



Women in the Mid-Seventeenth Century Mughal Bengal: A Study of Socio-Religious Position in the Reflection of Contemporary Sources

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Abstract

The beginning of Mughal Bengal witnessed the growth of Vaishnavism and neo-Vaishnavism, which spoke to gender equality in the social sphere through their dynamic ideas. Contemporary Vaishnava literary texts can work as a reflection of women's position in this century. It is to be noted that the spread of Vaishnavism was not able to counter the development of the Sakta-Tantric sect in Mughal Bengal. The ritualistic objectives of this sect developed several women-centric performances as well as Goddess worships in this period, which needs to be studied carefully to define the aspects of women's position in Mughal Bengal. In the mid-seventeenth century, Bengal saw the alteration of mass faith into rural folk beliefs, which can be identifiable through pirism, folk god and Goddess worship. In this respect, the huge transformation in the position of women can be traced in the socio-religious sphere of Bengal, which sometimes claims their superiority in the circles of faith. The literary works of this period provides us ample evidences of marriage, dowry, property rights and the role of women in a family.

***Keywords:** Mughal, Bengal, Goddess, Dowry, Ranja.*

Introduction

In the last nineteenth century, studies on women have become an inseparable aspect of all social science. History as a major discipline of social science incorporates women's history, feminist history, and gender history as its basic subjects. In fact, in recent times, an invisible controversy has centered around academia about how feminist history and women's history should be interpreted in accordance with their distinctiveness. The history of feminism refers to the evolution of feminist movements, whereas women's history merely emphasizes the issues related to the roles of women in historical events. The gender history expounds the existence of female approaches in history, which clearly do not engage with pan-feministic views but are concerned with the treatments of women as happened in history,

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either by manliness objective or by patriarchal norms in society. Simultaneously, it also defines the acts of womanhood and voices of women as reflected in different periods of history.

The position of women during the Mughal period has been widely studied by some of the prominent female historians in both India and Pakistan. These works are fundamentally based on Persian court chroniclers, accounts of foreign travellers, and some portions of Sanskrit and Hindi sources that are either connected to the prominent lady figures of the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal period or the popular saint poetess of medieval India. Other important aspects that the works have incorporated are the treatments of women in royal families, the marriage system, dowry, divorce, and the voices of womanhood through the writings of court ladies and mystic poetesses. But one thing should be noted: the works particularly emphasize the dominant narratives of women in this period, whose history can easily be accessed through the remarkable sources, whereas less description has been given to the condition of women in various regions of India. Hence, there are no sharp differences in the perspectives of their writings; even no major counterargument can be visible from each other. In fact, no adequate study has been made of the lives of common Indian women except in a few respects.

Literature Review

One of the most notable works written on the aspect of gender identity in Bengal has recently been published, “The Goddess Re-Discovered: Gender and Sexuality in Religious Texts of Medieval Bengal” by Saumitra Chakravarty, which fundamentally dealt with the literary perspective and was less historical in nature. This work interpreted everything in a feminist approach of resistance based on the literary texts of medieval Bengal. The author largely relied on Sakta-Tantric literature, Vaishnava literature, and translated and historical epics. This work touched on the major religious cults of medieval Bengal. But how the woman figure was depicted in various folk worships that have been developed since the mid-seventeenth century by rural Goddess worship and *pirism has not been adequately focused*. This work did not emphasize the social position of women as depicted in contemporary sources, which is a necessary paradigm to reconstruct the gender history of medieval Bengal. Moreover, any change in women's position after the sixteenth century, followed by Mughal rule, has not been properly addressed in this work. This all-thematic gap will be studied in this proposed synopsis. Tapan Raychaudhuri's “Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History” dealt with the different aspects of society, religion, and modes of life. However, there is scanty information about the life and condition of women, like the dress and ornaments of ladies, customs of marriage, and *Vrata* performances by household women. It is to be noted that the descriptions given there are hardly corroborated by the relevant evidences. Even though most of the sources used there are basically from earlier or later times, they have no connection with the period of study chosen by the author. The author tried to give an outline of women's life as a part of social profile. This work does not include the condition of women under patriarchal norms, domestic violence in the family, or household duties of women. Also, how the spread of Vaishnavism and the growth of folk Goddess cults influenced the position of women have not been discussed in any respect in

this work. Hence, it can be assumed that no work has been conducted on the position of women in Mughal Bengal from 1650 to 1700 AD.

Problem of Writing the History of Women in Mughal Bengal

In Mughal Bengali society, the position of women has not been discussed in a full-fledged manner due to the scarcity of historical evidences. Regarding the women in this period, less is known from the regional Persian sources, as they were written about the affairs of administration, ruling houses, and military adventure in this region. In addition, some proportion of the geographical description can be traced, but people's histories are deficient. The accounts of foreign travelers provide some scattered information about the women but not with appropriate focus, as whatever they have written was based on their curiosity about facts that might be eye witnessed or heard from others. The Bengali sources of this period entirely supplies evidences about the lives and conditions of women. Although most of them were literatures related to various religious sects of that time. But the comparative hypothetical analysis of facts with other categories of sources can create a scientific research problem about the specific themes of study.

Justification of Study

The Mughal period in Bengal witnessed different socio-cultural aspects such as the growth of Vaishnavism and neo-Vaishnavism, the Sahajiyā cult, the Sakta-Tantric cult, the emergence of folk beliefs, and *pirism* in rural Bengal. Various practices and social norms sprung up from them, which influenced the gender identity in this century. Vaishnavism gave a voice to the females and emphasized gender equality. Simultaneously, the Sahajiyās disseminated the generalized male-female relationship as depicted in their writings. The Sakta-Tantric cult, although it seems to be patriarchal in nature, gave birth to so many female-centric rituals, as noted in the respective texts. However, the growth of Goddess worship and folk cults promoted the female role in the socio-religious sphere basically after the mid-seventeenth century. In all the above socio-religious forces, the participation of women can be seen in every sphere. In the making of social norms, family relations, patriarchal, and matriarchal identities, the role of women always played a vital factor in this period. But this has not been incorporated as a theme of research in any other earlier works; even no difference has been shown in how the women of Mughal Bengal were distinct from the other parts of India. Without the discussion of women, it is impossible to define the social history and gender history; hence, the position of women in Mughal Bengal necessitates a major research work to fulfil this objective.

Goddess Faith and Women in Mid-Seventeenth Century Mughal Bengal

The full-fledged development of the Goddess faith dynamically changed the religious position of women in the mid-seventeenth century compared to the preceding times. The major factor was its popularity among the marginal sections, who started admiring the Goddesses by means of some superstitious beliefs. The most notable phenomenon was the alteration of dominant Goddess figures into rural ones, where Goddesses acted as the saviours and representatives of the villagers by living away from urban areas. In that regard, it can be observed from contemporary Mangalkavyas that the popular images of such

Goddesses as Durga, Kali, Sasthi, Manasa, and Sitala were all built up in rural society. The rise of these cults countered the predominance of various god worships, as can be understood from several literary texts of mid-seventeenth-century Bengal.

Several evidences of Goddess worship can be traced from the sixteenth century onward. One such Goddess was Manasa Devi, who was supposed to reside in the *Sij* tree. It is because of this belief that the majority of the communities in Bengal and north-eastern India consider it to be a sacred tree.[†] The masses also worship another Goddess, named Sitala, for curing smallpox. These religious traditions sometimes developed as a type of treatment to get cured of certain specific ailments in the rural areas. At many places they led to the beginning of different superstitious customs. In Bengal, the fear of supernatural events contributed to the spread of black magic and prejudiced ideas across all the social classes. The majority of poets of that century admired Dakinis and Yoginis as a means of resisting evil forces.

The *Manasamangal* of Ketakadas, written in the mid-seventeenth century, describes the story of Goddess Manasa and Chand Saudagar in which Chand is a Bengali merchant who was fond of Lord Siva. He does not worship the snake deity Manasa. As a result, he suffered bitterly, perhaps because of the curse of the deity Manasa.[‡] *Manasamangal* delineated the superiority of the Goddess above the God Siva and even regarded Manasa as Visva-Mata, which signifies the transformation of faith among the peoples as well as the ultimate dominance of the Goddess. This becomes evident from the perusal of the following verse from *Manasamangal* quoted below:

“তবেতকরিবক্ষমাআপনারমান।
নিশ্চয়ইকরিবমাতানাকরিবআন।।
সত্যসত্যতিনবারবলেনবিশ্বমাতা।
শুনহদেবতাগণবেহুলারকথা”[§]

(In this verse, Manasa is referred to as Visva-Mata, or the mother of the universe. This verse also demonstrates Manasa's superiority over all Goddesses.)

In every section of this literary text, the main theme revolves around the subject of a constant clash between the Goddess and God. The Goddess Manasa ultimately emerges as the winner, and she punished Chand Saudagar, who worshipped lord Siva. Yet another aspect of this conflict is the power struggle which took place between a dominant male God and an indigenous female Goddess. However, in different parts of Bengal, Devi Manasa has been worshipped in various forms, including the Goddess of snake and the Goddess of prosperity and blessing. In the present day Bangladesh, we come across extensive use of Nag-Ghats, which ascertain its relevance among the indigenous peoples who identify it as the symbol of

[†]Roy, Priyam Kumar, “Exploring the Mangalkavya: A Narrative of the Pretext of the Textual Universe”, *Ensemble-A bilingual peer-reviewed academic Journal*, Vol. 2, No-1, pp. 143–154.

[‡]Khemananda, Ketakadas, *Manasamangal*, edited by Bijan Bihari Bhattacharya, Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2018, p. 90.

[§]Ibid.

the generative force of this deity. ^{**}In particular, among the lower caste peoples of Bengal like Bauri and Bagdi, etc., Goddess Manasa is still venerated as the chief household deity. ^{††}Some other contemporary texts like the *Durgamangal* of Rupnarayan Ghosh, and *Sasthimangal* of Krishnaram Das, have also glorified the female Goddesses like Durga, Kali, and Sasthi, respectively. The *Kalikamangal*, considered to be the masterpiece of Krishnaram Das, was apparently composed by him on the order of the Goddess Kali on the auspicious day of Krishnapakka. ^{‡‡}It is mentioned that the Devi instructed him to write a eulogy about her, even referring to what could be the subject. His second notable work was *Sasthimangal*, which was composed in 1679 AD. Only ten verses of the text have survived till date. ^{§§}Sasthi was a folk deity who was supposed to have no Puranic or mythological roots. The story of this text was related to one lady Lilavati, who played an effective role in establishing the worship of Sasthi by disseminating her glory. However, after completing the mission in different countries, the Devi arrived at Saptagram with her endeared Lilavati. After disguising herself as a Brahman woman, she entered the secret house of King Satrujit of Saptagram. At that time, she saw that the queen was eating fish. On being asked by the queen, she said that she had come from Burdwan, where she lived with seven sons and one daughter. She was there for the holy bath at the Ganges and also to worship Sasthi. Thereafter, she defined the miraculous story of Devi, where she enunciated the incident of Sai Bin's wife (a character of this poetry) who was blessed with seven sons by Sasthi Devi. One day, the daughter-in-law of this woman during her pregnancy told a lie after eating the holy foods of worship and said that they were eaten by cats. Consequently, the Devi's curse brought about a disaster at the time of her parturition as all the children were abducted by cat after birth. But, following the sorrow of this mother, the Devi became kind and returned the children, whereby she started to be worshipped by this woman for her graceful conduct. After hearing this story, the Queen and all of her servants began to worship Devi Sasthi. ^{***}*Raymangal* was another remarkable work of Krishnaram Das, which enunciated several rural folk beliefs of remotest Bengal and incorporated the folk tiger God in the Sundarban area named Dakshin Roy. It also mentions the crocodile God Kalu Roy. In this story, Ratai, a woodcutter whose six brothers had been killed because he pulled down a tree that was close to Dakshin Roy's residence. However, following the regret of losing his brother, Dakshin Roy returned them by granting a new life to each of them. ^{†††}Regarding the admiration of Goddess, another contemporary work *Durgamangal* of Bhabani Prasad during the second half of the seventeenth century provide us with important inputs. ^{‡‡‡}Although this work was based on the *Markandeya Purana*, it defines the story of Lord Rama's worship of Durga. He praised the Goddess as the locomotive of blessings, wit, and saviour of human misery. By highlighting the story to show how the Goddess had been revered by the Gods, Bhabani Prasad tended to establish the

^{**}Roy, Priyam Kumar, "Exploring the Mangalkavya: A Narrative of the Pretext of the Textual Universe", *Ensemble-A bilingual peer-reviewed academic Journal*, Vol. 2, No-1, pp. 143–154.

^{††}*Ibid.*, p. 148.

^{‡‡}Sen, Sukumar, *Bangala Sahityer Itihas*, Part-II, (reprint) Calcutta, Ananda Publishers Pvt. Ltd., 2012, p. 257.

^{§§}*Ibid.*, p. 260.

^{***}*Ibid.*, p. 261.

^{†††}*Ibid.*, p. 266.

^{‡‡‡}*Ibid.*, p. 275.

supreme power of Goddess Durga over the other deities. Yet another work was *Durgamangal*, which was composed by Rupnarayan Ghosh, who was a near contemporary of Bhabani Prasad. His work was also based on the *Markandeya Purana*. The subject of *Durgamangal*, however, marks a minor difference from the earlier one. The subject of this text is surrounded by the story of Dhanapati, a merchant by profession who had two wives. One day, his second wife lost a goat in the pasture land. On the instruction of Brahmanas, she worshipped Durga and got the goat back.^{§§§} There is a common tendency in the major Mangalkavyas like *Manasamangal* and *Sasthimangal*, that the Goddesses were forcefully trying to create their position through the medium of someone who was inclined to abide by the orders. In the case of Manasa, it was Behula, the daughter-in-law of Chand Saudagar, who had been directly compelled by Manasa to convince her father-in-law for Her worship. Simultaneously, the same fact can be seen in *Sasthimangal*, where Devi Sasthi's fellow Lilavati was working for the popularisation of worship. In both of them, the basic objective was to increase the relevancy of their worship among the rural peoples of Bengal. The evolution of folk worship was also related with the minor healing power, the female deities possessed. The example of *Sitalamangal* can be found in the *Skanda Purana* and *Bhavaprakash*, where she appeared to be the Goddess of smallpox. During the period of our study, the same Goddess Sitala of Krishnaram Das had a significant impact in the context of curing smallpox as a folk medicine in seventeenth-century Bengal.

Let us now explore the connections, if any, of the folk Goddess cults with any specific castes. Though we have no concrete evidence suggesting this relationship, a perusal of the contemporary literature might help us in our investigation. It is revealed in the *Manasamangal* of Ketakadas that Manasa was trying to dominate Chand, who was Vaishya by caste, while the author, Ketakadas, was a Kayastha. Incidentally, the author of *Sasthimangal*, Krishnaram Das, was also a Kayastha. Ramdas Adak, the composer of *Anadimangal*, was a Kaivarta (fisherman) by profession. Bhabani Prasad, the author of *Durgamangal*, belonged to Vaidya family. The author of *Dharmamangal*, Ruparam Chakrabarty, belonged to a native Brahman family of Burdwan, whose father used to teach in a local toll (village school). Hence, it can be seen that the authors and their stories came from diverse caste affiliations like Brahmans, Kayasthas, Vaishyas, Vaidyas, and Kaivartas, instead of particular caste influences from the local folk beliefs.

Women in Mid-Seventeenth Century Mughal Bengal's Society

The discussion about the social position of women in Mughal Bengal is hardly visible in any specific work. There are some practices related to women that can be discernible in this period. An important example was the popularity of the Goddess Sitala, as evident from *Sitalamangal*, also known as the Goddess of small pox. This Goddess was basically worshipped by the lower sections of people in rural Bengal.^{****} The Goddess of cholera was

^{§§§}Sen, Sukumar, *BangalaSahityyerItihas*, Part-I, Calcutta, Modern Book Agency, 1940, p. 603.

^{****}Ghatak, Progya, "The Sitala Saga: A Case of Cultural Integration in the Folk Tradition of West Bengal", *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities*, Vol. V, Number-2, 2013, pp. 119-131.

equally worshipped by the Muslims as Ola-Bibi and the Hindus as Ola-Devi. There was a long-standing custom of women participating especially in religious rites known as *Vrata*. In order to please various Gods for prosperity and happiness of their families, the female *Vratīs* used to engage in fasting and sacrifice rituals.^{††††} The *Vratas* were orally transmitted through the vernacular traditions against the Brahmanical form of language, in which the commoners participated in a large number of ways, promoting the popular culture. The prevalence of the practice of Sati can be traceable from the account of foreign travellers who visited Bengal in the mid-seventeenth century. Although, there are several shortcomings with the travelogues. The most prominent of them was the absence of credibility in their observations, and another was the misunderstandings of those narrators, in several cases, about Indian society, culture, and heritage because of their lack of acquaintance with the Indian sub-continent. The problem is that their narrations are mostly based on observations and even hearsay. In this regard, there are two categorizations: one is eye-witnessed, while the other is heard from someone else. Another notable fact is that they have only enunciated those things that appeared strange to them on special ground, i.e., in comparison to their own culture. But, despite these limitations, their descriptions are adequate for depicting this aspect. To take an example of the observations of Jean Baptiste Tavernier, we find that he enumerated an incident of female infanticide, although he knew nothing about this practice, precisely what the Bengali people called *Sati* or *Sahamarana*. But he provided an unblemished eye-witnessed picture. He wrote,

"I was there at that time. As throughout the length of the Ganges, and also in all Bengal, there is but little fuel, these poor women send to beg for wood out of charity to burn themselves with the dead bodies of their husband..... The woman who intends to burn herself, preceded by some drums, flutes, and hautboys and dressed in her most beautiful ornaments, comes dancing to the funeral pile, and having ascended it she places herself, half lying, half seated. Then the body of her husband is laid across her, and all the relatives and friends bring her, one a letter, another a piece of cloth, this one flower, that one piece of silver or copper, saying to her, give this from me to my mother, or my brother or to some relatives or friends, whoever the dead person may be whom they have most loved while alive. When the woman sees that they bring her nothing more, she asks those present three times whether they have any more commissions for her and if they do not reply she wraps all they have brought in a *taffeta*, which she places between her lap and the back of the body of her defunct husband, calling upon the priests to apply fire to the funeral pile..."^{†††††}

In the mid-seventeenth century, some scattered evidences about the social condition of women can be traced from the vernacular Bengali sources, especially the Mangalkavyas. The

^{††††}Debnath, Amar, "Praxis of Bratakatha and Panchali in Folk Rituals of the Bengalis: A Study on the Role of Women", *Research Journal of English Language and Literature*, Vol. 10, Issue-1, 2022, pp. 290–293.

^{†††††}Tavernier, Jean Baptiste, *Travels in India*, Vol-2, translated from the original French of 1676 with a biographical sketch of the author, notes, appendices, Etc by V. Ball (reprint) New Delhi, Gyanbooks, 2020, p. 214.

marriage system was the most important institution to define the status of women, where the family priest used to conduct the program. Under their instructions, the marriage relationship had to be fulfilled. The practice of dowry was connected to marriage institutions. At the time of marriage, the parents and relatives of the girl gifted ornaments, furniture, jewellery, horses, and other luxurious items. The nature of the dowry varied in terms of the economic status of the parents. The mention of *Jautuk* (dowry) can be found at the time of Ranja's marriage in *Anadimangal*.^{§§§§}

The birth of a male child was always welcomed with joy, as it was believed that the son was the actual inheritor of the family because he had to take care of the parents at their last age. In *Manasamangal*, we see that Sanaka, Chand's wife, ostentatiously celebrated the birth of her last son, Lakhindar,^{*****} but the birth of Behula was also glorified.^{†††††} In the *Anadimangal* of Ramdas Adak, Ranja, the mother of Lausen (the central character of this *kavya*), was expecting a male child, for which she organized a grand worship.

পুত্রকামসঙ্কল্পকরিলরঞ্জাবতি।
বিধিমেতেপূজাকরেঠাকুরযুগপতি।।
অতঃপরগুরুনির্দেশেপেয়েরামা।
মহাপূজাআরম্ভকরিলমনোরমা।।^{†††††}

(Ranjabati was expecting a male child, so she organized grand-worship under the supervision of the family priest)

Women's primary responsibilities were to maintain household duties such as caring for parents, husbands, and children. We found in *Manasamangal* that Behula was a household woman who was dedicated to her family and went to save the life of her husband to protect the family line.^{§§§§§} In the *Anadimangal* also, it can be seen that a lady was expected to be Sati and Savitri in her dealings with all kinds of household duties.

অসতীহইলেতারনরকেতেসাজা।।
কহিতেউচিতপাছেমেনেভাবেদুখ।
কোনকালেঅসতীরনাহিহেরি মুখ।।
সতীসমসুধন্যাসংসারেনারিঃআর।
সাবিত্রীহইতেহইলকুলউদ্ধার।।^{*****}

(Nobody should face the unchaste woman because she would be in hell. The righteous ladies are capable of saving a family from a bad situation)

^{§§§§} Adak, Ramdas, *Anadimangal*, edited by Basanta Kumar Chattopadhyaya, Calcutta, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad Mandir, 1345 B.S (1938), p. 27.

^{*****} Khemananda, Ketakadas, *Manasamangal*, edited by Bijan Bihari Bhattacharya, Delhi, Sahitya Akademi, 2018, p. 16.

^{†††††} Ibid., p. 19.

^{†††††} Adak, Ramdas, *Anadimangal*, p. 41.

^{§§§§§} Khemananda, Ketakadas, *Manasamangal*, p. 27.

^{*****} Adak, Ramdas, *Anadimangal*, p. 72.

Similarly, *Anadimangal*, referring to the household attitude of Ranja, mentions that she was to serve her husband as the master of the family. Ranja poured water on her husband's feet after his return to home; that was supposed to be her prime duty as a housewife.^{†††††} These duties were regarded to be the pre-requisites for achieving heaven after the conclusion of material life. We might also observe how gender identity has been reflected through these activities. The society of Bengal was patriarchal from ancient times and in the medieval period this trend continued. It can be seen in the discussion about women of this period that from the moment of her birth to household duties, the life of a female was encircled by the elements of male-centric norms dictated by and dependent upon the father, husband and son. They had no longer been able to stay under their paternal care as they had to be in their husband's care where they were entrusted with the duties of protecting family prestige and giving birth to a male child, for which they had to worship various deities and perform rituals. However, the woman in those circumstances was still able to hold supreme power after becoming the mother of a son, as in the case of Ranja, the mother of Lausen in *Anadimangal*. Women were restricted from indulging in illicit affairs as they were expected to be true Sati. As such no rules were enforced in terms of dowry, we don't have any clear evidence that it was a socially enforced norm. However, it was a common practice in every family.

Conclusion

A glimpse at the contemporary Bengali sources shows us that society was patriarchal in nature in which women were bound to live under male dominance, abiding by the norms of society. The position and role of women has also been evaluated in this work, especially, with reference to the marriage system and their attitude towards household duties. They were supposed to fully dedicate themselves to their respective families by taking care of their husbands and children. Sometimes, they maintained full responsibility in a family as the guardian, as was the case with the character of Ranja, the mother of Lausen, in *Anadimangal*. Further, the importance of women can also be seen in Goddess faith of mid-seventeenth century, because the Goddesses always chose household ladies to spread their religion. But it is difficult to argue whether the Goddess faith had fully contributed to the alteration of social status of women in mid-seventeenth century Bengal. The widespread acceptance of Goddess worship in rural areas had no real effect on the established social ideals. However, it is true that in the religious sphere, they reached in a superior stage, which appeared to be a dynamic transformation of Bengal's social life.

^{†††††}Ibid., p. 30.