

19th Century Women Emancipation Movement and Bengali Theatre

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Abstract: *In the nineteenth century, the expansion of Western education and Culture led to the emergence of rational progressive ideas in the minds of Bengali youth. The society started roaring against Hindu inhuman customs as sati, polygamy, child marriage and the caste system. As a result, the brutal Sati was abolished. 'Widow Remarriage Act' was formulated. In the second half of the nineteenth century, due to the spread of institutional education for women, progressive thinking spread among women. Women's position in society and women's rights highlighted through stories, novels, plays, essays and autobiographies. After taking higher education, someone went to study medicine in Europe, someone became the Principal of the college, and someone joined other jobs. Bengali Theatre was influenced by these social movements of women. In Bengali theater, situation of women's misery were also presented. Some playwright quizzed against women emancipation movement. Actresses started perform in Bengali Theatre. The women wrote many plays. So nineteenth century was the century of emancipation movement. In this century women became aware their own individuality. The women awakening in this nineteenth century shows an example of revolutionary feminism.*

Key Words: *Bengali Theatre, Feminism, Nineteenth Century, women emancipation movement.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

The nineteenth century is the century of a renaissance in the history of Bengalis. And also the emancipation of women. In this century, the community reformers started questioning against the existing scriptures and religious disciplines. And the educated society, in particular Raja Rammohun Roy, started shouting against the funeral custom of 'Sati', where an alive widow sacrificed herself on her husband's pyre and all other customs. That started with the expansion of Western education, philosophy and culture. Since the establishment of Hindu College in 1817, the Bengali educated youth started questioning against the religious system of Hinduism. They wanted to foil the old-fashioned ideas like polytheism, polygamy and child marriage. On the other hand, they fought for the Widow Remarriage Act. 1929 Sati Regulation XVII Act was enacted. Under the leadership of Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, there was a trend of progressive movements like forming widow remarriage, expansion of women education, polygamy and child marriage. As a result of that movement in 1856, the Widow Remarriage Act was enacted. Social reformers took pioneering role in women education. And these social movements were deeply impacted in Bengali Theatre.

In Vedic society, the word 'women' was used to refer to 'NARI' in Sanskrit. In the Vedic period, 'women' was meant, 'she satisfies her husband, gives birth to a son, and does not speak over the husband's word.' In ancient times, the women were a productive consumer product. There was no existence of woman in her own individuality. Woman used to spend her life as a shadow of man. In 'Aitareya Brahmin', it was said that 'son is self-esteem ... daughter is the cause of tribulation'. Elsewhere, 'Manu' compared the woman to the door of hell.

In the nineteenth century, there was no change in the notion of prejudice. Its evidence is available in the newspapers. There was some connotation of the helplessness of the parents to marry daughter, in the article 'Kannyadan'(1864) published in 'Som Prakash', 'Daughter's birth annihilated.'

From the second half of the nineteenth century, modern thinking had spread among women in our country. Since then, institutional education had begun for women. From this episode, women got clearance to go from inside to outside to the school. That was unimaginable at the beginning of the nineteenth century. Victoria Girls' School was established in 1849. In 1876, Kadambini Basu applied for higher education. Bethune College was established in 1879. In 1883, Kadambini Basu and Chandramukhi Basu became the first women graduates.

In the middle of the nineteenth century, women came forward in various social and political movements. Various women's associations were formed by women. In 1879, 'Banga Mahila Samaj' was formed, 'Christian Women's Association' formed in 1881, 'Sakhi Samity' formed in 1886. Women were involved at Indian National Congress in 1885. Kadambini Ganguly, Vidya Gaurililkanth, Rama Bai, Shrimati Nikumba and Swarnakumari Ghosal were present at the fifth session of the National Congress in Bombay in 1889. Kadmwari Ganguly gave lecture at the sixth session of Congress in Calcutta in 1890. Besides editing of 'Ablaabandhav', 'Bangmahilah', 'Bambabodhini' and 'Bharati', women were published regular articles and novels. In 1856, Chittabhasini, the first book of Bengali women writer was published. In this way, gradually women were becoming socially resourcing new lifestyles.

2. IMPACT OF 'BRAHMA SAMAJ' IN WOMEN'S LIBERATION MOVEMENT:

It should be remembered that the role of Brahma Samaj was also important in the 19th century women's emancipation movement. Raja Rammohan Roy was the pioneer of Brahma Samaj. The first graduate Kadambini Devi too was a Brahma. Brahma women came forward in social reform. Many women of Brahma Samaj became educated in the house. Kumudini Devi, Kailashvahini Devi, Ramasundari and Swarnakumari Devi were among of them. With regard to the social taboo and rights of the Hindu women, Kailashbahini Devi, who wrote two books 'Hindu Females'(1863) and 'Hindu Abalakuler Vidyavash'.

Drama was performed by the elite society's women; it was possible due to the role of Brahma Samaj. Parallel to the professional stage but the independent theatre started in the second half of the nineteenth century in Jorasanko Thakurbari. With progressive mentality, women of Thakurbari were cast on the stage. In this regard, the pioneer role was enlightened by Gnanadeini Devi, Satyendranath Tagore, Jyotirendranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore. Kadambwari Devi, Jyotirendranath Tagore and Rabindranath Tagore performed at the stage together with Jyotirendranath Tagore's 'Manmayee'. On 26 February, 1881, Rabindranath Tagore's play 'Valmiki Pratibha' was performed by Prativa Devi and Indira Devi. With the introduction of a separate trend in the Bengali Theater had emerged in that theater. In Jyotirendranath Tagore's 'Jamon Karmo Tamon Fal', Saratkumari Chaudhuri (Akshay Choudhury's wife), played a role. Thakurbari women also organized their own initiative. On the occasion of the marriage of Saratkumari's daughter Suprapva and Sukumar Halder, a play named 'Bibaha Utsav'(Marriage Festival) was performed. These initiatives later made a deep impact on the Bengali theater.

3. THE DRAMA ON HINDU WOMEN'S MISERY:

In many plays, contemporary societal situations such as polygamy, immorality of 'Babu Culture', alcoholism, and women education were coming up in the Bengali Theatre. In March 1857, Ramanarayan Tarkaratna's 'Kulin Kul-Sarbasva' (1854) was first performed at Jairam Basak's house. On April 23, 1859, Metropolitan Theater performed Umesh Chandra Mitra's 'Bidhaba Bibaha Natak'(Widow Marriage Drama, 1854) plays.

As the entrepreneur of drama performance on the subject of Hindu women's life, Jorasanko Natyashala's role was so important. The plan of Ganendranath Tagore, son of Girindranath Tagore, advertisement was published to write a play on the issue of polygamy and the current misery of Hindu women. In 1867, 'Nava Natak' was written by Ramnarayan Tarkaman, was performed on the issue of polytheism. 'Hindu Mahila Natak' (1968) on the issue of Hindu women's current misery, written by Bipin Mohan Sengupta, could not be played due to the theatre closed.

4. FEMALE ACTRESS IN BENGALI THEATRE:

Female actresses were allowed to enter the theater stage, due to the women's liberation movement. Michael Madhusudan Dutta's role was important in this regard. He had to face a lot of reproach for this. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar of the modern mind had also opposed this decision.

Overcoming all obstacles, in 1873, the female actresses acted in Madhusudan Dutt's 'Sharmistha' drama in Bengal Theater. Elokeshi, Jagatarini, Golap Sundari, Shyama, these actresses came from brothel. Although in 1835, female actresses were acted in Nabin Basu's 'Vidyasundar' drama. But this incident seemed to be condemned to the educated society. As a result, for several years, the entry of female actress was prohibited.

Following the Bengal Theatre, the female actress became enthralled at the theater. In 1874, Binodini Dasi was acted on the first time in the play 'Shatru Sanhar' in Great National Theatre.

5. CASE STUDY OF FEMALE ACTRESSES IN THEATRE:

In the last phase of the nineteenth century, highly educated women were involved in the workplace outside. Chandramukhi Basu became the Principal of Bethune College. Kadambini Basu went to study medical in England. Kamini Sen, Kumudini Das, Sarla Ghosal also presented examples in the women's society. Some had married more than the old age. Or had lived unmarried. But it is also necessary to mention that before 1881, the elite class women were not allowed to perform and watch in the Bengali drama. In this case, women was spent her life under men. Only in some rich family, women were given the opportunity to watch the drama sitting in the special place. After the establishment of professional theater in 1872, women also lost the right. The middle class women were still far from the theater. Actresses came from brothel. These actresses did not receive honor in the theatre.

They wanted to come out from the dark place of the society and looked for the light. But they got cheating and disrespect. If we read Nati Binodini's autobiography 'Aamar Katha'(My Talk), then there we see the status of women actresses in that period. Among of them, actress Golap Sundari (Sukumari) married with the theatre actor Goshtoh Bihari Dutta. There was a huge stir in this society. Written rhymes in Calcutta –

'I am a woman of hobby Sukumari
We do theater together with husband and wife
The people of the world see!'

After a few days of marriage, leaving Sukumari with a daughter and went abroad. Sukumari again joined the theater and also established a theatre. Wrote a play 'Apurba Sati'. She was the first female playwright in Bengali. On 23 August 1875, the Indian National Theater staged the drama as Sujumari's night.

6. CONCLUSION:

In the nineteenth century, women along with men came forward in various social movements. The women's social position and disrespect were also voiced by the protesters. They presented these things in stories, novels, essays, poems, plays and autobiographies. Women came out from all boundaries, joined political movement. But we did not find them at the stage. Women from upper-class or middle-class families were absent in Bengali Theater. Apart from the Tagore's family, women did not act in theatre. The actress had to be brought from the dark society. As a result of their arrival, the female of the elite society stopped watching the drama. Although the actresses praised by the audience, but those women had no place in a decent society. They were considered hateful. They wanted to get place in a decent society through acting. Wanted a decent life. But in return, dishonor and deception had been received. So Nati Binodini left the theater in a very young age.

In the nineteenth century, middle-class and elite class women wrote many plays. But many times they had spied their names while publishing. The book had been published in a different name. Indumati Dasi published the play 'Birat Nandini'. In 1866, she published the play 'Urwashi' by the name 'Dzitanya'. Subsequently, several other plays had been written, such as Kamini Sundari Devi 'Ramer Banabas' (1977), Kusum Kumari Devi 'Kailas Kusum' (1878), Shrimati Swarnalata 'Shurbala Surbala' (1878), Kamini Roy 'Puranikee' (1897), Swarnakumari Devi 'Basant Utsav' (1879) and 'Bibaha Utsav' (1892).

Many of the society did not accept the education of female. At that time, conservative playwrights wrote against women's education. Many plays had been written like Bhirilal Chattopadhyay 'Khand Pralay or Pancharong' (1878), Amrutalal Bose's 'Bibaha Bibhrat' (1884), Radhavinod Haldar's 'Dowabara Bhattarer Tejbare Mag' (1887), Haridas Bhattacharya's 'Meyecheler Lekhapara' (1897) and Durgadas Dey's 'Miss Benoobbi, B. A' (1898). They quizzed the women of higher education and women's rights.

Feminist movements are being developed to eliminate gender discrimination and women's rights around the world. There, in the nineteenth century, the women awakening in this Bengali shows an example of revolutionary feminism.

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