

# History of Ancient Bengal: Life, Role and Participation of Women

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**Abstract-** The participation or position of women in any society or civilization is a very important issue. There is no room for underestimating the contribution of women in shaping the foundation or structure of any society. From the beginning of civilization to the present time, women have perpetuated human civilization through direct or indirect cooperation and coexistence with men. Women have many forms. The main topic of this study is the form, position and participation of women in ancient Bengal. However, the first thing that comes to the fore in conducting this research is that the social system of ancient Bengal was patriarchal. In that patriarchal society, women were very much dependent, confined to the corner of the house, deprived of education, an entity without freedom. Again all the books or sources we find were also written by male society. Where more has been written about the ruler's conquest of the kingdom, the security system of the state, diplomacy, politics etc. Due to this discussion many important topics about women's society has gone into hiding. Nevertheless, as far as possible, the research work has been done according to the acceptability from various books, articles and essays. It is hoped that the study will provide important information about the female society of ancient Bengal.

**Index terms-** Women, society, ornaments, ancient Bengal, dupatta.

## **I.Introduction**

The role of women in building any society is impeccable. There is no way to deny the contribution of women in the development of civilization. It can be said that the women of ancient Bengal have had a great impact on today's women in various fields as we can see. Not much is known about the status of women in ancient Bengal, their participation in politics and their economic emancipation. Much is still unknown about the status and the role of women in ancient Bengal due to scarcity of resources. Much of what is known about ancient Bengal is basically related to war and politics. Most of which were written by men. That's why the issues of women have been neglected. Another reason is that the ancient society was patriarchal and women did not have any status or importance as a single person in that society. At that time women were housewives, they were not rulers or soldiers, nor were they priests. Therefore, the men directly influenced the politics and society of the ancient times. In ancient Bengal the woman was the mother, life partner of men, loving sister and caring daughter. Therefore, contemporary literary works have sometimes reflected fragments of women's lives. From which we get some information about women of Ancient Bengal. My current research will be conducted by keeping in mind the scarcity of information. At present the status of women and the issue of women's empowerment has become very strong day by day. Women are trying to continue to move forward in all fields. If we know about the status, activities and the role of women in ancient Bengal, the women of the present time will get some inspiration. My present research will be conducted in an attempt to know about the way of life of women society in ancient Bengal.

## **II.Methodology**

The biggest obstacle to gaining knowledge about the history of ancient Bengal is the scarcity of sources. It goes without saying that there is not much source of information about the history of women of ancient Bengal in terms of access to information. My current research will be conducted keeping in mind the scarcity of sources. To know about the women's society of ancient Bengal I have to rely on the information obtained from contemporary literature, articles, inscriptions, statues and terracotta plaques. In my present research, I will try my best to compile fragments of the women's society of ancient Bengal from the materials obtained from these sources. After excluding and including all data from these I will use those information in my research work. Basically the secondary sources will be used to conduct my current research.

## **III.Everyday life of women in ancient Bengal**

There is a paucity of sources known about ancient Bengal. Most of what is available is a history centered on state expansion, state governance and administration. Due to which many other aspects of daily life remain unknown. And if we talk about the women's society, the lack of information is even more evident. While writing the history about the rulers and their regime, the history of the women's society has been suppressed a lot. The name of the queen is sometimes found along with the ruler's name in land grant papers, coins, copperplates, inscriptions etc. However, the presence of Goddesses in indigenous and non-Aryan societies in

Bengal show that women were revered for their ability to give birth and were worshipped as a symbol of fertility. In ancient Bengal, Chandi and Mansa were considered very important and powerful Goddesses. Also they were considered to be the epitome of female power. There are many similarities between the women's society of ancient Bengal and the current women's society. Especially in Hindu society, the ideals and rituals that are still observed today were also prevalent in the ancient Bengal society. In ancient Bengal the social system was patriarchal. For this reason the women of ancient Bengal were dependent on men. Women were neither priests nor warriors. That is why they were considered less important in ancient Bengal. From birth to death they had to depend on male guardians. To give an outline of the position of women in the society and state of ancient Bengal, one has to rely on short information, which has been collected from various books and articles. Considering all kinds of adversities, efforts have been made to determine the position of women in the society and state of ancient Bengal.

### Women's clothing

In ancient Bengal the main wear of women was *Saree*. Women from all walks of life wore *Saree*. However, women with a slightly higher taste used to wear a piece of cloth with a *Saree* which was similar to the modern day *Dupatta*. This *Dupatta* was again used as a *Veil* as required. The women of poor and middle class families used to wear only one garment and with that they would give the *Veil* again. Like the present time, the women of ancient Bengal also wore *Saree* with one or more *Kuchi* at the waist. However, in most cases they did not wear blouses or undergarment, rather some parts of their upper body were exposed. In some cases, women from affluent families and urban areas used to cover some parts of their body with a *Veil* or use a bodice or breastplate to cover their breasts. However, its use was limited to aristocratic families and urban women. Various types of herbs, flowers, geometric designs etc. were used in the *Sarees* worn by women. Evidence of which is found in various manuscripts. It was customary for women to keep some part of their body uncovered, not only in ancient Bengal but also in the entire ancient Australian, Polynesian, Melanesian ethnic groups.



Fig1: Woman wearing *Dupatta*.

There were special costumes for meetings and special occasions. Some information about this can be found in Jimutbahana's *Dayvag* book. Those who were dancers wore tight-fitting dresses up to the ankles, with a *Dupatta* hanging over their shoulders. The edge of the *Dupatta* used to fly in the air while dancing.



Fig2: Dancing Women.

### Women's makeup and hairstyles

The women of ancient Bengal used to have long hair. They tied their hair in different ways. Most of the time they wore high bangs and sometimes they preferred to have open hair. Among the women whose husbands were alive, they used to put a *Tip* of *Kajal* on the forehead and wear vermilion on the scalp. Women also used to put *Alta* on their feet. To make the lips attractive, the women of ancient Bengal used colour like the lipstick of today. The women of ancient Bengal used to practice beauty regularly to

maintain their beauty. In this case they used sandalwood powder, saffron, mriganavi etc. It is known from Damodardev's Chottogram script that kajal was applied in the eyes of women of ancient Bengal. In addition, women used camphor as a cosmetics, which is known from Madanpala's Manahil script. They women used to put different types of flowers on the head and used lacquer to dye their lips. These issues have come up the writings of Bengali poets at various times.



Fig3: Hairstyle of woman.

In the case of widows there was no issue of adornment. As soon as they became widows, vermilion was removed from their scalp. Widows spent the rest of their lives unadorned and dressed white *Saree*. It is known from Narayanpala's Bhagalpur inscript that women used to wear garlands around their necks and put flowers on their heads. The inscription further reveals that if for some reason the clothes were removed from the women's chest, they would cover her chest with a garland of flowers. These were confined to the affluent families of the city. The Sahitya Parishad script of Bishwarup Sen and other contemporary scripts testify that the women of the society, especially the married women, used to adorn themselves with cosmetics and ornaments after bathing in the river every evening. They used camphor for perfume. From king to feudal Lords even women of royal status used to show their taste in the use of costumes, cosmetics and ornaments. The details of women's adornment have appeared in various texts of ancient Bengal. Poet Rajshekhar is one of them. He describes about women's cosmetics and hairstyles in his text *Kabbyamimangsha*. The women of ancient Bengal used sandalwood powder to enhance the beauty of their face. They wore a necklace of yarn around their necks, a long *Saree* up to their feet and their arms were open.

### Women's ornaments

Both men and women in ancient Bengal used somewhat similar ornaments. Men and women used to wear ornaments like *Karnakundal*, *Karnanguri*, *Kanthahar*, *Mekhla*, *Rings* etc. Married women used to wear chains. At that time the wives of the royal servants also wore necklaces, *Karnanguri*, garlands etc. and they also wore nose pins made of precious stones. The daughters of the royal family wore precious pearl necklaces. From Shandhakar Nandi's *Ramcharitam*, information is available about various types of beautiful ornaments with diamonds, jeweled anklets, sapphires etc. Needless to say, there were jewels made of gold and silver. Such precious ornaments were beyond the reach of the ordinary middle class and the poor families.



Fig4: Woman wearing jewellery.

Ordinary middle class and poor women would have been content to use conch shells, young palm leaf earrings and flower garlands. There are some descriptions of what kind of ornaments were used on the occasion of the marriage of the daughters of aristocratic families from the *Naishadhacharita*. In ancient times, according to the caste system, those who had a husband and those who were the mother of a son, used to bath the bride while singing the *Mangalgita*. After bathing, the bride was dressed in a white cloth made of jute. Then the bride's friends would put *Tilak* on the forehead of the bride. The bride was given a gold *Tip* according to her family's ability.



Fig5: Women's ornaments and make up.

*Kajal* was put on the bride's eyes during the wedding, then two *Monikundals* were put on the ears of the bride. *Alta* was given to dye the lips of the bride, and a necklace of seven layers was worn around the neck. The bride used to wear conch shells both hands and the bride's feet used to wear *Alta*. The housewives used to arrange the bride at the time of marriage. And the male members of the family and the Brahmins used to do the outside work starting from reciting mantras. The women used to draw *Alpana* at the place where the marriage would be performed.

### The practice of female slave

From the *Idilpur* script of Keshab Sen and the *Shahittya Parishad* script of Bishwarup Sen, it is known about the *Shavanandinis* of ancient Bengal. They royal court and the amusement house were moved by the sound of their anklets. Thus those who kept the *Majlis* intoxicated had a special place in the royal court and in the affluent society. In ancient Bengal it was customary to keep a maid. This maid were kept only for sexual gratification. This custom was prevalent in Bengal for a long time. Batsayan mentions a lot of information about these maids in his *Kamasutra*. These maids of ancient Bengal were bought and sold as property at different times. Even in the case of inheritance, these maids were passed from one person to another. According to Jimutbahan's *Dayabhaga*, if more than one person was entitled to a single maid by inheritance, then that maid would be the right of each one after the other according to each part.

The practice of Devadasi is also found in ancient Bengal. The first mention of the Devadasi practice is found in the *Rajtarangini* text of Kalhan. The book contains a description of the dancer Kamala. Kamala was the main Devadasi of a temple of Pundrabardhan, she was an expert in singing and dancing. Those who were Devadasi were all endowed with various qualities and Kamala was one of them. Although they were expert in singing and dancing their main job was to be a partner in the lust of the rich and influential society. Judging from this, Devadasi can be compared to Barramas. They were called Dev-Barbanita in *Ramcharitam* written by Kalidash and Barrama in *Pavandoot* written by Dhoyee. This practice was not very widespread during the Pala Dynasty. Later, as a result of southern influence and contact, the Devadasi practice began to spread to different parts of ancient Bengal. This spread further towards Sen Dynasty and Devadasi took over the minds, imaginations, desires and aspirations of the people at the highest levels of society.

### Wedding rituals

According to ancient Bengal scripts and contemporary literature, almost all of the norms and rituals that are still practiced in today's Hindu society and the social customs and rituals that ordinary women in urban and rural areas observe in their lives was also active among the ancient Bengal women. However, in ancient times no marriage was practiced among the different cast. But

sometimes marriage of different cast has taken place in ancient Bengal. For example, Parshab Keshab was the grandfather of Loknath the king of Samatata. Keshab father was a Brahmin but his mother was probably of Shudra descent. But Keshab never had to be despised in the society for that. From this it is understood that marriages of different cast were sometimes held among the Hindus of ancient Bengal.



Fig6: Wedding ceremony.

According to the general rules of ancient Bengal, a man will have a wife. That is, at that time ordinary middle class men used to get married only once. Practice of many marriages was circulated in fudal lords, aristocrats and Brahmins. Devpala's Munger script and Mahipal's Bangar script indicate animosity towards wives. In some scriptures it is said that a husband loved all his wives equally. There are many instances of polygamy in the ancient Bengal script. However, the fact that one wife is enough to form an ideal family is mentioned the Amgachi inscription of Bigrahapal the III. Some widow marriages were practiced at the lowest level of Hindu community.

### The widow's life

Widowhood was like a lot of hardship and curse for women in ancient Bengal as it is today. As soon as a women's husband died, the vermilion was removed from her seat. Far from providing any kind of cosmetics for a widow, it was a kind of sin for a widow to live her everyday life in comfort. As soon as she became a widow, she had to give up everything even wearing ornaments was banned for a widow. However, at that time, although not at the highest level of the Hindu community, the practice of widow marriage was somewhat at a very low level of the Hindu community. At that time, there were some common rules for widow. Among them after being a widow a women had to live at her husband's house with the relatives of her husband until death, no cosmetics or ornaments could be used, the widow had to live a moderate life and for the welfare of the soul of her husband, all the rituals had to be performed. If there were no male members in the widow's husband's house, she could stay in her father's house until her death. According to the *Prayashchitta Prakaran* text widows could not eat any food that aroused their sexual desire, for example they could not eat fish, any kind of meat etc. The text *Brihadharma Purana* also give the same information. Widows had a vegetarian presence on their everyday food list. Moreover, the presence of a widow was considered inauspicious in any kind of auspicious ceremony, marriage etc. That is why widows usually refrained from participating in such events.

In ancient Bengal widows were encouraged in the Brahmin society to go to Shahamaran on the cheetah of the husband after the death of the husband. It was said that the soul of the dead husband would go to heaven. According to Brihadharma Purana, 'The wife who goes in Shahamaran with her husband frees her husband from sin. There is nothing more courageous and heroic for a woman than this. As a result of this cohabitation, a wife can go to heaven and have intercourse with her husband. Even long aafter the death of the husband, if a wife can sacrifice herself by jumping into the fire with one of her husband's favorite objects, then that wife will also get the opportunity to go to heaven and have intercourse with her husband'. It is understood from this statement that the practice of Satidah and Shahamaran was still prevalent in ancient Bengal.

### Women's property rights

In ancient Bengal, except as daughter or wives, women did not have any legal or social rights in wealth. However, in the absence of the husband, the childless widow could claim her full rights to the husband's property. According to some historians, a widow had no right to claim any money other than to support herself. They further said that the claims of the deceased husband's brother and close relatives are much more legitimate than the demands of a widow. Widows had no right to sell, mortgage or donate property. In addition, a widow can establish her right to her husband's property only if she adheres to the rules of her widowhood.

### Women's education

In ancient Bengal, it is believed that the women of upper class families of the urban society used to be educated. About writing love letters to women is known from Dhoyee's *Pawandoot* Kavya. This suggests that women of some families, not all levels had the opportunity to acquire education. Apart from acquiring education, they also had to master other disciplines, among which dance was one of them. Padmavati, the wife of Joydev, the author of Gitagovinda was an expert in dance. In ancient Bengal, the

practice of child marriage and religious restrictions deprived women of the opportunity to acquire knowledge. Both Manu and Kalluk forbade the study of *Vedas* and *Sriti Shastras* for women. According to Manu's opinion, 'Marriage ceremonies are like performing Vedic reforms for women and living in a *Gurugriha* serving the husband'. Despite these restrictions, it is believed that many women in ancient Bengal were educated. The Buddhist nuns Mekhla, Members of the royal family Bhagawati Lazmi and Leela, were proficient in Buddhist theology and also they wrote some Buddhist treatises. Each of them gave up their family life and devoted themselves entirely to Buddhism. Therefore, it would be appropriate to consider these incidents as exceptions.

Verses of many women poets have been quoted in *Subhasia Ratnakosh* and *Saduktikarnamrita*. Vidya and Bhabak Devi were among the women poets of ancient Bengal. *Saduktikarnamrita* mentions women's self-sung songs. According to written evidence, various literary works and archaeological evidence, it is known that women of all classes of ancient Bengal used to sing and dance. By singing they used to complete many tasks of daily life and even while husking paddy and harvesting rice they sang. Those who were lower caste women used to sing and dance in various festivals. They were very good at dancing and music.

Women in the Vedic period enjoyed all the privileges of the society like men. Patanjali and Katyayana also spoke about the opportunity for women of the Vedic age to receive education. At that time women used to get married after reaching adulthood and they were also quite free to choose their own spouse. These method of choosing a life partner was called *Swayamvar*.

### **Dominance of women and their hard working**

Along with the rapid development of individual ownership of land and wealth in ancient Bengal, the slave system arose. Then the male race became the lord of land, property and slaves. With that predominance began the dominance of the male race over the female race. The men then claimed that the son, daughter and wife were also his property. Prior to that, the position and status of women in the feudal society was relatively advanced. But individual ownership of property, marriage and family practices gradually became stronger in order to keep women in control. In communist society, women worked as laborers but later, due to the availability of slave labor, the wealthy people did not need female laborers. In ancient Bengal legislators and clerics all were men. So every rule was made in favor of the male who was the head of the family. Common women not only had to look after their husbands, children, relatives and guests but also they had to work hard outside of the home. Apart from royal families, feudal leaders and women from very wealthy families, even the wives of fairly well-to-do families had to work hard from dawn to dusk.

Among the women who lived in villages and belonged to relatively poor families, they kept moving the wheels of their families by working in the fields and outside as well as doing housework. Women used to go to market, buy and sell goods and beside these they also took care of their husbands, sons, daughters and family members. Poet Sharan has tried to portray the busyness of women through his writings- "After finishing the work at the market, the women of the village are running fast, their eyes are wide open. Clothes are repeatedly being removed from their shoulders to walk briskly and they are pulling their clothes again and again. The farmer of the house went to the field that morning, now it is time to return to his house. Thinking of this, the women are speeding down the length of their road and counting the prices of goods on their fingers.

### **IV. Women in politics and governance**

Copper plate or inscriptions carries very valuable and important information to know about ancient Bengal. The inscriptions found usually reveal the names of Rajmata and the queens of ruling kings. Sometimes the queen was also referred to as Mahadevi or Agramahishi and Empress. Polygamy was common in royal families and the queen and other women of the royal family lived in a protected harem. Inscriptions praise queens for their goddess-like qualities and deep affection for their husbands. The most desirable and desired desire of queens was to be the mother of virtuous and brave sons. The name of queens along with feudal kings, princes, kings and others are found from inscriptions of the Chandra dynasty to the end of the ancient period. But the Pala rulers never mentioned the names of queens in land grant inscriptions till the last days of their reign. Women in South India participated in state politics. The Sen and Burman rulers who came to Bengal from South India may have tried to uphold the tradition of women's political participation.

The list of kings recorded in land grant documents also provides information that no women served as rulers. No charter issued by a queen in ancient Bengal has been found so far. However, land was sometimes granted by the king by charter to Brahmins to officiate at the religious ceremonies of the queen. The negligible influence of the women of the royal family on the politics of ancient Bengal is variously attested. For example, despite the marriage alliances of the Bengal royal family with the Chalukya, Hayyam and Kalachuri dynasties, the hostility of the pala kings to these dynasties never completely ceased. It appears that the precepts of Manu that women can never act independently and women reveal secrets, these precepts of Manu strongly influenced that Bengali society of ancient Bengal and that was why queens never participated in politics. They had to be content with being the main goddess of the royal family.

When discussing the state power and politics of ancient Bengali women, the story of queen Mainamati or Madnavati comes to the fore as told in the Bengali folktale titled song of Gopichand. Queen Mainamati was the wife of king Manikchandra and the mother of the Gopichandra. The Gopichandra married the two daughters of king Harishchandra, Aduna and Paduna, and under the influence of his mother queen Mainamati he left the throne and became a Yogi. Some hymns mention the feat of queen

Mainamati fighting with a certain king named Dharmapala. But due to the lack of detailed information about her, it is not right to say that her power in politics was very important based on the story told only in folklore.

In ancient times kingdoms and empires arose as a result of wars between different families or clans. To maintain the integrity of the state, peace and order in society and politics, rulers needed the support of soldiers and clansmen and religious discipline. But women could not be warriors or military leaders. That is why they were not able to perform royal duties and activities. Religious rules for women made her dependent on men from birth to death. Women can never be an independent existence. Women lacked military skills and did not care for her education. The main work of women was to perform household duties only. Because women were considered inferior to men by nature. Because of that, religious restrictions have always kept women outside the sphere of political power and essentially barred them from participating in politics and administration. The history of the human race shows that women have always been subservient to men. From ancient time to the present day, women were considered men's servants if not their slaves. In ancient Bengal men were the makers of laws, social customs and religious precepts and everything was in favor of the male society at that time. Religious rules and social customs, laws and the prevailing law and order situation of ancient Bengal made women a kind of non-entity.

## V. Conclusion

Men and women are each other complement. It is the combined efforts of men and women for that any civilization develops and survives for ages. The same pattern is observed in all times and in all civilization. It was no different in ancient Bengal. In ancient civilizations all over the world, women were subordinate to men. Women were considered weaker than men and were always subordinate to men. Very little is known about the social life of women throughout the ancient world. In ancient society women did not have any dignity or importance as an individual. Another reason for the lack of information about women's society in ancient Bengal is that women were generally housewives during that period. So, they influenced the politics and society of ancient Bengal not directly but indirectly. Hence, contemporary literature sometimes reflects fragmentary pictures of women's life. A very limited information has to be relied upon to give a clear outline of the position of women in society and in the state. However, it should not be forgotten that all the books available to know about the women's society of ancient Bengal were compiled or written by men. Therefore, to evaluate the position of women in the society and the state, we have to rely on the testimony of men. Women had no ability or opportunity to write down their own words. So, the history of women has always been marred by the limitations of a nationalistic perspective, because the barriers imposed by religion and society had never allowed women to acquire education. Although, there were some exceptions but those were not very numerous. Keeping this adverse situation in mind, an attempt has been made to determine the position of women in the society and state of ancient Bengal.

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