



## Women Education in Colonial Bengal: Retrospection

Sudhansu Sekhar Datta<sup>1</sup>

Kaushik Mukherjee<sup>2</sup>

### Abstract

Modern education came to Bengal through the East India Company. The missionaries also landed up for proselytising activities. They were perturbed by the backwardness of the Indian society especially the plights of women. The people of Bengal came in touch with the western ideas as Calcutta was made the capital of colonial India. The influence of liberalism and modern education brought in by the Britishers transformed a section of Bengal society. Bengal became the cradle of social reforms. The outcome of missionary's activities and reforms brought by social reformers opened the gate of educational institution for the women. Though the conservative and orthodox Bengal society did not allow female education initially, gradually female education gained momentum and took steps in the right direction. Commissions constituted by the Britishers also facilitated the progress of female education. An attempt has been made to retrospect the situation of female education in colonial Bengal.

Keywords: *Female Education, Missionaries, Social Reformer, Colonial Bengal*

### Introduction

The light of western educational system came to India through colonial connection brought in by the European traders and missionaries. The idea of education and pedagogical methods underwent different phases in colonial India. After the battle of Plassey, British got the foothold in Bengal and subsequently the influence of East India Company spread throughout the country. India was placed under East India Company from 1764 to 1858. At the initial level, these colonial masters were not even bothered about the socio-economic conditions of the Indians as they were primarily interested in consolidating their political and demographic stronghold. It was initially the missionaries who primarily came for the proselytising activities, thought about bringing western education to India. It must be noted the social conditions of women was healthy at that time because of the absolute domination of the patriarchs. Education was considered to be a privilege only few could afford to have access and afford. Hence, when the light of western

---

<sup>1</sup>Academic Counsellor, IGNOU

<sup>2</sup>Special Educator, Under Banipur, C.L.R.C., SamagraSikshaAbhiyan (PaschimBangaSamagraSikshaAbhiyan)



education fell on the society, it was unevenly distributed among men and women. The missionaries established schools which were perceived by progressive sections of the Indian society as relevant. In fact, Bengal was the first province to witness the influx of western ideas and socio-cultural values which ultimately gives birth to the ethnocentrism in Bengali educated population (Debroy). Indian society initially did not understand to react to these activities in the wake of unprecedented attack on the existing educational, social and cultural fronts by the missionaries. But gradually the introspection by educated Indians also gives birth to the social reform movements which gave emphasis on the correctives steps to preserve the culture in the wake of invasion of western thoughts in society. The need for women's education came to the lime light once the missionaries started school for girls. The social reformers recognised the need of bringing women within the ambit of educational activities for ushering changes. It is to be noted that that facilities for women education were restricted to prominent places of India. Thus the journey of Indian women in the field of modern education registered a humble beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century in India. The social reformers also recognised the fact of stagnation of Indian society due to absence of access to modern education. They think of bringing about both the genders in the arena of education. A miniscule percentage of Indian families were in a position to impart education to their children. Even those who had the means faced a dilemma of sending their daughters because of the fear of cultural pollution brought by the modern education. They were apprehensive that the purity of Indian women could be lost if women are exposed to the modern education. Strong patriarchal values initially prevented them from sending their daughters to schools. The objective of sending their sons to the schools established by colonial masters was more motivated by the thought of getting a job than acquiring western philosophy and enlightenment. Women fell behind as they were not considered as bread winners for the families. The patriarchal mindset of Indian society prevented women to start their journey in the field of education along with their male counter parts. Rather they were offered option of having access to elementary education and that too most of times within the four walls of their homes. This paper attempts to bring to the focus the initiatives of the missionaries, East India Company, British Empire as well as the role of individuals in ushering a new era of women's education in Bengal.

### **Place of Women in Educational system in Bengal under British Rule-**

Initially British rulers were only interested in consolidating their political hold and expansion. The journey begins from Bengal. They were least bothered about introduction of western education to the people of Bengal. The condition of women in the Bengali society can be known only through the writings of the male authors. They had to live in seclusion and not allowed to come out of the homes. Learning was considered to be a sin for the women. The plight of women has been depicted in novels wrote by famous Bengali authors. A dispassionate analyse of the texts, political narratives, folklore etc shows the subordinate position of the women in Indian society (Mukhopadhyay). The vivid description of a Bengali women was brilliantly depicted by Sreemati Rassundari's "Amar Jibon" (My Life). The prevalence of child marriage and life within the four walls of the homes was the fate of the women in that traditional orthodox society.



Interestingly, agonies and voices of unknown always shrouded in mystery. The society gave importance to the learning of the household courses than providing access to the education. Hence, the concept of women education was beyond to be imagined in true sense. The Charter Act of 1813 can be truly said to be the beginning of the western education in Bengal. The intention was to provide scope to few people from the upper caste with the expectation that fruits of modern education would trickle down from them. But the Britishers cleverly avoided their responsibilities towards women education (Dua). The torch bearers of women education in Bengal was the missionaries. In 1819, they set up Calcutta Female Juvenile Society which was the initial step to introduce education for the women. The Bethune School was founded by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune in 1849 for female education (Kapadia). But the efforts could achieve limited success because of the prevailing superstition that women's education inevitably lead to the widowhood of the women (Debroy). Social evil like child marriage lowered the chances of girls to remain in the school for longer periods. The East India Company faced tremendous resistance from the orthodox section of Hindu society to promote the women's education. They were in a dilemma as any forceful attempt to introduce the women's education could backfire and destabilise the political holding. This was one of the reasons for restricting education to the males of the upper-class Hindu society. The missionaries also could not gain a strong foothold in respect of women's education because of their proselytising activities. There was a fear factor that if girls were to be sent to the missionaries' school, they might be converted. The upper middle-class families avoided those schools initially. A notable attempt was made by Serampur missionaries which was established by William Carey. He founded a school with hostel facilities for boys in 1800. It should be also highlighted that these missionaries played a pivotal role in spreading western education in Bengal. Serampur missionaries thought about female education as it was denied by the conservative families of society. After many deliberations, in 1816 they arranged for girl's education in the boy's school. The girls were asked to sit behind curtain. But this could not bring the desired result as the enrolment was too low. Finally, In the year 1822, Serampur Missionaries established a girl's School (Jayakumar). So, early 19<sup>th</sup> century, Bengal witnessed very slow progress in women's education. Things started changing from the middle of the century when Lord Bentick and Lord Dalhousie made an attempt to spread women's education in Bengal and rest of the country under their rule (Dua). Till 1854, there was hardly any comprehensive policy on education. The introduction of Woods Dispatch (1854) marked the beginning of a new era. It was instrumental in establishing 700 girl's school with 7000 enrolments (Reddy and Manas). In fact, before this dispatch, there was no provision for female education in the formal system (Mittal). It is to be noted that Indian Education Commission constituted in 1882 clearly indicated extremely backward condition of the female education in India. It also acknowledged the need for assigning special attention to the education of girls. It highlighted the lack of willingness on part of Indian males regarding women's education. This commission made significant recommendations like release of grant in aid for the girls' school, appointment of lady inspector for proper monitoring of the education and even made provisions for the widow who enrol for teacher training along with the prizes for the girls who give consent to become teachers. But the public apathy towards women education was so adverse which can be understood from the treatment of Chandramukhi Basu, first women graduate in the hands of university authority dominated by patriarchal values. It was in fact the intervention of the then



Vice- Chancellor of Calcutta University, Arthur Hobbhouse, women started appearing for entrance examination from 1877(Kapadia). Gradually people accepted the fact that women should receive primary and secondary education. The early twentieth century witnesses some of the reforms that were brought by the Britishers. The education policy announced by the Government in 1919, earmarked more financial resources for spreading girl's education. A significant contribution was also made by the Saddler University Commission which was constituted by the Government of India in 1917. It was with set up with the intention to enquire about the problems of higher education. But it should be noted that the commission made some effective suggestions like establishment of purdah school, setting up of Board of Women Education for safeguarding the women's education along with the power of framing suitable curricular for women(Dua). This period was also marked by the rise of nationalism. The newly educated women of Bengal became conscious about this movement. Education helped them to come out of their homes. The changed attitudes of husbands and other male members of family helped them to challenge the existing glass ceiling of the traditional Bengali society. This outpour of nationalistic feelings on part of women could be attributed to the western education. Then another committee named, Hartog Committee (1929) was constituted which actually laid down the plan for women's education. The final attempt made by the Britishers which left imprint on the women's education was the Report on the Post-War Educational Development. It gave women's education status at par with the men's education.

### **Contribution of noted Individuals-**

In Bengal, many individuals who came into close contact with Britishers, realised and adopted the Western concept of liberalism and freedom. It is interesting to note that upper class Bengali families initially interested to learn this education for purely getting financial benefits. But the ideals of European civilization and the zeal of Christian missionaries compelled them to think about the brighter side of education. It was Ram Mohun Roy who found potentialities of the English language. He became an advocate of English education. He even submitted a memorandum in 1823 to the Governor-General of India for the starting of the English education. The humanist and reformist side of his character was manifested in the establishment of the “Brahma Samaj” which accommodated the women by incorporating the concept of equality and pleaded for the teaching of females for transforming them into the equal partnership with men(Sharma). The female education got tremendous impetus from the tireless crusade of another social reformer IswarchandraVidyasagar. Perhaps it would be exaggerating to say that his contribution is unparalleled in the field of education. It was because of his own efforts, female education expanded throughout Bengal especially in and around Calcutta. He was so passionate about female education that he went door to door to influence the decisions of the patriarchs of the Bengal Society to send their daughters to schools(Ghosh and Mete).He vehemently protested against the orthodox Hindu society for forcing women to remain subordinate to men. His solo efforts to establish schools for females won the hearts of many unnamed sensible persons of Bengal society who in turn invest their personal wealth to build schools for women even in the distant places in Bengal. Vidysagar was truly a pioneer in the field of women's education because his efforts helped to overcome the traditional resistance



against female education. Another pioneering work in the field of female education was started by Sister Nivedita in North Calcutta. She came from England but loved India dearly and stayed back to serve. She started a girl's school at Bagbazar to impart education to girls. Her passion for the girl's education was evident from her initiative to visit door to door and request parents to send their daughters to the school(Sahoo). Another pioneer, Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain put tremendous effort to bring the light of primary education to the Muslim girls in Kolkata. She established first school for Muslim girls in the city. In spite of the barriers and criticisms, she continued to run the school till her death and persuaded parents to send their daughters to school. The list of visionaries is nevertheless limited to the already mentioned personalities. The Gandhian philosophy, the attempt of Brahma Samaj to impart education for the females and writings of Rabindranath Tagore also influenced many progressive individuals in small towns and villages to come forward and establish schools for women.

### Conclusion-

There is no doubt that the Britishers brought the ideas of modern education and facilitated the access of modern education to the Indian women. They were equally supported by many progressive Indians like Ram Mohun Roy and Vidyasagar who realised the need of liberating women from the clutches of patriarchy. Bengalis were exposed to the enlightenment of European civilization being the capital of British Empire. Missionaries also came to propagate Christianity and spread education. Missionaries never made distinction between genders so far education was concerned. They could become partially successful to convince the progressive section of Bengal society about the need of female education. Social Reformers also came up with the ideas of reforms that played a significant role in bringing the women in the educational arena. It is true that before independence, female education in Bengal could not make rapid strides but it is undoubtedly set the stage for birth of women's consciousness.

### References-

- Debroy, B. "Social Reform and Social Reform Movements in Bengal in the 19th Century." Divekar, V D. *Social Reform Movements in India*. Bombay: Popular Prakashan Pvt Ltd, 1991. 1-34.
- Dua, Radha. *Women Education : Issues and Concerns*. Delhi: A.P.H Publishing Corporation, 2008.
- Ghosh, Bijaylakshmi and Jayanta Mete. *Empowering Women Through Education*. New Delhi: Kunal Books, 2012.
- Jayakumar, A. *A History of Christianity in India*. Kolkata: SCEPTRE, 2013.
- Kapadia, K M. *Marrriage and Family in India*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press, 1966.
- Mittal, S C. *Modern India*. New Delhi: National Council of Educational Research and Training, 2003.



BSSS Journal of Social Work: ISSN (Print) -0975-251X, E-ISSN-2582-4864, Vol. XIII, Issue-I (2021), pp-1-6, Sudhansu Sekhar Datta<sup>1</sup> Kaushik Mukherjee<sup>2</sup>, Women Education in Colonial Bengal: Retrospection <https://doi.org/10.51767/jsw1301>

---

Mukhopadhyay, Amites. *Social Movements*. Noida: Dorling Kinderslay (India) Pvt Ltd, 2012.

Reddy, Jayashree S and Gouri Manik Manas. *Parental Attitude Towards Women Education : A Critical Study*. Jaipur: Aadi Publications, 2012.

Sahoo, Subrata. "Women Empowerment in Bengal and Sister Nivedita." *International Journal for Innovative Research in Multidisciplinary Field* IV.6 (2016): 83-85. 1 February 2020.  
<<https://www.ijirmf.com/wp-content/uploads/201806015.pdf>>.

Sharma, Lalita. *Social Movements in India*. Jaipur: Book Enclave, 2014.

\*\*\*\*\*