

# Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal'

SUMANTA BANERJEE

The entertainments, diversions and festivities of the common people are all disappearing one by one. There are no *jatras* now, no panchalis, not to speak of *kobis*. With what will the common folks live ... ?

BASANTIKA<sup>1</sup>

Taking all matters into consideration, the poor woman of this country should be an object of compassion rather than of our contempt. The stimulus given to India by British example, and capital employed for the education of Indian females, is not among the least of her beneficial operations. The time will come when their worth shall be duly appreciated by the daughters of India; and then, should this work chance to be perused by them, they will sigh at the follies of their ancestors, smile at their own good fortune ...

CAPT. N. AUGUSTUS WILLARD<sup>2</sup>

CAPT. WILLARD, who wrote these lines in 1834, was appealing to his countrymen to consider sympathetically the plight of Indian women who were "perfectly ignorant of all knowledge." One sign of such ignorance, which shocked Willard and his English contemporaries, was that these women were fond of singing songs that "mostly appear to be licentious and voluptuous."<sup>3</sup>

Englishmen, like Willard, who came to Bengal in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, carried two burdens: the 'white man's burden' of educating the unenlightened natives, and the 'man's burden' of emancipating native women from what they considered to

\* The present article is largely based on data collected by the author in the course of a research project (1985-86) on the popular culture of nineteenth century Calcutta, funded by the Indian Council of Social Science Research, Delhi. In translating excerpts from Bengali songs and poems into English, some liberty has been taken to convey the mood and the message, rather than merely the literal meaning.

be a socio-cultural milieu of utter ignorance and impurity. The latter burden came to be shared by the English educated Bengali *bhadralok* of the nineteenth century (sons of absentee landlords, East India Company agents and traders who made fortunes in the eighteenth century, various professionals and government servants) all of whom, in spite of differences in economic and social status, were moving towards the development of certain common standards of behaviour and cultural norms. They played a leading role in implementing a model of female education in Bengal that was primarily fashioned by contemporary English missionaries, educationists and administrators. The Bengali *bhadralok*'s concept of the emancipation of women was derived from these new teachers but was, at the same time, considerably modified by the patriarchal norms of traditional Hindu society. It was a concept shared over time by the women of their families.<sup>4</sup>

There were subtle differences among members of the nineteenth century Bengali urban elite over the extent to which women should be educated and allowed free movement in society. However, they all agreed on the need to eradicate what they were trained to believe was the pernicious influence of certain prevailing literary and cultural forms on Bengali women, particularly on the women belonging to their own homes. These forms, some traditionally rural, others born in the course of urbanization in nineteenth century Calcutta, emerged primarily from the lower economic social groups and represented a popular culture that ran parallel to what could be called the 'official culture' propagated by the *bhadralok*. Many of these forms — doggerels and poems, songs and theatrical performances — were fashioned by women who remained outside the framework of the formal education introduced by English missionaries and scholars. Significantly, in nineteenth century Bengal in general and Calcutta in particular, this popular culture had a wide female audience, ranging from the lower caste and lower class self-employed women of the marketplace, to the wives and daughters of the *bhadralok* in the sheltered *andarmahal* or *zenana* (secluded quarters for women).

Women of nineteenth century Bengal, like women in other regions, were not economically or socially a homogenous group. Their life styles and occupations, according to a contemporary observer, varied depending on whether they were "women of rich families," "women of the middle station," or "poor women." While women of the "rich" and "middle station" stayed in seclusion in the *andarmahals*, the

majority were working women, either self employed like *naptenis* (women from the barber caste who used to decorate with *aha* [red liquid] the feet of *andarmahal* women), sweepers, owners of stalls selling vegetables or fish, street singers and dancers, maidservants, or women employed by mercantile firms dealing in seed produce, mustard, linseed etc.<sup>5</sup> The poorer class of women used whatever time they had left after housework to assist the men in the traditional occupations like cultivation, pottery, spinning, basket-making etc. Such participation extended to cultural activities like community singing and dancing during festivals, as well as to *bratas* (rituals relating mainly to birth, marriage and death) meant exclusively for women and performed with a view to attaining their aspirations.

Because of the nature of their work, these women had to move in that 'dangerous society' which was considered to be a threat to their sheltered sisters who lived in the *andarmahals* of upper class Bengali gentlefolk. For the members of the *zenana*, it was often this vast multitude of working women (like *naptenis*, sweepers or singers) who had access to the *andarmahal* and so provided the only link to the outside world. Even as *Bamabodhini Patrika* and other advocates of women's emancipation were warning against the appearance of *bhadralok* women in public, almost every year women from the lower groups not only congregated in public, but also sang and danced during popular festivals. Describing a fair on the occasion of Raas (held to celebrate Krishna's carousel with the milkmaids), the Bengali weekly *Somaprakosh* reported: "Ninety nine per cent of the participants were women, and one per cent men ... and of this ninety nine per cent again, ninety nine per cent were young women..."<sup>6</sup> A few months later, the same paper, describing another religious festival at Ghosepara near Calcutta said: "Of the participants, eighty per cent are women."<sup>7</sup>

With the decline of the village economy and the beginnings of industry in nineteenth century Bengal, there was a regular exodus of poorer men and women from the countryside to Calcutta. These were mainly artisans engaged in small scale occupations. They settled down in different parts of the 'black town' (the areas in Calcutta inhabited by the indigenous population, as opposed to the 'white town' which was the exclusive preserve of the Europeans). Each group occupied a distinct quarter in the town, which bore the name of its respective profession. Although they and their descendants have long since disappeared, these areas of Calcutta still continue to be

known by those old names. Thus, Kumartuli in north Calcutta, was the settlement of the *kumars* or potters; Colootala of the *kolus* or oilpressers; Patuatola of the *patuas* or painters; Sankharitola of the *sankharis* or conch shell workers.

These Bengali villagers brought with them into Calcutta the songs they inherited from rural folk culture with their own poetic rules, their own musical scales and rhythms. Along with their women, they not only kept alive the old folk culture in the squalor of the growing metropolis of Calcutta, but enriched it with new motifs borrowed from the surrounding urban scenes. The street literature of nineteenth century Calcutta — songs, dances, doggerels, theatrical performances, recitations — became a great melting pot of tradition and topicality.

The appeal of these popular forms cut across the economic divisions among Bengali women of the nineteenth century. Folklore, from which street literature derived, was essentially a shared experience. There was no sharp distinction between high and low. In their cultural preferences and practices, women of all classes therefore shared a common interest in certain types of literature — an interest which continued almost till the beginning of the present century. This was possible because the literary' creations of the lower economic groups, particularly those fashioned by the women of these groups, retained particular traditional features and used specific dialects and idioms<sup>8</sup> which were common to women of almost all classes of households in nineteenth century Bengal. A schism in this cultural homogeneity among Bengali women appeared with the spread of the new system of female education to the zenanas of bhadrakok homes.

By the end of the nineteenth century this system of education had produced a new breed of women in bhadrakok homes who, by their writings, cultivated patterns of behaviour which displaced women's popular culture from Bengali middle class society. The old popular culture which had rested on the social ties binding together women from different classes was discarded, and retained only by women of the lower social strata who did not relinquish their commitment to it as rapidly as the others. But finally, even they had to grasp the logic of an altered social world, and the old forms of women's popular culture withered.

The close proximity among the various socio-economic groups of women through their predilection for particular cultural genres in nineteenth century Bengal, often led the educated Bengali bhadrakok to club together women in general (including those from elite

homes) with lower social groups. Describing the contemporary cultural scene, one leading weekly reported: "Wherever there are *sangs* [pantomimes, lampooning familiar social types] and farces, you'll find the vulgar masses, children and women."<sup>9</sup> The same paper, referring to the decline in the popularity of *kathakata* (reading and exposition of mythological stories in the colloquial language, often in contemporary terms of reference) among the *sushikshita dal* (well-educated groups), commented: "... only women and the lower orders are its [i.e. *kathakata*'s] admirers..."<sup>10</sup>

These attitudes of educated Bengali men influenced their entire concept of women's emancipation. Attempts at the cultural emancipation of women in nineteenth century Bengal often boiled down to strenuous efforts to wean away their own wives and daughters from those forms of popular culture which were beginning to be associated in the minds of the bhadrakok with the "licentious and voluptuous tastes" of the *itarjan* or the 'vulgar' populace. While initiating social reforms such as women's education, widow remarriage, ban on child marriage and on kulin Brahmin polygamy, which were primarily aimed at bringing about changes in Bengali *sambhranto* (respectable upper classes and upper castes) homes where the women in many respects enjoyed less freedom than women of the 'lower orders' the male bhadrakok undoubtedly paved the way for the 'emancipation' of their womenfolk — an emancipation which meant greater participation for women in the new social milieu and cultural affairs of educated society." But, in the process, indigenous forms of women's popular culture were suppressed (often tarred with a brush dipped in moral values) through the imposition of cultural norms newly acquired by the male bhadrakok from their English mentors. The denunciation of popular culture was simultaneous with the formation of a new bhadrakok culture.

The present article argues that some of the main forms of popular culture in nineteenth century Bengal, in the composition and appreciation of which women of lower social groups took a leading part, expressed certain concerns, experiences and aspirations which appealed to most or all contemporary women. The mode of expression, the dialect and the idiom of popular cultural forms manifested a power and a robust sense of humour which were to be markedly absent in the future literary compositions of 'emancipated' and 'educated' women from bhadrakok homes. Often stark and bitter in expressing the plight of women in a male-dominated society, the

poems and songs popular among the lower social groups were, at the same time, tough, sensuous or bawdy, in an idiom specific to women. Further, the Bengali *bhadralok*, influenced by colonial education, began to look down upon the cultural products of the lower groups as manifestations of vulgar taste and often perceived them as threats to the newly emerging cultural integrity of their own domestic lives.<sup>12</sup>

Their conceited and consistent ideological campaign — often backed by administrative sanctions — against these popular literary productions, combined with other socio-economic factors (e.g. the diminishing number of old patrons, the rise of the book culture) led initially to the marginalization, and finally to the exile from urban society, of both these specific forms of women's culture and of their women 'practitioners'. The gradual elimination of women folk performers from Calcutta in the last decade of the nineteenth century is suggested by the following figures. According to the 1891 Bengal Census, there were 17,023 actresses, singers, dancers and their accompanists. In 1901, the number had gone down to 3,527.<sup>13</sup> Ironically, in this ideological crusade Bengali educated men found their biggest allies in their newly 'emancipated' wives and daughters who, from the end of the nineteenth century, began to play a leading role through a spate of women's magazines, in changing the older forms of women's popular culture.

### Women in nineteenth century popular culture

The literary compositions of women found their way into most of the main forms of popular culture — doggerels, poems, proverbs, songs, dramatic compositions — and into their different sub genres or types such as *kirtans*, *panchalis*, *kavi* songs, *tarjas*, *jhumur* songs and dances, *jatra* performances, kathakata recitals, *bashar* songs at weddings and similar songs peculiar to certain women's rituals, etc. While the bulk of such compositions are of anonymous authorship, and have been handed down to us through oral preservation (often published by enterprising collectors towards the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the present century), it has been possible to trace the names and life stories of a few women composers. For the purpose of this inquiry, contemporary compositions by a few male representa-

lives of popular culture have been included because their songs, in the use of feminine idioms and dialect as also in their treatment of women's problems, suggest the influence of their women colleagues. As for the content of the women's songs of this period, although conventionally academics divide them into the religious and the secular, such a division may not always be useful. An examination of the style in which religious themes are dealt with in many so-called religious songs would show how contemporary secular problems were often articulated through religious myths.

In this context, let us take two specific groups of religious songs which were popular among women in nineteenth century Bengal. The first group is the *agamani* and *vijaya* songs, the former sung on the eve of the annual Durga Puja, welcoming the arrival of the goddess, and the latter sung at the end of the four day festivities lamenting her departure. A peculiar feature of both types of songs is the imagery in which the goddess is presented. The singers, through the use of familiar descriptive terms, domesticate Uma — the goddess Durga — who is turned into a typical young Bengali bride. The arrival of Durga from the Himalayas once every year is visualized as the homecoming of the bride. In the *agamani* songs, the devotees' longing for an audience with the goddess becomes the palpable craving of a lonely mother for the company of her long lost daughter. The singers describe the woes that Uma suffers in the inhospitable home of her drug addict husband Shiva,<sup>14</sup> and urge Uma's father to bring her back home:

*Bhangore bhikarijamai tomar, sonar bhramari Gauri dinar  
Umar jato basan-bhushan, beta tab bechey bhdang kheychhe!*<sup>15</sup>

(your son-in-law is a hemp smoking beggar,  
My Gauri [another name for Uma] is a precious  
bumble-bee.  
All the clothes and ornaments of Uma,  
That boulder has sold away  
To smoke his hemp!)

Similarly, the *vijaya* songs express the mother's sorrow at the departure of her daughter: the immersion of the goddess Durga becomes an excuse to give vent to the pangs of separation that every Bengali mother suffers when her daughter leaves for the home of her hus-

band. The contemporary social problems of a poor Bengali home — the poverty of Lima's husband, the sufferings of the young bride, the few fleeting days of reunion between mother and daughter, the distance between the natal home of the bride and the home of her husband that makes such reunions difficult — are pushed into the foreground, relegating religious devotion to the background.<sup>16</sup>

The second group of religious songs of nineteenth century Bengali popular culture consists of the hosts of kirtans, panchalis, kavi songs, and similar types of compositions dealing with the love of Krishna and Radha. Here again, the divine pair is deglamourized through the imagery into a rustic young couple — often in a daring adulterous and incestuous relationship — expressing the same fears and hopes, wounded pride and blissful consummation that are the lot of ordinary mortals in love. Stripped of omnipotent divine qualities, Krishna and Radha are brought down to earth and turned into vulnerable human beings, as sensitive to pain and pleasure as any mortal.<sup>17</sup>

The love songs of Radha and Krishna were a rich repertoire for the different groups of women singers who used to throng the marketplaces and streets of nineteenth century Bengal villages and of Calcutta. These women singers were Vaishnavites, and were variously known as boshtamis or neries in popular parlance. The Vaishnava religion in Bengal, with its stress on the equality of man and woman among other things, provided room for Bengali women from different segments of society: widows of kulin Brahmins who had nowhere to go, women who wanted to escape prostitution after having been seduced from their homes and deserted by their lovers, prostitutes who, after becoming old, had lost their occupations, or outcasts aspiring to independence and recognition. The *Census of India, Bengal 1872* reported that the followers of Vaishnavism "open their arms to those who are rejected by all others — the outcasts, the crippled, the diseased and the unfortunate." Contemporary records abound with references to women in villages — widows, married as well as unmarried women — deserting their homes to join some Vaishnavite *akhara* or monastery.<sup>18</sup> Here religious norms allowed them a freedom of movement, an access to all corners of society, both high and low, and a certain liberty in their relations with men — privileges which were out of reach for rich and middle class Bengali women of the time.<sup>19</sup> Many of these Vaishnavite women went around singing and begging from door to door. Some, who had learnt to read and write in their homes, taught the girls in the andarmahal of the bhadralok

homes. A few from among them rose to be well-known poets and singers. In 1826, we learn from a contemporary Bengali newspaper, *Samachar Darpan*, that in Kaikala village in Bengal, on the occasion of Saraswati Puja three *neri kavis* were invited from Calcutta to the house of one Krishnakanta Dutta.<sup>20</sup> The kavis were practitioners of a literary genre which developed in Bengal towards the end of the eighteenth century, marked by the impromptu composition of poems set to tune, and sung in poetic duels between two individual poets and their respective followers. The kavis also went around with their own troupes of musicians and sang songs on Radha and Krishna, Shiva and Parvati, and on Kali.

That these *neri kavis* became a force to reckon with is evident from a letter written by rival male poets in the same paper two years later. Describing themselves as "Vagrant Muchi and Dom Poetasters" (from the lower caste communities), they complained how some years ago "Neri [lit. shaven-headed] Vaishnaves" had ousted them from their occupations by singing and dancing during almost every festival at the houses of the rich. "But by devising some means with the help of the *Sudder* [which could either mean the district administrative headquarters, or the outer apartment of the male head of a Bengali household], we have succeeded in getting rid of the Neries."<sup>21</sup> It might be worth investigating whether these male kavis actually filed any complaint with the administration against the Vaishnavite women singers who at one time threatened their careers.

Women poets had indeed been a part of the Vaishnavite literary tradition in Bengal from the fifteenth century. While their songs expressing Radha's devotion to Krishna were similar in style to those composed by male poets, there were also some songs which ridicule male hypocrisy, irresponsibility and cowardice. A typical example is the following excerpt from a song by Rammoni, or Rami as she was popularly known, a washerwoman by caste, who was reputed to be a friend of the famous fifteenth century Bengali Vaishnavite poet Chandidas. It is a bitter reproach of her male neighbours who were spreading calumny about her relationship with Chandidas, a plight also suffered by Radha in her affair with Krishna:

What can I say, friend?  
I don't have enough words!  
Even as I weep when I tell you this story  
My accursed face breaks into laughter!

Can you imagine the cheek of the sinister men?  
 They have stopped worshipping the Devi  
 And have started tarnishing my reputation.

Kami then ends with a curse on her detractors:

Let the thunderbolt crash on heads of those  
 Who from their housetops shout abuses at good people.  
 I won't stay any longer in this land of injustice,  
 I'll go to a place where there are no hell-hounds.<sup>22</sup>

The tradition of using the Radha-Krishna story as a vehicle for voicing women's grievances in contemporary society, continued well into the nineteenth century. Radha's complaints about an elusive Krishna dallying elsewhere with his mistresses, could be easily recognized as the bitter admonitions of a Bengali wife hurled at her profligate husband (a subject which was the staple of numerous contemporary social novels, poems, plays and farces). Let us take for instance, the following lines from a song by a well-known woman kavi called Jogyeswari, who was a rival of Bhola Maira, Neelu Thakur and other famous male kavis in Calcutta in the early years of the nineteenth century. The song belongs to the *biraha* type, a sub-division in the repertoire of Radha Krishna songs expressing Radha's woes at her separation from Krishna. The words of the song express the woman's dismay at her lover's infidelity:

*Nobeenarpranadban boye tint akbon,  
 Bbesbeben sukhasagare.  
 Bhalo sukhe thakun tint, tatey khOti nai  
 Amaye phele gelen keno shftnkher karate.  
 Bolo Bolo pranonatherey  
 Bichhedke tdnr deke nejete.  
 Jodi thake dhar, fla boy sbudhei a~shbo tar  
 Keno toshil kore pord rnoshil barflte.  
 Amar holo udor bojha budhor ghdrete.  
 Tintpran loye hey holen satantar,  
 Madan tdbujbe na, bolle sbune ntf,  
 Amar thain chahey rajkar.*

He has now turned into the darling of  
 His new young sweetheart, and is  
 Floating in eternal happiness!  
 Well! Let him be happy.  
 There's no harm done.  
 But why did he have to leave me  
 On the horns of a dilemma?

The poetess goes on to explain her dilemma in terms of a contemporary socio-economic analogy, that of a revenue collector and a tax payer. Whatever she had — in this case her soul — has been taken away from her by her lover. But Madan, the god of love, keeps harassing her, like the revenue collector, reminding her of the anguish of separation. What more can she pay as tax? She then appeals to her lover to help her out of this dilemma or situation by taking the anguish away from her.

While the *biraha* songs provided women with a form to express the feelings of a deserted wife or beloved, often in this rather mournful style, there was another category of Radha Krishna love songs which offered an avenue to let off steam in a more uninhibited way. This was the *kbeur* which dealt with the love affair in a merry, ribald manner. It was recognized as an essential part of the narrative songs on Radha and Krishna and was popular among all classes of Bengalis till the beginning of the nineteenth century. It began to be condemned as obscene by the educated Bengali gentry and was finally banished from 'respectable' society by the end of the century.

But even as late as 1892, the tradition of *kheur* was kept alive by both male and female singers of the lower strata in western Bengal, Burdwan and Birbhum. A contemporary report tells us that instead of using the conventional *khole*, a type of drum played during kirtans, the male and female singers of *kheur* stood and played on the *modal* — a tribal drum — and exchanged repartee in the form of short songs.<sup>24</sup> From another source, we get a specimen of such repartee. The woman singer quips:

*Orey amar Kalo Bhramar,  
 Modhu lutbijodi dye!*

(Come hither, my black-bee,  
 If you want to feast on my honey!)

The bold Radha's unabashed invitation to the black-bee, who is the unmistakable dark-skinned Krishna, is resented by the possessive husband who retorts:

*Ami thaktey chaker modhu panch bhramore kheyejaye!*

(How is it that while I am here, all and sundry come to taste the honeycomb!)<sup>25</sup>

While biraha and the other sections of the Radha-Krishna narrative deal in a serious vein with the ardent moods of the lovers, kheur in a ribald style expresses the mischievous thoughts lurking behind such moods. Often openly erotic like the above exchange, it sometimes expressed the sheer playfulness involved in a love affair as in the following:

*Goponeyjatek suk, prakashe tato asukh,  
Nanadi dekhley pare pronoy ki roy?*

(There is as much happiness in having it in secret  
As pain in making it public.  
Will love be possible,  
If the sister-in law comes to know of it?)<sup>26</sup>

The themes of kheur were borrowed not only from the stories of Radha and Krishna but also from other mythological narratives. The words were put in the mouth of a woman character, although the songs might be written by men. Interspersed with serious mythological narratives about divinities, were these comic and abusive songs which parodied the heroes and heroines. Radhamadhav Kar, an old theatre personality of Calcutta, in his reminiscences in the course of an interview, gave an illustration of a kheur in a jatra performance in the middle of the nineteenth century. It was sung by Ambalika, a female character in the *Mahabharata*, as a repartee directed against her mother-in-law, Satyavati. Ambalika became a widow at an early age. Satyavati, in her desire to preserve the family line, wanted her to beget a child with the eldest son, the venerable Vyasa (a practice which was quite common in those days as is evident from numerous stories in the *Mahabharata*). In the kheur, Ambalika satirizes the leering behaviour of the old Vyasa:

*Sey jey masto derey,  
Daari nerey,  
Andarey dhukey,  
Giye boshlo taal thukey!*

(The whopping shaggy beast, shaking his beard, he entered my bedroom, sat on the bed slapping his arms).

As Ambalika tries to escape, old Vyasa stands in her way and pulls at her sari. When Satyavati tries to convince her daughter-in-law of the need to accept Vyasa's overtures to have a son, Ambalika retorts with a refrain:

If it has to be done,  
Why don't you do it, mother?

She then reminds Satyavati of the latter's not-too-reputable past:

People say —

As a girl you used to row a boat in the river.  
Seeing your beauty, tempted by your 'lotus-bud',  
The great Parashar stung you, and —  
There was a hue and cry:  
You've done it once,  
You don't have anything to fear.  
Now you can do as much as you want to,  
No one will say anything.  
If it has to be done,  
Why don't you do it, mother?<sup>27</sup>

The bawdy satirical wit, the frank sensuality, the hearty unashamed appetite expressed in kheurs in the language and idiom of women, could be explained at two levels. At one level, songs of this type challenged the orthodoxy embedded in brahminical religion. By ridiculing the venerable Hindu gods and goddesses, heroes and heroines, they provided an oblique criticism of the purist conventions sought to be imposed by the Brahmin priestly order. Significantly contemporary bhadrakritics, obviously ashamed of such uninhibited debunking of Hindu deities, took pains to dismiss kheurs as the domain of the itarjans or 'lower orders' whose base instincts, they said, needed to be tickled by such 'obscene' songs!<sup>28</sup>

At the other level, such songs afforded a 'dissenting space' for women. For nineteenth century Bengali women of both classes (the sheltered upper class zenana as well as the comparatively independent working women of the lower groups, both living in a male-dominated social environment), the prevailing patriarchal values were the ruling norms. A common saying current in those days reveals the typical male attitude:

*Nad, ghora, naaree —jey chorbey taari*

(The boat, the horse and the woman belong to  
whoever rides them).

Among the poorer classes in the villages, during famines, women were the first to bear the brunt of the crisis, either deserted by the menfolk, or even worse, sold to touts by their husbands or fathers. In this context, it is not surprising that even women poets — who often scored over their male rivals — could not escape humiliation from fellow male poets. Thus, the early nineteenth century woman kavi Jogyeshwari (whose song has been quoted above), was once insulted during a public poetic duel by her male contender, the famous Bhola Maira; in a song in reply to her, he took her to task for daring to "bellow forth" in the presence of the babus and described her as a "shameless" woman who had lost all sense of proportion.<sup>29</sup> In such a social milieu, songs like *kheurs* seemed to temporarily liberate the women not only from the external censorship prevalent in *bhadralok* homes, but also from the internal censor — the traditional fear of the power wielded by men. The mockery of male depravity (as in the barbed shaft aimed at Krishna's promiscuity, or in the more openly bawdy description of the old Vyasa), based on a common recognition of tyrannical husbands or unfaithful lovers, was no doubt popular with female listeners, who found in the songs a symbolic solace or perhaps even a revenge.

Such symbolic inversions or reversions — where the dominated (the lower groups, or women in the present context) laugh at the values and shibboleths of the dominators — have often been explained by anthropologists as a means of emotional release, as symbolic expressions of underlying and normally suppressed conflicts within society, as a mechanism by which the pressures engendered by social conflict may be vented without allowing the conflict to become

fully overt and threaten the survival of the social system.<sup>30</sup> But a quite different result could flow from such ritualistic displays of defiance in the form of female ribaldry. Instead of containing discontent within the confines of light-hearted *kheurs*, it could widen the behavioural options for women within or even outside marriage, or encourage disobedience among both men and women of the lower orders in a society that did not allow them formal means of protest.<sup>31</sup>

It was this fear that could have prompted the nineteenth century Bengali *bhadralok* to abandon the attitude of complacent indulgence, and to launch a campaign against women's songs in particular, and against contemporary popular and folk cultural forms in general. We should also remember in this connection that such songs did not always resort to the cover of religious themes. There was quite a substantial crop of songs, dances and theatrical performances in folk repertoires that grew around secular subjects. The pace-setter in Bengali literature was the famous romance *Vidya-Sundar* by the early eighteenth century composer Bharatchandra Ray who was the court poet of Raja Krishnachandra of Nabadwip.<sup>32</sup> Although *Vidya-Sundar* was written in chaste — often Sanskritized — Bengali, and was meant to please a feudal royal patron, it became a popular story which was later treated in colloquial style by urban folk singers who catered to the wider audience of the growing metropolis of Calcutta.

From the early nineteenth century, a host of popular versions of *Vidya-Sundar* flooded the market prompting the journal *Calcutta Review* to warn its readers that the particular narrative's "tendency is essentially and grossly immoral, and its perusal by native females must be injurious in the extreme," after noting that it "is the great favourite of Hindu ladies. . ."<sup>33</sup> *Jatras* (folk and popular theatrical performances) were composed about the romantic pair Vidya and Sundar. This fed the tendency towards an increasing secularization of themes in popular songs which had begun to deal directly with contemporary events and characters without taking recourse to religious themes. Working women composed songs about their respective occupations. Their dances (like those of the *methrani* or sweeper) became stock pieces for providing comic relief in *jatras*, and later, on the modern Bengali stage which, from the middle of the nineteenth century, began to mount plays written in the style of European playwrights.

Certain traditional forms like *tarjas* (marked by an exchange of *repartee*) and *jhumur* (described in Bengali literary criticism variously

as a tribal song and dance performance, or as part of the Radha-Krishna kirtan or song) became vehicles for singing about non religious events. Women singers formed their own troupes of tarja and jhumur performers, which toured the country. We come across the name of Bhavani (also known as Bhavarani) who led one such group in the late 1850s. One of her jhumur songs parodies the conventional style used by traditional poets to describe a familiar episode in the Radha-Krishna story — Radha's frequent trips to the river, ostensibly to fill her water vessel but actually to tarry there for a glimpse of Krishna:

*Chal soi, bandha ghatyjai,  
Aghater jaleyr mukhey chhai!  
Gholajalporleypetey  
Gata omni guliye othhey  
Petphempey oar dhekur uthey, heu heu heu!*

(Come on friends, let's go to the new bathing place,  
Enough of the waters of out-of-the way tanks!  
As soon as I take in the muddy waters,  
I feel like throwing up.  
My belly aches and I start belching — heu heu heu!

Having de-romanticized the situation by describing in bare prosaic language the physical hazards involved in such a rendezvous, the singer introduces a bitter-sad note describing her emotional state:

*My tears dry up in my eyes,  
I go around making merry.  
I'm writhing in pain,  
Yet, I act coy  
Swinging my hips.  
The accursed ornaments of mine  
May not remain long with me,  
What with the evil eyes  
Cast upon them  
By the wretched wenches!<sup>34</sup>*

The frequency of descriptions of prostitutes and their life styles in nineteenth century Bengali songs and sayings is striking. Apart from

songs written about them by men, they themselves created their own genre, known as *bashya sangeet* (songs of prostitutes) where they ridiculed their male clients and also laughed at themselves. The rise in the number of prostitutes in nineteenth century Calcutta could be explained by several factors: the increasing migration into Calcutta of men who left their families behind in their villages, the poverty of widows and deserted women from both high and low castes, and the need of poor working women to supplement their meagre earnings. In 1853, Calcutta with a population of about 400,000 people, supported 12,419 prostitutes. Of these more than 10,000 were Hindus, including several daughters of kulin Brahmins. More than a decade later, in 1867, although the city's total population had come down to some extent, the number of prostitutes rose to more than 30,000. We are told that it was mostly women of the weaver, barber, washermen, milkmen, fishermen and other lower castes who resorted to this profession.<sup>35</sup>

The metaphors used in the *bashya sangeet* replace the traditional romantic images of flowers, rivers, moon, etc., with more substantial images of material things of daily use. The following lines from one such song are interesting:

*Amar bhalobasha abaar kothaey baasha bendhechey,  
Piriteyrparota khey mota hoyechey.  
Mashey mashey barchhey bbaara  
Baariulee dichhey taara  
Goylaparar moyla chhonra praney merechhey!<sup>36</sup>*

(Love has taken me to another room, another place,  
Past affairs have fattened me like rich *paranthas*  
[layered fried bread]  
The room rent is going up every month  
The landlady is threatening to evict me  
But my soul is smitten by that dark lad from the *goylap arar* [milkmen's colony].)

Or, take these lines which play on the imagery of the contemporary popular game of kite-flying:

*Why are you still hanging on  
After having snipped the kite of love?<sup>37</sup>*

Bold wit emerges in a comic song, sung by gypsy women (known as *bedeni*) who used to sell herbs and oils in the streets of Calcutta, advertised as cures for 'broken hearts':

*Ei oshudh more chhuntery cbbuntery,  
Hurkoe boujaye aapni shutey,  
Baro-pbatka purusbjara,  
Aanchal-dhara boye utbey!*<sup>38</sup>

(As soon as these medicines of mine are touched, the truant wife will come back to sleep with her husband, the profligate will get tied down to his wife's sari.)

Doggerels which originated from the daily experiences or social situations of working women found their way into the andarmahals and became household proverbs (some of them being still in use). Many such proverbs are directed against worthless husbands, like the following:

*Bhaat debar naam nei, kit marar Gonsbai*

(He can't provide me with rice, and yet is quite a mighty one in beating me with his fists.)

or:

*Darbarey na mukhpeye gharey eshey maag thengae.*

(Unable to speak out in the court, he comes home and takes it out on his wife.)

Implements of daily use, and experiences in the kitchen became the central images in proverbs and doggerels. Thus:

*Dhenki swarge geleo dhan bhane*

(Even when a husking machine goes to heaven, it continues to husk paddy. In other words, habits die hard.)

*Teley beguney chotey otha*

(To explode in anger like brinjals dropped in a frying pan).

Or, take this beautiful couplet describing the fate of love:

*Piritjakhon joteyphul kalaiphotey  
Piritjakhon chbotey dbenkite pheley kotey.*<sup>39</sup>

(When love comes, it bubbles like frying peas. When love leaves, it pounds you like paddy in the husking machine.)

Strikingly enough, the five major social issues directly affecting women in nineteenth century Bengal taken up by contemporary bhadrak social reformers — *sati* (widow immolation), widow remarriage, child marriage, kulin polygamy and female education — rarely found a place in the majority of songs or doggerels composed by women from lower social groups. There is a lone doggerel describing the fate of the wife of a Kolu (belonging to the lower caste of oilmen) being forcibly burnt on the pyre of another man, while the audience shouts blessings on her in mistaken piety, drowning her complaints. It is often used as a proverb to imply that the wrong person is being praised or abused for what he/she has not done.

*(kaar aguney ke ba mare, amijatey kolu  
Mda amar kipunyabati, bolchney de ulu).*<sup>40</sup>

Though no direct references to kulin polygamy are to be found in the street songs of women, doggerels and proverbs abound with digs at co-wives and taunts at old men wanting to marry young women.

We must hasten to add in this context that the issues of *sati*, widow remarriage, kulin polygamy or female education were the staple of numerous songs, poems, plays and polemical articles in nineteenth century Bengal. But they were almost always written by the educated bhadrak or by their women. Even when their authorship is anonymous, the mode of expression, the style of composition, the frequent use of chaste Sanskritized words (as distinct from the popular idiom found in the conversation of uneducated women), indicate the bhadrak origins of such literary compositions.

The lack of serious interest in these major social issues within women's popular cultural forms could have resulted from the fact that these issues had no relevance for the women involved. For instance, kulin polygamy affected mainly the upper caste and upper class Hindus. As for widows, among lower caste and lower class Bengalis (who formed the majority of the population) their re-marriage or co-habitation with a man, was often accepted in their respective communities. *Sanga* or *sangat* appeared to be a recognized form of marriage among the lower social groups, as is evident from a contemporary popular saying:

*Gharparley chhagoley maray*  
*Ranr holey sabot eshey sanga kortey chay*<sup>41</sup>

(When the hut collapses, even the goat tramples on it.  
When one becomes a widow, everyone comes to arrange  
a sanga with her.)

In cities like Calcutta, widows from the lower classes were often known to be co-habiting with men of their choice, as revealed by the evidence of a woman textile worker before the Indian Factory Commission, who said that she was a widow and was living with an "adopted husband".<sup>42</sup> The system of child marriage also might not have been as<sub>3</sub>widespread among these classes as among upper caste Hindus.

It is necessary to draw attention to another aspect of these popular compositions by women. Certain types of colloquial expressions and expletives, peculiar to women only, occur frequently. One can pick out some of these words at random: *abaagi* (a wretched woman); *aantkuri* (a barren woman); *bhataar* (husband); *dabka* (a girl with a youthful body); *dhoska* (aged woman); *dhumshi* (fat woman); *minshey* (man); *naang* (lover); *raanr* (widow or a prostitute). Most of these words were used in a perjorative sense, and were looked down upon by educated males in respectable Bengali households. Not only such words, but the profanities and oaths, the *double entendres* and bawdy quips that marked women's songs and proverbs were a kind of reservoir in which various speech patterns and images derived from folk humour, which were excluded from bhadrakok discourse, could freely accumulate. For the Bengali male elite, which was making strenuous efforts to create new patterns of deference and patron-

age, such songs and expressions were perceived as products of lower class beliefs and behaviour which were doubly annoying and embarrassing because they were shared by their own women in the andarmahals. This is how a bhadrakok described an andarmahal towards the end of the nineteenth century:

It is needless to add that their [the women's] familiar conversation is not characterized by that chaste, dignified language which constitutes a prominent characteristic of a people far advanced in civilization. Objectionable modes of expression generally pass muster among them, simply because they labour under the great disadvantage of the national barrenness of intellect and the acknowledged poverty of colloquial literature.<sup>44</sup>

Even Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the famous Bengali novelist of that period, who had a perceptive ear for women's dialect (he uses, for instance, the word *maagir* rather than the genteel *mabilaor nari* quite frequently in dialogues in his novels) while reviewing a play in 1873 rebuked the playwright for having used *bhataar* (instead of the more refined *purush*) too often in the dialogue of a woman character, and said it reflected "vulgarity in style"<sup>45</sup> Often the bhadrakok felt that such songs and expressions were also threatening or dangerous. Following is a typical comment by a contemporary newspaper:

Look at the streets of Calcutta, how the vulgar lower orders right in front of thousands of bhadrakok, trampling on the chests of the powerful police force, go around wherever they want to, singing extremely obscene songs and making obscene gestures!<sup>46</sup>

Such concern for 'social discipline' and 'public order' shaped the vigorous bhadrakok campaign to suppress popular cultural forms and artistes in Calcutta.

### **The bhadrakok campaign against women artistes and their performances**

To free the andarmahal from the contaminating culture of the lower orders, it was necessary to strike at its roots i.e. at various

cultural forms and at those who practised them, particularly the women who had free access to the zenana. From the mid-nineteenth century, educated Bengali males attempted to rouse public opinion through articles in newspapers, meetings in city halls, and often through books, against these popular forms and against their performers. By the beginning of the present century, they had succeeded, to a large extent, in driving them away from the precincts of 'respectable' urban society, pushing them either to distant villages where their descendants today still manage somehow to carry on their earlier occupations, or down into the underworld of prostitution, from where some among them fought their way out to make a place for themselves in Calcutta's theatre, and later, in the film world.

It is worth noting, however, that during the early decades of the nineteenth century, the Bengali bhadralok community did not present a homogeneous set of ideas, either in their attitude towards women, or towards many other social questions. First, there was the tendency to maintain status quo in the andarmahal, by allowing the women to continue their life style, while at the same time recognizing the need for women's education, preferably by the older methods rather than by those advocated by the Christian missionaries or their followers.<sup>47</sup> The second tendency was represented by the Young Bengal group and the various new educated converts to Christianity, who vigorously campaigned, often in a demonstrative fashion, for the remarriage of widows, for an end to polygamy, for the emancipation of women through the new system of education in English and other similar reforms.<sup>48</sup> By the last decades of the nineteenth century, both these tendencies seemed to lose their respective sharp edges and often merged into a third — that of accepting the reforms at a gradual pace and in modified forms as part of the general bhadralok inclination towards social stability based on a set of values born of a compromise between the old and the new.<sup>49</sup>

By the middle of the nineteenth century, contempt for popular culture was becoming a common feature of all the three tendencies.<sup>50</sup> This contempt was a gift from the Christian missionaries and English administrators. They were the first, in the early nineteenth century, to start a systematic attack on the popular art forms which were still being patronized by the Bengali aristocracy. In 1806, Reverend James Ward expressed his shock when, invited to attend

the Durga Puja festivities in the house of Raja Rajkrishna Dev of Shovabazar, he had first to listen to kavi songs. Before two o'clock at night the place was cleared of the *nautch* girls who usually danced to the tunes of classical Hindustani music, and entertained both Bengali aristocrats and their English friends, and then the main doors were opened to the public. Ward describes the scene:

... a vast crowd of natives rushed in, almost treading upon one another among whom were the vocal singers, having on long caps like sugar loaves... Four sets of singers... entertained their guests with filthy songs and danced in indecent attitudes before the goddess, holding up their hands, turning round, putting forward their heads towards the image every now and then, bending their bodies...

Ward then describes his feelings: "The whole scene produced on my mind sensations of the greatest horror," and he felt unable to copy a single line of those songs as they were "so full of broad obscenity." He adds:

All those actions which a sense of decency keeps out of the most indecent English songs, are here detailed, sung and laughed at, without the least sense of shame. A poor ballad singer in England, would be sent to the house of correction, and flogged, for performing the meritorious actions of these wretched idolaters.<sup>51</sup>

E.S. Montagu, Secretary of the Calcutta School Book Society, in an 1820 memorandum on the indigenous works which had appeared from the native presses since 1805, found a large number of Bengali books "distinguished only by their flagrant violation of common decency," and added: "The avidity with which these indecent publications are sought for, and the general currency obtained for them, ... is deeply to be lamented, as manifesting aloud the degraded state of those minds which will take such pleasure therein."<sup>52</sup> Mr Montagu succeeded in converting "one Pundit" to his viewpoint. "Subsequently he in conjunction with some other natives, concurred among themselves to express their dissatisfaction with such works . . ."<sup>53</sup> The works in question were popular versions of *Vidya Sundar* and similar romantic stories. This incident indicates how the indigenous elite (including the traditionalist pundits) were gradually being 'reformed' and taught to denounce popular cultural forms.

By the 1850s, the Bengali elite were becoming more and more

articulate against the culture of the itarjans. Writing in 1853, a bhadrakok describes how "hundreds may be seen keeping up whole nights to see and listen" to jatras which treat of the "amours of the lascivious Krishna and of the beautiful shepherdess Radha, or of the liaison of Bydya and Sundar." He then warns: "It is needless to say that topics like these exercise a baneful influence on the moral character of the auditors. They harden the heart and sear the conscience . . . . The gesticulations with which many of the characters in these *yatras* recite their several parts, are vulgar and laughable."<sup>54</sup> Another bhadrakok writing in 1855, complains that almost all the plots of the jatras are taken from the amours of Krishna and of Radhika, and asks: "Who that has any pretension to a polite taste, will not be disgusted with the vulgar mode of dancing with which our play commences; and who that has any moral tendency will not censure the immorality of the pieces that are performed?"<sup>55</sup>

It is clear that the objection was both to the form and to the content of these popular performances. Even when performances dealt with religious divinities like Krishna and Radha, their depiction in terms of human passions offended the newly acquired sense of morality of the bhadrakok, who had to hear constantly from their English mentors that the Hindu gods and goddesses were the "personifications of a truly fiendish or infernal character."<sup>56</sup> Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's brother, Sanjeev Chandra, succinctly expressed the bhadrakok attitude towards the popular jatras of those times:

Anyone from among the illiterate fishermen, boatmen, potters, blacksmiths, who can rhyme, thinks that he has composed a song; singing it, the jatra performer thinks that he has sung a song; listening to it the audience think that they have heard a song. But there is nothing in these songs except rhyming . . . . Thanks to the present type of jatras, Krishna and Radha look like *goalas* [milkmen]; in the past, the qualities of a good poet made them appear as divinities.<sup>57</sup>

What were the implications of this attitude for women performers, for their songs and for their theatres?

Women artistes specializing in certain forms of cultural performance — both religious and secular — were the first to bear the brunt. We have already referred to the Boshtomis or Vaishnavite women singers, who not only roamed around the streets singing

kirtans, but also taught the members of the andarmahal, through kathakata or recitation of mythological stories. Swarnakumari Devi, the eldest sister of Rabindranath Tagore, heard from her elders how every morning

a Vaishnavite lady — pure after a bath, dressed in white, fair-skinned — appeared in the zenana to teach. She was no mean scholar. She was well-versed in Sanskrit, and needless to say, in Bengali also. Moreover, she had a wonderful power of describing, and impressed everyone with her kathakata performance. Even those who were not in the least interested in learning, used to gather at the reading room to listen to the Vaishnavite lady's description of the dawn, of gods and goddesses.

But Swarnakumari Devi, who was born in 1855, "did not have the fortune to see the Vaishnavite lady."<sup>58</sup> Apparently, by then, the Tagore family's male members, eager to emancipate their women from the influence of the lascivious stories of Radha and Krishna, had barred their doors to the Vaishnavite kathakata reciters.

One must remember that kathakata was an important source, both of popular entertainment and of religious knowledge (presented in a simple narrative form, often with references to the contemporary environment) for the unlettered. Even after the elimination of women kathakata performers from respectable andarmahals, the practice continued in village fairs and religious congregations for several years, attracting huge crowds including women. Since religious fairs and congregations also provided women of the andarmahals with an opportunity to get permission to go out and attend kathakatas, the Bengali bhadrakok soon became alarmed at the exposure of their women to such performances. Their fears found expression in contemporary journals. Thus, one bhadrakok writer complained that during the narration of the Krishna-Leela: "It is not possible for an uneducated young woman to remain unexcited when listening to episodes like Raas [Krishna's dance with the milkmaids] or Krishna's escape with the clothes of the milkmaids." He then proposed:

. . . since it [kathakata] has become a source of so much evil, it is not advisable for bhadrakoks to encourage it. Those who allow their ladies to go to kathakata performances should be careful . . . . If, during kathakata performances, women stay home and are provided

with opportunities to listen to good instructions, discussions on good books and to train themselves in artistic occupations, their religious sense will improve and their souls will become pure and they will be suitable for domestic work...<sup>59</sup>

The bhadrakok fear of their women being corrupted by popular entertainments was in all probability, a result of their new 'enlightenment' by the British. One can well imagine the impact of rebukes, such as the following administered by one such enlightened educator, who was shocked to find that *Vidya-Sundar* was "the great favourite of Hindu ladies," and added: "The study of it must destroy all purity of mind and yet it cannot be doubted, that if any book is read by, and to, respectable Bengali females, this is it."<sup>60</sup>

Driven out from the andarmahals, the Vaishnavite singers carried on their occupations in the streets of Calcutta, and occasionally in the courtyard of some rich Bengali homes when invited for religious events, almost till the end of the nineteenth century. They specialized in a particular type of kirtan, known as *dhap* which used to be sung in a light rhythm.<sup>61</sup> We come across the name of one Sahachari, who was a popular kirtan singer around the 1840s, to be followed by Jaganmohini who made a name as an expert *dhap* singer. She was reputed to have a distinct intonation as well as a wide range,<sup>62</sup>

But the popularization of kirtan in the form of *dhap* and in easily acceptable idioms by women singers, became a target of bhadrakok ridicule. Towards the end of the nineteenth century, a doggerel which ridiculed these women singers became popular in bhadrakok circles. It ran thus:

*Jato chhiloe nara-buney*  
*Sab holoe kirtuney;*  
*Kaste bhengey garaley*  
*Khole kartal*<sup>63</sup>

(All those who were agricultural labourers or 'lower orders' working in the paddy fields, have become kirtan-singers. They have bent their sickles to fashion drums and cymbals.)

We can also sense the unmistakable bhadrakok disapproval of the style of these popular female singers in other contemporary records. There is an attempt to brand them as prostitutes, so that they could be driven out from the streets under the anti-prostitution law: "Groups of kirtan and *dhap* singers have become indirect avenues for prostitutes to earn money... . They wear four or six pieces of anklets round their feet; they have a scarf around their shoulders like the *khemta* (a style of dance popular in nineteenth century Bengal) dancers; they wear whatever ornaments they can afford; and decorate their coiffure with colourful flowers...,"<sup>64</sup>

The independent lifestyle of the Vaishnavite women, and the expression of unashamed sensuality and eroticism in their songs on Krishna and Radha, now appeared as a set of alternative mores which posed a challenge to the nineteenth century Bengali bhadrakok. Eager to preserve his authority over the andarmahal, and yet keen on impressing his English mentors with the progress he had achieved in educating and emancipating his womenfolk, the bhadrakok was caught in a peculiar bind. The Evangelist missionaries, the English teachers from Victorian England and the English administrators trained at Haileybury College — all brought up to look down upon the 'native' customs and habits as obscene — constantly warned the bhadrakok against the corrupt influence of their popular culture on their women. The Radha-Krishna kirtans celebrating the frolics of the divine pair in unabashed human terms, which had entertained both Bengali men and women all these years, suddenly assumed threatening dimensions for the bhadrakok. These kirtans were not only obscene, according to the new rulers, but could also whisk away their women into the dark alleys of adultery. The colonial interpretation of Hindu religious myths in accordance with the contemporary Victorian ethical norms, drove some of the bhadrakok to discard Hinduism and embrace Christianity, some to evolve Brahma morality, and almost all the bhadrakok to disown or ban those forms of popular culture which expressed human passions in a down-to-earth manner and indulged in raillery at the expense of the sacrosanct Hindu divinities. What used to be innocent fun, now held a threat to domestic stability, thanks to the 'enlightenment.'

Vaishnavite women became the main target of attack because they sought to continue a tradition — both social and literary

—which was uncomfortable for the bhadralok. They were literally hounded out from bhadralok society. After being ostracized from the andarmahals and persecuted in the streets of Calcutta, they tried to carve out a place for themselves within the new female education system. In the late 1860s normal schools were set up to train Bengali women teachers who were expected to visit the andarmahals and teach those women who were not willing to come out and attend public schools. We find from contemporary records that Vaishnavite women — who, as we have seen, were accustomed to imparting lessons to andarmahal women in the traditional style — offered themselves for training in the new system. The Bengali bhadralok however objected to their entry into these training schools. A letter in a contemporary journal complains:

. . . there is a 'normal school' in Dhaka; but the majority of the trainees are Vaishnavites. We are not insulting them, but let us remember that people have no respect for Vaishnavite women . . . if they therefore do not send their daughters to be taught by such women, we should not be surprised. Women of this type cannot educate girls who are expected to grow up to embellish their homes, provide happiness to their husbands and become ideals for their children...<sup>65</sup>

The bhadralok offensive was directed against the various popular forms as well as against women's participation in them. Thus, while jatra remained an object of such attacks almost throughout the nineteenth century, women performers in jatras were singled out for special criticism. Mahendranath Dutt (a brother of Swami Vivekananda) in his reminiscences about his childhood in Calcutta in 1873-74 describes the female jatra groups: "They themselves acted (in different roles) and also played the parts of clowns. As a child, I saw jatra-plays like *Daksba-yagna* and Parvati's marriage— They could not play on *tanpura* or violin; but managed with cymbals, clapping of hands and kettledrums, and they sang in chorus." Dutt then added: "But female jatra could not continue for long. The educated people began to denounce them, and they disappeared."<sup>66</sup>

When the educated bhadralok started to stage Bengali plays written in the style of European theatrical pieces, women from the lower strata tried to make their way into this new cultural medium.

For example, in October 1835 Nobinchunder Bose mounted a play adapted from *Vidya-Sundar* at a spacious hall belonging to another rich Bengali, Ramtonu Bosu (popularly known in Calcutta in those days as Tonu Mag, since he worked as an agent of Mag, a Burmese-Arakanese merchant house). In a rare instance of bhadralok appreciation of the artistic merits of the women performers, a contemporary Bengali correspondent wrote:

The female characters in particular were excellent. The part of Bidya . . . played by Radha Moni (generally called Moni), a girl of nearly sixteen years of age, was very ably sustained; her graceful motions, her sweet voice and her love tricks with Sundar filled the minds of the audience with rapture and delight. The other female characters were equally well performed, and amongst the rest we must not omit to mention the part of the Rani, or wife of Raja Bir Singha, and that of Malini . . . were acted by an elderly woman Jay Durga, who did justice to both characters in the two-fold capacity. . .

He then added: "The proprietor, Babu Nobinchander Bose deserves our highest praise for endeavouring to raise the character of our mistaken though truly praiseworthy women."<sup>67</sup> As expected, both the play (being an adaptation from *Vidya-Sundar*) and the actresses, drew derogatory comments from the Bengali bhadralok community as well as from their English mentors. It however goes to the credit of the Bengali correspondent who originally reviewed the play that he stuck to his guns despite the barrage of criticism.<sup>68</sup> But it seems that the opposition to the introduction of actresses (who primarily came from the Vaishnavite community from lower strata, or most often, from the red light areas of Calcutta) by the bhadralok was so vehement, that the Bengali theatre movement could not dare to induct actresses again (after the rough weather which the October 1835 *Vidya-Sundar* play ran into) till the early 1870s when the poet-playwright Michael Madhusudan Dutt campaigned for the right to allow women to act in female roles.

Even in the 1870s, however, when actresses like Binodini, Golapi, Jagattarini, Elokeshi and Shyama were making their mark on the Bengali stage, sections of the bhadralok continued to resent their presence. Manomohan Bosu, a well known literary figure who was equally proficient in the folk kavi form as well as in the modernized form of Bengali theatre, came out vehemently against the

intrusion of these actresses onto the contemporary theatre: "To get actresses, one has to collect prostitutes from the red-light areas. Young bhadralks carousing with prostitutes in their midst, dancing and acting on stage, in public with prostitutes — can we see and listen to all this? How can we suffer it?"<sup>69</sup> In his animosity towards women artistes, Manomohan Bosu was even prepared to overcome the bhadrlok prejudice against jatra artists. He said: "It is even better to have the abominable acting of the *jatra-wallahs* [male performers] which goes against the grain of our existence. But still, our national theatre community or other acting communities should not adopt this shameful system [of introducing actresses] which encourages vices and destroys our religious principles."<sup>70</sup>

Behind the bhadrlok opposition to the introduction of actresses in the bhadrlok theatre, was the prejudice against prostitutes. As we have seen, prostitutes came to constitute a major section of the female population in nineteenth century Bengal, sometimes even creating their own cultural genres, and they posed a constant threat to the bhadrlok confidence about their own wives and daughters. The educated Bengali male's fears emerge clearly in an unusually frank article in a leading contemporary Bengali journal. After referring to the evil influence of prostitutes on Bengali men, the journal said:

It is not only men who are led astray. Many women of the andarmahal deviate from a religious life under such influence. When they, being imprisoned [in their andarmahals] see how free the prostitutes are, when many among them find their own husbands addicted to frolics with prostitutes, is it surprising that they also would be fired with the desire for such vices, mistaking them for delights? We learn that many such women have left their homes to join the ranks of prostitutes. . . .<sup>71</sup>

It was not only Vaishnavite women actresses and prostitutes who were singled out for such attacks. Any class of women following an independent lifestyle and likely to influence the norms of the andarmahal through cultural activities was suspect. In the effort to fashion the respectable woman into a shape that would suit their newly acquired tastes and demands, the bhadrlok sought to insulate their women from these traditional cultural forms — songs and

jatras, kathakatas and doggerels — composed and performed by women from outside respectable society. Since many of these popular 'events' took place in the open — in streets, marketplaces, fairs and at religious festivals — the bhadrlok had to step up their campaign against these open displays. One of the casualties of this campaign was the jhumur. We have mentioned earlier how in the 1850s the jhumur singer Bhavani toured Calcutta and other parts of Bengal with her own troupe. We find from Mahendranath Dutt's reminiscences that till the 1870s, women jhumur troupes were still to be seen in the streets of Calcutta. His description of their performances is tinged with typical bhadrlok contempt:

They were *chhotolok* [the uneducated lower orders], dark skinned wenches who stank when they passed by. They used to wear anklets round their feet when they sang. In those days during wedding ceremonies, *jhumurwalis* [female performers] used to dance on peacock-shaped papier-mache boats set up on bullock-carts. As they danced a man from behind used to beat a drum, or strike a bell-metal plate. . . . Their language was extremely coarse, but some among them had talents as poets.

Dutt adds: "But later these jhumurwalis became objects of virulent censure."<sup>72</sup> By the beginning of the twentieth century jhumur troupes had practically disappeared. A collector of these songs, writing in 1905 said: "The number of tarja and jhumur troupes is going down day by day in this country. It is doubtful whether we can come across even twenty tarja and jhumur troupes all over Bengal now. *Because of the police, in many places their clubs have been closed down.*"<sup>73</sup> (emphasis mine)

To illustrate how 'obscene' their songs were, Mahendranath Dutt quotes a couplet from a jhumur song which describes the familiar image of goddess Kali standing on the supine Shiva:

*Maagi minsheyke chit koreyphele diye buke diyecheypaa;  
Ar chokhta kareyjulurjulur, mukhey neiko raa.*<sup>74</sup>

(The hussy has thrown the bloke flat on his back, with her foot on his chest; wordless she stands glaring in anger.)

The bhadrakok reaction to such language describing the goddess in a facetious style suggesting the earthy image of an Amazon bestriding a suppliant male, rather than any religious devotion, doubtless was one of hurt and outrage. We should also remember that during this period the Bengali bhadrakok were trying to salvage Kali from her tribal associations. In order to demarcate their own compositions from the popular songs on Kali (composed by Ramprasad and by folk poets of earlier centuries) the bhadrakok were creating their own image of a goddess endowed with ethereal qualities, and expressing it in songs full of emotional frenzy. The gross, rustic shrew of Ramprasad's songs was being replaced by the divine Mother, whose ugly nakedness was to be glossed over by chaste Bengali expressions. Typical of the bhadrakok version of Kali are the following lines from a song:

Who is she walking on the heart of Hara [Shiva] ?  
Who is the enchantress who has stolen the heart of Hara?<sup>75</sup>

While jhumur was banned from the marketplace, another performative genre of women artistes — the panchali — was exiled from the andarmahals. Women singers of panchali narrated stories from mythology in doggerels. A contemporary writer describes a panchali session in an andarmahal:

They [the women] sit on benches or chairs, or squat down bare-footed on *Jarash bichhana* [a clean white sheet] and enjoy the *tamasha* [entertainment] to their hearts' content. These amusements continue till evening, entertaining the guests with songs on gods and goddesses (Durga, Krishna and his mistress Radha); those relating to Durga have a reference to the ill-treatment she experienced at the hands of her parents, but those pertaining to Krishna and Radha tell of his juvenile frolics with his mother and the milkmaids, and amorous songs on disappointed love, which though they may appear harmless to their worshippers, have nevertheless a partial tendency to debase the mind.

The writer then assures his readers that such songs "which were shamefully characterized by the worst species of obscenity and immorality" were on their way out from the andarmahal thanks to the "progress of enlightenment" which has "of late years, wrought a salutary change in their [women's] minds."<sup>76</sup>

Another form of women's entertainment in the andarmahal also retreated in the face of increasing bhadrakok criticism. This was known as the *basharghar* jokes or songs. The basharghar was the bridal chamber in the Bengali household where, after the wedding, the bride, her female relatives and her girl friends spent the night with the bridegroom (he being the only male in the gathering), cracking jokes at his expense and singing songs. The ceremony not only freed the members of the andarmahal from the censorious frowns of the male patriarchs, but also offered them an opportunity to wreak a sort of vengeance on male superiority. The newly-married husband, who for the rest of his life would dominate the wife, on this particular evening had to play a reverse role — that of the beleaguered male. What follows is a faithful description of the plight of a bhadrakok (who was marrying for the second time) on his entry into the basharghar:

There were only women all around . . . First they received me with much welcome, but gradually they began to use their hands. . . . They slapped me, they pulled my ears, and my beard and moustache were about to be plucked out. The war ended after some time. Then, the ladies asked me to take my wife on my lap, and they began to hurl taunts at me. I cannot reproduce them. You, and the readers can well imagine what sort of jokes they were. I somehow managed to escape and was thanking my stars, when the younger ladies asked me to sing. I had learnt a few songs when I was a student. Remembering one such song, I began to sing a Brahma Samaj song. Immediately there were shouts of "Shut up! Shut up!" I then began to sing a song by Ramprasad. But that didn't please them either.

After being unable to meet the ladies' demands for songs like *tappa* and *kheur*, the bridegroom had to suffer another round of taunts: "Stupid ass! Dullard! The lout doesn't know anything but books, books and books!"<sup>77</sup>

While the writer of the above letter described his woes in a half-humorous style, the editor — a dyed-in-the-wool bhadrakok — who published it in his newspaper was in no mood for such indulgence. In a strongly worded editorial he condemned the behaviour of the women, and asked: "Is this a specimen of our women's natural mildness? Is this an expression of their modesty? Is this a sign of their bashfulness?" He then warned:

When things have gone beyond the bounds of polite norms and reached the stage of intemperance, it is not advisable to allow indulgence any longer... Let every master of the house, after reading this letter, warn his wife, daughters and daughters-in-law. Since they [the women] are incapable of making proper use of their freedom in this regard, they cannot have any right to freedom.<sup>78</sup>

The ceremonial basharghar managed to maintain a precarious existence even as late as the 1950s in Calcutta. Although the rituals of traditional Hindu marriage are followed faithfully by many, even among the most westernized Bengali bhadralok of Calcutta today, one rarely comes across basharghar songs and raillery. They may, however, still be alive in rural areas.

One by one, the independent forms practised by women disappeared by the turn of the present century; under attack by the Christian missionaries, English administrators and the Bengali bhadralok, they had to give in to a hostile male world. Even fellow male artistes — who were being equally hounded out from respectable society — did not always lose the chance to denounce these women.<sup>79</sup> Though they could enjoy patronage in the andarmahal till almost the end of the nineteenth century, as a new generation of educated 'ladies' began to replace the older generation, the ties of the andarmahal with popular forms of culture were snapped.

### III

#### **Conclusion: The rise of the *bhadramabila***

By the end of the third quarter of the nineteenth century, the products of Bethune School, other women's educational institutions and of various forms of zenana teaching (either through trained women teachers or private coaching by husbands) were making their presence felt in the Bengali cultural field. It is estimated that 190 odd women authors from 1856 to 1910 produced about 400 works, including poems, novels, plays, essays and autobiographies. During the same period, 21 periodicals with which women were associated editorially, and which were primarily devoted to women's issues were in circulation in Bengal.<sup>80</sup>

The majority of the women authors of this period came from respectable homes, usually from upper-caste, well-to-do bhadralok

families. The leading names are those of Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) of the Tagore family who was Rabindranath's elder sister; Prasannamoyi Devi (1857-1939), daughter of an East Bengal *zamindar* (landlord) who was educated in her home; Girindramohini Dasi (1858-1925), who learnt English first from her father and later from her husband, a scion of the family of the well-known millionaire Akrur Dutt; Mankumari Basu (1863-1943), a niece of the poet Michael Madhusudan Dutt; and Kamini Ray (1864-1933), who was educated in a school, and later became a teacher at the Bethune School.

The aim of this section is not to assess the literary merits of the compositions of these women — some of which were definitely of a high standard — but to indicate the new style and content that set them apart from women's popular cultural forms. The style of their compositions — poems, stories, novels, articles — showed signs of the training that they had undergone. The earthy dialect, the witty, homely idioms that marked the sayings of their predecessors were replaced by chaste, Sanskrit-derived compound Bengali words and expressions. Metaphors and images were now borrowed from the classics, the stress more often being on the distant, the romantic, and the ethereal. Reviewing Prasannamoyi Devi's collection of poems *Banalata* in 1880, the *Calcutta Review* commented:

It consists of several short poems on a variety of subjects which bear the impress of a mind emancipated from the thraldom of... Juthi, Mallika, Malati [names of flowers commons in Bengali households] of bygone ages, and awakening to an appreciative perception of the beautiful, the grand and the sublime not simply in terrestrial objects, but likewise in the phenomenal aspects of Nature, in all her immensity.<sup>81</sup>

The minds of the imprisoned andarmahal women were indeed opened to a world different from and wider than the domesticated scene of the panchalis, kathakatas, dhap kirtans and similar other popular cultural forms to which they had been accustomed to in the past. While editing the magazine *Bbarati* (from 1884 to 1894), Swarnakumari Devi introduced a variety of social and political topics as well as reports from abroad. Prasannamoyi Devi composed poems on the plight of women who were married to unworthy husbands, as well as on the Rani of Jhansi, and on the visit of the

Prince of Wales to Calcutta in 1876.

Their treatment of these various issues — personal as well as social — was often marked by a soft sentimentality, in sharp contrast to the forthright, aggressive and ribald tone of women's popular cultural forms. The portrayal of saintly, virtuous and dutiful women, so often found in their poems and novels, must, in part, have been influenced by the 'text books' they studied. An eighteenth century pastoral romance — *Paul and Virginia* by Bernardin de St Pierre — was one such book recommended for the women of the andarmahal. Girindramohini Dasi learnt it by heart from her father. The book tells the story of the respectful love of Paul, the poor, illegitimate child of a deserted woman, for Virginia, the daughter of an aristocrat, and ends with the death of Virginia when her ship is wrecked in a storm. She could have been saved but for her maidenly modesty which made her refuse the preferred assistance of a naked sailor!

The model of female education, which influenced the compositions of the women authors of bhadralok families, stressed the cultivation of genteel norms and domestic virtues among respectable women. Speaking in 1856, a Young Bengal, radical said:

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

He then pointed out how best to train the Bengali woman to serve this purpose: "She must be refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated. . . ."<sup>82</sup> More than two decades later, a Brahma magazine reiterated the same model for women's education:

A woman's nature is generally emotional while a man's is rational. Only that therefore can be termed authentic female education which primarily aims at improving the heart of a woman, and only secondarily at improving her mind.... The main aim of real female education is to train, improve and nourish the gentle and noble qualities of her heart . . . Under such a system [of education], attempts should be made through means of religious education, moral education, reading of poems which inspire noble feelings,

and training in music which rouses pure thoughts, so that women can become tenderhearted, affectionate, compassionate and genuinely devout to be able to be virtuous and religious-minded...<sup>83</sup>

The woman's magazine *Bamabodbini Patrika* emphasized a similar need for *naram-naram* or gentle and tender education for women.<sup>84</sup>

The lesson indicated for andarmahal women in these suggestions was clear. The coarse, 'untutored' expletives and expressions that they shared with the women of the streets, had to be expurgated from their vocabulary. Any sign of assertiveness or of departure from their domestic roles that might be inspired by stories about the adulterous Radha, or the assertive Vidya, had to be suppressed. *Bamabodbini Patrika* warned against the tendency to subvert the objective of female education by some women who still read *Vidya-Sundarand* panchalis in the andarmahal.<sup>85</sup>

The model of the new "refined, reorganized, recast, regenerated" Bengali woman, however, was reinforced from an unsuspected quarter. Quite a few women, from those professions looked down upon by the bhadralok, succeeded in trespassing into the field of educated women's literature with their own original compositions written in the refined, chaste Bengali required by the bhadralok. Earlier, in the 1840s, and 1850s, some Bengali newspapers had dared to carry letters signed by "prostitutes who have been ousted from their houses."<sup>86</sup> These letters described the circumstances that had forced the women into prostitution: desertion by husbands or lovers, economic necessities, and so on. But now literary compositions began to emerge from these very 'red light' areas of Calcutta. In 1870, a book came out entitled *Kamini Kalanka* written by one Nabinkali Devi, which purported to be the autobiography of a prostitute.<sup>87</sup> A theatre actress Golap (who was one of the first women to be recruited for acting in Michael Madhusudan Dutt's *Sharmisbtha* in 1873, and later, after her marriage to a bhadralok came to be known as Sukumari Dutta), published in 1875, a play called *Apurva Sati*. Another actress, Tinkari, (who acted in a Bengali version of Shakespeare's *Macbeth* at the Minerva Theatre in Calcutta, and became so rich that on her death, she gifted two houses to a hospital in the city, and willed the sale proceeds from her ornaments to needy tenants in her neighbourhood) published a collection of stories in 1894. The best known among these

actresses was Binodini who joined the stage when she was nine years old, and retired at quite an early age after 14 years, wishing to escape from the compulsions of prostitution which the life of an actress entailed in those days. Her collection of poems *Kanak O Nalinee* came out in 1905 and her autobiography *Amar Katha* in 1912.<sup>88</sup>

These actresses learnt to communicate in the new literary language by taking on roles in which they played heroines who had to utter dialogues often in high-flown, ornate Bengali. Some among them also learnt from their bhadralok patrons in the world of Bengali theatre, or from those educated Bengali gentlemen who kept them as their mistresses—a common practice in nineteenth century Bengal. But, in spite of their success in breaking through the barrier of language, they still seemed to remain untouchables to both the bhadralok and their newly emerging *bhadramahila* (educated wives and daughters of the bhadralok) sisters.

How did the bhadralok intellectuals react to these efforts by socially oppressed women? When Nabinkali Devi's *Kamini Kalanka* was reviewed in *Hindoo Patriot*, the progressive Brahmos in their journal *Indian Mirror* came out with bitter comments: "Imagine a public woman depicting in her peculiar language the scenes of her early life and the strange vicissitudes which a career like hers necessarily presented . . . . The repentance was all a sham for we are told the authoress was still pursuing her ignominious course. . . ."<sup>89</sup> The courage of a young liberal bhadralok from an upper caste family to marry the actress Golap, evoked only bitter contempt from his peers. Manomohan Bosu, a noted theatre personality of those days, composed a sarcastic song in 1874, which was meant to be sung as a *nagar sankeertan* (a popular urban form of street singing in procession, initiated by the Vaishnavite preacher Chaitanya in fifteenth century Nadia in Bengal, and which still continues today). The song lampoons Golap reminding her that when she was a public woman, she had a hundred husbands and that fate had brought to her a gem of a husband through the theatre green room. It describes Golap "dressed as a chaste woman, but looking for sport."<sup>90</sup>

Thus, the acquirement of and proficiency in the new literary forms was not necessarily a passport for entry into the society of the bhadramahila. The bhadralok insistence on membership of the andarmahal, on the total dependence of the woman on the male

head of the family, on strict adherence to the traditional responsibilities of a respectable home, was an important pre-condition for a woman's literary apprenticeship.

As a result, when they started writing, the bhadramahilas internalized the male concepts of the new womanhood. Thus Kailashbhashini Devi's *Hindu Mahilaganer Heenabastha*, which was published in 1863 and favourably reviewed in contemporary newspapers, though stressing the need for the education of women to free them from superstition, finally accepted this position: "From the particular nature and capacities with which God had endowed women, it is quite clear that the subservience of women is God's will. By becoming strong therefore, women can never become independent.... It does not become a woman to be without protection. An unprotected woman will not be respected anywhere. . . ."<sup>91</sup> Another woman writer, Hamangini Choudhury, writing in *Antahpur*, a women's magazine, advises Bengali wives in these words: "Even if the husband uses abusive language out of blind anger and behaves rudely, the wife's duty is to accept it in silence. It is extremely improper to show disobedience before the husband. Even if you are at the point of death, you should never speak ill of your husband to others. . . ."<sup>92</sup>

In these literary activities which arose from within the framework of a strictly defined domestic role, one could not expect any expression of women's independent aspiration. The literature of the bhadramahila was constrained by their obligation to be refined, to cultivate those tastes which their husbands liked, to speak in a language which did not come spontaneously but had to be learnt painstakingly. The women artistes of the market place and streets also lived in a male-dominated society. But their economic self-reliance, their independent life style and non-conformity to the morals of bhadralok society allowed them some freedom which often found expression in the derisive defiance of patriarchal norms, irreverent drollery at the expense of the divinities, and bolder assertion of their own desires, although often under the somewhat transparent veil of allegory.

Why did they fail to sustain their culture? We can hazard a few guesses. The popular culture of nineteenth century Calcutta was derived in part from the rural traditions which arrived in the metropolis and were modified in the new environs. The women who migrated to Calcutta in the early nineteenth century were mainly

the wives and daughters of artisans and cottage-industry workers, who sought to replicate their economic and cultural life-styles in the new setting. But with the growth of modern industries in Bengal and the emergence of a new generation (their own sons and daughters) cut off from their rural roots — who joined these industries as workers — the rural cultural traditions were eroded to a great extent. Migrants from other parts of India — eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar — came to swell the ranks of these workers. The change in occupations affected their cultural output. The linguistic homogeneity of the working class in Bengal was fragmented. Could this be one of the reasons why the industrial proletariat of Bengal has come out with few songs, compared to the rich heritage of the nineteenth century working class songs of the industrialized nations of the West, or even of Bombay in the present century? This is a subject beyond the purview of the present article which is primarily concerned with the impact of the newly acquired culture of the *bhadralok* of nineteenth century Calcutta, upon contemporary forms of women's popular culture in particular, and upon popular culture in general.

The cultural values imbibed by the *bhadralok* from Victorian England changed the character of the patrons of art. We have already seen how they drove a wedge into the relatively homogeneous cultural world of the women of nineteenth century Bengal. In the general context of popular culture, though the bulk of their audience were common people, the *jatrawallas*, the *kavis* and other folk artistes of Calcutta depended on rich patrons for their actual livelihood. In the early nineteenth century, patronage was offered by the descendants of the old zamindars or landed gentry, the *parvenu banias* (traders and brokers) and the East India Company agents, who were yet to give up their traditional attachment to these forms of entertainment, and were yet to be enlightened by English education. However, by the late nineteenth century, their sons and grandsons had grown up to look down upon these forms as licentious and voluptuous, thanks to the education that they had received in Hindu College and other institutions. By the end of the century, as 'enlightenment' closed in blotting out the familiar world with education, industrialization, new cultural tastes and activities, the popular culture that developed in nineteenth century Calcutta had to retreat and seek refuge in the Bengal countryside, perhaps in the hope of rediscovering the ties that had led to its

birth. As one perceptive observer of the history of Bengali *kavis* describes the retreat:

.. . Faced by the powerful onslaught of English education, prudery camouflaged by Brahma Samaj fastidiousness, and the mid-Victorian morals of the Bankim [Chatterjee] group . . . the *kavi* songs with their tumult, jugglery of tunes and rustic slanging matches had to wind up from Calcutta. Deserting the gas-lit urban atmosphere, the *kavi* songs, *tarjas* and *panchalis* descended on the dimly-lit village stage in evenings ringing with the cricket's chirp...<sup>93</sup>

But even in the Bengal villages, the women among these folk artistes had to fight the same sort of discrimination that they had suffered in Calcutta. We hear about one Kusumkumari at the turn of the present century who, during a *kavi* song performance in a village in the East Bengal district of Barisal, was abused by her male contender. The latter's aspersions, curiously enough, echo the same attitude which a hundred years ago Bhola Maira betrayed when attacking Jogyeshwari: "How dare you sing with us being a woman? You are only good for cooking!"<sup>94</sup> But the poetic rules of these folk cultural forms — like the practice of poetic duels in *kavi* songs — did allow the women singers to retaliate. Public performances, where the audience also often participated, — an integral aspect of folk performance — helped these women to draw upon a fund of imagery which belonged not to the mind of a single poet, but to the hidden collective life of the entire audience. Their retorts in a *kavi* duel, their amazingly imaginative interpretations of a mythological story in a *panchali* session, could therefore still evoke appreciative responses from the audience.

On the other hand, in the environment of a nuclear family (which was developing towards the end of the nineteenth century as opposed to the traditional Hindu joint family), the *bhadramahila's* cultural pursuits acquired a private chamber character. The collective gaiety of a *panchali* session or a *basharghar* was narrowed into individual compositions to be appreciated by the husband and his friends, or to be printed in magazines to be read by the educated few. The language itself of these compositions became the code of a private and defensive world insulated from the mainstream of life in the streets.

There were of course some exceptions. Mankumari Basu wrote

satirical verses on westernized Bengali men and women. Swarnakumari Devi's farces sometimes incorporated traditional women's dialect into the dialogues of her female characters. An interesting departure from conventional, effete bhadramahila literature was poem entitled "Bangaleer Babu" (the Bengali Babu) composed in 1882 by Mokhadayinee Mukhopadhyaya, a sister of W.C. Bonerjee, one of the founders of the Indian National Congress. She composed the poem as a retaliation against another poem entitled "Bangaleer Meye" (The Bengali Girl), written by the famous poet, Hem Chandra Bandyopadhyaya, who made fun of Bengali women describing them as shrews who were fond of Dashu Ray's doggerels and jhumur songs and had no serious interests. Mokshadayinee in a parody of the poem, replaced the Bengali woman with the Bengali babu — the lawyers, the deputy magistrates, the school teachers, the sub judges, the clerks, the overseers — who from "ten in the morning till four in the afternoon work as slaves" and yet brag about their positions, and end up "blustering over pegs" of whisky in their homes in the evening.<sup>95</sup>

But the bulk of the literature produced by the newly educated women at the end of the nineteenth century, consisted of poems which expressed in refined, chaste Bengali a wide range of private sentiments — undying faith in the husband; grief at separation from or on the death of the husband; affection for children; love for nature and — often in a didactic tone — the need to educate their sisters who were still awaiting emancipation.

Education no doubt helped the bhadramahila to gain access to the sophisticated literature which was being produced by her male peers, to the debates that were raging on social reforms in intellectual circles, to the new concepts of white-collar domestic bliss and the accomplishments necessary to keep the husband in good humour. But in the process she lost something else — the potent and vigorous language of women's popular and folk cultural forms, the nimble-wilted drollery and gusto that her mothers and grandmothers shared with the panchali singers and the jhumur dancers of the past. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee half-humorously summed up the situation. While acknowledging that the "new woman's" tastes were better than her predecessor's he said: "Her voice has ceased to rend the air like the cuckoo, and has become instead the mew of a pussy."<sup>96</sup>

## NOTES

1. Basantika is a woman character in a skit in a Bengali journal, *Hasantab*, 2, no. 10(1874).
2. N. Augustus Willard, *A Treatise of the Music of India* (1834) in William Jones and N.A. Willard, *Music of India* (Calcutta: Sushil Gupta, 1962), p. 76.
3. Ibid.
4. The attitude comes out clearly in the following speech by a Young Bengali advocate of female education:  
Hindoo girls may be permitted to attend public schools so long as they are infants, or, when ripened into womanhood, to receive a finished education at home: but for them to come out into society, it will be foolish to fear or expect the consummation of such a result, constituted as Hindu society at present is, as it will be, on the other hand, equally foolish on the part of any among our orthodox countrymen now to think of debarring our women from the light of knowledge, which has already struggled its way into their chambers of darkness. Educated, our women will certainly become more amiable and high principled, more faithful and devoted to our service, but will by no means rebel against the sense of their rightful guardians.  
Koylaschunder Bose, "On the Education of Hindu Females," Medical College Theatre, Calcutta, 14 August 1846 in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, ed. Alok Roy (Calcutta: Bibliographical Research Centre, 1975), p. 198. The same sentiments were expressed in 1864, curiously enough, by a women's magazine which championed female education:  
As long as the minds of men and women do not become pure, it will not be advisable to let them [women] out in this dangerous society....To bring out women in the open, the first requirement is to make them change their uncouth dress and steady their fragile minds by religious advice....  
*Bamabodhini Patrika*, c. 1864 (Sraavan, B.S. 1271), p. 163-
5. See speech by Babu Greesh Chandra Ghosh, "Female Occupations in Bengal," Bengal Social Science Association, Calcutta, 30 Jan. 1868, in Bela Dutt Gupta, *Sociology in India* (Calcutta: Centre for Sociological Research, 1972), app., pp. 60-61.
6. *Somaprakash*, 7 Dec., 1863-
7. *Somaprakash*, c. 1864 (Chaitra 23, B.S. 1270).
8. Sukurnar Sen, *Women's Dialect in Bengali* (Calcutta: Jijnasa, 1979). See also Sushil Kumar De, ed. *Bangla Prabod* (1945; rpt. Calcutta: A. Mukherjee, 1986). An exhaustive collection of Bengali proverbs, this

contains an invaluable introduction by DC which devotes considerable space to women's proverbs, popular in the past, but now lost (pp. 2632).

9. *Somaprakash*, 23 Nov. 1863.
10. *Somaprakash*, April 1864 (Chaitra, 23, B.S. 1270).  
The bhadrakok tendency to equate women with the 'lower orders' can also be seen in the following statement of another Bengali intellectual who draws sanction from the scriptures: "There has been a discipline effected by the Rishis and the Brahmans in the heart and mind of the women and masses of Hindu society." Refuting the criticism that the "Sudras lay under a special suppression" in India, he claims that this was simply "on par with matters like the disabilities of woman and child." He then adds, "The Sudras knew it, and have never gone to Western savants for a redress of grievances in which it seems, *common cause might as well be made with the Hindu womankind from the topmost down to be lowest castes*" (emphasis mine). Jogendra Chandra Ghosh, *Brahmanism and the Sudra* (Calcutta, 1901), pp. 50-52.
11. When speaking of the reforms for 'emancipating' women in nineteenth century Bengal, we often tend to ignore the possibility that the issues around which the debates on 'emancipation' revolved might have concerned only the andarmahal women of respectable bhadrakok homes who constituted a minority of Bengali women.
12. Meredith Borthwick, "Bhadramahila and Changing Conjugal Relations in Bengal, 1850-1900," in Michael Allen and S.N. Mukherjee, *Women in India and Nepal*, Australian National University Monographs on South Asia, No. 8 (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1982), pp. 108-9. Borthwick analyses how both the new anglicized education and the colonial avenues of employment made it desirable for the English educated bhadrakok to have a wife who had some understanding of this new milieu.
13. Usha Chakrabarty, *Condition of Bengali Women Around the Second Half of the Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta: Published by the author 1963), p. 97.
14. The transformation of the mighty Shiva of Aryan mythology into a corpulent and indolent hemp-smoker in Bengali folklore (found both in popular Bengali folk songs as well as in folk paintings) needs some explanation. Kosambi suggests pre-Aryan gods or goellings who were incorporated into and identified with the established Aryan Hindu pantheon, like Shiva and Vishnu. While retaining their primitive features in the local imagination, these gods were rechristened under new names. (See D.D. Kosambi, *The Culture and Civilization of India in Historical Outline* (Delhi: Vikas, 1977), pp. 48, 179) It is quite possible that a similar local god associated with a cultivator's life style.

marked by labour in the fields during the sowing and harvesting seasons, and by a sort of languor during the offseason, was incorporated into the Shiva image. A modern Bengali critic seeks to explain the popular image of Shiva in Bengal by suggesting that there was a deliberate attempt on the part of the upper caste Bengalis, after the Muslim invasion, to woo lower caste Hindus by co-opting the local gods into the Aryan pantheon. According to him:

The Muslims came and conquered the country. The Hindus lost their kings and kingdoms. As a result, cracks developed among the warrior communities — the Bagdis, Doms, Hadis, Lohars, Khoiras, Tiors, etc. (who belonged to the lower castes). Temptations for royal patronage, for conversion to the religion of the conquerors, struck at the roots of society. At that moment, there was no other way available to bind them together except some religious identity. They had to be told: they were blessed by the gods, there was nothing ignoble in their occupations. Even if they did not have jobs of paid warriors, they could live with dignity by following their respective occupations.... They had to be told that the great Mahadeva (Shiva) himself at one time worked on the fields as an ordinary peasant. Annapoorna (another form of the goddess Durga, Shiva's consort), who gives rice to the entire world, once had to take on the appearance of a low caste Bagdi woman to catch fish. For a nation which believes in rebirth, consequences of one's misdeeds and in gods, these assurances were of no mean value.

(Harekrishna Mukhopadhyaya, *Gaudabanga Sanskriti* (Calcutta, 1972), pp. 117-18.)

15. Vaishnavcharan Basak, comp., *Bharatiya Sahasra Sangeet* (Calcutta, Basak and Sons, n.d.).
16. Debiprasad Sarbadhikary's reminiscences of his childhood in a Bengali village give us a glimpse into the easy identification by Bengali women of the immersion of the goddess Durga with the departure of the newly-wed daughter for the home of the husband. He describes a typical scene on the day of the immersion, "...when the village housewife with tears in her eyes, and in a choked voice, bade goodbye to the Mother (Durga), no one seemed to remember the great omnipotent goddess. It was as if the sad scene of seeing off a village bride on her way to her father-in-law's house, had just been reenacted." See *Smriti rekha* (Calcutta: Nikhil Chandra Sarbadhikary, 1933), p. 83-
17. The legends and anecdotes that had grown around Krishna in Bengal are at variance with the ancient Sanskrit texts. Krishna in Bengali folklore is a cowherd prince, who falls in love with Radha. Radha is married to Ayan Ghosh, who happens to be an uncle of Krishna. Ghosh is a Bengali surname, not usually found in any other part of India. Ayan's

- mother, Jotila, and sister Kutila (literally meaning wily and crooked) are always waiting to catch unaware the two lovers who go to great lengths in secretly arranging their rendezvous. Radha as a Bengali village housewife, involved in an adulterous relationship, going to the river on the plea of filling her water vessel, but actually to meet Krishna, or pining in her home for the return of Krishna, or starting at the sound of his flute: these images have inspired Bengali folk poets for centuries.
18. Panchan Mandal, *Chithi-patre Samajchitra*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Vishwabarati, 1953).
  19. See reports in *Somaprakash*, c. 1863 (Chaitra 12, B.S. 1270) and in *Samvad Pravakar*, c. 1847 (Poush 18, B.S. 1254) in Benoy Ghosh, ed. *Samayik Patre Sanglar Samajchitra* (Calcutta: Papyrus, 1978), 1.
  20. Their names were Golokmani, Dayamani and Ratnamani. *Samachar Darpan*, 11 March 1826; quoted in Brojen Bandyopadhyay, ed. *Satvadpatre Sekaler Katba*, 2 vols. (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1932, 1935).
  21. *Samachar Darpan*, 22 Nov. 1828 in *ibid.*
  22. Ramani Mohan Mullick, *Pracheena Stree Kavi* (Calcutta, 1863). The Devi here is a local Bengali goddess called Vashuli who was worshipped by Chandidas. The poetess Rarii was employed as a sweeper in the temple of Vashuli.
  23. Durgadas Lahiri, comp., *Bangleer Gaan* (Calcutta, 1905J, p. 186. Madan is the god of love in Hindu mythology.
  24. *Vishwakosh* (Calcutta, 1892). A reference to kheur is found under the entry kavi.
  25. Prafulla Chandra Pal, *Pracheen Kabiwalar Gaan* (Calcutta: Calcutta University, 1958), p. 36.
  26. Quoted in Mukhopadhyay, *Goudabanga Sanskriti*, p. 130. The last line is a variation on the perennial theme of keeping the affair secret from Jotila and Kutila, the two in laws. See note 17.
  27. Bepin Bihari Gupta, *Puratan Prasanga* (Calcutta: Vidyabharti, 1966), pp. 254-60. Ambalika, the daughter of Kashi Raja, was married to Vichitraveerjya, the son of King Shantanu and his wife Satyavati. Vichitra veerjya died young, and Satyavati sent her eldest son, Vyasa (composer of the epic poem *Mahabharata*) who was born out of her pre-marital union with the sage Parasara, to beget a child with Ambalika. The result was the birth of Pandu, the father of the five Pandava heroes. ("Adi Parva," *Mahabharata*).
  28. Even Ishwar Chandra Gupta, the well known poet and journalist, who was sympathetic towards kavis and other folk poets, seemed to be ashamed of the liberty they often took in jatra's in ridiculing Hindu deities. He wrote: "Except the merry-making *itar* (vulgar oronedu-

- cated] people no one from respectable society can find any pleasure in their compositions." *SamvadPravakar*, 28 June 1848; quoted in Gaurishankar Bhattacharya, *Bangla Lokanaty Sameeksha* (Calcutta: Rabindra Bharati University, 1972), p. 188. Explaining the gradual dissociation of the bhadrakalok from these traditional popular cultural forms, Sivanath Shastri, the Brahmo reformer wrote later: "As English education spread in the country, educated people developed a sense of disgust towards these forms. Many felt ashamed to be present at kavi or jatra performances." See Sivanath Shastri, *Ramtonu Labiri, O Tatkaleen Bango Samaj* (Calcutta: New Age, 1957), p. 57.
29. Pal, *Pracheen Kabiwalar Gaan*, 80.
  30. M. Gluckman, *Closed Systems and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1964) and *Order and Rebellion in Tribal Society* (London: Cohen and West, 1963).
  31. See Natalie Zimmon Davis, "Women on Top: Symbolic Sexual Inversion and Political Disorder in Early Modern Europe," in Barbara A. Babcock, ed. *The Reversible World: Symbolic Inversion in Art and Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1978).
  32. The story of Vidya-Sundar has been treated by many Bengali poets, the earliest being a composition by the sixteenth century poet Govinda Das of Chittagong (now a part of Bangladesh). But the best, in terms of poetic images, is that composed by Bharatchandra (1712-60). The story revolves round Vidya (which literally means knowledge), daughter of the king of Bardhaman; Sundar (literally meaning beautiful), son of the king of Kanchi; and Malini (an elderly woman selling flowers) who acts as a sort of go-between in arranging secret rendezvous for the lovers. The lovers get married according to Gandharva rites by exchanging garlands, unknown to their parents. Much of the poem is taken up by rather uninhibited descriptions of the various stages of their love making, couched in beautiful imagery. Sundar is finally caught when Vidya is found to be pregnant. On the eve of his execution, he prays to Kali who appears and saves him by revealing his identity. The King of Bardhaman welcomes him as his son-in law, and everything ends happily.
- We should add however that in Bengali folk literature there was an old oral tradition of romantic songs about ordinary human characters (as distinct from the romantic songs about the divine pair Radha and Krishna). In Mymensingh (now in Bangladesh) there were two such popular songs: one on Andha-Bondhu, a blind flute player with whom the wife of a prince fell in love, and the other on Shyam Ray, a prince who wanted to marry a low caste Dom woman. See Dinesh Sen, *Banglar Pura Naree* (Calcutta, 1939).
33. *Calcutta Review*, 13, no. 26 (1850), pp. 257-83.

34. *Bangaleer Gaan*, comp. Lahiri, p. 1041.
35. *Report of Chief Magistrate of Calcutta and Calcutta Municipal Corporation Health Report*, quoted in Chakrabarty, *Condition of Bengali Women*.
36. Meghnad Gupta, *Rater Kolkata* (Calcutta: Hemanta K. Roy, 1923), p. 10. The last line is an imaginative localized version of the Krishna legend sung in flippant vein.
37. *Ibid.*
38. *Bharatiya Sahasra Sangeet*, comp. Basak, p. 553-
39. All the proverbs quoted here are taken from *Bang/a Prabod*, ed. De.
40. There was occasional interaction between popular and bhadrakalok forms, as well as between men and women artists, on the issue of widow remarriage.

An anonymous, well known song on widow remarriage, which adopts the voice of a woman, was popular in the streets of Calcutta in the nineteenth century. It begins thus:

*Benchey thak Vidyasagar chirojeebee bdye  
Sadarey korechhey report bidhobader hobey biye.*

(Long live Vidyasagar! He has submitted a report to the headquarters recommending marriage for widows.)

After describing how they will live happily with their husbands following the passing of the legislation, the widows sing:

*Alochaley, kanchkalaye, malshar mukhey diye chhai  
Ed boeyjabo shabey barondala mathaye loye.*

(Fie on sunned rice [the staple food which Bengali widows were supposed to have], green plantains and earthen pots! [used by widows in their daily worship]. With our husbands alive, we shall carry on our heads baskets welcoming them.)

Quoted in *Bharatiya Sahasra*, comp. Basak, p. 455.

Another anonymous folk song describes in a lilting tune:

*Orey Vidyasagar dibey biye  
Bidhobader dbdrey,  
Tara aarphelbhey na chul  
Bandhbey benee gunjbe reyphul  
Sankha sari porbey notun korey.*

(Vidyasagar is getting widows to remarry. They'll no longer shave their heads. From now on, they'll tie their hair in tresses, tuck in flowers, and wear shell bangles and saris again.)

Quoted in Barun Kumar Chakravarty, *Loka Sanskriti: Nana Prasanga* (Calcutta: Booktrust, 1981), pp. 20-21.

A male folk poet, Dasarathi Ray, popularly known as Dasu Ray, whose panchali songs were sung all over nineteenth century Bengal, composed a song on widow remarriage, putting the words in the mouth of

a woman who expresses her happiness at the prospect of remarriage.

In fact, many of Dasu Ray's songs use the popular idiom common among women. Born in 1805, he was probably influenced in the composition of his songs by a woman kavi of his village, Akshaya Patni. She had her own troupe which Dasu Ray joined as a young man. His relatives and the upper caste villagers did not approve of his attachment to Akshaya (who as her surname suggests, may have belonged to the lower caste of ferrymen). Dasu Ray was compelled to quit her troupe and set up his own troupe of panchali singers in 1835. One of his songs, put in the mouth of women 'sinners' (*kula-kalankinis*) narrates the exploits of some of the much revered 'Virtuous' women of the Hindu epics — Kunti, Ahalya, Mandodari, Satyawati and others — all of whom had children out of wedlock. The 'sinners' then ruefully complain:

They all fell in love and still got the reputation of being chaste women;

They easily came into possession of piety, wealth and love.

But in our love, there is only immense agony.

We can't bear it any more.

What else can we say?

See, Harimohan Mukhopadhyay, *Dashu Rayer Panchali*, p. 639.

41. *Bangla Prabod*, ed. De, p. 73-
42. *The Report of the Indian Factory Commission 1890* (Calcutta: Government of India, 1890).
43. Chakrabarty, *Condition of Bengali Women*, p. 63-
44. Shib Chander Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are* (London: Edward Stanford 1881; rpt. Calcutta, 1883), p. 8.
45. Review of *Naesho Rupeya* in *Bangardarshan* c. 1873 (Vaishak, B.S. 1280).
46. *Sulabh Samachar*; c. 1871 (Bhadra 28, B.S. 1278).
47. This tendency is represented by people like Radhakanta Deb (1784-1867) of the Shobhabazar royal family; the writer Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyaya (1787-1848) who founded the Dharmasabha to fight the Act banning sati, and edited the newspaper *Samachar Chandrika*; and later by the poet journalist Ishwar Chandra Gupta, who ran the popular newspaper *Samvad Prabhakar*.
48. For the views of this section of the bhadrakalok, see Gautam Chattopadhyay, ed. *Awakening in Bengal in Early Nineteenth Century* (Calcutta: Research India, 1965). This is a compilation of speeches and articles submitted to the Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge, an organization of the Young Bengal group.
49. In spite of the differences of opinion which often divided them, the Brahmo Samaj movement on the one hand, and intellectuals like Bankim

Chandra Chatterjee on the other, could both be taken as representatives of this trend. See, Pradip Sinha, *Nineteenth Century Bengal: Aspects of Social History* (Calcutta: Punthi Pustak, 1965).

50. See note 28 for Ishwar Chandra Gupta's views. As for the Young Bengal group, their attitude towards popular culture was set by their preceptor, H. Derozio (1819-42) whose journal *The Kaleidoscope* condemned the kavi songs which are "most esteemed by the natives" as "so disgustingly obscene and vulgar that they would shock the ears of any but a native to hear them." See *The Kaleidoscope*, no. 5 (Dec. 1829) quoted in *Awakening in Bengal*, ed. Chattopadhyay, p.79- Journals like the *Tattvabodhini Patrika* edited by the Brahmos, or *Bangadarshan* edited by men like Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, which shaped the views of the bhadralok to a great extent, took a similar stand on the popular cultural forms of nineteenth century Bengal.
51. Quoted in Bose, *The Hindoos As They Are*, pp. 118-19.
52. *Third Report of the Calcutta School Book Society* (1819 20), app. no. 2, p. 47.
53. *Ibid.*
54. Hur Chunder Dutt, *Bengali Life and Society* (Calcutta, 1853), pp. 10-11.
55. "A Hindoo on the Drama," Letter, *Morning Chronicle*, Jan. 1855.
56. *Calcutta Review*, 23, no. 26 (1850), pp. 257-83-
57. *Bangadarshan*, c. 1873 (Kartik, B.S. 1280).
58. See Swamakumari Devi's article on education in the andarmahal in *Pradeep*, c. 1899 (Bhadra, B.S. 1306), quoted in Brojen Bandyopadhyay, *Sahitya Sadhak Charithmala*, No. 28 (Calcutta: Bangiya Sahitya Parishad, 1948). We get a glimpse of the Vaishnavite woman singer's immense popularity in the nineteenth century Bengali andarmahal from an amusing incident in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's novel *Bisba Briksha* (1873) set in the early part of the century. The villain dressed as a Vaishnavite female singer enters the andarmahal and is immediately flooded with requests for songs. The nature of the requests indicates the wide range of the taste of the andarmahal women in those days. Some ask for songs by Gobinda Adhikari and Gopal Urey, popular kavis of early nineteenth century Calcutta. Others want to hear Dashu Ray's panchali. A few elderly women order songs on Krishna, following which some middle-aged women start an argument about which section of the Krishna kirtan should be sung — the *sakhi-samvad* (dialogue between Radha and her women friends) or the *viraha*. In the midst of all this a "shameless young girl" demands a "tappa by Nidhu." The tappa or love song, marked by a rhythmical swing and composed by Ramnidhi Gupta, popularly known as Nidhu Babu, were great hits in Bengal at that time, but were often looked down upon by the orthodox and the puritanical, who felt that they belonged to the immoral environs of the brothel.

- 59- *Somaprakash*, c. 1863 (Chaitra 23. B.S. 1270).
60. *Calcutta Review*, 13, no. 26 (1850), pp. 257-83.
61. Dhap, invented by Rupchand Chattopadhyay of Murshidabad (1722-92), was later embellished by Madhusudan Kan (1818-63) of Jessore. Women singers came to monopolize this style. See Harimohan Mukhopadhyay, *Banglar Kirtan O Kirtaniya* (Calcutta: Calcutta Sahitya Sansad, 1971).
62. *Vishwakosh*.
63. *Ibid.*
64. *Ibid.*
65. *Somaprakash*, c. 1866 (Paush 3, B.S. 1273).
66. Mahendranath Dutt, *Kolikatar Puratan Kahinee O Pratha* (1929; rpt. Calcutta: Mahendra Publishing Committee, 1983), p. 29. Daksha-yagna is an episode in Hindu mythology, which describes a sacrifice organized by Daksha, the father of Parvati. Parvati cannot bear to hear her father speak ill of her absent husband, Shiva, and dies on the spot from grief. Shiva arrives with his followers, kills Daksha and spoils his yagna (fire sacrifice).
67. Bhuban Mohun Mitra, "The Native Theatre," *Hindu Pioneer*, 1, no. 2 (Oct. 1835), in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, ed. Ray. See also entry under 'rangaJaya' in *Vishwakosh*.
68. "Much has been said by the correspondent of the *Hurkaru* about 'Bidya Sundar's being a very indecent play. Is it indecent because it is a Bengali work? Is it devoid of novelty and utility because it is a play composed in the vernacular language of the country?... The play of *Romeo and Juliet* and that of *Bidya Sundar* are much alike; he who thinks differently does not understand the spirit of Bharat Chandar's writings. . . . The Native Theatre is immoral because women of a public character are seen on this stage? Look... to the theatres of Italy, France, Germany etc., and tell me what you can object to the Native Theatre which you do not disapprove in others?" (Bhuban Mohun Mitra, Letter, *Hindu Pioneer*, 1, no. 3 (Nov. 1835) in *Nineteenth Century Studies*, ed. Ray). Attempts to defend indigenous popular culture and to appreciate lower class women performers were few and far between in nineteenth century bhadralok literature. We come across a review of jatra performance sponsored by "some respectable gentlemen well-versed in music" in Jorasanko, Calcutta, where we learn about a girl "over thirteen years old" called Chiddam (a rustic distortion of the name Sreedam, suggesting the plebian origins of the girl) whose songs charmed the audience. The reviewer writes: "... the girl is not very beautiful, but there is a certain gracefulness in her and one is moved to like her. I have never heard such a sweet voice ..." *Samvad Bhaskar*, 30 March, 1849.
69. *Madhyastha*, c. 1873 (Paush, B.S. 1280), pp. 621-23. Even the liberal minded journal *Hindoo Patriot* grudgingly accepted the introduction of