Talking About Scandals: Religion, Law and Love in Late Nineteenth Century Bengal

* Social history of a scandalous event that rocked Bengal in 1873
* The stories that circulated around this episode were narrated in farces, in newspaper editorials and reports, and in journals
* They were also told through bazaar paintings, wood cut prints, street songs, and on the stages of the new public theatre
* They belonged therefore, to processes that constituted an emerging public sphere where private people argued about their intimate concerns through novel modes of public communication.
* Rajeshwari Sunder Rajan has drawn our attention to the changing definitions of the word scandal. Whereas in 1582 it denoted a ‘moral lapse’, and in 1590 a ‘damage of reputation’, in 1622 a ‘disgraceful reputation’ by 1844 it also comes to mean ‘slander’
* By 1838 it means both ‘offence to moral feeling or decency’ and ‘injurious report published concerning another which may be the foundation of a legal action’.
* Whereas, the older meaning of a violation of norms is carried into early 19th century usage, a new meaning also develops which moves from slander to legal offence, shifting the onus of definition from the moral community to the law court.
* It is interesting that the 1838 definition also includes ‘published report’ as a criterion, indicating both the consolidation of a public sphere and its constitution through the print medium.
* The Bengali counterpart to the word is *ketchha*, which is taken from the Persian word *kissa*.
* While the Persian original referred to stories, mostly on fabulous romances, the Bengali derivation changed its meaning to denote scandalous stories, thus obliquely affirming the potentially transgressive character of romances. In the representations of the scandal that concern us, we find the English term frequently in use, even in Bengali texts.
* A **trial** makes scandalous disclosures, publicises intimate transgressions. Its reception has the same function as enlarging the scope of **gossip**, pulling it out of hidden, intimate, familiar circles into the realm of public concern and argument.
* An **event** is something that creates a shared field of discussion and thereby creates an interpretive community which reads the text of the event.
* An event of the ‘gossipable’ kind adds a peculiarly intimate twist to it.
* If **gossip** flourishes within an intimate group and draws its discussions into a tighter circle of acquaintances and concerns, a **scandal** performs the same function within an anonymous, abstract public: it draws an unseen community of concerned people closer together by focusing on intimate issues about its constituents.
* The range of its reception defines the space of public sphere.
* In 1873 a sensational murder case came up before the Hooghly Sessions Court at Serampore in south west Bengal
* A powerful mohunt, Madhavchandra Giri of Tarakeswar, the manager cum guru of the rich and popular Saivite temple and pilgrimage centre in Hooghly, was accused of first seducing and then raping Elokeshi, the young wife of one Nobinchandra Banerji, who worked as an employee at a military press in Calcutta
* Mohunt has established a liaison with Elokeshi with the connivance of Elokeshi’s parents, with whom she had been staying while her husband worked in Calcutta.
* On a visit home to his wife, Nobin came to know of what had been afoot through village gossip, and he angrily confronted his wife.
* A frightened and repentant Elokeshi confessed all, and Nobin decided to forgive her and take her away from Tarakeswar.
* The mohunt, however, ordered his musclemen to bar their way.
* In a fit of blind rage, Nobin severed Elokeshi’s throat with a fish knife and then, full of horror at his own deed, turned himself in at the local police station with an unequivocal confession.
* An Indian jury acquitted him on grounds of insanity but the European judge demurred and the case was sent up to the Calcutta High Court.
* Nobin was sentenced to life transportation, but in 1875 he received a pardon because of massive public petitions for mercy.
* The mohunt was sentenced to three years’ rigorous imprisonment and a fine of Rs. 3000, but Bengali public opinion generally considered this punishment as grossly lenient
* It is thus evident that both the event and the trials were of a sensational nature
* The mohunt and his English lawyer were mobbed outside the court and the trial was frequently interrupted by existing crowds of spectators who demanded either clemency for Nobin or a harsher sentence for the mohunt
* Calcutta and district town notables got up petitions and subscriptions to help Nobin
* A plea for mercy registered more than 10,000 signatures, revealing the involvement of the lower middle class as well
* Plays written as late as 1924 referred to the Elokeshi episode in such a way as to assume that it was still in public knowledge
* Tarakeswar had been a centre of great scandals, at least from the early nineteenth century. In 1824, Mohunt Shrimanta Giri was executed for murdering the lover of his mistress. In 1912, Nagendrabala Debi accused the mohunt of raping her daughter. In 1924 the Swarajists organised a satyagraha campaign against Mohunt Satish Giri’s alleged sexual and financial misconduct and managed to achieve a measure of public control over temple funds
* We find that from the second decade of the nineteenth century that such scandals become a focus of public attention.
* Certainly, the focus owes a lot to the new possibilities of publicity, i.e the new law courts and trial procedures, which at times were something of a public spectacle and followed the tropes of a suspense drama.
* Then there was the press, which repeated the trial events at length and commented on them; and added to this was the growth of dissident religious sects among Hindus who agitated over the legal redefinition of norms of Hindu conjugality.
* Despite its highly sensational nature, the 1824 scandal had not created waves of representations, nor did it have as tenacious a grip on public memory.
* The 1873 events, in contrast, were vividly remembered and recalled during the 1924 satyagraha.
* Missionaries speculated on the possible disenchantment of Hindus with their own leadership and institutions.
* English owned newspapers debated the morals of native society, British justice, and whether or not the government should embark on a more intrusive course of action vis a vis Hindu institutions.
* Bengali newspapers gave elaborate, often verbatim reports of trial proceedings and critically discussed the stance of European judges, Hindu lawyers, the jury, as well as public responses to the events and trials.
* These were passionate debates about the precise degree of culpability of each of the characters involved in the scandal, as well as about whether the various judgements fairly and correctly interpreted and applied the laws.
* Finally, there were arguments about the nature of colonial law and Hindu religious norms.
* Popular press: farces; printed plays; wood cut print; collection of popular songs on the event were compiled and printed;
* Bazaar prints; In the entire corpus of popular painting and print, this was the only event depicted
* A brisk market developed over the production and sale of objects commemorating the event: saris and betel-leaf boxes were inscribed with Elokeshi’s name, fish knives had it scored into the iron.
* A balm, claiming to be specially effective for headaches brought on by hard study for examinations, allegedly used the oil that the mohunt had produced inside the gaol as part of his prison labour
* A report on the variety of metal objects in use in Bengal, written in 1894, referred to the sale of these commemorative objects even twenty years after the event.
* What was it that made the 1870s a vantage point of interest in the stories of Nobin, Elokeshi and Madhavgiri?
* The 1870s were in many ways, an interesting transitional moment in Bengal.
* Broad generalized formal political institutions had not yet fully articulated themselves and the politics of associations and congresses would come into their own only from the next decade.
* Local self-government under Viceroy Ripon began in 1880s---yet made their appearance in 1870s.
* The making of public sphere in Bengal sees a remarkable downward reach in the 1870s. Theatre escapes the exclusive control of upper class patrons and their private, amateur shows.
* The first public companies and stages are formed at the initiative of middle class young men of north Calcutta
* Tickets are priced so as to allow, at least occasionally, the lower middle classes into the public halls.
* The great Bengali newspaper, *Amrita Bazaar*, is founded by a district town’s middle class family not renowned for great educational or cultural achievements.
* In less than a decade, another important newspaper, *Bangabashi*, innovates a novel marketing strategy to target a readership of lower middle class commuting clerks from district towns and villages.
* Farces, pamphlets, tracts and lyrics are written and published by men and even by a few women.
* These are people with no knowledge of English, Persian or Sanskrit: they now begin to wield their everyday language, the new vernacular prose, as soon as they think they have an interesting story to tell.
* The newly formed Bengal Theatre had opened with two erudite plays by the great playwright Michael Madhusudan Datta on classical themes. Both were miserable flops. In despair, the management experimented with a play by an unknown playwright, Lakshminarayan Das.
* His scandal play, *Mohanter Ei Ki Kaj*! Seems to be the only thing that he ever wrote that made a name. He probably belonged to the Sudra caste.
* The fortunes of the Bengal Theatre were made from the proceeds of this one play, *Mohanter Ei Ki Kaj*! Later the play was picked up by a host of other companies and performed outside Calcutta.
* At the Sessions Court, Judge Field said he was assuming the fact of adultery because Elokeshi had been found ‘ joking and flirting’ with the mohunt. While this would not count as evidence in the case of Europeans, in Hindu society such behavior signified adulterous connection.
* Hearing the appeal lodged by the mohunt at the High Court, Judge Markby made a similar point.
* The pilgrimage to Tarakeswar boomed largely because of the fame of its miracle cures for several diseases, especially barrenness.
* A large number of young women therefore flocked to the place and undertook the prescribed penances within mixed crowds and with no privacy in an extremely congested space.
* In a number of scandal plays, Elokeshi visits the mohunt the first time to receive a cure for barrenness and the mohunt, attracted by her, plans the seduction. There were rumours that the mohunt selected his victims from young pilgrims, and then his musclemen would procure them for him. Afterwards, the women could not return to their families: their only sanctuary lay in the growing brothels of Tarakeswar.
* Newspapers in 1873 were full of lurid descriptions of the licentiousness of the temple pandas or touts at Puri and Tarakeswar.
* Elokeshi episode was a massive public confirmation of all these fears.
* Pilgrimage journeys by women –enhanced mobility in an age of safer roads and modern transport. The new railways carried a much larger number of women into such ambiguous holy places.
* The journey exposed ‘respectable’ women of ordinary means, those who would normally be secluded within the domestic space, to male contact and the male gaze within mixed crowds.
* Both journey and act of pilgrimage therefore aroused deep male fears about the erosion of boundaries, and women’s exposure to men, and to different castes.
* The railway carriage became the sign of a dangerous modernity, of Kaliyug, of the loss of gender and caste anchorage.
* Reformists argued that the scandal had made pilgrimage redundant because the sacredness of the sites had been disapproved by the immorality of its custodians.
* The orthodox, on the other hand, insisted that the woman’s holiest space lay within the family, in devoted service to the household and the family deity. It was only an immoral woman who used a religious pretext to wander outside the home.
* It was deemed more important to be a good woman than to be the mother of sons.
* But who is the good woman? Where does her goodness lie, and what destroys it? Up to the 1870s these questions remained remarkably open and troubled.
* The good woman, whether in reformist or in orthodox rhetoric, would primarily be the good wife, although the terms of description would differ.
* Two sets of women talk about Elokeshi: one the village wives, the other the village prostitutes. On the whole the wives condemned her, they doubt her love for Nobin, they allege she was not only too happy to be raped, they confidently and proudly assert that no one can rape a woman against her will.
* In contrast, the prostitutes are compassionate, full of criticism of male lust and weakness. They believe in Elokeshi’s innocence since they know how easy it is to be misjudged. They bemoaned the loss of Elokeshi’s wifely status.
* All the accounts agreed that Nobin has always been a loving husband: a fact proved when coming to know of the scandal, his first impulse was not to leave or kill her but to run away with her and retrieve their lost happiness.
* Women’s chastity had become a keyword in the political vocabulary of Hindu nationalism, which had begun to develop at about this time.
* The Hindu woman’s unique steadfastness to the husband in the face of gross double standards, her unconditional, uncompromising monogamy, were celebrated as the sign that marked Hindus off from the rest of the world, and which constituted the Hindu claim to nationhood.
* The chaste body of the Hindu woman was thus made to carry an unusual political weight since she had maintained this difference in the face of foreign rule.
* The Hindu man, in contrast, had allowed himself to be colonized and surrendered his autonomy before the assaults of Western power knowledge.
* It was in this charged political context that the scandal was reviewed.
* According to newspapers, for a fairly wide segment of middle class and popular opinion Nobin was morally wrong in taking back his guilty wife. Such love conceals a lapse from the moral duties of the husband and of the Hindu man’s dharma.
* Abandoning her would have been both morally right and prudent; even killing her for such a crime was not excessive. However, for the murder to be justifiable it should have preceded the escape attempt.
* Less judgemental and more sympathetic songs still criticise Nobin for trying to rescue an unworthy wife and thereby putting his own life in danger.
* At the same time, Nobin’s passionate love for an unfaithful wife powerfully captured the popular imagination.
* According to police reports, he had rushed to the police station after the murder with these words on his lips: ‘Hang me quick. This world is a wilderness to me. I am impatient to join my wife in the next.’
* The words were reported verbatim in all the newspapers, and plays, and songs were woven around them.
* Nobin’s words were celebrated not as a sign of unreason and weakness but of noble and strong love.
* However, strong his love and bitter his temporary rage, was Nobin not a murderer, and hence deserving punishment?
* Was then the European judge not more correct than the Indian jury and public opinion?
* Petitioners who pleaded for Nobin’s release had admitted that Elokeshi was more sinned than sinning, given the choice of leaving her with the mohunt and killing her, Nobin, they said, had acted as a true husband, since a life of dishonour is worse for a woman than death.
* *Bengalee*, reformist newspaper: In sympathising with the unfortunate Nobin people forget that the victim was not the man that he and all Bengal believe to be a vile seducer, nor the still worse scoundrel who bartered his daughter’s virtue…but a tender girl of 16 years…What had she done to forfeit her young life?
* It is within this sense of guilt that the deepest resonances of the scandal need to be located.
* Soon public debates would decisively shift their ground and there would be little room left for looking at women like Elokeshi: a girl whose father sold her off, whose guru raped her, and whose husband killed her.