Revisiting the Intellectual History of Women Thinkers: A Critical Study of Colonial and Postcolonial Bengal

Sanchayita Paul Chakraborty
Dhritiman Chakraborty

This special issue of *Sanglap* intends to revive the lost voices of women thinkers from "the clutches of academic amnesia" (Chakrabarti ii) and to reorient the focus on the intellectual contribution of women in colonial Bengal in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Critical discussions on the cultural and intellectual life in colonial Bengal often bypassed the intellectual investment of women who were trailblazers. This guest-edited issue of *Sanglap* explores the reasons behind this politics of marginalisation through different articles focusing on some of the remarkable women of colonial Bengal who intervened in the thought-scape with their lives and works.

The nineteenth century in colonial Bengal was a period of great churning in the fields of thoughts and activities that initiated multilayered social and religious reforms, cultural movements, epistemic shifts, and intense historical debates. The word 'Intellectual' emerged as a keyword in that period. 'Intellectual' translates in Bengali as '*Buddhijibi*'. Haricharan Bandyopadhyay in *Bangiya Sabdakosh*, which is considered the most reliable source for reference in Bengal, defines *Buddhijibi* as someone who can understand her own rights and her physical and mental condition by using her intellect (Bandyopadhyay 1599). This emphasis on 'intellect' significantly opens up the question of who can be called 'intellectual'. The very act of intellection was considered the prerogative of men, as has been the case in most of the cultures in this world. What we want to argue is that women, in concertedly attempting to write about their rights and deprivation, actually staked claim on this process of intellection. Therefore, contestation from a gender perspective took a different form that, without discounting the preeminence of the body in women's thinking, actually tried to reclaim the very space of mind to argue a robust case of women's agency. Was their attempt exhaustive or inclusive so far as the caste, religion and class optics are concerned? Did they have any distinct trajectory that the other cultures in South Asia could emulate? What kind of transnational networks could they mobilise to uphold their case? These are some questions that demand more scrutiny. Many contributors to this issue have dealt with this range of concerns either directly or tangentially. While some contributions are in the form of narrative reconstruction of a historical event around the figure of a woman thinker, others are bringing up nuanced optics to study fictional works, travelogues, diary writings, and so on.

Conventional society in colonial Bengal derecognised any cognitive capability of women. The orthodox people reinforced women's "social subordination and submissiveness" (Sarkar 7). This social attitude undermined women's assertion of the subjective self through her words and works. This politics of denial, therefore, negated women's identity as intellectual thinkers. For these women thinkers, "their significant intervention into and sometimes a radical critique of the cultural polemic of an evolving modernity" (Chakrabarti 4) often remained unrecognised. This issue of *Sanglap* attempts to reconstruct, rethink and recover the intellectual contribution of women in colonial and postcolonial Bengal.

Moreover, the existing scholarship in this area is primarily dominated by the trans-Atlantic and Eurocentric knowledge episteme and the precedence of the canonisation of male thinkers. This mode of research tends to homogenise the non-Western intellectual contribution. Even within the larger rubric of the 'non-Western', the diversity and plurality of women's voices remain marginalised. This special issue brings to attention the forgotten and marginalised Bengali women

to retrieve diverse social, cultural and political articulations in the larger sites of creation. By revisiting the critical intervention of the women thinkers in colonial Bengal, this journal issue brings forth some forgotten Bengali women like Hemlata Sarkar, Sunity Devi, Prabhabati Debi Saraswati, Kadambini Ganguly, and Jamini Sen. Articulation of women's intellect was difficult in this context, and their modes of intellectual expression and knowledge transmission were never limited to the mode of writing only. Some of these women, such as Prabhabati Debi Saraswati and Hemlata Sarkar, chose the mode of writing to articulate their social and literary imagination. However, Kadambini Ganguly and Jamini Sen, two leading female doctors of colonial Bengal, worked hard to assert their intellectual agency through their medical engagements, although they wrote very little about their struggle against the patriarchal politics of marginalisation. Though this issue revives Sunity Devi's autobiography written in English, an outstanding achievement in her time, the focus is more on her work as a pioneer in women's reform movements and as a religious reformer in spreading Brahmoism in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. The review essay included in this issue recontextualized the literary imagination of Chandrabati, who was considered the first Bengali woman poet to create her poetic universe in the sixteenth century. The interview with Professor Geraldine Forbes, who rethinks the genre of women's history through her oeuvre, completes this issue. Together, these articles try to relocate their contribution to the dissemination of knowledge. It initiates a process of rethinking the dominant mode of intellectual history in colonial and postcolonial Bengal from a gender perspective. Let us go through some seminal aspects of the individual articles that are anthologised in this issue.

The article on Hemlata Sarkar reflects on the travelogue she wrote at the beginning of the twentieth century based on what she saw in Kathmandu, Nepal. She is initially using a comparative framework to discuss both the similarities and differences between Calcutta, where she belonged and the seat of British colonial power, and Kathmandu, the capital of an independent Hindu nation, where she went to accompany her husband, who was a medical practitioner. These connecting threads have been the dominant optic through which travelogues have been read. However, in this piece, Chakraborty explores what new anthropological perspectives travel narratives can open up. Hence, we obtain the proposition of South Asia as a method. An excursus on South Asian cultures and lives immediately widens the 'frame of reference' to discuss some of the social and political complexities that effectively eschew Eurocentric postulations. This is where the chapter attempts an original contribution towards forming what Chakraborty argues as 'reversing the gaze' from a woman's perspective and erecting an imaginary of what he calls taking recourse to some eminent scholars on South Asian anthropology as 'samadukhasukhata', which connotes how certain collectivity emerges from sharing a commonality of pain and happiness. This coevalness defined the cultural encounter Sarkar experienced while in Kathmandu.

The article on Prabhabati Debi Saraswati revisits her domestic and detective novels against the prevailing "critical assumptions, historical circumstances and also ideological underpinning" (Chatterjee 1), which intends to marginalise women's writing and her intellectual contribution to the world of literary thinking. Resisting the patriarchal bias in the genre of Bengali detective fiction, Prabhabati launched the first female detective, *bhadramahila goyenda*, Krishna Choudhury, through her detective fiction in the 1950s. Her fictional world represents a woman thinker who expresses her dilemmas as a woman in a male-dominated print culture. Her engagement with feminist literary aesthetics was by introducing the genre of women's detective fiction, which was quite exceptional in the then-contemporary Bengali as well as the Indian literary scene. Prabhabati realises that the assertion of women's agency is not always a radical way forward; rather, it moves through the dual processes of compliance and contestations.

Reorienting the historiography of medical education in colonial Bengal, two articles in this issue retrace the intellectual contributions of two women medics, Kadambini Ganguly and Jamini Sen. While Kadambini received some critical attention as the first female doctor in colonial Bengal, Jamini Sen's thinking and her tireless work as a woman medic was relegated to oblivion. Being a physician and a renowned scholar of the history of colonial medicine, Jayanta Bhattacharya concentrated more on the politics of marginalisation within the colonial medical education system and the patriarchal bias that women medics had to confront in nineteenth century Bengal. Though the consolidation of women's education created some space for more women to participate in public education institutions, prevalent patriarchal politics denied any intellectual ability of women medics and, therefore, created obstacles in the path of women's medical education. Bhattacharya's article traces the genealogy of hegemonic control in the field of colonial medical education and how some Bengali women's persistent efforts finally succeeded in carving a niche for the women medics within the fold of the medical profession in colonial Bengal. This article also documents the emergence of Kadambini Ganguly as the first successful woman medic and her consistent resistance against social and cultural inhibitions, which prohibited women's entry into the public world of the medical profession.

Kadambini's successor in the world of colonial medicine, Jamini Sen, also confronted the same patriarchal politics of subjugation. Dr. Sen insisted on continuing her work in developing maternity care in various parts of Eastern India, resisting the constant opposition from the colonial medical authorities. Pritha Kundu's article in this issue re-reads Jamini Sen's journal to document her struggle against colonial control and male supremacy in the medical profession. Both Kadambini and Jamini documented very little about their fight against dominant patriarchal politics, colonial hegemony, and structures of subjugation. Their work as women medics asserts their intellectual agency. These two articles encourage us to rethink their intellectual legacy in the world of women medics in colonial Bengal.

The article on Sunity Devi attempts to re-evaluate her contribution as a woman thinker and reformer, specifically in the Princely State of Cooch Behar. Going beyond her popular identity as Maharaja Nripendra Narayan's wife and Keshab Sen's daughter, this article reinforces her intellectual contribution to the reform movements. She played a leading role in developing the condition of women by introducing different reform policies, especially in the field of women's education. This article rediscovers her ideas of religious reform and her conceptualisation of Brahmoism against the ritualistic obligations of Hindu Brahminism. She actively participated in spreading Brahmoism in the Princely State of Cooch Behar and promoted women's right to religious independence. Sunity Devi documents her struggles against the patriarchal negation of women's identity and articulates her social thinking in her autobiography, which was written in English, a rare achievement in contemporary print culture. This article offers a re-reading of Sunity Devi's autobiography to trace her agency as a woman thinker, her work as a reformer and her religious thoughts, which are often forgotten in the realms of history.

The Review Essay on *The Ramayan of Chandrabati* re-evaluates two books — the new edition of *Chandrabati Birochito Ramayan* published in 2023 and the English translation of Chandrabati's *Ramayana* by one of the leading woman thinkers of our time, Nabaneeta Dev Sen, published in 2020. The revival of Chandrabati's literary legacy through these two books relocates the intellectual tradition of women thinkers since the sixteenth century. It also presents a retelling of the classical epic from the perspective of a woman in the form of *palagaan*, which is to be sung by women in their everyday lives. The narrator's gaze is reversed here as Sita is depicting the epic story, and her narrative is represented by a woman poet instead of the male poet, Valmiki, who first composed the *Ramayana*. Chandrabati trod the untrodden path of words when it was difficult to imagine women writing and rethinking religious tales. When Nabaneeta Dev Sen

attempts to rediscover Chandrabati's epic through her translation, she highlights how this woman's text traverses different disciplines such as "Orality, Bengal Studies, Bengali Literature, Comparative Literature and Gender studies," thus making a "triumphal march of Chandrabati across academic trends and disciplines" (Sen ix). Written by a woman poet for a predominantly female audience and then recreated through a woman's translation, Chandrabati's Ramayana anticipates a community of women readers and writers across time and space. This text manifests the feminist literary aesthetics that will be carried forward by future generations of women writers.

Revisiting the intellectual history of women thinkers in colonial and postcolonial Bengal highlights how prevalent modes of historiography excluded the contribution of women intellectuals in shaping social, cultural, political, and religious domains. The interview with Professor Geraldine Forbes, a noted thinker in women's studies and women's history, reinforces the need to understand the categories of women's archives, women's history and the idea of the intellectual. She emphasises how it is necessary to understand different conceptualisations of feminism in tracing the development of women's history and also points out the limitations of Western modes of feminism in envisaging the different feminist orientations in colonial and postcolonial India. She focuses on how it is crucial to go beyond conventional archives and to move into alternative archives to tap the intellectual contribution of women. Geraldine comments in this context, "Mapping intellectual history through practice is an intriguing idea and would include an examination of letters, photographs, memoirs, and memories" (Forbes 5). While defining the intellectuals, it is necessary to revise the parameters to include the intellectual thinking of women. As Geraldine remarks, "In compiling an intellectual history, one would have to situate their ideas within the social framework of the time" (Forbes 4).

Our attempt in this journal issue is to critically engage with some of the important yet unsung women who, through their words and works, significantly shaped the cultural, social, political, and religious debates in colonial Bengal. This issue is an effort to reclaim the place of Bengali women in the intellectual world. This is a selective study, and the vast majority lies outside the critical purview of this journal issue. It requires deeper research and consistent efforts of scholars to unearth the larger realm of the intellectual history of the women thinkers in colonial and postcolonial Bengal. It is necessary to reorient the critical optics to recognise the intellectual contribution of women thinkers to a comprehensive understanding of intellectual history and to reorganise the historical visibility of women's thinking.

Works Cited

Bandyopadhyay, Haricharan. *Bangiya Sabdakosh: A Bengali-Bengali Lexicon*. Volume II. New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi, 2016. Print.

Chakrabarti, Sumit. *Local selfhood, global turns: Akshay Kumar Dutta and Bengali intellectual history in the nineteenth century*. New Delhi: Cambridge University Press, 2024. Print.

Chandrabati. *Chandrabati's Ramayan*. Trans. Nabaneeta Dev Sen, with an afterword by Ipshita Chanda. New Delhi: Zubaan, 2020. Print.

Sanchayita Paul Chakraboty
Assistant Professor in English & Director
Kailashbasini Centre for Women's Studies
Dr. Meghnad Saha College
sanchayita.dhritiman@gmail.com

Dhritiman Chakraborty
Assistant Professor & Joint-Director
Abid Ali Khan Center for Digital Archive and Translation of Cultures
Gour College
University of Gour Banga
dhrtmn87@gmail.com