

Abstract

This is a study of a collection of 19th Century Bengali “advice for women” texts whose purpose was the redefinition of women’s roles in 19th Century Bengal and the adaptation of these roles to the changed circumstances of life in British-ruled India. These texts were “how to do it” books, guides to relations within extended families, the rearing of children, and the management of households. Addressed to women, but written by men, they were often constructed in the form of a dialogue between husband and wife in which the husband instructed the wife on proper conduct. The paper surveys the general concerns and considerations in this collection of texts, which represent a wide range of views on women’s roles in society. It then turns to an examination of two chapters of one text, Grha Lakshmi (The Lakshmi of the House) by Girijaprasann Raychaudhuri, and discusses the implications for men and women’s relationships in 19th Century Bengal of the contradictory roles for women in this text.

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**Face to Face:
Roles for
Bengali Women
in Love
and Family**
*(A study based on
Grha Lakshmi,
a 19th Century
Bengali “advice for
women” text)*

by

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FACE TO FACE: ROLES FOR BENGALI WOMEN IN LOVE AND FAMILY

In 1884 a twenty-two year old Indian man wrote the first of what would become two editions of a book on women's conduct. He published Grha Lakshmi ("The Virtuous Housewife" or literally "The Lakshmi of the House") in an edition of one thousand copies which sold for eight annas apiece (Bengal Library 1884:175).¹

Grha Lakshmi was one of almost twenty "advice for women" books written in Bengali during the 1880s and 1890s. The authors of most of these texts were men; their purpose in writing was the redefinition of women's roles and the adaptation of these roles to the changed circumstances of life in British-ruled nineteenth century Bengal. Before 1860, few similar texts existed. But by 1884, as the education of wives and daughters gained acceptance among urban and literate Bengali families, enough texts had been written for the author of Grha Lakshmi to note: "There is no lack of books for women full of moral instructions" (Raychaudhuri 1887:1).

The focus of this paper is these "advice for women" texts--and, in particular, two chapters of one text, Grha Lakshmi. Because their subject was women's conduct, all the texts tell us something about the lives and activities of Bengali women in this period. Since all but one of these authors were men, they tell us even more about the ideas men had about how women's roles should be adapted to the new conditions of life of that time in British India. Through the pages of these texts we watch Bengali men as they attempt to redefine the roles of women in their society; through a close reading of the two selected chapters of Grha Lakshmi we see the conflicts and inconsistencies that accompany one author as he moves toward such a redefinition.

Traditional Roles

A defining male perspective had always marked traditional definitions of women's roles in India. Traditional Hindu law codes and legends defined a woman's purpose in life as the bearing of children and emphasized the need for male control over her at all stages of her life (Manu 1958:233). Legends and religious texts offered images of goddesses, such as both aspects of the major goddess Kali/Durga in Bengal, who were either seductive destroyers or compliant wives and indulgent mothers.

Traditional social structures also required that a married woman, especially when young, subordinate her needs to the demands of her husband's extended family. A young girl in Bengal (as in other parts of India) was married at (or in some cases a little before) puberty and upon her marriage left her family home to grow into adulthood in her in-laws' home. Many traditions encouraged her to separate herself psychologically as she was already separated legally and physically from her childhood home and her father's lineage. During the early years of a girl's married life, before the birth of a first child, she was expected to be dutiful and obedient to her husband's parents, to rise early and to work hard. Contact with her husband was restricted; she could not speak to him in front of his parents and might see him alone only at night (Borthwick 1984:3-25; Chakraborty 1963:1-8;

Jacobson 1977:65-66; Roy 1972:94-100; Kakar 1978:73-76; Urquhart 1983). The early years of marriage were potentially a period of such isolation and stress for young girls that accounts of suicides of young wives, where we find them, usually attribute these deaths to bad conditions in their in-laws' houses (Walsh 1983:31).

A major traditional source from which girls could learn how to behave as young wives was the didactic stories of the Bratakathas. The bratas were rituals or vows performed in worship of a goddess and often accompanied by the telling of a story. The goddesses usually had some special connection with women and their lives. Many bratas, for instance, address the goddess Sosthi, worshipped to insure fertility and the survival of children. Many others address Lakshmi (pronounced "Lokkhi" in Bengali). This goddess was so associated with wealth and prosperity in Bengal that even today, a good girl is called a "lokki meye"--literally, "a girl like Lakshmi"--and the housewife whose virtue and good conduct brings prosperity to her husband's family is the "grho-lokki"--the Lakshmi of the house.

The bratas taught proper conduct and emphasized desirable qualities of character through story and example. Worshipping the goddesses and hearing the stories again and again during childhood, girls learned what would be expected of them as adults in their in-laws' houses. The "Mother and Father Owl Story" for instance, accompanied the worship of Lakshmi in the Bengali month of Bhadro. At the end of the story, the elderly Brahmin mother-in-law, about to die, gives this advice to her daughter-in-law:

"Daily, get up very early and sweep up whatever is scattered about. Never sleep during the day. In the evening time, put incense and sprinkle Ganges water in the rooms and light the lamps. Never speak roughly or loudly with a metallic sounding voice and never cause a clatter while moving about. If you move, move as if there is no sound from your feet. Always silently invoke Lokkhi and Narayan in your mind, then the mercy of Ma Lokkhi will come."
(Mukhopadhyaya 1931:9)²

Printed texts for the bratas began to appear in the early twentieth century. The earlier tradition was oral and one editor blamed the need for collection and publication on the disturbing influence of foreign education:³ "There were many bratas and the rules to perform them were current," he wrote in 1909, "but unfortunately by the influence of Western education all these bratas are disappearing."

The Bengalis who have English education do not like their wives or daughters to do Lokkhi puja [worship] or Sosthi puja [worship]. They think by all these superstitious deeds the ideas of religion diminish instead of increasing. (Kathakacunamadi 1909:preface)

Changed Circumstances in British India

Both the appearance of printed bratakathas in the twentieth century and the nineteenth century production of "advice for women" texts were prompted by the changed circumstances of Indian life under British rule and especially by changes that followed the introduction and expansion of English language

education in India and Bengal. Schools using English as a medium and Eastern subjects as curriculum had appeared in Calcutta early in the nineteenth century. But by the middle of the nineteenth century this education was increasingly the prerequisite for employment in both the British government services and in the Western-style occupations (such as law, journalism, education, and medicine) that were available in the cities of British India. After the Education Act of 1854 the greater numbers of these institutions and the continued economic benefits of their programs led many more families to enroll their sons (Walsh 1983).

By the mid-nineteenth century all over India the combination of British rule and English language education had produced a small class of Indian men--often called "the English Educated Elite"--schooled in the ideas and values of Western culture and dependent for their livelihood on employment in the Western-style occupations of the Raj. The numbers of this group were small. Even by the 1880s less than one half of one percent of India's total population had acquired enough education to sit for the college entrance examination (McCully 1940:177). But by virtue of their contacts with the British rulers, knowledge of the English language, and economic power, they became an influential group.

The last half of the nineteenth century was marked by the struggles of the Western educated to adapt the Western ideas and life styles of their education to indigenous customs and, as well, to gain for themselves and their new way of life both acceptance and integration into Indian society (Walsh 1983:2-9). Throughout India the Western educated became the founders and leaders of nineteenth century social reform movements and of the twentieth century Nationalist movement. In Bengal they published journals and newspapers in both English and Bengali, and formed debating societies and political groups (Walsh 1983:35-36). The Brahmo Samaj, a society aimed at reforming the Hindu religion and social customs, was founded and joined primarily by the Western educated. It was also the Western educated who became the major actors in the struggle to redefine women's roles in Bengali society. The transformation of men's roles under the impact of British rule, then, led directly to the transformation of women's roles, a process that occupied the last fifty years of the nineteenth century.

In part the effort for reform proceeded from ideological concerns. Nineteenth century British writers often focused their most severe criticisms of Hindu society on the role of women. Practices such as sati (the burying or burning of a widow with her dead husband, already illegal in 1829), of child marriage, the practice of purdah (the restriction of women to the antahpur, the women's quarters of the house, not allowing their travel outside the home) and the traditional Hindu ban on literacy for women--all these customary practices were used as evidence of the general decadence and backwardness of traditional Hindu society. Reform minded Western educated Hindus--especially those in societies such as the Brahmo Samaj--took these criticisms to heart, and these issues became part of the social reform agenda most passionately debated among those concerned with the reform of women's role in Bengali society (Kopf 1979:14-15; 34-41).

Similarly if less passionately debated was the traditional relationship between husband and wife in Hindu society. English commentators were often struck by the restrictions on relations between husbands and wives in extended

families and the absence of an ideal of companionship and friendship among young couples. The Victorian ideal of the "companionate" marriage, in which the wife served as friend and advisor to her husband, was one often spoken of by reform-minded Bengali men (Borthwick 1984:114-124).

Concern for the reform of women's roles, however, was not entirely ideological. Western education and employment reshaped life for boys and young men in British India. Students often traveled away from home to attend school, and even after graduation, occupations such as law, education, or government service frequently required long residence away from home. Often wives (and children) accompanied their husbands to new homes; the increased frequency of this travel contributed to a lessening of prudah restriction in the late nineteenth century (Borthwick 1983:231). By the 1880s the question of a woman leaving the extended family to live with her husband was sufficiently defined for one text to include a chapter criticizing the practice (Raychaudhuri 1887:57-64).

The new requirements of education and employment in British India changed the attitude with which Western educated boys approached marriage. Instead of imagining a wife whose only obligation would be to fit smoothly into the functioning of the extended family, the Western educated had other concerns. Men in government service, or those whose work brought them into social contact with the British, found that a wife who could be brought out of prudah for social occasions could be a positive asset (Borthwick 1984:123-124). Increasingly during the last half of the nineteenth century Western educated boys resisted the idea of marriage to illiterate girls who knew nothing of the Westernized world in which their husbands would live and work. While education in English remained rare even for girls of Western educated families, by the 1880s the acquisition of some education had become an asset in the marriage market. Stories circulated about visitors who might ask a potential bride for a demonstration of her skills (Bagal 1949:26; Borthwick 1984:103). In Calcutta literacy rates for women rose steadily between 1871 and 1901 (Borthwick 1984:108).

By the 1880s ideological and practical concerns had combined to focus the attention of Western educated Bengali men on the role of women in their society. Writers seem almost to have rediscovered the Bengali woman. Innumerable works focused on her. Novels like Sibnath Sastri's Mej Bou ("Middle Daughter-in-law," 1879), Gopalcandra Datta's Sulochana ("The Exemplary Wife," 1882), and Sitanath Nandi's Bangagrha ("The Bengali Home," 1884) described her life in the home, her responsibilities and obligations, and the manner in which she raised her children. Dramas like Umescandra Mitra's 1879 Vidhavavivaha Nataka ("Drama of Widow Marriage") and farces like Miss Bino Bibi B.A. (1898) portrayed her triumphs and failures within the constraints of tradition and her emancipation or degradation through exposure to the ideas of the West. These works added to a growing body of literature on women in which novels were most numerous, but tracts, plays, and essays were also present.

"Advice for Women" Texts

Among this profusion of works on or about women were the "advice for women" texts. These were "how to do it" books--guides to relations within

extended families, the rearing of children, and the management of households. Addressed to women, but written by men, they were often constructed in the form of a dialogue between husband and wife in which the husband instructed the wife on proper conduct. They had titles like "The Bengali Wife," "A Husband's Advice to His Wife," "Advice to Women," "Conversations with the Wife," and "The Lakshmi of the House." Most concerned themselves with issues of social and moral conduct. Some texts (titled "Mother and Son," "Hints to Parents," and "The Education of Children in the Family") contained advice on child-rearing and the formation of character. Others were exclusively medical, emphasizing modern hygiene and the treatment of diseases, as in the 1895 edition of the The Diseases of Childhood, which advertized that it had "special reference to Indian diseases" (Bandyopadhyaya 1887).

Bengali translations of English books--such as the 1881 edition of "The Parent's Friend" or that of Herbert Spencer's more famous Education: Intellectual, Moral and Physical in 1888--indicate that books in English may have been the original inspiration of this genre (Bengal Library 1881-1888). But these Bengali texts are not narrow imitations of foreign works.⁴ Their focus, as we will see, is indigenous; their concerns the issues of behavior and responsibility faced by Bengali women in the changing world of the nineteenth century.

The language of these texts sets them somewhat apart from the more polemical tracts, essays, or dramas about women in this period. In 1880, for instance, Sibnath Sastri, a famous Brahma leader, published a tract called Grha Dharma ("Household Dharma") (Sastri 1885). Widely known and quoted in the late nineteenth century, Sastri's ideas on family obligations and relationships contributed to the beliefs of many Western educated Bengalis. The language of his book is a highly Sanskritized Bengali which was fashionable at the time. Complex, indeed, often impenetrable, it was thought to be more advanced than the simpler language of ordinary speech. Books in this Sanskritized style were almost certainly intended for men, and in Sastri's case, for men who could probably have read with equal ease in English.

"Advice for women" texts, on the other hand, were written in much simpler, more relaxed, colloquial language. These books were intended, not only for the English educated men who were Bankim Candra's or Sibnath Sastri's contemporaries, but also for their wives and daughters. Idioms are frequent and Sanskrit compounds rare. In the opening chapter of Grha Lakshmi, for example, the fictional "husband" begins reading a long passage on marital relations from a current journal to his fictional "wife."⁵ "That big look you were giving in my direction," he finally says, interrupting his reading, "aren't you listening to what I'm reading?" "Certainly I'm listening," says the wife, "but I'm not understanding anything at all" (Raychaudhuri 1887:3). The remainder of the chapter is devoted to the husband's colloquial exposition of the meaning of the passage.

Colloquial language was a deliberate choice of the authors of texts for women, many of whom knew English and were well acquainted with Western culture. Six out of nineteen authors, for example, belonged to one or another sect of the reformist religious society, the Brahma Samaj. Some, like Girijaprasann Raychaudhuri, Pratapcandra Majumdar and Vipradas Mukhopadhyay,

were graduates of English language schools (Raychaudhuri and Majumdar from Presidency College in Calcutta; Vipradas Mukhopadhyay from Sanskrit College). (Sengupta 1976:121; Kopf 1979:47-48). Others like Ishan Candra Basu and Dhirendranath Pal published works in both English and Bengali (Basu 1887; Pal 1909; 1911). In yet other works the appearance of chapter titles or cover pages in English or references to Western figures such as Catherine the Great or Sir Philip Sidney demonstrate the authors' familiarity with the culture and language of the West (Gupta 1885).

Educational Purpose of the Texts

The intention of these authors was to produce books that might be used in the growing movement for women's education in Bengal. In the 1860s one observer had noted that even families who sent their girls out to school rarely kept them in attendance past their tenth year and even as late as the 1880s; purdah restrictions still left many families reluctant to send married girls out of the home for education. An alternative was home study, the tutoring of the girl by family members in the home; most of the "advice for women" texts seem to have been intended for this method of education (Borthwick 1984:68-80). "Bengali girls can not go to school after their marriage and can not be educated," wrote the author of Ramni Aisarya as late as 1900:

They get early marriage...[and] their education remains incomplete in every respect. It goes without saying that every husband wants to see his wife well educated; the women also have realized the necessity of education. But there was not a single book which they could read and learn all that is required. "Ramani Aisarya" has fulfilled that dearth.... (Pal 1900:preface).

Indeed, the frame story of many of the texts for women recreates the conditions of home study. A husband and his young wife meet late at night; the husband instructs her on proper conduct, social obligations, and the need for literacy. Both appear young--and relatively new to marriage. (Indeed it would be difficult to imagine older wives as enthusiastic as the young characters of these texts.) "Now sleep", says the husband at the end of one chapter of Grha Lakshmi, "Much of the night has gone." And the wife replies, "I don't know, when I stay with you, I don't get [much] sleep. I wish only to hear you talk" (Raychaudhuri 1887:18).

A common nineteenth century idea, often repeated but not unique to these texts, was that husbands ought to tutor their wives. (Gandhi himself records his early efforts in this regard.) (Gandhi 1957:11-14) "From the time of birth up to marriage," writes one author, "the teacher is the mother; after marriage the giver of education is the husband." In spite of some evidence to the contrary the authors of these texts are optimistic about tutoring: "Until now," says one,

The women of our country used to perform their duties the way women of older generations did. They did not care much for the advice of men. Nowadays, by taking the burden of giving advice to modern women, we are taking a new type of responsibility on our shoulders (Basu 1884:preface).

Proper education, it was believed, would provide the foundation for the future happiness of both the couple and the family. Husbands, writes Dhirendranath Pal, should begin to educate their wives from the first day of marriage:

Even from that day the husband should keep an eye on the education of the wife. We will show very slowly how the husband should behave and how he should educate [his] wife [so that] she, being well educated, can make the husband and family members happy (Pal 1880:1).

One conservative author suggests that only home education will keep the wife safely under the influence of the husband. Where outside education would create friction between husband and wife, home education guarantees compatibility. For if

...women acquire education [while] remaining under the subjugation of the husband, then there can never be any difference of opinion between them (Gupta 1885:9).

Nineteenth century observers often criticized home study as impractical; girls who worked hard all day were, they said, too exhausted to absorb anything at night (Borthwick 1984:69). Yet one twentieth century study of Bengali women shows how attractive the intimacy and intensity of these imagined late-night conversations might be to unmarried or young just-married Bengali girls. As one woman relates:

I fell in love with [my husband] so intensely from the very night of our wedding that my whole day was spent dreaming about meeting him at night. If he ever came home early or ran into me alone on the veranda, I felt as though I were going through an electric shock....If he even said a word to me alone, I was so elated. I always expected him to talk to me when I came to bed at night. I hoped he would take a personal interest in me, that he would ask how my days went, whether I needed anything. I also missed my father who discussed his office problems with me. I wondered why my husband had nothing to talk about. I often asked him questions about his work, his colleagues, his friends. I tried to imagine his life outside home (Roy 1972:98).

The texts of the 1880s and 1890s frequently proclaimed the need for "suitable" materials for women--and decried the quality of already existing books. The conservative author of Bangali Bou, for instance, complained that modern books were too salacious:

...the books so far written are educating [women] about the love affairs of husband and wife [he wrote]. In fact, there are hardly any lines in all those books that educate a woman so that she can get along in her family life (Gupta 1885:preface).

Others thought existing books were too dull. "If the books remain lying in Gurudas Babu's bookstore," wrote the author of Grha Lakshmi, "we do not believe that any benefit will come to the women of Bengal" (Raychaudhuri 1887:1).

Sectarian Differences/Underlying Agreement

Disagreements over "suitability" usually masked deeper differences. There were numerous issues at stake in redefining the roles of nineteenth century Bengali women and, among the literate classes of Bengal, many disagreements about how these issues should be resolved. Age of marriage, remarriage of widows, the degree and kind of women's education, purdah restrictions, and even the kind of clothing women should wear if they were to venture outside the home--all were bitterly debated among the Western educated.⁶

Even among reform Hindus there were considerable differences of interpretation on any and all of these issues and what was "suitable" in one reform Hindu context was not considered so in another. Within the different sects of the Brahma Samaj, for example, the meaning of the "emancipation" of women was hotly debated between more conservative Brahmos and the "progressive" Sadharan Samajists; a great scandal erupted between the two groups when, in the late 1870s, the Sadharan Samaj brought women out to attend the Hindu Mohila Vidyalay (School for Hindu Women), allowing them to wear Westernized clothes eat, at the table, and use spoons and forks (Kopf 1979:124; 40).

The texts for women represent a relatively wide range of sectarian viewpoints. At the conservative end of the spectrum was the author of the text Bangali Bou who saw the degrading effects of late marriage (which he defined as after age ten) and higher education at work among modern women. One symptom of this degradation, he wrote, was the refusal of educated women to do their own housework:

We have seen with our own eyes [that] very many women of respectable and important [families] often spend their days eating and things like that, lying down on the bed, reading the newspaper and instead of them a main-servant, a female cook or a Brahmin cook do the domestic work (Gupta 1885:4).

At the other end of the spectrum were the Brahma authors, one of whom drew a direct line between literacy and membership in the Brahma Samaj. "Do you know my friend Lavender?" the wife in this text asks:

She has learned to read and write very well. She writes letters to her husband every day. Now she says she will go with her husband to the Brahma Samaj.

"If you learn to read and write," says the husband, "you will also become that type of person" (Mitra 1884:4).⁷

In between these two extremes, however, authors were more circumspect about their views. "Everything of yours is the English style," claims the wife in the midst of one discussion in Grha Laksmi. "No, no, no," replies the husband, "This is [our] native country's opinion" (Raychaudhuri 1887:32). This text and the most popular women's text, Dhirendranath Pal's "Conversations with the Wife," were both at some pains to obscure their differences with tradition.

But however bitterly authors opposed each other on ideological issues (such as age of marriage or education) most would have agreed with Dhirendranath Pal that "in the world [there is] one work for women, another for men" and thought that their books also should "show how the wife can be made educated, religious and truly worthy to be called a wife" (Pal 1880:1). There was considerable agreement on the topics appropriate and important for women.

As a result, there was something of a standard "curriculum" to be found in these "advice for women" texts. Most texts included chapters on reading and writing, on the "duties" of women (social and religious), on the relationship between husband and wife, on relations with in-laws, and on the care and character development of children. In regard to these topics, the texts focused on what they saw as the central concerns of the married woman--her family relationships and obligations. In addition some texts added discussions of dress and ornamentation, sections on daily worship or, less often, chapters on the art of singing, painting, and poetry.⁸

A favorite subject of many texts was "bhalobasa" (love). By this authors generally meant romantic love, which nineteenth century Bengalis most often saw as a foreign idea, imported from the West, and one particularly dangerous to the needs and demands of the extended family unit. Writers often emphasized the antisocial aspects of this kind of love. "It is obvious," says the author of Bangali Bou

...that modern women are ignorant of their family duties; instead they only learn about love and act according to their own wishes (Gupta 1885:preface).

The "wife" in Grha Lakshmi would have agreed. "Now because of this [love between husband and wife]," she says, "we can see after marriage a separation begins. So the mother for this reason will almost quarrel, even with the son" (Raychaudhuri 1887:11). Another tactic, one taken by the author of Songini was to redefine "love" to include more socially sanctioned and family oriented feelings (Pal 1884:10-13).

On one issue alone all the texts were in agreement; the issue of literacy for women. Texts might disagree on what women should wear or at what age they should be married or educated, or even about the mode and substance of that education, but they were unanimous that women should learn to read.

Opposition to the idea of literacy came from orthodox Hinduism which forbade literacy for women threatening that women who learned to read would become widows. Nevertheless by the late nineteenth century, Western educated Bengali men--including the authors of these texts--wanted wives who could read and write, at least in Bengali if not in English and they worried (as did Indian men in general) about British criticisms that the conditions in which Indian women existed were backward and barbaric. Almost every author includes a chapter on lekhapora (writing and reading) or "education" in his book. Even a conservative text like Bangali Bou, which opposed "outside" or "higher" education, supported the idea that women should have some kind of education, and certainly that they should be literate (Gupta 1885).

To the extent, then, that all authors argued for the necessity of women's literacy, it would seem all were self-consciously committed to at least some change in the roles women played in Bengali society. Disagreements might exist among authors on the extent and speed of these changes but not as to whether change itself was necessary. But as we move on to a more detailed examination of two chapters of one of these texts, Grha Lakshmi, we will see that the authors were not only in disagreement with each other about the nature and extent to which women's roles must change, but they were also--assuming that this text is a representative guide--in considerable disagreement with themselves over this same issue. Thus, the author of Grha Lakshmi, in one context, speeds forward by moving women (and men) on toward roles appropriate to a romantic and individually oriented future, though in most other contexts he pulls back from this vision, reasserting the older, more orthodox roles and relationships of Bengal's indigenous past.

The "Lakshmi of the House"

The 1887 edition of Grha Lakshmi sets out the defining features of women's roles in the context of two contradictory chapters: one on the relations between husbands and wives and the second on the need for literacy. These chapters--"Husband and Wife" and "Writing/Reading"--were similar to sections in many other texts for women and a close reading of this one text, then, may give us insight into the problems authors faced in their attempts to redefine the place of women in Bengali society.

The author of Grha Lakshmi, Girijaprasann Raychaudhuri, was born in 1862 into a Boidyo family in Barisal district and attended City College School in Calcutta and later Presidency College. He became a lawyer, practicing in the Calcutta High Court, and a writer. At the time of his death in 1899 he had written six books, three works of criticism on the novelist Bankim Chandra Chatterji and three works of advice for women. The three books for women were Grha Lakshmi in two editions, Hitokotha (Beneficial Words), and the more fictional Dompatir Potralap (The Letters and Conversations of a Husband and Wife) (Vidyalankar 1938:372; Sengupta 1976:121).⁹

Grha Lakshmi, though not the most popular of the texts for women, did come out in a second edition. (The most popular text, Conversations with the Wife by Dhirendranath Pal, was issued in nine editions between 1880 and 1909.) In sectarian terms the author of Grha Lakshmi was located somewhat to the right of center among the texts on women's conduct. A follower of Bankim Chandra, he was more conservative than most Brahma authors yet less conservative than the author of Bangali Bou (Gupta 1885). Further his choice of a title, with its deliberate evocation of images of the "Lakshmi of the House"--the virtuous traditional wife who brings prosperity to her husband's family--may indicate a desire for this text to be seen within a traditional rather than reforming context.

The Intimacy of Literacy

In "Writing/Reading," however, the author, moving directly into an argument for literacy, offers a variety of reasons why women should learn to read. They should be able, he says, to reproduce their own letters to

husbands away at college or work. They should be able to keep household accounts and count and add without error; then the husband coming home after "the whole day sweating, doing the work of the office" can be released from these tasks (Raychaudhuri 1887:14). They should be educated for the joy of education, to learn about the world--"where, when, what is happening," the husband exclaims enthusiastically, "from the daily newspaper you can know that while sitting in your own room" (Raychaudhuri 1887:15). Finally, women should know how to read and write so they can pass this knowledge on to their children. The husband says,

Look...you don't want to write and read from fear of your mother. Later, again, perhaps your descendants won't want to write and read from fear of their mother....If the mother gains an education the descendants can become educated in a way that they could not be [if they were educated] by a thousand gurus....(Raychaudhuri 1887:16).

Here we can see the impact of newly arisen conditions in the world of British India. This was a world of office work, travel away from home, newspapers, and a complex educational system in which one's children would have to be able to negotiate. Ambitious Western educated boys expected to spend time at college or at work separated from the family home. They wanted wives who could cope with and help them cope with these new conditions.

But these arguments were addressed to women who only half lived in this modern world, and the more traditional context of their world made literacy largely irrelevant. Thus the wife is able in this text to reject each of her husband's arguments. She would learn to read and write, she says, but "auntie says 'Girls do not read. If they read doesn't it happen that they become widows?'" (Raychaudhuri 1887:13). In any case, she continues that women already keep the household accounts. The elder women of the household do it--doesn't her husband think they do them properly? As for the need to write letters--how long will they be separated, she asks, that she would need this knowledge? Besides, writing and reading are necessary only for those who work outside the house. "Ah!" she says, "will the wife, wearing pantaloons and a loose robe [office clothing] go for one half day to the office?" (Raychaudhuri 1887:14)

The author of Grha Lakshmi was not the only writer to have difficulty constructing a convincing argument for literacy. Another text, Strir Prati Syamir Upadesh (A Husband's Advice to His Wife), also illustrates this problem. "Suppose," says the husband in that text, that one day "Mother, younger brother's wife and elder brother's wife had gone to Tarakeshor in the morning and only you and I remained at home." And he, the husband says, has a terrible fever.

My younger brother Bipin writes a letter [from school] saying "Elder brother, I've come and forgotten my book. Please send the book quickly. On Wednesday my exams will begin." As I [plan to] send the book, I have wrapped it in paper, but so much fever strikes me that I am completely bedridden. I have stamps in a box, but you [the wife] not knowing how to write and read, couldn't write the address. Bipin doesn't get the book; his examination is unsuccessful. The family is in great danger (Mitra 1884:1).

For men in the wealthier circumstances of extended family life, it was not easy to find solid reasons for a wife to become literate. Large families and the more traditional circumstances of women's lives obviated, to some extent, the need for literacy. Only by sending the elders out of the house and becoming incapacitated by fever could the protagonist make his point. Under normal circumstances if one's husband was away there was always someone, as the Grha Lakshmi wife points out, who could be flattered into writing or reading a letter.

In "Writing/Reading" it is only the husband's final argument, that education will make her a better mother, which overcomes the wife's reluctance. Yet more convincing than the explicit arguments which lead to her conversion are the implicit suggestions that have accompanied them. For literacy, the text implies, will enable the wife to have a different, more intimate, and more romantic relationship with her husband. Education will enable her to share his life more fully. In fact, education is a wife's duty because "in the family," the husband says, "...the wife is the husband's friend in everything....she is the one who gives the husband help regarding every matter...." (Raychaudhuri 1887:14). Literacy will not only make the wife a better friend to her husband, but it will also enable husband and wife to communicate in a more intimate, direct manner. The wife who learns to read will share, the text implies, the secret thoughts of her husband. The husband says,

Soroj, don't you see how much fault there is in not learning writing and reading? I will write letters to you, but you can't read. Certain others will read the letters and for this reason I will not be able to write all the thoughts in my mind. Perhaps I will become uneasy for news of you. You, flattering some person [to write]-- then if you can, on the last day of the month you will give one little letter; that letter another will write; certainly I will not be able to learn all thoughts through him (Raychaudhuri 1887:13).

All the things he has told her on previous visits will become part of an exclusive bond between them. It is implied that the illiterate wife may even be rejecting this bond. "When I come I tell you so much," the husband says, "You dont pay any heed" (Raychaudhuri 1887:13).

Finally in a long sequence at the end of the chapter the husband "dreams" of what it will be like when his wife has learned to read and write:

"You don't know," he tells her, "on the day that I get the first letter written by your hand, how great my pleasure will be. Today after so many days you have said, 'I will learn writing and reading.' How can I explain what pleasure this has given me? Just now, as if I am dreaming, you have sat down to write a letter to me. In writing the first letter how much shyness comes, how many things are suddenly torn up. In the end, a single page having been written, you have it sent to me. I, as I read that page, one time, two times, how many times--reading, no other wish exists to be fulfilled.

Again, as if I am dreaming, you sitting in front of me reading very slowly one part of Betal. Your hair is flying, blowing suddenly

over your face. Slowly, slowly, your two lips are moving. With insatiable eyes I am looking at them, seeing them. The world, the family--to me all seem empty, like the sky. All my senses enter my eyes to see and see again that unequalled sight; [It is] as if I am attaining heavenly bliss. Ah Ha! Will such a day happen?" (Raychaudhuri 1887:17)

In the husband's "dream" he and the wife are alone in the world. The focus of all his attention is the wife; she is the sole object of his "insatiable" eyes. Neither the world nor the family come between husband and wife, and only his relationship with her has significance. The intense, romantic relationship imagined in this chapter was, one suspects, equally attractive to the young girls for whom the text was intended and to the twenty-two year old author who wrote the book.

This exclusive and intimate bond takes on particular significance when contrasted with the explicit message of the rest of the text. In other chapters the author condemns just this romantic and intimate love relationship which is implied in the context of a discussion of literacy, a relationship already explicitly rejected as selfish, foolish, and undesirable in the earlier chapter, "Husband and Wife."

"Love" Versus Family

In "Husband and Wife" (the first chapter of Grha Lakshmi) the author defines the primary responsibility of both wife and husband as their duty to the family. It is true that husband and wife are intimately bound together. Each is considered half the body of the other. But this "householder" stage of their lives:

...is not for the happiness of individuals, it is not for the enjoyment of sensual pleasures; it is not for the glory of fame. The stage of the householder is for the observance of duty [dharma], for doing good to others (Raychaudhuri 1887:7).

The wife only imperfectly understands the meaning of this. Asked to describe the "duties" which husband and wife owe each other, she puts forward a description of romantic and exclusive love:

"Both [she says] will love [bhalobasibe] each other; whatever thought is in one's mind that he or she will tell to the other; in the happiness of one will be the happiness of the other. In the sorrow of one will be the sorrow of the other--mutually they will try to increase the happiness of each other--" (Raychaudhuri 1887:7).

"Stop!" says the husband, "I don't want to hear any more."

An argument follows about the purpose of marriage and love in which the husband argues bitterly against a romantic or in any way exclusive relation between husband and wife. Husband and wife, says the husband, have a mutual obligation to support each other's household duty and to restrain any bad instincts in each other.

Wife: "And what I said [about love], that's nothing? Won't they mutually love each other?"

Husband: "Certainly they will love."

Wife: "Certainly they will love! Was that such a little matter? What has happened to you today?"

Husband: "Nothing. Calm down a little and listen. I can explain everything. And in what I am saying there is even something about love" (Raychaudhuri 1887:8).

"These days," the husband says with disapproval,

"...girls have only one mania; day and night thinking only 'love, love' [bhalobasa] they are unstable! There is no big news about love. It is only a trick with words. If you love, not talking a lot about good 'love,' not making childish demands, doesn't love happen anyway? Look at the people of ancient times. You who are so impatient, talking about 'love,' 'love'--if they came here, they wouldn't be able to understand even [so much as] the purpose of this talk. But because of that did they love less or did they find less love?" (Raychaudhuri 1887:8-9).

Love, like hunger or thirst, is an instinct nourished by good conduct. If a husband and wife help each other to accomplish the purpose of their marriage--if they become the helpers of each others' "duty and work"--then love occurs naturally. Then, "the husband has to love the wife; even if this is not taught, it happens" (Raychaudhuri 1887:10).

But the other kind of love, says the husband, the kind currently talked about, "there is a need to educate about that."

...it is quite often seen that girls from childhood sit and begin to talk about the aim of marriage. Repeating 'love' 'love,' in the end like a character in a novel some, perhaps, go mad. Their minds are interested in nothing else. Only the love of a husband becomes suddenly as if it were the aim of life. In this there is harm, both to them and to the husbands. [If] the husband thinks the wife is his all [and] the wife thinks the husband is her all, [then] household duty goes all to hell. Family duty goes all to hell. Only two people, sitting face to face, night and day, pass their time (Raychaudhuri 1887:11).

Neither the husband nor the wife, then, may live only for their own love and happiness. Where "Writing/Reading" urges women to become literate and implies that a new kind of relationship with their husbands awaits them when they do, "Husband and Wife" forbids any couple to live only for each other. Bhalobasa (romantic, exclusive love) is condemned as trivial and selfish. Family, household, and duty all take precedence over personal happiness, personal choice, or mere "love." Otherwise,

...if the husband and wife only mutually love each other that would not be enough; if they are only mutually searching for the happiness

of each other, that would not be enough--the Hindu wife has to be the co-practiser-of-duty of the Hindu husband, the one who, with her husband practices virtue. Otherwise don't you talk about a kind of love in which the husband's duty becomes the loss of his work? Don't you talk about a kind of search for happiness in which the husband's future fruit becomes sorrow?

"Love is certainly a good thing," the husband says, concluding his restatement of an older, orthodox position. "The search for happiness is certainly a good thing. "But you don't understand these things well. That is why you have to be given education in this way." (Raychaudhuri 1887:12)

Other chapters in Grha Lakshmi echo the same themes and show how isolated the implication of exclusivity and romance in the chapter on literacy are. In "In-laws' House" a great emphasis is placed on the necessity of avoiding quarrels with in-laws. It is the wife's responsibility to subordinate personal feelings to the greater demand of family tranquility.

There is no more ill-fated husband than the husband of a malicious wife. In the house where there is always envy, malice, competition, mutual bad-feelings, always quarrels, grumbling--in that house Lokkhi does not stay (Raychaudhuri 1887:34).

In the chapter "Husband Going Abroad" the wife is discouraged from asking to accompany her husband when he goes away from home to work or school. Her departure might disrupt and damage the family. Her obligation is not only to fulfill her own familial obligations but also to help the husband to do the same. "This then is the work of women," says the husband in conclusion:

"It is necessary [that they] encourage the husband [to do] his duty and work and to prevent [him from neglecting] his duty. To cause [the husband] to fall into danger for her own happiness is the work of a bad woman (Raychaudhuri 1887:Chap.6).

Contradictory Roles for Women

Grha Lakshmi offers its readers two contradictory roles for women: one explicit, one implicit. The first, defined by the need to subordinate personal wishes and desires to family obligations, is consciously articulated and defended. The second, inspired by the fantasy of a romantic and exclusive love relationship, is merely (not deliberately) implied. The two roles--that of educated helpmate and dutiful daughter-in-law--are presented without acknowledging their contradictions, and to some extent the separate contexts out of which they arise helps the author to do this. In the chapters on traditional subjects--in "Husband and Wife" for example, or "In-laws' House"--the boundaries within which the author works are familiar to him. He is in the world of the "grho-lokkhi," the traditional world of extended families, social duties, and the authority of elders. His ideas easily shape themselves to fit a context set by older indigenous patterns.

But the context of the chapter on literacy is different. This is a subject surrounded by Western criticisms of Indian society which were made necessary, in fact, by the new conditions of life in British India. Even the

arguments for literacy offered by the husband (as we have seen) presuppose a world changed by the Western presence--just as the wife's answers assume more traditional surroundings. The context of the discussion of literacy, then, is far from traditional; in fact, it is Western in origin and subtly shaped by Western images and values. "Literacy" here stands for more than the ability to read and write a language. It represents an adaptation to the newer cultural order, to the culturally mixed world of British India. The subject itself carries these connotations and--whether the author consciously recognizes this or not--the author adapts his view of husband-and-wife relations to fit this new context.

Although Girijaprosann Raychaudhuri identifies the desire for bhalobasa as a modern obsession (most nineteenth century Bengalis would have agreed as well), the conflict between romantic love and family duty (dharma) was not unique to the nineteenth century. Even the Hindu god Rama had to abandon his wife Sita when his love for her conflicted with his social and religious obligations. And Monisha Roy, in a modern study, notes the conflicting desires of Bengali women for a romantic lover, on the one hand, and a responsible husband on the other and suggests that these images had traditional counterparts in the opposing characters of two major Bengali gods: Krishna, the romantic boy-lover and Shiva, the devoted husband and consummate ascetic (Roy 1972:41-42).

Still, the ambivalence of the Grha Lakshmi text shows us two sides of the roles being imagined for Bengali women by Western educated men like Raychudhuri. On the one hand, is the issue of the reform of orthodox conditions: all the authors of these texts wanted women to become literate. Although there could be great differences in the conditions under which they imagined literate women living, all saw some kind of education as a good thing. Responding to the changes brought into their own lives, by British rule, all could imagine the need for wives who would also be prepared to adapt to these changes.

Similarly, "advice for women" authors also seem eager to imagine themselves (as husbands) coming into more dyadic relations with their wives--or, at least, establishing a firmer authority over wives within the confines of the extended family. Reading these women's advice books against twentieth century anthropological accounts, one is struck by the degree of fantasy in the authors' imagined relationship between husbands and wives. Even in the twentieth century evidence is convincing that extended family rules and structures placed considerable distance between young couples. Young husbands and wives could spend time together only at night; during the day they were obliged by custom to ignore each other's presence. Nevertheless authors of "advice to women" texts have little difficulty imagining themselves tutoring, controlling, and shaping the lives of their wives. The frame story of these books presupposes a wife willing to listen while her husband lectures her on proper behavior and conduct, and in the prefaces these authors urge husbands to begin educating their wives from the "first day" of marriage (Pal 1880:1).

The "story" of young Western educated boys tutoring (or failing to tutor) their wives is one that appears in many contexts and in many regions in India since the nineteenth century and continues to modern times (Borthwick 1984:69; Carstairs 1967:296; Gandhi 1957:13). This eagerness of men to imagine themselves "teachers" of their wives suggests that a significant motive in the

struggle to redefine women's roles in nineteenth century Bengal was the desire of young Western educated husbands to ally themselves with their wives against the power and control of older family members. Changing roles for women in Bengal, then, meant new roles for men also. At least for young husbands, these changes might mean more dyadic relations with wives and greater freedom within the traditional constraints of extended family relationships.

And yet for the author of Grha Lakshmi, the world of romantic love becomes bleak indeed when separated too far from that of the extended family. The terrible emptiness that awaits those who forsake family duties is captured in an early image in the text: Love! love! says the husband, girls will go mad if they continually talk about love--"[If] the husband thinks the wife is his all [and] the wife thinks the husband is her all, [then] household duty goes all to hell. Family duty does all to hell. Only two people, sitting face to face, night and day, pass their time." (Raychaudhuri 1887:11) If the author of Grha Lakshmi fails to reconcile the demands of family duty with a fantasy of romantic love it may also be because he could not imagine life outside of the old family structures. Attracted in certain contexts to Western-style love relationships, and living in a world which demanded adaptation to a new cultural order, he and others like him could still fear a future cutoff from the world of the extended family. One psychologist has suggested that it is family connectedness that lies at the very core of the Indian psyche (Roland 1988:89-127). Indian men and women define themselves primarily in relation to their families and this identification leaves them happiest when fulfilling family obligations and most secure when identifying with the strengths and successes of their family and its members. If this is true, we may understand why loyalties to older family structures persist so strongly even in a text like Grha Lakshmi which attempts to articulate guidelines for social change.

Conclusion

It has often been said that the conservatism of Hindu families comes from the women, and nineteenth century reformers often identified older women in families as their opponents in the effort to alter women's conditions. But one of the curiosities of the Grha Lakshmi text is the way in which, in all but the chapter on literacy, husband and wife switch roles--she arguing for romantic love between husband and wife and he, as we have seen, for more orthodox relations.

In fact, if we accept romantic love (bhalobasa) as a "Western" and "modern" idea (as many nineteenth century authors do), then it is the women in these texts who are the proponents of social change. Women are the advocates of bhalobasa (romantic love)--obsessed with it, as Raychaudhuri argues in Grha Lakshmi, using it as an excuse to follow their own wishes, as the author of Bangali Bou asserts (Raychaudhuri 1887:11; Gupta 1885:preface). Young wives may argue against literacy for fear of social sanctions--"Auntie says 'girls do not read,;" says the Grha Lakshmi wife--but if this text is an accurate guide then young girls, young wives were the forces urging more individualistic and exclusive relationships onto their husbands (Raychaudhuri 1887:13).

If we accept this portrayal of women's concerns as accurate, then it would seem that Bengali women also saw advantages in more dyadic relationships with

their husbands. The agency for the most obvious restrictions on women in nineteenth century society, after all, was not the young husband, but the elders of the extended family. Prohibitions against literacy and restrictions on education and travel outside the home most often came from elders. Indeed, studies of this period show that young Western educated husbands were often agents of the liberation of their wives and insisted on education over family objections, arranging for escapes from more rigid orthodox households (Murshid 1983; Borthwick 1984). It is not surprising then that young girls, far from identifying their husbands as oppressors, saw them as allies; nor would it be surprising if young wives saw the possibility of more exclusive relations with their husbands as an avenue for gaining some release from the controls of family elders.

Two recent studies of nineteenth century Bengali women have presented a curious anomaly; the individual life stories of these women are full of accounts of the bravery and tenacity with which women struggled to become literate, educated, and free of the restrictions of orthodox society (Murshid 1983; Borthwick 1984). Yet both authors are uncomfortable with an analysis (their own) which credits men with the "emancipation" of women in their society; both are disappointed with the failure of women in this period to identify and struggle against a patriarchal society which assigned them to a separate and subordinate sphere.

But the conflict between "love" and family outlined in Grha Lakshmi suggests that women did not identify their own needs against those of their husband's because they may have seen relations with those husbands as crucial to escape another kind of oppression. Certainly as this analysis has shown, we do not need to be unstinting in our praise of the Bengali men who sought to reform women's roles in this period. Their efforts were motivated by their own needs and concerns, and their commitment to the "emancipation" of the women of their society was, at best, ambivalent. But even as we read accounts of some educated Bengali women drinking the water in which their husbands' feet were washed (a traditionally enjoined practice), or of others declaring that they worshiped their husbands as gods, we should consider these accounts with a clear understanding of the choices available to women in this period (Borthwick 1984:147).

High caste Bengali Hindu society had within it two hierarchies of oppression--one of gender and the other of age. Young men in extended families suffered from the age hierarchy and sought to mitigate its effects through the creation of more exclusive relations with their wives. Young women in Bengal, however, suffered under both hierarchies; but because the degree of their oppression within the extended family unit was so much greater than that of their husbands, they were more eager to seek an escape from it. If the portrayal of women in these "advice for women" texts is accurate, dominating but more exclusive relations for young women in nineteenth century Bengal with their husbands may have seemed an acceptable alternative to the boredom and drudgery of an illiterate life restricted to the women's quarters of their in-laws' homes.

Notes

1. Lakshmi is the Hindu goddess worshipped for wealth and good fortune in India. She is especially worshipped by women to bring prosperity to their husbands' homes. "Eight annas" is about three quarters of a rupee, or about six cents at current values.
2. Although the stories of the bratakathas may be traced to episodes in medieval Bengali literature, the printed texts referred to in this paper appeared only in the twentieth century.
3. The earliest printed collections of the bratas listed in the Bengali Catalogue of the National Library in Calcutta were Vipradasa Mukhopadhyaya, Meyeli Brata-Kotha, Calcutta, 1906, and Tarakbhusan Kothakcurnmadi, Sosthyadi Kotha, Murshidabad, 1909. Within the twentieth century, a particular author's version of the stories could be reissued again and again with virtually no changes in the text; Asutos Mukhopadhyay's Meyeder Bratakatha was issued seven times between 1914 and 1931 (Bengal Library 1914:42-43; Mukhopadhyay 1931); the India Office Library's 1926 edition of Asutos Majumdar's Meyder Bratakatha is identical to the 1978 edition by the same author and available on Calcutta streets ten years ago (Majumdar 1926; Majumdar 1978).
4. Meredith Borthwick suggests that the curriculum for women's education was broadly imitative of an English curriculum for girls. The major emphasis of the texts I have looked at is on the maintenance of traditional Indian structures of family life (Borthwick 1984:80-86).
5. The journal is Bango Darshan, founded by Bankim Chandra Chatterjee. The author of Grha Lakshmi wrote three books on Bankim Chandra's novels and was a well known critic of that novelist. (Sengupta 1976:121)
6. In Grha Lakshmi when the wife asks the husband for a piece of English crepe (a popular nineteenth century fabric) the husband explodes: "Chi! Chi! Wearing that is like standing nude...Those women who wear this cloth, fie on them! and to that husband who causes his wife to wear this kind of cloth and exposes her to everyone, truly, truly fie!" (Raychaudhuri 1887:23-24)
7. But then, even among the Brahmos, authors could be quite conservative. Isancandra Basu, author of Stridiger Prati Upadesh, was a student of Rajnarain Bose, a writer for Tattvabodhini Patrika and a member of the most conservative of Brahma sects, the Adi Brahma Samaj (Sengupta 1976:56). His text shows an unusual preoccupation with "chastity." Three separate chapters are devoted to this subject--explaining it, giving the "signs" of it and "preserving" it. A table in the appendix even lists the characteristics which separate the chaste woman from the unchaste prostitute (Basu 1884:70). Reviewing this text for the 1884 Catalogue of Printed Books, an editor noted that the author "inclines towards the orthodox views" on the subjects of women's character, social and domestic obligations, education, and child marriage (Bengal Library 1884:28-29).
8. Most texts were arranged topically, but there were other possibilities. One author divided his work according to the different tasks of a girl's

life cycle with chapters like "Girl," "Housewife," and "Mother" (Pal 1900). Another used the various emotions and had chapters on "Desire," "Devotion," and "Envy of Others" (Dasi 1883). A third proceeded according to living space: "House," "Bedroom," "Kitchen," "Reading Room," "Cowshed," and "Latrine" (Mitra 1890). Texts by Brahma authors had chapters emphasizing the particular reform issues and concerns of those sects. Satyacharan Mitra, a member of Keshub Sen's Brahma sect, had a chapter on widow marriage in his text and several on superstitions: "What is a ghost?" "About sneezing and lizards," and "What is a woman-ghost?" (Mitra 1884). Pratapcandra Majumdar illustrated virtuous and womanly behavior through chapters on "The Character of Manika," "Draupadi," and "Florence Nightingale" (Majumdar 1898).

9. Girijaprasann Raychaudhuri had some help writing the first edition of his text. For that book the first four chapters--"Husband and Wife," "Writing/Reading," "Clothing and Ornamentation," and "In-laws' House"--were written by Haridas Bandyopadhyaya, described by Raychaudhuri as the editor of "Kalpana." In the second edition, the one consulted for this paper, Raychaudhuri rewrote chapter two completely, "Husband and Wife" and says "I have also changed the other writing of Haridas Babu according to my wishes. Therefore," he says, "I am totally responsible for this book." (Raychaudhuri 1887:preface).

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