

**GENDER, FOOD AND DOMESTICITY IN  
WEST BENGAL**

*Dissertation submitted to the Jawaharlal Nehru University in partial  
fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the Degree of*

**MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY**

**MADHUPARNA DAS**

Under the supervision of

**DR. NILIKA MEHROTRA**



**Centre for the Study of Social Systems  
School of Social Sciences  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi – 110067  
India  
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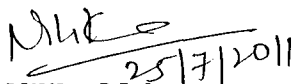
**CERTIFICATE**

This is to certify that the dissertation titled, "**GENDER, FOOD AND DOMESTICITY IN WEST BENGAL**" by Miss. **Madhuparna Das**, in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other Degree of this or any other University. To the best of our knowledge this is an original work.

We recommend that the dissertation be placed before the examiners for evaluation.

  
Prof. Susan Visvanathan  
(CHAIRPERSON)

**Chairperson**  
CSSS/SSS  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi-110067

  
25/7/2011  
Dr. Nilika Mehrotra  
(SUPERVISOR)

**Associate Professor**  
Centre for the Study  
of Social Systems  
School of Social Sciences  
Jawaharlal Nehru University  
New Delhi

July 25, 2011

## **DECLARATION**

I declare that the dissertation entitled “**GENDER, FOOD AND DOMESTICITY IN WEST BENGAL**” submitted by me , in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of the degree of **Master of Philosophy** has not been previously submitted for any other Degree of this or any other University. To the best of our knowledge this is an original work.

*Madhuparna Das.*  
**Madhuparna Das**

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# CHAPTER-1

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Perspectives on Gender

In every society inequality is a social reality, inequality is some sort of disadvantage that is faced in the lines of caste, class, gender, race, and these inequalities can affect different things in society. When we look at gender inequality, there is a universal subordination of women in society; they are always accorded secondary status to men. There are many arguments put forward in connection to the differential status accorded in society to men and women.

First the difference between men and women was taken by many scholars to be a sexual difference, given by biological determinism, which argued that genetically there is something inherent in the male species that make them dominant sex, and there is something “lacking” in the female species as a result of which women are not only naturally subordinate but in general quite satisfied with their position, since it gives to them protection and the opportunity to maximize maternal pleasures, which to them are the most satisfying experiences of life. (Ortner, 1996: 25)

When we look at the feminist analysis of gender, Simone de Beauviour is the first to make such an analysis in her famous book, “The Second Sex” 1949. She argued that ‘one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one’, this is in rejection of the debate put forward by the biological determinists. She further states that ‘though there are physiological differences between men and women, these differences have no meaning in themselves, they depend for their meaning on the whole context in which actual men and women live their lives.’

Taking the line of division in society of the operation of nature and culture, Ortner makes the argument that culture is associated with men, and although women are important participants in culture, they are more aligned more closely with nature, because a woman's body and its functions keep her closer to nature more than a man's physiology, allowing him more freedom to work in culture. The purpose of culture, in one sense, is to rise above nature, culture has the ability to transform, i.e. to socialize and culturalize nature. Therefore, if women are more aligned with nature then they fall socially below cultural men. Ultimately,

both a woman's body and her social position create a different structure for her that is in an intermediary relation to nature and culture. (1996).

However, Ortner further argues that whatever differences are there among men and women, it is ultimately culturally constructed, even though women may look closer to nature because of the physiological reasons in reality are not any closer to nature than men because both have consciousness and are mortals.(ibid:41)

Leela Dube (1988:11) has argued that even though the differences are seen as naturally occurring the differences are actually culturally constructed, from a very early age girls and boys are given differential treatment which helps in taking the gender appropriate roles in the future.

There are different socialization processes for boys and girls. She further argues that in case of the girls growing up in a patrilineal, patrilocal milieu of Indian society, it is through the process of socialization, which comes with the use of rituals and ceremonies, the use of language, and practices within and in relation to the family that the gender appropriate roles are taught to the girls.

Whatever be the reasons put forward for the differences, natural or culturally acquired, the universal situation is that women are accorded secondary status to men and are thought to be suited within the household and men in the public spaces.

Even when we look at the early anthropological writings on different societies, we can see the male bias in terms of how men are thought as important in society and therefore it's the men's activities that are recorded and the study of women and women's roles was relatively rarely recorded, and so by the 1960s, women anthropologists began asking why women were not a more important focus of research. When the women anthropologists placed women in the centre of their studies, entirely new understandings of the cultures came about. For example, Annette Weiner (1988) studied the same culture that Malinowski had, in the Trobriand Islands, and found that Malinowski had overlooked an entire women-run economic system. Similarly, Sally Slocum pointed out that, although hunting was a focus for paleoanthropologists interested in human origins, the gathering of wild foods which was a female activity was hardly discussed. Slocum's work forced paleoanthropologists to consider the role of gathered foods and, consequently, of women, in human evolution. (Ember, 2007:240)



## 1.2 Early Anthropological Writings on Food

Also looking at the study of food in early anthropological writing, women are absent from the studies. It is evident that in all culture, women are closely connected to food, in terms of cooking and serving of food to the other members of the household, and as cited above in Slocum's work which brought to light the importance of gathered food by the women, but somehow the anthropological literature of food has rarely mentioned women in a central position in terms of food.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the anthropologists' early interest in food was more towards the ritualistic aspects of consumption revolving around the issues of taboo, totemism, sacrifice and communion. This can be seen from the work of Sir James Frazer (1854-1941) which includes the famous "golden bough". In that book food was dealt in connection to issues such as taboo, and totemism. (Goody, 1982:11)

Another topic that the early anthropologists stressed on was sacrifice, where food was dealt with in terms of the offering that was used in the rituals that were for the purpose of feeding both the living and the dead. Outside the sphere of ancestor worship anthropological enquiry has been directed to examining the links between the offering of food to the supernatural agencies and other aspects of social organization. The solidary effects on the community, the moral dimension of the distribution of sacred food, often in a sacrificial but also in ritual context, was the core of the study done by scholar like Robertson Smith (1846-94). (ibid: 12)

Radcliffe Brown's (1922) emphasis among the Andaman islanders was that food gathering was their most important social activity. And it was around food that their social sentiments were frequently called into action.

The structuralists like Levi Strauss (1983), Mary Douglas (1972) have examined the practice of cooking and eating as encoding implicit messages that are to be interpreted in relation to their contexts, and in which cultural oppositions, puzzles and paradoxes may achieve a symbolic resolution. The structuralists argued that, the transformation of natural foodstuffs into cultural products of the table mediates relations between nature and culture.

From here it can be gathered that women were not deemed as important actors in a society, they were not thought of contributing anything important as compared to men, they were left out of studies as mentioned above, from topics that are closely related to them such

as food. Because of this differential status accorded to women, Feminists have for long been involved in movements aimed at defining, establishing, and defending equal political, economic, and social rights and equal opportunities for women.

There are many branches of feminism but the common factor is that all seek gender equality and sees patriarchy, in which the male as the primary authority figure is seen central to social organization, and where fathers hold authority over women, children, and property. Patriarchy implies the institutions of male rule and privilege, and is dependent on female subordination. Most forms of feminism characterize patriarchy as an unjust social system that is oppressive to women. As the feminist and political theorist Carole Pateman writes: "The patriarchal construction of the difference between masculinity and femininity is the political difference between freedom and subjection."(1998: 207)

Feminists have looked at the domestic space, the household as a site of patriarchal oppression, and have argued that acts within the household like cleaning, cooking are oppressive. Feminists especially the second wave feminists have looked at home as a site of leisure and a 'haven' from the public sphere of work, demonstrating that the home is a site of labor for women and also how the freedom and autonomy that is frequently associated with the home has to be seen with a dimension of gendered power relations. This view of domestic space has for some feminists abandoning home: as Judy Giles observes, in many feminist narratives, "leaving home"... is a necessary condition of liberation and necessary for women to become 'modern' emancipated subjects' (2004: 141-142). This argument was also evident in the lines of Rita Felski, who has argued, that feminism has frequently been structured by the same oppositions between public and private spheres that structure wider theories of modernity and celebrate 'mobility, movement, boundary crossing' and associate home with 'familiarity, dullness, stasis'(2000: 86).

When looking at the home or domestic space, it is important to consider those feminist perspectives, which have been influential about propagating certain notion about the home and domestic space

Till late only few scholars in food studies brought a gendered or feminist perspective to their work on food, and most feminist scholars focused only on women's food pathologies, although works on food pathologies like anorexia, bulimia, and other eating disorders among women is vitally important, other aspects of women's relationship to food are also important.

Feminists had written on issues around housework and domesticity, but cooking was ignored like it was nothing more than a marker of patriarchal oppression because it was an activity in the domestic space, and as shown in the above section on the second wave feminism, the domestic space was thought of as ordinary and static as opposed where the male authority held strong to the public space.

### 1.3 Postcolonial Feminism

However as the second wave of feminism progressed, lesbians, women of colour, and third-world women began voicing their argument that their social locations provided them with different conceptions of themselves other than those being articulated by white, middle-class feminists (Fraser and Nicholson 1990:33). In this regard, there are feminists like Uma Narayan, Gayatri Spivak and Chandra Mohanty Talpade bringing forth their critic of the western feminists that are important for gaining an insight into the debate.

In dislocating cultures, Uma Narayan (1997) attempts to read and deconstruct the representations of the "Indian tradition" of *sati* in Western feminist discourses and particularly in Mary Daly's book *Gyn/Ecology: The Metaethics of Radical Feminism*. Narayan's (1997) preoccupations with the problematics of the representations of *sati* in Western feminist discourse are mainly connected to other representationalist discursive areas, namely dowry-murders in India and domestic violence-murders in the United States. Narayan highlights it through the example of a conversation between two men where one equates *sati* to dowry murder and the other says *sati* is a voluntary act and dowry murder is not *sati* because it is simply killing by the in laws for the want of more dowries.

Narayan (1997) argues that because of globalization the issues like dowry murder, *sati*, does not remain as issues restricted for communities in India alone, but also becomes an issue for immigrant Indian communities in countries such as Britain or the United States. Also because of growing transnational "exchange" of feminist scholarship and information, where people want to learn about "Other cultures" and women's issues within them, in the age of globalization, images, narratives, and the entire chain of events pertaining to the Third World lose their national and historical differences under the homogenizing epistemic logic of some readily available connection-making apparatuses present among the people trying to make sense of these issues.

And so, Narayan (1997) further argues, such apparatuses, informational, ideological, etc., as they are, continue to provide visibility to issues like dowry-murders in India and relative invisibility to domestic-violence murders in the United States.

Narayan (1997) also culturally analyses food to examine colonialist constructions in the book. She examines contemporary Indian culture and identity through the lens of curry, which is made from a mixture of many spices using different combinations for particular dishes, emphasizing the fact that Indian curries have great variety.

By comparing the “fabrication” of curry powder, one mixture of spice which is used for all ‘Indian curry’, which was an English creation fixed onto Indian cuisine and accepted as quintessentially Indian by the colonizer, to the “fabrication” of an India from a variety of cultural and political entities explains her concept of the “cookbook approach to other cultures”.

The pre-colonial history of India as a number of linguistic and religious entities rather than a unified nation can be readily seen in Indian cuisine, Narayan argues, that India with its enormous regional variations echoes in the contemporary cuisines of India, but In England however, non-Indians ignore these differences in the common practice of the assumption that curry can describe all Indian food. Catering to this fabricated notion of Indian unity in order to make a living, many South Asian immigrants are engaged in feeding the English this version of “fabricated” Indian food.

Bringing a feminist analysis to the food practices of the Indian immigrant community in England, Narayan utilizes Partha Chatterjee’s work (1993) about Indians having conflicting goals. They want “to cultivate the material techniques of modern western civilization” on the one hand, while “retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture” on the other.

The impulse to modernity, Chatterjee posits (1993), is undertaken by males in the public sphere, while the work of resistance to assimilation is done by women in the private sphere. The association of women with resistance to assimilation through their identification with tradition, Narayan worries, may have negative consequences for women by defining opposition to these traditions as abandoning Indian culture and assimilating to the West.

In the “under western eyes” Mohanty (1984) argues that in the Western feminist texts on women of the third world there is a constitution of a colonial other.

She argues that there is an assumption of the category of 'third world women' as a coherent group with identical interests' experiences and goals. Economic, religious and familial structures are judged by Western standards where the 'typical' Third world Woman is thus being defined as religious, family-oriented, illiterate and domestic. The attitude of white feminists towards third world women is thus very paternalistic. Through this producing of a Third World Other, white Western feminists are discursively representing themselves as being sexually liberated, free-minded, in control of their own lives and secular.

Also Mohanty (1984) finds that the model of power which these Western feminist writings imply i.e. the classical notion of men as oppressors and women as oppressed is inadequate, as it implies a universal notion of patriarchy and thus only stresses the binary 'men versus women'. Furthermore, in not taking into account the various socio-political contexts, women are stripped of their historical and political agency.

Mohanty (1984) also criticizes Western methodological practices which are over-simplified and are in fact just trying to find 'proof' of various cases of powerless women in order to support the above mentioned classical notion of (third world) women as powerless victims. (1984:346)

The white feminist concept of 'sisterhood' is therefore also criticized by Mohanty, as it implies a false sense of common experiences and goals; as if all women are oppressed by a monolithic, conspiring sort of patriarchal dominance. Rather than 'sisterhood', the idea of solidarity appeals more to her.

In, 'Can the Subaltern Speak?' Spivak (1988) argues that "The subaltern is not privileged and does not speak in a vocabulary that is understood by those engaged in the academics to understand the "other". Spivak (1988) argues that the subalterns can never express their own reasoning, forms of knowledge or logic; they must instead form their knowledge to Western ways of knowing. "Spivak discusses some nuances of the race and power dynamics involved in the banning of the Sati.

There is much in talk about sati in the western feminist's discourses, the practice being oppressive and inhuman, but she argues we never hear from the sati-performing women themselves and so she concludes that the subaltern cannot speak.

From the above works of postcolonial feminists it can be seen that the western feminists were creating a homogeneous category of women without taking into account the cultural differences, and they tackled the issues of the third world women like sati for example with whatever reasoning and forms of knowledge that they had, without really taking into account the reasoning and logic of the third world women who experienced it.

There was an essentializing of victimhood of women by these western feminists, and the domestic space was taken as oppressive and acts like cleaning and cooking within the household as oppressive acts, but in tune with the criticism put forward by the post-colonial feminists, there are many literature of recent origin that are on food and cooking, which talk about women's connection to food and cooking as not being oppressive but intimate.

#### **1.4 Food Studies with Gender Perspective**

Avakian, (2006) in her work, "Through the Kitchen Window", argues that women's relationship to food is much more than mere victimization. There are several stories in the book about women and food that provide glimpses into the lives of women in their various contexts and tell about the meanings embedded in women's relationships to food.

"They introduce us to cooking and eating as a way to maintain once colonized and now fragile histories; as creativity, sensuality, nurturance, love; as imposed, compulsory, and oppressive; as a way to combine diverse, even opposing, traditions; to claim or reclaim food rituals, transforming them or creating new ones and in doing so revising personal or collective histories. Thinking about women and food can help us understand how women reproduce or resist and rebel against prevailing ideas of what they should be and codes that determine what they can do—gender constructions as varied as the worlds we see when we look in through their kitchen windows. The voices in these pieces and the recipes themselves provide a rich array of dishes, a sumptuous feast—food for thought about our histories, our current shifting contexts, and our future agendas". (Avakian, 2006: 9).

Avakian argues that cooking is more than just victimization; she states that by looking deeper in the relation of food and women there is seen to be some spaces within the oppression. Cooking she argues becomes a vehicle for artistic expression, a source of sensual pleasure, an opportunity for resistance and even power.

Shapiro, in her work, *Perfection Salad: Women and Cooking at the Turn of the Century* (2008) argued that "The women who founded and led the domestic-science movement in America were deeply interested in food, not because they admitted to any particularly intense appetite for it, but because it offered the easiest and most immediate access to the homes of the nation. If they could reform American eating habits, they could reform Americans". (Shapiro, 2008: 5)

Shapiro traces the standardization and blandness of American cuisine back to a turn-of-the-century women's movement to "professionalize" housewives through the introduction of domestic science, which aimed to turn every home into a little laboratory that dispensed "scientifically-prepared" food in as efficient and germ free manner.

Counihan has also been central to the feminist study of food editing the journal *Food and Food ways*, co-editing a collection of articles from that journal (1998), co-editing another volume on food and culture that includes a number of articles on women (1997), and authoring a collection of her own articles on women and food (1999).

Counihan(1988) argues that food practices are both constitutive and reflective of gender construction, in her article "female identity, food, and power in contemporary florence" she further argues that by looking at the life history of women in Florentine, it can be seen that women's identity and power have traditionally been attained and manifested through control over food provisioning. Furthermore, their ability to manipulate the symbolic content of food had enabled them to influence the behaviour and values of their families. However with the recent changes in Italian society and economy there had been new role expectations for women. They were expected to continue with their role in the homes as well as hold full-time wage-labour jobs. Counihan argues that because of time and identity conflicts, they could perform neither well. While they were glimpsing the possibility of public political and economic power, they were losing their traditional domestic influence over family and children.

Focusing on bread and the effects of industrialization, Aida Kanafani-Zahar (1997) examines the relationship between women's status and bread-making in Lebanon. In addition to being the basis of the diet, bread also has sacred significance in that region. Women's status is elevated, because they have exclusive responsibility for baking bread. Bread-baking skills are valued, and are passed down from older women to their eldest daughters or daughters in-law.

However with the industrialization women do not need to bake, as bread is readily available for purchase, and like Counihan, Kanafani-Zahar posits that rather than being liberated from an arduous task, women actually lose the status they had as bakers.

Both Counihan and Kanafani-Zahar argue that the interdependent relations between women and men which existed before industrialization have been supplanted; women now struggled for equal power (public) with men, while losing the influence (private) through giving which they enjoyed in the past.

Counihan and Zahar contends that in a society women gain influence (private power) through giving even as they may be locked out of coercive (public) power. In this analysis women feed others in return for “love, favours, good behaviour and the power that comes from being needed”.

Therecent scholarship on women and food conclusively demonstrates thatstudying the relationship between women and food can help us to understandhow women reproduce, resist, and rebel against gender constructionsas they are practiced and contested in various sites, as well asilluminate the contexts in which these struggles are located. These works also illuminate the fact that domestic space and the kitchen can be a site of certain amount of power and not a place which is dull and oppressive as essentialized by the second wave feminists.

It can be argued that Food is an important and an endlessly fascinating lens for social and cultural analysis. The subject is a central for understanding cultural practices and learning about culture in many levels, because food everywhere is not just about eating and eating always is not just a biological process.

Inspired by the above works, I have tried to look at gender inequality and domesticity in Bengal. Bengal like the other regions of India had experienced colonialism, freedom and most recently globalization; so I will look at gender in relation to the changes that was brought in Bengal by these periods.



## 1.5 Bengal

The colonial period in Bengal is very interesting because, that was the time during which Bengal had experienced an alien culture, in-terms of the British culture imposed on the indigenous life ways. It was during this time that a new patriarchy had evolved and also the image of the new woman, who was to be differentiated from the western woman and also the lower class woman. To understand the concepts of new patriarchy and the new women Chatterjee was central to it.

Chatterjee (1993) argues that the Colonial rulers condemned the treatment of women in India by identifying a scriptural tradition in which customs such as sati was sanctioned by religion. The “degenerate and barbaric” social customs of the Indian people sanctioned by the religion was one of the reasons or justification put forwarded by the British for their rule over India.

The nationalist response was to construct a reformed tradition and defend it on the grounds of modernity. In the process, it created the image of a new woman who was superior to Western women, traditional Indian women and lowclass women. There also evolved a new patriarchy, investing women with the dubious honour of representing a distinctively modern national culture.

Chatterjee further argues that scholars have been mistaken in equating political nationalism with nationalism as such, he shows how anti-colonialist nationalists produced their own domain of sovereignty within colonial society by appropriating their own version of modernity by dividing the social space into home and the world, the world was a space for the men who could take the ways of the rulers but the home was the place of the woman where she had to maintain the spiritual purity and essence.

When looking at domesticity in colonial times Walsh (2004) was central to it, by using a rich collection of advice manuals published mainly in Bengali for women during the late-nineteenth century, Walsh attempts to place domesticity as a cultural practice within its broader historical context. He focuses on how the contestations among and within urban, elite, "middle-class" Indian families came to define the Hindu woman of the twentieth century and the domestic world in which she was embedded.

“Advice literatures make clear that Indian debates about how to become modern went far beyond the introduction of a new language (English), the latest Enlightenment ideologies

(rationalism, nationalism, market economics, and so forth), or imperial economies into the Indian subcontinent. The "naturalization" of a global domesticity as the only "civilized" way to behave meant that colonized people in India (as all over the world) needed to think about all of daily domestic life and its intimate family relationships. They needed to think about how they brushed their teeth and whether their bowel movements were daily and regular, about how to organize a home, and what kind of relationship a wife should have with her husband. They needed to move practices associated with home and family life out of the unconscious depths of collective social identity and up into conscious consideration" (Walsh, 2004: 2)

To look at gender relations and the constructions of femininity, I considered particularly the middle class, "*Bhadralok*" of Bengal, because women of even one region cannot be taken as one homogeneous category as they experience different things in society uniquely. For example education opportunities would have different effects on different classes of women, the middle class women will more readily avail it than a lower class women, who cannot afford to not toil in the fields to make a living alongside men.

Also seclusion and purdah would not be a system that would occur homogeneously throughout the caste hierarchy, because the upper and middle class men could afford to seclude their women because of their economically sound standing whereas a man from the lower class cannot afford to seclude his woman because he needs her economic support to make a living.

## 1.6 Middle Class

My work deals with the Middle class (*Bhadralok*) of Bengal in colonial and also post-colonial times, who maintained a certain lifestyle, through their typical taste of things, from dress, food, etc. this certain way of life and their taste was important to mark them off in colonial times from the colonizer and also from the people from lower class. So, to look at this particular class and their taste and preferences Bourdieu was of central importance. He argues that in the course of everyday life people constantly choose between what they find aesthetically pleasing and what they consider tacky, or ugly.

Bourdieu (1984) bases his study on surveys that took into account the multitude of social factors that play a part in a French person's choice of clothing, furniture, leisure activities, dinner menus for guests, and many other matters of taste. What emerged from his analysis was that, social snobbery was everywhere in the bourgeois world. The different aesthetic choices people made were choices made in opposition to those made by other classes.

Taste, as argued by him is not pure, the social world, he argues, functions simultaneously as a system of power relations and as a symbolic system in which minute distinctions of taste become the basis for social judgement.

## 1.7 Food in Bengal

Throughout my work food will be figuring out in connection to domesticity, gender, rituals because Food is very central to a Bengali society and especially the women, so, looking at food will involve looking at the domestic as well as the public space of the Bengali society. Food is involved in most of the activities of women in a household in a mundane level, like daily puja rituals, daily meals; they also relate to food not only for consumption but also in various rituals *stri acars* where the indigenous knowledge of these rituals also involve knowledge of food raw and cooked, that is only restricted to women of Bengali society.

Food also has a public nature to it in the sense that in the colonial times there was a constant effort to create a “*Bhadralok*” cuisine especially by the men, there were numerous cook books written by men and also the whole giving up of too much of chillies and tamarind in the food of the *Bhadralok*. So, looking at food historically can bring into light much more than what people think of Bengali food as constituting of only *Bhaat* (rice) and *MaccherJhol* (fish stew), various sweetmeats and junk food mainly *Fuchhkak* (fried puffed bread with stuffed mashed potatoes and tamarind water).

Cooking and presentation of food is an art undertaken by the Bengali women. It has been well documented in one of Satyajit ray's movie “*agantuk*”. One of the scenes of the movie is as follows: a guest arrives in a household, among all the dishes laid out are some snacks made of lentil paste. Usually these snacks are sold in the market in the form of nuggets. However, when prepared at home they are beautifully patterned and presented to the guests by the women; they appear beautiful patterned just like jewellery carved in the hands

of an expert jeweller. The snacks are called "*Phool Bori*" or more appropriately *Gahana Bori* (*Gahana* means jewellery). The guest looking at the beautiful creation says, "So much of beauty in a plate of food, it is only possible in Bengal".(Majumdar 2002, 285)

## 1.8 Caste and Food

Food was one of the major ways in maintaining caste purity; this is the reason why the middle class households that could afford domestic cooks and *Jogare* (helps) appointed Brahmin men and women as cooks, mostly men. Swapna Banerjee (2004) has argued that the most significant distinction in caste status of servants in colonial Bengal was in terms of *Jalchal* and *Ajalchal*: upper caste Hindus could accept water from a *Jalchal* and not from an *Ajalchal*. While a servant belonging to an *Ajalchal* caste would not have entry into the kitchen, Brahmins, who were *Jalchal*, were in high demand as cooks and kitchen staff (*Jogare*). (2004:67)

The demand for Brahmin cooks increased to such an extent that sometimes other cooks faked their caste identity to get a job as Brahmin cook. Male workers coming to eastern Bengal from Orissa called themselves Brahmins and hired themselves out as cooks. The maintenance of purity with food became harder when the technology to preserve food by refrigeration was introduced, with the introduction of technology in the middle class homes, caste could not be maintained in the strict ways that was possible earlier.

Leftovers are an extremely sensitive category in traditional Hindu thought (Khare 1976; Marriott 1968; Appadurai 1981) and, most often the eating of leftovers or wastes carries the risk of moral degradation, biological contamination, and loss of status. Their treatment and the etiquette that surrounds them stand very near the moral center of Hindu social thought.

I argue that with the introduction of refrigerator, where the *Basi Khana* (stale food) which is thought to be ritually impure is most often given to the domestics who are of high caste to consume and also because of the different kinds of food cooked and refrigerated in the same place the distinction of vegetarian and non-vegetarian food stored at the same place cannot be maintained.

However in contemporary India several books contain chapters on the treatment of leftovers. There is even one cookbook, Tasty Dishes from Waste Items (Reejhsinghani 1973a), that is built entirely around this principle. Its author goes so far as to say in her

introduction that she is "taking these discarded articles of food out of the wastebin and [making] interesting and delightfully different dishes from them."(Appadurai 1988:8)

Also when we look at women as gatekeepers, earlier it was possible to keep a watch on the food habits of the children, who could make sure that children did not eat street food prepared by low caste people, however with the changes in society, with women working out for wage, children are left on their own who readily take to these treats (*Fuchhkas, Jhal Muri, Alu Kabli*).

With the whole globalization of food and introduction of fast food joints, coffee houses, restaurants, it is even more difficult to keep monitoring food habits and also the caste purity and impurity that comes with it.

The diet of schoolchildren and students has always been a matter of concern for mothers, mostly because of their love for unhealthy street foods and snacks from 'outside', which are generally regarded as dangerous and polluting through their association with lower-class producers (Mukhopadhyay 2004).

Vegetarianism for high caste Brahmins in Bengal included fish in their diet, but they had to keep away from meat such as chicken and mutton. There was according to Donner (2008) a profound idea that meat, and in particular chicken, was 'dirty' and 'polluting'. Thus, vegetarianism within this specific social landscape does not automatically signify high-caste status. While the link between vegetarianism and caste is weak even in the case of Brahmins, vegetarian.

Caste-status was, of course, implicitly present for example in high-caste middle-class family the cooking or consuming of specific kinds of meat in the house was prohibited, but the members were only required to be strictly vegetarian during life cycle festivals and *pujas*.

## **1.9 Indigenous Knowledge of Bengali Women's Rituals**

Food as stated is involved in a lot of Bengali rituals which are performed only by the women and also the local knowledge of food and its meaning is transferred by women of one generation to the other through the imitation of these rituals. Food is also used throughout the socialization process of girls which brings forth the social meaning of food, as will be shown in chapter 2.

To look at the position of Bengali women in the domestic space, Fruzzetti's , 'Gift of a Virgin, was of central importance, Fruzzetti(1993) argues that Bengali women within the domestic space commands a position which cannot be seen as that secondary to men. Bengali Women in the domestic space has a world that is separate from that that of men, this is evident when looking at the *stri acars* that are performed solely by the women without a male priest in all life cycle rituals. These rituals are a part of the little tradition, which is abound by legends, folk lore involving local gods and goddesses, only the women have the knowledge of the proper ways of approaching them. There are also many food items raw and cooked that are used during the rituals and their symbolism and relevance is also a knowledge restricted to women only.

When looking at marriage rituals, a proper marriage is thought of being completed only when the male priests has done all the required rituals that are taught from the *guru* to the *Sishya* as prescribed in the sanskritic texts, but equally important are the *Stri Acars* that are performed by the women during the marriage. These complicated rituals *Stri Acars* are not written down anywhere but are transferred by imitation and the knowhow of these rituals are restricted to women only.

So, food is something that women are associated with from a very young age, in terms of their religious symbolic meanings, and also in terms of what constitutes proper food for women in the society, like foods to be avoided and to be indulged in. Girls are also taught the virtues of *Bratas*, vegetarianism etc.

Women take to such traditional practices, but I will argue in chapter 3, that women are not taking to these practices only because the society imposes these on them but women also have certain aims. By taking to the prescribed ways of gender ideology women are not oppressed in-fact within their separate sphere women create a space from which they can resist male authority in subtle and silent ways.

Their resistance is never articulated, because to voice it would be to bring out into the open, to make public the Spaces within which they operate as part of their everyday lives.

Mc Gee's (1992) essay on votive rites was important for looking at the ways women manipulate these traditional practices to create a certain niche for themselves. McGee examines the significance of votive rites for women by contrasting textual descriptions compiled by men with contemporary statements by women. According to the texts, votive

rites promise both the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation (*Moksa*) and a variety of lesser this-worldly rewards. The latter group of secondary goals enables the compilers of the texts to define these rites as 'optional' rather than 'obligatory'. Yet McGee's informants rarely mention spiritual liberation as a reason for observing votive rites, and they are quite clear that these rites are obligatory for women.

“Women cannot be seen as pawns in the game of gender” (Ortner 1996) It is interesting to note here how Ortner in “making gender” talks of the nuns who in their religious journey because of their devotion to god make sure of the prospect of being reborn as a man in next life at the same time overcome the various negative stigmas attached to being born as a woman and also the hardships faced by the women in everyday social life.

This is also evident in Donner's (2008) work where she looks at vegetarianism as a traditional practice that is being taken up by more and more contemporary Bengali mothers and the new version of vegetarianism is not the same as the local vegetarianism in Bengal, because in Bengal only Jains and widows vegetarian diet is supposed to be without fish otherwise even the high caste Brahmins vegetarian diets contain fish.

Donner also argues that vegetarianism has a more political capacity, because fish is the sign of auspiciousness daughter in laws giving up fish is seen as not being an ideal daughter in law, but since vegetarianism is a traditional practice and usually undertaken by women to conceive children (Donner 2008) where there had been problems, women are supported by in some cases, their husbands who set up nuclear households, and without upfront rebellion the woman is able to break away from the extended household and the authority of the mother in law and the other elder women in the family.

### **1.10 Women as Gatekeepers**

In their role as gatekeepers (Counihan 2004), women participate in the reproduction of gendered ideologies about women, family, and domestic labour. Their gatekeeping is mediated by desires to control food consumption, yet prepare food in a variety of ways. They must alter or edit their food menus, acquire new food items as a means of meeting nutritional needs, and also the new needs of the family especially the men and children who especially in the globalized world has become more experimental with food.

The television is a site where many cookery shows have come up where people are introduced to new cuisines from their living room. There are also a host of Italian, Chinese,

Mexican restaurants as well as fast food corners like mac Donald's and pizza hut everywhere to compete with home cooked meals. Men and especially children are constantly demanding these dishes and so it is the women who try to reproduce these non-Bengali dishes to please the palate of the men and the children. This new shift away from Bengali food has also changes a certain power relation in the kitchen where the elderly women who is accustomed to the new cuisines cannot decide the menu for the meals so the power shifts to the younger daughter in laws, who readily cook pastas and noodles for the children and also nutritional food (according to the new standards, with olive oil etc.) for the men in the household.

The meaning of nutritional food has also shifted from what was earlier seen as everything made in *Desi* ghee to food with no oil or the use of olive oil.

With this background I will look at the question of emancipation of Indian women where the emancipation of women has been argued in terms of the globally stressed ideas of access to education and employment. But the question is, is this the right track?

In India where even now women have to consult the family elders about the subjects pursued for studies and occupations, also where, if there is lack of resources it is the male child who gets the resources to pursue careers and where the women's job is not taken seriously, it can be deduced that the male domination can adapt to the changing rules of the game of gender right from seclusion to superficial freedom of education and employment opportunities. So, even though women gain education and employment, the patriarchal structure and male domination is seen to hold strong. Some can negotiate and gain some amount of economic power, but their position will still be subordinate, and in India even though women do well in education and also in the career aspect still they are not accorded the highest respect if they fail as a daughter, daughter in law, wife and mother.

## 1.11 Methodology

The data that I have made use of is qualitative data. I have made use of a number of books, journal articles, magazine, cookbooks, and biographies for a holistic study on gender, domesticity and food in Bengal.

There are many articles and books that I have used from diverse disciplines such as history, political sciences, anthropology, sociology with a heavier inclination on anthropology with its rich abundant material on the topic, I have made use of many secondary ethnographies on Bengal which directly may not have been on food but have talked of food in



relation to other issues such as colonialism, domesticity, motherhood, indigenous culture of women etc.

Since my work deals with women's domesticity and intimate relation with food, it was not enough to only make use of scholarly academic material, so I have made use of cookbooks by Bengali men and women, like "*Pak Pranali, Boumake Harane*" etc., and women's magazines which always have a section on recipes.

Since I was dealing with Bengal it was very important to also look at the fictions written by great writers like Tagore, Sarat Chandra, which are books read by every Bengali women. There are also movies that are based on these novels especially the ones by Satyajit ray, which was also felt central to my topic.

### **1.12 Objective of Study**

My objective was to look at how gender is constructed in a Bengali society, and how gender relations are changing if at all in the colonial and post-colonial times in Bengal. I have constantly referred to food, raw and cooked as well as the typical Bengali kitchen tools to illuminate the importance of it throughout a woman's life because of her constant association with them.

Feminists as stated above have argued that the domestic space is dull, static and oppressive and have equated the public space with mobility, emancipation. I will look also if this argument holds ground in Bengal especially at a time when even the government is equating access to education and employment of women with their emancipation.

### **1.13 Limitation**

- There is a very rich source of literature in Bengali on the topic of research but because of my inability to read Bengali I had to rely on translated works.
- Even though food and women are so intimately connected there were not much ethnographic study on Bengali women and food.

- It would have been interesting to look at the Bengali stri acars performed during marriage to get a real sense of the rituals performed by the women, with a field work undertaken in Bengal, and witness the changes and continuities in the rituals.

#### 1.14 Outline of Study

In the first chapter, I have discussed the inequality of gender in society in general which is put across by Ortner in the words, “the universal domination of women”. However she also argues that women have specific roles and symbolism in different cultures, for which women cannot be taken as a homogenous category; that is seen done by the western feminists. This homogenization of women as a category is criticized by the post-colonial feminist in India, so in the same line of argument I have looked at the question of the subordination of Indian women within India culture. To look at the specific cultural history of Indian women I have considered studying the written Sanskrit text by Brahmin men and the oral texts by the women that are abundant in the little tradition of the regions. There are many songs and narratives that belong to women which spell out the innermost desires of women; this can be also seen in the work of Raheja and Gold (1994) in “Listen to the Heron’s Words.

Further I have explored the system of seclusion and male control from the colonial to the post-colonial period in India in general and Bengal in particular.

In the second chapter I have explored the nature of Bengali household with the power structure of the male and females separately within the household. Further in the chapter I have explored the socialization process of Hindu girls in Bengali households undertaken by the elder women of the household. Here I have talked of how girls are socialized by the women of the household into learning the importance of domesticity, the importance of religious rituals (daily household rituals and also the big festivities that are celebrated according to Bengali calendar), importance of food (raw and cooked), also apart from these it is unique that these girls are also encouraged to read a number of literature (*Puranas, epics, BrataPancali, Vaishnava* poetries, literature of Tagore, Bankim Chandra, Sarat Chandra).

Next I have looked at the space of women through the rituals performed by them within the household which brings to light the indigenous knowledge of these women and also their importance within the ritual spaces in the domestic sphere.

In the third chapter, I have looked at globalisation, liberalisation and the socio economic changes that were gradually taking place in West Bengal. Then I have looked into the domestic space for changes brought about by globalisation and neoliberal policies adopted by India, and have discussed marriage, eating habits, socialisation and new birthing technology, next I have explored the certain past practices that are still present in Bengal in terms of votive rites and vegetarianism.

I will be arguing that in Bengal it is the domestic space that has more potential for strategizing for creating a space for the women, since it is more familiar to the women by the whole process of socialization for the women to play the gender games; the domestic area involving motherhood, food chores, traditional practices like Bratas and vegetarianism that can be used to create a niche for themselves by the women.

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## CHAPTER-2

### **Exploring Women's Lives through Colonial and Postcolonial Times**

In This chapter I explore the Inequality of gender in society in general and take the case of India and Bengal in particular. Through the periods of colonial and postcolonial India/Bengal, I explore changes in gender relations and domesticity among the middle class.

#### **2.1 Inequality in Society**

Inequality is built into the structures of society, looking at gender inequality, there is a universal subordination of women in society; they are always accorded secondary status to men. There are many arguments put forward in connection to the differential status accorded in society to men and women.

First the difference between men and women was taken by many scholars to be a sexual difference, given by biological determinism, which argued that 'genetically there is something inherent in the male species that make them dominant sex, and there is something "lacking" in the female species; as a result of which women are not only naturally subordinate but in general quite satisfied with their position , since it gives to them protection and the opportunity to maximize maternal pleasures, which to them are the most satisfying experiences of life'. (Ortner, 1996: 25)

When we look at the feminist analysis of gender, Simone de Beauvoir is the first to make such an analysis in her famous book, "The Second Sex" 1949. She argued that 'one is not born a woman, but rather becomes one', this is in rejection of the debate put forward by the biological determinists. She further states that 'though there are physiological differences between men and women, these differences have no meaning in themselves, they depend for their meaning on the whole context in which actual men and women live their lives.'

Taking the line of division in society of the operation of nature and culture, Ortner makes the argument that culture is associated with men, and although women are important

participants in culture, they are more aligned more closely with nature, because a woman's body and its functions keep her closer to nature more than a man's physiology, allowing him more freedom to work in culture. The purpose of culture, in one sense, is to rise above nature, culture has the ability to transform, i.e. to socialize and culturalize nature. Therefore, if women are more aligned with nature then they fall socially below cultural men. Ultimately, both a woman's body and her social position create a different structure for her that is in an intermediary relation to nature and culture. (1996). (Ortner, 1996:27).

However, Ortner further argues that whatever differences are there among men and women, it is ultimately culturally constructed, even though women may look closer to nature because of the physiological reasons in reality are not any closer to nature than men because both have consciousness and are mortals.(ibid:41)

In every society there certainly exists a structure in which men are placed higher than women, still there are differences in terms of specificity of culture, 'there are specific cultural concepts and symbolization of women that are extraordinarily diverse and even mutually contradictory. Further, the actual treatment of women and their relative power and contributions vary enormously from culture to culture, and over different periods of history over different periods of time' (Ortner, 1996:21).

This argument of Ortner (1996) is in tune with the postcolonial criticisms (Narayan 1997, Spivak 1988, and Mohanty 1984) of western feminists who tend to locate women in a homogeneous category without taking into consideration the particular cultural differences. Looking at the above discussion, it can be concluded that since every society has a unique culture then to explore the question of subordination of Indian women, India's cultural history needs to be looked at.

## **2.2 Texts: Written and Oral**

In every society there are specific roles and role expectations that are attached to men and women as the ideal to maintain the power structure in the society, which is dependent on the particular culture of the society. Liddle and Joshi (1986) argue that, to look at the "unique cultural heritage" of Indian women, the methodology that needs to be applied is that of textual analysis, so first there is a need to look at the written textual ancient literature of

India, which have numerous preserved stories at its best about Indian women, who till present date are taken to be the ideals for women in India by the society at large. Sita has been for long the ideal women for the Indian society, from the epic Ramayana. The Vedas, the epics and other classical texts which are the earliest written history in India, can be read for the purpose of looking for the “cultural heritage” of women of India.

However, trying to look at women’s history by locating women only from the classical texts can be problematic, since as argued by Mies (1980), Liddle and Joshi (1986) these text are written by Brahmin men and this may affect the representation of women which can further lead to distorted study. Dube (1986) argues on this line that, ‘Incomplete or one-sided understanding is distorted understanding’.

There are many criticisms put forward towards the one sided understanding of society and social processes by ignoring women consciously and sometimes unconsciously altogether in the studies and sometimes representing them as under the universal category of ‘man’.

Dube (1986) argues that by not taking into account of women as social actors in their contribution to continuity and change in society has led to distorted understanding of social reality. She argues further that, ‘women were absent, ignored, relegated in some disciplines to limited area and were commonly misrepresented’. (1986: xi)

Shirley and Edwin Ardener (1975) in the same line of argument made the observation that most anthropologists practicing ethnography in the field were only talking to the leaders of the cultures, that is generally the adult males. But at the time of analysis they would use the data to represent the culture as a whole, leaving out the perspectives of women, children and other groups. Edwin Ardener (1975:2) argued: “we are for practical purpose in a male world....Those trained in ethnography evidently have a bias towards the kinds of model that men are ready to provide (or to concur in) rather than towards any that women might provide. If the men appear ‘articulate’ compared with the women, it is a case of like speaking to like”.

Kramarae (1981:3) argues on the same thought that ‘men and women have different ways of looking at or perceiving the world because of women’s and men’s different experience and activities rooted in the division of labour. She further argues that because men are the dominant group in society, the male perception is also dominant. Women’s perceptions and systems of perceiving are seen as less competent and ignored’

Mies (1980) argues in tune with the scholars on muting of women as a category that, 'The Vedas, epics and other classical literary texts belong to the line of tradition Robert Redfield called the great tradition, which is sustained by a small class of literates, which possessed the monopoly of education and literacy and lived mainly at the courts and the cities. The "great tradition" is found in the Hymns, the Brahmins, the Upanishads, the great epics, the *Mahabharata and the Ramayana* and in post-Buddhist *Puranas* and *Tantras*, which however at a later date has assimilated many elements of the little tradition. The great tradition is essentially identical with the Brahmanic-Sanskritic culture, which is characterized by the following features: recognition of the sacredness of the four Vedas, vegetarianism, Brahmanic ritual and pantheon, strict prohibition of eating beef, prohibition of alcohol, observant of the ritual purity-regulations of the Brahmins, prohibition of commensality and of cohabitations with "impure" castes, belief in rebirth (*samsara*), in the law of *Karma* and in other Brahmanical theological concepts like the doctrine of *Maya*, and of *moksha*, the idea of salvation and ultimate liberation'.(1980: 38)

She further argues that, 'since literacy was an important factor by which one belonged to the great tradition then, women of all castes are excluded from the great tradition, since women until the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not have any access to the study of the classical religious and philosophical texts and so belonged therefore to the little tradition, which represented their culture'. (ibid: 39)

For the purpose of the study of women in India Mies(1980: 39) argues, that it would be better to look at the Little Tradition than the Great Tradition. "The Little Tradition belongs to the masses in the villages and in the cities, which reflects the religious, social and cultural life of certain regions and often revolves around a local god or a mythical hero". She argues that the texts of the Little Tradition are oral texts in the form of legends, songs, and proverbs in the regional languages, which were handed down orally among the women. And it was the oral texts which could be said to be women's text since it did not require the ability to read and write. "A careful analysis of these would reveal more on women's feelings and thoughts than a reading of the classical texts"(ibid: 39)

The using of songs, proverbs and legends in the regional language can be seen as comprising the subject matter of women in many recent ethnographic studies, which have revealed many interesting things about the nature women. This can be seen in the recent ethnographic studies undertaken to study women in various parts of India, I have considered

the work by Raheja and Gold (1994) Raheja and Gold by analysing the songs and stories performed by women in ritual occasions argue that, through their oral texts it can be seen that women do not passively submit to male expectations about their roles and position in life, these village women are capable of looking after their own interest through their own ways. Raheja and Gold (1994) show how these women use received cultural materials, continuously reinterpreting 'traditional' practices to suit themselves.

### 2.3 The Mother Goddesses

The cult of mother goddess Mies(1980) argues has always been an important part of the little tradition, which is found in many local and regional representations (Assam, Bengal) and under various names, like in Assam she is known as *Ma Kamakhya* . In sanskritized form the Devi appears as the wife of the great Hindu gods as either Durga or Kali (Bengal) or Lakshmi or Parvati. “..Sanskritization of the Devi cult took place in the Hindu renaissance as a reaction to Jainism and Buddhism; this can be particularly seen in the sect of *Shaktas* whose religious ideas are laid down in the *Tantras*, where the goddess play a decisive role. She is Shakti (strength, energy) and the actually active, practical and also violent aspect of the non-violent, vegetarian and contemplative god. She is the doer of his deeds; it is she, who like Durga kills the demons” (Mies1980: 40-41)

Here I look at the myth associated with the Goddess to see how through the myth Goddess *Kamakhya* is appearing as the wife of the great god *Shiva*, which is a process of Sanskritization.

One of the most persistent mythologies concerning the origin of worship at the site of *Kamakhya* temple is associated with the myth of Sati, who was the wife of the ascetic god Shiva and daughter of the *Puranic* king *Daksha*. *Daksha* was unhappy with his daughter's choice of husband, and when he performed a grand Vedic sacrifice for all the deities, he did not invite Shiva . In a rage, Sati threw herself onto the fire, knowing that this would make the sacrifice impure. Because she was the all-powerful mother goddess, Sati left her body in that moment to be reborn as the goddess *Parvati*. Meanwhile, Shiva was stricken with grief and rage at the loss of his wife. He put Sati's body over his shoulder and began his *Tandava* (dance of cosmic destruction) throughout the heavens. The other Gods, afraid of their annihilation, went to Lord Vishnu for help to stop the destruction. Thus, wherever Shiva



wandered while dancing, Vishnu followed. He sent his discus *Sudarshana chakra* to destroy the corpse of Sati. Pieces of her body fell until Shiva was left without a body to carry. Seeing this, Shiva sat down to do *Mahatapasya* (great penance) (Mishra 2004)

By looking at the Little tradition and the mother goddess worship as Shakti it can be argued that, this cultural heritage of women in India, portrayed the woman as 'the active powerful principle, women are seen as extremely powerful like Durga Or Kali. This portrayal of women gave strong implications to the men in terms of how they perceived women and such a view of women as being powerful, according to Liddle and Joshi (1986: 56) 'legitimized a system of control to restrain women's power, which makes no sense if read in the context of the western concept of secondary position of women'.

## 2.4 Seclusion

One of the devices to control women in India has from a long time been seclusion or purdah. Liddle and Joshi, (1986) stated that seclusion is, "not a specific set of constraints on behaviour, but an approach to how women should live in a patriarchal society. It ranges from the strictest purdah to the general idea that a woman's place is 'in the home'. Its essential feature is that it privatizes women and confines them to the domestic sphere, which helps to control both their sexuality and their economic independence from men. Paid work is forbidden, and women's work is defined as domestic, private and unpaid. Such work is often not even considered to be real work". (1986: 92)

However the observance of Seclusion or purdah is not uniform in a society. Caste and class are important variables in the observance of purdah. Seclusion was more strictly and generally practiced in the upper strata of society. The practice was the strictest among the royal families where it became a prestige issue, not to allow the royal women to be exposed to the public. So, these women were made to live in the inner secluded quarters of the palace, called the *Antahpuram*, where only certain people could enter. (Liddle and Joshi 1986; Dube, 1997).

In general the upper castes were able to seclude their women because they could afford to protect their women from going out in the public spaces for paid work, because of their better economic standing. The practice of seclusion was the weakest among the lower

castes, because unlike the upper castes, they needed the economic contribution of their women, this meant that the lower caste women could not be secluded and it was necessary for these women to be out in the public area for paid work and so they were relatively freer than the women of upper castes.

## **2.5 Women's Labour and Caste**

Liddle and Joshi (1986) on the sexual division of labour argued that, 'with the rise in caste status the kind of work that women did also change along with the economic reward attached to it. The women of the lower castes had to undertake wage work outside along with men because they needed the income to contribute to the household. These women also had to take on the household chores solely by themselves, which amounted to twice the amount of work done by men and upper and middle caste women. At the middle levels, the women were to withdraw from waged work, but continue to perform unpaid labour in the family fields, and also do their daily household chores. At the upper levels the women withdraw from the outside work and their work is restricted only in the domestic space. They receive no income, but their work is equally vital to maintenance of life. These women do not have any economic power and become totally dependent on men economically. (1986:90)

The women as they keep rising in the caste ladder withdraw from the work in the outside, because of man's need to control the sexuality of woman, so that they can make sure that woman of the upper castes have legitimate heirs to maintain the caste purity so that the maintenance of property within the caste group was possible'.(Chakravarti 1993; Liddle and Joshi 1986)

The strong seclusion among the upper caste women for controlling their sexuality was also a reason why there was such a strict code of conduct for the upper caste widows. Here they had to follow apart from other things a strict vegetarian diet and also were not seen to be partaking in the joys of life.

## 2.6 Seclusion and Class

Seclusion in the class society cannot be seen in the same face as it existed in the caste societies, because of the British and Indian reformers effort in colonial India and in postcolonial period the constitution granting equal opportunity to all citizens, women could not be restricted to the inner quarters of the household "*antahpuram*", but this does not mean that seclusion does not operates, it just adapts to new conditions of life in the society.

Liddle and Joshi (1986), argue that, there are two areas where the seclusion in the form of male control over women in class society can be seen, that is Education and Employment. Women achieving formal education was not until the 19<sup>th</sup> century and women in employment is also not a very old phenomenon. Though these steps can be seen as women moving out of seclusion into the public area, which is a sign of progression, there are underlying gender games that are being played. As stated earlier the status of men and the whole family is partly derived from the proper conduct of women, so the men take it upon them to keep in check that their status in society does not get affected by their women's conduct. And so, even though superficially it was seen that women were going for formal education and getting in paid jobs there was still strong male control that were underlying in the areas of education and employment.

Here, I am going to look at women in the colonial and post-colonial times in India particularly Bengal and see how male control has changed during the course of time. Taking colonial time as the starting point is important because of the disruption of the indigenous culture of India and the imposition of an alien culture at the time, and how men manipulated and played the games to still control the women when the men themselves were controlled by the colonizers.

## 2.7 Colonialism and Women

The colonial period of Bengal is very interesting because, it was the time during which Bengal had experienced an alien culture, in-terms of the British culture imposed on the indigenous life ways. It was during this time that a new patriarchy had evolved and also the new woman, who was to be differentiated from the western woman and also the lower class woman.

Chatterjee (1989) argues that the Colonial rulers condemned the treatment of women in India by taking into account the ancient scriptures where customs such as sati and child marriage were sanctioned by religion. The British called the customs taking it straight from the scriptures as “degenerate and barbaric”. They took these social customs of the Indian people sanctioned by the religion and placed it as one of the justifications forwarded by the British for their rule over India. (1989: 622)

The nationalist responded to this by constructing a reformed tradition so as to defend it on the grounds of modernity. In the process, the nationalists created a new patriarchy and also the image of a new woman who was superior to Western women, traditional Indian women and lower class women.

## **2.8 Colonial Modernity**

The distinct modernity that men and women had to take upon themselves in colonial India can be aptly grasped from Partha Chatterjee’s work. Chatterjee in his work “Nation and its Fragment” (1993,) has argued that Indian nationalism had to intervene at a time when British had tried to impose their ways on the indigenous life-ways, he further argues that nationalists had to for this reason instead cultivate their own version of Indian modernity that was not something borrowed from the west without any changes into India. This he shows by arguing on the lines that “Nationalism separated the domain of culture into two spheres – the material and the spiritual. In the material sphere the European power was considered superior with their Science, technology, rational forms of economic organization, and modern methods of statecraft-these gave them the power to dominate other less powerful countries in the world. And the spiritual sphere was considered to be a space where India was superior to the European powers”.

So as a nationalist project the Indian men had to learn the European superior ways in the material sphere. For this the colonized people took to learning of the superior techniques of organizing material life and incorporating them within their culture. But this could not mean that the colonized people simply imitated the west in every aspect of life because then the distinction that is visible between the west and the east would disappear which was not desirable.

As stated earlier in the spiritual sphere India was superior and so it was an important duty to maintain that spiritual superiority. So the project was to cultivate the material techniques of modern Western civilization while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of the national culture. “This completed the formulation of the nationalist project and as an ideological justification for the selective appropriation of Western modernity” (Chatterjee, 1989: 623-624)

For this purpose Chatterjee argued that the nationalists separated the social space into “the world” and “the home”, in Bengal this distinction was the *Ghar* and the *Bahir*. This separation also landed up justifying the separation of the worlds of the men and the women. The world was the domain of the male. The home was the domain of the women, who had to maintain the spiritual essence away from the world of profanity.

The *Bahir* was a world of the men where the changes were to take place and the home (*Ghar*) was the place of the women where she had to make sure that no changes were to occur and the distinctive spiritual culture preserved. It was the women who had to protect, preserve and strengthen the distinctive spiritual essence, and sustain the indigenous culture while the men engaged in the ways of the *Sahibs* (1989, 1993).

It was witnessed in the colonial times that even though the appropriation of modernity meant that only the world outside the home was a space where changes were to occur, slowly even the institution of family got entangled in wider social relations; it could not be isolated from the influence of changes in the outside world. Consequently, the organization and ways of life at home also changed. The men had taken to a whole lot of changes in terms of their dress, manners, food habits, religious observances and social relations and this was to be compensated by the strict maintenance of spiritual purity on the part of women at home. They therefore had different set of rules for women in terms of their dress, food habits, religious behaviour etc. which were to be very different from that of what men indulged in.

For example men were taking to the ways of the white men even at home in-terms of dress, food habits etc. in many houses there came up two kitchens, in the outer kitchen the men of the household employed Muslim cooks who cooked meat and other fancy non Bengali dishes and in the inner pure kitchen the women ruled where they involved in typical Bengali food. The women also made sure that the children of the household especially the girls were socialized in Indian /Bengali tradition.

Sudha Mazumder (Forbes 1997) talks in her account how, her father had employed a Muslim cook in the outer kitchen for cooking non Bengali (*Belati Khana*) food solely for him and even though he sometimes tried to treat his daughter (Sudha) with the fancy foods, the mother always made sure that she had gone through a thorough cleansing after partaking the *Belati Khana*. “Immediately after having eaten this food, I had to undergo a thorough wash and change every item of my clothing before I was permitted to touch anything in Mother’s apartment. Unorthodox food was considered to be unclean and therefore I was unclean until I had been thoroughly washed.”(1997:23). Mazumder describes her mother as pole apart from her father, because while her husband adopted the western ideas, she clung to her eastern ones. He had his ways of living and thinking but she firmly held on to her own’. (1997: 20)

When looking at women throughout the colonial times there were new standards set for the women to achieve, Chatterjee(1993,1989) argues “The new standard set was that no matter what changes came in the external conditions of life for women, they should not lose their essential spiritual qualities, i.e. feminine virtues; they must not become essentially westernised. The new woman was also to distinguish herself from the "common" woman, who was coarse, vulgar, loud, and quarrelsome”.

## **2.9 Rewriting Patriarchy and Domesticity**

There were numerous advice manuals written mostly by men, which were, as argued by Walsh (2004), a good place to look for the "new patriarchy" that was developed by the nationalist during the national struggle. The new patriarchy was a reconfiguration of patriarchal customs, rules, and prescriptions that was intended both to fit Bengali women for the changed conditions of and to create conditions and structures in the private sphere that would compensate Bengali men for their loss of power and position in public life.

These numerous advice manuals were written to train middle and upper class Bengali women to embody the new nationalist ideologies of womanhood. Hancock (2001) has talked about the emergence of home science during the 19<sup>th</sup> century so that women could be trained in the cultural refinements needed to be learned by the new woman. In tune with this sort of teaching, many manuals came out one titled including one titled 'Griha Lakshmi' (the Lakshmi of the household) Walsh argues that the aim of such a manual was that of ‘producing housewives who did not become a *memsahib* by taking to formal education, a woman was to

be constructed who could use the education to increase her efficiency in the household that had new requirements of the new middle class (*Bhadralok*). Chakrabarty mentions in line with the argument that, “The truly modern housewife, it was said, would be so auspicious as to mark the eternal return of the cosmic principle embodied in the goddess Lakshmi, the goddess of domestic well-being by whose grace the extended family (and clan, and hence, by extending the sentiment, the nation, *Bharatlakshmi*) lived and prospered”. (Chakrabarty 1992:15)

## 2.10 Food and Colonialism

Women were given advices on everything including cooking, which is seen in a Bengali society as an area of only women, because of the new culture that was to be upheld by the *Bhadramahilas* (Middle class educated women); food which is a very important aspect of daily life in Bengal was also brought into a contested area. There were many men who wrote a number of cook books to teach the women proper ways of making a *Bhadralok*'s meal. They gave advice and the women had to make sure that these were in their performance.

Meredith Borthwick (1984) has argued on how new techniques of education, culinary skills and hygienic trainings were created to sharpen the ‘traditional’ skills of ‘new’ woman.

The many educational institutions that came up in Bengal by the efforts of British officials and Indian reformers had subjects on culinary skills included in the curriculum. Although women were situated in space of the family kitchen and had the responsibility of preparing food, the knowledge of cooking came primarily from men. This can be seen in the extract below by the writer Priyanath Basu, who had written on educating of women in and around, the kitchen:

“What are women supposed to learn – where to store rice and lentils, how to keep pickles so that one could find it easily, how to prepare pickles, chutney and fruit preserves according to season, how to begin cooking, how to make good food in jiffy at a low cost, what should be cooked first and what later, how to cook *Pulao* (a fancy rice dish), curry, *Gourma* (a meat dish made with yogurt), chop, cutlet, lentils, vegetables, leafy vegetables, chutney, what are the right days to prepare which sweet, how to prepare juices from mango,

papaya and the like, how to make food look good, how to serve food aesthetically, how to make barley, arrowroot to cure patients, how to make varieties of soup, etcetera". (Ray, 2010: 62)

Cooking as subject needed to be included for a women's education curriculum also because during the 19<sup>th</sup> century the *Bhadralok* were developing a growing dislike for that of excess chillies and tamarind in their food. And so, since cooking was women's duty they needed to prepare food to the liking of the *Bhadralok* men. If I look at the disavowal of the two tastes from Bourdieu's lens then the adopting of this particular taste can be seen as being developed by the *Bhadralok* to mark themselves off from the lower classes that tend to indulge in the excess of chillies in their food. It has been seen from various sources that it is the people of the lower classes that tantalised their taste buds with excess of chillies.

When we look at the street food of Bengal especially the *Fuchkas* (fried bread balls fill with tamarind water and mashed potatoes) it is made with excess of chillies and tamarind and looking at the *Bhadralok* expurgating the two from their meal means street food is not a *Bhadralok's* indulgence. However it is seen that women and children enjoy this street treats from which we can assume that women like the excesses but in order to cook for the men in the house they have learnt to stay away from the chillies and tamarind in the home cooked meals.

Below I have used an extract to show the disavowal of the taste of tamarind and chillies

"A passage in *Kamalakanter Daftar*, Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay wrote:

To tell the truth, I cannot find anything under the sun as harmful as tamarind. Whoever eats it gets acidity and belches. . . .The anglicized Bengalis who dine on tables using knives and forks, eating meals cooked by Faizu Khansama, have managed to avoid the menace of tamarind. Irrespective of the desirability of the wholesale adaptation of the [Western] new manners by the Bengali, there is at least one feature of it which is redeeming: there is no need to wash down the rice with fish cooked in tamarind sauce. But think of the plight of those who have no choice but to eat meals cooked by Padi pisi [aunt] on a Munger stone plate sitting in a thatched cottage! Padi pisi comes from high-caste Kulin stock, bathes daily early in the morning, is respectably attired in namabali [scarf printed with the sacred motif of god] and wears a bracelet made of the auspicious basil-wood. But when it comes to



culinary skills, all she knows is how to prepare lentil dal and fish cooked in tamarind sauce. Faizu is a lowly Muslim but cooks like a chef'. (Mukhopadhyay: 43)

Mukhopadhyay (ibid:44) gives numerous Bengali cook books like 'Bipradas Mukhopadhyay's *Pak-pranali* (1987[1885–1902]), Pragyasundari Devi's *Amis O Niramis Ahar* (1900) Baisnabcharan Basak's *Soukhin Pakpranali* (1916) to show how the marginalization of chilli and tamarind in the construction of Bengali haute cuisine in the late 19th- century, Where he argues that tamarind and chillies are made references to in connection with only certain pickles and chutney but 'excesses' are not to be indulged in.

## 2.11 The New Woman

'The theme of the Indian women taking to the lifestyle and the ways of the memsahibs with the newly acquired formal education was a theme taken up in every form of written and oral propagation that ranged from the essays of the 19<sup>th</sup> century moralist, novels, skits and jingles. Social parody was the most popular and effective medium of this ideological propagation'. (Chatterjee 1993:122)

These works are interesting to read on how through these artistic mediums the society was to accomplish a mission of creating a new woman and while at the same time setting the limits on the extent of modernity that was allowed to these women and so I have cited example from the work of Partha Chatterjee, a skit, which portrays a family who has been exposed to a certain amount of the modernity that the British brought to India.

The main protagonist was a character called Mr Dhurandhar Pakrashi, whose educated wife calls him a "Fool" and the wife, she wants to become a "Lady Novelist" like Mary Corelli. The rest is a dialogue between the protagonist and his daughter, Phulkumari.

Phulkumari: Papa! Papa! I want to go to the races please take me with you.

Dhurandhar: Finished with your tennis?

Phulkumari: Yes, now I want to go to the races. And you have to get me a new bicycle. I won't ride the one you got me last year. And my football is torn; you have to get me a new one. And Papa, please buy me a self-driving car, and also a nice pony, please fix a nice electric lamp in my drawing room; I can't see very well in the gas light.

Dhurandhar: nothing else? How about asking the Banerjee Company to rebuild this house upside down, ceiling at the bottom and floor on top?

Phulkumari: how can that be Papa? You can't give me an education and then expect me to have low tastes. (Chaterjee, 1993:122)

From the above skit it can be argued that, it was a notion that if women were to get formal education then they are thought to divert from their ideal of a good wife and a good daughter. It's because of education that the wife calls the husband names, which is not a culturally accepted norm. Also the skit shows that the daughter is demanding things that are mainly entertained by boys like football, pony, etc. and also talks about her education which does not allow her to have low taste, which can be seen when she asks her father to replace gas lamps with electric lamps. When the protagonist says, "How about asking the Banerjee Company to rebuild this house upside down, ceiling at the bottom and floor on top?", he is trying to state that since everything in the house is going upside down like in a Patriarchal family where the man of the house should have power, instead he was being called names and the girl of the house was getting indulged in the interests of boys, it is as good as the house being built upside down.

The protagonist is ridiculed in the skit because he allows too much freedom to the women in the household, and the women are also ridiculed in the skit. From here it can be seen that since the women taking to the lifestyle of western women was not a crime in the state's eye, so society developed such ways, as ridicule, gossip as society's informal controlling device for the effective in monitoring of the behaviour of people.

This skit spells out what Karlekar argues in the following lines, "the historical roots of prejudice against the expansion of women's education in certain areas that lay in a basic conviction that there was something special about a woman's nature, which would be destroyed by excessive exposure to education".(1986: ws25)

## 2.12 Women's Education in Colonial Times

There were many superstitions related to women and studies traditionally in Bengal, one such superstition was 'that widowhood would surely follow if girls touched books, which has had been rebutted by Pandit GourmohanVidyalankarin in his "Stri Siksha-vidhayak"("Directives for Women's Education").' (Karlekar, 1986: ws25)

This superstition was so profound that no mother or grandmother would allow the girl child to have any kind of formal education, which was why education was not an area for girls until the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century.

Women in the past were not really encouraged for formal education, also because Motherhood was seen as a true vocation of women; the ideal that was set for ideal women taken from the religious texts was that of Sita. And it was set as an ideal that the true happiness of a woman lies in the fulfilment of her family roles. So, in many occasions the mother especially the grandmother did not really see any merit in formal education, it was more important to make the girl child an expert in religious scriptures and in the art of cooking, which would be of great help in her future in law's household, so domestic work expertise was given precedence over formal education, however the middle class women in Bengal, within their houses were encouraged to a number of diverse literary tradition from the great epics, the Mahabharata, the Ramayana; to also reading writers like Sharat Chandra, Rabindranath Tagore.

During the British rule with their involvement in the question of womenthings were changing rapidly, especially with them taking interest in the project of emancipating the oppressed (as thought by the British) women who were made victims of Sati, seclusion and other social evils. Many reformers and the British officers in colonial India tried to raise the status of the Indian women, and most of their efforts centred on the access of women to education. In connection to the project British officials made arrangements for teaching women at home; there were also many women Christian missionaries who took interest in Indian women's education.

The first steps taken in the direction of education of women in India were by missionaries and philanthropists in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. The first girls' school was founded in Calcutta in 1820 was by David Hare. In 1848, several schools were started in Bombay on the initiative of Professor Patterson, and in 1851 J.E.D. Bethune had founded the famous

Bethune school in Calcutta. Education had made steady advance since the nineteenth century. With the Initial *zenana* education, but after the founding of the Bethune School and its College department many upper-caste women of the Tagore and rays household took to education in these institutions. (Karlekar 1975, Ray, 2010)

In Bengal we can see the changes in terms of the education by looking within the Tagore household, while Swarnakumari Devi had been taught at home her daughter Sarala Devi entered Bethune School. (Ray, 2010)

However, these private efforts of the missionaries and philanthropists remained limited to only certain groups (women of the ray and Tagore households). The majority of the Hindus and Muslims hesitated to send their daughters to these schools, because of the exposure of women to harmful Western influences. This situation was slowly changing when in the 1850s Indians themselves began to open schools for girls for formal education. So, the initial steps by the missionaries and philanthropists created the institutional framework for the further development of women's education.

Education for women also could be realized because, the nationalists argued that, for women to run the household, her domestic affairs smoothly and according to the new physical and economic conditions set by the outside world she would need to have some idea of the world outside the home into which she could even go out as long as it did not threaten her femininity. "The more enlightened sections of the Hindus advocated a limited education for girls who would serve the major purpose of making women intelligent companions for the emergent *Bhadralok* and better mothers for the next generation".(Karlekar, 1975: ws25).

Formal education became not only acceptable, for the new *Bhadramahila* (respectable woman), when it was demonstrated that it was possible for a woman to preserve her femininity, which was also marked in her dress, and eating habits, etc. at the same time as acquiring the cultural refinements in terms of the new social forms of "disciplining" of orderliness, cleanliness, and a personal sense of responsibility, the practical skills of literacy, accounting and hygiene and the ability to run the household afforded by modern education (Chatterjee, 1993: 128; Borthwick 1984: 245-256)

There were many educational institutions that came up like in the case of Bengal the *Utterparah Hitakari Sabha*, the *Madhya Bangla Sammilani*, *The Mahakali Pathshala*, and the so-called modern educational institution such as Victoria College.

These schools apart from other subjects also included subjects of culinary importance so that the essential nature of women did not get lost in their academic curriculum, for example 'the *Utterparah Hitakari Sabha* included cooking in its list of subjects for study, and cooking competition were organized and prizes were awarded by the *Madhya Bangla Sammilani*. The *Mahakali Pathshala*, which was established on conservative Hindu principles, also placed great emphasis on the learning of culinary skills. Even in the so-called modern educational institutions such as Victoria College, cookery was included in the curriculum'. (Ray, 2010:61)

Apart from the inclusion of culinary skills in schools and colleges, various domestic manuals and women's journals began publishing recipes for the benefit of 'modern' women. Teaching them the proper ways of cooking which Bengali women has been doing in their *Ranna ghar* (kitchen) from the very beginning.

Home science as an academic discipline also came about at the time, Hancock has written extensively on the emergence of home science as a subject in institutions during the late colonial period, particularly during the years 1910-1940. (2001).

The efforts that were made in the line of women's education were showing their first fruits in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, because this was the time where the spread of formal education among the women of the Bengali middle class was applaudable. Women by this time were taking to even employment especially in the fields of medicine and teaching (traditional professions of women). This can be seen partly in the light of demands for education and health care amongst female relatives of middle-class men. Since the professionalization of health care and education was taking place, the *Bhadralok* wanted the services for the female relatives by women professionals also partly for the maintenance of sex segregation and female seclusion. "In the area of higher education, Chandramukhi Bose (1860-1944) and Kadambini Ganguli(1861-1923) were celebrated as examples of what Bengali women could achieve in formal learning: they took their B.A. degrees from the University of Calcutta in 1883, before most British universities agreed to accept women on their examination rolls. Kadambini then went on to medical college and became the first professionally schooled woman doctor". (Chatterjee, 1989: 628)

## 2.13 Women's Education and Employment in Postcolonial Times

Educational opportunities had become greater with the independence of India, and the constitution guaranteeing right to education for every citizen, without discrimination against caste, creed, religion and sex. So, the result was that women from the middle class began to see new possibilities for change in women's position. But these changes were only superficial because even after what the constitution guaranteed, a woman was still in a patriarchal social structure, where women were to be controlled by the men.

Dube (1997) argues that, 'there was a certain delinking of women's education and employment in the upper and middle classes. Girls were given education not to build a career out of it but to become efficient housewives and mothers, who could properly socialize their children. Educated women were also in demand by the middle class people for marriage, so education was an attractive asset in the marriage market. However even if education was necessary for marriage negotiation a woman's education should be such that it did not excel that of the prospective groom otherwise, the education did not help build status but instead made it hard for the parents to get any suitable groom'. (1997: 146)

When looking at women's education more often it was not her who chose what to study, but it was the family or the institution head who took these decisions on behalf of her (so called freedom of education). This can be seen from a certain case of 'Indrani VijayaLakshmi, who stated that even though she wanted to do a degree in chemistry, the principal of the institution did not allow her to do so on the grounds that if she pursued chemistry then she would be taking up a scarce science place which would be useless for her because girls were not thought to pursue a career, so he forced her into humanities'. (Liddle and Joshi, 1986:122)

So, even though superficially it looks as though the new opportunities are progressive in terms of women having greater freedom than the earlier generations especially in caste based societies, underneath the truth is that the male control was still very much there.

However the difference in the post-colonial class society was that because of the individualism of the class structure, women were more readily able to negotiate and demand education for them and also could take advantage of the opportunities of professional employment, which in-turn could make them less dependent economically on men.

In the case of employment, that is, work outside the home there were criteria of respectability that had to be upheld. There was a constant criteria of respectability of jobs, which was confirmed in a study of women school teachers by Malavika Karlekar (1975), where almost half of the respondents attributed their choice of occupation to the criteria of respectability. As argued by Liddle and Joshi, "Respectability was to be retained by minimising the woman's sexual freedom in the job, and through emphasising the economic and status benefits attaching to her occupation". (Liddle and Joshi, 1986)

Also there were very few jobs that were seen suitable for women, so women have a narrower range of occupations than men; women are employed into occupations that are seen as an extension of their ideological roles, like teaching, medicine, nursing, social work. And whenever there were scarcity for jobs the men were chosen over women as employees and also the pay differed for same amount of work that men and women did, men always got more pay than women.

Dube (1997: 147) argues that the motive in permitting a daughter to work is often, for the reason that she can earn some of her own dowry. Some parents [(in class structure), italics not by the author] '... may visualize career for their daughters but they seldom count on being supported by them.....Where women work and support their parents or younger siblings, this usually traps them in situation where marriage does not remain an option".

This can be seen beautifully depicted in one Bollywood movie "*tapasya*" in 1976 starring Rakhi Gulzar, where she is shown as the eldest daughter who is seen in a romantic relationship with a man but in time when she has to look after her ill father and siblings gives up that relationship and in turn takes to paid employment to support the family and support the dreams of her siblings aspiring for a bright career. She does not marry until in the climax of the movie when she sees that all her siblings are settled and she has done the *tapasya* (meditation) to take the duties and fulfill them towards the people of her family.

So, from the above it can be argued that even though equal rights are guaranteed by the constitution, the male control and supremacy in gender relations is still present with new ways of controls. From here it can be seen that of women's subordination remains embodied in the personal relations of the patriarchal family, and patriarchal relations are part and parcel of the social structure. So, despite the liberality of the laws, the inequalities remained throughout the caste and class society.

## 2.14 The “New” Middle Class Women Debate in Postcolonial India

The 1990's was heralded as an era of new opportunities and there is of much talk about a New Middle Class with new patterns of consumption with their increased purchasing capacity. The new middle class in India Jaffrelot (2008) argues, is not really a homogeneous category (upper middle class, lower middle class); it is the consumption patterns that bring the group closer. Jaffrelot (2008) argues that the new middle class made benefits primarily on the expansion of the service sector of the economy and of professional white collar employment within the private sector, in particular within multinational corporations.

When we look at the media representation the middle class is represented as the true beneficiaries of globalization, Media images in recent years have propagated the liberties of consumerism through the use of enabling images of women, without confronting the unequal gender relations.

With this backdrop, taking the question of women, when there is so much employment opportunity the question is do women in India really benefit from the whole globalization hype?

Many international agencies and feminist organizations rally behind the concept of women's empowerment, and for the empowerment of women the plans of action universally stress improved educational and employment opportunities as critical means for women to attain greater control over their lives. Here the question arises, Do Schooling and Work Empower Women in Developing Countries?

To conclude, it was evident that, in traditional caste societies the male control through seclusion could be visible in the practice of keeping the women in the inner quarters of their homes, denying education and so on. However in the class society the same signs of seclusion cannot be visible because of the changes that the society is going through in terms of discussing the issues of women and taking progressive steps towards their coming of seclusion to gain education and employment. The class structure also makes it easier for women as individual to try to negotiate as well as resist the roles and ideologies put on them by the society at large.



However by looking at the colonial and post-colonial handling of the women's issue, it was evident that even though women were taking education and employment, there is still a strong male control seen controlling the decisions made by the women. There were many informal control mechanisms of society like, in the colonial times there were skits, which ridiculed the idea of an Indian woman adopting western ideals.

Empowerment of women cannot be achieved on the lines of discussions of the Government and the reformers through education and employment only, because the institution of male control is embedded in the structures of society which not only adapts to the changes of society but also to the forms of women's resistance. .

But here again even the resistance of women should not be underestimated because with the new educational and employment opportunities in the class society women use their education not only for the benefit of their family but also for themselves in getting job in maintaining their economic independence and sometimes also ignoring the constraints which are imposed to control their movements and their behaviour. Wherever the women can with their new economic independence they try to negotiate more democratic relationships within the family, but can also withdraw from the family if the other members are not willing to adjust.

The changes in the globalising economics of Asia, if it does not challenge the existing patriarchal traditions then there is little hope for emancipation of women by Improving education and employment opportunity.

## CHAPTER-3

### **Growing up as an Ideal Bengali Woman.**

#### **3.1 Bengali Household and Women**

'Structurally, the Bengali Hindu family is patrilineal in descent, patrilocal in residence and patriarchal in authority. In such a system sons were favoured because it is the sons who were to carry on the family name and tradition. Ray (1991:5) argues that the right and obligation to perform *Shraddha*, which occupied a central place in the Hindu psyche, bound sons inexorably to the long line of ancestors in the family, while girls were to be married off to another family and are taken to be temporary members of the family.(Ray1991, Fruzzetti).

Boys remained in the families even after their marriage, continuing the family traditions and name, while girls were to move to an unfamiliar surrounding after marriage. Marriage, as an institution under the Hindu customary law, was an indissoluble sacrament, For a Hindu girl marriage was not an option; it was the only destination of life; its fulfilment lay in begetting a son for the family. In Bengal it is only a married woman that is thought of as an ideal woman.(Ray, 1991; Fruzzetti, 1993; Donner, 2008).

Marriage is patrilocal in Bengali society where a bride is taken into her husband's family, which is usually an extended patrilineal family.Ray (1991: 5) argued that, the joint family became the established institution by the nineteenth century in the Bengali society. Also by looking at most of the biographies and auto biographies of women in Bengal the institution of joint family is seen to be the established norm in the Bengali society. Banerji (2006) has talked about her childhood being spent in the ancestral three storied house in Calcutta, where she lived with her parents and grandparents.The joint household is also evident from the recordings of the Tagore household in Bengal, even in contemporary time, in Donner'(2008) work also it is seen that the architecture of the houses in Bengal is made in keeping the norm of joint household in mind.

Fruzzetti(1984) through her ethnographic study says that in Bengal the widest group of persons is designated by "*Gosthi Paribar*" and "*Ekanna Borti Poribar*",Where the members of the household live together under a *Karta* eating together from a single kitchen

and single batch of rice (*Ekanna Borti Poribar*). In such a structure it is the *Karta*, the head of the family who had the most amount of power and also made decisions on all significant family affairs. Below him there is a clear hierarchy of each individual male, whose ranking and share at power is determined by seniority and relationship to *Karta*. The relationship between *Karta* and the others is one of affection and love on the part of the former and respect on the part of the latter.

Women in the family also, have a substructure of power. The *Karta*'s wife or '*Ginni*' is the head of domestic side of the family and has command over the other females of the household.

A young bride's status was the lowest in the family; she was invariably assigned the hardest and most arduous domestic chores. Her position improved somewhat when she became the mother of a son, and assumed importance only when she became the *Ginni*, usually at an advanced age. (Fruzzetti 1984, 1993; Ray 1991)

In the traditional cultural system women were married off at a very young age and their socialization was such that they were to inculcate the ideals set by the society for them. They were trained to become passive, obedient, hardworking, and self-sacrificing.

When looking at the anxieties and fears of a young bride at the time of marriage Ray (1991) looks at the autobiography of Rassundari Devi, *Amar Jiban* (My Life. Calcutta 1876). Which brings out the anxieties of Rassundari Devi on the day of her marriage "On the day of her departure to her in-laws' home, she ran to her mother and begged, "Dear mother, please don't give me away". Yet, every girl has been traditionally given away to the husband's family. On arrival she enters into several role relationships with strictly prescribed codes of conduct. For instance, she is not supposed to speak with her husband's older male relatives and is expected to observe the courtesy of covering her head in front of older females". (1991:6)

After her marriage there are many roles that she enters into and each has its own flavor. There is a relationship of avoidance that exists between the new bride and the elderly males of the household, like the father-in-law, husband's elder brother and so on. So the bride's new world is that of the women's world.

In the domestic side if the mother in law is also the *Ginni* then she commands the most amount of power on the newly wedded (daughter in law). Dube (1988) has argued that

in most of the socialization of girls is done from a young age with keeping in mind of an invisible Mother in law, because the mother-in-law daughter-in-law relation is thought to be filled with tension and conflict. They seem to seek influence over the same men in the household, this is one big reason behind them trying to cook the favorite dishes and please the men of the household, which further gives them some Private power. From the mother-in-law's point of view, the new bride is potentially dangerous because she poses a threat to a power she herself acquired after a long period of waiting and also fears that if the conjugal bond of the daughter-in-law and son develops can lead to the break of the joint family.

There may also be some tensions and dislikes between the young bride and the 'Nanad' (sister-in-law) However, (Ray1991) argues that, since the *Nanad* is the daughter of the house and like the young bride coming into the family the daughter of the household also has to be married off, visiting only occasionally, the tension is not as strong as the one with the *Ja* (husband's brother's wife) (ibid: 3016)

Ray (1991) argues that, 'It is actually the *Ja* ' or husband's brother's wife with whom a new bride has to contend with, because the young bride and also the other women in the household are initially strangers to each other, there is more space in this relationship for strong feelings of bitterness, if the ways of these women do not match. Also there is a constant attempt to please the mother-in-law as well as the male members of the household which pit them against each other. Ray argues that 'There is often mutual resentment most importantly because of competition for greater popularity among the members of the new family and greater powers especially in the kitchen and the store which are the acknowledged centers of the domestic space' (Ray1991: 3017).

Daily household duties are divided among all the women in the house, with the youngestbride's share being the greatest. The complete day of a married woman in her in-laws' house can be summarized briefly, and here I put forward an ideal typical situation whereas in reality there are alternatives with the variables of the caste and class brought in.

'The youngest wife of the house since she has the most amount of work to her share, she is to wake up early to undertake those work. After waking up she needs to take a bath and wear fresh set of clothes so as to approach the *Ranna Ghar*, which has to be approached in a ritually pure form. She sets up tea and milk to be served to the elders and the children after they wake up'. (Fruzzetti1990:100)

‘Some of the members who work outside the home require to eat a heavy meal before going to work, which means that boiled rice, a lentil dish, a vegetable or two, and some amount of fish and meat must be ready by the time the men and school children finish getting ready. After the men and children are fed, the other women of the household eat their food, the youngest wife eating the last after which she also requires to clean the area.’(ibid: 100)

‘There is some time in the afternoon when there are no household duties, when the young bride can take some rest unless the *Ginni* already has some plans like visiting temples, neighbors, planned on which the young bride is asked to accompany their mothers-in-law or other elder women of their houses.’(ibid: 100)

‘The evening is marked by again the young bride returning to the *Ranna Ghar* where she has to prepare rice or *Rotis* (wheat cake), and prepare for dinner by cutting vegetables and preparing the spices, etc. Once again the men and children are fed first, followed by the older women, and last the young married women. No *stri* will eat rice before her husband has finished his meal. Again, the feeding and cooking area is cleaned and the utensils washed and put away. Beds and bedding are laid out for everyone. Only after all the other people of the household have gone to sleep can the younger women retire’. (ibid: 100-101)

“The *Kuladebata* has to be worshipped daily by the household's married women, there are days that are devoted to certain gods and the daily pujas need to be performed in accordance to the proper ways in worshipping the certain god on certain days. The Thursday worship of Goddess Lakshmi is performed by most households in which there are married women. Though the worship is quite simple, preparation for it requires time and effort: the worship room must be cleaned and the deity washed, garlanded, and dressed before the ritual is actually performed”. (ibid: 101)

From the above, it can be argued that though in reality with the important variables of caste and class being brought into the picture, the process of work within the household may differ but one thing that would not be changed is that the youngest daughter in law has the least amount of power and the most amount of work to do. And she has been traditionally doing these duties so as to not upset the members of the household, and even their socialization is done in such a manner which makes these women ready for the joint family arrangement.

Another important aspect that can be glanced from the example given above that the young daughter-in-law has the most amount of work in the food area; the food area, constituting as a whole the cooking area (*Ranna Ghar*), serving and eating area and the storage area of food. In India where so much of the notion of purity and pollution is attached to food, the women of the household have an overwhelming responsibility to maintain the purity of food.

### 3.2 '*Ranna Ghar*'

After the *Thakur Ghar* the *Ranna Ghar* is the purest part of the house and so a woman has to keep in mind the intrinsic purity to be maintained in the *RannaGhar* (cooking area), which is ritually at a higher place than the eating area followed by the storage room. (Khare, 1976a) So, the cook approaching the kitchen also should be in a ritually pure form, which requires the cook to bathe and then wearing a fresh set of clothes to handle cooking.

In a typical Bengali kitchen there are no modern kitchen appliances, even if they are there they are rarely used, like mixer-grinders, choppers etc. instead at least two kitchen tools that are found in every household are the *Bonti*(cutting tool)and the *Patasil Nora*(mortar and pestle).

“The *Bonti* is a curved blade rising out of a narrow, flat, wooden base. Sometimes the blade is mounted on a small iron tripod to increase its height. Its versatility lies in the many different types and sizes of both blade and base, as well as from the various uses to which it is put. The *Bonti*'s uniqueness comes from the posture required to use it: one must either squat on ones haunches or sit on the floor with one knee raised while the corresponding foot presses down on the base”. (Banerji, 2001: 79)

The *Bonti* is contrasted with the knife by Banerji (2001) when she argues that even though *Bonti* and knife both are cutting tools the *Bonti* makes the act of cutting gentler. For this she looks at the act of cutting. When cutting with a *Bonti* she argues that, “The cook positions herself in front of the tool, one foot pressed firmly against the wooden base, holding the vegetable or fish or meat in both hands and running it into the blade,where the food is embraced even as it is dismembered”. Even when we look at the painting in Bengal especially *Kalighat* paintings; There are local images of women sitting with a *Bonti* to cut vegetables as well as fish and other protein.

A woman in Bengali household is trained to use the *Bonti* and is very good at it, using a *Bonti* is not very simple and requires a lot of practice, there is a certain way of sitting, certain way of holding the vegetables and proteins to be cut and so without the knowledge one cannot approach such a tool. The art of using the *Bonti* for cutting the vegetables is known as “*KutnoKata*”, and this was earlier one of the qualities sought in a potential daughter in law by the *Ginni*.

The *Patasil Nora* is another tool which is used in the Bengali kitchen, traditionally and even now in modern Bengali kitchen whenever possible the spices are pounded only in the *Patasil* with the *Nora*. A typical act in the kitchen is that of a *Jogare*(help) is seen pounding the spices everyday afresh for the everyday cooking. Traditionally in Bengal there was no concept of ready-made spices. Every meal was to be made from scratch, for which the women had to spend a major portion of the day in the kitchen. Apart from its use in the kitchen, it is also used in the *Stri Acars*, and holds sacredness to it, as would be evident from the *stri acars* that will be dealt with later in the chapter.

### 3.3 Male Cook

During the colonial times in Bengal there was an overwhelming practice of employing cooks in the middle class households. Most of the cooks were men and only a few were women. Men were employed as the cooks of the household and women even if they were hired were given the jobs of helps(*Jogare*). This was also seen in Banerji’s (2006) work in the chapter *Patoler ma*, where she spoke of how everyday a woman used to pound the *Masalas* (spices) on the *patasil* needed by the Brahmin cook.

Cooking as a profession was seen to be an area of the males and since food has been traditionally one of the ways of maintaining intrinsic caste purity so overwhelmingly the male cooks were Brahmins. Swapna Banerjee (2004) has argued that the most significant distinction in caste status of servants in colonial Bengal was in terms of *Jalchal* and *Ajalchal*: upper caste Hindus could accept water from a *Jalchal* and not from an *Ajalchal*. While a servant belonging to an *Ajalchal* caste would not have entry into the kitchen, Brahmins, who were *Jalchal*, were in high demand as cooks and kitchen staff (*Jogare*). (2004:67).

Even though hiring of Brahmin men as cooks was a very common phenomenon among middle class Bengali households there was a certain inferiority attached to the food cooked by the cook in comparison to food cooked by the women of the household.

Ray (2010) cites Dinesh Chandra Sen to put forward the argument of aestheticizing women's labor, she argues that, "Dinesh Chandra Sen makes it very clear why he insisted that the women of the house should cook, and he makes it very clear why women's cooking is so significant:

*Grihini* (mistress) – is in fact the mistress of the kitchen. She would supervise the cook, as she is acquainted with the likes and dislikes of each of her family members. Food constitutes the essence of one's life. Hence, its charge cannot be left to a paid cook. When *Grihini* herself takes the charge of the kitchen, she resembles none other than the goddess *Annapurna* (*Anna* meaning rice). She is affection personified, which makes the food she prepares, taste like nectar". (Ray 2010:65)

It was then love and affection that set apart women's cooking from those of the hired male cooks. The lady of the house was different from the hired cooks because she did not cook for wage labour. She was the giver of food; the names of *Annapurna* and *Lakshmi*, the rice-giving deities are repeatedly mentioned in this context. In this way Ray(2010) argues, the Aestheticizing of women's cooking took place in the Bengali households.

The Aestheticizing of women's cooking can also be seen as a reason for women not being employed as cooks, since cooking for women was to be a labour of love and not of money. When it came to an image of women in the kitchen it is that of Goddess *Lakshmi* and *Annapurna*.

### **3.4 Socialization within the Household**

Socialization is very important aspect of growing up, because it is by this process that a person inculcates the culture of the society, within which one has to live. From the point of view of young children, they do not really know what is desirable and what is not desirable in the society, what actions can be reprimanded and what awarded, so it is through socialisation that children inculcate the appropriate behaviours in society. Socialization is a process which takes place within the household and also outside. Inside the domestic space socialization is mostly the duty of the women. As stated earlier, that Bengal has extended patriarchal



household i.e. joint family so the task of socializing the children by the mother within the household is also shared by the other women of the household.

So it's the duty of the mother, grandmother and older aunts who are wholly responsible for socialization of children within the household to make them cultural beings. And this is one of the reason society puts the women within the domestic space so that she can constantly be there for the socialization process of the children. (Ortner1996).

As discussed in chapter one, men and women have different role expectation that is carved out from the cultural heritage of the society so it is therefore necessary that boys and girls are socialized into different roles to fit into ideals that society has set for them. Bengal has a very rich culture in terms of their music, dance, folk art, theatre and literature and so it was important for the young to be educated in their rich variety of culture.

Even though Bengali girls were traditionally not allowed formal education in the public space it did not mean that they were uneducated, domestic space was not only a space to learn domesticity but also a space to be enriched with various cultural traditions. Even though the Bengali women earlier did not have education as per the definition today i.e. English medium education in the arts and sciences; they had a variety of Bengali literature at their disposal within the household which every Bengali girl was expected to read.

Here I will be taking up the socialization of girls within the domestic space and look at the whole process in phases of early childhood and adolescence.

### **Early Childhood**

In the early childhood the young girls before their starting of schooling are constantly seen to be around the women of the household, watching them cook and engaged with other works in and around the food area(kitchen, eating area and storage space), and also engaging in religious activities. The young girls by their constant connection with the women witness the daily rituals of worship, cleaning and cooking.

The young find it amusing to see the grandmother and the other women of the household clean the *Thakur ghar* with so many intriguing pictures and effigies. She watches the women performing the daily *Pujas*, offering the deities food and flowers and listening to the chants (*Pancali and Brata Katha*), which fascinate her. Sometimes the young girls are seen helping their mothers to arrange things for the daily *Pujas* that take place in the household, in the process asking many fascinating questions that they seek answer for about gods and goddesses, which if the mother has time answers with constant reference to

religious texts like the *Bhagwad Gita* and the great Indian epics *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*. (Roy 1992; Banerji 2006)

However, if the mother is a working woman the task shifts to the grandmother or other older women of the household (shared parenting in joint households), who has ample time and is more than happy to speak of endless religious tales and also in the process teaching her the ways of proper conduct in the *Thakur ghar* (place of worship). “The *Thakur Ghar* set aside for the gods, and every morning and evening the gods receive their dues of a variety, with seasonal fruits, sweets, *Batashas* (hard sweet puffs) and leaves of the holy basil”(Banerji 2006:14).

In every Bengali/Indian household the *Pujas* or worship accompanied by food offering to God, and the offering is always preceded by meticulous aesthetic preparation. In her account, Banerji (2006) mentioned how she would sit quietly in a corner observing her grandmother in the *Thakur ghar*, ‘as she would pull out a round stone slab and sprinkling it with water and would rub it with a small bar of sandalwood and then lighting the incense sticks...which would fill the room with a fragrance of devotion. Flowers would then be laid out at the feet of the gods, following which the *Batashas*, fruits and sweets would then be laid out ceremoniously in different copper or silver plates as offering to the gods’.(Banerji, 2006:16 )

Banerji (2006) beautifully brings out the relationship between worship and food, while she looks at how women meticulously prepare for the daily puja by beautifully decorating and placing the food, raw and cooked offered to god. She argues (2010) that ‘Rice is an integral part of such offerings. Un-husked rice and tree foiled grasses (*Durba*) are presented to the deities along with fruits and foods, such as sweetmeats’. (2010: 136)

From this a child learns to respect the *Thakur ghar*, and in the process over the time also learns the proper ways of conducting daily rites of puja in the household, she also learns the religious importance of food and in particular certain food items such as rice, milk etc.

Then around the age of five or six a girl is supposed to begin her studies, along with the other siblings of the household. Roy (1992: 19) argues that, ‘The very first year or two may be the responsibility of the mother or the younger aunts or perhaps an older sister, who introduces the young child to alphabets both English and Bengali. In the same household a private tutor may be appointed to teach all the children their first alphabets and numbers’. But this has changed drastically in the post liberalization Bengal, especially in the urban Kolkata,

where, there has been a tremendous rise of English medium Montessori schools. (Donner, 2008)

Going back to the discussion of socialization of a child within the household; it is argued by Roy (1992) that once a child starts going to school the responsibility of her education shifts from the mother to one of the male members of the household. 'It usually shifts to the father, an uncle, or the grandfather, whoever has spare time in the evening. The child spends two to three hours in the evening with the father, doing the homework'. (Roy, 1992: 2)

However during the sessions Roy (1992) further argues that, the presence of the grandmother is constantly there to look at what education the father is giving the daughter, while mostly commenting on the fact that, it is stupid to make girls go through such hard work; after all in the future their work will be to look after their husband and son".(ibid: 21)

Since there was the notion prevalent in Bengal that girls who touch books widowhood falls on them, so most of the women were not given education. Most of the elderly women especially the grandmothers, who have had no education herself, see no merit in her granddaughter taking to formal education. These elderly women feel that since they themselves without having any formal education have still managed to do a good job in maintaining a household and bring successful as a mother and a wife, feels that formal education is not going to help the granddaughter in the realm of the domestic.

The grandmother if she has had no education does not see any merit behind a girl having to do so much hard work, by reading difficult books to make a good wife and a mother. Then she gives herself as an example to state that a woman does not have to study to be a good wife and a mother.

### **Adolescence**

In the adolescent years, the girl in the household spends time with her grandmother and aunts, helping around the house, especially in the food area, and the Thakur ghar.

Beginning with assistance in cooking and other kitchen work, serving of food, caring for younger siblings, preparing for the worship of family deities, and looking after the aged, girls learn to take over some of the responsibilities in the household by themselves, for those who do not take interest in the household work are constantly teased and picked on by the older women of the households. The picking on women not knowing the duties of a *Grihini* is also explicit in many Bengali *Chaddas*, one such *Chaddas* is,

'Where the housewife is an able cook

And can finely pare her vegetables,  
Its been heard spoken,  
That the home is never broken.  
She who lacks the sense of income and expenditure,  
Is angry at good words,  
Makes sharp retort and causes needles and pain,  
The husband of such a one can never home remain.’(Forbes 1997: 46)

In the Bengali middle class households the women are assisted in their household work by domestic helps, so that they are left with sometime in the afternoons to relax and engage in activities like listening to Bengali music, sometimes telling stories to the young (with the relevance of the epics or the local legends and folktales), and sometimes adolescent girls reading the religious texts to the elderly women like the Mahabharata, Ramayana or the *Puranas*. Roy (1992) argues that by making the young girls read such cultural texts is a way of the elderly women amusing themselves as well as teaching the young girls the virtues of the great Indian women of the Indian scriptures. These women feel that the young girls should learn the virtues of being like these great women, “so they deliberately pick chapters from these epics and Puranas where women are seen making great sacrifices, where the virtues of piousness, tolerance are displayed”. (Roy 1992: 32)

Indian/Bengali literature is very rich and diverse and since Bengali girls within the household are constantly exposed to the texts, so it is important to look at the various literary traditions in relation to the socialization process.

### **3.5 Bengali Literature**

#### **The Epic’s Ideals**

Every girl in an Indian/Bengali household grows up with stories from the epics like Mahabharata, Ramayana, *Bhagwad Gita* and the *Puranas*. Traditionally these stories were mostly narrated as bed time stories by the grandmothers and also during the adolescent years as mentioned above, girls were asked to read these texts themselves to the elderly women. These stories are important since as mentioned in chapter 1, the ideals for girls are always taken from the great tradition’s literature, and so from a young age, these stories are narrated

to them so that they can value the virtues like piousness, tolerance, sacrifice etc. of women like *Sita* and *Savitri*.

“*Sita* is considered one of the most ideal of Indian women because she was a faithful, tolerant, and sacrificing wife; of Lord *Rama*, the great hero of the epic *The Ramayana*. *Sita* was beautiful, pious, and devoted to her husband. After she was abducted by the demon king *Ravana*, *Rama* began a war with him eventually killing him and rescuing *Sita*. However, *Rama* did not wish to accept her back as his wife until she proved her chastity by standing the test of fire; the fire could not burn her because a chaste woman has supernatural power. Even after *Sita* proved her chastity, she had been exiled to the forest because *Rama* had succumbed to his subjects’ suspicions about her chastity; she withstood all such false allegations without protest. Although she grew old in banishment, she continued to love her husband and abide by his judgment”. (Roy 1992: 33)

### **Love In The Epics**

“Both *Kalidasa* and *Bhababhuti* (the Sanskrit authors) describe erotic love that was different from the earlier literature of the Epics where only ideals and duties were made explicit.

*Rama's* love for *Sita* after she was abducted by *Ravana* was described by *Bhababhuti* as follows:

But ah the sorrow died in me, O *Lakshman*,  
When I went further into the forest into *Want*.  
I had *Sita!* Now it rises again  
Like fire, set swiftly blazing by the logs.  
Blow o' wind; where my beloved tarries  
Touch her feet, and then me too.  
In thee our bodies touch one another,  
In the moon our glances are united”.(Roy 1992: 35)

From here it can be concluded that even *Sita* and *Rama* who are epitomized as ideals for men and women in Indian society when it comes to being virtuous and dutiful, also have a different shade to them when looked at through the extracts written by *Bhababhuti* and *Kalidasa*. The *Rama* who in the epic is shown only as a dutiful, strong and just man,

upholding the virtues of society at all time, when looked at from the verses of *Bhababhuti* is seen as a vulnerable man, expressing his love for his wife.

### ***Brata Katha***

During the times of *Brata*, the young girls witness older relatives performing *Bratas* that are prescribed for the married women, and some observe *Bratas* themselves, which are to be observed by unmarried girls. Apart from the performing of the rituals there are also stories narrated (*Brata Katha*), as a part of the whole Brata performance.

Roy(1992) argues that, 'The same morals that the epics stress remain, but are couched in a more homespun form, which appeals to folk sentiments'.(1992:35)

Here I explore one *Brata Katha* which is popular in most households:

Firstly, *Sasthi Brata Katha* is one of the most popular stories read or told by an elderly woman when during the observance of the rites called *Sasthi-Brata*. *Sasthi* in Bengal is the Goddess of Fertility. 'The story talks about a lazy woman who lacks in observing wifely duties such as cleaning the house, cooking in time, and waiting for the men to come home and eat. She was often eating before the men and also never bothered to worship the deity *Sasthi*. And as a consequence she never had a child who lived to grow into an adult. They all died at very early ages. Then one night the deity appeared in her dream, where she was asked to observe her *Brata* so that she gets the blessing of the deity to have her sons grow up to become adults. She did, and her next son lived and she had several children afterward'.(Roy 1991:35)

### **Medieval Vaishnava Literature**

In Bengal some of the widely read poets were, *Chandidas*, *Gobindadas* and *Bidyapati* (fifteenth century). These poets were born in rural Bengal which also reflected in their writings because they used many images from the rural scene, which appealed to the readers. 'As a result the theme of love between *Radha* and the *Krishna* is mixed with folk Eros and deep religious emotion (*Bhakti*). The best example of this is the *Krishna Kirtan* by Chandi Das, the verses are about the divine love between Radha and Krishna and readers readily identify with them, not always because of pure religious feelings but often for the vicarious pleasure derived from the stories'. (Roy1991)

## **The (New) In Literature**

Roy argues that the literature in the form of writings by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, Rabindranath Tagore and Sarat Chandra Chatterjee of the 19<sup>th</sup> century “was influenced by a romanticism that had its roots the European tradition of post-renaissance romanticism”.

In the writings of Bankim Chandra there was a new kind of love that was evident in, which love was not equivalent to lust, but was a romantic relationship between men and women with the idea of mutual respect for each other. Roy argues, “Bankim Chandra, for the first time, emphasized the fact that romantic love can be realized in an ideally created conjugal love if strengthened by a woman's devotion and her chastity”.

The mastery in his writing can be seen from the fact that he wrote about love, conjugality and respect at a time when the social condition in Bengal was not ready for it, it was still a time when young girls were dying of marital rape (Sarkar 2000) so Roy argues that ‘he was in a need to create imaginary situations based in part on historical events and placed them in historically remote settings’.

Tagore was one author who influenced Bengali culture to a great extent and can be considered the major phenomenon behind the 20<sup>th</sup> century renaissance in Bengal. Roy argues, ‘His writings continue to emphasise both divine and romantic love, but unlike Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s work, Tagore moved it from imaginary and historical settings to a semi-urban milieu. Tagore brought many shades to a woman, that of wife, lover, friend, mistress. In his writings he often put a woman and a man at equal footing’.

The third author is Sarat Chandra Chatterjee. Sarat Chandra was an author who treated women with sympathy and understanding and also put them on pedestals to honour and worship. And most of the women in Bengal actually identifies with the characters that were created by him.

Sudha Mazumder (Forbes 1997) in her account states that, her mother’s favourite reads were the epics, Ramayana and Mahabharata, but she also read passionately the very popular historical romances of the writer Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.(ibid: 20)

Bankim Chandra, Tagore, and Sarat Chandra are representative of renaissance Bengali literature and are considered very important, because they rejected the popular notions in society about women and women’s role as that being passive, obedient, etc. and protested through their writings. All three in their work deal with the emotional conflicts and needs of Bengali woman of middle classes as opposed to the duties and roles spelled out to them by cultural traditions.

The popularity of these novels can be seen in the films that were made by Satyajit Ray, out of the novels written by Tagore, and even in the contemporary times movies not only in Bengali but mainstream Bollywood movies are also made on these novels; one such movie is that of *Parineeta*, The original novel written by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee.

### 3.6 Rituals Performed By Women Within The Household

There are many rituals within a Bengali household that are performed solely by women. The life cycle rituals that are performed by the women are a part of the little tradition, which is abound by legends, folk lore involving local gods and goddesses, only the women have the knowledge of the proper ways of approaching and performing them. There are also many food items raw and cooked that are used during the rituals and their symbolism and relevance is also a knowledge restricted to women only.

Here I will explore in details the rituals, *Stri Acar* of marriage, because apart from the rituals performed by the male priests taught from the *Guru* to the *Sishya* as prescribed in the Sanskritic texts, the *Stri Acars* that are performed by the women during the marriage are equally important. These complicated rituals *Stri Acars* are not written down anywhere but are transferred by imitation and the knowhow of these rituals are restricted to women only.

#### Stri Acars

Various marriage *stri acars* come before, after, or during the other Brahminical marriage rites presided by the male priests.

The very first ritual is that of *Khoi Bhaja* (frying the pulses). Then comes the rites of *Sankha Porana*, (the wearing of the conch-shell bangles) in which the bride's father provides a pair of bangles, which are put on her wrists by a *Sankari* (shell-maker). There is also a myth attached to this ritual and according to the myth, "the Goddess *Durga*, mother of all Bengalis, went to her in-laws' house (that of Lord Siva, her husband). There she was made fun of for not having jewellery on her arms. Returning to the house of her father, King *Dasaratha*, she was met by Siva disguised as a *Sankari* (conch-shell bangle seller) who offered her shell bangles to propitiate her anger" (1990: 70).

Fruzzetti argues that since then all brides wear conch-shell bangles as a sign of marriage. Besides being one of the attributes of *Laksmi*, the shell is sacred in many other



contexts. (ibid: 71). After *Sankha Porana*, the *Gae Halud* (rite of splashing turmeric on the bride or groom) is performed. Following that is the *Kalai Mugla* which is a rite in celebration of the Goddess of Children and the *Sil and Nora* (grinding stone and pestle) are used symbolically and then following this, the cowrie games of women, *Kaure Khela*, are performed.

### 3.7 The Symbolism of Food

#### *Khoi Bhaja*

*Khoi Bhaja* is a ritual where pulses are fried by women to be used during the marriage rituals. The participating women are five, seven or nine, depending on the number of days the house of the bride and groom separately observe birth pollution. (Fruzzetti 1990:71)

There is a certain way of frying the pulses that are known only to the women; the pulses are fried on clean wet sand in a metal pan without any oil because the food is an offering to God and needs to be pure. The women stand in a circle holding each other by shoulders while the *Ginni* slowly fries the pulses with the help of, a bunch of twigs. The process is repeated again five, seven or nine times, frying a small amount of pulse at a time.

The fried *Khoi* is then used on the day of the marriage in the process of setting up the *Kubi Pata* (altar for Lord *Kuber*). The altar for Lord *Kuber* is set up separately in the houses of the bride and the groom, at the altar the women set up three metal glasses filled with *Dhan* (paddy), *Khoi* (fried pulses) and crushed rice.

*Khoi* is also used during the time of *Agni Sakkhi*, when the bride and the groom needs to pour the *Khoi* into the fire as an offering to Lord Vishnu, who is believed to be witnessing and blessing the marriage.

The frying of the pulses must be done the day before marriage because on the day of marriage itself Goddess *Sasthi/Markandiya* is worshipped and pulses cannot be fried that day. Thursdays are also forbidden days because they are sacred to Laksmi, who is worshipped on the day of marriage. (Fruzzetti 1990:71-72)

#### **Wearing The Conch Shell Bangles (*Sankhaporana*)**

The ritual starts early in the morning with the bride bathing and changing into a new set of clothes, then she sits with a *Sankari* (conch shell maker *jati*) who comes to the bride's house with many sets of bangles to find a pair that fits the bride.

The *Sankari* tries on a number of bangles on the girl before giving the one that fits her, when the right pair is found the *Sankari* dips it into a metal plate containing turmeric water and sacred grass that the *Ginnima* puts out. The bangles are dipped into that water so that it can be purified, since the *Sankari* belongs to a lower caste she needs to purify the bangles before giving it to the father of the bride. The father of the bride gives those set of bangles to the daughter and on her part the daughter, needs to preserve this for a year. The *Sankari* is given some money and a *Pai* (a cup) of rice as a *Poana* for the services, at the end of the ritual the *Ginnima* does *Pranam* and the *Sankari* taking the money and the *Poana* departs. (Fruzzetti 1990:74)

### ***Gae Halud***

*Gae Halud* is a ceremony of putting turmeric paste prepared at home on the body of the bride and the groom. However the ceremony does not take place simultaneously in both the houses because the turmeric paste used for the *Gae Halud* ceremony in the bride's house should come from the groom's house. The time of performance is fixed in the *Panjika* (calendar, which gives the dates and times of day for the performance of many rituals associated with marriage) according to the astrologically calculated most auspicious moment. The groom's side notifies the bride's house when its *Gae Halud* will be performed since the bride's *Gae Halud* cannot begin before the groom's. (ibid: 75).

After the *Gae Halud Tattva* arrives from the groom's house, which is greeted ritually by the women by blowing Conch Shells and taking up the *Ululu* (auspicious cadence women utter at the time of *Stri acars*), the ritual begins in the bride's house.

The bride dressed in her *Gae Halud* sari brought out to the *Camlatala* (the enclosure where the rituals are performed) by the women where she sits as the *Ginnima* begins the ritual. The *Ginnima* (the eldest woman of the house or the bride's mother or a Brahman woman in the case of a non-Brahman house) covers the bride's head with the end part (*acal*) of the *stri* and make her sit next to the *Camlatala*. The bride sits on a *Piri*, a low stool decorated with rice-paste drawings representing Laksmi and her attributes. (ibid: 77). The *Ginni* begins the ritual by taking a red thread from the *Uttan Tala* and tying it around the bride's waist. Next, she puts a *Bel mala* (a garland of sacred wood-apple) around the bride's neck. The pre-pubertal girl (*Nit Kanya*) goes through the same rituals as the bride. The *Ginni* then takes some turmeric paste and coconut oil and applies them one at a time to the bride's

forehead, neck, chest, shoulders, and arms, oil is applied to hair after which the bride does *Pranam*. The other participating women repeat the actions done by the *Ginni* (*ibid*: 77-78).

After the turmeric-smearing rite is completed, the bride's head is covered and she is taken into the *Kubi ghar* to worship Lord Kubera. The bride's face is uncovered after she has done *Pranam* to Lord Kubera. Each ritual during the marriage ceremonies ends in the *Kubi ghar*. (*ibid*: 78)

### **Mixing Oil and Pulses**

This ritual is called *Kalai Mugla* which takes place separately in the bride and the groom's house. In their separate spaces the bride and the groom each are symbolically represented as the *Sil/Nora*, male/female and *Sasthi/Markandiya*. After a *pan* is pressed to the bride's or groom's forehead, women pour oil on it, which drips down onto the bound hands of bride or groom, each of whom is then told by the women to mix the pulses well. Here the male/female complementarity in marriage, conception, and birth is explicitly expressed. Bride and groom separately enact the union of male and female, and the basic complementarity that encompasses all persons, men and women alike. (*ibid*: 79-80)

### **Playing with Cowries**

*Cowries* in this ritual represent the deity of wealth and children. Before the games actually start, one of the women takes a flat clay pot from the *Camlatala* and puts nine cowries, nine betel nuts, nine cardamom seeds, and nine whole turmeric roots into it. Another clay pot is used to cover the assemblage, and the two are tied together to make the *Kol Sara*. The women then place the *Kol Sara* on the *Sil* propped up by the *Nora*. The groom is then invited to break the *Kol Sara* with his left foot. The women then count the broken pot shards, for the number of pieces indicates the number of children the couple will have. The cowries, seeds, and roots are collected again, and the games are begun (*ibid*: 82).

There are variations in the rules of the games played in different households, in the game played by the husband and wife, in one variation is where a *Pai* (a cup) of paddy is given to bride and groom together with a few cowries. The groom pours out the rice and the bride fills the *Pai* again. This is repeated five, seven, or nine times, and then the bride spills the *Pai* and the groom collects the rice. Later, the groom throws five, seven, or nine cowries and the bride gathers them up. Then the spilling and collecting is reversed again. Finally, the bride holds a full *Pai* of paddy on her head and walks with the groom to the *Thakur ghar* (the

worship room where the gods of the house are kept) or to the rice storage room. While walking, the groom keeps throwing paddy from the *Pai* with the aid of small twigs. Reaching the room, both do *Pranam* to the gods or the paddy jars, after which the bride collects all the rice spilled on the way with the help of the same twigs used by the groom.(ibid: 82)

### 3.8 Marriage Rituals of Welcome and Farewell

When the groom is welcomed in the bride's house there is the blowing of conch shells and the taking up of *Ululu* (auspicious cadence women utter at the time of *Stri acars*). The *Ginni* does *Abahan* (the welcome) by touching the *Uttan Tala* plate to the groom's forehead then to the ground and up to the groom again repeating it three times. As the groom steps inside the house, the women of the house make him stand in front of the *Camlatala* to finish the remaining welcoming rituals, then the *Sasthi Kathi* which is a space where the groom is introduced to the women of the household. Performing the ritual, the women are to walk in circles around the groom carrying a torch made of *Pan* Stems and cotton soaked in oil. After the first woman in the circle does *Abahan* with the *Uttan Tala*, all the women go around him five, seven, or nine times with the lit *pan* stems. The women touch the ground and then the groom's forehead as they go around. (ibid: 90)

After the marriage ceremony is performed, the bride is transferred to the groom's house where on her first entering the house all the rooms are kept and milk is left boiling on the stove, which is allowed to spill over which symbolises wealth and abundance coming to the house, i.e. *Lakshmi* (Goddess of wealth) entering the house. As soon as the bride and groom arrive at the groom's house, the women involved in the welcoming rituals step outside the door, and one of them pours a *Kulsi* of water on the ground under the car. This is similar to when deities, entering the temple or the house where their *puja* is done, have water poured in their path to settle the dust, then a metal plate filled with lac dye and milk is laid out by the *Ginni* of the house. The *Jar* holds the plate under the bride's feet and the latter imprints her soles on the mixture of milk and lac (just as deities at *puja* have their feet dyed with lac and milk). The women then hold the bride's arm and lead her into the house, where she stands in front of the *Camlatala*. The bride stands to the left of the groom, and the two are tied to each other with the *girt Chara* (containing cowries, turmeric, and betel nut) between them. The mistress of the house places a fish in front of the *Camlatala* for the bride to see. (ibid: 91)

Then there is another ritual where, the mother-in-law brings our *Sanajal* (water with pieces of gold in it), which she puts in front of the bride asking her to look into the water

where the mother-in-laws face is visible. This is a way of expressing respect for each other, of treating each other like gold, precious and dear. The *Ginni* then hands the bride the fish, which has been lying on the floor. The bride holds the fish for a short time before putting it back on the floor. (ibid: 91)

This ritual can be seen in the light of how a woman establishes her authority as a mother-in-law, and she used the domestic space and uses “fish outside water”, to show to the new bride that outside her habitat she needs to be cool and calm. The use of fish and gold in terms of *Sanajal* can be seen to be used because women are more familiar with such things in the house and can relate to these things more easily.

Another ritual is that performed by the sister-in-law. Where the sister-in-laws gives the new bride a *Kulsi* (pot) filled with water to be placed on her waist. The *Nanod* by this ritual is set to test the strength of the new bride, the strength is tested by the length of time the new bride can withstand the pain of carrying the filled *Kulsi*. The *Nanods* only remove the *Kulsi* when the brother promises to give them money (*Sankha Sari*) and grant them *Poana*.

This can also be seen in the light of the brother-sister relationship in India which is close, when the brother gets married the sister has to share the love and affection that was showered on her with the new bride, so she through the ritual can be seen as making a deal with the brother that till the time she keeps getting the love and affection she will be nice to the new bride.

On the same day, the *Ginnima* introduces the bride to the rest of the household. The *Ginni* or any other elder woman of the house takes the *Kajal Lata* and, writing the names of each relative on the floor, states the kinship status and relationship of each person to the bride. She is thus also introduced to the hierarchy of women, some of whom live in the same place and share in the daily *Sangsar* work. (ibid: 93-94)

This can be seen in the light that since the *Ginni* is the most powerful of women in the domestic side makes sure in her own ways to communicate it to the new bride so that she can learn to respect the authority of the women of the household as the *Ginni* explains her, the substructure of power.

### 3.9 Conclusion

The socialization of girls in the household is not only about the domestic tasks but she is also introduced to various forms of literature which opens her mind to diverse notions such as ideal woman, motherhood, conjugal life, marriage, love and also freedom. From the epics

they learn about the ideal women like *Sita* and *Savitri*, from the *Vaishnava poetry* and writings of Kalidasa and Bhababhuti, the girls see aspects like passion and love that even *Rama* and *Sita* indulged in contrary to their portrayals in the epics which only spelled out their duties and virtues. From the writings of Tagore, Bankim Chandra, and Sarat Chandra the readers saw different shades of woman in-terms of a companion, friend, wife, lover, mistress. And these novels were a space at the time in Bengal where women were put at an equal position with men as human beings.

Next looking at the *Stri Acars*, brings out that woman constitute a separate sub culture in Bengal, they interact among themselves in a domain and language that is understood only by the women which constitute an indigenously separate world of symbols that helps in constituting a world of women, that is separate from the of men, in which the women are not necessarily inferior or less equal to men. The rituals that these women perform are not written and recorded; they need to be transferred orally and with practice. Here it was evident that all the ritual acts were repeated five, seven or nine time, this repetition can be seen as a trick the women devise to learn the rituals by-heart, since education came to women at a very late period, so they had their own ways of learning things.

The *Stri Acar* rituals are a space where the women command great power in-terms of their indigenous knowledge, where they themselves are the initiators and performers of the rituals. The *Gae Halud* ceremony is opined by Fruzzetti as being the functional equivalent to *Gotra Badal* performed by the male priests.

By looking at the whole domestic space and the socialization of women within it, it becomes a familiar space where women can more readily negotiate and manipulate and scrape out certain power for themselves within the domestic space as opposed to the public spaces, since women have certain knowledge that are exclusive to them in the domestic and also food can be seen as a potential area where the negotiations can be done since throughout the *acars* and also the socialization process the social meaning of raw and cooked food is brought out in the lives of the women.

## **CHAPTER-4**

### **Changing Gender Relations and Food Culture**

In this chapter I have explored globalization, and also the question of emancipation of women dealt by the government. India's liberalization policy and the socio-economic changes that were gradually taking place in west Bengal also have great impact in the domestic spaces, in-terms of new educational system, new jobs desired, new birthing systems, new food practices and how women in these spaces negotiate within a patriarchal system for creating a niche for themselves.

#### **4.1 Liberalization and Urban Change in Calcutta**

In 1990s the post liberalization period, there were many changes that were experienced by the people in India. The changes were most profound in the cities and metropolises like Delhi, Mumbai, Chennai and Kolkata. There was rapid transition in social and spatial spaces. This period with globalization and India's neoliberal policies, people were experiencing the influx of new goods and commodities, new media, new opportunities in terms of employment in the IT related industries and the service sector.

The 1990s is also a period where many scholars have argued that there is an emergence of a 'New Middle Class'. Though the middle class had its roots in the colonial times the middle class in the post liberalization period differed.

Jaffrelot (2008) argues that the new middle class was not a single homogeneous category because there were divisions in terms of the upper middle class and the lower middle class, however he argues that the middle class comes across as a homogeneous category when it is analysed in terms of their patterns of consumption in the society.

The middle class are readily taking to the changes that are brought in by globalization and liberalization in terms of indulging in the new goods and commodities brought to the Indian markets and those who are not able to afford, are aspiring to the future consumption of such commodities.

Donner (2008) has argued about the newness of the middle class in terms of its composition, where she says that the new middle class integrates a wider range of group in addition to the salaried employees of the earlier times of period into a discourse about what it means to be modern.

Fernandes (2004;2006) opines the 'new middle class is not new when it comes to its social base rather the newness of the middle class comes from process of producing a distinctive social and political identity that represents and lays claim to the benefits of the liberalization. At a structural level the group is seen of being composed of English speaking

urban white collar segments of the middle class who are seen to be benefiting from the new opportunities brought in by the neoliberal policies for employment especially in private sector'.

She further argues that 'the middle class's growing visibility is marking the emergence of a wider national political culture in India'. Fernandes (2004; 2006) shows how production of middle class identity is also linked to a politics of spatial purification, which centres on the middle class claiming the public space and a corresponding action to clear such spaces off the poor and working classes. This process she argues represents an emerging dimension in Indian politics where social groups are demanding that the middle class needs to be thought of as a distinctive social group. This thought is reflected in the government initiative in the works of beautifying the city by getting rid of street vendors from the pavements, clearing slums or at least trying to hide them with structure built in front of them. Chaterjee 2004 cites the recent clean up drives, the suburbanization of the middle class, a new concern with heritage and their emergence of modernist spaces for consumption as being the main characteristics of this development.

## 4.2 The Socio-Political Atmosphere

Bengal has had a rule of 30 years of the Left Government led by the (CPI (M)). The Left front through its rule had the maximum amount of support coming from the rural electorates; the urban population has not been favourable towards the Government's rule. The Left front has always been criticized for their anti-urban political stand which reflected in the political parties not being able to gather support from the urban population. However, to gain support looking at the wider changes taking place with the new liberalisation policies of India these political parties began a program of urban restructuring. The urban restructuring in Kolkata can be seen in the same light as discussed above by Fernandes (2004; 2006) and Chaterjee (2004). (Donner 2008: 9)

The changes that came about with the Government's initiative were appreciated by the middle classes when they were making the most out of opportunities that were brought in by the changes for instance they bought flats, also engaged in new consumption patterns inside and outside the home and also made use of the new infrastructures built by the Government for making commutation easier. However, soon the people started realising that in the middle class aim creating a middle class space by the initiatives of beautifying the city, they were losing out on other things like cheap labour which always came from the slums and also the goods and services had become very expensive.

The people of the slum were neglected and did not figure in the new projects undertaken by the Government for example vendors and street food sellers were being moved out of the roads and pavements, so as to match the newly acquired middle class life style.



“So soon where-as earlier a lack of initiative and the anti-urban politics stand of the Left Front was bemoaned, debates about the needs of ‘ordinary’ citizens gradually centred around middle-class electorates and their lifestyles. In this process of negotiation, the democratization of public space that Kaviraj (1997) asserts is taking place, and has largely been substituted by processes of intensified privatization and segregation, to which new suburban middle-class enclaves contribute a great deal”.(Donner 2008:14)

### **4.3 Creating a Public Space for Women**

Looking at the question of women, there had been a lot of discussion on the topic of empowerment of women at the national and the state level. Since the 1970s there has been tremendous effort by the state towards the improvement of education for women. There has been opening up of many Government schools, colleges and Universities in cities, towns as well as villages. Education of women also became a standard theme on which many TV serials and movies were made to encourage parents to educate the girl child. There has also been constant effort by Government to get women to participate more and more into the work force. From here it can be grasped that the notion of female emancipation and empowerment is taken to be rooted in women gaining higher education and economic independence through employment.

The empowerment of women and employment of women are seen in the same manner because of also what was seen as the “border crossing” of ideas by Narayan (1997), in the west the feminist especially of the second wave associated the public space with empowerment for women, naturally employment was seen as equivalent to women’s emancipation, this idea borrowed by the government has also taken it to apply to Indian women. Regardless of their ability to usher in real change, empowerment of women is still seen as accompanied by employment.

After looking at the changes in the public spaces in the post-liberalization period, I explore the continuities and changes taking place within the domestic sphere. In institution such as marriage, child birth, food habits, traditional religious and cultural practices.

### **4.4 Domesticity**

There were many changes that were taking place in West Bengal in the post liberalization period. To discuss the question of women in the state level as discussed above the government was constantly talking about women empowerment and for this they made further efforts in the line of women’s education and employment.

There were new employment opportunities in the IT sector and Service sector where Men and Women were taking to these opportunities. However, for women the ideology of society perceiving women did not change much, where marriage and family was still seen as a proper way for women in a Bengali society. This can be seen from the introduction of

Donner's book, "Domestic Goddesses" where she states that Shibani, a teacher by profession, who also headed the committee in which "women's problems were discussed" was criticized for being a mother and still getting involved in the "*Baire*"(outside world of politics and employment. (Donner2008:3)

Donner argues that the 'Bengali middleclass women also held very strong views on the domesticities of 'other' communities, including Marwaris, Christians and Muslims, who even when they were undoubtedly middle-class, were described as different with reference to housework, parenting and respectability'.(Donner2008:3)

#### 4.5 Marriage

Marriage, for a Hindu girl still was still not seen as an option for her, it was to be her only destination of life. On marriage, the girl moved in with her In-Laws, i.e., within an extended Patriarchal family. It was seen that people in Bengal always built their houses with keeping in mind of staying with an extended family; the houses are two or three storeyed buildings to accommodate a man's sons, their wives and unmarried children. The joint family was seen to be also deeply embedded in the psyche of the Bengali middle class people. This is evident from the fact that the middle class mothers socialized their daughters in such a manner that they could fit in and adjust to joint family life. Joint family life in Bengal was seen as a prerequisite for bringing children up in a socially responsible manner, and thus the capacity of the daughter-in-law to adjust to it was also a crucial characteristic in marriage.

Donner (2008) in her work mentioned that most of the women who she met during her field work in Kolkata were living in joint family arrangements, where in order to adjust they have to work very hard within their households regardless of them being in employment.

Here I am citing a case to show how a woman has to adjust in a joint family especially during her initial years of marriage where she commands the least amount of power within the household.

Rekha, a 34-year-old mother of a daughter talks about her time in the joint family in these words:

*"I was on my feet day and night, I was asked to get up before anybody else to serve morning tea, then cooked with my mother-in-law, sent the men to work with the tiffin, always waited for my mother-in-law to eat first before I got the leftovers, and I never had any spare time. The first few weeks, had my husband not taken me out once in a while, I think I would have killed myself, it only gradually got better as I learned about their household and their ways, and adjusted to it".( Donner, 2008: 79 ).*

From here it can be deduced that even though women participated in the wider socio-cultural changes that were taking place in Kolkata like taking to education and employment,

their experience of marriage and domesticity did not seem to change much. Even though women were readily taking to paid employment it did not mean that they could do away with the household duties of a woman, she had to manage doing both the work, when a woman failed to do the household work she was often criticized, other things did not matter.

However certainly there were some changes that were visible, in-terms of social spaces being opened up for love, premarital relationship and courtship within negotiated marriages, which could be seen from the sprouting of coffee shops and modern lounges where most young men and women were seen spending time together. However, these social spaces did not mean that the traditional meaning of marriage has changed, marriage is still defined in terms of collective interests over individual desires; and also the ideas about what constituted an 'Appropriate Marriage' is definite.

#### **4.6 Patrilocal Pregnancies**

The ultimate goal of marriage was in traditional Bengali society was procreation of a son, even though there is still a preference for a boy child who can continue the family name and traditions, there are changes that are creeping into this practice. In the post-liberalization period as discussed above the cost of living has risen to many folds, which has made the supporting of a family become an expensive matter especially at a time when there is indulgence of people in the new patterns of consumption.

Traditionally children were socialised and educated to a certain age within the household and later were sent to the Government schools, only the very affluent families invested a lot of money in the children's education by educating them in public schools and also abroad. However, in the recent times because of the neoliberal policies where everything has become expensive, children's education has also become one of the commodities. There is also a de-linking of education and learning in the post liberalization period, that I argue is taking place. This can be seen in-terms of how one looks at education, earlier educational was a learning process, nowadays education is more of an initial investment for a later earning process.

Donner (2008) argues that, with new employment opportunities in various sectors the middle class parents want to tap these opportunities for their children, so to realise their dream of a bright career especially of being employed in a white collar job, the middle class parents are constantly investing in their children's education from a young age. The middle class parents in contemporary Kolkata are moving towards a norm of 'single child family', even if the first child is a girl, so that they can invest in the expensive education to realise their dream of producing a white collar worker out of their child.(ibid: 91)

So gradually it is seen that in the middle class families today, pregnancies are planned in great detail and are timed very carefully. However even then pregnancy is expected to

occur between two years of the marriage otherwise questions are raised by the society about the woman. Getting pregnant is a matter of deep anxiety, not only for the women concerned, but also for their husbands, in-laws and the wife's natal family. (Donner 2008: 91).

Even though there are spaces opened up for planning a pregnancy, the pregnancies still occurs when the couple is living within the extended households. And as stated in chapter 2 under the section "women and Bengali household" in these families, which are overwhelmingly extended patriarchal family, women's orientation towards their roles are very pronounced, regardless of whether they are in employment.

Within an extended household at the time of pregnancy the pregnant woman is under the total tutelage of the *Ginni*, who exercises her authority by instructing the pregnant daughter-in-law into everything from how she should stay, what she should eat, which food she should avoid, the kind of books and music to indulge in, etc. Basically there is a code of conduct that is imposed onto the daughter-in-law by the in-laws and especially the mother-in-law who justifies it on the ground that she had given birth herself and was an experienced mother.

Here I am going to look at the food taboos and indulgence experienced by expecting mothers.

Rekha describes the very caring treatment she received in her in laws house in these words:

*I used to get these cravings for all sorts of special foods, and my mother in-law would send the maidservant out to get special treats like sour mango, which was exactly what I needed. Another day I wanted some sweetmeat from a specific shop, and my husband would go and buy ten of those, all of which I ate in one evening.* (Donner, 2008: 94)

However, Donner (2008) argues that in majority of the pregnancies, the mother-in-law imposed her authority in case of food to be taken by the daughter-in-law. She mentions how the food cravings would turn the daily meals into a battle between daughter-in-law and her husband's mother, with both sides depicting the other as inconsiderate, irrational and ignorant.

Citing another case from donner's work:

Sunita, a 50-year-old, described in detail how (according to her) her mother-in-law would deliberately make her prepare dishes she found abhorrent when she was pregnant, and how she was deprived of the treats and desired foods benefiting a mother.

*When I was pregnant I could keep nothing down, but she (mother-in-law) would just try to force me to eat all these things like almonds and milk, and I would sit on my bed and could not get any of it down, so I started to throw all of it out of the window and lost a lot of weight, since they would not allow me to eat anything I really wanted.* (Donner, 2008: 105).

## 4.7 New Birthing Techniques

Traditionally Bengali women at the time of pregnancy were sent back to her parent's house where she would have her first child. Her time in the natal home would be filled with pampering her by providing her with many treats mostly in terms of food and satisfying all the cravings that she got during the time. Traditionally the child birth practice was where a local *Dhai* was called in to help in the process of birthing, with her indigenous knowledge that is gathered in time by practice.

However, in recent years this practice has changed where the pregnant woman gives birth to her child either in the in-laws house or in a hospital with constant professional attention by doctor. This change has brought the responsibility of caring for the pregnant women from the realm of the parents to the in-laws. The affines are the ones who make arrangements for the professional medical help that is required throughout the period of pregnancy and child birth and also pay for the check-up and other related services. So Donner (2008) argues that the in-laws take this opportunity to impose their authority on her as seen above about the code of conduct to be followed by the pregnant women. Donner further argues that in the traditional practice of child birth in the natal house, the women stay a few weeks even after delivery in order to take some time off the household chores in the in-laws house and used the time to rest. With the new changes this period of rest in the parent's house disappears and with it also the beautiful aspect of the whole child birth experience in the natal home.

Another practice that is gaining momentum in contemporary Kolkata in relation to child birth is that, more and more middle class women are readily going for medicalized caesarean than normal delivery. The middle class women who economically were well off and could afford to pay for such an expensive option to an expensive normal delivery is opting for the caesarean birth.

Here I am citing two cases from Donner's study to highlight the difference between normal birthing and Caesareans as well as how economy figure in the process.

### Case 1:

Madhushree said that she was, aware of the arguments put forward by childcare experts against Caesareans birth. But still she insisted on having a caesarean birth because it was less painful. She also said that unlike women of the lower classes she could afford the money for the operation and also that she was in no hurry to resume her household work which could be managed by her mother-in-law by the help of hiring domestic helps.(Donner 2008: 116)

### Case 2:

Lakshmi could not afford to pay the cost of a caesarean birth because in order to maintain the family she was working as an office helper even if contributing marginally to the household income. Her husband also did not earn that much that she could opt for an

operation, when she had the option of having her child by normal delivery. She also said that they were not economically well off to hire domestic help and the household duties were solely dependent on her. She ended up having a normal delivery and within a matter of 3 days returned to her duties of cooking, cleaning and the like as well as looking after the baby on her own. (Donner 2008: 119)

#### 4.8 Early Education

In the second chapter I showed how children of very young age were socialized in the household, especially the girl child who would be socialized in the rich Bengali culture by the joint effort of the women of the households.

However, with the post liberalization, it was clear that Educational achievement was an important marker of middle-class status. So, the early formal schooling of children changed from times that preceded, it was evident in the mushrooming of the Montessori schools in Kolkata, where the young children were admitted to at very young age by the middle class parents. These nurseries had also undertaken the task of teaching children to sit for the future school entrance tests which was a key to their bright careered future.

As stated earlier in the post liberalisation period in tune with the wider socio economic transformations the middle class parents were keen on investing in their children's education so that in future they can get their children to have a bright career especially in the newly opened opportunities in the IT sector and the Service sector. So in the 1990s the middle class parents took to the educational opportunities put forward by the newly opened Montessori schools for the pre-schooling among the middle classes. Donner (2008) has looked at the selective procedures of these schools and argues that among other things the schools are seen to be stressing of the fact that looking after the child is the responsibility of the mother. Through the interviews and application forms that were used for selecting the pre-schoolers it was argued by Donner that employment of the mothers were not seen in a favourable light and even if the mother was employed, her first priority should be her child.

This new emphasis on the mother looking after a child's education can be seen as a contrary to the practices that were prevalent in the traditional times, where the formal education of a child was mostly supervised by a male member of the household or a male house tutor was to be appointed. The supervision of formal education of the children was traditionally an area of the male members of the household whereas the women of the household were to impart cultural education to the children within the household.

With the new concept of pre-schooling in Montessori schools the responsibility of the child's education was on the mother. This had effect also in the substructure of power in the domestic side. Since the mother was to be constantly with the child looking after the studies, she had less time to spend on other household work, which she could justify on the ground of her having to mind the child's study which is an important step to realise the dream of a bright career for the child in future. However the new division of labour frustrates the

expectations of the *Ginni* who find herself in the very hub of domestic activity like taking charge of their grandchildren minding, minding the domestics, planning marriage, neighbourhood activities and so on.

After a woman has her son married, apart from other things she wants to hand over the household duties to the daughter in law and would like to see her power and independence expand rather than diminish with tasks such as minding domestic help's tasks so on which frustrates the *Ginni*. Donner argues that there are certain mechanisms that are applied by these women can be seen as signs of subtle resistance, like the cultivation of chronic illnesses and the manipulation of social relations with extended kin. Some of these women try to win over the grandchildren by making them special treats on regular basis; so as to command more authority which comes with being needed by the grandchildren.

#### 4.9 Middle Class Children's Tiffin

The early schools also meant the disruption of Bengali meals, because of the whole "tiffin culture". When a son or daughter entered school, the women of the household especially the mothers felt that their loving and controlled 'education of the senses' was disrupted, because mother and child had to rearrange meals taken in the home around the lunch taken in the nursery.

Mother's took great care about the food that were to be consumed by the children as also seen in the colonial Bengal, Sudha Mazumder (1997) talks in her account how, her father had employed a Muslim cook in the outer kitchen for cooking non Bengali (*BelatiKhana*) food solely for him and even though he sometimes tried to treat his daughter (Sudha) with the fancy foods, the mother always made sure that she had gone through a thorough cleansing after partaking the *BelatiKhana*. "Immediately after having eaten this food, I had to undergo a thorough wash and change every item of my clothing before I was permitted to touch anything in Mother's apartment. Unorthodox food was considered to be unclean and therefore I was unclean until I had been thoroughly washed (Forbes 1997: 23)

However, once a son or daughter enters school, a mother loses such a role of controlling and educating the senses. Donner argues that the tiffin becomes a site where the teachers try to assert their authority over mothers who constantly call the food sent by the mothers as inappropriate for a tiffin, although these women cook full meals on a regular basis for the family, are here seen being educated in the ways of the world found beyond the home, over a tiffin box.

The tiffin also made the mothers worry about their children sharing food, because of the global nature of these nurseries, where children from all ethnic groups study. The mother's constantly feared that even though they send food that were pure by the standard of their community, once the children go to school the mothers are unable to monitor whether they eat their own tiffin or someone else's which may contain food that are to be prohibited by their community. For example in Bengal the Jains are strictly vegetarian, who do not even

include onion and garlic in their food, while Brahmins in Bengal include fish in their vegetarian diet.

Moreover, because of the increase in the consumer goods that are advertised and sold in the market, the preparing of the tiffin become a Hercules task for the mothers when they had to compete with the readymade snacks from the market. Consequently, even very young middle-class children demanded snacks like Maggi noodles for their lunch from early on, and commercially produced food has become inseparable from schooling in the nursery.

#### 4.10 Food in Post-Colonial Bengal

The normality in terms of food habits has changed in post-colonial Bengal there is seen a tendency of the Bengali home cooked meal being replaced by fancy Non-Bengali restaurant food. The media especially the television was a transmitter of ideas such as a non-Bengali restaurant food as being more fashionable than a home cooked meal. While before liberalization eating out had been the exception for middle-class families, restaurants and eating takeaway food at home has clearly become more common as argued by Donner(2008).

There is also a shift seen away from that of cereal to that of more expensive processed food. The overall impact can be seen in a very diverse urban food basket. Traditionally Bengali household food preparation would begin with the man of the house going to the local bazaar to purchase fresh vegetables and fish. While within the household the food preparation began with the *Jogare*(help) getting the masalas ready by freshly pounding on the *Patasil*. And the other women on receiving the fresh vegetables and fish start to prepare by cutting them on the *Bonti* while the *Ginni* decided the menu.

However, in recent years the practices have changed, Donner (2008) mentions that in recent years there seems to be an overwhelming demand for chicken and mutton especially by the men and children of the household. This also meant that the man who does the vegetable and fish shopping every-day from the local bazaar also needed to go to an area that was predominantly Muslim to purchase chicken and mutton, which are not sold in the local bazaar because of notion held traditionally that these meat were polluting. Donner argues that preference for meat, and more specifically red meat, in many young boys from the more affluent Bengali Hindu families was gaining momentum and although the preparation of mutton was not regular in the Bengali kitchens, chicken had become a regular item in many middleclass households. There was a degree of tolerance that was there in the consumption of meat for boys but the girls would not be allowed to consume too much meat, a boy's preference for meat was acceptable because of the connection that is assumed between meat and virility. It was seen that because of the popularity of them non-Bengali food, in all households with younger children, mothers had adopted some non-Bengali foods into the weekly diets which they prepared at home.

There were many fancy restaurants that had come up which served fancy Non-Bengali food; these restaurants were becoming popular among the middle class people especially the



men and children. At the same there were also a host of Bengali food restaurants that were equally gaining momentum, who asserted that Bengali food do not go with alcohol “beer cannot be had with *posto* (poppy seed), *Masur dal* cannot be had with vodka” and so these restaurants did not serve alcohol as opposed to the Multicuisine restaurants, where women of Bengali household find the atmosphere uncomfortable. On this ground the Bengali Restaurants advertised themselves as preparing ‘Authentic, *ghorua* (home like) Bengali food. (Janeja 2010:141)

These restaurants claim to be cooking *ghorua Khana*, but are not seen practising the normal Bengali cooking ways, that involves the woman to be ritually clean before entering the kitchen, where she is to make use of the traditional tools like the *patasil* for the pounding of fresh spices to be used for cooking, using the Bonti for the cutting purposes, and the most important idea of fresh raw food items used in cooking. There is also a great care taken to not use left-over food, for the maintenance of ritual purity of food.

The restaurants also do not hire cooks only on the basis of caste, this can be seen from Janeja’s work where, she cites a restaurant in Calcutta, where the restaurant owner when asked if a Bengali Hindu undertook the cooking, answered by saying that, “*musholmanrao to bangali. Home eyei shob nei. Musholman meyer ao aagey ekhaney chilo; ekhon bortomaney Musholman kwyu nei, shobai Hindu aachey...*” (*Even the Muslims are Bengali. In the Home we do not have discrimination, Even Muslim girls were here before; now at present no one is Muslim, all are Hindu...*). (Janeja 2010: 130).

Here, I am citing a case from Donner’s study to show the emerging taste for Non-Bengali food among young boys and girls, Anjali, the mother of an adolescent girl, complained that:

Nowadays they get all these foods in the restaurants and coffee shops, and because I don’t want her to eat anything there I told her ‘Let me know what it is you want and I will cook it for you’, so I am doing *chowmein* and *kebabs* as well as *pasta* for her. Some of the ingredients are expensive but it is better than eating the same food outside, she would just fall ill. (Donner2008: 174)

So to compete with restaurant food the mother sometimes tried to recreate the ‘fancy’ restaurant foods in the home, and some would go so far as to cook red meat for their sons. This was, more often in nuclear households, where the mother of the boy in question was the only housewife. In tune with the new food preferences that were developed in the post-liberalization era many cook books came up with recipes that were non-Bengali written by Bengali’s which propagated that people needed to change and try something different rather than the same monotonous meals.

There was another practice that was gaining momentum in the post-liberalisation period that of providing non-Bengali food to the guest invited for lunches and dinners. Even though in Bengali homes the cooks and the women are expert in their Bengali food but they constantly try to recreate fancy non-Bengali dishes which they feel would impress their guest, but most often this may not be the case. Janeja (2010) in her work mentions of a dinner where

the host serves Bengali food along with a Chinese vegetable dish. The guest do not appreciate the vegetable which could be seen in the left overs left by the guest in the sides of their plates. From here we can see how women were taking to the new food in their menus even though the Bengali food was better than the non-Bengali foods.

#### 4.11 Caste and Food

Food was one of the major ways in maintaining caste purity; this is the reason why the middle class households that could afford domestic cooks and *Jogare* (helps) appointed Brahmin men and women as cooks, mostly men. Swapna Banerjee (2004) has argued that the most significant distinction in caste status of servants in colonial Bengal was in terms of *Jalchal* and *Ajalchal*: upper caste Hindus could accept water from a *Jalchal* and not from an *Ajalchal*. While a servant belonging to an *Ajalchal* caste would not have entry into the kitchen, Brahmins, who were *Jalchal*, were in high demand as cooks and kitchen staff (*Jogare*). (Banerjee 2004: 67)

There was a great importance attached to the preserving of caste purity through food practices in traditional Bengal however, the maintenance of purity with food became harder in the contemporary times when there were many sporting of restaurants, which did not pay heed to caste when it came to appointing of the cooks. The refrigeration of food was another factor which hindered maintaining the ritual purity of food to be consumed. Leftovers (*BasiKhana*) are an extremely sensitive category in traditional Hindu thought (Khare 1976; Marriott 1968; Appadurai 1981) and, most often the eating of leftovers or wastes carries the risk of moral degradation, biological contamination, and loss of status. Their treatment and the etiquette that surrounds them stand very near the moral center of Hindu social thought.

With the technology entering the Middle class Bengali kitchen in-terms of refrigerator, the preserving of leftover food became possible. Most often the practice is to dispose the food to the domestics, where the *BasiKhana* (stale food) which is thought to be ritually impure is given to the domestics who are of high caste to consume, which even though violates their caste norms is undertaken in the face of the economic strains. Another factor is that since all the leftover food is collectively refrigerated in the same area, the strict distinction vegetarian and non-vegetarian food cannot be maintained. However in contemporary times the only treatment of leftover food is not deposing off to the domestics, in connection this food Appadurai has talked of how in contemporary times there are cook books that teach women to use the leftovers to create new dishes. He cites one such cook book, 'Tasty Dishes from Waste Items (Reejhsinghani 1973a), that is built entirely around this principle. Its author goes so far as to say in her introduction that she is "taking these discarded articles of food out of the wastebin and [making] interesting and delightfully different dishes from them." (Appadurai 1988:8)

Also when we look at women as gatekeepers, earlier it was possible to keep a watch on the food habits of the children, who could make sure that children did not eat street food

prepared by low caste people, and also containing excesses in chillies and tamarind that are two tastes that the Bengali Bhadrakal had expurgated in the colonial times itself. However with the changes in society, with women working out for wage, children are left on their own who readily take to these treats (*Fuchkas, JhalMuri, AluKabli*). With the whole globalization of food and introduction of fast food joints, coffee houses, restaurants, it is even more difficult to keep monitoring food habits and also the caste purity and impurity that comes with it.

Vegetarianism for high caste Brahmins in Bengal included fish in their diet, but they had to keep away from meat such as chicken and mutton. There was according to Donner (2008) a profound idea that meat, and in particular chicken, was 'dirty' and 'polluting'. Thus, vegetarianism within this specific social landscape does not automatically signify high-caste status.

In contemporary Bengal caste was not a factor that was visible in the social spaces, but was present in the customs of the high caste middle class families, which could be seen in-terms of the members of the household observing a vegetarian diet during life cycle festivals and *pujas*.

By looking at the domestic space it is seen above that there were many changes that were occurring in the institution of marriage, child's socialization, birthing practices, food practices in contemporary Bengal. So, next i will be looking at two practices that have survived even in the contemporary times in Bengal that of vegetarianism and the practise of votive rites, *Bratas*.

Donner in her study on motherhood has made the observation that in contemporary Calcutta more and more middle class mother were turning vegetarian, and Bengal is a place where eating fish is said to be auspicious, so to look at the change it is essential to explore the meaning and history of vegetarianism in Bengal.

#### **4.12 Local Understandings of Vegetarianism in Bengal**

In Bengal, when we look at vegetarianism it is seen as being gendered. Traditionally vegetarianism was associated with widowed. 'Brahminical patriarchy's conceptualisation of the widow is a woman who was sexually and socially 'dead' but physically alive'. 'Notions of self-sacrifice and self-restraint, which in any case are widely prevalent with regard to women, are doubled in the case of Hindu widows and they play a crucial role in formulating an ideology of low or minimal entitlement to the widow' (Chakravarti 1993:133) These women were to maintain a strict vegetarian diet; they were to exclude fish, egg, meat, onion, garlic and Masur dal. Meat and fish were thought to be as heating so these women had to keep away from such food. This strict vegetarianism was in accordance to the prevalent notion that the heating food tend to increase the sexual appetite of the women and so to control these women's sexuality society imposed the strict vegetarianism on them. Even in the recent times it is perfectly acceptable for these women to avoid the white saris of

widowhood and attend social events and outings, as opposed to the earlier times being confined to the home, but it is still seen as inappropriate and even offensive for them to eat fish.

Vegetarianism also applied to unmarried women who had passed the age where they could reasonably expect to get married. The reason cited was that unmarried women tend to be physically imbalanced due to their lack of sexual intercourse and are more prone than men to suffer physically if it is denied (Uberoi 1996: 342).

Vegetarianism in however for the Brahmins was not the same as in the other parts of the country. In Bengal Vegetarianism for high caste Brahmins included fish in their diet, but they had to keep away from meat such as chicken and mutton. There was according to Donner a profound idea that meat, and in particular chicken, was 'dirty' and 'polluting'. Thus, vegetarianism within this specific social landscape does not automatically signify high-caste status'. (Donner 2008)

#### **4.13 Vegetarianism In Contemporary Bengal**

In contemporary Calcutta, Donner makes an observation that vegetarianism was increasingly adopted by the young middle class mothers. These women's vegetarianism was different when looked against the background of the local meaning of vegetarianism in Bengal.

Here to get a clearer idea I am citing a case from Donner's work:

Moon-Moon, a middle class woman in Bengal had problems conceiving and it was then that she undertook vegetarianism, after which she gave birth to a girl. Even after conceiving, for which she had taken vegetarianism, did not give it up Moon-Moon's vegetarianism. Donner (2008: 179) argues that Moon-Moon's vegetarianism was different from that of the Jains, an ethnic community where a strict vegetarian diet is followed in terms of food habit, , it is also different from that of the one practiced by her mother, who was a widow (society imposes vegetarianism). Moon-Moon vegetarianism is also different from that of the upper caste Brahmins whose diet included fish in their vegetarian food. Donner further argues that since vegetarianism was not part of the repertoire attributed to the role of dutiful daughter-in-law, the institution needed to be seen in the light of having a political potential. This assumption is justified when we see Moon-Moon pointing out that since vegetarian diet is non-heating and said to control sexual urges she continues with the vegetarian diet so that she can maintain a single child family. She further states that in the post-liberalisation period the cost of living has increased and to give the best of opportunities in terms of education and career, for a middle class family it was necessary to have a single child so that the parents can invest in their expensive education in order to realise their dream of producing an urban white collar employee out of their child. Moon-Moon also states that it was after she adopted the vegetarian diet in their non-vegetarian extended family, that her husband pressed to set up a separate household.

#### 4.14 Bratas

When we look at votive rites (Bratas) this is a traditional practice that has survived also in the contemporary period within the household. In Bengal *Bratas* (ritual fasts) form part of the middle-class lifestyles and have featured prominently in the education of girls from the nineteenth century onwards, Fasting on behalf of others was, and is, a woman's issue all women represented it as a choice made with the wellbeing of the whole family in mind.

However, McGee in her study on votive rites contrasts the representation of votive rites in the classical texts that were written by dominant men, to the statements by contemporary women that she collected in her field work. By looking at the votive rites by comparing and contrasting the textual men's knowledge to that of oral women's knowledge there was seen to be a contradiction on how each looked at votive rites.

According to the text votive rites confers both the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation and a variety of lesser this-worldly rewards. The latter group of secondary goals is described (*Mukti*) in the texts as 'optional' (*kamya*) rather than 'obligatory' (*nitya*). The text define the votive rites as being optional, however the women that McGee spoke to defined the rites as being obligatory. McGee by analyzing the texts further brings to light that there is an assumption where women are said to not attain liberation without first being reborn as a man. With this understanding she tackles votive rites, where she argues that even though the women speak of these rites as being obligatory to maintain marital bliss and the well-being of the husband and children, they at the same time are also making sure of their own liberation, since according to *Stridharma*, the maintenance of happiness at home is also important for a woman to gain liberation. So, by taking to the Bratas, the women are performing their duties as a devoted wife and mother at the same time is fulfilling an obligation which is the way to their liberation.

From here I can argue that since women within the domestic space grow up with certain traditional practices in the course of time internalize them and use these traditional practices in their future by reinterpreting them to their own advantage. The knowledge of these practices helps the women to use it to strategize and negotiate within the household to create a space for them.

#### 4.15 The Political in the Domestic

The domestic can be seen from the above as having a space where women can negotiate and create some space for themselves in a patriarchal society.

The class based society has given more advantage to women in-terms of negotiating power for themselves especially in the domestic domain. When women are faced with the new birthing practices in the in laws house, where the traditional practice of having the first child in the natal house is giving way to birthing in the hospital or the in laws house under their supervision. The women are seen taking to the caesareans, which gives them a space where these women can talk to the doctors for prescribing them rest after the child birth, an area which cannot be encroached upon by the in laws power. While in the case of normal delivery which was the only way child birth happened in traditional times is an area where the mother in law has ample knowledge with her own experiences, so the daughter in law cannot strategize within the space, and needs to resume the household chores soon after child birth.

When looking at the new educational systems where children's schooling, i.e. checking the studies, doing the home work, preparing the tiffin, picking and dropping of children in the schools is a responsibility wholly on the mother's shoulder is seen to upset the traditional division of labour within the domestic side of the household. Firstly because of the constant need of the mother by the child she has lesser time to mind the household duties, which falls back on to the elderly woman (mother-in-law), who has to keep minding the domestics and also look after the minute things within the household. Even in terms of cooking food for the grandchild which is a loving gesture on the part of the paternal grandmother is also taken away by the daughter in law, since with the schooling of the children meal timings and also meals in terms of appropriate food is standardized by the schools that is communicated to the mother who does the needful.

This frustrates the elderly women because; most elderly women in India assume that they can live a carefree life with little household work to do, one the sons get married. She can see that period of time, where she can use her authority to delegate work to the daughter-in-laws, but recently this has changed where it is the elderly women who has to mind the domestics and look after the house and also mind the child at times.

When looking at the diverse food practices in contemporary Bengal and also looking at the preference for Non-Bengali meal, women of the house especially the mothers and the grandmothers constantly engage in a food fight where both try to win over the males in the household by creating special dishes for them, even if they themselves don't indulge in such food. This can be seen in Donner's study where the elderly widowed women who can give up other signs that marks her as a widow but needs to maintain a strict vegetarian diet that need to exclude *Masur* dal, onion, garlic, fish and other forms of protein from her diet at times cooks special fish dishes for their sons. These women do not eat these dishes but readily cook it for the sons can be seen as a tussle of power(private) between her and her daughter in law;

When looking at vegetarianism, Khare (1992) emphasizes that within South Asian knowledge systems, food and the practice of vegetarianism provide powerful symbolic and moral messages. Because it is, on the one hand, a distinctly Hindu trait and, on the other hand, relates high-status with physical and mental health, vegetarianism has political potential. This is true of the new vegetarianism in Bengal adopted by the middle class Bengali mothers who excluded even fish when seen against the local understanding of vegetarianism and also against the centrality of fish in Bengali food and culture can be seen as a political act

When looking at *Brata*, Women observe *Bratas* as obligatory even though scriptures do not spell them as compulsory, they take to this traditional practice so that she can portray submissive role in society, and appear to uphold traditional gender ideology. Fasting on behalf of others was, and is a woman's issue often a personal symbol that helps women to create some individual space in a strictly Patrilocal setting.

To conclude, in this chapter it can be seen that though there are changes that are occurring in the post liberalization period where women are more and more moving into employment, still they are expected to comply with the role of ideal woman, in-terms of the women fulfilling all the roles that are expected in the Bengali society.

This has led to a condition where women are seen working in the household as well as in an employment, because in India The organisation of paid work is around men's lifestyles, and the organisation of domestic work, particularly childcare, around the assumption that the woman will be permanently available in the home .

However it is seen that because of the class structure and also a certain amount of economic independence women are able to negotiate within the households. In this chapter I have looked at the domestic space where changes are occurring in-terms of providing space where women are able to use the space to negotiate certain privileges for themselves.

I have also looked at how women are taking to traditional practices and using them as a political act to strategize within the domestic space, in this the socialization of women within the domestic space which gave them all knowledge about the cultural practices, which help them to choose as certain areas where the negotiations can be of the maximum help.

For example if moon-moon did not know the centrality of fish in Bengali culture and food, then she could not have had the opportunity to stay in a separate household without her having to press for it.

This education that they receive within the household gives the girls the materials that they can reinterpret and use them to their advantage to create a space for themselves. So, I see the domestic space as a familiar area where women can play the gender games to create a niche for themselves.

## CHAPTER-5

### CONCLUSION

Male domination is justified in India with various cultural explanations that I have already dealt with in chapter 1. In India looking at the great and little tradition and also the cult of Devi who is worshipped as Shakti, it can be deduced that Indian women are seen as extremely powerful and unable to constrain their power all by themselves and that is the justification given for male domination, it is argued that men have to constrain their power by dominating them with systems such as the purdah and seclusion.

Seclusion is a system that cannot be universally found to the same extent. In India seclusion was a system more pronounced in the upper class and middle class (upper caste) who could, because of their economic aspect do without the women going out in public to work for pay, unlike the 'lower-caste' women whose economic contribution was essential and so could not be secluded.

By looking at the institution of seclusion as a means of controlling the way of life of women, from the colonial to post-colonial times, it was seen that seclusion could be strictly practised in the earlier times in caste societies, where the women would be secluded in the inner quarters of the household "*antahpuram*". This was evident from the biographies of women, as well as the novels written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Bengali writers, such as Tagore, who tried to voice their disapproval of such practice especially in his novel *Ghare Baire*, where the husband constantly is seen buying clothes and gifts for the wife and also encourages her to leave the *antahpur*, to sit in the outer rooms and hold conversation with one of his friends. This was very different from what prevailed in Bengal at the time in terms of seclusion.

However in the colonial times gradually with the British involvement and with the help of the India reformers, seclusion of women to the inner quarters was not practically possible. Social reformers in India emphasized the crucial importance of education of women to improve their status in society. however, when we saw the education system which had a new subject added to the curriculum of "home science" and the justification for it, it was clear that the reformers were interested in the women's education not so much for their socio



-economic or political upliftment, but to make them more capable of fulfilling their role in society of wives and mothers.

With this background when I looked at the public spaces created for women in the postcolonial time, in-terms of employment and education it was seen that, Discrimination in the labour market continued to control women economically, and sexual harassment at work maintained men's sexual control over women. Also working women were responsible for both domestic and paid work which demanded twice the labour of men, because the organisation of paid work was around men's lifestyles, and the organisation of domestic work, particularly childcare, around the assumption that the woman will be permanently available in the home.

However in the new class structure than the traditional caste structure there is space for women's personal struggles Some could negotiate and gain some amount of economic power, but their position was still subordinate, and in India even though women do well in education and also in the career aspect still they are not accorded the highest respect if they fail as a daughter, daughter in law, wife and mother (domestic space).So, even though women gained education and employment, the patriarchal structure and male domination was seen to be holding strong.

When looking at the domestic space especially among Bengali women, the *stri acars* that they perform in the life cycle rituals, brings out that woman constitute a separate sub culture in Bengal. The world of women can be seen as separate from that of men and in that domain woman are not necessarily inferior to men. It is this separate structure that allows freedom of action of woman away from man. Woman in Bengal in this particular domain constitute an indigenously separate world of meaning and symbols, which is evident while looking at the *stri acars* of the marriage, where there are many complex rituals which demand local women's understanding of the symbolism of raw and cooked food and kitchen tools that are required during the rituals. The rules for the rituals are not set in any Brahminical texts and so women are the sole bearers of such indigenous knowledge which are learnt by women through imitation. Here it was evident that all the ritual acts were repeated five, seven or nine time, this repetition can be seen as a trick the women devise to learn the rituals by-heart.

However with globalization and modernization these local rituals may be losing its meaning, and if this continues then the indigenous world of women, with their pool of

knowledge on rituals and food will also be gone, because these are not documented in texts but are indigenous forms of knowledge that are embedded in the minds of these women.

Raheja and Gold(1994) has mentioned in their work “listen to the heron’s words” how the narratives and songs of women are losing its place in society where for example in marriages instead of the earlier practices of women singing the local songs are being replaced by the music bands playing Bollywood music.

The socialization of Bengali girls within the household is interesting because when they are taught about domesticity and the virtues of piousness and docility, they are introduced to writers such as Tagore, Sarat Chandra who have in their fictions given more than one shade to women, the characters that they write about in terms of women are not seen as being satisfied just being a docile wife doing her gender appropriate roles and duties, they are seen as women who desire love, passion. So, a Bengali woman who is introduced to such diverse literature in terms of Puranas, Vedas, *Brata Pancali*, Vaishnava poetry, and fictions by Tagore, Sarat Chandra, can easily realize their wants as individuals and also the duties as member of society. They are also taught the practices and also introduced to the virtues of Bratas, vegetarianism etc. from a very early age. They learn how these practices are viewed highly in society and in some use their knowledge to manipulate and create a niche for themselves in the domestic space.

When looking at food and cooking in Bengal it came through as more than an “assumed” act (of oppression) in the domestic area, it can be seen as a means of gaining private power, because as argued by Counihan, women feed others for love and power that comes with being needed this was evident where In Bengal the elderly widowed women who can give up other signs that marks her as a widow but needs to maintain a strict vegetarian diet that need to exclude *Masur* dal, onion, garlic, fish and other forms of protein from her diet at times cooks special fish dishes for their sons. These women do not eat these dishes but readily cook it for the sons, this can be seen as a tussle of power(private) between her and her daughter in law which is also evident among Bengali cook books titled “*BoumakeHarane*” (defeating the daughter in law).

Such competition in the kitchen among the women of the household has to be for a reason and that reason cannot be related to act of cooking as being oppressive, the reason is the private power that one gains through feeding the male members of the household and creating certain dependency of these important male members of the household on them.

Also looking at food and women in the era of globalization it was concluded that since the meaning of food was changing for the household members, i.e. moving away from Bengali food to non-Bengali food like Mughlai, Chinese, Italian, fast food. The earlier power structure in the kitchen was also undergoing a change with the different demands of food in the menu, where the younger women who could cook healthy food, i.e. not the notion of healthy food that was prevalent earlier but food made with minimum oil and especially oils like olive oil and continental dishes were seen to gain more power.

Earlier the eldest women (*Ginni*) decided the menu but with the globalization of food systems it is the younger women, who get a hold of that power. There is a constant effort by women to learn new dishes and incorporating them in the household menus, this has given rise to many cookbooks in regional languages, cookery shows in television and cooking classes that teach women different cuisines, which are constantly demanded in the households.

Women take to learning these non-Bengali dishes because they need to compete with the bazaar food (fast food joints, restaurants), which are constantly indulged in by children and also the men, so that they can maintain the dependency of these members of the family on them and food is one avenue where such dependency can be realized and with them some power.

However this way of appropriating private power for women is only possible for a certain section of society. Here I have explicitly dealt with the middle class women because the meaning of food is not the same for lower class women who can hardly afford to eat all the three meals; they cannot provide pastas or noodles to their children because the ingredients are expensive and they do not know the proper ways of cooking these dishes.

Food as a form of indulgence is seen among the middle and upper class Bengali people not the lower class and this can also be seen as a marker of distinction, where more and more middle class Bengali women serve Chinese or Italian to guests for dinner than the typical Bengali food.

Government has always emphasized that the emancipation of women is related to the maximum employment opportunities provided for women, this is because media images, western feminists portray such images without considering the inequalities and differences of different cultures.

The public space is equated with superiority; mobility, freedom etc. and the domestic space is equated with an inferior status where life is dull, static and oppressive, and hence argue that women's emancipation can be only realized by them going out in public space by acquiring education and employment and denouncing the domestic space.

However from the study it can be concluded that employment and education does not lead to emancipation of women, because inequality is built into the structures of society and merely providing women with education and employment cannot lead to their emancipation.

But on the contrary the domestic space has more potential for women to strategize and negotiate for creating a space for themselves, since it is a more familiar domain to the women to play the gender games; the domestic area involving motherhood, food chores, traditional practices like *Bratas* and vegetarianism that can be used to create a niche for themselves by the women.

This is true and can be seen from the fact that women observe *Bratas* as obligatory even though scriptures do not spell them as compulsory, they take to this traditional practice so that she can portray submissive role in society, and appear to uphold traditional gender ideology.

They are not, however, subservient or oppressed by a public image of docility they can actually negotiate and in a subtle manner resist patriarch, they can continue to privately and covertly challenge men's authority in part by pretending that men are the ones in charge.

Women are given or to be more appropriate can scrape out power for themselves within the domestic space as opposed to the public spaces, since women have certain knowledge that are exclusive to them in the domestic space from which men were always kept out. So, if we talk about the games of gender, it can be played best in the domestic area by women who know the rules better with their long association in it.

There were also a question that kept coming to me, that is when the local meaning of vegetarianism in Bengal does not exclude fish and even the Brahmins eat fish, why do the contemporary Bengali mothers give up eating even fish, when fish is a sign of auspiciousness in Bengal?

Is it only because of the reason put forward in the third chapter which equates protein as heating and increasing sexual appetite or is it because in the ceremony of *Baran* (welcoming ceremony in marriage) during which the mother-in-law invites the new daughter-in-law inside the house and asks her to hold a fish and says that a new daughter-in-law should be like a fish in the new environment, serene and cool out of its natural habitat; and the daughter in law after becoming a mother herself is looking to symbolically give up being a docile daughter-in-law?

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