

Gender History and Women's Empowerment in Colonial Bengal (1865-1943): A Historical Critique

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Abstract:

The study evaluated the trajectory of gender history and women's empowerment in colonial Bengal from 1865-1943 using a critical historical perspective. It explored how colonial modernity, social reform movements, and indigenous reactions synergistically influenced emerging discourses on women's roles, rights, and identities. The advancement of women's education, enabled by missionary initiatives and institutions, led to the emergence of a new 'bhadramahila' identity, primarily restricted to urban, upper-caste environments. The article emphasises how colonial practices frequently reinforced existing hierarchies, while nationalist ideology occasionally romanticised women in domestic roles, thereby constraining their agency. Subaltern viewpoints, particularly those of rural and lower-caste women, have been marginalised in conventional historiography. This study emphasises the intricate relationship among reform, resistance, and representation in colonial Bengal by positioning gender as a fundamental analytical category. It identified that women's emancipation during this era was neither linear nor universal, but rather a negotiated process influenced by class, caste, religion, and colonial power dynamics.

Keywords: Gender History, Women Empowerment, Colonial Bengal.

I. INTRODUCTION:

The examination of gender history in colonial Bengal from 1865 to 1943 provides a crucial perspective on the changing status of women in a society experiencing significant socio-political and cultural upheaval. This era, characterized by the establishment of British colonial dominance and the emergence of socio-religious reform groups, experienced substantial discussions on women's roles, rights, and identities. Gender, as a category of historical study, allows for the examination of the structuring and negotiation of power relations in both public and private domains, as well as the impact of colonial modernity on traditional norms regulating women's lives. Colonial Bengal became a pivotal centre for intellectual and social revolution, significantly shaped by the Bengal Renaissance. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed women's education, widow remarriage, and the eradication of repressive customs like sati and child marriage. These attempts, albeit progressive, were frequently articulated within a paternalistic narrative that regarded women as subjects of reform rather than as active agents. Simultaneously, colonial authorities intervened in indigenous social customs, resulting in a complicated interplay between colonial authority and native reformist goals. The advent of women's education and the progressive involvement of women in public life signified a crucial stage in the empowerment movement. Institutions, print culture, and literary forms empowered women to express their voices and challenge patriarchal limitations. Figures such as Begum Rokeya significantly challenged both colonial and indigenous systems of oppression by promoting female education and gender equality. Nevertheless, access to these opportunities was restricted to specific societal segments, notably urban and upper-caste women, hence highlighting intrinsic class and caste prejudices. The convergence of nationalism and gender in the late 19th and early 20th centuries profoundly impacted women's empowerment. The nationalist movement frequently represented the nation using the image of the "mother", so idealizing women's duties in the domestic realm while concurrently engaging them in political endeavors. This dichotomy generated difficulties between tradition and modernity, as women navigated their identities within both nationalist and patriarchal structures. A historical analysis of gender and women's emancipation in colonial Bengal uncovers a multifaceted and intricate process. Although the era saw significant advancements in enhancing women's position, these transformations were neither consistent nor entirely liberating. Rather, they were influenced by the converging dynamics of colonialism, nationalism, class, caste, and patriarchy. This work aims to rigorously analyze these processes to enhance understanding of the nature and constraints of women's empowerment in colonial Bengal (Chattopadhyay, S., 2012). The objective of the study is to historical critique on gender history and women empowerment in Colonial Bengal (1865-1943).

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY:

A methodology describes the procedures a researcher will follow to guarantee they get accurate, dependable data that supports their aims and objectives.

Duration of the study: The duration of the study was 1865-1943.

Research Design: The research design is the framework of methods and procedures that a researcher chooses to use in order to conduct a study. In this research, qualitative research design was used.

Sources of Data: The secondary data sources are books, government and non-government documentary evidences, journals, e-resources, newspaper, abstracts etc. In this research, secondary data sources were used.

Methodology: Qualitative research is a research methodology that deals with understanding human beliefs, behavior, values, and perceptions of certain social or non-social issues within their own environmental contexts. The secondary data was e- resources, publications, websites, reports, journal articles, internal organization records, and censuses etc. In this research, qualitative research and secondary data were used.

Research Tool: Historical research is a process of collecting and interpreting data about past events or ideas in order to find how they affected the present events and ideas. In this research, historical analysis tool was used.

Analysis and Interpretation: The process of summarizing and characterizing a dataset that was gathered by another party is known as descriptive analysis. In this research, descriptive analysis was used.

III. STRUCTURE OF BENGALI SOCIETY IN THE LATE 19TH CENTURY:

The configuration of Bengali society in the late 19th century was marked by an intricate interaction of class, caste, religion, and colonial impact under British rule. Society was predominantly segmented into a conventional hierarchical caste structure among Hindus, in addition to a substantial Muslim demographic with its distinct social stratification. The rise of a new middle class, commonly known as the *bhadralok*, signified a substantial transition, as they were educated in Western ideologies and significantly contributed to social reform and intellectual movements linked to the Bengal Renaissance. The rural community predominantly adhered to agriculture, governed by zamindars under the Permanent Settlement, while peasants and sharecroppers encountered financial difficulties. Social customs such as child marriage, *purdah*, and limitations on women epitomised entrenched patriarchy, but reform initiatives spearheaded by individuals such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar contested these conventions. Consequently, Bengali society during this era was undergoing transformation, reconciling traditional frameworks with the demands and prospects of colonial modernity. The configuration of Bengali society in the late 19th century illustrates a transitional period characterised by the interplay between tradition and colonial modernism. Fundamentally, society persisted as profoundly hierarchical, regulated by caste inequalities among Hindus and analogous social stratifications within the Muslim community. Colonial interference, particularly via programmes such as the Permanent Settlement, transformed agrarian relations by reinforcing the zamindari system, hence exacerbating the disparity between landlords and peasants. This economic stratification frequently resulted in rural indebtedness and social discord, while metropolitan areas such as Calcutta emerged as epicentres of novel intellectual and cultural endeavours (Thakur, D.N., 2012). A hallmark of this era was the emergence of the *bhadralok* class—an educated, urban middle class that profited from English education and administrative positions under British governance. This class emerged as the catalyst for reformist and nationalist ideologies, playing a pivotal role in the Bengal Renaissance. Reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar championed women's education, widow remarriage, and the eradication of repressive conventions, thus instigating incremental transformations in gender relations. Nonetheless, patriarchal practices persisted profoundly, especially in rural regions, where women encountered constraints such as *purdah* and restricted educational opportunities. Religion significantly influenced the organisation of society, frequently intertwining with class and caste identities. The rise of the educated *bhadralok* middle class signified a notable social transformation, as they acted as catalysts for change through their interaction with Western education and ideas, especially during the Bengal Renaissance. Fourth, notwithstanding reform initiatives spearheaded by individuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, patriarchal norms and gender disparities persisted, constraining women's responsibilities and prospects. The era signifies a transitional society in which traditional frameworks coexisted with nascent contemporary principles, leading to progressive yet inconsistent social transformation throughout urban and rural Bengal. The configuration of Bengali society in the late 19th century was characterised by a vibrant interplay of tradition and change within colonial governance. Despite the persistence of entrenched inequalities of caste, class, and gender in shaping social connections, transformative forces arose from colonial policies, Western education, and reform organisations. The Permanent Settlement exacerbated economic disparities in rural regions, while the emergence of the *bhadralok* class in urban centres indicated the development of a modern, educated middle class. Reform attempts linked to the Bengal Renaissance, spearheaded by individuals like Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, contested traditional customs and established a basis for social advancement, especially regarding women's rights. Nonetheless, these modifications were incremental and inconsistent, with rural regions predominantly opposing reform. Consequently, late 19th-century Bengali society represents a

transitional phase, characterised by the growing scrutiny of old systems, which, while not completely eradicated, facilitated subsequent social and political advancements in contemporary India (Banerjee, D., 2016).

IV. CASTE, CLASS AND GENDER RELATIONS:

In India, caste, class, and gender relations are intricately connected, influencing social structures and the distribution of resources, opportunities, and power. Caste determines conventional duties, social hierarchy, and community demarcations, frequently perpetuating systemic disparities, whereas class signifies economic status and mobility, affecting education, employment, and lifestyle choices. Gender further complicates these arrangements since women and gender minorities often encounter many layers of discrimination—within caste, class, and patriarchal norms. The convergence of these three axes engenders intricate social dynamics in which privilege and oppression coexist, influencing not just material situations but also social recognition, political engagement, and cultural identity. Comprehending these relationships is essential for tackling social justice, equality, and empowerment in modern society. The discourse on caste, class, and gender relations emphasises that these social categories do not function independently but overlap to create complex kinds of inequity. Caste frequently determines social norms and community associations, constraining upward mobility, whereas class signifies access to income, education, and economic influence, which may either maintain or contest caste hierarchy. Gender dynamics intersect with both caste and class, since women and gender minorities often endure compounded marginalisation, encountering obstacles in education, work, and decision-making. The interrelation of caste, class, and gender in India establishes complex hierarchies of privilege and disadvantage that influence social, economic, and political dynamics. Although social reforms, affirmative action, and education have mitigated some inequalities, the intersectional nature of oppression indicates that marginalised groups, especially women from lower castes and economically disadvantaged backgrounds, still encounter substantial obstacles. Addressing these inequities necessitates comprehensive strategies that concurrently address caste-based discrimination, economic inequality, and gender bias. Society may achieve enhanced social justice, empowerment, and equitable involvement for all solely through intersectional and inclusive policies (Ruth, S.S. et al., 2010).

V. ROLE OF RELIGION AND CUSTOMS IN SHAPING WOMEN'S LIVES:

Religion and customs have historically exerted a significant and intricate influence on women's lives, affecting their social standing, rights, obligations, and personal decisions. In several societies, religious teachings and traditional conventions have prescribed rules for women's conduct, attire, education, marriage, and involvement in public life, frequently strengthening patriarchal institutions that constrain autonomy. Prescribed gender roles in religious scriptures and community practices often allocate women the principal duty for home responsibilities and caregiving, while dissuading or limiting their participation in economic, political, or academic endeavors. Simultaneously, religion and customs can furnish women with a feeling of identity, community, and ethical direction, establishing support networks via rituals, festivals, and religious assemblies. These influences are not uniform; they differ among areas, cultures, and historical epochs, with women frequently negotiating, resisting, or reinterpreting religious and cultural conventions to assert agency and pursue education, work, or social transformation. In modern times, legal systems, educational initiatives, and feminist groups have progressively contested restricting conventions, underscoring the conflict between traditional behaviour and women's rights. Religion and customs significantly influence women's lives in a diverse manner—constraining, defining, and occasionally empowering them—highlighting the necessity for a sophisticated awareness of cultural context in the pursuit of gender justice. The discourse on the impact of religion and customs in shaping women's lives demonstrates a dual and frequently contradictory influence. Religious beliefs and traditional conventions have historically perpetuated gender hierarchies, restricting women's access to school, employment, and public engagement, while imposing stringent behavioural norms and household obligations. These conventions frequently sustain structural disparities, rendering women reliant on male authority and limiting their personal options. Ultimately, comprehending the significance of religion and rituals is crucial for advancing gender parity, as it elucidates both the obstacles to surmount and the cultural frameworks that may be leveraged to facilitate women's empowerment (Chakraborty, I. & Chakraborty, A., 2010).

VI. IMPACT OF COLONIAL RULE ON INDIGENOUS SOCIAL STRUCTURES:

Colonial governance significantly transformed indigenous social institutions, reconfiguring the traditional fabric of societies throughout the colonised world. The implementation of external administrative, economic, and legal frameworks upset established social hierarchies and cultural traditions. Colonial authorities frequently weakened or supplanted traditional governance systems, such as tribal councils, village panchayats, or chieftainships, thereby diminishing local autonomy and leadership. The implementation of land revenue regimes, such as the Permanent Settlement in India, transferred land control from indigenous communities to colonial landlords, resulting in new class divides and heightened social disparities. Indigenous labour patterns, artisanal

techniques, and cooperative networks were undermined, resulting in the marginalisation of once-respected occupational groupings. Colonial legal systems frequently institutionalised social identities into rigid classifications, solidifying caste, ethnic, or tribal divisions that had previously been more malleable. This occasionally exacerbated social inequality and inter-community disputes. Furthermore, missionary endeavours and colonial education disseminated Western values that contested local cultural norms, transforming family structures, gender roles, and religious practices. In spite of these disturbances, certain indigenous tribes adjusted by engaging in negotiations with colonial authorities, establishing new socio-political alliances, or relocating to maintain their autonomy. The total influence resulted in a restructuring of indigenous social structures, shifting from flexible, community-orientated systems to hierarchically segregated, economically dependent, and administratively controlled social regimes. The influence of colonial governance on native social frameworks was complex, encompassing administrative, economic, and cultural aspects. Centralised government imposed by colonial authorities undermined traditional leadership structures, diminishing the power of local chiefs, village councils, and tribe elders. This fostered reliance on colonial institutions and frequently resulted in diminished communal cohesion. Revenue policies and the commercialisation of agriculture economically turned subsistence societies into market-dependent communities, resulting in social inequities and the marginalisation of lower-status groups. The legal and census codification of social categories, especially caste and ethnic identities, solidified formerly flexible divides, exacerbating social stratification. The advent of Western education, religion, and cultural standards contested indigenous values and gender roles, resulting in incremental transformations in family structures and societal conduct. Although several communities either adapted to or resisted these alterations, colonial interventions fundamentally reconfigured Indigenous societies, frequently emphasising administrative efficiency at the expense of local wellbeing, and established lasting legacies that influenced social interactions long after independence (Nair, J., 1994).

VII. WOMEN AND SOCIAL REFORM:

The women's and social reform movement in India gained prominence in the 19th and early 20th centuries, propelled by a confluence of social, religious, and political awakening. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Jyotirao Phule championed the eradication of repressive customs, including sati, child marriage, and purdah, while endorsing widow remarriage and women's education. These initiatives were interconnected with extensive campaigns for modernisation and social justice, indicating an increasing acknowledgement that the empowerment of women is crucial for societal advancement. Reform societies, educational institutions, and periodicals significantly influenced public opinion, facilitating discourse and policy transformation. The movement established a vital basis for women's empowerment, illustrating that persistent activism, education, and legal initiatives could effectuate enduring cultural change. The women's movement and social reform significantly transformed Indian society by contesting repressive norms and promoting gender equality. Due to the collaborative endeavours of reformers, social organisations, and educational programmes, practices such as sati and child marriage were diminished, while chances for women's education and social engagement progressively increased. Despite ongoing resistance and regional inequities, these reforms had a profound effect by enabling women to claim their rights and participate in the nation's social, cultural, and political spheres. The legacy of this movement highlights that social change is a lengthy but essential process, grounded in knowledge, lobbying, and the continual challenge of established conventions (Pande, R., 2018).

VIII. DEVELOPMENT OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN BENGAL:

The evolution of female education in Bengal has been a multifaceted and transforming process, influenced by socio-cultural, religious, and political elements throughout the ages. In the early 19th century, Bengal experienced the rise of social reform movements that contested traditional norms limiting women's educational opportunities. Reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were instrumental in promoting female literacy, widow remarriage, and the elimination of social impediments like child marriage, acknowledging education as an essential instrument for women's empowerment. The founding of schools such as the Bethune School in 1849 was a pivotal advancement, offering organised instruction for girls and establishing the groundwork for advanced female education. During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, missionary initiatives and governmental interventions enhanced access to education, while women from progressive backgrounds increasingly engaged in formal learning. The dissemination of female education was inconsistent, with rural regions falling behind due to entrenched patriarchal traditions, poverty, and inadequate infrastructure. The nationalist struggle and the post-independence era expedited the advancement of female education via policy initiatives, scholarships, and community activities designed to mitigate gender inequities. Today, Bengal embodies the legacy of these historical endeavours, with women actively engaging in education at all levels; nonetheless, obstacles persist in achieving equitable access, surmounting socio-economic barriers, and fostering gender-sensitive curricula. The progress of female education in Bengal illustrates the interaction between

social reform, political activism, and institutional development, while emphasising the continuous pursuit of gender equality in education. The discourse on the advancement of female education in Bengal illustrates the interaction of social reform, cultural evolution, and legislative intervention in defining educational prospects for women. Historical evidence demonstrates that the initiatives of reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar were pivotal in contesting established patriarchal conventions, advancing literacy, and founding institutions dedicated to girls. The advancement of female education was not uniform; it encountered opposition from traditional societal factions and was frequently restricted to urban locales and progressive households, underscoring the socio-economic and cultural obstacles that affected accessibility. Missionary schools and subsequent government policies facilitated increased access, underscoring the significance of institutional assistance in conjunction with social campaigning. The development of female education in Bengal highlights the essential need for ongoing social campaigning, institutional backing, and progressive policy formulation in empowering women and promoting a more inclusive and educated society (Pandey, S.K., 2022).

IX. ROLE OF MISSIONARIES AND COLONIAL POLICIES:

The function of missionaries throughout the colonial era was complex, involving religious, educational, and social aspects. Missionaries, especially from European nations such as Britain, France, and Portugal, sought to disseminate Christianity among indigenous populations, frequently framing it as a civilising endeavour. Their endeavours extended beyond religious conversion; they implemented Western education, healthcare, and social reforms, thereby establishing pathways for literacy and knowledge that were previously unattainable for numerous marginalised populations. Missionary schools and universities emerged as significant centres of education, advancing English literacy and modern sciences in conjunction with religious instruction. This educational endeavour, although primarily aimed at conversion, inadvertently fostered the rise of a new educated class that began to challenge conventional hierarchies and social conventions. Missionaries significantly contributed to the documentation of indigenous languages, cultures, and customs, supplying colonial administrators with comprehensive knowledge that enhanced government and control. The missionary presence frequently altered native religious practices and social structures, engendering tensions and opposition among populations strongly entrenched in indigenous traditions. Their effect was both transformational and contentious, intertwining the moral and spiritual goals of the missionaries with the political and economic demands of the colonial state. Colonial policies aimed to reinforce imperial authority and enable resource extraction, while concurrently transforming the social and political dynamics of the colonies. The amalgamation of missionary endeavours and colonial policies engendered a multifaceted socio-cultural metamorphosis: educational advancements, legal reforms, and health initiatives propelled modernity and social consciousness, whereas economic exploitation, cultural dislocation, and administrative oversight solidified colonial supremacy. Missionaries and colonial policies significantly influenced education and the empowerment of women in colonial India. Missionary schools, especially those founded for girls, contested the dominant conventions that limited female education, providing reading, numeracy, vocational skills, and religious teaching. These institutions afforded women opportunities for intellectual advancement, social ascent, and engagement in public life, which were essentially unprecedented inside conventional patriarchal frameworks. Colonial policies supported these initiatives with legal and administrative reforms that progressively validated women's education and participation in professions like teaching and nursing. Initiatives including the implementation of mandatory elementary education in specific areas, the creation of government-funded girls' schools, and scholarships for female students facilitated the expansion of educational options. Furthermore, the advancement of social reforms—such as the eradication of rituals like Sati and the imposition of limitations on child marriage—fostered a more conducive climate for women's societal engagement. The interaction between missionary endeavours and colonial administration fostered modernisation, education, and social advancement, while concurrently strengthening colonial authority—an ambivalent legacy that influenced the course of Indian society into the post-colonial period (O'Dell, B.D., 2014).

X. GROWTH OF GIRLS' SCHOOLS AND INSTITUTIONS:

The proliferation of girls' schools and institutions has been a crucial element of educational and social transformation, especially since the 19th century. This growth in India accelerated throughout the colonial era due to the initiatives of reformers such as Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who championed women's education as a vehicle for social advancement. Missionary organisations and the British government contributed to the establishment of early girls' schools, although these institutions first encountered opposition due to dominant societal standards, including purdah and child marriage. The gradual emergence of institutions such as Bethune School signified a pivotal moment, fostering wider acceptance of female education. The proliferation of girls' schools and institutions signifies a wider shift in society's perceptions on women's roles and rights. Initially, female education in India was restricted by stringent societal practices and patriarchal standards; however, reform movements spearheaded by individuals such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan

Roy contested these limitations by highlighting the moral and intellectual advancement of women. The founding of innovative institutions like Bethune School not only offered formal education to females but also represented a transition towards the acceptability of women in public and intellectual spheres. The advancement of girls' education became intrinsically associated with national growth and social progress over time. During the freedom movement, leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi championed inclusive education, acknowledging women as equal contributors to nation-building. Post-independence policies reinforced this goal by institutionalising gender equality in education via constitutional provisions and specialised programmes. Consequently, there has been a consistent rise in female literacy, enrolment, and engagement in higher education. Nonetheless, the discourse also underscores enduring obstacles. Notwithstanding governmental programmes like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao and changes under the National Education Policy 2020, discrepancies persist in rural-urban access, educational quality, and socio-cultural acceptance in specific areas. Challenges such as early marriage, economic limitations, and gender discrimination continue to obstruct the complete attainment of educational possibilities for females. Consequently, although the expansion of girls' schools and institutions signifies significant advancement, it necessitates ongoing endeavours to guarantee equity, quality, and empowerment in education. The proliferation of girls' schools and institutions signifies a wider shift in society's perceptions on women's roles and rights. Initially, female education in India was limited by stringent societal practices and patriarchal standards; however, reform movements spearheaded by individuals such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy contested these obstacles by highlighting the moral and intellectual advancement of women. The period from 1865 to 1943 represents a pivotal moment in the evolution of girls' education in India, marked by reformist enthusiasm, the establishment of institutions, and the increasing recognition of women's education as a societal imperative (Nazneen, S, Hossain, N. & Chopra, D., 2019).

XI. EDUCATION AS A TOOL OF EMPOWERMENT:

Education served as a potent instrument of empowerment from 1865 to 1943, particularly in colonial India, by allowing individuals—especially women and marginalised groups—to contest old hierarchies and claim their social, economic, and intellectual rights. Reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Ram Mohan Roy advocated for modern education to eliminate societal injustices like child marriage and gender inequity. The proliferation of Western education, coupled with the founding of institutions and missionary schools, facilitated new opportunities for critical thinking, literacy, and engagement in civic life. The education of women, specifically, resulted in heightened awareness, enhanced self-confidence, and a gradual participation in professional fields and reform initiatives. Moreover, education cultivated nationalist awareness, empowering educated Indians to challenge colonial governance and engage actively in the independence movement (Sarkar, L. & Chowdhury, P., 2017). Consequently, education not only altered individual lives but also served as a catalyst for extensive social and political empowerment during this transformative period. The discourse on education as a mechanism of empowerment (1865–1943) illustrates that the proliferation of modern education during colonial governance had a twofold and transformative impact on Indian society. The British implemented Western education mainly to fulfil administrative requirements; however, it inadvertently fostered critical awareness among Indians. Social reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Raja Ram Mohan Roy, and Jyotirao Phule acknowledged education as a tool to destroy oppressive social systems, including caste prejudice and gender injustice. The advent of women's education contested entrenched patriarchal norms, progressively allowing women to engage in intellectual, social, and political domains. The period from 1865 to 1943 witnessed education as a revolutionary catalyst for empowerment in colonial India, promoting individual development and societal transformation. It empowered marginalised groups, especially women and lower castes, to confront systemic inequities and assert their rights. Visionary reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Jyotirao Phule illustrated that educational access could eradicate restrictive social norms and foster inclusivity. Furthermore, education fostered political consciousness and nationalist fervour, playing a crucial role in India's independence fight. Despite access being inconsistent and restricted in extent, its influence on transforming societal views and empowering individuals was significant. Consequently, education arose not just as a method for knowledge acquisition but also as a significant catalyst for social justice, equality, and national consciousness during this pivotal historical era (Chakraborty, S.P. & Chakraborty, D., 2018).

XII. PERSISTENCE OF PATRIARCHY AND SOCIAL RESISTANCE:

The interval from 1865 to 1943, especially in colonial India and areas such as Bengal, was characterised by notable socio-religious reform initiatives amid the persistent dominance of patriarchal systems. Notwithstanding advancements in advocating for women's education, legal rights, and social mobility, patriarchy persisted as a deeply ingrained element within cultural, religious, and institutional structures. Concurrently, several manifestations of social resistance—initiated by reformers and women alike—arose to contest these disparities. This period concurrently saw the incremental emergence of critical awareness regarding these inequities. Reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Rammohan Roy commenced legislative and

educational changes; yet, their endeavours frequently embodied a moderate stance aimed at reconciling advancement with societal approval. More radical critiques arose from women like Pandita Ramabai and Begum Rokeya, who challenged the fundamental tenets of patriarchy and underscored the importance of women's autonomy, education, and self-sufficiency. Nonetheless, social pushback was neither consistent nor universally effective. Class, caste, and geographical differences influenced the situation, with urban, educated women possessing greater opportunities for resistance compared to their rural counterparts. The interval between 1865-1943 signifies a pivotal transitional time in the history of gender relations in colonial India, characterised by the coexistence of enduring patriarchy and nascent forms of social resistance. Notwithstanding the implementation of reformist concepts, contemporary education, and legal measures, patriarchal systems persisted as profoundly ingrained within society norms, cultural practices, and institutional frameworks. These systems perpetuated and constrained women's roles, reinforcing male supremacy in both private and public domains. Concurrently, the period saw the emergence of notable opposition spearheaded by reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, alongside trailblazing women like Pandita Ramabai and Begum Rokeya. Their contributions were crucial in challenging repressive practices and advancing women's education and rights. Nonetheless, these endeavours primarily yielded incremental modifications instead of a comprehensive overhaul of gender relations. The interplay between progressive reforms and conservative opposition underscores the intricacy of social transformation during this era. Although the foundations of women's empowerment and gender equality were established, their effects were inconsistent and frequently confined to particular social groupings. The enduring nature of patriarchy, alongside incremental and disjointed opposition, highlights that the pursuit of gender equality has been protracted, contentious, and remains unfinished (Banerjee, S., 2015).

XIII. CLASS, CASTE AND RURAL-URBAN DISPARITIES:

The era from 1865 to 1943 in colonial India was characterised by profound social disparities influenced by the interrelated dynamics of class, caste, and rural-urban differences. The inflexible caste hierarchy persisted in dictating social status, occupation, and resource accessibility, with the so-called "upper" castes reaping perks, while the "lower" castes and marginalised people encountered systemic exclusion. Concurrently, class stratifications exacerbated due to colonial economic policies, notably with the proliferation of zamindari systems, the commercialisation of agriculture, and the advent of a new middle class. Rural regions continued to exhibit economic underdevelopment, marked by agricultural hardship, indebtedness, and restricted access to education and healthcare services. Conversely, urban areas emerged as focal points for government, commerce, and contemporary education, serving a limited portion of the population. These discrepancies were exacerbated by colonial administration, which emphasised income extraction and urban development at the expense of rural welfare. Social reform groups and nationalist endeavours sought to rectify these disparities; yet, systemic obstacles remained prevalent throughout many regions. The interval from 1865-1943 saw the solidification of social hierarchies influenced by caste and class, as well as an expanding divide between rural and urban India. These gaps not only restricted social mobility but also obstructed inclusive growth. Although initiatives for reform and resistance established a foundation for future transformation, the structural disparities of this era persisted in shaping post-independence Indian society. Comprehending these historical tendencies is crucial for tackling current concerns of inequality and social justice (Banerjee, D., 2017).

XIV. GENDER INEQUALITY WITHIN NATIONALIST DISCOURSE:

The era from 1865 to 1943 in India saw the emergence of nationalist awareness under colonial governance. The nationalist movement pursued political autonomy and social transformation; however, it was profoundly entrenched in prevailing patriarchal frameworks. Gender inequality continued to be a prominent aspect of nationalist rhetoric, with women being symbolically exalted while simultaneously confined to conventional positions. Nationalist leaders frequently depicted women as representations of the nation—innocent, spiritual, and ethically superior. This emblematic depiction, shaped by intellectuals such as Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay and subsequently popularised through the icon of Bharat Mata, positioned women at the core of cultural nationalism. Nonetheless, this exaltation did not result in genuine empowerment. Rather, it reaffirmed the notion that women's principal function resided in the domestic realm, upholding tradition and moral norms. Social reform movements of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, spearheaded by individuals such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, tackled topics including sati, widow remarriage, and women's education. Nevertheless, these reforms were frequently articulated via a paternalistic lens, as males assumed the role of change agents and women were relegated to passive recipients. During the nationalist movement, particularly under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, women's involvement markedly intensified. Gandhi urged women to participate in initiatives like the Non-Cooperation Movement and the Quit India Movement. Nonetheless, their duties frequently confined them to non-violent, supportive endeavours that conformed to conventional feminine values of sacrifice and patience. Furthermore, nationalist rhetoric established a distinction between the "internal" (domestic) and "external" (global) realms. Women were linked to the private sphere, symbolising the nation's

spiritual essence, whilst men inhabited the public sphere of politics and civic life. This split, subsequently examined by scholars such as Partha Chatterjee, perpetuated gender hierarchies even within progressive nationalist ideology. Notwithstanding these limitations, numerous women vigorously opposed gender conventions. Figures like Sarojini Naidu, Annie Besant, and Kasturba Gandhi were instrumental in political mobilisation and advocacy. Their involvement underscored both the potential and constraints of women's agency under the nationalist paradigm. Gender inequality in nationalist discourse from 1865 to 1943 illustrates a complicated interaction of inclusion and exclusion, wherein women's involvement in the liberation movement failed to result in true equality. Nationalist ideology facilitated women's presence in public and political spheres, yet concurrently reinforced traditional gender roles by idealising women as guardians of culture, morals, and the domestic realm. This dual posture constrained women's autonomy and decision-making authority, hence preserving patriarchal systems largely intact even inside progressive groups. Consequently, the nationalist discourse of the era should be perceived as both a spark for women's awakening and a framework that limited their complete freedom, resulting in a legacy of incomplete gender justice in contemporary India (Lakshmi, M.J., 2021).

XV. CONCLUSION:

The examination of gender history and women's empowerment in colonial Bengal from 1865 to 1943 uncovers a multifaceted process influenced by social change, imperial intervention, and indigenous agency. The era experienced notable changes in women's standing, especially in education, social involvement, and intellectual participation. Reformers including Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, and Keshab Chandra Sen significantly challenged regressive customs like sati, child marriage, and prohibitions on widow remarriage, thus establishing a conversation on women's rights within a patriarchal context. Nonetheless, women's empowerment throughout this era was not solely a consequence of male-driven reform initiatives. Bengali women progressively become active agents in defining their identities and futures. Individuals like Kadambini Ganguly, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain, and Sarala Devi Chaudhurani contested gender conventions and broadened the realm of women's public participation. Their contributions to education, literature, and nationalist politics highlight the shift from passive recipients of reform to active agents of change. This empowerment was also characterised by intrinsic restrictions. Colonial policies frequently positioned women's issues within a civilising agenda, perpetuating cultural hierarchies and selective advancement. Furthermore, the advantages of reform were predominantly restricted to urban, upper-caste, and middle-class women, hence marginalising rural and disadvantaged women. The convergence of gender with class, caste, and religion thus produced disparate pathways of empowerment. The nationalist movement further complicated gender roles by engaging women in the public domain while also idealising them as embodiments of tradition and cultural purity. This dualism both broadened opportunities and solidified new mechanisms of control. Women's involvement in movements like the Swadeshi movement and civil disobedience campaigns represented a notable transformation; however, their contributions were frequently overshadowed by male-centric nationalist discourses. In summary, the trajectory of women's empowerment in colonial Bengal is neither linear nor homogeneous. It illustrates a dynamic interaction among reform, resistance, and negotiation within a colonial and patriarchal framework. Despite significant advancements in education and social transformation, genuine empowerment remained incomplete and hierarchical. This historical analysis emphasises the necessity of perceiving women's empowerment as a continuous endeavour, grounded in both structural transformation and women's agency, rather than as a finalised initiative of the colonial era.

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