The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849-1905

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Traditional Roles of Women in Bengali Society

By the middle of the eighteenth century, the British had already acquired almost monopoly control over the foreign trade of Bengal, and were subsequently to extend their control to include the system of land tenure. Changes in the socioeconomic structure that came in the wake of the British presence unsettled the earlier indigenous balance of power.[1] The old aristocratic elite, both Hindu and Muslim, continued to perform a useful function for the new British rulers, but it was not large enough to fulfil all the needs of the rapidly expanding colonial administration. A new social group emerged out of the upheaval to serve the needs of the rulers, dependent on their patronage for its rise to power. Although this "middle class" owed its rise to prominence entirely to opportunities for gaining wealth and status provided by the British, the relationship with the conquerors was one of interdependence. This class was vital to the maintenance of British rule. Its members functioned as intermediaries between the rulers and the bulk of the ruled, serving as clerks and junior administrators in the expanding colonial bureaucracy, and as brokers, financiers and agents in trade with the East India Company. These were advantageous positions that allowed them to build up their own fortunes. Wealth gained was invested in the joint stock market and in the expansion of building in Calcutta, as well as in rural property.[2]

[1] S. N. Mukherjee, "The Social Implications of the Political Thought of Raja Rammohun Roy," in R. S. Sharma and V. Jha, eds., *Indian Society: Historical Probings. In Memory of D. D. Kosambi* (New Delhi, 1974), p. 361.

[2] S. N. Mukherjee, "Class, Caste and Politics in Calcutta, 1815-1838," in his *Calcutta: Myths and History* (Calcutta, 1977).

The new social group was known collectively as the *bhadralok*, meaning literally "respectable men" or "gentlemen." The term is imprecise, and has been the subject of scholarly debate. In its broadest sense it includes all those who are not *chotolok*, or the *hoi polloi*. However, in the context of nineteenth-century Bengal, it is generally used to refer to a group sharing certain characteristics—"a *de facto* social group, which held a common position along some continuum of the economy, enjoyed a style of life in common and was conscious of its existence as a class organized to further its ends."[3] The *bhadralok* represented a highly significant social phenomenon, using the authority conferred by recently acquired wealth to gain status according to traditional caste categories.

The term *bhadralok* encompassed two main groups: the *abhijāt bhadralok* and the *grihastha bhadralok*. The *abhijāt bhadralok* became permanent residents of Calcutta in the second half of the eighteenth century. They rapidly acquired fortunes, and consequently social status and influence, by working as junior partners for the British. In the first half of the nineteenth century, and even later, they exercised undisputed social leadership in Calcutta through gaining control of the *dals*, multicaste social factions formed under the leadership of rich men who had the authority to arbitrate disputes over caste rules and customary law. The *grihastha bhadralok*, also known as the *madhyabitta srenī*, were a middle-income group including small landholders, government employees, members of the professions, teachers, and journalists.[4]

[3] S. N. Mukherjee, "Bhadralok in Bengali Language and Literature: An Essay on the Language of Class and Status," *Bengal Past and Present*, 95:2 (July-December 1976), 225-237. J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth-Century Bengal* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1968), pp. 1-20, "Bengal and the Bhadralok," gives a succinct account of the *bhadralok* at the beginning of the twentieth century. J. McGuire, *The Making of a Colonial Mind: A Quantitative Study of the Bhadralok in Calcutta, 1857-1885* (Canberra, 1982), is a detailed quantitative study of the composition of the *bhadralok* in the second half of the nineteenth century.

[4] S. N. Mukherjee, "Class, Caste," parts III, IV.

Women in the *bhadralok* household

The pace of change in the early nineteenth century makes it extremely difficult to pinpoint a distinctly "typical" *bhadralok* lifestyle. However, it is possible to draw out certain common features of social organization and their effect on the position of women. The nucleus of the new middle class was in Calcutta, the center of British economic and political activity, although through the colonial administrative system in rural towns it had a solid *mofussil* base as well. When men came to Calcutta seeking their fortunes in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, they came alone, leaving their families in the village home. There was a high preponderance of males over females in the urban population of Calcutta.[5] As they became established, they brought their families to Calcutta. The presence of women played an important part in consolidating the social identity of the *bhadralok*.

In Calcutta, control over women's behavior according to orthodox practice was adhered to with greater rigidity than ever before. In the fluid and uncertain social atmosphere of the new colonial metropolis, the position of women was an additional means of determining social status. The practice of purdah was a well-established feature of social organization governing women's behavior in Bengali society. Under strictest purdah, women were confined to the *antahpur*, or to the "invisibility" of closed carriages when moving around outside the home. These rules applied to women of the *bhadralok* in Calcutta, but social commentators noted that women in the *mofussil* were able to move about with greater freedom:

> Even in Bengal, if you are travelling through an unfrequented part of the country, you will sometimes meet women of the more respectable classes walking out of doors. As soon as they observe you, they try to get out of the way; or if this cannot be done, they will veil their

[5] *Ibid.*, pp. 6-7.

> faces by drawing their white cotton scarf over their heads. The women of the most respectable classes are also allowed to leave their apartments to bathe in the Ganges. They rise early for this purpose, and return home before daybreak. I have often heard their shrill voices very early in the morning, about three or four o'clock, when passing on their way to the river.[6]

The rigid observance of purdah in Calcutta is encapsulated in the image of the women of the Tagore family being taken to the Ganges in a closed palanquin and lowered into the water to bathe, in order to ensure complete invisibility in a public place.[7] In Hindu society the position of women had always been a symbol of male honor, to be maintained by careful control over female sexuality.[8] The move from the *mofussil* to Calcutta brought women's behavior under much closer scrutiny because of the need to enforce rules of behavior in order to determine and maintain social status in a loose and dynamic social situation.[9] In the *mofussil*, respectable

[6] J. Kerr, *The Domestic Life, Character, and Customs of the Natives of India* (London, 1865), p. 84.

[7] Reminiscences of Swarnakumari Debi, cited in Pulinbihari Sen, "Satyendranāth Thākur Bānglāi strīswādhīnatār anyatam pathikrith," in Indira Debi Caudhurani, ed., *Purātanī* (Calcutta, 1957), p. 197.

[8] For a full discussion of the implications and rationale of purdah, see H. Papanek, "Purdah: Separate Worlds and Symbolic Shelter," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15 (1973). This has since been included in a useful collection devoted to purdah among both Hindus and Muslims; see H. Papanek and G. Minault, eds., *Separate Worlds: Studies of Purdah in South Asia* (Delhi, 1982). Another excellent study of purdah has recently been published: P. Jeffery, *Frogs in a Well. Indian Women in Purdah* (London, 1979).

[9] C. Pastner, "Accommodations to Purdah: The Female Perspective," *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 36:2 (May 1974), notes that "full purdah" is only likely to happen where there is a change in factors governing the traditional maintenance of social stratification. L. Davidoff, *The Best Circles. Society, Etiquette and the Season* (London, 1973), shows a similar process taking place in Victorian England. The rise of the middle classes after the industrial revolution upset the traditional class hierarchy, and the strict application of rules of etiquette was used as a way of determining and consol-

women were to be seen bathing publicly alongside men, smoking, and even walking in groups through the streets, but these "liberties" were not possible in Calcutta.[10] A practical reason for circumscribing women's freedom of movement in the city was a fear of the real dangers of the unfamiliar urban environment.

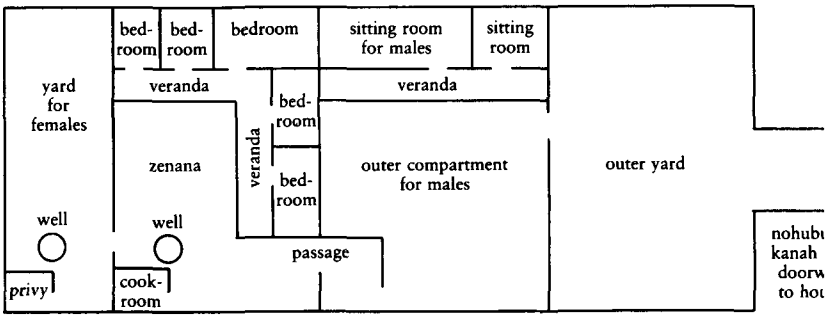
In Calcutta and the *mofussil* alike, the *antahpur* was the center of the female world. It represented a separate community of women, subject to male control through confinement to an enclosed space without access to the world outside it. The *bhadralok* themselves moved freely between the public world of streets and offices and the private world of household affairs. The houses they built gave architectural expression to the division between public and private space. Women carried out the daily domestic routine within the *antahpur*, an inner courtyard surrounded by a kitchen and living apartments. The male recreation and reception area was located beyond this, around an outer courtyard from which there was access to the public street (Fig. 1). The inner courtyard was smaller, darker and less airy than the outer (Figs. 2, 3). According to one missionary visitor to a Calcutta *zenana*, it was "a collection of dirty courtyards, dark corners, break-neck staircases, filthy outhouses and entries, overlaid with rubbish, or occupied by half-clad native servants, stretched about on charpoys, or on the ground indifferently—narrow verandahs, and unfurnished, or semi-furnished, and very small rooms.[11]" A Bengali observer gave a more favorable impression:

> Making allowances for a queer taste, the women's apartments are always prettily ornamented. The furniture is

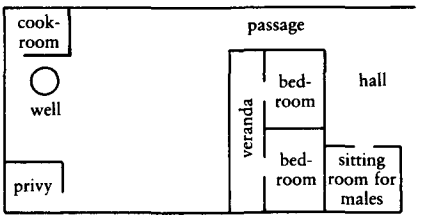
idating rank, as well as a means of maintaining position in the new social hierarchy.

[10] "Strīlokdiger snān pranālī," *BP*, 5, 72 (August 1869); "Bhadra strīlokdiger madhye tāmāk byābahār," *BP*, 6, 81 (May 1870); Kerr, *Domestic Life*, p. 84.

[11] Mrs. Weitbrecht, *The Women of India, and Christian Work in the Zenana* (London, 1875), p. 105.



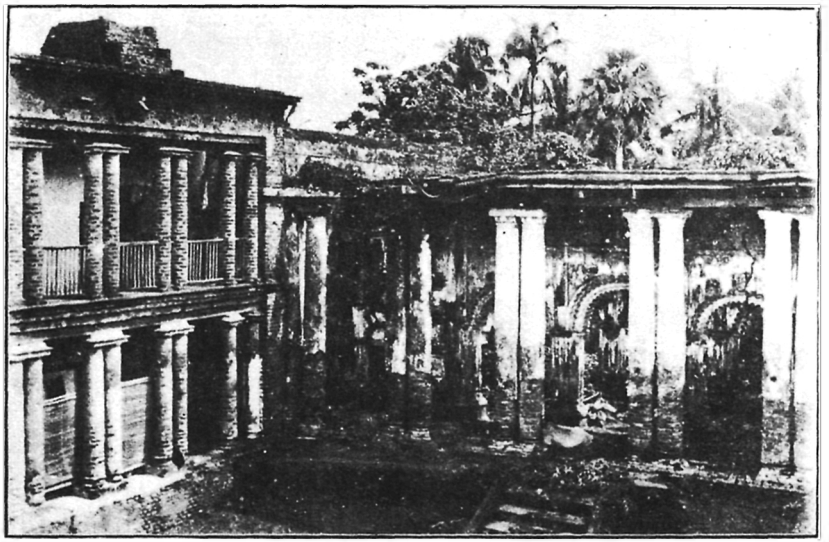
Houses of the Very Rich



Houses of the Middle Class

1. Internal layout of houses of the very rich and of the middle class.

not very rich or expensive; but everything is neat and orderly, from the door-mat and the spitting-vessel to the daubs pasted on the walls, representing the countless millions of gods and goddesses of the Hindu pantheon. One of the most prominent articles of furniture, almost in every room, is the cot or *tuktposh* to sleep upon. The beds are almost all of them well-made and very commodious, for the Bengali loves to roll in bed. There is first the *tuktposh*, which is a very wide bench, or rather a number of wide benches put together; then a mat or carpet on it; then a mattress, commonly of cotton, which makes the bed somewhat too warm; then a cotton *lape*, which is a light and soft mattress, over it; and then the



2. Outer quadrangle (*sadarmahal*) and shrine (*chandīmandap*) of the house of a rural *zamindar*.

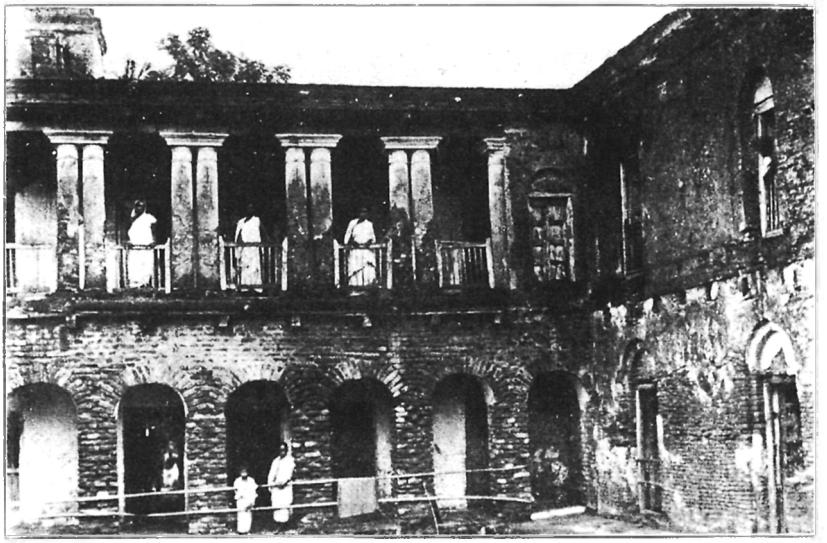
> bed-sheet, and an infinite number of pillows. Carpeting the room is not in fashion in the *zenānā*, but there are small carpets for the ladies to sit upon, which have the advantage of being moveable at pleasure.[12]

In wealthy houses one would pass through court after court to reach the *zenana*. In a less wealthy family, sometimes it would be just "one small room, no windows for ventilation."[13] The only exposure women had to sun and light was the time spent in recreation on the rooftop, if it was not too publicly visible, where they played games and tended potted plants.[14]

[12] S. C. Dutt, "Home-Life in Bengal," in *India: Past and Present* (London, 1880), p. 221.

[13] Weitbrecht, *Women of India*, pp. 98, 100.

[14] *Ibid.*, p. 98; M. M. Urquhart, *Women of Bengal. A Study of the Hindu Pardanasins of Calcutta* (Calcutta, 1927) p. 18; Kerr, *Domestic Life*, p. 76.



3. Inner quadrangle (*antahpur* or *andarmahal*) of the house of a rural *zamindar*. Note the "unreformed" dress of the women.

Women were not allowed to cross the threshold of the *antahpur* into the outer apartments of the public male world.

The typical *bhadralok* house would have been occupied by a joint family. This was the basic unit of social organization in Bengal, and would usually have spanned three generations of the paternal line. Within the joint family authority was vested in the oldest male member, the *kartā*, and the oldest female, the *ginnī*, except in cases where the most senior person had abdicated his or her authority in favor of someone younger. The *kartā* was responsible for the financial support and general welfare of the whole family. The *ginnī* looked after the household stores, made arrangements for meals, and supervised the behavior of family members.[15] The average number of females in a joint family would be hard to determine in the absence of reliable statistics, but the Reverend Krishna Mohan

[15] S. C. Bose, *The Hindoos as They Are* (Calcutta, 1881), pp. 2-3.

Banerjea estimated in 1840 that "the number of females in each family is on the average about six or eight, including grown-up and elderly women."[16] The women in the joint family household were usually the *ginnī*, her prepubertal unmarried daughters (if she was not herself very old), her daughters-in-law, younger granddaughters, and often a widowed aunt or sister.

The smooth functioning of the joint family depended on the degree of harmony among its womenfolk, who were responsible for maintaining the daily domestic routine. Whereas males in the family were related by ties of blood, women were "strangers" brought in from outside. Daughters left their natal home between the ages of ten and twelve to live with their husband's family, only returning home for occasional short visits. Their place would be taken by other girls of the same age who joined the household as daughters-in-law. If there were a number of sons in a family, there would be a continuing procession of young brides, or *bou*. A woman was culturally bonded into her husband's family on marriage, and in the subsequent socialization process of the young *bou*. This bond was always regarded as more tenuous than the blood tie between males, however, and women were often treated with suspicion and accused of attempting to disrupt filial and fraternal solidarity. A well-defined set of prescriptive roles provided guidelines for harmonious living and for avoiding conflict that would upset the solidarity of the joint family, but at times personality clashes between individuals undermined the authority of the ideal.[17]

[16] Questions proposed to the Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjea, with his answers, in the *Calcutta Christian Observer*, March 1840, cited in [T. Smith], "Native Female Education," *CR*, 25:49 (1855), 97-99. In the same article, Mrs. Wilson (formerly Miss Cook, the first lady teacher sent from London to Calcutta by the British and Foreign School Society in 1821), estimated that there would be ten to twenty women in a large household. The editor added a footnote here to say that an even larger number of women could be collected to form a class if there was a desire for education.

[17] See M. Roy, *Bengali Women* (Chicago, 1975), chapter one, section on "Family Roles," and chapter three, "Marriage."

When a young *bou* was taken into a family on marriage, her relationship with other members was governed by intricate rules of conduct. The "intruding" *bou* avoided becoming a source of tension by strict observance of the rules governing familial relationships. A husband's relation to his wife was subordinate to that with his mother. In order that men could maintain the mother-son link as the primary relationship even after marriage, wives were not allowed to speak with their husbands in the daytime, or in the presence of others, and were only permitted to attend to his most private needs. On occasions when a meeting was unavoidable, symbolic distance was maintained by the woman covering her head with her sari border as a sign of invisibility. A *bou* had to observe purdah with all senior males in her husband's family, and defer to their wives. She could only relax in a nonhierarchical relationship with her husband's younger unmarried brothers (*debar*) and sisters. She was expected to wait on her father-in-law, and to obey the orders of her mother-in-law. The latter was often the most forceful presence in her early married life. The authority structure was strictly hierarchical, with the old *ginnī* at the top and the youngest *bou* at the bottom.

The young *bou* was generally made well aware of the lowliness of her position, and her life was fraught with the hardships of being a newcomer. Her training "commences under the superintendence of a mother-in-law somewhat advanced in life, and not unoften of a tyrannical disposition. She is a stern disciplinarian, keen observer, and eloquent admonisher. The elderly lady is sometimes seconded by one or two of her grown up daughters, to whom the youthful daughter-in-law is an intruder and rival. And between the mother and the daughters they make the life of the poor novice, during the first years of her tutelage, sometimes very uncomfortable indeed."[18]

A woman would move up in the household hierarchy when

[18] P. C. Mozoomdar, "Hindu Women," *Theistic Quarterly Review*, 3 (October 1879). See also S. C. Dutt, "Hindu Women; Their Condition and Character," part one, *India*, p. 185.

a younger bride came, but a surer means of ensuring her status was by becoming the mother of a son, the progenitor of a link in the patriarchal system. In a large household not all women could ever expect to rise to the elevated position of *ginnī*. They would have authority only over their own immediate family, particularly over their sons, who remained with them after marriage.[19]

The young *bou* would be taught to perform the domestic tasks and religious rituals that constituted the daily routine of the *antahpur*. The sacred and the mundane were intertwined in her life, giving it greater significance and satisfaction than purely routine housework would have done. The day began with sweeping the floors and washing utensils. Then she would bathe and carry out the morning's religious duties. Next came cooking—a communal activity participated in by all the women in the house. Older women served the meal to the men of the house. Women ate afterwards, and would then wash at the tank. The main period of leisure was the afternoon. In the evening the *bou* performed the worship of the family deity again, and then cooked the last meal of the day.[20] Apart from this routine, there were children to attend and sick patients to care for. An important feature of her work was that it was all communal. Although there was often inequity in the distribution of the workload, causing resentment, domestic life constituted social life and was not something separate from it.

Whether a woman did most of this household work herself or supervised servants depended on the family's economic

[19] Weitbrecht, *Women of India*, p. 48; E. Storrow, *The Eastern Lily Gathered: A Memoir of Bala Shoondaree Tagore with Observations on the Position and Prospects of Hindu Female Society* (London, 1852), p. 18; Girish Chunder Ghose, "Social Reformation. The Condition of Women in India," reprinted from the *Hindoo Patriot*, 10 August 1854, in M. N. Ghosh, ed., *Selections from the Writings of Grish Chunder Ghose* (Calcutta, 1912), p. 185.

[20] J. C. Gangooly, *Life and Religion of the Hindoos, with a Sketch of My Life and Experience* (London, 1860), pp. 74ff; S. C. Dutt, "Home-Life in Bengal," *India*, pp. 222-223. For a similar though much more recent description, see M. Cattell, *Behind the Purdah* (Calcutta, 1916), pp. 28-75.

position. Born in 1809, Rassundari Debi was the first Bengali woman to write an autobiography, in which she gave a full description of her domestic life. She had a relatively easy life for the first few years of marriage, but suddenly, at the age of eighteen, found herself responsible for about twenty-five servants, after her mother-in-law became blind. None of these servants was internal to the household, so that she also had to do all the housework. She mentioned that she had to attend to food offerings for the family deity, give hospitality to guests and travelers, cook twice a day for the family and all the servants, and wait on her blind mother-in-law. The amount of work was so great that she worked ceaselessly from dawn till late at night.[21]

A woman was initiated into her role by specific rituals from childhood. At the age of five a girl was initiated into the various *bratas*, or vows, that gave religious authority and sanctity to the priorities and values in a woman's life. The *bratas* initiated her into the observance of religion in her daily life and instructed her in the method of performing the rituals at the same time.

One *brata* was the Siva Puja. Before performing it the girl had to fast, bathe, and change into clean clothes. After this she conducted the worship, the aim of which was to pray for a husband like Siva. The Hari or Krishna *brata* consisted of painting the feet of the god in white sandal paste on a brass plate, and then asking boons of him. In another *brata* the girl painted ten images of deified men on the floor with *ālpanā* or rice paste. She then asked for certain qualities represented by these figures. In the Sajuti *brata*, the girl again painted various pictures on the floor, then an elderly lady dictated "a volley of abuses and curses" against any potential *satīn*, or rival wife, which the girl would repeat.[22]

There was a wide range of *bratas*, of which a girl would generally be proficient in only a few. Some *bratas* were sea-

[21] Rassundari Debi, *Āmār jīban* (Calcutta, 1898?), pp. 28, 31.
[22] S. C. Bose, *The Hindoos*, pp. 35-40.

sonal, others regional. In East Bengal, girls aged between six and ten would often perform the Maghmandal *brata*. Throughout the cold month of Magh, the young girl would have to rise at dawn and carry the clay *stūpa* representing the sun to the side of the tank, where she would recite *mantras* and worship it with flowers.[23] *Bratas* were also performed for the sake of correcting temperamental faults. For example, one girl was made to perform the *madhu-sankranti brata*, giving a small bell metal bowl of honey and a silver coin to a holy man for two successive years, to curb her bad temper and sharp tongue.[24] A girl would be taught how to perform each *pūjā* ritual in full detail, with the natural result that "her mind being filled with germinal susceptibilities, she imbibes almost instinctively an increasing predilection for the performance of religious ceremonies."[25] When a girl married, she would then perform the *bratas* designated for married women.

The performance of *bratas* undoubtedly played an important part in conditioning a woman to her ideal role in society and the family. Though in the context of the purdah system these rituals conditioned women into acceptance of a fairly rigid role, they also provided a liberating diversion. Rituals and ceremonies were a relief from daily routine, and released the imagination and deeper feelings from the immediate confines of the environment.

Purdah women were well versed in the art of relaxation during their leisure hours. Their favorite occupations were said to be "cards and gossip, in which friends, foes, relatives and neighbours, and servants thump and bump against every point of the scandal compass."[26] Some were more industrious

[23] Sudaksina Sen, *Jīban smriti* (Calcutta, 1933), pp. 13-15.

[24] S. Mazumdar, *A Pattern of Life. The Memoirs of an Indian Woman* (New Delhi, 1977), pp. 29-36.

[25] S. C. Bose, *The Hindoos*, p. 35. See also the section on *brata* rites in A. Kayal, "Women in Folk-sayings of West Bengal" in S. Sen Gupta, *A Study of Women of Bengal* (Calcutta, 1970), Appendix II, pp. xxi-xxv.

[26] Girish Chunder Ghose, "Female Occupations in Bengal," paper read to the Bengal Social Science Association on 30 January 1868. Reprinted in B. Dutt Gupta, *Sociology in India* (Calcutta, 1972), Appendix V, p. 53.

and prepared pickles or sweets for their husbands and children.[27] Most descriptions of leisure time by nineteenth-century commentators carried an element of disapproval. For instance one missionary, Reverend Storrow, saw purdah women as languid and licentious, lounging on couches, listening to gossip, fanned by servants, or having their arms and limbs rubbed.[28] Male commentators tended to see women's leisure pastimes as indicative of the barrenness of *zenana* life. Their judgments tended more to reflect the influence of nineteenth-century puritanism on their thinking than present accurate descriptions.

Performance of the daily household tasks may have been monotonous, but it was usually a shared social activity rather than a solitary burden. In any case, the routine was continually interrupted by festivals and special occasions, on which women from different families would have the opportunity to meet and talk. A wedding was celebrated by days and nights of festivities. Female guests were conveyed to the host's house in closed palanquins. Unseen, they were able to peep out at the street life, which provided them with "abundant material" for talk in their leisure hours.[29]

The various *pūjās* performed during the course of the year—the Saraswati Puja, the Laksmi Puja, the Jaggadhatri Puja, and the grandest of all, the Durga Puja—also provided a chance to participate in activities that had meaning beyond the immediate surroundings. In wealthy families, nautch parties were watched by women through thin bamboo screens around the upper stories.[30] In describing such an occasion in 1826, Fanny Parkes gave a glimpse of the wholeness of the two seemingly separate worlds of the inner and outer apartments: "from the interior we could look down upon the guests in the hall below,

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 59; K. M. Banerjea, *Native Female Education* (Calcutta, 1858), p. 43.

[28] E. Storrow, *The Eastern Lily Gathered*, p. 25.

[29] G. W. Johnson, *The Stranger in India; or, Three Years in Calcutta* (London, 1843), I, 240.

[30] [H. Ashmore], *Narrative of a Three Months' March in India; and a Residence in the Doab* (London, 1841), pp. 96-98; R. Heber, *Narrative of a Journey through the Upper Provinces of India, from Calcutta to Bombay, 1824-25* (London, 1861), I, 37.

and distinguish perfectly all that passed. The ladies of the *zenāna* appeared to know all the gentlemen by sight, and told me their names." Mrs. Parkes was disappointed that the women were inquisitive about personal matters, and "not ladylike," but her account showed the vitality of these women in contrast to the meekness and submissive passivity of the ideal.[31]

Wealthy women could arrange for readings of the epics and *purānas* to be held in their own homes, "an act of religion fully equal in expense as well as its devotional effects to a poojah." The family deity was ritually installed in the compound, then a Brahmin would proceed to expound the stories of the *Rāmāyana* and *Mahābhārata* in colloquial Bengali:

> A good reader must be an inimitable actor. The voice, the gesture, the proud or piteous look of the characters whom he brings forward, must be represented with the truthfulness and reality of nature. At times his audience is convulsed with laughter—in another moment audible sobs proceed from the listeners who press closer and closer around him. When he describes the scene in which the five sons of Pandoo after having lost every inch of land at the gaming table, lose also their common wife—and the beautiful Drapodi is dragged into the divan of the ruthless Doorjadhon, an attempt being here made to forcibly reduce her to nudity and the Gods come to her rescue supplying her with endless garments as fast as those worn by her are taken away—the commotion in that female audience, the outbursts of indignation and grief, the flash of a chaste shame, may be better imagined than described.

The wife of the *abhijāt bhadralok* millionaire, Ramdoolal Dey, organized such a reading. It lasted ninety days, during which time "thousands" of women came to listen to it.[32]

[31] F. Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, during Four-and-Twenty Years in the East; with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* (London, 1850), I, 59-60.

[32] Girish Chunder Ghose, "Ramdoolal Dey, the Bengalee Millionaire," from M. N. Ghosh, ed., *Selections*, pp. 23-24. See also his reply to a lecture

Women were given wide scope for the exercise of their imagination by these semi-theatrical events. Readings from the epics formed a part of women's social conditioning in ideal female roles. However, women also delighted in less pious literature such as the *Bidyāsundar*, a highly erotic masterpiece composed by the court poet Bharatcandra around the middle of the eighteenth century.[33] In this tale of triumphant love between a prince of Kanci and a princess of Burdwan, one of the most entertaining sections describes the women of the city indulging in *pati-nindā*, or "husband revilement," with great wit and sarcasm.[34]

Women also found relief from the repressive strictures of the ideal stereotype of pure, chaste Hindu womanhood in their interaction with each other. Much of their leisure was spent in gossip—about their husbands, families, food, surroundings, or ornaments. Gossip could in itself be creative, and was a natural outlet for tension and avoidance of escalated conflict. It was an enjoyable and functional pastime for women.

In contrast with the prescribed ideal, a large part of women's conversation was frankly sexual. In 1839, one English missionary lady had noted that women "will sit for hours in circles wiling away the time in silly obscene conversation, to which none but an experienced Christian female can safely hazard exposure."[35] A Bengali woman, writing in 1848, confirmed her impression: "The only colloquy of which we are capable is of the following sort: 'What was cooked in your house today? How many curries? How many persons dined? How is your he? I hope he comes to you daily at night.' "[36] Most *bhadralok* commentators on female behavior were equally

by Mr. Justice Phear at the Canning Institute, Howrah, on 25 March 1868. M. N. Ghosh, *The Life of Grish Chunder Ghose* (Calcutta, 1911), p. 127.

[33] E. Dimock, tr., *The Thief of Love* (Chicago, 1963).

[34] For a good discussion of the development of this literary convention, see W. Smith, "The *Pati-nindā* in Medieval Bengali Literature," *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 99:1 (1979), 105-109.

[35] P. Chapman, *Hindoo Female Education* (London, 1839), p. 28.

[36] Letter in *Sadhu Ranjan*, 17 Sraban 1255 (1848). Reprinted in K. M. Banerjea, *Native Female Education*, p. 130.

censorious. One such observer, S. C. Bose, listed women's amusements as needlework, cards, and listening to puerile stories. He commented sanctimoniously that "their social tone is neither so pure nor so elevated as becomes a polished, refined community."[37]

Comments of this type are indicative of the influence of nineteenth-century puritanism on the mind of the *bhadralok*. In practice, sexual gossip and innuendo served an important function. In a society where free expression of women's sexuality in relation to men was heavily repressed, other outlets for such a powerful force were inevitable. Extreme repression seemed to result in a heightened consciousness of sex among Hindu women, rather than the culturally approved sexless opposite. For instance, at weddings the female customs of *strī ācār*, with their profusion of sexual rites, allusions, and teasing, provided an opportunity for the repressed sexuality of women to find release in a socially sanctioned way.[38] The "double standard" of conduct accepted by *bhadralok* society, where it was not uncommon for a man to have more than one wife, or at least to have extramarital relations with prostitutes and nautch girls, would have contributed to women's preoccupation with sexuality. Women's anxiety and insecurity in these matters was evident from the abundance of charms and *bratas* that they could use in attempting to stabilize their husbands' affections.[39] The release of sexual tension through female conversation was a psychological outlet for women who were obliged to maintain extremely strict propriety in front of males.[40]

[37] S. C. Bose, *The Hindoos*, p. 8.

[38] *Ibid.* Chapter V, "Marriage Ceremonies," mentions some "obscene" rites that the author terms "relics of unmitigated barbarism" (p. 87). However, he felt that to describe any of these fully "would be an outrage on common decency" (p. 86).

[39] T. Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir* (Delhi, 1969), pp. 9-11, notes this preoccupation with sexuality in medieval Bengali society.

[40] C. Pastner, "Accommodations to Purdah," explains the predominance of sexual themes in female language and behavior in contemporary village society in these terms.

Nondomestic activities

Although for the most part women were physically confined within the narrow boundaries of the *antahpur*, opportunities for venturing beyond it were occasionally available. Pilgrimages provided an exceptional chance for exploring wider horizons, especially for older women and widows. Women could travel all over India to places of pilgrimage. Respectable Bengali women attempted to maintain purdah by traveling in closed carriages, but inevitably in a public place such as a *ghāt* or temple strict segregation of the sexes broke down. A party of women often traveled with a few male relatives for added protection.[41] Even greater mobility was permitted to older women who devoted themselves to a religious life and went to live in holy cities such as Gaya, Benares, or Brindaban.[42]

There were always exceptions to the commonly accepted depiction of the *zenana* women as illiterate, uneducated, and "the sure victims of ennui."[43] Although the lot of most women was undoubtedly domestic, some were involved in pursuits that had more connection with the outside world of male activity. For instance, there was scope for exercising some authority in the religious sphere. Some women even managed to obtain an independent income. Instances are recorded of women who set up small money-lending enterprises. Reformer Iswarcandra Vidyasagar's grandmother and *zamindar* Jaykrishna Mukherjee's mother are both known to have done this.[44]

Women were theoretically unable to inherit property. Their only economic asset was their jewelry, brought with them to

[41] Nalinikanta Cattopadhyay, *Nabakānta Cattopādhyāy (jībanī o bangsa brittānta)* (Calcutta, 1922), pp. 11, 27.

[42] Niranjan Niyogi, *Sādhan o sebā. Nababidhān pracārak sradheya bhāi Brajagopāl Niyogī Mahāsayer jibanālekhya* (Calcutta, 1963), p. 2; Sibnath Sastri, appendix to *Ātmacarit* (Calcutta, 1918), in *Sibnāth Racanāsangraha* (Calcutta, 1975), II, p. 219.

[43] E. Storrow, *The Eastern Lily Gathered*, p. v.

[44] N. Mukherjee, *A Bengal Zamindar: Jaykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara and His Times 1808-1888* (Calcutta, 1975), pp. 7-8.

the marriage as *strīdhan*, or dowry. This could often amount to a substantial sum. A *zamindari* could even be purchased for a woman as part of her *strīdhan*.[45] Women were supposed to have absolute rights in their *strīdhan*, which was passed down in the female line. In exceptional circumstances, women were able to inherit. Widows without heirs had a life interest in their husbands' property.[46] Possession of property gave them not only financial independence and power, but also a chance to prove that they were capable of competently managing the property they had inherited. As they remained in purdah, their estates were managed by appointed male agents, who could become quite influential,[47] but even so, women property owners had to have a thorough understanding of the public functioning of the legal and administrative structure of the larger society in order to retain their control.

In 1836, more than half the principal *zamindars* in Rajshahi were women.[48] Janhabi Chaudhurani was a famous landowner in Mymensingh in the nineteenth century, feared for her power, strength, and tyranny but loved for her benevolence. She established the Janhabi High School, a charitable dispensary, and a guesthouse in her area.[49] Kamalkamini Debi, a *zamindar* of the Hughly district, spent one *lakh* of rupees on a village resthouse.[50] Daughters of some *zamindars* were among the very few women who were educated, to enable them to deal with the outside world and not be cheated of their inheritance on becoming widows.[51] Maharani Swarnamayi, a prominent *zamindar*, was recognized by Sir Richard

[45] P. C. Ray, *Life and Experiences of a Bengali Chemist* (Calcutta, 1932), p. 46.

[46] C. Sorabji, *India Calling* (London, 1935). Cornelia Sorabji, the first Indian woman to graduate in and practice law, was of the opinion that "till the English Married Women's Property Act, indeed, Hindu women might be said to have had greater rights than English married women" (pp. 84-85).

[47] *IMS*, 16 October 1881.

[48] W. Adam, *Reports on the State of Education in Bengal 1835 and 1838*, edited by A. M. Basu (Calcutta, 1941), p. 189.

[49] Krishna Kumar Mitra, *Ātmacarit* (Calcutta, 1974), pp. 59-61.

[50] *BP*, 4:2, 287 (December 1888).

[51] W. Adam, *Reports*, p. 187.

Temple as a "leader of Native Society." She was no less powerful for having to communicate with him from behind the barrier of a curtain.[52] An exceptional woman, she was active in the management of her estates and an even-handed benefactor of numerous good causes throughout the nineteenth century. The title Maharani and the insignia of the Order of the Crown of India were conferred on her by the British government.[53]

There were also other women of exceptional talent who shone in traditionally male realms. Their cases cannot be put forward as options available to any ordinary women, but are nevertheless interesting. One such woman was Hati Vidyalankar, daughter of a *kulīn* Brahmin pandit of Burdwan. She opened her own *tol*, or traditional school, in Benares to teach the *nabanyāya* school of philosophy. She died in 1810.[54] Another woman pandit was Rupamanjari, called Hatu, who did not marry but studied under pandits in Gaya and Benares until she was welcomed home with the title Vidyalankar.[55] Drabamayi was educated in her father's *tol*, and later helped to instruct students there, to the amazement and admiration of the Brahmin pandits.[56] Evidently these women were curiosities even in their own time, but their achievements show that women were occasionally recognized by men as being competent in the same sphere as themselves.

Undeniably, purdah was a system by which men exercised ultimate control over women's behavior, albeit unconsciously. However, it cannot simply be assumed that such a system was repressive and unbearable for those who lived under it. It is

[52] *Liberal and New Dispensation*, 23 April 1882.

[53] U. Chakraborty, *Condition of Bengali Women around the 2nd Half of the 19th Century* (Calcutta, 1963), pp. 113-116; "Mahārānī Swarnamayī C. I.," *BP*, 6:2, 392 (September 1897).

[54] Brajendranath Bandopadhyay, *Catuspātīr juge bidusī bangamahilā* (Calcutta, 1964), pp. 7-8; [Gourmohan Vidyalankar], *Strīsiksā bidhāyak* (Calcutta, 1822), p. 16.

[55] She died in 1875. B. Bandopadhyay, *Catuspātīr juge bidusī bangamahilā*, pp. 9-12.

[56] *Ibid.*, pp. 13-14.

not particularly meaningful to use a standard of judgment based on the concept of individual freedom to analyze the social structure of nineteenth-century Bengal, in which group identification was preeminent. In a society where neither men nor women were socialized as individuals, but as members of a group, to "judge this socialization by our standards of coercion and oppression is misleading."[57]

One can only fully understand the lives of women by viewing them from the perspective of their own experience. Over time, Bengali women had devised numerous ways of adjusting and accommodating to the strictures of purdah. Some of these ways have already been mentioned, such as the sexual frankness permissible in female conversation, and the sociability accompanying women's performance of household tasks. Women could also exercise power over men from within purdah in a number of subtle ways, alluded to by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee as "the indirect agency of *sari* Government."[58] They could use "feminine" emotional power over men's affections to win concessions for themselves, or try to achieve the same ends by persistent nagging. One English resident of Calcutta in the nineteenth century observed that a Hindu wife was a lot more independent than was generally supposed: "In cases not a few she disputes his authority and domineers over him."[59] There were other means of protesting against male decisions that were often more effective than straightforward confrontation. These included the withdrawal of sexual favors, the disruption of the household through a refusal to perform domestic tasks, feigning illness, or threatening to return to the natal home. Women could also play male relatives off against each other, using their skills of diplomacy to co-

[57] L. A. Tilly, "The Social Sciences and the Study of Women: A Review Article," *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 20:1 (January 1978), 166-173, criticizes the Rosaldo and Lamphere collection of essays (*Woman, Culture, and Society* [Stanford, 1978]) on these grounds.

[58] Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) in J. C. Bagal, ed., *Bankim Rachanavali* (Calcutta, 1969), III, 14.

[59] Kerr, *Domestic Life*, p. 81. The author was a principal of the Hindu College.

ordinate the desired result according to their own needs. In all of these situations, the tactics used by women relied on "a male awareness of their dependence on women for the successful maintenance of the domestic arena of society."[60]

For those women who did not fall into the special and unfortunate categories of widows or *kulīn* brides, who were seen to be ill-treated and deprived within the terms of their own society, the social system prevailing in Bengal in the early nineteenth century would have been valued for its positive aspects. The world of purdah represented a separate culture, with its own complex rituals and behavioral codes, generating a confidence in group identity and a sense of communality among women. Separateness enhanced male dependence on women's activities, placing a higher value on women's work.[61] Women's activities were important for the functioning of society as a whole. Their actions were crucial to status areas connected with the male, public world. Women's role in the "politics of status maintenance" would have included such work as "the formal and informal gift exchanges between families that accompany ceremonies; conveying information—'gossip'—that establishes or injures family status or that is crucial to economic affairs; preparation and management of feasts that validate family status in the community and discharge obligations to others." Other important status-maintenance activities relying on women's involvement were marriage negotiations and the observance of public religious rituals.[62] An exceptionally devout woman, or devoted wife, would bring honor to the whole family. Women would have

[60] C. Pastner, "Accommodations to Purdah," p. 411. Although Pastner's study is based on recent fieldwork, the analysis of how a theoretical system functions in reality is useful for understanding purdah in nineteenth-century Bengal. P. Jeffery's study, *Frogs in a Well*, is similarly useful.

[61] H. Papanek, "Purdah"; C. Pastner, "Accommodations to Purdah," noted that social stratification was less evident among women than among men.

[62] H. Papanek, "Family Status Production: The 'Work' and 'Non-Work' of Women," *Signs*, 4:4 (1979), 778. The article is about women generally, but seems particularly applicable to nineteenth-century Bengal.