, there were various types of Indian, non- Bengalis and Indians, along with various tribal peoples lived in Bengal during this period.

In the Hindu society of mughal Bengal, caste and caste system was prevalent. The Hindu society at that time was divided into 36 castes of Brahmins and Sudras was the majority. *Mangal Kavyas*, including **Bharat Chandra's Annadamangal**, deal with the caste based structure and livelihood of Hindu society. Brahmins mainly performed puja and performed supernatural Shraddha's. Kayastha mainly worked as a clerk. Buddhists were generally involved in medicine preparation and medicine.

The system of caste discrimination was particularly strict in the Hindu society of the period under discussion. For upper caste Shudras, the fear of losing caste hung over their heads like a **Damocles Sword**. But the Brahmins, kayasthas and Vaidyas, though terrified of caste, were not indiscriminate about accepting vrittis. On the other hand, the existence of equal rights of men and women was proven in the in the vedic period, but the condition of women become deplorable in the changing times. (Majumdar, 1943) The condition of women become more deplorable in the middle ages beyond the Antiquity. Contemporary Bengali literature, especially **Bharatchandra's poetry** and **Ramprasad's** songs, Persian works, especially "*Riaz-us- Salatin's*. And accounts of high- ranking employees of English companies such as **Verelestand Cartier**, provide a very bleak picture of Bengali Women's society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Not that the image of women's society in the 18<sup>th</sup> century is similar to the image of women's society in the 15<sup>th</sup> - 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries was similar. It seems to them that the female characters depicted in the Mangal Kavyas come alive, all the rules of the society have become Victims of deprivation and unequal humiliation.

**Objectives:** The present article has been undertaken with following objectives:

- i) This article shows how the Structure of Bengali society was during the days of Non- Muslim to Muslim rule.
- ii) This article discusses how Bengali women risked their lives to obey their parent's orders.
- iii) This article shows how the medieval Bengali woman becomes a Versatile instrument of humiliation, deprivation and deception in a Patriarchal Society.

**Methodology:** The article is descriptive in nature and is based on the secondary sources of information.

### **Discussion:**

The Mughal society was a completely patriarchal society like its predecessors and successors. In this society, woman is only a creature without independence and rights. His Virginity, youth ,and dignity and old age subordinated to father and son in several orders. His family is a biggest family. A family full of happiness, comfort, love, affection and Sympathy is very desirable. But in most cases the authority of the mother-in-law, the anger of satin, the wealth of the nuns, and the Jealousy of JA are his constant companions. The proletariat in family life is only the Sphere of child production and the product of men's desire for pleasure. The mother of the son has some respect in the family. Of the contrary, only disrespect and neglect.(Karim, ,1956) Multiple Marriages of men are accepted in the society. Even going to his Barangays is neither prohibited nor punishable. However, there is no rule Remarriage for Hindu women, even if they are widowed as girls. She wil become a celibate or an object of adultery by a lustful man. Again, the Hindu society does not hesitate to label that woman with the bright Stigma of unchastity. But Hindu and Muslim Scriptural laws and social customs keep women captive in the steadfast fortress of devotion and hand over the pot of devotion to her. But the scriptures and society did not think woman is a flesh and blood creature and that her body has the desires and desires of the mind. But the society is stingy in giving women the status of her conch Vermillion.

According to conventional scriptures, women are "*papiyasi*", women are *Kashya Dwaram*. In *Syed Alaol's "Padmavati kavya"*, the Guru says to the disciple, "*Styria Jati heenmati*". According to contemporary Scriptures , society has made "*pati*" the ultimate Guru of women. In *Syed Alaol's "Sikandar Nama"*, Rani

Roussan to said, “ *Pati Bine Satir Nahik Gurujan*”. Mukundaram’s flowers call Rupasi Rama to- “ Swami Baniter Pati

Swami Baniter Gati

Swami Banter Se Bidhata”.

The wife’s religious pursuits are in the service of the husband. Poet Haridev wrote in Shitalamangal’s

“Nari haiya purusher seva Nahi kare

Sat Janmoy hoy tar Bebasheyer Ghare”. And this is why the tyrannical wife Alaol sits in the steadfast fortress of adultery constant changing like Padmavati

“Swami Piriti babel Nije Pranto Dibo”. However, the society as a whole is not backward at all when it comes to denying this woman her dignity. This society did not recognize the individuality of women. He was not considered a flesh and blood creature. On the other hand, happiness and ease have blown away the pleasures and desires of his body and mind. This society is stingy in giving women the dignity of its branch of Vermillion, but it does not feel the least bit to wear the “ *SATIN*” of unchastity on her forehead for no reason. In this case ,the heroine of *Chandimangal’s* Banik Khanda , Fullora, and her bad luck can be recalled.

The Bengali Women’s family in the discussion is a big family. A family full of relatives, members, happiness, comfort, love, affection, and receiving sympathy and affection is the absolute desire and natural of a Bengali women. But mother-in- law’s authority, Satin’s Jealousy , Nun’s jealousy and Ja’s jealousy are the constant companions of Bengali brides. When widowed by the fault of my fate, a woman has to endure various types of Yama pains in the family or father’s house of the dead husband. The situation of the newly widowed Behula in the mind of the *Ketak Das* kshemananda may be recalled in this regard. When the three brothers wanted to take lovely sister Behula to their home, she suppressed a lot of grief and pain-

“ Maa BaperBarite amar Nahi saje

Sakal Bhaoujer Sange mor Jhagra Badhe”.

In fact, it was not at all comforting for the woman to run away to her father’s house because she was wounded by various pains in her husband’s house. If you read *Bhartachandra’s Annadamangal*, it is known that if the husband is unable to bear the pain of the house and the woman wants to go to her father’s house, her partner warns her by saying-

“ Janani ashe jabe pyrite base

Vase dibe sada Tara

Bape na jigase may na santaye

Jadi dekhe lakhichara”

In the period of Renaissance in Bengal in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in the darkness of the middle ages, Bengali Women’s tried to stand on its individuality with self- consciousness. They have declared Jihad against the traditional patriarchal system of society. So princess Chandrani is not at all ready to exhaust her young, frivolous life in the weakness of satirtha sanakar towards the eunuch Brahmins. Again, when Sadhaba blames her daughter- in-Law for his untimely death by abusing her daughter- in-law and blames it on her impurity and unchastity, **Behula’s** response is a strong protest against society.

“ Marilo Putra Tomar Mor Kulakhane

Ar Chay Putra Tomar Marilo Keno”.

The poet’s imagination is not able to dismiss this matter. Because in a social commentary paper of *Panchanan Mandal* it is seen that the housewife is tortured in the brothel and comes to her father’s house to face extreme pain and finally she goes to Yama’s house. And his unsympathetic father God atones for this sin according to Village law.

Reading the Bengali poetry books in the middle ages, it seems that the relationship between husband and wife in the Hindu Family was much like that of master and servant. After marriage, all the responsibilities of the family come upon him, but he had no right to take decisions on any important question of the family. In this, men have treated women as small- minded, misguided, and the gates of hell under some punishment. A literary echo of this can be heard in Syed Alaol’s poem Padmavati. When Mahishi Nagabati wanted to stop the king from taking manasticism, the Guru gave the discipline the ultimate knowledge-

*“ Priya, Pati Hin Moti Ki Buddhi Tomar*

*Praner Bipakhaye Karma Ki Fal Sangsar*

*Striya Buddhi Shune Jar Gata Karo Pran*

*Uchchatarata upadesh Kay Hay Aganna”.*

(Priya, motionless moti, what is your intelligence, Karma against life is the result of life, He who listens to the wife’s wisdom, lives his life, The highest advice is ignorance).

Imaginative poet Bhavananda, the translator of Srimad Bhagavatam, paints a poignant of Bengali Women’s position in the family. The poet wrote that if he goes to eat something with a full Stomach due to extreme hunger, his mother-in- law, Nanadi may abuse him. Gurujan Slanders her as Kalankini when she sees Dance Singing. And

“ Uttam Purush Jadi Dekhi Chakhu Bhor

Suni Matra Nije Pati Teje Kop Kari”. (If I see a good man, I will fill my eyes, on listen, I am angry with my husband).

“*Kulo Badhu*” knew no bounds to such suffering. But by the grace of God, if a son could be born, the pain of the woman would be alleviated to some extent. But not all women are the only ones who suffer. There were exceptional instances of this. Abdul Hakim’s poem “*Lalmoti Sarful Mulak*” talks about the intimate relationship between mother-in- law and daughter-in- law. The daughter-in- law of a rare son is not equal to the daughter-in-law.

### **Marriage and Caste Customs:**

Girls were usually married before the age of eight. Because if the older daughter was in the father’s house, the father’s family and mother would be Niraygami .i.e. incestuous. The Kaulinya system was entirely responsible for the early marriage of Bengali Hindus girls. Due to the Kaulinya tradition, the fathers of the noble clan were forced to give daughters to the cremation- traveling nobles in case of need. And because of this sect, Marrying girls with daughters and grand daughters for greed of money and for body and lust is a turned into a business. There is evidence that at this time, the matrimonial of kulinkayet Bamun used to keep the address of the father’s house of a large number of spouses in the book or in the register and would go to one in-law’s house in turn and collect money as principal for getting the unlucky wife to bed.

## **Polygamy:**

Apart from Child marriage, another curse of Kaulinya system is Polygamy. Polygamy created problems with the question of ownership over the husband. **Chandimangal** poet **Mukundaram** Srimanta's second wife assuming told Sushila the Singhal Princess.

“ Pratham Bayashe Dukhya Dhare Na Jay Buk

Kon Doshe Dile more Saja”.(If the chest does not go to grief in the first age, if it is a crime, it will be Sentenced to death).

In Hari Dev's Raimangal, mercy lamentation with a family of brides plagued by in laws is “ Narino sahite ami satiner jwala” and “ sat satiner ghar barai janjal”. On the other, the mother told menaka and Himalayas said that “ Nahi dibo kanya mor darn satine”. Despite this, the kulin Bala of that time accepted satin Jwala as a sign of fate, like the Ganges of Mansamangal.

## **Unequal Marriage:**

Another problem related to the Marriage of Hindu women in medieval Bengal was unequal Marriage. Age difference is one of the highlights of such Marriages. The early marriage of kulin's daughter has been discussed earlier. However, in case of child marriage, there was no special problem if the age of the daughter was Six, Eight or Ten younger than the age of the groom. But the marriage of the Eight year old daughter “ Gouri” with the crematorium traveler is definitely an unequal marriage. The consequence of this unequal marriage of Sitaram, the grandson of the famous kulin Vishnu Tagore of kulpanchi kamikaze Paulina Mela, is reported to be a thirteen day old daughter of Sitaram marriage. At that time, it was not only child girls who were unequally married. Child grooms were also unequally married. In this case, the age of the daughter was quite a bit older than the groom. The daughter- obsessed patriarch lured the child groom's father with money to marry off his older daughter to the child groom. In that case, the daughter is angry- “youth went out looking for a groom”. Again this must be said “ I am her elder sister”.

It should be noted that there are more examples of different types of unequal Marriages in the Bengali literature of the middle ages. The story of Sudarshana and eternal youth marriage with blind, deaf, kunja, and dumb aristocratic husbands and the physical pain and mental anguish of the women who gave birth have been expressed in both Hindu and Muslim writings of this era.(Khan, & Majed., 1969)

## **Dowry System:**

During the Mughal Period in Bengal, there was a system of Usury in Hindu and Muslim society. It should be noted that voluntary Dowry for daughters and son- in – law was not part of the tradition. However, the demand for Kulin pots reinforces the caste in the society. Bhartachandra's poetry States that bridegroom was a part of upper class marriage. And “*konyapan*” (Dowry) was common among the lower classes of the society. However, due to inadequacy of brides, marriage of daughters was practiced in some parts of the upper caste society.

## **Satidah system:**

Bengali literature of the middle ages has many references to Hindu women being consorts. Examples of this are the death of climbing the Cheetah, wife of Jamadagni Muni Renuka in Krittivasi Ramayana, the death of **Chhaya** in Mukundaram's Chandimangal, the death of Karnasena's Six daughters-in- law in Ruparam's Dharmamangal poem and the death of Bhavananda Majumdar's two wives Chandramukhi and Padmamukhi in Bhartachandra's Annadamangal, can be remembered. However, it is not considered that there was a special strictness of a Co- Death and Satidah during the period under discussion. It should be noted that Chand Sadagar's seven daughters-in-law did not have to sacrifice their lives in the Pyre. Despite

this, in a undeniably small number of cases, many Hindu women were forced to Climb the pyres of their husbands. In some cases, newly widowed women were willing partners.

### **Women and Courtesans Scholarship:**

In medieval Bengali society there was a presence of housewife women. The rise of Courtesanism was influenced by social norms of the time, kaulinya customs, Creation of widows at various ages due to the death of kulin husbands and future thoughts of widows. However, regardless of the reason, prostitution took place in various yards and Permanent markets, commercial centers, administrative centers and even religious places. In medieval Bengali literature, the visitation of Merchant's and aristocrats to the court was an indicator of status. It may be noted that in Dharmamangal, king Karma sen decided to spend the rest of his life with *Bebasya's* daughter Bar Banita.

### **Women's Education:**

Generally there was no provision of education for women. They were deprived of education because of the scriptures that the wife became a slave or commodity in the house of law created by men. Because it makes torture and exploration much easier. Higher education of Hindu girls was hindered mainly due to two reasons, one was the girls higher education or her early widowed. Two, daughter's marriage at a young age, so it can be said that rest of the women's Society was drowned in the darkness of ignorance, except for two or four people. The weak woman's confession in Chandimangal's Banik Khanda is probably for the sake of the greater women of that time.

Girls from elite Hindu and Muslim families received some Education. Munshis and Maulbis used to come to the houses to education the girls of muslim families. Instances of hiring private teachers are also found in wealthy Hindi homes. It is probably due to the influence of Sri Chaitanya's communist religious movement that awareness of women's education first entered the Vaishnava society. Many of the Vaishnavites and MA Gosals were educated, Nityananda pari Panhabi Devi used to discuss the poem Anhrit Kadambavali in Sanskrit in praise of her mother-in-law Panhavi Devi. Apart from these, many women of the Vaishnava society received the light of education. They were the true pioneers of women's education. They are discussed in the book "*Alpana of Abhinaya Samaj*" in puthi Patra written by Chitra Devi.

Women's education was particularly restricted in medieval Bengali society. Up to the age of seven or eight, girls studied together with boys for primary education and were thus taught *Panchali* and *Vratakatha* texts and in some cases ,Bengali Ramayana- Mahabharata texts. However, well-educated women were not rare in Bengal at the time. In this case, we can recall the poet Anandamoyi ,a well- Varsed poet of Hati Vidyalankar and Alankar Shastra. The society of this era did not give proper opportunities to women in terms of literacy and education, but they taught their policies orally in a very favorable way. From childhood, mothers and grandmother's taught women the principles of service to elders, especially husbands. A mother suffering from her husband's veil said to her daughter

*" karih Swamir Tumi Manasthir Karma*

*Shastras kahe Swamir seva Jubatir Dharma".*

Even in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, a few women, though few in number, were not lagging behind in education, their identity is found in the literature of this era. In this context, it may be mentioned that **Lalmati**, the heroine of Abdul Hakim's **LalmatiSaifulMulkKavya**. Apart from this, Mallika's Hazar Sawal poem written by Abdul Hakim Gada's tells about Mallika Nastri's admirable erudition of a woman. Chandrani of Lore Chandrani kavya, Vidya of Vidyasundar , Khullana of Chandimangal , Lilavati Brahmani etc. Of Daulat kazi seem to have been educated at a young age. Chandravati, daughter of East Bengal poet Banshi Das, composed an entrie Ramayana. All the Begums of the sultans of Bengal were tasteful and educated. After the death of their husbands, many women also Signed Yogata in in administrative matters. But it is true that some girls

were able to get education due to personal interest and initiative. But girls education was generally not looked upon favorably and they lagged behind greatly in this field although many of them excelled in home-based arts, education and ethics.

### **Conclusion:**

The rule of Iron Strict rules kept the women in the society. Women had no Identity in the society. Even women had no right to Gita or husbands property. As a result the Hindu widow had to depend entirely on Patra or family or relatives for her sustenance. And if it was possible to some how prove the women untruthful, it would be easy to leave her. Bhabananda talks about accepting the helpless condition of women in her Hari lineage as the bane of the gods, but not all women of that era accepted it. They did not hold back in all cases to answer husbands sister and mother- in- law's complaints. Behula mother-in- law Sanaka says that if Lakshindar dies because of her, then because of whose fault will his Six sons die. Behula's defiant voice is the strong protest of a fearless woman. Besides, there was no shortage of brave women like Vishnu Kumari, the mother of Maharaja Kritichandand Tejaswini like Jai Durga ,the female Zamindar, who protested the Company's worklike **Rani Bhabani**.

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