



SYNOPSIS

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Women and Education: Bengal 1820-1947

by

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The Ph.D. thesis titled ‘Women and Education: Bengal 1820-1947’ is about the progress of female education under colonial rule in Bengal and women’s reaction towards it. Female education, it has been noted, was not an unknown concept for Bengalis. Both in Hindu and Muslim families, some women were taught to read religious texts. There were also some landed families who taught their daughters and wives how to keep accounts and manage their estates. There were also some women scholars in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. But they were exceptions. The actual process of institutionalization of female education was started gradually from the second decade of nineteenth century.

It is difficult to generalize the progress of female education in Bengal. It can be understood as a conglomeration of different reactions which varied according to class, religion and region. These changing trends of female education over a long period from beginning of Company’s rule to independence have not been studied. This research work seeks to study these trends.

Western education brought changes in the perception of indigenous people. They were not happy with their unlettered female members. They wanted their women to become companionate wife; informed mothers for future generations; a medium for upholding tradition and improving social cohesion. This research work is an attempt to understand whether that was just formation of new patriarchies? Was it only a journey to make women shift from *nirakshar* to *jitakshar*?

Till the second half of nineteenth century, most of the beneficiaries were Brahmo and upper class women. But during 1820s, when missionaries were first attempting to educate girls most of the students of their schools came from the lower classes. With the growing concern of educated natives the number of enrolment of lower class women were reduced. This research work attempts to seek reasons behind gradual aloofness of lower class women. It also seeks to study the direct and indirect influence of education on lower class women.

One of the impediments in the path of progress of female education was superstitious beliefs. It prevented women from enjoying the benefits of education. In the 1870s, the progressive minded Brahmos pleaded in support of scientific education for women. They were taught scientific subjects in two ways: formal training in western medical science and publication of scientific essays in contemporary journals.

The second form of scientific education has not been studied. It is attempted to understand this form of education.

It has often been argued that education helped in the emergence of ‘new women’ or *bhadramahila*. This research work attempts to understand the extent to which these women were ‘new’? Were they only different in their attires, attitudes and tastes? Did education enable them to play pioneering role in female emancipation? The chapterization of this research work is as follows:

Chapter I- Beginning of Female Education in Bengal

Chapter II- Changing Perception of Indigenous Society

Chapter III- Women and Scientific Education

Chapter IV- Muslim Women and Education

Chapter V- Education and Society

Acquaintance with western ideologies made a section of the Bengali youth aware about the subservient condition of their female wards. They stressed that there was need for the improvement of women’s condition and this could be achieved only through the cultivation of mind by well-directed education. The initiative for the development of female education in nineteenth century Bengal was taken by the Christian missionary societies, native literati and British officials. Among them, the role of educated natives was very significant. In patriarchal society, acceptance of the Bengali literati was mandatory for any kind of social change. During the 1820s, several missionary societies set up schools for Bengali girls. A group of educated natives provided support to these initiatives. They also started *pathshalas* to educate their females.

It was not a one way process because the whole society was not influenced by it evenly and at the same time. The supporters of female education had to confront the orthodox society. They were however not unanimous regarding its framework. Several trends emerged as time passed. At the initial stage, the educated literati wanted to facilitate the emergence of the perfect mother, perfect wife and perfect house-wife. So, some acceptable womanly subjects like home science, child-rearing, needle work, cooking etc. were taught. During the 1860s and 1870s, some liberal minded educated youths gradually expressed their desire for perfect life partners instead of a perfect wife. Perception of conjugal life started to change. Mutual love in

married life got importance. These youths started to mould their women in this new concept. They stressed that women had equal rights to acquire knowledge of all subjects. It was limited within educated Hindu and Brahmo families. Orthodox Hindu families till the last decade of the nineteenth century regarded female education as a process that could destroy established social norms. They were reluctant to educate their girls. Changing demands of the marriage market forced this orthodox society to educate their girls. It became a trend in the last decade of nineteenth century to marry daughters to educated bridegrooms. Demand for such educated youths was high. These educated youths too wanted to get educated wives. Thus, minimum education became a condition for eligible brides.

As the process of female education was not pre-planned or well structured, several types of education practices were prevalent. From the beginning, the government did not show any interest in this regard. Perhaps they did not want to give up their policy of non-interference in social spheres of Indians. But the interest of educated Bengalis influenced their interest in the issue of female education. Interestingly, the Government's policy was highly influenced by the demands of the middle class. As a consequence, Bethune School was established only for girls of *bhadra* family. For a long time, the door of the school remained closed to the girls other than those from this class. As Hindu middle class men were main supporters of female education, they were only interested about their class. Though education of women was considered as the indicator of social progress, no initiative was taken by the Hindu middle class to educate all section of women. Muslim and lower class women stayed aloof from this process. The female schools under missionary societies provided open access to all women of the society. Most of the students came from the lower strata. As the upper class Hindus especially the prominent leaders of the society were busy in imparting education among their female wards, the policy of public instruction gradually changed. With the foundation of Bethune School, the journey of modernisation of woman was started. Unfortunately, the process of female education deliberately kept aloof a large part of society and was conducted in favour of upper class Hindu women. In 1882, the Hunter Commission recommended to educate girls of backward region and races. It could not improve their condition because the Department of Public Instruction was still influenced by the middle class. In 1917, Calcutta University Commission surveyed the condition of female education by

surveying the opinions of middle class literati. Beside this, backward classes and regions were lagging behind by almost thirty years than the upper class women.

Purdah constituted one of the obstacles in the progress of female education. But for lower class women, it was not so rigorous and these women had to work outside. Had there been any attempt to include them in the new educational system, then society at large would have benefitted. It cannot be denied that the beneficiaries of western education in Bengal were upper and middle class Hindu youths. It was quite obvious that in male dominated society, only the women of this class got education. In some regions of Bengal beyond Calcutta, missionaries tried to educate *adivasis*. Some girls attended these schools. But they did not continue their study for a long time. As the Muslim youths also kept themselves aloof from western education, their female wards were outside the purview of social reform. The Muslim *sharif* families like the Hindu upper class put social restrictions on female members. They had to observe *purdah* strictly. It also created obstacles for the progress of Muslim women until that time when Muslim men began to show interest in it. In Muslim society also, female members of western educated families did sometimes get access to education.

The second half of nineteenth century saw the beginning of a national awakening among the educated natives. In the last half of nineteenth century, it was felt that sufficient attention to development and promotion of science should be given for the all-round reconstruction of the country. It was necessary for native mothers to be free from all kinds of superstitions to inculcate scientific minds among the youth. It was also felt that healthy educated mothers could alone give birth to healthy sons which was indispensable for building a nation. This awareness led to growing concern about women's health and reform of birthing practices. Female native doctors, trained midwives, prejudice-free customs and acceptance of scientific methods of child-birth were necessary to improve health awareness of women. All these were possible only through the cultivation of science. It led to inclusion of scientific subjects in curriculum.

Beside this, it was felt that women should have some knowledge about pregnancy, lying-in rooms and child care after birth. Illiteracy, ignorance and observance of unscientific methods were harmful for both mother and child during pregnancy and delivery. So, women should be made aware of this matter. From

1860s, a series of detailed and informative articles were published addressing this issue. *Bamabodhini Patrika*, a well-known journal for women, took initiative in this regard. Some books were also published. Some important guidebooks like *Dhatrisiksha evam Prasutisiksha Kathopakathanchhale Dhai evam Prasutidiger prati Upadesh* by Dr. Jadunath Mukhopadhyay, *Saral Dhatrisiksha* by Sundarimohan Das, *Shishumangal O Prasuti Kalyan* by Dr. Nishikanta Basu were published. Women also took initiative to create an awareness among their sisters about the necessity of birthing reforms. Srimati Shatadalbasini Biswas, teacher of Guwahati Government Girls' School, wrote *Santanpalan*. Need of female medical practitioners influenced society to send girls for practical training. A section of women established themselves in medical world as doctor or midwives.

In colonial Bengal, it was gradually realized that cultivation of science in mother tongue should be encouraged for the overall development of society. During second half of nineteenth century, it was felt that women should be part of the process of popularization of science. This changing perception surfaced in various journals of that time. Popular newspapers like *Bamabodhini Patrika* published many scientific essays to propagate scientific knowledge among its female readers. Essays on various topics like geography, physics, astronomy and human anatomy were published in this journal. *Bangamahila*, another journal for women, also attempted to make its readers aware about scientific theories. During this time, educated women also started to write on scientific issues. Narendrabala Devi, Priyambada Devi, Kumudini Basu, Swarnakumari Devi and some other women published several articles on scientific themes to make their readers aware in this regard. The process of cultivation of science which was initiated through contemporary journals did not reflect in the process of higher studies of women in Bengal. The process of popularizing science was started in the second half of nineteenth century. But no steps were taken to institutionalize it. Women had to wait more than fifty years to prove themselves eligible for this stream. With the efforts of Brahmo leaders, science was included in the curriculum of female education in 1870s. But it was limited within the curriculum of female schools. For long, girls were not permitted to complete their higher studies in science. In Bethune School, only Botany was taught. Nevertheless, some women like Sarala Devi, Chameli Bose, Asima Chatterjee studied scientific subjects.

Emergence of several ideologies about nation influenced the process of female education. Growth of Hindu revivalism also affected it. This new concept glorified

India's past and tended to defend Hindu customs. All these attempts to change social customs, social manners, and lifestyles were regarded as the fall out of a process of westernization and thereby opposed. Another feature of Indian nationalism was to regard country as motherland as opposed to the European concept of fatherland. The country was worshipped as *Desh Mata*. With the growing popularity of the concept of motherland, female members were regarded as the symbol of moral tradition of India. So, an attempt to educate women in Indian tradition was felt necessary. Mahakali Pathshala founded in 1893, school of Sister Nivedita were illustrations of this kind of concept. Almost at the same time, the necessity of physical well-being of the people was realized. Woman like Sarala Devi introduced Pratapaditya Utsab, Birastami Utsab. Institutions like Gokhale Memorial Girls' School included physical training in its curriculum.

Education also brought changes in the situation of widows who belonged to economically backward classes. Many families considered a widow, especially a young widow, responsible for their son's death. Her sins in former life were assumed to be the cause of her husband's death. Consequently, a childless widow preferred to return to the house of her father or brother. In a family which could support her economically, a widow had to follow the strict rules of *purdah* which forbade all pleasures. In some cases, due to the poor economic condition of families these women were compelled to seek paid employment outside the *zenana*. The emergence of nuclear families in 1860s made this problem more acute. The earning male members often began to shift to their workplace with their families. So, nobody was there to take responsibilities of these women. With the spread of female education the need of female teachers from the *bhadra* family was felt. Many widows, especially from the economically backward class, availed the benefit by joining training programs. Some widows were also trained as midwives to replace traditional *dhais*. The traditional belief that education caused widowhood was not applicable to these women. So there was no problem in receiving education for these women.

Some educated women who took up salaried jobs faced some difficulties in connection with their matrimony. Most of these women either remained unmarried throughout their lives or gave up their jobs after marriage. It is difficult to find the reasons behind this. Most of these women were married to educated men. It may be that many of these educated men wanted only educated wives. They could not shake off the prevalent belief that economically independent wives would be too arrogant

and give up all womanly qualities. There was another possibility that women too ultimately preferred to perform their duties as wife and mother. On the other hand, a section of lower class women lost their economic independence due to the changing perception of women. In the first half of nineteenth century, *vaishnavis* acted as teachers in upper class Hindu families. Later, their position was occupied by the missionary teachers. Some families even preferred to get English educated Hindu *bhadramahila* as teachers. *Vaishnavis* were not allowed entry due to their lower position in society. Before becoming educated, women were entertained by the female performers of *Jhumur*, *Tarja*, *Jatra*, *Kobi*. The educated women preferred to spend time in other pursuits like reading, sewing and theaters. Consequently, these female performers lost their position. Beside this, changing lifestyle, dress, costume, ornaments created difference between old and new generation. It created a rift in the *andramahal* and led to emergence of nuclear family.

The movement for change in the condition of women through education was supported by a section of educated natives. Educated men often wanted mental satisfaction in their married life. Western education brought some new ideas about social and conjugal life among the Bengali literati. The aim of female education was to inculcate those new ideas among the women. The ability to run the household, according to the changed social condition, cleanliness, modernity in attitude and attire, western impression in taste were considered essential criteria for the wives of educated youths. All these were imposed by men and the reforming zeal of the female members changed according to that of men. In the emergence of new women, both Hindus and Muslims, men played a crucial role. It was just an imposition of new norms instead of traditional customs. The process of female education facilitated the emergence of *bhadramahila*. With time, other women were included in this process. But progress was very slow. Actual emancipation of women did not take place before independence. Frequent news of early marriage, torture on women, dowry death proved that women had a long way to go before they could achieve equality.