

Reading Together: “Communitarian Reading” and Women Readers in Colonial Bengal

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In this article, I seek to consider this practice of “communitarian” reading—reading aloud, reading together—as a defining aspect of the cultures of reading among Bengali women in the nineteenth century. I wish to contest the privileging of “silent” reading as a “modern” mode of reading and the subsequent celebration of the protean incorporeality of the “silent” reader, in the works of prominent scholars of readership, arguing that the privileging of “silent” reading as the predominant “modern” mode of reading does not offer a sufficient framework for the study of reading practices of the “historical” “woman reader” in the age of colonial “modernity” in a terrain such as that of Bengal. The article thus engages with alternate frameworks of considering the practice of reading aloud, drawing upon diverse feminist scholarship on practices of reading to argue in favor of considering the practice of “communitarian” reading as a form of female sociality for Bengali women in the nineteenth century, at a time when public spaces remained largely inaccessible to women.

Far from its somber beginnings with Nathanael Brassey Halhed’s *A Grammar of the Bengali Language* (1778), and thereafter at the Serampore Mission Press in 1800 with the publication of the *Bengali New Testament*, the world of the Bengali language in print in colonial Bengal (a province in British-governed India) expanded to a robust publishing industry by the end of the nineteenth century (Chakravorty and Gupta 2004; Ghosh 2006; Chakravorty and Gupta 2008). This growth in print and the emergence of a Bengali middle class—the so-called Bengali *bhadralok*—“with political ambition” through a “complicated process of migration, and economic and socio-spatial restructuring that occurred in the second half of the nineteenth century” (Chattopadhyay 2005, 14) would lead to a consequent emergence of a vocal public sphere (Chattopadhyay 2005). Apart from colonial institutions such as the university and the bureaucracy, and missionary-run enterprises like the aforementioned Serampore Mission Press, that were integral to the opening up of this public sphere, the educated Bengali middle classes produced “an entire institutional network of printing

Hypatia vol. 32, no. 3 (Summer 2017) © by Hypatia, Inc.

presses, publishing houses, newspapers, magazines, and literary societies . . . *outside* the purview of the state and the European missionaries” (Chatterjee 1993, 7). The so-called enlightened *bhadralok*, keen to transform the Bengali language into a language befitting the articulations of a modern society, forged a “cultural project” (9) to give shape to this modern language, and what followed was a rapid proliferation of a body of literature—from novels and advice manuals to street literature¹ deemed obscene—with a readership well outside the bounds of Calcutta (the erstwhile capital of British-governed India). It also gave rise to a thriving public sphere that debated myriad things from politics to social reform, from culture to the condition and education of Bengali middle-class women, the *bhadramahila*.

The undeniable intellectual influence of the Bengali *bhadralok* in this public sphere, however, was not a uniform, uncontested one. Sumanta Banerjee has analyzed the various forms of urban folk culture that proliferated in the newly urbanized colonial capital, and the impact of the “cultural project” of Bengali modernity upon the same (Banerjee 1990). Anindita Ghosh—in her exploration of the much-maligned street literature patronized by the “polluting ‘others’ [of the modern guardians of culture],” that is to say “women, the lower middle classes, and poor Muslims”—has argued that “the written word” had become “an essential tool for ordering power relations in the cultural sphere,” one that made for anxious policing of boundaries between respectable and obscene literature and “contesting” literary cultures (Ghosh 2006, 5). This alignment of the *bhadramahila* with the less-than-respectable producers and readers of “street literature,” the “contesting” other to the project of *becoming* modern, is a significant one, as is the observation that women’s patronage kept a flourishing sub-genre of what Ghosh dubs “women’s literature” in circulation (178). Judith E. Walsh, in her study of advice literature composed for women, has highlighted the ironies of a sub-genre of literature that sought the patronage of the aforementioned female readers even as it cautioned them, among other things, on the dangers of injudicious reading (Walsh 2004). This gendered world of readership in nineteenth-century Bengal is the concern of this article.

A considerable body of work devoted to women in nineteenth-century Bengal concentrates on the proliferation of women’s education and the intense debate in the public sphere over the same (Murshid 1983; Borthwick 1984; Chakrabarty 1995; Walsh 2004). Although women writers of the period have garnered increasing scholarly attention (Sarkar 2001; Dey 2010), studies in readership and women’s participation in book production and circulation remain scarce in the emerging field of book history in India (Sen 1984/2008; Darnton 2001; Orsini 2001; Darton 2002; Chakravorty and Gupta 2004; Ghosh 2004; 2006; Stark 2007; Chakravorty and Gupta 2008). It is important to note, as Partha Chatterjee has observed, that women’s education gained cultural legitimacy in colonial Bengal only with the rise of print capitalism and the establishment of institutions of secondary education that legitimized modern Bengali language and literature outside the direct purview of the colonial state, in a domain governed by the *bhadralok* (Chatterjee 1993). Women’s access to the public sphere, and indeed, to public institutions such as the theater, remained anxiously policed and curtailed, even as women’s roles and responsibilities in the

domestic sphere were eulogized to construct the idealized figure of the *grihalakshmi* or the goddess of the household (Chatterjee 1993; Chakrabarty 2000). Women, as *objects* of reform on the part of the colonial state *and* the modern Bengali *bhadralok*, could not be “allowed” to “navigate the world of knowledge, unchaperoned” (Ghosh 2006, 25). It is in this light that this article considers women’s reading practices in colonial Bengal, addressing in particular the practice of reading aloud in the *antahpur* (the inner or the domestic sphere), often in the company of others—reading *together*. This article will argue, drawing upon texts from the period, that the practice of social or “communitarian reading” (Chartier 1994, 21) formed a defining aspect of the cultures of reading among Bengali women at the time—a form of female sociality that opens up different possibilities for women’s participation in the public sphere in colonial Bengal. The article will further argue that the seeming absence of active resistance to patriarchal norms that confined the Bengali *bhadramahila* to the domestic sphere need not imply that there was no attempt on the part of women to negotiate such stipulations, that this very sociality, often clandestine in nature, enables us to consider women’s negotiations with the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

In order to do so, this article will, first, contextualize its foregrounding of cultures of reading in the domestic sphere in the light of feminist scholarship of South Asia and the necessity of reinscribing women’s voices in history. The article will emphasize the “social nature of reading” (Long 2003, 2), made visible by the practice of “communitarian reading.” It will argue in favor of reframing our conceptualization of the practices of reading, wherein silent/solitary reading is granted a certain privileged theoretical position (Certeau 1984; Flint 1993). The argument for this reconceptualization is intended to offer a sufficient framework for the consideration of the reading practices of historical readers in Bengal at the time of colonial modernity. Following this, the article will delve into the historical terrain of nineteenth-century Bengal, looking into narratives from the period that offer glimpses into the elusive reading cultures of the *antahpur* such that it is possible to reorient contemporary theorizations of women’s participation in the public sphere while seemingly excluded from its space.

READING CULTURE

Feminist “rewritings” of women’s history in South Asia have placed increasing importance on women’s narratives. In the words of Chandra Talpade Mohanty, “[feminist] analysis has always recognized the centrality of rewriting and remembering history,” as it is “a process which is significant not merely as a corrective to the gaps, erasures, and misunderstandings of hegemonic masculinist history, but because the very practice of remembering and rewriting leads to the formation of politicized consciousness and self-identity” (Mohanty 1991, 34). Writing—or rather, women’s traditions of storytelling—seen as the “context through which new political identities are forged” and “a space for struggle and contestation about reality itself” (34), has been considered crucial to this process of feminist rewriting, dismantling literary canons and reinscribing women’s voices as testimony for lived experience. Even as anthologies of women’s

narratives—written and oral—(Tharu and Lalita 1991; 1993; Dharmarajan 2004; Zaidi 2015) set about the task of this necessary re-inscription, contemporary feminist scholarship has sought to problematize the same (Spivak 1988; Suleri 1992; Mani 1998; Das 2007), asking questions about voice and subjecthood.

Gayatri Spivak's now famous question, "Can the subaltern speak?," has in many ways set the tone for this questioning (Spivak 1988, 90). Spivak elaborates on the problems of locating the "woman-in-imperialism" (102)—the colonized (Hindu) female subject in nineteenth-century India—and her "historically muted" (91) voice, raising a series of methodological concerns about representing the subaltern woman's "voice-consciousness," systematically critiquing academic assumptions about making visible a "pure form of [subaltern] consciousness" (81), unmediated by ideology. Veena Das's ethnographic forays into the lives of the survivors of the communal riots of 1947 (in Punjab) and 1984 (in Delhi) further complicates this question of women's voices as she points out that "voice is not identical to speech; nor does it stand in opposition to writing" (Das 2007, 8). Probing into the insidious world of rumors and the callousness of state authorities that accompanied the violence, Das speaks of the "threat" of "words animated by some other voice"—an act of what she terms "forgery." The task of "recovering" the voices of such survivors, for Das, demands a consideration of their "everyday life" and its "eventfulness," wherein "[female survivors of such violence] give an expression to their violation" (53).

This mode of questioning is pertinent to this article, concerned as it is with women's eventful everydays in nineteenth-century Bengal. Reading, as a practice, firmly falls in the domain of those practices of everyday life that resist being seen, "flexible and adjusted to perpetual mutation" (Certeau 1984, 41); a practice that nonetheless merits, in nineteenth-century Bengal, volumes cautioning women about the dangers of the same (Walsh 2004). Foregrounding the practice of reading, this article seeks to delve into the manner in which Bengali women at the time negotiated regarding their exclusion from public spaces and conditional access to the public sphere. This negotiation, as the article will point out in its consideration of the specific circumstances of nineteenth-century Bengal, did not necessarily take the shape of explicit condemnation, or of strident, activist demands for inclusion. In a social structure with deeply embedded notions of a woman's place within the domestic sphere, Bengali women's negotiating the limits of acceptable conduct often involved engaging in forms of being social woven into the fabric of their everyday lives. The delicate task of reinscribing women's voices in feminist historiography therefore cannot but entail delving into the ordinary, wherein "self-creation is a careful putting together of life" (Das 2007, 218).

CULTURES OF READING

Roger Chartier's influential analysis of the cultures of reading and reading communities in France in the period between the fifteenth and eighteenth centuries identifies three "fundamental cleavages" that distinguish modern reading practices from the

nonmodern: first, between reading aloud and silent, visual reading; second, between a “reverential” reading of a limited number of texts and a voracious, irreverent reading of a wide variety of texts; and third, between a “private, cloistered, solitary reading,” and “the collective reading—both disciplined and rebellious—of communitarian spaces” (Chartier 1994, 17). Chartier does not hold these cleavages as absolute; indeed, he questions an uncritical chronology of transition from nonmodern cultures of reading to the modern as he points out that these transformations did not occur at a uniform pace. Chartier thus makes a case for a measured approach to understanding the use of the printed book in early modern France, addressing the various facets of the many representations of the act of reading. Chartier asks for a careful negotiation between the dichotomies of “the reading of a text and the reading of an image,” of “literate reading and hesitant reading,” of “intimate reading and communitarian reading” (21).

READING ALOUD

Chartier’s appeal for directing theoretical attention toward communities of readers and diverse cultures of reading, tied as it is to the specific historical and geographical terrains of early modern France, is of immense relevance to this article. This article draws upon two important formulations of Chartier’s analysis, the first of which lies in “acknowledging the importance and the diversity of reading aloud” (Chartier 1994, 20). The article contends that the celebratory myth of the disembodied silent reader (see Certeau 1984), autonomous in her mind’s own terrain, is seductive, but it is also one that runs the risk of comfortably dismissing the material and lived reality of the actual reader (Rose 1993), tied to a corporeal body and its oddities and to a specific geographical location. The discourse on the dangers of feminine reading practices in nineteenth-century Bengal is intimately associated with the bodies of actual or historical readers, their alleged unwillingness to work and to employ their physical bodies in a manner befitting the custodians of respectable households (Chakrabarty 2000; Walsh 2004; 2005). Even as the so-called domestic goddess undertakes her labor as a labor of love, her blood and sweat and hunger glorified and fetishized in the language of sacrifice (Sangari 1993), cautionary tales of the “passive consumption” of books produce a subject that is all body. The disruptive bodies of women readers hover like specters in narratives of the time, pitching into fits of feminine hysterics, dabbling in dangerous discourses of romantic/erotic love, and asserting, through their unfeminine laziness, an autonomy that is rooted in the corporeal body and its desire to rest. If we are to investigate the possibilities of autonomy of the reader, it is imperative that we frame the practice of reading aloud, with its visible, undeniable ties to the corporeal body *not* in “opposition” to that of silent or visual reading, but in conjunction with the same, as aspects of a practice that cannot be divorced from the bodies of those who practice it or the spaces they practice in.

Such framing also takes into account varying levels of literacy and access to the “social infrastructure of reading” (Long 2003, 8–9), that is to say, the process of

socialization into reading through formal and informal means, as well as the physical infrastructure invested in reading in the shape of classrooms, libraries (public and personal), dissemination and circulation of reading material, and so on. Elizabeth McHenry's reconstruction of African American reading cultures and practices in the nineteenth century is instructive in this regard, wherein she speaks of the "oral literacy" of unlettered African American readers—women readers in particular—at the time. McHenry's African American readers often had access to texts only through reading aloud, in spaces such as reading societies that "endorsed a broader notion of oral literacy that did not valorize the power of formal or individualized literacy over communal knowledge" (McHenry 2002, 13). The mediation of the voice and oralization for the sake of comprehension, in circumstances such as this, is not a choice but a *necessary* condition of participation. The relegation of reading aloud to the realm of the nonmodern—"a practice that has largely been lost" (Chartier 1994, 21)—thus does not allow for an adequate understanding of reading practices in the wake of colonial modernity, even more so when the actual readers under consideration belong to sections of the society historically deprived of the privilege of being modern.

READING TOGETHER

The second formulation that this article derives from Chartier's analysis is his call to locate the diverse facets of "the collective reading—both disciplined and rebellious—of communitarian spaces," or, very simply, the practice of "communitarian reading." It should be made clear that the term *community* herein does not refer to a primeval, prepolitical entity, but to one that is "constituted through agreements" (Das 2007, 9), through negotiations and participation in shared practices. Christine Pawley, drawing upon Chartier's work, has cautioned us about the dangers of an overt emphasis on the "visually appealing" yet "stereotypical portrait of the eighteenth- (and indeed, nineteenth- and twentieth-) century reader as young, female, and solitary" (Pawley 2002, 144–45). Pawley elaborates upon possible approaches to the study of reading communities that are not imagined communities but also ones involving actual or historical readers. Elizabeth Long has similarly emphasized the "social nature of reading" when she argues that a "powerful," albeit "partial picture of the solitary reader governs our understanding of reading" (Long 2003, 2). Without denying the significance of solitary reading as a practice, Long underlines the fact that locating reading as a primarily solitary activity within the private realm reasserts long-held assumptions about the absolute division between the public and the private realms, as well as the idea that any form of "significant social development" must necessarily involve the public realm (16). It is an important intervention, one that is central to this article's pursuit of women's reading communities in the Bengali *antahpur* in the nineteenth century.

Such assumptions about the public and the private realms establishes the private realm as one that is "not the domain of politics," since politics "presupposes and excludes that domain of disenfranchisement, unpaid labor and the barely legible or

illegible human” (Butler and Spivak 2007, 15). There is, however, considerable evidence to be drawn from women’s history in the West that unsettles such a purely oppositional framework of conceptualizing the public and the private domains. For instance, Maria DiCenzo, Lucy Delap, and Leila Ryan in their study of the suffrage movement in Britain and its “emphasis on the potential of print as an organizational and mobilizing tool (building solidarities among otherwise disparate groups, communities, and geographic regions)” (DiCenzo, Delap, and Ryan 2011, 55) have underlined the manner in which existing cultures of “communitarian reading” in women’s book clubs and reading rooms—those much-maligned centers of feminine gossip—were harnessed to articulate different possibilities for women as a precursor to collective action with wide-ranging implications in the public sphere. Nancy Fraser has called such acts of collective identity-formation, with clearly defined goals of resistance, “subaltern counterpublics”—“parallel discursive arenas where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counterdiscourses to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests, and needs” (Fraser 1992, 123). Fraser’s critique of Habermas’s public sphere is a powerful intervention, especially in its recognition of the exclusion of women in the same (Habermas 1989). In a context such as that of nineteenth-century Bengal, however, the notion of the counterpublic—constructed as it is on the public/private binary—cannot quite accommodate the complex character of the *antahpur*. The reading communities in the Bengali *antahpur* did not necessarily possess the deliberate oppositional character Fraser attributes to the counterpublic. The *antahpur*, furthermore, does not quite neatly map onto the private sphere, constructed as it is on a caste-specific understanding of appropriate (unwaged) labor for women. Women from the so-called lower castes performed waged labor (see Sen 1999) and played a vital role in the proliferation of print in colonial Bengal, through their participation in the informal networks of book distribution.

The following section of the article, drawing upon nineteenth-century narratives, will elaborate upon various aspects of the cultures of “communitarian reading” in the Bengali *antahpur*.

SIGHTS AND SOUNDS OF READING

Reverend James Long, in his account of the state of print in mid-nineteenth century Bengal, writes,

We know a native who was for years employed by a rich Babu to read 2 hours daily to 40 or 50 females in his house. This has been a practice from time immemorial in Bengal—where “readings” as in all Eastern countries have been so popular, and where intonation, gesture, &c., make a book listened to more telling, than when simply read. Women sometimes sit in a circle round a woman, who reads a book to them. Allowing them an average of 10 hearers or readers to each book, we calculate these 600,000 Bengali books have 2,000,000 readers or hearers. (Long 1859)²

Long's momentous *Returns relating to Publications in the Bengali Language, in 1857, to which is added a list of the native presses, with the books printed at each, their price and character, with a notice of the past condition and future prospects of the vernacular press of Bengal, and the statistics of the Bombay and Madras Vernacular Presses* (henceforth referred to as *Returns*) was composed out of an urgent desire to "understand the Native mind," following the events of the Mutiny of 1857. Long's report was composed laboriously, after a year spent gathering information on the vernacular presses, visiting each printing press in the erstwhile Calcutta (then capital of British India), buying all available books, making note of prices, attending oral readings, and ended up becoming what was, in Darnton's words, "a panoramic view of Bengali literature in general, measured by statistics and colored by sympathetic readings of the books themselves" (Darnton 2001, 241). The report, among other things, is significant for the glimpse it offers of the female reading public at the time, as evident in this quotation.

Reverend Long, like his fellow missionaries in colonial Bengal, had a keen interest in the proliferation of literacy among native women in particular. Long's *Returns* therefore argues for an "improved" vernacular press for the purpose of female education, observing that "considering the short time Hindu females can remain under school instruction, their domestic duties, and the state of Hindu society, the staple of sound tuition must be given through their own language—this will lead to a large demand for Vernacular books, both for schools and to form a family library" (Long 1859). Long has words of praise to offer for the "intelligence" of Bengali women, and speaks of multiple books published by the Vernacular Literary Society that have grown popular among them.

Produced at a time when female education and literacy had taken significant steps forward (Murshid 1983; Borthwick 1984) following decades of effort on the part of European missionaries and native reformers, Long's *Returns* captures an era of thriving vernacular print. It is also an era of a considerable female reading public who consumed books deemed both good and bad, and whose practices of consumption contributed significantly to the proliferation of the printed book and print culture in Bengal (Ghosh 2004; Joshi 2004; Ghosh 2006). Indeed, the necessity of female education and literacy in reformist rhetoric by the mid-nineteenth century gained a near commonsensical tone, as British and native reformers alike made a case for the same as a necessary component in the production of conjugal harmony. Women's narratives of the period similarly emphasized the significance of literacy and education. For instance, Nabinkali Dasi, writing an advice manual for young women, defines reading as a kind of pleasure that "will remain with you your whole life,"

And when you grow up, you won't be able to play, because you won't have time to spare and, as a result, you won't be able to enjoy yourself anymore. But the pleasure of your studies will remain with you your whole life. There will be no stage in your life when that pleasure will be inappropriate. There is no one with whom it must be shared. Even mourning for a son has no effect on it. (Dasi 1883, quoted in Walsh 2005, 128)

For Nabinkali, reading is a pleasure that is never “inappropriate” and never at risk of being under siege at any point in one’s life—regardless of one’s household responsibilities and the ties of kinship and blood.

Rasasundari Debi, in a text that is considered the first autobiography in the Bengali language, writes,

Writing requires a number of accessories—paper, a pen, ink and an ink-pot. One has to arrange and display them before one can begin to write. I am a woman, and a married woman at that—I am not even supposed to read and write. Reading and writing has been decided upon as the foremost of crimes that women can commit. What will people say if I display my pen and ink and attempt to write! I was terrified of the prospect of being rebuked. So I gave up on any attempt to write and only read in secret. (Debi 1868/2008, 39)

Rasasundari and Nabinkali were products of a thriving culture of reading, aided and abetted by the proliferation of print and the privileged status enjoyed by “education”—*lekhapora* (writing-reading)—in Bengali middle-class ideology at the time. It is important to take note of the particular emphasis placed on the act of reading in these narratives. Rasasundari’s self-narrative, *Amar Jiban (My Life)*, is centered around her account of her solitary, heroic endeavor to master the written word in the secrecy of her kitchen. Her need for secrecy, one that prevented her from attempting to write, also necessitated reading in comparative silence, lest she be discovered by other members of her household. “Communitarian reading” (Chartier 1994, 21) nonetheless finds a place of significance in Rasasundari’s text. She uses the word “moaning” to refer to her early reading skills—the halting, unpracticed reading of the autodidact as opposed to the polished, performative reading of the professional reader, a *kathak* or a *pandit*. Her earliest reading audience comprised a group of women—domestic servants and a few neighbors who did not betray her confidence as she displayed her newly acquired skill by reading out loud to them. Rasasundari would go on to find a community of readers in more of her neighbors, in whose company she read the devotional *Chaitanya Bhagbat*: “Afterwards, I would sit in a quiet spot with the neighbours who were often around me, and read the *Chaitanya Bhagbat*. One person would be on guard, ensuring no one saw us” (Debi 1868/2008, 48). Even later, as she overcame her fear of masculine censure and spoke candidly of her mastery of the written word, Rasasundari would find fellow readers in her three sisters-in-law,

When they [Rasasundari’s sisters-in-law] learned that I can read manuscripts, they were very pleased. “You can read!” they told me. “We have learned nothing in all our years.”

And so two of the sisters began to learn to read and write under my tutelage. They could not pursue their education for very long, soon giving up on the endeavour. But they always took special care of me on account of my ability to read and write. From there onwards, I no longer read

manuscripts in secrecy. I would read in public, in the presence of my sisters-in-law. What a delight it was! (49)

Rasasundari's delight in overcoming her sense of fear and shame and finding a community of readers underlines the social nature of this endeavor, one wherein the act of reading aloud ensures comprehension on the part of a community with varying levels of literacy. Indeed, Rasasundari's self-narrative underlines the easy coexistence of cultures of solitary as well as "communitarian reading" in the *antaḥpur* at the time.

There are glimpses of such practices of "communitarian reading" in advice manuals written for women at the time as well, often tinged with a note of paternal concern. Jadunath Mukhopadhyay, in a manual titled *Bangali Meyer Neeti-Shiksha (Moral Education for Bengali Women)*, thus writes that "[there] are far greater chances of a girl learning from novels than that of a boy. There are few girls who have not heard novels being read out by their aunts, grandmothers, mothers and *ayahs*" (Mukhopadhyay 1889, 307). Mukhopadhyay underlines the sheer ubiquity of the practice when he notes that a good book is one that can be read without shame in the company of all and sundry (319). Mukhopadhyay's advice—resulting in an elaborate set of guidelines for appropriate reading, including an entire chapter dedicated to "books appropriate for women"—itself takes on a conversational tone that is characteristic of a number of advice manuals of the time. For Chartier, such "dovetailing" of writing with speech itself derives "from the culture of the tale and oral recitation," traces of a past orality "coming to surface" in a world dominated by print (Chartier 1994, 20). In the context of nineteenth-century Bengal, perhaps, such "dovetailing" might be deemed a conscious attempt to emulate the speaking voice, to engage with the ubiquitous practice of "communitarian reading" that allows for interaction and discussion with an immediate readership. Anindita Ghosh calls this co-existence of "heterodox reading cultures" a hallmark of the reading cultures of Bengal in the nineteenth century: "The printed book in the nineteenth century is thus situated amidst strong surviving oral traditions as well as communal reading practices in Bengal that considerably compromised its impact as a 'civilising' tool" (Ghosh 2004, 184).

Despite pervasive concerns about the passive or uncritical consumption of bad books and the varying levels of literacy in such communities of female readers, the glimpses of readerly engagement in the act of "communitarian reading" in narratives of the time suggest the very opposite. Saratkumari Debi, writing about women's *majlises* (gatherings), has her women readers passionately discuss their readings, "Have you read that book? That part in that particular book makes me want to cry," its very generic nature suggesting a certain sense of familiarity (Biswas 2011, 109). Kalyani Dutta's collection of anecdotes, drawing upon experiences of women of varying ages—from those who were born in the last decades of the nineteenth century to many who had lived in colonial Calcutta in the early twentieth century—in the *antaḥpur*, speaks of similar reading practices (Dutta 1992, 107–108). The illustrated print edition of the *Ramayana* composed by the medieval poet Krittibash was a much-read text. Dutta speaks of emotionally charged readings of Oriya texts, largely devotional in nature, by the Brahmin cooks from Orissa on many afternoons, especially on the

occasion of *sankranti* or on a particularly auspicious day. Another anecdote, narrated by Sashishekhara Basu, paints the portrait of an outright critical audience:

Sashishekhara Basu recounted an anecdote of a romantic novel being read aloud to a domestic audience of an extended family, c. 1875. Among the questions asked by the audience was the troubling issue of whether such romantic relationships actually took place in respectable households—how did the author know of these dalliances? Had the author bothered to enter a middle-class home to know how things actually were? The questions from the female audience were more critical as the author was, presumably, a man. What did men know of how a household was run? (Chattopadhyay 2005, 264)

Dutta's anecdotes make no mention of how the sensational *Adi Leela* or *Kashi'r Kechcha* were consumed or discussed, just as they delicately “forget” to name the sources who obtained such salacious street literature for the female readers in the *antahpur* in the first place. There are, however, women in her anecdotes—figures who lived through the tumultuous early decades of the twentieth century and often carved a difficult path of their own making, one that involved copious amounts of reading and writing—who display an encyclopedic knowledge of the much-disparaged popular novels and plays. Sarayubala Devi, of Goalbagan, is one such figure. Dutta speaks of a deep bond forged between herself and Sarayubala *dashima* over their discussions of theater and her collection of books. Sarayubala Devi's collection also included wedding poems printed by elite households such as the *zamindars* of Uttarpara and the *Sarbadhikaris*—another popular, feminine form that had its roots in women's oral rituals in the *basarghar* (the traditional female gathering at the bridal chamber with the bride and the groom on the Hindu wedding night, involving coarse, abusive banter that is often explicitly sexual in nature). In a remarkable instance of print redefining a traditional practice, “[the] songs and dialogues at these [*basarghar*] sessions [following the expansion of print] were often provided by commercial publications specifically catered for this purpose, and women organised carefully rehearsed performances based on these texts” (Ghosh 2004, 180).

At a time when the distribution of books was dependent on an informal network of vendors hawking books in various parts of the city and beyond, the *antahpur* of respectable households did not merely obtain books from—approved by—male family members with subscriptions to public libraries and appropriate periodicals. Reverend Long speaks disapprovingly of the daring “female of the higher class [who] wished a European Lady, her teacher, to procure for her the licentious tale *Videa Sundar*,” which “the latter refused and gave her [*Sushilar Upakhyan*] one of the Vernacular Literary Society's publications—the result was that half a dozen copies of the last work was sold to the friends of the family” (Long 1859). But *bhadramahila* also obtained books from vendors, outside the supervision of male members of the household. This informal network of book vendors did not distribute books in the Indian-dominated parts of Calcutta alone but, as Reverend Long testifies, in towns nearby as well. “The poet and colonial servant Nabin Sen,” Ghosh writes, “described his dismay when, on

return to his native village in 1866 after some years in Calcutta, he realised ‘what female education had done to [his] . . . land’ (Ghosh 2004, 184). The poet’s disapproval of and horror at women’s reading practices in his native village notwithstanding, the spread of women’s education beyond the confines of the colonial capital and the circulation of books by the way of hawkers who, in Long’s words, “[devoted] the rainy season to the cultivation of their fields” (Long 1859) ensured that the printed book from the city’s printing presses made its way to the libraries of rural households as well. Many of these vendors were women—often of lower-caste origin and therefore not subject to concerns about respectability and the dishonorable nature of waged labor. Rabindranath Tagore’s elder sister, Swarnakumari Debi, thus recalls the “commotion” in the women’s quarters with the arrival of the “flower woman” carrying books from the Battala presses, from poetry to fiction to fantasy (Bannerji 2002, 53). Swarnakumari’s anecdotes, furthermore, mention the visits of an educated Vaishnavi to the women’s quarters, wherein she would read and sing to the inhabitants of the *antahpur*. These marginal women and their labor played a vital role in book distribution in the burgeoning consumer economy of colonial Bengal.

The books plied by vendors would range from cheap devotional chapbooks produced explicitly for female readers, such as *Satyanarayana Bratakatha* or *Lakshmir Pachali*, as well as more inappropriate reading material such as sensational narratives of crime and adultery. As the public theater grew in popularity, on the first night of the performance, playhouses often distributed among audience members theater handbills and printed books containing the text of the play being performed. Handbills were also distributed directly to households, usually by female employees hired by the theater companies for the very purpose of distribution and circulation. Printed books were sold alongside other products of the colonial economy, such as “porcelain utensils” and “Japanese glassware,” and such sales would involve haggling like any other sale: “Sometimes, they would only pay 5 pc. instead of 6 pc. if they bought three books [worth 2 pc. each]” (Dutta 1992, 107). The *sadar* or the main courtyard of the household, Dutta reminds us, was left “wide open” (30) not only for guests and the extended family, but also for hawkers from every quarter, producing a sort of space that does not quite rest on a “fixed script” (Chattopadhyay 2005, 163).

There is much to be gleaned from these admittedly brief glances into the elusive practices of “communitarian reading” in the Bengali *antahpur* in the nineteenth century. Sumanta Banerjee, writing about what he calls “the rise of the *bhadramahila*” and her literature in nineteenth-century Bengal, constructs a narrative of loss marked by an enforced “snapping” of ties between women from various sections of the society who were traditionally brought together by centuries of women’s popular cultural forms that spoke in a distinctive voice (Banerjee 1990). Banerjee’s apprehensions about the loss of a “vigorous,” transgressive feminine voice, defined by the linguistic peculiarities of the women’s sphere and the centuries-old literary-cultural traditions of women, is not entirely unfounded—the scrupulously chaste linguistic choices of Nabinkali Dasi or Rasasundari Debi reflect none of the “coarse, ‘untutored’ expletives and expressions that [the *bhadramahila*] shared with the women of the streets” (Banerjee 1990, 163). The note of finality struck in the image of the “snapping” of ties

between the *andarmahal* of the educated, middle-class households in the modern city and the female performers from lower rungs of the caste and class ladder, though overstated, is not entirely inaccurate: “[the] gradual elimination of women folk performers from Calcutta in the last decade of the nineteenth century is suggested by the following figures. According to the 1891 Bengal census, there were 17,023 actresses, singers, dancers and their accompanists. In 1901, the number had gone down to 3,527” (Banerjee 1990, 9, 132).

And yet what is evident herein is the shifting terrain of leisure practices available to middle-class women at the time, with an increasing delegitimization of traditional forms of leisure on grounds of concern over obscenity or potential dishonor. The rise of the *bhadramahila* and her literature, as Banerjee calls it, is significant in this regard, as it draws our attention to the increasing importance of reading as a leisure practice made *available* to women. For all the caveats placed upon reading inappropriate texts and demands for critical reading, the note of urgency struck by many of the advice manuals for women suggests an irrevocable shift in the leisure practices of Bengali *bhadramahila*. Banerjee’s mourning of the loss of ties between women of various social classes thus does not take adequate note of the newer ties forged over the circulation of the printed book—ties of the sort made possible by informal networks of book distribution and leisured communities of reading.

READING PUBLIC

The discursive space in colonial Bengal is tied to the specificities of colonial subjugation and a firmly entrenched notion of a woman’s place that can be traced back to precolonial domestic ideologies. Women’s narratives from the nineteenth century thus seldom argue for roles beyond those prescribed for women. “Caged bird” is an oft-repeated metaphor in these narratives, the confinement of the *bhadramahila* within the domestic sphere an oft-lamented one; indeed, Rasasundari Debi echoes many of her contemporaries when she speaks of being locked up like a thief, her resentment seeping through in the strong choice of words, despite the narrator’s protestations otherwise. Women’s activist groups dedicated to social reform, however, were few and far between—the short-lived Sakhi Samiti (1885), founded by Swarnakumari Debi (and modeled on the women’s branch of the Theosophical Society); the Bharat Stree Mahamandal (1910), founded by her daughter Sarala Devi Chaudhurani in Punjab, with branches in several places in India including Calcutta—such activism being the forte of male reformers on most occasions. It is thus in the banal, eventful everyday of the *bhadramahila*, in acts as seemingly innocuous as gathering around a book to read out loud what might be the entirely respectable *Ramayana* or a scandalous potboiler, that one must look for expressions of self-creation, for reinscriptions of the domestic with meanings altogether different from the ones ascribed to it. Everyday spaces, after all, are not “self-evidently innocent” (Rose 1993, 37) and gain the meanings inscribed upon them by the subjects who inhabit them. The “wide open” *sadar* or main courtyard of the household—as this article has noted earlier—

frequented by male and female hawkers and street vendors of different castes, or the easy movement of women of various ranks into the innermost spheres of the *antah-pur*, leads to the production of a space that does not rely on a familiar script but instead allows for being in public, albeit located firmly within the domestic sphere. This versatile rearrangement of space “opens up to unpredictable possibilities challenging ‘strategies of containment’” (Chattopadhyay 2005, 163), and of women’s participation in the emerging public sphere.

Such versatile spaces were not uncommon in Bengali dwellings at the time—the *dalan* (courtyard) of many an elite household became a site for performances open to the public. The *roak* (sitting area attached the house) and the *baithak khana* (public drawing room) served as the venue for many a *majlis* or an *adda*, from the gathering of luminaries in the households of the educated gentlemen to the banter of young men, doubling as the public sphere and facilitating conversation and rational-critical debate despite their attachment to the household. The romanticized *adda* or *majlis* of Bengali literature, however, was an all-male terrain, wherein women were a peripheral or outright intruding presence, silently serving tea and snacks, interrupting the enthusiastic visitors who lost track of time in conversation and overstayed their welcome (Chakarabarty 2000; Chattopadhyay 2005). It is important, then, to take into account the forms of female sociality that emerged in such informal, leisurely gatherings, even more so in the light of the “witty banishment of women from the privileged [masculine] space of the *adda* [a leisurely gathering in a public space]” (Chattopadhyay 2005, 185). Perhaps one of the lasting impressions of the valorization of the all-male *adda* in Bengali cultural memory is in the erasure of such forms of female sociality, with the printed book at its center—as ephemeral and elusive as the *adda*, impossible to recover except in the shape of fleeting anecdotes—from literature, as well as from critical-historical inquiry.

The seeming absence of resistance to patriarchal norms that confined the Bengali *bhadramahila* to the domestic sphere need not imply that there was no attempt on the part of women to negotiate such stipulations. Indeed, there is, in the very thrill and fear of transgression in the clandestine gatherings or the covert networks of supply of less-than-respectable books, in the comfort of a leisurely reading session of the *Ramayana*, an everyday renegotiation of the prescribed boundaries of meaning that seek to “secure the identity” (Massey 1994, 10) of the domestic sphere as a static domain of tradition. Such renegotiations are essentially time-bound, confined to the specific moment of the act of “antidiscipline” (Certeau 1984, xv) that transforms the domestic sphere into a site marked by “the *affect* of communal speech; speech as passionate, multi-sensory experience” (Chattopadhyay 2005, 183). The study of the everyday, Certeau writes, concentrates “on the ways of frequenting or dwelling in a place . . . on the many ways of establishing a kind of reliability within the situations imposed on an individual, that is, of making it possible to live in them by reintroducing into them the plural mobility of goals and desires” (Certeau 1984, xv). The “communitarian” practices of reading of the Bengali *bhadramahila*—the act of reading together—brought together conversation and reading, and made “habitable” the demands of reform and modernity upon them.

NOTES

1. The term *street literature* for the cheap print editions brought out by the mushrooming presses at Battala (in Calcutta) was first used by Reverend James Long in his *Returns* (Long 1859). The use persisted in the catalogues of the British Library as well.

2. Robert Darnton (2001; 2002), in his citations of the *Returns*, refers to a consistent pagination in Roman numbers. In my own perusal of the *Returns*, preserved in microfiche in the Oriental and India Office Records section at the British Library, however, I found the pagination inconsistent and missing on occasion. I have therefore opted to cite Long (1859) in the course of this chapter, without referring to page numbers.

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