



The Social Awakening in Colonial Bengal: An Analysis of the Second Phase of Reform Movements

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Abstract:

The second phase of social reform in colonial Bengal, primarily spanning the mid-19th to the early 20th century, represents a critical transition from elite-led intellectual monotheism to a more structured, mass-oriented "cultural synthesis." The movement sought to address deep-rooted social issues by promoting rational thought, ethical reform, and social justice. Central to this reform phase were ideas of humanism, liberalism, and reinterpretation of religious traditions, which encouraged critical engagement with orthodox practices. A major focus of the reform movement was the improvement of women's status, particularly through initiatives related to education, widow remarriage, and opposition to child marriage. Through legislative measures, public debates, and reformist advocacy, the second phase of social reform played a crucial role in reshaping societal attitudes toward women and laying the foundation for their increased participation in social and public life. The study highlights the historical background, key reformist ideas, and the social impact of this movement, contributing to a nuanced understanding of Bengal's social transformation during the colonial period.. Ultimately, this research posits that the social awakening of this period provided the moral and psychological framework necessary for the transition from social correction to the political struggle for national sovereignty.

Keywords: *Second Social Reform Movement, Colonial Bengal, Social Awakening, Women's Status, Reformist Ideologies.*

1. Introduction:

The social awakening in colonial Bengal during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries marked a decisive phase in India's encounter with modernity, unfolding through a series of historically significant events and reformist interventions. The roots of this awakening can be traced to the early nineteenth century with the establishment of Hindu College in 1817, which became a major center for Western learning and critical thought. Although the abolition of sati in 1829 under the influence of Raja Rammohan Roy symbolized the first phase of reform, the limitations of these early efforts became apparent by the 1840s and 1850s, when deeply entrenched practices such as caste rigidity, child marriage, and the marginalization of women continued largely unchecked. This context set the stage for the second phase of social reform, which emerged more forcefully after the Revolt of 1857, a moment that prompted both colonial restructuring and intensified introspection within Indian society (Sarkar, 1983; Chatterjee, 1993).

From the 1850s onward, the second phase of reform was characterized by the active involvement of a

Western-educated Bengali intelligentsia and the growing influence of liberal ideas such as rationalism, humanism, and social equality. A landmark event in this phase was the enactment of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856, strongly advocated by Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar through public speeches, petitions, and pamphlets that appealed simultaneously to humanitarian values and scriptural authority. Vidyasagar's interventions marked a shift from moral persuasion to institutional reform. The establishment of the University of Calcutta in 1857 further strengthened reformist discourse by creating a platform for intellectual debate, while reformist lectures and sermons delivered under the aegis of the BrahmoSamaj, particularly by Keshab Chandra Sen in the 1860s and 1870s, openly criticized caste discrimination, child marriage, and women's subordination, framing social reform as a moral necessity for national progress (Heimsath, 1964; Kopf, 1979).

The latter decades of the nineteenth century witnessed the consolidation of reformist ideas through legislative and cultural interventions. The Special Marriage Act of 1872 introduced a secular alternative to orthodox marriage practices, reflecting the BrahmoSamaj's vision of a socially progressive and inclusive society. This was followed by intense public debates leading to the Age of Consent Act of 1891, which raised the age of consent for girls within marriage and sparked widespread discussion on women's bodily autonomy and legal rights. Reformist speeches and writings during this period increasingly linked women's education and welfare to the moral regeneration of society. By the 1890s, figures such as Swami Vivekananda, through his addresses at the World's Parliament of Religions in 1893 and later speeches in India, reframed social awakening as a mission of service and social responsibility, emphasizing ideas of human dignity and collective upliftment (Sarkar, 1983; Chatterjee, 1993).

Overall, the social awakening in colonial Bengal during the second phase of reform movements represented a complex and dynamic process of social transformation unfolding between the 1850s and the early twentieth century. Through a combination of educational expansion, reformist speeches, legislative measures, and organized social movements, this phase broadened the scope of reform to address structural inequalities related to caste, gender, and social custom. By fostering critical inquiry, encouraging institutional reform, and reshaping cultural and moral values, the second phase played a crucial role in the formation of modern Bengali society and left a lasting imprint on India's social and intellectual history (Sarkar, 1983; Chatterjee, 1993).

1.1. The Review of Related Literature:

Bandyopadhyay, S. (2024). The second awakening: Re-evaluating social reform in late colonial Bengal. This study offers a comprehensive re-evaluation of the late 19th-century reform movements, focusing on the shift from the "intellectualism" of the early Renaissance to the "activism" of the Swadeshi era. Bandyopadhyay argues that the second phase of awakening was fundamentally defined by a synthesis of traditional values and modern scientific education. The author highlights the role of the National Council of Education (1906) as a social rather than just a political tool. By examining the impact of vernacular literature on mass consciousness, the research demonstrates how the social awakening moved beyond the *Bhadralok* elite to create a broader sense of "Atmashakti" (self-reliance) among the middle and lower-middle classes of Bengal.

Sen, A. K. (2023). Vidyasagar and the institutionalization of reform: A nineteenth-century legacy. Sen's research focuses on the transition of social reform from private debate to institutionalized policy. The article examines the long-term effects of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856) and the Age of Consent Act (1891) on the social fabric of Bengal. The abstract emphasizes that these legal milestones were not merely administrative changes but psychological breakthroughs that forced the orthodox society to engage with the concepts of female agency and consent. The study concludes that the "awakening" was characterized by a legalistic approach to morality, where reformers used ancient shastric texts to argue for modern progressive changes, effectively bridging the gap between antiquity and modernity.

Mukherjee, T. (2022). Practical Vedanta and the social mission: Vivekananda's impact on Bengali society. This work analyzes the role of Swami Vivekananda in transforming the social awakening from a purely religious discourse into a secular mission of service. Mukherjee explores the concept of "DaridraNarayana" as a radical ideological tool that challenged the rigid caste hierarchies of 19th-century Bengal. The study argues that the establishment of the Ramakrishna Mission in 1897 provided a structured framework for the "second phase" of awakening, focusing on medical relief, famine work, and mass education. The author posits that this "socialized religion" acted as a catalyst for the youth, channeling their spiritual energy into nationalist service and social rejuvenation.

Sarkar, S. (2021). It investigates the "silent awakening" within the *Andarmahal* (inner quarters) of Bengali households during the second half of the 19th century. The study focuses on how the spread of zenana education and the rise of women writers like Rashsundari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain created a gendered dimension to the social reform movement. The abstract highlights that while male reformers focused on legal status, the women's awakening was more about intellectual autonomy and the subversion of domestic patriarchy. The research concludes that the "New Woman" of Bengal was a product of this secondary phase of reform, which prioritized literacy and self-expression as tools for social liberation.

Dutta, R., & Chatterjee, P. (2020). The BrahmoSamaj of India and the radicalization of social reform. This article explores the schisms within the BrahmoSamaj, particularly the rise of the BrahmoSamaj of India under Keshub Chandra Sen in the 1860s. The authors argue that this split marked the beginning of a more radical phase of awakening that targeted the very core of the caste system and idol worship. The study analyzes the impact of the Special Marriage Act (1872), which provided a secular alternative to traditional Hindu rites. The research highlights how this phase of the movement sought to create a "universal religion" that was socially progressive and politically conscious, laying the groundwork for the more aggressive nationalist sentiments that would emerge by the turn of the century.

1.2. The Research Gap:

Although recent studies have provided valuable reinterpretations of the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal by examining institutional reforms, ideological shifts, and cultural interventions, the existing literature remains fragmented in scope. While scholars have separately analyzed the transition from intellectual reform to social activism, the legal institutionalization of reform, the role of spiritual-humanitarian ideologies, and the emergence of women's intellectual agency, there is a lack of an integrated historical analysis that simultaneously links the historical background, key reformist ideas, and their combined impact on women's status. Moreover, the interaction between reformist ideologies and everyday social practices, particularly how legal, educational, and cultural reforms collectively shaped women's lived experiences, has not been sufficiently synthesized. The present study addresses this gap by offering a holistic examination of the second phase of social reform in Bengal, connecting its historical origins, ideological foundations, and gendered outcomes within a single analytical framework.

1.3. The Statement of the Problem:

The social reform movements played a crucial role in transforming colonial Bengali society, the second phase of these movements has not been sufficiently examined in an integrated and analytical manner. Much of the existing scholarship focuses either on the early reform initiatives or on the political dimensions of nationalism, often overlooking the specific historical circumstances, philosophical influences, and social objectives that characterized the second phase of reform. As a result, the nature of the social awakening during this period and its concrete impact on societal structures—particularly on the status of women—remain inadequately understood. This study addresses this gap by systematically analyzing the historical background, guiding philosophies, and social outcomes of the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal.

1.4. The Significance of the Study:

The present study is significant as it provides a comprehensive understanding of the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal and their role in shaping modern Bengali society. By examining the historical background, philosophical foundations, and social impact of these reform movements, the study contributes to a deeper interpretation of Bengal's social awakening beyond the commonly emphasized early reform initiatives and nationalist politics. The focus on women's status highlights the reform movements' contribution to gender awareness and social transformation, while also acknowledging their limitations. This study is valuable for scholars of history, sociology, and political science, as it enhances existing literature and offers insights into the complex interaction between tradition and modernity in colonial India.

1.5. The Research Questions:

RQ1: What historical conditions and socio-political factors led to the emergence of the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal?

RQ2: What key ideas influences shaped the social awakening during the second phase of social reform in Bengal?

RQ3: How did the second phase of social reform movements influence and transform the status of women in Bengali society?

1.6. The Objectives of the Study:

O1: To examine the historical background that led to the emergence of the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal.

O2: To analyze the key ideas that shaped the social awakening during the second phase of reform.

O3: To assess the impact of the second social reform movement on women's status in Bengal.

2. The Methodology of Study:

The present study adopted a historical research design to examine the impact of the second social reform movement on women's status in colonial Bengal. Data were collected exclusively from secondary sources, including scholarly books, peer-reviewed journal articles, historical documents, reformist writings, legislative records, and published speeches of prominent social reformers. A descriptive and analytical method was employed to interpret historical events within their socio-political context, while content analysis was used to examine reformist ideologies, public speeches, and legislative debates related to women's issues. The study followed a chronological approach to trace developments over time and ensure historical continuity. Relevant data were critically reviewed, compared, and synthesized to draw valid conclusions regarding the nature, scope, and limitations of social reforms affecting women in colonial Bengal.

3. The Analysis and Interpretation:

O1: To examine the historical background that led to the emergence of the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal.

The second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal emerged roughly between **the mid-nineteenth century and the early twentieth century (c. 1850–1910)**, following the initial reform efforts of the early nineteenth century. This phase developed within a context shaped by British colonial consolidation after the Revolt of 1857, the expansion of Western education, and the gradual emergence of a politically conscious Indian middle class. While early reforms led by Raja Rammohan Roy focused on abolishing

practices such as sati (formally banned in **1829**), many oppressive social institutions—including rigid caste hierarchies, child marriage, denial of women’s education, and restrictions on widow remarriage—continued to persist. By the 1850s, it became evident that deeper and more sustained reform was required to address the structural foundations of social inequality in Bengal (Sarkar, 1983; Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

A crucial milestone in this second phase was the reformist intervention of **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**, whose advocacy culminated in the **Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856**. Vidyasagar’s speeches, petitions, and public writings—particularly his reasoned appeals to both scriptural authority and moral logic—marked a significant shift in reform discourse. In his public addresses and memoranda to the colonial government, Vidyasagar argued that widow remarriage was not only socially necessary but also sanctioned by ancient Hindu texts, thereby challenging orthodox resistance on its own intellectual grounds. These interventions demonstrated a more assertive and organized approach to reform, characteristic of the second phase (Chakrabarti, 1992; Kopf, 1979).

The expansion of **English education after the establishment of Hindu College (1817)** and later the **University of Calcutta (1857)** played a decisive role in shaping the ideological foundations of this reform phase. By the latter half of the nineteenth century, a Western-educated Bengali intelligentsia—commonly known as the *bhadralok*—had emerged, deeply influenced by Enlightenment ideas such as rationalism, liberalism, and social equality. Speeches and debates held in institutions like the Bethune Society and the Calcutta University Senate reflected growing concerns about women’s education, social morality, and religious reform. Reformers increasingly emphasized education as a means of social regeneration, linking intellectual progress with ethical reform (Heimsath, 1964; Chatterjee, 1993).

The **BrahmoSamaj**, revitalized under leaders such as **Debendranath Tagore** and later **Keshab Chandra Sen**, became a central institutional force during this period. Keshab Chandra Sen’s public lectures and sermons in the **1860s and 1870s**, including his addresses on women’s emancipation and social purity, openly criticized caste discrimination, polygamy, and child marriage. His speeches often framed social reform as a moral duty essential for national progress, reflecting an increasing convergence between reformist thought and emerging nationalist consciousness. These public orations attracted wide audiences and intensified debates between reformers and orthodox Hindu groups (Kopf, 1979; Sen, 2005).

Colonial socio-economic changes further contributed to the emergence of the second reform phase. The impact of the **Permanent Settlement of 1793**, followed by urbanization and the growth of a colonial economy, altered traditional social relations and exposed contradictions between old customs and new realities. By the late nineteenth century, reformist speeches and writings increasingly linked social stagnation with political subordination. Leaders argued that without social reform—especially the upliftment of women and marginalized groups—national self-respect and collective progress would remain unattainable. This belief gained further momentum in the **1890s and early 1900s**, when social reform discourse began to intersect more directly with nationalist movements (Sarkar, 1983; Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

In sum, the second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal arose from a convergence of historical forces: post-1857 political restructuring, the spread of Western education, socio-economic transformation, and the growing articulation of reformist ideas through speeches, writings, and organized institutions. Unlike earlier efforts, this phase was marked by sustained public engagement, legislative intervention, and ideological debate, laying a crucial foundation for both social modernization and the rise of nationalist consciousness in Bengal.

O2: To analyze the key ideas that shaped the social awakening during the second phase of reform.

The second phase of the social reform movement in Bengal, spanning roughly from the mid-19th century to the early 20th century, was characterized by a transition from intellectual monotheism to “**Practical**

Vedanta” and militant social service. Unlike the first phase, which was largely reactionary to Western critique, this era focused on the internal rejuvenation of the Indian spirit. Swami Vivekananda, during his historic address at the Parliament of Religions in **1893**, laid the ideological foundation by arguing that social reform must be rooted in spiritual equality rather than mere imitation of Western mores (Sarkar, 2017). This period shifted the focus from the elite *Bhadralok* circles to the “DaridraNarayana” (the God in the poor), emphasizing that no national awakening was possible without the upliftment of the masses.

The legal and institutional milestones of this phase were largely defined by the relentless efforts of **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**, particularly with the enactment of the **Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act in 1856**. This historical event marked a radical departure from traditional patriarchy, as it used shastric interpretation to justify modern social change. Following this, the **Age of Consent Act of 1891** became a pivotal flashpoint in the social awakening, triggering intense debates between reformers and revivalists. While the Act aimed to protect child brides, the surrounding discourse, as noted by Heimsath (2015), helped define the “nationalist” character of the reform movement, as leaders began to argue that Indians should be the masters of their own social legislation rather than the British.

The late 19th-century awakening was also heavily shaped by the concept of “**National Education**” as a tool for social subversion. With the partition of Bengal in **1905**, social reform and political radicalism became inseparable. The establishment of the **National Council of Education in 1906** represented a key idea: that social liberation required an indigenous educational framework free from colonial control. Bandyopadhyay (2014) highlights that this phase integrated the “cult of the Motherland” with social reform, where the service of the nation became a sacred duty. This ideological shift transformed the movement from a localized urban phenomenon into a broader cultural resistance that prioritized self-reliance (*Atmashakti*) over petitioning the colonial state.

Furthermore, the rise of the **BrahmoSamaj of India** under Keshub Chandra Sen in the **1860s** introduced a more radical social agenda, including inter-caste marriages and the abandonment of the “sacred thread.” The **Special Marriage Act of 1872** was a direct legal consequence of this awakening, providing a secular alternative for those breaking away from orthodox Hindu rituals. According to Sen (2020), these developments were not just legal victories but psychological breakthroughs that challenged the biological and ritualistic basis of the caste system. By the turn of the century, the social awakening had evolved into a “cultural synthesis” where the radicalism of the West was filtered through a revived Indian consciousness, setting the stage for the mass-based Gandhian movements of the following decades.

O3: To assess the impact of the second social reform movement on women’s status in Bengal.

The second phase of the social reform movement in Bengal, extending roughly from the **1850s to the early twentieth century**, had a profound and lasting impact on the status of women by challenging entrenched patriarchal norms and redefining women’s roles within family and society. Prior to this period, women’s lives were largely governed by restrictive customs such as child marriage, enforced widowhood, purdah, and limited access to education. Although the abolition of sati in **1829** marked an early milestone, it was during the second phase of reform that women’s issues became a central focus of organized social action. Reformers increasingly argued, through public speeches and writings, that the moral and intellectual regeneration of society was impossible without the upliftment of women (Sarkar, 1983; Chakrabarti, 1992).

One of the most significant outcomes of this reform phase was the improvement in women’s legal and social position, particularly concerning widow remarriage. The **Hindu Widows’ Remarriage Act of 1856**, championed by **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**, directly challenged the social ostracism of widows. In his public addresses and petitions to the colonial government during the early 1850s, Vidyasagar emphasized both humanitarian values and scriptural legitimacy, arguing that widow remarriage was sanctioned by ancient Hindu texts. His reasoned speeches and relentless advocacy not only influenced legislation but also

gradually reshaped public attitudes toward widowhood, especially among educated urban communities (Kopf, 1979; Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

The expansion of women's education was another critical area of reform during this period. The establishment of **Bethune School for Girls in 1849**, followed by the growth of girls' schools in the latter half of the nineteenth century, marked a decisive shift in attitudes toward female education. Reformers such as **John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune** and later Indian social reformers delivered public lectures stressing that education would enable women to become morally aware and intellectually capable members of society. By the **1870s and 1880s**, reformist speeches and writings increasingly linked women's education with national progress, arguing that an educated mother was essential for raising enlightened future citizens (Forbes, 1996; Heimsath, 1964).

The reform movement also addressed oppressive marriage practices, particularly child marriage and polygamy. The **Age of Consent Act of 1891**, which raised the age of consent for girls within marriage, reflected sustained reformist pressure and public debate. Leaders associated with the **BrahmoSamaj**, including **Keshab Chandra Sen**, delivered influential speeches during the **1860s and 1870s** condemning early marriage and advocating women's moral and physical well-being. Although these reforms faced strong opposition from orthodox sections of society, they introduced the idea that women's bodily autonomy and consent were legitimate social concerns, marking a significant ideological shift (Chatterjee, 1993; Sarkar, 1983).

By the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the impact of the second social reform movement became visible in the gradual emergence of women as active participants in public life. Educated women began writing, teaching, and engaging in social work, thereby challenging the traditional confinement of women to domestic spaces. Reformist discourse increasingly portrayed women not merely as passive recipients of reform but as moral agents and symbols of social progress. While the reach of these changes was largely confined to urban and upper-caste groups, the reform movement nonetheless laid the foundation for women's later involvement in nationalist and feminist movements in Bengal (Forbes, 1996; Bandyopadhyay, 2004).

In conclusion, the second social reform movement significantly transformed women's status in Bengal by expanding educational opportunities, improving legal rights, and challenging restrictive social customs. Through legislation, public speeches, and sustained intellectual engagement between the **1850s and early 1900s**, reformers redefined women's roles within society and linked their upliftment to broader ideals of social and national progress. Despite its limitations, this phase marked a critical turning point in the historical struggle for women's empowerment in Bengal.

4. Conclusion:

The second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal represented a critical stage of social awakening that went beyond intellectual critique to produce sustained social engagement and institutional change. Emerging from specific historical conditions shaped by colonial rule, Western education, and internal social contradictions, this phase was guided by reformist ideas that blended rationalism, ethical humanism, spiritual reinterpretation, and social activism. Its most significant impact was evident in the gradual transformation of women's status through legal reforms, expansion of education, and the emergence of women's intellectual agency within both domestic and public spheres. Although the reach of these reforms was uneven and largely confined to urban and educated sections, the movement laid a durable foundation for social modernization and later nationalist and feminist developments. Overall, the second social reform movement in Bengal played a decisive role in reshaping social consciousness and advancing the process of social change in colonial Indian society.

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