



# Women Education in Nineteenth Century Bengal: A Critical Evaluation

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Women play a vital role in the progress of a family, society or country. In order to make democracy successful in the country women education is equally important with the men. Education is one of the milestones for women empowerment because it enables them to respond to the challenges, to confront their traditional role and change their lifestyle. Standing in the twenty first century if we go back to the nineteenth century, we will find that women had to go through a tough time to cross the hurdle of blind faith and superstition to promote education for them. The purpose of this paper is to explore the original motive of the colonial Govt. and the Indian intelligentsia for patronizing women education.

From the very beginning the colonial masters considered the oriental countries, like India as feminine and wanted to project the fact that the despondent condition of women in India was responsible for India's inferior status and its subordination also. In 1840, James Mill in his book '*History of British India*', wrote: "The condition of women is one of the most remarkable circumstances in the manners of nation....As society refines upon its enjoyments, and advances into the state of civilization,...in which the qualities of the mind are ranked above the qualities of the body, the condition of the weaker sex is gradually improved, till they associate on equal terms with men and occupy

the place of voluntary and useful coadjutors" (Mill, I, 1840: 445-447). He also noted that the lower condition of Hindu women is beyond description. If they (the Hindus) have to reach in the light of civilization, they must take care of women.

It was no doubt that Western civilization was much more superior in political and other materialistic affairs than India. Partha Chatterjee opines, colonial subjects were forced to obey and learn the European thought, education and technology to overreach the structure and discourse of domination. But in its basic part, the nationalist thought tried to reveal itself by separating family and tradition from colonial pattern. Distinctiveness of East would be lost in colonial discourse by the blind imitation of West. So, family or women (more specifically) became that category which could make East distinct from West (Biswas, 2011: 18).

The most accurate description about the condition of women in the social context of nineteenth century could be found in contemporary novels, satires, essays and periodicals. In his second book on Abolition of the custom *Sutee*,<sup>19</sup> published in 1819, Rammohun Roy had opined: "Women are supposed to be mainly cook, bed partner and obedient maid. In the time of marriage man accepts his wife as better-half, but in day-to-day

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life, he does not hesitate to behave like a beast” [Roy, 1819: 47]. Marriages of Hindu children were fixed at the age of 4-5 years. Marriages of eight to ten years girl with an old man were regular incident in that time. Polygamy among Brahmins, otherwise known as *Kulinism*, was a long-standing social evil which had to be eradicated along with others. Young Bengal intellectuals had been stirred up against this obnoxious practice as early as 1836. When Vidyasagar was fighting for the cause of widow remarriage, the Maharaja of Burdwan as well as Kishori Chand Mitra sent petitions demanding legislation against polygamy. A move for that purpose could be initiated only after the Mutiny. It is interesting to find that three of the four Indian members of a committee appointed by the Government of India to examine the question—Ramnath Tagore, Raja Digambar Mitra and Jay Krishna Mukherjee—opined that the evils of Kulinism had been greatly exaggerated. It was again Vidyasagar who emphatically asserted that it was a great evil and legislation was necessary to put an end to the practice. It is strange that even Bankim Chandra could not see eye to eye with Vidyasagar regarding an enactment to suppress Kulinism. As a result of the sharp division of opinion the Government did not proceed further and the idea of legislation was dropped at this point (Basu, 1975: 146-148). *Vidyasagar* in his book related to polygamy, published in 1871, and had published a big, detailed list of polygamous mentioning name, address, age and number of marriages. Among them 133 were from Hooghly district and 64 were from the village *Janai* near Calcutta. After marriages, the wives of polygamous were bound to live in parental home. The husband visited their wives once a year. And, in most of the cases, the father-in-law had to pay ‘visit’ to the son in law. (Vidyasagar *Rachana Sangraha*, II [Society], 291-95)

At the beginning of nineteenth century, another evil custom was *Sutee*. This custom was prevailed in every Hindu family irrespective of class and caste. In 1820 fifty seven cases of

*Sutee* were reported in Burdwan. *Bagdi*, *goala*(milkman), *muchi*(leather worker), *chhutor*(carpenter), *kaibarto* (fisherman), *modak*(sweet maker), *chasa*(farmer) etc. castes were included among them (Parliamentary Papers (HOC), 1823, Vol.XVII, p.32). In the same year ninety three cases of *sutee* were reported in Hooghly district. Often widows were seen to give threat to commit suicide by fasting to be prevented from their strong determination of being *Sutee*. Many times, relatives of dead person forced the widow to become *Sutee*. In 1822 Fanny Parks, an English woman, had witnessed an incident of *Sutee*. When the widow was trying to run away from the burning funeral pyre for fear of life, mob took her back forcefully (Chakrabarty, 2010: 6). In most of the cases, relatives of dead person instigate the widow to become *Sutee* for getting the property.

On 15<sup>th</sup> November, 1823, a news of death of a person named Kamalakanta Chattopadhyay was published in *Samachar Durpan*. He had 22 alive wives. At the time of his death only two wives were present in his house then. After his death, his four wives determined to become *Sutee* (Bandyopadhyay, 1970, I :253-54). According to the report of Government, ninety percent among the *sutees* did not understand the glory of being ‘*Sutee*’. But the resolution to become *sutees* cannot proceed so much from having reasoned themselves into a conviction of the purity of the act itself, as from an infatuation produced by the absurdities poured into their ears by ignorant Brahmins (Parliamentary Papers (HOC), 1826-1827, Vol.XX, p.9). Lack of education could be identified as its main cause.

Remarriage of widows was another burning issue of the nineteenth century, and we find Pandit Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar among those who fight for the cause. The Brahmo Samaj which was equated with a progressive force came out heavily against this social evil. In this case the first futile attempt was made by Raja Rajballav of Dacca in the mid-eighteenth



century. The orthodox forces were too strong to effect this reform for the next one hundred years. In the thirties of the last century the movement for widow remarriage was strongly advocated by the *Samachar Darpan*, the *Jnananveshan*, the *Bengal Spectator* etc. (Banerjee, 1979: 29). This was only natural, as the movement was a logical consequence of the abolition of Sati in 1829. The *Samachar Darpan*, in its issue dated March 14, 1835, published a letter of an unmarried Kulin Brahmin girl in which attention was drawn to the sufferings of Bengali widows and the Government was urged to take necessary steps for mitigating their sufferings. On the very next day some other women of Chinsurah supported the first correspondent in a letter to the editor of the paper and in conclusion wrote, "Why cannot a wife marry again after the death of her husband when a husband can marry after the death of his wife? Cannot a woman have desire for marriage like a man? Oh, dear fathers and brothers! Consider these carefully in your mind and you will realise how you find us in grief and also insulted like slaves" (Samachar Darpan, 18.4.1835).

Vidyasagar wrote a pamphlet on widow marriage which was published in January 1855. He had realized that the widow marriage campaign, to have a general appeal to the people, must be backed by reference to authoritative *Shlokas* or verses in the Sastras. He found what he wanted in a *Shloka* in the *Parasar Samhita*: "*Gate mritepravrajiteklibecapatitepatau // Pancasvapatsunarinampatiranyobidhiyate//*" (A second marriage is sanctioned for women in five situations: if their husbands be not heard of, if they die, retire from the world, prove to be impotent or becomes outcastes). It created a stir in the country and started a heat controversy. It became the talking point everywhere. He next sent a petition in October, 1855, demanding legislation to legalise widow remarriage and for removing all obstacles to the inheritance of the sons of remarried widows. There were numerous other petitions and

counter-petitions. The substance of the counter petition sent by Radhakanta Dev and supported by thirty seven thousand people was: remarriage of widows was compatible to the British social structure, but it had no compatibility with the conventions of Hinduism. So, this law opposed to rituals and customs of Hindu Shastra. There was no evidence of marriage of widows in our ancient puranas, shastras and epics. There would be very much complications regarding the Hindu Law of Inheritance.

In this situation, education of women seemed to be an essential need to change their status in the society. Education eliminates inequalities and disparities as the means of recovering their status within and out of their families. Education provides more strength to women. Such strength comes from the process of empowerment and empowerment will come from the education.

Women education was not merely new issue in India. Ancient India had much pride in this matter. In the Vedic period women had access to education, but gradually they had lost this right. Indian scriptures mention about several women sages and seers. Women enjoyed equivalent positions and rights in the early Vedic era. In the Vedic period, educational system was very developed. The women in ancient India were given significance and they held an important position in the society. Gargi, Apala, Lopamudra, Maitreyi were leading stars in Rigvedic tradition.

Historically, women have taken part in all spheres of life with courage and gusto. Indian mythology is rich with stories of highly educated and evolved women. One can trace the historical evidence of ancient Indian education to the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C. when education was imparted orally, and many women scholars were part in it. When Buddhism spread in India, some world-famous educational institutes such as Nalanda, Vikramshila and Takshashila were established. A number of female students were also enrolled in these Centres of learning. Jahnvi Devi, Sita



Devi, Suvadra Devi and Hemlata Devi were highly educated in Chaitanya era. Many 'unknown' women were very familiar to Vaishnav scriptures. Still education has been found to be restricted to a certain stratum of the society. It was not available to a mass scale.

As we have said earlier, in the nineteenth century, the women's question became a part of the greater discourse of progress and modernity, and a movement for female education started as a part of the 'colonized males' search for the 'new woman'. Thus, women education became an important agenda of reform program of the educated Indians in the nineteenth century (Bandyopadhyay, 2004). Many schools were initiated by reform organizations like *Brahmo Samaj* and *School Book Society* in Calcutta. J. E. Drinkwater Bethune started a school for the girls in 1849 at Calcutta. Though originally known as the Hindu Female School, it maintained a secular approach. Instruction was imparted in Bengali and there were no fees. For girls who lived far away, and were unable to afford transport, a carriage was provided. On the carriage was emblazoned a Sanskrit verse declaring that a daughter's education was her father's religious duty. The first two pupils of this school were the daughters of the orthodox Pandit Madan Mohan Tarkalankar. For this, he had to face many kinds of social torture. Bethune had to face many difficulties to continue the school. In a letter to Governor Dalhousie, she had written-

"Every kind of annoyance and persecution was set on foot to deter me from continuity to support the school and with such success that at one time the number of enrolled pupils dwindled to 7, and on some occasion not more than  $\frac{3}{4}$  were present at the school. At this time the question was agitated whether or not I should offer stipends to the girls who attended, as was done on the first establishment of some of the Govt. College and I was assured that if I would offer 5 or 6 rupees a month to each, I might count on immediately recruiting the school to any extent that I might think

desirable from Brahminical families of unquestioned caste and respectability." (Quoted in Basu, 1975:160)

Support for the school waned after Bethune's death in August 1851. The Government took the responsibility over in 1856. In 1879, it started its journey towards higher education. Thus, 'College Classes in Bethune School', the first women's college in Bengal was established. In 1882, Kadambini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Basu became the first two female graduates in India. In 1884, Chandramukhi Basu passed the examination of the Master's Degree in Arts (M.A.) from the University of Calcutta. She became the first Principal of Bethune College in 1888, retiring in 1901 due to ill health. She had to tackle a continuous hurdle and challenge from the conservative Society. It is very much clear in a letter of the then Executive Director (Education) J.S. Sletter, dated 22<sup>nd</sup> May, 1902. He wrote: Miss Basu had to work among a people extremely conservative, especially in the matter of female education and labouring under the baneful custom of child-marriage and she may well be looked upon as the pioneer in the field of the higher education of native females in Bengalee....Her health broke down through the hard labour and untiring energy which she brought upon her work. (Quoted in, Chakrabarty, 2010: 201)

Leaders of Young Bengal had always spoken for female education in their lectures and periodicals. In alter, traditional Hindu orthodox society had published sarcastic essays in their periodicals. It was believed that education made woman widow and polluted. Even some newly English educated persons like Kashi Prasad Ghosh were also against of female education. He wrote an essay criticizing the female education movements in *HinduIntelligencer*. Pundit Gauri Shankar Tarkabagish gave an excellent answer to this criticism in the editorial column of *Sambad Vaskar*. Addressing the editor of *Hindu Intelligencer*, he asked that in spite of being educated in English, why was he opposing



education of Hindu Women? .... By doing so if he thought that he was protecting women and preserving Hindu religion then we would ask him about his religious practices. Because there was no symbol of Hindu practices, such as, *Doljatra*, *Durgotsav*, temple etc. in his house (Ghose, 1964: 413-14).

In 1865, the famous journal *Somprakash* in its editorial page, discussed on the hindrances of female education. It pointed out five factors as the obstacles on the way of female education. These were:

1. As the male persons in this country are not well-educated, they could not be aware of female education.
2. Due to child marriage young girls are unable to read in school for more days.
3. It is very difficult to continue the task of education with low salaried staffs.
4. After marriage, most of the girls forget the childhood education due to lack of practices.
5. European women are not habituated in cooking. So, they have enough time to study. In contrast, Indian women are highly engaged in housekeeping. (Somprakash, May 29, 1865)

In *Sarbashubhakari Patrika* (1850) Madanmohan Tarkalankar wrote an essay on female education. He rejected the idea that women had not enough intelligence and mental strength for education. He wrote "...God established only physical difference between men and women. God had not created any difference in mental strength between the two. In childhood as girls are calmer and quieter than boys, they could learn more.....whoever think that education would make women characterless, quarrelsome and arrogant, they really need some advices. Education make man modest, chaste and gentle" (*Sarbashubhakari Patrika*, Ashwin 1772 in Shakian era).

A similar essay was published in *Sulabha Patrika* edited by Dwarikanath Roy. Rejecting the idea that education make women widow, it wrote, "... Is education so powerful? Is it a tiger? Supposedly if education has dangerous power

like this then it could kill the learnt person itself.... If woman could be widow for her education, then also man could be widower for his education" (*Sulabha Patrika*, Vol.2, No.1-2, 1854).

Already there was a debate regarding the effects of female education but after the middle of nineteenth century another issue regarding the method, rules and regulation and syllabus of 'feminine' education was added to it. The conservative people of the society thought that the excessive pressure of education would be harmful to women. The basic ideas of reading and writing and a minimum knowledge of arithmetic, hygiene, needlework, embroidery and in Bengal the local language including English were considered enough for the women. The Darwinian Theory and Colonial-European Anthropology had a great impact on this debate. Various essays on composition of brain and size and of skull were begun to publish to prove the intellectual inferiority of female to male. In this Biological- Scientific graph, the place of women was below to man. Some supporters of women education argued that education of woman should be limited to that extent which needed to establish her eligibility, personality and virginity as a perfect wife. Even, sometime, in spite of being the subject of this discourse women were often led by same thought and opinion. For example, Jyanadanandini Devi, wife of Satyendranath Tagore, opined clearly that mother and wife were the two ultimate role model of women. Radharani Lahiri who had taken part in Brahma Reform Movement, declared that the most important work of women was housekeeping (Biswas, 2011: 17).

In this regard, *Bamabodhini Patrika* wrote: "education is not merely a knowledge of historical incident or scientific truth but a natural development of religious ideas, intelligence of whole life is the main motto of education. As family is the main working field of woman, education regarding the maintenance of order and peace of the family and child care



can be called the original female education” (*Bamabodhini Patrika*, June, 1873).

In an essay titled as “Higher education of women”, it was argued that the health of woman was being deteriorated by this type of work of opposite nature. To prove this argument the example of woman of U.S.A. was given. The essayist wrote: “the method of education of male and female could not be same for two major reasons. First, women should not work hard during menstrual cycle. Second, extra mental labour would make her unable to breastfeed. Even, her nervous system could break down” (*Paricharika*, July, 1886).

In the new era of construction of new womanhood, it was the conventional image of woman as wife and mother, simply garnished by education and some Victorian Womanly ideals borrowed from the West, that was projected as ‘ideal’ for the ‘good’ Indian woman. Even the *Bamabodhini Patrika*, the journal for women’s enlightenment, published in Bengal by the enlightened and educated Brahmos, propagated such a model. The *Bamabodhini Patrika* wrote: “The wife, like Goddess Laxmi worships her husband as if he is God Narayan, will go to heaven after her death and will taste every happiness along with her husband just as God Narayan and Goddess Laxmi, enjoy eternal happiness.” (*Bamabodhini Patrika*, 1904) The idea of modern educated housewife was always tied to the older patriarchal imagination of the mythical divine figure of Laxmi. Laxmi as a model hindu wife combined submission with loyalty. This new concept of womanhood was a fine blending of the self-sacrificing Hindu wife and the Victorian helpmate. Far from having an emancipating effect, education thereforereinforced the confinement of women to idealized domestic roles as good wives and better mothers.

Evidently, a new sphere of social clash was developed. Active presence of women in public domain created a tension in gentlemen’s mind. Role of this highly educated women was the major theme of this crisis. In this respect,

someone namely Shashibhushan Dasgupta leaves a question in Indian Mirror, What is to be said of the fate of these poor girls after they became use to such costly habits of living? When they are married, how could they make their husband happy? (Quoted in Chakrabarty, 2012: 200)

Thus, this educated women had to face a continuous criticism and sarcasm from this patriarchal society. “*Model Bhogini*” written by Jogen Basu is a perfect example of this type. Their dresses, body-languages were a matter of concern of the then male dominated society. They had to go through a continuous process of evaluation of society. Actually, the male society was wavering with a divided mind.

In this connection, there comes the division of external life and internal life. External life is the arena of materialistic affairs and internal life is the arena of spiritualistic affairs. As far as the colonial subjects would achieve western technologies the need to protect spiritual arena would be increased. Anticolonial nationalism is not only an intimation of the ideas of freedom, humanitarianism of west, rather, it is an effort of defining the difference from West. Home and the family is the arena which bears our own distinct identity and it is the duty of women to protect this distinctiveness. Women should not change her feminine features with the changes of situation. They should not be westernized, more specifically, European women or mem-sahib. Because this is the distinctiveness of East.

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