



Aspects of female education in nineteenth century Bengal

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Abstract

Roles and responsibilities of men and women were important factors to decide their access to education. The condition of female education was not good in nineteenth century Bengal but the initiatives for social reforms along with serious steps towards female education included many crucial aspects related to the lives of women. Social evils i.e., Sati, child marriage etc. were criticised and social awareness was spread against it. Female education was encouraged, though the courses of female education were aimed at making them good wives and nurturing mothers only rather than their individual growth. Women were socialising through organisational activities which helped them developing a group identity and led them towards collective sense of educational advancement.

Keywords: Women, education, Bengal, prejudices, religion, culture, challenges of female education

Introduction

In most of the cultures, boys were trained to be strong, independent and confident enough to face difficulties of the outside world but girls were taught the opposite with no autonomy on themselves. ^[1] It was one of those socially constructed ideologies related to male and female upbringing in a well established patriarchal society where men were considered superior to women. Jobs which entailed authority, power and control were considered men's jobs and jobs involving caring, nurturing, servicing were seen as women's jobs. Such ideologies were spread through social institutions i.e., the family, religion, law, political, educational and economic institutions, media and knowledge system." ^[2] So, when the demand of female education started gaining momentum in Bengal, it was taken as 'invasion on protected cultural space'. ^[3] The opportunities of getting their own identities, to be on their own; mentally or financially were likely to be opened through the door of education was disturbing enough to the society to leave it to grow freely.

Religious customs, played a major role in spreading uneven orthodox rules i.e., kept away women and shudras from reading, supported patriarchy but the economic changes came in Indian society were remarkable in deciding the status of both gender in society. On top of that, economic men moved out of the household and the domestic women remained in it. Boys went to schools and universities to acquire knowledge and skills for operating in the outside world, while girls remained at home, acquiring skills for the domestic world. ^[4] The prejudices, against female education of bringing misfortune and female intrigue, were spread all over Bengal against female education. ^[5] So, it was necessary to spread the awareness for female education through social reforms. ^[6]

The cultural background of Bengal was closely associated with goddess Durga on the part of Shakta tradition (Hinduism). The Goddess Durga; a divine lady generally depicted in a gesture of killing the demon Mahishasura, was challenging the underrated position of women by being fully conscious of her existence and her capabilities. Her military

exploited and achievements against the demons came forth to the light in the popular text of Devi Mahatmyam which formed a part of the 6th century text Markandeya Purana. 7 The evocation of goddess Kali (fierce in nature) from the third eye of Maa Durga to kill all the asuras depicted philosophically the "mindsets." Goddess Durga was the representation of a lady who was conscious about all her rupas (characters). So, when she needed a violent personality to give equal throwback, she quickly evoked Kali. Here, Kali was none but the wrath form/personality emerged from goddess Durga herself. There were dialogues where she replied firmly to the demon (Shumbha) when he said her weak; taking help of other women. In reply of this she revealed this truth to him that there was no one but 'her'. By saying this, all other forms (rupas) merged inside her, she fought and finally killed him. ^[8] Though the concept of "religion-based morality and values" lost its significance in "economics, science or technology", ^[9] its modern interpretation in terms of women's efforts in nineteenth century kept its significance. Here, goddess Durga (representation of sakti) resided in every lady who was aware of her hidden potential and fought against the evil trying to harm her. Women with such awareness (kali; ready to destroy enemies) became pioneer in the social field (resonated the battle field) for spreading awareness (against social evil) by many female faces (different rupas of goddess durga) through different educational and social welfare organisations (her weapons), magazines, newspapers were based on the core principal of building their identity.

By covering different aspects of society, this article is concerned with prevalent ideologies of society, prejudices against female education, social reforms, and new challenges and initiatives for female education in Bengal.

Social Ideologies And Women

Any specific source on the life of women was hard to find before eighteenth century as it was not considered important apart from the efficient work of 'Tryambakayajvan's Stridharmapaddhati'. ^[10] In the nineteenth century there

were memoirs written and later remembered lore, or the accounts of others who told their stories. There were chances of ambiguity as it was based on memories especially in the accounts. Nevertheless, women like Rassundari Devi, Dr. Vina Mazumdar, etc of nineteenth century started writing their own life experiences. Many female pioneers in this field shared keeping their study a secret from not only male but female members of the house. The elder women were the first in the houses to resist younger females from getting education as they were trying to maintain the rules previously set under patriarchal influence to maintain the status-quo. They ensured the non challenging attitudes towards the customs as if they internalised patriarchal values. ^[11] Moreover, the prevalent superstitious beliefs discussed by William Adam in his Report on the State of Education in Bengal (1836) of getting misfortune of becoming widow or getting rebellious after getting education were also hindering the path of spreading education among female. ^[12] On top of that, they were considered more cultural rather than civic concerns' ^[13] which means they were the carrier of traditional roles and responsibilities which did not supposed to be disturbed. ^[14] These prevalent ideologies kept any social reform away from Indian society.

In Indian society, generally female were glorified as a goddess of love, sympathy, care and deep nurturing properties. ^[15] So, the philosophy of vibrant, transformed and strong version of kali, (fierce goddess in Shakta tradition of Hinduism) was not very famous for women in Indian society but the role like lady Sita (wife of lord Ram; gentle in nature) was appreciated among laymen. Ironically, Indian women were highly revered as a mother in their youth and old age but they had almost no right to choose their pathways since their childhood. They were revered for their sacrifices. They indeed maintain a home, raise kids, taking care of old age people and enduring many obstacles for their family without getting paid and without much thinking of their life goals. They took it as their primary responsibilities and other work secondary. It was hard for them to think of themselves after getting tired mentally as well physically by doing daily household routine of the house. The title of 'BENIVOLENT' or 'CARING' was always attached to a mother or wife respectively to keep them in non-rebellious mode.

Males were reluctant towards house-hold duties because these works were considered menial and come under feminine category. Based on work, the areas were described as inner world (antahpur) where all the limited household work and family belonged to women whereas rest of the extensive areas with a lot of possible work lie under outer world, belongs to men. ^[16] There was no such division in earlier era due to the mutual participation of man and women in household production but division of labour opened limitless opportunities for men whereas women's space and freedom got confide. ^[17] In nineteenth century Bengal, the independent women were less in number. Many cases of early marriages could not give any chance to them to read or write, widowhood even ceased most of their freedom but the concerning fact was women could not resist marriage for a long time which led to the end of their study or professional career eventually. Moreover, there were less chances to grow as an individual inside or outside the house

due to their social status and excessive dependence on men were some of the possible reasons which reduced the rate of success of any scheme run in Bengal regarding female education. ^[18]

Prejudices Against Girls' Education In Bengal

Education was not considered good for women due to the prevalent superstitious beliefs of becoming widow or encouraging female intrigue. Also, the essence of patriarchy was settled deep down in women that elder women of the house refused to accept any new idea i.e., education of young girls in order to maintain the patriarchal system. Though education for women was limited to a few women of upper classes and Vaishnav girls along with girls of some affluent families, a large number of girls/women were not getting it. Some socio-cultural and economic issues i.e., labour division, sex segregation, early marriage, institutions for girls; which kind of schools, who would teach and who would be taught etc, put unsolved questions in front of the reformers and thinkers. ^[19] Unlike South Indians, the North Indian people were concerned about irresponsible attitude of girls/women towards home affairs and fear of loosening control over them after getting education. ^[20] Moreover, "educated women were mocked as oblivious of their tradition and their domestic duties." ^[21] These beliefs stopped many of the girls to become educated despite their desire to learn.

Beginning of Social Reforms, Promoting Education And Challenges Faced By Women

There was huge impact of social norms and practices on young minds. The growth of a child regardless of a girl or a boy was same till three to four, afterwards, people started conditioning and grooming them and assigning them work as per male or female sex. Boys were encouraged to face the world leaving their narcissistic attitude, while girls had to be conscious of their beauty and servicing manners. But the problem aroused when these non social tendencies led towards passivity of women and started deciding their submissive position and silence over the atrocities committed to them in the four walls of house. ^[22]

Social reforms and changing perspectives towards women were started with analysing the poor status of women in society due to the social, cultural and religious customs like widow-burning (Sati), polygamy, child-marriages, and child-widowhood. ²³ When the British came in India, many of them targeted women and their poor position in the society. Herbert Hope Risley pointed out the interest of Indians in politics and intellectual ideas but not much in reforming their own society. Missionaries, also, mentioned the lower status of women in Indian society. Constant criticism of Indian mindsets and culture, religion and social customs for women's heinous position was urgently needed to be addressed. But, the question of modernised role of woman became more important in nineteenth century than what she really urged for? On one hand when autobiographies of women were considered as a milestone in the women's history in India which shed light on many hidden

aspects of women's life, on the other hand they only became "a ground for the discussion of traditional beliefs and values" ^[24]. The Indian reformers, missionaries and British

government worked towards the improvement of the status of women with their specific agendas.

Some women of Hindu upper castes families and among the Vaishnava communities were found educated but pioneering steps towards 'broad female education initiatives' were taken by missionaries in Bengal.²⁵ Missionaries analysed the convenience in spreading Christianity once they tended Indian women beliefs towards their religion. Unmarried female missionaries started making connection in the process of home tuition i.e., Zenana education but failure of this agenda made missionary authorities agree for girl's schools. Their agenda of 'conversion of Indian from influential families'²⁶ was opposed by nationalists.

For many nationalists, women were the carrier of traditional roles, ideologies and prestige of houses and intervening in their life-styles was transgressing the cultural boundaries.^[27] But, reformatory policies were made for women against evil customs i.e., child marriages, sati etc, through colonial interventions by which they legitimised the rule of British administrators. They provided financial assistance to the Female Education. Local elites supported this effort.^[28] The Bengali reformers also became conscious of women's situations. A bunch of newly educated Indian i.e., Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Madan Mohan Tarkalankar etc. started working against the atrocities faced by Bengali women.^[29] The demand of educated wives and nurturing mothers by new English educated officers started increasing the rate of educated women but 'non- productive activities were preferred rather than helpful life skills'.^[30] The subjects included in

girls' education were aimed at making them a good wife or a mother.^[31] Women were genuinely not the main concern of the society when social and financial mobility and social and religious reforms stressed on their education but their education was started just for fulfilling the demand of the roles of educated wives, careful mothers, traditional preservers and a tool to make conversion into Christianity permanent.^[32]

Women started socialising with the help of organisations and published magazines to spread the awareness among young generation of Bengal. As a result, not only the number of girl/women got increased in the field of education, but a few organisations i.e., Brahmo samaj and other started demands for equal opportunities for both boys and girls.^[33] The equality could not be re-established until the two sexes had equal rights in law along with formal demands for female labour by general industries on a large scale.^[34] Job opportunities reduced their dependence on others as working class women were more independent than the Bourgeoisie or propertied class women.^[35] But, it was challenging for women to work outside and trying to cope up with home and public sphere simultaneously due to the opposite qualifications and attitude demands. The public space required impendence, mobility, competitiveness and long hours of work whereas the family demanded the opposite-subservience, service and co-operation. Such demands encouraged male dominance and inequality as no such expectations were made with males.^[36]

Though most of the topics of women's organisations in nineteenth century were mostly concerned with the social harmony, the progress of nature, beauty, work and talk etc. but the changing perspectives of women were clearer with

the strong urge of Radharani Lahiri while addressing the fifth anniversary of the Banga Mahila Samaj, for mixing of the spirit of Sita and Savitri with the western women's interests in charitable activities and helping others.^[37] It was the call for all women to develop a group identity by encouraging themselves for social activities and by making them confident enough to deal with the social evils and by inspiring new generations.

Conclusion

There was bifurcation of roles, responsibilities and opportunities as per male or female identity i.e. education was one of those opportunities preferred to male over female in most of the areas. Though female education was negligible in nineteenth century Bengal, it was started getting attention from British government, nationalists and missionaries along with local elites' support. However, these groups were bounded with their specific agendas. The roles of women were limited to a few occupations like teachers and nurses etc. but their initial steps towards education, increasing awareness against social evils and more or less demands of equal opportunities were crucial aspects of nineteenth century Bengal to bring changes in their lives.

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