



RENAISSANCE AND THE QUESTION OF FEMALE EDUCATION IN BENGAL: AN OVERVIEW

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ABSTRACT:

In creating the Bengali intelligentsia and cultural make up, the role of English education is unquestionable. The educational exertions of the missionaries gave an impetus to come out the home breaking all the barriers of social prejudices. Though, it was not able to attract people irrespective of caste and class. The dilemma of educated men in quest of imparting education among the women hindered the way of spreading education. But in spite of all these, ray of western thought and perception deeply influenced the mind of educated Bengalis, from which concept of Bengali renaissance germinated. Liberalism, Rationalism, scientism, and nationalism began to be emerged in this part of India. In consequence, breaking the initial hesitation a large number of educated people came forward to take initiative or assist in the opening of educational institutions as per the demand of modern age.

KEYWORDS: Renaissance, Education, women emancipation, social prejudices, enlightenment.

INTRODUCTION

The establishment of Asiatic Society and different educational institutions like Hindu college took a crucial role in molding the refined world of the Bengalis. The Calcutta School Book Society and Calcutta School Society played a great role in spreading modern education in Bengal. General Assemblies Institution founded by Alexander Duff and Calcutta Medical College had also outstanding contribution in shaping the thought and mind of educated Bengalis towards new world of knowledge.. In colonial perspective the enlightened Bengalis also felt the need of educated wife as their life partner. But the controversy existed to what extent and what type of education should be given to women.

ZENANA EDUCATION AND ITS BACKDROP:

In the second half of the 19th century due to impact of renaissance, western educated progressive Bengalis tried to break the social barriers according to their own way. But conservative people were not ready to emancipate their women. They were also not intended to send their children to the schools founded by the Missionaries due to fear of conversion. Apart from these the 'Bhadraloks' were averse due to cynicism towards the approach of the schools where all castes and classes irrespective of socio-economic stratum could be admitted. As a result the missionary schools were unable to attract the girls of respectable families of Calcutta and other places of Bengal. But the demand of educated females was growing soon. The respectable Hindus felt a compulsion to raise their social status imparting education to their females. In 1850's and 1860', demand of European lady tutors began to grow.



CONTROVERSY OVER THE ISSUE:

In 1838, in a letter published in 'The Samachar Darpan', a Brahman pointed out the growing demand of educated wives in consonance with changing mentality of the newly educated people. He observed as stated below:

"Bengali men are now receiving education and consequently their minds are being enlightened. Under the circumstances how can they get on with their unlettered wives? Can they expect from these wives the sort of company they require after a long day of physical and mental labor? Will they be able to communicate their real feelings to these women?"

The newly educated enlightened Bengalis felt an urge to educate their life partners according to the norms of changing society. But in the mind of the educated men was not ready to provide right type of education as required by that time, since they had doubt whether the females were deserved to be educated in modern way. In this context Rammohan's English version of his original Bengali Pamphlet deserves to be mentioned here:

".....As to their inferiority in point of understanding when did you ever afford them (women) a fair opportunity of exhibiting their natural capacity? How then can you assume them of want of understanding? If after instruction in knowledge and wisdom a person cannot comprehend or retain what has been taught, we may consider him as deficient. But as you keep women generally void of education and acquirements, you cannot, therefore, in justice pronounce on their inferiority."

(quoted by Kalidas Nag in a speech titled 'Symposium on Women's education' cited in 'Bethune School and college Centenary Volume, 1849-1949', edited by Kalidas Nag, 1951, p. 189).

In very short time in the Hindu College Derozio was able to change the mentality of his students in accord with the new world. Though all the infused ideas were not projected as he wished and the activities of his disciples were not beyond criticism at that time and later, the contribution of Derozio in inculcating new thinking to change social ills and practices cannot be ignored at all. Dwarakanath Tagore, Prasanna kumar Tagore also advocated for female education. Apart from them, Kissory Chand Mitra, Sibnath Sastri, Pearychand Mitra and Akshay Kumar Datta deserve to be remembered specially. There felt an urge to impart elementary education to girls. Even the traditional reformers like Raja Radhakanta Deb and Madan Mohan Tarkalankar also supported female education. In 1821, a letter written by Radhakanta Deb to W.H. Pearce in context of Miss Cook's arrival in Bengal may be quoted here:

"The Hindoos cannot but feel themselves grateful if her (Miss Cook's) laudable intentions to teach the Hindoo ladies in European works of art both manual and mechanical prevail upon her to instruct for the present some poor women of good caste that when these have acquired a degree of skillfulness under her benevolent instructions they may hereafter be retained in the families of respectable Hindoos and their knowledge will thereby diffused among native females generally without interfering with their immemorial customs and usages." (cited in J.C. Bagal's Women's Education in Eastern India ----The First Phase, p. 104).

But, Akshay Kumar Datta in 'Tattvabodhini Patrika' strongly advocated for the cause of women education. In his consideration women were not inferior to men by any means; rather they were superior in some aspects.

VIDYASAGAR'S EXERTIONS:

The most ardent social reformer, Vidyasagar's initiatives in progress of female education in colonial India is unparalleled. His earnest zeal in educating girls in remote villages is ever memorable. Vidyasagar opened thirty five girls' schools in between November, 1857 to 15th May 1858 in the districts of Hooghly, Burdwan, Nadia and Medinipore. Of them, twenty girls' schools in Hooghly district, eleven in Burdwan district, one in Nodia district and three in Midnapore district. In this field he was different in approach in comparison with the Brahmas and the Missionaries. Vidyasagar explicitly expressed his concern to the Officiating Secretary to the Government of Bengal Mr. Ashley Eden about the rule of the school on 15th December, 1862 as quoted below:

“The teachers are expressly forbidden to interfere with the religion of the children in any way directly or indirectly.” (Unpublished Letters of Vidyasagar. edited by Arabinda Ghose, Calcutta, Ananda Publishers, 1971) pp. 39-40.

Establishment of Bethune School and Controversy:

The establishment of Bethune school is a landmark in the history of female education in Bengal. Drink Water Bethune started the proposed girls’ school with twenty one girls on May 7, 1849. Initially its name was ‘Calcutta Female School’. His aim was to attract girls of upper castes and classes imparting them education free from religious instruction. Dakshinaranjan Mukhopadhyay, Ramgopal Ghose and Madan mohan Tarkalankar helped Bethune to establish the school. Dakshinaranjan donated five and a half bighas of land in Mirzapur and one thousand rupees in cash. Vidyasagar also donated one thousand rupees to the fund and agreed to donate books which were worth of rupees five thousand. Breaking all the social barriers and prejudices, Pandit Madanmohan Tarkalankar sent his two daughters---Bhubanmala and Kundamala to the Calcutta Female school.

In December, 1850, Bethune appointed Iswarchandra Vidyasagar as the honorary Secretary of the school. Both of them heartily tried to influence the respectable people of Kolkata to send their daughters to the newly established school. Influential Natives of Calcutta began to show their interest about the school. The leading newspapers of Bengal expressed their gratitude to the honest attempt of Bethune. To support Bethune’s exertion Debendranath Tagore, Raja Kalikrishna Bahadur came forward. Miss kadambini Bose for the first time was allowed from the school to sit for the Entrance examination in 1878 and she passed the examination with credit.

The guardians were hostile towards the Christian Missionary schools due to fear of religious instruction. The girls’ schools established by the different missionary society were attended only by girls belonging to low castes as Bagdi, Byadh and Bairagi, and by daughters of prostitutes. Bethune wanted to break all the hostile attitudes of the Bengali ‘bhadralok’s by imparting education free from any kind of religious instruction. Following the instance of Bethune, Kissorichand Mitra and Joykrishna Mukherji established girls’ schools at Rajshahi and Uttarpara respectively.

Initially, conservative Hindus were not only in dilemma to send their daughters to Bethune School but they strongly opposed the effort. They were in doubt about positive impact of education and had a belief that getting the opportunity of education girls would spoil the inherent qualities of them. Ghulam Murshid in his ‘Reluctant Debutante: Reponse of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905’ (pp. 33-34) very nicely presented the mentality of educated Bengalis who were in contradiction of imparting education to their females. He writes:

“.....Ishwar Gupta, who strongly supported the establishment of the Bethune School in 1949, soon became hostile towards female education. In his poem “Durbhiksha”, he deplored the fact that women were losing their virtues as a result of the expansion of female education:

The women were, in the older days, virtuous,
They used to observe their rituals and abide strictly by the religious codes,
Bethune alone has destroyed all their womanly qualities.
Don’t you expect to get them as before.
Ignoring everything around them, the girls are holding books,
They must learn ABC and speak the language of England...
Most certainly they will themselves drive their carriage and go to Garer Math for an airing.
Perhaps they will also wear boots and smoke cigars.
(‘Durbhiksha’, Kabita Sangraha, Vol. I, ed. by Bankimchandra Chatterji, Calcutta, 1885. Pp. 121-22.)

After the immature death of Bethune, with the help of the enlightened Bengalis and Government support Vidyasagar was able to run the progress of the institution. After long time while Vidyasagar was not

the Secretary of the institution, visited the school and dropped his tears heavily seeing the strength of students but he had a great lament that the founder did not see the full fledged school having considerable number of girls.

The Brahmos and their dilemma:

In the second half of the 19th century, zenana education began to be popularized by the young Brahmos and the Brahmo-influenced Hindus. The famous Brahmo leaders including Keshab Chandra Sen, Aghore Nath Gupta, Umesh Chandra Datta, Sibnath Sastri and Bijoy Krishna Goswami realized the importance of female education and advocated for it. But they had a contradiction to accept western education in the form of institutionalization. The respectable Hindu families started to receive education privately in their homes by lady tutor and later on they were allowed to sit for examinations conducted by the Bamabodhini Sabha, which launched a scheme of Zenana education in 1863. It is lamentable that the wives of the progressive leaders were not educated well. They did not get any institutional or formal education. The Brahmo leaders were not able to make them free from traditional thinking. Keshab Chandra gave marry his minor girl of thirteen years with the son of Coochbehar Maharaj. But in spite of many contradictions the Brahmos had a leading role to popularize the concept. In the 'Indian Mirror', The Brahmo Samaj appealed to the European women living in Bengal in this way:

"We should also solicit the assistance of the numerous respectable European ladies residing in this country, in the great work of zenana reform.....we sincerely hope, therefore, they will spend at least their leisure hours visiting native families, and imparting gratuitous instruction as far as possible.....disinterested philanthropy always does immense good, and is appreciated thankfully....." (Cited in 'The Free Church of Scotland Monthly Record'. November 1, 1867. P. 249)

To uplift the social status and to meet the growing demand of educated girls, zenana education became popular among the respectable natives. The exertion did not to face resistance from the conservatives. In between 1840 and 1882, it became a fashion of enlightened Bengalis to instruct their daughters and wives under the European ladies at home.

Enlightened by the spectrum of Renaissance, Bengali 'Bhadralok' admitted the access of White Missionary Memsahab into their andarmahal. In this way gradually, the Hindu women whom Mrs. Sale was able to meet overcame their fears, began to learn and to read. Mrs. Hannah Mullens of London Missionary Society expanded the practice of visiting high-caste families to instruct the zenanas rudimentary reading writing and needle work. Emphasis was given to inject moral lesson through fables. In this way, a change in orthodox Hindu society occurred silently.

Zenana education flourished under the auspicious of the Brahmos. Some of the followers of Keshab Chandra Sen founded Bamabodhini Sabha and they began to publish Bamabodhini Patrika in 1863. It campaigned in favour of zenana education more than sixty years from its publication. Many of the Brahmos started to educate their sisters and wives behind the eyes of the elder members of the family. There were a lot of instances who were illiterate before their marriage but soon they were educated by their husbands secretly. Bamasundari, Kailasbasini Debi, Nistarini Debi, Kumudini, Drabamayi, Manorama Majumdar Jnanada Debi are of few examples.

Initially, there was a contradiction among the Brahmo leaders about the syllabus of the female education. Leaders like Dwarakanath Ganguli, Sibnath Sastri, Sasipada Banerjee and Durgamohan Das argued in favour of imparting all kinds of knowledge. They did not want to discriminate on gender basis. But, Umesh Chandra Datta, Keshab Chandra Sen advocated female education which is 'womanly'. It is noticeable that a reputed journal like the Tattvabodhini Patrika of the Adi Brahmo Samaj also pleaded for female education which would be purely for the women folk. An article namely 'Strishiksha O Striswadhinata', published in the Tattvabodhini Patrika clearly described:

"We are not against female education. Women should, of course, receive some education and thus free themselves from the clutches of superstition. Moreover, we expect that education will give them such refinement of character as will make them acceptable as well as respectable to the educated men of Bengal.

However, we are against the kind of education now being given to women.....The books women are asked to read are either translation from English or are English –influenced. Consequently, our women become denationalized. We believe women should read only those books that will help them to become better wives and better mothers. This is an age of luxury. Most of the women are luxurious and indifferent to housekeeping and to the bringing up of their children.” (Strishiksha O Striswadhinata’, Tattvabodhini Patrika , Nov.-Dec., 1878, pp. 154-56)

Annette Akroyd, a British Unitarian, who came in India in the latter half of 19th century, “was ‘shocked’ when she finally met Mrs. Sen (wife of Keshab Sen). She had expected to meet someone as well-educated and sophisticated as Mrs. Monomohun ghose, but instead found ‘that the wife of the great apostle of women’s emancipation in India was ignorant of England.’ But worse, she found Mrs. Sen ‘covered by a barbaric display of jewels, playing with them like a foolish petted child in place of attempting rational conversation.” P. 48. (quoted from ‘The Brahma Idea of Social Reform and the Problem of Female Emancipation in Bengal’ by David Kopf, University of Minnesota, published in Asian Studies Centre, Michigan State University, in the article ‘Bengal in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries’ edited by John R. Mclane, 1975)

CONCLUSION:

It should be mentioned that in spite of Keshab’s continuous opposition against the merger of Bethune School, it was successfully realized with the help of the progressive Brahmos like Dwarakanath Ganguly and Monomohun Ghose. The first two women who obtained the B.A.degree from the college were Miss Kadambini Bose who was a Brahma and Miss Chandramukhi Bose who was a Christian. One of them became the first modern Indian woman physician who also secured M.D. from Edinburgh. Sivnath Sastri, Sib Chandra Deb, Anadamohun Bose, Bijoy Krishna Goswami and Monomohun Ghose, the members of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj came forward and supported the emancipation of Indian women unconditionally. The rest of the enlightened Bengalis were gradually initiated to follow the path of Vidyasagar to impart education to women folk free from all sorts of religious education.

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