



NINETEENTH CENTURY NEW WOMAN OF BENGAL

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ABSTRACT:

The colonial rule in India brought about many changes in the daily life of the Indians. The Muslim rule while separated the world of women and the men there arose many complexities within the world of women. In nineteenth century with the coming of the British rule in Bengal a change took place in the life and culture of the Bengalees. The new western educated Bengali men thought of improving the position of women in the society and the Britishers with their position strengthening in India also tried to bring about social reforms in India. The new elite western educated bengalees however opposed to the intervention of the Britishers in the inner domain of the society and took up the challenge in their own way resulting in giving birth to a new woman who is educated but at the same time is maintaining the traditional uniqueness of Indian culture.

KEYWORDS : *Purdah, Colonial education, Missionaries, Ghar/Bahir, Baishnavis, Padas, Ustani, Bismillah, Madrassah, Zenana, Bhadramahila.*

INTRODUCTION

This paper tries to portrait the coming up of a new class of women in the nineteenth century India. They are in character far different from the women of the existing period. In Bengal the social reformers of the early nineteenth century tried to improve the social condition of the women in bringing about changes in the existing social practices, they got the help of the British in bringing about laws against such evil practices as 'Sati' and 'child marriage'. The Britishers with their position strengthening in India started criticizing the worthlessness of native traditions and stressed on the urgency of social reforms especially of women. The new elite Bengali men took it as a challenge as they though wanted reforms in the society did not wanted the colonial interference especially in the inner domain. Thus it was they who took the initiative to educate women to bring about a cultural refinement in the society. The women when given opportunity not only did fulfill the aspirations of the early nationalists but also developed a personality of their own.

POSITION OF WOMEN BEFORE THE COMING OF THE COLONIAL RULE

The Muslim rule in India emphasized the purdah system and the separation of the world of women from the outside world gradually began to take place. The women henceforth slowly disappeared from the public world. They were totally neglected remained secluded from the society. They even found no arena to express their own thoughts. It was only after centuries of silence, in the nineteenth century with the dominance of British power in India came new culture along with colonial education. The urban elite class imbibed with enlightenment, western education, philosophy and humanism found the old traditional practices against women of India barbaric. At the same time Britain's position also became more and more secure in the colonies, the administration became more and more receptive to the missionaries' arguments. They themselves observed the worthlessness of native traditions and social practices and the colonial power also stressed on the urgent need of social improvement. In the words of Uma Chakravarti, "In seeking a

psychological advantage over their subjects, colonial psychology felt compelled to assert the moral superiority of the rulers in many subtle and not so subtle ways..... Throughout the first half of the nineteenth century and even before, writers like Mill, Orme, Dubois, Macaulay and Bentinck were labouring to certify the 'natives' as a frail, cowardly and soft bodied people.¹ (Chakravarti, 1989)

RESHAPING OF WOMEN IN THE COLONIAL RULE

The colonial power when talks of the social reform they pointed out to the social barbarities in everyday customs of India, including practice of sati, child widowhood, female infanticide etc. and claim their role of protector of Indian Women. It is here that the 'Woman's question' began to dominate the public discourse and also became the touchstone of colonial- nationalists encounter. This gave birth to social reform movements using sometimes among the Indian new elites using the agencies of colonial power. Women of the time were in the forefront of all main items on the agenda of social reform movement. For reformers, women emancipation was prerequisite to national regeneration and an index of national achievement in the connected discourse of civilization, progress, modernity and nationalism.² (Sen, 1993) On one hand, a movement was made by intelligentsia for legislative reforms and on the other hand came the attempt of creating female counterpart of the male elite. The reformer through series of campaigns finally was successful in bringing out bills against Sati in 1829 and also was enabled to introduce widow remarriage in 1856.

In Bengal as Partha Chatterjee rightly points out that the reformers or the new bilingual intelligentsia came to think of its own language as belonging to the inner domain of cultural identity, from which colonial intruder had to be kept out; language therefore became a zone over which the nation first had to declare its sovereignty and then had to transfer in order to make it adequate for the modern world.³ (Chatterjee, 1993). The Bengalis also wanted to ascertain distinctly 'traditional' and Indian culture in all forms of cultural domain. The newly educated Bengalis thought was that only nation itself has the right to bring changes or reforms in essential aspects of its cultural identity.⁴ (Chatterjee 1993). The women was pictured the symbol of tradition and Indian culture by the reformers who said that in the ancient times (Vedic period) women enjoyed independence dignity and respect from men folk. This was pure Hinduism. However the issue of formal education for women in the early years was not very easy because it was linked with gender segregation and seclusion (Purdah) practiced by the upper classes, with a reworking of private-public gender role. The social reformer never wanted total liberation for women. Thus they stressed more on the traditional image on which was added a Victorian concept of socially accomplished women. The female counterpart of the Indian elite therefore should be no way equal to her husband. Thus evolve the 'new woman' who was to be modern, but she would also have to display the signs of national tradition and therefore would be essentially different from the 'western woman'.⁵(Chatterjee 1993).

The liberal reformists or nationalists also are of the opinion that the new woman constructed out of this process must restrict herself within the realm of the family. This new ideal woman otherwise would be denounced as Malini Bhattacharya points out that, 'The nationalists wished to perceive their women as mothers and sisters, (may be even lovers, as it turns out in Rabindranath Tagore's *Ghaire Baire*), who must use their pristine power, primarily to inspire them to be true "males" dedicated to the service of the motherland.'⁶(Bhattacharya and Sen 2003)

The nationalists of the time were suffering from the home/ world (Ghar/Bahir) dichotomy. They neither did want a fully liberal society nor did they want the typical role of patriarchy to be curbed, yet they wanted to accept modernity. Thus the nationalist attempt to bring about modernity started with many hindrances. In 1851, for instance a prize essay on 'Hindu female education' marshaled evidence that women education was encouraged in ancient India and it was not harmful but positively beneficial for women to be educated.⁷ (Sharma 1851) Here it was said that women from respectable families can read and write without affecting the honour of the family and doing no harm to them or their caste. In 1870, again in the writings of Sib Chandra jana a brahmo youth it was debated that the duties of the devoted wife can be maintained even

if she is educated. The old prejudices against women was changing, instead it was said that by educating the women the condition of the country will improve and that there will be happiness, welfare and civilized manners in social life. (Jana, Shib, Chandra, Patibratya-dharma- siksa, Calcutta: Gupta Press, 1870). At the same time however it is seen that apart from giving the women formal education, books were been written on their manner and conduct at home. In 1884, Girija Prasann Roy Choudhuri came out with books on women conduct 'Gaha Lakshmi', the virtuous house Wife or literally Lakshmi of the house⁸(Bengal Library 1884). The authors' main purpose was to redefine the woman's role in the changing situation of the colonial rule. In the book we find moral instructions for women. There are many other books of the type where it is stated what relationship should exist between a husband and wife or how a mother should raise her children, even they were taught by these middle class Bengali men through these texts how a woman will become an ideal homemaker⁹(Mitra 1887). The middle class educated men of the time was thus suffering from the dichotomy that how much of the western style to be imitated and allowed to enter to the inner domain without destroying the sanctity of the of the inner world. It was clear that a new class of women was needed for the changing society but again she should not be a mere imitation of the western women. Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay who was voicing in his writing the feelings of the large sections of the newly western educated youths of Bengal in 'Lajjasilata' talks of the natural and social principles that provide the basis of feminine virtues. Modesty or decorum in manner and conduct, he says, is a human quality and not a animal nature and women cultivate and cherish these spiritual qualities much more than a man. Home or family is the centre for expressing these spiritual qualities, and newly educated women will take the responsibility of protecting the nation's culture in the inner domain. This is how the westernization of women would be different from the men in the modern world of the nation¹⁰ (Mukhopadhyay 1969).

In Bengal, before the introduction of formal education by the Christian missionaries for women, we find though not formal education but women of upper caste did receive some sort of elementary education at home which was primarily religious in nature. Though we do not have enough authentic sources, yet it can be said that few names of Bengali women like Janhabi Devi, Sita Devi, Hemlata Devi etc were spreading Baishnavism after the death of Chaitnya. Hemlata was the daughter of famous Srinibas Gosain and she wrote Baishnav padas.¹¹ (Sen 1352). This naturally proves that these women had some sort of education that enable them to read and recite the 'padas' written in the name of Chaitnya. This style of imparting elementary education through Baishnavis among women continued for a long time. Adam's in his report on the State of Education in Bengal had mentioned of this tradition. He had mentioned of fourteen to fifteen hundred baishnavis in Natore of Rajshahi district only connected with teaching of women¹² (Basu 1941). In Debbandranath Tagore's autobiography also we get the mention of Nilmoni Thakur A Baishnav Gosain known to the family and a religious Guru too many members of the family. His wife was known as 'Ma Gosain' who was equally respected by them. There was a class of Baishnavis who acted then as female educator and even in the family of Dwarkanath Tagore this style of education was embraced then; they sometimes stay in the pupil's house also. They mainly teach the girl child snaskrit and baishnav padas¹³ (Tagore 1962).

In aristocratic Muslim families too women did receive some sort of elementary education again mainly of religious in nature. They were mainly taught to read Koran and to keep household accounts dealing with savings and expenditure. Reading and writing of Bengali were discouraged, although they were taught the basics of Urdu.¹⁴ (Ray 2002). Education in a Muslim family starts from the 'bismillah' ceremony at an early age of four years. This type of teaching was also religious centric. The child was taught the verses of Quran which he will recite in a parrot like manner, the girls of the houses were also taught in the same manner by the female educator 'ustani'. Learning to recite the Quran in Arabic was no guarantee that the child would understand a word of it, depending upon the knowledge of his/her tutor. Girls could participate only rarely in instruction outside the home, as they were kept in purdah from a very early age. One of the earliest references to girls school in North India, noted in the government report of 1845, referred to six schools in Delhi with a total of 46 students. All the students were Muslims, as were the teachers, and the education consists of memorizing the Quran¹⁵ (Chakraborty 2011).

In this scenario came forward the missionaries for female formal education. From Adam's report it is clear that formal female education started with the 'Calcutta Female Juvenile Society'.¹⁶(Bose 1941). However the name of Robert May also comes up from the book of Liard as the pioneer of female education in Bengal¹⁷ (Liard 1972). The early Hindu social reformers both Rammohun Roy and Radhakanta Dev was also in favour of female formal education, but while Rammohun restricted himself only within writings, it was Radhakanta Dev who took direct steps and started giving school education in his home. He also conducted 'School Book Society' exams in the school¹⁸ (Vide; A Rapid Sketch of Raja Radhakanta Deva Bahadur, with some notices of his Ancestors and the Testimonials of his Character and Learning 1859). He also encouraged personalities like Gour Mohun Tarkalankar to write the book 'Stri Siksa Bidhayak'. Raja Baidyanath Roy also show encouragement to female education by benevolently donating twenty thousand rupees to a girls school in 1825 near old church at Calcutta¹⁹ (Bandopadhyaya 1377). We also get names of Shibkrishna Bahadur and Kashinath Mallick interested in female education. The Derozians were also in support of female education and thus we see that in 'Jnanannesan' magazine of the Young Bengal it was written in 1832 in favour of female education: 'For the whole of the fair sex being without knowledge have continued blindfold, they know nothing of what is good or evil, and have a poor support from the food and clothes bestowed upon them by their relative whilst they must perform the necessary work in the house like servants'²⁰ (Moitra Ed 1979). But one thing among these encouraging notes must not be missed that women education for respectable families was till then restricted within the house and after much effort the schools opened by the missionaries failed to get girls of respectable families in their schools.

The programme of female education however was boosted with the opening of Bethune School in 1849. This was not a missionary school and thus the fear of changing of religion was no more applicable, slowly women of respectable families started coming to school for receiving formal education. We must not however forget the names of Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay and Madanmohun Tarkalanker who had played an important role in the making of Bethune School for girls. Dakshinaranjan donated the space for the construction of the school the valuation of the school land was then twelve thousand rupees²¹ (Ghosh 1982). The most important thing that came up with the Bethune school was the effort of the educated young Bengalis mainly the Brahmos to give basic education to the women of the inner domain or the 'andarmahal'. In kashipur Kishore Chand Mitra tried to open a girl's school in his house only, or in Majilpur some Brahma youths tried to open a school for girls. All this proved that the middle class Bengali family is gradually accepting the fact that women should receive an elementary school education from the early stage. But again one should remember that the whole of Bengali society till then could not be changed for mass education of women. The educated women of the early decades of the nineteenth century mainly belonged to the Christian or brahmo family²² (Bamabodhini Patrika 1274). The Bengali girls overall read only at the early ages mainly 'akhanmanjari', 'bodhodoy' or 'charupath' and that was also till their marriage and most of them were married at an early stage and after marriage education naturally comes to an end when they themselves became early mothers²³ (Bamabodhini Patrika 1274).

In the second half of the nineteenth century however the formal education of women became more popular. It was remarkable from ninety five girls school with a total attendance of 2,500 the figures went up to 2,238 schools in 1890 with a total of more than 80,000 students²⁴ (Ghulam 1983). In higher education also gradually Bengali women found their space and eminent women like Chandramukhi Bose (1860-1944) and Kadambini Ganguli (1861-1963) took their Bachelor of Arts degree from the University of Calcutta in 1883. Kadambini later became doctor and also the first professionally schooled woman doctor

The Muslim reformers of the period however were alike in their ideological concerns regarding women like their Hindu counterparts. The Muslim upper-class women of the time remained under strict purdah in the inner domain or the andarmahal. The primary education imparted to them as mentioned earlier was mainly religious. But the western educated Muslim reformers also like their brahmo Hindu counterparts took up the question of female education and the Muslims came up with the idea that education will not only make women good mothers, wives or home-maker but at the same time they will be

truly appreciating the message of Islam and consequently will become better mothers in making their children understanding the spirit of Islam in a better way. The Muslim reformers of the time was searching a new identity and thus wanted strong and courageous sons who would help in restoring the prestigious glory of the Muslims before the advent of the British rule. Again the question of sending girls to school for elementary education came to the front and it is seen that the powerful section of the society was against it and preference to education at home or zenana education prevailed.

In Dacca in 1883 there is example of educated Muslim progressive youths, mainly students of Dacca College coming forward with the idea of female education of their community. They made a scheme of education for girl students where they can study the course where they can study at home for classes 1-5, and take the examination with the help of their guardians. The successful candidates were given certificates and awards. Teaching was imparted through either the Urdu or Bengali medium. To meet the demand for home education for women, a class of female tutors emerged, some of whom went from house to house teaching young girls Arabic, Persian and Urdu, and, in some cases, also English²⁵ (Ray 2002). Eminent personalities like Syed Amir Ali, Abdul Latif and others came forward and started arguing in favour of formal education for women. As a result of all these the Muslim Balika Madrassah was established in 1897 with 25 students. This was the first school in Calcutta initiated by Muslims²⁶ (Ahmed 1983). But it was Nawab Faizunnessa Chaudhurani (1834-1903) who came forward with the idea of giving formal education to muslim girls of all class. She founded a free madrasah for girls, which later became the famous Faizunnessa Degree College. She established a primary school for girls at each administrative centre of her estate and even established an English medium school for girls observing strict purdah name Girl's Pilot High School. In Dhaka Eden School for girls in the model of Bethun School was established. During the vice royalty of Lord Curzon(1899-1905) female education again became the subject of government attention the zenana education of East Bengal government made considerable progress. But again one thing must be remembered that of the first generation educated Muslim women were not many in numbers. According to the Report of Female Education in Bengal, 1881-82, out of 184 students in the High English School classes there was not a single Muslim woman, and at the Middle English School level out of 340 students only four were Muslim²⁷ (Ray 2002). However with time the formal zenana education made a considerable progress. According to the Eastern Bengal and Assam Education Report of 1913, it would be seen that that the number of formal primary girl's schools gradually increased. In Calcutta also the Bengal Government tried to increase formal education for girls, without much success as more emphasis was given on recruitment procedure and training of teachers of this school. In the period between 1905-1911 (Declaration of Partition of Bengal in 1905 and its annulment in 1911) the spread of zenana education suffered to a great extent, It was only in 2013 after two years of reunification of Bengal that a Female Education Committee was reestablished with the same responsibilities of spreading education²⁸ (Avril and Siobham 2006).

The eminent Muslim social reformer Sir Sayyid Ahmed had inaugurated the Muslim Educational Conference in 1886 but in this first conference nothing was talked about muslim female education. It was only in the third annual meeting of MEC in Lahore in 1888 that the first resolution on muslim female education was taken. The Muslim reformers of the day thought that through muslim girls schools they would teach the girls not only the Islamic religion but also the lives of great people and their teachings as related in Aligarh, in 1905. It was in 1902 that Shaikh Muhammad Abdullah relentlessly worked as the secretary of the women education section of MEC and finally was successful in founding a girl's school in Aligarh. It was in 1919 we find that Begum Khediv Jung speaking of women education and the need of educated women as teachers or doctors. It was in this atmosphere that Begum Rokeye came up with her Sakhawat Memorial Girl's School in Calcutta in 1911. She took her ideas of running a school system from the Brahma social reformers of the day.

Thus it is seen that the women education in India had faced almost similar hurdles in India, be it Muslim or Hindu at its initial stage in India. But once the social reformers and the nationalist of the day was successful in bringing about a new class of bhadramahila (respectable women) quite different from the

common women of the time with the cultural refinements afforded by education they started talking about themselves and created a place for themselves in public life. These 'New Women' spoke of themselves and their conditions through the periodicals, newspapers and autobiographies of the time. Rassundari Devi (born around 1809) was entirely self taught and wrote the first autobiography of a Bengali woman. She wrote, "I was so immersed in a sea of housework that I was not conscious of what I was going through day and night. After some time the desire to learn how to read properly grew very strong in me. I was angry with myself for wanting to read.....people used to despise women of learning.....In fact older women used to show a great deal of displeasure if they saw a piece of paper in the hand of a woman"²⁹ (Tharu and Lalitha 1991). Rassundari Devi had to go through a painstaking effort to literate herself with her son's book but with the coming of the new women we see women regularly contributing their thoughts in periodicals of the period, Antahpur, Mahila, Bharat Mahila, Bamabodhini etc. among these Bamabodhini was made for women only. Its main objective was to address the dearth of reading material particularly suitable for Bengali women and to impart knowledge on such subjects such as Bengali, History, Geography, Elementary Science, Hygiene, Astronomy, Housekeeping and Religion³⁰ (Murshid 1930). The Bamabodhini Patrika also tried to introduce a correspondence course of women called Antahpur Siksha. Bamabodhini thus can be stressed as the first women periodical talking about women need. However the periodicals mentioned also contains writings of Hindu and Brahmo women mostly that are how we see the elite men of the day allowed their women to highlight their own image as free chaste and strong mother and consorts pressed into the service of the nation/community³¹ (Dagmar 1999). Among the women it was Rokeya Begum who first dared to claim that education would not only give women equality with men but also will give them economic independence. Rokeya appeal to women was very much clear

My sisters! Rub your eyes and wake up- march forward. Mothers, please declare that you are no more animals. Sisters, please deny that you are inanimate objects like furniture. And daughters please aver that you are not decorative pieces to be conserved with jewellery preserved in a safe. And together shout: we are human beings. And demonstrate through your work that we women are half of the best of the world. In truth, we are the begetters of the world³² (Begum 2002). Rokeya was a devout Muslim but at the same time she realized the weaknesses of the contemporary Muslim women and tried to make them overcome their weaknesses through education. Following thus Begum Rokeya's footsteps we see Akhtar Imam (b.1919), Fazilatunnessa Zoha (1905-76) and Daulatunnessa Khatun (1918-?) made significant contribution through their writings for the development of the women of the time. They wrote a number of essays and stories on women education and purdah. Some of the Muslim periodicals of the time were Islam Pracharak, Nabanoor, Masik Mohammadi etc. Thus we see Rokeya's writings point to the 'emerging views of the next generation': of Muslim women who gradually evolved their own viewpoints on purdah, polygamy, divorce and other social issues, distinct from those of men in the generation of reform.³³ (Gail, 1998)

CONCLUSION

Thus response to formal education among women in Bengal brought a sea-change in their life. The new- women who came out of the process not only was educated and a good companion, a perfect mother and a good hostess but along with it women created a new space for them. Education helped women to move from private sphere to public sphere. Women of Bengal through their writings tried to make a new world of their own. The 'new women' started using their new power of education and set up organizations where social reform was given primary importance. Thus we see that this first generation of educated women found an independent voice of their own where they talked of their personal life and the conditions of the society. The women of the next generation developed new organizations of their own where beside social reforms political protest also came up under the active leadership of women.

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