

CONTRIBUTION OF VERNACULAR JOURNALISM IN MEDICALISATION OF CHILDBIRTH–IN THE CONTEXT OF COLONIAL BENGAL

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ABSTRACT

India, in the Colonial period, experienced the emergence of print culture. From infusing the ideals of Nationalism to opposing the evils of existing social norms, the print culture acted as a catalyst in every sphere of social reformation. Similarly, it also played a vital role in the field of Medicalization of Childbirth. In the nineteenth century, women of the Indian society used to live inside Zenanas. The impenetrability of these Zenanas, secluded women from the outer world & hence they had no knowledge about the world beyond their Zenanas. However, with the arrival of vernacular journalism, even the women living inside Zenanas started gaining knowledge of the world outside. From the second half of the nineteenth century, many women magazines & medical journals were published in Bengali, with the aim of educating Bengali women on their health issues & personal hygiene. These publications began to criticize the existing birthing practices & asked for reformation in the field of maternity health care services, thus preparing the mindset of women for accepting the medicalization of Childbirth. This research paper will focus on the contribution made by vernacular journalism in medicalization of Childbirth in the context of Colonial Bengal.

KEYWORDS: *Vernacular Journalism, Midwifery, Dhais, Childbirth, Sutikagriha, Bamabodhini Patrika, Medicalization Of Childbirth*

INTRODUCTION

BEGINNING OF VERNACULAR JOURNALISM

The art of printing was a gift to India, by the Portuguese missionaries. In the beginning of the nineteenth century, printing presses were set up in different parts of India. Pradip Kumar Bose, in his work entitled "Health and society in Bengal: A selection from late 19th-Century Bengali Periodicals" have shown the important role played by health journals in spreading the ideals of modern medical practices.[i] With the use of vernacular language Bengali in these journals and magazines, it became possible to spread the new health-related information among every section of the society. The authorship of earlier articles on medicalization of childbirth is mostly obscured. Generally, these articles were the translated version of popular European books on Midwifery or quotes from lectures given by British obstetricians. For example, Dr. James Simpson's lectures on Midwifery were translated & published in an essay on Dhatribidya(Midwifery).

Many English medical journals like the Calcutta Medical News, Calcutta Medical Journal, Lancet, Indian Medical

Gazette, The Indian Medical and Pharmaceutical Review, Indian Medical Record, Indian Medical Record, Indian Medical Research Memoirs, were circulated throughout Bengal. However, English is the medium of these journals made it difficult for the lower class people to read and understand them.

VERNACULAR JOURNALISM ON HEALTH ISSUES

The colonial rule gave rise to the class of Bhadralkos, who were the English educated middle-class Bengalis. This class formed the basis of reformation in the Bengali Society. They were inspired from the ideals of modern western society & hence they aimed to diffuse those ideals into the society of Bengal. However, people from the lower strata of the society, who had no knowledge of English language, could not gain any knowledge regarding ideals of modern western society. Therefore, a section of the Bhadralkos class turned out to be the editors of the vernacular magazines and journals, so that all the classes of the society could read them and gain new insight from them. Health and hygiene soon became an important topic in Vernacular Journalism. Jadunath Mukhopadhyay, the editor of one of the earliest journal Chikitsa Darpan, started the journal as he felt the need to start a vernacular journal regarding Western medical science to compensate for the unavailability of updated medical knowledge.

Reports on infant mortality were published from the 1870s. For instance, the Amrita Bazar Patrika in 1876, published a report quoting an IMS (Indian Medical Service) official revealed: - "Of every thousand Hindu children born in 1875, there died 596 within a year, and of the Mahomedans, no less than 735." [ii]

The Reports on high mortality rate alarmed the Bhadralkos class & they felt the need for reforming the prevalent birthing practices. The District Health Officer of Faridpur, Dr. Abhay Kumar Sarkar mentioned in an article published under the journal Swasthya that, if infant mortality could not be curtailed then Bengali race would soon become extinct.[iii]

Dagmar Engels, in his work entitled 'The politics of childbirth' have shown that from the 1920's, motherhood and fertility were no longer considered casually as moral issues but were increasingly viewed as social; problems linked with women's health and living conditions.[iv] In Banglar Samayik Patrika Panji, Gita Chattopadhyay mentions that around twenty-two journals were published from the late nineteenth century in order to arouse the scientific consciousness of the Bengalis. According to her, the main motive of these publications was to gain the confidence of the ordinary people on the application of modern western methods of treatment and to eradicate different prejudices and fear-associated with western medicine and treatment.[v] In the opinion of Ambalika Guha, "the western educated middle class' preoccupation with health became increasingly evident in the 1860s and 1870s, more so in Bengal than in other parts of India. The concern for health was visibly a reaction to the colonial indictment of the Bengalis as effeminate. . . Of all the reasons cited for the supposed frailty of the Bengalis, child marriage and premature consummation leading to early pregnancies and debilitating diseases amongst mothers and children formed intense subjects of discussion in the reflective debates of the time." [vi]

Some important Vernacular Medical Journals of Colonial Bengal were Arogya, Adhunik Chikitsa, Astro Chikitsa Samvadall, Bhisak Darpan (1900), Chikitsak Bandhab, Chikitsa Darshan, (1888), Chikitsa Darpan, (1871), Chikitsa Prakash (1909), Chikitsa Jagat, Chikitsa Sangraha, Chikitsa Sammilani (1880), Suchikitsa, Svasthya (1900), Svasthya Samacara

(1912), Shorir. Other than these medical journals, different women's journals also contained articles and essays on health care of women, they were

Anthapur (1900), Bamabodhini Patrika (1867), Bangalakshmi (1926), Bangamahila (1875), Bharati (1890), Mahila (1897), Paricarika (1882), Sachitar Sisir (1920).

CONTRIBUTION OF BAMABODHINI PATRIKA

In 1863, the "Bamabodhini Patrika" was started by the leaders of Brahma Samaj with the aim of educating the middle-class Bengali women, this magazine played an important role in the process of medicalization of childbirth.[vii] Facility of Anthapur Siksa (Home Tutoring) for the women was started by this magazine so that women could receive an education without challenging the existing social norms and practices. Health and hygiene formed an integral part of the syllabus made for Anthapur Siksa. Health-related issues were published under the section called Svasthya Raksha (Protection of health) Bamabodhini Patrika also published a series of educative essays on domesticity, childbearing & childrearing entitled 'Ramanir Kartabya' (Duties of a Woman), 'Dhatribidya' (Art of Midwifery) & 'Sisu Palan' (Infant Rearing).

While the essays under Ramanir Kartabya, advised women to keep their home and surroundings clean, those published under

Dhatribidya and Sisu Palan aimed to provide a rational understanding of Maternity and Child health care. Elementary knowledge on the functioning of the human body was provided to women through women's journals, from the beginning of the 1870s. For instance, articles entitled Sharirik Kriya (Bodily Functions) were regularly-featured, under Bamabodhini Patrika. In the opinion of Meredith Borthwick, a considerable number of urban middle-class members who read about Western medicines in the magazines and journals published by the Brahmos, slowly internalized new ideas about reproductive health care, hygiene, and midwifery.[viii]

One of the earliest essays among the Dhatribidya series stated the need for starting the series in the following words

"The Prevalent superstition and ignorance among the pregnant women have resulted in a number of mishaps. Therefore, they should be made aware of their duties during pregnancy. To attain a sound knowledge of midwifery it is essential to learn about the functions of the abdomen, pelvis, and the change in the position of the foetus in the uterus. However, it is illogical to write down such details in Bamabodhini. Those aspects of midwifery which the women readers will not feel embarrassed to read will be discussed here".[ix] Thus, a boundary was set for the content of the magazines, so that ordinary Bengali women could freely read them, without any sort of further obstacle. However, gradually the scenario began to change. According to Ambalika Guha, "In the later essays of the Dhatribidya series, the spotlight shifted from the socio-cultural settings of birth to the physiological details of labor. Women were taught to recognize three types of labor: normal labor, delayed labor, and abnormal labor. Each of the types was defined briefly and the possibilities of danger to both the mother and the child in cases of abnormal labor were spelt out. The duties of the Dhais in each of the three stages were also vividly outlined." [x] Thus, Bamabodhini Patrika gradually transcended the limits it had set for itself in educating women on the scientific aspects of midwifery.

RESPONSE OF BENGALI WOMEN

Limited nature of Bengali women's response towards social reforms has been highlighted by Ghulam Murshid, in his work "Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernisation, 1849-1905" [xi]. From the second half of the nineteenth century, writings from women authors like Kailashbashini Devi, were published in women journals. These writings give us a hint of the responses women had regarding contemporary reforms. Kailashbashini Devi in her work "Hindu Mahilaganer Hinabastha" (the Woeful plight of Hindu women), portrayed the evils of child marriage by showing its relation with early maternity and its impact on health. She wrote, "Unless child marriage is prevented, our land will never have happiness and prosperity, marital harmony will never be established and girl children will never escape the harrowing torment of widowhood; child marriage has emerged as one of the main reasons for the backwardness of Bengalis. . . there are instances of twelve or thirteen-year-old girls getting in the family way, thereby putting themselves in grave danger. Some leave the world along with the new-born. . . Some escape this fate themselves but lose their beloved infants. . . Maybe the new mother contracts post-natal maladies which cause extreme sufferings; or else the infant is very sick or emaciated, adding to the parent's woes.[xii]

Another women writer named Bamasundari, through her essay in Anthapur expressed her views on pregnancy in the following words: "In this country, a number of pregnant women do not take care of their bodies; rather than do those things which would keep them fit they do those that are positively harmful. They eat whatever they feel like without going into the advantages or disadvantages of what they are eating; they also live and stay in whatever manner they please. They do not know how all these excesses adversely affect the unborn child. If they knew they would not perhaps behave in such a manner." [xiii]

TRADITIONAL MIDWIVES (DHAIS)

In the pre-colonial era, traditional midwives or dhais used to assist pregnant women during their delivery. This institution of traditional midwives was hereditary in nature, where it passed on from mother to daughter of the same family. However, in the colonial period, the dhais were being labeled as ignorant & their practices were called unscientific in nature. Soon, the traditional midwives or the dhais were viewed as dirty witches, being responsible for most of the deaths occurred during childbirth. This shift from traditional dhais to modern scientific midwifery formed the basic feature of medicalization of childbirth in India, in which indigenous journals & magazines played the role of an active catalyst by constantly criticizing the practises of the dhais.[xiv] From the 1880s, pamphlets written by Bengali medical men in lucid Bengali language on the scientific theories of childbirth were circulated throughout Bengal, with the aim of educating the so-called uneducated, Dhais. For example, in 1867 Dhatrisiksa (Education for the Dhais) written by Jadunath Mukherjee, was published with the objective of educating the dhais in modern scientific midwifery.[xv] In this Journal, the technique of discussion in the form of dialogue was adopted as the writer felt it was the best method for 'conveying knowledge to simple and unsophisticated minds.'

SUTIKAGRIHA

Before the advent of modern medical practices, the birth of a child used to take place in an ill-ventilated & small room known as Sutikagriha (place of birth), situated in a corner of the house.[xvi] Essays from 'Dhatribidya' started criticizing the practice of choosing the most unhygienic room as the place of birth & suggested that spacious & well-ventilated rooms must be chosen for this purpose. The journal Chikitsa Darshan showed an imaginary conversation between a doctor named Kirti Babu and a Bengali village man called Umesh Majumder, where the doctor explained the need for a well spacious Sutikagriha.[xvii] An unhygienic condition of the Sutikagriha was held as the one of the causes of maternal and infant mortality. The journal Svasthya condemned the unhygienic and poor quality bedding provided during childbirth. In the Journal Bangalashmi, Dr. Ramesh Chandra Ray wrote an article highlighting the essential norms to be followed during pregnancy. He urged the women to do regular exercise for maintaining the fitness of their body.[xviii]

CONCLUSIONS

In comparison to the English medical journals, the vernacular ones were able to reach out to a larger number of readers as a result of their lucid languages. As the editors of these magazines mainly came from the sophisticated class of Bhadrakols, hence in most of the cases they failed to properly understand the hardship and problems faced by the lower strata of the society. They did not realize that, for villagers living far away from the domain of hospitals and dispensaries, dhais were the only relief. Further, the dhais were not as dirty as a result of their choices, it was a result of their poverty, which made them the way they were. In the initial phase of vernacular journalism, most of the medical vernacular journals echoed the voices of English medical journals from which they were translated or inspired. English journals being mainly written by Europeans, carried a tinge of apathy for the indigenous practices of India, which thus passed on to the vernacular journals. However, with the rise of indigenous medical practitioners, original articles were produced in the vernacular journals rather than the translated ones, thus expanding the horizon of vernacular journalism in Bengal and their contribution in the medicalization of childbirth.

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