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Love in a Colonial Climate: Marriage, Sex and Romance in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

TAPAN RAYCHAUDHURI

Studies concerned with the intimate areas of human experience suggest that the institutions and social mores structured around the instinctive drives of mankind—such as sex, love and fear, are not meant to serve the same purpose in every culture.¹ Belief systems, world views and culturally-determined expectations from life determine the texture, causation and expression of even our very basic emotions. Nature's purpose for the sexual impulse may be the propagation of the species, but in controlling and harnessing this drive for the ends of social cohesion, different cultures have had very different objectives in view and used very different means. The emotive affects associated with its expression have also varied accordingly.

The present paper is an attempt to explore the implications of an 'external' factor, namely colonial rule and the wide-ranging developments associated with it, for an intimate area of experience in the life of a social group in nineteenth-century India—the Bengali Hindu *bhadralok*. It focuses on a sphere of cultural change where 'private' concerns were profoundly altered through interaction with developments in the 'public' sphere. I have used the quotation marks to suggest that the distinction, as is now often recognized, has limited validity beyond a point. There is a large volume of literature now on women in modern Bengal, especially the changes that occurred in their condition and status in the course of the nineteenth century.² Such studies necessarily cover some of the themes discussed in this paper. However, its central concern—the affects associated with the relationship between men and women in its sexual context—the

¹ For a discussion of the relevant historiographical ideas, see Lawrence Stone, *The Past and the Present Revisited* (Routledge and Kegan Paul, London and New York, 1987), chs 18 and 19.

² See Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849–1905* (Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University, Rajshahi, Second Impression, 1983); Meredith Brothwick, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal 1849–1905* (Princeton University Press, Princeton, 1984); Dipesh Chakraborty, 'The Difference-Deferral of Colonial Modernity: Public Debates on Domesticity in British Bengal'; Tanika Sarkar, 'A Book of her Own. A Life of her Own: Autobiography of a Nineteenth-century Woman', *History Workshop Journal*, 36 (1993).

elements of change and continuity in this area of experience, has attracted relatively little attention.³ To locate this study in its appropriate context, this paper will perforce have to refer to some data well-known to students of Bengali society.

I

A set of beliefs and values were structured into the institutions and practices concerning marriage and sexuality in bhadrakalok society. The institution of marriage in the Brahminical culture is meant to achieve one specific purpose above all else: '*putrarthe kriyate bharya*'—a man takes a wife in order to beget sons. In an agrarian society where one needs able-bodied men to carry on the essential task of agriculture, there may be perceived economic reasons for this prescription, or the obiter dictum may simply encapsulate a patriarchal preference structured into the system of dominant values. The scriptures, however, link it to a very different, and according to Hindu religious belief, a more fundamental necessity: only sons can offer sustenance acceptable to the manes, and when the time comes, to one's own departed soul. Sons are hence essential for the spiritual salvation of believing Hindus.

The belief was evidently a source of anxious concern to all caste Hindus in Bengal, and, very probably to all Hindus. When his only son gave up the ancestral faith, the poet Michael Madhusudan Datta's father remarried so that he could have a son who would ensure the salvation of his soul.⁴ The nationalist leader Bipin Pal's father also declared his intention to act in the same way when his only son became a Brahmo. The elder Pal explained in a deeply moving letter that the son he was about to cast out from his life was dearer to him than life itself because his own salvation and that of all his ancestors depended on him. As a Hindu he had no choice but to try and have another son so that he could repay the *pitirina*, a man's debt to his forefathers and ensure the salvation of his own soul.⁵ Confirmation of this well-known concern comes from less elev-

³ A major exception is Nirad Chaudhuri's brilliant literary study, *Bangali jibane ramani* (Women in Bengali Life). (Mitra o Ghosh, Calcutta, third print, Bengali year 1378 [1971]). Also see Sambuddha Chakrabarti, *Andare Antare* (Calcutta, 1995).

⁴ See Jogindranath Basu, *Michael Madhusudan Datter Jiban-charit*, ed. Sukhamay Mukhopadhyay (Ashok Pustakalaya, Calcutta, 1978), 6-7.

⁵ Bipin Pal, *Sattar Batsar* (Calcutta, Bengali year 1362 [1957]), 226-30.

ated levels of society as well. We learn from the memoirs of a Brahmo lady that a prospective mother-in-law, a Hindu, confessed her fears of damnation if her son married outside the Hindu fold and thereby lost his right to offer water to her thirsty soul after her death.⁶ The status of a wife in her husband's family as well as the larger kinship group depended crucially on her success in giving birth to sons. To the husband, the mother of his sons was a valued person, worthy of special respect. While polygamy was not very widely practised, taking a second wife if the first had failed to give the husband a son surely had the approval of society. There are instances of such approval even in the most westernized sections of Bengali society.⁷

As the extended rather than the elementary family was modally the basic unit of social organization, values which helped sustain it dominated all social mores. Resonances of these values are to be found in the most sophisticated literary products of the period. Bankim's ideal heroine, Debi Chaudhurani, trained to live in the light of *Bhagavadgita*, returns to her polygamous husband and dastardly father-in-law after a career in patriotic banditry to work out her *karma* as a Hindu wife.⁸ Tagore, in one of his most sensitive literary essays, describes Uma's initial failure to win the love of Siva when she appeared as an enchantress because such pleasure-oriented love was not conducive to the welfare of all (*sakaler mangal*).⁹ A young girl was given in marriage to a family rather than an individual. Felicity for the large family unit rather than the individuals who got married was evidently the primary purpose of the institution. The ideal bride was one who earned the praise of her husband's extended family, the in-laws in particular. The husband is almost peripheral to the daily

⁶ This information as well as a number of others cited in this paper occur in a manuscript memoir written by one Haimabati Sen. Born around 1866, married at the age of nine and widowed the following year, Haimabati or Hem later remarried and trained herself to practice as a medical licentiate. This remarkable memoir is unique in its detailed account of domestic life in nineteenth-century Bengal. The manuscript was discovered by Geraldine Forbes. Professor Forbes and I have prepared an annotated English translation of this memoir which we expect to publish in the near future.

⁷ Prasannamayi Debi, daughter and sister of civilians and educated at home by an English governess records with approval the action of a zamindar's daughter who prevailed on her father to take a second wife because her own mother had failed to produce a son and heir. See Prasannamayi Debi, *Purba Katha* (Reminiscence) (Subarnarekha, Calcutta, 1982).

⁸ See Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Debi Chaudhurani*, concluding chapter.

⁹ Rabindranath Tagore, *Prachin Sahitya, Rabindra-rachanabali*, 5 (Calcutta, Bengali year 1392 [1985]), 514-15.

life of the young brides, as described in the nineteenth-century Bengali memoirs.¹⁰

If the wife had to accept her husband's family as her own and learn to subject her will to that of others, the relevant process of socialization had to begin early. Child marriage, with the bride no older than 8 to 10, and under no circumstances after she had attained puberty, was a necessary concomitant of such a system. Marriage for girls at the age of one to four was not unknown. The brides in the earliest instances of widow remarriage, sponsored by modernizing reformers, were aged six to twelve.¹¹

Fear of feminine sexuality and anxiety to control it were of course conscious motives behind the institution of child marriage. The cruder arguments in the debate on widow remarriage evoked the age-old belief in the greater lust of women—allegedly eight times as intense as that of men.¹² The belief system informed by patriarchal values emphasized the occult implications of uncontrolled female sexuality. An unchaste wife was supposed to be a source of endless misfortunes to her husband's family.¹³ Child marriage was evidently meant to ensure that this highly disruptive force was contained within the bounds of legitimate conjugal relationship as soon as a young girl became aware of her sexual urge.

Male domination, an unquestioning surrender on part of the wife to her husband's authority, whatever his worth as a human being, is a clearly stated principle in *Manusmriti*, the most authoritative text on right conduct for Brahminical Hindus. Our nineteenth-century sources frequently project the norms of conjugal life as based on uninhibited patriarchy. The husband is a god on earth, the lord and master to whom the wife must offer unquestioning *bhakti*. These values, emphasized in the much revered *Manusmriti*, were supposed to be the bulwark of the Hindu family system down the ages. Such norms are, however, not conspicuous in the literature of mediaeval Bengal. A husband taking a second wife is shown to be anxious to

¹⁰ A remarkable instance of such marginalization is found in the earliest memoir written by a Bengali lady, Rassundari Debi, discussed in several contexts below. See Rassundari Debi, *Amar Jiban* (My Life), in Nareshchandra Jana *et al.* (eds), *Atmakatha* (Autobiographies), vol. 1 (Ananya Prakashan, Calcutta, 1981).

¹¹ See Binay Ghosh, (ed.) *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra* (Picture of Bengali Society in Periodicals), vol. 4, *Tatvabodhini Patrika* (Theological Journal), 201, 206–7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 160.

¹³ For a detailed discussion of these beliefs in mediaeval Bengal, see T. Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir: An Introductory Study in Social History*, 2nd edn (Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1969), Introduction.

mollify the first. A set passage in every *panchali* portrays the frustration of dissatisfied wives. A husband who is not good in bed is described with some scorn.¹⁴ In the uninhibited love scenes in *Bidyasundar*, the most famous literary work from the eighteenth century, the heroine has better things to do than washing her husband's feet. The Sakta tradition with its emphasis on the worship of the mother goddess enjoined special respect for women. Rajnarayan Basu, generally critical of the received tradition, suggests that these norms had considerable impact on the followers of the cult. The folk tradition as reflected in the *bratas*, special rites performed by women, do underline the ideals of unquestioning devotion to the husband and patient submissiveness. These are, however counterbalanced by feminine rituals meant to reduce the husband, through occult means, to the position of a bleating sheep meekly obeying the wife.

But when critics, indigenous or foreign, challenged established practice, nineteenth-century apologists of Hindu ways in Bengal projected patriarchy as the only acceptable principle in no uncertain terms: 'Women must be subject to the authority of men,' wrote one author. Others stated the same sentiment in more guarded language.¹⁵

Maintenance and enhancement of ritual status through marriage was an aspiration somewhat peculiar to the Bengali Hindu tradition. The upper castes in Bengal were segmented horizontally into exogamous gotras or 'clans' descended from the same putative ancestor. There was also a hierarchy of ritual status determined according to the purity of one's lineage. Purity meant a record of correct ritual observance over generations. The most important criterion was the history of a family's marital exchanges. One's ritual status depended very heavily on the record of ritual purity of the families into which one's ancestors had married. Each of the three upper castes—Brahmins, Baidyas and Kayasthas, had their Kulins, families accorded the highest ritual status and hence much sought after in the marriage market. Among Brahmins Kulinism produced an extreme form of

¹⁴ See *ibid.*, introduction.

¹⁵ Satyacharan Mitra, who declared himself to be a propagator of Hinduism, quoted an anonymous author on the frontispiece of his highly popular tract, *Strir prati swamir upadesh* (Advice from a Husband to his Wife) (Calcutta, 1884), as follows: 'Let the husband be handsome or ugly, energetic or lacking in spirit, a husband is entitled to the unquestioning devotion of a chaste wife. This is the true meaning of chastity for a chaste wife.' Further down on the same page he quotes the reformer Keshab Sen: 'The flowers which God has created for men are not for you; again, the flowers which have blossomed for you in heaven are not for men.'

hypergamy as marriage of their daughters to Kulin bridegrooms was an object of aspiration to all Brahmins.¹⁶ It is not clear exactly when Kulin polygyny assumed its exaggerated form, but it was a fact of Bengali social life by the early years of the nineteenth century. For the poorer Kulins, marriage became a profession: the wives lived in their parental homes and the husbands visited their in-laws for a few days each year, if that, to collect their stipend. Kulinism was originally based on nine-fold criteria which included secular components like wealth, righteous conduct and scholarship as well. But a Kulin's status in the nineteenth century depended exclusively on his family's record of ritual purity. Since a Kulin girl could not marry a non-Kulin, they were often given in marriage to much younger or much older bridegrooms and often had to remain spinsters. Again, as marriage was an essential rite for a woman's salvation, even a nominal marriage to a dying man was preferable to spinsterhood. The anxiety to ensure that their daughters did not remain unmarried led to the custom of infant betrothal among a section of Brahmins.¹⁷

The social consequences of the beliefs and values enshrined in the institutions concerning marriage can be summed up as follows. Child marriage was universally practised, except in the case of the Kulin women who might have to wait till very late in life until a groom with suitable ritual status had been found. Polygamy, widespread among the Kulins who constituted a small segment of caste Hindu society, does not appear to have been much in vogue among non-Kulins. Enforced widowhood, as is well-known, was mandatory for Bengali caste Hindus. The anxious concern of the reformers regarding the condition of the widows suggests not merely the sharpening of certain sensibilities, but the possibility that they accounted for a very large proportion of women of 'marriageable age'. One can only speculate if this was always so or a development of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The reformist tracts refer to the impact of the law prohibiting suttee, but the widows burnt on the funeral pyre do not appear to have been numerous enough at any time to

¹⁶ There is a large body of literature on Kulin polygamy produced by the reformist critics of the system in the nineteenth century. Ramnarayan Tarkaratna's satirical play, *Kulin Kulasarbasva Natak* (Calcutta, 1854), is perhaps the best known literary work on the subject. Also see Iswarchandra Viyasagar's tract on polygamy, *Bahubibaha*, in his collected works, Tirthapati Datta (ed.), *Vidyasagar Rachanavali* (Tulikalām, Calcutta, 1987), 873-1088.

¹⁷ See Girishchandra Bidyaratna, *Balyajiban (swayam likhita)* (Boyhood days, Written by Himself), in Nareshchandra Jana *et al.* (eds), *Atmakatha*, vol. 1.

affect the total number. The demographic factors responsible for this situation, if it did exist, have to be sought elsewhere. To conclude, the emotive affects of man–woman relationship were largely determined by the institutions I have described—child marriage, extended family households, enforced widowhood, Kulin polygamy and the associated phenomenon of enforced spinsterhood.

The flip side of the efforts rigidly to control feminine sexuality was extensive exploitation of women and surreptitious subversion of the norms on which the extended family was based. The contemporary sources are quite explicit on this point.¹⁸

The state and the church have played a central role in regulating marriage and sexual conduct in the west. The Indian experience is very different in this respect. Codes of social conduct were embodied in the *smriti* texts, and more crucially in *desachara*, i.e., traditional practice, known to and accepted by all concerned. They were enforced infrequently by caste councils or the village elders. But sanctions operated in less structured ways most of the time. The elders within the extended family, men as well as women, were the guardians of sexual morality and proper conjugal conduct. And watching over all one's actions was the eagle-eyed kinship group, the *jnatis* whose wrath could 'sever the wings of the god-bird Garuda himself'.¹⁹ Sanctions could be harsh and involve loss of caste. These were inevitably harsher in the case of women who literally became homeless when punished for any real or supposed delinquency. As neither the husband's family nor the parents dared accept such unfortunates, prostitution or suicide were often the only alternatives open to them.²⁰

II

Perhaps the most important institutional determinant of the emotional affects in matrimony was the age of the bride at marriage.

¹⁸ See for instance, Vidyasagar, *Bidhababibaha bishayak prastab*, in *Rachanabali*, 706.

¹⁹ See Raychaudhuri, *Bengal under Akbar and Jahangir*, introduction.

²⁰ See Ghosh, *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, vol. 4, 178. The once popular 'penny dreadful', Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay, *Haridaser Guptakatha* (first published 1897, Bishwabani Prakashani, Calcutta, 1987), contains numerous incidents in which women are forced to leave their homes. The doyen of Bengali literary studies, late Sukumar Sen, believed that this novel provided the most authentic description of nineteenth-century Bengali society.

The miseries of the child-bride are a recurrent theme in Bengali folklore. Most accounts of pre-puberty marriage written by women, however, open with tales of childish pleasure at the pomp and grandeur of the wedding ceremony. The gifts of costly jewellery and expensive sarees, the feast, music and illumination enchanted the child-brides who knew that all this pageantry was for their benefit, though the pleasure was mixed with vague apprehensions. Rassundari writes: 'Then I felt quite pleased; there will be the wedding, the musicians will come, everybody will join in the joyous ululation. But I can not enumerate all the anxious thoughts which also crowded my mind . . . I felt very scared and spent my days weeping all the time. . . . Everyone tried to comfort me, but no way would the misery in my heart go away.'²¹ The real trauma came at the moment of departure from the parental home. Rassundari compares the state of her mind at the time to that of the sacrificial goat quaking with fear just before slaughter. Haimavati writes how the realization that she would indeed have to leave the parental home dawned on her and how she sought to avoid the calamity in desperate fear. Her ultimate hope that her father would help her out of her mortal danger proved to be futile. The memory of that excruciating misery remained with most women the rest of their lives. Rassundari despairing of any help from human beings asked her mother if God almighty would accompany her and was assured that He certainly would.²²

Deep anxiety and a sense of helpless misery darkened the first experience of life in the in-laws' home. Rassundari thus recalls her first few months in her husband's home more than half a century later: 'People keep birds in cages for their own amusement. I felt my predicament to be similar. I became a prisoner in that cage for the rest of my life; there was no hope of escape so long as I lived. . . . There was so much festivity, so many people . . . but I did not know any of them, so I began to cry. My heart was breaking.'²³

Bengali nursery rhymes are full of references to the cruelty the brides suffered at the hands of the mother-in-law and sisters-in-law. Popular images of the child bride's life confirm that image of suffering. Exceptions to this pattern are, however, numerous in our sources. The people in Rassundari's new home were far from cruel.

²¹ Rassundari, *Amar Jiban*, 15.

²² Haimavati, married at the age of nine, recalled her trauma when she wrote her memoirs in her seventies. Rassundari, *ibid.*, 15-16.

²³ Rassundari, *Amar Jiban*, 17.

They assured her that this was indeed her own home, and the people her own people, but this did not stop her tears. Her mother-in-law took her in her lap. She felt she had found a new mother. She was treated with more kindness than she had known at home. But still for three months she wept all the time. Then, to quote her words, 'the bark of a tree from a far away place grew into the body of another plant. How strange, how mysterious, are the ways [of God].'²⁴

This description is not untypical. Haimabati, married to an unmitigated scoundrel, found some solace in her mother-in-law's kindness. Prasannamayi, the daughter of a westernized zaminder and civilian, was gently protected from the unwelcome curiosity of the villagers who found her ways strangely alien. Kindness to a child-bride could assume spectacular forms. Poet Tagore's mother received from her princely father-in-law, Dwarkanath, toys studded with rubies and diamonds worth one hundred thousand rupees. Keshab Sen's mother, in describing her father-in-law's great affection for the child-bride also remembered his gifts of sweets and freshly minted coins.²⁵

The institution of child marriage precluded sex before puberty in pre-modern times, at least in theory. The young couple went through a 'second wedding' after the wife had menstruated for the first time. The latter occasion had its appropriate ritual, '*pushpotsav*', the festival of flower, an occasion for saturnalian scenes out of bounds to men.²⁶ The rite of second wedding had apparently become relatively rare in the nineteenth century, though most child-brides spent a year or more in the parental home before moving into the husband's home on a permanent basis. But there is nothing to suggest that sex before puberty did not occur or that it was in fact even frowned upon. A child-bride, married at nine or even earlier, would often return to her husband's home before she had attained puberty.²⁷ By contrast, such restrictions appear to have been observed much more rigidly

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

²⁵ Prasannamayi describes her predicament owing to her 'education' (the fact that she could read) and western-style clothes which earned her the title of '*membau*' (European bride) and how her mother-in-law defended her against such calumny. See her *Purbakatha*, 44. Also See Debi Saradasundari, *Atmakatha*, 8,9, in N. Jana *et al.* (eds), *Atmakatha*, vol. 1. and Praphullamayi Debi, *Amader Katha* (Our Story), in Somendranath Basu (ed.) *Smritikatha* (Baitanik Prakashani, Calcutta, 1986), 26.

²⁶ One text refers quite casually to the practice of dancing in the nude during this ritual. See Satyacharan Mitra, *Strir prati swamir upadesh*, 5.

²⁷ See, for instance, Saradasundari, 27, *Atmakatha*, 8.

in Maharashtra, though precocious boys did their best to get round them.²⁸ Haimabati Sen, in her account of her experiences as a medical practitioner, mentions one incident in which a bride aged eleven bled to death as a result of rape by her husband.

The data on the sexual side of conjugal relations within the traditional system of marriage as experienced and perceived by women are expectedly limited. We have, however, a graphic account in the memoirs of Haimabati Sen which were not meant for publication. She was not yet ten and her husband was forty-five. Her experiences were probably not atypical except that the age difference in her case was well above average though by no means exceptional. She writes: 'My elder sister-in-law used to take me to my husband's room. Whenever I fell asleep, somebody used to remove my clothes. I would feel scared on waking up and again wrap the clothes around my body.' On another occasion she screamed when her husband tried to pull her towards him and felt a great contempt for the man when he lied to his mother to cover up his misdemeanour. Later, a neighbour's mistress interceded on the husband's behalf explaining the advantages of compliance with one's husband's wishes. Haimabati, however, persisted in her uncomprehending refusal. Incomprehension, shame, fear and disgust rather than arousal marked her response to these first lessons in sex.

It is often stated that the child-brides knew all about sex thanks to the obscene conversation in which women habitually indulged. The nineteenth-century Bengali memoirs provide little evidence in support of such statements.²⁹ To my knowledge, Haimabati's memoirs are the only account written by a Bengali woman which refers explicitly to matters sexual. She mentions that she once woke up and found her lecherous husband having sex with a prostitute. The incomprehensible scene sent her into a state of shock and she took months to recover from it. Rassundari's account of her childhood projects an image of total innocence verging on stupidity. If sex was a part of the child bride's marital experience before puberty, in all likelihood she learnt the relevant lessons from nature or a precocious husband. If she derived any pleasure from sex, we have no evidence

²⁸ See Harinarayan Apte's famous Marathi novel, *Pan Lakshyant Kon Ghetto*, Bengali translation by S. Kamtanurkar, *Kintu Ke Khabar Rakhe*, (New Delhi, 1971), 243f, 249f.

²⁹ Dr Tanika Sarkar, who has recently interviewed a number of Bengali ladies to collect data concerning their life experience, was told by one octogenarian that the first time she saw her husband without clothes she thought that the unfortunate youth was endowed with a tail.

for the fact. Rassundari in her memoir, however, recalls with joy and wonder how her body flowered and bore fruits through God's miraculous ways. It is not clear if this statement is *inter alia* a reference to a happy sex life.³⁰ Girish Bidyaratna's joyous account of sex in boyhood, referred to below—he was twelve and she eleven—implies that his partner shared his ecstasy. The fact that their difference in age was only one year suggests that the child-bride may indeed have joined in the game with some enthusiasm.³¹

The husband, as already noted, is almost a peripheral figure in the memoirs written by Bengali women other than those whose life-style was changed considerably by new conditions of employment and break away from the extended family households. Prasannamayi, who is known to have had a very unhappy marriage, hardly mentions her husband. Rassundari is conscious of the fact that she had been virtually silent about her husband in her memoir and makes up for it in a page-long encomium on his character and happy references to the occasions when he appreciated her life skills. Haimabati does write at length about her middle-aged first husband, but only with resentment and aversion. As is well-known, in an extended family household wives were not to talk to their husbands during day-time, especially in the presence of others. A modest wife drew her veil to cover her face when the husband or any of his older relations were around. Rassundari went to the illogical extreme: she shyly withdrew behind a door when her husband's horse walked into the courtyard.³²

The polygamous home, by all accounts, was the abode of misery. A co-wife in feminine vocabulary was a thorn in one's side (*satin kanta*). The critics of polygamy underline the fact that the *bratas* performed by women had as one of their prime objectives deliverance from the danger of marriage to a polygamous husband. A famous satire describes the 'partition' of a husband's body, each of the man's two wives claiming a side as her sphere of influence. The misery of the Kulin wife who hardly ever saw her husband is a constant theme in the reformist literature.³³

There is little by way of evidence regarding the experience of polygamy coming from women who had to endure it. One remarkable exception is the memoir, or rather the reminiscences, of Nistarini

³⁰ Rassundari, *Amar Jiban*, 44.

³¹ Girishchandra Bidyaratna, *Balyajiban*, 16.

³² Rassundari, *Amar Jiban*, 33, 57–9. Nistarini Debi, *Sekele katha*, 27, in N. Jana et al. (eds), *Atmakatha*, vol. 2.

³³ See Vidyasagar, *Bahubibaha*, in *Rachanabali*, 866; Dinabandhu Mitra, *Sadhabar Ekadasi* (Calcutta, 1866).

Debi, an aunt of the famous revolutionary, Upadhyay Brahmandhab. It throws an unusual light on the emotive affects of Kulin polygamy as experienced by women. She refers with contempt to her Kulin grandfather who had fifty-four wives, but describes her grandmother's first encounter with the man as follows: 'So long as her husband was there, she walked about near him, her veil properly drawn. It was as if she was trying to imprint the image of this handsome man on her mind the way one meditates on the image of one's deity.' The handsome man demanded his rightful stipend as a Kulin husband. The wife was delighted to give him her last ornaments, deeply obliged to have been of some use to her lord and master. Such spirit of selflessness is rarely encountered, Nistarini comments, among novel-reading modern girls. She also wrote approvingly of her father who agreed to marry a second time to satisfy his father's lust for money. 'Our husband is our God, he is all we have,' she concludes. When her husband, whom she had known only for a short while, died, she felt lost. A co-wife she met by chance broke down when she was informed of the tragedy. This lady had not met her husband even once after the wedding.³⁴

Tradition, however, did not prescribe only abject surrender to the husband's will. Dwarkanath Tagore's wife sought the opinion of pundits on her duty as a Brahmin when she learnt that her husband had broken the taboos regarding commensality by dining with Englishmen. Advised that she should not touch him but continue to perform her other duties as a wife, she lived accordingly the rest of her life.³⁵

In a domestic world where there were strict rules of avoidance in relation to the male sex (there were important exceptions to this rule in practice, as noted below), the child-wife's daily life was spent most of the time with other women in the family. Her happiness at this stage depended more on her relation with her husband's mother, sisters, female cousins, aunts etc., rather than with her husband. Such relationships could be marked by mutual tensions as well as affection. Haimabati recalled in her old age the kindness of her husband's cousins and nieces, as well as the constant nagging of his sister. She describes how one little girl who was not ill-disposed towards her, embarrassed her by broadcasting details of her

³⁴ Nistarini Debi, *Sekele Katha*, 8, 11, 19, 21, 29.

³⁵ Kshitindranath Thakur, *Dwarakanath Thakurer Jibani* (Calcutta, Bengali year 1376 [1969]), 74-5.

gaucheries. Praphullamayi, a daughter-in-law of Debendranath Tagore, talks of the bonds of deep mutual affection among the women in the Tagore family. But she also records the history of tensions in her father's family—how her grandmother, pushed beyond endurance by her daughter-in-law, had induced Praphulla's father to take another wife, and how one of Praphulla's sisters was driven to death by the cruelty she suffered in her husband's home. Dewan Kartikeya described how, in an extended family, wives constantly quarrelled if one of the brothers had a high income and the others were dependent on him.³⁶

In a system under which a girl married into a family rather than simply another young person, her conjugal experience was indistinguishable from her experience of family life. In that context, her life passed through clearly marked stages, each with its specific duties, expectations and distinctive emotional colouring. The first few years after marriage were spent in the role of a new bride. As the first children were born and passed through their years of childhood, she matured into the role of a young wife eventually inheriting the role and status of the mistress of the family from the mother-in-law, if she happened to be married to the eldest son. With her sons grown up and married she gradually retired into the role of mother. Widowhood altered her status and condition of life. Rassundari writes of her widowhood, 'I had a golden crown on my head. That crown has fallen from my head.' As mentioned above, Nistarini, the wife of a polygamous Kulin who had lived with her husband only for a short period, records a similar feeling of desolation at the news of her husband's death. She only thanks her stars that she got the news in time so that she did not unwittingly violate the ritual taboos binding on widows. For Rassundari, however, the new situation which she compared to the life of a *sannyasin*, an ascetic, had its compensations. 'Now my name is mother', she commented. Her considered judgement on her life is very positive: 'I have spent my life happily and in great joy surrounded by husband, sons, daughters-in-law, other members of the family and neighbours.'³⁷ Arguably, her assessment of her life as a wife and a householder was not atypical, given a modicum of affluence. One remarkable feature of her self-assessment is that she considered her otherwise happy life as having

³⁶ Praphullamayi Debi, *Amader Katha*, in Somendranath Basu (ed.), *Smritikatha*, 26–8. Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajibancharit*, 24–5 in N. Jana et al. (eds), *Atmakatha*, vol. 1.

³⁷ Rassundari, *Amar Jiban*, 34, 35. Nistarini Debi, *Sekele Katha*, 29.

been spent in bondage to others. The other memoirs written by nineteenth-century Bengali women are less articulate in their awareness of bondage.

Rassundari's happy assessment of her life as a wife and a householder has to be read with her description of back-breaking drudgery which was a central feature of that life. The rules of ritual purity imposed a heavy burden of domestic duty on the women in traditional families. Even the wives of very rich zamindars had to cook for the members of the extended family as well as the never-ending stream of house-guests. Saradasundari's mother-in-law, whom she describes as kind though short-tempered, insisted that the child-bride should polish the floors. Rassundari had twenty to twenty-five servants, but she had to cook for her husband, twelve children and the servants as well. She often fell asleep without any meal, having worked hard from early morning till late at night. She recalls these experiences in her old age with a measure of amusement rather than any resentment. She tells us how once she sat down to her first meal of the day long after midnight when the child on her lap pissed into her plate. She treats the episode as a playful dispensation of a somewhat naughty Divinity. Yet her only complaint against her fate was that in her days of youth women had no freedom, especially that they were excluded from education.³⁸

References to the marital experiences in the memoirs written by men are much more frequent and often quite explicit. In general, they project an image of marital happiness. At times, the language evokes memories of great felicity. Nineteenth-century Bengali literature is replete with tales of childhood love. Girls grew up expecting to be married off by the age of twelve at the very latest. Medical evidence suggests that they reached puberty relatively early. The husband was usually an adolescent aged fourteen to eighteen. If we are to believe the record of men's memoirs, strong mutual attachment was not uncommon in these circumstances and the feelings described in some of the autobiographies are not very different from modern notions of romantic love. Sub-teenage love has become a familiar feature of the American social scene. One need not treat the Bengali experience in an earlier age with incredulity. Dewan Kartikeya writes convincingly of the intense emotional attachment which the wives felt for their husbands and the deep happiness the

³⁸ See Prasannamayi Debi, *Purba Katha*, 7, 30; Rassundari, *Amar Jiban*, 24-6; Saradasundari, *Atmakatha*, 8.

men of his generation derived from their marriage in childhood. In his opinion, their emotional security gave this system of marriage a distinct advantage over the uncertainties of courtship, English style. Pandit Girish Bidyaratna, who married at eleven a ten-year-old girl to whom he had been engaged since the age of one, wrote appreciatively of the fact that his wife had acquired an adequate amount of flesh by the time of marriage. He fell in love with this short-haired girl while returning home after the wedding. As they had to share a room with others during the first year of their marriage, opportunities for cohabitation were limited, though not altogether absent. Still, when he had to return to Calcutta after his weekend visits to the village home, he wept for days on end, so sharp were the pangs of separation. A couple of years later they had a room to themselves and made up for lost time. 'I have no words to describe the joy in which we spent our nights', he wrote, adding somewhat sadly, 'now at the age of seventy, . . . my life is bereft of all pleasure.' Girish Bidyaratna's uninhibited recollection of sexual pleasure has resonances of a very ancient Indian tradition—a delight in the pleasures of the body without any sense of shame. Victorian critics of Indian society saw this attitude as degenerate lechery.³⁹ That description, like other pejoratives used by Macaulay and friends, were accepted as valid by most Western educated Bengalis. The fact had interesting consequences for their psyche which I shall discuss later.

It needs to be noted that all men did not share Girish or Kartikēya's romantic and passionate view of matrimony. Prasannamayī mentions the advice given by an uncle to his doctor nephew devastated by the death of his wife: 'Why all this lamentation? A wife is no more than a pair of slippers. You have lost one pair; I shall get you an even better one.'

It is difficult to reconstruct the history of deviations from the approved norms of sexual behaviour in any society, because such activities are necessarily clandestine. The 'traditional' norms in Bengali Hindu society permitted a degree of tolerance, at least so far as men were concerned. Hypocrisy, our sources point out, was not a characteristic vice of the traditional society. People did not think too badly of extra-marital sexual indulgence, though Brahminical ideals put a high premium on the control of one's

³⁹ Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajibancharit*, 47, in *Atmakatha*, vol. 1; Girishchandra Bidyaratna, *Balyajiban*, 12, 14, 16.

instinctive drives. Men who lived by such ideals were also not uncommon.⁴⁰

At the same time, Tantricism and certain other religious cults had mystical rites based on sexual practices as essential parts of their mystical regimes. *Bhairavi chakras*, in which Tantric practitioners participated with their female partners was common enough in some parts of Bengal. New sects like the *Kartabhajas* had emerged in the late eighteenth or early nineteenth century. Some of these flourished as classless freemasonries and their practices had strong sexual overtones. Vaishnav gurus, it is alleged, at times emulated Lord Krishna in their dealings with their female disciples.⁴¹

More secular deviations from the approved norms of sexual conduct were of course not unknown. The wealthy had in their service professional dancers and singers who would sometimes perform in transparent attire and even very sober men would not hesitate to join them on the dancing floor.⁴²

Immorality had more surreptitious outlets as well. The Bengali counterparts of penny dreadfuls rejoiced in accounts of illicit relationships within the extended family. Haimabati Sen's unpublished memoir provides a number of actual instances of such deviant behaviour. The great Vidyasagar himself, in his campaign for the legalisation of widow remarriage, cited the exploitation of hapless widows by male members of the family as one of his arguments. The *Tatva-bodhini Patrika* wrote: 'Even married women were attracted towards devious ways by the example of widows who had been corrupted . . . In truth, as a household contains very large number of people, brothers, nephews etc. and generations of women are cooped up in the zenana, horrendously immoral acts, worse than prostitution, do occur. The combination of circumstances cited are no doubt strong influences contributing to adultery between persons belonging to prohibited degrees'. Kulin women who remained spinsters or had only nominal marriages were similarly exploited. Children were born

⁴⁰ See Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Kabibar Iswarchandra Gupter Jibani o Kabitwa* (The life and poetical genius of the poet Iswarchandra Gupta); Iswarchandra Vidyasagar describes in his autobiographical sketch the high Brahminical ideals by which his forefathers lived. See his *Vidyasagar Charit*, in *Vidyasagar Rachanavali*, 408.

⁴¹ See Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajibancharit*, 73, 74; Mahendranath Datta, *Srimad Vivekananda Swamir Jibaner Ghatanabali*, 3 vols, 4th edn (Calcutta, 1977); Akshaykumar Datta, *Bharatiya Upasak Sampraday*, first published 1870, 1883; new edn (Calcutta, Bengali year 1394 [1987]), 220-8.

⁴² Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajibancharit*, 83.

fairly frequently to wives of polygamous husbands who never visited their wives. Abortion was cited as a widespread social evil by reformers who wanted to legalize widow remarriage and abolish polygamy. Women who strayed from the straight and narrow often ended up in the brothels of Calcutta or Benares.⁴³

But the evidence suggests that connivance must have been at least as common as punishment, partly because the extended family feared that scandal would affect their ritual status as well as secular standing. Vidyasagar mentions almost institutionalized arrangements to legitimize conception when a Kulin wife had no contact with her polygamous husband.⁴⁴ Haimabati records one incident in which the mother-in-law intervened to stop the public humiliation of her daughter-in-law caught red-handed with her lover. The informality of the mechanisms for imposing social sanctions permitted a measure of laxity. Sanctions usually operated in an insidious way. Women had to watch their steps very carefully in the in-laws' home or risk a great deal of niggling mental cruelty. It was more often inflicted by other women in the family than by the men. More extreme sanctions appear to have been relatively rare, because the internalized values were the most effective means of control and, for reasons stated above, the enforcers had good reasons for condoning delinquency. It is also necessary to emphasize that deviation in all probability was precisely what the term implies and not modal behaviour in any sense.

One form of sexual activity was considered unmentionable in Bengali culture. Our sources are conspicuously silent on the theme of homosexuality. Explicit references to the practice are, however, not entirely absent. Radhakanta Dev's famous letter which led to Derozio's dismissal from Hindu College accused some teachers of the college of connivance at various misdeeds including sodomy. A manuscript diary, written by Kaminikumar Datta, the younger brother of Aswini Kumar Datta, refers explicitly to a homosexual affair. Other memoirs talk vaguely of immorality among young people in rural areas. Since their access to the fair sex was limited, the immorality in question very probably subsumed homosexuality.

⁴³ See Vidyasagar, *Bahubibaha*, in *Rachanabali*, 866-7; Binay Ghosh (ed.), *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, vol. 4, 160-1; Bhubanchandra Mukhopadhyay, *Haridaser Guptakatha*, 143.

⁴⁴ Vidyasagar, *Bahubibaha*, in *Rachanabali*, 866-7.

III

The norms, mores and deviations I have described so far, probably represent long-established patterns of social behaviour, though my account is based on nineteenth-century evidence. Very probably, such social behaviour and associated affects were also modal in the nineteenth century, though the impressionistic evidence available is not adequate for any sort of quantification. Changes traceable to various facets of the colonial encounter began to modify the attitudes, conduct, and the emotive affects associated with man-woman relationships first among small groups of people. The modalities, so far as one can judge, changed very slowly though sharp and sudden discontinuity marked the lives of a handful of men and women.

Expectedly, the first indications of basic change in attitudes affecting even the most intimate concerns are to be found in the life history of the students of the Hindu College. Or perhaps one should go a bit further back in time. Bishop Heber has recorded the responses of Raja Radhakanta Deb, the highly conservative leader of Hindu society to the presence of European ladies at the Bishop's reception. While the Raja would not dream of emulating this example, he expressed his appreciation of the way in which such civilized mingling of the sexes enhanced the quality of life. The first generation of Hindu College students boisterously defied all taboos on food and drink during their student days but later only a few deviated in practice from the inherited way of life, though the faith in its worth and validity had been badly shaken by the exposure to the rationalist thought of the enlightenment.

A small number did match their thoughts with appropriate action. K. M. Banerji left the Hindu fold. Dakshinaranjan Mukherji defied social norms to court and marry the widowed maharani of Burdwan, an adventure which nearly cost him his life. The poet Madhusudan found it impossible to marry the little girl his parents had selected for him. His reaction to the proposal as stated in a letter to his friend, Gourdas Basak, reflects the new sensibility: 'It harrows up my blood and makes my hair stand like quills on the fretful porcupine.' His quest for an acceptable partner ended in his two successive marriages to European ladies.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ See *Samayikpatre Banglar samajchitra*, vol. 4, 209; Jogindranath Basu, *Michael Madhusudan Datter Jibancharit*, 92-7; Manmathanath Ghosh, *Raja Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyayer Jibancharit*, first published, 1917; new edn. (Calcutta, 1982), 37-44.

But the vast majority of the newly educated were content to adhere to inherited practices. Even the members of the highly enlightened Tagore family, including the poet, accepted without fuss the sub-teenage brides selected for them by the elders, often from relatively poor families because their low-caste status among Brahmins and unorthodox ways were barriers to suitable marriage alliances. As one member of the family, Satyendranath's daughter, Indira Debi points out, the cultural and social gap did not stand in the way of marital happiness. Nor did the fact that the wives were mere children at the time of marriage. Rabindranath Tagore's poems in memory of his wife, *Smaran* (In Memoriam), bear witness to an intense and passionate love.⁴⁶

Rational scepticism was not the only factor which induced a rejection of tradition. The educated Bengalis' confidence in their own culture was badly shaken by their new rulers' continual criticism of Indian society and religion. The racial stereotypes integral to these ethnocentric assessments pictured the Bengalis as an effeminate and degenerate race. Though such judgements were questioned from time to time, educated Bengalis appear to have accepted them by and large. Even the defenders of the Hindu tradition wrote of a glorious past and a degenerate present while prescribing agendas for recovery. References to the powerful English and weak Bengalis were an integral part of the nationalist discourse. Even an old-fashioned pandit like Girish Bidyaratna tried to explain the alleged physical degeneration of Bengalis. He traced it to the 'immature' semen of adolescent fathers, an unfortunate feature of child marriage. The loss of cultural self-confidence had reached such depths that even a patriot like Rajnarayan Basu was hesitant to admit to an Anglicized host that he missed his habitual supply of mustard oil lest his friend should consider him an unreformed Bengali.⁴⁷

A belief in the superiority of English ways was the other side of this lack of confidence. That the said ways were superior was not to

⁴⁶ Indira Debi, *Jiban-katha*, in *Ekshan*, 19 and 20, Bengali years 1399, 1400; Rabindranath Tagore, *Smaran*, in *Rabindra-Rachanabali*, 8 (7th reprint, Calcutta, 1977), 59-63; also see Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay, *Rabindra-jibani o Rabindra-sahitya-prabeshak*, II (Calcutta, 1977), 59-63.

⁴⁷ See Vidyasagar's views on the civilizing influence of contact with the English, *Bahubibaha*, in *Rachanabali*, 881. For Girish Bidyaratna's views on 'immature semen', see his *Balyajiban*, 15. The *Tatvabodhini Patrika* commented: 'The sort of labour which the English, a strong people living in a cold climate, can undertake and endure is sure to undermine the health of the weak-bodied people of this country.' See *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, vol. 4, 190. Also see Rajnarayan Basu's autobiography, *Atmacharit*, 47 (4th edn, Calcutta, 1961), 43-4.

be questioned because the English themselves said that they were. Such simple faith eventually produced a backlash, but it was long in vogue and some never lost it. It was projected in sober terms by sophisticated trend-setters like Satyen Tagore. Keshab Sen preached it in his grand rhetorical style for he was 'overwhelmed by the charms of English family life.' Even a passionate patriot like Bankim Chattopadhyay proclaimed that the Bengalis' salvation lay in the imitation of all that is good in English culture, because the less civilized had always progressed by imitating those who were more advanced.⁴⁸

The agenda for social reform in nineteenth-century Bengal derived partly from a mood of introspection informed by new sensibilities, the end product of complex interaction with western culture as well as a profound sense of inferiority, itself a product of that interaction. Rammohan's plea for abolition of suttee or Vidyasagar's campaign in favour of widow remarriage were not simply attempts to emulate western mores. The encounter had triggered off processes, especially a serious if at times anguished mood of introspection, which induced a basic reorientation of attitudes. These attitudes were no mere clones of their western counterparts. A mixture of rational considerations, a genuine concern not to overstep scriptural prescriptions and an intense emotionalism—which reminds one of the sixteenth-century Vaishnava anxiety for the salvation of all human beings— informs the discourse on social reform in nineteenth-century Bengal. An awareness of inequities in one's immediate social environment was integral to this new orientation, though it was mostly confined to matters affecting one's own class. The sense of inadequacy generated by colonial rule and sensitiveness to western criticism aggravated the resulting anxieties. The preoccupation with issues like widow remarriage, polygamy, child marriage and women's education, areas of social life which were distressing in terms of the new sensibilities, has to be understood in this context.

It has been suggested that western romantic literature had a major impact, not merely on the aesthetic sensibilities of the western-educated Bengalis, but on their expectations from life, especially in the area of the relationship between men and women. Bankim

⁴⁸ Keshab Sen, 'Impressions of England', in 48, *Diary, Sermons, Addresses and Epistles*, 3rd edn (Calcutta, 1938), 487 f; Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, 'Jatibaira' (Racial animosity), in *Bibidha Prabandha* (Bangiya Sahitya Parishad edition, Calcutta, 1941), 341–6; also 'Anukaran' (Imitation), *ibid.*, 73–9; Satyendranath Tagore, *Amar Balyakatha* (Story of My Childhood) (first published, 1915, reprinted as *Rabindraprasanga Granthamala* (4), 2nd edn (Calcutta, 1967), 4–6.

wrote that every college student in Bengal knew by heart the balcony scene in *Romeo and Juliet*. The yearning for romantic love, allegedly the product of such literary studies, apparently could not be satisfied within the institutional framework of child marriage and the extended family.⁴⁹

I have cited evidence which indicates that child marriage did not preclude romantic attachment and the taboos inhibiting free communication between husband and wife could stimulate rather than stifle the yearning for love. New job opportunities in the colonial bureaucracy induced young men to leave their village homes. As soon as it became necessary for their wives to join them, there was a dramatic change in the ambience of family life. Conjugal relations, informed by new sensibilities and at last free from the taboos which had to be observed under the authority of the elders, assumed an altogether new character. The wife of a young Deputy Magistrate described the happiness of her peer group as follows: 'First, we were young, and our husbands were well placed. Besides they were very much in love with us, willing to lay down their lives if we so wished . . . How could women who had such husbands at their feet be unhappy?'⁵⁰ This lady's husband accused her of cruelty if she failed to write to him regularly. He habitually addressed her as 'my dear' and she writes how she waited eagerly for his return when he went on tours.

The Brahmo enthusiasts and preachers introduced a new dimension in their marriages. The wife was expected to be their true companions in faith and support them in times of trial.⁵¹ The wives often lived up to such expectations. The educated husband now frequently appeared in the role of a teacher. Manuals were written to help husbands with the task of educating their wives. In one of the more popular manuals, written in the form of dialogues, the husband expresses the hope that the wife will surpass him in learning.⁵² The oft-repeated argument that women had to be educated so that they could be fit companions of their educated husbands was evidently

⁴⁹ For a moving literary statement of this thesis, see Niradchandra Chaudhuri, *Bangali Jibane Ramani*; for Bankim's reference to the students' familiarity with the balcony scene, see 'Sakuntala, Miranda o Desdemona', *Bibidha Prabandha*, 83.

⁵⁰ Kailasbasini Debi, *Atmakatha*, 16 in *Atmakatha*, vol. 2.

⁵¹ See, for example, the autobiography of the Brahmo preacher Bangachandra Ray, *Amar Kshudra Jibanalekhya* (A Portrait of my Insignificant Life), 38, in *Atmakatha*, vol. 4. Other Brahmo stalwarts like Keshabchandra Sen, Prakash Ray etc. were also courageously supported by their wives in times of their trial.

⁵² Satyacharan Mitra, *Strir Prati Swamir Upadesh*, 5.

not the only conscious motive behind the male initiative to educate their wives. There was a prolonged debate on what was appropriate education for women. While the centrist position on this emphasized education which would help women perform their duties efficiently as wife and mother plus an elementary knowledge of the world to broaden their minds and cure superstition, a more egalitarian approach was not unknown. Ramesh Datta in his comments on the condition of women in England observed that the only way women could be truly free and equal of men was to open all careers to them.⁵³ Kailasbasini, whose pride in her husband's love for her has been cited above, showed a will of her own in refusing to give up the traditional Hindu practices, for while she had accepted her husband's spiritual beliefs, she would not do anything to risk her connections with their network of relations.⁵⁴

Purdah also became a major issue. A change in social mores in this regard had profound implications for the relationship between men and women. Satyen Tagore created a sensation by taking his wife out in an open carriage. When the other ladies of the Tagore household followed this example, Calcutta society treated the matter as a great scandal. But before long, other Brahmos also defied the seclusion taboos. The often transparent sarees they wore at home were considered indecorous by their men and there were curious experiments with hybrid semi-western styles until the Parsee-style saree introduced by Mrs Satyen Tagore set the fashion. The issue of women appearing in public caused great controversy. Even the reformer Keshab was not willing to see them at his meetings sitting outside the screen provided for them. More radical Brahmos finally broke the taboo. There was a prolonged debate in the pages of the periodical *Somprakash* on the question, and freedom without liberal education was considered dangerous for the women's morals. A correspondent signing herself as 'a chaste wife' asked if one should first learn to swim before getting into water. Sibnath Sastri's autobiography provides plentiful evidence of free mixing between men and women among the Brahmos. Nabin Sen's memoirs also project similar patterns of social conduct among the government functionaries in the district and subdivisional towns of Bengal. Dewan Kartikeya

⁵³ R. C. Dutt, *Three Years in Europe, Being Extracts from Letters Sent from Europe by a Hindu* (Calcutta and London, 1873), 87f, 91.

⁵⁴ Kailasbasini Debi, *Atmakatha*, 25.

records how this new freedom of social intercourse transformed the quality of life for the men and women of his generation.⁵⁵

One logical consequence of the altered expectations from conjugal relationship was the quest for consensual marriage. The Brahmos led the way in this matter as in many other areas of social life. Consent, however, had little meaning so long as the custom of child marriage persisted. The custom had come under attack even from people who did not believe in consensual marriage. Western critics described it as barbaric and the criticism appears to have struck home. Besides, many features of the system, especially motherhood at a very early age, were seen to be cruel and socially dysfunctional. The agenda for national reconstruction rejected child marriage on the ground that the system produced unhealthy children, destroyed all buoyancy by burdening men with the responsibilities of family too early in life and generally contributed to national degeneration.⁵⁶ We do not have the statistics on the upward trend, if any, in the average age of marriage in Bengal. But change in this respect appears to have been very slow except among the Brahmos and, very probably, the average age at marriage for girls was under twelve as late as the 1920s.

Changes in attitudes as well as economic conditions gradually undermined the ideological basis of the extended family. Here too western criticisms and the general sense of inadequacy which prompted continual comparisons with English ways induced a belief that the system undermined initiative and was hence a factor in the alleged social degeneration of Bengalis.⁵⁷ An offshoot of this critical attitude was the notion that a man should not marry before he was economically independent. Those who married widows, under the authority of the new law and very rarely with parental consent, usually had to live up to this new norm.⁵⁸ But a general movement in this direction depended of course on the average age at marriage. As the modernizers were also opposed to great difference in age

⁵⁵ For the debate on women's education, see Brothwick, *Changing Role*, ch. 3; for Kartikeya's comment on the joys of free mixing, see Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajib-ancharit*, 28; also see Nabinchandra Sen, *Amar Jiban*, in Shantikumar Dasgupta and Haribandhu Mukhati (eds), *Nabinchandra Rachanabali* (Dattachaudhuri and Sons, Calcutta, 1974), Part I, 277-86.

⁵⁶ See Iswarchandra Vidyasagar, *Balyabibaher Dosh* (The Evils of Child Marriage), in *Rachanabali*, 679-85.

⁵⁷ See *Samayikpatre Banglar Samajchitra*, vol. 4, 247.

⁵⁸ See Gurucharan Mahalanabish, *Atmakatha*, 29f, in *Atmakatha*, vol. 4.

between husband and wife, economically independent husbands were a rarity so long as the bride was a girl of twelve to fourteen.

The Brahmos, as already noted, were the first to introduce a form of consensual marriage. Here too the initiative was taken by the elders and there was little courtship with or without chaperones. Only, the would-be husband was introduced to the girl and after the two had talked for a while the elders asked both parties if they were willing to go ahead with the marriage. The engaged couple had opportunities of meeting after this and there were instances both in fiction and real life where the girls exercised their freedom to break off the engagement. As modernizing families ceased to observe strict segregation of women, the parties to consensual marriage sometimes knew each other before marriage was actually suggested.⁵⁹ But consensual marriage was by no means universal in any section of Bengali society. As already noted, even in the trend-setting Tagore family parents continued to choose spouses for their children who had little say in such matters. The emphasis on consent had unusual expressions among the ideologues of the Brahma Samaj. Sibnath Sastri, forced into a bigamous marriage by his father, later tried to induce his second wife to divorce and remarry. She firmly refused. Durgamohan Das arranged a remarriage for his widowed step-mother aged fourteen.⁶⁰

Romantic love is a pervasive theme in Bengali literature from the early eighteen-sixties onwards. The Calcutta stage projected it to enthusiastic audiences and Bankim wrote of it in a way which made it credible in the context of contemporary experience. This was not to the liking of the more conservative elements who accused him of corrupting the youth with his tales of love and war.⁶¹ Brahma ethos with its strong overtones of Victorian puritanism, as also the traditional emphasis on the elders' right to choose spouses for the young,

⁵⁹ Haimabati describes two incidents in which she was introduced to prospective bridegrooms and her consent to marriage was sought by the guardians. The first of these two young men visited her for quite some time until she decided to break off the engagement because of his mother's objections. She accepted and married the second young man. The heroine in Tagore's *Gora*, Sucharita, broke off her engagement to Panu Babu. See Rabindranath Tagore, *Gora*, in *Rabindra Rachanabali*, vol. 6 (Calcutta, 1976).

⁶⁰ Sibnath Sastri, *Atmacharit*, 87f, in *Atmakatha*, vol. 5. Sudhiranjan Das, *Ja Dekhechhi Ja Peyechi* (What I Have Heard and What I have Received) (Calcutta, 1969), I, 33.

⁶¹ See Prabhat Mukhopadhyay, 'Nishiddha phal' (Forbidden Fruit), in *Galpa Samagra*, (Omnibus collection of short stories), part II (Calcutta, 1987), 271.

confirmed such attitudes. Even the enthusiastic readers of Bankim treated love in real life either as an irrelevant joke or a form of deviant behaviour.

The biographical literature does provide a few instances of romance leading to marriage. Some of the early rebels against established social mores, like Michael, Dakshinaranjan and Gyanendramohan Tagore, courted the ladies whom they eventually married. The poet Nabin Sen, who was in the habit of falling in love repeatedly from a very early age, did manage by a cleverly planted suicide threat to get his father to secure for him the bride he wanted. But this romantic alliance was so unusual that the city of Dacca where the bride lived was filled with hair-raising tales of the couple's death-defying love for each other.⁶² Incidentally, the heroine was aged ten at the time of marriage and the choice was his rather than hers. The younger generation of the Tagore family had some experience of courting. Indira Devi, writing in her old age, recalled that she did receive romantic attention. One forelorn lover would come and stand under a tree in front of her house every day hoping to catch a glimpse of the fair lady. This devotion inspired one of Tagore's better known songs—*pratidina hai* etc. (everyday he comes and leaves in vain). Indira had a prolonged correspondence with her future husband.⁶³ Her cousin, Sarala Debi, had enough admirers to inspire her to write a satire, *Premik Sabha* (The Association of Lovers).⁶⁴ We also have glimpses of romantic love in humbler levels of society. A Brahmo missionary wrote that when he decided to get married he could only think of the melancholy face of his friend's widowed sister, the girl he eventually married.⁶⁵ But courtship or romantic love preceding marriage was very much the exception to the modal pattern of behaviour.

Romantic love appears to have flourished more after marriage than as a pre-marital emotional experience leading to happy union. There is plentiful evidence to prove that a new intensity of emotion in conjugal relationship for which there is little precedent in the pre-modern past was now a part of the bhadralok's life experience.

⁶² Nabin Sen, *Amar Jiban*, in *Nabinchandra Rachanabali*, vol. 1, 16off.

⁶³ Indira Debi's Memoirs, in *Ekshan*, vols 19 and 20, Bengali years 1399 [1992] and 1400 [1993].

⁶⁴ Sarala Debi Chaudhuri, *Jibaner Jhara Pata* (Life's Fallen Leaves), 2nd edn (Calcutta, 1982), 100-1.

⁶⁵ Srinath Chanda, *Brahmo Samaje Challish Bachhar* (Forty Years in Brahmo Samaj), 2nd edn (Calcutta, Bengali year 1375 [1968]), 129-30.

The greater intimacy made possible by the household set-up of the bureaucrats and professionals in urban and suburban areas, new sensibilities generated by a complex set of circumstances and the expectations informed by exposure to romantic literature, western and Indian, all contributed to an ambience of romance in marriage. Kailasbasini's not very literate diary, Jnanendranath Das's epistles to his dead wife interspersed with the letters they had actually exchanged, the strange tale of B. C. Roy's parents' painful aspiration towards spiritual love unpolluted by physical desire (of which more later), Bankim's descriptions of playful to intense attachment and his confession of his immense debt to his wife are all parts of a vast body of available documentation bearing on a new feeling for one's partner in marriage.⁶⁶

Yet the age of the bride at marriage was seldom above twelve. The fact does not appear to have been a serious barrier to romantic feeling in men. The civilian and historian R. C. Dutt who deplored the limitations to women's freedom in England and was in favour of all careers being opened to women, saw nothing incongruous in projecting a girl of thirteen or twelve as the beautiful heroine of a novel based on contemporary life. The Brahma leader,⁶⁷ Bijaykrishna Goswami recalled his conjugal life with his five-year-old wife who would lie down on his book to stop him from reading so that she might have his full attention. The adjustment of emotions and expectations to the realities of inherited social practice against which few revolted gave an unusual colouring to the affects of marital life.

Beyond reasonable doubt, the new sensibilities sharpened by romantic literature stimulated a yearning for romantic love, especially in young men. It seems unlikely that such expectations were always matched by the experience of conjugal life. The poet Nabin Sen writes very openly of his frustrations, though as a modern young man he had insisted successfully on having a say in the choice of his bride. The discourse on women's education underlines the cultural gap between the college-educated husbands and their often illiterate wives. The failure of communication often led, we are told, young

⁶⁶ Kailasbasini Debi, *Atmakatha*, 16, 19, 29 etc; Jnanendranath Das, *Mahashanti o Nidra* (Eternal Peace and Sleep) (Calcutta, 1919); Prakashchandra Ray, *Aghor-Prakash*; Bankimchandra Chattopadhyay, *Bishbriksha* (The Poison Tree), *Bankim Rachanabali* (Patra's Publication, Calcutta, 1983), vol. 1, 204-8.

⁶⁷ Rameshchandra Datta, *Samsar-katha*, in Jogeshchandrachandra Bagal, editor, *Ramesh Rachanabali, Samagra Upanyas*, 391. Amritalal Sengupta, *Jogamaya Thakurani, Madaripur* (1916), 7.

men to seek the company of prostitutes.⁶⁸ The argument seems somewhat specious because the prostitutes were not culturally or educationally superior to the housewives. The impetus behind the male initiative for women's education came largely from their desire for better communication with their wives. The frustrated lover, in and out of marriage, is a central figure in Bengali fiction of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Their portraits are understandably more convincing than those of the successful hero.

The biographical literature contains hints of extra-marital love and at times hard data. As access to women unrelated to one other than courtesans was strictly limited, romantic attachments as much as illicit relationships did develop within the extended family. Dewan Kartikeya writes of his platonic love for a lady who was evidently a married relation. He also records his sense of revulsion when the object of love sought a full-fledged affair. Nabin Sen, a narcissistic braggart, mentions several extramarital affairs in his autobiography. He also describes one grand passion and how he asked his eldest son to place his beloved's farewell letter on his funeral pyre. The new sensibility is evident, in all references to such relationships. Kartikeya writes with deep sympathy of the love of a young prostitute which he did not reciprocate. 'Her life may be polluted but her love was not'. The famous actress Binodini speaks very openly of her life as a kept woman but also asks in a spirit of bitter defiance if society was not responsible for the life she had been forced to choose.⁶⁹

A depressing feature of the new sensibility was a mood of morbid introspection focused on sexuality. There is nothing in the tradition which suggests that sexuality itself was ever considered an evil or that people spent a great deal of time brooding over the sinfulness of their sexual fantasies. Brahmos, influenced by the Christian doctrine of sin, appear to have been obsessed with notions of purity in such matters. Keeping diaries in which young people confessed their sinful thoughts became a popular habit.⁷⁰ A thirteen-year-old boy wrote in his diary: 'This wretched person is a slave to his passions.'⁷¹

⁶⁸ See Ghulam Murshid, *Reluctant Debutante*, ch. 3.

⁶⁹ Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajibancharit*, 34-5, 37, 83-7; Nabin Sen, *Amar Jiban*, I, 147-53, II, 150ff, 166ff, 194ff; Binodini Dasi, *Amar Katha o Anyanya Rachana* (My story and Other Writings) (first published Bengali year 1319 [1912], revised edn, Calcutta, 1394 (1987), 62.

⁷⁰ See Bangachandra Ray, *Amar Kshudra Jibanalakhyia*, 33 in *Atmakatha*, vol. 4; Pratapchandra Majumdar, *Ashish* (Blessings), 65, 67 in *Atmakatha*, 4.

⁷¹ Kaminikumara Datta's Diary (manuscript). I was allowed to consult the manuscript by Mr Datta's granddaughter, Ms Krishna Dutt.

Ramkrishna's famous disciple, Ramchandra Datta, described how his sinful mind phantasized on sex with the women he met. The poet Krishnachandra Majumdar confessed that such obsessive thoughts which he tried to fight by thinking of his mother eventually stimulated sexual fantasies about his mother herself.⁷²

Colonial rule had created centres of administration where the functionaries often had to live as single men. Prostitution flourished in the small towns and, of course, Calcutta, a boom city in the earlier half of the nineteenth century, when men, we are told, met socially in brothels. The hetaira tradition of northern India found a new market in Calcutta.⁷³ The reformers' effort at purifying such evils partly explains the repressive attitudes.

Not illogically, the new puritans drew upon old ascetic ideals. Haimabati's husband declared to his newly-married wife that he had taken a vow of celibacy for six months. He eventually fathered six children. Dr B. C. Roy's parents did adopt successfully the vow of celibacy after they had produced several children. Prakash Ray mentions in their 'joint memoir' how they transformed a practical necessity, contraception, into a spiritual quest for platonic love. They kissed one last time, uttering Satyam, Truth with a capital T, and vowed not to touch each other again below the neck. The decision nearly broke the wife's heart. Eventually when she went to Lucknow for higher education, the two tested their love by stopping all mutual communication. When spiritual love finally triumphed, they celebrated a spiritual wedding, the wife bedecked as a Buddhist nun, her head duly shaven. The assembled Brahmo brothers and sisters applauded this supreme triumph in ecstatic joy.⁷⁴ I have suggested above that the new Indian sensibilities were no clone of their western counterparts and had no precedents in the Indian tradition. The evidence just cited, though somewhat extreme, perhaps proves my point.

Politics does not often influence the love life of mankind in general, but the colonial context produced curious interactions. Bankim in his *Anandamath* had conjured up a story of patriots living as ascetics to liberate the motherland. One of the protagonists, a married man, was joined by his wife in male attire but the vow of celibacy was not to be broken until the motherland had been liberated. In fact both achieved martyrdom on the field of glory. This fictional account pro-

⁷² Krishnachandra Majumdar, *Ra Ser Itibratta* (History of Ra Se), 17-19.

⁷³ Kartikeyachandra Ray, *Atmajibancharit*, 31-2; Somnath Chakrabarti, *Kolkatar Bajjibilas* (The Courtesans of Calcutta) (Calcutta, 1991).

⁷⁴ Prakashchandra Ray, *Aghor-Prakash* (Calcutta, 1921), chs 9, 10, 17, 25, 26, 31.

vided role models for the early revolutionaries like Brahmabandhab. As Nirad Chaudhuri points out, even men of his generation perceived a conflict between the demands of love and service to one's country.⁷⁵ Vivekananda called upon young men and women to serve the nation as a band of ascetics. He was partly influenced no doubt by the Christian missionary example, but a belief in the irreconcilability of patriotic dedication and happy family life was a factor in his preference, presumably because the demands of the family would be a serious distraction.

But something more than practical necessity was at stake in these prescriptions. He and his fellow mystics were all initiated into celibacy by their master, Ramakrishna who perceived sex and spiritual regimes as mutually irreconcilable, even though the tradition saw no necessary conflict between the two. Celibacy, *brahmacharya*, as one possible precondition for the mystical quest, is no doubt a part of the Hindu tradition. But the nineteenth-century Bengali discourse on national reconstruction based on the reconstructed individual, standing strong and pure, ready like a sharpened sword to serve the nation, emphasized celibacy as a value in itself and as a means towards achievement of spiritual, moral and physical strength. The story of Vivekananda's early life reflects this concern.⁷⁶ It was a concern which appears to have been widely shared by the idealistic young in the latter years of the nineteenth century. An old prescription meant for those seeking *brahmopalavdhi*, realization of Brahman, now served mostly secular purposes. It was now expected to bolster up the insecure ego of colonial youth convinced of their degeneration and weakness of body and mind.

Emotions considered appropriate in a given context are not necessarily a part of people's actual experience. However, to educated Bengalis the notion that they rose above the humiliations of political subjection in the serene and transcendent experience of their love life became a part of their articulated ideology. The family as haven acquired a new meaning in the colonial context. The idea was expressed very powerfully in the introductory part of Tagore's famous poem, *Prem'er Abhishek* (Love's Anointing).⁷⁷ Given below is a very free and inept translation of some of the relevant lines:

⁷⁵ Niradchandra Chaudhuri, *Bangali Jibane Ramani*, ch. 6.

⁷⁶ Mahendranath Datta, *Srimad Vivekananda Swamir Jibaner Ghatanabali* vol. I.

⁷⁷ Rabindranath Tagore, 'Prem'er Abhishek' in *Sadhana*, Phalgun, 1300 (Bengali Year); also *Rabindra-rachanabali*; vol. 4, 544-7. This introductory part of the poem was left out in later editions because the poet's Anglophile friend, Loken Palit had objected to it.

Why talk, my beloved, of all the insults, the misery of life in the world outside?

A small man am I, my master, a foreigner, an Englishman

Barks out his harsh commands from on high.

He does not know my language,

To him, my misery means nothing,

But listen my master,

Here, sheltered in my private heaven,

I am the king.

Oh my love, I am blessed,

Blessed that my soul is filled with your love.

You have made me king.

On my head you have placed the crown of glory.

Were such sentiments a part of middle class Bengali consciousness?

Nirad Chaudhuri, born in 1897, and an uncompromising admirer of British rule in India, assures us that they were.⁷⁸

⁷⁸ Chaudhuri, *Bangali Jibane Ramani*, 210-11.