



THE ROLE OF WOMEN AS FORAGERS IN COLONIAL RURAL BENGAL WITH REFERENCE TO TWO NOVELS OF BIBHUTIBHUSHAN BANDYOPADHYAY

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ABSTRACT

“Foraging”, by definition, means the search for wild resources for food. The human history of foraging dates back to the beginning of human civilisation-until 12,000 years ago, when the Neolithic Revolution came and systematic agriculture became general practice. But much after that, foraging has persisted with the human societies. For the early Nomadic tribe, hunting and gathering was the only way to acquire food. Later, even in the agrarian societies, foraging continued as a complementary method of subsistence. The most important point to be noted is that, the main task of foraging for food fell upon the females of the clan while men were assigned the heavier tasks of cultivation, hunting or cattle grazing. There exists a line of continuity from the early Nomadic women to the women in the pre-independence rural Bengal who depended upon foraging for food at various levels, as the supply of extra nutrition for the family members, as a measure for fighting poverty, as a means of livelihood, and during famines or other sorts of natural calamity, as the sole source of sustenance. With special reference to two Bengali novels *Pather Panchali* and *Ashani Sanket* by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay, this paper attempts to show the socio-economic history of female foragers in some imaginary villages in the southern part of formerly undivided Bengal.

Keywords:

Foraging, Hunter-gatherer, Colonial Bengal, Capitalism, Ecofeminism

Introduction

“Foraging”, by definition, means the search for wild resources for food. The human history of foraging dates back to the beginning of human civilisation-until 12,000 years ago, when the Neolithic Revolution came and systematic agriculture came into general practice. But much after that, foraging had persisted with the human societies. For the early Nomadic tribe, hunting and gathering was the only way to acquire food. Later, even in the agrarian societies, foraging continued as a complementary method of subsistence. The most important point to be noted is that, the main task of foraging for food fell upon the females of the clan while men were assigned the heavier tasks of cultivation, hunting or cattle grazing. As an eminent Ecofeminism theoretician has observed, women were traditionally given the role of provider of food for the family because as females, they were imagined to be closer to nature and thus, were imagined to be in better control of natural resources (Shiva, 1988). There exists a line of continuity from the early Nomadic women to the women in the pre-independence rural Bengal who depended upon foraging for food at various levels, as the supply of extra nutrition for the family members, as a measure for fighting poverty, as a means of livelihood, and during famines or other sorts of natural calamity, as the sole source of sustenance. With special reference to two Bengali novels *Pather Panchali* and *Ashani Sanket* by Bibhutibhusan Bandyopadhyay, this paper attempts to show the socio-economic history of female foragers in some imaginary villages in the southern part of formerly undivided Bengal.

Foraging as a lifestyle and its evolution

Foraging, or the act of collection of sustenance from natural resources had been a common practice for the human society from the prehistoric times. Initially, all the communities depended upon hunting and foraging for their sustenance. Depending upon the changes in environmental conditions varying on different seasons, the food security was low. Gradually, with the increase in the number of members in the groups, the prehistoric people had to face food scarcity at a growing rate. The systematised agriculture, however, came much later. The Neolithic men had the first recorded evidence of crop growing practice that came nearest to agriculture in technical terms. They had also been credited with the domestication of animals, thereby introducing food security. But gathering minor food items to substantiate a meal was a regular practice that has continued to the modern period, and in some places of the world, in some secluded communities, it is still a major source of nutrition. Foraging, it has to be noted, is differentiated from agriculture in the sense that while the agricultural processes have a system well established for centuries, and have an expected output, foraging as a system of procuring food has been comparatively unorganised and the output is also highly unpredictable, depending upon various natural conditions. With the evolution of systematised agriculture, foraging took a secondary role, although in the seasons of snow or a drought, people went back to their habit of collecting food items from natural sources. Thus, the practice continued till the modern and postmodern period in different evolved forms like recreational sports or some religious or social practices all over the world. It was a recognition to the bounty of nature and humanity’s debt to it. But slowly, some places lost their resources to a factor which has been termed as “The Tragedy of the Commons” by American ecologist Garret Hardin (Hardin, 1968). By this, Hardin expressed his observation that the old Nomadic

ways of hunting and gathering food slowly went away because humans exceeded the carrying capacity of most of the natural places, by over-fishing, over-grazing, over-foraging for food. With the advent of the Industrial Evolution in Europe, the vast chunks of land got claimed by the new factories. Most of the lands which were left uncultivated, got claimed by the industries in this phase. Finally with the new Capitalistic approach to the natural resources and land, almost no place was left unclaimed or left to nature, to be replenished automatically. There was hardly any place left for common property for the foragers to survive solely based on natural, uncultivated resources.

Nature in a capitalist society

A capitalistic approach to natural resources of the world was primarily based on the Judeo-Christianism, said Lynn White Jr. (White,1967). He said that man was ordered to go and dominate Earth, according to Genesis; and it established a master-slave relationship between humans and nature. That created a one-dimensional relationship between the civilised men and nature, where nature was an inexhaustible source of sustenance, and the humans did not have any responsibility to take care or replenish it. This approach went well with the introduction of modern science and the industrial revolution that came thereafter. The mines were hewing up coal and iron, rivers were bound and their forces altered, the mountains were holed and broken down. In such a situation, the economically marginalised people were either dislocated from their natural habitat, or found themselves turned into industry workers. Their natural pattern of food gathering was disturbed and almost diminished. There were hardly left any unclaimed land or waterbody or marshy lands where some natural items of food could be gathered. Due to the excessive use of chemical fertilizers and pesticides in systematised agriculture, fishery, and animal husbandry sectors, many small animals and plant species got extinct from the world, leading to a great harm and imbalance in the ecosystem. The selective cultivation of some species and abolition of other, relatively less yielding crops, variety of species was gradually diminishing, leading to a capitalised, market-based economy where nothing was left to natural processes.

The economic history of rural Bengal before Independence

In this grim scenario, India under the colonizers was no exception. When we take up the situation at a close introspect, we find that a large section of the people of rural Bengal exclusively depended upon a small income depending upon foraging for food items collected from uncultivated natural resources, and at times selling them to the people in the upper tiers of the society. In *Chandi Mangal Kavya* by Mukundaram, that belongs to the sixteenth century, we find the marginalised women depending mostly on foraged food including meat of hunted animals, small fish and wild fruits and roots for sustenance. With the infiltration of the colonizers, the rural economy faced a downslide. The poverty, accentuated by the merciless Indigo planters as well as zaminders led village people leave their ancestral houses and migrate to the cities for a living. This social history is portrayed vividly in many novels of Bibhishan Bandyopadhyay, who knew Bengal villages under colonial rule and the life of its people pretty well. In his novels we find the struggles of the poor and socially marginalised people to put together a meal for the family. In the process we also

find that while men were away to the cities for a living, the onus of the sustenance fell entirely upon the women of the family. In various small ways they fought and tried to use the natural resources for food. Thus, we found that small fishes, molluscs, crab, wild fruits and leafy vegetables, roots and mushrooms, crops stolen from the ratholes etc helped these hapless families to survive.

Traditional role of women as a provider of sustenance

As many food studies theorists have observed, women have traditionally been entrusted with the task of providing a regular meal for the entire family from the prehistoric times (Avakian,2014). While men went for hunting in a typical hunter-gatherer community, there was not a certainty of success. It was either a feast or a fast. Women traditionally intervened into this pattern by using their long-time experience and instinct to find out sources of food from nature. This ensured that some food was provided to each member of the community in the difficult days. Women also knew how to hunt small animals and provide a nutritious meal, in a small scale, while not being away from the family for too long. Again, as Svizzero has observed, agriculture and foraging were not necessarily exclusive of each other, and in many communities both existed as complimentary to each other (Svizzero, 2016). This also indicates how procurement of food had required active participation of both genders in various ways. In addition to providing meals for their family, these women learnt to preserve extra food items and sometimes were commercially involved in exchanging them for other items from other members of the community. In rural Bengal, the foraging practices were sustained and encouraged by women in their everyday practices as well as in emergencies, as found in the novels by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay discussed below.

The female foragers operating at different economic levels: *Pather Panchali* (1929)

In *Pather Panchali*, a novel by Bibhutibhushan Bandyopadhyay that portrays the journey of its young protagonist from a scenic village of colonial Bengal to the cities in the face of extreme poverty under the colonial rule, we can see many female characters who live in the villages and try their utmost to survive in the face of food scarcity. Durga, the elder sister of Apu the protagonist, is a teenage girl who spends most of her time in the hedges and bushes of the village in search of wild food items. Her father remains out of the village for most of the year and often fails to send money home, and the children remain hungry most of the times. The mother of the kids, Sarbajaya, depends upon her own skills of cooking a meagre meal mostly based upon the foraged items collected by herself and Durga. But being a part of the Brahmin clan, she must not be seen doing these practices, because the upper caste people were traditionally not supposed to forage out of need. Here we also find Dasi-thakrun, a poor woman who gathers wild fruits and sells them to other villagers, thus earning some money to help her family, running a business without any capital. Women traditionally have more knowledge about the nooks and corners of village spaces where a few items can be collected from. Thus, Durga manages to find more fruits and berries than Apu, her brother. And while their father, Harihar, also has a hobby of fishing like most other men in the village, his foraging practice remains a sole recreation for himself, while the foraging of the women of the village plays an important role in the daily life of their family. Again, it is found that it is a common practice among the villagers to forage

even when there is not much of shortage of food. This practice indicates how the rural Bengal took it as normal to depend upon natural resources to complement their food, a practice that links them with the prehistoric hunter-gatherer communities.

Foraging as life saver in the times of famine: *Ashani Sanket* (1943)

In the novel *Ashani Sanket* (1943) of Bandyopadhyay, we find the foraging practices have more intense role to play. Written in the contest of the great Bengal Famine of 1943 in the wake of World war II, we find the picture of villages getting ravished by drought and scarcity of food. Very soon the available foodgrains are picked up by the Government to feed the army, and villagers have nothing left to eat. The stocks are looted, nobody want to help others, foodgrains can not be bought even when one has money. In this situation, the villagers depend upon their old practised skills of finding food in the wild, because another season of crops is far away. As the situation worsens, these foods become scarce too, and people now attempt to eat food that was not considered worthy of eating by the humans. The protagonist Gangacharan, a Brahmin, is initially doubtful about these food items that were not familiar to the middle class villagers till then: small molluscs, roots of lotus, even wild arums, that were a food for the poorest of the poor till now. As the famine hit both the poor and well-to-do alike, humans compete with animals for food in the wild. It is another level of dehumanisation where bare survival skills matter more than the class or caste. And here also, the females of the village bear the entire burden of feeding their families and occasional visitors with wild food while the men sit helpless.

Conclusion

Anthropologist Carole Counihan has commented that, “The predominant role of women in feeding is a cultural universal, a major component of female identity, and an important source of female connection to and influence over others” (Counihan, 1999). We face it at every walk of life. This idea permeates our social activities. Women, for their part, also follow the given norms as are expected in most cases without much intervention. Even in the present century where internet-based media dominate our culture, we find numerous cooking channels that claim to represent “authentic” food culture by showing women actors walking through the village roads, collecting vegetables and fruits growing wild, or catching crabs and fish from small waterbodies. Then these women are shown to be cooking these materials following some village recipes that remind an urban viewer of a feeling similar to nostalgia. It is a dish of delicacy and not a survival food. These scripted shows seem to present a “reality” that was never there in the life of the viewer. It is a fictionalised representation of a time that provides the urban, migrated people a sense of comfort in the thought that somewhere in a remote village in Bengal, our “traditional” food culture remains preserved. Apparently, urban people nurture the idea that authenticity is interconnected with nature, and hence, it can still be found in villages. Much of this fiction ignores the fact that the practice of foraging and hunting is almost obsolete in the present-day Bengal villages. The villagers also face the impact of capitalist culture and consume food that is commercially sourced. Debol Dev, who is working in a protected forest and trying to preserve the species of wild food that Bengal has long forgotten, argues that together with the wide commercialisation of cultivated food items, rural people have also forgotten the uses and nutritional value

of many plants, fruits, roots, mushrooms and small animals that have sustained the rural Bengal in the earlier centuries (Dev, 2021). Thus, although the foraging practices of the colonial Bengal is not anymore serving the purposes it originally served, the memory and its fictional representations still sustain a nostalgic nation.

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