

# Revisiting Women's Agency in the Pre-Colonial Social Structure of Bengal; A Comparative Study

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## ABSTRACT

This research examines women's agency in pre-colonial Bengal using a structure-agency method, analysing secondary sources using content-based thematic analysis and comparing two major social groupings. It vividly depicts precolonial Bengali Hindu and Muslim attitudes on women and agency webbing. It concluded that women's agency grew with structural modernization, hence, established practices developed path dependency with the operational paradigm shift where the modernization-induced change in women's status demonstrates agency. The socio-physical environment, religio-cultural settings, economic status quo, and cultural norms that have been associated with submission to men, such as for Hindu women, who were primarily subject to caste and other scenarios, and Muslim women, who were better off but still in the lower tier of society, led agency transformations. These established practices had shaped a new sort of path dependency, which had to persist until women were empowered and agency webbing except only a few upper-class women could have self-refine.

**Keywords:** Women status, Structure-Agency, Pre-colonial Bengal, Social change, Historical role.

## INTRODUCTION

Women is the wonderful creation of nature, and their agency can be said to be the primary source in modern society for being a key stakeholder from family life to state-governance. Historically, women have always played a significant role as agents of change in the society as they occupy key roles in many spheres of life, contribute to social progress. Hence, the progress in development standards of any society can be verified by the overall status index of women. The status of women in the pre-colonial social order was marginal (Dey, 2020). The concept of marginalization is hazy and has several facets and the marginalized persons may be abandoned, excluded, or disregarded in social, economic, political, and legal spheres, making them vulnerable. Being marginalized is insulting to one's financial security, sense of worth, and personal safety. This marginalization arises from the discriminatory views of society (Room, 1995). Before coming of Muslim rule in India and in pre-colonial Bengal, the vast majority of Bengalis worked in agriculture, and the community was highly stratified (Kabeer, 1988). Their social standing varied by caste and ethnicity throughout these societies and literacy and educational rates were low (Dixon, 1982).

Amin (1996) studied the status of Muslim women in pre and colonial regime as she claimed that women in pre-colonial Bengal had an active role in the economy and made significant contributions to family income generation. They contributed to economic activity via farming, making, and selling goods, and trading. The welfare of family and communities depended on women being economically active. On the other hand, Bagchi (1993) revealed that Pre-colonial Bengali women were cultured and creative as well as they excelled in documentation, dance, and music and creative arts. Bengali culture was shaped by women's inventiveness and creative achievements. Women gave community support as they were family and community caretakers, mediators, and advisers as well as they supported each other including attended civic activities and social engagements (Sangari & Vaid, 1990).

The study of women's agency, which sheds light on the complexities of societal gender dynamics, is essential for the development of a more just, equitable, and inclusive society. By analysing the factors that influence women's choice-making and behaviour, societies can pave the way for women to participate fully in all aspects of society. Exploring the agency of women by looking at the history of women's agency in fields like education, healthcare, employment, and legal rights, it let get a better understanding of the challenges and opportunities faced by women in diverse paradigm. Women's agency investigation within the social structure, on the other hand, is essential to social justice since it calls for the recognition and redress of historical and systemic racial injustice and abuse. Women's agency must be understood for cultural and societal change to occur.

There are several historical goals that might be advanced via investigation of women's roles in Bengal prior to colonization. The interpersonal, cultural, and financial aspects of pre-colonial Bengal is be better understood by looking at the position of women at that time and It's useful for learning about the freedoms and restrictions women faced in different societies (Pandey, 2022). Gender dynamics in pre-colonial Bengal can be examined through the lens of women's agency as their life and their relationships with males across different contexts will be better comprehended with an awareness of the power dynamics, societal conventions, and ideologies at play (Kamal, 2008). The interconnectedness of caste, class, religion, and geography illuminates' women's identities and these issues affect their experiences and possibilities in the patriarchal institutions. Women's autonomy, resistance, and engagement reveal their tactics for navigating society and pursuing their interests as well as the historical gender dynamics will inform gender equality legislation and advocacy (Topdar, 2017). This research advances women's emancipation and interpersonal justice by examining and reviewing historical roles and conditions of women that explore the hue of psychosocial order. This order has been constructed by the social structure and activity of women, which define her agency. This means that the agency of women is reciprocally dependent on structural social construction. It will debunk pre-colonial gender prejudices, challenge monolithic narratives that depict women as victimized or passive contributors and celebrate their range of perspectives and accomplishments.

### **Conceptual and Operational Framework: Agency of women in social structure**

To comprehend the interaction between broader social constructions and individual intervention, the structure-agency paradigm is a sophisticated understanding utensil of social processes. By recognizing people`s active construction and milieu of social assemblies, it is considerate of how social systems impact individual possibilities, limits, and identities.

The term "structure" is used to describe the larger social, cultural, economic, and political institutions that have an impact on people's daily lives (Haenfler, 2012). All the structures, regulations, and conventions that have developed through time as a result of societal pressures fall under this umbrella (Henrich et al., 2005). Both formal (such as laws, administration, and institutions) and informal (such as conventions, traditions, and societal obligations) structures exist in society.

Individuals' "agency" is defined as their ability to take initiative, make decisions, and exert control over their lives within the framework of societal norms and institutions (Mosedale, 2005). It places a premium on people seeing themselves as agents of change in their personalized circumstances and the situations of those around them as the decision-making, deliberate action, and the freedom to follow one's own dreams are all components of agency (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Individuals are seen as dynamic agents who perceive, negotiate, and react to social situations, rather than just passive receivers of social constructions, according to structure and agency paradigm. People have some control over their social surroundings but are also influenced by it and people's decisions and actions are shaped by the social structures that surround them (Malhotra, Schuler, & Boender, 2002). However, people exert control over their lives by construing and reconsidering these structures, arguing against accepted norms, developing novel habits, and altering established social orders. Therefore, people's freedom to think and act effectively and autonomously is not reliant on their social standing alone.

Women's "status" corresponds to their engagement privileges and duties in regulating society. It refers to the status of women in the social system in terms of rights and obligations in juxtaposition with men (Xaxa, 2004). On the other hand, "position" provided to women in society by tradition, philosophical thought, religion, and economic development can be utilized to describe how they are perceived by society (Glenn, 2016). Status advancement primarily entails broadening the scope of societal participation rights. The more significant role that women play in society and, consequently, the more highly esteemed they are, the more equal the possibilities structure for men and women (Kumar, 2014). The concept of status additionally implies the concept of equality as the women's status in pre-colonial Bengal fluctuated with characteristics such as socioeconomic status, religious affiliation, geographical location, and cultural era. It is crucial to remember that women's lives and duties differed depending on the community and social setting. The possibilities and limits women confront in many spheres are strongly influenced and shaped by a number of factors, including education, economic activity, societal norms and practices, and self-decision (Dore, Stone, & Buchanan, 2014). Women's autonomy is formed along several axes, including educational attainment, economic participation, societal norms and behaviours, and individual choice. By breaking down the barriers and openings that women face in various settings, researchers and policymakers will better craft strategies and laws to empower women and advance gender parity. Unequal access to education, work, healthcare, and legal rights restrict women's agency in different areas of life due to social structures, including gender roles and conventions.

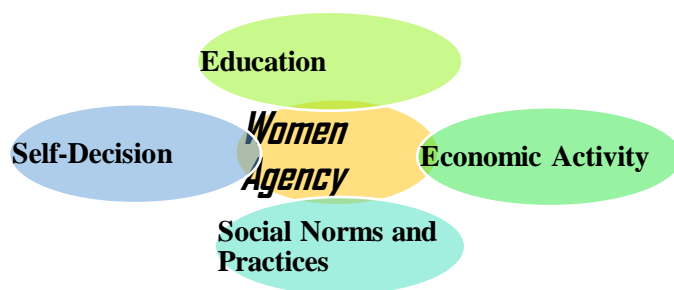


Figure -1: Women agency Indicators

Since the words "access" and "control" are indications of women's autonomy and standing in society, attitudes and behaviours toward women would be used to gauge the civilization of any given area or country (Dyson & Moore, 1983). These two terms are important for comparing how women and men are positioned in societal structure and how those two groups have evolved over time (Risman, 2018). By investigating these interrelated factors as education, economic activity, societal norms and customs, self-decision that enhance equality, and social justice as well find out structure of women's agency within it. The operational proposition in this study based on the details of following notions:

### Education

**Access to Knowledge and Skills:** Education empowers women by providing knowledge, skills, and critical thinking. Good education helps women make better life, health, and well-being decisions (Mosedale, 2005).

**Empowerment and Autonomy:** Education provides women greater choices and independence. Women with greater education make more choices at home, in their communities, and in society (Goldin, 2006).

### Economic Activity

**Financial Independence:** Reciprocally women's financial independence and job rely on the agency. Economic empowerment provides women greater life autonomy as they can make more active choices with the structure (Kabeer, 2008).

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**Access to Resources:** Women's ability to get economic tools like jobs, loans, and property rights has a direct effect on their freedom. Giving people more economic power often gives families and groups more bargaining power (Bardhan, 1985).

### Social Norms and Practices

**Cultural and Societal Expectations:** Social conventions impact women's roles. Discover regarding these principles to recognize the challenges women face while trying to lead and grow (Ely, Ibarra, & Kolb, 2011).

**Norms Impacting Decision-Making:** Social norms influence education, marriage, childbearing, and professions. Considering these processes helps challenge harmful habits and promote constructive change (Organization, 2004).

### Self-Decision

**Autonomy and Personal Choices:** Self-determination is crucial to agency. Self-decision inquiry explores how women make choices about education, work, relationships, and personal health (Johnson, 2010).

**Informed Decision-Making:** Determination and fact-gathering go together. Providing women with accurate and full information empowers them to make choices that reflect their values (Organization, 2004).

### Problem Statement and Research gap:

The intricate relationship between personal agency, societal norms, and historical legacies in determining women's autonomy and empowerment may be better understood via the lens of agency, structure, and path-dependency. To promote gender equality and women's empowerment, this paradigm looks at how women manage and control their agency within current societal institutions. There is a dearth of comparison analysis between two major social forces, and coordinated analysis is typically absent, particularly in Bengal, both of which have an influence on the present and future of any given system or event. In a path dependent model, the outcomes of actions taken in the past dictate the range of options available in the future. It may include finding distributions, trends, or correlations in a certain setting. There is a gap in the field of women's agency studies that may be filled by integrating these ideas; doing so would allow us to better understand the interplay between historical and social factors and women's subordination. However, when it comes to Bengali women, there has been a noticeable lack of research into the specific social, cultural, and political factors that either support or undermine women's agency, as well as an examination of how past actions and decisions have influenced these dynamics. In the absence of subordination mapping and path-dependency, it is difficult to provide an accurate interpretation in any given source or context. Giving further details would assist in comprehending its intended significance in relation to the given situations.

### Method and design

This study is descriptive and analytical based on secondary sources of data and an in-depth literature-based review whereas the enormous time and geographical variances make it difficult to present a comprehensive assessment of women's experiences in pre-colonial Bengal social structure. In this historical analysis, both qualitative and quantitative methods were used in this research which is both expository and systematic in charm. Since interpretive or critical social science, the use of "logic in practice," and a circuitous approach to inquiry are common features of qualitative research (Finfgeld-Connett, 2014). Most quantitative studies, on the other hand, have a positivist stance, use "reconstructed logic," and proceed in a sequential fashion. So, it places a premium on in-depth analyses of situations that develop organically in social life (Finfgeld Connett, 2013). By combining quantitative and qualitative methods, we can better understand potential outcomes of situation and ongoing nature of concern about the life and social structure (Wicks & Whiteford, 2006). Hence, Secondary sources such books, articles, media commentary, and laws have been studied to help define the central paradigm of women's agency and evaluate the historical shift in Bangladesh (Hussain, 2010). Collective qualitative data analysis (QDA) is being used to get a complete picture of existing disclosures and

the agency's capabilities. Here, by using a coding system to identify key themes, situations, and acts related to women's distinguished social roles and critically assessing the sources' validity, reliability, and assumptions (Olzak, 1994). On the other hand, creating a time-ordered section that emphasizes the achievements and struggles of women activists by comparing data from several sources to improve the analysis as well as explored the phenomenon's origins, strategies, and outcomes for women. Finally gives a summary of the political and social climate, cultural norms, and major events that moulded the women's movement and inspired its members to succeed and change. It considers area peculiarities and scene universals to create a more holistic picture as putting it in a context and period that fit the themes with an investigation if a woman's ethnicity, social class, or geography influenced the views and contributions.

## ANALYSIS, DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

A holistic acquaintance of women's agency within certain circumstances will be achieved by investigating these interrelated factors: education, economic activity, societal norms and customs, self-decision, etc. that enhances gender inequality and social justice by taking a comprehensive approach to understanding the factors that hinder women's autonomy and then working to remove those obstacles (Dey, 2020). To create spaces where women become autonomous, fully engaged in society, and empowered to achieve their full potential, it is essential to investigate these aspects of women's life. Considering these issues, the sectional analysis as well as the comparative analysis employed to each theme as tried to explore the nature of Hindu society's and nature of Muslim society's with a final provision of comparative analysis to portray the big pictures at large.

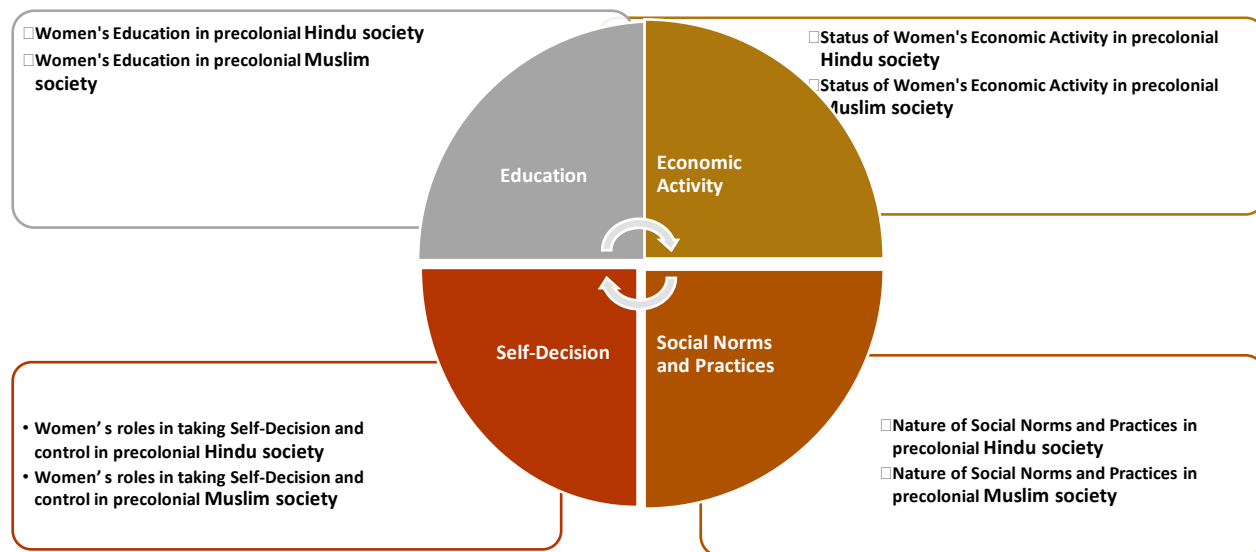


Figure -2: Sectional analysis and comparison of Women agency

Only members of the higher classes, mostly males, were allowed to attend school. Girls from upper castes, however, got a more limited education at home, one that focuses on domestic duties and religious observances. The Brahmins and the Kshatriyas were members of the upper castes, who had more social rank and advantages than the lower classes and the tribal people (Audretsch, 2013). It is better to discuss the position of women in the pre-colonial social system by dividing the women of the Muslim community and the women of the Hindu community.

### Education

Education affects women's access to potential, self-determination, financial status, civic and political engagement, capacity to question gender norms, and well-being, making it crucial to evaluate their agency in society (Kabeer, 1999). It has always been difficult for women, affecting their agency, However, it gives women the information, skills, and analytical thinking they need to make informed choices and exercise

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agency (Leitner, 1882). Educated women have a greater tendency to make intelligent gender-related choices, access, and adopt decent family discussion.

- **Women's Education in precolonial Hindu society**

Hindu social structure changed throughout time, but it varied widely across the Indian subcontinent because educated women were considered differently in precolonial Hindu society. Pre-colonial Hindu Bengali education was moulded by local customs (Chitalkar, 2021). Women's educational possibilities and social status differed widely. Gurukul students lived with their professors since they were viewed as commoners, especially upper-class guys.

Caste affected many aspects of life, including education as the Brahmins, traditional instructors, have had different regulations than other castes (Chitalkar, 2021; Chowdhury Sengupta, 1993). The traditional instructors, Brahmins shaped schools and education. Brahmin women have been educated in scriptures and holy palimpsests, but their education focused on home and social obligations and rituals and conventions. Lower-caste women have less educational opportunities due to societal norms (Kabeer, 1988). Cultural values including women's family and home obligations influenced educational goals. Oral education was important for bringing on spiritual and cultural comprehension.

- **Women's Education in precolonial Muslim society**

Muslim cultures in South Asia and elsewhere differed based on geography, culture, and socioeconomic status. Women in precolonial Muslim nations had several educational options whereas religious education was common in Bengal Muslim schools before colonialism (Rahim, 1963). Girls were educated in Quranic sciences and Islamic ideals, especially in the home or mosque. Traditional and conservative civilizations often had female role models teach girls religion. Since local traditions, clan rituals, and ethnic beliefs shaped women's education, women educators taught Islamic values, etiquette, and literacy (Talbot, 1995). In certain Muslim households in Bengal, women were economically active and acquired economic education. Traditional education for women has concentrated on household and community employment skills. This includes cooking, sewing, and polishing. Females have had higher formal education in cities and rich households. Scholars, madrasas, and cultural centres increased learning possibilities (Kamal, 2008; Room, 1995). Rural girls received a rigorous education that emphasized religion and practical instruction. Female literacy rates varied but were consistently lower than male rates. However, several big cities and aristocratic society had more access for educating women.

## **Economic Activism and Operation**

Economic self-reliance is considered a key factor in developing a sense of individuality. Significant and well-documented gender inequalities in employment and earnings are found across cultural and ethnic groupings (Gressel et al., 2020). However, because resources are shared between men and women in families, men's and women's individual labour market circumstances do not entirely define where they fall within the structure of segregation.

- **Status of Women's Economic Activity in precolonial Hindu society**

Women's economic engagement in precolonial Hindu civilization varied by area, caste, and social status (Kumar, 2014). Caste, regional, and social customs shaped women's economic engagement in agricultural, handicraft, and commercial businesses, which supported their settings and properties (Chowdhury Sengupta, 1993). Women managed domestic economy chores including resource management and family finances in several Bengali areas. Women's professional and home duties are often interwoven, giving them more household decision-making power. Due to caste, Bengal codified this segregation of labour and output. Women's agricultural work was vital to their families' and communities' economies (Bagchi, 1993; Chowdhury Sengupta, 1993). Brahmin women, especially higher caste women, have had some authority in their

households and communities. By working in the inner portion and maintaining a ceremonial detached component in their financial activities, they hoped to maintain their upper-class standing and social dignity over the subordinate castes. Women, particularly lower caste women, worked in agriculture, crafts, and trade to support their family. In artisan communities, women would weave, make pottery, and care for animals, as well as cultivate seeds and harvest crops. They shopped and sold at local markets, particularly in urban and semi-urban domains, to support their families and communities (Henrich et al., 2005; Mosedale, 2005). They traded goods, amenities, and agricultural products to earn a profit, and some women have created businesses, operated family businesses, or supplied critical services. Although women's economic duties varied by area or group, fishing communities seen women actively fishing.

- **Status of Women's Economic Activity in precolonial Muslim society**

Hence, in the field of economic empowerment for women in the Muslim community of India, it was partial and, to some extent, entirely circumscribed (Rahim, 1963). Due to various religious and social rules, women of Muslim community do not have the opportunity to go out, so their participation in economic fields including business, agriculture, industry is minimal (Sartori, 2008; Wade, 1998). However, this barrier has existed in the social structure of India for a long time. Women's sense of individuality, existence, and independence was nearly absent (Banerjee, 2010). All financial decisions in a family were taken by men, and even women had rare access to develop in their own way.

### **Social Norms and Practices**

Social conventions and practices assist us comprehend women's agency in the larger cultural environment in which they live and the elements that affect their agency. Social customs and standards frequently determine socially acceptable roles and actions for women. Power dynamics affect women's agency via social norms and behaviours (Dore et al., 2014; Meyers, 2002). These standards reveal how social structures limit women's autonomy in multiple spheres of life. Social norms and behaviours limit women's resources, opportunities, and decision-making, perpetuating gender inequity.

- **Nature of Social Norms and Practices in precolonial Hindu society**

Marriage is a key institution that shapes social standards in all South Asian societies. In precolonial Hindu society, social structure, and women's agency can be explored by addressing some social practices and institutionalized appeals based on Marriage, *Satidah*, *Kulline* and *Debadashi* system.

**Marriage, Sati-dah, Kulin and Debadashi system:** Hindu sati-dah was barbaric which shackled women with rope or shackles, was brutal and degrading as it involves burning a widow alive with her husband as it's a notion of virtuous act impact women's agency (Sangari & Vaid, 1990). A Sanskrit sati lady must be entirely loyal to her husband as the widow was burnt alive if the husband died. So, "a sati" is a "pure and virtuous woman." After discovering her husband's adultery, a loving wife burnt herself with his body to secure their marriage's longevity (Rawat & Kumar, 2015; Sangari & Vaid, 1990). Widows would create individual pyres and adorn them with their husbands' turbans and shoes. Every Hindu household, regardless of age, caste, social class, or religion, performed this practice. Many people performed sati under social structural pressure and coercion. The practice is often forced on widows by families and communities (Kooria, 2021; Rawat & Kumar, 2015). This source's coercion and social pressure endanger their autonomy and decision-making. Widows who opposed Sati or stated their desire to avoid it were terrorized and stigmatized. Some societies consider them responsible for their spouse's death for defying tradition and dishonouring family. Their paucity of social ties prevented them from fully participating in public life and its consequences varied geographically. In certain locations, Sati was rare or forbidden, allowing widows more control over their interpersonal and professional life (Kamal, 2008). However, sati burning required official authority at the time. The local faujdar had to determine whether the lady was forced into the pyre. Institutionalized sati-dah facts are scarce nowadays but it was mentioned in several places from 1812-1828 (Pennington, 2005). The data shows that Bengal had more Hindu sati than Mumbai (Bombay), Madras, or even the municipality of Benares, the most orthodox.

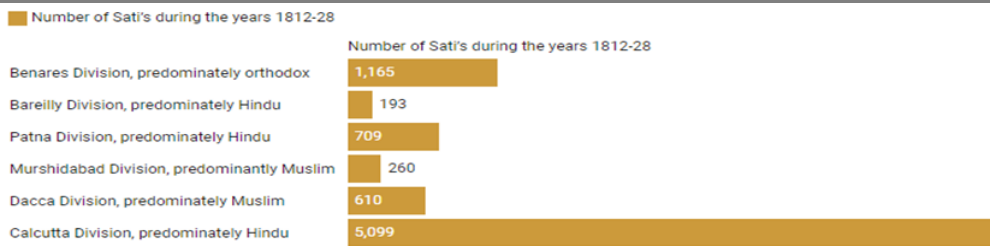


Figure -1: Number Sati's event from 1812-1828

**Kulina-** Under Brahminical Sen monarch Ball-al Sen, the practice was instituted. A Kulin group was among the highest-caste Brahmins (Sangari & Vaid, 1990). Many elderly marriages occur without the husband supporting the woman. Multiple societal issues arose from Kulin-Brahmin polygamy. They nearly made a living collecting gorgeous dowries from several weddings. Kulin polygamy increased in the eighteenth century for societal and financial reasons, although most Kulin must have remained monogamous (Kabeer, 1988; Sangari & Vaid, 1990). Sometimes females were not allowed to reside with their guardians for a period of six to eight years after birth. Dowry was necessary, and bride costs were speculated in certain localities. **Devadashi-** This system was another Hindu social plague. Beautiful, unmarried women were sacrificed to the deities in temples and became their maidservants. It corrupted temples and endangered their lives.

- **Nature of Social Norms and Practices in precolonial Muslim society**

Many dynasties and emperors, as well as local customs and Islamic culture and ideas, shaped Bengali social standards and behaviours throughout this time and Islam affects culture. Islamic prayer, fasting, and philanthropy affected daily life (Rahim, 1963). The Sharia affected the judicial system because Qazis were Islamic judges who administered justice according to Islamic principles. The social hierarchy divided people by occupation, money, and social status (Jaffar, 1972). Planning weddings and following Islamic rules are fundamental to Islamic marriage. As in many other communities of the time, it was patriarchal, with men in authority, property and inheritance rights favouring males' family members, the expanded family system common, and women's roles centered on residential and family responsibilities (Hussein-Khan, 1832). Women's clothes often covered the body humbly, reflecting Islamic beliefs and local cultural standards, although experiences varied widely depending on each person's position. As the cultural environment was a mix of Islamic and native traditions, Muslim rituals and festivals like Eid were observed alongside native festivities (Sangari & Vaid, 1990). Several women faced societal restraints, while others had greater autonomy and agency.

### **Self-Decision making and Autonomy.**

Self-decision-taking is essential to understanding and strengthening women's agency in life and represents their autonomy and empowerment (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007). Rightful participation and equality in life are crucial to women's agency and those who make their own decisions enjoy better physical and emotional health, higher education, and more economic freedom (Hussain, 2010). It highlights patriarchal, racist, and cultural conventions that restrict women's autonomy.

- **Women' s roles in taking Self-Decision and control in precolonial Hindu society.**

Regardless of the viewpoint, the status of Hindu women is distressing, both physically and mentally and women is fated to endure time in the jail of *Anthapur* in suffering and confinement (Sangari & Vaid, 1990). During that era, women's autonomy was not acknowledged in Hindu culture and their viewpoint was deemed worthless whereas they were transferred from one owner to another, like to slaves (Risman, 2018; Sangari & Vaid, 1990). Hindus did not acknowledge the rights of women and did not have inheritance rights to their fathers' or spouses' property. Child marriage does not provide the right of remarriage if spouses die at the age of twenty-two. Sati's recurrence, the ban on second marriages, the proliferation of the purdah system, and the



increase in polygamy were the most detrimental circumstances for women (Banerjee, 2010; Dyson & Moore, 1983). Women's existence in this culture is profoundly melancholic and they were consistently reliant on others. Women had the burden of several individuals and various duties within the household.

- **Women's roles in taking Self-decision and control in precolonial Muslim society.**

Precolonial Bengali Muslim women have several aspects to consider while making decisions. Hussain (2010) noted that Muslim women in Bengal experienced socio-economic and educational hurdles that have affected their self-decisions. However, 19th-century Bengali women were asserting their autonomy, suggesting self-decision-making as their standing and capacity to choose self-decisions within precolonial Muslim civilizations varied by geography, culture, socioeconomic threshold, and Islamic interpretation. Precolonial Muslim civilizations were varied and covered a broad cultural range over many centuries, therefore women's experiences were not uniform (Kumar, 2014; Rahim, 1963). Most Muslim communities gave women greater independence and agency than today. According to historical data, Muslim women had more opportunity and agency than current women due to 20th-century events. Despite legal inequalities, Muslim women filed over half of divorce proceedings and participated in recognized Islam.

### **Women victims of slavery**

Young girls whose parents sold them into harem concubines because to shortages, malnutrition, and famine. A wretched, cursed, and stigmatized existence in a four-walled cottage was theirs forever. According to 1649 to 1754 human sale records, women and girls were sold as slaves. For instances, Sri Bodai's wife sold her 11-year-old daughter for three rupees in 1719. However, the selling cause remains unknown (Prakash, 2003). Due of poverty, Sri Parvati Dasi sold her 6-year-old Sri Manidasi for three rupees in 1721. Sri Nanda Ram Chandra sold the slave's daughter for 1 rupee in 1737 for unknown reasons (Malhotra et al., 2002; Sangari & Vaid, 1990). When they were newborns, European and other western bandits or slave merchants took the lovely ladies from their parents. Once grown, they sold them to slumlords, royal families, rich nobles, or aristocracy. Medieval Bengali parents sometimes sold their daughters. The female slaves did housework and were sometimes concubines. The sexual servitude of Bengali women was particularly brutal (Chattopadhyay, 1959). The licentious owners solely used them sexually. The Delhi exhibition included thousands of bandits every year (Prakash, 2003). Female slaves were priced based on age, attractiveness, and other personal traits, while male slaves rated based on physique, health, vitality, etc. Peasants also sold themselves or their wives and daughters freely.

### **Comparative Discussion and Proposition of path-dependency**

Precolonial Bengali Hindu and Muslim women had comparable and diverse educational options. With its varied culture and history, Bengal has seen different educational methods influenced by local customs, social institutions, and religious norms. Hindus and Muslims stressed religious education for women (Majee, 2020). Bengali Muslim and Hindu women learned their religions' texts, rituals, and traditions. In both societies, women's education focused on home. Young women were taught cooking, sewing, and childcare. Muslim women learned practical skills to aid in homemaking. Bengal's Muslim community had a well-developed madrasa (school) system for teaching all races, castes, and heredities (Sanyal, 2020). In Bengali Hindu civilizations, caste is more important since education was concentrated, tightly specialized, and solely offered by Brahmin-run institutions for the top caste. Higher-caste Hindu women enjoy greater access to formal education (Wade, 1998). Family history and income affect social mobility, but Muslim women's access is more affected by socioeconomic factors than caste or religious identity at all. Urban Muslim women have greater access to professional education, offering them economic advantages (Meyers, 2002). Muslim women in Bengal's urban cities constantly worked in teaching, healthcare, and other disciplines.

Women's economic involvement was also influenced by religious conventions, but there was a plethora of resemblances in working and financial activism. Rural agriculture and livestock care relied on women farmers mostly (Henrich et al., 2005). In principally Muslim Bengal, the purdah system is a strong element of social

structure that promotes female modesty and seclusion, influencing women's public visibility and economic engagement. Hence, in Muslim societies, cultural, interpersonal, and societal difficulties shaped women's economic roles and outdoor involvement in financial activities, which enabled their agency (Ibrahim & Alkire, 2007; Mosedale, 2005; Risman, 2018). On the other hand, Hindu women's economic participation varied widely by caste and status. Henceforth, upper-caste women could work in business and agriculture, while lower-caste women had fewer economic opportunities as women have led family businesses, boosting domestic economic activity, which empowered to make her agency within the framework of social structure (Risman, 2018; Sartori, 2008).

Women's self-decision-making in these two cultures had different social constructions, religious convictions, and cultural traditions that affected women's roles and self-determination. For Muslim women, Islamic law moulded Muslim women's agency as the Shariah law interpretations also affected women's autonomy in various settings as well (Narain, 2001). However, in Hinduism, social customs, and religious scriptures specific to castes and subgroups governed women's duties. Some Hindu societies gave women property and inheritance rights, but patriarchal norms and caste-bound environments limited their liberty (Denton, 2012). Traditional gender roles established women's household tasks, including domestic chores, childrearing, and family and societal conventions. While Muslim women agree to marriage and divorce under certain conditions, family and cultural expectations generally affect their marital, child-rearing, and household decisions but Hindu castes and groups have diverse marriage and family rituals (Raday, 2003).

Polygamy and child marriage were frequent in both communities. Hindus forbade widow marriage but allowed polygamy. Women have been physically and intellectually subjugated by males since losing their uniqueness as when a girl hit 10 or 11 and doesn't marry, her father is outcast consequently girls had to commit suicide (Meyers, 2002; Raday, 2003; Sangari & Vaid, 1990). Child widows were beforehand isolated, head-shaved, and socially isolated. Child marriage is nevertheless widespread despite being prohibited since 1860.

**Notion of Path Dependence of Agency through social structure:** Historical events and actions shaped future occurrences, which is considered path dependence (David, 2007). Gender norms, legal rights, and cultural expectations also shape women's agency, but they struggle to break beyond discrimination and inequities due to cumulative impacts that were created by path-dependence. Cultural exclusion of women from educational or economic possibilities often spans centuries. Economic differences let limit women's options, but access to resources, work opportunities, and personal independence can elevate them. The historical status and agency of women have often been determined by social mores, cultural norms, and structural imbalances that have contributed to the creation of dependence patterns (Williams, 2003).

Women have historically had fewer educational options or have sometimes been denied access altogether. Due to a lack of education, women became reliant on males for financial assistance and decision-making since they have often been restricted in doing housework (Room, 1995; Williams, 2003). Besides, women's initiative and agency have traditionally been restricted by laws and cultural conventions, making it harder for them to own property and take self-decision-making processes.

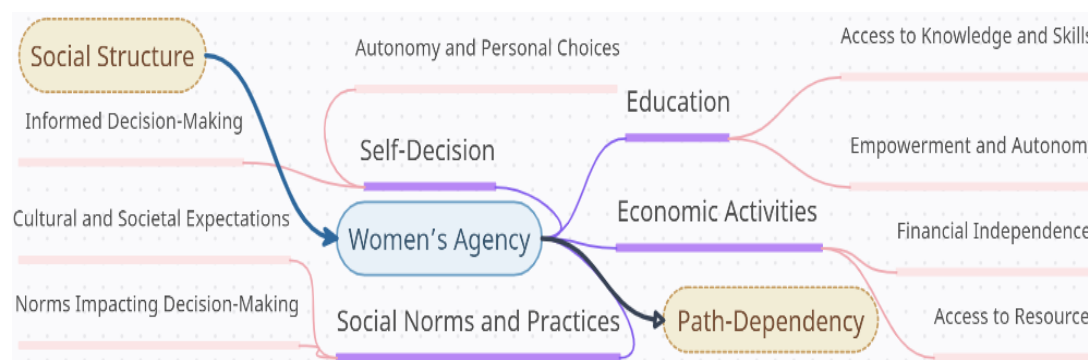


Figure -2: Concept Mapping of Social Structure to Women's Agency and Path Dependency

These limitations encouraged reliance by keeping women from participating fully in social and economic spheres. These social structure-based norms have the power to influence expectations and actions in ways that support women's dependence in households and society at large by fragile of agency in Bengal (Basu & Amin, 2000). Due to their historical underrepresentation in positions of both economic and political authority, women found it more difficult to influence decisions and speak out for their own interests. Marriage and family-related cultural conventions and social cast made women in submissive positions as the agency of women has been shaped by a complex interplay of events that often led to pathways of dependence. Therefore, we can observe women's true social situation at the time. However, frequent aristocratic women have enriched social life by their culture and taste. Jinna Tunnesa, Murshid Quli Khan's wife Dardana, and cultured Nafisa Begum are renowned (Ganguly-Scrase, 2003). Nawab Ali Bardi Khan's real friend, knowledgeable and sensible counsel Sharaf-Unnessa, Sirajuddaula's mother Amina Begum, and wife Lut-Funnessa Begum are all worthy of recognition. Some Hindu women overcame reliance and blockage as Rani Bhabani of Nator stood out historically as a skilled zamindar, she carefully managed her huge domains as well (Bose, 1993). Thus, lots of Hindu and Muslim women have contributed to social, economic, administrative, and political sectors, but these ladies are rare, which is intriguing.

## CONCLUSION

Historically, women have often been unable to exercise agency, the ability to act autonomously and make their own decisions due to a combination of social, cultural, economic, and political reasons. Women in precolonial Bengali Hindu and Muslim communities faced a multiplicity of oppressions stemming from their gender, sexual orientation, aptitude, class, and race. with the passage of time, the agency of women increased alongside the modernization of social structure but having different agency structures and practices established path dependence with the shift of the structural paradigm. This shift in women's standing because of social modernization indicates a rise in women's agency. It means that agency has a strong nexus to the structure regarding societal changes that has reflected in new patterns of path dependence. A number of factors contributed to societal shifts, and therefore, their impact on society is relative. The socio-physical environment, the religio-cultural circumstances, the economic status quo, and the cultural norms that have been associated with humility and submission to men, where Hindu women were primarily subject to the caste and other established social settings, and Muslim women had some better position, comparative but similar for both in the lower tier of society. Consequentially, these established social structures and practices had moulded a new form of path dependence, which had to continue until the date of empowerment and agency webbing for women at large where women had been denied the opportunity for self-refinement except for a few upper-class women. Because of further obstacles to agency and self-determination, women from oppressed communities are much more reliant on dominant social groupings than they already were. As a result, they have been subject to oppression and systemic discrimination, which has reduced their agency by limiting their access to resources like land, property, and financial capital. As this way, they have relied more on their economic well-being, which includes things like employment and public participation, to survive. Many women had been pushed into subservient positions, depending on other establishments for their economic and social status, because of this systemic imbalance. Despite their best efforts, women have been unable to escape the shackles of reliance and attain economic self-sufficiency due to cultural norms and gender-specific behaviours that limit their decision-making power.

### **Recommendation and future policy direction:**

Implementing policies that challenge established power relations, eliminate biased practices, and enhance women's agency and decision-making ability is crucial in addressing subjection against women's agency within societal structure. Adopt and implement gender equality legislation to preserve women's agency in home, employment, education, healthcare, and politics. To address historical path dependency and prevent domestic abuse, sexual harassment, and harmful cultural behaviours, it's need to give gender-based violence survivors shelter, legal help, counselling, and healthcare. To empower women economically, close the gender wage gap, offer equitable employment, education, and training, and stimulate entrepreneurship and formal economy involvement. These policy initiatives may help governments, parliamentarians, and other stakeholders remove

cultural obstacles to women's agency and create an environment where women may exercise their rights, make autonomous choices, and fully engage in society.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

Regarding the research, writing, and/or publishing of this paper, the authors have declared that there are no probable conflicts of interest that might potentially arise.

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