

Working Women in Ancient and Medieval Bengal

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Abstract: As literature is the portrait of the society, our aim and object of this paper is to uncover the life of the working women in the ancient and medieval Bengal, as depicted in literature of that period. As a prelude, economic and social condition of Bengal is discussed in brief. Life on the one side was full of pomp and luxury and on the other it was full of want and austerity. But the woman had to struggle hard for the upliftment of their own life and of the society too. As Bengal was mainly of agro-based culture, women had to participate in agricultural production. Society was divided into different professional sections, where women were active participants in their own society. They worked inside the house and also in the outside and in the fields. Ancient and medieval Bengali literature depicts the women in various works, profession and activities – whatever they do, they were self-contented with their work and their contribution to the society. .

It is commonly said that literature is the portrait of the society. In Bengali literature between the eighth and twelfth centuries well as between twelfth and eighteenth centuries, apart from the contemporary historical accounts, travelogues and biographical works, we find the picture of the social and cultural life of ancient Bengal. These literary sources are generally used for reconstruction of the socio-cultural life of Bengali women of both the old and medieval period. Our aim and object of this paper is to uncover, in particular, the life of the working women in that period. As a prelude, economic and social condition of Bengal may be discussed first.

With a plenty of alluvial soil and industrious people, Bengal was one of the richest countries in the East. The

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introduction of Muslim rule, beginning in the thirteenth century, contributed much to its economic life. In the pre-Muslim period, Bengal was politically disintegrated. The Muslim rule "not only integrated the Bengali people into one political platform and contributed to the development of a common social and cultural life, but stimulated their progress and prosperity in economic life as well".¹

Gold and silver coins were very rare in the past. Only cowries (small shells) were in circulation as the medium of transaction. The economic life of the city was quite different from that of the village. During the reign of Vijoysen (12th century) rich women in the cities used to wear gold, silver and jewels, whereas the village girls had no opportunity even to see such things. They used to wear indigenous ornaments made of different seeds, weeds, palm-leaves, beads and flowers. In contemporary literature of that period, we find so many descriptions of poverty and austerity in village life. In his *Arya Saptasati* Gobardhan Achariya (12th century) describes how a village women having no winter clothes, made a fire and kept it lit for the whole night, in spite of ashes covering her tender skin and in spite of tears caused by smoke (Poem no.304). In another poem by an anonymous poet, we see the husband of a village girl feeling sorry at seeing his wife begging to an unwilling neighbour for a needle to sew her only torn cloth. A poor mother is seen in a poem by poet 'Bar' praying to the Almighty, so that she can feed her hungry children for one hundred days with only one piece of bread.

In *Sheikh Shubhodaya*, we find that the king himself is professing austerity in everyday life. King Vijoysena says that

he is a fortunate man when he has in his home a wife and children, a broken earthen pot to drink with some rice.

But we find that in cities, life was, on the contrary, full of pomp and luxury. In *Charyapada*, between the ninth and eleven century, the early specimen of Bengali literature, the term *Nagar* or city was referred to a prosperous village. In this text one can find a vivid picture of urban life. People indulged in luxury. They had singers, dancers and prostitutes to entertain them and polygamy (poem no.10) was in vogue too. Even the morality of the housewives was bad. We see that a (Tr.) "daughter-in-law, who is afraid of the crow in the day time, goes out at night to meet an amorous friend" ² (Tr. of poem no.2): *দিবসই বহুড়ি কাগই ডরে ভাও/ রাতি ভইলে কামরু জাও*.. In one poem we find paradox of life "I have no rice in the pot, but I go out to entertain others" ³. *হাঁড়িত ভাত নাহি নিতি আবেসি* (Tr. of poem no. 33).

During Muslim rule, between thirteenth and eighteenth centuries, a remarkable degree of prosperity could be observed. Gold and silver coins were abundantly in circulation. In general, people were better off. An examination of the contemporary Bengali literature will reveal a glorious picture. The *Manasamangal* of poet Vipradas (15th century) gives us this picture:

কপূর তাম্বুল খায়

কস্তুরী চন্দন গায়

গোলামে যোগায় ঘন ঘন ।

কেহ মলে অংগ পদ

কেহ করে খোসামোদ

কোন সেবক চামর ঢুলায় ।।

(Tr.) "The servant often prepares sweet betel-leaf(Pan) and applies perfumes of musks and sandals on her body. One

attendant massages her legs, the other indulges in flatteries and another is engaged in waving the fan to give her relief in hot summer days".⁴ (Vipradas, *Manashamangal*, 17th century).

In aristocratic societies, the lady of the house did not cook herself. She used to keep many helpers (পাচক-পাটিকা). In *Chandimangal* (16th century) of Mukundaram, there is a reference to a rich lady busy in tasting the curries, while the slave-girl cooks (বিবি চাষে বাদী যথা রাখে).

The people were generous in entertaining guests. In one text we find that about fifty curries⁵ were prepared for a few persons. People spent extravagantly in marriage ceremonies too. Those people who spent unnecessarily in the marriage ceremony of a daughter or a son were condemned in *Chaitanya Bhagabat*.⁶

Trade and commerce flourished in this period. The *Padma-Puran* by Vijoygupta (15th century) gives a graphic description of *Chandsowdagar's* commercial voyage to Sri Lanka. The various commodities, which filled his fourteen boats, consisted of precious stones, cotton and jute clothes, fruits, drugs, grains and livestock. The merchants bartered these for utensils, ivory, conch-shell etc. In Mukundaram's *Chandimangal*, the merchant Dhanapati was seen saying: 'I would get white Chamry in exchange for jute and hemp - পাট শন বদলে ধবল চামর পাব. We also find Fullara, a fowler-woman, bartering the skin of a deer for a rough wrapper in a local market: হরিণ বদলে পাই পুরানো খোসাল Mukundaram's *Chandimangal* (16th century). The economic life of the working people was not easy going. For economic security they used to live in joint families. In *Malua*, one

heroine of Mymensingh Ballads, we find five brothers and their wives living a very happy joint-family life. In *Krishnakirtan*, the mother-in-law was hostile (দুর্জন স্বাভাৱী), but in *Chandimangal* both father-in-law and mother-in-law of Fullara were very loving. Fullara goes to the market herself and sells meat, thus contributing to the earnings of the family.

Contemporary literature also show that the cost of living was very low. *Chandikavya* of Dwiza Madhab (16th century) gives the following account of expenditure incurred in celebrating the marriage of an ordinary person:

2 pieces of small cloth	20 cowries
Pan (betel-leaf)	4 cowries
Khayer (Katha)	4 cowries
Lime	2 cowries
Vermilion	4 cowries
Khulna (ordinary saree) (8, 000 cowries amounted to one Rupee)	18 cowries
Total	52 cowries

Ibn Batuta, the famous traveler, who visited Bengal in the fourteenth century, mentioned the price of the following articles in his travel account:⁷:

1 maund rice	1 anna 9 pies
1 maund of sugar	1 rupee 7 annas
1 cow	3 rupees
15 yard of fine cotton-cloth	2 rupees
1 fat fowl	1 anna
1 maund of Ghee	1 rupee 7 annas

The cheapness of necessary articles prevailed down to the time of Shaesta Khan, Governor of Bengal (17th century), when rice sold at two annas per maund.⁸

Agriculture was always the principal occupation in Bengal. In old Bengali literature, we find the details of cultivation and also so many aphorisms embodying the agricultural wisdom of the people:

(a) “রোদে ধান, ছায়ার পান”

“The paddy thrives in the sun and the betel-leaf in the shade” (Khana, c. 10th century).

(b) “দিনে রোদ রাতে জল।

তাতে বাড়ে ধানের বল।”

“If the paddy plant gets sun-shine by day
and showers by night, it grows rapidly”

(Khana, c. 10th century).

Women also actively participated in agricultural production, specially in the act of husking rice. *Dhenki* or the rice-husking pedal was once considered as an indispensable domestic implement.⁹:

“বাহার ঘরে নাহি ঢেঁকি মুখল।

সে বহুঝির নাহি কুশল।

Tr. The housewife who has no ‘Dhenki’ or a pedal in her house, is branded as forsaken by luck (Aphorism of “Dak”, c. 12th century).

Common farmers were well-to-do no doubt, but the fate of their harvest was often uncertain, because of drought or for other adverse natural phenomenon. The land was very fertile and the people worked very hard. Farmers undertook intensive cultivation for every kind of food-crop, which they needed for the whole year. They grew in abundance not only jute, rice or cotton, but also vegetable, oil-seeds, cereals, lentils, pepper, garlic, onion, cumin, parsley etc.

Women also took part in producing vegetable and fruits within their compound:

লোকের পিঙ্কন দেখে পাটের পাহড়া।
প্রতি ঘর চালে দেখে সোনার কুমড়া।

“Everybody wears cloth made of jute -silk.
Every roof is decorated with gold -like pumpkins”
(Sheikh Faizullah, 16th century¹⁰).

Every village was self-sufficient. In Mukundaram's *Chandikavya* (16th century), we find a growing village inhabited by the people of various profession. The village had every essential for a decent livelihood. The author listed the following professions in his work:

Tanti or *jola* (weavers) *Tambuli* or *Barui* (pan or betel-leaf sellers and growers), *Goala* (dairy-producer), *Khatibs* of *Makhtabs* (teachers of Muslim religious institution). *Tol-Pundit* of *Pathsala* (Hindu or Buddhist teacher of primary level). *Mudi* (shop-keeper or grocers), *Malakar* (garland-maker) *Kamar* (Blacksmith) *Bene*, (gold and silver ornament-maker) *Jele* (fishermen) *Ganak*, (Astrologer and fortune-teller) *Kabiraj*,

(Physician using herbal medicine or the follower of *Ayurvedic* system of treatment) *Teli* (the oil-seed crushers), *Siuli* (maker of molasses from date-juice), *Dhobha* (washer-man), *Mukeri* (the Carter), *Pithari* (the rice-cake-maker), *Kabari* (the fishmonger), *Tirkan* (the maker of war-weapons), *Chutar* (the carpenter), *Kagozi* (the paper-maker), *Kalander* (the conjurer or juggler of animals like tiger and bear), *Maulana* (the performer of religious and marriage functions in Muslim society), *Rangrej* (the colour manufacturer or dyers) etc.¹¹

It is found that production formed the basis of village economy. For every professional family, there was a fixed area in the village, which was called 'Para', e.g. *Kumar-para* (the potter's area), *Telipara* (oil producers area), etc. There were some professions in the village in which every member of the family used to take part jointly. Most of the trades and professions were carried on through generation.¹²

It is commonly believed that in medieval period, women were the idol of beauty and pleasure. Of course, we have seen in the medieval Bengali literature, people wrote page after pages to describe the beauty of the heroine. Even we have seen, the hero fainted, not seeing the heroine physically, but only hearing the beauty of the girl as in '*Padmavati*' of Alaol or seeing the picture of the girl as in *Satimaina* of Daulat Kazi (17th century).

It is interesting to note that, the poets described the beauty of women which represented not the beauty of a girl but nearly an exercise of similes. Similes, in most cases, were drawn from the traditional poetic-diction, which showed no difference between the beauty of a man or a women. As for example,

Alaol, one of the greatest poets of the medieval Bengal, while describing the beauty of his patron, Magon Thakur (মাগন ঠাকুর), he had drawn a series of similes like forehead with second-night moon, brows with a bow, eyes with the blue lotus, ears with the vulture, nose with a beak of the bird called 'shuk', teeth with pearls, lips with the fruit called 'Bandhuli,' sweetness of the voice with that of cuckoo, neck with a conch-shell and waist with that of a lion.

Such description is similar to of any heroine or hero in the medieval Bengali poems. But it is observed that, while describing the virtues or activities of a women, she is represented as a human being with abilities and qualities. There are so many references in the old-Bengali literature, where, women or house-wives depicted as an idol of sincerity, duty and family-administration.

Bengali women are simple, sincere, hospitable and devoted by nature. Natural phenomenon, like cyclone, drought, flood, etc. have taught the womenfolk of our country to cope with all adverse circumstances of life. The preparedness of Bengali women to sacrifice, has been praised through the ages:

মিঠ রাখে সরস্যা কাটে ।
 সে গৃহিণীতে ঘর না টুটে ।।
 অভিষি দেখিয়া মরে লাজে ।
 তবু তার পূজায় সাজে ।।
 রোদ্রে কাঁটাকুটায় রাখে ।
 খড় কাঠ বর্ষাক বান্ধে ।।
 কাঁথ কলসী পানিক যায় ।
 হেঁট মুণ্ডে কাক্‌হো না চায় ।

যেন যায় তেন আইসে ।
বলে 'ডাক' গৃহিণী সেইসে ।।”

(Tr: “The house -wife, who cooks sweet dishes and cuts the vegetables very fine, never fails in life. She is eager to serve the guest to her utmost capacity. In sunny days, she uses thorns for cooking and saves the hays for bad days i.e. the rainy seasons. The good housewife goes with a pitcher on her waist to bring water, keeping her eyes to the ground, never looking at other”).

In this quotation, we find different qualities of a housewife skilled in cooking, precision in cutting vegetables, home-management, in entertaining the guest, economic and frugal in using fuels and modest in attitude towards the strangers while doing outdoor works.

To a Bengali women, the house-hold duties are like holy duties and she goes to perform her duties in the morning purifying herself by the morning bath. In a popular Ballad of Mymensing, "*Kazal Rekha*" (c.17th-18th century) we find¹⁵:

“ভোরেতে উঠিয়া কন্যা ভোরের স্নান করে ।
শুদ্ধ শান্তে যায় কন্যা রন্ধনশালার ঘরে ।।
উবু হইয়া বাক্য্য কেশ আইটা বসন পরে ।
গাঙ্গের না পানি দিয়া ঘর মাজন করে”

(Tr: “Leaving her bed early in the morning, she takes her bath and goes to the kitchen, pure in mind and body. After

doing-up her hair and dressing tightly, she cleans her home with river-water”).

In old Bengali texts, we find so many references to Bengali wife's fidelity. Poets have composed many aphorisms or wise-sayings about the relation between husband and wife or a man and a woman:

“পুরুষ অর্ধাঙ্গ নারী বিধি নিযুক্তিত.....
 রমণী শরীর জান পুরুষ জীবন।
 জীবন রহিত অঙ্গ কোন প্রয়োজন?”

(Tr: “It is the divine law that the women is other half of the man. Women is the body and the man is the soul: a body without soul is of no use”).

“গৃহস্থির গৃহ চলে গৃহিণীর গুণে”।

“The virtues of a house-wife contribute to the smooth running of the house-hold affairs of farmer”.¹⁶

Agriculture was always the principal occupation in Bengal. In old and medieval Bengali literature, we find not only the details of cultivation but also so many, wise sayings, embodying the agricultural wisdom of the people. Women also actively participated in agricultural production, specially in the act of husking rice.

Dhenki or husking pedals or a grinder of pulses and spices were absolutely essential in every house, as it had so many uses other than the agricultural purposes. *Dhenkies* were used for grinding charcoals, for making *Tikka* for smoking

Hukka or for making gun-powder or *Barud*, materials used in fire-works. Home-made papers were made from the pulp pounded by *Dhenkies* by the paper-makers' wives.

The renowned scholar Abdul Karim Shahitya Bisharad¹⁷ once expressed his experience of hearing the sound of pulp-making and the noise of village-girls working with the *Dhenkies* in his young age.

In old Bengali literature, we find that women were not only depicted as sincere, loving and faithful, but also as active members of the family, working from dawn to dusk for the welfare of her kith and kin. We can trace many references from the medieval Bengali literature of women engaged in different work or occupations.

Cooking was always regarded as an inherent skill or talent for an efficient housewife, whether she is single, divorced or widow, earns her daily food and clothing by herself, or depends on the male members earning. If she is married, or grown up, she feels that cooking is her holy duties. Poets also described elaborately, the culinary achievements of traditional Bengali women. Such poetic descriptions are available in *Chaiytanna Bhagabot* of Brindabandas, *Dharmamangal* of Ghanaram Chakravarti, *Chandimangol* of Mukundaram and *Annadamangol* of Bharat Chandra Roy-Gunakar. Poets even gave a long list of different items of curries and sweets and even some cooking recipes too.

The culture of culinary art of making a variety of sweet-pies, rice-cakes, generally called *pithas*, are favoured by almost

all Bengali women. A mother-in-law makes *pithas* with pleasures. *Pitha*-making, as a profession, can be traced in *Chandimangol* (16th century): .পিঠা বেচিয়া নাম বলাইল পিঠাহারী (Tr) She earns her daily-bread by selling sweet pies and delicious *Pithas*.¹⁹

Bengali fairy-tales, folk-ballads, nursery rhymes, all tell us of beautiful and artistic designs on such rice-cakes, popularly known as *Nakshi-pitha*. In "*Kajal-Rekha*" we find

নানা জাতি পিঠা করে গন্ধে আমোদিত ।
চন্দ্রপুলি করে কন্যা । চন্দ্রের আকৃতি ।।
ক্ষীরপুলি করে কন্যা । ক্ষিরেতে ভরিয়া
বসাল করিয়া তায় চিনি ভাঁজ দিয়া " ।।

(Tr). She prepares different kinds of cakes, all of nice flavour. She prepares a moon-shaped cake called Chandra-Puli. She also makes a cake, Khir-Puli by name, full of milk-cream and sweetened with sugar syrup (Dinesh Chandra Sen, *Purba Vanga Gitika* vol.11. Pp. 371-377).

Crisp-Rice or *Muri* has always been a favourite national-snack for the common people of Bangladesh. It needs particular skill in making *Muri*, which is passed on from generation to generation. It is prepared by the women exclusively. We find references of *Muriwali* in *Gupi Chandrar Sannyas* of Sukur Mahmud (18th century). *Chira* is also used by the patients of stomach- ailments and. *Khai* "-LB"- was favoured by all with curd made of buffalo's milk. *Nidaya* heroine of Mukundaram in her family- way says²⁰:

“নিধানী করিয়া ঝই/ ভথি মহিষের দই।

প্রাণ পাই পাইলে আমসি (আমসত)।

In literary references we find, women were also the sellers of dairy-products. The heroine of Baru Chandidasa's *Krishnakirtan* (c. 15th century) Radha was a member of a dairy producer's family. In this medieval Bengali texts, the heroine is frequently called as *Goali* or *Goalini*. The story of Radha vividly reflects the life and activities of common women of that time. A recent publication by BARD²¹ supplies us with modern involvement of women in milk- cow -rearing which is very much productive for improving a single woman's destitute-life.

In another medieval Bengali classic, *Chandimangal* of Mukundaram, we see the heroine of one episode, *Khullana* goes to the field for grazing her goats, alone without proper food and shelter for the whole -day:-

প্রভাতে ছাগল লয়া। চলিল খুলনা।

আঁচলে বাঁধিল রামা চালু অর্ধ কোনা।।”

Fullara, the heroine of the first episode of Mukundaram's *Chbandimangal* (16th century), who was the daughter of a hunter and was married to another young hunter named *Kal-Ketu*. Her husband was very poor. She had to carry on the whole business of selling the animal's flesh, specially deer's meat, her husband could procure²².

Though *Chandimangal* is a story of goddess *Chandi*, it reveals a picture of a society, where women were not confined within the four walls of her house. It can be inferred that, such

activities as tending domestic animals, were not under-valued by the society, which accepted help from women. Such classic roles of women, as exemplified in every myth and the ballads of old Bengal, shows that, their place in society was very significant and it can be held up as a model of ideal womanhood even in modern times. Poet Abdul Hakim (17th century) also criticises a pretty woman, without character or common sense as of no use. Idiots are like an animal who are maintained by menfolk or male guardian's earning solely, but destroys the prestige of her master--“জানহীন নারী কুকুরের সমসর/ নর অগ্নে প্রতিপাল্য, খর্ব করে নর” (লালমোতি সয়ফুলমলক) and “রূপে গুণে জাতি যেবা হয় সমতুল/ তবে সে বাখানি রূপ মর্যাদা বহল”। (লালমোতি কাব্য - আব্দুল হাকিম- ১৭- শতাব্দী).

It is observed that, every woman of the family had participation in all house-hold duties. Such a reference is available in the Mymensingh Ballad (17th -18th century)--Om Zv Kv†U avb fv†b kviox†i jBqvÔ Tr. She, with her mother-in law, husks the rice and spins the thread for weaving their clothing's. From 14th to 19th centuries, spinning was looked upon as women's job by the family tradition. Among the poems, which mention this job are Mymensingh Ballad, *Dharmamangal* and *Gopi Chander Gan*.

It is also interesting to note that women had a major share in the finest part of *Moslin* cloth weaving:

“ The delicacy of touch that it required, inspired the women of a weavers family to spin the finest yarn by employing their natural patience, gentleness and hereditary skills. These women who acquired this skill, by practice through generations were mostly the Eastern Bengali women”.²³

Brokers were engaged for supplying 'Moslin's to traders or dealers. In one list of brokers, quoted by Dr. A. Karim in his book *Dhakai Moslim*, we find a name of a broker as *Sonamoyee Dalal*.²⁴ I wonder, whither this name of the broker is a women's name or not ?

From the early Buddhist period women of *Dom patni section (Charya Pada)* were expert in making baskets. These baskets were usually made by women of all ages without any male's help. Women were also used to sell their baskets from door to door. In a poem, a women proudly claims that....."ঝুচনী চুপড়ী বেচি/ ফিরি বাড়ি বাড়ি জাতের ব্যাভার হেন. This is the occupation of her caste. She roams from dawn to dusk to sell her bamboo products. Another woman says:

ক) "ভাল মন্দ নাহি জানি ভাতারের ভাত/ ঝুড়ি চুপড়ি বুনিতে বুনিতে গেল হাত..... মনসা মঙ্গল I don't get any financial help from my husband or beloved one's. I earn my daily food from the sweat of my brow'.

খ) "আমার জাতির ধর্ম মাথায় পসার/ যাহার প্রসাদে সুখে আছে পরিবার / দেব পিতৃলোক পূজি/ জাতি গোত্র তুধি / রাজকর দেই মোরা নিজ ঘরে বসি/ খাই বিলাই আর করি যে সঞ্চয়/ যা কিছু দেখ এই পশারিতে হয়।"

Women of Bangladesh, specially in Chittagong, Noakhali, Comilla, Khulna, Barisal and Jessore-were skilled in making different kinds of floor covering and mats. The women of Faridpur, Mymensingh and Sylhet are also skilled from inherent interest in floor-mats. *Shital pati, etc.* These areas were abundant in different kinds of reeds from which mats were made of. Variety of mats are known as *mota* (মোতা) *Hogla*, (হোগলা) *Madur*, (মাদুর) *Chatai* (made of Bamboo) and *Pati* etc. In one

Ballad of Mymensingh, *Malua*, we find a reference of *Shitalpati* pati--“ শুইতে দিছে শীতল পাটি উত্তম বিছান/ বাতাস করিতে দিছে আবেগ পাঞ্জা খান”।^{২০}

Shitalpati is still popular as soothing fan in hot summer days. These mat-makers were also efficient in making hand-fans or *Hat Pakha* from palm-leaves and bamboos. Many exquisitely-woven designs and folk-motifs are reflected on these handicrafts.

Kantha or quilt-making is a known and traditional skill to the women of Bangladesh. Traditionally, house-wives made various kind of quilts from torn cloths to keep themselves and their baby's body warm during the cold -winter-nights. Small quilts are used as baby's napkins as well. Sometimes they did beautiful works in the *Kanthas*. The body and the border of *Kanthas* had artistic designs made with coloured threads, which are popularly known as *Nakshi- kantha* meaning embroidered quilts or bed spreads.

Every cultivator's wife or daughters of old and medieval Bengali involved in processing jutes. Women separate, clean and dry the jute-plants kept immersed in water. In fact, even now, most of the work relating to the processing of jute at home, is done by women. A folk-song describes:

“আয়-আয়, আয়রে সই,
পাট বাছিতে চল।

এই পাট বেচিয়া এবার কিনমু রূপার মল।।

পাটে আমার ভাত কাপড়---

পাটে ঢাকাই শাড়ি--

পাটের দৌলতে আমার
শান- বাক্স বাড়ি।।

(Tr.) "Oh come sister, come, come /Let's go and separate the jute from the stem./ I shall sell this jute and buy silver - ornament for my ankles. / This jute ¹ gives rice and clothes, /Jute gives us Dhakai Sari (Sari made in Dhaka)/ It is because of the wealth of jute, /That my house is beautiful and well-built." (Traditional folk-songs of Bangladesh)²⁶

W. W. Hunter described 76 women Gunny-bag- makers who were in Dhaka Division during 19th century.²⁷

Apart from 'Barai' in Sree Krishna Kirtan', we find other 'Dasees' or 'Bandeess' and 'Bua's in other texts, e.g. 'Heera' in Bharat Chandra's 'Annada- Mangal', 'Ratna' in Sati' Maina Lor Chandrani', Padma in 'Lalmoti Saiful Mulk', 'Hetubati' in 'Laili Majnu'. Their main role was to communicate the heroines love to the hero or vice versa. Sometimes they provided the source of consolation or sympathy to the heroines when they were deserted or disappointed in love.

In medieval Bengal, women did not only engage themselves in lighter jobs, they were also found carrying heavy loads of dirty clothes for washing purpose. In Vijoygupta's *Padma puran*²⁸ (15th century). We find the daughter of a washerman, washing clothes in the pond. (পুকুরেতে বস্ত্র ধোয়ায় ধোপার কুমারী) They employed indigenous methods for washing.

We find in the same book. (“ধোপানী কাপড় কাচে ক্ষারে আর খোলে”)
 ‘The washer -women washes her clothes with alkali and ashes of
 Kalabash of banana plant”

During 8th -18th centuries, a class of Bengali women used to ply boats. The act of rowing was very popular among the Dom-Caste. They earned their daily-bread by this job (ঘাটের খেয়ানী আমি নিত্য মেলে কড়ি--- (Tr.) I am a ferry-women, I ferry people and get cowri as fair.

The landless women of medieval Bengal, had a hard life, finding no other alternative to earn their living expenses. Some poor women used to collect pieces of wood and sell them in the nearest market. In *Sardamangal*²⁹. A poet Dayaram, (17th century), a mother adopting a child, says-“I shall rear this child by selling wood myself in the market” “বাজারে বেচিয়া কাঠ করিব পালন”।

Another poem in the Mymensing Ballad, depicts a picture of a happy wood-seller's family:- কঠুরিয়া কঠরাণী বইসাইয়াছে পাড়া/ ফিরি ফিরি কাঠ বিকাইয়া খায় তারা।।”

In the past, when printing machine was unknown to the people, hand -written manuscripts were the only media of writing. The meticulous work of copying was done by the copyist, both amateur and professionals. We know of another copyist among women in the colophon of an old Bengali manuscript *Laili Majnu*, we find the name of the copyist as Rahimunesa who was herself a poet. We know also of one manuscript called *Prembilash*, copied by the Queen of Bana Bishnupur. Jamila Gazi and Japela Gazi presumably two sisters

copied the manuscript named *Lalmoti Saiful-Mulk of Pargana Roshnabad*,³⁰ now preserved in the Bangla Academy library.

Compared to the agricultural, poultry maintaining and multifarious activities of women in medieval Bengal, we have quoted here only a short list of occupations of old and medieval Bengal. We have seen, women enjoyed their house-hold duties along with the other members of the family. One women was proud of her work inhabited by her caste or creed, women worked sometime inside the house and sometime in open fields, beside and unknown male-person, some times they went door to door³¹ for selling cosmetics, ornaments jewelleryes and pink pearls etc. who were known as (বণিকিনি) *Banikinee*. There were also some women, who used to play with the orphan child, told stories, rhymes and fairytales to the children in leisure time to the neighbour homes and were called আলাপিনী (play-lady). Of course, there were appreciation for the work done by housewives or self-employed women irrespective of caste & creed.

Efficient women were always busy wherever they were. In one proverb it is said-----*(খুন্ড বাড়ি গেলাম কাঁকালে ঘড়া/ বাপের বাড়ি এলাম ঢেঁকিতে বার)* : (Tr.) "I am busy in father -in- laws house with a pitcher in my waist and when I came to father's house ----I am busy with husking pedals". In a proverb used by the women-folk, we find an ovation to a women, who does her work satisfactorily ---*"পুতের মার আদর নাই / কাজের মার আদর চাই।"*

There is no appreciation to a mother for a son, but all the appreciation are for a teenager or for a matured girl who presents good output, performing her inherent quality of nursing the ailing family members, managing the cleaning, cooking and

house-hold duties or helping the on-going students of *Maktabas*, *Tols* or *Pathsalas* for their kith and keen.

On the other hand, there are so many age-old aphorisms among the women-folk censuring the useless and idle women. As for example ----ক) “বধু বড় কামে দড়/ লাউ কুটে খরতর ।” (Tr.) “The daughter in law is expert in her work when she is eager to cut the pumkin---- the easiest job in cutting the vegetables” আ) - অরাধুনীর হাতে পড়ি কই মাছ কান্দে-- (Tr.) “The *kai* fish also shed tears being the victim of unskilled cook or being dependant to an idle fish- cleaner.

In conclusion, we can say that in the ancient and medieval Bengali society, traditionally women had their work with job-satisfaction in it and they had the appreciation for the good work and censure for the badwork.

Notes

1. M. A. Rahim, *Social and Cultural History of Bengal*, vol No.1, Karachi-1963, p. 383.
2. Syed Ali Ahsan (ed.) *Charja Gitika*, 1984, Dhaka, p. 51.
3. Syed Ali Ahsan (ed.), *Charja Gitika*, 1984, Dhaka, p. 85.
4. Vipradas, *Manasamangal*, S. K. Sen (ed), Calcutta, 1956, p.66.
5. Jayananda, Chitanya Mangal, Ngendra Nath Basu (ed.) quoted in journal “Malancha”, 1321 B.S. No-11, p. 24 (পঞ্চাশ বঙ্গন অনু রাঙ্গিল কৌতুকে)
6. Chaitanya Bhagabat quoted by Prabhash Chandra Sen, Shahitya Parishat Patrika- Calcutta. vol-xxvii, no.111, p.109.[ধন নষ্ট করে কন্যা পুত্রের বিবাহে]
7. M. A. Rahim. *ibid.*, vol. I, p. 406.
8. T.C. Das Gupta, *Aspects of Bengali Society*, Calcutta, 1935, p. 222

9. Quoted by, T.C. D. Gupta, *Ibid*, -p.223
10. Sheikh Faizullah, Goraksha-Vijoy Qt. By A. Karim Shahitya Visarad. *Vangiya Musalman Shahitya Parishat Patrika* 1325, B. S. 'Magh', p. 246.
11. Mukundaram-Chandimangal, Sukumar Sen (ed.), 1975 Calcutta, pp.77-81.
12. Amitabha Mukerjee- 'Unish Sataker Samaj-o-Sangskriti, 1971 Calcutta, p. 21.
13. Prabhash Chandra Sen-prachin Vanga Shahitye Bangalir Dainandin *Jiban-Shahitya Parishat Patrika*, vol. no: 27, 111, B.S.,1327, p. 90.
14. Mymenshing Gitika, Dinesh Chandra Sen (ed.), Calcutta, vol. 1, 1958, p. 331.
15. Alaol-Padmavati (17th century) Syed Ali Ahsan (ed.), Dhaka,19,p. 396.
16. Rameshwar-Shivayan,(ed.), Jogilal Halder, Calcutta, 1957, p.215.
17. Abdul Karim Shahitya Bisharad, Presidential address, *Vangiya Mussalman Shahitya Patrika*,1325, B.S.
18. Amitabha Mukherjee, 'Unish Sataker Samaj-O-Sangskriti',1971,Calcutta, p. 21.
19. Kabikankan Mukundaram Chandimangal, Sukumar Sen (ed.), Calcutta,1975, ,p.77.
20. Kabikankan Mukundaram Chandimangal, Sukumar Sen (ed.), Calcutta, 1975.
21. Shawkat Ara Begum, "Women in Agriculture and Women in Milk, Cow - rearing, A Journal, 'BARD' Dhaka, 1986-87.
22. Kavi Kankan Chandi - Chandimangal, Sukumar Sen (ed.), p.138.
23. Ghulam Hossain Selim- Reazus, Salatin, (Tr.) Akbaruddin, Dhaka, 1975, p.15.
24. A. Karim, Dhakai Muslin, p.90, 1st Edition, Dhaka.
25. *Mymenshingh Gitika*, vol.1, Calcutta, 1958, p. 161.
26. Sirajuddin Kashimpuri - ' *Bangladesher Lok Sangeet Parichiti* ', Dhakam, 1973, p. 180.

27. W. Hunter - Statistical Report of Bengal, vol. 5, 1975.
28. Vijoy Gupta- Padma Puran or Manasha Mangal- Collected by Vasanta Kumar Bhattachariya, Calcutta-B.S,1335, p.69.
29. T.C. Gupta, Dayaram's Saradamangal- Journal of the Departments of Letters, Calcutta University, 1933, p.24
30. Pargana Roshanabad, a Persian word - meaning (the land of light), the estate of the Raja of Hilly- Tripura, was composed of three four compact blocks, e.g.Comilla, Sylhet, Noakhali and Mirersarai. The Moghul Governors named this area for administrative purpose and because of the educated and nlightened people were the inhabitants of the big area''. J.G.Cumming -Survey and Settlement report of Chakla Roshnabad- 1899-Calcutta, p. 2 (appendix).
31. Roy Bahadur Dinesh Chandra Sen- Prachin Bangla Shahitye Mussalmaner Abadan-Mukhdumi and Ahsanullah library, Dhaka,1936,Chapter-1.