

Nirbachon Ar Iccha: Women as Subjects in the Bengali Muslim Ghoti-Bangal Divide

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Abstract

In the complex socio-political landscape of Bengal, the Ghoti-Bangal divide represents a longstanding cultural rivalry between natives and those with origins in East Pakistan (presentday Bangladesh). While often perceived through culinary or sporting affiliations, this divide conceals a deeper, gendered political conflict where women's autonomy becomes the primary site for asserting cultural superiority. This paper argues that within the Bengali Muslim community, women's choices, their *Nirbachon* (choice) and *Iccha* (desire) regarding education, occupation, marriage, and religious observance like the pordah, are systematically politicized to maintain and deepen this communal rift. Through a qualitative narrative approach, this study captures the lived experiences of women from both factions, revealing how the Muslim Ghoti community often frames its women's relative freedoms as markers of modernity and sophistication, while the Muslim Bangal community valorizes its women's adherence to traditional norms as evidence of superior piety and authenticity. This instrumentalization of female agency transforms personal life decisions into political statements, reinforcing internal hierarchies and social boundaries. The findings expose a pattern where women's bodies and choices are weaponized in a silent cultural war,

leading to their psychological burden, social scrutiny, and constrained autonomy. This politicization not only violates their fundamental right to dignity and self-determination but also perpetuates a cycle of inter-community gender-based discrimination. The study underscores the urgent need to depoliticize women's lives and advocates for a community dialogue that prioritizes genuine gender justice over divisive identity politics.

Keywords: *Gender Politics, Bengali Muslim Women, Ghoti-Bangal divide, Women's Agency*

Introduction

The Ghoti-Bangal divide in Bengal exemplifies a complex interplay of cultural, regional, and gender dynamics shaped by the 1947 Partition's resettlement patterns, historical migration, linguistic diversity, and culinary practices, intensifying sharply after the 1971 Bangladesh Liberation War. This divide is often simplified in popular discourse through humour or sports rivalries; however, within the Bengali Muslim community, it penetrates deeper into the lived experiences of women. Their roles illuminate the negotiation of cultural superiority, moral authority, and religious authenticity, making their experiences integral to understanding the divide.

Women's choices, referred to as *nirbachon* and *iccha* concerning education, marriage, professional aspirations, mobility, and religious practices, are rarely viewed as individual expressions. Instead, they become intertwined with broader community narratives that shape identities. For instance, Ghoti Muslim families might highlight women's freedoms and mobility as signs of modernization, while Bangal Muslim families emphasize traditional values like *purdah*, early marriage, and domesticity as indicators of

moral and religious superiority. In both contexts, women's lives transcend personal agency, evolving into symbols that perpetuate the Ghoti-Bangal distinction.

Literature has historically exposed this gendered erasure. In Hasan Azizul Huq's novel, *Agunpaki*, the unnamed female protagonist illustrates the lack of female subjectivity within Bengali Muslim households, where her identity is defined through relational roles daughter, wife, kin, rather than as an independent individual. This literary representation reflects broader societal structures that minimise women's presence, often relegating their choices to the dictates of family honour and community expectations.

Despite Islamic teachings promoting women's rights to education, consent in marriage, inheritance, and moral agency, societal practices frequently contradict these ideals (Mitra, 2006). For instance, the practice of *pardah*, historically viewed as a protective measure, often functions as a tool for surveillance and social regulation, limiting women's engagement in public contexts and reinforcing gendered social norms. This paper posits that within the framework of the Ghoti-Bangla divide, women's *nirbachon* and *iccha* are not merely constrained; rather, they become politicized outcomes of a silent cultural conflict where women's bodies and choices are exploited as instruments in broader ideological battles.

***Nirbachon* (choice) and *iccha* (desire): Gendered Choice and Desire in Existing Scholarship**

Scholarship on Muslim women in Bengal has historically remained fragmented, shaped by nationalist historiography, reformist discourse, and selective feminist attention. Early studies on women in colonial Bengal largely centred on Hindu, upper-caste experiences, treating Muslim women either as peripheral or as passive subjects bound by religious

conservatism. As a result, Muslim women frequently appeared in scholarship as problems to be reformed rather than as historical and social actors in their own right. More recent feminist and historical interventions have challenged this marginalisation, foregrounding Muslim women's lived realities while interrogating the structures that shaped their visibility, agency, and everyday practices.

A foundational contribution to this field is Amin's *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876–1939* (Amin, 1996), which provides a detailed historical account of Muslim women's lives during the late colonial period. Amin demonstrates that women's education, mobility, and public participation were mediated through family, religion, and class, even as reformist discourses increasingly addressed women's moral uplift. Importantly, Amin shows that women's "choice" was never autonomous; rather, it was negotiated within patriarchal family structures and community expectations. This historical insight is crucial for understanding the persistence of regulated femininity in contemporary Bengali Muslim society. The question of Muslim women's marginality is taken further by Sarkar (2001) in *Muslim Women and the Politics of (In)visibility in Late Colonial Bengal*. Sarkar argues that Muslim women were rendered invisible within nationalist historiography not because of their absence from public life, but because their visibility disrupted the dominant construction of the "ideal Indian woman" as Hindu, upper-caste, and middle-class. Muslim women thus became the constitutive "other" against which both Hindu femininity and Muslim masculinity were defined. Sarkar's analysis is particularly significant for highlighting how women's bodies and behaviours become symbolic sites through which community boundaries and moral hierarchies are produced. Literary and cultural histories have further

complicated understandings of Muslim women's agency. Azim and Hasan (2013), in *Language, Literature, Education and Community: The Bengali Muslim Woman in the Early Twentieth Century*, examine women's writings in Muslim-edited journals and demonstrate that women's engagement with education and self-expression was deeply constrained by religious morality, linguistic politics, and nationalist anxieties. Their work shows that women's empowerment did not follow a linear trajectory; rather, women occupied an ambiguous position between domestic religiosity and limited public participation. This scholarship is particularly relevant to contemporary discussions of *nirbachon* and *iccha*, as it highlights how women's desires were historically articulated within socially sanctioned boundaries.

While historical and literary scholarship provides crucial background, sociological studies have shifted attention to everyday practices through which gendered and communal distinctions are maintained. Sabur (2014), in *Gender, Veiling, and Class: Symbolic Boundaries and Veiling in Bengali Muslim Families*, offers an ethnographic analysis of veiling practices among Bengali Muslims. Sabur argues that *hijab* and *burqa* function not merely as religious observances but as classed and symbolic markers of respectability. Veiling becomes a means of producing distinctions within the Muslim community itself, separating "proper" women from "modern" ones. Sabur's work is central to understanding how women's bodies are mobilised to sustain both moral and class hierarchies.

Feminist theoretical interventions further complicate simplistic readings of women's agency within religious contexts. Mahmood's *Politics of Piety* (Mahmood, 2005) challenges liberal feminist assumptions that agency must necessarily manifest as resistance to norms. Mahmood

demonstrates that women may actively inhabit religious practices as ethical and moral disciplines. This framework is particularly useful for interpreting narratives in which women articulate veiling and domesticity as meaningful choices rather than as imposed constraints, without denying the presence of power structures. The relationship between gender, nationalism, and community identity has been theorised by Chatterjee (1993) and Yuval-Davis (1997). Chatterjee's concept of the "inner domain" of culture reveals how women are positioned as custodians of tradition within nationalist projects, while Yuval-Davis highlights women's role as biological and cultural reproducers of the nation and community. Together, these perspectives explain why women's conduct, sexuality, and everyday choices become central to sustaining symbolic boundaries within and between communities. Within the specific context of Bengal, sociological work on migration and Partition has highlighted how identities continue to be shaped by displacement and resettlement. Studies on the Ghoti-Bangal divide demonstrate that distinctions initially rooted in geography and migration history have been sustained through everyday cultural practices and stereotypes (Bhaumik, 2022; Shamshad, 2016). However, this literature has largely treated the divide as cultural or linguistic, paying limited attention to its gendered dimensions.

Literary representations such as Hasan Azizul Huq's *Agunpaki* further illuminate the gendered erasure that accompanies these processes. The unnamed female protagonist, whose identity is defined entirely through relational roles, reflects the broader marginalisation of women's subjectivity within Bengali Muslim households. While fictional, such narratives resonate strongly with sociological findings on women's lack of autonomy and symbolic burden within family and community life.

Despite the breadth of existing scholarship, significant gaps remain. Much of the literature examines Muslim women within colonial history, nationalist discourse, or broad community frameworks, often treating the Muslim community as internally homogeneous. There has been limited sociological engagement with intra-community distinctions, such as the Ghoti-Bangal divide, and with how women's everyday choices become sites for negotiating these distinctions. Moreover, while education, veiling, marriage, and mobility have been studied individually, fewer works examine how these domains intersect to transform women's *nirbachon* and *iccha* into politicised markers of community identity. This paper addresses these gaps by foregrounding oral narratives of Bengali Muslim women from both Ghoti and Bangal backgrounds. By examining how women's choices are learnt, justified, and evaluated within everyday life, the study extends existing scholarship on Muslim women, gendered agency, and identity politics in Bengal. In doing so, it shifts the analytical focus from women as objects of reform or symbols of tradition to women as social subjects whose lives reveal the intimate workings of intra-community power.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine women's *nirbachon* (choice) and *iccha* (desire) as lived and negotiated within the Bengali Muslim Ghoti-Bangal divide. Given the study's focus on everyday meanings, moral reasoning, and intra-community comparisons, a qualitative approach was considered most appropriate. Rather than treating women's choices as isolated decisions, the research foregrounds narratives as socially embedded accounts shaped by family, religion, class, and community identity.

The study is based on 78 respondents drawn from Bengali Muslim Ghoti and Bangal families.

- Ghoti families: 38 respondents
- Bangal families: 40 respondents

Participants included women across different age groups (18–70 years), marital statuses (unmarried, married, widowed), and socio-economic backgrounds, as well as a smaller number of male respondents whose narratives provided insight into gendered expectations, moral surveillance, and community norms.

The research employed a combination of purposive sampling and snowball sampling. Initial participants were identified through purposive sampling to ensure representation from both Ghoti and Bangal families and to capture variation across age, education, and marital status. Subsequently, snowball sampling was used to access additional respondents, particularly older women and those residing in more conservative family settings, where access through formal means was limited. Snowballing proved especially effective in reaching participants who were hesitant to speak openly about issues of veiling, marriage, and family control, as referrals from trusted contacts helped establish rapport and trust.

Data were collected through in-depth oral narratives, informal semi-structured interviews, and extended conversations conducted in Bengali. Interviews focused on women's experiences of education, marriage, work, mobility, veiling practices, and perceptions of the "other" group. Rather than following a rigid questionnaire, conversations were allowed to unfold organically, enabling respondents to narrate their experiences in their own terms. Special attention

was paid to moments of hesitation, justification, laughter, and silence, as these were treated as meaningful components of the narrative. In many cases, interviews took place within domestic spaces, allowing observation of family dynamics and everyday interactions that shaped women's choices.

The analysis follows an inductive thematic approach, grounded in narrative interpretation. Transcripts and field notes were read iteratively to identify recurring themes such as socialisation, surveillance, respectability, education, marriage, and moral comparison. Rather than coding responses in isolation, narratives were analysed relationally, with particular attention to how women compared themselves to others and justified their choices in relation to family and community expectations. Women's narratives were treated not merely as reflections of personal experience but as socially situated accounts that reveal broader structures of power. The concepts of *nirbachon* and *iccha* were used as analytical lenses to examine how women's choices were permitted, constrained, or redirected within everyday life.

Given the sensitive nature of the subject matter, ethical considerations were central to the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and anonymity was maintained by using pseudonyms and removing identifying details. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Care was taken to ensure that interviews did not place respondents at risk of familial or social repercussions, particularly in discussions related to marriage, veiling, and autonomy. As a qualitative study based on non-probability sampling, the findings are not intended to be statistically generalisable. However, the strength of the research lies in its depth and richness, offering detailed insight into the everyday processes through which women's choices are shaped and evaluated within the Ghoti-Bangal divide.

Snowball sampling, while effective in accessing hard-to-reach participants, may also reflect existing social networks; this limitation is acknowledged and mitigated through diversity in age, location, and socio-economic background among respondents.

By combining purposive and snowball sampling with narrative analysis, this study contributes methodologically to scholarship on Muslim women by foregrounding women's voices and everyday moral reasoning. The approach enables a nuanced understanding of how gendered agency is experienced, justified, and constrained within intra-community dynamics, moving beyond binary notions of choice and coercion.

Findings and Analysis

This section analyses women's (choice) and *iccha* (desire) as they are articulated, negotiated, and disciplined in everyday life among Bengali Muslim Ghoti and Bangal families. Drawing on oral narratives collected from 78 respondents, the findings demonstrate that women's choices are rarely autonomous acts. Instead, they are socially learnt, morally evaluated, and continuously compared across the Ghoti-Bangal divide. Women emerge as symbolic sites through which families and communities articulate modernity, religiosity, respectability, and moral superiority.

Veiling practices emerge as the most visible and morally charged domain through which women's choices are evaluated. Importantly, *purdah* is not narrated as a rule imposed at a single moment, but as a moral sensibility gradually cultivated within the family.

Ruba, a college student from a Bangal family, repeatedly framed *hijab* as an inherited ethical value:

My family back in Bangladesh, they have always said that a hijab is the most beautiful thing because it hides something even more beautiful, my hair.

The phrase “have always said” indicates repetition and long-term socialisation. Modesty here is not presented as restriction but as aesthetic and moral refinement. Even moments of doubt are narrated as internal negotiations rather than resistance: *Sometimes I get influenced by the Ghotis here... but my inner self keeps telling me that hijab is beautiful.*

The “inner self” functions as internalised authority, revealing how surveillance becomes self-regulation. Ruba then converts personal practice into communal comparison: *Ghotis do wear hijab, but mostly for fashion... I feel we are more aware of these norms than the other.*

Through this comparison, Bangal women are positioned as morally disciplined, while Ghoti women are implicitly framed as insufficiently religious. Thus, *purdah* operates not merely as clothing but as a moral language through which collective superiority is asserted.

Male narratives intensify this moralisation. Kamal’s statement regarding marriage illustrates how women’s bodies become sites of honour and control:

I will only marry someone who wears a burqa because only then I will know she has saved herself from the evil world.

Here, veiling is imagined as proof of purity, loyalty, and marital worth. Notably, male piety or restraint is absent from the narrative. Moral responsibility is displaced onto women, reinforcing how *nirbachon* is evaluated through male approval and desire. Marriage becomes a reward

for discipline, further embedding control within intimate relationships.

Women's narratives reveal how restriction is internalised and retrospectively reframed as desire. Farjana, a primary school teacher from Murshidabad, narrated the incident that led to her adopting the *burqa*:

Abbu saw a boy looking at us when we were returning from tuition... the next day my mother told me it was the right time to wear the burqa.

Regulation is mediated through the mother, demonstrating how patriarchal norms are reproduced by women themselves. Farjana's later reflection is particularly revealing:

Since that day I feel like a complete woman.

Womanhood here is achieved not through autonomy but through concealment and surveillance. *Ichha* is reshaped; restriction becomes moral maturity. This illustrates how women learn to desire what is permitted rather than perceive it as coercion.

Ghoti women do not reject modesty but contest its rigid moral hierarchy. Dolly, a homemaker and tuition teacher, stated:

Be it a dupatta or a burqa, it does the same job. We are not less religious. Our parents give us freedom to choose.

Her narrative asserts an alternative ethical framework in which choice itself becomes a moral value. Religiosity is detached from visible discipline and reattached to autonomy and intention. This reveals how intra-community difference is not about belief, but about how belief is performed on women's bodies.

Older women's narratives demonstrate how restrictions on movement become embodied habits. S. Begum, now in her seventies, recalled:

Bari gulor upor diye jetam...

ekhono ami shei bhabei jai.

(used to go through the lanes between the houses... even now,

I still go the same way)

Despite social change, her body continues to follow learned spatial boundaries. She further avoided Bangal households, describing them as loud and uncultured. These perceptions reflect long-standing Ghoti stereotypes and demonstrate how gendered mobility intersects with communal prejudice. Women's movement thus becomes shaped simultaneously by fear, respectability, and community identity.

Education emerges as a valued yet conditional aspiration. Older women like S. Begum were denied formal schooling but valued for religious knowledge, which enhanced marital prospects. Religious literacy functioned as cultural capital where formal education was unavailable.

In contemporary contexts, education is encouraged but remains evaluated through its usefulness to family and marriage. Teaching is repeatedly described as the most acceptable profession, as it aligns with domestic responsibilities. Where education threatens independence, it is curtailed. Rukaiya, who held a master's degree, narrated:

I wanted to teach but after marriage my in-laws did not allow me, even though my husband supported it.

Here, *nirbachon* is revealed as revocable. Marriage relocates patriarchal authority rather than dismantling it.

Marriage represents a critical rupture in women's autonomy. Inter-group marriages remain fraught. Kajol described her sister's marriage to a Bangal man:

We usually do not trust outsiders... but since it was my sister's choice, we did not object much.

Acceptance is narrated as concession, not norm, and is closely tied to economic security and land ownership. Choice is tolerated only when buffered by class.

Age of marriage further illustrates this divide. Ghoti families frequently frame delayed marriage and consent as markers of modernity, while Bangal families facing economic precarity prioritise early marriage, limiting women's educational trajectories.

Across all narratives, women function as symbolic measures through which communities define themselves. Ghoti families present women's education, mobility, and delayed marriage as evidence of modernity. Bangal families frame veiling, domesticity, and obedience as signs of moral and religious authenticity. In both cases, women's *nirbachon* and *iccha* are transformed into collective statements.

Women thus carry the emotional and symbolic burden of representing community honour. Their lives are continuously evaluated, narrated, and compared, making everyday existence a site of moral labour.

The findings demonstrate that women's choices within the Bengali Muslim Ghoti- Bangal divide are not absent, but carefully trained, morally redirected, and conditionally permitted. Oral narratives reveal how women learn to desire what is socially sanctioned, internalise restriction as virtue, and negotiate limited autonomy within family and marriage. By centring women's voices, this study shows how intra-

community boundaries are reproduced not through overt conflict, but through everyday practices inscribed on women's bodies and lives.

Conclusion

This paper explores the dynamics surrounding women's *nirbachon* (choice) and *iccha* (desire) within the context of the Bengali Muslim Ghoti-Bangal divide, offering a nuanced understanding that transcends conventional notions of this divide as merely cultural or regional rivalry. It emphasizes the critical yet often overlooked role of gender as a significant axis through which intra-community distinctions are produced and maintained. The analysis draws on oral narratives, revealing that women's everyday decisions—encompassing aspects of education, marriage, work, mobility, and religious practices—are not solely personal choices. Instead, these decisions are socially mediated and acquire collective significance within their respective communities. The findings indicate that women's lives serve as symbolic sites for the articulation of community values such as moral superiority, religious authenticity, and modernity. The study illustrates that while Muslim Ghoti families may regard women's educational opportunities and mobility as signs of progress, Muslim Bangal families often emphasize veiling and adherence to domestic roles as indicators of piety. In both contexts, women's agency is characterized by a nuanced interplay: it is neither entirely absent nor fully autonomous, but rather selectively permitted and evaluated within familial and communal frameworks.

Crucially, the research highlights that the gendered politicization of women's choices is not solely enforced through overt coercion. Instead, it is sustained through processes of socialization, moral reasoning, and the internalization of

communal expectations. Women frequently align their desires with socially accepted norms, often reframing restrictions as virtues and perceived autonomy as a responsibility. Consequently, women shoulder a disproportionate emotional and symbolic burden, as their experiences become focal points for the reinforcement of community boundaries. By foregrounding women's voices, this study significantly contributes to the scholarship on Muslim women, gender agency, and identity politics in Bengal. It suggests a shift in perspective, advocating for understanding agency as relational, negotiated, and embedded within existing power structures, rather than depicting women solely as passive victims or fully autonomous actors.

The study calls for a re-evaluation of how gender inequality is addressed in these contexts, challenging rigid binaries of tradition versus modernity and choice versus coercion. It emphasizes the importance of recognizing women as social subjects in their own right, rather than merely as representatives of collective identity, to promote more equitable and inclusive social belonging.

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