A Study on The Marriage System of Colonial Bengal

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Abstract: Marriages in colonial Bengal were jeweled with sets of customs and rituals which depended on the caste and class hierarchy of native people. But while talking about such an important aspect in colonial Bengal, one can not only focus on the natives. The foreign population of nineteenth and twentieth century Bengal mainly consisted of British who at first intended to trade here and later settled down with a long term plan to rule. During this long span, besides the political and economic sectors, social and personal lives of this population were equally vivid. Though there are discussions on native marriages in several research works, the British and Anglo-Indian or Inter-racial marriages in colonial Bengal are not much discussed. Till eighteenth century, the British mostly had affairs with native women in Bengal but their main families were in Britain. After finishing their economic ventures, they used to leave their native *bibis* and kids behind to join their families overseas. But since the beginning of colonial rule, great number of British began to be posted in Bengal and they stayed for long time, sometimes for lifetime. These young and mostly unmarried officials used to start and continue their married lives in Bengal during their postings. Unlike the natives, marriage for these British officials was complicated due to the scarcity of British women. Thus, many British officials found wives from native women and some British women also married native elites. But inter-racial marriages were often more complicated.

The objective of this study is to portray the main aspects of Bengali, British and inter-racial marriages in colonial Bengal, their resemblances and diversities and will shade some light on the sustainability of these ties.

Keywords: *Brides, grooms, customs, consent, qualification, sustainability, marriage, Bengal.*

Introduction

Though two different communities with different cultures and living patterns coexisted in British Bengal, marriage was one thing which was universal in both communities. The number of unmarried persons, other than the ones suffering from any physical or mental condition, was extremely small (Imperial Gazetteer, 1909: 43). But the nature of marriages was different. The natives of Bengal often came in contact with the British for economic and political purposes but never gladly considered them for the very sacred tie, marriage. Margaret MacMillan stated, "Indians thought British women mingled freely with men who were not relations, they wore low-cut dresses, danced in public places. In Indian society only prostitutes and dancing girls did such things." (MacMillan, 1988: 20) For the British, initially, marriage with local women was popular from 1713 onwards when the earliest marriage registers for the Church of England appeared (Ghosh, 2008: 39). The inter-racial marriages went up till mid-eighteenth century. However, by

around the 1860s, due to several social changes and challenges, an adverse attitude towards the natives became increasingly evident among the British (Sen, 2001:3). In this regard, Sen (2002:3) noted that "*even having a bibi gradually became a matter of shame*". The British men of nineteenth century did not want Indian wives for marriage, rather they wanted middle class British girls (MacMillan, 1988: 17).

It was easy for the natives to find their suitable matches as they were in their own land but for the British being in a minor community with very few women, it was hard. Among these women, there were single working-class women, widows of crown troops (Stanley, 1998: 14), and daughters of railway men, civilians and merchants. A very important source to find brides was the orphanages where many Eurasian girls could be found who were raised with such an intention (Anthony, 1962: 16). By 1920s the term Eurasian was replaced by Anglo-Indians and their number in Kolkata city was 13621, mainly located at *Bowbazar* (Thompson, 1923: 74). Interestingly, a large number of British women began to arrive in Bengal since 1780s to get grooms (Verenede, 1996: 2). The return of the first generation of British merchants and traders to Britain with all their riches created India's impression as 'El Dorado' (Banerjee, 2019: 52). According to Ghosh, (1970), between 1757 and 1800, there were 1581 "European marriages" in Bengal among which 2,626 Writers and Cadets, 3,500 non officials and about 10,000 troops (Ghosh, 1970: 60-61). Limited numbers of inter-racial marriages were still on the cards but these often brought complications.

Methodology

This study is a historical research which involves synthesizing data from primary sources like census reports, gazetteers, travelogues and autobiographies of nineteenth and early twentieth century which have been collected from the Central Library (Rare Section) of Dhaka University, Bangladesh. Numerous secondary sources like books, novels, articles, newspapers have been scrutinized to understand different perspectives on different marriage systems of colonial Bengal.

Requisite qualifications for brides and grooms

While discussing the native marriages, Majumdar (2000:6) noted that "*the qualifications needed in a groom were clearly marked by colonial origins, while those sought in a bride sound traditional*". For British, this was partially true too. While the prime concern for grooms was their socio-economic position, women had to possess a set of qualifications to have a good marriage alliance. Here some core factors of colonial Bengal marriage system have been discussed.

Caste

According to LSSO' Malley, till nineteenth century, caste was only a matter relating to marriage and caste paid most attention at the maintenance of its marriage customs. In colonial society, endogamy, exogamy and hypergamy were all in force. If the caste was endogamous, the bride and the bridegroom had to be of the same caste and sub-caste. If the caste was exogamous, the parties had to be of the same but could belong to different clans; where hypergamy was practiced, man from higher castes could take wives from a lower class. Elites of the society could keep concubines or escorts from lowers classes (O'Malley, 1932: 90). But for women it was an essential subject to marry into one of the same or higher castes. This created a much disgraceful custom of colonial Bengal, kulinism. To maintain caste chastity the Brahmans aspired to get their daughters married to

the kulin Brahmans, the highest in the caste hierarchy and this gave the Kulins opportunity to take marriage as a profession. On the other hand, like other foreign invaders, the British were untouchables. Margaret Macmillan pointed, "Strict Hindus dared not to eat with them, barely remain in the same room" (MacMillan, 1988: 13). However, by the end of nineteenth century, caste rigidity began to decline. According to Majumdar (2009:6), "*the homogenization of caste was indicative of the emergence of a new kind of urban identity- bhadralok".* In a marriage periodical *Ghatak* in 1927, for a *'Mukhya Kulin'* girl, there was no objection with a non-kulin groom (Mitra, 1927: 74).

Though the British always considered the native caste oriented marriage system as backwardness, they were not completely free from it. A common concern in the British society of Bengal was the fall of a British in the clutches of a wrong woman with "suspicious Indian blood" (MacMillan 1988: 132). Even the Eurasian women who married British men of high social status were never considered the same and could only expect to become second-class Europeans and the working-class British husbands who chose to stay in India became "domiciled European", a category barely distinguishable from the Eurasian (Anderson 2011: 151). But the British were not on the extreme side while considering marrying the natives. By the nineteenth century the British were the ruling elites and they knew that to protect the Raj, solidarity among the two communities was important.

Age

For native males in Bengal, age was not a binding fact as it was for the females. Though, through the Age of Consent Act of 1891 the age of marriage for girls was set at twelve, in traditional families, daughters had to be married before attaining puberty. But with time the age of marriage among the natives gradually raised among the higher castes mainly because of education and enlightenment. British women who arrived in Kolkata were of different age groups. For them, marriage would take place after the girl had attained puberty at varying intervals (Thompson, 1923: 222). But often they were married at a very young age in Bengal. William Huggins termed such young British brides as "women-children" (Huggins, 1824: 102). Generally the junior most ones used to get the best match, the high officials in Kolkata. It was said that the comparatively aged women had to find grooms from outside of Kolkata (Sur, 2019: 82). Thus there was demand of younger girls for marriage as according to the men, the younger brides could be molded easily to adopt the Kolkata culture. But, British grooms in Bengal on the other hand were good deal older than their wives as they had to wait to get promoted to good positions and for young women from Britain (MacMillan, 1988: 133).

Explicit qualifications for males

In case of native grooms, the general requirements included- caste hierarchy, family position and financial condition. According to Rochona Majumdar, "participation in public life and civil society" was gaining more importance for grooms (Majumdar, 2009:41). In his travelogue, George Johnson mentioned, knowledge of the English language was considered by the Hindus a high qualification (Johnson, 1843: 231). Whereas, in British community, professional position and income of the groom were the vital requirements for marriage. British Officials of Indian Civil Service were often compared to Brahmins, the 'heaven born' at the summit of caste system (MacMillan, 1988: 129).

Rankings like lieutenants, collectors were also very lucrative. Even a very wealthy native male could be a good option too for these British women. "There was something about their being very rich that overrode the colour thing." one British girl opined about a native elite (Adams, 2012).

Explicit qualification of females

There was a set of qualifications required for women to score good in marriage market in both the communities. But the availability of native women and the scarcity of British women brought different treatments for them during marriage proceedings. While it was very rare to find British brides in Bengal, the difference in the proportion in native boys and girls in Bengal was not more than 4.2% in 1872 (Beverley, 1872: 151).

For native women, emphasize on *kula* or family mattered much to secure social dignity and the amount of dowry. The advertisement in *Ghatak* magazine also mentioned that the father of the girl was a "high level government employee who was able to pay three thousand rupees as dowry" (Mitra, 1927: 74). The other important requirements were age and physical beauty. George W Johnson stated, "She is wholely debarred from the benefits of knowledge, her beauty and her address constitute her chief accomplishments." (Johnson, 1843: 23) Often this lack of beauty had to be compensated by increased dowry. On the other hand, beauty wasn't the sole demand for English wife. With such a surplus of unmarried men, a British girl had to be very ugly not to find a match (Macmillan, 1988: 129). But they also had to possess number of requirements to be a good wife. Margaret Macmillan added, "Girls whether they were brought up in India or at Home, were given an education intended to equip them with the accomplishments that would make them desirable on the marriage market" (MacMillan, 1988:125).

Resemblance between the natives and the British brides

In both native and British communities, what was not wanted was an overeducated woman. Educated women were seen as threats to the age old patriarchy and chauvinism. It was mostly true for the natives who believed that wife's education will cause the death of husband. But emphasize on moderate educational qualification of females was a new trend in middle class family by the end nineteenth century (Majumdar, 2009: 42). One main prerequisite for marriage was the chastity of women. Chastity of women mattered the most in native marriages. To ensure this, girls were married off at a very young age. Surprisingly, even in the British society of Bengal, there was high demand of chastity of wives. Margaret Macmillan showed the case of a British woman who was brought up in Kolkata 'pure' and 'unsullied' and thus her grateful groom sent his mother-in-law a warm letter of thanks for bride's 'child-like-innocence' (MacMillan, 1988: 126). Another important thing was household expertise. From very young age, the native girls were given lessons on household chores from her family. It was important for the British women too, to have expertise in household activities. As they did not have helping hands from Britain and were not accustomed with the native servants, they were often under more pressure. But they were trained too, as from mid teens up to middle twenties British girls stayed with their parents and learned household basics from mothers (Gorham, 1982: 27). Organizing capability was a vital role for both community wives. While the British wives had to arrange parties on behalf of their husbands, the native wives had to arrange different *pujas* and other religious programs.

Finding a suitable match

Marriages among natives were mainly arranged and only the elder family members had the call. In most cases, a father would marry his son below and daughter above, his own rank, for the dowry and bride-gift respectively (Census of India 1891, 1893: 256). The brides and grooms did not have much opinion regarding the whole process, even they were not allowed to meet each other before wedding (Johnson, 1843: 229). A group of women and men, who were professional match makers (*ghataks*), used to bring suitable proposals to the families. Their demand was so high that by the end of 1920, marriage bureaus came into being (Majumdar, 2009: 37). In addition, by early twentieth century, there was an escalating influence of astrology in the native marriage market (Amrita bazar Patrika 26 March 1927). But change began to arrive from 1850s onwards when the demand for allowing the couples to marry of their own choice was regularly raised in families (Ray (ed.) 1995: 309).

Same was the case for the British brides whose courtships were done at home (Britain) while their partners were posted in Kolkata. These alliances were also fixed by the families and the couple had to depend on photographs and letters till engagement. In many cases the engagements were done years before wedding (MacMillan, 1988: 127). But those who came to Bengal to find own groom were lucky. These women had specially made arrangements to get introduced to eligible bachelors. The churches and the orphanages like Kidderpore Orphanage in Kolkata were known for holding monthly or weekly balls where British bachelors could introduce themselves to these women (MacMillan, 1988: 133). Secret societies like the “Spinsters' Secret Society” grew up consisting these British women to find suitable grooms (Nair (ed.) 1989: 202).

Marriage customs

Finding a proper match was just the beginning of an elaborate process of wedding rituals. The native marriage customs varied significantly as almost to defy general treatment (O'Malley, 1932: 92). George W. Johnson has described elaborately the native weddings he witnessed during his three years stay in Kolkata. From his account and the experiences of Mahendranath Dutta, a basic picture can be drawn. After picking a suitable match, both the families visited the brides and grooms respectively and presented them with few rupees not exceeding sixteen to twenty. A day was then fixed for the written contract called *pattur* when the dowry and dates of further ceremonies were also fixed. As planned a series of ceremonies like the anointment ceremony, wedding and reception were held, each ending with grand dinners. In the wealthy native weddings, there was showdown of wealth with fireworks, illuminations, musicians both native and English. In some instances a hundred thousand of rupees were spent (Johnson, 1843: 243-248). For the native elites, marriage was such expensive that Basu Mullick saw it as a cause of shrinking charities in Kolkata (Mullick, 1940: 40-41). But since twentieth century, different marriage ceremonies began to be performed without ostentations. Many elites began to follow the simple wedding styles ("Notun Bibaha Paddhati" 1910: 80-81). In nineteenth century society, widow remarriage was not encouraged on mass level. A man could marry a widow if it was his second or fourth marriage but never as a bachelor (O'Malley, 1913: 322). In native weddings, according to Mr. Baines, there was no registration of marriages and even if there were, the multiple ceremonies customary among the

natives would render the data of little service (Census of British India, 1883: 84). Moreover, the necessity of marriage in native society was so much that even prostitutes were even found married with "dagger, fig-tree or a bunch of flowers, in order to give her a social identity." (Hunter, 1881: 254)

Details about British weddings in Bengal can be found from the writing of Margaret Macmillan. After getting a suitable match, most couples arranged a wedding as much like one at home as possible. The bulk of the expenditure was bore by the grooms (Sur, 2019: 89). The couple used to get married in a church following the British style. They were surrounded with family and friends and grand wedding breakfast was arranged. There would be a white cake and a row of gifts (MacMillan, 1988: 135). According to a report on the ministry in Bengal published in 1836 in *The Times*, there were 132 exclusive chaplains paid by the government in the presidency of Bengal (Anderson, 2011: 129). Two registers for British marriages were maintained to record documents. However, Claudius Buchanan, an Anglican clergyman who once served as the vice principal of Fort William college, questioned the validity of British marriage all over India, in 1813 (Anderson, 2011: 125). Interestingly though, an influential, multi-volume work named 'Justice of the Peace and Parish Officer' which was regularly updated between 1754 and 1875 cleared the hoax to a certain extent. It was stated that, for the British subjects out of England, marriage according to the *lex loci* (law of the place) was recognized as a valid marriage and the Marriage Act in England was not mandatory for subjects stationed at foreign land (Chitty, 1837: 248).

One basic difference between the two community's marriages was the participation range. In British weddings formal arrangements were made and many relatives from Britain could not attend. On the other hand, the native weddings involved whole neighborhood. Many relatives and specially married women used to come and stay days before the wedding, celebrating and enjoying (Dutta, 1973: 65).

Wedding costume

For native brides, wedding meant a lot of jewelleries and red silk *sarees* with veil (Johnson, 1843: 249). But the period from 1870s onwards, women began to bring changes in *saree* draping and jewellery following Brahmika attire (Majumdar, 2009:140-41). But traditional jewelleries which were customary for women were big *noths*, silver anklets and toe rings. The rich brides used gold and pearls (Dutta, 1973: 48-49). The grooms, as Johnson described, wore silk vestments and ornaments of gold with precious stones (Johnson, 1843: 238). British marriage costumes in Bengal followed their own style. The groom wore traditional suit, The bride was always seen in white gown with clouds of white tulle, a veil with a 'circlet of Myrtle or orange blossom' which were brought from Home or from a big shop of Kolkata otherwise the tailor of Bengal would have done the job (MacMillan, 1988: 135).

Marital consent for women

The Age of Consent bill which was passed in 1891, made native girl's age of marriage twelve from ten. It was vehemently opposed by the common people on the ground that "married girls must cohabit with their husbands on the first appearance of their menstruation according to Hindu *shastras*" (Dainik Samachar Chandrika, 1891). While commenting on the Age of Consent Act of

1891, Rajendralal Mitra stated, "Hindu women are given away as cattle. How come their consents make any difference?" (Mitra, 1890) This was true in many cases where the prime concern of girls' families was to get them married at any cost to protect their social dignity and to lessen economic burden. Native girls were married at such a tender age that they did not have any single idea of marriage, let alone consent. In the first autobiography written by any Bengali woman, *Amar Jiban*, the author Rassundari Devi described her feeling during her marriage at the age twelve, "After all the wedding rituals, I was roaming around with my mother happily, thinking that the guests will leave soon" (Devi, 1876: 19). She had no idea that she would be leaving with them too. Even if she had, nothing would depend on her will. According to Tanika Sarkar, in nineteenth century Bengal, woman was not seen, as a person of an individual identity (Sarkar, 2000: 601). Rassundari Devi echoed the same thing where she mentioned that the status of native women in nineteenth century was not more than that of an animal (Devi, 1876: 40). Thus the question of their consent was a far cry. But a new change was gradually ushering among the educated elites of Bengal, regarding female consent. A prominent example was Satyendranath Tagore who decided to wait until his wife came to the age to be able to give her consent to start their conjugal life (Choudhurani,1957: 48-49). While it seems like the British women must had clear consent in the marriages, it was far from truth. Heather Lea Nelso's PhD thesis gives a true scenario- British martial law was notoriously gender biased which believed that women were naturally destined to be wives and mothers. The British women of nineteenth century were "too young", "less educated" to put consent. Moreover, ties which were fixed back in Britain gave no more than one option to the brides to put consent. Though women who came to India had several options, were often financially very unstable and had the urgency to settle down. Nelso (2015: 20) pointed out that "*further down the economic ladder, the more financial strains compromised women consent"*. This was very much true for the Eurasian brides of colonial Bengal who were at the bottom of the hierarchy. They were raised with sole aim of getting married, that too without any family or relatives around.

Inter-racial marriages in colonial Bengal

It was estimated that during the mid-18th century, 90% of the Englishmen in India had formally married either Indian or Eurasian women (Sen, 2001:3). More specifically, many officers of East India Company married into aristocratic families (Sen, 2001: 3). Therefore, it is evident from the wills of East India Company officials that more than one-third of the British men in the 1780s in India were leaving all their possessions either to Anglo-Indian children or to one or more Indian wives (Dalrymple, 2002). Author William Dalrymple recalled Sophia Pattle, born in Calcutta, who was descended from a Hindu Bengali woman from Chandernagore (Dalrymple, 2002). But nineteenth century saw a steady change and number of such marriages went down. Though very less in number, some significant inter-racial marriage alliances were still seen in documents. This section of the study attempts to explain the fact from both perspectives.

Native aspect

Though, socially not accepted, the Muslim and Hindu laws had some validation for these inter-racial marriages. In Muslim law, it was not mandatory for both parties to be Indian, or Muslim and for much of the nineteenth century, this was similar for the predominant Hindu community too

(Anderson, 2011: 136). Apart from religious tolerance, economic or political gain was another reason behind some of these marriages. For mutual benefit, the two communities often overcame caste and hierarchy barrier. British often found rich natives as useful patron and guide to know more about their colony. Whereas, some ambitious native fathers sometimes balanced their daughters' "loss of caste" for a British son-in-law‘s connections with the government and his assets in Britain (Anderson, 2011: 138).

European aspect

Mainly, poor British working class was keen to have inter-racial arrangements as the government was not interested to bring working class British women spending so much. Even for the middle class British like the soldiers, it was tough to get a British wife considering how high maintenance they were. According to Thomas Williamson, the annual expense on a European wife was about 600 pounds, whereas, a native woman could be kept well for 48 pounds a year (Williamson, 1810: 173-175, 414-415). Besides, as we saw, there was financial gain in inter-racial marriages. Stephen Lushington reported in 1824 about Eurasian girls in the Lower Military Orphan School, Bengal that "*to those who become the wives of soldiers, an allowance of four rupees each was paid from the public funds.*" (Lushington, 1824: 257) This financial incentive was important for many lower class British. Among the rich officials, loneliness and boredoms in Kolkata sometimes led them to marry native women, even if they had family back in Britain, as there was no legal obligation because if any Englishman's wife lived more than seven years abroad, he was free to remarry in native India (Anderson, 2011:127). Again, the wills of the period also show amazing ties of intense affection and loyalty on both sides in some inter-racial marriages. Many British men, during their departure, asked their close friends to care for their 'well beloved' Indian partners (Dalrymple, 2002).

Sustainability of the Marriages

The question of sustainability had different answers for these different kinds of marriages. Rate of sustainability was the highest among the natives of Bengal for obvious reasons. The brides and grooms both were from same environment and culture which helped both specially the girl to get adapted in the marriage fast. Being married as a child, the girl literally grew up in their in-laws house which made her accustomed to the house and household activities which were the main task of a native wife. According to Baghchi (1993: 2214), "*on the fragile shoulder of the girl child laid the burden of keeping the patriarchal structure of the family in place"*. Thus, wives were mainly occupied with the *andarmahal*. The fact that most of the native families were joint ones, often saved the wives from the loneliness that could have been caused by the absence of their busy husbands. Most of the time, they did not have any other expectation from their husbands apart from the financial support. Adultery of males was socially accepted and by the course of time, polygamy had become the hallmark of social prestige (Basu, 1983: 78). Among the natives divorce was opposed to the divine idea of marriage. But it was also permitted on such grounds as the disloyalty of the wife or her failure to bear a son (O'Malley, 1932: 94). However, the bill which empowered the Hindu wives to divorce leprous, impotent or insane husbands was vigorously opposed on religious grounds in Indian Legislative Assembly (O'Malley 1932: 94). Though the marriages sustained for the longest, in many cases they were unhappy ones. Rajat Kanta Ray pointed out that,

there was lack of mutual love in nineteenth century Bengali weddings (Ray (ed.), 1995:302). Mismatch was often made where educated elites were forcefully married to girl children, which created a thick emotional barrier between the two. The novel *Sei Somoy* by Sunil Gangopadhhay portrays such mismatched marriages through the characters like educated Ganganarayan and Nabinkumar and their uneducated child brides Lilavati, Sarojini respectively. Ganganarayan while describing his wife to his childhood friend Bindu stated that, "She's still a child. She's of no use to me." (Gangopaddhay, 1991: 125) The native couples were often not even allowed to meet during the day. A play in 1879-80 showed a mother-in-law cursing her daughter-in-law for talking to her husband at day time (Bhattacharyya, 1286: 34). Among the British couples of Bengal, sustainability rate was not as high as the native marriages, but was still good. In the foreign land, the two shared same foreign background and culture and could become each others' biggest supports. Unlike the native wives, the British women were their husbands' companions too. Marriage among British meant "joining the team, chanting slogans, cheering it on" Margaret Macmillan stated while adding that many women learned about their husbands' work and wrote up their notes (MacMillan, 1988: 144). Moreover, women who came in search of grooms, were mostly escaping hardship and miseries they faced in Britain. Some were previously engaged in prostitution in Britain (Collingham, 2001: 37). Many of these women failed to get a husband in their native land thus India was their sole option (Nair (ed.), 1989: 508). These women remained very grateful to their husbands and were satisfied with what Kolkata offered (Dewar, 1920:146). The fact that divorce was not easy in European Society as well, also worked behind the sustainability of the marriages. It was extremely difficult for women to obtain a divorce until the 1857 Matrimonial Causes Act was passed. More specifically, the women could not divorce their husbands until the legislation of 1857 despite their sufferings from unhealthy marriage life and cruel experiences from their husbands and their in laws. Even after that, they mostly could not afford one. Divorce was very expensive and required evidence. An English divorce, mid-century, was worth 2,000 pounds (Anderson, 2011: 134). Also, if a woman before obtaining a divorce left her husband, she would lose lost all the right of claiming the property (Wood, 2018). But still, cases of separation if not legal divorce, were visible among British couples of Bengal. Unlike the native wives, the British wives had the option to go back to their own land, away from the previous life and start over again. One prime reason behind such separations was financial crisis. Even the "heaven-borne" ICS salary was not adequate to cover children's school fees and fairs (MacMillan, 1988: 141). So those who were escaping the hardship of their home, were again put into it. The second most important reason was the adjustment issue. British women faced great difficulties in adjusting in Bengal. Even the women raised in Kolkata had hard time adjusting if their husbands were posted in remote areas (MacMillan, 1988). Unlike the joint families of natives, the British families were nuclear in pattern. Thus, long distance between husband and wife could have a heavy toll on the relation. The British husbands often had to stay away for days for official postings whereas the wives had to accompany their kids who were sent to Britain for education, to supervise them (MacMillan, 1988: 158). This long distance often caused adultery. Even it was common for the lonely wives who were always the center of focus by lot of British eligible bachelors. Even the demand of British widow was very high. Mrs Postans wrote in her Memoir in 1838 that a widow of a British office in Kolkata got three marriage proposals from her husband's colleagues within three hours of her husband's death

(Martin, 1837: 45). Many British officials used to marry the widow of the civilians to get the 300 pound pension that she used to get. But by nineteenth century this stipend regulation began very strict and many widows stopped getting it. British officers whose main aim was to achieve this pension, began to abandon their wives. According to William Huggins, some British marriages in Kolkata turned to be so bitter and deadly that many British officials decided to stay unmarried (Huggins, 1824: 95).

Inter-racial marriages sustained much less than other marriage ties

Inter-racial marriages were already very few in number in nineteenth century Bengal and the existing ones faced extreme complexities. Anderson (2011: 153) stated that "*The status of mistress, illegitimate, and even orphan, were imposed on many Eurasian and Indian spouses and descendants".* Apart from the social outcaste, the inter-racial marriage was a huge political setback for British officials. This happened with British resident James Achilles Kirkpatrick, who married Khairun-Nissa, a fourteen years old daughter of the noble family of Hyderabad. After the marriage, Young Colonel Arthur Wellesley wrote to Kolkata that Kirkpatrick could not be trusted any more with any official works of British government (Dalrymple, 2002). Even in Britain, these marriages were valid but had no legal basis prior to the 1872 Marriage Act (Anderson, 2011: 135). There was still confusion over the legality of many marriages involving Europeans or Eurasians in India despite the enactment of the Indian Christian Marriage Act of 1872 (Anderson, 2011: 124). The problem was worse in the lower class British men. At least the high officials with good moral values, married the native women following the native laws. But it was rare in lower category of British, especially who had temporary posting in Bengal. Margaret Macmillan correctly stated that the further down the social scale went, the less seriously either marriage or divorce taken (MacMillan, 1988: 142). British soldier regiments preferred creating temporary bonds with native women as their postings were often changed and called back home. The women in their ignorance about British law, assumed that they were properly married. But they were often deceived and left back. Even if they were legally married, many soldiers often used their posting back at Britain to cut the ties. Besides the couple, children borne out of such marriages were the most ill-fated. Generally the children used to get their fathers' nationality but much depended on other facts like skin colour and gender. When a Kolkata agent wrote to Warren Hastings, the Governor General of India, asking about his Indian step-grandchildren who were of mixed skin tones, it was suggested that the children would be shipped to Britain except the dark one (Dalrymple, 2002). Mostly, white male kids from these marriages had better chance to be sent to Britain than their sisters. Many inter-racial parents used to willingly abandon their kids too. There were military orphanages built in whole India for such kids and these were the kids who grew up as Eurasians. Bengal Military Orphan Society adopted a practice of paying its men on christening of their mixed-race children, with government contributing three rupees per month for each child (Annual Register, 1821: 32). Thus, a lot of children were separated from their inter-racial parents. Till date, there are men and women who blame India for separating them from their parents (MacMillan, 1988: 158).

Even this small range of intermixing did not last long: the rise of the Victorian Evangelicals in the1830s and 40s slowly killed the practice. Opening of Suez Canal in 1869 made coming of British women easy as transport cost was decreased (Farewell, 1990: 59-60). From the second and third

decade of the nineteenth century there was the desire from the government's side to elevate the British administrators of the city to a position of distinct identity (Banerjee, 1998: 39). According to Indrani Sen, "The diverse reasons for this change included the events of 1857, which caused a rift between the races, the establishment of empire, a consequent cultivation of an aloof imperial identity and, perhaps most important, the encouragement by the government of white, resident wives." (Sen, 2001: 3) Thus, the practice of marrying or cohabiting with Indian *bibis* quickly began to decline. More specifically, in 1780-1785, one in three had the willingness of turning up for the marriage, while it further declined in 1805 and 1810 to one in four and one in five respectively. By 1830, it stood to only one-in-six (Dalrymple, 2002).

Marriage: A male game

Just like the consent issue, native women had no separate identity after marriage. Many of them were literally forced to embrace practices such as strict purdah, endorsed malpractices like polygamy and their sole duty was to produce sons. In return they did not even get firm commitments from their husbands. A man could as unhesitatingly discard his wife as he "changed his dress" (Ray (ed.), 1995; 320). A wealthy *babu* could proudly declare that he had not seen his wife even more than once after marriage (Bandopadhyay (ed.), 1981: 164). Interestingly though, even if the woman's husband had abandoned her, she had to be very much faithful to her (Sarkar, 2000: 603). After the death of her husband, the wife was expected to live in solitude (Census of British India, 1883:85). Physical violence against wives was a common scenario. The year 1872 alone had recorded 205 native infant girls death due to marital violence (Sarkar, 2000: 611). For instance, the *Education Gazette* May 1873 had reported a shocking incident of a 'mature' husband of a girl of eleven who had dragged her out by the hair and beat her to death. Despite such a criminal offence, the accused person was let off with a light sentence (Education Gazette, 1873). Among British, though there was liberty for some women to choose grooms, they had almost same fate after marriage. Prior to the passing of the 1882 Married Property Act, when a woman got married, her wealth was usually passed to her husband. She was also expected to produce children. However, she had no legal rights over her own children (Anderson, 2011: 141). Again, if her husband decided to abandon her from inheriting his properties, the fate of a British wife became like other Hindu widows. In other words, they had to earn their living by doing either menial labour or begging (Vickery, 2003: 285). Moreover, they were not secured from violence too. Both upper class and lower class men used "*to strike their wives with pokers and similar weapons, throw them downstairs, beat them during pregnancy, enforce sexual intercourse after childbirth, and indulge in marital rape or enforced sodomy.*" (Hammerton, 1990: 276)

Adjustment was always women's burden. In native case, at a very early age the girl had to leave her house as a wife. Rassundari Devi portrayed in her autobiography *Amar Jiban,* how all of a sudden she was out of her affectionate maternal house and entered into a caged life after marriage (Devi, 1876: 67). From her writing we get a glimpse about how a young bride was expected to work relentlessly from morning to midnight. The feeling was more or less same for the British brides, sometimes much worse. As they mostly had to settle and adjust in an unknown land far from home and had no one to share her sufferings with. They either had to endure an abusive marriage or after separation, an abusive society where they were all alone. Some could not adjust at all and had

hysterics, suicidal attempts *etc* (MacMillan, 1988:137). Moreover, many of the British women of lower class British men were only dependent on their husbands, if their husbands died by some reason, they were completely helpless in this foreign land, many ended up in prostitution. Suresh Ghosh portrayed how a suffering British wife warned her friend who was planning to come to Kolkata to find groom, by terming the whole process "folly and impropriety" (Ghosh,1970:65). Another misery for British wives in Bengal was the lack of support, proper medical help and guidance during childbirth. They had no option to seek help from their dear ones and mainly absence of assistance from their mothers was very traumatic for them during childbirth and post-natal phase (Choudhury, 1988: 525).

Concluding Remarks

Though the two communities of East and West were very different in their purpose of life and basic habits, one habit was common- the desire to form a family. Marriage had been an integral part of colonial Bengal society and the fact that it was so diverse in colonial Bengal makes it more important. This paper attempts to bring these diverse marriage systems together to have a comparative analysis. It finds that, there have been two very important aspects of the entire marriage system in colonial Bengal- The upper hand of men in the marriage procedure in both native and British community and the lion's share of responsibility of woman to make the marriage work. Irrespective of their class and environment, it was the women who faced the hardships of marriages- physical and emotional abuses, lack of consent, adjustment issues *etc*. Apart from the individual gender based roles, studying the Colonial Bengal marriage system helped to understand how these ties also played crucial role politically and economically. In many cases both the natives and British opted for inter-racial marriages for political gain; one for higher connections among elites, others for sustaining as the ruling party. The economic impact of marriages was not less. Apart from the individual gains like dowry and bride-gift, a huge marriage market grew up with *ghatak*, marriage bureaus and astrology organizations centering the native marriages. On the other hand British weddings benefited the orphanages, churches which arranged balls and dances, wedding ceremonies. But amid all these, genuine affection and emotion played strong roles in many marriage alliances and that's why even in the rigidly knit British society, we found native wives and in native elite households, there were British wives who left her everything behind. Thus, marriage in colonial Bengal was not only a matter of two individuals, it portrays the diversity of colonial Bengal society; the homogeneity and rigidity of the communities and provides an insight of the social and personal lives of the individuals.

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