

Making and Breaking of Bengali Hindu Women: Placing Partition Memoirs by Bengali Hindu Women against “Broto Katha”

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I

When one looks at the word “woman” from the perspective of gender, it always comes with some predefined notions, in most cases defined by the representatives of patriarchy, which also provides the whole thing with a flavour of social politics of gender. Even Tagore had to write that a “woman” is half her womanhood and half a man’s imagination. In her inaugural speech on 9th March 1989 at a seminar titled *Indian Women: Myth and Reality*, Ashapura Devi says:

“Women have always been misled by the imposed ideal of womanhood. Be it her gentle manners and natural tenderness, or her lack of physical strength, she has always found herself hidden behind a mist of illusions, fenced in on all sides and forced away from the real world into the seclusion of a helpless and dispossessed life. It is the unfair system that fostered the absurd notion - that she has no place in the world of work outside her home. Man is the maker of that world, and a woman’s duty is to make him a home.”¹

At the advent of civilisation, the texture was essentially matriarchal. Probably the priority was given to the fertile nature of womanhood. Gradually with the growing complexity, the patriarchy took control over society and the first thing it did was to prove its rival gender subordinate. This hypothesis falls fine with almost every civilisation in the world, including India. To confirm the superiority of the “man” they very cunningly defined religion and gendered its concepts in favour of them. From the Christian Bible to Hindu scriptures - every religious text shows women as subordinate and unfortunately opiumed by religion. The society accepts these gendered narratives as words from Gods, therefore, truth.

For Bengali Hindu women the fact is no different. Even modern poet like Tagore could not go beyond its influence. For example, in *Home and the World* he shapes Bengali women as yet unready to face the world outside the threshold. Though against it we have his Labanya in *Sesher Kobita*, Tagore places her as exceptional, in other word, rare. In *Dui Bigha Jomi* he clearly conceives the Bengali women as an embodiment of softness and sweetness. While searching for the stereotype that the “Bengali Hindu Woman” is, one may easily search the religious scriptures and works of literature. But often the process ends incomplete with only the search covering the mainstream Hinduism that affects the Bengali social practices. Instead, this article tries to search for the stereotype in a long-neglected² part of the socio-religious practice – namely the ‘Broto Katha’.

Jnanendramohon Das in *Bangala Bhashar Avbhidhan* defines Broto as rules, discipline, and pious ritualistic ceremony to be performed regularly to achieve wealth and other mundane comforts. Madhuri Sarkar in her *Broto: Samaj o Sanskriti* (Broto: Society and

Culture) has preferred to relate it to English 'ritual' or 'rite' where she also defines them according to *Standard Dictionary of English Language* as "A prescribed form or method for performance of a religious or Solemn Ceremony". In this essay the term Broto would be used in the sense Madhuri Sarkar has used it in her above-mentioned book.³ Broto Katha is the literature which validates the rituals. While worshipping involves a philosophy of higher standards, Broto(s), in most of the cases, are concerned with the fulfilment of mere mundane wishes. Rather I would like to say - momentary wishes. That's why many of them can be observed at any time of the year depending on the desire of the individual. Thus religious scriptures explain the philosophy behind religion and Broto Katha or the literature of the Broto explains what rituals are to be performed and often they are validated by stories where such performances have resulted in magical results, often without explaining the reasons or philosophy behind that. The explanation for this may be found in the observations of Abanindranath Tagore. And this same observation has particularly fetched my interest in searching for Bengali Hindu woman stereotype in the Broto Katha(s) widely observed in Bengal. He observes in his famous book *Banglar Broto* that we bear a prejudice that these are invented by our ancestors to teach the women about religion and its rules. He thinks that this applies only for the Shastriyo (Scriptural) Broto⁴ and does not apply for Meyeli Broto⁵. They were regularly performed even before the Hinduism or any religious scriptures of it existed. This observation by Abanindranath has inspired me to search what the Shastriyo Broto and its literature tells about Bengali Hindu women and what the Meyeli Broto has to say regarding the same. A section of this essay is dedicated to my findings that came out of a thorough study of the Broto and Broto Katha. It will also give focus on the male-female or masculine-feminine binary that comes out from it while it is studied and explained from the perspective of gender narratives.

The next section is dedicated to the breaking of this stereotype. In this respect, I find a very interesting dichotomy that runs through the Bengali socio-political and religious construction. In one hand Bengal has given birth to woman prodigies like Rani Rashmoni, Dr Kadambini Ganguly, Sarojini Naidu, Matangini Hazra and Preetilata Waddedar. On the other hand, we have domesticated our Goddess Durga in the attire of a housewife busy with the family consisting of an addicted husband and four children; as if to confirm that whatever bravery a woman manifests, her ultimate place in the family is that of a wife or a mother. Although there are exceptions, at intervals the society craves for the stereotype. Such is that craving that the largest celebrated festival of the Bengalis cannot ignore the influence of it. But my reading of Bengali literature and my understanding of Bengali social history suggest that a major shift had affected the construction of Bengali Hindu woman stereotype during and after the Partition of 1947. Women in a large scale started coming out of the domestic periphery claiming their share in the domains which previously was meant for the men only and a new gender binary was taking shape. This was no more exceptional but new-normal⁶. This was even more prominent in the narratives by the Bengali Hindu women of that specific piece of time. The present essay focuses on how the Broto Katha has helped in forming a stereotype and how these Partition narratives by Bengali Hindu women help to break the same.

II

Before lurking into the domain of Broto Katha to search for the Bengali Hindu Women stereotype, let me clear some facts about it to avoid misconception. Madhuri Sarkar in her book has related Broto Katha to 'rituals' or 'rites'. And such rites can be found in

peoples of different religions and these rituals are ancient than the religion they believe in and in some cases have evolved socially to be included in the religion. Such rituals are not exclusive of Hinduism but may be found in believers of Islam and even in Mexico, where the society is Christian. In the Sundarbans both the Hindus and the Muslims observe the Broto of Bon Bibi. The Bengali Hindus observe the Satyanarayan Broto which is originally the worship of Satyapir. Asan Bibi's Broto is also observed by the Hindus. (*Banglar Broto*, 24) The Lakshmi Puja Broto which the Bengali Hindu women observe every Thursday is an amalgamation of the Aryan and the Non- Aryan cultural practices. The same kind of rituals can be found in Mexico. The women in unkempt hair perform the ritual. The expectation is same – material and agricultural wealth.⁷ Thus these rituals are not exclusive parts of one's religious belief but are reflections of the mundane desires of human society. In course of history, they have been influenced and moulded by religion and mundane desires have taken shapes of Gods or Goddesses. My objective primarily is to seek a gendered perspective to look at the nature of those 'desires'. And here I shall take into consideration those Broto(s) which are mainly observed by Bengali women who are believers of Hinduism.

An interesting fact reflects when one looks at the classifications of the Broto Katha. According to Abanindranath, these are of two types – 'Shastriyo' (Scriptural) and Meyeli. (*Banglar Broto*, 05) 'Shastriyo' Broto can be observed by both men and women. 'Meyeli' Broto are for women and are to be strictly observed by women. Thus according to this classification, there is no Broto for the men specifically. And as we know, in conservative Bengali Hindu Society women take active parts in such ritualistic celebrations and men remain aloof. The scenario can be well understood from the depiction of the observation of Gajan or Charak by a 'babu'⁸ in 19th Century Calcutta in *Hutom Pyanchar Naksha* by Kaliprasanna Singha. The book depicts the Calcutta culture of that period. In the very first chapter, Singha describes the Charak in Calcutta of his time and narrates how the babu is annoyed as he has to do his part in the ritual, while he is all set to go out and spend the night at the 'kotha' of his mistress. And his wives are tensed and eager to avoid any imperfection in the observation of the rituals. (*Hutom Pyanchar Naksha*, 43) Madhuri Sarkar in her book also makes an elaborate classification of Broto(s) which are generally observed in Bengal, under five categories, namely – 'Kumari Broto' (to be observed by virgin girls), 'Sodhoba Broto' (to be observed by married women), 'Pouranik Broto' (included in the Puranas), 'Purushder Broto' (to be observed by men) and 'Barkendrik Broto' (to be observed on specific days in every week). The first two categories are meant for women; 'Pouranik' and 'Barkendrik' Broto can be observed by both men and women. But in general, the women are the active participants in the rituals in most of the cases. In support of this observation, one may refer to the conventional stories (Katha) attached with some of these frequently observed rituals (like Lakshmi Puja Broto or Harish Mongol Chandi Broto) where the women are depicted as active participants. Sarkar presents a list of almost three hundred such rituals observed in different parts of Bengal⁹ and only sixteen of them are mentioned as 'Purushder Broto'. (*Broto: Samaj o Sanskriti*, 23)

As Sarkar has suggested that Broto Katha reflects simple mundane human desire, from the above observation it may be concluded that in a family these desires are mainly confined to the female members or it is their duty to see that these desires are fulfilled. The men are only bread earners and the women are responsible for the material prosperity of the family. Still, nowadays such thoughts are nurtured and often the daughters and the wives are made responsible if the family runs through days of struggle.

If one looks at the list provided by Sarkar on the objectives of these rituals one can find a pattern. (*Broto: Samaj o Sanskriti*, pg. 21-37) Only a few of them have objectives which may be called 'sublime'. Most of them are observed for the fulfilment of wishes related to our daily family life. From securing good crops to providing security to the family members – every big and small wish seems to have a Broto for it. The women are to perform rituals for the safety security and prosperity of the family members, ancestors, domestic animals, crops, other harvests and business. They will even perform rituals for the peace of their dead mother-in-law. But if we look at what they perform for themselves, the finding is interesting.

The unmarried women will observe Broto for the safety of her father and brother because they will give her social and economic security, Some of such rituals are 'Bhai Duj', 'Kartik Purnima Broto' (to be observed on the full moon night during the Bengali month Kartik), 'Tusu', 'Tushtushali', 'Jompukur Broto'. They will pray for a rich good looking husband because the husband will replace father and brother after marriage. Some of such rituals are 'Baluka Broto', 'Magh Mondol Broto' etc. The married women will perform rituals for the long life of her husband and to get a son. For that, they will even observe rituals to confirm their husband's love and affection. When the son is born the observation will be for the long life and prosperity of the son. Some of such rituals are 'Sabitri Broto', 'Tara Broto', 'Joshi Broto', 'Jitashami Broto', 'Birinchi Broto', 'Fagun Koinyar Broto', 'Lakshmi Broto', 'Natai Chandi Broto', 'Itu', 'BelPukur Broto', 'Meleni Broto', 'Neel Shashthi Brata' etc. The reason becomes apparent that after marriage the woman is dependent on them. From these instances, this becomes evident that the stereotype that 'Broto' created of Bengali Hindu women is that of a dependant. That the woman does not pray for herself except only to make her attractive to her husband because only that will confirm her supply, suggests that the woman's role is limited inside the house with household work and in the bed-chamber. She is not allowed to go out to earn and become self-reliant. Her only aim is to bear a male child. There are rituals to confirm good luck while the husband is away. But no rituals or the narrative related to it; speak anything about women going out to earn or women taking the stand to protect the family. Although many rituals are performed to satisfy a Goddess, often the Goddess seems to be dependent on her husband, a more powerful God. The popular narrative of 'Lakshmi Broto' confirms that Goddess Lakshmi depends on the advice of Lord Vishnu or Narayana. In 'Chaitra Lakshmi Broto' (*Broto: Samaj o Sanskriti*, pg. 114) Lakshmi is found to serve as a slave in a Brahmin's house. Even if she is a Goddess she is under the control of Brahminism – more specifically Brahmin men. The woman will worship a Goddess, herself a victim of patriarchy, therefore, confirming a 'doubly redoubled' clutch of patriarchy in the society.

Now from 'Broto' let us come to 'Katha' or the narratives which are often attached to many of these rituals. The narratives are mainly attached to convince the listeners regarding the importance and effect of the rituals. But these often manifest the society's take on gender especially the women, helping in creating a stereotype of Bengali Hindu Women. Menstruation is impious according to the narratives. No woman can perform rituals during her days of menstruation. The married women have to wear a traditional sari, conch shell bangles and vermilion to observe these rituals, (even to listen to the narrative related to it) which in alternative narratives are symbols of patriarchy signifying that women after marriage become the property of the men and thus conforming to these narratives, dependants on them.

When translated into English the popular narrative of the 'Lakshmi Broto' reads –

“These women giggle loudly and speak foul words,
And sleep in the evening forgetting all works.
They have given away modesty, essential of a woman
And travel anywhere by their ill wish drawn.
They do not offer essence or light the evening wick
And vermillion on their forehead seems so bleak.
They do not apply cow dung in their lawns at dawn
Do not even hate to work without changing every morn.
Neither have they showed dedication towards parents-in-law
Negligence of in-laws is another great flaw.
Women must have modesty and all feminine traits.
But even before the husbands, they finish their plates.”¹⁰

(Taken from popular narrative related to 'Lakshmi Broto', translation mine)

This representative narrative is clearly indicative of the male-female binary that the Broto Katha wants to establish. Most of the narratives conform to the same. The ideal woman should be behind the curtain; they must confine themselves to household works, perform pujas and rituals, and be a slave to her husband and in-laws. Those who will dare to live a life of freedom and voice their heart out will be termed as socially inappropriate. They will not pray for themselves but the men in their family and after marriage, in their husband's family because, they will only prosper as a class or gender if the men allow them to. And this is what is validated by religion too. For example, the popular prayer for 'Itu Pujo' ritual is - "The maiden may get a rich husband and from him a good looking son, agricultural and monetary wealth." For "Punyi Pukur Broto" it is – "I am pious maiden Leelavati, lucky sister of seven brothers." In most of the narratives irrespective of their class, the men are depicted as earners, often living away from home for months, as if their sole purpose is to make wealth. And the women are held responsible for the failure of the men. The prosperity is the credit of the men and retaining it would be confirmed by their wives' or daughters' observation of Broto. They will be held responsible even if they have nothing to do with the husband's failure. In lion's share of the narratives, the women are presented as essentially wicked, contemplating conspiracy against the victim who is saved by observation of the Broto; for example, the stepmother in the narrative of 'Natai Chandi Broto' or the youngest wife in the family in the narrative of 'Neel Shashthi Broto'. One cannot ignore that a masculine understanding of the society (as well as Nation to some extent) emerges out of it. The gender politics to impose patriarchy over the women are evident in these narratives.

Practically, rituals originated even before people became civilised. At that time most rituals were performed to please the agencies of Nature to survive. Later at the advent of a complex civilisation, especially during the later Vedic period, patriarchy engulfed the social construction and moulded it accordingly. Everything was reconstructed in the language of patriarchs. The rituals were also modified. Narratives were formed to give patriarchy an upper hand. When the rituals were accepted and included as a part of Hinduism, they were moulded as an agency of patriarchy itself. The narratives became gendered, giving an upper hand to the 'first' gender and depicting the second gender as dependents. The Broto Katha(s) observed by the Bengali Hindu Women are part of the same historical process of gender politics and as explained earlier they contribute equally in creating a stereotype that depicts women as dependants and weaker section of the society.

III

In “Noishobdyer Gronthi Ebong ‘Deshbhager Sahityo’: Sottar Ananta Bibhajan” Abdul Kafi mentions a Facebook post of Shri Kallol Lahiri from 15th January 2016. Shri. Lahiri narrates her grandmother’s belief regarding ‘Lakshmi Puja’. This elderly woman was a victim of Partition and a refugee. She had never allowed anyone in her family to perform ‘Lakshmi Broto’ since they had to leave their ancestral home after Partition of 1947 and take a sojourn for the infinite struggle. The ‘Lakshmi Broto’ is performed wishing wealth, stability and prosperity of the house. Those who had lost their houses did not need that ritual – such she used to believe still she counted her last breath. (pg. 39)

This narrative compelled me to look at the Partition’s Bengali Hindu women from a very different angle. Loads of narratives are there to show how they were victimised. Loads are dedicated to narrating how they participated willingly or unwillingly in income generation increasing female employment. But simultaneously they were breaking the stereotypes set by their religion. Broto Katha being a rich socio-religious practice and having a rich oral or written narrative took my interest. Earlier I have explained how from a social ritual, which existed long before the formation of religion, it was gradually accepted and influenced by it. The previous section is also dedicated to tracing the stereotype of Bengali Hindu Women found in Broto Katha or the narratives related to these rituals. I would like to take into consideration memoirs by three Bengali Hindu women – *Riots, Partition and Independence* by Manikuntala Sen, *Two Women, One Family, Divided Nations* by Meghna Guhathakurta and *Trauma & Triumph* by Hasna Saha; and also one interview of Phulrenu Guha titled *Rehabilitation, East & West* (all of them are taken from the anthology titled *No Woman’s Land*, edited by Ritu Menon and first published in 2017 by Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for women) to place against the Broto Katha narratives to redefine the politics of the making and breaking of stereotypes of the Bengali Hindu Women and to trace how a new ‘gendered’ understanding as a counter-narrative to the masculine understanding of the society (as well as Nation to some extent) emerges out of it.

While Meghna Guhathakurta pens the experiences of her grandmother Sumati and her mother Basanti, Manikuntala Sen, Hasna Saha and Phulrenu Guha narrate their own experience before and after Partition. Some would argue that writing about their lives and getting published were sufficient to show that these women were breaking stereotypes. But, we have past instances of literature by women. Actually, the stereotypes were being broken by the things they chose to speak on or the activities they were participating in. While the Broto Katha tried to emphasis on what a woman should behave like, these Partition narratives practically ignored the concept of ‘religion’ in the sense it is generally accepted. While Broto Katha narratives and scriptures have always encouraged a gendered version of politics, these narratives made the word ‘religion’ political in itself. Here, whenever they have used words like ‘Hindus’ or ‘Muslims’, it seems that the words are secularly political rather than being religiously biased. 1947 Partition, in reality, was a game of politics between Indian National Congress led by Nehru and Muslim League led by Jinnah, which was played in the name of religion. Conforming to that fact, in these narratives, no more these words are representing ‘religion’, but power and class. I consider this to be their first and firm step towards breaking the stereotype. The narratives are essentially secular in nature. The reference to God and religion has been replaced by the narration of the time they were representing, the society and power politics. The stereotype that has so far been spoken about was

based on the religious formation of the society that even shaped gender politics. And now these narratives suddenly speaks about religion which itself is controlled by power politics. Thus when Sumati says that during her daughter's marriage in 1950 she could not trust a Muslim driver; it does not reflect her Hinduism but her being willingly or unwillingly in the opposite side of power politics in the name of religion. (Guhathakurta, 105) Manikuntala Sen or Phulrenu Guha does not judge men and women as religiously Hindu or Muslim when they speak about their political career. When they call them by their religion they suggest their position in the power-politics. Hasna Saha narrates how the Imam had threatened her father that to live in East Pakistan he had to learn Urdu. Here, Urdu is not essentially the language of the Muslims but the politically powerful class. Their narratives essentially avoid mentioning their religious practice or rather it seems that these women find that their socio-political and economical experiences and realisations were more important and representative of the time. Thus these are completely invalidating the agency, itself, that created the stereotype.

While the stereotype that Broto Katha gives us is a woman behind the curtain and dependent on men, not allowed to even to take a decision even regarding her own life, these narratives present the 'New Woman' as Ashapura Devi calls them in the previously mentioned speech. Completely crushing down the concept of 'Soti-Sabitri-Grigobadhu' or pious and domesticated housewife, these women are taking an important stand in their family as well as in society. I would like to begin with Sumati Guhathakurta's narrative.

Sumati, born in 1899, belongs to a generation which was more prone to follow the stereotype defined by religion and accepted by the conservative society. Brahminical politics did not allow Hindu women to have a taste of education. People like Rammohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, Sister Nivedita, Begum Rokeya had to struggle a lot to confirm education for Bengali women. But in rural conservative Bengal education for a woman was a hard-earned thing at least when Sumati was of school-going age. As her experiences (narrated by Meghna) tells us in the first person –

“The single most important event in my growing years was my education. I completed ten years of schooling, ignoring my father's resistance and social strictures, and passed my Matriculation exam in 1917 with flying colours. This was a time when the only girls who went to school without any moral qualms were Christians or those from Brahmo Samaj families.” (Guhathakurta, 98-99)

The words which strike are – “without moral qualms”. This directly places the whole question of female education in conservative Bengali Hindu society against the accepted stereotype that does not allow it. That's why I have chosen narratives by those women who had made them educated. And this was possibly their first step to ensure the breaking of stereotype. The politics of gender behind it can be understood easily. Education will only encourage them to demand equality and question the validity of religion as well as patriarchy. So the possibility of that should be nipped in the bud. Against it, Sumati confirmed her education. Her mother's contribution is also important. Being uneducated herself, she had understood the importance of education for her daughter. Later in the narrative, she adds that her marriage to a reputed family was confirmed not because of her appearance but because of her degree. Now, feminists may raise the question, but to me, in Sumati's time, this was a big blow to the stereotype consideration that a wife needs to be beautiful, fertile and rich but not educated. In several Partition narratives, we find that the aged widows were expendables. Often they were left on their fate while the rest of the family would migrate. Sometimes they would be sent to Brindaban to live

on people's considerations¹¹. But education provides a strength in nature which makes these women bear strong willpower. We find Sumati taking an important role in making every decision that is related to her family. From her daughter's marriage to leaving for India with her younger son and daughter – everything was decided by her, though her elder son was married and was of age to decide for the family. This matriarchy although in a small periphery is certainly a blow to the gender binary prevalent in the society during her time. Even when her elder son Jyotirmoy dies during 1971 massacre at Dhaka University, it is again she who decides that her presence beside Basanti, her daughter-in-law and living at Bangladesh, is the need of the time.

Now let us speak of Basanti Guhathakurata, wife of Jyotirmay who is the elder son of Sumati. She is another woman who breaks the stereotype. As she speaks through the pen of her daughter, Meghna, we come to know of her struggle during Partition. Being highly educated she was working as a Headmistress and had married her college mate by her own choice. Not only that, she was involved in cultural as well as political activities along with her husband. Her active participation in every decision making is worth noticing. It was she who decided that she would not leave East Pakistan for she had a brother to look after and secondly her husband was also reluctant. Even when her husband was shot during the 1971 Dhaka University Massacre, with her daughter she decided to stand strong and stay in Bangladesh to respect her husband's sacrifice. As a woman claiming her share in every sphere inside and outside the threshold and stand tall to support her socio-political ideology can obviously be called a breaker of stereotype.

Both Manikuntala Sen and Phulrenu Guha are politicians, the former a leftist and the later even was a cabinet minister during Indira Gandhi's regime. Both of them did not have to take the strain of migration that happened during the Partition of 1947. Guha was born in Calcutta and Sen was settled in Calcutta well before Partition. But the factor that makes their accounts countable in our present discourse is their active involvement in politics during the partition days and their involvement in the refugee welfare works during those days. Today India has only 12.6% female representation in the Parliament. Politics has always been a 'man-thing' in India. Where women are still dolls in the hands of men in 2020 and every day we begin our schedule with the news of rape or molestation only to prove that patriarchy still rules the society, one cannot think that in the 1940s two women would not only be important political figures but also, Manikuntala Sen will be mentioned in *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Women in World History* and Phulrenu Guha will be a cabinet minister later. Their narratives in consideration are not about the grooming of women but their political involvements, ideologies and the account of their works for the partition victims during days of riots and during the camp days, especially for the women, raped abused and humiliated. When a large number of the women in Bengali Hindu families were still busy indoor praying Gods and being slaves to their husbands these women had spent days outside home together with men party members to work for these destitute women. While the nation still hails the mythical Rama's forgoing his wife for she was kidnapped by Ravana, these narratives are really documents of the breaking of patriarchal stereotypes, paving way for woman empowerment. As Guha narrates in her interview –

"We decided that instead of accepting dole, a new work-plan should be implemented. It was like this – we would hand over the dresses that we tailored to the government and the government would give us what it spent on them. In other words, refugee women would both tailor and stitch the cloths – blouses, petticoats, shirts, trousers etc. – and we would

pay them for the work done. This helped many of these destitute girls to become self-sufficient." (Guha, 196-197)

These women were not only self-reliant themselves but were dedicated to the goal of making other women self-sufficient. This had certainly contributed to changing the prevalent gender binary. More and more destitute women were becoming self-reliant. And the next few decades will see that these women will confirm education for their girl child. As a result in the 70s women, employment had increased in West Bengal and most of these Bengali women were educated and belonged to Hindu refugee families.

One interesting incident that took place during the Kolkata riots of 1946 is documented in Sen's narrative. She writes –

"I was under the impression that women could not be a party to violence. But thanks to what I saw in the Ballygunge area, I had to abandon this illusion. I will not mention the name of the road I was walking down one day on my way to the Rashbehari tramline from Fern Road. I noticed a slight stir. From the top floor of the houses, women were throwing stout sticks into the hands of the men standing below. I wondered what the problem was. It seemed that the Muslims were coming, and I assumed that they were coming to attack the huge group. I was slightly scared too as I was on the road. Then I was shocked to hear that all this excitement in the neighbourhood was about a person wearing a lungi." (Sen, 61)

This incident seems interesting to me because we only expect men as participants in Partition violence and are generally used to find women as victims. But in this instance, these Hindu Bengali women are taking an active part in violence. Interestingly it was against a 'man' allegedly to be a Muslim. I can not only let this go as an incident triggered by religious difference. Probably the women were more active because the target was a man from the other community. I can't help thinking of it from the perspective of gender politics and gender domination. The Bengali Hindu women were not violent against any man but one who is a potential oppressor, as we know a woman's womb becomes a soft target during any communal riot and the patriarchs of any community think that by dominating over the women they can dominate a certain community.

While the Guhathakurtas belonged to a reputed educated and prospering middle-class family, Sen and Guha had a stable family history and political connections. Without disrespecting their contribution in breaking the stereotype, it must be said that the life and death struggle for existence was left for those belonging to the simple lower middle class of poor families. Hasna Saha, being a daughter of a simple schoolmaster, living at a remote village named Arkandi, belongs to this section. That's why her narrative is very important in the present context. These families generally preferred to live modestly in society abiding by social norms. They did not dream high; did not try to be revolutionary. Some of them went to school but ultimately the girls in these families did not dream of getting higher education or getting a respectable job. Either they would become a housewife or if poverty insisted work as household maids of the rich families. But Partition changed the whole social setup. The gender binary received a major shift. When circumstances made these women homeless, some fought hard to hold a grip over life. One such woman was Saha's mother who left Arkandi with only her six children and nothing else, for the Cooper's Transit Camp in Nadia in search of her husband who was found there ill and sick. I consider this exceptional and expressive of an alternative gender binary. She was not biding time in futile prayers and lamentation. But she chose to step out of the house to save the family, to stand by the male counterpart when he was in distress. And not only this woman did such, many such instances may be found but

often they remain undocumented because we do not search exceptional in the commoners. Some such interviews are documented in *The Trauma and Triumph – Gender and Partition in Eastern India*, edited by Jashodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta under the title ‘Widows of Brindaban: Memories of Partition’.

Living in the camp these families knew the importance of education and so Hasna and her sister were educated. Instead of thinking about marriage, they were thinking about a job to provide for the family. Both the sisters got employment in government projects for the refugee women. Apparently, there is nothing exceptional in this simple narrative by Hasna. But, it was not only the case of Hasna, Joya Chatterji in her *The Spoils of Partition: Bengal and India, 1947-1967* narrates how the significance of the women grew in the Post Partition Bengal. She narrates –

“As refugee women rapidly become more literate and as more of them joined the rank of the employed, the working *bhadramahila* (gentlewoman) was a new and important phenomenon in urban West Bengal.”¹² (Chatterji, 153)

Hasna, her sister and many other Bengali Hindu women from the refugee families were making this shift possible. The gender binary was shifting. If we find the new Bengali Hindu women as strong and claiming their share in the society, it was made possible by these women. Bengal had seen many revolutionary women. But women’s coming out of the house in such a large number to stand by their family in time of struggle was a phenomenon that was resulted by Partition of 1947. The historical shift gave a permanent blow to the gender binary in Bengali Hindu social construction. The politics of domination by patriarchy probably had received the highest resistance during this period. Partition’s communal violence had a gendered nature. The women were brutally abused and humiliated. Possibly this made the social stereotype of masculinity as a saviour crush down. Males in one’s own community were fragile and weak against a class and those from the other community were brutal and threat. This probably explains the incident mentioned earlier from Sen’s narrative. Thus probably a gendered awareness rose among women that, now they had to take care of themselves. The stereotype of dependency broke during Partition and according to me, Partition had made the Bengali Hindu Women self-sufficient as a class or gender for the first time in history. The dependent Bengali Hindu women from Broto Katha now turned into the self-reliant Bengali women of Partition.

Notes

- ¹The translation of Ashapura Devi's speech appears as an article in the book titled "Indian Women: Myth and Reality", edited by Jashodhara Bagchi (Sangam Books, India, 1995).
- ²'Neglected' in the sense neglected by the academics. Socially, often in a tribe, Broto is an integral part of women's daily life and 'religious' practice.
- ³In the first chapter Sarkar has defined Broto and has referred to stalwarts like Haricharan Bandyopadhyay, Abanindranath Tagore and Turner. Here she has defined Broto as a ritual to achieve certain goals and fulfil certain wishes and has shown its evolution through history (Pustak Bipani, Kolkata, 2019).
- ⁴Madhuri Sarkar explains following Abanindranath that Broto evolved along with the society. These existed even before the advent of Hinduism. Later Hinduism adopted them. As an example, Sarkar takes the Lakshmi Puja Broto by the Bengali women observed every Thursday. Those accepted by mainstream Hinduism are referred to as Shastriyo or Scriptural Broto.
- ⁵Meyeli Broto are to be performed by women only and does not relate to Hinduism directly, rather these rituals are concerned with the fulfilment of their 'feminine' wishes. This essay will later focus on how even the femininity of the wishes is decided.
- ⁶Ashapura Devi in her speech mentions the term 'new-woman'. I think this term aptly applies to these women also.
- ⁷The mention of Asan Bibi or Satyapir may be found in "Banglar Brata" by Abanindranath Tagore (pg. 24, 1943 edition, Viswabharti) and the instance from Mexico can be found in "Myths of Mexico and Peru" by Lewis Spence (pg. 85, 2010 edition, Cosimo Classics). Bonbibi can be found in Amitav Ghosh's "The Hungry Tide". Lakshmi Puja is also observed every Thursday by Bengali Hindu women with a desire to achieve mundane wealth and agricultural wealth. Although the influence of Aryan Hinduism has included idol worshipping or pot-puja (image of the Goddesses drawn on clay plate) originally the paddy or wheat sheaf was worshipped. Later the Goddess took the place of it. It suggests that such rituals originated when humans were essentially Nature worshippers.
- ⁸This babu culture was mostly fostered by the zamindari system and the wealthy class of Bengal. These people challenged the orthodox social ways of Bengal and gave rise to a completely new way of living in the then British-reigned Kolkata.
- ⁹Some of these are observed by Muslims and some by the tribes, who still think themselves to be outside the periphery of Hinduism, again supporting the hypothesis that some of these rituals are ancient in respect of the Hinduism.
- ¹⁰Belonging to a Bengali Hindu Family I have seen my grandmother and my mother observing 'Lakshmi Broto' every Thursday. The narrative is collected from my mother who can recite the whole narrative at one go. The lines rhyming properly make it easier. To retain the flavour I have tried to retain the same rhyming pattern in the translated version.
- ¹¹Some of such interviews are recorded in the first volume of The Trauma and Triumph – Gender and Partition in Eastern India edited by Jasodhara Bagchi and Subhoranjan Dasgupta. (pg – 187 to 191)
- ¹²In this context, one may also refer to Rittwik Ghatak's famous movie "Meghe Dhaka Tara" (Cloud Shrouded Star) or Jashodhara Bagchi's 'Women in Calcutta, After Independence' in S. Chaudhuri, Calcutta Vol. II.

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