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## BODY POLITICS IN SECRET SOCIETIES IN PRE - INDEPENDENT BENGAL 1880 – 1930: A STUDY ON ANUSHILAN SAMITI

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### Abstract

The proposed research aims to study body politics through the lens of gender, masculinity, and sexuality in “Revolutionary Secret Societies” that emerged in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal. This study tends to explore the idea of masculinity, sexuality and gender corroborating with the concept of Nationalism. This study also tries to discern the body politics of revolutionary “secret societies” as constructed in the colonial Bengal where representation of women and gender are amiss. Though there was a significance in their lives, representation of women in revolutionary activities was lesser in number in public domain.

**Keywords:** Revolutionary Secret Societies, Colonial Bengal, Body Politics, Gender, Masculinity, Sexuality, Anushilan Samiti.

### Introduction

I have tried to study the body politics through the lens of gender, masculinity and sexuality in the revolutionary secret societies in late 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century colonial Bengal. Anushilan Samiti is one of the primary examples of secret societies. It was an organisation that existed in Bengal during the first three decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Its two arms were the Dhaka Anushilan Samiti centred in Dhaka, and the Jugantar Group centred at Calcutta. Anushilan Samiti was established by Pramathanath Mitra, a barrister from Calcutta on 24<sup>th</sup> March 1902. On the other hand, Dhaka Anushilan Samiti was founded by Pulin Behari Das on November in 1905. It was one of largest associations that engaged largely with revolutionary activities like Jugantar Dal, Suhird Samiti, Swadesh Bandhab Samiti, Jubak Samiti Mandali Sadhana Samaj etc. These associations or groups recruited young boys and men for the same during this period. Firstly, construction of these groups like Anushilan Samiti with ideas of nation and nationalism were linked with discipline and controlling of desires. Secondly celebration of the nation as a mother figure and sacrificing lives for her. Here I try to describe the socio political and cultural behaviour of these societies. There are also the question of masculinity, sexuality and gender corroborating with the concept of nationalism. In this era the nation was considered synonymous with ‘samaj’ where the active participation of women in armed revolution was absent completely<sup>1</sup>.

As these years (1905-1915) had multiple histories which together constituted an extremely complex era, the relations between body politics of secret societies and nationalism were extremely complicated. Bengali bhadrolok recruited only Hindu men. Bengali bhadrolok was so much influenced by western ideas. Anushilan Samiti was also the part of this kind of ideas. Application of ‘samaj’ in the secret societies is insightful to understand how masculinity, sexuality, and gender in ‘revolutionary secret societies’ were framed to dispense ideas on nation and nation building. As mentioned earlier that, till 1914 active participation of women as members in ‘revolutionary secret societies’ were not present. Here Anushilan Samiti also deals with question of masculinity, gender and sexuality.

**Materials and Methods / Framework:** Ishani Mukhpadhyay has shown in her work how women participated in the freedom movement in early 20 century. Her writing is a collection of names and letters of women helping the Bengali revolutionaries to fulfil their mission. But the idea of ‘desher kaj, desher seba or work was linked with masculinity where women were treated as lesser or weaker section of society who cannot be trained for battles of national movement. Sarala Debi Chaudhurani was present when Anushilan Samiti was founded<sup>2</sup>. She helped Anushilan Samiti. Sarala Debi belonged to upper class and cast family of Calcutta<sup>3</sup>. Her active participation in the physical training of men can be seen in isolation as common women were not recruited in any of these groups. Nivedita, was a disciple of Swami Vivekananda, presented the society with a rich collection of ‘Europe revolutionary literature’<sup>4</sup>. Other names of women such as Pritilata Waddedar, Bina Dutta could join these revolutionary activities actively after 1920. But before the first half of the era of armed revolution unmarried women were not actively taking part in it and what was the

<sup>1</sup> Here samaj is referred to the local or regional Bengali Society that constituted the idea of nation through various platforms.

<sup>2</sup> NAI, Home Political A, File no - 63

<sup>3</sup> .Sarkar Sumit, The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903 – 1908, (New Delhi; People’s Publishing House, 1994), 472

<sup>4</sup> Sarkar Sumit, THE Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 472



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turning point where women's participation increased. If the revolutionary societies mushroomed across the Bengal, why active participation of women were so less in numbers? Whereas, the second half in the era of secret societies more number of women joined the movement actively as members of these groups. During this period, they were acting in a masculine framework.

Emergence of such revolutionary groups is well discussed in various historical writings<sup>5</sup>. It is often categorized under the revolutionaries of national movement by historians while the colonial officers have categorized them as terrorist<sup>6</sup>. In another view this groups are connected with the physical culture that appeared in 1860s. Revolutionary association began through the help of leaders belonging to upper cast families mostly. Till the first twenty years of the organizations, name of women is absent. Most of the evidence shows that it was necessary to be married to take part in the revolutionary activities<sup>7</sup>.

### Literature Review

This period (1880- 1904) has been fascinating for many historians due to its historical shifts and junctures in Colonial Indian politics and some of the aspects of Revolutionary era is also covered by them. Mrilini Sinha in her book on colonial masculinity discussed how for the British a Bengali man was masculine enough. She describes how British officials thought about Bengalis as 'lustful', 'bookish', 'effeminate', 'languorous', 'over- serious', with a definite 'lack of discipline'<sup>8</sup>. She magnificently captures the "manly Englishman" and "effeminate Bengali" with illustrations to make sense of masculinity in Bengal during this time concentrating on the role of gender in determining imperial domestic and cultural history<sup>9</sup>. She writes, 'emerging dynamics between colonial and nationalist politics in the 1880s and 1890s in India is best captured in the logic of masculinity'<sup>10</sup>. As the exact opposition of the Victorian fashion of manliness, Bengalis faced the crisis of a stereotyping infused with feminine hyperboles. Even the secret societies in Bengal primarily started with the foundation of akhras or clubs to practice physical exercises such as wrestling, boxing, body building etc. These are the physical space where mentality is built and an exhibition of masculinity is constructed. In her book Colonial Masculinity: The "Manly Englishman" and the Effeminate Bengali" in the Late nineteenth Century, Sinha captures Indian society from 1880s in relation to stereotyping masculinity as power. Her observation on the foundation of national and colonial politics was based on the coming of Ilbert Bill, agitation in native volunteer movement, active participation of natives public administration, and age of consent bill. These four interlinked movements led to a construction of nation building where she argues how 'power was exercised in colonial India among are within the colonisers and colonised'<sup>11</sup>. This contestation of showcasing masculinity as a symbol of power promoted a consciousness with regard to physical fitness. As mentioned before an overarching culture of physical education is noticed since 1860s in Calcutta.

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Andrew Sartori, for instance, he tries to bring out the essence of culture and politics in freedom movement<sup>13</sup>.

Peter Heehs has extensively worked on Anushilan Samiti, where he describes the trajectory of organization since its origins<sup>14</sup>. He views Anushilan Samiti as a brain child of Aurobindo Ghosh who formulated a plan of establishing a revolutionary society in Calcutta<sup>15</sup>.

<sup>5</sup> Historian such as Peter Heehs, Sumit Sarkar, Amalendu De, Sartori many more has worked on this specific time period.

<sup>6</sup> Colonial reports prove that these 'revolutionary secret societies' were banned as they were 'dangerous' to the society. Home political proceeding of January, March, April, July, October and December in 1909 – 1911.

<sup>7</sup> As the biographies, autobiographies of various revolutionaries and colonial documents and literary sources talk about 'boudi' or sister in laws, pishima, thakuma, kakima or aunties and grandmothers with regard to women participants in the revolutionary activities. They were not given membership till 1914 openly. They have always been treated as 'help'.

<sup>8</sup> Sinha Mrinalini, Colonial Masculinity, The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the late Nineteenth Century (New York; Manchester University Press. 1995) Introduction,

<sup>9</sup> Sinha Mrinalini, Colonial Masculinity, Introduction

<sup>10</sup> Sinha Mrinalini Colonial Masculinity, Introduction.

<sup>11</sup> Sinha Mrinalini, Colonial Masculinity, 1.

<sup>12</sup> Rosselli "The Self Image of Effeteness".

<sup>13</sup> Sartori Andrew, Bengal in Global concept History, 90-99,

<sup>14</sup> Heehs Peter, The Bomb in Bengal, The Rise of Revolutionary Terrorism in India 1900- 1910 (New Delhi; Oxford University press, 2004

<sup>15</sup> Heehs Peter, Bomb in Bengal.



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Dr Amiya kumar Samanta has collected through official records such as notes, manuscripts or personal accounts of numbers of secret societies that mushroomed throughout the Bengal during this ‘swadeshi movement’. This will also elaborate the question of inclusion of women as members of “revolutionary secret societies”.

### Methodology

Here I would like to mention one Bengali book edited by Amalendu De on Anushilan Samiti. This book has covered the history of Anushilan Samiti since its origin. There are many others scholars like Dr. Ishita Chattopadhyay, Gautam Basu, Dr. Ananda Bhattacharjya, Dr. Parthashankha Majumder, Dr. Ishani Mukhopadhyay, Dr. Amalendu De, Girish Chandra Maiti and Dr. Keka Dutta Roy have enriched this book by their writings. This does not only give an insight to Anushilan Samiti but also helps to understand the socio-political structure of ‘revolutionary era’. Where the role of a woman was defined by patriarchal social structure, she needs to be protected like a material property. Charu Gupta discusses the question of sexuality and gender in 1920 to 1930 colonial U.P. She explores the ‘domestic domain’ as well as ‘public domain’. Other hand Tanika Sarkar argues how women were considered as ‘ideal’ one in 19<sup>th</sup> century where her role is defined to perfection in house hold chores or sector by Hindu men to use her as a political resource<sup>16</sup>. With the coming of ‘revolutionary secret societies’ women Gods were worshipped as the Goddess is considered as a symbol of ‘shakti’. At the same time women were considered as a ‘problem’ with regard to their inclusion or active participation in the association. Praffulla Ranjan Dasgupta a member of Anushilan Samiti writes that an imaginary fear was prevailed in his mind whenever inclusion of women come in the path of forwarding revolutionary activities<sup>17</sup>. Many vernacular literatures described women as the ‘trouble maker’ or a reason for ‘distraction’. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s Anandamath, Debi Choudhurani, Rabindranath Tagore’s Ghore Baire were the contemporary literature that enable the revolutionaries to have perspectives on gender and masculinity. Revolutionaries and members of secret societies such as Pulin Bihari Das’s autobiography, Amar Jiban Kahini, Trailokyanath Chakrabarty’s Jele Trish Bachar O Pak Bharater Swadhinata Sangram, Hemchandra Kanungo’s Banglay Biplab Procheta can be considered as firsthand accounts through which a thorough discussion on their ideas on body politics can be drawn.

There were several causes of the turning point of women participation in the ‘secret societies’ in revolutionary movement with the coming of Gandhi, a huge population was attracted and got connected to the revolutionary movement. Apart from its education played a major role. With the coming of different education bill and modernity people were being impacted. They started taking apart. Maybe they wanted to join the movement before but their acceptance was dependent on the men or leaders if the groups who were men.

**Conclusion:** I have focused on Anushilan Samiti as an example and how organisational politics in such ‘secret societies’ was structured in colonial Bengal. This revolutionary contingent appeared in the public domain accommodating Hindu young boys and men, providing a space for physical exercise. The culture of practicing different sports was available to only men. Membership was given by the recruiters or leaders and a massive number of adolescent boys came under them to fight for country. From the archival records we get many lists with names of boys aged 9 – 12 or 13 but a single girl. As it is established that the role of women was considered as visibly invisible from the specific political space it is important to understand the everyday life of a woman during this period. I have tried to study the idea behind such construction of body politics and its application in the socio-political domain in colonial Bengal.

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<sup>16</sup> Sarkar Tanika, The Hindu Wife and the Hindu Nation: Domesticity and Nationalism in Nineteenth Century Bengal ,200 – 215.

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