

## **A Move towards Emancipation: Women's Education in Colonial India, with a special focus on the Northeast**

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It has been advocated by a large numbers of scholars and historians that the lives of Indian women began to change significantly for the first time in the nineteenth century when the colonial government, appalled by many repressive patriarchal practices and socio-cultural norms of the Brahmanical and Islamic societies, raised the voice for native women's education and reformation. The training of the Indian woman, especially in Western values and dictates, is considered to have been the first step in their path towards modernization and emancipation. Education ushered in considerable awareness among the then Indian women, imbibing in them many positive values of life, and inciting them to stand up against many societal evils and malpractices which plagued them and hindered them from leading a decent life. Women like Sarojini Naidu, Pandita Ramabai, Rokeya Shekhawat Hussain, who emerged as guiding lights for the common Indian women, inspiring them to awake to a new life and understanding, were but the products of this new wave of education which had started dawning upon the Indian society in the colonial era. All the same, women's education was never something which was accomplished in a very smooth or easy manner. Gender discrimination persisted not only in the Indian society but also within the interstices of the colonial power-matrices. For quite a long time, women's education as an agenda did not gain much ground either with the colonists or the nationalists, and women continued to be burdened under the weight of irrational beliefs and superstitions even when their male counterparts started embracing the new trend of Westernization and cultural renaissance brought in by the white masters.

The delay in introduction of Western education for women is believed to have been caused due to multiple factors. Firstly, the motive of the Company behind the scheme of introducing English education for Indians was to produce a class of educated natives who could fill in the jobs of clerks in the administration, as this would be more economical for the British. The British wanted to create a group of people who would think along the same lines as them and would maintain loyalty towards them. Since most of the workers were men, women's education was not given much thought or consideration. Secondly, the rise of Evangelism in Europe and the mission of disseminating the gospel also incited the British to train the natives in Western culture and Biblical dictates. Indian women were found to be mainly confined within the *zenanas* or female quarters – an exclusively female space to which the males had little access. Hence, the goal of advancing education towards them was found to be quite tedious. Thirdly, native women were found to be more reluctant than men with regard to the admittance of new alterations or changes in their culture or way of life, a fact which was observed by quite a number of white women who visited India around that time, Katherine Mayo being one such prominent woman among them. In her narrative *Mother India*, Mayo expressed astonishment at her discovery that Indian women, despite being burdened under 'irrational' customs such as the 'sati' and the 'purdah', preferred to carry on with the old order of life rather than accept new changes which could usher in freedom and liberty from 'repression'.<sup>1</sup> Fourthly, the emphasis of the British was never on mass education. The British only concentrated on educating a handful of natives for accomplishing their ulterior purposes. The goal of educating native women at large for the sake of improving or reforming their lives was never a matter of much concern. Lastly, the British felt that educating the women could hurt the religious sentiments of the conservative nationalists and incite them against the Government. Such observations were also made by Katherine Mayo who wrote in her book of how conservative Indians, time and again, raised stringent protests in the legislative assemblies against the schemes of educating their women:

It is strictly enjoined in the religious books of the Hindus that females should not be allowed to come under any influence outside that of the family. For this reason, no system of school and college education

can be made to suit their requirements . . . <sup>2</sup>

Indian women's education was therefore, actually a legacy of the white women missionaries who came to India with the purpose of advancing the Empire's goal of evangelization. These women missionaries, for the first time, seriously discovered and highlighted the potentialities of educating native women, and ardently toiled towards the fulfillment of their mission with exemplary tenacity, determination and fortitude. These women were actually the products of the class of the 'New Woman' who was emerging in England and other Western nations. Spurred on by the dictates of feminism, they were asserting themselves on all fronts and proclaiming the 'Rights of Women' at an equal footage as the 'Rights of Men'.<sup>3</sup> Rise of women's education in the West had impelled these women to campaign for women's legal and political rights and even for sexual freedom and birth control. In the colonies, they found a fertile ground to expand their feminist agendas. Freeing their 'Eastern sisters' from 'oppressive societal structures' and traditional religious practices was a primary motive of these women. Education was thought to be the most viable medium for awakening the native women to an awareness of their rights as women. Education was also thought to be a great corollary to evangelism, which could help in the mission of spreading Christianity. With sustained efforts, women missionaries carried out their goal of disseminating knowledge among the native women, in the field of academics as well as vocational fields such as tailoring, needlework, etc. In addition, women missionaries endeavoured for an overall 'refinement' of the native women with regard to dressing, food habits, behaviour, and any such sphere of life which would bring about 'culture' and 'decency' in them, and inculcate in them the ideas of 'morality' and 'propriety' as acceptable to the Victorian mindset. It was believed by them that this would help in the propagation of the ideals of Victorianism which were then believed by the British to be the most advanced and modernized of all philosophies of life. However, the indigenous women always harboured an ambiguous and complicated attitude with regard to the white women. Most often, they could not associate themselves with the white women who tried to hammer upon the concept of 'global sisterhood' in their campaign for women's rights. The concept of 'global sisterhood' remained problematic as ethnicity, class, cultural differences also had their part in shaping the varied perceptions of women under varied contexts. It was assumed that the white missionaries, while trying to propagate a new culture, were ignoring "minority cultures".<sup>4</sup> Also, the apprehension that western education would instill such values which would contaminate the hitherto revered traditional values of the society made indigenous women reluctant to accept new ideas and changes. Lastly, given the context of the then Indian nationalistic scenario, people were more involved in the fight for freedom from imperial rule, and this made the agenda of women's liberation and reformation go to the backyard.<sup>5</sup> Thus, the mission of educating the native woman always remained riddled with difficulties. Nonetheless, undeterred by such hurdles and obstacles, women missionaries carried out their mission of disseminating education, and it was under their initiatives that English education actually dawned upon the native women in its true light.

White women missionaries contributed vigorously to the cause of native women's education. Kumari Jayawardena, in her book, *The White Women's Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Colonial rule*, made a detailed analysis of the humanitarian activities carried out by many of the white women in India. In it, she mentioned the case of Louisa Bullock, who played an instrumental role in forming the Ladies Association for the Promotion of Female Education among the Heathen in 1866. Then, she mentioned about Mrs. F.A. Butler and others who toiled for collecting funds for setting up societies for the betterment of women. Then there were the Baptist missionaries made pioneering efforts to abolish many 'dreadful practices' in India which crippled women. In this context, a prominent woman was Miss Chaffin, a nurse, who came to Bengal in 1813. At that time, a widespread belief among the Bengalis was that literary girls would become widows. Missionaries strove ardently to cure the people of such mindsets, and finally, by 1822, they managed to form six schools for girls with 160 pupils.<sup>6</sup>

From the 1820s onward, missionary girls' schools and convents got organized in almost every major town in India. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, these schools were geared to foreign examinations, and they trained girls for graduate studies, both locally and abroad. *Zenana* education also succeeded to a great extent, although missionaries found it easier to 'civilize' Indian girls in school, since

education in the *zenana* could not wholly do away the old habits. In the process, white women missionaries had to constantly combat the authoritarian attitudes and male chauvinism of the patriarchal society, yet their missions to bring about changes in the lives of Indian girls continued unabated.<sup>7</sup>

Education of the native women in and around the Northeast frontiers of the country was a still more arduous goal. For a long time, British colonialism did not make headway into these regions inhabited by 'hostile' tribes like the Abors, the Nagas, the Daflas, the Manipuris, the Chins, and others. Even when colonialism did extend to the frontiers, the women missionaries were denied entry for long, especially for fear of the 'formidable' hill men. The initial decades of the nineteenth century saw the entry of very few European women as missionaries. These women were drawn from the Women's Missionary Society in Boston, and initially headed towards Burma.<sup>8</sup> Women like Ann Hasseltine Judson, wife of Adoniram Judson, Mrs. Samuel Newell, Mrs. Sarah Broadman, Mrs. Francis Mason, Mrs. Justus Vinton, Maria B. Ingalls and others extended the evangelist work in Burma. Under their labour and initiatives, Burma received a number of schools and colleges, prominent among them being the Kamendine and Morton Lane, the Mandalay High school, the Ko Tha Byu High school, the Rangoon Baptist college, the Christian college.<sup>9</sup> In the Northeast provinces of India, missionary activities owed their beginnings primarily to the initiatives of David Scott, who worked enthusiastically towards the establishment of schools in the Garo Hills for educating the Garos. In 1829, the Baptist Missionary Society opened a branch of the Serampore Mission in Gauhati. James Roe and his wife, arrived in Gauhati in July, 1829, followed by Reverend Robinson. They managed to get three Khasis and nine Garos enrolled in the Mission.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, missionaries started sojourning more frequently to the Northeast. Two American Missionaries, Nathan Brown and Oliver Cutter, along with their wives, landed in Sadiya, and Mrs. Cutter established a school in June, 1836.<sup>11</sup> They were followed by C.A. Bruce, the then Superintendent of the Tea plantations in Upper Assam, and his wife, who opened schools for the children of the Khamtis and Singphows. By 1838, the number of schools was 50. Three more schools were set up at Sadiya. One school was set up at Jaypur and placed under the charge of Miles and Mrs. Bronson, who enrolled at least 40 more boys.<sup>12</sup> By 1890, a dozen of village schools were formed and supervised in Nowgong by Miss Pursel. In the Dibrugarh-Sadiya fields, Miss Langhlin and Miss bonney supervised the assamese Girls' Primary School.<sup>13</sup> Laura Amy Carvell, Orrell Keller, Anna E. Long, Sarah Christopher, Daisy Andrew, Marie Bronson, Isabella Wilson Jessie Trevor Moore, Miriam Russel (later Mrs. Burdette), Miss Stella Mason, Miss Ella C. Bond, Miss Alice Rood, Dr. Alice Mark, Miss Mille Marvin, Dr. Dorothy Kinney, and many others visited the frontiers from time to time, advancing the cause of women's education. In this way, education slowly started dawning among the natives. All the same, the task of achieving such goals was always excruciatingly difficult. In a land where language, culture, society, everything seemed incomprehensible, the missionaries carried out their work with unending resoluteness, only for the sake of bettering the lives of those native women whom they believed to be 'ruined' under the weight of centuries-old superstitions and obsolete rituals. Mary Mead Clark, wife of Rev. R.W. Clark, who furthered 'civilizing' missions with vigour in the Naga Hills since 1885, wrote in her accounts about the many hurdles and hindrances faced by these women.<sup>14</sup> The greatest difficulty was dealing with the tribal women like the Nagas and the Garos. Convincing the tribal women to enter the folds of education and modernization was never so easy. Living for ages within the sequestered folds of the hilly regions and isolated from the gradually modernizing Indian society, tribal women considered themselves almost the de facto guardians of their indigenous heritage and culture, and obstinately tried to evade any influences of a foreign culture which threatened to erode their native customs and ways of life. Mary Mead Clark reflected with regret how the native women posed the greatest reluctance even when their men were willing to open themselves to the light of Western civilization and evangelization:

There was difficulty in early persuading the women . . . It was with great difficulty that a Christian man with an unconverted wife could prevent sacrifices and offerings for the restoration of the sick. There would come the taunt, "Oh, you don't care if we die . . . You have taken the Sahib's religion, and do not care longer for your family".<sup>15</sup>

With regard to education, native women posed the same reluctance. As Laura Hardin Carson, a white woman missionary to Burma observed:

The daughter of the chief, a twelve-year-old girl, listened with eager shining eyes . . . “I am going to that school,” she said. “You are not going,” her mother replied . . . some people passing through her village told her parents that Ma Wine had become a Christian . . . They were very angry and sent her word that if it were true she need never return home for they would not receive her.<sup>16</sup>

Owing to such obstinacies of the tribal women, the ratio of male-female education in the frontiers remained variable for a long time. The brave women missionaries had to tread through “steaming valleys and dense jungles filled with wild beasts”, move from door to door, talking with the tribal women and advocating their unselfish cause.<sup>17</sup> Their efforts, however, did bear fruit in the long run. Mary Mead Clark recorded the immense satisfaction experienced by the white women on witnessing their ‘heathen’ sisters finally getting educated and awakening to a new way of life:

. . . one of the schoolgirls arose and said, “I believe on this Jesus, accept him as my only savior, and I wish to be numbered among his followers”. Her’s was the first Naga woman’s voice ever heard making the great confession. How bright and beautiful, how hallowed seemed the dark and dingy room thus lightened by the presence of the life-giving spirit.<sup>132</sup>

As the tribal women of the frontiers started availing themselves of the opportunities of education, they also started emancipating themselves from the burden of many societal and religious cults and beliefs which plagued their lives. Practices such as child marriages had slowly started showing signs of decline among the tribal communities of the Northeast. Western education brought about rationality and understanding among the tribal women, and helped them raise their standard and means of living. Most of the educated tribal girls themselves took up the burden of relieving others like them from the morass of ignorance and ‘moral filth’:

Two of this man’s sons became preachers . . . His only daughter went to . . . the Lady Dufferin Hospital and trained as a nurse and returned to minister to the suffering sisters of her race women who because of their ignorance of hygiene and medicine, believing all pain and suffering to be caused by angry spirits, go through absolutely unnecessary suffering beyond the power of my pen to portray.<sup>18</sup>

An analysis of such facts greatly serves to evince the contribution of the white women missionaries towards the education of the native women of the Northeast. The imposition of Western education and culture went a long way towards extricating native women from many ‘illogical’ practices and systems. Western education ushered in rationality and propriety amongst the ‘uncivilized’ tribes, emancipating them from their ‘cultural and moral degradation’, simultaneously serving the imperial purpose of moulding natives who ‘could be controlled’. Under the initiatives of the white women, much humanitarian activities saw fulfillment in the frontiers and wild tracts where many people feared to tread. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to say that today, if one attempts to trace the journey of modernization and civilization among the tribal people of the Northeast, one has to but go back inevitably to those ‘Ladies of the Raj’ who had, for the first time, unselfishly toiled and struggled for bringing about education among the ‘unawakened’ tribes.

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