CHAPTER – 6

EMANCIPATED AND EDUCATED WOMEN: THE NEW WOMEN IN THE NOVELS OF SHANTA DEVI AND SITA DEVI
CHAPTER – 6

EMANCIPATED AND EDUCATED WOMEN: THE NEW WOMEN IN
THE NOVELS OF SHANTA DEVI AND SITA DEVI

6.1 Women education in Bengali society

At the beginning of the 19th century there was practically no arrangement for women's education in Bengal. Contemporary evidence suggests that it would have been a herculean task to bring middle class women out of the deeply curtained inner chambers of their homes. Not that attempts had not been made to dispel notions that women would become widows if they studied, but the fruits of such efforts were enjoyed only by a few aristocratic families. Even their women studied indoors under the supervision of lady teachers. As in all other matters relating to women, here also the scriptures used to be quoted in favour of keeping women illiterate. And once again it was the same scriptures which informed that in the Vedic ages there was no such bar, women were free to move around in society and to receive education. In the last chapter we have seen that many slokas of the Rig Veda were composed by women who thus attained the stature of sages or rishis. These compositions speak volumes of their erudition and qualities of imagination. Particular mention must be made of Ghosa, Saswati, Ghora, Apala, who were rishikas or female rishis.

Not that ancient society was totally free from resistance to women's learning. At the request of his wife Maitreyee, Yajnyabalkya had imparted education to her but at the same time, confronted by Gargi's sharp questions, had said that if she asked any more, her head would fall off, something which he had never told a man. Yet the doors of education were not closed to women.
In the post Rig Veda era, women began to lose their rights. This was the time of Aryans mingling with non-Aryans and since many women from the latter communities had entered Aryan homes, it was thought that the former rights must be taken away. Actually throughout the ages men had never wholly accepted that women had a right to get educated but had to yield in the face of stubborn determination to be part of the enlightened world,

Women like Khana, Maitreyee in the Vedic ages, Gulbedan Begum, Jahanara, Noorjahan in the Mughal period, 'Vidya' in the Bengali literature of the Middle Ages, Anandamoyee Devi, Gangamani Devi, Hati Vidyalankar, Drabamoyee Devi, Shyammohini Devi, these were the representatives of the enlightened world. On the other hand were the 'millions who represented the world of darkness, for whom there were the kitchen utensils only. If some was aged eight, the other was the eighteenth wife of a decrepit kulin.

Society was then an immoveable burden which did not enjoy the freedom to think, did not have any conscience, had only a blind adherence to rituals which passed off as religion. That society was fragmented into many parts, unity was not even thought of. Yet there appeared on the scene some men who had embarked on a daring expedition. History has termed them reformers.

The initial steps towards women's education were hesitant. In front of them blocking the way stood orthodoxy like the Himalayas, its purpose, to keep women away from books. The arguments were many. If they went in for studies women would either become widows or lose their character. And there was the Smriti Shastra : girls must be married off before they were ten and in their in-laws' place where would they get the time to study?

Yet there were exceptions within the conservatives. While Bhabanicharan Bandyopadhyay, Ramkamal Sen and others wanted women to be kept away a thousand
miles from education, some others were not averse to the idea provided the girls studied within the confines of their homes. This group was led by Radhakanta Dev. But even they did not favour the learning of English as that language was needed to earn money and surely women would not have to do that. Though a conservative, Radhakanta Dev was not reactionary and made some contributions in the early stages of women's education. The Calcutta School Society established in 1817 had under it schools where girls were also taught and they sat for their examinations at Radhakanta Deb's house. This system continued till 1824 when it was discontinued. Thus on principle he was not opposed to women getting educated. On June 27, 1832, Samachar Darpan wrote:

"He (Radhakanta Dev) had patronised the teaching of girls. It was at" his home that girls first sat for examinations and they were the first Hindu girls to do so. We also saw him taking interest in Miss Wilson's school and suggesting ways in which girls could be encouraged to study."¹

Radhakanta's problem perhaps lay elsewhere. His wealth and stature tempted him to be the leader of society which was largely conservative at that time. He seemed to be in a dilemma, he could not oppose the spread of education among women and at the same time did not favour their going out to study. Some Hindu pundits, however, did not have that problem and openly proclaimed the need for educating girls. Two names must be mentioned, those of Gourmohan Vidyalankar and Gourisankar Tarkabagish. Both played pioneering role in the campaign for women's education, at a time when their contemporaries like Rammohan Roy do not appear to have said anything on the subject. Gourisankar was the editor of Sambad Bhaskar and Rasaraj and when Bethune School was established he was one of the few Hindus to welcome the move. In an editorial in Sambad Bhaskar on May 26, 1849, he wrote:
"We met Raja Rammohun Roy in Calcutta and informed him that we were engaged in efforts to end evil practices like sati and also to allow widows to re-marry and women to get educated even if lakhs of people take up arms against us we shall speak in favour of schools for girls."ii

Some Brahmin pundits did not just speak in favour of such education but also sent girls of their own families to school to ensure the move's success. Two of the twenty one girls who joined Bethune School in the first year, were the daughters of Madanmohan Tarkalankar who had written a long article in Sarvasubhakari in support of the idea. Pundit Taranath Tarkavachaspati had also sent his daughters to Bethune School.

Then there was Young Bengal whose members believed in education for all. Its views used to be published in journals like Parthenon, Enquirer and Jnananeshwan. Other bodies like Academic Association also discussed the idea, favouring it. On the other hand Kashi Prasad, though Western educated, bitterly criticised the idea in his Hindu Intelligencer. In May 1849 Gourishankar wrote in Samhad Bhaskar:

"We wish to ask the editor of Hindu Intelligencer why he, though trained in the English language, is opposing women's education, have they in any way caused him mental anguish.

Mr. Editor if you publish the reasons why Hindu girls should no go to school for studies then we shall reply to each point and if we fail we shall consider you the victor. Do you think that by such articles you will ingratiate yourself with the orthodox groups? If that is what you think, then why cannot Baboo Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay join any such group."iii

Such exchanges between Gourishankar and Kashi Prasad were common at that time. The Christian missionaries wanted women to be educated for reasons of their own. They were finding it impossible to acquaint Bengali women with the Bible and so their
wives took the responsibility upon themselves, either individually or through organizations under the church; The East India Company on the other hand pursued a policy of non-interference on social matters, fearing any reaction which might harm their interest in the country. But that stand had to be changed with the 1813 Charter in which the East, India Company was told by the British Parliament to allow missionaries, to work and to spend at least one lakh rupees every year from its profits for the education of natives; The purpose was to create a band of Western educated Indians who would serve British interests, of course-without hurting sentiments.

This encouraged the missionaries and particularly their wives to no end. In 1816-17 the missionaries at Serampore partitioned off a portion of their boys' school for girls. This was the first step towards women's education outside their homes. The missionaries at Dutch Serampore were very active and the Baptist Missionary Society under Dr. William Carey (1761-1834) had played a very important role.

Then there was Robert May (1788-1818) of the London Missionary Society. He arrived in Chinsurah in 1812 and in 1818 started a school for girls there with 14 students. Mention must also be made of Hannah Marshman who had started a similar school in 1807 at Serampore. In the absence of, statistical evidence, however, the credit of starting the first school for girls goes to Mr. May. Mr. May who may be regarded as the pioneer of 'lower female education' started a Girl's school at Chinsurah shortly before his death in 1818, his efforts did not produce much success and the institution was discontinued by the Company's Government. May died at the age of thirty. Speaking of him a contemporary missionary Thomas Thompson said, "a little active man never so happy as when he is teaching children and managing schools, he has a peculiar facility and practical wisdom which, few possess. He seems admirably qualified for such understanding".iv
In 1817 David Hare set up his School Book Society in Calcutta, for publishing in Bengali textbooks for girls. Helped by the Church Missionary Society Miss Mary Anne Cooke established thirty schools for girls between 1823 and 1828 and contemporary records say that quite a few local girls had been educated there.

In 1823 Carey, Marshman and Ward became very active in Serampore for popularising the Bible through girls' schools and The Serampore Native Female Education Society came into being. They wanted to reach the middle class and the rich through day schools and boarding schools for girls. As a result of, their efforts Bengal had, by the end of 1850, twenty six day schools with 690 students and 28 boarding schools with 836 students.

Two of the fourteen schools that Mrs. Marshman and Mrs. Emilia Carey had set up, were located at Rishra which they pronounced Ishera. The schools were Dankuni Line School (Number One Ishera) with 16 girls and Stirling School (Number Two Ishera) with 20, girls. At these schools they studied Bengali, history, geography, simple arithmetic and learnt how to sew. And of course studied the Bible. Samachar Darpan of April 10, 1824, carried an item on the examinations and prize distribution ceremony :

On April 5 at 10 in morning the girl students of Serampore and nearby areas sat for their examinations at the house of Babugopal Mullick. In all 230 girls had gathered. Many sahibs and their bibis (wives) had come, the girls read out from small books, spelt out words. Later Mrs. Marshman distributed clothes, coins, pictures etc. Some had sweets and left for their homes others had made things like socks, handkerchieves and small bags which were exhibited to the satisfaction of all.’

Initially prominent Hindus of Serampore had helped the missionaries to set up girls' schools as they had when the schools for boys had come up. Later the purpose of the missionaries became
clear to them and they kept themselves away from efforts to build schools in the villages. The poor among the upper castes also stopped sending their daughters to these schools.

That the main purpose of these schools was to spread Christianity was commented upon even by an orthodox Christian like Reverend Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay.

He said, "Now the Public schools.......... little has been done in educational though much attempted in the catechizing way."v

It was because of this that such schools did not last long and the Christian missions were forced to give up attempts at spread of education, seeing the rising public opinion against them. The over stress on religious training had invited the ire of men like Radhakanta Dev, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Raja Vaidyanath and others. It has to be remembered that Bengali society was still very conservative and women from upper caste homes did not attend these schools leaving their purdah behind them. The students came mainly from lower caste families and some poor upper caste ones too, though it is doubtful whether they did so out of any urge for education or because of other reasons--'artificial encouragement' as Krishnamohan Bandyopadhyay put it. On 24.2.1838 Samachar Darpan carried the following letter from a brahmin :vi

"Some well meaning sahibs and their wives have set up schools for women. In one or two places very low caste girls go to these schools for clothes and other things. At other places their efforts have failed."

It would, however, be a travesty of truth to suggest that all efforts by the missionaries had failed. At Serampore Mary Hannah Marshman had set an example by employing all her energy towards women's education. In May 1818 she had written in Friend of India, published by
the Serampore mission, appealing to European women to bring out their counterparts in India from darkness and to make them conscious of their own existence.

People like William Ward and Hannah Marshman also had the spread of Christianity as their goal. But the spread of education among women was also very much on their minds and their efforts did have an impact on the poor lower caste Hindus and those of other religious persuasion. So whatever their ultimate aim might have been, they deserve a place in the history of women's education in India. It also needs to be kept in mind that no aristocratic Hindu had displayed their kind of sincerity in this sphere.

Later, however, some men came forward. Once again it was Rammohun Roy who played a leading role in making his countrymen aware of the need for women's education. At the same time he was vehemently opposed to Sanskrit teaching. In 1823 he wrote to the Governor-General Lord Amherst, "The Sanskrit system of education would be the best calculated to keep this country in darkness."vii

In the second half of the 19th century there was a great debate on women's education. Particularly in 1849 when J.E.D. Bethune set up his Hindu Female School. According to one opinion he had been inspired in doing this by the school that Peary Charan Sarkar and others set up at Barasat in 1847. That school, however, had failed to create any stir in the society.

As seen earlier some Hindus had wholeheartedly supported Bethune. But for the large part Bengali society was against him and those who had sent their daughters to the school were almost ostracized. Writing to Lord Dalhousie in March 1850, Bethune said:

“Every kind of annoyance and persecution was set on foot to deter my friends from continuing to support the school and with such success that at one time the number of enrolled pupils
dwindled to 07 and on some occasion not more than 3/4 were present in the school. At this time the question was agitated whether or not I should offer stipends to the girls who attended, as was done of the first establishment of some of the Govt. Colleges and I was assured that if I would offer 5 or 6 rupees a month to each, I might count on immediately recruiting to the school to any extent that I might think desirable from Brahminical families of unquestioned caste and respectability."viii

Bethune was not willing to increase the number of students in that way. Despite all odds he kept the school going but after his death conditions became precarious. However, it did not shut down as both Lord Dalhousie and his wife were interested in the education of girls and their assistance kept the school going. Slowly the government's attitude was also changing and in 1854 the importance of women's education was acknowledged in Wood's despatch. The need for financial assistance was also mentioned.

Soon after the establishment of the school, Bethune had appointed Vidyasagar as the honorary secretary and he was one of the Bengalis who played a great part in its success. His report of December 15, 1862, read in part as follows:

"The pupils are taught in Bengali. The subjects are, arithmetic, history, geography, history of Bengal, life stories, and sewing. There is one headmistress, two teachers to assist her and two pundits. Judging by the way the number of pupils is going up, the committee feels that the popularity of the school, is increasing among that section for which it was established."ix

Vidyasagar, however, had spoken too early. Resistance and indifference stood in the way of the school progressing and in 1868 Bamabodhini expressed its anguish on learning that the number of students stood at only thirty. The journal quoted the Friend of India to say that for such, a small number the government was spending one lakh, forty two thousand, seven hundred and seventy six rupees which amounted to sheer waste of money.
Bambodhini was not wrong in its observation. Bethune School of course went on to play an important role in the spread of women's education. As for Vidyasagar at the request of Lt. Governor Haliday he opened a number of such schools in Burdwan, Hooghly, Midnapore and Nadia districts. Here another name must be mentioned. Four years before Bethune, in 1845 the zamindar of Uttapara Joykrishna Mukhopadhyay had tried his best to introduce education for women in rural areas. If he had received the government's permission then girls school at Uttapara would have been a predecessor to Bethune's school.

Joykrishna believed that daughters also had to be brought up with care and educated. He had promised that if he was allowed to establish his school, his two daughters, Lakshmi and Saraswati, would study there. His thoughts were revolutionary for rural Bengal of that age and the collector D. J. Money had reported:

“Here is the proof, if proof were wanting, of the change that is taking place. Babu Joykissen Mukherjee has made a great step towards a reformation among his countrymen. He is in advance of them. He is shaking OFF the clogging dust of tradition and custom and has commenced in earnest the march of the true philanthropist, may his enlightened views be attended with complete success.”

The Education Council did not permit him to open his school but he was not disheartened. Four years later he again applied for permission. He had said that apart from donating the land he would give Rs. 2000 for constructing the school building and would give Rs. 60 every month to meet the running cost and no fees would be charged from the girls. Their syllabus would include Bengali, drawing and painting, needlework and English would be kept as an optional subject. But permission was again denied. Though he could not establish a school at Uttapara, he donated Rs. 10,000 for constructing the Bethune School and Bethune acknowledged that Joykrishna had thought of women's education before he did. After this
Joykrishna got involved with other-social welfare work. His dream, however, came true in 1863, thanks to the efforts of his two brothers Bijoykrishna and Rajkrishna.

To men like Joykrishna Mukhopadhyay the 19th century was a time of hope. It was due to him and some other zmindars that a number of girls' schools came up in the villages of Hooghly district. A man ahead of his times, Joykrishna wanted his countrymen to be educated primarily through the medium of Bengali and use English as the vehicle of higher education. He enjoyed the support of Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar who at that time had been appointed Assistant Inspector and advised him on how to go about in the work of spreading education.

It was due to Joykrishna’s efforts that ten Anglo-Bengali schools were established in Hooghly, at Jirat, Mayapur, Boluti, Dwarbashini, Rasikpur (Mandalgram), Khamargachi, Kumir Mora, Puinan, Jagatballavpur and Jejur villages.

It has also been observed that Lt Governor Halliday seeking Vidyasagar's help for the spread of women's education. This was natural as Vidyasagar's work as the Principal of Sanskrit College had earned for him the admiration of officials. Shortly before he was promoted to the post of Lt. Governor, Halliday had sent a minute to the Governor General to which he had appended a note prepared by Vidyasagar which revealed his farsightedness in the matter of primary education. Despite objections from some quarters, Halliday had left it to Vidyasagar to select sites for some model Bengali schools and he did that touring the districts and selecting places with great care.

The Lt. Governor made Vidyasagar his principal adviser and the latter got down to the task of establishing model schools for girls on the same lines as the ones for boys. He believed that in this also the government would be wholly with him and in one year, between 1857 and 1858, he set up thirty five such schools in Hooghly, Burdwan and Midnapore. Twenty of these
schools were in Hooghly. Given below is a list of the villages where, these were located, the time of their establishment and monthly expenses.

The following table below show the expenses:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VILLAGE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COST (IN RUPEES)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Petra</td>
<td>November 24, 1857</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daspur</td>
<td>November 26, 1857</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bainchi</td>
<td>December 01, 1857</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Digushui</td>
<td>December 07, 1857</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Talandu</td>
<td>December 07, 1857</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hatia</td>
<td>December 15, 1857</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hayera</td>
<td>December 15, 1857</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Napara</td>
<td>January 30, 1858</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Udayrajpur</td>
<td>March 02, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ramjibanpur</td>
<td>March 16, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Akarpur</td>
<td>March 28, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Siakhala</td>
<td>April 01, 1858</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mahesh</td>
<td>April 01, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Birsingha</td>
<td>April 01, 1858</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goalsara</td>
<td>April 04, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Vidya
asagar did not know he had a shock waiting for him. On May 7, 1857, the Government of India informed that without adequate voluntary donations such schools should not be established. He realised that his efforts were to go unrewarded. The amount due to teachers on account of their salaries was Rs. 3439 for they had not received any payment from the day they joined duty.

On June 26, 1858, he wrote to the Director of Public Instruction that the schools had been established with the understanding that the government would meet the expenses if the local people constructed the building. "Now it appears that the schools will have to be wound up as Govt. of India is not prepared to assist on that condition. Neither you nor the Bengal Government had any objections, if you had then I would not have been in this helpless condition. Now salaries have to be paid and you will be, doing me an injustice if you ask me to pay the salaries from my own resources."\(^\text{11}\)

The DPI informed the Bengal Government of this letter and added that if a man like Vidya
asagar felt discouraged then the work of spreading women's education would suffer. The Lt. Governor wrote to the Govt. of India which wanted to know who had given the pundit the impression that the money would be sanctioned? In his reply Vidya
asagar pointed out that as the government had already assisted in the setting up of some schools he had also hoped to get such assistance—"not only that, at every stage I had kept you (DPI) informed. I thought I

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>VILLAGE</th>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>COST (IN RUPEES)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dandipur</td>
<td>April 04, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Depur</td>
<td>May 01, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Raujupur</td>
<td>May 01, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malaypur</td>
<td>May 12, 1858</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bishnudaspur</td>
<td>May 15, 1858</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TABLE NO.01**
was acting according to the wishes of the government and always received encouragement for my efforts.\textsuperscript{xii}

Such correspondence continued and finally the Lt. Governor informed the Govt. of India that the whole thing was based on a misunderstanding both on the part of the Lt. Governor and the pundit and keeping this in view some favourable decision may be taken". On December 22, 1858, Govt. of India informed that the amount due to teachers would be paid by it and the Secretary of State would be requested for sanction of Rs. 1000, a part of which would be spend on the schools set up by Vidyasagar and the rest on other model schools which were supported by the government.

Secretary of State did not sanction any such amount. This was understandable as their hands were then full with the Sepoy Mutiny and they had little time for education. Vidyasagar's close associate Dwarkanath Bidysabhusan wrote in Somprakash :

"Vidyasagar lost all sense when it came to the welfare of his country. He thought the Lt. Governor's support was enough and there was no cause for worry. When such a cause arose he might not have, been frustrated but was cerainly hurt."\textsuperscript{xiii}

The actual problem was a difference of opinion with the Education Department director Young. Though the Lt. Governor had requested Vidyasagar to set up these girls schools, there was nothing in writing and Young opposed Vidyasagar taking advantage of this absence of records. He succeeded.

Meanwhile to shoulder this new responsibility Vidyasagar had resigned as the Principal of Sanskrit college. He was thus in some financial trouble but had not entirely given up hopes about these schools. For running these he started a fund for women's education. Contributions came regularly from some eminent persons including Pratap Chandra Sinha, Raja
of Paikpara. The new Lt. Governor Sir Cecil Beadon also used to contribute Rs. 55 every month. We find him writing on May 30, 1863, that he was sending Rs. 165 as contribution for the months of April, May and June.

While the schools were run with such contributions and their number grew, the lack of teachers began to be felt. The problem began to be discussed in various journals. In 1866 the reputed social worker Miss Mary Carpenter came to Calcutta from England and got down to the task of collecting information about the conditions of women and their education. She desired to meet Vidyasagar and soon a warm relationship developed. Along with the then director of education W. S. Atkinson they visited the girls school at Uttapara. On the return journey the carriage overturned and Vidyasagar was hurt on the knee.

After looking around for herself Miss Carpenter encouraged the government to make arrangements for the setting up teacher training schools. In this she was supported by Keshab Chandra Sen, Manmohan Ghosh, Dwijendranath Tagore and others. As secretary of Bethune School, Vidyasagar was opposed to the idea as he felt that adult women would not be available to learn how to teach. His objection was ignored and along with Bethune School a normal school was started for producing teachers.

Actually this was not, an entirely new move. In Chinsurah the missionaries had established such a school where the teachers; used to be trained to teach in the villages. The Serampore mission had also planned such a school.

But people had their doubts. One of them wrote in 'Somparakash'—"who will come to these schools? Native widows? We can say that no upper caste widows will come. Such a school in Dacca has only attracted women of the Vaishnav faith who are not respected in society.
John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune (Founder of Bethune College, Kolkata)

Bethune School (Laying of Foundation Stone (Cornwallis Square, Kolkata, Year 1850)

IMAGE 7(a) IMAGE 7(b)

[Source Image 7(a) & 7(b): Retrieved from http://www.bethunecollege.ac.in/]

Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar

Sir Frederick James Halliday

IMAGE 8(a) IMAGE 8(b)

Nobody would be able to blame parents if they refuse to send their daughters to schools where such women would be teachers.\textsuperscript{xiv} In a letter to Lt. Governor William Grey, Vidyasagar voiced his reservations, pointing out that it would be futile to expect a society to allow adult women to come out of their homes when it did not allow little girls to do so. He said he would have been the first to support the move if it had any chance of success but since that was not the case he could not advise the government to go in for this.

This letter was written in 1867 when Vidyasagar had gone through many bitter experiences. During his campaign for widow marriage he had seen how fragile was the liberalism of many and the failure of the roots of western education to go down deep-in them.

Others, however, did not support him. Bamabodhini wrote that women teachers were essential for girls who needed soft treatment. Also the presence of women teachers would remove reservations in the minds of parents about sending their daughters to school. And as for the .need to go to school, the paper pointed out that at home the girls cannot expect to get proper education from fathers and brothers who have other things to do. It was further pointed out that women trained in such, schools would be able to at least serve their own villages and families which also would be of great advantage to society.

Another journal \textit{Somprakash} felt that instead of raising objections people should wait to see the response to these Normal Schools. The reference to objections was aimed at Vidyasagar. However, Vidyasagar's fears came true, The Normal School that had been established had to be closed down within three years. In the spread of women's education the newly formed Brahmo Samaj, its leader Keshab Chandra Sen and his young followers played a significant role. It was due to their effort that in later days women's teacher training school was established. Mention must be made of the society they established, the \textit{Bamabodhini Sabha} in this regard.
An important development was the formation of the *Hitakari Sabha* or Welfare Association, in Uttarpara. Established in 1863, one of its prime objects was the spread of women's education. It received generous contributions from the Maharaja of Travancore (modern Kerala) and the princely state of Holkar. The money was used to enable poor students to study in schools of their choice and scholarships were given to girls in Konnagar, Bally, Serampore, Shibpur, Ariadaha and other places. Pyarimohan Bandyopadhyay, the noted lawyer of Allahabad, was then spending his days of retirement in Uttarpara and he donated his entire property to the *Hitakari Sabha* for women's education. The *sabha* established girls' schools in Uttarpara and adjoining villages and the government report of 1864-65 said:

"Several girls' schools have been established in Howrah and Hooghly districts. The *Hitakari Sabha* with a view to encouraging these institutions have resolved to hold general examinations at the end of February 1865 and to institute eight scholarships of two rupees tenable for one year". xv (Report on Public Institutions 1864-65).

The stepbrother of Joykrishna Mukhopadhyaya, Bijoykrishna Mukhopadhyaya, and brother Rajkrishna Mukhopadhyay were, directly associated with the *sabha* but not Joykrishna though he devoted himself to other social work. This was because of family reasons and his biographer Ambika Charan Gupta made no mention of *Hitakari Sabha*. To enable girls to study and sit for examinations within their homes, the Sabha had evolved a system unique at that time. This really helped in the spread of education in the entire region comprising Hooghly, Howrah and Burdwan. Among the women who benefitted from such education was the poet Kamini Roy.

The members of the first year's governing body were, Bijaykrishna Mukhopadhyay (President), Pyarimohan Bandyopadhyay (Vice President), Harihar Chattopadhyay (General Secretary), Karunamoy Bandyopadhyay (Assistant Secretary), Pramada Charan
Bandyopadhyay (Treasurer) and Manmatha Chattopadhyay (auditor). There was also a Muslim member which was surprising considering the times.

The *Hitakari Sabha* used to organise discussions on women's education at its annual meetings. At the fourth meeting H. Bell had spoken on "The Good Effects of Women's Education". At the sixteenth meeting Sir Surendranath Bandopadhyay, Pratap Chandra Mazumdar, Keshab Chandra Sen, Reverend Kalicharan Bandyopadhyay and others had discussed "Education of Indian Women". After visiting Uttarpura Mary Carpenter had observed that a great zeal has been displayed by a body of young men interested in the training of their sisters and daughters.

To encourage girls, the *Hitakari Sabha* began holding scholarship examinations from 1865. In the first year 26 students from eight schools sat for the Junior Examination. In the second year, 26 students sat for the Junior Examination and 13 for the Senior Examination. In 1867, 11 appeared in the Junior Examination, 19 at the Senior Examination and 7 took the Final Examination. Later these names were changed to Lower Primary, Upper Primary, Middle Vernacular. In 1867-68 a special examination was introduced for those who declined to come out of their homes, on the same lines as, the *Bamabodhini Sabha*. In the first two years one and two students sat for such examination but unfortunately none could get through. The pass mark was 40 and in 1870 one of two examinees passed. She was Jnanada pasi of Konnagar in Hooghly.

The scholarships given to the students were one, two and three rupees a month for those who occupied the first three positions. At first the scholarship was for one year which was later increased to two rupees. While any number of students could sit for the first two examinations, only those who received, scholarships in the second examination were entitled to
appear at the third or middle vernacular exams. Initially the examination used to take place in March. Later the date; was shifted to December or a little earlier than that.

The Hitakari Sabha had also introduced, a system of rewarding the head pundits of the school which, achieved the best result. The records of 1870-71 state:

“The prize of a gold mohur offered by the Sabha to the head pundit of the school standing first in the examinations, has been won by Pundit Bissessur Bandyopadhyay, Head Pundit of the Ootterparah Girls' School which decidedly stood first at the late Examination.” xvi

The system of examination attracted the attention of the Bengal Government and in 1876 it directed that such examinations be held in the Burdwan, Presidency and Dacca divisions. In Burdwan division the responsibility was given to the Hitakari Sabha which gradually had to conduct these in Burdwan, Bankura, Birbhum and Midnapore districts in addition to Howrah, Hooghly and 24 Parganas. Recognising the quality of the examinations organized by the Hitakari Sabha, the government, in 1901, stopped its own divisional examinations. Paucity of funds also stood in the way of scholarships being given, though the Hitakari Sabha continued with the system in its own original districts. It also stopped conducting examination in other districts.

Regarding the studies conducted at the homes of more conservative girls, Mary Carpenter commented, "Young ladies who are obliged to leave the school on account of marriage are permitted to continue their studies in the Zenana and to hold scholarships. A native convert female teacher, who is employed in the school, visits them in their homes and conducts the necessary examinations". The syllabus for these students included "studies from Mahabharata and Ramayana, Arithmetic, Hygiene and Mathematics" the subjects so chosen to make them "exemplary mothers and wives."xvii

At first there were no prizes, like scholarships, for those studying in the 'Zenana' system. This was changed in 1872 following a report of Bhudeb Mukhopadhyay whose
experience of conducting examinations in the previous year had shown that while in other schools the students study hard to get scholarships, the 'Zenana' students do not do that as there was no incentive. For 72 years, from' 1868 to 1949, the Hitakari Sabha conducted the 'Zenana' examinations and 80 students were successful. Overall, however, the 'Zenana' system did not yield much result as strong opposition to women's education was coming down, there ws indifference about this.

Talking of women's education, mention must be made of the role played by contemporary, journals. The Bamabodhini used to regularly carry articles written by newly educated women and a collection of such articles, named Bamarachanabali, was published, in 1872. The cost of publication was met by Hare , Prize Fund committee. This 'Committee had also helped the Bamabodhini Samaj publish some textbooks.

The 70's of the 19th century saw a large number of schools for women established in the, districts. But these were all primary institutions and their number fell short of the required. Some, however, did good work, like the Konnagar Balika Vidyalaya. The journal Bamabodhini, however, felt that both male and female students were getting the same type of education and that the latter required something different. An important development of this period was the appointment of a woman inspector for the 'Zenana' schools. The first such inspector was Manmohini Wheeler, the daughter of Reverend Krishna Mohan Bandyopadhyay.

Women's education began to go beyond the primary stage and Bethune School played an important role in this. This elevation to the secondary stage was possible because of the good work done at the primary stage which has been acknowledged by intellectuals like Jogesh Chandra Bagal and others. Calcutta University was established in 1857 and it did yeomen work in the spread of higher education but the base had been prepared by the primary schools. In a report Raja Radhakanta Dev wrote that the reading and spelling of the girls examined
was satisfactory. This was 28 years before the Bethune School was established and shows that females did study even before Bethune appeared on the scene. By 1820 there were schools for them at Sovabazar, Janbazar, Entally and Shyambazar in Calcutta.

Opposition, however, continued Hemchandra Bandyopadhyay wrote a satire called 'Bengali Women'. In reply was written 'Bengali Babu'. A rough transaction would read as follows:

There goes Bengali babu

To toil from 10 to 4

A slave the whole day

Lawyers some, some teachers

Pride matching their post

They care not for those around

Toiling hard the whole day

They brag drunk back home. (Bandopadhyay, 2006, p. 100).xviii

These lines were not penned by a man but a woman named Mokshadayini Mukhopadhyay who was born in Hooghly in 1888. But women like her who were born in aristocratic families were few and far between. The women needed self confidence to fight men like Hemchandra and that confidence was instilled in them by Bethune's school and the undying efforts of Vidyasagar. Shortly after the establishment of Bethune School, the Mokshadayinis came out from behind the curtains to take up the pen on behalf of women. They began to be published, particularly in Nari Siksha Patrika (Dacca). Balaranjika (Barisal), Sabitri (Gaya). These journals believed that women were entitled to enjoy the same rights as men. With the same objects in mind, Derozio's
disciples, Radhanath Sikdar and Pyarichand Mitra brought out a monthly journal for women. The book *Alaler Gharer Dulal* was also published at the same time.

Women writers were also encouraged by *Bamabodhini, Hemlata* (1873), *Abalabandhab* (1879), *Banga Mahila* (1875) and several other publications. So there can be no doubt liberal men were constantly seeking to work towards the uplift of women. This had the desired effect of women deciding to give expression themselves to their problems and also their thoughts. Periodicals edited by women began to appear.

Mokshadayini Mukhopadhyay brought out *Banga Mahila*, the first periodical to be edited by a woman. This was followed in 1875 by *Anathini* edited by Thakamani Devi of Dhulian. The importance of this publication lay in the fact that it was not brought out from Calcutta but a small district town like Dhulian. Thus women were coming up even well beyond the city limits.

Among the various such journals, *Bharati* occupied a special place. It came out in 1877 edited by Dwijendranath Tagore but reached its pinnacle when edited from 1884 by Swarnakumari Devi and her two daughters Hiranmoyee and Sarala Devi. Swarnakumari Devi and Sarala Devi's knowledge of western literature helped in the creation of an enlightened readership and they were the first to pay for contributions. The readership of *Bharati* was never exclusively female.

Two other women members of the Jorasanko Tagore family need to be mentioned here. They were Jnanadanandini Devi, daughter-in-law of Devendranath Tgore and wife of Satyendranath Tagore and his granddaughter Pragnyasundari Devi. In 1885 the former edited a periodical for children but which later carried items for elders also. Prajnasundari Devi edited the monthly *Punya* from 1897 to 1901 which informed readers of the literature of different states and also carried articles on music, cooking and religion.
Some other women edited periodicals of the time were Sugrihini, a Hindi monthly journal published from Shillong, edited by Hemanta Kumari Devi, monthly Birohi edited by Sushila Devi. Bharat Bhagini published from Lahore and edited by Hara Devi and Mukul. An, illustrated monthly, Antahpur, used to be published by Banalata Devi who was the daughter of eminent Brahmo leader Sasipada Bandyopadhyay of Baranagar. These publications helped women to discover themselves and be aware of their rights in society. For instance Mokshadayini had very forcefully written that men and women should enjoy equal rights. Her family background perhaps helped such advanced thinking—she was the elder sister of Umesh Chandra Banerjee, first president of the Indian National Congress. She wrote a novel, Safal Swapna which was translated by Nalinee, Blair and appeared under the title The Dream Fulfilled. During the first war she wrote a touching biography of her grandson Kalyan Kumar Mukhopadhyay who was a doctor in the British Army and died after being taken prisoner by the Turks at Baghdad.

And now Nagendrabala Mustafi of Hooghly, also known as Nagendrabala Saraswati, she was married when ten years old to Khagendra Nath Mustafi. By the time she was twenty, her fame as a poet had spread with her first collection of poems, Marma Gatha published in 1896. She also wrote for Purnima which used to be published from Bansberia in the same district.

Shortly after her marriage Nagendrabala was attacked by an incurable disease and many of her poems, in the words of Jadunath Kanjilal who edited Purnima observed that it reflected the stream of sorrow flowing through her. She died at the age of twenty nine. Of her thirteen published books which can be traced, the last, Sati, ‘was a novel. Her best work perhaps was the collection of poems, Prem Gatha (Songs of Love) which was rewarded by the Higher Prize Essay Fund of Calcutta. Many of her poems were marked by their lyrical quality.

Some translations of Nagendrabala’s poems:

147
1

I have none in this world
   To call my own

My pain has none
   To weep for me

2

To whom I go
   For sympathy
   Breaks my heart
   Ignoring me

3

His warm breath
   Breaks the heart
   Tears from the deep
   Floods the eyes

4

Why came you with
   My heart's wound
   Will you wipe away
Love and affection.

5

Hapless am I

So feeling pity

Came you

With love for me?

(Bandopadhyay, 2006, p. 103)xix

The last, two decades of the 19th century saw the emergence of other women poets in Hooghly district, such as Surabala Ghosh, Phulkumari Gupta, Indira Devi and Nanibala Ghosh. Sarajubala, daughter of philosopher Brajendranath Seal, earned repute both as a poet and dramatist.

Spread of education among women began at a slow pace in the 19th century only to gather momentum in the second half of the century, thanks to men like Vidyasagar and others. But the importance of the first half cannot be ignored. It was during that sad past when darkness still engulfed society, that men like Gourmohan Vidyalankar and Gourishankar Tarkabagish had taken up the pen to promote the cause. The efforts of Joykrishna Mukhopadhyay, the missionaries, all indicated the storm that was to come later. Leaders of society differed on ways and means but all accepted the need to educate women. As Madanmohan Tarkalankar has observed that men and women were created structurally slightly different but have the same minds and so if boys can earn why the girls cannot do so. In the second half, Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar had expressed his reservations about Miss Carpenter's Normal School idea but even then had given her full co-operation.
It is important to mention that even on the face of numerous constraints some women had
been able to emerge from darkness. For instance, Muslims were even more conservative than
Hindus but even then in the early days of 'Zenana' education organized by the Hiiikari Sab ha, five
Muslim women took advantage of this. They were, Chaddiknessa, Rajekannesssa. Jindan Neha,
Sabhannasa Khatun and Mesata Benu, all from Hooghly.

Such was the status of women during that time when Shanta Devi and Sita Devi emerged into
the limelight.

6.3 The “New Woman” in the novels of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi

Education was perceived as a means to strengthen and shape female morality and equip
Indian women to be good wives and mothers, The Calcutta Review in 1864 argued that
education need not oppose nature, which has framed her to be a wife and mother and
simultaneously urged the importance of the connection between extension of education and
morality. In essence, the thrust of this educational effort appears to have been to recast the
much-manned Indian female sensuality of the zenanas with its preoccupations with the
body and bodily functions and with its rites focusing on sex and sexuality. While reform
measures in the earlier part of the nineteenth century had taken the form of legislations
banning social evils, by the second half of the century the focus had shifted to the gradual
removal of social evils by recasting and reshaping the minds of Indian women through
education.

Not only was the emergence from the zenana co be the long-term objective of the
education programme, the attempt was, equally importantly, to help in shaping the Indian
"New Woman"—a phrase used by Urquhart to denote the westernized modern woman—who was to be modelled on the pattern to the English woman. xx

Such was the background of women’s education as well as women emancipation during that century in which Shanta Devi and Sita Devi was born and brought up. They both started their literary career in the 20th century when the concept of “New Woman” was much in vogue.

The New Woman started emerging in India, in the 20th century as well as in the early 21st century mainly due to the impetus given to women’s education. The spread of education instilled a sense of individuality among women and made them aware of their rights. Economic independence motivates them to realize their own aspirations. A number of women’s organizations, formed in different parts of the country worked both for social reforms and education for women. The English language provided a common medium of communication for women from different linguistic backgrounds to work for a common goal. Feminist trends appeared on the horizon and they have come into conflict with the conventional moral code. Over years, the age-old image of the woman seems to be slowly blurring and gradually shading off into a new image. The New Woman, however, is a compulsive emergence out of the existing Indian ethos and not just a blind imitation of the West. The emerging New Woman is a product of the inevitable transformation taking place in our society as the country marches ahead to catch up with the rest of the world.

The New Woman’s struggle for an identity of her own is portrayed well in the Indian English novel. Her freedom is defined in terms of the “space” she moves in and the “voice” she is given to speak for herself. The impact of the National Movement and the spread of modern education is so enormous that the image of woman in the post independence Indian novel shows a perceptible shift towards modernity and is still changing. Authenticity,
candour, boldness, ebullience, frankness and vehement assertion are some of the traits associated with the new image. The term empowerment of women has come to be associated with women’s struggle for social justice and equality. It is essentially a broader concept heralding a shift from unjust to just, subservient to successful, passive to active ability and entity for women. The goal of empowerment seems to challenge the subordination and transform the structure which acts against women.

Indian women novelists, influenced by the women’s liberation movement, have brought to light the injustice meted out to women by the patriarchal society. These novels have a feminist undercurrent with a woman as the central character who rebels against the existing social set up. The emerging new women are rebellious, recalcitrant and self-assertive. Economic independence makes her confident and articulate. The emerging New Woman strives for her identity but still she has to depend for emotional support on her family. However, even in these modern times, there are characters in literature who, either live in the conventional old style or are a combination of the old and the new. New Woman is marked by her struggle for identity and attainment of individual aspirations. She is a person who is neither subjugated nor defied but a human person desirous of living in society as a responsible member with equal rights and freedom to pursue her own goals.

Educational opportunities, employment avenues, progressive attitude, economic independence, influence of Western feminist movements have impelled women to voice their feelings and experiences. It has become easier for women than men to write about themselves and awaken the other suppressed women. Commenting about the urge for creativity among women, Meena Shirwadkar rightly opines: As women received education they began to feel an increasing urge to voice their feelings. The awareness of individuality, the sense of
incompatibility with their tradition-bound surroundings, resentment of male-dominated ideas of morality and behaviour, problems at home and the place of work or in society — all came up in a welter for projection. (Shirwadkar, 1979, p. 103)\footnote{xxi}

The new education has awakened in her, a woman’s self. As a result of this she has started thinking of independent and self-reliant life. And in order to translate this thinking into reality, she has started fighting against her own timid self. The fight is tough, but it has set in women’s suffering from certain weaknesses and complexes have been very honestly highlighted by the Indian women novelists. This new woman has become conscious of her destination viz., to liberate herself from the clutches of unjust taboos and customs forced on her by the male dominance. This trend continues and as a consequence, the image of woman also continues to change.

6.4 Women’s writing in Bengal

The tradition of women’s writing in Bengal began with Swarnakumari Devi (1855-1932) and flowed down the century creating writers like Anurupa Devi (1882-1958), Nirupama Devi (1883-1951), Giribala Devi (1894-1974) and Prabhavati Devi Saraswati (1905-1972). They succeeded in challenging the traditional role definitions within which women’s lives were circumscribed. The Hindu conjugal order was called in to searing question by novelists like Shanti Devi, Sita Devi and Jyotirmayi Devi. Even though there was no active rebellion in their works, they proved that they were better exponents of the psychodynamics of a woman’s life. They succeeded in challenging the patriarchal deifying of the conforming woman. The socio-economic unrest in Bengal during the first four decades of the 20th century formed the core of many novels written during this period. What made women’s writing of the same period different was the attempt to look at the issues through
the eyes of women characters. The feminist tradition in Bengali literature arrives at its culmination in Ashapurna Devi (1909-1995), the first woman writer in India to win the Jnanpith award. She was a prolific writer and published hundred and fifty novels and a large number of poems and short stories. In her seminal work, the trilogy – Pratham Pratishruti, (translated into English as The First Promise), Suvarnalatha and Bakul katha. She traced the history of the age, but with an important difference. She made the homemaker woman the instrument of social change. Her protagonists are ordinary women but history is rearticulated through the trajectory of their personal lives and domestic spaces. Her seven compelling women characters shape their own lives and the lives of people around them. Her fiction acknowledged the concept of female transcendence and alerted her generation to the developing female identity. She staunchly believed that if human race was to proceed to a better society there should be equal rights for man and woman and that equal rights could be ensured only when men and women had attained the same level of consciousness. She boldly asserted that men must be made to see that the world was not their exclusive possession. Commemorating her contributions, Esha Dey says: In her own life time, Ashapurna Devi became a cult figure as the voice which spoke for the vast majority of ordinary women doomed to remain outside the charmed circle of the enlightened, reformed upper and upper middle classes of Bengal. To those enmeshed in a semi-medieval stratified existence, she appeared the very symbol of the woman’s yearning for a new self definition. Ashapurna Devi’s rare insight into the innermost recesses of the human mind is well revealed in her short stories and novels. In the short story, “A Woman’s Secret Treasures”, there is a mother who does not hesitate to kill a kitten as part of the disciplining programme meant to turn her daughter into a well mannered, neat little girl. In all her stories, the context is the domestic world. She believed that “amidst this familiar world lies hidden an inexhaustible fund of mystery” (Indian Women Novelists, 110) and substantiated it in her fiction.
Prominent Women Writers of the 20th Century who propagated women emancipation and women education

Mention must be made of the famous writers and the social activist, Mahasweta Devi who was also awarded with Akademi prize. Her Aranyer Adhikar - Rights over the forest, is a novel about the Santali rebels. Hazar Curasir Ma - Mother of the prisoner No 1084 , is a political novel. The whole novel states the affairs of a single day. Ashapurna was a prolific authoress, while Mahasweta has been writing on how Ashapurna's literary world war of middle class families treads on the political ideas.

Prominent writers of that era also include Begum Rokeya and Begum Sufia Kamal . Begum Rokeya was an inspiring figure who contributed much to the struggle to liberate women from the bondage of social malaises. Her life can be seen in the context of other social reformers within what was then India. To raise popular consciousness, especially among women, she wrote a number of articles, stories and novels, mostly in Bengali.Here mention should be made of “Pipasa”(Thirst in the year 1902) and Boligarto , a short story which depicts the liberation of women . Here mention must be made of Sufia Kamal’s who was Bangladeshi poet, freedom fighter, feminist and political activist. Kamal was an influential cultural icon in the Bengali nationalist movement of the 1950s and 60s and an important civil society leader in independent Bangladesh. A short story Shainik Bodhu which she wrote was published in a local paper in 1923.Her literary career took off after her first poetry publication. Her first book of poems, Sanjher Maya (Evening Enchantment), came out in 1938, bearing a foreword from Kazi Nazrul Islam and attracting praise from Rabindranath Tagore.

6.4.1 The concept of Bengali “Bhadramahila” in the 19th and the 20th century

The concept of “bhadramahila” in Bengal, accepting Borthwick’s definition of them as “the mothers, wives and daughters of the many school masters, lawyers, doctors and government servants who made up the English-educated professional Bengali middle class or
At this time, a more formal kind of education was becoming more and more accessible to the Bengali bhadramahila as the increased numbers of girls in secondary English schools and in colleges show. An official report commented: “...A curious development in the social usage, especially amongst the educated middle class Hindus, is that the possession of a University degree seems now to increase the eligibility of a girl for marriage.”

In the 19th century new waking of Bengal created new excitement among the Bengali women and as a result a new social reformation took place between them. Although this reformation was tried in the first part of the 19th century but the actual time of women upliftment was started from the second half of that century. Long standing superstitious women felt that their destiny was to accept these conditions without any protest. Being encircled with the prevalent superstitious conditions they failed to tear the then systems although some men were educated in the first part of the 19th century. A change took place in the second half of 19th century regarding the conditions of women for the reason of spreading education amongst the women through education women class felt the taste of freedom. They established strongly their positions in the families. At this time it was seen that the women tried to establish their social existence breaking the social limit. She learnt how to give importance in their own rights and dignity and she had the power to equalize with the qualities of Bhupati or Amal. The drive for female education resulted in an increase of schools, but the direction of this change was evident from the fact that the rate of increase was greater for secondary English schools and colleges than the rate of increase in primary schools. It was also true that many more girls entered primary school than completed it. The interest in women’s higher education was contemporaneous with a heated debate over the curriculum for girls’ education. All those who felt that girls should be compulsorily taught cooking, needle work and housewifery to bring their education closer to life found in the
government their champions. This entailed a heavier emphasis on humanities, arts and crafts than on the sciences. Even in 1936-37 there was no well equipped laboratory in any Indian girls’ school in Bengal. Despite its limitations, women’s education did take a significant step forward. That its importance was realised by women themselves is evident in the founding of women’s educational associations. The Nari Shiksha Samiti started in 1919 with the object of imparting such education to girls and women as would make them helpful wives and mothers and useful members of society and enable them to earn an honest living in case of need. Under the supervision of Abala Bose, it founded about 40 girls’ schools in Calcutta by 1929, started a Hindu widows’ home in 1922 called the Vidyasagar Bani Bhawan which trained widows as teachers or nurses, and opened an industrial school for women in 1926 called the Manila Shilpa Bhandar The Vidyasagar Bani Bhawan in 1928 put students of the two highest classes through a short intensive course of lessons in teaching. Then three of them were put in charge of three separate schools situated in the interior. This experiment was well spoken of by the assistant inspectress of schools, Dacca circle, after inspecting the schools. One of these students, Shantilata Das, assessing her work in a predominantly Muslim village of Manickgunj district, Dacca, observed that the condition of those girls is very saddening. There is considerable enthusiasm to learn but the parents constantly burden their daughters with housework and pay no heed to their education. Their only thought is to equip their daughters for marriage .as if that is the sole aim of a woman’s life. If the girls sit down to study or mention the school, they are reprimanded with questions like : ‘Are you going to become a memsahib?’ ‘Will you earn money by it ?’ and sometimes they are beaten as well. The girls live in constant fear ; very often, they run away to school without even eating. xxvi Her colleague in the venture, Charubala Sarkar, did not find any substantial difference in attitude in a predominantly BaidyaKayastha Hindu populated village. Nor, for that matter, did the third colleague, Indubala Gupta, in a Brahman dominated village. It would seem that
education for women retained its urban bias and that hostility to female education was not entirely absent from lives of women even in towns. Shova Ghosh, whose in-laws allowed her to continue her studies after marriage, recounted in her book “Aaj O Tafu Picchu Dake” (in Bengali), 1981, her embarrassment in studying at home, lest people think “this housewife only sits with books in her hand and does not do any housework.....When the school coach used to come to the corner of the street and the coachman used to call 'Gari aya baba' and I used to cover my head with the end of my sari and board the bus, the windows of houses on both sides of the street would open and the neighbouring women would stare curiously at a housewife going to college...I realised that this society thought better if married women worked at home rather than study.” xxvii

The ideology of housewification attacked girls at an early age. The routine and rituals of housework in a big household, as recounted by some women in their autobiographies, seem to have been a time consuming process. The invisibility and lack of mobility implied in the keeping of purdah was a major hurdle in the acquisition of education by women. Manikuntala Sen in her “Sediner Katha”, 1982 describes how when she studied in college, she sat behind a wooden partition in the classroom, and looked through a small hole to see the teacher. Even when in high school, she realised that girls could not walk around in public, not even to and from school. It was only when she came to Calcutta that she saw women move around unescorted in public transport. Shova, who travelled by tram to Bhowanipur with her husband, was warned by a relative that this was “unseemly” behaviour. Though she had a harmonium and loved singing, she had to close the windows before singing, as it was considered “shameless.” xxviii Yet, the conventions governing bhadramahila behaviour were themselves in flux at this time, as is seen in controversies carried on in newspapers where some readers argued for abolition of the purdah and criticised men for harassing women travelling by public transport. There was also an ongoing debate on women’s property rights.
The general understanding seemed to be that dowry was a form of compensation for women’s lack of inheritance rights. But some voices were raised against dowry, Kamala Bose and Giribala Ray being the most vociferous. Kamala argued that the majority of Bengalee fathers have no property or money at all to part with. Moreover, the money that is given as dowry does not go to the bride at all, in majority of cases it fills the pocket of her father-in-law. Giribala Ray, the author, while protesting dowry system, advocated equal education for girls and boys. Although a dominant theory at this time was that education would make women better wives and mothers, some argued against the view. Shanta Devi emphatically asserted that women were to be educated to take full responsibility for themselves. She decried the notion that “with marriage, all the problems of her life have been solved... A daughter may not marry at all; even if she does, she should be able to look after herself, choose her own profession and have mental and economic independence,” (Bangalakshmi, 1928)

Education thus came to be viewed as a gateway to freedom or swadhinata. The understanding of this notion was crucial to the debate. Amiya Debi said: “... swadhinata cannot be given, it has to be taken by force. If women really want it, they have to agitate and fight for it themselves—it is only natural that men will want to obstruct them.” (Bangalakshmi 1931) She compared the reforms carried out by the British government to the measures taken by Indian men for women: “the givers of swadhinata do so only because they want slightly more refined and well mannered women. The responsibility for this swadhinata cannot be with well wishing men. If it does, then adhinata alone is strengthened.” (Bijoli, August 4; 1922). Education was one important force for improving the status of the Bengali bhadramahila. Their new self awareness manifested itself in their thinking, their expectations which rose—sometimes ahead of social practice.
6.5 (Sanjukta)- Shanta Devi and Sita Devi and their contribution to women education

Shanta Devi and Sita Devi were influenced by the above scenario of that period it was reflected it through their writings in their novels and short stories also. Their family was very much progressive and their father Sri Ramananda Chatterjee was himself influenced by the Western culture.

Their mother, Manorama Devi was also educated and progressive in her outlook. Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s stay in Santiniketan for the purpose of study after their graduation also made them aware of the freedom of women through the strong influence of Rabindranath Tagore and the liberal surrounding of Santiniketan.

In this context mention must be made of “Uddyanlata” (The Garden Creeper) which was published in the year 1918 in “Prabasi” which speaks about the liberated, emancipated and the educated women. Here, mention must be made of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi who very well knew the difference between “liberation” and “freedom”. Such characters were depicted in their novels also.

Both their joint works were written in the name of “Sanjukta Devi”. Sita and Shanta Devi, in collaboration, have produced three social novels – The Garden Creeper, The Knight Errant and The Cage of Gold. Though they are mere translations of their Bengali originals, they advance the novel to a still forward step and hence are considered significant. Madhavi De, writes about their significance thus: Their principal interest has in fact that they seek to project the image of “new-woman” a fact which is very relevant to studies pertaining to the emergence of women novelists in India in the contest of fast-changing social order promising a new deal for the Indian women awaiting her liberation from the tyranny of ages. xxxix

Their narratives confronted and documented the aspects of a woman’s life which were
earlier invisibilised as too embarrassing to recognize and reaffirmed the validity of women’s experience. Their fiction can, thus, rightly be considered as critiques of the structures of domination that determined the lives of women and as honest representations of individual and collective transcendence to personhood.

The social reformer in Shanta Devi and Sita Devi gave priority to women. They took the centre stage in their prose works. Their portrayal of women characters in their short stories and novels changed consequent to the contemporary changes in the society. Due to English education and the influence of Western culture, women characters were no longer the submissive sufferers of patriarchy. They started to assert their individuality. The heroines created by them during that phase are bold to have a futuristic outlook. They are more emancipated and empowered to transform themselves in the twentieth century. They are all forerunners to the later day women characters in the 21st century who were depicted by the so-called staunch feminist writers. This made them a visionary for the cause of women emancipation who always propagated women education through their works.

Mention must be made of “The Garden Creeper” where one finds the central character “Mukti” who was brought up by her illustrious and educated father “Shibeshwar” (which shows a glimpse of Ramananada Chatterjee) and who was educated by her father and who refused to marry her daughter at a young age. Mukti was well educated in Bethune College, according to the story and she also started working for a living after her education. The same instance is shown in another novel of Santa Devi “Loyalty” where the chief protagonist “Sunanda” was also educated by her foster father and had access to education, though living in a small village.

But it is observed that due to the social conditions of that time some of the characters in their novels were torn between tradition and modernity. So one finds the character “Mokshada” in the story “The Garden Creeper” (Uddyanlata in Bengali) the grandmother of
“Mukti” who was keen to marry her granddaughter by the prevailing norms of the society at a very young age. But this was refuted by her father “Shibeshwar”. The following is the quote of the story in Bengali –

“না না মা, তুমি আমার মেয়েকে নিয়ে ওসব কার্যকর গণ্ড বিস্মৃতি দরজায় যাচাই করে বেড়াতে পারে না। সে আমি কিছুতেই দেব না। পালন বছরের ছেলে দু-বছর পরে একটু সাব দিয়ে মাথা কিনে নেবে আর কি! আমার মেয়ের পায়ে অন্য ঢের ঢের ছেলে গড়ে গড়ে যাবে। এখন ছেলেমানুষ একে নিয়ে ওসব কিছু করতে হবে না। তাহলে মাথাটি একেবারে খাওয়া হবে। পড়াঙ্গোনি কিছু হবে না।”

(No no mother, don’t try to marry my daughter off with any boy. I won’t agree………Her education will be zero if she is married off at such a young age).

Both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi was very much against child-marriage and so in each of their short stories and novels characters like “Krishna”, “Khanika”, “Sudha” and “Karuna” was not married off at a young age. In this context mention must be made of Ashapurna Devi’s trilogy “Pratham Pratishruti” where the protagonist was married off at a earlier age but Santa Devi and Sita Devi broke free this tradition and progressed towards modernity. They always championed the cause of educated women who are not confined within the boundaries of her home.

Their short stories and novels always portray the emancipated women. The heroines of this novels became a advocacy of women’s education and cause of the emancipation of women. Both their writings also made its impact on the traditional and social orders and quickened the spirit of social and cultural criticism in a section of Bengali intelligentsia. This spirit found a most articulate representative in their illustrious father Ramananda.
Chatterjee’s literary magazine “Prabasi” and “The Modern Review” founded in 1901 and 1907. Their stories of that time like “The Ugly Bride”, “The Letter” “The Broken Lily” make a devastating exposure of traditional Hindu family life and of the Hindu attitude to women. It is mentionworthy that the protagonists of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s novels do not hesitate to voice their feelings openly against the ills of the society like widow remarriage, the caste system and religious hypocrisy. E.J. Thomson remarks, “They advocate higher education of women and woman’s emancipation and empowerment”.\(^{xxx}\) The women protagonists of their fictional writings during that time are all self-assertive, liberated and emancipated. How both the sisters envisioned the new ideal womanhood in the creation of women characters is scrutinized through the short stories.

Santa Devi stories often show a delightful humour with lifelike pictures of manners and persons. She has also depicted some harsh realities of Bengali conservation society during that time in her stories and has also kept in the mind the Bengali culture, its education and the traditions. The three heroines of her novels “Kali”, “Sunanda” and “Surama” face different trials and tribulations of the society and it is depicted in the short stories written by Shanta Devi. Though of course the common theme of the story is the women education and the prevalent customs of the society.

The story “The Ugly Bride” narrates the story of Tara Sundari and Kalo. This story starts in a train where Tara Sundari, an aged old widow lady was travelling with her companion. Tara Sundari, has the habit of giving advice to people who are even unknown to her. The following is an extract from the story -

“The girl looked at her mother as if for instruction, and her mother said, " Tell her your name, what is the harm ?"

The girl's face pleaded her own guilt in being born a daughter as she answered, " Kalidasi."

Then, God help you !" said "Tara-didi " You are not likely to be married."
Binu made a dry face at this. "Ah, stop your nonsense, didi" she put in.

Tara-sundari resented such interference with her philanthropy and replied, " Why? Have I said anything wrong? Now look here (this to the widow), as soon as you reach Calcutta, find a suitable name for your daughter; for, be sure, the modern young man will never marry a Kalidasi or a Jagadamba, or a Katayani, or anyone with a name smelling of the days of your great-grandma." xxxi

It is witnessed in Shanta Devi’s novels that the girls in Bengali society during that time who were specially dark complexioned had no value in the marriage market. Their parents showed no interest towards their education but were more interested to marry them off at a young age. It also shows that girls during that time used to silently suffer without uttering any word. Though many of them were keen to educate themselves their traditional and conservative household forebade them to do so. Moreover they were taught by their parents to silently suffer in the hands of their fate. It is also observed in Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s works that women’s identity is not shaped individually, but in relation to others around them. The gender pattern of socialization in the society has resulted in forming different patterns of identification for men and women. Men learn self-reliance and self-dependence while women learn to take care of others and to thwart themselves. Similar instance is shown in the story “The Broken Lily” where one finds that educated and the cultured protagonist “Surama” who became a puppet in the hands of the societal norms which led to her untimely death. It also depicts the helpless character of “Amar” a school master who was also partly responsible for Surama’s untimely death.

The following are the extracts, “The procession advances on and on. I follow as one of the crowd. I have no right to walk with the members of your aristocrat husband's family. Something happened and the procession stopped for a moment. A tramcar or some other
vehicle in front had come to a standstill. For two minutes we all stood there. The crowd on both sides pushed their way to the bedstead to look their fill at you. Two young men, college students I thought from their appearance and the number of books in their hands, pushed right to the front and then started back as if in surprise. " Such beauty in death! " whispered one to the other, "What she must have been in life? I never thought to see such loveliness except in pictures. I wonder whose house she is leaving dark." xxii

Shanta Devi makes the character Amar repent for his action and turn him humane. The story ends with the message that man should also take action and should not be a weakling just like Amar in this story. Tagore emphasizes that a man should get to know the mind of his woman and then only would he be able to treat her equally. Both the sister were aware with the progressing time that women themselves should create a space for their survival. They knew that the social system was against women’s emancipation as well as education and therefore they relied heavily on women’s wish to make them free from the bondages.

Through Mukti’s character in “Uddyanlata”, Shanta Devi and Sita Devi emphasizes the necessity of education for women. Her decision to remain a strong and not to marry in the strong wave of opposition is another instance of showing their women characters as strong individuals of that age.

In all their stories Shanta Devi and Sita Devi sends their message through their stories that gender equality can be achieved only by educating the women. In creating characters like “Mukti”, “Banya” and “Surama” they had envisioned the “New Women of India”. Their ideologies have been carried forward in the 21st century also. Mention must be made of Ashopke Viswanathan’s Bengali film made in the year 2015 titled “Bhrasta Tara” inspired by Sita Devi’s novel “The Broken Lily”.

They have dismissed the patriarchal notion that women are innately unfit to assume
responsibility and require masculine guidance and protection. Given proper training that women themselves can act independently is Tagore’s strong message sent out to men. They have deconstructed the social roles, which represents the patriarchy defined female and male traits. They have inverted the active male and passive female syndrome. This strategic decision helps to achieve space for female growth, which is the tenet of feminism. As the Feminist Betty Frieden has observed in The Feminine Mystique (1963), the impulse for freedom must come from each individual woman who must find her own answers and her own experience and strategies for liberation.

As a true emancipated women, they were very much conscious of subordination and to fight for their rights. In each of their novels they have given a clarion call to the womenfolk to realize their status and fight for their rights in their every sphere of life. Here Sita Devi speaks through “The Broken Lily” the character of “Surama” to awaken the conscience of women for their emancipation. They also brings in all the pathos of women who suffer in the high caste system. During their days, though born into the higher caste, the status of women was no better when compared to the lower caste women. Suffering was even worse with no basic requirements to be fulfilled. The men’s room was well furnished whereas the inner quarters of women were devoid of ventilation, with stained floors and walls. As women of lowest self-esteem, they were unable to raise their voice against this inhuman treatment meted out to them.

In Santa Devi’s story “Loyalty” the protagonist “Sunanda” hard-hitting writing in the letter, on the fundamental problems of patriarchal oppression in its different forms like dowry, denigration of womenfolk, inhuman treatment in providing accommodation, denial of women’s education, the loss of identity, and lower self-esteem attempts to make men understand the sufferings of women. In Helen Cixous’ encouraging words, “Write yourself. Your body must be heard. It is time for women to start scoring their feats in writing and oral
language” (The Newly Born women, 23).xxxiv Their texts enables a woman to tell and write her story about the culture of the times and to unravel the story of gender relationships. The protagonist in both of their novels is a new woman envisioned by both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi challenges the patriarchal oppression. However all of the characters does not get liberated and suffer in the hands of society as well as fate.

There were two types of characters in both of their novels where travelling in parallel. One submits to patriarchy and the other succeeds at the end. Surama is a victim, whereas Mukti is a winner in a similar situation. Perhaps with the death of Surama, Santa Devi wanted to display the feminine value and the traditional Hindu woman who loves only once. With the character of Mukti, Shanta Devi and Sita Devi completely inverts the picture of the traditional Hindu woman. Mukti is an epicurean in her attitude and forever anxious to leave nothing in life.

Equality of the sexes, casteless society, and mutual faith between the couple in marriage, and profession and position of power for women are the messages conceptualized through the characters written by Shanta Devi and Sita Devi. They have shown a remarkable understanding of a woman’s psyche, perceives the injustice of an unequal social structure, and advocates for gender freedom and decision making power for women in the family and the larger society.

“Loyalty” is another story written by Shanta Devi who is the protagonist of the story. It is shown in this story that man made customs were so hard during the then Bengali society that human emotions used to bend down before them. It also describes the life of Sunanda, who was educated but could not go against the traditional setup of the Hindu society. It is shown here that the man, who was her foster father though made her a modern woman yet, when it came to customs he becomes a hypocrite and can change the mind of a innocent girl into a matured woman if and when he demanded by taking the excuse of the society. That
women though liberated cannot be free from societal norms.

Both the sisters maintained that a wholesome education must educate the mind along with the senses. They were brought up in a family atmosphere where freedom was emphasized - freedom of language, imagination, spirit and mind. Thus they held that the main purpose of education is to promote freedom, freedom from structured and oppressive school education, freedom from the confined walls of the classroom, freedom for consonance with child’s nature, and freedom of movement.

It is mentionworthy that both Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s stories are on a variety of themes: love, nature, supernatural events, social issues, psychological relationships etc. Through the stories we come to know the social conditions in which women were placed, almost always the victims, and more interestingly, responding differently yet with the same dignity, how each handled the pressures associated with it. The treatment of women and their position in society was of serious concern to them. They tried to narrate in their stories that was worse –that the society as a whole, even the women, seemed to have got used to this slow poisoning without realizing the effect it cumulatively had on it. There was very little protest and the poison gradually had settled in the 'body-society'. They saw in the women an immense wealth- their courage against all odds, their power of survival under the worst possible conditions and oppression, their forbearance, their self-sacrifice and gentleness. It pained them to see such colossal waste of so much human treasure. Through their stories and novels they wanted to shape public opinion, personal beliefs and the society's self-perception. They wished to bring out into the open, and consciously and critically look at the position of women in the society. They wanted these stories to be the mirror in which men would see themselves and would want to change, for it was necessary to bring about a change in the way men looked at themselves in order to change the lives of women.

Most of their stories reflect on child-marriage, women education, the dowry system,
growing gulf between city and country and bigoted orthodoxy of caste system. Their stories are fables of modern women, where fairy tale meets hard ground, where myths are reworked, and the religion of man triumphs over the religion of rituals and convention, where the love of a woman infuses the universe with humanity.

Being the champion of the emancipation of women and following their illustrious father’s footsteps who was influenced in the true tradition of Raja Ram Mohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidhya Sagar, Shanta Devi and Sita Devi through their novels brings out the problems of the women of their age. They tried to instill in the minds of their readers as well as women that women should be educated, liberated and free against all the evils of the society.

Both Sita Devi and Shanta Devi treated education as one of the strongest means for the change and development of original potentialities, personalities and productive powers of men and women which according to them were the specific necessities for the emancipation of women from all the evils existed in the society. This strong influence is carried forward in the 21st century also. Mention must be made of “Writer’s Workshop” which is based in Lake Gardens, Kolkata and has been founded by P. Lal, son in law of Shanta Devi and Shyamasree Devi, daughter of Shanta Devi present headed by Shanta Devi’s grandson Prof. Ananda Lal who is a Professor of English at Jadavpur University, Kolkata.

Education, in the present social situations of the society may also be used as the means of emancipation of the women all over the world. It may be treated as one of the means of changing the psycho-social, socio-cultural, socio-religious, socio-political, socio-economic conditions of men and women. Such changes definitely will help to bring changes towards the life of the women. When the community of woman becomes able to understand the dignity of life in a better way the process of emancipation will certainly become the reality. Thus education may be the panacea of all evils in the process of emancipation movement of the women all over the globe.
Smt. Chandramukhi Basu
(First Graduate of Bethune College)

Dr. Kadambini Ganguli
(First South Asian female physician)

Lady Abala Bose
(Educationist and Social Worker)

Pritilata Waddedar
(A fearless freedom fighter)

Eminent Bethune College Alumni


Endnotes:


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Ibid.


Ibid.

Kempson, M. Report on Popular Education, North-Western Province; 1864—65. *From Director of Public Instruction, North-Western Province: to Secretary to Government, North-Western Provinces*, (NO.5. A) dated Bareilly the 6th May, 1865. UPRR.


Ibid.


References:


