

Threads in Reform: The Transformation of Women's Dress in Colonial Bengal

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Abstract:

During the colonial period, Bengal experienced many social and cultural changes due to the influence of Western education and values. One significant area of change was in the way women dressed. Traditionally, Bengali women wore a simple saree, often without any garments underneath, which was not always considered modest or practical especially for appearing in public. With the growth of new ideas about women's roles in society, many reformers and women themselves began to rethink the question of appropriate clothing. Some adopted blouses, petticoats, and even gowns. Others developed new ways of draping the saree, such as the 'Brahmika saree', which balanced modesty, mobility, and cultural identity. This period marked the beginning of a new awareness among women about their appearance, respectability, and role in society.

Keywords: Saree, Modernity, Western Influence, Women's Clothing Reform

The introduction of Western education and culture brought significant changes to Bengali society during the colonial period. As new ideas and values spread, many Bengalis began to re-evaluate their traditional customs and ways of life. This era witnessed a gradual yet noticeable transformation in everyday practices and social behaviour. Shib Chunder Bose, a contemporary Bengali literatus, commented that the eager imitation of Western manners by the Bengali Baboos affected their traditional ways of thinking and living. In their desire to appear modern and more advanced than the common man, they began to adopt European styles and tastes. As a result, they gradually became disconnected from their cultural roots and began to immerse themselves in an imagined world shaped by European ideals of refinement.¹ Inevitably, Western influence extended to modes of dress, reflected not only in the adoption of Western attire but also in the westernization of traditional clothing. Bose vividly described the change in dressing styles after the establishment of British rule:

the establishment of the British rule in India has introduced a very great change in the national costume and taste, irrespective of the intellectual revolution, which is still greater. Twenty years ago the gala dress of a Bengalee boy consisted of a simple Dacca dhootee and a Dacca ecloye, with a pair of tinsel-worked shoes; but now rich English, German and China satin, brocade and velvet with embossed flowers, and gold and silver fringes and outskirts, have come into fashion and general use. It is a common sight to see a boy dressed in a pantaloons and coat made of the above costly stuffs, with a laced velvet cap, driving about the streets of Calcutta during the festive days.²

From the 1860s, some liberal minded Brahmos stressed on the public appearance of women for overall development of the later. The necessity of breaking seclusion was acutely felt. One of the obstacles in fulfilling this wish was their inadequate and indecent method of dress. This problem has been mentioned by many contemporary writers-both men and women. Bengali women used to wear only a five-yard-long saree which was inadequate to protect their modesty. Fanny Parks visited India and published a book on her travels in 1850. In this book, she described the kind of dress used by Bengali women. She says that sarees used by the ladies of 'baboo's *zenana*' were of muslin, edged with bright border. The women used to wear it by passing several times round the figure. 'No other attire was worn beneath the saree'. The texture of the *saree* was so thin that the form of the limbs and the color of the skin could be traced through it. Visiting the house of an opulent Hindu in Calcutta Fanny Parks describes:

The dress consisted of one long strip of Benares gauze of thin texture, with the end thrown over shoulder. The dress was rather transparent, almost useless as veil. Their necks and arms were covered with jewels.³

Rassundari Devi has written in her autobiography that in her days there was no thin clothes. They have to wear thicker sarees.

In those days, unlike now, the fabrics were not thin they were thick and heavy. I used to wear that garment with the veil drawn up to my chest while doing all those tasks. It was impossible to see outside through that cloth like a bullock yoked to a mill, even my eyes were covered. My gaze could not go beyond my own feet.⁴

It appears from the description of the two types of dresses that thin fabrics were typically worn by women from upper-class, urban, and prestigious families. In rural areas, and among middle- and lower-class families, women wore thicker garments. In the Bengali year 1308, a reputed Bengali journal wrote that fine fabrics were used only by women from wealthy and aristocratic families, while women from lower-class families wore thick and coarse clothing.⁵

They felt it was unthinkable for women to appear in public unless they were properly and modestly dressed. In 1868, a poem titled 'Suxmabastra' published in *Bamabodhini Patrika* noted that Bengali women were nearly unclothed in their sarees, and such attire was considered inappropriate for public appearance. Though most women preferred thin fabrics and disliked coarse ones, such preferences were often deemed inappropriate in terms of modesty. Among the educated sections of society, there was a growing awareness about women's clothing. A contemporary English-educated Bengali man remarked that it would be more appropriate for Bengali women to wear thicker and more modest garments, instead of the thin, loose saris commonly worn without adequate covering. In comparison, women from the North-Western Provinces, Central Provinces, and the South wore clothing considered more modest and respectable. He also observed that while some respectable Hindu women had begun wearing the *unghia* (a type of corset), the garments worn underneath were still regarded as too revealing. Therefore, he urged Bengali *baboos* to encourage positive changes in the attire of the women in their families. Such changes, he argued, were essential not only for personal decency but also for public morality. Social reforms in women's dress, he believed, should accompany

religious, moral, and intellectual progress. Improving women's clothing was, in his view, just as important to their dignity and status as other aspects of national development were to the progress of society.⁶ Another article argued that due to the lack of a proper dress women should live within the walls of *antahpur*. If they travelled on train or on public roads then it would be very shameful to the natives.⁷ This magazine also argued that some men did not like to allow women to travel in an open palanquin or regarded the travel of a woman by train as a matter of shame but they did not object to women's wearing thin almost transparent *sarees* and bathing in the open. It was also said that those women who maintained *purdah* to come out in front of their fathers, father-in-laws and brother-in-laws did not feel ashamed to wear such *sarees* or to take bath in the pond with men.⁸ As Bengali women did not wear anything except *saree* it was sometimes an insufficient protection from cold. It caused several diseases:

The *saree* by itself is sometimes an insufficient protection from cold, and there can be no doubt that the prevalence of dysentery, cholera and kindred ailments, is due in part to the chills that are inevitable when a woman passes from the cook room into draughty verandah or courtyard. It is possible also that the increasing susceptibility of the women of Calcutta to tuberculosis may be due to the insufficiency of their clothing.⁹

In the early 1870s, the concern regarding a decent and appropriate dress for women was steadily increasing. A meeting was organized by Bamahitaishini Sabha in 1871 in this context. The views expressed by the participating women in that discussion were later published in the *Bamabodhini Patrika* under the title 'Banganganadiger Parichhed' (The Attire of Bengali Women). In that publication, a woman named Mrs. Saudamini Khastagir remarked that the type of clothing commonly worn by women in our country leaves much of the body exposed, and such immodest dress is not suitable for respectable society. She further stated that for the holistic advancement of society, progress must be made in all areas; otherwise, true development cannot be achieved. Even if a Bengali woman is advanced in every respect, if her attire is not proper, it may undermine her confidence. Regarding Western attire, she opined that although some aspects of English clothing are commendable, in many ways they are even less suitable than Indian garments. Therefore, in trying to overcome the shortcomings of Bengali dress, there is no sense in adopting the negative aspects of English fashion. Moreover, she emphasized that foreign clothes are often quite expensive and are not particularly favorable for the nation's well-being. Even different kinds of dresses put on by the women of Bombay or North Western India was quite good but the use of traditional Bengali dress was much more satisfactory than the imitation of others. Beside this, the imitation could rob Bengali women of their Bengali looks. Hence, the kind of clothing adopted should be one that is both decent and beneficial for the country's interest.¹⁰

Another woman, Rajlaxmi Sen, who attended this meeting, argued that the dress of Bengali women would be such by which they could be distinguished from the others. It was very decent that few women wore blouses, jackets and shoes. However, she mentioned that some unchaste women also wore such articles of dress. Therefore, the *bhadramahila* should use a wrapper along with these articles to differentiate themselves from these unchaste women. This wrapper should be used in such a way that the woman could move easily.¹¹ In this same article *Bamabodhini Patrika* praised the fact that women were becoming conscious of the need

to reform their dress. It suggested that women could wear either *ijar* (trouser), *piran* (blouse) and *saree* or long *piran* and *saree* inside home. They should use wrappers and shoes while going out. It also mentioned that unwilling women could skip shoes. In a letter published in the periodical a Bengali lady from Bombay claimed the dress used by the female members of her family was decent and suitable both for summer and winter. One could easily move in this dress. The women of their family put on shoes, socks, bodice, blouse, petticoat and a *saree*. They used a wrapper when they went out. She claimed that the dress was partly similar to Bengali, partly to Muslim and partly to the English attire but was not the imitation of any particular style. The writer claimed that it was not very different from the dress used by many *bhadramahila* or that suggested by the magazine. But it was better than the latter. She wished to send a set of dress or photograph of this dress if any woman wished to see it.¹²

Some educated men who started to wear western dresses or westernized traditional dresses started in their family western dress for women. A small section of women started to wear gown. Following the western style, many Bengali *bhadramahila* such as the wife of the barrister Monmohan Ghosh started to wear gowns.¹³ But many women did not like the western dress. Srimati Hemantakumari Chaudhurani, the editor of *Antahpur* magazine wrote that we have always been dependent on others, as if we possess nothing of our own. With the spread of women's independence in recent times, various parts of India are undergoing change and reformation and similarly, there is no doubt that the clothing of Bengali women is also evolving and progressing. It is undeniably difficult to preserve modesty in all situations with just a single piece of cloth while moving freely in public. For this reason, many women have begun adopting various items of dress chemise, petticoat, bodice, and jacket following the example of the English. Earlier, such attire did not exist in Bengal as part of women's clothing clothes that could help uphold one's dignity. To make going out easier, many women have even started wearing gowns instead of saris. However, there is a significant difference between the gown and the sari. Though gowns offer greater convenience when going outdoors, it has been observed that they can hinder proper blood circulation in the body. Srimati Chaudhurani lamented that some Bengali women were blindly imitating Western attire without considering its merits and demerits.

It is unfortunate that while we have found comfort in learning to wear jackets, chemises, and similar garments in imitation of English women, on the other hand, tempted by luxury, we are also becoming weak and impoverished by wearing their unsuitable clothing.¹⁴

On the other hand, Sri Jyotirmoyee Gangopadhyay argued in favor of wearing the gown. According to her, most educated women, and it would not be an exaggeration to say about 99 percent, did not consider the gown as tasteful and graceful as the saree. Nevertheless, the gown was necessary for women who worked alongside men outside the home. She observed that women who wore sarees in public often faced various forms of harassment from men, whereas those who wore gowns were not subjected to such behavior. Gangopadhyay emphasized that many women adopted the gown not to westernize themselves, but to protect their dignity and safety.¹⁵

The acute need for modest and appropriate clothing for women was also recognized within the Tagore family, a prominent center of women's emancipation during the colonial period. Debendranath Tagore himself acknowledged the necessity of reforming women's dress in India. Sarala Devi Chaudhurani notes that since the time of her maternal grandfather, there had been extensive discussions and experiments within the family regarding suitable attire for women. After much deliberation, it was decided that the unmarried girls of the household would wear the *peshwaj*, a type of *salwar kameez*, when going out in public.¹⁶ Swarnakumari Dvi also mentioned her father's attempt to design a decent dress for women. She wrote that it was extremely difficult for Bengali women to step out in front of men wearing only the sari. Her father, Debendranath Tagore, had a lifelong distaste for the traditional attire of Bengali women and a strong desire to reform it. At times, he even experimented on the women of his own household, including his daughters, in an attempt to invent a refined and dignified dress. Swarnakumari Devi further wrote that, in their childhood, they wore clothes similar to those worn by children of aristocratic Muslim families. As they grew older, they had to wear new styles of clothing frequently because whenever Debendranath Tagore came across an image of a particular dress, he would immediately summon the tailor to have it made. However, despite repeated experiments, he was unable to create an outfit that satisfied him. It was only when Jnanadanandini Devi returned to the Tagore household from Bombay, dressed in an elegant and attractive outfit inspired by the women there, that his dissatisfaction was finally resolved. This attire, with its perfect blend of traditional essence, grace, and modesty, was exactly what he had envisioned.¹⁷

Satyendranath Tagore, son of Debendranath Tagore, planned to take his wife to his workplace in western India. The lack of proper dress was a great impediment in the way of his plan. In 1863, Satyendranath Tagore wrote to his wife that the dress which Bengali women put on was not adequate to attend *bhadra* society.¹⁸ To solve this problem, Satyendranath Tagore asked a French tailor in Calcutta to design an 'oriental' dress for his wife. The dress was prepared accordingly but it was so complicated that Jnanadanandini Devi could not wear it without the help of her husband. In Bombay, Jnanadanandini Devi lived in a Parsi family for few months. This family was so westernized at that time that two daughters of this family were sent to England to be educated. From this family, Jnanadanandini Devi learnt western manners and etiquette. She gave up her complicated dress and started to wear *saree* in Parsi style. The only difference with Parsi style was that she threw the end over her left shoulder instead of right shoulder. She also started to wear a petticoat underneath the *saree*. Sarala Devi writes about the innovation of her maternal aunt, Jnanadanandini Devi:

Mejomami's credit goes to another innovation, not just in our family, but in all parts of the province of Bengal. That is the style in which *saree* is worn by women of Bengal... When she went to Bombay with her husband she was attracted by the way Parsi and Gujrati women donned in their *sarees*... *Mejomami* embraced this form but she retained the mode of wearing the end of the *saree* in Bengali style. After a visit to Bombay my mother and *Mejomami* returned home by wearing *sarees* in the newly adopted mode. Soon it became the trend of wearing *saree* among all women of Tagore family. Some Brahmo women also adopted this

reformed style. Later it came to be known as 'Thakurbarir saree'. When it gained popularity among Brahmo women it was named as 'Brahmika Saree'.¹⁹

The second evolution in the way of putting on *sarees* was ushered in after Delhi Durbar of 1911. Suniti Devi, Maharani of Coochbehar and her sister Sucharu Devi, Maharani of Mayurbhanj attended the Durbar along with the Maharanis of other princely states. Suniti Devi and Sucharu Devi were both the daughters of renowned Brahmo leader Keshabchandra Sen. In this assembly, they introduced a new style of wearing *sarees*. They retained this new style after returning to their home. This graceful style attracted Bengali women very much.²⁰

Gradually, educated women started to adopt this reformed style to go outside the home. The older women were hostile towards the reformed dress. They even slandered younger women for wearing unorthodox dresses. A lady writes in *Bharati Patrika* how the women, who used to wear new dresses, were rebuked by the elderly women. In a party she met a girl who used to wear a blouse and petticoat. But on that day, she wore only a *saree* because she came to the in-law's house of her sister and that family did not like such unorthodox dresses. The girl also said that her sister had given up wearing such modern articles of dress as other female members of that conservative family cracked joke at her.²¹ Apart from this, in traditional Hindu families, a married woman had to change her saree multiple times during household chores. Different sarees were used for different purposes. For example, the saree worn for daily worship could not be used for cooking. Therefore, it was also inconvenient for women to wear a saree with a blouse and petticoat in the *andarmahal*. Nevertheless, women gradually began to prefer a new style of draping the saree, which was both decent and a fusion of traditional and Western attire, instead of wearing a gown.

The transformation in women's clothing during the colonial period was more than a matter of fashion; it was closely connected to broader social reforms and the changing status of women in society. As educated women stepped into public life and began working alongside men, they required more modest and comfortable clothing. After much experimentation, they adopted new styles of attire that reflected a desire to preserve traditional identity while also embracing modern values. These changes were not always easy, and many women faced resistance. Yet, over time, they began to shape their own dress choices, keeping their cultural traditions in mind.

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¹¹ Sen, Rajlaxmi, 'Banganganaganer Parichhad', *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Bhadra, 1278 B.S., p. 151

¹² 'Banganganaganer Parichhad', *Bamabodhini Patrika*, Kartik, 1278 B.S., pp.225-26

This letter was written by a Bengali woman from Singhagarh of Bombay.

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¹⁸ Devi, Jnanadanandini, *Puratani*, edited by her daughter Indira Devi, Ananda Publishers, Kolkata, 2012, p.207. It was first published in 1956

¹⁹ Devi, Sarala, *op.cit.*, pp.53-54

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²¹ 'Kalikatar Streesamaj', *Bharati, Bhadra*, 1288 B.S., p. 233. It was written by a woman who did not write her name. She only wrote Srimati Sha...