

## **Stepping Into the Outer World: Women in Politics in Colonial Bengal**

**1889-1920**

**Rachana Chakraborty**

**Department of History, University of Calcutta, India**

*onlyrachana@gmail.com*

During the first half of the nineteenth century, Bengal's encounter with Western modernity, shaped Bengali culture in unique ways. It was the first to witness a cultural revival along the lines of liberal enlightenment and to address the women's question as well. The new role envisaged for the women of Bengal, however, did not seek to create independent women who would be self-reliant or share equal status with men. However, an interest towards the public domain soon surfaced among a section of women.

The objective of this paper is to trace the first stirrings of political participation of some of the exceptional women of Bengal who dared to step into the predominantly 'men's world' and thereby initiate a struggle against colonialism. The journey which began with *Kadambini Ganguly* was followed up by *Saraladevi Chaudhurani*, daughter of *Swarnakumari Devi*, *Hemantakumari Chaudhury*, *Lilabati Mitra*, *Kumudini Maitra*, *Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay*, *Sarojini Naidu*, and *Begum Ammam Bibi*. Women's participation in the freedom struggle gained a new dimension with the advent of Mahatma Gandhi.

Although in late nineteenth century Bengal, such women were few, yet there were indeed some exceptions who dared to cross over to the 'outer domain'. The first stirrings of political consciousness among Bengali women were articulated through the freedom movement. Once this process began, issues of gender inequality came to be voiced. If not for all, for at least the more sensitive women, participation in the freedom movement initiated a protracted struggle against two different marks of servility: colonialism and patriarchy. The politically conscious women of the first half of the twentieth century started discussing the issues of gender subordination in more sophisticated terms.

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