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# “Birds in a Cage”

## Changes in Bengali Social Life as Recorded in Autobiographies by Women

Srabashi Ghosh

“Birds in a Cage”, that is how *Rasasundari*, a self-taught lady and the first Bengali autobiographer described the condition of women in her book published in 1876. The autobiography of *Manikuntala*, a front-ranking leader of the undivided Communist Party, was published in 1982. In between we find quite a few autobiographies written by Bengali women. Their accounts span the better part of two centuries.

Here we have tried to trace the changes in Bengali social life as experienced by these women and as recorded in their autobiographies. The issues that we have particularly focused our attention on are the status of women in their families, the question of marriage, education and the changing aspirations of women. We have also referred to the psychological tensions and uncertainties that women had to undergo in the face of social resistance.

The picture that emerges is not one of determined progress of women's emancipation led by the leaders of Bengal Renaissance but one of hesitant and uncertain advance in a period of social turmoil. These autobiographies throw new light on and add new dimensions to our understanding of the process of social change which conventional history has so far overlooked.

### I

THE first Bengali autobiography “My Life” was published in 1876. The title page described the authoress, *Rasasundari Devi*, as a religious lady and a devoted housewife. Then came “My Story” by *Binodini Dasi* (1912), followed by the “Autobiography of *Devi Saradasundari*” (1913), “Tales from the Past” by *Nistarini Devi* (1913), “Tales of Yore” by *Prasannamayee Devi* (1917), “*Amiyabala's Diary*” (1920), “*Memories of My Life*” by *Sudakshina Sen* (1932), “*Leaves Shed from Life*” by *Sarala Devi Chowdhurani* (1944), “*Clinging Chains*” by *Bina Das* (1947), “*Diary of a House-Wife*” by *Kailashbasini Devi* (1952) and another book by the same name by *Manoda Devi* (1955). These were succeeded by *Gnanadanandini Devi's* “*Days Gone by*” (1956), “*Memories from the Past*” by *Shanta Nag* (1970), “*With Regards to All*” by *Kananbala Devi* (1973), “*Ferrying Down the Memory Stream*” by *Sahana Devi* (1978), “*They Call Me Back Even Now*” by *Shova Ghosh* (1981) and “*Tales from Those Days*” by *Manikuntala Sen* (1982) one after the other. We have also used a letter by an anonymous prostitute. It appeared in a journal called *Vidya-Darshan* in 1842 under the title ‘Reasons Why Bengalee Women Go Astray’. We have an unpublished diary by another housewife *Kusumkumari Devi*. There is also a memoir “*Kakdweep*” 1948 by a peasant woman, *Mandakini Sinha*, which records the author's experience during the peasant insurrection known as *Tebhaga* Movement. There is also another autobiography called “*The Diary of an Educated Prostitute*” (1929) by one *Manada Devi* which had many editions and was translated both in Hindi and English. But its authenticity as well as its significance in the present context are rather doubtful.

Of course, there are many more autobiographical sketches, memoirs and stories both published and unpublished. A good many of these concern *Rabindranath* and *Viswabharati*. Most of the women who had

come across the great poet could not overcome his influence all their lives. His personality shadowed their own individuality. We have not mentioned these writings purposefully since these do not tell us much apart from the greatness of the poet, his compassion and concern for Indian women, and the degree of freedom that was enjoyed by women in his *ashram* at Santiniketan.

One thing should be mentioned at the outset. Most of these autobiographers came from the upper strata of the society. Many of them were high caste (*kulin*) Brahmins. Financially too, they were well off. Barring *Nistarini* none was illiterate. Some of them were indeed highly educated. *Saradasundari* was the mother of *Keshav Chandra Sen*, a well known orator and founder of the *Navavidhan Brahmo Samaj*. *Nistarini's* younger brother *Reverend Kalicharan Bandopadhyaya* was a well known figure and one of the doyens of Bengal Renaissance. *Prasannamayee*, herself a writer of some reputation, was the elder sister of *Pramatha Chowdhury*, a Barrister-at-Law and litterateur of repute. He was the founder editor of the renowned journal *Sabuj Patra*. *Gnanada* was married to *Rabindranath's* second elder brother *Satyendranath*, the first Indian civilian. *Sarala* was *Rabindranath's* niece, a famous singer and a sympathiser of the extremist movements in Bengal. She was the first Bengali woman to preside over a gathering of young men in Calcutta. *Sahana*, a much reputed singer of her time, was also very near to the *Tagore* family. *Shanta Nag* was the elder daughter of *Ramananda Chatterjee*, editor of *Prabasee* and *The Modern Review*.

*Kailashbasini's* husband *Kisori Chand Mitra* belonged to the radical *Young Bengal*, the disciples of *Derozio*. *Amiyabala*, *Sudakshina* and *Manoda* were not from any well known family. Nevertheless they had a middle class background. Their fathers or husbands were quite highly-placed officials. *Kusumkumari* did some social service at her leisure. But she was better known as the mother of *Jibanananda*, a front-ranking

post-*Rabindranath* poet.

On the other hand *Binodini* and *Kanan* did not have a family background to be proud of. We are not even told who their fathers were. *Binodini* was the only daughter of a fallen woman. And although through perseverance and hard work she became the ‘*Prima Dona* of Bengalee Stage’ she was denied a regular family life. She was an artiste in the true sense, totally given to her work. She helped to build the *Star Theatre* by donating all that she could afford, even physical labour. But her sacrifice was not recognised either by her co-artistes or by the larger society. She was looked down upon for her lowly birth both by the Hindus as well as the Brahmos. Even in her lifetime she was forgotten. Her bitterness prompted her to write her own biography to expose the hypocrisy of the contemporary society. The boldness with which she wielded her pen amazes us even to this day.

*Kanan* was a first rate singer and a very popular lady of the Bengali screen. She was born fifty years after *Binodini*. We do not know whether her parents were married or not. But the gifted and courageous girl never looked back. She took every opportunity to emerge as a fine singer and a complete artiste. She got the due recognition for her talents, married happily and after retirement devoted herself to the cause of hapless artistes. She did not meet the fate of *Binodini*.

To the old guard of the undivided Communist Party *Manikuntala Sen* is a well known name. She hailed from an educated, rather religious family of *Barishal*, now in Bangladesh. Her contemporary was *Bina Das*, a revolutionary from her school days. Later she became a follower of *Gandhi*. Like *Manikuntala* she was also elected to the Legislative Assembly. *Shova Ghosh's* husband *Deviprasad* was a member of the Parliament and a founder-member of the *Hindu Mahasabha*.

Since most of our biographers came from the upper strata of the society, their vision was restricted to the problems of their own

class. They were oblivious of the bigger society to which they did not belong. The early autobiographers maintained a distance from the lower caste and the untouchables. Some of the near relations of Prasannamayee "used to get their courtyards cleared by Brahmin maids so that they did not have to tread on the shadow of any *Sudra* woman".<sup>1</sup> So the history of social evolution spanning almost two centuries that is reflected in their autobiographies is very much incomplete. After seven decades since the publication of the first autobiography, Bina tells us about the female labourers of rice mills of Tollygunge area. Manikuntala passingly refers to the prostitutes living around the Kalighat temple whom she met in course of her election campaign. But these are only very stray instances where ordinary working women are mentioned. Binodini who published her book thirty-five years before Bina, mostly speaks of her career as an actress, her associates and admirers who were the elites of Calcutta society. She was a sensitive and a talented actress. Mentally she was far advanced and conscious of her dignity which alienated her both from the society she was born into and the society she wanted to belong to. On the other hand, the anonymous writer in *Vidya-Darshan* refused to accept the status of a virtuous *kulin* wife of a polygamous husband. She deserted her family to live all by herself. And the only way open to her was that of prostitution. Mandakini was a peasant woman. She got involved in the *Tebhaga* Movement the experience of which she narrated in her memoirs. If more and more women like her speak up and talk about their lives, their experiences and expectations only then we will be able to reconstruct a true and total picture of our society. But although segmented, the picture that emerges from these autobiographies is an authentic picture of the changing social values, and position of women in Bengali society.

## II

In the nineteenth century and even in the mid-twentieth, the predominating concern of men about their daughters was how to give them to marriage, even if only ritualistic marriage. Often young daughters of *kulin* Brahmins were wedded to polygamous old men. Nistarini was one of the thirty or forty wives of her husband. She was not even aware of the exact number of her co-wives. Binodini also went through the ritual of marriage though it was never expected that she would be a housewife. She was married as early in her life that she could not even remember her so called husband.

To marry off the daughter at a very early age was the custom. Any departure was frowned upon by the society often leading to social ostracism. Except the caste of the groom no other consideration was important. Even after marriage many girls continued to live with their parents. The

polygamous husband did not take any responsibility of his wives. Many *kulin* girls saw their husbands only on the wedding night after which the grooms would depart with whatever booty they could grab as wedding gifts.

Even the more progressive Tagore family, itself ostracised because of some impurity in the caste lineage, was not free from this mentality. When Sarala crossed thirty but was still not interested in marriage her mother and elder sister became anxious. On the pretext of her mother's illness she was asked to come back home. When she arrived she found the bridegroom's party already waiting for her. She was compelled to marry to save her father from embarrassment.<sup>2</sup> She was married to Rambhaja Dutta Chowdhury, a progressive gentleman from Punjab who was marrying for the third time after the death of his first two wives. Nevertheless, Sarala was fortunate to have a husband, who was a political activist and a writer and who encouraged Sarala to maintain her public life. All this happened in the first decade of the twentieth century.

However, a decade later this rigid mentality showed signs of cracking down. When Sahana's wedding was arranged, her uncle C R Das was sad. He thought perhaps Sahana would be able to devote her life to music.<sup>3</sup> However, it was nothing more than wishful thinking. He himself performed the *sampradan* in Sahana's marriage. In 1916 it was not considered proper that a girl from a respectable family would pursue her own vocation.

But Amala Das, C R Das's sister and Sahana's aunt thought otherwise. She was also a talented singer. She was the first woman from a respectable family to cut a gramophone disc. Amala remained a spinster throughout her life. She spent her old age in an *ashram* separated from her family. We do not have any record as to how much resistance and social approbation she had to face for her courage. Perhaps her somewhat religious inclinations made things easier for her. In Indian society religious women have always enjoyed more freedom than others.

But times had been changing. So we find Bina Das, unmarried even at thirty-six, a full-time political worker. Manikuntala and some of her women comrades devoted themselves to social and political work. They did not hesitate to live away from their families. It seems, the *swadeshi* and the nationalist movements initially, and later the communist movement changed in attitude towards the role of women. The excitement of the times gave them courage to defy many a social taboo. What the social reformers tried to propagate and even what were beyond their dreams were suddenly acceptable. Many shrank back. But those who rode the waves were not a handful in number. However, for the overwhelming majority of women, marriage was (and still is) the be all and end

all of their lives.

In marriage, the only factor to be considered was caste and nothing else. Not even enlightened families took any interest in the would be son-in-law's character or that of the family. One night after her elder sister's marriage, Manoda heard her grandmother weeping. The old lady had come to know that members of the family in which her grand-daughter was married, tied their wives against the leg of the bedstead and slept with their maid-servants.<sup>4</sup> Manoda's grandfather was in the civil service. Theirs was an educated and well-to-do family.

Undue importance to caste was one of the reasons that led to polygamy. To many of the upper caste Brahmins wedding meant nothing but monetary gain. They were not supposed to take responsibilities of their wives or children. They never brought all of their wives home. The women stayed with their parents. The husband visited them by turn. Number of visits varied on the quantum of *dakshina* from the wives' relatives. The polygamous *kulin* male maintained a register of their wives. In it he jotted down the addresses of his in-laws, the amount of expected gifts, number of children by the wife, if any, and similar other information. If the *dakshina* was not upto the expectation, the husband took away even her clothings. Often marriage was the means to tide over the economic hardship of the family. Nistarini wrote of an incident when unable to keep the wolf out of the door a *kulin* father took his son to the bride's house to claim her ornaments. Not satisfied with what they got, the son remarked, "Father, this is not enough! Please do not mind. Don't say anything to my mother. Let us go. I can marry again and bring money to you."<sup>5</sup> Binodini's five-year old brother was wedded to a motherless child of two and a half years. What little jewellery they got as dowry was then sold. That staved off starvation for some time.<sup>6</sup>

In a male dominated world women accepted and rationalised their plight. Take the case of Prasannamayee. Her father was in the civil service. An English governess was appointed for her. She mixed with the wives and daughters of the British civilians. Nevertheless in their family women were not treated better than elsewhere. Her aunts were widowed early. They spent the rest of their lives in strictest celibacy. To maintain their caste purity, Prasanna was wedded to a *kulin* bridegroom who later turned out to be a lunatic. But Prasanna was so infatuated by her caste that neither her aunt's plight nor her own misfortune could influence her judgment.

One of Prasanna's great-aunts was married to a high caste employee of the zamindari. After her death Prasanna's teen-aged aunt was married to that same old man. Justifying her grandmother's action Prasanna wrote, "As no one else from the ritually acceptable caste was available, my

grandmother was compelled to do it.”<sup>7</sup> Prasanna, it should be remembered, was quite a famous poet during her time.

Sarala too was in favour of polygamy of Hindu men. In Punjab, after her marriage, she met a few gentlemen who had married for a second time to have a son. Sarala’s sympathy was with them. She wrote, “The Culture of Hindu women is to appreciate the necessity of maintaining the lineage of the husband’s family. This negation of self is a way of protecting oneself from the serpent’s bite (*sic*) of the husband’s attraction towards other women.”<sup>8</sup> She herself was liberated enough to accept a job in Mysore against the objection of her family. But the idea of equal rights and responsibilities of a man and a woman to build a home did not attract her. In her autobiography she declared that banning polygamy by law was unnecessary.<sup>9</sup>

Again it was generally assumed that the inclination for men to go to several women was natural. The duty of a devoted wife was to accept this and to try to prevent it if she could. The onus was always on the women. Speaking about her son Saradasundari commented, “My daughter-in-law was so thin and small that, if Keshava had been a bad-natured boy, he would surely have gone astray.”<sup>10</sup> When a doctor living nearby did not marry after the untimely death of his wife, Prasannamayee was impressed by his ‘mental strength and religious devotion’. To her it was exceptional, whereas her aunts’ life-long celibacy was but natural. Among all the nineteenth century women only illiterate and neglected Nistarini was against it. She said, “That which is good and true lasts; that which is bad and untrue will never last in whichever society it is.”<sup>11</sup>

Women did not have any right on their husband’s property, even husband’s home. They could neither inherit their paternal property. After the death of the husband they were often driven out of the husband’s home. They had to take the shelter of their brothers. But there also they were unwanted. Often their conditions were no better than maid servants. When things became unbearable some of them left their families. The ultimate destination was the red-light district. Perhaps it was their only possible protest against social injustice. When the sixteen year old girl from Shantipur first saw her husband after wedding she was stupefied. She could not believe that this man of fifty, grey-haired, uncouth and sick was her lawfully married husband. Not only his look but also his behaviour at night shocked her mortally. She was stunned with shame, hatred and chagrin. She doubted if she could ever show her face to other people. She wrote in *Vidya-Darshan*, “Although initially it was my desire to remain righteous and to keep up the prestige of my family, I had to take to prostitution when everything went beyond the limit of my endurance.”<sup>12</sup> Nor was she alone. Her younger sister and twenty of her friends travelled along the same path.

The life of a woman revolved round the axis of family and marriage and little else besides. Women were expected to be dutiful

to their parents, husbands, children and other members of the family. But they hardly received any respect or consideration from them. And nobody cared about their happiness. Once Nistarini’s mother brought her son-in-law to look after him in his sickness. She would often cook separately for the bridegroom. But the menfolk of the family resented it.<sup>13</sup> Nistarini’s brothers were unconcerned that their sister could be hurt. Nistarini was not supposed to have a personality of her own. In her autobiography, Nistarini too did not record her reactions in the face of such humiliation.

If ‘affectionate’ blood relations could be so cruel, it can only be expected that the treatment in the in-law’s place would be even worse. To most people a bride was nothing more than a necessary commodity to be discarded or replaced at will. Prasannamayee knew a doctor who broke down after the untimely death of his wife. At this his uncle was very annoyed. He said, “Yadav, you should be ashamed to mourn in this manner. Wife is nothing but a pair of slippers. You have lost one, I will get you another. Why do you have to cry? A person is lucky if the wife dies. Because then he gets the dowry again.”<sup>14</sup>

While the bridegroom’s family took marriage to be a source of additional income, the bride’s people were careful to perform the ceremony as much thriftily as they could. Prasannamayee and Manoda were lucky to be born in well-off families. But in an ordinary family birth of one daughter cast a pall of gloom. Right from early childhood she would be given to understand that she was unwanted. For, her birth meant dwindling of family fortune. Nistarini remembered that her father and elder brother had quite often gave vent to such feeling.<sup>15</sup> After his second daughter, Seeta, was born Ramananda Chatterjee’s elder brother wrote, “We are sorry to hear that you have become the father of a second girl!”<sup>16</sup>

There were of course a few exceptions. Sudakshina’s husband longed for a daughter and when one was born he thanked God for the gift.<sup>17</sup> Ramananda too was angry with his conservative brother. But such examples were rare.

If parents grudgingly spent money to get their daughters married, what was the fate of such girls as were fatherless or orphans? Saradasundari said, “My third daughter too was married to my eldest son-in-law. Previously she was betrothed to a rich man’s son. But when my eldest daughter died my husband’s elder brother broke the previous arrangement and wedded Chuni to my eldest son-in-law. This marriage was performed in a very niggardly manner. Not even a *sari* was presented to her.”<sup>18</sup>

Actually at that time women had to depend on other people’s charity—be it her father, grandfather, husband or some other relation. Sarada was fortunate to have an affectionate and responsible husband. Till his untimely death she was respected, cared for and happy. But everything changed after the death of her husband. She was almost

at the point of starvation. Her husband’s younger brother took away the cot on which she slept. All her late husband’s woollens were snatched away from her possession. With her young children she used to spend her days in fear behind closed doors. She was mortally afraid that one day she would be driven out of the house along with her children. All these happened in the presence of her mother-in-law. That old lady was not too happy about the turn of events but she was neither expected to stand by her daughter-in-law nor had the power to dissuade her sons. All she did was to pound her head against the wall and cry.<sup>19</sup>

However, it is not that from the beginning of Sarada’s married life her mother-in-law took the girl under her wings. Sarada was married off at the age of ten. But her mother-in-law would not believe it. She thought that she had been deceived by Sarada’s father and so was somewhat revengeful. Sarada worked all through the day. When she was tired of household chores and wanted to play she was punished. What she remembered of her girlhood was an all pervading fear. Just a look at her in-laws was enough to dry up her blood in the veins.<sup>20</sup> And Sarada was no exception. In most of the families older women tried to make younger girls blunt so that they could not feel the extent of social deprivation. And when in turn these girls were mothers-in-law the behaviour towards their next generation changed but a little. It is true that Sarada was not so cruel towards her daughters-in-law. At the same time she could not praise them whole-heartedly. She said, “All my children were good. Though their wives came from different families, my sons’ influences transformed them into better women.”<sup>21</sup>

Even in enlightened Brahmo families girl-wives were not always treated well. Once when Gnanadanandini became sick a doctor was called and she was given medicine. But in the large joint family there was none to look after her or even to see whether she got her food in time. Her mother-in-law (Rabindranath’s mother) was unconcerned. If any of her daughters-in-law was ill she would direct the maid servants to inform some clerk of the *kutchari*, and there her duties ended.<sup>22</sup>

There are also some rare instances when daughters-in-law were received with open arms. At the age of twelve Rasasundary was married. Her mother-in-law accepted her like a beloved daughter. As long as she was capable she did not bother the young girl with household chores. She told her to enjoy herself and even asked other village girls to come and play with her.

Sudakshina’s grandfather had ordered widows of his village not to perform the ritualistic *nirambu upabasa* (fasting without water) prescribed for widows on specific days of the month. In spite of being a Brahmin priest himself he was open minded. When his widowed daughter went to her in-laws temporarily she requested the mother-in-law of her daughter to permit her to have

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something on the days of fasting. And what is more surprising is that his request was honoured.<sup>23</sup>

Marrying off the daughter at an early age was such a strong custom that even Rabindranath could not defy it initially. He married off his second daughter Renuka when she was only eleven. Later his youngest daughter Meera wrote, "Father would have done well if he gave her some education instead of marrying her off so early."<sup>24</sup> In her opinion perhaps it was the failure of Renuka's husband to be established in life which led to her disease and untimely death.

In general the nineteenth century women did not speak against child marriage. Only Saradasundari said, "Previously I thought that all the dictates of our Hindu religion were good. . . . But now I think it is better to get girls married after they have matured to some extent. Because then they do not have to put up with so much disadvantages."<sup>25</sup>

Owing to social reform movements and spread of education among girls, in the twentieth century the custom of child marriage began to wane. But even then there were people who tried to romanticise it. Dineshchandra Sen was a learned man and a renowned researcher and literary critic. He wrote the foreword for the new edition of Rasasundari's autobiography. At one place Rasasundari recorded the pain she had to endure when after marriage at a very early age she was forced to leave her parents. On the day after her marriage, and throughout the three days during her journey to her new home, she did not stop crying. Referring to the weeping girl Dineshchandra wrote, "Nowadays one does not find girls shedding tears while leaving for their in-law's places. But Rasasundari's was the true picture of those times. When a small girl, just weaned away from the mother, still tender and immature. . . is sent away to her in-law's place with the groom for the first time a pall of unspoken sadness shrouded the whole village. Such a picture has now become part of our memory. But we want to treasure these memories."<sup>26</sup>

With education, girls were married at a slightly advanced age. But even then they were not consulted at the time of marriage. Shova Ghosh was surprised to know that her would-be father-in-law had inquired whether Shova approved of the impending marriage with his son. To Shova's relatives, however, the idea did not appeal.<sup>27</sup> This happened in the year 1919. Perhaps things were somewhat better in Brahmo families. Even in 1876 we find Sudakshina's mother consulting her daughter about her marriage.

### III

From the secluded rooms at the hind-quarters of the houses the first place to which women were permitted to go was school. Spread of English education was a positive force towards their emancipation.

The missionaries had begun to set up schools for girls in Calcutta from the early part of nineteenth century. However, girls from Hindu families probably were not sent to these schools before 1849. In that year Bethune founded the 'Hindu Female School'. Nevertheless, it would be untrue to say that women were not given any education before that time. In the autobiographies we find some contradictory statements about women education in Bengal which we will try to present here. It seems more extensive research is required in this area.

Among all our women autobiographers, Rasasundari was unique in her quest for education. Though she never raised her voice in disobedience to society, her life itself was a forceful protest. She was one of the first persons to realise that education had a value of its own. Rasasundari was aggrieved by the general lack of education among women around her: "why shall we live such a miserable life? Like thieves we spend our lives in prisons. Only because we are born as women shall we be denied education too!"<sup>28</sup>

In her early childhood Rasasundari was very shy and withdrawn. In her ancestral home there was a *pathsala* for boys run by a missionary woman. Rasasundari's uncle used to take her there everyday and told her to sit quietly. But she was not even taught the Bengali alphabets. It seems that the missionary woman was not interested to teach her. However, Rasasundari became familiar with the alphabets just by looking at them everyday and hearing the boys recite them. Almost two decades later Rasasundari exploited this familiarity with the alphabets to learn to read on her own.

As schools for girls began to come up and the news spread, the village elders showed their indignation and condemned it outright. "It seems *Kaliyuga* has come. . . . Now women have come to the fore and menfolk have taken the backseat. In our times we did not have such problems. . . . As things stand now gentlemen are likely to lose their *jati*. Perhaps all the hussies will now join the chorus to go to school!"<sup>29</sup>

Rasasundari was so afraid of being scorned that she dared not look at anything in print in front of others. Even after she learnt to read she kept this secret from her affectionate sister-in-law who lived in same house.

This was in 1840s. From Gnanadanandini's memoirs we find that around this time her mother used to read and write. But she was also equally careful to keep it a secret. Gnanada said "One night I suddenly woke up from sleep. Raising my head I found my mother reading or writing something. But as soon as she found me awake she tried to hide the papers. She was afraid that being only a child I might tell others about it."<sup>30</sup> She further narrated, "One of our elder relatives lived nearby. She was educated. For fear of public scorn she wrote letters and

kept daily accounts very secretly. But somehow people came to know and she was condemned."<sup>31</sup>

Against this, Prasannamayee's testimony appears rather strange. She was born in Rajshahi (Bangladesh) in 1857. According to her most of the women of her village could read printed books and sign their names, even at that time. Among them Kasishwari was highly educated. After the death of her husband she learnt to read and write from her *mantradata guru*. She travelled in many places as a pilgrim. On returning to her native village she founded a *pathsala* in her house. Small boys and girls were taught by her in the morning. And in the evening she arranged a study circle for older women. With closely cropped hair and white borderless *sari* worn in a simple way Kasishwari was a personality not to be ignored.<sup>32</sup>

We do not know how Gnanada's mother got her education. Shova Ghosh wrote that in some families young girls were taught by missionary women. According to her this was in vogue from 1820 to 1880. Her great-grandfather Ramkumar Bose arranged for his young daughters-in-law to be educated by a nun. At regular intervals these girls were examined by a more qualified missionary lady.<sup>33</sup> In some families mendicant women of the *vaishnava* sect used to come to teach the ladies. Rabindranath's mother was educated by such a *vaishnavi* who was equally conversant in Sanskrit as in Bengali.<sup>34</sup>

From the second half of the nineteenth century, however, unmarried girls from the upper strata of Calcutta society were sent to schools. In some families girl-wives had permission to take lessons from some junior member of the family—not always junior in age but junior in relationship. Saradasundari's youngest son arranged regular study sessions for his elder sisters-in-law in their house.<sup>35</sup> Gnanada took regular lessons from her younger brother-in-law.<sup>36</sup> In his letters from abroad Gnanada's husband inquired about the progress of her study. He advised her to learn the English language well.

In some remote villages women education was introduced by some farsighted unorthodox men. Sudakshina's mother was educated by her brother at the insistence of her husband. On his deathbed he requested his wife to educate their daughters and not to marry them off early.<sup>37</sup> They were Hindu Brahmins and not converted Brahmos. For a few days young Binodini also was sent to a free school in the locality. This appears to be rather curious. Does it indicate that women education was spreading fast at least in the urban areas, so as to entice a prostitute to send her daughter to school around 1870s? According to a report published in the *Hindoo Patriot* on January 16, 1871, of the total number of pupils enrolled in

ifferent schools 0.20 per cent came from disreputable classes'.<sup>38</sup>

Against Rasasundari's secret and heroic efforts to be able to read just three decades earlier all these look stunningly progressive. The source of Rasasundari's inspiration was a strong desire to read the *Vaishnava* literary texts. From her childhood she was religious minded. One night she dreamt of reading aloud from the text *Chaitanya-Bhagabata*. That was the beginning of it all. Waking up she made up her mind to have a go at it. She was not totally ignorant of Bengali alphabets. But what knowledge she acquired in the *pathsala* more than a decade ago was naturally forgotten. Somehow she obtained one page of a religious text and another handwritten page of her eldest son. During the time spent in the kitchen she hid them behind her long veil. While cooking she would secretly look at them and try to recall her childhood impressions. She would then compare a letter or a word from the page with its phonetics. All this time the pages would remain tucked and hidden behind the stack of cooking utensils.<sup>39</sup> It was a long and hard journey but she ultimately succeeded. Much later when she was in her middle age she would once again slowly learn to write, but this time at the request of her sons who longed to receive letters from her while staying away from home.

Rasasundari's determination and perseverance were incomparable. And this was appreciated by her relatives and neighbours. But generally in the nineteenth century women were forbidden to read or write, because supposedly that was sure to bring widowhood to them except perhaps in the *zamindar* and *talukdar* families where some education for women was necessary to preserve the landed property. But when Rasasundari could read, her sister-in-law and neighbours were enthusiastic and everyday they flocked around her to hear her read the religious texts. What does it signify? Did the women find in Rasasundari a symbolic realisation of their dream, or social conservatism had already weakened by then? In his village Sohagdal in Vikrampur (Bangladesh) Sudakshina's maternal uncle founded a *pathsala* for girls with the help of some of his friends. This has around 1860. Though idle talkers and village elders were against the effort, the enrolment figure did not stop increasing.<sup>40</sup>

In 1872 Sudakshina's mother came to Calcutta with her two daughters. At that time she was admitted to Bethune school. That she was a married woman and mother of two children did not deter her to go to school. Due to her failing health, however, she had to discontinue. Slightly more than a decade later, when her daughter started going to school Sudakshina also got herself enrolled in a private school. This was so extraordinary that it surprised her classmates. She was a topic of hot discussion in the school.

Opposition against educating the wives did not only come from men but from the older women also.<sup>41</sup> However, from the beginning of the twentieth century this attitude began to change. An educated daughter or daughter-in-law became a thing to be proud of. Shanta's grandmother once spent a fortnight (*Kalpabasa*) on the bank of the rivers in Prayaga for religious purpose. Similar other ladies assembled there often boasted about the accomplishment and education of their daughters-in-law during conversation. Shanta wrote, "Once when she could not stand it any longer she told the ladies that her daughter-in-law (Shanta's mother) could read English, Bengali and even Parsi".<sup>42</sup>

Even long after women's education was accepted by the society, women were considered to be inferior to men in intelligence. They were not given the opportunity to study science. Perhaps it was thought what was not needed for household chores such as cooking, raising of children, knitting, writing letters or keeping daily accounts was unnecessary for them. Sarala and Shanta were students of Bethune College which was founded in 1879 exclusively for girls. No science subject was taught there. Shanta complained, "As long as I was a student, every year the inspector would visit the college and ask 'How many of you want to learn mathematics?' Every year some of us used to raise our hands. But four years passed and nothing happened".<sup>43</sup> Sarala was more determined than Shanta, she wanted to study physics just like her brothers. Bethune College did not offer her the opportunity. In vain she wrote to the education directorate. At last one of her father's friends, Mahendralal Sarker, arranged for her to attend the evening lectures in his Science Association.<sup>44</sup>

This was perhaps the first time that boys and girls attended the class together. At the time of entering and leaving the lecture theatre Sarala was invariably accompanied by her brothers one on each side. Her classmates whispered among themselves about her 'bodyguards'. Manikuntala also had a similar and interesting experience. She was a student of Brojomohan College, Barisal (Bangladesh). The first woman student of the institution, Savitri, came to the college in a closed coach. It used to stop just in front of the classroom. Hiding her face behind a long veil Savitri climbed down and entered an anteroom. Instantly the doors were shut. A maid servant accompanied her to help in these errands. In the classroom she sat behind a partition made of wood and smoked glass. In the glass there was a small hole for her to see the professors. She responded to roll-call by tinkling her bangles.<sup>45</sup> Manikuntala herself was a student of this college. She too sat behind that wooden partition in the third decade of this century. But when she came to Calcutta for post-graduate studies she found girls

travelling alone in public transport.<sup>46</sup>

After women began to get education and were somewhat exposed to the world outside they were caught between two worlds. Kailashbasini's husband daringly rejected many Hindu customs. He also wanted Kailashbasini to follow him. Intellectually Kailashbasini was with her husband. But she was very cautious in public. She did not have the courage to follow what she knew to be true lest she was ostracised. She wrote in her diary, "I do not care for *Hinduani*. But I make a big show of it all the same. The only reason for this is that if I am not strict in my attitude my husband will discard *Hinduani* altogether. Hindus are our close relatives. As we cannot leave them, I follow the customs ... When Ramtanubabu's wife goes to her husband's ancestral home she is not allowed to enter the kitchen nor touch drinking water. After serving cooked food to her son her sister-in-law goes for a bath. But my daughter eats with everybody. No question is raised just because I maintain *Hinduani*. Nobody is interested in what my husband does. This happens to be our Bengali custom. And that is why all rational people have rejected it. I am also not in favour of it. But I never disclose this to my husband".<sup>47</sup> Kailashbasini ascribed a lot of value to the security that lay in the acceptance by her in-laws. While hating *Hinduani* she embraced it for fear of isolation. She was not unwilling to live with what she knew to be untrue. She went so far as not to open her real self to her husband.

A similar attitude we find in Sudakshina's mother. Though she was attracted to Brahmoism and performed *upasana* (Brahmo prayers) regularly she could not give up the worshipping *Shiva* publicly.<sup>48</sup> Fear of social approbation or ostracism was a very powerful sentiment which enforced strictest adherence to the behaviour pattern of women. Only in the beginning of this century they matured enough to challenge and overcome it.

Bina Das's mother was attached to a number of welfare organisations. It was her influence that attracted Bina towards revolutionary activities. Manikuntala was supported by her mother in joining the Communist Party. From her early youth she was being groomed for a religious avocation. Her brother-in-law wanted her to be a nun. She herself had no objection to it. In fact initially she was quite inclined towards it. Later when she was attracted to atheistic communism her brother-in-law and others were shocked and distressed. Young Manikuntala was torn between the two. Had not her mother stood beside her she would not have had the courage to come to Calcutta in search of the Communist Party. She asked Manikuntala about communism and its atheism. After listening to Manikuntala's explanation she commented, "In all living beings there is God. To serve them is religion. If this is your new political belief I would not object to

your participation in it. If you take part in it you yourself will be elevated and I too will be glad."<sup>49</sup> The first time Manikuntala was arrested for her political connection her relatives were upset. Manikuntala felt guilty and ashamed. She tried her best to hide away from them. But once again her mother gave her courage. It is interesting to note that Manikuntala's mother had no English education. She was proficient in Sanskrit.

#### IV

The subjugation of women was so complete that they did not consider themselves as human beings far from being equal to men. They were destined to play a secondary and passive role. This comes out sharply in the early autobiographies. Again and again they refer themselves as *meyemanush*, and not *manush*. Their only duty was to efface themselves as thoroughly and completely as they could. It seems they were embarrassed even about their existence. They were forbidden to give vent to their emotions. When her baby daughter fell from the palanquin Prasannamayee's mother hesitated to cry out to draw the attention of others.<sup>50</sup> (Had the child been a boy would she have screamed out?) Sometimes their shyness took curious proportions. Rasasundari used to hide herself when the horse of her husband came for its feed. She felt, "How can I appear before the horse of my master! It would be a matter of shame if the horse looks at me!"<sup>51</sup>

Rasasundari thought herself as a housewife and a mother first. The idea of *sahadharmini* did not appeal to her. Once, when her husband was away from home, she took initiative to settle an age-old dispute. Afterwards she was terribly afraid. She was apprehensive of her husband's reaction. But fortunately her husband was very much satisfied.<sup>52</sup> Rasasundari knew that he was a lenient person.<sup>53</sup> Nevertheless she was not accustomed to take any initiative.

Her contemporary Saradasundari was so humble that she could not be forthright in her autobiography lest it hurt the feelings of others.<sup>54</sup> When her brother-in-law snatched away her dead husband's possessions she wept. Looking at her, her mother-in-law began to pound her head. Then Sarada thought, "Why did I cry? It is only for me that she was so much upset."<sup>55</sup> To Sarada the wrongs done to her by her husband's brother or the inability of her mother-in-law to protect her from being robbed and humiliated, was secondary.

Sarada was a quiet and self-effacing woman, as women were expected to be. And even when she was being persuaded to relate her memoirs by the disciples of her son Keshab Chandra, it was not Sarada's life as an individual that played the prominent part in the narration. It was the *Acharya-Mata* which got the dominant place. Jogendralal<sup>56</sup> wrote in the foreword, "when Saradadevi narrated the story of her life and I took it

down, I considered it as sacred as a religious text. . . I viewed her as the mother of Kesab Chandra."<sup>57</sup>

Rasasundari and Saradasundari were contemporary. But there is a distinct difference in their accounts. In Rasasundari we find a developing self who was becoming increasingly conscious of her position in life. She equated herself with a caged bird.<sup>58</sup> She found it humiliating that even after all the household chores were attended to, women were expected to stand by the head of the family to serve and please him "as if women cannot have anything better to do!"<sup>59</sup>

It will be unwise to expect a stronger comment from Rasasundari. But in course of discussion about her book Dinesh Sen, who wrote the preface, carefully tried to distract the attention of the readers from the real import of her comments. He glibly said that "all the strict social customs were liked by Rasasundari".<sup>60</sup> He tried to depict her as an ideal and uncritical woman calling the rest to follow her example to preserve the sanctity of home. Dineshchandra adds further, "In the outside world men are subordinated, humiliated and bereft of all honour. Therefore it is only within the four walls of their homes that they can vindicate themselves."<sup>61</sup> This perhaps more than anything else, sums up how even educated men rationalised the dominance of men over women in the family.

The only nineteenth century housewife who was very near to considering herself at par with her husband was Kailashbasini. Though she was grateful to Kishori Chand for her education and well-being she never forgot her worth. Once she told her husband, "It is true that you have never chided me, but I also have never done anything to be admonished. From my childhood I follow your instructions as far as possible. If you can't find any fault, how can you rebuke me?"<sup>62</sup> While in the background of the nineteenth century it was a courageous thing to say, it should not also be forgotten that Kailashbasini's confidence came from her awareness that she was able to mould herself in accordance with the expectations of her husband.

Sarala Devi learnt physics to be equal to her brothers. She travelled extensively in India on her own. The assertive individuality of an unmarried girl of his family caused anxiety in the mind of Devendranath Tagore, Rabindranath's father. In spite of being a non-believer in idolatry he proposed Sarala's marriage with a sword.<sup>63</sup> Sarala had the courage to reject it. Later on she worked shoulder to shoulder with her husband even in the face of the wrath of the government. But even she at a later point of her life concurred to the prevailing ethos that wives are meant basically to beget sons to their husbands.

The assimilation by women of the attitude and mores of a male dominant society was very deep. Amiyabala bears testimony to

such mental make up. She was married to an aristocratic family. After sometime her husband sent her back to her parents as she had not come upto his expectations. Amiyabala was mortally hurt. But her remorse did not lead her to question the social injustice. Amiyabala wrote in her diary, "You did not take the responsibility of cultivating your wife but put all the blame on me. . . I humbly accept the injustice."<sup>64</sup> Her relatives wanted to send her back to her husband along with monetary compensations for her shortcomings. But Amiya refused not because her dignity was hurt. She wrote, "How could she tell her husband, 'I do not care whether you are happy or not, you have to accept me'?"<sup>65</sup> She considered it 'selfish' to place her happiness over that of her husband. Women after all "are born only to drink the poison of the world like *Shiva*".<sup>66</sup>

The consciousness about their deprivation did not permeate into the thinking of the women. They lacked the sense of self. They basked in the glory of their husbands. Their identity was merged into that of the husband and their families. Prasannamayee was married to an insane husband. But even she was proud of her *Kulinism*. Nistarini considered herself fortunate that among the forty odd wives of her husband she was one of the few, who were informed of the death of their husband in time.<sup>67</sup> This was a strange satisfaction considering the fact that her husband did nothing for her and she had to live the life of an unwanted maid-servant in the families of her brothers. This sense of devious well being came to Nistarini after a chance meeting with another wife of her husband while in a pilgrimage. She was ignorant of her widowhood.

It may also be that their understanding of their position in life was clouded by the fact that they belonged to high caste and their families were from the upper social strata. So the protest had to come from an anonymous prostitute. She left her home at an early age but out of her free will in a state of terrible mental agony. As early as in 1842 she commented the following about the person she was married to. "I did not marry him knowingly. . . nor had I loved him. But he is my husband, source of all my happiness. What wonder!"<sup>68</sup>

Joining this voice of protest we find Binodini. She relentlessly tried to rise above her environment. She was acquainted with the power of the social currents against which she tried to swim. The writer in *Vidya-Darshan* was born in a middle class family but preferred prostitution because only in this way she could assert herself. On the other hand Binodini was born in a disreputable family but tried her best to provide for her dependants by using her talents and not by selling her body.<sup>69</sup> She was not liked precisely because of this. The society was not prepared to put up with such self-confidence in a lowly prostitute. But Binodini did not crave for pity. She attacked

Ref:  
Binodini  
Dasi

Ref:  
Binodini

her contemporary society mercilessly. "The life of a prostitute is condemned by social hatred and ostracism. . . But how does a girl court such a life? Many a times it is found that the self-same people, who violate the chastity of innocent and defenceless women, first posing to be their lovers, eager to sacrifice everything for them and then abandoning them afterwards, are often their worst critics. In such circumstances who are to be blamed—these girls who are cheated or those who cheat them? Often these people are the zealous keepers of social morals trying their best to trample these hapless women under their feet at every turn. On the one hand they destroy these unfortunate girls and on the other hand if these women strive to save their impressionable children from this life of sin by sending them to schools or vocational centres the same people try their best to drive them out."<sup>70</sup>

Binodini's was a lonely fight against a hypocritical society. It was only natural that she failed. As soon as she retired prematurely from the stage she was forgotten. Her autobiography failed to create a stir even among the 'enlightened' in Calcutta. On the other hand her friends and mentors did not hesitate to exploit her. She was persuaded to accept the position of a kept woman because only then her paramour would contribute towards building a theatre. She not only did that but out of enthusiasm carried the bricks as a day labourer when she could. But when the theatre was built she was betrayed. And Binodini retired from the stage.

Her instructor Girish Chandra Ghosh, himself an actor and director of great repute, advised her to write her memoirs. But even to him her critical attitude was not acceptable. He said, "One should not be so much outspoken in one's autobiography. It is likely that, owing to such harsh comments, the memoirs will be counterproductive. Readers will find it difficult to be compassionate for the writer. After all that is why the book has been written."<sup>71</sup> Like Dineshchandra Sen, Girish Chandra was equally eager to make Binodini acceptable to the contemporary society at the cost of the truth contained in her writing.

## V

With the spread of education among women awareness of the external world began to grow slowly. In her autobiography Kailashbasini had mentioned Dwarkanath Tagore's death in Britain.<sup>72</sup> She also "knew (*sic*) that introduction of a new ammunition had led to Sepoy Mutiny."<sup>73</sup> Among her contemporaries Prasannamayee used to read newspapers. Gnanadanandini travelled widely in India and abroad. But the external events did not leave any lasting impression on their mind.

But things began to change with the agitation against the partition of Bengal. While the social reform movements of the nine-

teenth century left the mind and consciousness of the women mostly untouched, the political uprising had a salutary effect. Sudakshina Sen, a simple housewife of a Brahmo family, wrote, "I can distinctly remember that in those days we went to Sri Anandamohun Basu's house quite often to discuss about the partition with him and his wife."<sup>74</sup> Arandhan was observed on the day of the partition. Sahana wrote, "How delighted were we to observe that day along with all our countrymen."<sup>75</sup> Women were so excited that they even ran out to the porticoes to look at the processions, to hear patriotic songs. "Even at home we used to sing them again and again. The flame of patriotism was kindled in our mind."<sup>76</sup>

Around this time we find Sarala organising the youth and inspiring them to learn the martial arts. She was the first woman to preside over an all male gathering. After setting the first stanza of the song *Vande Mataram* to tune Rabindranath left it to Sarala to do the rest. She not only did it but sang the song for the first time in the 1905 Congress session. Sarala also was close to the revolutionary terrorists. The tradition once started continued through Bina and Manikuntala. Even those who were not directly involved showed keen interest in social and political events.

Not only young girls, even middle aged women were aroused by the political turmoil. And this continued. Talking about a much later period Shova Ghosh mentioned her eagerness to attend the Lok Sabha sessions.<sup>77</sup> Even at the age of seventy Kusumkumari read newspapers. Distressed by the communal tension on the eve of independence she wrote in her diary, "Tomorrow is the Direct Action Day called by the Muslim League. Can't imagine how it will pass. . . God may save all. I feel somewhat apprehensive."<sup>78</sup>

Gradually women acquired an independent mind and for the first time a generation gap yawned between the parents and their daughters. Its evidence we find in the writing of Bina Das. With Gandhi, Bina toured South Bengal in the wake of communal violence. For the first time she came face to face with rural poverty. But her sensitiveness towards ordinary people's plight brought a caustic remark from her father. "The hapless state of your countrymen is only a figment of your imagination."<sup>79</sup> But Bina did not change her mind. Said she, "Sitting on the soft chair in an air-conditioned room of the Legislative Assembly, as I heard the sophisticated speeches delivered by the honourable members, I kept thinking how far these people were from the actual problems of our country."<sup>80</sup>

The Communist Party and its mass organisations helped further to bring about a sense of self-reliance among women. In the context of her experiences of *Tebhaga* movement in which she was a participant,

Mandakini Sinha said, whenever the women's self-defence organisation gave its call peasant women joined in the processions. In 1948 when the Communist Party was banned and men absconded, women kept alive the party-activities. Sometimes they met for political discussions all by themselves. When her husband was arrested Mandakini served in different households to provide for her family. For her difficulties she neither blamed the movement nor her luck. Asked why she retired from active politics she said, "I renounced political activities mainly because I was neglected. Besides, the party is no longer the same as it had been in the past. It has splintered into small factions. I cannot bring myself to like what I see today."<sup>81</sup>

Political turmoil, the war, famine and finally partition aroused women on the one hand, and on the other hand the grip of society on individuals slackened. While Binodini passed into oblivion, Kananbala, a renowned actress of the Bengali screen, was accepted even in the upper social strata. Her birth was forgotten, her achievements remembered. She was happily married and raised a family. In her middle age and after retirement she came forward to set up an organisation to look after the destitute artistes and technicians. Just like her talents, her social work also received due recognition. Compared to Binodini's the times had changed.

As social constraints gradually relaxed, women had the opportunity to assert and test their abilities. In spite of independence outside, the age-old subjugation caused women to waver. They fumbled in their new ways of life. This uncertainty got reflected in the attitude of some of the writers. While Bina perceived herself as an individual, her contemporary Sahana wrote her autobiography not so much to speak about herself but the great men among whom she grew up. Hers was not a happy family life. Her marriage proved to be stifling for her talents. Physically sick and mentally broken she found her solace in the *ashram* of Sri Aurobindo. But she never recorded the source or cause of her travails.

Even in Manikuntala we find a lack of confidence. Speaking about the programmes of mass communication of the party she said, "Something could have been achieved if men would have taken interest in such organisations. With our limited strength what we women could do?"<sup>82</sup>

But Manikuntala was a figure to reckon with in the party. She toured rural Bengal with her male comrades. She addressed large public meetings and organised rural and industrial workers. She was sent to various foreign countries as an Indian representative. Outwardly these might be taken as a proof that women had triumphed over the age-old inhibitions and men had accepted equal status for them. But neither of these was true. In the subconscious mind of women

there were still the doubts about their ability which at every step, they had to remove forcefully.

Also men were still not prepared to accept women as equals. Not even in the Communist Party. As an ordinary female worker Manikuntala had quite a few reservations about the party. In the 1952 Assembly Elections Manikuntala was the only female contestant under the banner of the Communist Party. It contested about one hundred Assembly seats. She was unhappy about it. "Does the party think their women workers so unsuitable? After a long dispute it was evident that for the Kalighat seat there was no other candidate in the party. So I got it. The party was absolutely against any other female candidate since for all other seats there had been male claimants".<sup>83</sup> Even when women took as much part in political movements as men and faced police atrocities shoulder to shoulder with men there still remained traces of male chauvinism.

## VI

The women autobiographers of our discussion lived at a time which is perhaps the most talked about period in modern Indian history. Rasasundari's story begins in 1809 when she was born. This was about the time when influence of a Western civilisation accentuated a process of alienation of a section of Indian people from the main body of the society. These people were among the foremost to introduce changes in the old society. And for the first time a conscious movement was under way to ameliorate the deplorable condition of women. The conventional history maintains that pace of this reform movement was fast. In spite of antagonism from the larger section of the Bengali society within a mere three decades *sati* was banned and remarriage of girl widows was introduced by legislature. However, this streak of modernisation almost a century and half ago fails to explain the plight of women today. Confronting an increase in bride-burning cases (while *sati* was prohibited by legislature in 1829) and the like, we are compelled to look back to the history more closely than ever and examine its elements in a new light. Here the testimonies of the women autobiographers provide a new dimension which explains some of the contradictions of today.

The legislations, that the history of the Bengal Renaissance is so boastful of, were passed by foreign rulers at the behest of a group of English-educated men. Their concern was not shared by the society, not even by the English-educated gentry as a whole. More significantly women themselves remained uninformed and indifferent. In his autobiography Raj Narain Bose, one of the pioneers of modern Bengal, wrote that the legislation on widow remarriage caused 'turbulence' in the then Bengali society. And yet none of our women autobiographers had alluded to it. Saradasundari had met the first

remarried widow. But she never found it necessary to mention this in her memoirs. Did they think that concern for reforms, even reforms relating to women, should better be left with men?

Again all these attempts for social reforms did not make any dent on the inherent social feeling that the world of women was a separate world and it should better remain so. Within this world women were expected to remain chaste, submissive and dutiful. Except taking care of their most elementary needs, nothing more needed to be done. That is why a highly educated and 'progressive' person like Reverend Kalichuran Bannerjee allowed his own sister Nistarini to live the life of an unwanted maid-servant among her own relations. The Reverend's responsibilities ended with the remittance of a fixed monthly sum.

Women also accepted their subjugation as natural. They did not want deliverance. Perhaps they did not know what deliverance meant. Age-long bondage made them accept their own position as something ordained by heaven and decided at the time of birth. So with the possibility of the curtain being removed there was a flutter, a feeling of uncertainty. Just as a person long kept in darkness would be blinded after stepping out in the sun and try to close his eyes so our women also were hesitant and even afraid when the truth of their situation began to be unveiled slowly. The reactions against those who did take the first hesitant steps were diverse. In many cases even women themselves resented. Age-long social inhibition had made women their enemies. When Satyendranath wanted Gnanadanandini to go abroad, all the anger of Satyendranath's mother was directed against Gnanadanandini. She stopped talking to her daughter-in-law.

But in this all prevailing gloom of the nineteenth century we also find the first sparks of protests and heroic struggles. There was Rasasundari unique in her quest for education. She realised and was conscious of her subordination. But she did not know what to do about it. On her death bed Rasasundari's mother wanted to see her. But Rasasundari was not allowed to go. It was feared that during her absence her husband's daily routine could have been somewhat upset.

Rasasundari was an ordinary housewife in a remote village. But she equated her status with that of a perpetual bonded labour.<sup>85</sup> When she was not allowed to see her mother at her deathbed Rasasundari felt as if she was a bird in a cage. She wistfully wrote, if she had but a pair of wings she could have met her mother. But not everybody accepted her fate like Rasasundari. There are also instances of conscious and deliberate protest—which was not tempered by the fear of consequences. The girl who wrote the letter in *Vidya-Darshan* did not wait for a pair of wings to grow. She left her family because she could not accept the

person she was married to. A family which could be so unkind to her as to find a match in a person who was old, deceased and uncouth no longer meant anything to her. She could barter her security for an uncharted path which the society called sinful. On the other hand we find Sahana, a much gifted artiste renouncing everything to accept the life of an *ashramite* in the wake of an emotional crisis borne out of the pains of ill health and mal-adjusted family life.

With Binodini the spark became a fire. She mercilessly attacked the hypocrisy of her time. Perhaps she could do it because she did not have anything to lose as Prasannamayee had. She was a self-made woman who could face the world on her own strength. She did not compromise her dignity. She retired from the stage at the height of her career because she could no longer stand the people who betrayed her. It is interesting to note in this connection that Binodini's autobiography went into oblivion. But not the 'Autobiography of An Educated Prostitute'. This girl did not raise any question. She upheld the prevailing moral standard and blamed herself for her fall. But at the same time she provided details of the lives of prostitutes and their paramours drawn from different ranks including the highly placed. Predictably this book had many editions and was translated into Hindi and English.

The autobiographies record how although hesitant and stumbling women began to overcome their inhibitions gradually. From their autobiographies it appears that towards their self-emancipation the nineteenth century reform movement did not play such a major role as is generally believed to be. The reforms only touched the fringe and the reactions were not unidirectional. Women remain confined in the small eddies of their limited awareness. It is only with women like Bina Das, Manikuntala and Mandakini that we find a self-assertion, borne out of their own consciousness, conviction and experience. They no longer had the inclination to cling to, at all cost, the safety and security of a world in which they were deprived, misunderstood and humiliated.

## Notes

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- 1 Prasannamayee Devi, *Purbakatha* (Tales of Yore), p 3.
- 2 Sarala Devi Chowdhurani, *Jeebanee Jharapata* (Leaves Shed from Life), p 187.
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