

Hyper- Masculine Raj and Feminized Orient: A Review Article on the politics of gender in context of colonial Bengal

DR. SREYASI GHOSH

Assistant Professor and HOD, Dept. of History,
Hiralal Mazumdar Memorial College For Women

E-mail- sreyasighosh@yahoo.com

Introduction- Indrani Sen has judiciously commented in her famous book entitled *Woman and Empire: Representations in the writings of British India(1858-1900)* that colonial constructions were not only built along the axis of race, but also along the axis of gender. Undoubtedly colonial representations of these two categories of race and gender often displayed such complex and inextricable interconnections that it is very difficult to separate them. According to Mrinalini Sinha also (author of the book- *Colonial Masculinity: The “manly Englishman” and the “effeminate Bengali” in the late nineteenth century*) the emerging dynamics between colonial and nationalist politics in the 1880s and 1890s in India is best captured in the logic of colonial masculinity. Another eminent author Indira Chowdhury wrote in *The Frail Hero and Virile History* that colonially imposed stereotypes actually expressed the fabrication of ontological and epistemological distinctions between an “Occidental” Self that was in command and an “Oriental” Other that had to be commanded. Especially continuous attack of Masculine British Raj on frailty/effeminacy and cowardice of the Bengali male has become a very important topic of scholarly debate/ discussion.

John Rosselli in his article entitled *The Self Image Of Effeteness: Physical Education And Nationalism In Nineteenth- Century Bengal* (Past and Present, Number 86,- Feb 1980) has shown that European perception of Indians as a passive and effeminate people goes back to the early years of colonial rule. Richard Orme in the 1770s wrote in his *History of the Military Transactions of the British Nation in Indostan* that all natives showed effeminacy of character but the Bengalis were still of weaker frame and more enervated character. In the 1820s Bishop Heber argued that Bengalis were regarded as the greatest cowards in India. Charles Grant and James Mill described the passive and effeminate character of the Bengali male. Macaulay ,the most renowned and often- cited source on Bengali effeminacy wrote- *Whatever the Bengali does he does languidly. His favourite pursuits are sedentary. He shrinks from bodily exertion; and....he seldom engages in personal conflict, and scarcely ever enlists as a soldier. There never perhaps existed a people so thoroughly fitted by habit for a foreign yoke* (Mrinalini Sinha-*Colonial Masculinity: The “Manly” Englishman and the “Effeminate Bengali” in the Late Nineteenth Century* ,p.-15).

Macaulay also argued that this frailty had important impact on the moral character of the inhabitants of Bengal.

Thomas Metcalf in his famous book entitled *Ideologies Of The Raj* has brilliantly established that distinctions based on gender gained an avowedly “scientific” strength with the growth of a powerful domestic ideology in Britain during the early nineteenth century. He wrote- *According to this theory, innate and demonstrable biological differences defined a fundamental difference between male and female.....These differences in the structuring of the body, in turn, dictated differing patterns of behaviour for men and women*(p.-93).

The very nature of the British empire sharpened those gender- based distinctions (Ashis Nandy). Undoubtedly the Hyper- Masculine British Raj wanted to manifest their moral superiority and masculine character through the activities like the abolition of Sati in 1829 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891. Facing the challenge of British power, our leaders of anti- colonial nationalist movement divided the world of social institutions and practices into two separate domains- the material and the spiritual. While they were helpless to imitate western skills in material domain, they were determined to preserve their own cultural identity in the spiritual field(Partha Chatterjee- *The Nation and Its Fragments*). In colonial Bengal cultural nationalism took shelter in images of dauntless sati and the equally valiant widow to dismiss the charge of inferior moral character that was according to colonisers was the fruit of effeminacy. Tanika Sarkar in her book entitled *Hindu Wife , Hindu Nation* has written-

Woman”s chastity had become a keyword in the political vocabulary of Hindu nationalism.....The chaste body of the Hindu woman was thus made to carry an unusual political weight since she had maintained this difference in the face of foreign rule. The Hindu man, in contrast,... had allowed himself to be colonized and surrendered his autonomy before the assaults of Western power- knowledge (p.-91).

Question of sati/ widow immolation- Lata Mani has written in her article entitled *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in colonial India* (Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid edited *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*) that the legislative prohibition of widow immolation was the culmination of a debate during which 8,134 instances of sati had been recorded, mainly, though not exclusively, among upper caste Hindus, with a high concentration- 63%- in the area around Calcutta city. This brutal custom, banned by law in 1829, again achieved enormous significance from 1870s and we can read the resignification of sati figure as part of the Hindu revivalist cultural backlash that followed the Age of Consent debates between 1890-1892. Colonisers assessed the Bengali male as effeminate, and disabled by his non-martial traits from serving in the British army or even occupying higher administrative posts that required a greater sense of responsibility and moral character. To counter this repeated assault nationalist

leaders cleverly used the image of chaste and heroic womanhood as resource of nationalist self- description and in the Puranic myth of the iconic woman Sabitri they found the figure of the sati/ valiant widow. Chandranath Basu in *Sabitri Tattva* (published in 1900) had shown Sabitri as an ideal Hindu woman whose only *dharma* was *pativratya / satitva* or wifely devotion. The myth of Sabitri influenced the historiography of Rajanikanta Gupta who used Tod's *Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan* as his main source material. His heroine got the status of Sabitri through her steadfast wifely devotion and her willingness to die with her dead husband (in the story entitled *Birbalar Atmabisarjan*). Indira Chowdhury has rightly argued in her article entitled *Constructing Chastity: The Sati and the Widow in Nineteenth- Century Bengal* that sati as a signifier of Hindu womanhood became a competitive metaphor of self- description- a figure that could resist the colonial notions of “barbaric” Hindu tradition (We can see the article in the book entitled *Women in History*- edited by Anuradha Chanda, Mahua Sarkar and Kunal Chattopadhyay).

For Gayatri Spivak the sati is caught between imperialist and indigenous patriarchy. She cannot speak. She is represented through male discourse –and is thus the site of an ideological battleground- in which others speak for her(One can see here the chapter entitled *Structures of Patriarchy and Constructions of Gender* from Kate Currie's book- *Beyond Orientalism*). Lata Mani also wrote in her article entitled *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* that women in fact became the site on which tradition was debated and reformulated. In her own language- *What was at stake was not women but tradition....neither subject, nor object, but ground- such is the status of women in the discourse on sati* (Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid edited book- *Recasting Women* , p-118).

This image of sati clearly became an icon of worship, self- sacrifice, and courage, qualities that political heroes of the anti- colonial struggle sought to exemplify during the Swadeshi Movement of Bengal(One can see here the book of Tanika Sarkar entitled *Rebels, Wives, Saints: Designing selves and Nations in Colonial Times*).

The Age of Consent Controversy- The Age of Consent Act(1891), which prohibited the consummation of marriage for girls below the age of twelve, definitely gave a golden opportunity to the British Raj to express their liberal intentions in the face of the “unmanly” practices of the Bengali male(Thomas R. Metcalf/ Mrinalini Sinha). While studying its context we can see that in 1890 Phulmonee, a girl of about ten or eleven, was mercilessly raped to death by her husband Hari Maiti, a man of thirty- five. After that event forty- four women doctors brought out long lists of cases where child- wives had been severely wounded or killed because of marital rape. In spite of these cases Hindu revivalist leaders furiously opposed the Age of Consent Bill because according to their orthodox version, colonial government made intrusion in their sacred religious domain through this Bill. Tanika Sarkar has written-*The domestic realm was all*

that they could rule within colonialism. The community leadership- inevitably, male, upper-caste, landowning middle class- was divorced from agricultural as well as industrial, commercial and financial entrepreneurship and from administrative decisions and legislative and military power by colonial racial discrimination. By the latter half of the century, with the crisis of investment having become acute, the shrinking scope for self- expression through “male” enterprise, alongside the militant nationalist self- organisation of the late nineteenth century, gave the Age of Consent debates their extraordinary charge(Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation, p.-229).

Himani Bannerji has pragmatically argued that the reforming desire of the British Raj had very little to do with the safety of indigenous women/girls, though initiated in their names. In her book entitled *Inventing Subjects: Studies in Hegemony, Patriarchy and Colonialism* she wrote- *Nowhere is there a provision in the Bill for a direct role to be played by the very people whose bodies are to be the discursive battleground between indigenous men and a patriarchal colonial state(p.-77).*

The Age of Consent Act is undoubtedly considered by the colonisers as the most important step towards improvement of the native society and like other reform projects this Act also manifested white man’s burden attitude. Following Himani Bannerji we can say that the practices and objectives of the British Raj leading to this Act converted the body of the indigenous woman/girl into an object of scientific penetration and vivisection. The colonisers condemned the “Hindu” male as both effeminate/ unmanly and brutal and described themselves as the ultimate guardian- patriarch who could legally control sexual /reproductive life of our women. It is an interesting fact that the British Raj argued that their reform project was actually a return to an earlier state of civilization of the “Hindus” themselves, of being “Aryans”. Aryans either waited to consummate their marriages, or even married at a later age than was the prevalent practice in colonial Bengal. Through the execution of the Age of Consent Act, the weak/ effeminate Bengali male could become equal to more “manly races” of India during colonial rule. Colonisers argued that that marriage used to take place earlier in Bengal than in the Hindustan provinces, where it might be supported that among a more purely Aryan population the custom approached more nearly to the ancient practices. According to official discourse one can find the true cause of the weak masculinity of the Bengali male in premature, overactive sex life and unregulated breeding.

Like sati debate in the Age of Consent controversy also women became sites upon which various versions of scripture/ tradition/ law were elaborated and contested. The colonisers were determined to establish themselves as the ultimate protector of our indigenous women. On the other hand, insistence of our revivalist/ nationalist leaders upon self- rule in the sacred domestic sphere coincided with their insistence that an ideal Hindu girl should sacrifice her physical safety, and even her life if necessary, for the sake of the community’s claim to autonomy.

The physical culture movement and rise of terrorism in colonial Bengal – In 19th century

prominent middle-class Bengali intelligentsia tried their level best to combat the charge of effeminacy. In the 1860s the renowned Tagores of Jorasanko and the organisation with which they were most closely associated, the Adi Brahma Samaj played a very important role for physical regeneration of the Bengali male. Annually organised by the Tagores, the Hindu Mela functioned for 14 years from 1867 to 1880. Describing the significance of Hindu Mela Indira Chowdhury wrote (in her famous book entitled *The Frail Hero and Virile History*)- *The inaugural song of the 1868 Hindu Mela was composed by Satyendranath Tagore. The song celebrated the virtuous and heroic women figures drawn from Puranic lore-Sharmistha, Savitri, Sita, Damayanti along with legendary ascetics such as Vasistha, Gautama, Atri, Viswamitra and poets like Valmiki, Vyasa, Bhababhuti and Kalidasa who immortalized heroic moments. The motherland- the womb of the brave, the song declared, had been the birth of innumerable heroes(not only the epic heroes like Bhishma, Arjuna and Bhima but also Rajput gallants like Prithviraj) yet “bondage has brought on darkness”, Satyendranath’s song amalgamated an “Indian” identity that fused Puranic heroism with Rajput valour, implying that only such an identity could resist British domination (p.-20)*

According to John Rosselli from the starting point the Hindu Mela under its chief organiser Nabagopal Mitra made much of gymnastics, wrestling and many other traditional sports. Nabagopal Mitra established a gymnastic school in 1868 and he had trained and sent out many physical education teachers, besides founding several akhras. The *National Paper*, the organ of the Hindu Mela organisers, made a strong campaign for Bengalis to be allowed to serve in the army (late 1860s). One of old pupils of Nabagopal, Bipin Chandra Pal, established a secret society and its chief goal was the development of physical culture and the training of all adults in handling arms.

Eminent Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chatterjee tried his best to answer the charge of Bengali unmanliness/ effeminacy which he described as *Bharat Kalanka*. Swami Vivekananda was a powerful proponent of cultivating a manly physique. He said- *You will be nearer to God through football than through the Bhagwad Gita*. Vivekananda had to balance the active, passionate masculinity of the kshatriya, with the self-denying aspects of the brahmanical asceticism. The dynamism of the sannyasi icon influenced the participants of the Swadeshi movement(1905) greatly. Sarala Devi tried to spread militant and nationalistic culture through her institutionalization of the Birashtami Utsab(1902).

The physical culture movement, nurtured by the enormous effort of the middle-class Bengali intelligentsia, had become a base for terrorist organisations against the Hyper-Masculine British Raj. Pulin Behari Das, the renowned terrorist leader of the Dacca Anushilan Samiti, published a manual of lathi-play in which he strongly commented that without a healthy body and strength of character there could be no perfect intellectual development.

John Rosselli had brilliantly shown that this Bengali movement was in many ways like other nationalist revivals of physical culture in Europe, China, and in India itself. In his language- *The deliberate revival of traditional sports or the new emphasis given them-as with Indian wrestling and lathi- play- can be paralleled in early nineteenth-century Hungary(horse-races) and also in late nineteenth –century Ireland(the old sport of hurling). In early nineteenth-century Scandinavia and Germany body- building went together with a cult of ancient heroes, a call to national self- defence, and a devotion to folk music and folk dance.....the Chinese secret societies that led the Boxer Rebellion combined traditional religious inspiration with puritanical avoidance of women and other sources of sensual pleasure...and the charges sometimes brought against them of disreputable activities such as brigandage, can-as will be seen- both be found in the Bengali movement* (Rosselli's article- *The Self-Image Of Effeteness: Physical Education And Nationalism In Nineteenth-Century Bengal*, p.-132).

Conclusion- In conclusion it must be admitted that British imperialism wanted to establish moral superiority over the colonised people and tried to convince the colonised of their fundamental inhumanity and the consequent need for the permanent domination/hegemony of the colonisers. Deeply disturbed by the charge of effeminacy, our leaders of revivalist cultural nationalism took shelter in the heroic images of self-sacrificing sati/chaste woman. Indira Chowdhury said that her celebrated purity enabled the discourse on identity to transform her into the spirited “Aryan” woman of the past. By unprotestingly sacrificing her physical body and renouncing her attachment to the material world, the *sati* used to rise above “womanliness” and became symbol of fortitude, endurance and courage. On the other hand , by sacrificing the affective family- space for motherland and unquestioningly obeying the revolutionary leader, the Bengali male could assert their masculine vigour in the terrorist movement. In that way nationalist leaders tried to solve the long-lasting problem, which was indeed the outcome of the notorious charge of unmanliness and degeneration. Continuous scholarly research is actually necessary to understand the links between gender, sexuality and nationalism. Through this elaborate effort the multiple layers of image-construction process can be uncovered.

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