

# Fairs and Females: A Socio-cultural Perspective of 19th and 20th Century Bengal

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**Abstract:** *Fair or Mela has been an integral part of Bengali culture since time immemorial. A fair is generally a conglomeration of people in a festive arrangement for buying and selling goods centering on religious or other special occasions at a specific time and a place. Fair was an integral part of colonial Bengal's socio-cultural and economic spheres as well. Numerous fairs used to be held in 19th and 20th century Bengal for various reasons which concerned seasonal harvesting, religious festivals, marketing, occasional cultural events, promoting entertainment including traditional games and sports, arts. In a broader aspect, fairs have played role in shaping colonial Bengal's society and in several ways helped to develop our rich culture over the decades. Another major yet less valued aspect of these fairs is the involvement of women in these which speak in volumes about the socio-economic participation of different classes of women in colonial Bengal. Women of lower social classes participated in these fairs mostly as sellers or entertainers whereas women of higher social classes were found as occasional visitors. Though, due to 'purdah' restrictions the numbers of native elite women visitors were often low, women of British or Anglo-Indian families often visited such fairs in their proximity. A number of British women have written about their splendid experiences at Bengali fairs in their memoirs. This vivid participation of women of all strata in different categories in Bengali fairs has not gained much focus in earlier studies. Not merely in the lens of feminism, the role of the womenfolk in those Bengali fairs to contribute in accelerating their families' economic standard, deserves historical recognition. This paper attempts to study the roles of such women, played in the fairs in both parts of Bengal in 19th and 20th centuries and its grave significance in revisiting gender roles in colonial Bengal's society.*

**Keywords:** Bengal, Fair, Women, Role, Sellers, Dependents, Visitors

## Introduction

Bengal (West Bengal and Present day Bangladesh) has always been a land of festivals and fairs. It is said popularly in Bengal that, "Thirteen festivals in twelve months (Baro mashe tero parbon)." Most of the festivals are accompanied by fairs. In the 19th and 20th century Bengal melas or fairs were of huge significance because of their socio-cultural, economic and political importance. During the

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British colonial period the fairs got a new dimension due to the contact and confrontation with a new set of culture. For the foreign traders, it was also a place of meeting and exchanging views with the natives. The economic importance of the fair cannot be overstated. These fairs had always been a business hub. It was a place for exhibition and shopping of local and international products. The fair was also a place for social and political exchange. W.W. Hunter (1877) states some of the objectives of such local fairs, which include—to establish an attractive centre for the general encouragement of trade and exhibition of local produce, to improve the social relations between the different chiefs, to create friendly communication with the officials of the province. The people of the Bengal region have found entertainment and relaxation through the Bengali fairs and festivities, some of which have a history dating back more than thousands of years. Fairs and festivals are significant social events for the common mass. The celebration of fairs and festivals has become a fundamental aspect of Bengali culture, especially in the villages. As T. B. Pandian (1898:196) stated, “..nothing is so useful, and so needful to the villagers, as the tradition of the village fair that meets the needs of the village communities—both the rich and the poor”. Since centuries, women had been a big part of these fairs. They played a very important role in making these fairs successful. Sometimes they worked directly as the sellers of local produce, sometimes worked as the producers. Sometimes these women entertained the people who visited the fair through dancing, singing, performing in the circus or working as prostitutes. Again the number of female visitors was not ignorable. But the contribution of women in the fairs has not been properly recognized or researched in historical or gender studies. So this paper wants to examine the role of women in the fairs that were held in the 19th and 20th century Bengal. The later parts of the paper, in this connection, are divided into several categories. The current first part gives an overview of the paper putting the rationale and central argument of the research; the second part of the paper deals with the methodology of the paper; the third part encompasses the definition and the types of fairs used to be held in Bengal; the fourth part explains the findings of the research—the roles women had played so far in the fairs; and the last part draws the conclusion highlighting the significant findings of the research work.

### **Research Methodology**

This research is qualitative in nature as it demands for in-depth methodical and comprehensive analysis of relevant literary data. It not only caters secondary historical narratives, rather it has been a research work based on various ranges of primary sources with gender perspectives. This research attempts to interpret and correlate the evidence regarding the data about fairs and women of colonial Bengal. For primary data, British Bengal's census reports, gazettes, gazetteers, magazines, survey settlement reports, the memoirs of British officials and their women in Bengal, various annual reports, and contemporary weekly, monthly, or regular newspapers like *Bangadarshan*, *Prabashi*, *Bangabani*, *Soma Prakash*,

Sabuj Patra and similar ones have been studied. Most of the primary data has been collected from the rare section of the Central Library of the University of Dhaka. Apart from the primary sources, this paper also delves into all available secondary data like journal articles and available relevant books and reliable e-resources since secondary sources provide contexts and perspectives to interpret the primary sources which sometimes fail to provide a lot of information on their own from a wider angle. The best strength of the work is the use of contemporary narratives of 19th and 20th century as well as the most recent relevant narratives. This amalgamation provides the paper the authenticity which it aims for.

### **Contemporary Fairs or Mela in 19th and 20th century Bengal**

Before knowing the contribution of women in fairs, it is necessary to shed light on how many types of fairs were held in Bengal. Innumerable fairs in Bengal are a reflection of the region's rich cultural heritage. However, the significance of any fair is determined by the purpose of it. In colonial Bengal, though fairs were held for several socio-economic purpose, most of the fairs had a religious trait. During the British colonial period, especially in the 19th and 20th centuries, all religious groups, including Hindus, Muslims, Buddhists, Christians, and others, used to organize fairs on religious occasions. The Muslim community arranged fairs on occasions like Eid and Muharram. The Hindu community celebrated Janmastami, Dol Jatra, Durga Puja, Shiv Puja, Kali Puja, Ratha Jatra and many more numerous religious events with fairs. Like these two communities, the Buddhists, the Christians and other communities also arranged fairs during their religious festivals. Some fairs were also held centering religious shrines or Dargahs.

According to W. W. Hunter, in Champaran District numerous fairs on religious occasions were arranged, such as Kartik Snan at Bakolhar, Tataria, Basohi, Rajwatia, Kanbarpur, on the 31st October; Seorat, at Karantha, Mahmuda, Banwaria, and Kuria on the 1st April; Janam Astomi at Machargaonwan on 30th August, Dasahara at Nena Tar and Dhobani on the 26th September. In the month of October an annual fair was held at Bettia attended by 25000-30000 people. This fair continued for 15 days and commemorated the story of Rama, Lakhshman and Ravana. In this fair utensils made of iron and brass and clothes were sold mostly. A similar fair was also arranged at Sirsa and attended by 2000 people. A fair on similar religious purpose took place in April at Sitakund, continued for three days and was attended by 15000 people. The main objects of commerce were cloth and metal vessels. A similar gathering was also held at Adapur in the same month for the same religious purpose. In that fair besides clothes and utensils, cattle especially goats were also present as principal articles of trade. A fair at Araraj was held which was attended by 10000 people and lasted for eight days. In this fair cattle, horses and clothes were sold (Hunter, 1877).

Hinduism has an enriched practice of pilgrimage known as the Tirtha-yatra, which includes holy bathing in water sources as a ritualized symbol of purification. So

fairs on the bank of rivers centering religious gatherings like the Kumbh Mela, Gangasagar Mela and the Snan Jatra Mela in Bengal were held on a national scale. Kumbh Mela is the largest congregation of its kind (Paul, 2022). Gangasagar mela held on the island of Gangasagar, also known as Sagar Island, which is part of the Ganges delta and lies on the Bay of Bengal's continental shelf approximately 54 nautical miles south of Kolkata. After the Kumbh Mela, the Gangasagar fair hosts the second-largest gathering of this kind (Chakraborty, 2020). Fairs were also held on the bank of Damodar river, Gopalpur, Dignagar, Dainhat, Mohanpur, Keogram, Biragitala at Bardhaman district (Hunter, 1877). Fairs were also held in the places where there was enough water supply for the people and cattle (Pandian, 1898). A very popular fair in Bengal was Ras jatra mela. Ras jatra festival followed by a splendid fair that was attended by 25000 or 26000 people at Nadiya. Some minor fairs were also held like Pot Purnima fair (Hunter, 1875). In Rajshahi district three great religious-trading fairs were held annually. Among these, two were arranged at Premtoli to celebrate the anniversary of the visit of Chaitanya to Gaur and the other was at Manda in honor of God Ram. The 3rd one was organized at Bagha on the second day of Ramadan to celebrate this holy month. These fairs always worked as temporary trade centres (Hunter, 1875). Another fair is found to be arranged on the bank of Atrai River at Manda in Rajshahi district. This was held on the occasion of the Hindu festival Sri Nabami. In the Khetur village of Rajshahi a fair was held annually at a temple that was built in the honor of Chaitanya (Hunter, 1876). It is found that in the 19th centuries at least 47 fairs were held annually in Dinajpur district. Among these most of the fairs were religious gatherings but the purposes were commercial (Strong, 1912). According to Bakarganj District Gazetteers, there were 21 fairs that took place in the district which were called after the name of the village these were held. The most important fairs were held at Kalisuri, Kalaskati and Lakhutia in October and November and were attended by around 5000 people. Some important fairs were also held at Jhalakati, Aliganj, Lata, Sarikal, Rajar Hat and Chandkhali and were flourished by 2500 people on an average (Jack, 1918). A very interesting fair that used to take place with celebration centering the Ulai Chandi festival in the month of Baisakh honoring the goddess Ulai Chandi, the Goddess of Cholera. This fair was visited by 10000 pilgrims and lasted for three days (Hunter, 1875).

In the Muslim Community, fairs had been a part of celebrating Eid festival in colonial Bengal. According to Muntasir Mamun (1989), in the 19th and 20th centuries in Old Dhaka fairs were an important part of the Eid celebration, especially for common people. Fairs were arranged at Chalk bazar and Ramna with great festivity. Another prominent fair was the Muharram Mela that was held on the day of Ashura.

During this period, some fairs were arranged in the honor of religiously or socially important persons. In Nadia Gopinath Mela used to take place in April/May in honour of Gopinath Thakur, an idol belonging to the Maharaja of Krishnagar. This

fair was attended by 25000 pilgrims and lasted for 7 days. In Krisnagar fairs during Mahadol or Baradol (swinging festival) used to be observed with great splendor. A very notable fair held at Nadiya district was Chaitanya Mela, in the honour of famous reformer of Bengal Chaitanya. In the month of January or February around five thousand Vaishnavs assembled there. A fair called the Uprodh Bhanjan took place yearly at Kulia of Nadiya district. This was held to celebrate the reunification of Gauranga Deva and his wife (Hunter, 1875). Lalan Mela, which is still held annually at Chheuria, has its origin in the 19th century. Spiritual philosopher Lalan Sai (1774-1890) has left such a way of life and philosophy through the songs he composed, which is still prevalent till now, in the blend of traditional rural life of this region. No specific information is available about the exact time and history of the beginning of the Lalan Mela in Cheunuria. However, from the findings of many researchers, it is assumed that Lalan Sai established his Akhrabari sometime before or after 1850 AD in Cheunuria village. Lalan used to perform 'Sadhuseva' or 'Sadhusanga' every year on Dol Purnima at the Akhrabari he established in Cheunuria. Later on this tradition took the form of Lalan Mela (Zakaria, 2021). A very popular fair in this region of the 20th century is known as the Dublar Char Mela. Haribhajan (1829–1923), a sannyasi, shaped the Dublar Char Mela in 1923. On the occasion of Rash-Purnima, this fair was held every year at Dublar Char, which is situated near Poshur river south of the Sundarban forest in the Bagerhat district. During this time, a large number of devotees visited this location and go for holy bath (Zakaria, 2021).

There were some fairs in which commercial and political purposes marged together, like exhibitions, sales or exchange of products. It is found that, in Lohardaga district, two large fairs were held annually in the month of February, one at Chutia and the other at Daltonganj. These were found in 1851 and 1873 respectively. The main object of the Chutia Fair was the establishment of a lucrative center for the encouragement of exhibition for trading of local products and the improvement of relationship between the different chiefs of Chutia as well as bringing them into friendly communications with the European officers of the Province. However, in later years this mela could not attain the objective as a meeting place for trade purposes. The Daltonganj fair also started to give an impetus to trade and commerce by bringing foreign traders, breaking up the monopoly of the local merchants. The number of people assembled in these fairs was estimated at 20000 to 25000 (Hunter, 1877).

According to the Statistical Accounts of Bengal, a fair with huge commercial importance was held at Munshiganj in the Bengali month of Kartik. This fair was usually attended by 50000 persons and generally continued for three weeks. At Nangalband a fair was held which was also of commercial importance. The fair started with a religious bathing ceremony and after that brisk trade was carried out for several days (Hunter, 1877). In Buddhist villages, particularly in the Chittagong region's Buddhist villages and viharas, fairs were organized for both religious and

commercial purposes. A similar kind of fair was organized in the Chittagong Hill Tracts by the local officers. The main purpose of it was to meet the independent chiefs and their people and to make friendly relations with the tribes of the district (Hunter, 1876).

A very important socio-political and cultural fair, Hindu Mela started in Kolkata in the late 1860s with the intention of igniting nationalist sentiment among Bengalis. The principal purpose of this fair was to awaken the young people with the glory of Hinduism. The yearly event, which included exhibitions, was successful in inspiring a wave of patriotism in Bangla literature and folklore, including poetry, music, and theater. However this fair lost its importance during the beginning of the 20th century (Zakaria, 2021).

Seasonal or agro-centric fairs like Baishakhi Mela, arranged on the first day of Bengali month of Baishakh, Chaitra Sangkranti Mela, held on the last day of Bengali month of Chaitra, have been a part of Bengali culture for a long time. Chaitra Mela was seen to be arranged in Nadiya district called Tulsibihar Mela. The gathering in the fair had approximately 10000 people and continued for 15 days. On the day of the full moon in Phalgun a fair was held annually at Kartabhajas in Nadiya district (Hunter, 1875). Poush Mela has been going on with pride and glory in Santiniketan since 1894. The Santiniketan ashram was envisioned by Debendranath Tagore as a sanctuary of spiritual solace. In the Santiniketan Trust Deed, he included provisions for an annual fair to promote interaction and intellectual exchange between pilgrims, sages, and mendicants from various religious communities. In 1892 the Trust decided to celebrate the day of Debendranath's conversion, the seventh of the Poush by giving alms to the needy and underprivileged after a special prayer. In its third year, the festival took on the appearance of a fair as the local residents set up small stalls selling handicrafts, trinkets, earthenware items, candies, and fried savories. They gathered around in the late afternoon and evening to see the wiry, athletic performances by the nearby santhal community demonstrating their abilities in archery and other sports, as well as to listen to local folk musicians. Later on, the spirit of Poush Mela was shaped in the early decades of the 20th century by Rabindranath Tagore's distinctive ashram school that was established in 1901. The Poush Mela placed a strong emphasis on achieving three goals; boosting the village economy by providing a venue for the trading of local goods; promoting folk art and performance, and creating a nonhierarchical setting for interaction between the urban bhadralok middle class and members of the village community (Ganguly, 2013).

Thus this land produced numerous fairs which played a significant role in the social, economic, religious, cultural and political lives of the people of Bengal since time immemorial. And these fairs were made successful by the participants of which women consisted a large section.

## **Role of Women in the Fairs of Bengal**

### ***4.1 Women as sellers in the fairs***

Women of lower social classes in Bengal have been earning independently or as dependents since a long time. Fairs were not any exception. According to Soma Prakash newspaper (1863), in one fair during Raas festival 99% of participants were female and among them 99% were young women. Participation of women in other fairs were also very prominent. Among these participants, a large number of women were involved as sellers. Most of the time women accompanied their male partners or other family members to sell their products and worked as their partners assistants. The income thus generated did not directly belong to them but they were most definitely a part of making that. On rare occasions, few women came to these fairs as independent sellers of their products. Death of male breadwinners, abusive married life, to support elderly parents, to raise wedding money, bad harvest and many other reasons worked as push factors for these women who decided to earn their own money through such fairs. Due to the lack of male help, they faced a hard time to conduct their expected business, but the money thus made solely belonged to them. The 1931 census of Bengal defines women as working dependents if they only assisted other members of the family at work and the census defines women as independent earners only if they received money or some other direct returns from their work (Porter, 1933). In almost every record of the relevant period, women of poorer sections were shown as dependent earners as they used their spare time to assist their husbands in traditional occupations like cultivation, spinning, pottery, making products like baskets or jewelries or fishnets and such others. British official James Kerr (1865), supports this statement in book *Domestic Life, Character, and Customs of the Natives of India* as well. He states that native women in the middle and lower ranks of life were generally industrious and contributed their fair share to the support of the family. Among such sellers a large number of women were engaged in selling cloth, food and jewellery items in different fairs. Spinning of cotton thread was the most common employment of the women of all classes in rural areas. Both independently earning women and women whom society considered dependents of husbands were great spinners. They did it manually and also with the help of machines. Kerr believes that in most districts of Bengal, large numbers of women spin regularly, in intervals from their household works and earns about 4 ana a month. He adds, "In passing a village early in the morning, you may frequently see a light burning and hear sound of spinning long before day break." (1865:79) In 1901, there were 1974 female cotton spinners comparing to 100 male spinners (Gait, 1902). A lot of women were involved in tailoring clothes with these fabrics. In 1877, according to William Hunter, there were 231 female tailors in Dhaka (Hunter, 1877). Cotton fabrics thus made, were great component for regional fairs. Such stalls attracted vast audience and buyers. Sarees made of such fabrics were desired components

of Andarmahal\*\*\* pujas (Prabashi, 1334). Another very interesting fabric was Nakshi katha (Handcrafted blankets) which had huge demand among Bengalis for occasions like marriage or childbirth (Ghosh, 2020). Along with fabric stalls, stalls for copper utensils, clay toys were also very popular (Sahitya, 1326). These stalls were dominated by women of all sorts. Stalls of jewelry had great importance in such fairs. Women of all classes were fond of these jewelry items and specially women of lower-middle class or lower classes who could hardly afford gold or silver jewelries, were great consumers of these hand-made jewelries from the fairs. There were small cottage industries or individual initiatives by women who crafted these jewelries with woods, shells, copper materials, brass and other means (Jahan, 2018). Ready-made bracelets, earrings, necklaces, anklets, finger rings, nose rings, hair accessories, waist bands were popular jewelry items sold by women vendors in fairs. Jewelries, elaborately carved and painted, known as ‘cacharoos’ were also sold by jewelry vendors (Taylor, 1840). Solid rings from large white conch shells were also in demand (Hunter, 1879). According to the census of 1911, in the early 1900s, there were 1443 females engaged in making bangles, sacred threads, beads and necklaces (Malley, 1912). Apart from these, a lot of women from many other occupations used to gather around in such fairs. W.W Hunter gives a vivid account of such women in several volumes of his Statistical Account of Bengal. For example in Dhaka there were 38 basket-makers, 54 mat-makers, 3 thread sellers, 221 dealers in firewood, 6 ganja sellers, 21 pan sellers, 507 weavers, 4979 spinners, 65 cloth vendors, 14 ornament sellers, 54 garland sellers, 3 toy makers, gunny bag makers, 1 broom sellers, 28 costermongers and so on (Hunter 1877). This was the scenario of almost all districts of Bengal. For these female sellers, the fair was a great opportunity to showcase their products and earn. Many of these women were single and managed their stalls on their own. Among the women who came as associates of male sellers were mainly related to agricultural products or products which needed male help to gather. Narratives of poor women working in the fields with their husbands can be found from several contemporary literary works (Webb, 1866). These women were engaged in fairs as flour sellers, dealers in pottery, fish sellers, vegetable sellers, shoe makers, milk sellers, rice sellers, oil dealers, sellers of spices, sellers of molasses and so on. But there were exceptions too. According to L.S.S.O Malley, in Khulna when women were compelled to earn their own livelihood, they generally bought paddy, husked it in their houses and sold the rice. Many of them had shops or worked in shops (Malley, 1908). Apart from these regular times there were female sellers of season or festival oriented food products. During winters one of the core items of these fairs was pitha (rice cake) In almost every fair ubiquitous pitha caterers were present and these stalls were very famous. Lots of women alone or with their partners used to gather from different corners to put their pitha stalls in such fairs. Along with pitha another very common fair item which was solely dominated by females was sweetmeat.

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\*\*\* The section of house of a Zamindar residence where the women of the family stayed and no male had access to it.



Several types of sweets using milk, sugar and molasses. These sweets were of various colours and shapes and were mainly displayed in fairs celebrated for New Year (Mohanta, 2021). These stalls were very vibrantly decorated with festoons of flowers and mango leaves (Johnson, 1843). These seasonal or festival based fairs were attended by a huge number of sellers both male and female from different parts of Bengal. Thus the fairs also induced another important aspect of colonial Bengal, the internal migration. Women often with their families conducted such migration processes to attain fairs of adjacent or remote distances. In adverse socio-economic situations, single women also migrated for economic purposes which include participation in fairs too. Many factors worked behind such movements—the popularity of the fair, the socio-religious acceptance of the event on which the fair was based, the demand of specific products in that area and so on. The census report of 1921 defines patterns of internal migration in colonial Bengal (Thompson, 1923)-

Casual migration happened due to short moves which are continually taking place between adjacent villages. According to the census, in this type of migration, females predominated. The 2nd one was temporary migration which occurred due to journeys undertaken on business or pilgrimage. Another pattern of internal migration was periodic migration which often took place in connection with harvest. The other two patterns are semi-permanent or permanent migration. As the fairs were held for a time being and not permanently, it rarely had anything to do with the last two formats of migration, the first three were often induced by local or distant fairs. A large number of women, dependently or independently migrated casually, temporarily or periodically to participate in these fairs. But the occasion of fairs in a particular district were sometimes attended by the semi-permanent or permanent female migrants of that area. The women who migrated semi-permanently or permanently, often took the opportunity to work as laborers in mills, factories or tea plantations or in construction works. Many women were employed in these sectors for a long time but these jobs were not always certain. In the colonial society of Bengal, from time to time women were pushed out of their jobs by men when they needed a women's job (Sangari and Vaid, 1989). Apart from that, extremely unpleasant housing conditions of the mills; lack of social respect; extreme work pressure and competition often compelled women to leave such work sectors. So, many women who intended to earn independently, chose the option of small business. For such women, main targets were always such fairs taking place in their closest proximity. Because they could attain it per their will and it had less competitive vibe as a lot of fairs used to take place simultaneously. And as these fairs were mostly seasonal, these were easy gateway for women to earn more money in a short working span. They could also accommodate their children with them sometimes. Many female stalls which were led by women had their children or elderly women present in it for assisting (Goddens, 1966). Sometimes these women simply moonlighted and joined these fairs as sellers for a secondary or seasonal income while keeping the mill or factory work as their permanent

source of income. Because wage labour for women in industrial sectors in 19th and 20th century Bengal was too exploitative and restrictive to be considered as a source of liberty (Sen, 2004). Women often had to work two shifts to make as much money as a male worker and these seasonal fairs could relieve their financial burden for time being (Jahan, 2018).

**Table: Distribution of female sellers in Bengal throughout the decades.**

Year	Production and trade for local markets
1881	43.2
1901	33.3
1911	28.2
1921	21.0
1931	11.8

**\*Source: “Working Women in Colonial Bengal”, N. Banerjee, Recasting Women, K Sangari and S Vaid (ed.), New Delhi, 1989, p.279**

These local markets often include fairs as shopkeepers from regular markets used to put stalls of their products in the regional fairs to gain a bigger customer range.

Apart from these conventional earners, one class women was present in fairs who have been categorized by the census reports as “unproductive occupation” holders. They were female beggars. In various districts, the presence of local female beggars were very common. In the 1870s there were 3322 female beggars in Dhaka (Hunter, 1877). 1920s there were 120,000 females engaged in begging. In 1931, 940 females retained in this group for every 1000 males (Porter, 1933). According to Banglapedia, in Bengali customs, beggars had been widely patronised as they are often regarded as saints in disguise (Haq, 2021). Fairs were of no exceptions. Female beggars also gained sympathy from the visitors. So these females used fairs as a medium of earning too. Another unconventional earners were the female cleaners who used to keep fair premises clean. The arrangers of the fairs often appointed local females as cleaners. Different low caste women like Buna, Bagdi, Dom, Hari, methors, muchis worked as day labourers and were employed in streets and house sweeping (Malley, 1912).

#### ***4.2 Women as Entertainers in the fairs:***

Though the main function of fairs of colonial Bengal was to promote trade through open air marketing on any occasion, these were very significant or sometimes the only source of amusement for local people. Visitors who visited such fairs not only intended to buy commodities but also looked for recreation. Most of these

fairs were annual affairs and for the particular areas where these used to be held, these meant a break from year long exhaustion from work and hardship. A lot of people from poorer sections mainly attended these fairs looking for nearly free measures of amusement. Considering the clientele, the arrangers of the fairs were often smart enough to understand the importance of adding several mediums of exhibitions, acrobaticism, food and beverage system and so on. Thus there were a lot of people present in such fairs who earned as entertainers by selling their art and creativity to gather visitors. Women formed a noticeable part of this entertainment section too. The demand for females in this sector was created by the fact that male stallers mainly preferred agricultural or instrumental products which were daily life essentials. Moreover feminine enchantment had special demand in such arrangements. In entertaining segments, women who earned alone without the male partner were often seen participating in these fairs as acrobats in circuses, painters, musicians, actresses participating in plays or jattras. There were entertainment sectors like puppet shows or snake charming where women participated along with their husbands or family members and were earning jointly.

Among the independently earning females, an important class of participants was formed by the prostitutes. To quote Kirsi Vani Korhonen, “Besides the sale of foodstuffs, fabrics, spirits, hides, cattle and trinkets, the fairs were renowned as places for intimate relations..” (2022:158) It was similar situation for Bengal of that period. In the social scenario of the 19th century prostitution did not stigmatize the fairs rather enhanced the significance. Alone in Kolkata the numbers of prostitutes rose from 12419 to 30000 from 1853 to 1867 though the overall population declined over that period (Sangari and Vaid, 1989). Prostitutes could be found in every bazar (market place) in considerable numbers in Dhaka city as well (Allen, 1912). Among these, Muslim prostitutes were less in number and also tended to hide their religious identity (Banerjee, 1998). A contemporary newspaper *Sahitya* (1326) describes the importance of prostitutes in public fairs while narrating about *Snanjatrar Mela* of Nagpur in one of their editions. According to the write-up, the prostitutes who were termed as “barbilashi” were the main centre of attraction in the fair and their presence brought immense profit for the zamindars who arranged the fairs. They held such importance that the arrangers kept a place reserved for them in the fairs. The article also informs that these prostitutes had separate stalls for them and they also migrated from other areas to attain the fair. Particularly 300 prostitutes traveled from different places to attain the fair to get customers (*Sahitya*, 1326). In *Baronee Mela* of Dhaka there were also quarters for prostitutes (*Calcutta Gazette*, 1870). Another contemporary newspaper *Prabashi* (1334) also reported that zamindars in Rangpur used to bring prostitutes in fairs to increase consumers. The performances of these prostitutes were the centre of attraction for all classes of people. Several British narratives depicted the performances of these prostitutes as “nautches”. British women authors who were present in Bengal in 19th century, mostly considered these dancing performers as fascinating, most of them attended a nautch and wrote the experience in their narratives (Sen, 2008).

A lot of women also came in group or alone in these fairs to sing. They were mainly from vaishnav sect and traveled in groups. These vaishnavis used to sing in groups with their male partners. Several local musical instruments like digu, khanjani, nupur (anklet), gapijantra and so on. These musical gatherings had huge audiences and use of alcohol was common (Sahitya, 1326). The independent lifestyle of the vaishnavi women who decorated themselves with colourful flowers and jewelries were specialized in particular types of kirtan songs called “Dhap” (Sangari and Veid, 1989). The prostitutes often played dual roles as singers. They formed their songs namely “Besya sangit” where they ridiculed their clientele and themselves too (Sangari and Vaid, 1989). Accounts of female singers could be found in different volumes of the Statistical Account of Bengal by W.W. Hunter. Hunter (1877) gave accounts of female painters too. Particularly in Dhaka there were 32 painters during his record. Not much details about female painters in fairs could be found because of the scarcity of sources.

Apart from singing, women were also involved in acrobatics and acting. The evolution of the traditional circus could be traced from 18th century religious fairs which got more structured exhibitions of physical skills in the late 19th century particularly during the Hindu Mela days (1870-80). Women were part of such circuses from a very early period. The pioneer of the “Great National Circus” Nabogopal Mitra trained his young daughter Kushum to ride on the horses for performing in circus (Chatterjee, 2015). The “Great National Circus” had its stall in different fairs including the Snanjatrar mela in Nagpur (Sahitya, 1326). The “Great Indian Circus” was formed during this time too and it had an European female performer in it, Miss Maude (Chatterjee, 2015). Though it performed in elite households, it could not be known whether this circus performed in fairs. Female participants were also seen as the jattras which had been another form of traditional entertainment since 16th century Bengal (Khatun, 2021). These were folk theatrical performances. Lower ranked working women like methrani (sweeper) used to dance in these which became “stock pieces for providing comic relief in jattras.” (Sangari and Vaid, 1989:140) Mention of Vidya Sundar jatra was also found in the contemporary newspaper Bangadarshan (1346).

Puppet show or Putul Nach was also was another form of entertainment which had been traced back to the end of 14th century in Bengal. During the fair seasons, small farmers or workless labour traveled far from home to perform in fairs and festivals. Few women also participated in the fairs, mostly as voice givers. Renowned daily The Daily Star (2017) narrated that using string puppets, puppeteers depicted stories of rural people, their lifestyles, religious beliefs, rural cultures and much more. Contemporary British narratives also mention about the puppet shows of Bengal fairs. Jon and Rummen Godden in their memoir Two Under the Indian Sun: An Evocative Memoir of Childhood in Bengal reminisces about the puppet show in Bengal and women involvement in it. - “It was always a hereditary business: a grandmother might run a troupe, her great-great-grandson being the boy who beat the drum, but they all

ranked as actors.” (1966:87) James Kerr (1865) also portrayed his experience of such puppet shows which he called “kaputlee nautch”. He also gives vivid description of snake charmers and how they performed their acts with venomous snakes. Snake charmers were constantly seen in fairs and festivals and they had another important role which was selling various herbal medicines (Pillai, 1891). A whole fair namely Jhapan Mela was dedicated to the snake Goddess Mansha and used to held in Bengal since 1495 and had great acceptance in colonial times too (Lorea, 2018). This fair consisted of men and women from Bede tribe and they had one leader who was called Ojha. Even some Santal women could become ojha too (Lorea, 2018). This had a demand among the visitors, both as entertainment and medical concerns.

### ***4.3 Women as Visitors in the fairs***

These fairs of Bengal often gathered huge crowds from localities and also from distant areas. British official F. O. Bell in his survey settlement report regarding Dinajpur district, stated, “During fairs, a touring officer may be confident that he will not find any prominent villager in his own house.” (1941:54) Among these visitors large numbers of women were present. Just like the selling or entertainment section, women of lower social classes were predominant as visitors of these fairs as well. A lot of women, majority from lower classes, visited these fairs as buyers, audiences of the entertainment programs or just as overall fair visitors. One such fair was the annual fair of Moshan Chandipujar mela. This fair was attended by about 14000 people from Kolkata, Chandigarh, Srikrishnanagar, Barasat and majority of the visitors were females. Another such fair was a 15 days long fair on the bank of Jamuna river on the occasion of Maghi Purnima. This was attended by 15000-20000 people among which majority were women. Snan Jatra Mela of Jagannathpur village and Sharmaraj Pujar Mela of Doluipur village in 24 Pargana districts were similar two religious fairs which were attended by more females than males (Mitra, 1961). During such fairs which were celebrated basing on any religious occasion or deity, had more women present in it. Young maidens used to attain such festivities with offerings of fruits and flowers (Ashraf, 1959). Apart from the religious essence, a lot of women attended these fairs simply for enjoyment and to purchase stuffs like new clothes, brass jewelries, glass or copper utensils and other household products. For these women such fairs served as a great source of desired commodities at reasonable prices. Another very famous fair for women participation was Rath Jattrar Mela (Mitra, 1961). Manik Bandopadhyay (1936) in his famous novel Padma Nadir Majhi, narrates the story of a poor fishermen community living on the banks of Padma river in a fictitious village named Ketupur in today’s Bangladesh. There he depicts the scenario of Sonakhalir Mela on the bank of Padma which took place on the occasion of Rath, and the profound impact it had on the lives of these poor people. The author states that the fair brought immense happiness for the women and children of these families. Women bought sarees and bangles made of glass and other feminine products which were brought from cities. People used to save the whole year to spend on

this event (Bandyapadhyay, 1936). Though it was a fictional depiction, in reality too, for the women of poorer families, such fairs were a very significant part of their lives and sometimes the only means for amusement and recreation. On some occasions these fairs held so much importance for such families that women who were married off in different districts, used to come back to their maternal areas to celebrate the fairs. Such one fair took place in Katagar village, Faridpur district (Chowdhury, 2021). L.S.S.O Malley in his district gazetteer of Faridpur region stated, "In rural Bengal, shops are practically non-existent." (Malley, 1925:80) So apart from weekly rural markets, these fairs were of immense importance. Among the aboriginal women, these fairs were of great interest too. According to Binoy Ghosh (1950), the biggest fair in the southern part of Bankura district was Shoni mela of Motgoda region where Santal women visited in large numbers. They roamed around and danced from 10am or 11am in the morning till 10pm at night. Apart from these women, a lot of women involved in prostitutions were also visitors and buyers in such fairs. These women used to dress in bright coloured sarees of different patterns like Bombai, Baluchari, Dhakai, Nilambari etc and glittered jewellerys like brass anklets, nose rings, bangles (Sahitya, 1326). They used to roam around in search of customers and also to buy stuff from the stalls. Case was very different for women of other social classes for these fairs. Participation of affluent women was null as sellers and was very rare as visitors. On rare occasions, women from upper class families visited such events which had religious value but that movement was very restricted. James Kerr (1865) opines that these women were occasionally seen while passing in palankeens. Descriptions of these women taking bath on Ganges with high security during holy occasions can be found in the contemporary narratives of the British officials (Belnos, 1832). But sources are very scarce regarding their presence in such fairs. Some reasons behind the seclusion of upper class women from these fairs were- The strict purdah system followed by the elite class women did not allow them to travel much. According to Beveridge, the only time a native lady had a chance of seeing the world was when she went on a pilgrimage (Beveridge, 1876). It was almost the same for all women of the andarmahal. Muslim women had even more restrictions. Not only women, young girl children also faced movement restrictions. "As a daughter, the only associates of a girl were her girl playmates and her brother from among boys." (Ashraf, 1959:169) Apart from the restrictions regarding movement, the socio-cultural appeal of the fairs was not competent with the idea of "Ideal Bhadramahila". The presence of people from various classes, loud and vibrant natures of the jatrpalas or folk elements of the fairs were often not endorsed by the male members of the elite families and they attempted to keep their women away from such arrangements. Another reason behind the less involvement of upper class women were the similar arrangements of amusement in the andarmahal. Inside the zamindar houses, parties, plays, dance or musical arrangements, puja rituals were frequent events. During these events, a lot of female clothes, cosmetics or jewelry vendors had access to the andarmahals (Prabashi, 1334). But this also

had a crucial influence in the fairs. Sabyasachi Bhattacharya states, “The Bengali bhadramahila set the trends in fashion for several decades beginning in the late nineteenth century, not only for small-town womenfolk but also for the advanced urban middle classes in many parts of India.” (Bhattacharya, 2014:58) These vendors who sold such famine stuff in the upper class houses, used to stock those products for their stalls in upcoming fairs. This gave them the idea of trending products which could get a market among the general women. Beside these native women, there were a lot of British or Anglo-Indian women present in Bengal during this period. These women did not follow any purdah seclusion but they were very new in this land and were often confined to their own dinner parties or Ballroom dances. But British or Anglo-Indian women outside the city areas had different lives. Because, except in big cities, there were no theaters, no concert halls and English books or journals were difficult to get and were very expensive. These women sometimes accompanied their husbands, children and maids to visit the outdoors (Macmillan, 1988). One such British woman in 19th century was Henrietta Clive who used to take her daughters to observe such local festivals and fairs and theatres (Hickman, 2019). The presence of British pupil in local fairs was also evident through the writings of British officials who used to stay in Bengal. For British women the main attraction center was the plethora of Indian fabrics which were used for the making of their dresses for parties or dinners. Two British female novelists Jon and Rummer Godden (1966) in their memoir *Two Under the Indian Sun* recalled their childhood memories from their stay in Narayanganj in the 1900s, sharing their views of Diwali, New Year, Muharram festivals and the fairs and celebrations associated with these. An important detail of ‘Memshahibs’ (British women) attending and bargaining in such local stalls has been portrayed by Harriet G. Brittan. According to him, when these British ladies visited such places, sellers from different stalls used to gather around them and these women had to rush to one shop to avoid the crowd and buy something. He also depicts a fictional conversation between a stall owner and the British lady who bought a “piece of longcloth” for 10 rupees after bargaining with the staller who was asking 30 rupees for the same (Brittan, 188). So though, the presence of European or specifically British women were rare in local fairs, it was not as obscure as the upper class native women. These visitors, in total, played a very important socio-economic role in these fairs.

## Conclusion

The multi-faceted roles of females have been playing in the fairs of Bengal during the 19th and 20th century have put a new realization in front to acknowledge the contributions of women in the economic affluence of the families, upgrading the social lives of the people of different strata, maintaining the healthy and harmonious environment in parallel with men and very significantly entertaining the community getting out of the shackle of traditional protectionism. Despite being one of the key stakeholders in the fairs as sellers of the products, their active and pivotal roles in

the production of the local items, their visit turning the fair venue attractive, their purchasing the products—both local and foreign, their entertaining role through acrobatic performances at circuses as well as amusing presentations jatrpalas and less uttered role in prostitution, the womenfolk had always been underrated. These roles of women in the fairs of 19th and 20th century Bengal ultimately helped the society to embrace the changes it required for turning it into a better tolerant and vibrant one. Men had never been the only change makers. The active and passive roles of women in accelerating the economy, bringing positive changes to the society and thus establishing the circumference a modern society can dream for, have been perceived in the context of fair only from a precise spectrum. All other aspects are required to be addressed for the sake of the authentic history every reader looks for. This research leaves the window for the future endeavors of such kind.

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