Chapter Four

One Crusader, One Institution

In a state which was created on the linguistic basis (anti-Bengali), ironically it was the Bengali community, who took the lead in the field of women’s education, whether it was the case of the first school of the province (in 1867 the first girls school was tested at Patna by the Bengali community with the active co-operation of the principal of Patna college, Mc. Crindle. The name of Girish Chandra Ghose, Judge of the Small Causes-court may specially be mentioned in this connection\(^1\)) or the second one (Mokshada Girls School was established in January 1868 by the late K.D. Ghose father of Sri Aurobindo and a band of few other Brahmo young men as the Bhagalpur Girl’s institution\(^2\)) or the most prominent one, Bankipur girl’s High school in 1892.

4.0 The Crusader

In Patna the individual endeavour of Mrs. Aghor Kamini Devi (mother of Dr. B.C. Roy the first Chief Minister of Bengal) bore fruit and she founded the first girl’s high school of the province in 1892, with much strain and struggle. From 1877 onwards, the Brahmo Samaj in Patna was dominated by P.C. Roy and his wife Mrs. Aghore Kamini Devi. Sivanath Sastri rightly calls him “the soul of Bankipur Samaj”.\(^3\)

P.C. Roy came over to Bihar in 1874 in the service of the government as relief superintendent of Famine and was posted at Motihari;\(^4\) soon he was transferred to Patna. By 1881 Mrs. P.C. Roy had been convinced that a change in the status of women was urgently called for and for this they should be educated.\(^5\) She decided to open a school for girls in Patna. She realized that she was not adequately equipped to run an educational institution, because of lack of proper training. It speak volumes for the courage, determination and dedication of Mrs. Aghore Kamini Devi that in spite

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of being the mother of five children, she joined Isabelle Thoburn's famous women's college at Lucknow run by Christian missionaries in 1891.\(^6\) She stayed in the hostel for one complete session, lived the life of an ordinary hostler, submitted to the discipline, rules and regulations of the place and created an extremely good impression. Finding her an elderly lady, Principal Thoburn paid special attention to her and always insisted upon exempting her from many bindings and obligations. But she never sought concessions and considered herself equal to other students much younger to her. At the college, the environment was absolutely alien to her with young Christian and Anglo-Indian girls who dominated the schools rolls. But even in such strange environment she carried on her studies and learnt not only the kinder garden system, but also gained fairly good command over English & Hindi.\(^7\) She came back after a stay of nine months on 15 Dec. 1891 and opened the Bankipore Girl's school with ten girls at her rented bungalow in a beautiful surrounding at the bank of the Ganges. This bungalow belonged to one Englishman Stephen Bolland. The income of the school was only 48 Rs. Per month. It was run mainly on donations that too were irregular.\(^8\) The initial local response was of complete indifference. People would not send their daughters or sisters, as they were unwilling to expose their faces to public gaze. But Aghore Kamini never lost heart. Ten small girls at the outset!

Even these girls had to be brought from their homes. When parents showed unwillingness to send their daughters to the school because it would violate the *pardah* system, Aghore Kamini opened a hostel inside her house - *Chhatri Niwas*\(^9\) - so that girls would not give up their education.

Aghore Kamini enthusiastically visited the houses of prominent Brahmos and Bengalis in search of donations which were not forthcoming. She made friends with the mothers and gradually convinced them of the need for girls' education, gradually, this process of socialization yielded result. Many mothers agreed to send their girls to her school. This house visit and work of persuasion was one of the items in her daily

\(^7\) Ibid., p. 37
schedule. Some houses had to be visited numerous times and it needed a lot patience and tolerance to do such work. Some parents agreed to send their daughters on the condition that girls will be taught more of cooking than the three Rs. Taking into consideration the social conservatism, Prakash Chandra also suggested to her to lay more emphasis on cooking. But Aghore Kamini did not yield to this pressure too. She replied “What is there in cooking? I can teach the girls cooking in fifteen days. But what is needed more is the knowledge of arithmetic, geography and hygiene which would enlighten them and free them from permanent habitation in the kitchen. Indeed, these were the words coming from a Brahmo reformer of the late nineteenth century. It not only exuded the reformist zeal but also reflected the rebellious character of the Brahmo struggle against traditionalism. Education of girls was not all a likable propositions in the contemporary Bihari society. The age old traditionalism granting women an inferior status and confining them within the house was too based to be shaken. There had also been a shortage of teachers and this meant extremely heavy work for her.

The house along with the Roy family and children came to be called, paribar that is, family. She taught in the afternoon after heavy family work and spent the evening in looking after the records and files regarding the school management. Prakash Chandra often expressed surprise how she could manage so much of work. He believed that all human beings possess inexhaustible source of energy and therefore Aghore Kamini too as a sincere individual must be capable of doing a great work. By March 1892, fifteen Bihar girls also attended the school. Girls also came from outside the province. Besides Prakash Chandra and Guruprasad, two very sincere Brahmo missionaries Amritalal Bose and Brajagopal Niyogi helped her in various ways.

The subjects taught were arithmetic, geography and language. But Aghore Kamini had one problem. There was no teacher available to teach geography. She too did not have geography in her college course at Lucknow. Therefore, she tried to get over the problem herself. Prakash Chandra, who humorously called himself her

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10 Roy, op.cit., p. 145.
11 Ibid., p. 146.
12 Ibid., p. 148.
Pardhan Mantri or chief advisor, suggested her some readings on geography. She collected some books and did serious reading. After acquainting herself well with the subject she taught the girls very well.¹³ She further improved her teaching ability by reading books other than her own subjects. Prayer and physical exercise had also been in the daily routine. She got so involved with the girls that during Tiffin break she used to play with the girls and taught them several games. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee’s lyric Bande Matram was often sung in the prayer. She was able to give her love and affection to the girls and she greatly endeared her self to the girls. They regarded her as their mother and called her Majjee.¹⁴ The very utterance of the word used to fill the hearts of children with reverence.¹⁵ She attended the school and took classes even when she was ill. Often she went without eating as the food could not be prepared in time. She set such a good example of regularity and punctuality that other teachers also rarely remained absent and worked with full devotion in spite of the poor salary.¹⁶ The daily routine of Aghore Kamini gives an indication of her activities and engagements throughout the day. Her day began with prayer and sermons very early in the morning. Then she looked after her children and the school kids, who used to reside with her in an adjoining boarding house. After completing their bath and breakfast she used to prepare for the school and simultaneously arranged for Prakash Chandra’s departure to office. She remained engaged in school activities till 3’o clock, with a lunch break between twelve o’clock and one in the afternoon. During this time attention was paid to the education of the children. After the school she got engaged in various activities connected with the children for example, stitching their clothes, giving the dirty linen to the washer man, making quilt and shoes for them and so on. In the evening the children were helped in preparation of their lessons. Another compulsory involvement in the evening was attending to the sick and the diseased ones. This spirit of earning for the sick was an important quality of her character. In the holidays and sundays an additional work during the evening was meeting friends and visiting some Brahmo as well as non Brahmo families. She was not free even after dinner. She made estimates of the day’s expenses and recorded other financial accounts, like payment of salary to the teachers and so on. So the entire day kept her engaged in the activities concerning the school.

¹³ Ibid., p. 149.
¹⁴ Ibid., p. 151.
¹⁵ Ibid.
¹⁶ Ibid., p. 154.
One Sindhi gentleman Hiranand Jethwani was so impressed by the school that he brought his two daughters from far away Sind and put them in Aghore Kamini's care. *The Indian spectator,* the leading Calcutta newspaper reported on 2 April 1893:

> By far the most notable institution, however, at Bankipore, is an unpretentious Boarding House, managed by a Brahmo lady and her two daughters. Mrs. Prakash Chandra Rai is the wife of a gentleman who holds a respectable government appointment, and who is in well to do circumstances. At the age of 35 she and her husband took the vow of *Brahmacharya,* and both have religiously observed it up to date. With her husband's full consent, Mrs. Rai (Perhaps I should spell, 'Ray') went with her two daughters to Lucknow to study at Miss Thoburn's Institution there. One of the daughters is now 24, the other is much younger. The elder is married, but continuous to live with her parents, and to help them in their beneficent works. The younger girl is a pearl. She is unmarried, and looks after the children in the Boarding House with a little mothers care; and sets there the example of true sisterly love and self sacrifice. Mrs. Ray speaks English fluently, and is well read.

> Early in the morning the children in her home after their prayers in their own simple way for no set prayers are used, and no compulsion is put upon their tender conscience. Each of the elder boarders is in charge of one or two of the younger and each keeps a small dairy in which she notes down every day her failing and blacks hidings if any. The boarders attend the female school conducted under Mrs. Ray's supervision, and are helped in their studies at home by her and her daughters. The whole cost of education and boarding amounts to Rs. 7/- and odd per month. The children look bright and lively and the lesson of purity, self help and self sacrifice, taught to them by example and precept, are likely to have an enduring influence on their after life. The Boarding is not kept for profit; indeed, the amount charged to the boarders is much less than the actual cost. The deficit is made up by Mr. Ray who takes the deepest interest in the work of his wife and daughters.\(^\text{17}\)

> This is indeed a moving picture of a family fully devoted to the cause of education and upliftment. As year passed on, the struggle also increased. Finance proved to be the greatest hurdle. The maintenance of the boarding house, education of children and their caring during illness entailed a lot of expenditure. But she never gave up the hope and carried on with the school. She often used to forego her one time meal in order to feed the kids.\(^\text{18}\) Prakash Chandra often mentioned about the financial crisis in managing the school. But he was scolded by Aghore Kamini, "Why

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\(^{17}\) *The Indian Spectator,* 2 April 1893.

do you often complain about the lack of money? It reflects lack of faith in God's work.”19

So with lot of strain and stress the girls' school continued. A favourite song of Aghore Kamini had been Rabindranath Tagore's:

*Tomaro Patak jare dao,*  
*Tare bahibare shakati dao (In Bangla)*

Undoubtedly, she carried the banner of female emancipation with tremendous strength bestowed upon her by the blessings of God.

By 1896, the school became so well known that the then Chief Secretary, William Bolton, came to visit it. He was highly impressed by the school. He went straight to Aghore Kamini and said, “I am very pleased to see the school. In England this sort of work is generally done by unmarried or widowed women. How could you manage to do this with family and children?”20 Immediately he ordered the liberal sanction of grants. He also proposed the government takeover of the school, subject to the approval of the Managing Committee. This marked the end of the tremendous financial crisis the school was facing.

The struggle against tradition and convention reflected another aspect of the problem. Even if the financial crisis ended, the element of social resistance still continued. At every step Aghore Kamini and Prakash Chandra had to confront opposition of the orthodox religious elites, even for trivial matters. Once, for example, a storm of protest was raised when a girl appeared on the stage and presented a recitation.21 However, Aghore Kamini remained unperturbed. She evinced the Brahmo character of struggling against the old and traditional order. She wrote in her diary, “However, strong the oppositions I am not going to give up my struggle. This is my pledge.”22 This indeed reflected the truly rebellious character of Aghore Kamini.

19 Ibid.
20 Ibid. p. 199.
21 Ibid.
22 Ibid.
The school’s Managing Committee decided to hand over the school to the government in March, 1896. This was done mainly to avoid the financial problems the school was facing during private control. By a strange coincidence, the government decided to comply with the request of the Managing Committee and after a few days Aghore Kamini Devi passed away. Her diary records, on 31 March 1896, “Today the Managing Committee of the school has decided to hand over the school to the government. When the school was started there had been only five girls in the list. I depended on prayers to the Almighty. Owing to the prayers the school has forty girls today. Some new teachers have joined in and we are on the verge of retirement. Now the school has a lot of money, it is now rich,” 23 This proves that by March 1896, the school was in a favourable financial position. This was all the result of her untiring effort. The lamp of learning that she lighted continues to illuminate thousands of homes.

But the government did not take over the control of the school immediately. In fact, it took several years for the government to take control of the school. During this period, the school was managed mainly due to the efforts of Prakash Chandra Roy. It was he who called upon a devoted Brahmo Samaj member Brajagopal Niyogi to take charge as the Headmaster of the school and superintendent of the boarding house.

Prakash Chandra was the master as well as the mentor of Brajagopal. Therefore, on his request, the latter, who was then staying at Gaya and involved with the Samaj activities of the Gaya Brahmo Samaj, came to Patna in February 1982. 24 It was till then managed by Bidhan Mandali. On Prakash Chandra’s request, Brajagopal came from Gaya to manage the school. At that time, the school was located at the Sabjibagh area across the present Ashok Rajpath, very close to the Civil Court at Adalat. It was, in fact, located in the compound of the Adalat. The school itself had a compound. The school had a strong one storied pukka building. The quarter of the Principal was located in one corner of the compound. Brahagopal stayed here for four years. He was a great fighter for the cause of female education. The experiences he gained and the efforts he made for the proper education of women and girls were later applied by him in the foundation of Calcutta’s famous Victoria Institution, which

23 Ibid.
24 Niyogi, op.cit., p. 44.
became the symbol of women’s march towards freedom and progress in the early twentieth century Bengal. Under his supervision the school showed improvement and underwent expansion. It is recorded that mainly the girls from middle class Bengali families and some rich Bihari families attended the school because there was no other girls school except St. Joseph’s Convent which mainly the girls of British and European families attended.\(^{25}\)

Though this school was the premier institution for the education of girls in Bihar, mainly Bengali girls attended this school in the beginning. In 1906 the average number of girls in the school was 50, all of them were Bengalis.\(^{26}\) Since the institution was under the Brahmo Samaj it could not attract the Bihari population. Moreover the commissioner of Patna was not satisfied with the management of this school. The Director of Public Instruction, while discussing female education in Bihar remarked, it has not been doing good work since its establishment.” So, a Middle English school for *pardanashin* girls was sanctioned.\(^{27}\)

This apathy for a Brahmo school was obvious since the Biharis felt repelled at the personal conduct of some of the Brahmos (Aghore Kamini was one of them), who had taken to drinking and flaunting their disregard of all caste taboos, in intermixing inter-caste marriages, taking out their women folk in the open etc. Even some of the contemporary Europeans with all their desire for modernization of the Indians disliked the conduct of these Brahmos.\(^{28}\) Hence if the Biharis ignored the faith and did not send their daughters to this school, one can understand it.

However, Aghore Kamini Devi’s continued efforts to attract girls in larger number from Bihari families,\(^{29}\) bore fruit and the number of girls coming from Bihari families gradually increased. For encouraging female education among Bihari girls, Brajagopal also used Hindi as the medium of instruction. However, female education

\(^{25}\) Ibid.
\(^{26}\) S.N. Pandey, *Education and Social Change in Bihar*, Delhi, 1975, p. 28
\(^{27}\) Proceedings of Govt. of Bengal, General Department (Education) April 1906, Nos. 8-9, pp. 60-61.
\(^{28}\) “It is true that few members of the Brahmo Samaj – that is the new Deist religion – have thrown off the trammels of caste openly and are glad to frequent the European society; and many of them, unfortunately, in consequence of the removal of caste restraint, have become dissolute and drunken and their society is not desirable.” An ex – civilian, “Like in the Mofussil or the civilian in Lower Bengal (K London n.d.) 147 in S. Gopal, op.cit, p.48.
\(^{29}\) Ibid.
was not yet encouraged in the conservative Bihari families. Of course, Brajagopal did not give up the efforts and on account of his genuine involvement, the number of girls on the school rolls was increasing, and in this way the Bankipore Girl’s School played a pioneering role in the sphere of female education in Bihar.

Though the formal connection with the Brahmo Samaj was ended with the government’s take over, yet the informal connection continued till the middle of the twentieth century. In the first three decades of the present century more than half of the teachers of the school were Brahmos. Some lady teachers also came from Bengal. Several Brahmo ladies worked with tremendous devotion and unceasing energy to make it a great institution of learning for women. Prominent among these ladies were Banolata Dey, Muktikana Bose, Amarabala Pal, Shobhana Niyogi, Sushama Sen Gupta and Shobha Das. Banolata Dey, served as the Lady Principal of the school for a long time and under her leadership the school for a long time and under her leadership the school attained remarkable progress. Her principal ship was crucial because that witnessed the gradual transformation of the school as a top ranking high school for girls. Presently, the school with its majestic building opposite Golghar on the beautiful bank of the Ganges is definitely one of the oldest and a pioneer girl’s school in the state.

In her ideas and attitude Aghore Kamini was incredibly ahead of her time. In that age of diehard conservation particularly in respect of the status of women, she fought for the liberation of woman form the age old bondage in a tradition bound society. She openly advocated widow remarriage and inter caste marriage. She went against the convention of a caste ridden society when she arranged the marriage of her eldest daughter Susharbasini, with a young school teacher Brindavan Sur who belonged to a lower caste. The orthodox Hindu opinion reacted sharply and criticized them. In fact, the event provoked some Brahmos to renounce Brahmoism, but she remained firm. A sympathizer even threatened to “horse-whip” P.C. Roy for

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30 Roy op.cit., p.69
32 Bihar Bandhu, 7 Aug. 1894.
33 Roy, op.cit, p. 53.
having dared to marry his daughter to a man of a different caste. Even his mother left his house out of protest.\textsuperscript{34}

Aghore Kamini on the question of \textit{purdah} showed a defiant attitude. She decided to discard \textit{purdah} and sought to sit with the men folk during their prayers.\textsuperscript{35} From Patna she went to Hilsa in an open carriage without covering her face.\textsuperscript{36} Of course she was ridiculed, but did not budge. She thereafter regularly led groups of Brahmos both male and female to Rajigir and other places.\textsuperscript{37} In Rajigir the Brahmo girls sang \textit{Kirtan}\textsuperscript{38} in the market place. She repeated this number of times. She even put girls on the stage when a dramatic performance was organized to celebrate Maghotsav.\textsuperscript{39} For her courage in defying \textit{purdah} Mrs. Roy was vehemently criticized by her contemporaries. At one point some detractor even compared her conduct with that of “women of the street”.\textsuperscript{40}

P.C. Roy records that Aghore Kamini proceeded on the Brahmo belief that the “God is our father and all men and women are brothers and sisters, enjoying His equal protection and the benevolence of His Will”. Every member of the Samaj whether male or female has equal rights, \textsuperscript{41} according to Aghore Kamini. This idea was ingrained in her mind and her life was one of continuous struggle for emancipation of women. The founding of the girl’s school at Bankipore was an endeavour with this noble objective in her mind.\textsuperscript{42}

4.1 One Institution

First College of the Province

(The entire account of the following section is based on the interview with Sr. Lucile\textsuperscript{3} July/2004, and the Golden Jubilee souvenir of Patna Women’s College).

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{34} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 69.
\item \textsuperscript{35} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 41.
\item \textsuperscript{36} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 79.
\item \textsuperscript{37} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 70.
\item \textsuperscript{38} Devotion Song in praise of god.
\item \textsuperscript{39} Roy \textit{op.cit}, p. 76.
\item \textsuperscript{40} Roy, \textit{op.cit}, p.183.
\item \textsuperscript{41} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 266.
\item \textsuperscript{42} \textit{Ibid.}, p. 90.
\end{itemize}
“Even as late as 1940” Mother Theodosia (second principle of Patna Women’s college) explains, “Women’s education had not made such great strides in India, as it did after India’s independence. In Bihar the situation was even less advanced. In fact, although in some states, a grave concern was shown for women’s higher education, Bihar lagged far behind in this respect.”

The Bishop of Patna, Dr. B.J. Sullivan S.J., was looking out for religious women who would take in hand the higher education of girls. Thus begins the early chronicler of the first institution of the higher education for the women of Bihar. The Bishop invited sisters of St. Joseph’s from Calicut to found the college, led by Mother Josephine and Mother Clarissa.

Both of them came first in October 1939 and the finally on 16th April, 1940, taking great pains of the journey from Mangalore. Bishop Sullivan put his home at the disposal of the college and took care of every little thing sisters needed and saw every bit of the initial work formation of the Governing Body of the new college, drafting of the application to the Syndicate, getting the Senate to pass the approval of the Syndicate and of the initial staff. So that when the pioneer sisters arrived they were already professors of Patna Women’s College.

The first meeting of the Governing body of the college was held on 26th June, 1940. It gave an opportunity for the publicity of the ideas, aims and plans concerning the English system of education on higher level. The principal’s report was published in all the local papers. The inauguration was held on 1 July 1940. The small group gathered in the library which had first batch of 12 students. An address was read by one of the first students on the roll, Chinmaya Dasgupta. Before the end of July, the number had risen to 25 on 20th July; the government sanction for the opening of the college was received.

Affiliation was granted for the following subjects: Hindi, Bengali, French, English, Economics, Logic, Domestic Science, Education, History, Geography, Vernacular Composition (Hindi & Bengali) and Alternative English. From the start, stress was laid on library work and extra curricular activities. Debates, games editing the magazines were encouraged among the girls.
The college hostel began as a house for lady students of various colleges – 4 of P.W.C. students, 1 from Science College and 9 from B.N.R. Training College. In March 1941 B.A. classes were affiliated to the college. Mother Clarissa and Sister Benedicta visited Lady Irwin College, Delhi and Muslim University, Aligarh to get an idea of the equipment needed for domestic Science and Geography. The death of Rabindranath Tagore on 8 August 1941 was the occasion for a spurt of activities that brought important men to the college as chief guest and gave a boost to the image of the college.

The exams for the first batch of intermediate students began on 22 February 1942 out of 16 students, Chinmaya DasGupta bagged a first Division which no lady had secured for the last twenty years in the province and the college success percentage was 69 per cent while the university had only 49 per cent. In 1942 college was caught up in the civil Disobedience movement and it was closed for 3 months.

Taking stock of the financial state of the college mother Theodosia appealed to the Governor, Sir Thomas Rutherford, for a grants both recurring and non-recurring. In 1944 Mother Theodosia was awarded the Silver Kaiser – I – Hind medal for her valuable services in the field of education, both in Madras presidency and in Bihar. In 1945, a great spurt in the college life took place, numbers increased, influenced no doubt by the brilliant results of the previous year. Mother Theodosia was nominated to the Bihar council of women.

For the sisters a very special event was their interview with Mahatma Gandhi in Delhi, when he gave them a ten minutes interview in 1948 and Mother Theodosia was nominated as a member of the Syndicate, the first woman in the annals of the University to be so honored. About this time too the college was honored by a visit from Mrs. Sarojini Naidu, the nightingale of India.

Towards the middle of the year 1948 it became imperative despite paucity of funds to introduce science in to the curriculum. In July 1940 it was started and the college moved to the new building on Bayley Road, opposite Patna High Court.
In 1949 All India University commission visited Patna and found the college activities satisfactory. The legislative Patna university Act of 1952 transferred every college with its buildings, land, equipment and staff (teaching and non teaching) to the administration of the University and on 2nd January 1952 Patna women’s college became a constituent college of Patna University and over the years produced jewels like Captain Durba Banerjee, the first women pilot of India with the greatest number of flight hours in the world a record of the woman pilot, Mr. Tarkeshwari Sinha the first ex-student to be come a member of Parliament, Ms. Anuradha Mansingh, the IAS topper from the college and Ms. Manjari Jaruhar the first IPS officer from this college (As narrated to me by Sr. Lucile ex-principal of the college on 15th July, 2004, and references from the Souvenir published at the 50th anniversary of the college in 1990).