



The changing female attitude towards education in nineteenth century Bengal

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Abstract

Female education was unpopular and confined to the wealthy families but it became a crucial topic in nineteenth century. Each group of the society wanted to bring the change in the life of women for their specific agendas. These actions along with Individual interest of women towards education could not help but change. Reforms were made through social, religious and economic awareness. Some women led organisations, with the help of males, were established in Bengal. Though claiming equality in all aspects like men was indeed missing among groups of women.

Keywords: Female, education, nineteenth century, Bengal

Introduction

The expansion of female education in the nineteenth century Bengal brought significant changes in women's life but the roles and responsibilities of men and women were important factors to decide their educational access, category of employment, their peers etc. ^[1] In earlier era, received knowledge were used by both boys and girls to help in the production together but later labour division started increasing due to the bifurcation of work as per the private and home spaces. Such social norms were challenged by liberal minds, educated in new educational system in nineteenth century, apart from that different groups started their activities in the society for the welfare of women. As a result, gradual changes in the life of women, started with the social reforms which expended its periphery to the change in female attitude towards education. ^[2]

Advancing Female Education

The hardships in formal female education were due to the prejudices spread in the society. The fear of bringing misfortune or increasing female intrigue, from the education of women, was all over Bengal. ^[3] In the transition era of Bengal, there was a clash of old and new ideas of training suitable for women in a new environment and acceptance of women in public places or as government servants. In early nineteenth century, education was felt to be provided to female but in 'non- productive activities rather than helpful life skills'. ^[4] The subjects included in girls' education were meant to make them suitable wives or mothers. ^[5] Voices for equal curricular choices for boys and girls were low. ^[6] It was due to their upbringing which were gradually marking the girls position inferior to boys and a sense of 'pride in his manhood' was unconsciously feeding in the young male minds. ^[7] Moreover, these social practices differentiated work based on sex (boys/girls) different roles and uneven opportunities as well. As a result, women were intended to be educated by being prepared to accompany their men in systematic way nor the rivalry or competitor but as a subordinate.

Each group had a particular agenda to support female education. Indians wanted social, religious reform and financial mobility. Increasing demand of educated wives as their companions

by awakened men ^[8] or nurturing mothers for former glory restoration ^[9] increased the need of women to get educated. Missionaries were trying to convert married Indian women into Christianity for which unmarried female missionaries came to India in the 1840s. They started providing home tuitions to girls/ women of wealthy families where they read books, teach needlework, and brought those teaching charges to the Christ. Due to the unsuccessful rate of conversion from the 'Zanana project' (education via visiting homes), the mission finally tried to open schools for girls. ^[10] Through their reformatory policies for women against evil customs

i.e., child marriage, sati etc, colonial intervention got entry into the women's world and legitimized the rule of British administrators. Female education was rapidly increasing after getting financial assistance of government and local elite's support. ^[11] Other groups i.e., social reformers were concerned with women as scientific natures or members of civil society rather than upliftment of women as an individual being. ^[12]

Individual interests of women towards education and the socio-economic-religious reforms brought awareness among women. Schools and colleges were opened for girls/Women in which they got educated and encouraged to inspire other girls/women by standing against social evils or by educating them or by any other possible effort as much as they could do. Raising their voice through organisations was one of those efforts.

Initiatives Taken By Women

Women were not only getting education but capable ones tried to multiply the reach of education to more and more women in the latter half of the nineteenth century. By doing so, they were directly and indirectly challenging their status quo. Whether they were first female teacher Savitribai Phule from Maharashtra, first two lady graduates from the Calcutta university; Kadambini Ganguly and Chandramukhi Basu, Dr. Muthulakshmi Reddy, social reformer and educator; Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay and sister Subbulakshmi, and social workers and educators; Latika Roy, Fatima Sheikh (Co-founded indigenous Ladies' School) and Ramabai Sarasvati from Mumbai etc. They became pioneer and guided other women in this field. They

set up organisations, led schools and institutions for the well-fare of widows, orphans and other helpless women. The courage shown by many of the females for their education at the time when most of them were not even dared to step out without the consent of the family (which they rarely get) was considerable. Initially, it was started with individual courage of remarkable women i.e., Rassundari and Haimabati Sen etc. ^[13] in the direction to alter their life towards the better version of theirs’.

But the task was neither instant nor solely taken care by women. For many of the female pioneers, there were some of the crucial male supporters who played important role in their early lives. e.g. Pandita Ramabai(1860) had her priest father who taught her since childhood, Savitri bai phule (1831) had her husband, Rukaiya shekhaw(1932) had her brother and husband who helped her to achieve literacy against the prevailing social practices in society. Most of the voluntary associations, like Brahmika Samaj (1865), Bambodhini Sabha (1863), Bamhitaishini Sabha (1871), Arya Nari Samaj or Banga Mahila Samaj etc in nineteenth century, were running with the direct or indirect help of lenient male members of the society as they wanted women to stand for themselves against domestic violence and social evils. ^[14] All these associations were generally for spiritual and religious progress of women through debates/discussions and publishing articles or monthly/yearly magazines. Most of the ‘Bradralok mahila’ (educated middle/upper class Bengali women) worked as social reformers but their roles and responsibilities towards their houses, limited access and lack of social institutional support restricted their activeness as reformist and bounded their participation in large male-run organizations.. A few radical organisations like Brahmoo Samaj demanded equal treatment of men and women and this demand was taken up by Hindu women later. ^[15]

Towards Social, Economic & Educational Initiatives

Rising awareness among women, against the atrocities what they were facing on the pretext of faith, drove their attention regarding their extreme dependence on male members of their houses.. But this condition was not same for every woman as restrictions varies upon caste and class. Upper caste women, due to patriarchal dominance, faced restrictions on dress and mobility but lower caste women were not (due to the unworthiness considered to be safeguarded). The social, economic and political status of men and women varied with different classes. In Bourgeoisie or propertied classes, women were treated as property with major responsibility of producing heirs; treated as providers only whereas working class women were getting some economic independence. ^[16]

Available Job opportunities for women in nineteenth century were ‘wood engraving, embroidering insignia on soldiers’ uniform, operating a printing press, booking, painting, gardening, lace-making, making fans, making dolls for sale at fairs, dressmaking, midwifery and medicine’ ^[17] Despite of the concerned efforts, a few women could get over from ‘traditional prejudices’ and broke boundaries of inner world to step towards the outer world; a place of limitless opportunities. ^[18] Traditionally, women were getting lesser opportunities to read up to certain level so was the chances of employment for them. It was also due to the prevalent norms of society where “women who remain within the

household, being dependent or in seclusion were considered a symbol of social status in many patriarchal societies.” ^[19] Also, entering in the public space was a risky task for women because of the patriarchal and completely unknown field to practice their work. Apart from the above mentioned jobs for women, most of them mainly indulged in teaching and nursing while the number of women in professions like medicine and law was quite low. ^[20] “Jobs which entailed authority, power and control were considered men’s jobs and jobs involving caring, nurturing, servicing were seen as women’s job.” ^[21]

However, the change in the female attitude towards education started

increasing with the spreading awareness of their existence and choices. Meredith Borthwick pointed out the signs of consciousness in the writing of an English women quoted with a message to Ladies of Leiseure in Brahmoo Public Opinion, suggesting educated women to hold classes at home for at least two hours each week, to women about the rules of health, infant management, geography and sewing.

^[22] Radharani Lahiri, who once addressed the fifth anniversary of the Banga Mahila Samaj, urged for mixing of the spirit of Sita and Savitri with the western women’s interests in charitable activities and helping others. ^[23] It was more or less the balance between the courage of stepping forward and practicing their skills for social welfare along with giving their time and care to their private/home space but it became one of the reasons too which made women think of their choices to work outside as many of them had to work twice because working outside didn’t relieved them from their household work. ^[24]

Many unfolded aspects illustrated the reasons behind the lower social,

economic and educational status of women in the society. Gradually, the number of women in social field started increasing by breaking superstitious misconceptions, so that elder women become inspiration for younger ones and the journey towards the progress was started. ^[25] On top of their traditional roles, modern roles showed the revised version of the existing social values among Indian women where motherhood and wifehood were not the only goals of female body but thinking and acting beyond these aspects were well considered by these educated women.

Conclusion

The journey of silent to radically active women, started with social reforms before their education. The British government, nationalists and missionaries had their own agendas behind it but the common part was ‘change in the life of women’ which all groups wanted. Some women also showed their courage, required in the fulfilment of their deep seated desire to learn, despite the hardships they had to face in their life because of getting educated. Confident and educated upper and middle class women led organisations in Bengal for the welfare of other women which increased a sense of group identity within them as well as fostered their leading capability. Some liberal men supported them financially and helped in making public connections. Though the percentage of literate women was minimal but the bigger change was their ‘voices’ started raising for themselves against social evils, for justice and their personal rights in the latter half of the nineteenth century. ‘Education’ indeed gave them courage to accept their present situation and enough courage to shape it to become the better version of themselves.

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