

Redefining Identity: Tradition, Modernity and Dress Reforms among the Bengali Women

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Abstract: *This research paper examines the transformation of elite Bengali (Bhadramahila) women who were confined in the innermost part of their houses (andarmahal) due to the societal customs like sati, child marriage, purdah, illiteracy, widow-marriage etc of nineteenth century. At that time, the confinement of women inside of their houses was symbolised their seclusion and the deprivation of education was inclined them to took care of their families only. However, the advent of social and educational reforms of nineteenth century was marked a transformation in the lives of women. They were came outsidess of their houses for education and engaged them in variousreformativ activities. With these, a profound change was perceived in the lifestyle and clothing of Hindu women but the Muslim gentry was indifferent about it due to their religious backwardness. Thus, the modernisation process was started among the Muslim in early twentieth century. So, the present paper has attempted to show that how the 'reformed dress'was influenced the Bengali women in general and the Muslim women in particular at that timewhen they were indulged much in search of their identity and how they accepted such changes.The paper has also emphasised the comparative study about the reform of dress and modernity to both the segments of society.*

Key words: Bengali women (Bhadramahila), inner houses (andarmahal), societal changes, reformed dress, modernity.

The women's dress and appearance was a subject of discussion among the masses in late nineteenth century Bengal. Before that, the women were confined to the innermost part of their houses (andarmahal) and wore the fine translucent saris that reflected their seclusion. At that time, they were deprived of education and their lives only confined within the household and child rearing activities. The transformation of their lives began with the advent of social and educational reforms leading to a marked change in their lifestyle and clothing within the subsequent times. Thus, the dress reform and modernity was started among the women of Bengali society and it became an 'issue or movement'¹ later on.

From Tradition to Reform of Women's Dress:

In historical context, we find that the women from Bengali Hindu household were used to wear the transparent light saree without the underwear². An account of British lady, Fanny Parks who was the wife of Charles Crawford, officers of East India Company wrote about the attire of Bengali women during her brief journey in Calcutta. She narrated in her dairy³ the transparency of Bengali sarees, although these sarees was expensive due to the gold embroidery at the border of saree but despite the elegance, the women did not bestow full coverage. It also revealed body's contours and natural hues of the skin. There was absence of blouses and petticoats in the attire of Bengali women at that time⁴. Although the Brahmin was in favour of covering the body of women, they were also influenced by the Christian missionaries and colonialists towards the traditional short dresses. Thus, the dress reform movement was started among the Bengali women in late nineteenth century.

Jnanadandini Devi and the Modernisation of Bengali Hindu Women's Attire:

Jnanadandini Devi, the sister-in-law of noble laureate Rabindranath Tagore was the pioneering women who started the modernisation of women's attire in Bengal and vividly depicted the attire of Bengali women in her writings. At that time, the women were adorned themselves only with saree but in cold weather they used to wear a shawl. They were restricted to use the other dress or shoes also⁵.The women of Tagore family also did not wear the shoes. However, the question arises about the delicacy and decency of women's dress as transparent dress was inappropriate in public. Many men as well as women wrote about the prevailing indecency in women's dress at that time. Satyendranath Tagore, elder brother of Rabindranath Tagore wrote to his wife in 1863 that the Bengali women were dressed in such a way that it seems they were not wearing any clothes⁶. The leading Bengali periodical of women namely 'Bamabodhini Patrika' stated that the Bengali women

appeared also unclothed despite wearing the long saree and such type of attire was unsuitable for wearing in public⁷. A report published in '*Bamabodhini Patrika*' in 1864 noted that the members of '*Sangat Sabha*' led by Keshab Chandra Sen discussed the need to reform the women's dress, although they did not suggest any particular change related to dress at that time⁸. The debate was also started about the dress of Bengali women in early 1870. A meeting was held at the '*Bamabodhini Sabha*', founded by Keshab Chandra Sen to discuss measures for improving the Bengali clothing. Many were suggested the European dress for Bengali women, but few were feared to lose the Bengali identity by this dress⁹. Those people suggested that the dress of Bengali women should be such as to distinguish them from the women of other races. The eminent lady Rajlakshmi was also present in the discussion of this meeting. According to her, there were few women who wearing the blouse, jacket and shoes and these materials must be accepted as a part of authentic dress of women. Thus, the women gradually became conscious of the necessity to reform their style of clothing. According to '*Bamabodhini Patrika*', the girls were advised to wear the pyjamas, sarees and blouses, saree and long blouses at home and to put on a *cadar* and shoes when stepping out. It was also mentioned that those who preferred not to wear shoes were not obliged to do so¹⁰. A letter of Jnanadanandini Devi published in this magazine noted that the women of Tagore family wore the clothes that was beautiful and suitable for both the summer and winter seasons. The attire was appreciated by the people of Parsis, Europeans, Bengalis, Jews and Marathis, as it did not imitate any particular style. She also stressed the importance of wearing shoes for women also¹¹.

Jnanadanandini Devi also faced the problem in the early stage of her life due to clothing. When her husband Satyendranath Tagore, planned to take her to Bombay due to his posting there, the problem arises regarding the existing dress of Bengali women which was unsuitable for public appearances. Thus, her husband also felt the need of reform in women's dress and he prepared a dress like the Turkish attire for her wife's journey. During her stay in Bombay with a Parsi family of Manekji Karshedji, she adopted the Parsi dressing style in which she started to wear petticoat under the saree and used the shoes also¹². Unlike the Parsis, she draped the *palla* (pallu) of the saree over her left shoulder. Thus, Jnanadanandini Devi was at first encountered a distinct style of wearing a saree among the Bengali women. When she returned to Calcutta in 1865 wearing this new attire of Parsi Saree, this style was known as '*Bombai Dastur*' and also alternatively referred as '*Brahmika Saree*' as it associated with Brahmo Samaj or Thakurbarir Saree because of its connection with Tagore family. Although the orthodox Hindu women were not ready to accept this new sartorial style but the women of Brahmo families were ready to accept it. A renowned lady, Hemanta Kumari Chaudhury in her editorial note of women's magazine '*Antahpur*' wrote this new clothing style describing the combination of saree, chemise, petticoat and blouse which reflected the decency of clothing for Bengali women¹³.

In short, Jnanadanandini Devi was the first Bengali woman who invented such type of reformed cloth for Bengali women. Swarnakumari Devi, another well-known woman of Tagore family also mentioned that her father Debendranath Tagore appreciated the reformed clothing, which was introduced by Jnanadanandini Devi. Her particular

saree gained the popularity in late nineteenth century. She was played a significant role by giving the Bengali women a new direction by reforming their dress. Although she was received her education in England but she always maintained the Indian identity in her attire. According to Malavika Karlekar, Jnanadanandini Devi was preferred to maintain the identity of her own through her attire instead of wearing the European gowns. Her husband Satyendranath Tagore was also a staunch advocate of Indian identity¹⁴. Although she initiated the modernisation of Bengali women's attire, her influence did not extend to the entire Bengali society. The reformed clothes were adopted by the women from different family background at different times. As a result of this, many women from gentle families were not fully accepted the reformed clothes in 1901. An article of '*Bamabodhini Patrika*' noted the women's clothing of Brahmo as well as the conservative Hindus. There was no comparison of the clothing of Brahmo women from the conservative Hindus as they wore the clean and modest dress and the Hindu women were always embraced their saree and *cadar*. They were also walked barefoot¹⁵. Even, the women from conservative families did not wearing the shoes in the beginning of twentieth century. Thus, it was a matter of tradition for the Bengali Hindu Brahmin community but the Muslim gentry were not ready to adopt the new reformed clothing. As a result, they were lagged behind the Hindus and did not actively come forward for reforming the dress. The Muslim was in search of identity at that time, thus many preachers were not ready to accept this type of change.

Cultural shifts and Modernity among the Bengali Muslim women:

The modernisation process started among the Muslim of Bengal in early twentieth century led to the emergence of a new middle class which in turn brought about a cultural transformation known as '*Bangalakaran*' (bengalisation). This type of nationalisation led to the creation of a new dress code. In the late nineteenth century, there was assimilation in the clothing of Muslim gentlemen with the Brahmin women and men in society. The common dresses among the Muslim men were dhoti, pyjama, loose dress and *cadar* at that time. Those who followed western style used pants, shirts, coats, ties, boots and pumps and pocket watches. The women adopted Brahmin style sarees, along with jackets, ijars, petticoats, shoes and brochures designed on the shoulders to hold the anklets in place. During the dress reform movement, the girls were prescribed an extra dress with an intention to protect them from the evil gaze of society. This matter pertained to following religious scriptures and upholding modesty through practices like wearing the *burqa* (veil). However, this type of transformation was not without any controversies. Few were always raised the questions about the ideals of reform as one group was influenced by the Brahmo Samaj and another group explained their ideas of identity and dress. They had opposed the various aspects of bengalisation process. The Bengali intellectuals argued about this non-Islamic element of dress and also the matter of languages. Many reformers were took a leading role in politics at that time. They expressed their prejudices against such elements of bengalisation and modernisation of reforms. There was an interesting example that illustrates the trend towards the Islamisation of women's clothing. In 1883 James Wise stated that,

'During that time, the Upper class Muslim women abandoned the formal sarees and adopted the long sleeved jackets which were not related to their beauty'¹⁶.

It has been assumed that the long sleeved jackets referred to the North Indian kurta which many considered to be Islamic attire. According to the source '*Bahisht-e-Zewar*' written by Ashraf Ali Thanvi, western style clothing is considered un-Islamic, as it is not prescribed in the *Holy Quran*. This book was translated into Bengali in 1961 stating that 'women's wearing constitutes a violation of the *Sunnah*'¹⁷.

A well-known writer, Rafiuddin Ahmed analysed the Bengalis and highlighted their same ethnic, linguistic and geographical similarities and the differences emerged in the matters of religious beliefs, practices, myths, food and political affairs. He also cited two quotations that illustrated the clothing style of Muslim women in society. One of these was derived from the popular novel of Najibur Rahman, while the other drew upon the memoirs of elderly women, recounting their past¹⁸.

With the passage of time, there was emergence of New Muslim *Bhadramahila* (woman) in society who started to take initiatives with the transformation of educational system in colonial rule. In the process of modernisation, the Muslim women were not only worked for their social existence, but also started various reforms in many ways.

Cultural Variation of Muslim Dress:

The difference of dress among the Muslim was marked by the class and the culture. According to the writers Ibrahim Khan, the Muslim men from poorer background wore the towels and the women wore handloom saree. The men from noble families wore the dhoti and women wore the saree. However, the *Munshi* and *Maulvis* of East Bengal used to wear only the lungi which became the popular dress in that region. The Muslim of Ashraf families had their own dress of pyjama, chougā, chapkan, cap etc. Although, dhoti was a Hindu garment but many Muslims were liked to wear it¹⁹.

The matter of politics and class had also influenced the women's dress as well. The women from *sharif* families were used to wear the North Indian kurtas, salwars, dupattas rather than the traditional saree. Some critics were joined the politics of clothing by objecting the un-Islamic dress. They also gave their opinion against wearing of the saree. One of the writer named Meherullah wrote in newspaper '*Islam Kounudi*' that, the women should gave-up the half-naked Bengali dress and choose the Arabic and Turkish clothes²⁰. Due to the reform of Muslim women's dress, the inner dress was replaced by the brahmika saree, semij, blouse, shoes as well.

Influence of North Indian and Persian Style of Dress on Elite Muslim Women:

The study on women's clothing of Bengal emphasised that traditional and upper caste women preferred north Indian dresses, which influenced the prevailing fashion trends in the region. The places of Delhi and Lucknow in particular were considered the epicentre of South Asian Muslim culture. The European travellers (who were allowed to treat the women at the inner chamber of their houses) during the middle ages expressed their opinions on the dresses of women from Muslim noble families²¹. The dresses of notable women such as Durdana Begum, Ghaseti Begum and Marjaan Khanum indicates their preference for non-Bengali garments such as kurta, salwar, churidar, pyjama, dupatta etc over the traditional saree. As a result of this, the affluent Muslim families influenced by the Persian were preferred to wear the indigenous dresses. For example, Nawab Faizunnesa, Karimunnesa, the women from *sharif* (noble) Muslim zamindar families used to wear the saree²².

Transformation of Clothing from Rokeya to Shamsunnahar:

During the time of Rokeya, the women were dressed like the traditional Hindu families of *antahpur*. Usually, the attire consisted of fine woven saree such as, the muslin or cotton, draped around the body without any undergarments. A well-known writer, Tapan Roy Choudhury said about the wealthy women of seventh century who used to wear the corset or bodice under the saree and sometimes the *jjara* or *pyjama*. All these dresses were suitable according to the climate condition but these were not in accordance of purdah or religious norms. As the women lived inside because of which they wore these dresses but the majority women from disadvantaged backgrounds were unable to stay confined within their homes, so their clothing was of little concern. They wore the less expensive and functional dresses which used to wear by the peoples adjacent to the ground through the ages²³.

During the first half of the twentieth century, the women of upper class had the fondness of native saree which symbolise the north Indian culture. They described the trunked north Indian dresses while remembering the past history. Thus, such type of memories carried the clues of past ancestors²⁴. The women from *ashraf* families were followed the Persian-Arabic-Urdu culture, although the saree becomes the dress of mixed culture of Bengal²⁵.

Thus, the transformation of clothing was noticed from the late nineteenth to twentieth century, the dress like *burqa*, brooch and *brahmika* saree were symbolised the evolution of reformist women. It not only represented the culture of the age but also the evolution of the Bengal's culture. It was evolved over hundreds years and originated in West Asian Islamic culture. The Saree, brooch and *burqa* were both the garments and ornaments which identified the symbols of elite urban culture. This became the identified dress of Bengali Muslim women²⁶.

However, the only dress which represented the Bengali Muslim women was the *burqa*, a combination of body covering, face covering and the veil. The noble women (*Bhadramahila*) of nineteenth century did not step their feet outside without the *burqa*²⁷. Ashraf Ali Thanvi mentioned that it was used as a formality. The *burqa* was a symbol of excellence for the upper classes and the native middle classes²⁸. The *sharif* Muslim women observed the *burqa* which reflected their modesty and politeness.

During that time, Rokeya was one of the most popular revolutionary among the reformist Muslim women of Bengal who observed the purdah because of the need of time. She also enthusiastically spoke in favour of purdah as a garment in one of her essays titled '*Burqa*' and later on ridiculed about the use of purdah in her write-up titled '*Aborodhbasini*' in 1928²⁹.

Another prominent lady Shamsunnahar Begum used to wear *burqa* when she went to attend her classes at the Diocesan College in Kolkata³⁰. By 1940, the Muslim women were discarded the *burqa* although it was served as a cultural symbol to go outside from the inner chamber of houses. At that time, the popular magazines containing a women's section logo reflected a change in the pattern of clothing. The magazine '*Saogal*' was known as the mouthpiece for progressive women and it contained a page specifically for women known as '*Zenana Mahfil*'. At the same time, another contemporary magazine, '*Masik Mohammadi*' was started as a vanguard between the North Indian and Bengali culture.

It included a section known as '*Mahila Mahfil*' for women. The magazine '*Saagal*' included the pictures of two women who seated by wearing a garara, choli, dupatta, kurta etc and their head covered with a cloth. However, the image had changed by 1940, showing a woman at the steering wheel in a saree with an uncovered head³¹.

Conclusion:

Thus to conclude, it can be said that by the end of nineteenth century, the indigenous attire of Hindu and Muslim women posed an obstacle to the women's awakening movement. As a result of this, it became necessary to produce suitable dresses of women for moving outsides. Around 1860, the Brahmin was the first agency who thought for the evolution of women's clothing. An eminent lady of Tagore family, Jnanadanandini Devi was the pioneer of modernisation for the clothing of Bengali women at that time. Although the modern Bengali women welcomed the innovation of '*Brahmika Saree*', but the orthodox Muslim of Bengal did not accept it as representative of their community's identity.

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