

IMAGINING THE IDEAL 'WOMAN': WOMEN'S LIVES IN A HINDU RURAL COMMUNITY OF BANGLADESH

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Abstract:

This article aims to focus on how Bengali womanhood is understood through women's lifecycle in a Hindu community of rural Bangladesh. It argues that the life cycles map not only the women's personal experiences but also the social edifice on which their lives are rested. 'Woman' as a 'category' has long been contested as a matter of social construction signifying that almost in all societies it is determined by the society what makes a woman, 'woman'. Hence, to understand what constitutes the ideal 'woman' in a society; it looms large that the crucial insights of the society are apprehended in portraying the complete image of a 'woman'. Particularly it is important for a strong patriarchal society which nestles in a Hindu backdrop, because in such a society it is not only (or hardly) the women who construct themselves, but also the society at large which impose continuous values and prescriptions offering the basic building blocks for the edifice of Hindu womanhood.

Main text:

Marriage being the most important event in a woman's life in rural Bangladesh, to conjure up the image of a traditional Hindu woman, there appears a vivid portrait in mind of a lady draped in colourful, red sari with a dot of vermillion as a cosmetic mark on the forehead and the red vermillion powder in the parting of her hair indicating her sign of marriage and 'fortune'. This symbolic 'red' is a mark of happiness and auspiciousness in the life of a Hindu woman clearly delineating her status as a 'wife' — the most significant stage of her life. Life cycle stages hence set the matrix for apprehending the meanings underlying the Hindu women's lives constructing their visions as well as their world full of experiences.

In a society with a strong patriarchal backdrop like that of Bangladesh, a woman's life is canvassed with its complete image if her lifecycle is analysed. The life cycles map not only the women's personal experiences but also the social edifice on which their lives are rested. Even, how the woman are culturally constructed and contextually situated is also revealed through the analysis of the life cycle situations evolving around the lives of the women.

Basically speaking, a woman's life cycle comprises of five distinctive but mutually incorporating stages: childhood and adolescence, marriage, later years and old age. Every woman (invariably the Hindus and Muslims) experiences these stages of life showing marked variations and differences. The experiences are however crucially shaped by the social, economic and religious overtones the women confront in their daily world.

A Hindu woman's life cycle basically starts with her childhood which is considered as her period of incorporation into a new world of playing and learning. At this stage of life, a girl is free to play with the children of nearly neighbourhood making no clear gender differences. She is equally paid importance by her parents as hence she is imaged as a 'child' than a daughter. Mostly adored by her grandparents and uncles and aunts, other than her own parents, she is regarded as someone to be loved and looked forward to getting the attention of her close relatives. In her early childhood, a girl of a Hindu family is quite fascinated with the experiences she undergoes every day. She watches her mother working at home, her father going out in the morning returning in the afternoon, the maid cleaning the house and courtyard and her grandmother performing her daily pujas. All these seem to be new and something to be comparing with her own small experiences. Several questions hence arise in her mind about the daily social atmosphere she exhibits in her regular cultural life.

It is in the later periods of her childhood (approximately around her age of six or seven) that her socialization process gets started. First, being a Hindu, she achieves her religious training as she accompanies her grandmother (*thakurma* or *dida*) to the nearby temples (*mandirs*), religious meeting (*dharmashava*), and litany (*kirtan*) for ritual observances. Although a 'guru' is selected for her to initiate her in the domain of religious knowledge extracted from Hindu texts like the Gita, Ramayana, Upanishads etc. the primary teaching she gets is from the religiously legendary stories told by her old relatives like — her *thakur-da*, *thakur-ma* and others. A significant part of her religious learning however also becomes available to her from the daily observance of the pujas performed within the domain of her house i.e. in the *thakur-ghar* by her mother (*ma*), *kakimas* and *thakur-ma*. Second, alongside her educational training in school, she is initiated in the domain of housework where she is expected to help her mother with trifle jobs like — fetching water from the tube-well or nearby pond, feeding and accompanying her younger brothers and sisters and sometimes cleaning the courtyard or giving a hand in the daily chores. This, for the first stance puts her in the domestic scene presenting her as someone to be grown up quite differently embracing within her the art of housework. Later, as she steps into her period of adolescence, a girl in a Hindu rural setting is affirmed socially about finding her goal of life in marriage. Watching the womenfolk around her, she hence learns to capture in her mind an image of herself as a completely grown up woman consciously cultivating in her the essence of beauty and womanly virtues. In this stage, she tries to concentrate herself basically in household works and partly in education. Frequency of movements is constricted because by this period she learns that she is someone to be protected from the evil eyes of the lust of bad men. Gradually, she is well-aware of this fact when she experiences her menstruation cycle finding her new dimension of life accentuating on her power of chastity, sexuality and reproduction.

As a grown up person, a Hindu girl's personhood therefore resonates on looking forward to preparing herself for a 'good match' in marriage. Hearing from the peer groups, watching TV programs and reading religious scriptures and novels, she erects in her mind the idol of a perfect, imagined life-mate. Getting a new excitement in her mind, she not unlikely hence becomes cautious about her external outlooks as she decorates herself with cosmetics and colorful dresses. Internally also she begins to cultivate various dreams in her mind about her expected mate. She observes the 'shib-er-puja' (the ritual, young girls observe in expecting a good husband) and exhibits herself as 'shying' in open discussions regarding her marriage in her relative and neighborhood circle. Although Hindu girls are socialized to marry an unknown man chosen by their families, in some instances, they are prone to love affairs which they seriously try to hide from the elders. It is only with their friends and boudis that they share their inner feelings and the thoughts of romanticism and eroticism.

At the age of seventeen or eighteen, a village Hindu girl is considered to be passing her most suitable period of marriage. Groom is searched for her respective of caste status and designation and she is apparently put at the center of the circle of interest of her family members, relatives and neighbors. During this period of her life, a Hindu girl experiences a mixed feeling of happiness, hope and wonder thinking about the upcoming significant event of her life. Moreover, she remains intensely palpitated as the women folk around her continuously talk about the marriage situations and especially about the experiences she will go through the day and the night of the marriage. This is the time which marks for her a stage of separation from the rest of her known world.

As soon as a suitable groom candidate is found, the girl is observed to be much caring about her external outlooks. As a village Hindu girl, it is ingrained in her that her beauty is more crucial than other attributes in presenting herself as a good bride. Hence, the very day she hears that her marriage is going to be fixed soon, she starts various types of herbal treatments like — putting henna on hair, using turmeric paste as face scrub, musking the face with 'chandan' i.e. (sandal wood) etc. she knows that she has to do these as she will have to undergo a critical stage of 'meye-dekha' (i.e. the social way of bride selection by the groom's family) leading it to a successful marriage. If in any case, a girl is rejected as a bride twice or thrice by the groom's side she has to suffer several ridicules and harsh words by the people around her including those of her own family. But, if the bride is successfully selected, the bride's family is overcharged with several excitements ranging from social, economic to emotional. Bride's horoscope is exchanged with the groom's for matching. And if matched, as it establishes the chance for the matrimonial alliance, plans are made out and preparations are started within the family evolving all the interests around the girl's marriage. The girl is hence put in an 'auspicious' state who is going to step into the sacred world of marriage — the virtuous way of performing the 'dharma' for the Hindu women. Through this, as it is religiously understood, she offers her father to perform the sacred duty of 'kanya dan' (i.e. the gift of a virgin daughter)

From the very day of her marriage until the completion of it, a Hindu girl is situated in a liminal stage as thence she belongs neither to her father's family nor to that of her husband's. She is someone to be between and in an in-between status. During this period, she is not allowed to go outside as malicious sprits may cause harm to her and is withdrawn from the household duties. She is the locus of the auspicious event of the marriage and her significance surpasses all the others. Hence she is more important in the sense that she is

no longer a daughter or a niece or granddaughter, but a bride—a very special status. She is someone to be given away along with the dowry to the groom in front of the God of fire who, according to the Vedic scriptures, acts as the only witness of a Hindu wedding. (Roy: 1992)

As the marriage is completed, the girl in her beautiful bundle of sari and jewellery is reincorporated in her husband's lineage (gotra) leaving her own *gotra*. This indicates the commencement of a new journey of her life. With her special status of a new bride as she enters her in-laws house, she becomes the locus of excitements as well as suspicion of her in-laws. Excitements are hence for her being a new member of the house and suspicions are for the tensions regarding whether she will embrace them or enviously avoid them. As a new bride, the girl who has turned into a wife and a woman with her red sari, red vermilion on the parting of her hair and forehead and the shell bangles on both hands, almost invariably begins to correlate her expectations about her husband's house and her real life situations. But as she finds, where the essence of the marriage should primarily be the romantic love between her and her husband, it is enshrouded by a complex web of relationships between her husband and the members of his family. Yet, she seems not to be surprised or depressed by this, since being a village girl she has been continuously socialized about what is expected of her if she is to be a good daughter in-law and a wife.

The in-laws place (shashur-bari) is the place for a Hindu woman of continuous adjustments and re-adjustments as it is almost unthinkable for her to divorce her husband or remarry if her real life roles do not totally correspond with her expectations. Therefore mostly inhabiting a joint family, she has to manipulatively maintain her connection with a number of relationships other than her husband. Primary among these are her relationship with her mother-in-law (shashuri), sister-in-law (boudis or nanads) and brother-in-laws (thakur-po or bhashurs). For each type of people she has hence distinct sets of relationships: for example of shy and avoidance with shashurs and bhashurs, of friendliness and cordiality (but sometimes may of conflict) with boudis and nanads, of affection with thakur-po and of respect and love with shashuri.

During her stay in shashur-bari, a Hindu woman tries her utmost to maintain these relationships smoothly as it is her ingrained teaching that she has to be a good wife and a good in-law in her husband's house. She tries to serve her best in the house- • hold activities of her shashurbari — including cooking, cleaning and serving food. If she has sister-in-laws she may be hence assisted. But if such assistance is not available and she is the single one to contribute in housework she does these, almost in an obedient way despite feeling these to be monotonous and tiring.

It is the frustrations a woman undergoes in her shashur-bari that direct her to illuminate in her mind the idea of being a mother — a status attached with high evaluation and veneration in Hindu society. Moreover, as a Hindu woman learns from the very early years of her life that one of the most important roles of a woman is to become a mother the desire to become a mother is found to be almost deep seated in her mentality irrespective of the circumstances. Like marriage, she considers this as the ultimate destiny and fortune of every woman. Besides, as she understands, being a mother also allows her to attain status in the family and society; she becomes respectable overnight, so to speak. From the father-in-law to the maid, all begin to respect her when she is a mother. Even as a pregnant woman one captures attention and receives care from everyone including her husband. Her fear about pregnancy (from the old wives tales she has been hearing since childhood) is then overcome by the benefits she can foresee in it Also, she knows that if she does not bear a son soon she will lose prestige in all quarters. She may have more pressure on this matter, particularly if her husband happens to be the oldest son in the family. She must provide the family with a descendant. Although, she is not so sure what exactly she will feel and gain from this, she knows she will find in this highly prestigious role, some sort of gratification in her marriage. Finding this, she hence prepares herself to step into the mother's role, the ultimate achievement of a woman's life. (Roy: 1992)

In a Hindu society with a rural setting, a woman is subtly made to feel her misfortune by her family, neighbors and relatives if she does not become a mother within two to five years after her marriage. No woman is more unfortunate than one is unable to bear a child. Only she is considered to be a 'fortunate' woman who carries the line of her husband's gotra by giving birth to several sons. Therefore, when a Hindu woman becomes mother (ma), she attains the status of a person who is honored and valued. And in her newly acquired mother role as she shifts her attention to the child, the family also shifts its attention both to the mother and child allowing the mother to recover from the physical discomforts associated with childbirth. She is then the 'mother of a child'.

With almost a little interest in birth control measures the woman continues to reproduce until the passing of the edge of her sexual life and child bearing age. When she is thus at her age of forty or fifty she appears in the family a figure who is respected and sometimes, deified. She is thence someone who is well-suited with her husband's attitudes and children's expectations which are backed by her prolonged involvement with the rearing of her children. It is basically at this stage of her life that she becomes authoritative in her

household being a senior wife and a mother of many children. She may get under such a condition some additional affection and attention from both her husband and the family for her productive as well as reproductive contribution. Though by this time she is dressed in preferably light colored sari, she seems to be proud with the red in her hair and forehead which is marked with the stain of prolonged use indicating her fortune and happiness of having a husband. She tries to be as simple as possible avoiding the external adornments at this stage and her movement is comparatively free (except for some upper class, upper caste Hindu women who consider frequent movement as a form of undervaluing of their social status) considering that she is passing her asexual period finding her position generating in others mind not the image of lust and desire but of honor and reverence.

In her late fifties and sixties, a village Hindu woman concentrates her interest in religious activities like attaining dharmashivas, visiting mandirs and kirtans. During this stage she possesses the daughter-in-laws and sometimes maids to assist the housework. This marks her age and decaying physical strength letting her offer trifle jobs in daily house hold chores. She offers her time instead to the caring of her grandchildren telling tales and stories from holy books and from her own life she begins to count her numbered days to go to him, the God who is the ultimate destination of everyone. This is a stage when she is almost beyond the feelings of frustration. She is resigned to her rules as a woman. She is now an old woman, a grandmother who is there to die (Roy: 1972) marking an end to the ontogenetic development of her life as a rural Hindu woman from her childhood through her marriage and into her old age.

In the entire lifecycle as a widow, which is the most frustrated image of Hindu womanhood, a woman of a rural Hindu society is however stigmatized with a marginal entity. She is hence of no use to the family or even if used she is better treated as a honored maid' in the joint family of her brothers. If she is managed to be mother in any circumstances, she may have a little more respectable status as a 'mother' but it is still considered an unfortunate one. Remarriage is the least possible chance for her in a rigid socio-religious setting like that of a village and as she is deprived of material properties legalized by Hindu sanctions, she is also the most vulnerable. Vulnerability for her is hence dual: her old age and her dependency on the mercy of the members of her family (brothers, sons or brother-in-laws). She is someone unwanted, regarded polluted for not having a husband and is excluded from any festival or ceremonies. If more clarified, she is in simple words a symbol of curse, misfortune and hopelessness.

If seen through the social kaleidoscope, 'woman' as a 'category' has long been contested as a matter of social construction signifying that almost in all societies it is determined by the society what makes a woman, 'woman'. Hence, to understand what constitutes the 'womanhood' in a society it looms large that the crucial insights of the society are apprehended in portraying the complete image of a 'woman'. Particularly it is important for a strong patriarchal society which nestles in a Hindu backdrop, since in such a society it is not only (or hardly) the women who construct themselves but also the society at large which impose continuous values and prescriptions offering the basic building blocks for the edifice of Hindu womanhood.

A Hindu society of Bangladesh which has a rural set up is complexly understood having diverse dimensions of hierarchies operating within it. Such a society comprises not only of men-women relationships but also of perplexing inter-relationships among the women. Womanhood is in fact found to be situated in the cacophony of these relationships as they entangle the women's lives endowing them with particular meanings and specific choices. For apprehending its social image therefore the 'womanhood' among the Hindus of Khankhanapur is magnified through the lens of the relationships a woman has with her social surroundings. The interconnection between a woman and her family, neighborhood and the village society is in this regard a crucial locus of scrutiny as the Hindu women of the village are socially existent in these arenas finding themselves located as 'persons'. The social environment of a Hindu woman is also important from the standpoint that it continuously posits as well as re-positions the women shaping up the matrix of 'womanhood' for them (the women). Hence, how 'womanhood' is socially located in the Hindu rural constructions can be revealed basically through looking into the certain avenues of relationship patterns a society exhibits in its normal course — for example, the relationship of husband Vs wife, mother-in-law Vs daughter-in-law, brothers Vs sisters, mother Vs daughters, sister-in-law Vs sister-in-law, and father Vs daughter. Yet, equally important is in this respect the view of the society (comprising of both male and female) in relation to the ranking of castes. Most Hindu men of Khankhanapur, irrespective of caste and class, construct the image of a woman in their minds characterized by qualities like submissiveness, nurturance and dependence. Socialized from the very beginning of their lives, they prefer to see the women as family-oriented, more crudely speaking, male-oriented (i.e. passing every stage of life under the surveillance of an authorized male). No man can ever think the living of a woman's life without the control of a man. According to them, as the women are the 'weak' (durbal jati) they should always be guarded by their male counterpart: an unguarded woman (except in case of a widow or an old woman) is considered bad (kharap) as she is thence a threat to the existing social values with her potential sexuality.

Thus never perceiving women as free agents who can have personal choices and economic privileges, women are according to their ideology, better privileged in the domain of their households as then they do not have to take up the arduous task of earning a living. But, such a perception is apparent to be invalid for the men folk of the low caste Hindu groups like the chamar (leather worker) and methar (sweepers/cleaners), as they consider it quite justified and essential that women contribute their labor in the economic sector generating income for the family. With a little difference hence appear the views of the ghosh (confectioners), pal (potters), karmakar (blacksmith) and betei (bamboo weavers) men as they think that women should associate them in their economic work but should never become independent 'economic persons' participating in the public domain of work. For example, as the occupational tasks of the ghosh, pal, karmakar and betei men are respectively to prepare sweets, making clay utensils, shaping the iron tools and preparing bamboo household items all which they market at the local Khankhanapur bazaar, the men prefer their women (preferably wives and daughters) to assist them in the preparation of these goods, but never to go to the bazaar for marketing of these goods in order to gain cash income. In their words, it is *mayeloker kaj ghore, purush loker kaj baire* (women's work is within the house, men's work is outside it) that clearly demarcates the sphere of work in terms of the categorization of public Vs private.

Women's contribution in the realm of production as such though is in some way or other expected, Hindu men do not feel any urge to value the women's extra household works that are indirectly related to the economy of the men. For men, it is the women's duty ('daitto) to support their men folk in their every stage of life. Besides, in their views as women barely do some household chores like cooking and cleaning it is the men's right to ask for the women's assistance in the productive works without a payment in cash. As Ashit Roy, a betei man speaks, '*Meyelok sharadini ghore thake, ekto radhe — baare; shamir kaje ektu-ashtu shahajjo kora to tader kortobbo. Erjonne tader abar mullo kisher?*' there shows up the reflection of the crude masculine mentality of undermining women's work and putting the women in a status lower to them.

Basically inhabiting a rigid Hindu social structure, the Hindu men of Khankhanapur consider wifeness and motherhood as the ideal dimensions of womanhood. They respect a woman if she is a mother and evaluate if she is known to be a wife. However such an evaluation is based on position and not in terms of status. In terms of status, women are rarely in an authoritative position; rather in every state they are subjugated and inferior to men. Men are the 'makers' of reality and women are there 'made'.

Ritually, also men consider women as inappropriate agents of authority. According to them, women are not 'pure' in mind and physique to initiate and perform a ritual sacredly. Moreover, women possess trifle religious knowledge — the knowledge which is considered authoritative in ritual performances. Hence, as the men think, because women are polluted, they should not be allowed to enter the realm of 'sacredness' and 'purity' associated with their religion. Rather, they regard it religiously and morally prescribed that women should strive to find their way in performing household rituals (bratas) for the welfare of their families and households. This, for the woman, is represented as a separate realm of bhakti (reverence) by the Hindu men where men are posited with authoritative religious power and women with their sheer ritual power.

In proprietorship of ancestral property, the Hindu women of Khankhanapur are found to be denied their claims by the socio-legal values cushioned by the strong patriarchal attitudes and crude Hindu religious sanctions. Hindu men, being socialized in a rigid Hindu environment, therefore consider it quite natural that women are not the inheritors of the ancestral property. According to them, they are someone to be given away with a huge amount of dowry compensating their loss of property ownership. Though the amount of dowry hence depends on individual affords, this is in their view the material form of assets that a woman possesses from her paternal side serving as a security for her life in and after marriage. Sometimes even the women get property from her father and husband if she is lucky enough. In this juncture the Hindu men justify their sole proprietary rights on ancestral property depicting their standpoint as that, they are loaded with the duties of maintaining the living for the entire family, from which the women are set free. They conceptualize, since women are already someone to be taken care of (either by father, brother or husband), they need not have a significant share in property; as a token of security the material assets (preferably her jewellery) are quite enough for them.

That women are differentiated and hierarchized is also revealed from the women's attitudes toward women. It is the women in Khankhanapur rather than the men who set rules for the women's roles and expectations. From the early periods of her life, a Hindu woman gets constant message from the women folk around her about the dimensions of womanhood she has to pass through her lifecycle. These women range from her mother (ma), elder sisters (didi), thakur-ma, kakima, mashi (mother's sister), pishi (father's sister), mami (mother's brother's wife), and friends to the women of her neighborhood irrespective of age. Yet, in her entire lifecycle a Hindu woman encounters many other women who control her choices and expectations. They are her boudis (ja) and mother-in-laws (shashuri).

A mother from the early stage of a Hindu girl's life imparts in her (the daughters) the learning of the expected behavioural pattern for a woman. According to her, with whatever education her girl is offered, her ultimate goal is in marriage. In her words, '*rneyera joto poralekhai shikhuk, meyeder shamir bah jete hobe' — onner bah kaj kore khete kobe. Ekhon kaj na shikhle shashurir kotha shunte kobe*' (how much a girl is educated that doesn't matter, she has to go to her husband's house and work to live. If she is not trained in house works now, she has to get insulted by her mother-in-law). This creates in her mind an urge that she should socialize her daughter with house work and art-crafts like sewing and designing house wears so that as a good wife her daughter raises her evaluation high in shashurbari,

For a mother, a girl is borne to be given away. She does not expect her daughters to support her in old age. The daughters are, as she understands, simply given to her by the God to prepare her for 'others'. Therefore, a girl gets constant lessons from her mother to cultivate in her the seeds of patience, perseverance, nurturance, love and affection. According to her, as someday the girl will leave her, she prefers to teach her how to cope well with family situations rather than inspiring her in intellectual exercises like higher education in colleges and universities. One reason underlying this choice for a mother is particularly that it may be hard for her (the girl) to get a good match in old age and another is that she may be caught up in an insecure situation attending the higher levels of institutional achievements in academia.

Quite similar are the attitudes of the didi, boudis, kakimas and other women around her who continuously imagine the growing girl as a potential wife and a mother. In almost every afternoon gossip sessions, the women of the house talk of the girl's upcoming days that she will have to pass in her shashur-bah. As such, they strongly infabricate in a girl's mind that the only dimension of her womanhood is characterized by her role of a wife-mother dyad.

A significant and varied outlook toward the women in a Hindu village like Khankhanapur is observed through a woman's experience in her shashur-bari as she exhibits her relationship with distinct sets of women. Crucial are hence the attitudes of her shashuri or mother-in-law, nanad and boudis toward her. Except some cases, most mother-in-laws consider their daughter-in-laws as mere helping persons in household works. As soon as a woman gets a daughter-in-law she thinks herself relieved of household pressure. In her view, then it is the daughter-in-laws who should take part in carrying out the daily chores of the house. Moreover, she also considers that if the daughter-in-laws are not imposed with the house works they will get enough space for thinking about their husbands moving from the world of reality away to that of romanticism. Although, in some instances, maids are hired for house work assistance (preferably in rich households), the young bride along with her boudis (ja's) are expected to participate in the major house works like cooking. Mother-in-laws are hence only their authorized guardian in assisting the task of cooking or preparing the special dishes in the family occasions.

Most mother-in-laws usually expect their daughter-in-laws to be submissive and mild in character. Though their own daughters may not match with their expectations, they consider it as a must that their daughter-in-laws resemble the image they possess in their minds as 'ideal'. According to a Hindu mother-in-law in Kundupara, a daughter-in-law should be an ideal wife first who should possess in her, the qualities like — care for the family, respect for the old members of the house and love and affection or the younger, skill in house work, good managing power of the house hold affairs and the capability to maintain a happy family environment by strengthening the ties of the household members with her special power of affection. In her words hence *ghorer bou-i par-e ghore shukh ante, bou jodi bhalo na hoi, shei ghor hoi chitar aagun'* (it is a daughter-in-law who can bring happiness to a house. If the daughter-in-law is not good, the house becomes the fire of a funeral pyre), which means that it is a daughter-in-law who can make a home feels like a place of dream and happiness. Expectations of a mother-in-law in this Hindu village are not limited to these patterns of behavior only. According to her, a good daughter-in-law not only respects her mother-in-law like her own mother but also take care of her every need; she never attempts to take her husband away from his mother, rather she helps to maintain the strong tie existing between a mother and a son. Besides, a daughter-in-law is expected by a mother-in-law to enlighten her house with a child, preferably son who will help to maintain the ancestral line of her family with that of the heaven. The becoming of a mother' is the most accentuated interest a mother-in-law possesses in her relation with her daughter-in-law. If there is no child a daughter-in-law can bring to her family and remain barren for a long time, the mother-in-law considers her (the daughter-in-law) as 'bajja' (unable to produce children) and also 'alakkhi' (a word used for inauspiciousness and poor achievements). Daughter-in-laws giving birth to too many daughters are also considered by the mother-in-laws as in auspicious for the family especially because they (the daughters) impose greater pressures on the family resources in terms of extracting the huge amount of dowry during their marriages. In this regard, two cases can be illustrated — one is that of a ghosh woman Durga Rani Ghosh and another is that of Kalpana Kundu, a kundu woman. Durga Rani has six daughters and Kalpana Kundu has only one daughter who is unable to produce further children.

Durga Rani's daughters incurred huge amount of money during marriage leaving their father indebted. This created a bad impression in Durga Rani's mother-in-law's mind, which ultimately bring in her fate ill treatments from her (mother-in-law). Similarly, Kalpana Kundu when gave birth to her second daughter she was so tortured mentally that she underwent a massive ovarian problem disabling her to produce children.

Like the mother-in-laws the father-in-laws of a Hindu family also believe that they have married their sons to beget sons. Most often they do not consider that they need a male child who will keep their patrilineal family line illuminated. Even a husband, backed by the social and family values of the Hindu rule, hence begins to anticipate that the children his wife will beget him will be predominately sons. For some instances however, it is not likely that a Hindu family does not expect a daughter as child. To illustrate, the case of a Shaha family can be cited which show its acceptability of having daughter in the family in spite of preferring sons. Also low caste Hindu families and the untouchables are found in Khankhanapur who do not crudely differentiate between the children born to them on the basis of gender.

While wifehood and motherhood are the socially anticipated forms of Hindu womanhood, widowhood is signalled as a misfortune and inauspiciousness by the Hindu society of Khankhanapur. Both men and women, irrespective of caste backgrounds there visualize widowhood as a curse and a severe punishment for the bad conducts a woman had done in her previous birth. It is according to the society the most inauspicious and defiled status of a woman, which puts her life in peril. Marked with a social stigma hence any woman who is "bidhoba" or widow is considered as socially downtrodden and ill fated. She is for the society simply the symbol of a bad omen or 'Kulakkhan'.

In a rigid Hindu society like Khankhanapur womanhood indeed finds such a social image as a woman's productive and reproductive capacity are mostly controlled by the males of the society. Values and expectations henceforth being engendered from the masculine ideologies transmit to the feminine world, which in turn constructs the image of femininity in a Hindu village environment. Therefore, it is apparent to be vivid that, at the macro level though the ideas constructing womanhood are generated from the social arena of men, they get shaped and reshaped with its much constricted forms in the cultural sphere of women which is regarded rather a level with micro characteristics.

Conclusion:

Despite the rural societies in Bangladesh is undergoing social change, patriarchal values significantly shape the image of an 'ideal' woman in the Hindu community of Khankhanapur. This article shows that motherhood reserves the most revered space for Hindu women. It highlights the importance of the concept of 'purity', which is accepted by upper caste Hindu but defied by the lower caste. The main argument remains that values and expectations are engendered from the masculine ideologies and are transmitted to the feminine world, which in turn constructs the image of femininity in a Hindu village environment. The article describes in details the different stages of lives of Hindu women, in order to show how social values are imparted in the process of socialization of a Hindu girl to transform her into an ideal woman. Yet, this research leaves room for further investigation to see whether at the wake of globalization and continuous social change, the practical image of an 'ideal' Hindu woman gets possibly reshaped.

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