The Voices of Invisibility

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Abstract and Keywords

This chapter addresses Ashapurna’s practical considerations to reorganize the socio-cultural claims on a woman. Focusing on the intricacies of gender and power as exemplified in her non-fiction writings, it investigates Ashapurna’s observations on the conflicts of the strict divisions of the public and the private, and the discursive space she offers in her wide-ranging understanding of the contesting daily experience of women’s life. Therefore, her repeated attempts to negotiate with the oppositional constructions of femininity and the independent selfhood to attend to the needs of the post postcolonial times in terms of freedom of thought and practice of equal justice which are fundamental to all members of the society are examined from point of view of the twenty-first century reader. Simultaneously, her assessments of the binaries that interestingly dissolve into more fluid web of relations between the components like family, religion, and workplace are analysed.

Keywords: culture, family, home, practical feminism, gender asymmetry, history, justice, rights, self-sufficiency and social equilibrium

(p.141) Essays by Ashapurna Devi

Prelude to Ashapurna’s Essays
‘In order to be good womanists, or even good humanists, we need to follow the Hara-Gauri image as our motto. Great art demands androgyny ... It is one thing to be gender-conscious, another to be gender-bound. Being gender-bound by choice is a self-defeating act today.’


‘The revised education proposal should include “the woman question”—their “independence” and their “economic freedom”. Women themselves ought to put forward these demands.’

—Ashapurna Devi (1962b)

While selecting the essays of Ashapurna Devi, I have focused on those aspects which are obvious expressions of her personal response, articulating a resistance to the opposition of a dominant (colonial) culture and also an awareness of, and resistance to, gender oppression. Nevertheless, Ashapurna Devi, while translating the culture of biological difference and steering past (p. 142) the rough waters of such constructed differences, has (broadly) conformed to certain rules and practices of interest governing society. Ashapurna Devi’s humanitarian attempts at integration and togetherness (‘this world ... belongs to both sexes’) (Bagchi 1995: 19–23), has a bearing on the hegemony of gender relations in today’s world, when modernity should be synonymous with realization and revelation of progressive thought.

Though in her personal life Ashapurna had not been much of a rebel, the essays present the need for female solidarity and simultaneously the need to transcend the rigidity of oppression and commodification. To salvage the dignity of being human, and not man or woman as separate and opposed to each other, was the motto and philosophy of Ashapurna Devi. This liberating intervention to unveil the patriarchal formulations of gender polarities and demanding changes to achieve a more ‘inclusive’ social order situates Ashapurna in a unique position.
Although privileged to a certain extent, Ashapurna Devi was imprisoned in the model of patriarchal domestication (as discussed in the earlier sections). At least in the initial stage of her career, it was difficult and at times almost impossible for her to go beyond the fixed constraints of socially scripted roles of man-woman polarities and the chains of gender restrictions. It is therefore not surprising to see that a large part of Ashapurna’s questioning and concerns can be made sense of in terms of an endeavour to redress the gender differences (Bagchi 1995: 19).\(^1\) That she was groomed in religious tradition and ritual practices did not deter her from interrogating the debated issues of the time she inhabited. According to historian Sisir Kumar Das, Ashapurna was more concerned with the ‘issues of dowry, female education, changing perceptions of the family structure and the age-old relations among the members of the family than with more daring questions of sexuality’ (1995: 21). One cannot overlook the fact that most of her writings centre on women and the injustices and inequalities that they endure in every aspect (p.143) of their life. Novels like *Atikranto* (Surpassed), *Unmochon* (Unveiled), *Chharpatra* (Divorce), *Sukti-Sagar* (Irregular Relationship), to name a few of them, exemplify the same. Yet Ashapurna recoils at being called a feminist. Was it because the very title ‘feminist’ immediately segregates man and woman and narrowly restricts the relationship into ‘sexual politics’, or was she apprehensive of condemnation?

Ashapurna’s evolving position eventually stood out in its conviction that the marginalized situation be used creatively to the long-term advantage of the Indian people. She believed that such differences are constructed and not a biological given and hence this ‘imposition’ can be altered because ‘there is no proof as to whether women’s output is really less than that of men’\(^2\) (Devi 1962b). Thus, she consistently worked hard throughout her life (and travelled as much as she could, mainly after 1960s,\(^3\) giving public lectures outside Kolkata) to take a firm stand against the unequal status of men and women in society and to make both sexes aware of the consequences of discrimination, inviting a change in mindset because laws cannot change the social mentality (for example, Devi 1988). She emphasized upon the adverse effects of the social conditioning of unnatural strictures (which leads to the stifling of sexes), which have become ingrained in the socio-psychological system over centuries of patriarchal wants and urgently needs to be erased. In this context, Ashapurna Devi urges for an awakened consciousness of both sexes, where men and women could work independently with equal rights and equal accountability in order to have a healthy and progressive society.
The essays translated for this book are illustrations of such an enduring project, evident from the titles of the essays—‘Society and the Role of Women’ (Samaj Jibane Narir Dayitwa), ‘Present Education System and Woman’s Self-sufficiency’ (Bartaman Siksha Byabastha O Mahilader Swabalamban), ‘Girls of Kolkata—Then and Now’ (Kolkatar Meyera Ekhon Tokhon), ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems’ (Sudhu (p.144) Ain Pranayaneyi Samasyar Samadhan Noi), and ‘Woman in the Service of Humanity’ (Sevadharme Nari). These essays essentially are rooted in the specific social and material realities of the post-Independence Bengal (India). They bring to the forefront Ashapurna’s purpose to rewrite history—to scrutinize the politics of gender difference and its complex nexus, to re-examine the questions of authority and self-making. In doing so, the essays expose the tensions of a concealed dialectic that runs within the contour of recorded history.

The concern here is to investigate how far Ashapurna Devi focuses on the denials, repressions, and blank spaces that have made this particular history possible. The insinuating commentary and analysis in these essays have opened the way for a critical dismantling of some intriguing and diverse glimpses of everyday life. The essays explore the complex human experience in middle-class homes riddled with ideological constructs operative in the constitution of society and its culture. With equal perspicacity, Ashapurna also raises the problems in the life of women who are less privileged. She calls our attention to the deliberate denial of women of their rightful claims in all factories, industries, mines, tea gardens, on the pretext of their ‘limited capacity’ for physical labour. She emphasizes also on the fact that ‘even though they do the same amount of work as their male counterparts’, the works of the female labourers remain invisible and as a result they ‘get a lesser wage for equal labour’ (Devi 1962b). In this regard, choices and decisions remain highly gendered and ‘perhaps the greatest difficulty lies in relating the ideological to the experimental; that is, of relating various symbolic constructs to the lives and actions of women’ (Sangari and Vaid 1989: 5). This was essentially an argument for agency where the choice presenting itself seemed overwhelmingly determined by the ‘either/or logic’ either to uncritically accept and effectively conform to gender domination or be overt and vocal. Ashapurna understood this to be the prevalent, but intolerable choice and strove to deconstruct this binary logic in order to derive a higher level of understanding surpassing both.
As regards the middle-class women, Ashapurna’s project was not to contradict the normative model of womanhood or to evade the crucial requirements of retaining the spiritual quality of national culture. Nor was it her project to replace the powerful male subject at the centre of traditional historiography with a powerful female subject who would repossess the authority of the self. Emancipatory in their premise, Ashapurna’s essays delve deep into the tensions, conflict, ambiguity, and tragedy that had been naturalized in the historical process and show that women can get past ‘the gruelling grind of their working world, and fulfil the demands of the changing times and public life’. They can bear ‘the taxation of the present age’ and emerge as the other self, a confident self, putting together the fragments of the traditional mould to continue with their family life decently’ (Devi 1962a). In the same vein, however, Ashapurna Devi comments that ‘in the existing state of affairs, housewives are perhaps in the most difficult situation .... They are still haunted by those recently bygone days of oppression’ (1962a). As discussed in the section titled ‘A Critical Overview’, feminism in India is not a direct offshoot of feminism in the West. Yet when we think about Indian feminism, Ashapurna Devi and Simone de Beauvoir are the two names that come to our minds. This is because Ashapurna’s analytical and vigorous description of woman’s daily lives seems to coincide with ‘the phenomenological analysis of the concrete reality of woman’s existence’ of Beauvoir (Tidd 2004: 123). From the point of Western feminist discourse, it can also be said that Ashapurna, like Beauvoir, believes in liberty in the real sense; that is, Ashapurna believes that once a woman becomes self-sufficient and ‘ceases to be a parasite, the system based on her dependence crumbles; between her and the universe there is no longer any need for a masculine mediator’ (Tidd 2004: 689). But, in the context of our women’s movement, which is intimately bound up with our anti-colonial struggle, Ashapurna’s demands are far more a part of that struggle and continue to be so, across the bounds of class, caste, and community. In order to evaluate Ashapurna’s feminism, it is imperative that ‘we understand the negotiations between tradition and [colonial] modernity as well as the complexities of gender dimensions’ (Prasad and Suhasini 2011: 224). To overcome the fragmentation at every layer of society and the economic downturn which followed the colonial onslaught, there was a definite need to develop a sense of ‘self-sufficiency’, to use Ashapurna’s phrase, among both men and women.
The engagement with women’s various deprivations and gender asymmetry in the essays explains not only the complexity of the process whereby women continue to struggle with the ideological constraints at specific levels involving family, sexuality—the customary domains within which their daily lives are lived and constructed. The analytical explanations also demonstrate how the strict division of ‘private’ and ‘public’ spheres have facilitated the consolidation of the construction of gender and how women’s identification with the domestic sphere blocked the consequent social valuation of ‘her’ work (the ‘culture of difference’ that had a special connotation in a particular phase of Nationalism). By problematizing the relationship and focusing on the fragility of the lives of women in the public domain, who obediently serve the dominant ideology of the family, Ashapurna Devi raises the level of discussion towards the importance of, what Anita Desai calls, ‘practical feminism’ (Hogan and Pandit 1995: 168). She writes, ‘There is another aspect, that I claim is most important—since women are capable of earning, why should they endure the mortification of being dependant? For ages, they have borne the disgrace of confinement amidst resistance and insult; but not anymore’ (Devi 1962b).

While the indications are on developing of the possibilities of self-sufficiency, which would enable women to have a distinct (p.147) place in the household as an earning member as much as have greater power and control of their lives, Ashapurna strategically unfolds the nature of the gender struggle in the light of transitoriness of social processes. She shows the ways in which the tradition of Indian womanhood/femininity was affected, as it was constantly under the process of reinvention. Her empowering strategies, although radical at times, (for instance, when she talks about population control, a point I shall revert to), anticipates Indian feminists like Anita Desai and Madhu Kishwar, who are much ‘less drastic’, much ‘more Indian’ than the perception of radical gender positioning evident in the works of Simone de Beauvoir and her ilk. Rather, its attendant oppositional rhetoric is largely suspect in India as the essays and her works of fiction highlight. Ashapurna insists: ‘Being independent is related not only to familial need; associated with this is the question of self-esteem’. She explains further, ‘It is condemnable if sons of affluent families sit idle and while away their days in leisure, as they need not worry about their sustenance. The same holds true for the daughters or the wives of a wealthy family’ (Devi 1962b: 190). Clashing of interests within a family is, therefore, not seen as an integral part of a structure with harsh binaries such as power and powerlessness. There are sufficient hints in the essays as in her other writings that the control of patriarchy has loosened, yet for Ashapurna ‘it is essential that women have an identity of their own’ because the complexities generated by gender asymmetry have a significant impact on the well-being of family life as well.
For Ashapurna Devi, family life was an integral part of the *griha*—the household or the home; it was as much an emotional construct as a physical one. Therefore, the suggestions that emerge from these essays are customary, in the sense (p. 148) that they were quite predictable. Ashapurna did not wish that women should distance themselves or withdraw from the emotional and spiritual support that they had traditionally provided to the family. This characteristic of the women of the East is essentially what outshone them from that of the West; and the sensitive support helped to regenerate men from the ignominy of political subjection during the pre-Independence days. What Ashapurna wished to address was that just as women were expected to retain the dharma of a *Bharatya Nari* to uphold the moral, spiritual value of the *griha*, by maintaining the prescribed righteous conduct, so too their selflessness and their silent sacrifice needed sufficient recognition and equal respect. Simply exchanging words of ‘blind emotion’ and tokenistic inclusion of women in society would not solve the problems of inequality. Women need ‘power’ to share the benefits of the ‘modern’, but not as ‘subjects of the tests and experimentations’.

There is an ambiguity in the way in which society gauges them, they are ‘sometimes inspired to bear a hundred children to increase the population of the country; and at some other time she is asked to have a single child to control the population’, which Ashapurna debates. She further argues and points out that ‘men are not directly subjected to these trials and tribulations’ (1962a).

The subjugations and often invisible myriad conflicts that women endure in their daily lives are to be measured against the disavowal of their desire to lead lives as human beings. Ashapurna suggests that in order to surmount the varied forms of subjugation and denial which amount to overcoming the ‘shackles of control’, women should gain the strength to tear apart the veil of false consciousness. They should become conscious of their contribution. Even if women do not go out to earn, their contribution (in carrying out the task of managing the household is as much important as procuring food by the men) towards the society is equally important, although invisible. (p.149) Along with the emotional support and the significant part they play in retaining culture, women bear almost all responsibility for meeting the basic needs of the family. Yet, they are systematically denied the resources, information, and freedom of action, which are essential for fulfilling their responsibilities. The ‘wives’ can no longer be treated as subhuman and equated with ‘cattle’ (Devi 1962b). Considering the need of time, women should exert ‘self-will’ and put in a conscious effort to come out of ‘submerged conditions’. The systematic denial, which often breeds inequality in families, can be resolved ‘only with the consolidation of female power ... [and] an organized women’s movement’, asserted Ashapurna Devi (Bagchi 1995: 22–3).
This unequal power relation in an average middle class family, as exposed in all the essays (translated and included in this volume), renders a sharp critique of women and their continued enslaved condition during the 1960s and 1970s, the inception of resistance in the middle-class Bengali household and its subsequent spread. By analysing the asymmetries and inequalities and by examining the connections between gender and power within the specific context of women’s lives, Ashapurna further unfolds the folly and strength that underwrote the notions of rights and laws. She demonstrated how the designation of the family as a private domain withheld women from having an access to the process of ‘development’ and thus took the level of discussion to a situation of public debate.

With such an approach, much like that of an interventionist, Ashapurna probes into the interlacing conflict of the web of social structure, where family and especially women in the family become the central point of her argument, attempting to make women aware that until they become significant voices through persistence and defiance, they would be looked at with disdain and be rejected by society. The essays, albeit deceiving at times (owing to the ornamental and circumlocutory style of her writing, sometimes repetitive, and occasionally ironic and oblique), are essential analytical documents of how gender operates through the practices of power, and demonstrate how ‘female’ and ‘male’ are shaped not only at the micro level of everyday familial interaction but also at the macro level where social institutions control and regulate the practice of gender. In this regard, the essays ‘Present Education System and Woman’s Self-sufficiency’ and ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems’ are of special importance.

III
In general, the essays examine how the social organization of gender and the conflicts of ‘presumed ideas of the past’, ‘the invasion of Western ways of living’, and ‘the feats of modern technology’, have an impact on the lived experience of women in the contemporary urban middle-class family in India and take a new dimension of struggle in the freshly configured ground. The understanding and logical engagement that the essays foreground (which is an important part of present-day Indian feminism) is what André Béteille identified as a serious ‘lack’ in the existing sociological studies. Although not thoroughly ‘dispassionate’, the essays are what Béteille describes as ‘a critical examination of the middle-class family and its role in the reproduction of inequality’ (Béteille 1999: 451). They encapsulate the dynamism of tradition through either rejection or acceptance. Thereby, they document the necessary and the deficient area registered in the micro-politics of everyday familial experience identifying the winds of change and exposing the unsettling aspects of the transition (a part of capitalist modernity). Just as they express the anxiety and conflicts of emotional interdependence in a joint family and extended family system in India, disharmony is registered equally as the trend of transition has already made its way, destabilizing family life and affecting the roles of women, particularly those who wished to have a life of their own.14 ‘Girls (p.151) of Kolkata—Then and Now’ (1982) is an example of such unsettling phenomenon that links transition with transformation, and the unavoidable conditions created thereby which can lead to a paradigmatic shift in the definition of the effects of the modern on middle-class families. Ashapurna comments,

They cannot decide whether to wear a sari or a salwar kameez, a skirt or a trouser; whether to keep their hair short and free or to tie it up .... They cannot make up their mind whether to keep their hands empty like that of a widow or wear a dozen or two colourful glass bangles ... [and] by no means they are being able to hold themselves to a certain point .... True, the contemporary women of Kolkata are constantly wavering between the old and the new trends ... yet, they have made many heads turn and look in amazement. Like the women of Kolkata in ‘those days’, they too do all the kitchen work .... In addition, they have taken total charge of the day-to-day shopping [and] ... are readily shouldering the maximum responsibility of running the family and also executing it conscientiously .... Amazing! Seeing them who would say that it is just a recent past that their mothers and aunts used to draw their sari-ends to hide their bodies till their forehead in front of any male? They could not even think of going out of the house to study .... Now, like worthy daughters of the ten-armed goddess they are rearing the family, and managing both ‘indoors’ and ‘outdoors’ successfully .... But the truth is that ‘girls’ will remain ‘girls’. (1982)
This incisive revelation of the Indian family in transition by Ashapurna, demonstrating the ‘interface between the family and the new institutions of society’ is of significant value for our study on gender prototypes (Béteille 1999: 451). It brings forth how the complexities of gender/sexuality dynamics operational in societies are interrelated with the role of family as a self-contained entity, as well as in relation to society as a whole. It is more so because such non-fiction writings, of transition and transformation leading to disintegration of the ‘tight structure’ of Indian family having ‘varied consequences for women’, are rare. It is important to note here, although used in a slightly different context, that ‘this mean[s] breaking through the image of the ideal Indian woman as accommodating, self-sacrificing and devoted to serving her family’ (Forbes 2005 [1996]: 244). This also means social status is defined by the woman’s/girl’s place within the constructed framework of familial subjectivity and community being maintained. The fallout of the complexities is —‘Girls’ will remain ‘girls’—as suggested succinctly above by Ashapurna. It is because they are expected to conform to the regulations of the marital homes ‘with very low or non-existent agency’ (Dasgupta and Lal 2007: 18). ‘Even if a sense of aspiration tugged at their conscience at times ... women accepted their subjugation to avoid domestic/family conflicts and maintain peace and order at home’ (Devi 1988). But ‘the present scenario is no longer the same’, remarked Ashapurna. ‘These days the sense of self-improvement or self-empowerment is not only strong in women, but also fierce at times’, leading to a ‘rift’ in their family life and an increase in marriage break ups (Devi 1988: 207–8).

From this observation of Ashapurna we can draw that except for ‘the inevitability’ of the changed conditions of the ‘modern’, the benefits of ‘modernity’ are denied to women. Rather, more subtle ideological pressures are utilized to control as well as contain women’s modernity. The complexities of the national culture entailed women to remain subjugated while abiding within the traditional structures of family and the community, or else they would suffer ignominy and social rejection. The scenario of modernity of women in post-Independence India demonstrates the denial of their making independent choices as also the power of self-reasoning which stresses the problematic of gender difference and discrimination. This recognition leads us to a broad inquiry on the ‘woman question’, not only within the family.
Today, when exploration of the politics of gender relations in family and families that make the home and the world, are taking a lead in the contemporary feminist discourse, Ashapurna (p.153) Devi’s observation in these essays are indeed of special worth and cannot be overlooked or underestimated. It is not simply because the essays demonstrate the imbalance of power, exploitation, and deprivation as an inevitable consequence within the gendered structure of the family; how women become victims of exploitation in such a patriarchal family system and how patriarchal ideologies operate in a wide range of institutions. Their bearing is of far more importance. The essays extend our understanding of the operation of the pervasive mechanisms of subjugation, and of how ‘gender inequality and oppression has the carcinogenic potential to begin from home and spread through the world’ (Dasgupta and Lal 2007: 22).

IV
Recognizing the contests over the meaning of sanctioned culture, conflicts between women’s ‘traditional’ roles (fixed and prescriptive), differently defined legal rights, and controlled access to the public in the space of the nation leading to snags in total development, to counter the problem of gendered difference and discrimination becomes imperative. Although a gradual shift in traditional ways of life brought in by ‘modernity’ leading to overwhelming transformations is noticed in these essays (of course without any overt slant on shaking up the old order), Ashapurna’s gesture towards radical emancipation is not always fully endorsed. Ashapurna has exposed in the essays multiple patriarchal determinations that condemned women to domesticity, illiteracy, and blind ritual practices and emphasized that women should find their own voice and independent representation, and overcome the fear of censure of the community through practical reasoning.

For her, sexual differences cannot be erased, but discrimination can be curbed.17 To ensure confidence in women about their capability to triumph over the instability and oppression of the discriminatory practices through the power of (p.154) shakti (according to the Indian tantric philosophy, ‘shakti’ is the potent force), which lies latent in their subconscious and which is innate in Indian women (this is suppressed or valorized, depending upon patriarchal needs), was her primary and conscious drive in her journey towards promotion of mutual respect and uniform justice. Limiting herself within the boundaries of her own little world of domesticity, not swayed by the nationalist pedagogy and social confusion of her age, Ashapurna demonstrated the obligation of a writer to ‘show the way to ascension, and not simply write by instinct’.18 She explored the relevance of the silenced voices as contained within various conscriptions of domesticity (the concerns of the home and family) and showed in these selected essays how suppression becomes instrumental towards bestowing a negative signification to women, not only as a speaking voice but also in terms of material wealth and social power.
Such ‘critical examinations’ of the times of change, which had mostly affected the middle class,19 were possible because Ashapurna herself was a product of transition. It is her practical experience of life that saw changes from the colonial period to the postcolonial/post-Independence period and advancing to the independent modern nation-state. This enabled her to portray a vivid picture of everyday life bordering within the contesting daily experience of harsh binaries (like power/powerlessness, public/private). Emphasizing the conflicts of these strict divisions, which are essentially about interests of power relations and emotional commitment, Ashapurna assesses the binaries that interestingly dissolve into a more fluid web of relations20 between components like family, religion, and workplace. The essence that comes out clearly in these essays is that the culture21 of subjugation and subordination not only determines or controls women’s sexuality and reproductive powers, but also affects the social assessment of women’s productive and creative potential. This tension is visible in all her (p.155) narratives, in all her essays, through her repeated attempts to negotiate with the oppositional constructions of femininity and the independent selfhood. Ashapurna stood against this disparaging attitude in our culture (to suppress the lack of social respect) and suggested social respect for women’s capability to work and states,

I wish that at least some girls should come forward, manifest their potential in literature, arts, and music, and thereby enrich the nation. I wish they surpass males and take part in parachute diving, become pilots, engineers, lawyers, barristers, judges, and magistrates and bring glory to the female community by proving their proficiency and excellence; but, it is not possible for the majority of women to be a part of this enlightened section. It is essential that new avenues open up for them. For this, voices are to be raised. Girls need jobs. Not at the expense of the unemployment of males, nor by becoming their object of displeasure or envy; nor even by being their object of ‘special’ favouritism. (Devi 1962b)

Considering the time, which was fraught with contentions,22 the progressive stance of Ashapurna Devi, as revealed above, demonstrates the need to ameliorate the status of women from their encaged life (either as ‘cattle’ or ‘grihalakshmi’). In this context, we can say that for Ashapurna the personal became political—forming diverse aspects of moral concern. Jasodhara Bagchi reminds us, ‘Ashapurna Devi strongly celebrates the women who have broken away from the four walls of their rooms and have spread their wings in the sky’. True, withstanding the preserved culture of traditional social norms she sees the ‘reincarnation of the ten-armed goddess Durga in the modern middle-class Indian women demolishing the barrier between home and the world’ (Baghchi 1995: 9–10).
But this was won not without cost, for us ‘nothing is ever attained without a struggle’. While tracking the complexities of the social process of transition that was incurring a heavy toll on the Indian middle class family system, Ashapurna (p.156) exposes every small detail of ‘the micro-familial experiences’, and asserts that women’s identification with the domestic sphere and the consequent lack of a social valuation of her work cannot be overlooked. This inquiry, along with her insistence, as discussed earlier, that ‘women of the new generation ... [meet] the demands of social life, balancing her own workload all the time with domestic duties [and] she is also the mother of her child’ suggests concerns that inform the major strain in the post-feminist activities and certainly far beyond (Devi 1995: 21). Her concept of feminism makes us think of emancipation in a different light. Ashapurna’s feminist activities did not involve damaging of real relations between men and women. Her grievance was not against men but against the system. Rather, she believed that for transition to take positive routes and ‘proceed towards a better society’, men and women should not be ‘perpetually on a battle ground’ (Devi 1995: 23). Absence of such documents of transition, exploring, exposing, and understanding human life with admirable objectivity, would be like missing and ignoring what Forbes puts as the ‘important continuities and discontinuities’ of ‘women’s lives’ (2005: 168). Ashapurna delves deep into the dynamics of the domestic space and maps the home and family with women at its centre-stage, and shows that this space is equally ‘clamorous’ and intricate as the public domain. From the assessment she makes, we can draw that the social organization of gender not only traces the special mutation of the ideology of family in its confinement of women but also reiterates the complicated link between the domains.
Considering the interplay of gender domain/s, the formidable task was how to represent a ‘choice’ open to both the sexes. My point is, Ashapurna was arguing for, what Sangari and Vaid (p.157) call, ‘an objective gender-neutral method of enquiry’ (1989: 3). For a woman to be able to function successfully in the thick of the struggle, pitted against several opposing forces, was undoubtedly easier said than done. There are sufficient hints in the essays as in her other writings that the ‘entrenched gender-based proclivities have started to thaw’, but in practice, women’s political consciousness is ‘not yet in a tinder box state to affirm the flame of full freedom’.24 Howsoever, Ashapurna continued the project of rehabilitation against the exclusion from history to render a firm platform to the marginalized sex who, in spite of confinement within the narrow parameters of a restrictive social and mental environment, would find a source of control to regulate their own destiny. In the essay ‘Society and the Role of Women’, she makes a direct and authoritative statement: ‘The role of men in society may be direct, noticeable and powerful, but that the role of women in preserving the society is much more important can never be denied .... This truth becomes clear if we trace the trajectory of our social history.’ But no more like ‘good’ Hindu women,25 like true grihalakshmis,26 can they stay at home and help to ‘shore up patriarchy’. Women need access to the public space; they have to earn to meet the demands of present economic needs.

Ashapurna probes further into the cause of inequality in modern families and while promoting equal gender relations she makes a succinct observation, ‘our girls will also have to shoulder the burden of greater responsibility—the fight to earn bread and struggle to make a living’ (1962b). While this may be difficult, Ashapurna insists that the difficulties are to be taken as challenges, rather than as handicaps preventing their free movements. She explains this as a necessity, because ‘a male member in an ordinary middle class household is no longer single-handedly able to carry the entire financial burden’ (1962b). (p.158)
This realistic stance of Ashapurna—to opt for a direct approach and branch out from mere imaginary representation to grounded socio-cultural representation, to provide a holistic understanding of the crucial need, ‘to identify the sources of inequality in the family’ and what the present economy demands—is indeed a bold and practical move. This explains in a way the purpose of selecting these essays. In these essays, Ashapurna brings to our notice, to borrow a line from Bina Agarwal, that ‘although people feel that the ideal Indian family will break up with women’s economic independence, it is more imagined than real’ (Agarwal 2005: 55). Ashapurna rather emphasized that in order to progress, women must think more realistically and prove that they have enough ‘enabling power’ to conquer rampant commodification (an effect of politicization of gender relations) and emerge as active agents of social change. This does not mean that Ashapurna proposed straying from the traditional spiritual culture, which is an important preserve of India. Recurrences of the indigenous values, traditional to Indian family system, which at times are taken to philosophical levels, are prominent in all the essays. After all, our modernity is marked by ‘the difference posed by the present.’ (Chatterjee 1997: 20)

Translating the ‘ambiguity of our modernity’ (Chatterjee, Partha 1997: 20) (as these essays demonstrate), which accommodates tradition and the invasion of waves of changes brought in by transition, was indeed difficult and puzzling at times. It was also an interesting learning process to work on the complexities of translating the usage of culturally loaded terms like ‘dharma’, ‘seva’, ‘nari’, ‘lakshmi’, ‘sree’, which are often repeated and then juxtaposed with an essentially Western model of living, like ‘ladies hostels’, ‘crèches’, ‘divorce’, balancing the constraints and the ambivalence, contradictions and ironies, that attend the history of our modernity. However, I have retained those historically conditioned terms to maintain the fidelity of the original by retaining the layers of intention as posited in the original essays. To carry across the indefatigable spirit of Ashapurna, the subtleties of her idiomatic language, the shifts in the relations of gender and culture in contemporary India needed sufficient conscientiousness. To de-familiarize the cognitive value of the source language should not be the intention of any translator, especially when Indian culture is persistently interpreted in terms of Western culture (Dhareshwar 1998: 211–31). Retaining the ‘echo of the original’ is the responsibility of the translator (Benjamin 1991: 69–82); the responsibility is even more for the postcolonial translators translating from Indian language into English (Mohanty 1998; Niranjana 1992) particularly when ‘grotesque distortions’ of cultures in translation is a possibility (Pontiero 1994: 64–5). Attempts have been made to retain the original flavour in all the essays, closely translating the ‘world in the words’ and attending to the minute particulars with full ‘surrender’ (Spivak 1993: 178; Venuti 1998: 396–416).
What is important and which makes the task of translating these essays riveting and befitting simultaneously, is while tracking the ripples of changes through the colonial times to the modern period, Ashapurna deliberately turns from emphasizing on hypothetical assumptions and ideological prescriptions, which are primarily theoretical, to offer practical solutions. Herein lies the uniqueness of her essays, which are largely different from her literary texts, which although realistic, contribute less towards a practical ‘rearrangement’ of conflicting claims of disparate identities. Women’s entry in the public domain has brought with it consequent changes in the familial and social structures. From this perspective, Ashapurna insists that the male identity has to be asserted afresh, however, the (p.160) female identity also becomes significant and reliant on renovation. She declares,

Today, in every country, all over the world, girls are foraying into a larger arena with respect to their vocation by breaking the fetters of age-old regulations and by overcoming oppositions. It is not a matter of disgrace to identify and follow the path to success of such nations. (1962b)

This ‘critical openness’ of the author is highly significant because we know Ashapurna herself was no less a sufferer of the strict oppressive rules. Her focus, therefore, was on raising the level of awareness or, as Rabindranath Tagore would say, ‘educating the mind’, and maintaining equilibrium. Just as she emphasized (in all the essays included) on the preservation of innate qualities of an Indian nari that helped to preserve the sree of our traditional cultural values, she was open to value the dynamism of women of the Western world. She was aware of the difficulties of ‘inter-cultural communication’ that may bring inescapable transformations unacceptable to our conservative social structure. Substantiating her views, Ashapurna thus consciously attempted to provide data and facts revealing the alarming status of the middle-class working women in India.

Even now, approximately, sixty per cent of the eligible women are totally confined within the four walls. They are not candidates for jobs. Amongst the other forty per cent, about twenty-five to thirty are willing to work part-time; only the remaining ten to fifteen seek full-time employment. (Devi 1962b)
Exploring and exposing such statistics of Indian middle-class women even before the Women’s Year (1975)\textsuperscript{30} or the announcement of the \textit{Report of the Committee on the Status of Women in India} (1974)\textsuperscript{31} explains why these essays were censured. The reality was not to be in print by any major press. This could not be an excuse for an indomitable spirit to envisage a modern society that would balance the best of the East and \textbf{(p.161)} the West without any prejudices. For Ashapurna, to overcome the discriminatory process, economic independence was necessary, and to make it practicable women are to be supported with ‘ladies hostels’, ‘crèches’, and similar organizations; at the same time she was apprehensive of suggesting such changes as that may have bred further conflicts in the traditional familial relationship. With the modification in the Indian family structure—the transformation from an extended joint family to a unitary structure—it has become essential that Indian women are provided with these support systems. This will boost Indian women to work outdoors with proper devotion. Further, ‘active agency of woman’ that comes with the ‘expansion of women’s capabilities’, as observed by the economist philosopher Amartya Sen, ‘not only enhances women’s own freedom and well-being, but also ... can contribute substantially to the lives of all people—men as well as women, children as well as adults’ (2005: 248). To reach this level of sufficiency simply lifting the veil off the faces of women will not help; the veil has to be pulled off the psyche of both men and women, and family life has to be reorganized in relation to the changing roles of both man and woman.

Besides, Ashapurna saw no reason for closing the doors for women to the outside world. For her, aping the West for the sake of ‘fashion’ should not be the primary objective of our women; rather they should look for a systematic evaluation of Western work culture that would help themselves in their own progress (Devi 1988, 1992). From such a non-racial point of view, the feminism of Ashapurna Devi’s anti-colonial stance can be paralleled with mainstream feminism from all over the world, although in Ashapurna’s ideology.\textsuperscript{32} If need be, women should be given the freedom to ‘divorce’, so that they can have an option to their untold suffering and humiliation and have an independent way of life. For this, they may have to suffer social ostracism; yet Ashapurna insists that a legal support \textbf{(p.162)} system is an absolute necessity (despite social consequences). Along with this perceptive understanding about choice there are several other correlated contemporary issues in the essay ‘Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems’, such as ‘the legal divide between a daughter and a son’, a ‘problem child’ and problems of independent accommodation—‘shelter’ for those women who are financially self-sufficient and can live ‘alone’. Likewise, ‘inequality in property sharing’ and ‘inaccessibility of law in the lower rung of the society’ suggest that these issues should be a subject of concern for the social activists\textsuperscript{33} so that proper equilibrium can be maintained within the internal culture of our society, without overlooking the positive aspects of Western society.\textsuperscript{34}
VII

Rooted in Indian tradition, Ashapurna Devi’s was a cosmopolitan feminism. Taking from Kwame Anthony Appiah’s ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’, it can be said that roots in Ashapurna’s sense are seen as routes, as pathways/directions to broader connections and concerns. Ashapurna is averse to follow blindly any particular idealism that is devoid of good sense. From her practical views and the messages that follow these essays on ‘transition and the problems of gender’, it can be concluded that when ‘gender inequality is a far-reaching societal impairment’ and when ‘women’s power and initiative can uplift the lives of all human beings’ (Sen, Amartya 2005: 242), then a woman should not remain a ‘mute spectator’; neither should she any longer remain idle and be a burden to the family and society, and primarily to her ‘own self’. For this, education is most important and a conscious motivation to earn one’s own living is crucial. Ashapurna suggests, ‘Keep on striving for economic freedom until it is achieved. But we should be careful not to stray in this struggle and lose our soul in the process’ (p.163) (1962b), because earning should not come in the way of family harmony. She also maintains, in the last essay (amongst the ones I have selected), ‘the sacred task of serving is not only true for women, it is meant for both men and women’ (Devi 1992). D.H. Lawrence was of a similar opinion, for in most of his writings he articulates how there should be harmony between both sexes and this he does by bringing in the metaphor of ‘star-like equilibrium’ (1920: 148). Moreover, Ashapurna asserts that women should develop ‘the sensibility to go beyond the narrowed limits of the private sphere ... and extend their boundary to the greater public domain, [or else] from where will the noble feeling to make oneself a partner in welfare work for humanity at large be inculcated’ (Devi 1992). This is a clear indication of a rooted cosmopolitan feminism in which one’s own surrounding (without excluding men) and traditional cultural resources are connected with and opened out to the world, while gesturing, as Rabindranath Tagore would say, ‘beyond the limits of nation and geography’ (Dutta and Robinson 1997: 179).
The observations Ashapurna posits in the essays are undoubtedly as important as history; her reasoning goes far beyond the past and it is in this power of reasoning—her fearless reasoning towards freedom and equality, between male and female as well as between different nations—wherein lies her lasting voice. Without undermining the past, she emphasizes the demands of the present day situation. These essays indeed address vital issues and register serious concerns which are yet unresolved. They are a strong indicator of Ashapurna’s feminism which speaks for that freedom in a post postcolonial society that will not discriminate, treating all members of the society as equal while having equal right to participation outside the structures of their ‘given’ community. This could be achieved without any race/class/caste/gender bias. Freedom of thought and practice of equal justice are fundamental to all members of society when we speak in terms of development and when development is (p.164) still the measure of the status of the Third World countries. Ashapurna’s feminism speaks for/of that freedom that does not end with independence or political freedom of any country. The essays suggest modification of changing roles of both men and women in a modernized and globalized society. In addition, they also suggest a balanced familial and social order that would not breed separatism by repudiating the identity of women as merely family subjects or separating men as exclusively despotic. No nation can prosper by oppressing half of its mass, that is, women; or, through systematic hierarchization of gender ‘dis-accomodating’ those who would choose to live beyond the identity as family subjects, or by subjecting those women who choose to step beyond prescriptive roles to subtle ideological pressures. Simultaneously, the essays demonstrate that it is imperative to maintain harmony in the family, because it is the family (micro)—the nucleus of society—which goes on to form the bigger family (macro), which is the nation, in an uncomplicated sense. This harmony can be achieved only when the problems of gender difference are countered with prudent control at the micro level in the family, where equal economic power and equal involvement would prevail, and ‘not control of women’. However, we are to be aware that prescriptive assertions about sexual equity that we find in discursive/philosophic cognizance of women’s various deprivations and gender asymmetry would be irrelevant in a kind of writing that is propelled by the contestation of ‘plural voices and dialogic imagination’. We need to allow for this generic limitation while estimating Ashapurna Devi’s feminist articulation (see Prasad 2011).
These essays, although masked by mundane realities of everyday family matters, are also indeed a constructive cultural commentary on the ‘foundational’ issues which are invested with concerns of macro narrative of development. They demonstrate that a postcolonial woman writer can invert the emphasis on systematic oppression naturalized through (p.165) constructed cultural forms and ‘contribute to the making of better society’ (Devi 1989). Ashapurna is able to forge global connection with sheer social commitment and fill up the space not yet filled. Her endeavour to bridge the disparate/unequal social power structures acts as a merger for local and global spaces while establishing a link between the discourses on the East and the West (irrespective of specificities), now, Global North and Global South, which is important for attaining ‘global harmony’. Incidentally, these essays, despite their complex social value, did not receive due attention until they fell under the nib of my inexpert pen. The essays, which essentially speak for the ‘making of a better society’, of ‘justice’, of ‘harmony’ in social relations (which are not apart from contemporary feminist discourses of postcolonial nations) can facilitate the women of the so-called Third World to progress to the world of freedom of choice and the choice in having and exercising freedom. Ashapurna expresses a uniquely Bengali (Indian) sensibility, yet the deeply humane texture of her writings is relevant in today’s world and can continue to inspire the future interactions between literatures within and across nations and illuminate the darker corners of racial thinking.

(p.166) Notes

The translations, unless stated otherwise, are by the author of this volume.

(1.) Here Ashapurna speaks about ‘the unfair system that fostered absurd notions’. See also the Introduction by Jasodhara Bagchi (1995). See also the Introduction to Rajan (1999: 1–16). Here Rajan analyses ‘the sense of gender as a construction of identities, roles and relations of people on the ground of sexual differences’ and shows how it is usefully consonant with an understanding of decolonization as initiating the historical process of new nation-state formation. Also, Holmes (2007), wherein she examines extensively ‘how gender operates’ and shows how understandings of gender differences vary across cultures and change throughout history. Also see Dube (1988: 11–19).

(2.) We may note here that Ashapurna Devi had written this essay ‘long before the women’s year (1975) and long before feminism became a socio-political issue in today’s India’ (Sen, Nabaneeta Dev 1997); and before the Towards Equality report of the Government of India published in 1974.
(3.) For example, Ashapurna Devi, Address as President of the Bengal Branch of Nikhil Bharat Banga Sahitya Sammelan (All India Bengali Literary Conference), Cuttack, December 1964; Ashapurna Devi, Presidential Address at Banga Sahitya Sammelan, Siliguri, April 1972; Address as President of the Bengal Branch of Nikhil Bharat Banga Sahitya Sammelan, Jamshedpur, December 1973; Address as President of Nikhil Bharat Banga Sahitya Sammelan, Delhi 1989. See Devi (1997: 132–58).

(4.) To understand the complex web of gender attitudes which prevailed in the mid-nineteenth/late nineteenth century British India, and which had its distinctive and penetrating effects on the interweaving of the social and material realities even after India moved to a capitalist democracy after 1947, it is better that we refer to the brief introduction to this book. The selected essays are examples of the forceful narration of Ashapurna, and her emphasis on recreating a new space in the pre-existing feminine roles of caring (in spite of intermittent waves of bewildering influences). Given the colonial context and the instabilities created thereby in the ‘real’ conditions of men–women relationships, the essays of Ashapurna Devi selected for this volume is an attempt to showcase that by keeping true to the spiritual tradition of India, it is possible for a woman to rise beyond suffering through self-determination and live a conscious productive life overcoming the baffling incursion of multiple currents.

(5.) For attempting a study on the influence of the Western family system and the age-old patriarchal notions of female subservience (which were further consolidated through economic changes in the post-industrial era) on India in the last half of the nineteenth century which had disrupted the ‘indigenous social/family life’, and replicated in the post-Independence period as well, see Hobsbawm (1989). See also Bharati Ray’s assessment (1991; 2002: Introduction) of the institution of family which was entangled in wider social relations, and the consequent reorganization affecting the life at home as new norms for family life and conduct of women had to be reformulated in the second half of the nineteenth century to cope with the changes in the public world because of the colonial context. See also Dyhouse (1978) on the general devaluation of women in the area of production with the rise of capitalist economy, and the beginning of women’s resistance against the overwhelming and implicit subordination, and compare the cultural foregrounding of the trend strengthened by the arrival of English women in India around mid-nineteenth century and onwards. See also Mayo (1927); Urquhart (1983); Borthwick (1984); Bhattacharji (1990); and my work, A Caged Freedom (2001).
(6.) Although the term either/or logic is primarily known as an Aristotelian logic, the complexity of the usage of the term (pertaining to the specificities of time and situation) has been passed on to us through generations of philosophers, thinkers, and social scientists both from the West as well as the East. The intricacies attending the term mutual exclusivity based on the either/or logic with reference to Ashapurna are discussed in the ‘Critical Overview’. Ashapurna has herself explained the links between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’ in an interview with Chitra Deb, included in the section titled ‘The Other Side of Love’ in this volume.

(7.) For example, Kishwar—editor of Manushi, a journal about woman and society and a follower of Gandhi—in an essay entitled ‘Why I Do Not Consider Myself a Feminist’ says that the form is associated with the colonial oppressors in the rhetoric of political leaders and in popular perception (38–40). Quoted in Prasad and Subhashini (2011: 221).

(8.) For a more comprehensive study on how women were rendered dependent by the gendering of nationalist ideology and how ideals of wifely domesticity marked the formation of male nationalist subjectivity, see Partha Chatterjee (1989: 233–52); Dipesh Chakrabarty (1994, 1992) (for further studies on the ambivalence, contradictions, and ironies that attend the history of modernity) and in Mongia (1997: 223–47).

(9.) To understand how emotions play an important ‘moulding’ role in the history of the nation and how family as a social institution is enmeshed in the process, see Ray (2001).

(10.) For detailed analysis, see Ashapurna Devi, ‘Women in the Service of Humanity’ in this volume.

(11.) It is interesting to note the way Ashapurna unfurls in these essays (spanning over thirty years) the several layers of contradictions, which attend the complex picture of transition and transformation, and which had a significant influence on ‘woman and her life’ after 1947. She argues fascinatingly for the ‘woman question’, balancing between direct, at times oblique and occasionally ironic statements. For a study on ‘tensions and cross currents between the powerfully underwritten new ‘nationalism’ and the resistances it encounters and engenders’, see Tharu and Lalita (1995: 43–5).


(14.) Here we may note André Béteille’s observation that ‘new types of family arrangement are emerging in India that differ from those characteristics of both the traditional Indian joint family and modern Western nuclear family and they deserve attention in their own right’ (see Béteille 1992: 13).

(15.) For a fuller study on how Indian family ‘so tight in its structure, begins to disintegrate’, we may refer to Rajat Kanta Ray (2001: 183–5).


(17.) At this point, Nabaneeta Dev Sen’s observation in the ‘24 Ghanta State Summit 2010’ (20 March, Kolkata) deserves a mention. Dev Sen reminded everyone ‘how disempowerment began at home’. She also reminded us that the word ‘empowerment’ is loaded with ‘disempowerment’. Super-cop Kiran Bedi, who chaired the session, struck the discordant note with statistics on how badly pitted women were against men. Having asked, ‘what then is the strength of a woman?’, Bedi answered, ‘We are empowered with the three Hs—“humanity”, “heart” and “healing”. Men must acquire these womanly virtues if they want to move up.’ Malini Bhattacharya warned: ‘The urban woman is helpless in the face of domestic violence’. Although certain areas of women’s achievements were marked, overall tone as regards women’s position in our contemporary society was quite grim. At this juncture, it is justified that we consider Ashapurna Devi’s observation in her 1992 essay ‘Women in the Service of Humanity’. She said.

To love is akin to service, affection, compassion, consolation, consideration, and a ‘little touch of heart’. To give words of hope and assurance to a crestfallen soul, to provide confidence and enthusiasm to the dejected, to make efforts to bring the inspiration of a new life to someone unsuccessful and to bring the calmness of peace to the agitated, restless, aggrieved, and devastated souls—are all indeed great services, services that can reach the core of the heart of the multitude emotionally disturbed. Women can render such service very easily—without much effort. With our limited capabilities even if we cannot do any particular good, we can always extend love.

(18.) See Naina Dey’s Introduction to Ashapurna Devi’s Chchotogalpo Sankalan (1999: xi).


(20.) Here I refer to Margaret E. Noble’s (Sister Nivedita’s), ‘The Place of Woman in National Life’ in Noble (1906: 62–70).

(22.) The conflicts of the colonial times were retained in certain ways because the social or political changes that came with the independence from British rule after 1947 did not bring significant change in family values. At the same time, feminist movement enters into complex relationship with Civil Rights movement in India with demands for individual rights. For a fuller study, see ‘Political History 1947-1990’ in Tharu and Lalita (1995: 45-104). Also see Tharu (1995: 44-57). This is also discussed in the section titled ‘Silence and Its Contours’ in this volume.

(23.) See Ashapurna Devi in Bagchi (1995: 21). This has also been discussed in the section titled ‘Critical Overview’ in this volume.

(24.) See Prasad and Subhashini (2011: 224). I acknowledge them for their essay that has helped me to substantiate my argument.


(26.) For a fuller analysis on the concept of Lakshmi/grihalakshmi (‘Lakshmi’ of the household)—an ideal housewife, by whose grace the family, the extended family would prosper, and ‘Alakshmi’ (the ‘bibi’ or the Westernized woman)—neglectful of household duties and defiant of authority, which is not ‘becoming in a Bengali housewife’ (Borthwick 1984: 105), see Dipesh Chakrabarty’s extensive study on the family fortunes/misfortunes and social mobility, explained by the ‘Lakshmi-Alakshmi cycle’—‘both called into being by the exigencies of our colonial modernity’ in Chakrabarty (1994).

Here it is relevant to quote Ashapurna Devi’s seminal speech at Jadavpur University (1989). She emphasizes very clearly, ‘It is remarkable how the new woman proceeds from one victory to another, depending on nothing but her own enthusiasm and indomitable will. But is it only the outer world? Do the women of the new generation neglect their homes on the pretext of working outside like men? ... A woman’s home is still her life and soul .... She bears all responsibilities of her family and meets the demands of social life, balancing her own workload all the time with domestic duties. With all this work the woman carries on her struggle for emancipation ...’ (quoted in Bagchi 1995: 20–1). In ‘Women in the Service of Humanity’ (1992), Ashapurna argues, ‘A working woman on returning from her office at the same time as her husband, runs promptly straight to the kitchen to prepare food, although both are equally tired. But, is it because she is compelled to do so by her husband? .... It is her sheer natural concern, and the commitment in her that pushes her towards this family duty. She may utter angry words like, ‘slavery’, ‘subjugation’ to vent her indignation but it is never seen in such instances that the woman will spread out on her bed to relax, (as any male would do) expecting her husband to go forward and complete the work (excluding exceptions, of course). Our girls, how much ever they may talk about progress and emancipation, whatever harsh language they may use in writing to confirm their disapproval, their instinct is the same as that of the old - ‘giving’-traditional bharatiya nari, in whom the ‘world of domesticity’ and the concerns of the home and family are deep-seated. She is the primary and often the sole care-giver in the family—to serve, nurse and manage the household becomes her responsibility. If children fall sick, it is the mother who takes care of them and nurses them, not their father. If leave has to be taken from the place of work, it is the mother and not the father who takes leave, unless the situation is somewhat different. Can she be at peace until she herself nurses her sick children?’ See Gilligan and her criticism of the concept of ‘caring’ as a prescribed female quality (1993).

(29.) See also, Rajeswari Sunder Rajan (2007: 7).

(30.) See Nabaneeta Dev Sen (1997: viii). Dev wrote, Ashapurna had written these ‘... long before the women’s year (1975), long before feminism became a socio-political issue in today’s India... she had never been exposed to Western theories ... had no access.

(32.) In this context, we may refer to the study of capability approach by Martha Nussbaum and her concept of ‘treating each person as an end and none as a mere tool to the ends of others’ (2000: 5). For Ashapurna, humility in understanding our own limited part in a bigger whole as well as a willingness to position ourselves in the place of others was important. Emphasizing on Indian heritage, the inclusive approach can be seen as a preliminary step for accepting other cultures and building a strong relationship with the world.

(p.172)

(33.) Ashapurna speaks for peaceful activism.

(34.) In spite of the similarities/differences of caste, religion, race, class gender or nationality or the politics of locations, there are certain experiences and interests common to all social groups in all cultures and at all locations, which make us think of human life in a similar light. Although our focus is on ‘middle-class’ ‘local’ life as depicted by Ashapurna Devi, similar tensions and triumphs are noticed in different cultures, at all ‘global’ locations. Keeping Ashapurna Devi’s practical suggestions in mind (to identify the sources of inequality), we may cross refer to what Rosalind Coward an English author and journalist has to say regarding equal respect and uniform justice in her book Sacred Cows. ‘The real aims now should be to be aware of gender division and how it can discriminate, and to find policies which aim at equal treatment rather than assuming one sex or the other necessarily has advantages. We need to understand how people are living their lives and making their choices without preconceptions about men being one thing and women another. More than anything else, we must make sure that we are not dealing with passe notions of women’s rights but with what is now right for all members of our society’ (1999: 219).

(35.) For further references, see Ashapurna Devi ‘Indian Women’ in Bagchi (1995: 19–23).

(36.) For example we may refer to Anne-Marie Slaughter, who recalls how she’d had to quit her dream job as the first woman to direct policy planning at the US State Department because–even though her husband did the lion’s share of the family heavy-lifting–it clashed with her family’s needs. She laments that feminists have deceived a generation of women into believing they really could have “it all”... NY Times (Archive for the “Gender Differences”), “Articles about Men”, 6 August 2012.
(37.) For example, see Ashapurna Devi: ‘We are yet to realize that the labour force is the true wealth of a nation. Many countries, as we can see, have realized this. They have understood that if this asset—this labour power—is not harnessed for the growth of the nation, and if it is wasted like an unutilized treasure buried underground, then there is no hope of prosperity, progress and glory for the nation. The enormous labour power of our vast population is wasted, due to neglect and indifference. We can be proud as an independent nation, only if this huge work power is utilized properly. By talking big, a nation cannot prove its worth to the world. If employment can be provided to each and every able person of the country without any gender discrimination and can be rendered with subsistence, only then can our nation claim a place of pride in the world. Not otherwise!’ (Devi 1962b).

(38.) It is possible that many of the problems in the family can be avoided if women have greater economic power in the family. Without equal balance of power we cannot preserve familial harmony; moreover, ‘if we cannot retain tranquillity at home, peace of the nation is in jeopardy’ (Devi 1962b).

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(p.179) Society and the Role of Women*
The role of men in society may be direct, noticeable, and powerful, but the role of women in preserving the society is much more important and can never be denied. As long as women are steady and vigilant, society is assured of stability. No amount of waywardness among men can cause disruption. But if reversed, disaster befalls.

This truth becomes clear if we trace the trajectory of our social history. Every time women were distracted from their concerns and objectives, the country had to face adversity. The woman is the pillar of strength in every facet of life, be it domestic or social. This is because women are largely conservative by nature; they uphold and caringly nurture age-old customs and traditions, faith and values present in the conventional system, and carry forward the legacy of the past to future generations.

The social perspectives that necessitate the changes occurring inevitably with the passage of time centre on women. Again, women are subjects of the tests and experimentations that are conducted to attain and maintain social equilibrium. Sometimes a woman is inspired to bear a hundred children to increase the population of the country; and at some other time she is asked to have a single child to control the population. Men are not directly subjected to these trials and tribulations, and thus they remain more or less unaffected.

The only reason is her position as the mainstay of society as well as her family. She is the principal conductor of the family and the attendant of the house simultaneously. Just as she devotes herself towards the welfare and betterment of the family, working untiringly in a pleasant and gentle manner, she is equally conscious and firm about maintaining the sanctity, culture, and discipline of the family. Hence, another nomenclature for a woman is sree—the graceful goddess of wealth.

This is the actual role of a woman.

We notice plenty of such instances in real life. A house may have affluence and yet it is devoid of grace and beauty and looks wretched as it is bereft of a housewife. On the other hand, a very poor household looks peaceful, bright and beautiful, as if graced by Goddess Lakshmi, merely by the presence and care of a good housewife.

But women in modern times are confronted with other complexities. They can no longer limit themselves to the quiet confines of their domestic life and continue to live as housewives. To fulfil the demands of the changing times they are compelled to go out and get into the grueling grind of the working world and public life. Now there is hardly any field left where women are yet to venture. The pace at which it has expanded in the span of a single generation is definitely phenomenal and astonishing.
Not too long ago, public opinion was against educating girls. People used to say—‘what is the point?’ Shall they go out to work in office? Or shall they become a judge or a magistrate? It is enough if they learn how to keep the accounts of the washerman and milkman.

Most of the people who had uttered these scathing comments are still alive to find to their dismay, how, within the span of a generation, their beloved daughters have succeeded in ridiculing their scornful questions and answered them back boldly...But this has brought in problems. Such vast and rapid change sometimes affects the balance of human existence, the dearth of which is being felt in every sphere of life—in society and at home.

The system of private living in the antahpur (the inner precinct) that has been practised and preserved for ages is being severely disrupted by the enlightening influence of modern life. (p.181) The windows of the antahpur are now open, but along with fresh air, pollutants are also making their way into the secured domain, setting aflame the tranquil family atmosphere. As a consequence, women are getting somewhat misled, by diverse perspectives on modernity.

Undoubtedly, these are confusing times.

In such situations, distractions and illusions are not unusual. In fact, the influx of these waves is a complex problem. In our land, ‘Bharatbarsha’, there is no dearth of guides to show the way to those who are at a loss. Since time immemorial, in every era, great souls have arrived to show us the proper way, great priests and ascetics have come to lead us through the right path, and then came the social workers, philosophers, and learned people with pure souls to row the boat out of the waves of crisis. This is why, despite being stricken by several attacks and being divided by many opinions, ‘Bharat’ has not lost its spiritual strength. Its imperishable existence thus remains unaffected.

This present uncertainty, temporary in nature, is a result of Western education and a penchant for Western ways of thinking; obsession for advancement and the liability of the so-called ‘fashion’. Even if one values conventional ideals, the very thought of being rejected as ‘old fashioned’ provokes many parents to go overboard with the education and grooming of their children in a manner opposed to their liking.

Just the other day, I was listening to a young lady lamenting:
We used to take so much pleasure in waking up early in the morning, taking a dip in the pond and starting the day by doing Shiv puja. We enjoyed sitting for prayers with flowers, sandalwood paste, the pure Ganga water, leaves of the wood apple tree, and lighted incense sticks amidst the pleasant first light of sunrise and the cool morning breeze of the month of baishakh the first month of the Bengali calendar. But I did not get the scope to pass on this tradition to my daughter. The serenity of the atmosphere used to give me a sense of purity and a sense of satisfaction—the feeling of a (p.182) being complete ... It is beyond me to make my daughter understand the significance of these rituals, let alone give her a taste of such fulfilment. Her father, his brothers and sisters will contemptuously laugh at me and raise a loud uproar and try to prove me a ‘rustic’.

The fear of being called a ‘rustic’, and ‘old fashioned’ is no small fear. At the same time, the childhood practice of these small rituals cannot be undermined as worthless. In the words of the poet laureate:

To a hereditary deity, a household god; a village god—Climbing a ladder to the father of the universe, the sun-god I bow at your feet.

In modern days, no matter how much advancement may take place by way of education and science, in our thought and perception, we must not lose track of that goal that the poet glorifies. Leave alone disapproving of its importance, we cannot slight away the need for a ladder. Childhood is the time to lay the foundation of this ladder.

And yet we cannot deny the fact that if women are to remain steadfast in the ideal of self-sufficiency and make progress in the field of education it will not be possible to maintain the ‘traditional mould’ of family life. Nevertheless, housewives of the present times have to put together the fragments of the ‘traditional mould’ and continue with their family life decently.

In the existing state of affairs, housewives are perhaps in the most difficult situation. They are still haunted by those recently bygone days of oppression, the days of the ‘lost domain’, under the rigorous supervision of the crafty critics with a vulture’s eye trained upon them. At every step, without making any effort to be aware of the demands of the changing situation and surroundings, the elderly ladies are prompt to compare and criticize the present with their own age of strict conservatism .... They heave (p.183) an insinuating sigh and compare their tough days as housewives with the apparently happy life of present-day housewives; and on the other side, the next generation, the flag-bearers of the future, are trying to set domestic life on a fast track, thereby tending towards disintegration. The situation is definitely grave.

Our mothers and grandmothers did not have to confront this threat.
It is still fresh in the memory of many, as to how these ladies, although completely illiterate and totally uninformed about the outside world, ruled the household with such command and gusto. Their prohibitions were inviolable; their decision, a verdict of the Providence ... their wish, the last word—irrefutable and unarguable.

To question or to oppose her was impossible for her subordinates.

Where is this glory in present-day women? These modern women have no alternative but to struggle incessantly against obstacles and protests to carry on their work.

And again, these days nobody can be frightened into submissiveness. Fear of people, fear of condemnation, fear of social ostracism, fear of religion, fear of virtue and vice—all these have lost their fangs and are no longer deterrents; as a result, the woman who runs the family is left with no weapon of control. Hence, her role is quite a subdued one. Now she knows, her word is not the last word...her prohibitions are not inviolable...her verdict is not the dictum of Providence.

The reason behind this is the mould of the modern family system; and the mould is developed by the perspective of women’s emancipation.

When a housewife is ‘steadfast’ at the centre of a household, discipline in the family is firmly secured; a strong tie is maintained between all the family members.

Just as she is constantly alert to redress the complaints and discontentment of every family member, she is also able (p.184) to control to some extent the demerits and faults (like immodesty, disobedience, dereliction of duty, irresponsibility) of her subordinates.

But if the housewife is ‘mobile’—when, for the sake of her job she is away from her family most of the time—then where is the scope for proper control? ... Although her absence is fetching money, her family members are deprived of her care and service. Naturally, her children and servants take advantage of the situation and go wayward.

From these disconcerting circumstances, arise dissatisfaction, allegations, and arrogance. Even with the slightest slack in her duty, her position of authority becomes unstable and her reign over the family no longer remains absolute.

In the life of modern housewives infested with problems, perhaps the biggest problem is losing the power to rule over the family. Despite the fact that ‘she’ is attaining power in the outside world, her position is extremely miserable because ‘she’ is losing control in her own domain—within the microcosm of her family.
'She' has the responsibility of a homemaker, but does not receive her due respect; she toils hard to run the family well, but gets no recognition; ‘she’ plays the role of a guardian, but, without its credit. This indeed is a deplorable plight!

The situation is the same all around, leaving no scope to cite the example of another to tackle the situation.

The condition of men—the ‘housemasters’—is of course similar; but they face trivial challenges. He is no longer agreeable to be at the helm to steer the bottom ripped vessel of the present family system. He has laid down the equipment of steering—the helm, the scull, the oar, and has chosen the seat of a spectator. As if the freedom of women from their entrapment has signified a deliverance from responsibility for men!

And the end result? (p.185)

The discernible consequences are: an aloof and unconcerned husband, insolent servants, arrogant and unmanageable children, unsympathetic relatives, indifferent neighbours, and finally, an ever-escalating price in the market—these constitute the ingredients of homemakers of this age.

It is indeed tough to remain ‘steady’ in the midst of such a complex situation.

Further, it appears that every person these days is detached and self-centred. They are indifferent towards others’ happiness/sorrow, comfort/difficulty, and are impatient with the opinion of others. But the essence of domestic life is to accept opinions patiently, to be conscious about everybody’s happiness and unhappiness, comfort and discomfort.

So perhaps, it will not be wrong to say that in order to bear the taxation of the present age, the values of our family life are touching rock bottom.

In social life, the significance of the role of women has always been more vital than that of men. Presently, the disparity has increased considerably. Are not our traditional values losing their foothold in this scenario?

We cannot overlook this; the time-honoured values have to be reinstated.

A society without an ideal is like a temple without an idol. In temples, idols are quintessential to the sanctity, holiness, and peace of the place. If women are the backbone of a society, faith in the Almighty is the backbone of mankind. All education and all progress are fruitless without trust in god. We should try to plant this faith in our children from their infancy.

It is sad that in the name of ‘secularism’, religion finds no place in the curriculum in many of the educational institutions in our country. But, awakening of all ‘consciousness’ and of all beliefs begins at infancy.
It is more appropriate if these institutes are called ‘degree supplying factories’ rather than educational institutions ... yet (p.186) it is reassuring that all do not belong to the same category .... Moreover, it is also true that the most proper education of life takes place in the mother’s cradle.

Also, a child who has not even started talking properly watches the mother and learns to fold hands and ask for blessings (utters ‘namoh namoh’). So we come back to the same point again, that the importance of women’s responsibilities is more than that of men. Not only her own life, but also the life of the entire nation rests on the woman. Thus, her duty does not end with building herself ‘perfectly’. The frontiers of a woman’s duty are far more profound. She holds the future of the nation in her hands.

Note
(*) The original Bengali, ‘Samaj Jibane Narir Dayitwa’, was published in Matribani, Kolkata, Magh 1368 (1962).

(p.187) Present Education System and Women’s Self-sufficiency*

In all practical fields of work, at various places, times, and from person to person, there are varied opinions; and all such theories are, in some way or the other, supported by rational arguments. But, there are certain ‘absolute truths’ regarding which there can be no two different opinions—one such being the need for an extensive spread of education all over the country.

Education is the basic lifeline of a nation. Because, without education there cannot be a complete realization of the self or of the world at large; there cannot be holistic development of any individual. This realization is essential for every human being. Thus, all should have the right to education.

Till the recent past, however, this right was not unanimously recognized in our country, especially for women. Rather, it was said, ‘what is the need for intellectual excellence in women? Their workspace is restricted within the four walls. Their awareness of the outside world would rather cause more harm to the family and to the society at large.’

Of course, that age of darkness has ended, and realization for the need of education has dawned on society. These days nobody considers formal education as an unnecessary appendage for women. Girls from remote villages and interiors are encouraged to go to schools and colleges by overcoming various constraints; and those who cannot overcome such manacles, suffer significant mental agony. (p.188)
Even the domestic help who washes utensils sends her little girl child to school instead of asking her to help washing pots and pans and making her a companion in her daily toil. In general, these days nobody is indifferent or insensible about the need for education. Girls have full right to education; no longer is there any question of social restrictions. Of course, scope and availability of facilities is a separate issue.

But efforts are already on to do away with these impediments as far as possible. The need for setting up schools for girls, even in remote villages, is now realized. To achieve this objective, both the government and the non-government philanthropic organizations are working together.

So we can expect that gradually the general population, including girls of the country, will have scope for education; something which an independent and a developing nation must strive towards.

However, with education comes the question of self-sufficiency. Today, with the attainment of this right, our girls will also have to shoulder the burden of greater responsibility.

No longer do they have the scope of engaging in lofty thoughts and ideals as a pastime. They are forced to step into an unknown domain, the world of hardships, predominated by the ordeal of survival; the fight for existence—the fight to earn bread and struggle to make a living.

This is because a male member in an ordinary middle-class household is no longer able to shoulder the entire financial burden single-handedly. It is becoming impossible, not only because of the recent rise in prices of daily utility goods, which have shot to the skies; there is some other reason as well—people are gradually becoming more self-centred.

In fact, an awareness of self-worth has developed among the general mass. Except for a few, who are essentially miserly by nature, no one any longer has the mentality to pass their days in whatsoever insignificant way—to live a life of ennui and triviality. (p.189)

Everybody wants to live decently, live a life of contentment. Thus, in spite of meagre resources, there is an increasing inclination to elevate the standard of living.

Naturally, it is becoming necessary to increase the income. Earlier the outlook of ordinary people was ‘to cut the coat according to one’s cloth’—to spend within one’s means. Certainly, this is what it should be. But why should people remain satisfied with the bare necessities of life like food and clothing? Why should not they wish to live a quality life, to have better provisions, to provide better education to children, to provide better health care and diet?
Everybody wants that.

No longer are people willing to console themselves and breathe a sigh of discontent, thinking, ‘they are rich people, are we like them?’ With a firm resolve to surmount this rich–poor polarization, they have plunged into an unrelenting struggle. In this trial, women too have come forward and are toiling hard to earn a living.

Moreover, there is no dearth of people in our country for whom it is a struggle to make both ends meet—for whom ‘days do not pass’, ‘pots do not boil’. Women, instead of shedding tears as helpless spectators in this scenario, are extending their hands and are shouldering responsibility of earning along with their relegated task of home and hearth. Overall, there is no further hesitation in the question of women’s earning.

This is one aspect.

There is another aspect that I claim is the most important—since women are capable of earning, why should they endure the mortification of being dependant? For ages, they have borne the disgrace of confinement amidst resistance and insult; but not anymore. Being independent is related not only to familial need; associated with this is the question of self-esteem.

In a middle-class household women exert tremendous physical labour, but the worth of this manual labour is never (p.190) duly recognized; because, in return, it does not bring financial benefit. However, the moment they got an opportunity, women have proved that they are in no way inferior to men. Why won’t they make use of their capability if they are proficient enough? Why should they bear the ignominy of inferiority; the stigma of being an idle consumer?

It is condemnable if sons of affluent families sit idle and while away their days in leisure, as they need not worry about their sustenance. The same holds true for the daughters or the wives of a wealthy family.

No more can women bask in the glory of their husbands’ wealth and high posts; it is essential that they have an identity of their own. Why should ‘wives’ be equated with ‘cattle’?

Moreover, why should the time, energy, and money spent for education between the ages of five and twenty-five go fruitless?
Of course, what can be more graceful than the well-educated daughters and wives of affluent families utilizing their learning generously in acts of social welfare or charity? But those who do not have such benevolent inclination would rather utilize their education to earn, instead of lording over several servants, and amassing fat by idling away their days in comfort. With that earning, let them help their needy kith and kin. There are many instances of rich husbands keeping their wives in great comfort of wealth and riches. But their wives are answerable, even if they use an insignificant amount of that money as alms; or else they suffer indignation. However, if she has an earning of her own, she can avoid this humiliation. She need not withstand subjugation. Thus, the notion, ‘a wealthy wife has no necessity to earn’, is meaningless.

This is about the well-educated women.

Yet, it is to be noticed that despite all efforts to spread education extensively there is still a predominance of undereducated and half-educated women, or even illiterates. For them, to work and to earn is equally crucial. (p.191)

But, are they finding any employment?

Rather, who is giving it to them?

Is there any programme to resolve this extensive demand?

As it is, many men have begun to think that one of the major reasons for the rising unemployment problem in the country is the incursion of women in the world of earning. On top of this, if every woman, rich or poor, capable or incapable, demands a job, there would be no alternative for men other than to join hands and drown together in the ocean.

Nevertheless, the time is not yet ripe for every competent woman to demand employment.

Most of the girls even now are unaware of the benefits of a self-sufficient life; they still believe, ‘until and unless women are in a dire situation they do not step out to work’. So, most of the time they do not want to come out to take up a job, maybe for the lack of a proper support system or for some other familial problems.

Even now, approximately 60 per cent of eligible women are totally confined within the four walls. They do not aspire for jobs. Amongst the other 40 per cent, about 25 to 30 are willing to work part-time; only the remaining 10 to 15 per cent seek full-time employment.
Still, to what extent are the workplaces prepared to provide jobs to such small numbers of women? There is scarcely any field of work reserved for them. Only a few of them get employment as stenotypists and personal assistants and maybe a handful are appointed by private companies for interior decorations in the office, adding charisma to the workplace as being ‘presentable, good-looking and smart’ are the only prerequisites.

However, we are all aware that the work atmosphere for girls with these types of jobs is not always very comfortable. Most of them complain that to work with dignity is very difficult.

Those who are qualified enough to take up the job of teaching do not always opt for the same. But it goes without saying (p.192) that this is the most fitting career for girls. As a profession, it is beneficial for the nation and it provides a congenial and dignified work atmosphere as well. So the responsibility to build the future of the nation should remain with girls; because, it is the girls who have the inclination to develop the moral character and conscience of students, who are the future citizens.

The primary sections, particularly, should be in the custody of girls. We can expect better citizens, provided we entrust the responsibility of the primary sections to cultured and well-educated young women, experienced in child psychology. And their pay scale should also be revised in accordance with their qualification.

Generally, in ordinary schools, lower classes are not attended to with due care. The pay scale of the junior school teachers is very low as well. Teachers of the ‘morning shift’ often teach negligently. ‘I urge the school authority to give due thought in this matter.’

This is just one aspect.

Not all girls will opt for teaching as a profession. Other choices should be made available too.

Then questions may arise like what is the need for job reservations for women just like seat reservations for them in buses and trams? The way women have proved their proficiency in every sphere of life, immediately after attaining the right to education, proves they are in no way inferior to men; their achievements are in no way less than that of their male counterparts. In every field of work, they have the potential, to equal men in proficiency and efficiency. So what is the problem if women start with similar jobs?

Even then, I would say, considering their physique and mentality not all jobs are suitable for women. The pressure of file work tires their minds; on the other hand, these monotonous ten-to-five jobs also get in the way of their family life.
The joint family system is breaking up; but there are hardly any dependable private or public organizations evolving to look \( \text{(p.193)} \) after the children of working mothers. Therefore, maids and ayahs are to be entrusted with such responsibilities. For this alternative arrangement, mothers who go out to work have to spare a sizeable amount of their earnings. Other than this, to be with these unrefined and illiterate attendants is detrimental to young minds.

These days the job of cooking has also come under the domain of maids and servants; this again is not desirable as health, nutrition, taste, are all associated with this.

We are aware of the fact that the girls of Western countries which we ape as a model civilization and look upon with deference, are not dependent upon domestic helps. Of course, their way of life is much more organized, their household implements are more user-friendly, and males too lend their helping hands in the domestic work; yet, the overall responsibility to run the family rests with the women.

In our country, outdoor jobs relating to family matters are slowly coming under the purview of women. But, while doing this they are gradually losing grasp over household work.

This is because there is a considerable lack of balance between our traditional system and the modern way of living. Even today, the earning member of the family has to somehow gulp a handful of rice by nine in the morning and rush for his routine ten-to-five job. Besides this, there is a lack of availability of a proper mid-day meal for the general mass.

I feel, those girls who are less qualified and not capable of working in offices, should pay attention towards making these cheap small meals; this would help to generate money for themselves and free many other working women from the daily responsibility of ‘cooking pre-office meals’ and at the same time, provide them with solutions for several other related problems.

I am not talking about opening restaurants and canteens in the usual way—what I propose is that there should be an organized cooperative, ‘a combined kitchen’, that would provide \( \text{(p.194)} \) healthy food at a low price. This would also prove women to be innovative when they serve cheap and good food. It is even better if they can seek advice and keep in contact with specialized dieticians.

If this can be regularized in every locality, a lot of time and energy will be saved for/ by the housewives.

At this instant, the system may seem to be unpleasant and impractical, but then, any ‘useful arrangement’ when made operative can promote changes in the outlook automatically.
In our country before the introduction of maternity homes, did anybody think of sending their daughters or daughters-in-law to hospitals for childbirth? Until and unless it was an absolute emergency, they were not hospitalized. Now there are maternity welfare centres everywhere. The traditional ‘confinement room’, which was common in every household cannot be thought of these days. Even in remote villages, the outlook has changed.

I urge under-educated women to take the initiative of starting the ‘public kitchen’; I am convinced that people will fall for this useful alternative.’ However, this is only a partial remedy.

The authorities concerned should think about making provisions for extensive job opportunities. I wish that at least some girls should come forward, manifest their potential in literature, arts, and music, and thereby enrich the nation. I wish they surpass males and take part in parachute diving, become pilots, engineers, lawyers, barristers, judges, and magistrates and bring glory to the female community by proving their proficiency and excellence; but, it is not possible for the majority of women to be a part of this enlightened section.

It is essential that new avenues open up for them.

For this, voices are to be raised.

Girls need jobs. Not at the expense of the unemployment of males, nor by becoming their object of displeasure or envy; nor even by being their object of ‘special’ favouritism. Girls need employment in fields which are conducive to their physique and mental framework. Such appropriate and specific areas need to be explored.

Today, in every country, all over the world, girls are foraying into a larger arena with respect to their vocation by breaking the fetters of age-old superstitions and by overcoming oppositions. It is not a matter of disgrace to identify and follow the path to success of such nations.

Women have a natural flair for teaching, journalism, medical practice, nursing, library work, or even working as salespersons. Other than these, women have great expertise in handicrafts, in the running of small-scale or cottage industries. In arts and crafts, women undeniably have an innate talent. It is fascinating to watch the village girls exercising their skill in fine arts so naturally, without any training.

But, they do not have any means to make such expertise financially rewarding.

Our educational institutes, too, do not have any such facility to train their latent talents. On the contrary, initiatives to open different types of training schools for boys are in progress.
For girls, the women’s welfare centres are the sole and primary support. Sarojinalini Nari Mongol Samity, in this regard, is a notable establishment. Institutes of this kind are dedicated towards the cause of women. With the help of these institutions many young widows and poverty-stricken, helpless women find possible ways to earn their subsistence.

These welfare centres take the initiative to train women in handwork and make arrangements for their employment. But, as regards the assistance to their produce, these centres are helpless; they are unable to market them, particularly if their turnover exceeds the limit.

These articles are not produced in bulk using modern technological aids. So the sample articles remain confined merely as expensive showy items of exhibition. Middleclass customers can afford to buy one or two of them at the most, at their fancy (p.196) to add to their collection, but they do not cater to the needs of their daily use.

Indeed, schemes to impart handicraft training to girls should be initiated with proper scholarships; it is the duty of the concerned authority to provide opportunity to the girls in a way that they can avail of the prospect and utilize the vocation to earn and support their family as well.

There are regular courses in certain subjects of higher studies, like social science, home science, etc. But there is no suitable arrangement to make them their vocation.

Then we come to the question of female labourers.

Although our constitution proclaims, ‘equal wages for men and women’; it does not happen in practice. There is still a deliberate deprival and denial to women of this rightful claim in all factories, industries, mines, tea gardens, on the pretext that they have limited capacity for physical labour. Even though they do the same amount of work as their male counterparts, female labourers get a lesser wage for equal labour.

No one bothers to resolve this disparity.

There is no proof as to whether women’s output is really less than that of men. Whatever benefits employers have to provide to child-bearing women according to the Maternity Welfare Act, there is no end to their dissatisfaction about it. As one would expect, employers are reluctant to make the jobs of young women permanent, so that they can throw them out of their jobs whenever they become heavy with child, under one or another clause of termination.

Under such compulsive situations, finding no other option to earn in a decent and dignified manner, many of these young girls have to take up immoral ways of living. This is no less a disgrace for an independent nation.
Of course, to a certain extent, this aspect of degradation is common to almost all countries; nevertheless, we should consciously think to find its remedy. (p.197)

An alternative scope of earning made available will facilitate these women to abort this retrogressive path, and enable them to refrain from such a bleak and threatening course of life.

We must agree to the fact that if women’s empowerment is not initiated on an equal scale, if the manifestations of their strength and goodness are not respected, if their scope for attaining economic freedom is withheld, then all thoughts about our country’s welfare is meaningless, all development is crippled.

We cannot stop at only granting equal rights of education to women so that a woman can actually share an equal partnership with her husband and be equally significant. Along with this, women should get full-fledged vocational training opportunities in special areas conducive to earning.

The functioning of our present education system needs a thorough revision. This revised proposal should include ‘the woman question’—their independence and their economic freedom.

Women themselves ought to put forward these demands.

If all women—every employed woman, every female labourer, all housewives, students, and women’s organizations—can claim unanimously, that ‘women need employment’, only then can some new door open. Through this new path shall shine the light of a new life.

We are yet to realize that the labour force is the true wealth of a nation. Many countries, as we can see, have realized this. They have understood that if this asset, this labour-power, is not harnessed for the growth of the nation and if it is wasted like an unutilized treasure buried underground, then there is no hope of prosperity, progress, and glory for the nation.

The enormous labour power of our vast population is wasted, due to neglect and indifference. We can be proud as an independent nation, only if this huge work-power is exploited properly. (p.198)

By talking big, a nation cannot prove its worth to the world.

If employment can be provided to each and every able person of the country without any gender discrimination and can be rendered with subsistence, only then can our nation claim a place of pride in the world. Not otherwise!
As I conclude, I would like to express one more concern to all my fellow women—keep on striving for economic freedom until achieved. But we should be careful not to stray in this struggle, and lose our soul in the process. We should not allow earning to become the ultimate concern of our lives, so that we do not forego the blessed image that Tagore cherishes, the ‘chaste image’ of women that he preserves till his ‘last song’. We have to bear in mind that if we cannot preserve domestic harmony, the welfare of the nation is at stake; moreover, if we cannot retain tranquility at home, peace in the nation is in jeopardy.

Note


(p.199) Girls of Kolkata—Then and Now*

If we have to assess the ‘girls of Kolkata’, how they were ‘then’ and what they have become ‘now’, we have to first understand how Kolkata was at that time and what it is like at present. Like an introduction preceding a picture, or like a prelude to a song, it is by knowing the past that we can judge the present. Albeit, where to draw the thin line between the ‘then’ and the ‘now’ is the matter of contemplation.

‘Time’ is continuous, and with its eternal flow comes waves of change at every moment. ‘Step by step’, as a rule, each stage of life undergoes considerable changes. Yet we return to our childhood days and pick up a fragment of our memories of a particular phase; and placing it side by side with the present, we compare them, argue about the good and the bad of each period, lament for those pleasant bygone days, and at the same time pity the past.

It is but natural that the present Kolkata will feel sorry for the past. Was there anything worth mentioning to eulogize that ‘beloved Kolkata’? Were there busses? Were there rickshaws? There were movies ... but silent! Were there traffic constables signaling at every crossing? Were there highrise buildings? Were there exclusive shops for girls, exciting and colourful, with attractive names picked from the poems of Tagore, in every other lane and bylane? Alas! There was hardly anything in that ancient Kolkata. Forget ‘Television’; ‘All India Radio’ was a matter of fantasy, a remote possibility. No! Let us stop here, no more condemnation. If we have to note down what was not there in the ‘then’ Kolkata, the list will reach an epic (p.200) size, comparable to that of the Mahabharata; and then the ‘present generation’ will keep on gazing at that endless void and wonder—‘how did the people of “those days” manage to survive?’
But, they did survive and survived well. In ‘those’ days, Kolkata had its hosts of ‘Babus’. Hence, there was the ‘Babu Culture’. These babus indulged in every bit of luxury and in everything that can be deemed foppish. They had to have betel leaves, with scented khayer—catechu, sweetmeat sprinkled with pink atar ‘otto’, jora ilish—‘a pair of hilsa fish’ from the Ganga, cut together, deep fried, and served hot, spiced pui—a green creeper cooked with lobsters, langra, the best variety of mango, bought in hundreds. Let us stop here, it is better not to lengthen the list any further. Perhaps the ‘alluring’ present will heave a sigh from deep within.

In ‘those days’, Kolkata did not have the modern thirteen-storied apartments; instead, the babus had huge stretches of lands, not less than ‘thirteen bighas’ on which were built spectacular mansions with several mahallas.

The extravagance of these Bengali babus was unending. They wore dhotis of premium quality from Netrokona, they wore them after cutting off the sharp, starched borders lest they hurt the skin. They took joyrides in lando or fiton or bruhm coach and enjoyed the rhythmic sound of the hooves of a pair of horses drawing them. Or at times they even enjoyed the swinging motion of a palanquin ride; if not the babus, their wives definitely. There were hackneyed carriages as well. These carriages were for the day-to-day use—just like the ordinary, coarse variety rice for regular and mass consumption, instead of the fine classy basmati rice.

Just as a queen is for a king, a blind girl is for a blind boy. And those covered hackneyed carriages were for the middle order people, those between the elite babus and the poor. Was there any other alternative? Otherwise, how will the pardanassins (p.201) use the public thoroughfare and yet adhere to the restrictions of the purdah?

Certainly, purdah was in vogue for the women of Kolkata in ‘those days’; but they were allowed to go out in a covered carriage, from which they could have a taste of the world around them, peeping through the vertical blinds of the windows of those carriages, which opened only partially. Yet, in ‘those days’, women of Kolkata did not crusade against this restriction. For them this veil was an emblem of a woman’s dignity, their honour, and their grace.

Thus, the roads of Kolkata in ‘those days’ were like a desert. The wide spectrum of colours—red, blue, green, orange, yellow, black, violet, were not to be seen, dazzling the sight of the people walking by.
So, in ‘those days’ the women pedestrian in the roads of Kolkata were the ghutekurani, the ones who sold dried cow dung cakes, the churiwalis, the bangle sellers, the maid-servants who washed the utensils and the old women with cataract in their eyes, almost on their way to the crematorium. Astonished, the ‘present generation’ Kolkata may hold their heads in their hands and think—roads devoid of colours? … Oh! Like a lifeless body! … so Kolkata was not a city, it was deserted and cheerless like a cremation ground? …

But this is a misconception. Even in ‘those days’ Kolkata was called a ‘wonder city’. In the vast expanse of our country Bharatbarsha, there were so many new and old cities, and I don’t know why a relatively young city like Kolkata was called by this name; but ‘wonder city’ was the name of Kolkata … in ‘those days’ and even ‘now’ it is known by this name. It was said that in ‘those days’ one could get anything in Kolkata, be it even ‘tiger’s milk’ at midnight, if one could afford it.

Fashionable ladies wore ‘high heel’ footwear, they used a ‘lace pin’ to fix the end of the sari covering their head, used ‘broaches’ to keep the pleats of their sari in order, draped over (p.202) the shoulder. They even used ‘rouge’ and ‘powder’ to brighten their complexions. They spoke strangely in broken Bengali interrupted with several pauses, used spoons to eat delicately. When they wanted to go out for a change, they went to Giridi or to Jhajha. They sang brahmo sangeet. And even if they were wealthy, they wore trendy light jewellery.

But these ‘fashionable ladies’ were almost negligible in number; what matters is not how fashionable they were but how many of them were fashionable. The general women, on the contrary, who constituted the mass, were careful to remain barefoot and did not pin up their sari; they kept it free over the shoulder to cover their head properly and draw it more towards their face, when situation demanded.

These traditional women used to keep female barbers on a monthly pay basis, to clean their feet with a piece of deep burnt brick and to paint the borders of their feet with lac dye—a red liquid dye, that was used mostly by the married Hindu women. They soaked their hair in pure coconut oil mixed with hair conditioner made from medicinal herbs and then braided it neatly. They even dressed their hair in a European-styled bun, and used snake shaped hairpins and gold polished starflowers to decorate the bun. During winter, they applied homemade moisturizers made of flour mixed with the thin creamy layer of boiled milk, and during summer, they used the special ‘lallebuy’ soap to clean themselves. They caught different varieties of beetles routinely—green and golden ones—to make bindis of different colours to adorn their forehead, with the hard part of their wings, and stuck them on with resin.
The middle-aged women (who were usually widows) wore fine quality saris with broad black borders bought from Farasdanga, and the young ladies wore colourful, trendy saris, those were either blue or silver or red in colour or even contrast bordered, pleated, and wrapped immaculately round their bodies. (p. 203)

Girls of Kolkata did not have enough money, yet they loved to swathe themselves with gold ornaments like the glittering foil that envelops a cone of betel leaf. They were fond of wearing heavy gold ornaments and thought life was meaningless if they did not possess a broad scorpion chain, curved overlapping bangles, or at least a pair of gokhri bangles, and a rose leaf-shaped armlet. This fascination for gold was common to all girls, even in those from absolute middle-class families.

These fashionable girls did each and every household chore—cutting vegetables, cooking and serving food, preparing betel-leaf cones and keeping them in a small metal basin, and making small spicy lentil balls (and spreading them over several bamboo trays to dry under direct sunlight), to use them in cooking. They even took interest in embroidering kanthas, cotton wrappers with floral designs, or to embroider ‘fly away birds’ motif on carpets. Not only these, they took care of their children and, if need be, whacked them too. Quarrelling was also a part of their routine; and in the midst of these took a stroll round the locality regularly. They even squeezed in leisure time and enjoyed hours together in idle gossip or in playing cards and ludo, and although they were denied the delight of motion pictures, they certainly watched theatre.

Hours before the show-time they would reach the venue ready with all their accessories like a metal box full of betel-leaf cones filled with finely diced betel nuts, catechu, lime, etc., and a little container of tobacco mixture to consume with them. Along with these, they carried their small babies too, wrapped carefully. Or else who would look after them at home and babysit them in case of overnight shows? They sat through the shows, encaged within the huge metal net protection; and amidst quarrels to occupy the front row seats, they managed to discuss the ornament ‘patterns’ among themselves and exchanged addresses of their goldsmiths as well. (p.204)

City-bred girls of Kolkata in ‘those days’ looked down upon the girls who came from villages and interiors. They thought too much of themselves, as though they were of a special breed. But now?

What would be the prologue of the present day?

The Kolkata of today needs no introduction.
The image and complexion of this Kolkata is dynamic. So, it is not possible to
derive a conclusive picture of present day Kolkata. It is always restless.
Naturally, girls of contemporary Kolkata do not have the scope to remain calm
and relaxed. They cannot decide whether to wear a sari or a salwar kameez, a
skirt or a trouser; whether to keep their hair short and free or to tie it up and fix
an artificial bun of variegated design and remain stiff and still to keep that style
intact. They cannot make up their mind whether to keep their hands empty like
that of a widow or wear a dozen or two colourful glass bangles.

No, by no means are they able to hold themselves to a certain point. So along
with the traditional nose ring they wear a modern nightdress—a ‘nighty’; along
with a watch they tie an amulet stuffed with holy objects; they smoke and at the
same time get indoctrinated by gurus.

They make ornaments to keep them in the ‘safe vault’; they also knit woollen
sweaters just for the sake of it. They keep traditional cowrie shell wicker-
baskets, earthen plates with the image of Goddess Lakshmi, clay items to
decorate the house; and at the same time, they cannot do without sofas,
cushions, carpets, etc., to keep up with the contemporary fashion.

True, the contemporary females of Kolkata are constantly wavering between the
old and the new trends, yet as regards their work, it cannot be denied, that they
have made many heads turn and look in amazement. Like the women of Kolkata
in ‘those days’, they too do all the kitchen work like, chopping, cooking, serving,
etc. In addition to this, they have taken total (p.205) charge of the day-to-day
shopping as well. They are readily shouldering the maximum responsibility of
running the family and also executing it conscientiously.

Immediately after having been set free from their cage, they have mastered the
art of flying in the open sky. As soon as their feet were unshackled, they started
to run. They are maintaining both the ‘inside and outside’ impeccably, with equal
attention. Amazing! Seeing them who would say that it is just in the recent past
that their mothers and aunts used to draw their sari-ends to hide their bodies till
their forehead in front of any male? They could not even think of going out of the
house to study.

There is almost nothing that the girls of ‘present’ Kolkata cannot do—there is
nothing that they do not know or they do not understand. They have pulverized
the age-old vanity of men and have proven their ability in every sphere of work.
They are securing jobs and are flourishing progressively. Now, like worthy
daughters of the ten-armed goddess they are rearing the family, and managing
both ‘indoors’ and ‘outdoors’ successfully. They are active in women’s
associations, forming unions, hoisting flags, participating in public
demonstrations, and sloganeering in processions and rallies.
To continue with the appreciation and to list the virtues of the present generation women and their skill at multi-tasking, I need the invincible strength and the invisible power of the pen of Lord Ganesha. Since this is not available, for now I choose to stop here. But the truth is that ‘girls’ will remain ‘girls’—despite the changing roles of women in different generations and despite the apparent differences in their behaviour, manners, dresses, ways of living, girls of the past, the present, and future will be similar. In their field of work too, they will manifest the eternal feminine images in dressing and conversation; they will attract others and get attracted, become emotionally involved and get hurt and sulk. (p.206)

If you are annoyed with my observations, go back and try to recall that fitting comment of Tagore! In case you cannot, here are a few lines from his poem to help you—

Dressed in shoes and socks, with sprightly gait they walk. They speak in a style alien, with accents in their talks. Still, their glances go right out of the past

To those enchanting ladies of the time of Kalidas.

Note
(*) The Bengali version, ‘Kolkatar Meyera Ekhon Tokhon’, was published in Matribani, Kolkata, 1982.

(p.207) Laws Are Not the Sole Answer to Problems*
The Western influence is the harbinger of many changes in our social life. The heterodoxy promoted thereby has a bearing not only on the development; it has its detrimental effects too. Nevertheless, this influence has furthered the cause of the emergence of ‘the new woman’ in India. As far as education, independence, and legal rights are concerned, the impact is remarkable; women are now confident, independent, and resilient enough to act according to their own will. This progressive interaction on the one hand signals towards an easy and better way of living for women; on the other hand, it has also facilitated men to reduce the burden on them. Thus, the change in our society is quite apparent—lifestyles have changed following the Western model. It is a complete turnaround.

This progress, duly complemented by an extraordinary advancement of science and technology, has resulted in a faster and more dynamic way of life. Naturally, an eagerness to live independently has become more intense as people are becoming strongly individualistic. This tempting option of independent living, in turn, has given rise to complexities and conflicts never known before.
A sense of overlordship and supremacy were inherent in men; but such hegemonic practices were not profound in women as they were habitually self-effacing. Even if they were conscious of this and a sense of aspiration triggered their conscience at times, women accepted their subjugation to avoid domestic conflicts and maintain peace and order at home.

The present scenario is no longer the same. These days the sense of self-improvement or self-empowerment is not only (p.208) strong in women, but also fierce at times. They are increasingly becoming domineering and, consequently, a rift is often perceived within the family as well as in their personal lives.

Thirty, thirty-five, or even forty years do not amount to much in the eternal flow of time. So we can say with conviction that the ‘right to divorce’ is a relatively ‘recent’ phenomenon in our society as its legislation has taken place only in the post-Independence phase. Evidently, this law was strongly debated. While abolition of polygamy and child-marriage received unanimous support, legislation of the ‘divorce act’ was not readily accepted. The small faction supporting the Divorce Act opined: ‘This was absolutely necessary. Without this legal support, lakhs and lakhs of girls or even crores of girls are suffering humiliation and obliteration. This helplessness and vulnerability is making them suffer to death.’ For these victims, this act was undoubtedly essential.

On the other side, there was a very strong protest from the ones who did not approve of the ‘divorce act’ because, as per their perception, marriage is an eternal bond—perpetual, irrevocable, and imperishable. According to their view, introduction of this law would destroy social harmony; there would be no difference between human society and the animal world.

But then, questions can be raised—if marriage is an eternal bond, what happens to the polygamists? Or, if we believe in the consequences of previous life, what experience then does rebirth hold for us? Out of the two persons, if one indulges in wrongdoings and is consequentially reborn as a cat or a dog, and the other by virtue of his/her good deeds returns to the superior world of human beings, what is the explanation? They could give no satisfactory answer to these.

In spite of the waves of protest, the law was introduced and to one’s amazement it was noticed that married couples, ‘like rivers flooding out of the lock gate’, did not immediately flock to the courts of law to file their divorce cases as their traditional (p.209) mindset deemed it implausible. But the sapling was planted and gradually its dissemination had its own way to prominence. Break-up of marriage is no longer a rarity or a matter of misfortune these days. Divorced women in the present society are almost as common as widows of earlier days.

Nature abhors a vacuum; it fills up in due course. Is this an example of the kind?
Are the divorcees of today ready to accept the pity that widows of yesteryears used to endure? Is not impatience growing within them increasingly? The widows, who were ill-fated and had no alternative but to return to their father’s house, owing to no fault of theirs, were accepted with sympathy. But such sympathy or concern did not come easily for those girls who returned from their marital home to their paternal shelter due to their inability to adjust to the deprivation and torture that they were subject to. After all, people are generally more concerned about their own interest and convenience.

Moreover, family atmosphere is not always congenial enough. As the mother gradually gives up control, and the responsibilities of the family shift to the daughter(s)-in-law, they may be reluctant to willingly accommodate their divorced sister(s)-in-law. Men do not face any such problem. The divorced man remains firm in his own location/position howsoever guilty he may be for the separation. For men the ‘marital bond’ is just another experience of life. But for women this bond is their ‘sole lifeline’. This is because women do not have ‘a room’ of their own. For them the sanctioned space is either in their ‘father’s house’ or in their ‘husband’s house’. Do they have any family inheritance that they can call their own? Can they even claim to have an ‘ancestral home’? Or, aver that this is our family tradition? Actually, women do not have a specific location: they belong ‘neither here nor there’. In recent days, however, women have some economic freedom—many are engaged in earning and are self-reliant. Unlike the widows (p.210) of the past, the divorced daughters are no longer a burden to their fathers.

But, a big question still hangs on the issue of ‘shelter’. Even if they are financially self-sufficient, can any woman have an independent accommodation and live ‘alone’—more so if she is young! Alternative arrangements like ‘ladies’ hostels’, or similar residential arrangements do exist, but are they enough to meet the demand? In addition, the most challenging of all problems is having ‘children’. Even if a woman has a child or two, it is not possible to take refuge in a ‘boarding’, a hostel, or a mess along with them.

On top of this, there is a legal divide between a ‘daughter’ and a ‘son’; this complicates the issue even further. The father gets custody of the male child, because the son is the legal heir of the family. A girl child goes to the mother, as there is no question of legal inheritance for a daughter.
In these situations the worse sufferers are the children; the law-makers do not give a thought to the trauma that these children experience. The otherwise inseparable bond between siblings is severed due to their parents’ separation. The result is, the one destined to stay in the maternal uncle’s house suffers from a severe inferiority complex. This manifests in her unusual conduct and behaviour. In a word, she almost turns into a ‘problem child’. Being shifted out of her parental shelter, she wonders that her brother, elder or younger, who was so dear to her, is living a stable life as before where he belongs; this creates a feeling of envy and troubles her mentally. Even if given a chance to meet, they fail to have that same easy relationship. How can it ever be? They are aware of the fact that this meeting is as per a clause of the legal agreement; soon after they have to part and go separate ways.

The boy, who is under the custody of the father, may not experience a similar lowliness suffered by his sibling; yet he develops an extreme hatred, grudge, and anger towards his parents and this makes him no less miserable. Though he is not motherless, he suffers from a state of motherlessness. Gradually he becomes captive to his loneliness. He does not have the company of his near of kin, like grandparents, uncles, and aunts, a positive feature of the earlier joint family system which is almost absent in the modern nuclear family. Even the old long-serving domestic helps, the elderly, and responsible maids and servants, who almost become a part of the family, are rare. Excuse me readers, for using these repressive terms ‘maids’ and ‘servants’. I incorporate these words because a relatively recent expression ‘domestic help’ will not be appropriate in this context. For example, to relate the difference in prices of goods between the past and the present, it is not befitting if I say ‘during my childhood days the price of milk was twenty-five paisa per kilo’—I have to use terms like sher and charanna. Anyway, let us come back to where we were. The fact remains that no matter how much the father of that lonely boy tries to compensate by buying him every possible toy, and pours in him all the love, it is almost impossible to win his son’s heart. Thus he too is a ‘problem child’.

And when this divorced man plans to remarry to suture the broken family, the eternal problem of the ‘stepmother–stepson’ surfaces.

Girls have ‘equal right to the property’ of their father—this is a good and beneficial act indeed. A brother, under this act, cannot oust his divorced sister; she has to be given shelter in the parental house. But the fact remains—how many parents of middle-class families are capable of owning a house for themselves to leave behind for their descendants? Most of them live in rented houses. The man had borne the burden of the family all alone; he took the entire responsibility of bringing up more than one child; so he had been left with no available option but to ‘cut his coat according to the cloth’. Perhaps, his only legacy would be his widowed wife, one or two minor sons, and a few unmarried daughters. (p.212)
This is the usual picture in most of the cases.

So, can we really blame the brother’s wife if she is reluctant to accommodate her divorced sister-in-law in their small rented house? After all, she (the brother’s wife) is a part of the modern generation and prefers to live independently; wants to command authority, does not really bother about the sense of duty of the earlier days. Previously, the widowed sisters took away much of the workload in their brother’s family and became a part of the separate vegetarian kitchen meant for the old or not-so-old widows.

But, of what assistance will be the divorcee girls of recent times? She will be busy looking around for a job; or if she already has one, will have her timely meal, dress up in colourful, well-washed, ironed clothes and rush to catch a bus. To tolerate this is quite difficult. Other than this, since when have women been compassionate towards their fellow sufferers? Women themselves are their own enemies. Is wife-beating and wife-killing in so many households solely the handiwork of the wicked husband? Doesn’t the mother-in-law along with her daughters indulge in such malicious activities?

Let it be; but it remains a fact that a middle-class or a lower-class family is not open to the idea of welcoming a divorced daughter. Nor is it possible.

In some of the lower castes in India, certain minority communities do not consider the marital bond to be as immortal as the soul. They break marriages quite commonly. For that, they do not need much effort. Nor do they have to run to the court of law. It happens quite easily, only with the approval of their society.

But this practice is limited to certain specific communities. And for men, it is unquestionably easier—just as it was prior to the introduction of the Divorce Act. During those days widows were not the only undesirable burden on the family but also those who were abandoned by their husbands. In colloquial Bangla (p. 213) they were known as ‘bare naey na’ (a husband’s discard). These castaway women had no alternative but to take shelter in their paternal homes. They slaved in their parents’ house and despite all the humiliation, they retained their vermilion smear, wore conch shell bangles, ate fish, and never stopped from fasting and worshipping the goddess Mangalchandi, for the well-being of their husband. And their children? They too were often destined to serve as unpaid domestic helps at their maternal uncle’s.

Yet, in those days, this was a better option rather than working in other people’s homes, which was considered highly shameful. Nor did they have any education. And for these illiterate girls there were no such alternative arrangements as are available now.
Let them be as this is all past. But the present scenario is no different: Those who suffered before continue to remain deprived—those resourceless, destitute, illiterate girls of a middle-class family, without any backing or without any parental support. When unable to endure any further, they either hang themselves or burn themselves, but they do not approach the court for help—they are completely ignorant about it.

In reality, the advantages of the divorce law are being optimally utilized by the wealthy, educated, modern, enlightened couples who can easily proclaim, ‘no, this cannot go on any further’.

So, the majority of divorcees today, both male and female, belong to the higher rungs of society. The consequence of separation does not cast a shadow on the lives of their children. They are economically sound and can afford to send their children to a boarding school. Soon these children get habituated and are not afflicted by ‘home sicknesses’. Gradually they are getting used to seeing such situations.

Nor do they suffer from inferiority complex. These days ‘divorce’ is supposedly a ‘status symbol’. Children in schools, colleges, boardings, and hostels openly discuss their parents and criticize them without any feeling of embarrassment. (p.214) They do not feel ashamed at all. Often it is heard that these children say with a sigh of relief—‘thank god they are separated! What a respite; no more fights day in and day out! Ooh! It was so horrible!’ Or, ‘I think, Ma–Baba have taken the right decision. When it is impossible for them to come to an understanding, is there any point in hammering a nail and trying to bring them together?’

According to the more ‘enlightened’ children—‘So what if they had a love marriage? So what if they had lived a happy family life for a good ten years? Now that they cannot carry on, it is better that they part ways. And for us, shame, disrespect? Damn it. This is quite common in every civilized country in the world. Since our country was backward, people were so apprehensive about it.’

But these liberated thoughts crop up only in those children who grow up in an atmosphere of modernity and abundance. Even the separation of their parents does not impair their extravagant lifestyle in any way. This category of people is limited in number in our prevailing society, and yet it is true that this ‘high society’ is on a rapid rise. This is because the middle class of today are running towards this altered way of life in order to rise in ‘status’.

Modern men and women are running after making more money without caring about morality/immorality. The word ‘satisfaction’ seems to be erased from their lives. Their only concern is to catch up with the younger generation—to imitate and emulate them.
But no longer is there any escape for us from this. Will men–women in this chase even pause for once to think, ‘why are we running? What shall we get in return? Who are we imitating and what have they actually attained?’

I am not worried about this.

But, if they ever stop to think they will realize the real treasures that lie hidden in our own country Bharatbarsha. Then (p.215) they will try to move away from the trap of the accursed civilization ensnared in frustrations of broken families and fractured society. Then perhaps they will seek refuge in our rich treasure and value the ideals of sacrifice for our motherland.

By then, however, Bharat will perhaps have shun its own wealth and embraced a living that the West has already discarded. And our own country will witness an increase in the number of ‘crèches’, ‘boardings’, ‘hostels’, and ‘old-age homes’.

**Note**


(p.216)  Women in the Service of Humanity*

The ‘sacred task of serving’ is the moral responsibility of every human being. The spirit of service is perhaps the most revered of all virtues, irrespective of gender. Yet the two words ‘women’ and ‘service’ are somehow associated in our collective consciousness; the word *nari* has become pity and service personified. Of all the synonyms contained in our lexicon this seems to possess all the connotations of tenderness, beauty, and dignity not found in any other, as though this is a symbolic name for all the virtues of pity, affection, love, and sympathy put together:

So it is needless to say that in our thoughts and perceptions all the qualifying terms that denote humane qualities are images of a feminine form (care, kindness, forgiveness, devotion, and love). Again, all that is symbolic of wealth, prosperity, and splendour is represented by feminine deities, goddess Lakshmi and goddess Annapurna, the former an embodiment of opulence, beauty, grace, fortune and the latter, the provider and protector of food and wealth.

One may say that these are all poetic imaginations; passionate renditions of an imaginative mind. But, is this essentially correct? If we think carefully, we will observe that ‘nari’ is a much-revered creation of the Creator—designed with utmost care and attention, with a specific intention. So it is on nari—the primary pulse of the living world—that the Creator entrusts the responsibility of the universe, as she is the protector and nurturer of the pulse of life. (p.217)

This law of the Creator holds true not only for human society, it is valid for all living species inhabiting Earth.
So that this precept is discharged effectively and sustained unfailingly, the Creator had moulded the entire female species to His design, infusing and cramming the genus replete with the urge and inspiration to love and serve. The inclination to serve is instinctive in nari and its manifestation is observed right from childhood. This is commonly observed in every household—‘The representative of the mother is her dear little daughter.’

Of course in the present day, particularly in the modern urban family set-up, with the concept of a single child, this is becoming rare. But then, this is not society in its entirety. In rural and suburban families, this picture is quite familiar. A girl of five or seven years is seen looking after and managing little siblings with due care, keeping a protective watch over them. She is even seen changing the wet beds of the tiny ones to lessen her mother’s work pressure. Again, out of her own accord, she is seen affectionately dressing the baby up by putting kajal on its forehead and brushing its hair.

Are such leanings common among boys?

In a poor motherless family, the sight of a small girl, merely about eight years old, taking up the entire responsibility of the household is commonplace. Despite her tender age, with her inexperienced hands she cooks rice for her widowed father and brothers, brings drinking water from the tap outside and to the best of her ability takes utmost care of them. Yet, her elder brother, who may be ten-twelve years old, is not happy; he does not stop finding faults in her and ordering her around. So she stretches herself still further to keep them comfortable until they are satisfied. The poor father who toils to earn his daily wage is dependent on this eight-year-old girl for every matter concerning the household. Her sense of responsibility and earnestness teaches this small girl to perfect herself. (p.218)

It is instinctive in a girl to assume that all the domestic chores—to serve, to take care of the family members, to maintain rules and regulations at home—are part of her expected and accepted responsibilities. Not that she is always compelled to do these repetitive jobs every day or that such tasks are imposed upon her. It is out of her innate inclination that she shoulders such responsibilities.

In a well-off family, the scenario is different. In households where the wife herself is efficient, a host in oneself, this natural tendency does not get a chance to manifest in the little girl. Yet if anybody asks for a glass of water, it is the little girl in the house who serves it—not her elder brother. Nor does she expect otherwise.
The comparisons that we have been working on are all very insignificant and
minute aspects of the utterly mundane domestic life. But we must keep in mind
that this outlook is a bona fide Indian trend—an essentially Bharatiya mindset.
This sense is innate in our girls and it inspires them to inculcate it from early
childhood. Furthermore, ‘in the innocent, chaste figure of that little girl dwells
love, compassion, commitment’, which reminds us of the serene, caring, image
of Ma Sarada.

The picture of the Bharatiya nari becomes clear if we look back to the days of the
Great Famine in Bengal—the poignant sight of hunger stricken people lining up
in front of charitable let-outs to get hot mashed lentil-rice, and little girls lending
their small hands trying to cool that hot meal with a palm-leaf hand fan.

This giving and kind nature is the ideal of the Bharatiya nari. The Creator has
moulded her carefully to this design. To serve is the true religion of nari.

But, in the present age, to refute everything that is natural and to declare a
crusade against the rules of the Creator is considered the primary task of social
life. This campaign against the laws of nature is perhaps just for the sake of it
without assessing (p.219) its pros and cons. Human society is exulting at the
repeated incredible successes of science and technology, and continuing the
maddening competition contending the role of god without realizing its
consequences. Who knows, perhaps this madness will end up in ‘global
destruction’. Amongst the scientists who are flying their own flags of success,
after exhausting all natural resources, robbing Mother Earth empty, to attain
success, a few sensible ones are now spreading words of warning: ‘The wilful
violation and whimsical scientific decisions have resulted in air pollution, soil
pollution, pollution in the womb of the sea, pollution in every molecule and atom
of the earth. If this destruction continues the end of the earth is impending.’

Let us leave this topic aside and revert to our earlier subject. Nevertheless, it
can be said that, swayed by modern trends in our society, to comply with the
demands of ‘fashion’, many of our women are sacrificing their innate gentle
qualities and are developing a tendency to invite and justify a perverted life
style. So can there be any doubt that this is adversely affecting the female
community and making them disillusioned?

Eastern and Western ideologies were never the same; nor can they ever be.
Between the two domains belonging to the opposite poles, there is a heaven and
hell difference, a vast difference in every aspect—in their economic power, in
their resources, their geographic nature, and in their mentality. So it is only
natural that there will be differences in their social lives.
In Swami Vivekananda’s noble speech, we find an infinitesimally detailed analysis of the contrasts between the ‘orient’ and ‘occident’. In this comparative study, of course, he has not singled out any of the precepts as ‘the only one and the ultimate ideal’. He has made an impartial and pragmatic analysis of both the worlds and has discreetly discerned the deficiencies, faults, and the areas of virtue in each of these societies. Rendering a perspicacious detail of the weal and woe of the (p.220) East and the West, in his unbiased, unflinching, and vigorous speech, Swamiji has proclaimed categorically that seva dharma is the quintessence of nari—the dharma which is a byword of ‘motherly virtue’. It is because mother, ‘ma’, is the embodiment of all-enduring, selfless love and benevolence; an image of prosperity and welfare. The well-being of her children is her sole objective, her only prayer—the mantra of her life. There is a saying that ‘if at all there is a bad son, there is no bad mother’. A child may be unbecoming, oppressive, ruthless, and uncaring, but a mother can never devise harm for him—even if a son or a daughter commits numerous offences, the mother will never turn her face away.

According to Swamiji, ‘Amongst the various images of Bharatiya nari the greatest representation is that of the mother; her position as a mother is superior to her position as a wife. A man may be abandoned by his wife or by his son, but a mother can never do so ... Mother’s love knows no “ebb and flow”; there is no buying and selling of her love, no old age, no death. The status of mother is highest in the world. It is because in motherhood wherein lies the best opportunity for selfless learning and unselfish work.’

Elucidating further, Swamiji had said, ‘It is not that I am completely satisfied with the present condition of women in our society, but our right to interfere in women’s affairs is only to the extent of educating them. Women should attain such competence so that they can manage to sort out their problems amongst themselves in their own specific way.’

In those days when the conservatives (including many learned pundits) did not see ‘women’s education’ in a favourable light and did not consider it at all ‘necessary’, Swamiji at the core of his heart had earnest concern about ‘women’s education’, higher education/proper education: the education that would make women self-sufficient. This concern of Swamiji finds its reflection in every advice of his on womankind, as he (p.221) feared that if there is no advancement of women in education and training, the entire society would cease to progress. He wished women would get the opportunity for education, to true and holistic education at all times.
Undeniably, modern society has made this opportunity available to women; to all women extensively. One may be destined to share the nation’s burden of poverty, incapability, and inconvenience to whatever extent; but now, there is no hindrance of denial of right to education. Women today are no more shackled by law and/or society.

But has Swamiji’s dream of seeing women evolve as independent individuals come true? Have women been able to solve their own problems—be it in the past or nowadays?

The lamentation continues: ‘our society is still ruled by males’. And if this rule is considered an absolute misrule; then where is the spirit to break free from it? Some thoughtful modern girls retort and express aggrievedly: ‘Manu had said: “in childhood girls belong to their fathers, in youth to their husbands and in old age to their sons.” These are construed as conspiracies to trample girls.’ There is no end to their resentment against the ancient man. They do not have the patience to think on what pretext, under what circumstances this edict was created. At the same time, they do not try to realize why we are still adhering to the directives. If we do not abide by it, shall Manu come down to administer the punishment?

Actually, a small error remains tagged on to the root. Education has been imparted, but there has been no orientation to ‘solve one’s own problem’. Instead, a strong western influence is making its way rapidly. We do not really think whether it will be a boon or a curse. Hundreds of problems tear the entire country of ours; innumerable people are prey to deception, injustice, and neglect. Without paying heed to these problems, both men and women are imposing a burden on themselves because of the erroneous thinking of the ‘educated’ class of women. (p.222)

The other day, an old man was complaining agitatedly:

   Equal right! Equal right! But where is the equality? You girls occupy a place, wherever you wish to, nobody can say anything about it. But when an old man having no option got into a ladies compartment, a whole bunch of women, pounced on him and pushed him out of there! Is this an example of equal right? It is sheer luck that I did not lose my dear life. Can anything of this sort happen in any civilized country?

I was really shocked and ashamed to hear this.
However, what shall be the yardstick to determine the limit of ‘equal right’? Quite a large number of women who are vocal in their claim of ‘equal right’ have raised the demand that men should share the household chores. They quote the ‘Western society’ to make their demands stronger. And in their eagerness to mould themselves in this pattern, these women get accustomed to thinking that ‘to serve’ is slavery. For them to work devotedly for their husband, son, relatives in the family, means slavery. They even plan amongst their friends of equal understanding to start a movement to protest against the prevailing system.

This is again a flawed attempt to go against nature, just for the sake of fashion. To take care of and nurse her near and dear ones, are instinctive in a woman. On enquiry we may find that a woman will feel awkward if her husband lends his hands to share the domestic chores with her; and she would rather drive her husband out of the kitchen.

A working woman on returning from her office at the same time as her husband, runs promptly straight to the kitchen to prepare food, although both are equally tired. But, is it because she is compelled to do so by her husband? ... It is her sheer natural concern, and the commitment in her that pushes her towards this family duty.

She may utter angry words like, ‘slavery’, ‘subjugation’ to vent her indignation but it is never seen in such instances that the woman will spread out on her bed to relax (as any male would do) expecting her husband to go forward and complete the work (excluding exceptions, of course).

Our girls, how much ever they may talk about progress and emancipation, whatever harsh language they may use in writing to confirm their disapproval, their instinct is the same as that of the old, traditional Bharatiya nari who embodies the spirit of ‘giving’, in whom the ‘world of domesticity’ and the concerns of the home and family are deep-seated. She is the primary and often the sole care-giver in the family—to serve, nurse, and manage the household becomes her responsibility.

If children fall ill, it is the mother who takes care of them and nurses them, not their father. If leave has to be taken from the place of work, it is the mother and not the father, who takes leave, unless the situation is somewhat different. Can she be at peace until she herself nurses her sick children?
Contrastingly, she indulges in excited discussions about this amongst friends and associates in the outer world, who are partners in the cause of women’s liberation. They condemn the inequality between males and females in family life, and they label the imposed conditions as ‘enslavement’ and ‘servitude’ of females. In fact, in all tasks a woman does, she follows the diktat of her inner self. But, since it is in vogue to be at odds with society, particularly men, and keep the crusade against men, they ought to utter such expletives. Otherwise, it is thought unbefitting. But, ‘amidst the hundreds of other works that she has to finish, why is she so particular about cooking?’ If asked, she will surely burst out in rage—‘or else will the babu eat?’ ‘So what, if it does not suit his taste buds, what does that matter to you?’ What is the answer then?

It is not only the husband–wife relationship or the mother–son relationship; in all aspects of family life it is a woman’s crippling conscience and innate nature that governs her to sacrifice everything till the end of her life to ensure comfort and care to all members of the family. It is often seen even now, that a male member and his aged, widowed aunt (maternal aunt or paternal aunt) are the sole inhabitants of a household. It is this old woman who even after being chided, does not refrain from doing everything on her own—from cooking, to making the beds and every other thing on her own to the best of her capability, to make sure of his comfort. She thinks, ‘this is not too much work for me, so what is there to be troubled about it? I have been doing this all my life. But if this boy has to make these arrangements on his own then that would be immensely difficult for him.’

This warmth, this affection is eternal in women; the manifestations of which are seen right from childhood.

But do women have to close the door of their heart, burying the inclination which is indigenous to them, only by getting influenced by a particular confusing theory? Do they have to lose the spirit and consider that even serving their near and dear ones is ‘slavery’?

If that be so, wherefrom will the sensibility to go beyond the narrowed limits of the private sphere come and extend their boundary to the greater public domain? And from where will the noble feeling to make oneself a partner in welfare work for humanity at large be inculcated?

Yet, this was expected of modern-generation women: the expectation that after attaining emancipation, ‘the right to build one’s future’, women would learn to broaden their horizon; they would learn to manifest themselves nobly in wider areas of service, in their deeds, in their greatness, and in their generosity. But, where is the promise to fulfil that expectation? Is there any sign whatsoever? ... If so, to what extent?
Is it not a kind of ‘enslavement’ to follow blindly any particular idealism that is devoid of good senses?

It is through serving others that purity and purgation of our heart is attained and it is through the service of others that love emanates. (p.225)

Even if we nurse an ordinary plant every day, we develop a loving bond with that plant. If we give food to birds and animals, regularly just out of fancy, love and affection towards them come inexorably. If as a compulsion or in exchange of money, we render service to a temple or worship an idol daily, even then a particular attachment towards that inanimate object develops automatically. Indeed, seva is so pure and pleasant that routine work gradually turns into a sacrosanct passion.

Albeit, this is not only true for women. This sacred task of serving others is meant for both men and women—in fact, for the entire human race. But shall this sacred task be practised only by a few labelled social service organizations, establishments, and by some religious institutions with humanitarian concerns? Does no one else have any obligation? Cannot this consciousness dawn in our ordinary family life?—‘I am also one in this universe. I too have something to contribute’.

With our limited capability even if we cannot do any particular good, we can always extend love. To love is akin to service, affection, compassion, consolation, consideration, and a ‘little touch of heart’. To give words of hope and assurance to the crestfallen soul, to provide confidence and enthusiasm to the dejected, to make efforts to bring the inspiration of a new life to someone unsuccessful, and to bring the calmness of peace to the agitated, restless, aggrieved, and devastated souls are all indeed great services, services that can reach the core of the heart of the multitude emotionally disturbed. Women can render such service very easily—without much effort.

The woman is a figure of well-being, service, and motherhood. Hence, a woman’s heart can reach very close to all the distraught souls—this reaching out is the true service to those who are deeply afflicted; the service that reaches the Almighty through them. All love, all comfort, all help comes from Him; and, in turn reaches Him.

Note


Note: The excerpts of Swami Vivekananda are quoted in the original ‘Sevadharme Nari’ from Bharatiya Nari, Udbodhan, 1398: 18 and 47, respectively.
Letters from and to Ashapurna Devi

Letters from Ashapurna Devi

Ashapurna Devi
77 Beltala Road,
Kolkata 700026.
26.11.50

Respected Sir,

On receiving your letter, I am sad to learn that you are disappointed with me. This is not at all desirable. I never claim any remuneration for my writings. So, why this misunderstanding? Rather, I always feel uneasy and am perpetually hesitant to ask for money. I submit my work and leave it for the publisher’s consideration.

I am incapable of refusing requests, so I keep on writing and especially when it comes to contribution to newspapers, my earning is nil from most of them. Thus, I feel my letter to Basumati has been wrongly interpreted. What I wanted to specify was the discrepancy in the payment bill this time. An inadvertent mistake is not unusual, but I have not thought of it in the way you have looked at it. Perhaps the difference in payment has caught my eye because there seems to be no change in the rates of payment coming from the other dailies.

Anyway, I am extremely sorry for the displeasure caused, and I wish to be pardoned for the same.

Hope you are fine. Please accept my warm regards.

Humbly yours,
Ashapurna Devi.

[This letter was written to Prantosh Ghatak, Editor, Basumati and Basumati Sahitya Mandir Publishing House.]

Ashapurna Devi
77 Beltala Road,
Kolkata 700026.
7.3.51

Respected Sir,

Thanks for the reply. I am happy to receive all the answers to the queries in my last letter, except for one. The statement about the copyright of the book is not clear to me. What does ‘10 years of tenure mean’? If all books are sold before the completion of the 10th year, won’t you reprint them, or, if you agree to, how many copies would you reprint then?
Another query! You have mentioned that only novels will be accepted. I do not have any objection to that, but in a collection, to add a few ‘long stories’ would not be a bad idea. This is quite usual with any collected works.

I suggest you would consider the same, because if at all I include stories, they would be selected carefully before I send them for publication. Anyway, please inform me about the procedure for the submission of manuscripts. My answer to your (p.228) last query in the postscript is: I have completed the one I was writing. At the moment I am not writing any novels, except for the one which is being serialized.

There are two books among the ones which have been serialized, which are yet unpublished. May I please know the intention of your query? Wishing you good health, I end here.

Please accept my regards,
Ashapurna Devi.

[This letter was written to Prantosh Ghatak, in regards to the publication of a compilation of Ashapurna Devi’s works by Basumati Sahitya Mandir.]

Ashapurna Devi
77 Beltala Road,
Kolkata 700026.
1.9.56

Respected Sir,

Received your letter. I am done with the story; you may send somebody to collect the same according to your convenience.

Regards,
Ashapurna Devi.

[This letter was written to Prantosh Ghatak, Editor, Basumati.] (p.229)

Ashapurna Devi
77 Beltala Road,
Kolkata 700026.

Respected Sir,

Hope everything is fine. What about the publication of my book? It must have slipped your mind. So, take this as a reminder.

Another query, could you please guide me regarding the format of manuscripts for a serialized novel? I would also like to know about the procedure of sending one, and if at all Basumati is interested in serializing novels.
The April Issue of *Basumati* was great. It was highly appealing and has proven itself to be a magazine with a difference. I await your reply.

Warm regards,

Ashapurna Devi

Ashapurna Devi
Ph #46-3908
Flat #28, Block 3,
28/1/A Garihat Road,
Calcutta 700019.
30.11.61

Sir,

With humble submission, I am sending the poem by post as per your request (but only one of the two). I am unable to send both because of a delicate reason. The other poem was already presented to somebody and hence it is under his possession; it is for the same reason that I could not hand it over to you at our *Rabibasar* meeting on Sunday. There is no harm in reading (p.230) out a self-composed poem in a close gathering, but cannot be in print for obvious reasons.

Hope you will not mind. My good wishes are always with you.

Regards,
Ashapurna Devi.

[This letter was written to Prantosh Ghatak, Editor, *Basumati.*]

Ashapurna Devi
Ph #46-3908
Flat #28, Block 3,
28/1/A Garihat Road,
Calcutta 700019.
9.7.68

Dear,

Thanks for your letter. Responding to your queries, I would like to ask, is there any necessity for one to probe into the mood of any author? Anyway, since you urge to know the same I answer accordingly.

1. I don’t have any specific time to write. Any time is writing time, depending upon my free time—day or night, dawn or dusk, does not make much of a difference to me.
2. Apart from time, all I need to write are papers and a pen.
3. I do not keep any manuscript. Whatever I write, I write once and for all; the rest I leave to the responsibility of the ‘compositor’.
4. I could not understand what exactly you wanted to know about how I perceive my writing, so I am unable to give an answer. I would always like to write relaxingly, but is that possible?

5. You have asked about my mental state on the completion of certain writing. I can only say that I heave a sigh of relief. Thank God! It’s done.

(p.231)
The last answer will perhaps give you a shock. But, I am not joking, it’s a fact. I have forgotten the pleasure of passionate writing or to write to my desire, it is always about fulfilling others’ unending demands. Of course you can ask why I write so much. A good answer would be, I cannot turn down anybody’s request.

Hope you are keeping fine.

With regards and affection,
Ashapurna Devi.

[This letter to Ranjit Kumar Sen was published in Prothom Alo, Eid Issue, Dacca: 2009, September. Since Mr Sen’s letter could not be traced I had to take the liberty of making minor changes to retain the meaning of the letter.]

Ashapurna Devi
Ph #72-4664
17, Kanungo Park,
Raja S.C. Mullick Road, Garia,
Calcutta 700 084.
16.5.90

Dear,

It has been quite some time since I received your letter, dated 25/3/90, along with the picture card. I am sorry that I could not reply earlier than this. I was keeping extremely busy with my writing and was also not keeping well in between, and hence, the delay.

You have expressed your eagerness to know more about me and I welcome that warmly. At various times, there have been many discussions about my writings in several magazines and papers and also in some books. Besides, many ‘interviews’ have (p.232) been published. Unfortunately, all of those either have not been preserved or have not been collected. In this regard, to tell you the truth, I have never been very careful.

My son, Shri Sushanta Gupta, is sending ‘Xerox copies’ of some of the materials from whatever is available at hand. But the problem is, I do not really remember what has already been sent. We have not kept an account of that; hence, I am wondering whether some of them might be ‘duplicates’.
I am also sending two of my books along with the photocopies—one is a collection of my short stories *Swanirbachito Shreshtho Galpo* (A Selection of My Best Stories), the other is my novel *Pratham Pratisruti* (The First Promise). I’ll be happy to know that they have reached you. If you like reading *Pratham Pratisruti*, then I can also send the remaining two books of the trilogy—*Subarnalata* and *Bakulkatha*.

I have written many novels to fulfil the demand of the readers. But, I must say that I derive immense pleasure in writing short stories as well. Your interest to work on Bengali literature definitely deserves our appreciation.

Hope you are keeping well. From your letter I have learnt something about your sphere of work but I would also love to know about your family. I believe a person can be perceived somewhat fairly from within one’s family life. And once that is known the bonding of the hearts takes place. If you should happen to visit Calcutta, I hope we will surely meet.

With all my good wishes I am ending my letter here.

Ashapurna Devi

[This letter was written to Professor Hana Preinhaelterova, Prague. Professor Preinhaelterova has translated Ashapurna Devi’s short stories into Czech and she is now translating *Pratham Pratisruti*.] (p.233)

Ashapurna Devi
17, Kanungo Park,
P.O. Garia, 24 Parganas,
Calcutta 700 084.
Durga Sashthi 1990

Dear Ranumoni,

Our heartiest greetings to you and your family for the upcoming Durga Puja. I sincerely wish that all of you will enjoy the Pujas thoroughly. Enjoy some good food, visit Puja pandals and wear new clothes every day.
I am glad to hear that Bablu has managed to come over. The vacation is quite short, but it’s nice that he can spend at least those few days of Puja at home. I am sending the puja gifts through Chhotlu—a sari and sindur for you, daily-wear clothes for the girls, and a small amount of money for Atul, Bablu, and Babusona. I am really sorry dear that I could not manage to send them earlier. Here everybody is very busy, even on Sundays. I am sending another sari for Japu, a printed cotton sari—ask her to choose and keep the one she likes. Send the other back with Chhotlu; I have to give it to someone else. Your maternal uncle has given you a good tangail sari, and your mother gives you a printed cotton sari for daily use, and a red-bordered sari, which you can use as everyday puja wear. I did not buy the second sari; it was a felicitation gift for the reading of one of my works, so you need not feel obligated. I have plenty of such saris. I have always wished that you would wear one of them. Along with these, I am sending another sari and Rs 12 for Kali puja.

Blessings,
Ma.

[Bablu and Babusona (grandsons); Japu (granddaughter); Chhotlu: Sushanta Gupta (son); Atul: Ranu or Pushparenu’s husband (Pushparenu is Ashapurna’s only daughter).] (p.234)

Ph #72-4664
Ashapurna Devi
17, Kanungo Park,
Raja S.C. Mallick Road,
Garia,
Calcutta 700084.

Mother’s Blessings and (Seven) Advices to My Most Beloved Son
Sushanta On The Occasion Of His Birthday

Dear, your birth on this holy day of Dol Purnima* has made your life auspicious. I believe the blessed conjunction of the day of your birth with Sri Chaitanya Mahaprabhu’s on this full moon day will help you to live a life of fulfilment in the coming years. My good wishes continue to be with you for a safe, healthy, peaceful, and happy life.

Ma.

In my opinion:

1. Faith in God is the source of self-confidence.
2. With trust comes the power of stability.
3. It is better to keep silent rather than to answer back in times of confusion and turmoil. You cannot make one conscious of his/her faults by saying the undesirable truth. Retaliation only leads to loss of friendship. 

(p.235)

4. A life devoid of work brings dejection; be discreet and give priority to your work, and that’s the only way to maintain restraint.

5. Health is the greatest wealth, hence maintaining good health is...

[This is an incomplete letter; yet I have included it, because it gives us a clear perception of Ashapurna Devi’s spiritual realization together with her secular thinking.]

    Ph #72-4664
    Ashapurna Devi
    17, Kanungo Park,
    Raja S.C. Mallick Road,
    Garia,
    Calcutta 700084.

    Sri Santosh Kumar Mukhopadhyay,
    Deputy Registrar (E&T),
    Senate House,
    Kolkata 700073.

    Jagattarini Swarna Padak–1993

Respected Sir,

I have received your letter dated 31 January 1994 on 7 February 1994. Thanks for the same.

I take this opportunity to express my gratitude to the authorities of Calcutta University for electing me as the Jagattarini Gold Medal award winner for this year. I would be extremely happy to be present at the forthcoming convocation to receive the award in person. Sadly, due to my ill health, that will not be possible. I wish my daughter-in-law Dr Nupur Gupta (Professor, Dept of English, Jogomaya Devi College) be present at the convocation and accept the award on my behalf. 

(p.236)

I would be glad to receive a timely confirmation and your necessary instructions on this matter.

    Good Wishes and ‘Namaskar’,
    Ashapurna Devi.

    Ph #72-4664
    Ashapurna Devi,
7, Kanungo Park,
Raja S.C. Mallick Road,
Garia,
Calcutta - 700084.
23.7. 94

Sri Sourin Bhattacharya,
Secretary,
Bangiya Sahitya Parishad,
Kolkata.

Dear,

I am delighted to learn that various functions are being organized to commemorate the completion of 100 years of Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. I express my heartfelt thanks and gratitude for being invited to be a part of this prestigious celebration.

Amongst other distinguished organizations, Bangiya Sahitya Parishad is one of the foremost centres that uphold the cultural heritage of Bengali nationalism. Rabindranath Tagore glorified it to the stature of a deity in a Bengali’s household. He was one of the devoted founder members and he remained so until his last days to raise this organization as a centre of excellence.

It is but natural that with time there has been some decay in its glorious image—some greying has appeared for several reasons. Still its significance is as precious as an ancient place of worship. (p.237)

The library of Sahitya Parishad has invaluable collections of books and magazines—there are hardly a few comparable to this organization. This brings back memories of my early days’ close association with Bangiya Sahitya Parishad. I belonged to the same locality. Moreover, I was quite involved with Sahitya Parishad, albeit not directly. Let us not delve into such personal aspects and come to the point. I am extremely hesitant, yet I must say that although I am elated to receive this invitation, I am equally sad as it will not be possible for me to be present at the ceremonial function.

This is inevitably due to my bad health condition. I beg to be excused for this inconvenience and hope this prayer will be granted considering my present illness.

I wish this forthcoming ceremony will be a grand success in every respect. At the same time, I hope that this centenary celebration will generate new inspiration and give strength to the institution to move forward with fresh vigour to more successful bicentenary celebrations in future.
My daughter-in-law Dr. Nupur Gupta and my son Sushanta Gupta will try their best to attend the function on 27 July 1994.

Do accept my best wishes.
With warm regards, I end here.

‘Namaskar’,
Ashapurna Devi. (p.238)

Ph #72-4664
Ashapurna Devi
7, Kanungo Park,
Raja S.C. Mallick Road,
Garia,
Kolkata 700084.
5.11.94

I hereby grant permission to Smt. Jhumpa Nilanjana Lahiri (33 Naples Road, Brooklyn, Massachussets, U.S.A.) to translate a few of my short stories to English.

I should be informed about the stories chosen to be translated because quite a few of them have already been translated to English.

Ashapurna Devi.

[This letter was dictated to Sri Nripendranath Chakraborty by Ashapurna Devi and signed by her.]

Note
(*) Dol Purnima, also known as Holi, is observed on the full moon day in the month of Falguna (February–March). The festival is dedicated to Lord Krishna. It is more significant as this is also the birthday of Chaitanya Mahaprabhu (1485–1533) who is believed to be the incarnation of Lord Krishna.

Dol Purnima is observed every year to mark the arrival of the spring season. This festival celebrated all over Bengal is also known as the festival of colours.

Letters to Ashapurna Devi
Ph #40-4320
5A, Fern Road
16.8.93

Respected Mashima,
Hope you are in good health. I wish to visit you one of these days—haven’t seen you for a long time. I have to attend a seminar on women short story writers of 1400 B.S. (1993–4). For this purpose, I am sending my son Victor to collect a writing of Nabaneetadi on your stories. I had a word with Dada (Sushanta \( p. 239 \))

Gupta) over the phone yesterday; he has asked me to collect a photocopy of the same today. In case it is not ready, please hand over the original to Victor. I shall return it within a day or two.

You are perhaps busy writing for the Puja issue. Hope Dada, Boudi, and your dear granddaughters, are fine.

That’s all for today.

Warm regards (my pranam),
Kana Basu Misra \( p. 240 \)

[Mashima: Generally, in Bangla, elderly women are respectfully referred to as Mashima.]

Dada: Sushanta Gupta, Ashapurna Devi’s younger of the two sons.

Boudi: Sushanta Gupta’s wife; Ashapurna Devi’s only daughter-in-law.

Kana Basu Misra is a writer. She has received several awards and has been writing since the 1970s.]

Calcutta
1.10.1993

Respected Madam,

Hope you are in good health.

This letter is to invite you to a function, organized in memory of Leela Roy, scheduled for 6 October at 6.30 p.m. at St. Paul’s Cathedral. It shall be extremely gratifying if all of you can kindly attend the function.

Regards,
Annadasankar Ray’s letter to Ashapurna Devi

Respected Didi,

Hope you are keeping fine. It is since long that we are out of touch.

Didi, I am sending you a boy who I know quite well. He wants to stage a play on one of your stories. I shall also act in this production. Feel free to talk to him in this regard. I am not aware of your changed phone number; otherwise I would have called you personally.

Regards,
Sabitri.

[Date is not mentioned. Sabitri Chatterjee is a noted Bengali Film Actress.]

Golepark Cooperative Housing Society Ltd,
Block 12, Flat A-1,
49 B, Gobindapur Road,
Calcutta 700045.
15 December 1993

Respected Mashima,
At present, in the twilight of my life, I am rendered homeless and have to adjust with the new environment of my son’s flat. All my books and papers are still in the previous house at Dumdum, which was made sacred by your gracious presence. I go there occasionally. ‘Rabibasar’ work is in progress.

As of now, the matter of electing the editor-in-chief of ‘Rabibasar’ is not decided. I have left the decision to the members as per your advice. You are aware of the fact that 23 January 1994 is the birth centenary of Jyotirmoyee Devi. Since she was a member of ‘Rabibasar’ for a long time, it is tentatively planned that the centenary will be celebrated in ‘Rabibasar’ at Srimati Ashoka Gupta’s residence. It must be fresh in your memory how fond she was of you. Remembering those days, we take the opportunity to request you to write a few lines on Jyotirmoyee Devi and send it to us. I know it will not be possible for you to be present at the occasion, yet, we wish to begin the meeting with your invaluable written message. This wish cannot be fulfilled by anyone else. I can go and collect it if you so desire, or else you can mail it to the following address—146, Kabi Nabin Sen Road, Dum Dum, Calcutta 28.

We plan to compile and publish all the writings in a special ‘Rabibasarya’ edition.

Warm Regards,
Santosh.

[Jyotirmoyee Devi was a pioneering Bengali woman writer of the early twentieth century. She was a follower of Gandhi and actively worked in the Harijan colonies to understand the woes of the outlawed women.

Srimati Ashoka Gupta—Jyotirmoyee Devi’s daughter.

Santosh Kumar Dey—a dedicated official of ‘Rabibasar’.

Rabibasar is a well-known literary institution of Bengal, established in 1929 by a handful of litterateurs of Calcutta. Some of its early patrons were Rabindranath Tagore, Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, and Jaladhar Sen. ‘Rabibasar’ occupies a prominent position in the literary world of West Bengal, due to its regular sittings, lively discussions, and an atmosphere of ‘bonhomie’ among its members. Jaladhar Sen was the first Sarbadhayaksha or president (1936–8) followed by Khagendranath Mitra, who held the position for the following twenty-three years (1938–61). The third president was Kalikinkar Sengupta, a poet, who was assisted by a competent secretary Santosh Kumar De.
A novel feature of the organization is that its membership is limited to fifty-two, not less, not more. In conformity with its name, it is held on Sundays (generally once a fortnight) in any of the member’s house. Saratchandra Chattopadhyay, the famous novelist, became a member of ‘Rabibasar’ in 1934 and called two of its meetings in his house at Manoharpukur Road (now Ashwini Dutta Road, Kolkata). Rabindranath attended one of these two meetings and had agreed to become the Adhinayak of the organization. The poet later (1937) invited the members to Santiniketan where in ‘Uttarayan’ in the presence of local professors and other inmates of the Ashram ... a sitting of ‘Rabibasar’ was held with due éclat ... The poet had said ... that so long as ‘Rabibasar’ would continue to live, its members should strive to unify the country, engender hope and joy in the hearts of all ... Other prominent writers and scholars who contributed to its growth were Dineshchandra Sen, Rajsekhar Basu, Srikumar Banerjee, Shymaprasad Mukherjee, Sunitikumar Chatterjee, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, Radharani Devi, Ashapurna Devi, etc. The secretariat was situated for a large period of time at, Kavi Nabin Sen Road, Dum Dum, Calcutta 28.*

Presently the office is situated at AE-286-Salt Lake, Kolkata 700064.

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Ph #617-738-7731
Jhumpa N. Lahiri
33 Naples Road,
Brooklyn,
Massachusetts 02146,
U.S.A.
31 December 1993

Respected Ashapurna Devi,
My name is Jhumpa Nilanjana Lahiri. I was born in London and I grew up in America. I am 26 years of age. Presently I am doing my Ph.D. in Comparative Literature in Boston University. I have gathered some knowledge about a number of your short stories from my mother Tapati Lahiri, and since then I was eager to translate those stories into English. For my Ph.D. programme, I wish to select seven short stories from those retold by my mother and wish to translate them into English and discuss them critically. It is my desire that everybody round the world should taste the richness of your stories. Caroline Wright’s inspiration (my acquaintance who also knows you) has also added impetus to my interest. I write short stories in English. Of late some of these have been published here in literary magazines. I am greatly influenced by your writing and hope that you may grant permission so that I can start my work. I eagerly await your reply.

Please accept my pranam.

Yours truly,

Jhumpa.

**Note**

(*) [Source: *The Encyclopaedia of Indian Literatures*, Vol. 2, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, p. 1727.]