

Crossing the Threshold: Women in Colonial City Space

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***Ghar Hote Angina Bidesh*¹: Women's Negotiation with the City in Colonial Bengal**

When Bengali women crossed the thresholds of their “home” and stepped out into the world for the first time in the nineteenth century, this eventful moment became a moment of rupture- a break away from the cage, the *Pinjar*. Women had been the *pinjarabaddhapakhi* or “caged birds” as portrayed by Nagendrabala Mustafi in colonial Bengal. The first flutters of this caged bird into her “emancipated” existence introduced her to the unknown world of *Bahir*, the Outside. The different spaces in the city—its streets, markets and the public domains of education and work, constitute this outside world which witnessed woman’s journey from *nivritocharini* or domesticated being to *bhadramahila*, the Bengali New Woman. The city is inextricably linked with the making of this “reformed” New Woman who was conscious of her social existence in the urban space as the woman citizen. She transformed herself in her dress, appearance and behavior and made her foray into professions that were entirely dominated by men. In colonial

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times, the city was not used to witnessing upper class and middle class Bengali women on streets, unveiled and open to the scrutiny of public gaze. The public sphere was virtually forbidden to the domestic angel who was confined within the clearly demarcated world of the “home”. So claiming this city space, even partially, was not easy for a woman at that time. Therefore, she negotiated her space in the dominant patriarchal structure of the city through the constant process of contestations and compliance.

This paper looks into women’s encounter with the city space through their writings in the colonial period which meticulously documented their struggle in crafting a space for themselves in the cities. Occasionally such accounts emerge from early travel writings by women, such as the first travelogue written by a Bengali woman, Krishnabhabini Das who charted her interface with the two great cities—London and Calcutta. The illustrious Tagore family which initiated several cultural reforms in colonial Calcutta presented pioneering women like Jnanadanandini Devi, Swarnakumari Devi and Sarala Devi who went ahead to create a niche for themselves in the public and intellectual life of the city beside their blazing male counterparts. Again, the memoir of Santa Devi offers us that path-breaking moment when some young women decided to reclaim the city streets by walking their way back

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home from the Bethune College—a remarkable feat in itself in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Of course, later, women frequently took to streets in protest marches during the peak of nationalist movement but that was quite different from walking home all by themselves without a male guardian.

The present paper would discuss women's interaction with the colonial city through the following categories which shaped women's intervention into the public sphere: women's education, women's attire, women's committees and women's travel. These categories are connected with the emergence of the new phenomenon in the mid-nineteenth century: the *lekhika* or the woman writer. The paper would probe into these categories in the light of the essays, travel accounts and memoirs, penned by early women writers in Bengali, such as Krishnabhabini Das, Jnanadanandini Devi, Sarala Devi and others.

Nineteenth Century Calcutta and the Rise of the Colonial Bengali Middle Class Ideology

The public sphere in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century saw a simultaneous development of two oppositional movements:

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broadening of the liberal and reformist politics as well as the growth of rigid and closed nationalism. The city was configured within the conceptualization of the public sphere in the colonial middle class ideology which upheld a clearly demarcated private/public dichotomy. Within this dialectical relationship, the city was constructed following the ideology of western materialism and the colonial and Christian missionary reformist movements. Calcutta as a colonial city and the capital of the British ruled India until 1911, was at the heart of the colonial “civilizing mission” and the centre of its “modernizing” movements. The civilizing mission was a disguised manifestation of the Englishman’s burdens: “the white man’s burden” of educating the unenlightened natives, and the “man’s burden” of emancipating native women from what they considered to be a socio-cultural milieu of utter ignorance and impurity. The latter burden came to be shared by “the English-educated Bengali *bhadralok*² of the nineteenth century” (Banerjee, “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture” 167)³. An important aspect of this “modernizing” project, as shown by Sumit Sarkar in “The City Imagined: Calcutta of the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries”, was the rapid urbanization ushered in by the Western materialism and the growing industrialization:

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The last three decades of the nineteenth century saw some significant improvements: underground water pipes and drains in some areas from the 1870s; a pontoon bridge across the Hooghly river in 1874; horse-drawn trams from 1880; gas lights on streets, and then from 1891 a slow replacement of them by electricity; the first telephone in 1882 and a few motor-cars from 1896; and, as mentioned by Cotton, electric lights and fans in a few homes and electric trams from around 1900. (163)

These developments led to the establishments of new schools and colleges which were necessary for entering into modern liberal professions in government and mercantile organizations. Thus “Nineteenth century Calcutta had become a real metropolis for the *bhadralok*, providing education, opportunities for jobs, printed books, a taste for new cultural values” (Sarkar 176). The question is how the construct of the “*bhadramahila*” is situated within this “new cultural values”.

This class of urban Bengali *bhadralok* maintained a fine balance between their paternalistic reform strategies and the conformity to their

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patriarchal norms of the traditional Hindu society. They contributed in the implementation of the model of the formal female education in Bengal following the educational frameworks of the contemporary English missionaries, educationists and administrators. At the same time these urban elites were quite concerned about drawing the *lakshmanrekha*, or a boundary line for the education and free movements of women in society. Their anxiety over the conformity to the Hindu patriarchal norms also motivated them to obstruct the free flow of certain popular cultural and literary forms believed to be harmful for the middle class *bhadralok* morality. Interestingly, this ideology was equally shared by the women of the urban *bhadralok* families. The model of women's emancipation held up as an ideal for the upper and middle class women through the English educated social reformers often presents a construction of the urban elite "*bhadramahila*" who were educated for participating in "the new social milieu and cultural affairs of educated society" (Sarkar 172).

Formation of New Patriarchies? *Bhadramahila*⁴ in the Colonial City Space

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The norms of the “new social milieu and cultural affairs of the educated society” (Sarkar 172) in Calcutta were governed by the colonial education, Victorian ethics and the surge of “bourgeois” nationalism that led to the construction of the “new womanhood”. Under the influence of the liberal Western education and the colonial “civilizing mission”, the urban elites were made to realize the need of social reforms and the eradication of certain Hindu customs which paved the way for the colonial critique of Indian tradition and the subjugation of women in Indian societies in the name of religion, customs and tradition. Most of the writings of both the *bhadralok* and the *bhadramahila* dealt with these criticisms. But, ironically these uproars of the urban middle class concerning female emancipation, remained strategically silent on the social conservatism, the caste discrimination and the maintenance of the patriarchal norms within the family, and the public/private split.

The female education system, which occupied a major portion of the writings of the *Bhadramahila*, was the outcome of the Victorian ethics which believed in the construction of the “new woman” who was educated, and at the same time, cultivated genteel norms and domestic virtues. Echoes of this reformulated patriarchy are heard in the words of a young Radical in 1856,

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quoted by Sumanta Banerjee in his “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal”:

Females are not required to be educated by the standard which is adapted to men...Women has but one resource-Home. The end and aim of her life is to cultivate the domestic affections, to minister to the comfort and happiness of her husband, to look after and tend her children, and exercise her little supervision over domestic economies... (211)

He then added: “She must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated...” (212)⁵ This split between the private and the public, the home and the world is contained within the nationalist resolution of the “woman question” under the inevitable impact of the colonial rule. It sought to redefine the gender roles in the private and public spaces and tried to respond to the debates dealing with the everyday life of the “modern” woman in the city space, such as her dress, manners, food, education, her role within the family, her movements in the city, and her social engagements. The whole issue corresponded to the nationalist reformulation of the Indian/ Western,

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feminine/masculine, spiritual/material and home/world binaries. The West was the representative of the external material realm, which was also the territory of the male. On the other hand, the Indian tradition asserted its spiritual supremacy, which, as the nationalist reformers claimed, was preserved in the “home” - the domain of the female. As shown in the above-mentioned quotation, the belief in the discrete division of “home” and the “World”, the “ghar” and the “bahir” even by the Young Radicals in the nineteenth century, was typically a product of the anxiety of the westernization of Bengali women, which concerned the educated urban middle class men who were imitating the western models of education and behaviour to raise their social standards in the colonial “modern” world. The impact of this western culture also influenced their women at home. So the threat was double-edged. On the one hand, the middle-class elites were anxious to guard their women from the low-browed, popular, native cultural forms and expressions, performed by male/female practitioners who did not share the “refined” taste of the middle class urban intelligentsia. On the other hand, the middle class urban men, under the threat of the westernization of their women, felt it necessary to construct a “new womanhood” which would fit into their nationalist project. In fact, the schools and other female

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educational institutions which were opened by the Bengali urban elites were a kind of response to the inherent threat of westernization and proselytization in the educational institutions earlier established by the Christian missionaries in early nineteenth century. The construction of the new womanhood which corresponded to the rise of nationalism is analysed by Partha Chatterjee:

The new woman defined in this way was subjected to a new patriarchy. In fact, the social order connecting the home and the world in which nationalists placed the new woman was contrasted not only with that of modern western society; it was explicitly distinguished from the patriarchy of the indigenous tradition, the same tradition that had been put on the dock by the colonial interrogators. Sure, enough, nationalism adopted several elements from tradition as marks of its native cultural identity, but this was now a “classicized” tradition-reformed, reconstructed, fortified against charges of barbarism and irrationality (127).

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For these new women in colonial Bengal, the city was initially an alien, outside space, the *Bahir*, when contrasted with the secure inner world of their “Home”, the *Ghar*. Earlier, even when they made fleeting appearances in the *baithakkhana*, the drawing room where the outsiders were entertained, it had been strictly under the veil. Reclamation of the city space thus became synonymous with the proliferation of new spaces in their lives, hitherto unexplored, which expanded their horizon that was so long enclosed within the four walls of the home.

The Unveiled Woman: City as the Space of Women’s Education

By the turn of the century, and precisely around the time when the male nationalist resolution into the ‘home’ as distinct from the ‘world’ was reaching its zenith with the rise of Extremist nationalism, women were doing even more unusual things. They attended schools which began to develop in the metropolitan cities from the mid-nineteenth centuries, and which took them away from the domestic confines and the control of kinship networks, giving them a public identity beyond the familial. They

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were also admitted in the colleges and universities, receiving degrees in the sciences and arts, much earlier than the English women were allowed those in Britain. Some of them went abroad for medical training and a few of them took up employment as teachers and doctors.(S. Sarkar and T. Sarkar 6)

Sumit Sarkar and Tanika Sarkar, in their “Introduction” to *Women and Social Reform in Modern India*, marked the growing participation of women in the urban education system. Women’s coming into the realm of public affairs began with the initiation of their education in the formal public schools. Sending a girl child to school necessitated the disavowal of the traditional custom of *purda* or the veil. This unveiling of Bengali woman generated sharply divided opinions -while it faced the wrath of the traditionalists, it won the support of the progressive Brahmo and Hindu males. The following lampoon by Iswar Gupta represents the traditionalist perspective on women’s education and the prospect of their subsequent emancipation:

When the women took the books in their hands smartly,

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They, learning the 'A B', fashioning as Bibi, talk in the foreign tongue.

They end up handing the forks and spoons, forget to eat sitting in a *piri*

They will drive on their own car to relax in the *Garer Math*

Saying 'hoot' they wear the 'boot'; they will go to heaven by smoking
'chooroot'⁶. (111-112)

This lampoon clearly indicates the interface between women's education, the process of their "unveiling" and their free movements in the public space. It mirrors the traditionalist voice against women's education as it was at odds with the custom of veiling and confinement within the domestic space. The oppositional voice, presented by the progressive Brahmo and Hindu reformers like Monmohon Ghosh, Satyendranath Tagore, Sashipada Bandopadhyay, Umeshchandra Banerjee, Dwarakanath Ganguly, Kishorchand Mitra, realized the essential connection between women's education and their freedom. Kaliprasanna Singha asserted in *Narijati Bishayak Prastab (Proposal about Women)*:

If it is expectable that women will be educated, I cannot understand why they are not expected to be free. Without freedom, one cannot be properly educated. (151)

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Female education, which was the outcome of the colonial as well as nationalist reformist strategies, in spite of all the limitations, undeniably, engendered the first flutters of women's voices. It gave Bengali women the first taste of freedom. However, not all women were privileged enough to enjoy the fruit of the social reform movements. The women who crossed the thresholds of the domestic education to study in formal educational institutions- schools, colleges and even universities, belonged to the upper and middle classes of the social strata, and were protected by their supportive families—their progressive fathers and husbands who stood by them.

Those women who enjoyed the fruits of formal education in the second half of the nineteenth century achieved remarkably in the professional and academic fields. Chandramukhi Bose (1860-1944) and Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) were the first graduates of the University of Calcutta, and Kadambini even succeeded in becoming the first professional female doctor. These successes which the Bengali women attained through formal education opened up potential challenges for the new patriarchy, comprising the modern, middle class urban elites, as women now intruded into the professional public spaces that were designated as the male domain by social convention.

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The middle class women, nevertheless, welcomed the change as education helped them to discover their own voices. Consequently, as we see in many writings of women in the latter half of the nineteenth century, they enthusiastically promoted female education. In their cloistered world, to be educated was to be free. It endowed them with claims of “cultural superiority” as analysed by Partha Chatterjee:

superiority over the Western women for whom, it was believed, education meant only the acquisition of material skills to compete with men in the outside world, and hence a loss of feminine (spiritual) virtues; superiority over the preceding generation of women in their own homes who had been denied the opportunity of freedom by an oppressive and degenerate social tradition; and superiority over women of the lower classes who were culturally incapable of appreciating the virtues of freedom.⁷(129)

This probably explains the propagation of the nationalist model of “new womanhood” by many of the women writers such as Kailashbasini Devi,

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Krishnabhabini Das, Radharani Lahiri, Jnanadanandini Devi and others who, while advocating female education and promoting various forms of female emancipation through the reformation of their dress, behaviour and movement, were simultaneously quite conscious in their repeated emphasis on the maintenance of feminine virtues. They would not allow any kind of negligence of the household duties towards the family members or “to bring disgrace to the marital casket of vermilion” (Devi, “The Woeful Plight” 45)⁸.

The textual world of the women writers represents a balance between their private domestic world and the public city space. On the one hand, their formal education empowered them to run the household according to the values of the newly emerging bourgeoisie; on the other hand, their feminine conducts preserve the nationalist stress on spirituality and the sanctity of the home. And as a reward of maintaining the perfect balance between tradition and modernity they were granted permission to go to schools, to travel in public, to watch public entertainment programmes, and even to take employments in public institutions. However, the “ideological crusade”(Banerjee 173) of the Bengali urban educated elite eventually had a boomerang effect. The new “emancipated” women ended up producing

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stringent critique of this middle class patriarchal ideology through their writings in various women's magazines and other texts.

Changing Attire: Women in City Space

Women's public presence in the city necessitates a change in the conventional dress code of the Bengali women. Traditionally, they wore a single saree without a blouse and a petticoat whose texture was equated with the economic status of that household. But the fine sarees worn by women in the elite families, were often transparent enough to reveal their body outlines. Fanny Parks in her writing⁹ in 1850 marked this traditional attire as a hindrance in exposing the woman to the men other than her husband. The women who travelled to European cities often dressed themselves in western gowns and shoes. But the way in which the Bengali traditional saree was draped needed a change to allow women to move about in the city. This evolution was introduced by Jnanadanandini Devi in her way of wearing the saree which she created while staying in Bombay (present-day Mumbai) and Ahmadabad with her husband. She followed the Parsi way of wearing saree when she stayed with the Manekji family in Bombay. But she used to put the "anchal" on the left side which was different from the Parsi way of placing

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the “anchal” over the right shoulder. She wore her saree with a blouse, petticoat and a jacket. This style of draping the saree became immensely popular among women in the Tagore household. Jnanada was, however, not entirely satisfied by changing the sartorial style in her in-law’s family alone. In her first writing in *Bamabodhini Patrika*, she advertised herself as a guide who could help others in wearing the saree in this manner. This fashion which became popular in the Brahmo¹⁰ households, gradually came to be known as the “Brahmika Saree”¹¹. Another woman, Suniti Devi, also used this model of saree and wore it with a “kuchi”. This mode of wearing the saree with a “kuchi” (pleats) and “anchal” is still followed today. Thus, Jnanadanandini Devi played a pioneering role in defining women’s public appearance in the city, by using her unique sense of fashion which harmoniously combined tradition and modernity.

In the traditional Hindu household, the women were also prohibited from wearing shoes. Only the prostitutes and the women in Brahmo families defied this taboo. This posed another hindrance for women, stepping out of their homes. Their travels outside the domestic space, however, brought shoes into fashion. Jnanadanandini also wore shoes when she first travelled to Bombay. Not only that, she advocated the use of shoes by women in

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opposition to the prevailing custom in her letter to *Bamabodhini Patrika*. Therefore, the evolution in women's attire in the colonial city brought in considerable modernization, altering the lives of Bengali women by gradually replacing the old customs with new ones that were consistent with the changing times.

Women in Public Meetings in the Colonial City: The Emergence of the *Mahila Samity*

Women's social engagements in the city space began through their participation in the Brahma annual *Maghotsab*. After the division of the *Indian Brahma samaj* in 1878, women felt the need to have their separate *Samity* or organization. This led to the establishment of the *Banga Mahila samaj* in 1879. The former members of the *Bamahitaishani Sabha*, Radharani Lahiri, Swarnaprova Bose, Kailashkamini Dutta, Swaraswati Sen, Kamini Sen, Kadambini Bose were the founding members of the *Banga Mahila Samaj*. It grew up as a committee of hundred women members. This inspired the establishment of separate *Mahila Samities* by *Bharatbaorshio Brahma Samaj*, *Sadharan Brahma Samaj* and by Christian women. But the most elaborate social engagements were initiated with the advent of the

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Sakhi Samity, established by Swarnakumari Devi in 1886. This *Samity* managed to bring together female participants from traditional Hindu families as well as members from the other sects of *Brahmo Samaj*. *Sakhi Samity* was mainly a platform where women from various backgrounds could develop a shared understanding of life. It also helped the hapless widows and women in deplorable condition in becoming self-dependent¹².

Other than these *mahila samities*, women began to participate in various public meetings and get-togethers which gave them an opportunity to explore those domains in the public world that were exclusively controlled by the male authority. Again, Jnanadanandini Devi was a pioneering personality in the modernization of women's social engagements. Her education, cultivation of western culture and exposure to other cities like Bombay, Ahmadabad, and London shaped her social presence. She was so modern in her ways that she could go alone to attend an invitation of the Viceroy in the colonial Calcutta when her husband was unable to perform the formality. This action irked the traditional custodians of the society who were not accustomed to women fulfilling public obligations on their own. She organized meetings in the evening which became a space for free-spirited discussion among men and women. This had an important influence in

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modulating the personalities of women of the Tagore household like Indira Devi, Sarala Devi and Prativa Devi. We can get a glimpse of this kind of urban gathering in the memoir of Rathindranath Tagore:

Aunt Janadanandini presided over the Inga-Banga Samaj consisting of English-educated Indians...The afternoons would start with tennis and tea and end with supper...(Murshid 87)¹³

These social engagements in the urban space redefined the idea of women's freedom in the colonial Bengal.

Women in Profession: City as the Workplace

The late nineteenth century colonial Bengal witnessed the emergence of the *Bhadramahila* in the profession. Earlier, the economic structure of the lower class families urged their women to take up work outside their homes and make substantial financial contributions in running the household. This in turn resulted in the greater public presence of these women, and concurrently, ensured more freedom than what the upper-class women enjoyed. Economic independence was prohibited for woman hailing from the upper caste and upper and middle classes, in the early colonial Bengal.

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However, higher education ignited the desire of economic independence in some women who took up jobs in schools, colleges, hospitals and other government institutions. Thus space had to be created for professional women in the workplace with the appointments of women teachers like Chandramukhi Bose, Kamini Sen, Kumudini Khastagir and Sarala Devi and the women medics like Kadambini Ganguly and Jamini Sen. Nevertheless, there existed a kind of social prejudice against these highly educated women in colonial Calcutta which contributed in their being unmarried for a long time. The major patriarchal prejudice that worked against the marriage prospects of these *Bhadramahilas* who participated in urban professions was the notion that they were not sufficiently docile and traditional to be married off to a conventional Bengali family. These women thus got the space to explore the professional world and be economically independent without the aid of a husband. Some women like Chandramukhi Bose and Jamini Sen preferred to remain unmarried throughout their lives. Marriage and traditional domestic roles were at odds with the women's profession at that time. This often led to the resignation from their jobs after the women were married off. Sarala Devi in her *Jibaner Jharapata*, (*The Fallen Leaves of Life*) presented a view of the professional woman's experience:

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Being equally educated with the elder brothers, I wanted to prove the equal rights of men and women in being economically independent and that was the major motivation behind taking my job. If it was an unconscious drive, the desire of being economically independent was the major cause...But the desire erodes gradually and it is fulfilled after a short while. My desire was also fulfilled after six months (118-119).

This account of Sarala Devi reinforced the fact that economic independence was not the primary object of most of the professionally trained women, though we find exceptions like Chadramukhi Bose, Jamini Sen and Kadambini Ganguly. Undeniably, the inclusion of women in the workforce in colonial Calcutta did enlarge the boundaries of the urban, and predominantly patriarchal professional world. The proliferation of the female educational institutions in the late nineteenth century colonial cities, for example, necessitated the engagement of female teachers as they became the role models for bringing more girls and women into formal education.

Travel to Explore: Women in Foreign Cities

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Accounts of women's travel to foreign cities, especially to London, constitute important representations of their negotiation with the urban space. For women, to travel is to challenge the patriarchy and that entrenched norm which prohibited women's movement outside home. It also offers the alternative gaze of the colonized subject, looking at the colonizer's city space. The gaze distinctly becomes gendered as we see the woman traveler's encounter with the English women urges her to address the "woman question" from multiple perspectives. The insatiate desire of moving beyond the confines of the home, to carve her space in the public world, to know the city through her own eyes, inform the first flurry of women's travel writing. Indeed, the women who first ventured into the public world hailed from the enlightened Bengali families, most of them were Christians and Brahmos. Their religious background enabled them to defy the strictures of traditional Hindu Brahminic patriarchy while their western education and culture opened new windows to the world outside. Sometimes, these women moved beyond the precincts of the home as companions of their husband. At other times, their own desire to fly beyond the caged domesticity motivated their travel to foreign locations such as London. Krishnabhabini Das, belonged to this group of women who

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journeyed along with her husband to England in 1882. She was not the first woman to step out of her native soil. However, her experience brought in a change in her attire as an unveiled woman travelling outside home. She had to wear shoes and adequate clothing to walk on the streets of London and acquire sufficient education to deal with the public life in a foreign land. We have already presented the essential connection between disavowal of women's confinement, women's modern attire and her education. This is reinforced in Krishnabhabini's exploration of a foreign city.

The first woman to cross the *kalapani* was Kamalmani Thakur who was the wife of Gyanendromohan Thakur. It was easier for her to break the traditional Hindu customs of veiling and *kalapani* in 1859 as she had a Christian background. She travelled to London for better treatment with her husband and two daughters. Khetromohini Dutt, the wife of Gobindachandra Dutt who also converted to Christianity, followed the footsteps of Kamalmani when she travelled to France, Italy and England with her husband and two daughters. But women's encounter with the city can be better understood through the journey of Khetromohini's two daughters, Aru and Toru Dutt who moved abroad for better education. Their travel to the cities of Marseille, London and Cambridge for higher education was a

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pioneering act, paving the way for women's journey to foreign countries for the purpose of education. Subsequently, the Dutt sisters created an identity for themselves as renowned writers. Toru was the first Bengali woman who wrote novels and poems in English and French, and it is evident from her creative corpus that her travels to various European cities facilitated her growth as a writer.

The first Brahma woman to move to London was Rajkumari Bandopadhyay, the wife of Sashipada Bandopadhyay. Rajkumari travelled to England during the period of her pregnancy and gave birth to her son in England. She was the guest of Mary Carpenter who was an inspiring figure for the Brahma women in colonial Bengal. Hemangini Devi, the wife of Congress leader and barrister, Umeschandra Banerjee was a trailblazer in a sense, as she travelled to London without her husband. This was almost unthinkable for a Bengali woman of her times. Further, she was travelling in her pregnancy and was accompanied by her four small children. Hemangini's decision to settle in England not only changed her own lifestyle, but also altered the lives of her four daughters who were educated in universities and colleges of London and Cambridge. Jnanadanandini Devi also travelled alone to London during her pregnancy in 1877. She took her children along.

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Her stay in France and England for two and half years not only encouraged her movements outside the traditional bounds of the Bengali household, but it also contributed in her modernization.

Among this first group of women travelers, Krishnabhabini is unique in enunciating her comparative understanding of the two great cities - London and Calcutta, in one of the first travelogues written by a Bengali woman, *Englande Bangamahila (The Bengali Woman in England)*. Her movement beyond her domestic world or her *sansar* was a rebellion against the strictures of the Hindu Brahmanic patriarchy which believed in the custom of ostracizing a person from the community who had traveled to the foreign land by crossing the sea which was superstitiously treated as *kalapani*, the dirty unholy water. For the defiance of this purity-pollution taboo to accompany her husband in England, Krishnabhabini had to leave behind her daughter, Tilottama who was kept under her grandfather's care and was married off in an early age of ten.

Krishnabhabini's travelogue is tinged with the critique of the lack of woman's freedom in pursuing her studies in the foreign cities and the dual bondage of a woman citizen under the British colonialism. Her journey to

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England was essentially linked with the metaphor of breaking the cage, articulating her identity, and coming out unveiled in the public world by casting aside the inhibitions. Thus in her courageous efforts to create her space in an unknown city, she liberated herself from the pinions and reclaimed her voice. Krishnabhabini writes:

Today I opened my mouth and board on a mechanized car.

(Das 1885)

Her description of the city of London in constant reference to the cityscape of colonial Calcutta is exemplary, as for the first time, a Bengali woman, outside her cloistered world was documenting her observations and her persistent negotiations with the city space. In her words:

London is four times greater than Calcutta and in the population London is eighth times greater than Calcutta- Four million people live here....London is so big , but it is still growing, whenever you go , you see the hundreds of new houses are built and it is annexing the surrounding villages with it.(Das 43 as quoted in Bijit Ghosh)¹⁴

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The process of urbanization and the glory of the London marketplace stroke Krishnabhabini's sensibility who tried to fathom an unknown urban space by constantly referring back to Calcutta and drawing comparisons between the two cities. Her critique of the London class structure and the inhuman behavior towards the poor of London presented her as a socially conscious woman. The most important aspect of *Englande Bangamahila* is Krishnabhabini's comparative understanding of women's condition in both the cities.

Her applause for the individuality, education and free spirit of the British women made her conscious of the confined domesticated situation of her fellow woman in her native land. She indirectly backed the free movement of women in the public sphere by her praise of the British women, who even while being in the public space, was able to maintain the integrity of their character. Krishnabhabini writes:

In this country, the virtuous women are really virtuous.

One can brag of being virtuous by abstaining from the male world. But the women who can maintain her virtuosity even living in the male world, sharing equally

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the public space with men, really deserve praise and they are the powerful in mind and dharma. (152)

Krishnabhabini was impressed by the equality in the conjugal relationship in England. This led to her reflection on the gaping hiatus in the conjugal relationship in colonial Calcutta which allowed the husbands to live an unhindered public life, but the wives were expected to perform the subservient role of a domestic angel. She writes:

There is no *bahir* (outside) and *andar* (inside) in English homes as we see in Bengal. So the women take care of the public life as well as they also worked as the host to friends and male guests. (139-140)

She appreciated the way in which both English men and women shared their duties in the public sphere:

Besides performing the feminine responsibilities at home, English women run the shops, work as clerks, teach in schools, write books and newspapers, and deliver speeches in the public meetings. (140)

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It seems that Krishnabhabini's travel to London is not merely for her individual improvement; rather it is under the compulsion of being a companion to her outcaste husband. But it ultimately produced the first written documentation of a Bengali women's negotiation with the city space, in the form of travelogue, through the exploration of London and Calcutta.

Conclusion

Women's intervention in the city space is a journey through the double bind of tradition and modernity. She was celebrated as the model of "female emancipation" and "new womanhood", advocated by the colonial as well as the social reformist agendas. On the other hand, she had to bear the onus of the Hindu Brahminic upper caste patriarchy, to preserve the sanctity of "home", and to become the model of spiritual purity upheld by the Indian nationalist tradition. Nonetheless, within the site of multiple patriarchies, the woman in the nineteenth century Calcutta did create a space of her own through strategic contestation and compliance with the prevalent social norms. Even if it was a marginal zone in the dominant male city space, still it gave her a voice to assert her agency, to redefine the cityscape, to reformulate it from the feminine perspective and to relocate it within her writings.

Notes:

1. “*Ghar hote angina bidesh*” indicates the woman’s condition in the early nineteenth century Bengal when her life was primarily confined to the inner quarters of the sprawling household in traditional upper-class homes. She even lacked the freedom to move unrestrained in the outer parts of the house where male visitors were received. The “*ghar*” is the inside and the “*angina*” is the outer domain of the house.
2. “*Bhadralok*” is the typical term used to indicate the Bengali middle class urban elite in the Nineteenth century.
3. Banerjee, “Marginalization of Women’s Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal” p-167.
4. The social category of the “*Bhadramahila*” emerged in the nineteenth century after the introduction of the model of female education. This category generally indicates the women of the urban middle class homes.

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5. Sumanta Banerjee quotes this from Shib Chandra Bose's "On the Education of Hindoo Females" which was published in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, edited by Ray. p- 200, 214.
6. Sutapa Das quotes these lines from *Iswar Gupter Kabitasangraha*(*The Collection of Poems by Iswar Gupta*) edited by Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay. P-111-112.
7. Partha Chatterjee, "The Nation and Its Women", p-129.
8. Kailashbasini Devi, "The Woeful Plight of Hindu women", p-45
9. Fanny Parks. *Wandering of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, during four-and-twenty years in the East with Revelations of Life in Zenana*, p-60.
10. "Brahmos" were the followers of "Brahmoism", a monotheistic, reformist movement of Hindu religion that took shape in the

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nineteenth century. The “Brahmos” together formed the society, “Brahmo Samaj” under the leadership of reformist and progressive Hindu radicals. Later the Brahmo Samaj was divided into various sects. The Brahmos contributed a lot in the nineteenth and twentieth century social and religious reformation in colonial Bengal.

11. Sarala Devi described this in memoir, *Jibaner Jharapata (The Fallen Leaves of Life)* p-58-59.
12. The formation of *Samities* by women in colonial Bengal is discussed in detail by Golam Murshid in his book, *Nari Pragati: Adunikatar Abhighate Bangaramani. (The Advancement of Women: Bengali Women Under the Effect of Modernity)*.
13. Rathindranath Tagore, “On the Edges of Time”, as cited in Golam Murshid’s *Rassundari theke Rokeya: Naripragatir Aksho Bachar, (From Rassundari to Rokeya: Hundred Years of Women’s Advancement)* p-87.

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14. Krishnabhabini Das. *Englande Bangamahila (The Bengali Woman in England)*.

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