CHAPTER FOUR

The Educated Bengali Protestant Christian Women

This chapter examines the significance and role of the educated Christian women in their community. By the close of the nineteenth century women constituted one half of this new religious group, and their contribution towards the making of this community was as important as that of the men. In the absence of any other source or reliable basis for estimated information about the gender composition of this newly formed community the statistical assessment is based on the decennial Census reports. The early Indian Census reports present not merely statistical accounts of early modern India, but also a documentation of the British encounter with its colonised other; they are a documentation of the coloniser's attempts to come to an understanding of its colonial subjects and integrate Indian – at least from an administrative perspective – within the British Empire. According to the census of 1901 there were 6,614 native Protestant Christians in the town of Calcutta of which 3,470 were female whereas of the 4,246 native Roman Catholics only 1,560 were females.\(^1\) The term ‘native’ would imply all Indian Protestant or Catholic Christians who lived in Calcutta, but one may assume that of these a majority would be Bengali Christians.

As in the case of any other community every aspect of life of the Christian community was inscribed as much by men as by women. Hence the agency of the Christian women in the formulation of the urban Bengali Christian community life would be a striking phenomenon to examine. Also a study of the women’s world and its boundaries would help us to bring out the role of the community patriarchy in circumscribing this world. This chapter also focuses on the influence of the Protestant missionaries on the situation of the women of Bengal, resulting in their conversion to Christianity, their education and transformed outlook on life, their condition in the Bengali Christian

community, the ways in which the women within the community asserted a sexual difference within the patriarchal mores and the ways in which the icon of the Christian bhadramahila bore the distinctive stamp of the Christian community’s cultural difference with both the coloniser and the non-Christian Bengali.

Section I: A Brief Study of the Condition of Women before Western Influence on Bengali Society

In the nineteenth century Bengali patriarchal world, women were the subordinate gender and the ones who were publicly visible were from the lower classes of society. At the very outset it is necessary to bear in mind that the rural scenario was considerably different from the urban situation. Also, that the women of the lower orders of society in the urban areas were in much the same social position as those in the rural areas. In rural Bengal a certain category of men were allowed open access into the interiors of the Bengali household and the women of the house were able to freely socialize with them. In the course of describing the village school master in Recollections of my School-Days Lal Behari Day says,

He (Gopi) was naturally an amiable man, and a great favourite with the ladies of the village with many of whom he was on speaking terms. This may seem strange to our Anglo-Indian readers, who have a notion that Bengali women are kept shut up in their houses. However it may be in towns, there is no doubt that there is a great deal of liberty in the villages; and a spiritual director, or a family priest, or a Brahman pedagogue, is a sort of privileged person, who can find access to places from which other persons are carefully excluded.²

Sumanta Banerjee has very succinctly mentioned in his essay Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal, that ‘the poorer class of women used whatever time they had left after housework to assist the

men in the traditional occupations like cultivation, pottery, spinning, basket-making etc.’ They also participated in cultural activities meant exclusively for women and performed with a view to achieving their hopes like community singing and dancing during festivals, as well as in bratas i.e. rituals relating mainly to birth, marriage and death.³

These women who had to struggle along with their men to procure their basic survival requirements were free from social regimentation unlike their middle class counterparts who observed the social rituals far away from the public eye. Banerjee amplifies, that because of the nature of their work the women from the lower segments of society had to move in a world which according to their counterparts in the andarmahals would be considered ‘dangerous society’. It was these working women like the naptenis⁴, sweepers or singers who formed the link with the outside world for the members of the zenana. He continues that though Bamabodhini Patrika⁵ and other advocates of women's emancipation were warning against the appearance of bhadralok women in public, women from the lower classes not only gathered in public, but also sang and danced during popular festivals.⁶

In Calcutta there were two distinct types of women, the ‘unprotected’ women from the lower castes and lower classes of society and the sheltered bhadramahilas who resided in their andarmahals having very little contact with the world outside their homes. Under the impact of western influence in the early decades of the nineteenth century the Bengali bhadralok community had mixed ideas about the status of women and other social questions. But the attitude was changing and by the last decades of the nineteenth century a compromise had been worked out between the new ideas brought in by

---

⁴ Female barbers
⁵ Bamabodhini Patrika, (Journal for the Enlightenment of Women), a periodical for women published from Calcutta in Bengali uninterrupted between 1863 and 1922. A monthly publication, it was the brainchild of Umesh Chandra Datta a Young Turk of the Brahmo Samaj, and it was the mouthpiece of the Bamabodhini Sabha (Society for the Enlightenment of Women). It had a print run of a hundred copies a month priced at one anna each. Both men and women were contributors to the contents of this periodical.
⁶ Banerjee, op. cit., p. 129.
western education and missionary influence and the traditional social beliefs and practices. The Young Bengal group with its mentor Derozio and the various new educated converts to Christianity raised their voice against the prevailing repressive social norms for women—like sati, polygamy and the condition of widows and the general inhibited life of the middle and upper class women. The various changes and developments that took place in Bengali society like the protest movements, formation of societies and associations, religious reform movements, the birth of the educated Bengali middle class, the evolution of the Bengali bhadralok and the bhadramahila, also the new trends of thought and new styles of writing in Bengali literature, the spirit of nationalism, and other socio-political phenomena that developed were a result of the influence of western thought conveyed through education in English.

Although it immediately affected a small portion of the upper stratum of Bengali Hindu society only, it eventually spread to Muslims (though partially), and others, as well as to other parts of the subcontinent before the century closed. Ironically, the first educational institution founded by the British in India was the Calcutta Madrassa in response to a request made to Warren Hastings in 1780, for the promotion of Islamic learning. But the Muslims were not keen on learning English and despite an English class being established in the Madrassa in 1826, only two students passed the junior scholarship examination in the next twenty-five years. The Hindus had seen the signs of the time and moved on with the changes in the existing social systems.

With western enlightenment the Bengali intelligentsia began to think rationally and realised that the position of women in society was as important as that of men and hence women’s education should be a matter of equal concern. Raja Rammohun Roy propagated education for women as he recognized that this would give them the opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities. Vidyasagar looked back to the Vedic Age and emphasized to the people that the contemporary repressed condition of the Bengali women was only a much

---

later development. Gradually people became aware of, and tried to change women's subordination and disadvantages under patriarchy.

Women in early nineteenth century Bengal, were protected but not shown much deference. ‘Protecting women had become the major concern of the elite and this resulted in arranged marriages for girls, no remarriage for virgin widows, encouraging sati or immolation on the husband’s funeral pyre as an act of devotion, prohibitions on female education, and rigid enforcement of the rules of seclusion. Legally, women were denied the same rights as men in matters of inheritance, property ownership, and the guardianship of children.’

Female infanticide could also be added to this list of social evils that the British saw prevalent in Hindu society when they came to India. ‘The “women’s question” was a central issue in controversial debates over social reform in early and mid-nineteenth century Bengal – the period of its so-called renaissance.’ But as Partha Chatterjee goes on to point out ‘towards the close of the century...questions regarding the position of women in society do not arouse the same degree of public passion and acrimony as they did only a few decades before.’ He explains, ‘the reason lies in nationalism’s success in situating the “women’s question” in an inner domain of sovereignty, far removed from the arena of political contest with the colonial state. This inner domain of national culture was constituted in the light of the discovery of “tradition”.’ Partha Chatterjee’s observations are based on the situation of the Hindu women but this could also be said of the women in the Bengali Christian community. It all began with the British criticising Indian traditions with the aim of “civilizing” the Indian people. Well into the twentieth century Katherine Mayo in *Mother India* (1927), ‘arrived at the conclusion that far from being ready for political self-determination, India needed the continued civilizing influence of the British.’ But contrary to Mayo’s perception, after

---

10 Ibid., p.116.
11 Ibid., p. 117.
evangelization by Christian missionaries, the British government’s legal and administrative action and enlightenment through Western knowledge, the wheel had come full circle and the native was back to “tradition” in its reformed profile, and with a liberal mind, ‘the dominant tone changed from satire and self-irony to ponderous traditionalism.’

This chapter focuses on how the Protestant missionaries influenced the women of Bengal, resulting in their conversion to Christianity, their education and transformed outlook on life, their condition in the Bengali Christian community, the ways in which the women within the community asserted a sexual difference within the patriarchal mores and the ways in which the icon of the Christian bhadramahila bore the distinctive stamp of the Christian community’s cultural difference with both the coloniser and the non-Christian Bengali. However there are two aspects to this discussion, firstly, we are to analyse how the evolution of the Bengali Christian bhadramahila was informed by the Bengali Christian patriarchy and secondly, how these middle class women negotiated their dialectically constituted own agency in the changing environment in Bengal, dealing with patriarchy and at the same time imprinting their signature on the process of change. This leads us to the following questions, how much were the urban Bengali Christian women sheltered by their patriarchy? Were these educated women affected by the British ways of life? Did they abjure traditional ways and ideas completely? Did their ideas and aspirations undergo radical change? Were they trapped in a web of contradictory ideas?

Section II: Women’s Education as Propagated by the Missionaries

The burgeoning educated Bengali Protestant community was a consequence of missionary activity in the nineteenth century, and the new trends of thought that the missionaries brought with them affected the Bengali concept of patriarchy and the traditional Bengali notions of a woman and her social status and responsibilities, which changed considerably among the entire educated urban Bengalis. The education of women in the antapur began with Zenana

---

teaching by missionary women who had come out to India to become teachers. It aimed at imparting basic information on a range of subjects and also to help them to be better sisters, wives and mothers. The people of Bengal showed interest in western education and the missionaries imparted it through the native vernacular – Bengali. Schools had been opened for boys but soon girl students had their own institutions, though initially only girls from poorer economic conditions of society would flock to these and as girls would be married at a young age, attendance in girls’ schools dwindled as the girls grew older.

As early as 1812 the BMS had opened their doors for girl students in Calcutta. The LMS did the same in Chinsurah in 1815 and the Roman Catholics began admitting girl students in 1817 in Dacca. In 1819 the BMS introduced a systematic female education through a society – ‘Female Juvenile Society’ for the Establishment and Support of Bengalee Female Schools, the name was later changed to the ‘Female Department of the Bengal Christian School Society’ and finally to Calcutta Baptist Female Society’ for the Establishment and Support of Native Female Schools.\footnote{K.P. Sengupta, \textit{The Christian Missionaries in Bengal, 1793-1833} (Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1971), p.109.} Mrs. M.A. Cooke Wilson, a CMS missionary, established a number of girls’ schools in Calcutta. In 1824 she formed the ‘Ladies Society for Native Female Education in Calcutta and its Vicinity’ and a year later established the ‘Ladies Association for Native Female Education’ and her purpose was to establish girls’ schools in those areas of Calcutta which had not been covered by the earlier society. Like the male students, girls were examined regularly and prizes awarded in cash and kind for attendance and for performance in the examinations. For example, as early as in 1821 the Serampore Mission gave their girl students’ one new sari and four annas each,\footnote{Ibid., p. 112.} the CMS also distributed ‘prizes of cloth to the most deserving’ girls at the end of their examination held in Burdwan for the students of their female schools.\footnote{‘Schools &c. at Burdwan’, \textit{The Christian Intelligencer}, New Series, Vol. I, No: VIII (Calcutta, Church Mission Press, August 1831), p. 331.} The practice of giving incentives to attract girls from the lower classes of society to these schools for basic education, and
the teaching of Christian doctrines therein was no doubt a part of the tradition followed in such institutions set up by the missionary organizations. The following is an example of the kind of questions asked on Christianity at an examination for girls of the first class, eleven in number, under the instruction of the Church Missionary Society in Burdwan, on Thursday, February 10, 1831:

**Q** – Who commands us to honour our father and mother?
**A** – Jesus

**Q** – We are commanded by God to honour our father and mother: if any persons command differently, are we to obey them?
**A** – No, we must not obey them: we must obey God first...

**Q** – What does our Saviour call the Pharisees?
**A** – Blind leaders.

**Q** – If people follow blind leaders what do you think would become of them?
**A** – They would fall into the ditch.

**Q** – Are there any blind leaders in this country?
**A** – Yes, the Mussalmans.

**Q** – Are there any besides Mussalmans?
**A** – Yes, the learned Brahmins and Pundits. 

Influencing young, impressionable minds by directly condemning their native religion and religious leaders and introducing thoughts that would turn them away from their ancestral religion was a slow process which the Christian missionaries practiced with great zeal. From an early age they were encouraged to despise their Muslim and also Brahmin and other upper caste compatriots – this was the strategy practiced with students from the lower strata of society. The government supported women’s education as it was a part of the larger colonial design committed to the uplift of ‘an inferior culture.’ The Educational Despatch of 1854 noted that ‘the importance of female education in India cannot be over-estimated...a good education to their

daughters’ would improve ‘the educational and moral tone of the people much more than would the education of boys’. This suited the purpose of the missionaries as women and children were a special point of interest in the missionary project of conversion of the native Bengali for they had decided on education as the means of spreading Christianity and also social change. If the women could be influenced with Christian and western thoughts the male converts would not face problems within the family and the children would also be baptized for after all it is the woman who controls the home. Young minds could be easily moulded through the Zenana missions in the inner recesses of the upper class homes and also in the missionary educational institutions, and thus women’s education would initiate social change.

The first girl’s schools in India were opened by the Christian missionaries, and it is they who initiated the movement in every province of the country. It was Ward of the Serampore trio Carey, Marshman and Ward who in 1821 made an appeal to the ladies of Liverpool for the uplift of the Indian women and this resulted in the coming of Miss Cooke later Mrs. Wilson, the first lady teacher, and to the formation of the Society for Promoting Native Female Education in the East. By 1832 eight schools for girls were established in Calcutta, to be followed by several later, where religious and secular education was given by lady teachers.

In the early nineteenth century women were not sent to public schools by the upper classes of Calcutta but lady teachers were employed at home for their education. Jogesh Chandra Bagal says that it is there on record that the Debs of Shovabazar, the Tagores of Jorasanko and Pathuriaghata and the Roy family of Jorasanko resorted to this course in those days. But the education given at home was elementary in character hence other agencies stepped in to fill up the deficiency. The real credit for starting free public schools for the education

---

of women goes solely to the Ladies Societies formed in Calcutta by the European women in the early decades of the nineteenth century. They were helped materially and in various ways amongst others by Radhakanta Deb, Gourmohan Vidyalankar and Baidyanath Roy.\textsuperscript{22} The Female Juvenile Society was the first to appear in this field in 1819 formed with the help of the Baptist missionaries, with the purpose of setting up free schools in Calcutta and its suburbs for the education of girls. By 1823 this Society was incorporated with the Bengal Christian School Society and it became the latter’s female department.\textsuperscript{23} Besides other subjects, Christian doctrines were a part of the curriculum which was taught to Hindu and Muslim girls.

Bengali Christian women of the nineteenth century had evolved from a background of the Hindu brahmanical organisation, the Muslim patriarchy, sexism and male chauvinism – the existing Indian patriarchal norms. Going under the influence of the Protestant missionaries’ concepts of the woman’s position in society – which in turn was a reflection of the Victorian concept of the woman – she was expected to be pious, pure, and submissive and totally engrossed in domesticity. These were the four cardinal virtues. ‘Put them all together and they spelled mother, daughter, sister, wife – woman. Without them, no matter whether there was fame, achievement or wealth, all was ashes. With them she was promised happiness and power.’\textsuperscript{24} Virginia Woolf has written about the ‘killing’ of the phantom of the proper Victorian woman as the “Angel in the House,”\textsuperscript{25} silently working to maintain a stable and congenial atmosphere in the home, providing love and comfort to her husband and children, selfless and sacrificing whose sole purpose is to soothe, to flatter and to comfort the male half of the world. In the Victorian world a middle class or

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{22} Ibid., p. 2.
\item \textsuperscript{23} Ibid., p. 8.
\item \textsuperscript{25} Virginia Woolf, “Professions for Women”, reprinted in Sandra M. Gilbert and Susan Gubar (ed.), \textit{The Norton Anthology of Literature by Women: The Traditions in English} (New York, W.W. Norton & Company, 1985), pp. 138-88. Here Woolf writes about ‘killing’ the ‘Angel in the House’ as part of the occupation of a woman writer. The phrase "Angel in the House" comes from the title of an immensely popular poem by the English poet Coventry Patmore, in which he holds up his angel wife Emily as a model for all women as he considered her the perfect Victorian wife. "The Angel in the House" was originally published in 1854, revised through 1862.
\end{itemize}
upper middle class woman was expected to be a devoted wife and mother with no interest outside her home, keeping herself busy all day with housework, decorative sewing and embroidery and childcare and making the home a haven of peace for the husband when he returned after toiling in the world outside. The difficult and dirty housework would be left for the domestic help to handle. The outcome of the influence of these ideas on the young Bengali Christian women of the Victorian era that the missionaries imparted education to was an interesting mixture of Indian and European perceptions of a woman’s social significance. This implies that the Bengali Christian patriarchy in most part of the nineteenth century was both traditionally Indian and Victorian to a certain extent. Hence the various iniquities imposed upon women, such as child marriage and premature maternity, by patriarchal Hindu and Muslim cultures were not prevalent in both the rural and urban Bengali Christian communities. Besides, by the Age of Consent Act of 1891 marriage of girls below the age of twelve was declared illegal although this was not strictly enforced. But the Christians being under the jurisdiction of the church had to abide by this law as the church maintained a control over them. As the native concept of an ideal woman was not very different from the nineteenth century Victorian concept the missionaries did not have to toil much to teach their Bengali female students to love and respect their husband and be submissive to him. Even motherhood that was given prime importance in the Victorian period had been of equal importance in traditional Indian culture.

The urban Christian women generally attended missionary institutions, both vernacular and English medium. They retained their deep faith in religion just like their Hindu and Muslim counterparts and they were formally groomed to be good mothers and housewives and some of them were also highly educated teachers and doctors. The educated, colonised Bengali Christian women or bhadramahilas had come out from behind the purdah and some of them were professionally on a par with their male contemporaries but they did not belong to a homogenous social set up. Some of them were extremely westernised whereas the others remained rooted in their native culture despite western influence through education and social interaction.
The affluent, educated, Calcutta bhadralok Bengali Christian family, firmly established in Bengali culture was similar in many ways (in their lifestyle) to a Brahmo Bengali family of similar social standing. Though there were a few Bengali Christian families which were considerably westernised in their lifestyle, however, they were a minority. In both these newborn Bengali communities’ women gradually had the freedom to move about in society or practice their own profession but within the home or in the familial hierarchy the father or the husband was the central figure and the women were subordinates. Patriarchy is a multidimensional condition of power and status and male activities in all societies represent power, prestige and spatial segregation whereas females are associated with subordination, domesticity, the burden of childcare and the use of tools that are technologically or aesthetically inferior. The women belonged to the private space – the ‘home’, whereas the men to the public – the ‘world’.

By the end of the nineteenth century women's lives were changing dramatically on various fronts in Europe and in America, most visibly so for daughters of the middle and upper classes. This was a period which witnessed the beginning of a shift in social attitudes regarding gender relations – a moving away from the traditional patriarchal male supremacy and female dependence, towards a pattern of gender equality. In the post World War I era women were comparatively liberated and doing white collar jobs as they had filled in those vacancies created by the men who had left for the war front. Now the women were reluctant to relinquish their jobs and their financial independence and the self confidence that came with it.

In India too, the situation of the upper class women had changed considerably and they had come out of the seclusion of their homes to join a world which had hitherto been considered an exclusively male domain. A pan-Indian view of this period brings to mind the five distinguished Indian women E. F. Chapman has extolled in her book Notable Indian Women of the 19th Century. They are Pandita Ramabai Saraswati, Dr. Anandibai Joshee, Suniti Devi the Maharani of Cooch Behar (daughter of Keshub Chandra Sen), Toru

---

26 Chapman., op. cit.
Dutt and Cornelia Sorabji. Three of these women were Christians and one was Brahmo and Anandibai Joshee was born into a liberal Brahmin household. Pandita Ramabai and Anandibai were cousins but they were not too familiar with each other. Pandita Ramabai had embraced Christianity after she became a widow but Anandibai Joshee was a liberal Hindu. As these distinguished women were not from traditional and conservative Hindu backgrounds they did not find it difficult to step out of the conventional conservative world of the upper class women in India. As Chapman has said, ‘all these remarkable women have owed very much to their parents...the work of education or enlightenment has begun in the previous generation, and Ramabai, Toru Dutt, and Cornelia Sorabji have all borne witness to the debt they owe to their mothers.’

By the second decade of the twentieth century the educated Bengali Christian converts’ struggle for adjustment in the social set up of his new community was almost over, the new Bengali Christian society now had its definite form of outlook and the next generation was now in the forefront with a number of highly educated and independent minded women who could step into the ‘man’s world’ on an equal footing much like their counterparts in Europe and America. These Bengali Christian women broke the old defining patriarchal lines and stepped into the male domain paying no heed to scathing criticism from the rest of society egged on by their new found identity outside the world of traditional Hindu patriarchy.

The introduction of western thought into education contributed to a large extent to this transformation and print culture played an important role in moulding the natives according to western ideas. By the first decade of the 20th century a substantial number of Bengali women were educated/literate and so there would be a large number of readers among the middle class Bengali women in the second decade of the 20th century for the missionary publication *Mahila Bandhab*, a magazine for women. It gave its readers an all round grooming in social behaviour, value education, political information, general knowledge, religious education, motherhood etc. The title of the articles being

27 Ibid., p. 13.
printed both in English and in Bengali, while the articles were written in Bengali – for example, *Further Afield* – a missionary lady’s report on her activities in Karachi where she had gone to mobilise a movement among women against alcoholism. Not only does she talk about the various meetings that she held out there but she also gives a geographical description of Karachi. She makes it a point to quote a portion of a speech delivered by a Hindu youth at one such meeting which in turn serves as a self promotion. The youth had said, ‘Our individual opinions about religion may differ that does not really matter. We have to accept that the missionaries have come to educate us and have developed Bharatbarsha. They are responsible for whatever progress has happened in the field of women’s education. It is our duty to respect them.’

In the same issue of the Magazine another article which is said to be a true story entitled *Jacob Riis or Rees* teaches humility through the example of the character of the Danish king in the story. The article entitled *The Son of Man* is about Christ and His miracle of healing the paralysed man, the whole article has the character of a sermon.

The tradition of publishing periodicals for the Bengali Christians and others interested in the Christian way of life had begun with the European Christian missionaries who carried out their Christian teaching through these periodicals. *Satyapradip* (1860) edited by a Christian missionary Rev. Stabo was the first children’s magazine published by the Christian missionaries, in fact, it was the first children’s magazine in Bengali. After 1823 publishing of Christian literature was given special importance as the Calcutta Christian Trust and Book Society was established for this purpose. Every issue of *Satyapradip* contained eight to ten articles on various themes like, good values, the animal world, some facts from geography, some basic concepts of good health and hygiene, stories of some exemplary lives of people from the western world, social evils like slavery, and also about some social evils prevalent in nineteenth century Bengal like consumption of alcohol by the youth etc. The whole intention of the missionaries was to influence the

---

28 Bharatbarsha: ‘India’ in Bengali.
children in the Christian way of life. Besides, by citing examples of exemplary people from the west the children would slowly be taught to idealise the ‘whites.’ Some of the brief and pithy articles in the magazine were on themes as varied as ‘Words of Wisdom’, ‘The Ostrich’, ‘Lord Bacon’, ‘Happiness’ etc.\textsuperscript{31}

\textit{Jyotiringan}\textsuperscript{32}, a monthly periodical edited by S.C. Ghosh\textsuperscript{33} was first published in July 1869 and its title page declares that it is a magazine for women and children. The editorial of the first issue explains that its purpose is to provide moral teaching and value education and also to provide some reading for pleasure and relaxation through its articles. It declares that information on battles and political developments will never find a place in this periodical. Articles in this first issue cover topics like, ‘The Eagle’, ‘The Lion’, ‘A True Brave Heart’ etc. Value education has been combined very skilfully with general knowledge in ‘The Eagle’ which begins with a physical description of the bird, its natural habitat (in England and Scotland) and then goes on to narrate how the mother eagle cares for the its young ones; not only does it feed them and teach them to fly but it also protects them from danger. Similarly God takes care of us and as parents we should love and care for our children like the eagle does in the story. Therefore the second half of the nineteenth century saw the missionaries aiming at education in the homes through their periodicals as by now there were a considerable number of women and children educated in the vernacular who would find interest in and be able to read the missionary publications. The illustrations and the examples in the stories in these periodicals betray that they had been directly imported and reprinted in the Bengali magazine without adapting them to the local setting. This in a way familiarised the native with the European setting and generated a healthy interest in western culture perhaps?

\textit{Krishtiyo Bandhab} was another Christian periodical published from Calcutta in the latter part of the nineteenth century and it had a wide circulation even

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., Translation mine.
\textsuperscript{32} Jyotiringan, July 1869, pp.1-2. Translation mine.
\textsuperscript{33} The name of the editor of this magazine has been mentioned by Swapan Basu in the ‘Foreword’ to Satyapradip, op. cit., p. 1.
into the first quarter of the twentieth century. This was a monthly magazine which carried information on subjects as varied as Christ, conversion of a woman back to Hinduism, Christmas, trade and commerce, growing papaya trees, health etc. This was published by Protestant Bengali Christians for Bengali readers.

Rev. Lal Behari Day edited Arunodaya a fortnightly periodical in Bengali meant to propagate Christianity and the Christian system of education among those who did not know English. Keeping in mind the readership he aimed at, his articles were about simple day to day matters that the ordinary Bengali would find interest in. He has also dealt with social concerns like widow remarriage and female education etc. The title page of all issues of the newsletter carried a verse from the Bible. Another interesting aspect of this periodical is its stand on the rebellion of 1857 which it considered as a threat against Christianity as well as against ‘peace’ and ‘justice’.

In Chandramukhir Upakhyan (1858), Day had translated the title of this work as ‘Chandramukhee, a Tale of Bengali Life’ was first published serially in Arunodu and it is a long social story in support of widow remarriage, it describes several superstitions and it is also about conversion to Christianity.

Hannah Catherine Mullens (1826-1861) daughter of an LMS missionary and married to an LMS missionary carried on her work of Christian teaching within the household from a very young age and being born and brought up in Calcutta she could read and write in Bengali which was almost like her mother tongue. She wrote the first novel in Bengali Phulmoni o Karunar Bibaran

34 Dr. Surendranath Sen (ed.), Krishtiyo Bandhab, 46th year, New Series, November-December, 1927.
35 Arunodaya was edited and published by Lal Behari Day. Several educative articles were published in the magazine and Lal Behari’s love of Bengal and Bengali literature is reflected here. This periodical began in August 1856 and continued for six years.
36 ‘We have also a more sure word of prophecy; whereunto ye do well that ye take heed, as unto a light that shineth in a dark place, until the day dawn, and the day star arise in your hearts.’, II Peter, 1: 19.
37 As printed on the cover of the book which also mentions ‘reprinted from the Arunodaya with much improvement and addition. This book is meant for the Instruction and Entertainment of Young Persons.’ The book was published from Serampore in 1859. 164
(1852) 38 where she has written about two women Phulmoni and Karuna who are examples of the evil and the good woman and through their conversations and incidents in their lives Hannah Mullens has taught her readers what an ideal woman should be, how she should run her house, the right attitude to adopt towards her husband and children and towards her neighbours, what an ideal Christian family should be like etc.

Section III: Some Outstanding Bengali Christian Women

Some of them were outstanding in their achievements. Several names come to mind in this context, the first one being that of the nineteenth century Bengali Christian woman poet in English Toru Dutt of the famous Dutt family of Rambagan in Calcutta, who was brought up in India and in Europe and could express her thoughts equally brilliantly both in English and in French – poetry and prose. However, she died very young and had always been under the protective care of her parents, and had resented the life of confinement that she had during their stay in Calcutta, all the more because she had tasted freedom during her four year stay in Europe.

We are also reminded of Virginia Mary Mitter (Nandi) (1865 – 1945), a qualified doctor from Calcutta Medical College, who assisted her husband Dr. P.C. Nandi in treating his female patients, but she never practiced independently. Unfortunately not much is known about her childhood except that she was the daughter of a Bengali Christian gentleman Motilal Mitter who was posted in Uttar Pradesh. Young Virginia Mitter attended school in Kanpur and passed her F.A. Examination from Lucknow following which she joined the Calcutta Medical College, from where she passed her first M.B. Examination in 1889 in which she was placed first in the first class. In 1893 she cleared her second M.B. along with Bidhumukhi Bose, sister of

---

38 Hannah Catherine Mullens, *Phulmoni o Karunar Bibaran* (Calcutta, Calcutta Christian Tract and Book Society, 1852). Here, in plain and easy Bengali Hannah Catherine Mullens has portrayed the Christian way of life. However this work did not have widespread appeal as the protagonists of the narrative belong to an uneducated class in the Bengali Christian community, particularly those who were employed in European households, and the lessons taught are suitable to such women. Hence it did not have much relevance for the rest of the Bengali speaking people. A unique feature of the book is a list of suitable Bengali names for boys and girls at the end. This was possibly included to reiterate that conversion to Christianity does not change ones nationality or culture.
Chandramukhi Bose. She was married to Dr. Purna Chandra Nandi in 1894.\textsuperscript{39} She gave up an independent medical career after marriage ‘because her husband opposed her employment.’\textsuperscript{40} This is a glaring example of a Bengali Christian upper class lady who had to submit to a dominant patriarchy and decline an independent professional life.

The sisters Chandramukhi and Bidhumukhi Bose – Chandramukhi (1860 – 1944) was a Bengali speaking Christian from Dehradun, she passed the First Arts examination from Dehradun Native Christian School in 1880. Till then Bethune School did not admit non-Hindu girls. The rule was relaxed and she was admitted for the degree course, along with Kadambini Ganguly (1861-1923) a Brahmo lady. Chandramukhi and Kadambini were not only the first graduates from Bethune College, but they were also the first female graduates in the country and in the entire British Empire. Ganguly went on to study medicine at the Calcutta Medical College and was awarded a GBMC (Graduate of Bengal Medical College) degree, which gave her the right to practise. She even went to the United Kingdom in 1892 and returned to India after qualifying as LRCP (Edinburgh), LRCS (Glasgow), and GFPS (Dublin). After working for a short period in Lady Dufferin Hospital, she started her own private practice. The Brahmo community born out of western influence on the Bengali Hindu mind was as liberal as the Bengali Christians regarding their women and both had outstanding women in their communities.

After her graduation, Chandramukhi was the only and first woman to pass MA from Calcutta University in 1884 and began her career as a lecturer in Bethune College (it was still part of Bethune School) in 1886. The college was separated from the school in 1888 and she was appointed principal, thus becoming the first female head of an undergraduate academic establishment in South Asia. She retired in 1891 because of bad health and spent the rest of her life in Dehradun. Her sister Bidhumukhi and the above mentioned Virginia Mary Mitra (Nandi) were the first two woman medical graduates from Calcutta Medical College. They passed out in 1890. Chandramukhi and

\textsuperscript{39} As narrated by Probodh Chandra Nandi, Refer to the List of Interviewees.
\textsuperscript{40} Geraldine Forbes, \textit{Women in Colonial India} (New Delhi, Chronicle Books, 2008), p.113
Bidhumukhi’s youngest sister Bindubasini Bose was also a medical practitioner and she qualified from Calcutta Medical College in 1891.

Medical men, both Indian and British, at first opposed bringing women into medical colleges but they finally gave in as trained women were needed to treat purdanashin. While this training brought women doctors professional prestige and financial rewards, the downside was the negative attitude of the public who was not prepared to accept women doctors working alongside men.

The missionaries also reached out to the natives through medical service. Medical work was a missionary strategy in colonial India and ‘the offers of medical aid not only gave the missionaries access to the rich and the poor but also provided an opportunity to enter the “uncolonized space” of the zenana.’

Upper class women were the greatest sufferers as far as medical aid was concerned as they could not visit the hospitals where male doctors attended to the patients. Mortality rate in childbirth was considerable as the women had to depend on the expertise of the local Dai (midwife) who in turn relied on traditional methods based on instinct and practical sense. Gradually the need for female doctors was felt and the upper class was most vocal in its demands for such service. Initially the government did not think in terms of educating native women for this profession but gradually it realized the need and women first went to the Madras Medical College in 1875. In 1882 Abala Das and Ellen D’Abreau went from Calcutta to Madras to pursue medical studies. Brahmo and Christian families in Calcutta were keen on sending their daughters to Medical College but the conservative Council of Medical Colleges and Calcutta Medical Faculty did not approve of the idea, they preferred to think that women were meant to assist the doctors as nurses. Kadambini Ganguly a Brahmo woman was the first to be admitted to Medical College in 1884. There were three female students in the first session from 1884 – 1885. Besides Kadambini Ganguly, Bidhumukhi Bose, and Virginia

---

42 Ibid., p.108.
Mary Mitter had also joined the course and all three were special holders of scholarships of Rs. 20 per month.\textsuperscript{43}

Rani Ghosh (1900 – 1961), the first principal of Gokhale Memorial College remained the principal of both the school and college till her death. Born into a Bengali Christian family, she made education her vocation at the age of twenty three when she joined the Maharani School in Calcutta as a teacher, within six months she went over to Gokhale Memorial School and it was through her conviction and competence that later Gokhale Memorial Girls College could achieve eminence. She had completed her B.A. with honours in English and received her teacher’s diploma from London University and also obtained a diploma in advanced course in Psychology and Pedagogy from Edinburgh University. She joined Gokhale School in 1923 and received a doctorate in child psychology in 1958 from the Calcutta University. Later, she headed several prestigious academic societies and associations and was also member of the Calcutta University Senate and Syndicate. Her work with the eminent Brahmo educationist Sarala Ray, the founder of Gokhale Memorial School (founded in 1920), is yet another example of the socio-cultural affinity between the Bengali Christian and Brahmo women of Calcutta.\textsuperscript{44}

Rani Ghosh’s views on life certainly reflected her Christian upbringing, which was quite similar to that of Sarala Ray’s Brahmo grooming. Not only were the two ladies highly educated, liberal and broadminded but they were also idealistically very similar and neither was weighed down by religious bigotry. Rani Ghosh has confessed,

\begin{quote}
It was the motto that she set before us as the working principle of the Gokhale Memorial School, in these words, “the best of the East and the best of the West” that appealed to me most.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{43} Ibid., p.109.
Indian culture was formed and nurtured in pluralism. It is a ‘composite’ culture evolving itself into a unique system combining the contribution of all. Modern India’s contact with English education paved a new road to progress and imbibed a new direction in the accepted wisdom of the educated and enlightened leaders of that time. Christianity has played a leading role in the process of enhancing the foundational efforts. Though Christian missionary efforts through educational institutions did not succeed in converting all students to their faith, people of India gained immensely. The rediscovery of a new significance to the rich heritage of the past was the most important gain. It was difficult to distinguish between the enlightened Bengalis of the early twentieth century i.e. between the Bengali Christians and the Bengali Hindus except from the actual practice of their religion and in some cases from their names as some Christian families christened their children with biblical names.

After the demise of Sarala Ray, Rani Ghosh was at the helm of affairs in the Gokhale institution and she did her best to preserve the old as she struggled undaunted by impediments especially that of funds, to take the institution forward in order to expand and introduce University courses. Finally she even succeeded in opening B.A. and B.Sc. classes in the institution. So dedicated was she that she would teach in the kindergarten classes and even in the pre-university classes in order to compensate for the lack of teachers as they did not have sufficient funds to employ the required number. She had seen her institution through the pre-Independence days into the days of Independent India and in her we see the evolved Bengali Christian woman who was another example of Bengal’s modern woman free from inhibitions on an equal footing with men like many such New Women in the western world. S. E. Rani Ghosh is an example of the Bengali Christian woman who enjoyed the freedom of living in a society where she was on a par with men, and commanded public respect for her work and achievements. Christianity had provided opportunities for women to develop themselves to assume leadership in many areas of human life such as in the family, society and in various fields of specialization. Ultimately the missionary endeavours in our country rested on the principle that the more women are literate, the faster would be the advancement of the society.
Economic factors were responsible for the similarities in lifestyle and appearance among women of the upper classes of Bengal society. The upper middle-class Bengali Christian women and Brahmo women of similar social status had much in common by way of mannerisms, attire and outlook on life. They attended the same educational institutions and grew up with similar moral and social values, as the schools they attended were most often either Christian or Brahmo and the latter religion though a reformed version of Hinduism had also adopted the liberal ideas and values of Christianity. For example, Bina Das, Labonyaaprova Dutt’s classmate in Diocesan School, the well-known Bengali woman revolutionary who made an abortive attempt to assassinate the Governor of Bengal in 1932, was born of Brahmo parents. She was a product of the Protestant institution run by the Clewer Sisters, Diocesan College, Calcutta, from where she had completed her graduation with Honours in English and had gone back for a B.T. degree. In her deposition before the Special Tribunal of Calcutta High Court after her failed attempt to assassinate the then Bengal Governor Stanley Jackson, she declared how she had immensely profited from her study under the Sisters of her College but at the same time from her comparative knowledge of things she was deeply anguished because the Christian spirit was not evident in the administration of a Christian Government. The Christian missionaries had accomplished the difficult task of impressing upon the colonized all the higher Christian values along with western liberal thought thus emboldening them to think and act independently according to their convictions – resulting in this rather audacious step being taken by a woman in a patriarchal world.

Lillian Labonyaprona Dutt nee Ghosh was an outstanding Bengali Christian lady of her time who also evidently had the same nationalist and patriotic spirit seen so abundantly in her revolutionary Brahmo class mate and friend Bina Das. An honours graduate of Calcutta University she had also completed the B.T. course to teach in a school in Bhagalpur very early in life. Labonya displayed *swadeshi* (nationalist) tendencies and was nearly arrested for

---

46 Kalyan Chunder Dutt, refer to the List of Interviewees.
circulating *swadeshi* pamphlets. She later became a member of the Indian National Congress.\(^{47}\)

Stella Bose along with Niroj Basini Shome was co-founder of Women’s Christian College, Calcutta. In the Silver Jubilee Souvenir of the College Miss Shome wrote,

> Twenty-five years ago two women – one of them Miss Stella Bose now in glory – dreamed a dream and formulated plans. The dream materialised, the plan matured, and the College opened its doors on 19th July 1945 – with three students in three loaned rooms in the present building, with half a dozen efficient Professors, most of whom were honorary, and a Bank balance not worth mentioning. It was a venture of faith and faith has triumphed\(^{48}\)

The two Bengali Christian ladies Miss Bose and Miss Shome had set out on their ‘venture’ when India was on the verge of attaining her freedom from British domination and the education of women had come a long way since the days of William Carey and Dr. Duff. These two gifted, articulate and highly experienced (Miss Shome was Inspectress of Schools whereas Miss Bose was a College teacher and had even been acting Principal of Lady Brabourne College for a short while) teachers had realized the need for an exclusive women’s institution for higher education which women from all strata of society could attend. Their institution run on Christian principles was their contribution to society carrying on the legacy of the early missionaries, of spreading education. What is remarkable is the independent spirit and the determination of these two ladies who went ahead with their project despite all impediments. Educated women were certainly on a par with men in urban India now, pushing traditional patriarchy behind.

Towards the third decade of the twentieth century the Victorian concept of the role of women had radically changed, the proper role of women was no longer seen to be only at home. In nineteenth century Britain ‘the family was at the

\(^{47}\) Kalyan Chunder Dutt, refer to the ‘List of Interviewees.’

centre of Victorian middle-class social life and the fulcrum for the complex set of social values which comprised middle-class respectability, and this was easily adopted by the middle class Bengali Christians who were groomed by European missionaries, because it matched the prevailing native ideals. But it was the new wave of nationalism along with years of native female higher education that bolstered courage enabling young women to operate independently. For the women of the 1920s and 1930s it was clear that freedom from restrictive customs would make it possible for them to contribute to the regeneration of India.

In this context we may recall Partha Chatterjee’s observations on the ‘women’s question’ when he goes on to say that nationalism separates the domain of culture into two spheres the material and the spiritual. The West was superior to the East in the material sphere and was thus able to subjugate the ‘non European countries’ and dominate the whole world. Indian nationalists in the late nineteenth century argued that in the spiritual domain the East was superior to the West therefore the material techniques of modern Western civilization should be cultivated while retaining and strengthening the distinctive spiritual essence of national culture. ‘The material domain, argued nationalist writers, lies outside us – a mere external that influences us, conditions us, and forces us to adjust to it, ultimately it is unimportant. The spiritual, which lies within, is our true self; it is that which is genuinely essential.’ The nationalists argued that the West had subjugated us externally but they had failed to colonize the inner essential identity.

All the developments due to western influence in the women’s sphere, was keenly observed by litterateurs, and literature in the nineteenth century comprised of a fair amount of social parody of the Westernised Bengali women, although it was impossible to find any woman who actually matched some of those gross descriptions. The Bengali Christian women came into contact, more with the European missionaries who were industrious and had

50 Partha Chatterjee, ‘The Nation and its Fragments’, in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *The Partha Chatterjee Omnibus* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1999), p.120
traditional and conservative ideas and ways of life. But there were other European women, wives of government officials, who were somewhat different and it was the imitation of their fashions and various lifestyle practices that were ridiculed.

To ridicule the idea of a Bengali woman trying to imitate the ways of a memsaheb...was a sure recipe calculated to evoke raucous laughter and moral condemnation in both male and female audiences. It was, of course, a criticism of manners, of new items of clothing such as the blouse, the petticoat, and shoes (all, curiously, considered vulgar, although they clothed the body far better than the single length of sari that was customary for Bengali women, irrespective of wealth and social status, until the middle of the nineteenth century), of the use of Western cosmetics and jewellery, of the reading of novels, of needlework (considered a useless and expensive pastime), of riding in open carriages.  

It was suggested that the Westernised woman was fond of useless luxury and cared little for the well-being of the home. Undoubtedly people were envious of the new social elite emerging around the institutions of colonial administration and trade. It was said that educated men wanted educated wives hence the uneducated girls would find it difficult to secure husbands. The following is a piece of sarcasm on such a situation.

The educated man will not be able to go out with an uneducated wife as she will not be able to wear shoes or sit at a table and dine and she may not want to visit the Brahmo Samaj. Being uncultivated she will behave in a crude manner. She will try to keep bratas, and perform Lakshmi puja and even demand new sets of clothing during the religious festivals. Whereas an educated but ugly woman who is probably blind

---

51 Ibid., p. 121.
in one eye and lame in one foot will find an educated husband. All she needs to show is her certificate from school.\(^5\)

Further, as a reaction to the social developments due to western influence, several Bengali litterateurs ridiculed them in their writings. For example Iswar Gupta wrote. ‘Earlier the women were good, they used to observe all the bratas, but Bethune has upset it all. Will you ever get the women that way again?’ He could also foresee how “shameless” women were going to become in the future,

‘(They) will lift the curtain and the veil covering their head and visit public gatherings like that. They will say “damn Hinduism” and sip brandy. If we live a little longer we will witness these things. (They) will themselves drive their own bogeys and visit the Maidan for a breath of fresh air.’\(^6\)

The turn of the century saw the emergence of the educated bhadramahila, the genteel, middleclass Bengali woman like Chandramukhi and Bidhumukhi Bose, Kadambini Ganguly, and Virginia Mary Nandi nee Mitter who were sometimes even more educated than the often poorly educated European women who came to India. They were the new generation of middle class Bengali women, highly intelligent, educated and talented. The early twentieth century was the period of anti-colonial, national movement and this period saw the emergence of not only highly informed and intelligent but also highly articulate Bengali women both Hindu and Christian.

Speaking about educated, articulate and talented Bengali Christian women in the early years of the twentieth century one is reminded of the independent minded educationist Kamala Bose, second daughter of the outstanding nineteenth century Bengali Christian missionary Rev. Mathuranath Bose. Not much is known about her childhood years except that she was born in


Gopalganj where her father had established his indigenous Christian mission and later she had come to Calcutta where she completed her education. Her older sister Priscilla Saralabala Mitter, nee Bose had been a student of the B.A. class in Bethune College till her marriage to Chunilal Mitter, an employee of the Bengal Government Press. Kamala Bose remained a spinster. She went on to become the founder principal of Modern School Delhi in 1920 and held that post till 1947. The notable Indian author in English Khushwant Singh, while reminiscing his school years in his autobiography, has made the following observations about Kamala Bose, the founder principal,

‘(Raghubir Singh) ran into a Bengali Christian lady, Kamala Bose who agreed to come over from Calcutta to take over as Principal of the school (Modern School, Delhi). Kamala Bose was no beauty ... short and squat... and dark... Between the two, they gave birth to a school destined to be rated among the best in India... I lived in dread of Kamala Bose. Miss Bose did not believe in sparing the rod. She would make errant boys put out the palms of their hands and hit them hard with her foot-ruler – at times she made us turn our hands and hit them with its sharp edge on the back of our palms. Her example was followed by other teachers... ‘

A stern disciplinarian, Kamala Bose was comfortable and confident in a male dominated professional world. She was a product of the new wave of nationalist thought in early twentieth century India. She had come to the forefront during a period when independent women’s organizations were being formed in parts of India, i.e. 1910-1927 and women were making their presence felt in society. She was an Indian version of the New Woman of the western world. Here was a single woman living alone in Delhi and heading the administration of an institution with an iron hand and also interacting with great intellectuals and other distinguished people in pre-independence India. She was certainly not intimidated in any way in a male dominated world. Besides imbibing the boldness, sincerity and determination of her father she

55 Ira Ghosh nee Mitter, refer to the List of Interviewees.
was a visionary and great educator as is obvious from her own article on the state of Indian education – *A Plea for Educational Reform in India* where she says,

‘The urgent need of India today is not *more* of education, but also of *better* education...If the education of the people has been seriously lacking in quantity, it has been still more sadly wanting in quality...It is especially true about the early stages of education from the primary to the high school standard. The sooner the remedy is found the better will grow the prospect for the nation.’

Kamala Bose was an example of the second generation of the newly formed Christian community’s enlightened women who was leading the rest of the country into the mores of the modern world. She was heading a co-educational school which was ahead of its time and imparting secular education adopting new methods. As a widely travelled and much experienced head of an elitist Delhi school she was on a par with many of the principals in the schools she had visited in Europe; the following extract from her article further endorses her as a nationalist and a visionary:

The most prominent fact which stands out from a comparison between the progress of education in India and Europe is the utter illiteracy of the masses here... the economic competition between the peoples of the world grows keener every day. India has to enter this area with a serious handicap.

Kamala Bose is representative of all the other highly enlightened women of her generation in India and abroad. Having literally seen the world she was ‘globalised’ in the twenty-first century sense of the term. Perhaps her comment on literacy in Europe is slightly sweeping but we get the spirit of this remark—that the rate of literacy in India needs to go up. But at the same time her recommendations regarding character building of children and the role of the teacher as guide goes back to the indigenous Vedic tradition of education


59 Ibid., p. 43.
where both Nature and the teacher were jointly responsible for the moulding of a student’s character and personality. Being the principal of a secular school she does not mention Christianity but certainly emphasizes the value of religious and moral training which she herself underwent as the daughter of a much revered and respected native Christian missionary and also in the institutions she attended. What needs to be observed is that she comes across as a very secular person who she obviously was in practice or else she would find it difficult to continue in her situation as Principal of Modern School.

Who shall dare to estimate the moral and material advance of India when once the masses are educated, and the best intellects among her vast population are churned up to the top, to guide, lead and serve their mother land?60

She vested a lot of hope in her own people and the dreamer in her could visualise a highly advanced India once her people were educated. The nationalist spirit in this erudite, smart and independent Bengali Christian lady is more than evident.

Section IV: Some Case Studies

The following case studies of some of the above-mentioned highly competent and distinguished Bengali Christian bhadramahilas of Calcutta in the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth century give us reasonable insight into the urban Bengali Christian woman’s negotiation of her community’s patriarchy. One striking aspect of their lives is that they either remained unmarried or they married late – i.e. considering that girls were married at the age of fourteen and fifteen in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Of the ladies already mentioned in this chapter, Chandramukhi Bose married a widower, Pandit Keshavanand Momgayen of Dehradun at the age of forty-one, her sister Bidhumukhi remained unmarried.61 Both Kamala Bose and Rani Ghosh were spinsters. Similarly, in the cases of the Brahmo women,

60 Ibid., p.45.
Kadambini Ganguly and Bina Das, the former married after her graduation and the latter had a late marriage, even after her stint as a political prisoner.

One wonders why these ladies were so different from the rest of the contemporary women of similar social standing, especially regarding marriage. We could speculate some of the possible reasons – either it was too difficult to find a suitable match due to their comparatively mature age and high educational qualifications or some of the ladies having tasted independence of living preferred a self-sufficient life and successful career over marital bliss, or being choosy about their partner either delayed their marriage or were unable to decide on someone appropriate.

1. Toru Dutt (1856-1877)

This remarkable Indo-Anglian poet born into the famous Dutt family of Rambagan was the second daughter of Govin Chunder Dutt, who also was a poet in his own right. An understanding of Toru Dutt’s ancestry and cultural background would help us to recognize the source of the strength and force of her genius. The Dutts of Rambagan were an abhijata or elite family of Calcutta and one of the first to embrace Christianity as a whole family, and this changed their lifestyles and ways of thinking and considerably isolated them from the conservative Hindu community. This marginalisation resulted in alienation and loneliness and perhaps that was partly, the driving force behind Toru’s creativity. Her father was ‘a man of large views, great sympathy, and freedom from prejudice, and possessed a remarkable command of the English tongue’. 62

Nilmoni Dutt, one of the patriarchs of the Dutt family and great grandfather of Toru Dutt was a distinguished resident of Calcutta in the eighteenth century and he was a liberal Hindu whose friends included several Englishmen and even missionaries. It is remarkable how by a quirk of fate, ‘when the missionary William Carey was destitute and without a home, harassed by his wife’s insanity and his children’s illness, Nilmoni gave him a home in his

garden house in Manicktollah’. Toru’s grandfather Rasamoy Dutt was one of three sons of Nilmoni Dutt. Rasamoy was ‘Banian’ to Messrs. Cruttenden, Mackillop and Co. and was among the leading Bengali gentlemen in Calcutta at that time – he held several positions of importance and was a great advocate of English education. ‘He had a rare and choice collection of English books, and created in his children that remarkable devotion to English literature...He was catholic in his views, and opposed the extravagance in connexion with Hindu Pujas and ceremonies...’ Dr. Alexander Duff writing in October 1854 had said, ‘The old man (Rasamoy Dutt), the father, was the very first of my native acquaintances. Many a long and earnest talk have I had with him. From the first he was singularly enlightened in a general way, and superior to native prejudices. His sons were wont to come constantly to my house, to discuss the subject of Christianity and borrow books.’ Govin Chunder Dutt, Toru’s father, was one of five sons of Rasamoy. Thus the liberal frame of mind of the Dutts through two generations, and their reading and appreciation of English literature, culminated in the third generation’s conversion to Christianity. This was a classic instance of an entire family’s conversion out of conviction.

The Dutts embraced the legacy of some of the experiences of freedom that Christianity brought with it and therefore their women were socially progressive. Toru Dutt’s mother, Kshetramoni Dutt nee Mitter, initially resisted conversion to Christianity but was ultimately baptized. She travelled to England and France with her husband and children. She was well versed in Bengali and Sanskrit, but mastered the English language after marriage. Being well informed in Hindu mythology she inspired her children’s imagination with the ancient lays of India. We get a taste of this influence on Toru in her Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindusthan. In Sita she (Toru) nostalgically remembers her now departed brother and sister and their childhood experience of gathering around their mother to listen to her narration of stories about the unhappy queen of the Ramayana. Kshetramoni had translated into Bengali,

---

63 Ibid., p. 2.
64 Ibid., 5.
65 Ibid., p. 9.
The Blood of Jesus, a monograph on Christian salvation by Rev. William Reid (1814-1896).\textsuperscript{66} She had obviously been able to master the English language sufficiently in order to be able to translate English works into the vernacular.

A characteristic peculiar to the Dutts was their talent for creative writing in English, Toru’s father, Govin Chunder Dutt, her uncle Hur Chunder Dutt, and cousins Omesh Chunder Dutt and Greece Chunder Dutt had together published a volume entitled The Dutt Family Album, which was rather unusual at a time when Bengali was the language of literary culture in the city of Calcutta and it was also the language of nationalist discourse. Calcutta in Toru’s days was bilingual – English was the language of education and administration and Bengali was the language of resistance and creativity.\textsuperscript{67} For Govin Chunder’s daughters even French was a language of creativity and at the time of her death Toru was also learning and reading Sanskrit literature. ‘Toru Dutt commenced the study of Sanskrit in conjunction with her father...her study of Sanskrit lasted not quite a year. During that period she made several translations’.\textsuperscript{68} She had written to her friend Miss Martin, dated 8th September, 1876, ‘I hope I shall be able to bring out another ‘Sheaf’, not gleaned in French but in ‘Sanskrit Fields’! ...my ‘Sanskrit Sheaf’ is far from being gathered and complete.’\textsuperscript{69}

In her short lifespan she had translated almost two hundred French poems, the work of eighty different French poets into English and this, the only work published during her lifetime under the title of A Sheaf Gleaned in French Fields (1876) a 200 page anthology of French verse in English translation (and a few pieces of Heinrich Heine’s German poetry translated into English from their French versions) earned her considerable literary fame. After her death appeared another collection of verse – this time original poems based on Sanskrit myths and legends – in a volume entitled Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindusthan (1882), as well as two novels in French and English –

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{66} Chandani Lokuge (ed.), Toru Dutt, Collected Prose and Poetry (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006), p. viii.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Meenakshi Mukherjee, The Perishable Empire: Essays on Indian Writing in English (Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2000), pp. 90-91.
\item \textsuperscript{68} Das, op. cit., p.44.
\item \textsuperscript{69} Lokuge, op. cit., p. 302.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
Le Journal de Mademoiselle d’Arvers (1879) and an unfinished fragment known as Bianca or the Young Spanish Maiden (1880). Other miscellaneous pieces published in a popular journal of the day include an essay on Leconte de Lisle, a Creole poet, entitled An Eurasian Poet and an English translation of two political speeches made in the French Chamber of Deputies.70

Critics like Susie Tharu have commented on Toru Dutt’s ‘Savitri’ as a reactive construction of a ‘free’ woman to counter the negative image projected by the British and to idealize a pre-colonial golden past of India.71 On the other hand Meenakshi Mukherjee is of the opinion that,

Toru Dutt seems quite innocent of the desirability of a ‘national’ projection of Indian culture to counter colonial hegemony. Even the orthography of the Indian words used by her remains stubbornly regional – ‘Joystee’ for the month of Jaistha: ‘Drona Charjya’ rather than Dronacharya, which would be nearer to the Sanskrit spelling, hence acceptable to more readers across the country rather than its local variant...employment of a pan Indian idiom for the purposes of national projection was very far from Toru Dutt’s mind, whose India remained centred in Bagmaree and Maniktola Street, in and around Calcutta...Toru, despite her western orientation, remained curiously local in her conflation of India with Bengal.72

Toru was neither ‘regional’ nor ‘national’, nor was she European, she was something different, she was changing her navigational code of interaction between two cultures, there was an ambivalence in her and the different shades of the two cultures were working in her, and long before she could form a well-defined attitude her life met with an untimely end. Of all her writings it is her correspondences with her cousins while she was in England, her letters to her British friend Mary Martin written between 1873-1877 after her return to India from Europe, and to Clarisse Bader written just before her (Toru’s) death that show the development of her intellect and her identity as a result of cross-

71 Mukherjee, op. cit., p.114.
72 Ibid., pp. 105-6.
cultural exchange. They also portray the anglophile lifestyle of the elite upper class Bengali Christians in Calcutta.

The letters are also entrenched in the highly westernized and Christianized atmosphere of the Dutt family residence in Calcutta. Toru writes of her daily routine in Calcutta: ‘dinner, lunch, breakfast, croquet, lawn-tennis or picnic parties...’ and of ‘a more restful and withdrawn’ routine in the family’s country residence in Bagmari, ‘wholly given to reading Toru’s most formative influences were her family, Christianity, travel to France and England, and literature.‘

This is a precise definition of Toru’s world which as mentioned earlier was one of isolation from the main stream of upper-middle class Bengalis. She had seen the western world, attended the Higher Lectures of Women in Cambridge, briefly tasted the freedom of being, and therefore getting back into the reclusive life of a woman in Calcutta was not an easy task for both the sisters. The news of the Dutt family daughters studying in Cambridge caused a sensation in Calcutta society and made its way into the newspapers. The Brahma newsletter, Bamabodhini Patrika of March 1871 said.

This is an excerpt from the Abalabandhab: ‘We have learned from the letter of a reliable relative that the two daughters (very obviously meaning Aru and Toru) of Baboo Govin Chunder Dutt of the renowned Dutt family have been admitted into Cambridge University. It is almost three years since they have been in England with their father for higher studies. Will they be so fortunate as to be able to successfully acquire knowledge from that reputed University and become the pride of Bengali women?’

\[\text{\footnotesize 73 Lokuge, op. cit., p. xiv.} \]
\[\text{\footnotesize 74 Abalabandhab (Friend of the Weak), a 19th century Bengali journal for women published by Dwarakanath Ganguly, husband of Kadambini Bose, first woman doctor of Calcutta Medical College. ‘His journal devoted to the right of women to live as human beings, recorded in detail the agonies of those subjected to indignities of various kinds,’ Malavika Karlekar, Voices from Within (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1991), p. 165.} \]
The photograph of the two sisters Toru (when she was seventeen) and Aru taken in England⁷⁶ portrays a pair of Bengali girls who were very different from the rest of the girls of their age and class, back home in India of the time. ‘Hands resting on her sister Aru’s shoulder, she poses in full Victorian dress. Buttoned up to her neck, the formal dress billows to her ankles.’ But both the sisters look Indian despite their western attire. Lokuge rightly says that in the photograph Toru and Aru Dutt seem to be neither Indian nor western.

Toru Dutt had converted to Christianity at the very young age of six years along with the other members of her family. She had spent her formative years under the tutelage of her father at home, and at the age of fifteen she went to Europe and spent four years there till her father abruptly decided to return to Calcutta. She had experienced the most comfortable lifestyles and tasted the culture of England and her writings reveal that she was caught somewhere in between the ‘inherited Indian and acquired European literatures, religions and cultures, breaking boundaries and reconstructing none of her own’.⁷⁷ She looked forward to living in France and England yet she wrote nostalgic poems like Sita that brought back memories of her lost siblings spending an evening together with their mother listening to stories about Sita’s sorrow.

Toru Dutt died at the age of twenty-one – it was too early a stage in life to glimpse the many hues of worldly existence and develop a definite outlook and identity. She was greatly influenced by her anglophile father and also by her education and travels abroad, yet she took keen interest in Indian ballads and legends and made them subjects of her poems. She appreciated typically Bengali food along with continental dishes, just as her parents did too, ‘on our table, with mutton cutlets and roly-poly, comes up hot Kuchooree or cabbage Churchuree or ambole of eels. Isn’t this nice?’⁷⁸

After the family returned to Calcutta they longed to go back to England again, Toru has expressed this desire repeatedly in her letters to her friend Mary

⁷⁶ See Appendix for photograph.
⁷⁷ Ibid. p. xiv.
⁷⁸ Ibid., p.220.
Martin, ‘We hope (D.V.)\(^79\) to return to England and settle there for good; wouldn’t that be jolly? ... (19 December, 1873). We hope to go to England. I do not know if we shall be able to go; this time papa says he will sell all we have here and go to England and settle there for good... (10 March, 1874). We all want so much to return to England. We miss the free life we led there; here we can hardly go out of the limits of our own Garden, but Baugmaree happily is a pretty big place and we walk round our own park as much as we like... (9 May, 1874). I should so like to go back to Cambridge and have a look at you all... (19 September, 1874). We all long to go to Europe again. We hope, if we go, to settle in England and not return to India anymore... (17 November, 1874). She was certainly caught in the pull between two cultures and that affected her sensitive nature. However it is apparent that she preferred the freedom of existence that she experienced in Europe to the restricted life that they had to live in Calcutta. She expresses her apprehension when she says, ‘Papa wants to buy a carriage and a pair of horses; but I am set against it. I tell him if he allows himself to be entrammelled in Calcutta by equipage and gardens, we shall never be able to go to Europe again... (20 November, 1874).’ The family wanted to leave India for good and so she wrote, ‘We want to sell off the Garden before we leave India, as then we shall be able to settle for good in England. Already we have had some very good offers for it, but not such as we would wish to have... (6 June, 1875).\(^80\)

But at the same time she has also expressed her realisation that the Europeans looked down on the Bengalis. ‘We do not go much into society now. The Bengali reunions are always for men. Wives and daughters and all women kind are confined to the house, under lock and key, *a la lettre!* And Europeans are generally supercilious and look down on Bengalis. I have not been to one dinner party or any party at all since we left Europe. And then I do not know any people here except those of our kith and kin, and some of them I do not know, (24 March, 1876).\(^81\) In India they were aware of the presence of the Empire, the relationship with the Europeans was that of the imperialist and the

\(^{79}\) Latin phrase *Deo volente* meaning ‘God willing’. A reflection of her Christian education as this was a phrase commonly used by the European missionaries.

\(^{80}\) Lokuge, *op. cit.*, pp. 224-42.

\(^{81}\) Ibid., p.271.
other but in England that feeling was not there. The Dutts were aware of the European attitude to Bengalis in Calcutta but they had carved a niche for themselves amongst the whites back in Europe where they apparently did not feel any racial discrimination and were therefore comfortable. This was not a fact of the native Christian world. There is a definite note of resentment in Toru’s description of the position of women in Calcutta and perhaps she believes that the Europeans despised the Bengalis due to their backward social practices which Toru also found agonizing and loathsome. Toru was oscillating between western and native cultures but she was inclined more towards the west. However she had realised that the Europeans in India held a different attitude towards the natives as compared to those in Europe.

Toru often mentions in her letters that they go to the Old Church on Sundays, which is quite a distance from their home. They were particular about the practices of the Christian religion. She even mentions how they celebrate Christmas a little differently from the way they did in England. Then again, sometimes they have to skip attending Church because of ill health. ‘We attend the ‘Old Church’, of which Mr. Welland is the pastor. The church has been lately renewed and looks very grand and magnificent. (17 November, 1874).’

In spite of being isolated due to conversion they associate with some of their Hindu relatives who are cordial with them, her own maternal grandparents are Hindu but they love them and are in contact with them. Amongst close members of the family religion was no barrier in maintaining relationship. ‘Our grandfather and grandmother never can hear of our return to Europe; the latter weeps at even the mention of it. I wish you knew her: she is, I am sad to say, still a Hindu, but she is so gentle and loves us so much. She had many children, but now only Mamma and Mamma’s brother are living.’ (9 May, 1874) There is certainly some sort of a distancing and value judgement in the relationship with her grandmother, it is not the usual unbiased relationship

---

82 Ibid., p. 233.
83 Ibid., p. 228.
that grandchildren usually enjoy with their grandparents, but she knows and recognizes the goodness in the old lady.

There were relatives who had shunned them and she mentions one such set of relatives though in a seemingly matter of fact tone. Her youthful curiosity in the Hindu wedding they were left out of is apparent in her declaration that her grandmother had filled them in on the details of the event. ‘The day before yesterday my mother’s cousin was married. She is a Hindu and so is her family, so of course we were not invited. We heard all the particulars from my grandmother, who had been invited.’ (28 February, 1876)\textsuperscript{84} The distancing from her relatives caused by religious difference and therefore the inability to meet any of them only made her conjure images of them from beyond. She did not have the opportunity to know her own people. Her parents and social circumstances had cast her in an upper class, westernised profile which was away and above that of the usual upper-middle class Bengali Christians and completely different from her Hindu relatives. She did not outlive her impressionable years to metamorphose into an independent individual firm in her preferences. Her unconventional upbringing automatically alienated her from mainstream Calcutta. Yet, wasn’t her person, a representation of the westernised Bengali Christian, even into the twentieth century, who was caught between two identities – neither characteristically Bengali nor characteristically British, looking westward, but wedged somewhere in between?

2. **Stella Bose (1891-1969)**

Stella Bose is best remembered today as the founder principal of Women’s Christian College, Calcutta. She was the tenth child of Dr. Beharilal and Bhabatarini. Her father was a student of Duff School in Chinsurah and had converted to Christianity after he lost his mother and witnessed her cremation, when he was inspired by certain words of the Bible that he had read earlier. At the age of seventeen he was baptized by Revs. Alexander Duff and K.S. Macdonald and disinherited by his family. The missionaries gave him shelter

\textsuperscript{84} Ibid., p. 261.
and sponsored his medical studies in Edinburgh for the LRCP degree. He returned to the country on completion of his studies and finally settled and continued his medical practice in Serampore which was an important missionary settlement and was also inhabited by Englishmen and Scottish gentlemen because of a jute mill there. He married Bhabatarini Banerjee sister of the Principal of Ripon College, Jnan Ranjan Banerjee who was very progressive in outlook and retained her maiden surname even after marriage and was known as Bhabatarini Banerjee Bose. 85

They were an extremely westernized family and the girls were educated in Loreto House and Loreto College whilst the sons went to St. Xavier’s School and College. Miss Bose was a lecturer in English in Bethune College and she later went to Lady Brabourne College where she officiated as Vice-Principal but her real dream was to start a college for Girls in which she finally succeeded along with Miss Nirojbashini Shome who also nurtured a similar dream because the Diocesan College for Women had wound up and besides the early morning classes for women in Asutosh College there was no institution for women’s higher education in south Calcutta. The two ladies were totally committed to their work and they were not married, thus they gave all their energy to their institution. Although their new institution was not a missionary one the Bengal Christian Council and the Christian Board of Higher Education had come forward to help them in establishing the College. Miss Bose’s subject was English and she was a brilliant teacher. Stella Bose often quoted from Shakespeare, while teaching and while commenting in class one of her favourite quotes was, ‘a Daniel has come to judgement’. 86

85 All historical details about Stella Bose and her family are from two sources – 1. Interview of her nephew Peter Ronodhir Bose, refer to the List of Interviewees. 2. Subrota Ghosh, ‘Miss Nirojbashini Shome o Miss Stella Bose – Satabarsher Alokey’ in the Women’s Christian College Magazine (Calcutta, Women’s Christian College, 1991), p. ii. Translation mine.
86 Subrota Ghosh, ‘Miss Nirojbashini Shome o Miss Stella Bose – Satabarsher Alokey’ in the Women’s Christian College Magazine (Calcutta, Women’s Christian College, 1991), p. iii. This is a reference to Shakespeare’s The Merchant of Venice, Act 4, Scene1, which is a court scene where Shylock responds with, ‘A Daniel come to judgement, yea, a Daniel!—O wise young judge, how I do honour thee!’, to Portia who is cleverly playing with words. Shakespeare had framed Shylock’s words after the Biblical Daniel famed for his wise judgement and dream interpretations.
Stella used to travel all the way to and from Calcutta by train and horse drawn trams to school from the station. It was a tiring journey but their parents sent their children to the best English medium schools in the state. So Stella was used to hard work and commitment. She always dressed in a sari which was tied almost as neatly as a dress and was fond of wearing beads and brooches. In other words she did emulate the European ladies in her attire and use of accessories. She was very comfortable while speaking in English. Yet she preferred to live in their suburban home in Serampore even after it was no longer a favourite spot of the English and the Scots. She was concerned about the higher education of Bengali women and the underprivileged. Although she preferred a British lifestyle she was firmly rooted in the soil of her motherland.

Stella Bose’s personality is best reflected in a short article she had published in her college magazine. Here she points out the importance of little things in life and how they contribute towards success in almost every sphere of our being. She had deep conviction in the triumph of positive thinking and small steps taken at a time towards a larger cause. Stella was not a representative of any particular Christian mission but she worked like a dedicated missionary believing in the little drops that she was creating in her institution for the sea of humanity – with a conviction that they would one day make an ocean that society would be proud of.

"Precious things are wrapt up in small parcels.” It is not always the magnitude of the thing, which counts. It is the quality and not the quantity – the little things. It is “the daily round, the common task” the hum-drum duties of life – the little things – which go to build character.

We tell those who are in our care, “Take your needle and work at your pattern. It will come out a rose by and by. Life is like that, one stitch – a little thing taken patiently and the whole pattern will come out all right as embroidery.”

---

It was based on the strength of this belief in the patient weaving of the beautiful and intricately patterned tapestry that Stella Bose and Niroj Basini Shome were able to build their dreams into the Women’s Christian College that stands so proud even today educating thousands of women from all religious communities. They educated with a missionary zeal but without any ulterior religious motive.

3. **Lillian Labonyaprova Dutt nee Ghosh (1909-1966)**

She was the third daughter of Jogendranath Ghosh, a Bengali Christian and a senior officer in the Excise Department, but unfortunately he met with a sudden and untimely death in 1918, when he was still in his early forties, leaving his young widow and eight minor children – three sons and five daughters – to fend for themselves. It was a household reduced to genteel poverty, a constant struggle, a sort of swimming against the current with no help from anyone. Labonyaprova and her younger sisters went to Diocesan School followed by graduation from Diocesan College. She completed her graduation with Honours in English although her interest was History, but she had no option as the Diocesan College did not offer a course with Honours in History. Despite all odds, Labonya, her elder sister, Rowena Renuprova and younger sister Ena Toruprova established themselves as empowered women of the Bengali Christian community. Renuprova went on to become the first headmistress of Sir Romesh Mitter Institution in Bhowanipore, south Calcutta and died in harness in 1944 when she was only forty-three. Ena Ghosh as she was popularly known did her Masters in English from Calcutta University and became a college teacher. Later, she established the Calcutta Girls Evening

88 All historical data about Labonyaprova Dutt nee Ghosh have been secured from two sources, 1. Kalyan Chunder Dutt, refer to the List of Interviewees. 2. The Ghosh’s ‘Family Bible Records’. Many of the educated upper class Bengali Christian families maintained a fairly expensive edition of the Bible which came with extra pages for notes bound with it and it would be handed down from one generation to the next containing records of births, deaths and marriages in the family, mentioning the date and place of the event. These records would be written on the blank pages provided for writing notes in the Bible. Peter Bose mentioned in the course of his interview that their family had such a Bible containing family records and regretted that it had been misplaced when they moved out of their ancestral home in Serampore. Perhaps this tradition of maintaining records is a reflection of a practice the educated Bengali Christians had learned from their missionary teachers. The maintenance of records being a common practice of the office bearers of the Imperial Government and also of other Europeans who came during the colonial period.
College for working women in borrowed space in the Dharamtullah area of Calcutta in 1964, which today is run by the government and is a regular day college for girls. Both Renuprova and Ena were spinsters. Labonya went on to train as a teacher following her graduation and secured a B.T. Degree and proceeded to teach in a missionary school in Bilaspur before her marriage in 1932 to Sushil Chunder Dutt of the famous Dutt family of Rambagan. He was a Lecturer in English in Scottish Church College, Calcutta.

Perhaps the early struggle in their lives had imbued in the Ghosh siblings a fighting spirit most visibly manifested in the three sisters and in their spirit of independence which inspired them to carve independent and outstanding careers. Their Christian background had gifted them a legacy of social freedom as such they had the liberty to pursue their dreams and the young Labonya had the courage to take up a job in Bilaspur miles away from home.

As mentioned above, her classmate in school was the revolutionary Bina Das and Labonya too had not escaped the strong wave of nationalist spirit sweeping over the country. However, soon after she had started working she was married and she settled down as a full time housewife in the Rambagan joint family to which her husband belonged. But her urge to serve society did not die with the burden of domestic responsibility, and carried out extensive work among the slum dwellers of Rambagan and Dompara in the vicinity of her house. Her husband an erudite and much respected scholar had no objection to his wife’s social activities outside the four walls of their home. The ‘inside’ had successfully come ‘outside’ with its head held high.

As a social worker she had worked among the refugees of East Bengal streaming into India after the Partition of Bengal in 1947. Prior to this she had organised community kitchens during the Bengal famine of the forties and also after the communal riots of 1946. Her philanthropic Christian character was very obvious in her work and she continued undaunted even after husband’s sudden demise in 1956. She held several honorary positions on school and college Boards and in 1958 was a member of the Indian Delegation to the U.N. in New York. As Vice-President of the West Bengal Pradesh Congress Committee she had to chair important meetings and take vital decisions.
Unfortunately no written or published article is available on or by Labonyaprova, which would reveal her mind at work and take us closer to her inner self. However, in her achievements we observe that the prototype of the early twentieth century Bengali Christian New Woman had been completely evolved.

4. **Hiranmoyee Dasi (Sinha nee Mitra)**

This is a rather interesting story of a Zamindar’s wife who had accepted Christianity perforce as she wanted to live with her husband who had converted while studying in the erstwhile General Assembly’s Institution in Calcutta, living away from his home in Suri in present day Birbhum district. He was ostracized by his family but his wife did not forsake him. He was already a father of two children when he renounced his ancestral religion. She had held onto her own religion strictly according to the norms of the day as long as her father-in-law survived as he had transferred all his property to her after his son converted to Christianity and settled in Hazaribagh in Bihar. She was unlettered and had been married at the age of nine years. After her father-in-law’s demise she joined her husband in Hazaribagh and embraced his religion but never attended church service. So she was really a Christian by name but a Hindu in practice. After her husband passed away she lived the life of a Hindu widow observing all the *bratas* and rituals that a Hindu widow was expected to practice, enforcing such rules on the other members of the family as she was certainly the head of the Sinha family. Dressed in a borderless white sari wrapped over a *shameez* (a single long straight gown) in the traditional Bengali way she never used shoes or wore blouses. As she was a widow, jewellery was not to be thought of and her hair was cut very short. Unfortunately her own children – a son and a daughter died while still in their

---

89 All information about Hiranmoyee Dasi was gathered from 1. Ira Ghosh, refer to the List of Interviewees, and from 2. Sumita Shikha Sircar, refer to the List of Interviewees.

90 This is what Hiranmoyee had proudly reported to her grandchildren, and her great grandchildren Ira and Sumit Shikha are aware of this. There is no written record to prove what she said. But it is true that the zamindari was in her name and although she lived in Hazaribagh she received her share of the earnings from it, (which is why her great grand children remember her as a financially independent lady of the house) despite her having come away to live with her husband who had been ostracized from Suri society and the Sinha family living there.
twenties – her son was only 29 when he died leaving behind a 21 year old pregnant wife and three children. This daughter-n-law maintained a low profile but her mother-in-law never imposed any Hindu rules on her. The latter wore the typical white sari adorned by Hindu widows but she partook of non vegetarian food. Hiranmoyee was an example of a practical woman who had worked out a convenient equation in her lifestyle that did not in any way make coexistence with the rest of her Christian family difficult.

Hiranmoyee began her day by opening her eyes facing the portraits of her husband and her in-laws which hung on the wall opposite her bed. Then she would go to the garden and pick up a bowl of Ganga water which she sprinkled in the front and in the main areas of her house. She continued her Hindu habit of cleansing the house of evil spirits with the help of the waters of the holy Ganga. Like the traditional Hindu widows she ate only one big meal a day, and partook of a light meal at night which would never comprise of rice. She bathed in the late afternoon and only after this would she permit her grandchildren and great grandchildren to go near her. Inside the Sinha house in Hazaribagh two worlds peacefully co existed – Hindu and Christian, and members of the family had naturally adjusted to the rules of the coexisting religio-cultural practices.

Hiranmoyee learned to write her name late in life being tutored by her granddaughter, and switched over to the practice of signing on the zamindari papers as they came in periodically. So strong was her personality that everyone accepted her authority and observed the Hindu rules of segregating the non vegetarian food from the vegetarian and sat on the floor for meals in order to protect the furniture from getting contaminated by the cooked food and rice. The cook in her own vegetarian kitchen was a Bihari Brahmin. Although her children and grandchildren were baptized they had to partake of prasad on special occasions like their birthdays and on the occasion of the first rice eating ceremony. Sometimes missionary ladies visited the household and she had to sit at the table with them. Food was served but she would not partake of anything with them at the same table. Apparently once she had confessed to have gradually shred and dropped bits of a patty below the table.
after raising it to her lips under the pretence of eating it, for courtesy’s sake. Being a Hindu at heart she had even presented a golden Radha Krishna idol to the local temple in Hazaribagh. She also helped the poor very generously.

In order to keep herself clean she bathed several times a day and even during the chilly Bihar winters she did the same. In 1947 she was in her early eighties when she breathed her last due to pneumonia aggravated by her bathing fetish. She was buried next to her husband as she was a Christian according to church records. She herself had declared that she didn’t care what people did with her once she was dead. In her life she had been able to personalize her religious beliefs and practice and did not impose them on anyone else.

Hiranmoyee Dasi is an example of the mental turmoil experienced by a late nineteenth century Hindu woman caught in the tremendous pull between all that was familiar and socially acceptable to all that she had to accept per force and adjust with because of her husband’s sudden conversion to Christianity. She herself was certainly not confused as she was still a Hindu at heart and did not hide this from her progeny. Though she did not practice Christianity which she had officially accepted she respected her husband’s faith, the Bengali Christian community in Calcutta and in Hazaribagh knew that they were a Christian family her children were married into Bengali Christian households. Although she always covered her head she never hid in the andarmahal. After all she had to exercise her control over her little empire – she was the true matriarch. She did not have the westernized polish of the Calcutta bhadramahila but she was certainly not in the control of a patriarchal system. She had worked out her own space in which she dominated over everybody else in her own upper class respectable way. She was able to come out of the cloister of the traditional Hindu widow because of the difference that her husband had made to their lives through his conversion though she had not accepted the religion or the culture that had come with it.

91 Again there is no written evidence regarding these details but these are points that were corroborated by the cousins – Ira and Sumita Shikha who were interviewed separately and in two different locations.
The Victorian concepts of domesticity, conjugality and sexuality brought to India by the Evangelists had made their impact and created a new set of middle class values. But with the passage of time and the exposure to the external world these Bengali Christian women had evolved like their European counterparts, from the Victorian “Angel in the House” to the Bengali Christian new woman – traditional patriarchy had been sufficiently challenged.