

The ‘Other’ Side of Nineteenth Century Bengal:A History of Crises and Anxieties:The evolving societal definitions and re-definitions surrounding ‘effeminacy’ and ‘ideal’ womanhood

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Abstract: *This paper intends to present a rather less-discussed theme of the nineteenth Century in the history of Bengal, which is none other than the societal anxieties and crises, faced by the Bengali babus surrounding the notions of alleged ‘effeminacy’. We find a parallel crisis running amongst the colonized Indians that owing to the rigours of colonial penetration, somewhere or the other; the Bengali babus were lagging behind the necessary virility to challenge the colonial forces. Accordingly, the ‘other’ side of 19th Century Bengal was entrenched with a parallel phenomenon; the issue of anxiety prevalent amongst the society that the Bengali babus were becoming ‘frail’ and lacking in the ‘mainly’ prowess. This paper seeks to understand yet another history of 19th Century Bengal, and in critically examining an alternative history, viz, the history of societal crises surrounding the ‘effeminate’ babus, constructed and built around the politics of gender; and subsequently to trace the trajectory of the growing obsession with associating the womenfolk and their bodies as the very emblems of nationalism and the nation.*

Keywords: *Bengali babus, British rule, Gender, Nation and Nationalism, 19th Century Bengal*

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Introduction

19th Century is the hallmark of a remarkable time in the history of Bengal. Popularly hailed as an age of Renaissance, 19th Century in course of time, turned out to be a creative period in Bengal's history. To put it in other words, this was the time when men and ideas intersected in a process of synthetic cultural response to the West. From Raja Rammohun Roy to Keshub Chandra Sen via Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar, there was a new wave of social awakening. With a new invigoration of rationalistic and syncretistic ideas along with a current of new thoughts and convictions ushering in, 19th Century Bengal came to signify a period of social and cultural development and progress. Yet, this paper is going to delve into a significant 'other' side of 19th Century Bengal, in looking at the crises and anxieties within society, and particularly amongst the Bengali *bhadraloks*. In other words, this paper seeks to touch upon an alternative domain, to unravel a less-discussed upon site, and in interrogating and coming into terms with the 'other' side of history, in grappling with a history of anxieties, a history of insecurities and crises.

In this particular paper, our first central area of research is to look at the emergence of the notions of 'masculinity' and 'effeminacy' during 19th Century Bengal. Our first focus would be to probe into the matter, whether the notions of 'masculinity' and 'effeminacy' were already existent in the society, or were they constructions, i.e. 'created'. And proceeding from that, we would see how historians and scholars have picked this issue up in their works, delved with it and studied the matter intensely to the core. They do have their individual ways of explaining and elucidating on the matter, but over the broader question of 'masculinity' and 'effeminacy', they all have observed that the projections of 'masculinity' and 'effeminacy' in society are actually constructions, i.e., are being *created*, and hence not already there out in the air.¹

After looking at some of the works of scholars and historians, we raise a second question, namely *why* exactly did these constructions of binaries of 'masculinity' and 'effeminacy' at all emerge in society; and also exactly in what ways. Having looked into the reasons, our next area of study would be as follows- If these binaries were created and crafted down for some reason, what was the immediate reaction on the part of the colonized population in general and the 'men' in particular, to get over the charge of being 'effeminate'?

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Also, we must not forget that 19th Century was a period when a foreign power had come to exercise its domination over the Indian society. Having been come to be controlled by an external power, a strong feeling started developing among the ‘men’ folk that they were somehow lagging behind their strength. And the feeling was running high that, in order to claim independence from the clutches of British rule, the Indians had to regain their prior ‘manliness’ back. This regaining back of their lost courage would be subsequently reflected through several projects devised by the men themselves, like through the Hindu Mela, through various developments of physical culture in the *akhra*s and so on.

Finally, we intend to look at a shift within the discourse of ‘gender’ itself, when the societal anxieties faced by the ‘men’ in 19th Century Bengal reached such tremendous levels, that they ultimately had to take upon an altogether new discourse for upholding the age-old patriarchal order. We would see how the ‘nation’ then became central to their project; and within that discourse, how they connected nationalism with the body of the ‘woman’ of the ‘home’. In other words, having ridden with a number of crises, the ‘men’ had no other option left for them, than creating an altogether new discourse. And, this discourse was the bifurcation of society into two domains- the ‘inner’ and the ‘outer’, as has been conceptualized by eminent historian Partha Chatterjee. By trying to show that they were upholding the position of the woman by associating her and her body with the nation, this nationalist project tactfully dictated the ‘ideal’ roles to be performed by the woman, thereby delimiting her exercise of power. Thus the latter part of the paper will focus on this issue of ‘construction’ of a totally new discourse in 19th Century Bengal.

The cult of ‘masculinity’ and the parallel notion of ‘effeminacy’ of Bengali *babus*: The process through which it gradually developed.

Now, looking at the emergence of the notions of ‘masculinity’, in 19th Century Bengal, scholars have stressed on the point that it was actually a very complex process. Additionally, this emergence of the concept of ‘masculinity’ had a major part to play with the broader history of colonialism and imperialism. Now, looking at the imperialist centre, i.e. Britain, by the time of late 19th and early 20th Century, historians in Victorian and Edwardian Britain had started identifying the cult of ‘manliness’ at their ‘home’. This means that the British had started including and inculcating in their studies ways of upholding ‘manliness’, through public schools,

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through ideals of athleticism, militarism and so on.³ At around the same time, within the Indian context, the state of the people in India was one of subjugation, and hence, historically assessing, we can say that the Indians were in a colonized position before the British forces.

The state of the colonized Indians in general, and the native Bengali *babu* in particular, was thus representing a position of submission before the British. Consequently, this gave rise to a feeling that the imperialist project of the British during 19th Century was so very strong that the Bengali *babus* were left in a much lower social status. This alongside gave rise to a strong feeling on the part of the Indians in general, and the colonized 'men' in particular, that they were somewhat weak and fragile in both body as well as spirit to thwart the colonial forces. Therefore, there was a strong tendency on the part of the colonized 'men' to feel that they were lacking the necessary resistance power to challenge the colonial rule and hence had submitted before a superior power. Therefore, they increasingly started to have a strong feeling that they were unable to fulfill the duties of proper 'men', who should ideally be strong, courageous and bold enough to overthrow the colonial presence.

Now, addressing the issue of 'gender', it was the 'men' folk who felt that they lacked the 'prowess' and 'machismo' which were the ideal qualities for 'men'.⁴ They deeply believed that by not living up to the expectations of being true fighters for their country, they were becoming extremely feeble. And once the notions of 'weakness' and 'fragility' came to the fore, simultaneous and subsequent associations of qualities like 'strength', 'wisdom', 'boldness', 'courage' started to be ascribed to the 'ideal' men in the society.

This clearly shows us how the trope of gender was constantly being used and re-used in society, and hence, social constructions around notions of ideal 'masculinity' and undesirable 'effeminacy' started to be built in. Constructed around this project, the colonized *babus* in 19th Century Bengal had become well aware that the British had certified and labeled them as 'cowardly', 'frail', 'unmilitary' and hence 'effete'. This has been brilliantly analyzed by John Roselli in his article "The Self Image of Effeteness". He observes how by this time, the *babus* were being projected as a section of people who never represented qualities of courage, independence or strength. Accordingly, the construct of 'effeteness' brought with it both the notions of physical as well as mental weakness. The colonized were projected as people who

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were "lilliputian in size and weak in constitution", i.e. both in terms of physique as well as in terms of courage.⁵

Cited reasons behind the alleged 'effeminacy' of the *babus* in colonial India and their satirical representations in literary works.

Now, there are a wide number of reasons being provided behind this alleged effeminacy of the *babus*. Sometimes, it was suggested that owing to the climatically good quality and fertility of the soil for most of the part of the year, these men had very little to exert themselves. They did not have much physical labour to put in to the land, in order to survive, as the soil was naturally fertile and agriculturally suitable. Thus, these men naturally got the advantage of living their lives, without putting in physical labour. At certain times, diet of these people was being held responsible behind their weak physique. It was suggested that for the *babus*, rice constituted the major part of consumption. Hence their diet lacked in proteins and nutrients and therefore their very physical constitution became weak. And, applying the phrase that a healthy body would make way for a healthy mind, the *babus* were seen as people who were mentally feeble as well. These explanations given out in this period; have been wonderfully captured by Roselli. Most of the explanations of Bengali 'effeteness' were explained culturally, as Roselli argues.⁶ Now, at one level, different factors were being cited behind the supposed degeneration of the *babus*. At another level, late 1850s and 1860s were also the years when the reading material which the elites had earlier produced started shrinking down to a significant level whereby there was a constant obsession with the one and the only comical depictions of these Bengali *babus*. The *babu* in magazine literature was a figure of fun. He came to be depicted hilariously, as a peculiar mixture of European and Indian culture. His body came to be caricatured sarcastically, when he was projected as a strange and a weird man with 'three stomachs', Hindu, Muslim and European. His association with western education too was treated as a half-hearted one.

The *babu* was also portrayed as an English-educated 'native', hence neither wholly Indian nor wholly British; as pointed out by Judith Whitehead (1996). A 'low-lying people in a low-lying land'⁷, was a common means of insult; and this kind of scorn and ridicule had come to be deeply internalized by the Bengali intelligentsia in 19th Century Bengal as self-hatred.⁸

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Recurrent newspaper editorials in ‘The Bengalee’, ‘The Indian Mirror’, and ‘The Amrita Bazaar Patrika’ criticized the supposed weakness of the Bengali male physique.

The *babu* was also constantly projected as a person who possessed no self-restraint, and hence frequently became alcoholic. Owing to his low moral character, he frequently visited the prostitutes, who were socially labeled as the ‘fallen’ women. He was a figure who was on the one hand, overdrawn by emotions and temptations and hence made regular visits to these ‘secluded’ women’s quarters. Yet on the other, he constantly desired to keep his caste position intact. Unable to find either ways, and constantly overpowered and driven by both these intentions, he could not make a place for himself in society, whereby he could demand respect.

Building of the ‘civilizing mission’ by the colonizers

Ashis Nandy in his book (1983) brilliantly unfolds an underlying anxiety, constantly running at the back of the mind of the colonizers. Nandy brings out a crucial point in this connection. He says that the colonizers could not successfully rule over such a vast polity like India, if their subjects did not cooperate with them on a long-term basis. Therefore, the colonizers had to devise a means for making their ideology accepted by their subject population. Accordingly, the British used their ‘civilizing’ mission.

The colonizers saw the Indians as ‘barbarians’ who needed to civilize themselves. Imbibing upon the ‘civilizing mission’, the colonizers came to assert that these natives were ‘savage’ and hence needed to be ‘civilized’. The natives were subsequently labeled as ‘weak’ and ‘enervated’, since they failed to withstand the colonial order. So, the British developed its ‘civilizing’ project in such a fashion that the Indians in general, and the Bengali *babu* in particular, came to believe and internalize that they were actually ‘savage’ and retrogressive; and came to doubt themselves as ‘civilized’. Accordingly, we find significant changes in the mental consciousness of the *babus* and the ways they saw and described themselves.⁹

Cultivation of ideal ‘manliness’ by the *babus* in different ways: A reaction to the societal anxieties of the time.

As the ideas of ‘effeteness’ in 19th Century Bengal became more and more pronounced, there was a tremendous anxiety felt on the part of the *babus*. And it was primarily out of such

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self-consciousness, that these men sought about a solution so that they could cultivate the required 'masculinity' which they lacked. They felt that their state of being 'colonized' by a superior power was being strongly reflected in their 'effeminate' nature. And the immediate need of the hour was to generate a 'cult of masculinity'. The weak *babu* therefore required some preparation for cultivating his 'manly' prowess. And under this project, body building through physical exercise activities was the need of the hour. The development of a strong physique was considered an essential quality of men, because possessing strong, robust constitutions made 'men' the real 'heroes'.

At another level, the Bengali *babus* felt that they were much weaker when compared to the 'martial' races like the Rajputs, the Sikhs and the Marathas. Accordingly, the missing military element of the *babus* had to be restored. Consequently, the Hindu Mela vigorously started developing the mission of making the *babus* militant and martial, through several body-building projects in the *akhra*s (gymnasiums). Physical education therefore became an integral subject of the Hindu Mela.¹⁰

Now, the organizing committee of the Mela not only instituted a section on Physical Education, but also allocated spaces for displaying several forms of physical exercise and tournaments, for cultivating physical strength. And all the physical exercise activities, wrestling, *lathi khela* (playing with sticks) and so on, had to follow indigenous templates, so that the 'Indianness' or originality could be retained. This means that the Hindu Mela intended to build upon a section of 'masculine' population, but at the same time ensured that they were adhering to their indigenous customs. Yet at the same time, these men were nonetheless inspired by the West, in some way or the other. In fact, the body building project was inspired from ancient Greece and Rome, and also from France and Italy. Hence, there was always a subterranean anxiety on the part of the *babus*. This evidence of the *babus*' mastery of European exercises reveals the anxiety to imitate the Europeans in order to claim likeliness to the 'manly' colonizer.

Another scholar, Niharika Dinkar (2010) has critically examined the gendered context of nationalist ferment. In that context, she has studied the various swadeshi representations of the male body at that time with particular emphasis on artist Nandalal Bose's paintings. Dinkar

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makes a very crucial observation, that Nandalal Bose's paintings and portrayals of the native figure clearly expressed signs of crises surrounding 'masculinity' in Bengal. Dinkar points out that the use of watercolours by the swadeshi artists around this time was in such a way, that the paintings of the bodies of the native *babus* depicted a sort of a weakness and gullibility; and thus gave a clear idea that these men were not 'manly', and henceforth were 'effeminate'.¹¹

Construction of a new discourse, in response to the growing social unease

We have already tried to see that colonization of the natives was so much so that the natives came to portray *themselves* as 'frail', 'delicate' and 'feeble' both in terms of physicality, as well as morally. Tanika Sarkar in her book 'Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation' discloses a vital point before the readers. She points out that whereas early 19th Century male liberal reformers were deeply self-critical about the bondage of the women within the household, the satirized self-portrayal of the Bengali *babus* of the later decades showed very different forms of lapses and lacuna for themselves. The *babu* was someone who had completely lost his autonomy and had come to live under the chains of subjugation before the British colonizers.

This was also the time when it was being perceived that many of these *babus* had shrunk down to the level of parasitic petty- landlord. The general feeling that had started to crystallize at around this time was that the rent-revenue gap that the Permanent Settlement generated, had been a major security area for middle-class *bhadralok* earlier.¹² But, the landlords' certainty of exercising power over rent collection had started to diminish from the mid 19th Century by the Rent Acts of 1859 and 1885.¹³ In consequence to the 1859 Act, landlords had been complaining that the loss of their earlier power had eroded their moral authority, as well. And, in this connection, Tanika Sarkar makes a very significant statement that the moral order of patriarchy was now in 'peril'.¹⁴

Henceforth, the general intuition at around this period was that the native 'men' had become colonized and were no longer in a position to assert their supremacy through 'manly' prowess and vigour, and thus were turning 'effeminate'. Coupled by this assumption, it was further added that British colonialism had come to dominate the nation of India; and no one was external to the impacts of colonial subjugation except the women (as we shall see). In other

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words, the British Raj, with its powerful arm of dominating and exercising its foothold was so successful in its mission, that each and every person came to be chained by the shackles of colonialism. Hence, colonialism had penetrated rigorously to every possible space where it could.

But here was an exception. Since the assumption was that colonialism had made its entry *almost* everywhere, an exception was brought forth in order to claim that the nation was at least not colonized in its *entirety*. It indeed did retain some areas where colonialism could not intrude. And this supposed ‘untouched’, ‘uncontaminated’ space came to be the domain of the ‘home’, or the household.¹⁵

And if the household represented the nation, then the woman was its true patriotic subject.¹⁶ Henceforth, in other words, the ‘woman’ had to represent the nation. The social construction of the then time was that, the male body had experienced the grind of Western education, office, routine and hence the body of the ‘man’ was intruded by the impact of colonialism. As scars of colonialism had already been imprinted on the ‘male’ body, it was now the ‘woman’ who had to strongly take up the responsibility of representing the nation. This new discourse now constructed an image that it was the ‘ideal’ and necessary duty of the woman to remain thoroughly dedicated towards the nation. Consequently, the woman had to maintain her austerity, purity and chastity. Self-sacrifice and selfless love now came to characterize the so-called ‘ideal’ woman.

However, all these constructions were made so as to justify the ‘nationalist’ and the ‘colonialist’ agenda; and to ensure that the ‘woman’ in the ‘home’ continued to remain suppressed. Here two underlying currents were playing in the scene. At one level, if we go back to the main area of study in this paper, we can see that there did lay a lurking tension on the part of the men that they were losing their ‘masculine’ attributes and were becoming sort of ‘effete’. This constant and pestering social anxiety was quite a matter of disturbance as well as an embarrassment on the part of the males. At another level, in order to conceal that source of specking trouble from the society, these men had to build a repertoire of a counter-discourse; and this discourse contained within it all sorts of mechanisms which would try to suppress the inherent fear within

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themselves. And this took a convoluted path, which would constantly try to show that their project was enhancing the position of the women in society by portraying them as the very emblems of nationhood.

The entire discourse was thus built around a social *construction*, by separating the domain of culture into two spheres- namely the 'material' and the 'spiritual'. Proceeding from that, Partha Chatterjee argues that this material-spiritual discourse was condensed into an ideologically more powerful dichotomy-the 'outer' and the 'inner'. To the nationalist construction, this 'material' domain is a mere external, to which they are only forced to adjust; and nothing more. But the actual domain was the 'spiritual', which is one's true-self and one's own identity.¹⁷ And, the 'spiritual' or the 'inner' domain was the domain of the 'woman' within the confines of the home.

Further cultivations of ideologies on 'ideal' womanhood and 'ideal' motherhood

We have briefly mentioned about the construction of the new discourse by the men, in the previous section. Accordingly, the construct went on to declare that if the nation was to be revived, the original strength was to be found within the 'woman'. Since the 'public' world of education, work and politics were marked by colonization; the 'private' domain of the home came to be valorized as the *only* site which continued to retain its autonomy. Jashodhara Bagchi (1990) points out that the burgeoning nationalism in colonial Bengal in the last quarter of the nineteenth century caught hold of the image of the 'mother' to represent the nationalist aspiration. In this context, she raises a very fundamental question, that is, whether the creation of the image of the 'mother' was simply an accidental one or was there something that *forced* its creation. And Bagchi makes a very crucial observation in this connection. She strongly suggests that this very nationalist glorification of 'ideal' motherhood had a far reaching impact on the ideological control over women.¹⁸

We have already mentioned that the state of patriarchy itself was in danger. Hence, the upholders of the patriarchal order had no other option left but to shift the entire discourse; by making the 'woman' the subject. And within this project, they took up the issue of 'ideal' motherhood and 'ideal' womanhood. By shifting the focus of study from *their* alleged

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'effeminacy' to the 'ideal' qualities of a 'good' mother and a 'good' wife, these men tactfully aimed to solve their problem. Accordingly, the entire study now concentrated on assessing the qualities of the 'good' mother and the 'ideal' wife.

The 'ideal' mother was to be a constant sufferer, tirelessly and selflessly dedicating herself for her children. She was to provide constant support to her sons, who were colonized. At the same time, she was also a Divine figure. Since motherhood was associated with Goddess worship, she was seen as a source of potential strength. These ideas were reflected in early revivalist-nationalist depictions of motherhood; and her strength came to be centered on the worship of Kali, a figure of *shakti*.¹⁹ Also, the woman had to be an 'ideal' wife, as well. She had to remain ever-dedicated and committed to her husband (*pativrata*), by following her necessary duties within the home. Chastity and purity therefore, came to mark her body. Along with these, symbolisms like constant self-sacrifice, powerlessness, suffering and submission before her husband would determine her 'ideal' womanhood. Therefore, ancient figures of Savitri, Sanjukta and their 'virtues' were now being brought back.

Conclusion

We have tried to analyze in the paper that somewhere or the other, there did lay an underlying tension beneath the surface on the part of the *babu* in 19th Century Bengal that he was relegating to a colonized position. Yet at the same time, he could not bare open his unease before everyone, as he knew quite well that this would further highlight his lack of 'manliness'. So, the psychology of the *babus* worked in two ways. The first was the strong apprehension on their part that they was gradually becoming devoid of manly qualities, and were becoming 'frail heroes', or men who are marked by their weakness and fragility; and hence were not 'real' men. This would subsequently give rise to a feeling that they were men by birth, but not through their actions. So, the label of 'effeminate' people would come to characterize them. This was a severe anxiety faced by them, at a time when they had been grappled by the forces of colonization. So combined with the feelings of severe anxieties, social embarrassment on the one hand , yet a

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strong feeling of helplessness on the other to revert back; the situation was indeed a medley and a chaotic one for the *babus*.

Yet, on the other hand, the grim reality was that they were unable to resist the colonial presence. This failing spirit necessarily re-signified their weakness. And once the element of 'weakness' arises; the consequent feeling of becoming 'effeminate' too inadvertently creeps in. Needless to mention, it was nothing more humiliating for the 'males' than they *themselves* feeling that they lacked the necessary prowess and machismo. Nothing could be more disturbing for the 'men' than the constantly reverberating feeling amongst *them* that they were somewhere lagging behind 'man-like' attributes.

However, at yet another level, being 'men', they were not supposed to disclose their weakness before the society, as that would doubly re-affirm their state of 'effeminacy'. So, the net result was that they could neither swallow their failings blatantly, nor could they express their anxiety before the society. This was indeed a kind of a distressing middle position for them. And having been caught in such an ugly situation, they had the one and only one option to revert this image back, and this took the path of building a new discourse altogether, whereby the focus no longer remained on them, but shifted to the women.

By devising this trick, they felt that they would be serving two purposes at the same time. Firstly, they would gradually wipe out the image from the society that they were actually incompetent to resist colonialism. Secondly, by the entire project of creating and devising an altogether new discourse, the focus would now shift to the *women* from them. Automatically, this would give birth to a totally new situation, whereby the label of 'effeminacy' would be significantly removed from their bodies. However, this was only a temporary solution. The *babus* would try to assert their power and wipe out the stigma of 'effeminacy' from their bodies; but this was only on the surface. They would continue to have the underlying anxieties and tensions. Perhaps they could apparently solve out their problem, but the question is for how long. The social anxiety indeed continued to remain within the minds of the *babus*. Therefore, regardless of whatever discourse they constructed, the underlying tension could never be effaced.

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