Politics of Women's Dialect: A deeper look into Bengali Idioms and Proverbs

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Abstract

Patriarchy has its deep tentacles into society and living with it is a reality. Controlling women, however, has never been easy for society. That may be a reason why there have been such elaborate and well-planned measures to do so. Controlling the way women speak has been a major part of it by taking control of the thought process of the collective. This paper attempts to throw light upon the old Bengali proverbs and idioms that was and is a major part of the women's dialect in Bengal. Through statements like "Sak die mach dhaka jaena", or short but piercing rhymes like "Poorle narir, urle chai, tobe Narir kolonko nai", even everyday statements like, "bachte dilona bhat kapor, or korche daan sagor" are an integral part of the women's dialect in Bengal. It will be incorrect to claim that these phrases are obsolete nowadays because the entire Bengali women's dialect cannot be judged through the language of a handful of the educated class of urban women. These and many more such statements are part of the popular culture and language and are often repeatedly used to represent situations mostly by women. On the other hand, these statements unravel the horrific stories of atrocities women were subjected to through ages. The few mentioned here alone provides loads of information about tortures on widows, sexual abuse and domestic violence on women and also traumatic social injustice that took place on the so-called 'weaker vessels' through the ages. This paper tries to look into such oral histories that remained captured in the Bengali women's dialect. The dominance of patriarchy shaped up the way for men and shrewdly guided women to speak and think in a manner that made it easy for them to take them for granted. However, through this paper, some light can be thrown on untold social injustices and stories of resistance in Bengal, which remains an important chapter in the history of women's empowerment.

Keywords: Bengali Women's dialect, popular language, social injustices, patriarchy

Introduction

It is extremely crucial to detect how patriarchy plunges its deep tentacles into the core of society. At times people with the most liberal and progressive thought process fall victim to the subtle effects of patriarchy on them and thus grow popular practices that are impregnated with negativity, injustices, and ugly facts. Probably due to the mass use of certain statements or thoughts make the evil in them go unnoticed. Therefore, popular sayings in different languages capture decades of social injustices that remained engraved in the dialect of a certain cultural community or social order. Through the practice of such popular cultures like proverbs, many crucial realities of society can be traced. This paper will look into Bangla proverbs and popular sayings that have been and still are a part of the culture and tradition of Bengal and speak about the history of the treatment of its women.

Types of injustice against women

First and foremost it is important to mention that the above-mentioned statements are mainly used by women themselves and are a very important part of the Bengali women's dialect. Women are conditioned by the society itself to speak in a certain manner, think in a certain manner, even believe certain particular things, and needless to mention all of this is designed to suit the patriarchal society in the best way possible. This kind of manipulative psychological conditioning makes women a crucial tool in the entire patriarchal system. Speech is a very important part of this manipulation, but probably knowingly and at times unknowingly women have taken up these common sayings as a media to express themselves. Through these sayings, a lot of relatable situations are referred to or explained. Many of these sayings have a story attached to them. Surprisingly, there is a wide field of these common sayings. Everyone seems to know them over an enormous amount of space and they have survived through ages. This has happened mostly due to the prevailing oral tradition in the east. These statements are repeated again and again, whenever a situation is relatable to these. This feature of these sayings make them so unique, and this is the reason why they have elaborate historical evidences woven into them. Therefore whenever these statements, stories are repeated in different time frames and space, they carry the untold stories in them; stories of the women of Bengal and the injustice faced by them.

i) Proceeding categorically, the first statement that can be analyzed is "Shak diye mach dhaka jaena". It is the most common statement that almost every Bengali knowing person has come across at some point of time in their life. The main reason why this saying is used is quite plain. It is a statement used to describe and condemn cover-ups for any situation. In case a particular faulty action is being covered up by another flimsy object, then this statement is used. But what exactly does 'shak diye mach dhaka' mean? It tells a story, a widely known historical fact. Widowed women were not supposed to have fish. Fish was among the numerous basic needs

they had to give up as the consequence of losing their husbands. According to this tradition of patriarchy, under the shroud of religion, the women had no right to happiness after their husbands died. This is a vast topic and the list of tortures on widowed women are endless. However, coming back to the statement, many women who could not bear such atrocities transgressed. In certain cases, women defied the rules and consumed fish. 'Shak' which is a vegetarian dish and is part of Bengali cuisine is mentioned here as a camouflage. So basically the 'shak' is being used to cover the piece of fish on someone's plate, a person who is not supposed to consume fish. It is considered a horrible sin, and also has terrible consequences. In order to avoid getting caught, the 'shak' is being used to cover and hide the fish, and then the efforts go in vain, revealing the fish. This is how this common saying has become popular and it is so randomly used that the sad reality associated with it often goes unnoticed by the one who says this and also by the one who hears it. It is important to mention that these kinds of statements are mostly used by women, on the actions of other women and thus it takes a major place in the field of women's dialect.

ii) Another saying, rather a little rhyme, like, "Poorle naarir, urle chai, tobe naarir kolonko nai" also has a very traumatic story attached to it. Stories of physical torture on women are not new. There have been endless mentions of torture on women on different platforms. However, it is a sad reality that even if a woman is assaulted the fault is found in her character and she is the one scarred for life. Victim blaming is a horrific reality even today and there have been numerous cases where society has blamed the woman entirely for an assault that happened to her. Women were forced to live horrific lives if she was assaulted due to no fault of her own. Hence, this scar is termed as 'kolonko' in the Bengali language and this statement signifies that no woman of any age or category is safe. Only safety can be guaranteed to a woman after her dead body has been burnt completely and the ashes are flying. So the death does not ensure the safety of a lady. This is a hint to the possible perversions that can happen on a woman's corpse, necrophilic abuse too cannot be ruled out. Also, the importance of a pure character in a woman is mentioned in this statement. It subtly refers to a dreadful story about the fatal consequences that may be faced by women who willingly transgressed or even were falsely accused. However, trial on fire for establishing purity of a woman's character is not new. Sita's 'agni pariksha', that is ordeal by fire for 'Sita', the wife of Rama, is found in the epic 'Ramayana', and how she bore the brunt of false acquisition is a widely popular story, but that is entirely a different issue.

iii) Then there are lesser-known sayings, such as, "Bachte dilona bhaat kapor, morle korche daan sagor". This particular saying explains how a husband, who did not take care of the necessities of his wife, is donating like an ocean on the occasion of her death. The saying states he is donating enormously among the poor people on the occasion of his wife's death. It is the same wife who did not get bare minimum food and clothes from the same husband. There have been several reported incidents of women being abandoned by their families and husbands not taking the

responsibilities of their wives. This particular statement is impregnated with a major social issue that is still quite relevant in the contemporary era.

Sukumar Sen in his legendary work '*Women's Dialect'* talks ab0out the Bengali proverbs in an entire chapter dedicated to the topic. He says, "Bengali women- especially those who belong to the lower classes, are remarkably fond of spicing their talk with all sorts of broken verses and proverbs. These are called 'chhora' (a string or poem) and reciting them is known as 'chhora kata' (to spin verses). In their quarrels, too, Bengali women are apt to quote a series of verses and sayings; and a quarrel of this type is popularly known as 'chhora ketey gaal dewa" , abusing a person through recitation. These particular rhyme-like phrases are a gold mine for the researchers of social history. An acknowledgment of this tradition can be found in Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's *Indira.* In the novel he has a character of a little girl, called 'Hema', who has this habit of talking in quick and witty limericks that fit into the situation happening around her quite appropriately, often these riddles in rhymes bear more meaning than plain statements.
iv) Polygamy had also been a severe problem in Bengali society, especially due to the 'kuleen pratha', that certain high caste Brahmins could marry and did marry large number girls to liberate their families from sure hell for having unmarried girls in the family. There are several sayings about this problem. Society usually sets women against each other in most situations for its benefit, which leads to the heart-rendering picture of the sufferings of the co-wives of those times. Sayings about this problem are, "Swami Yam ke dewa jae tobu soteen ke dewa jaena" meaning a husband could be handed over to death but not a co wife or " Je nari soteen e pore taare bidhata bhinno gore", meaning the woman who has co wife, even the God bows to her; also "saat soteen e nori chori, bera agun e pure mori". Meaning, I live with seven co-wives and die burning from the fire in the fence. The statements make it clear how difficult it is to accept the infidelity of the husband while it is sanctioned by society. As mentioned earlier state of widowhood was horrific in Bengal, yet the women preferred that over remarriage amounting to polygamy. However, every woman suffers equally in this kind of situation, even though society sets them against one another for the system to run smoothly in an easy-going manner.

v) Marriage itself appears to be horrific as a system through these sayings. Women were also married off to far places, so that they would often not meet their family members ever in their lives. Under the circumstances they had to leave their families for ever. On the other hand the families had no idea about their lives forever. The most popular saying is "Gangey Gangey dekha hoy, bone bone dekha hoyna.". This statement says how rivers meet but sisters never meet after marriage. The difficulties are quite simply presented through these statements. There is a little story of a woman whose in-laws ill-treated her. One day her brother comes to visit her, but the mother-in-law does not leave her alone to talk with her brother lest she reveals her actual condition. So the clever woman hides the actual message for her family in a casual statement about her well-being. She says, "bari giye bolo dada, boro sukhe achi, jhinger ful futle ami bhojon e te boshi". Now the trick in this statement is that the 'jhingey' flower blooms in the

evening and the woman is trying to tell her brother she gets her first meal of the day in the evening, and this way the mother-in-law is not able to crack this code. Here it can be seen that the dialect is working as a tool of resistance for the woman.

Conclusion

The source of this paper is mainly from oral traditions found around us. There are several more such examples, only very few are mentioned here. However, this analysis opens the doors to a new field of analysis of more such oral traditions around us. Most of it however, remains in the normal, day to day dialects of the women. This is a new journey in the field of "other history".

Note:

The only reference book used in this paper is "Women's Dialect in Bengali" by Sukumar Sen. Other than this the paper is based on collective experience and primary sources that cannot even be termed as proper interviews.

References:

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The author has completed her post-graduation from Jadavpur University with Comparative literature. She is currently working as a blogger for an international company. She has papers on several subjects related to oral tradition and popular art. She also works as a freelance city reporter and translator. Her plan for the future is to explore the field of academics and pursue research.

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