Chapter 1:

INTRODUCTION
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1.1. Emergence of problem

Sita Devi (1895-1988) and Shanta Devi (1894-1988) are daughters of Sri Ramananda Chatterjee (1865-1943), the well-known publicist, who edited “Prabasi”, a Bengali monthly, and “The Modern Review”, an English one. Both are very influential, the latter being the most widely read of all Indian monthlies. ¹

This influence has come to him after a long struggle, in which he has shown uncompromising independence. Sprung from a family of Sanskrit professors and priests, his own generation, his cousins and brothers, first broke through their tradition of aloofness, and learned English. Sri Ramananda Chatterjee himself discarded the thread more than thirty years ago, when he joined the Brahma Samaj. For many years he was a College professor, first in Calcutta, then in Allahabad. But he was restive under the educational system of Indian universities and his relations with governing bodies were often strained. He has continued to have strained relations with all governing bodies. Calcutta University has found in him a sleepless critic, who has been largely responsible for the public's loss of confidence in that learned body. Nor can Government have faced any more watchful foe. Without any of the elaborate machinery for collecting news which our great Western journals have at their disposal, he has managed, year after year, to gather in, month by month, often from the most inaccessible sources, items which have served him in his warfare. One never knows what is going to find its way next into the pages of The Modern Review. Yet he cannot be dismissed as an extremist. He has the cross-bench type of mind; and ascendency today in India should

Young Shanta Devi and Sita Devi
Image 2 (a)

Shanta Devi                  Sita Devi
Matured images of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi

IMAGE 02 (b)

Source Image 2(a)&2(b) : De, M. (2003). Shanta Devi O Sita Devi (1st ed.). Kolkata, IN: Sahityalok.)
win their aims, it is hard to see how they could use Ramananda Chatterjee. But whether they used him or not, he would remain a force to be reckoned with the most resourceful, the most unresting of critics. Englishmen must have often found him bitter and unfair, but English scholars like E.J.Thompson for one have been compelled, sometimes almost against his will, to recognise his courage and his steadfast principle. He has repeatedly stood against a popular clamour from his own countrymen as stiffly as against any Government action, refusing to bow to the storm. ²

So, Sri Chatterjee, the father of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi whole life has been one of battle and political journalism. Yet the reader of his daughters' stories will be struck by the way they avoid politics. The centre of interest has shifted inward, to Hindu social life. This change of interest is a natural development from the father's effort, and completes it. Sri Ramananda Chatterjee or popularly known as Ramananda Babu is one of those Indians who cherish the name of Rammohan Ray, and, amid the insolent abuse recently flung at that name, as standing for the introduction of a denationalising foreign influence, he has proclaimed its outstanding greatness. Like Rammohan Ray, he has especially made the cause of women his own, and has never let pass any reasonable opportunity of protest against wrongs inflicted by society. No man living has a more flaming anger at cruelty than Ramananda Chatterjee. The negro-burning in Georgia during that time and the latest instance of a child-wife in Bengal committing suicide appear in his magazines, no less than the treatment of Indians in East Africa or Fiji, and go out into the bazaars and homes of all India. ³

He carried his convictions into action in his own family. His daughters were educated at home in the usual subjects, including English, and then sent to Bethune College, if the political party that is in the Calcutta. From the earliest days their father gave them the fullest intellectual freedom, never seeking to censor their reading. Both passed the B. A. with

² Ibid
great credit, at Calcutta University. In 1912, while still students, they published a volume of stories translated from English, which were immediately popular. They introduced “Brer Rabbit” to Bengali nurseries. They trained themselves by study and translation of George Elliot's work, and of a few stories from the French; they kept in close touch with their own land and its life. Their literary careers have advanced together. In 1917, Sita Devi's first original short story “Light of the Eyes” appeared in Prabasi, her sister's first one Sunanda appearing in the same magazine a month later.

In 1918, they wrote in collaboration a novel, “Udyanlata” (The Garden Creeper) in English, a serial for Prabasi. This was given over a column in the “Times Literary Supplement”, from the pen of the late Mr. J. D. Anderson, who knew Bengali literature as no other European did. He speaks of the books keen observation, sometimes girlishly amused, sometimes tenderly pitying, never harsh or bitter, which was rendered in a style which is in itself a delight to any competent student of Indian letters. They had excellent material, as he points out, in the contrast afforded between 'the varied life of the great cosmopolitan city of Calcutta, and also of the pleasant old-world existence led by rustic dwellers in the teeming villages of rural Bengal.'

The same writer gave equal praise to Sita Devi's “Cage of Gold”, which appeared first as a Prabasi serial in 1919. It was followed by Santa Devi's serial, “The Eternal” in 1920. It is interesting to observe that though they encouraged the education for women, yet they did not suggest that women should compete against men or neglect their domestic duties and responsibilities. All young women characters in Shanta Devi and Sita Devi’s work were proficient in household management and at the same time excellent in education. It is mentionworthy that Santa Devi was also a versatile painter and specialized painting in water colours. She was a disciple of the well-known artists, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal
Bose. Sita Devi has published in “The Modern Review” translations by herself of her own and her sister's stories.

The same writer gave equal praise to Sita Devi's “Cage of Gold”, which appeared first as a Prabasi serial in 1919. It was followed by Santa Devi's serial, “The Eternal”, in 1920. Both sisters have written reviews and other articles. Santa Devi has painted in water colour. She is a disciple of the well-known artists, Abanindranath Tagore and Nandalal Bose. Sita Devi has published in The Modern Review translations by herself of her own and her sister's stories.

The two sisters thus present a wide culture, and their writings proceed from lives of unfettered freedom of thought. Other circumstances have helped to give them their detached view of Hindu society. Though born in Calcutta, they lived in Allahabad from 1895 to 1908, and most of their dearest memories cluster about that place. They have also lived for a considerable period at Shantiniketan, Rabinindranath Tagore's 'Home of Peace', a place where thought is as liberal as the wide spaces that surround it. Here they found their fullest powers of expression, as nowhere else.

The readers of their stories will be in a position to understand something of the experience which lies behind these stories. He may be left to make his own comparisons, to see the resemblances and differences in their respective contributions. Bengali opinion discriminates between them by finding in Sita Devi's stories a touch of playful malice.  

Shanta Devi's often show a delightful humour, with lifelike pictures of manners and persons. Both may be expected to improve greatly in technique, as they are still at the beginning of their careers. To the foreign reader, perhaps the most interesting thing in their

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writings will be the intellectual and personal element their keen, scornful vision and the angry contempt which blazes out. We feel, too, that they are exceedingly stirred against things close to their daily lives.

Effective criticism of a society comes best from those who are members of it. Indian society has been portrayed in the writings of Bankim Chatterjee, of Rabindranath Tagore, of Sarat Chatterjee, and many others. But it is an immense gain to any nation that its society should be seen through the eyes of its own intellectual countrywomen; and Indian society, in its public aspects and activities, means Indian men. This fire of personality and personal feeling gives the sisters' work significance beyond itself, and will make it a matter of deep interest to watch the development and widening of their powers.

For the present, there is in their work the added interest of seeing Indian life as Indians themselves see it, and of noting how Indian society deals with the problems which are occupying society everywhere, the readjustment of the relations of different classes, and above all, the contribution of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi in the development of women’s education during that period. The present research problem analyses historically the contribution of Sita Devi and Shanta Devi in the development of women’s education in the 21st century. Before concentrating on the study the researcher will focus upon the study of the education and changing status of Bengali women during the 20th century.5

1.2. Theoretical Framework: Education and changing status of women: A historical overview

To know more about the background and the growing up of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi, the researcher, in this section will focus upon the historical phases in the evolution of women's education in India, and in Bengal, in particular, and also to take note of the overall status

of women in society during these phases. After providing a brief account of women's position in society during the ancient and medieval periods, we shall concentrate on the history of women's education and changing status during the 19th and the 20th centuries. The concern is to highlight how the spread of formal education among women received impetus from various 19th century social reform movements, followed by the nationalist movement from early 20th century onward. Spread of women's education, on the other hand, had a feedback effect on various socio-political and cultural movements aimed at changing women's status, i.e., their objective conditions of existence and subjective self-perceptions. This reciprocal relationship between education and changing status of women (as it has historically evolved over time) will be dwelt upon.

1.2.1 Education of women during the Vedic period

The essence of the Aryan civilization is preserved in the four Vedas namely Rig, Yajur, Sama and Atharvam and their different branches like Brahmanas and Upanishads. In order to understand the social, political and cultural background of the ancient Aryans, we have to explore the aforementioned Vedas. The word 'Veda' primarily means "knowledge" (from the word 'vid' which means to know), which virtually signifies sacred knowledge or scripture. "To the hymn collections of four Vedas and their Brahmanas the expression Veda is alone applicable."  

Since there is no archaeological or historical evidence of the human activities in India till about 300 B.C., we depend upon Vedic literature as a valid document of Indian social, political and religious history. For convenience historians have divided the Vedic age into two: The Early Vedic or Rig Vedic age which begins from 1500 B.C. and the post-Vedic age which extends from 1000 B.C. to 500 B.C. "It was during the Rig Vedic or Early Vedic age

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that most of the hymns of the Rig Veda were composed. It was in the later Vedic period that the Brahmanas, the three other Vedas and the Upanishads were composed. "7

Though the early Vedic family was of the patriarchal type, women had some control over the entire household. The Rig Veda reveals a stage where women enjoyed equal status with men. "...a Rig Vedic hymn describes how a maiden could take a soma twig and offer herself as a sacrifice to Indra. Vedic sacrifices were performed jointly by husband and wife."8 Patriarchy never denied women their rights and privileges. From 4th century B.C to 3rd century B.C. girls were given education. But this was practically confined to the well-to-do families. There existed the initiation ceremony or Upanayana, for both girls and boys. According to A.S. Altekar "...education was regarded as very essential to secure a suitable marriage."9 In Rig Vedic society "...the practice of child marriage did not exist."10 So women got an opportunity to acquire education. If they wanted to pursue knowledge without getting married, they were allowed to do so, without any constraints. The educators wisely divided women into two groups namely Brahmavadinis and Sadyodvahas. "The former were life-long students of theology and philosophy, the latter used to prosecute their studies till their marriage at the age of 15 or 16."11 Many educated women became teachers or Upadhyayinis. No wonder the age witnessed many sagacious and capable women "like Visvavara, Apala and Ghosha even composed mantras and rose to the rank of rishis."12

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9 Ibid


Lopamudra, one of the female preachers, is said to have preached as many as 179 hymns of the first book of the Rig Veda along with sage Agasthya. There were many women poets and philosophers during this period. This confirms the fact that if given equal opportunities women can definitely prove that they are as capable and as intelligent as men. Majurndar points out that the Aryans never neglected or showed prejudice towards women as far as their education was concerned. May be they were not conscious of the gender power-politics and conflicts at that time, as society was not so complex and was at a developing stage. Thus during the poetical period of the Vedas the Aryans, we can say, were concerned about the rightness of the social order in which they lived. The fact that the education of their women was not neglected itself shows the collective consciousness of a race which promulgated codes or laws which in turn contributed immensely to the creative force of the people which is crystallized in their Vedas.

According to Ray Choudhuri, the position of women was much better in this period than the subsequent times. The period witnessed many women scholars who were well versed in sacred texts. "These women not only composed hymns but were also well-versed in sacred texts. Women also learnt music and dancing." 13 Even in early Rig Vedic age the birth of a son was much more welcome than the birth of a daughter. But the Rig Vedic society was free from social evils like female infanticide, sati and child marriage. As a sign of woman's social dignity widow remarriage was permitted in Rig Vedic society, as evidenced in the funeral hymn in the Rig Veda: "the widow who lay on the pyre by the side of her dead husband was asked to come to the world of the living."14

Girls normally married after puberty, as can be judged from the frequent mention of unmarried ones such as "Ghosha" who grew up in the houses of their parents. Moreover, "the

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data of the Rig Veda shows that the girls and boys of the Rig Vedic society had freedom to choose their partners in life."¹⁵ In Rig Vedic times caste system was not all rigid. There was no compartmentalization of society. During this time intercaste marriages took place in society. People were given absolute freedom to choose their caste. "In one case the father was a priest, the mother grinder of corn and the son a physician, all three lived happily together."¹⁶

Rig Vedic women enjoyed economic independence also to a certain extent. The women belonging to lower strata took up spinning, weaving and needle work. Clothes were much more expensive in ancient India than at present. Among other important occupations, the first place must be given to weaving both in cotton and wool, which supplied clothes to people. "It is noteworthy as in later days, both men and women were engaged in this work as well as in the subsidiary process of dyeing and embroidery."¹⁷ In one of the hymns of Rig Veda, there is a simile in which night and dawn are compared to two young women engaged in weaving.¹⁸

There are many passages in Rig Veda that throw light on the extent of freedom enjoyed by women. They attended fairs and festivals and were free to move about with their husbands or loved ones. They were allowed to attend Sabhas or assemblies of the learned ones, in the company of their husbands or loved ones. "Like women at a gathering fair, the streams of oil look on with gentle smile and recline to Agni."¹⁹ In the family at least to a certain extent women enjoyed equal rights, as the Aryans believed that "...the wife and the husband being the equal halves of one substance were regarded equal in every respect and


both took equal part in all duties, religious and social." 20 This is the very idea forcefully expressed in Book 5 hymn 6 verse 8 of Rig Veda.

The degradation in their status came in the post-Vedic period. The historians place a number of reasons for this change. The most important social change that affected them was the caste system. Alexander's invasion of India in 326 B.C. was an important factor that affected the Aryan society. The Greeks who came to India along with Alexander were mainly soldiers. They did not give much importance to high ideals like chastity of women. Due to this the custodians of Hindu religion began to enforce strict moral laws on their followers. They wanted to preserve their Aryan culture by codifying certain rules for the members of their community. This system of law was mainly based on the concept of Dharma which constitutes the privileges, duties and obligations of a Hindu.

Great changes occurred in the Aryan way of life between 500 B.C. and 600 B.C. In the post-Rig Vedic age there was a reaction against rituals. One gets an idea of the post-Vedic society from the Brahmanas, Upanishads and the great epics. Another valuable book that throws light on the post-Vedic society of India is Kautilya's Arthashastra which is assigned to 2nd century B.C. Since the great epics happen to have value as social documents, they have to be included in our study while analysing the position of woman in post-Vedic ages. At the same time we should not overlook the fact that there is an element of imagination in these great epics.

The world of Indian woman became much more restricted in the time of the Smrithi writers. During the time of Kautilya, she began to be treated as a chattel. She had no separate identity of her own. The scriptures as well as the Dharma Sastras favoured the patriarchal system, which marginalized the role of Indian woman. Nothing but implicit obedience or

20 Ibid, p.2
subordination was expected from her. This culminated finally in the seclusion of women. The freedom that she enjoyed during the Rig Vedic age, was gradually taken away from her.

By 200 B.C. pre-pubescent marriages became the order of the day. The general belief was that if women were given freedom, they would transgress the limits. The Smriti writers like Kautilya, Manu and Yajnavalkya began to favour seclusion of women.

The general belief is that the seclusion of women was introduced by the Mughals in India. But this was practised as early as the time of Ashoka. The earliest reference to it, is in Panini III,2,36, which yields "Asuryampashya Raja-darah" which means those who do not see the sun, that is, the wives of a king." 21 The Dharmasastras are often used to denote the Smritis alone. The Smritis are the principal sources of lawyer's law. The complete codes of Manu and Yajnavalkya deal with rites, penance, true knowledge of Brahma and liberation. They also lay down rules which have to be observed by persons in the course of their life. The social customs and traditions which were reinforced by the law-givers degraded women. There was no sense of equality or justice in these laws. That women had no recognized place in society was revealed in the laws pertaining to marriage, divorce, property rights and right of inheritance. A thorough discrimination is shown by these Hindu law-givers. Moreover all these legislators were chauvinistic in their attitude.

According to Romila Thapar, ", . .the law books are both a reflection of early Indian society as well as attempts at working out what was believed to be a perfect social system." 22 With the best of intentions they visualized and virtually attempted to create an apparently perfect social system. And yet unwittingly, but not innocently, the steamroller-like stereotypes crushed the spirit of Indian woman by denying her the rightful place in society. Society was based on caste system in which the Brahmans occupied the top-most position.

The proselytising sects like Buddhism and Jainism tried their best to establish equality among the people of India. But their efforts produced some negative results.

First of all the Brahminical religion began to enforce strict moral codes on their followers. Secondly they began to encourage pre-pubescent marriages in order to detain women from joining the monastic orders. They felt that the ascetic ideals would destabilize society as well as family. The patriarchal family became very powerful during this period and it began to restrict the activities of women. The majority of women were "looked down upon as a temptation and hindrance in their march towards higher development."

This belief adversely affected the position of Indian woman. Her position in the family as well as in society became very low. There arose a tendency to picture woman as a weak-minded individual who is prone to all infirmities. Another idea which became popular during this period is that a woman needs protection and disciplining throughout her life. This is very well reflected in the writings of the ancient law-givers. These rules were founded on a very flimsy foundation, namely, the length of duration of their existence and these rules in fact had no references to the psychological and social realities and needs of the people. They failed miserably to embody any sense of social justice in them. Such "time-tested rules" merely pulled society backwards without ever giving women a chance for creativity, freshness, growth and development. All these so-called law-givers were men, who had male chauvinistic attitudes in their arbitrary prescriptions of rules which virtually degraded women for generations. The pre-pubescent marriage, in fact, inflicted another curse on women. The child-widows were ill-treated by the society. They were forced to live a life full of restrictions, which marred them physically as well as mentally. They were excluded from all auspicious ceremonies and were looked down upon as ominous beings. The question of

remarriage did not arise, as the law-givers prohibited widow remarriage from the 1st century A.D.

Kautilya's Artha Sastra which is a social as well as historical document reveals the status of woman in India. Kautilya considered woman as a child-bearing machine. Hence he encouraged pre-pubescent marriages. This type of marriage, which was imposed on the child-bride, damaged her totally. Physiologically it was dangerous since she was not physically fit to conceive a child. Psychologically it burdened her with the many responsibilities of child-rearing, when she herself was a child. This evil practice unfortunately continues in many parts of India despite the passage of centuries. The pre-pubescent marriage affected women in another way also. The young adolescent pregnancy, according to modem theories in medicine, carries higher risk due to toxaemia, cephalopelvic disproportion and uterine inertia. A few children of very young mothers show musculo-skeletal disorders or malformation. Yet another risk involved with early pregnancy was polydactyly. Children born to mothers aged 15 or more had a lower risk of polydactyly than in mothers younger than fifteen years. Other disorders which affect children born to young mothers are CNS malformation (Central Nervous System) and CVS(Cardinal Vein System) malformation which involves the cardiovascular system. Thus maternal age is a strong determinant.

Kautilya's Artha Sastra records the number of restrictions that were imposed on women. "According to him a woman who goes out during day time, to sports or to see a woman or spectacle shall pay a fine of six panas."24 Most of these customs denied woman her primary rights as an individual. The freedom that she enjoyed was taken away from her and

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she became a caged bird. In fact her condition was like what Emily Dickinson ironically articulated in one of her poems: "They put me in the closet I Because they liked me still" 25

The Indian woman began to identify herself as a subordinate individual, as a mere instrument of man. This reduced her level of self-confidence. Her roles began to get stereotyped as an individual accepting for herself the composite daughter-wife-mother image. She began to suppress her real feelings and it became difficult for her to untangle her true self from the existing social roles. Over a long period of time, a firm-rooted belief among the majority of women that they were only capable of producing children and managing the household affairs, to the exclusion of all other socially useful activities prevailed. Thus she virtually became a caged bird. The practice of payment of bride money had its own share of negative results, mostly psychological. Though it is an antithesis of dowry it treats woman as an object to be bought and sold. She gets stigmatized with a price tag on her body. As a result she might feel inferior to her possessor who is rightfully her owner. Conversely the owner's pride may play havoc with the woman's self-respect. Thus on the whole this practice dealt a heavy blow on the already damaged self-image of the Indian woman.

This reduced woman to a commodity to be bought at the bidders' choice, with the rich man buying off the bride of his choice. As years rolled by, women began to be regarded as chattels, and this had a far-reaching impact on the status of woman. She became "a caged bird displayed in the zoo." The restlessness arising out of this situation was mercilessly ignored. This must have increased the asymmetry that was already there in the man-woman relationship.

According to Romila Thapar, Manu cannot be held solely responsible for the oppression of Indian women. In a way it was done with the intention of preserving the caste

system. Romila Thapar says that Manu did not favour intercaste marriages as that, he felt, would pollute the Aryan society. So, "...to avoid pollution, you must control birth... but you lose control over birth, if you lose control over women." 26 Manu visualizes the role of an ideal Hindu or Indian woman. He believes that woman is by nature, wicked, susceptible to passion and infirmities. Hence she should be controlled by a male who is supposed to be strong and superior to her. Therefore many historians call it the "age of transition" as this period reflects distinctiveness as well as deterioration in the status of women from the preceding ages. Manu's laws do express a corpus of beliefs about women which are still prevalent in India, obviously keeping Manu alive, unconsciously yet with disastrous results.

Manu approved only three forms of marriage such as Brahma, where the father himself invites a learned man of Vedas to marry his daughter, then 'Daiva' where the girl is married to a priest who conducts a sacrifice, and the Arsha where the bride groom offers a cow and bull or two pairs of the same to the father of the bride. Manu as well as Yajnavalkya condemned the Asura, Prajapatya forms of marriage. An exception was made in the case of Kshatriyas, who could marry according to Gandharva rites.

Marriage was sacred and it was indissoluble. Remarriage was allowed for men under certain conditions. If the wife was barren, or if she had only daughters, and if she was quarrelsome by nature, he would remarry without any delay. Manu even makes provisions for punishments of a woman by her husband, if ever she committed any faults. She should be beaten with a rope or a split bamboo. He never sanctioned widow remarriage. According to him a widow should remain faithful to her husband's memory. But a widower could marry again in order to conduct the sacrificial rites.

Pre-pubescent marriages were encouraged gradually. They must have thought that if given a choice most women would prefer to escape from the monotonous domestic life. As far as a widow was concerned even in Rig Vedic times she was denied the right of inheritance. But if she was a putrika, she could inherit her father's wealth. The system of niyoga was encouraged by the ancient law-givers where she was forced to marry her brother-in-law to safeguard property rights. But Apastamba and Manu strongly reacted against this system. Thus in that age the position of a widow in society became miserable. Although Buddhism permitted the widow to inherit her husband's property, the Smriti writers like Manu and Narada forbade a widow to inherit her husband's property. They gave the right of inheritance to sapindas or kinsmen. The daughters in ancient India had some legal rights. In Vedic and post-Vedic ages, married and unmarried daughters had some rights of inheritance. But a widow, as well as a wife, had no claim over her husband's property. As far as the treatment of daughters is concerned, Manu orders affectionate treatment. According to him "where women are honoured there the god’s reside." But he disqualifies the putrika for marriage by saying that a prudent man should not marry a maiden who has no brothers. He also prohibits the custom of bride price and he emphatically says that the father accepting the cow and bull, during Arsha marriage, as highly improper.

Remarriage of discarded women was allowed after a certain period of time by Manu as well as Kautilya. She had to wait for three years before getting remarried. Manu also had definite views about man-woman equation. A husband, even if he is wicked, should be worshipped by the wife as her lord and master. Despite Manu's commitment to the concept of a stable, secure and morally founded society, his strictures against women seem to be cutting at the root of fairness, equality and the resultant happiness. He seems to be thinking that a woman could be the sacrificial goat at the altar of male supremacy. The effects of Manu's

commandments are found prevailing in Indian society even now. This is obviously the reason why even the educated Indian women of our times put up with the atrocities perpetrated on them by the so-called "gentlemen."

Denying woman's basic human rights is virtually like cutting the wings of a bird which would like to fly high to the empyrean heights of performance and fulfilment. Denial of the right to education, free choice in marriage, inheritance and other property rights, the right to remarriage, the right to social mobility and so on, has ultimately resulted in making the Indian woman a very unenviable entity devoid of, among other things, the highly necessary self-esteem which she always needs and deserves. Marriage became compulsory for a Hindu. It was an unbreakable bond which united two individuals until death. Society did not consider it as a contract with conditions binding on both partners. So the majority of women were forced to comply with the existing norm. There was no law which granted divorce (except in Kautilya's time) if the partners were unhappy. "The rules of marriage were rigidly enforced and marriage was primarily a social institution. The patriarchal system tended to keep the status of women at a low level, and the emergence of the joint family with special property rights for the male members reinforced male dominance."

In course of time she began to identify herself as a subordinate individual and as a mere instrument of man. This gradually destroyed her self-confidence and in turn destroyed her self-concept. The roles began to get stereotyped. She began to suppress her real feelings and it became difficult for her to untangle her true self from the existing social roles. There arose a firm-rooted belief among the majority of women that they were only capable of producing children and managing the household affairs.

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Thus the Rig Vedic concept of "Sahadharmini" or equal partner was slowly losing its relevance. It was in fact replaced by the 'Pativrata Dharma' or the duties of a chaste wife who would fulfill the wishes of her husband without questioning them. The rules prescribed for "pativrata" prevented her from eating even with her husband. This custom prevails even now in many parts of India. Almost a master-slave relationship began to develop between the husband and the wife. She was in fact trapped in the "Pativrata image" and she continues to be trapped in this miasma. One is now reminded of Prachi Momin who articulates the pathetic condition of women in general:

Call me P-

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I endure like a lamb

Spit on my back

I seek help from my heritage.  

Most of the law-givers were against the dissolution of marriage, and divorce was not granted. The marriage and the vow that preceded it were sacred according to Vedic Aryans. This concept got a firm foot-hold in Vedic society, mainly due to the writings of the law-givers who were invariably males who used the customs as means of psychological and physical oppression.

In the family man began to assert his power. Violence was also used to secure this end. This made an average Indian woman a storehouse of fears and weaknesses. Her self-
respect was torn into shreds and there was no escape from the miasma of discrimination. There was neither equality nor freedom.

In the post-Vedic period the right of choice of life partner was also taken away from woman. Manu who belongs to 2nd century B.C, for instance, insisted that a woman should never be allowed any freedom. "Day and night women must be kept in dependence by the males of their families. Her father protects her in her childhood, her husband protects her in her youth and her sons protect her in old age; a woman is never fit for independence."\(^{30}\)

This points to the deep rooted nature of civil customs binding Indian woman in a symbolic way. And "when a woman is transformed into a symbol by man, woman becomes a symbol of her social decontextualization, her silencing, the occlusion of her suffering, the suppression of her feeling."\(^{31}\) The perceptions of woman as property is central to the oppression of women in the family. The damage that was done continues even now. Physically she may not be confined to the house. She is free to pursue a career. But even now the concept of the majority of women remains the same, i.e., an ideal Indian woman is the one who is totally committed to her husband and family. "It is precisely this rootedness that has made it impossible for even the Indian feminist to challenge family as the single most oppressive institution."\(^{32}\)

### 1.2.2 The Buddhist Interlude

The story of Indian woman's self-respect and self-fulfilment has had numberless ups and downs, variations and vagaries, positive and negative vicissitudes. Her destiny has been

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formed by many forces working against and for her down the centuries. The Buddhist Interlude in India's history witnessed a conspicuous change for the better, for the long-oppressed Indian womanhood. This period roughly ranges between 3rd century B.C. and 6th century A.D. It literally brought her a wide-sweeping draught of fresh air which swept away, at least for a short period, the stinking air of stagnation, discrimination, oppression and exploitation.

On analysis it is found that the essence of Buddhist ideology was kindness towards all living beings. Thus in its attitude Buddhism was much more liberal than Brahmanism whose religious practices had been sanctioned by the Dharmasastras. Buddhism thus came as a boon to the oppressed classes, especially to women who had only marginal importance in that society. The Brahmanical religion imposed on them more and more restrictions which denied them their freedom of the self.

Gautama the Buddha, was not a reformer like Raja Ram Mohan Roy, but Buddha had a solid faith in essential man-woman equality regarding the attainment of salvation. The widows and barren women were ill-treated by the existing Brahmanical religion. But Buddha felt that these women also deserved compassion of the deepest variety. Especially towards the last stages he felt that he should do something to improve the status of the Indian woman. This can also be considered as the net result of the efforts of the Therigathas and the alms-women. They tried their best to convince Buddha about the futility of the invidious distinction that existed between man and woman. But all these reforms were mainly due to the compassion of the great sage. But perceiving the matter from the angle of justice, we can very well conclude that compassion is not a solid foundation for the emancipation of Indian woman. What we need is not freedom alone but equality based on a sense of justice.
Inspite of its defects, the Buddhist Age witnessed a series of changes which lifted woman out of her complacency. He made the adoption of daughters valid which went against the custom of the prevailing Brahmanical religion. This squashed the general belief that the birth of a son was indispensable to attain moksha or salvation. Buddhism was effecting a radical change from that of the Vedic religions. Between 500 B.C. and 600 A.D. the Brahmanical religion began to favour the seclusion of women from social activities. Many followers of Buddha realised that it was one's own Karma that was important. We can very well conclude that it was Buddha's firm belief in compassion as a great virtue that resulted in his encouragement given to the adoption of girls. No wonder it failed to withstand the ravages of time and the onslaught of the Dharmasastras. In its attitude Buddhism was much more liberal than the religious practice that was sanctioned by the Dharmasastras. Buddhism thus became a boon to the oppressed classes, especially women. Women were accepted as nuns in the Buddhist monasteries and were free to cross the boundaries of the country.

By the third century B.C. the influence of Buddhist ideology was strongly felt in most parts of the subcontinent. Gautama the Buddha believed in woman-man equality, as evidenced in his concept of marriage. According to him it was a contract between a mature man and a mature woman cutting at the roots of the pre-pubescent marriages which were encouraged by the establishment. In Buddhism women were allowed to marry men of their choice. The age at which a woman could marry was twenty. Pre-pubescent marriages were not encouraged by Buddhism, because the concept of child marriage was a negation of the idea of marriage as a contract between two mature and autonomous individuals. Secondly, child marriages were an offence against womanhood for the simple reason that the woman's consent was never sought or taken. This was indeed an insult to woman's concept of herself.
as an independent entity. "In its attitude to women, the Buddhist tradition showed greater liberality than Hindu tradition, as for instance, permitting women to become nuns." 33

The Vedic tradition of giving education to women was encouraged by Buddha. They received elementary education from their fathers, brothers or uncles. Those women who secured admission to the monastic order continued their education in the monastery. "The education given to female novices and nuns was not different from that imparted to their male counterparts. The nuns were initiated into the deepest problems of philosophy as also into the subtle mystical experiences attainable through intense meditative exercises." 34

After the decline of Buddhism, the ineligibility for learning Vedas was encouraged by the Brahmanical religion. By 15th century A.D, most of the women in Indian society were uneducated. But the Buddhist impact certainly was there on the Kshatriya classes. The women belonging to the Kshatriya families were educated at their homes, with the purpose of enabling them to manage their affairs on their own.

Buddhism recognised the real meaning of the word "dampati" which etymologically meant "the joint owners of the house." In order to emphasize this aspect Buddha gave the wife the right to inherit the husband's property. According to him she was his helpmate as well as his companion who had equal authority, when it came to the matters of the household. Thus married women were treated with a lot of respect in Buddhism. They were allowed to attend the discourses of Buddha. They were also free to practise the eightfold path which assured salvation. Even though the family was patriarchal at this time, Buddhism tried its best to do away with the asymmetry that existed between the husband and the wife.


Buddhism also permitted divorce in exceptional cases. Divorce was granted if the wife was barren, or if a partner was guilty of adultery. A sick wife was to be looked after by the husband. Granting divorce to a certain extent eliminated the discriminatory status of a custom by which man enjoyed more power and held a superior position vis-a-vis woman. Till then women were forced to occupy a secondary position in the social and domestic arena. The years of subjugation prepared them to accept their secondary role. Marriage was not a contract, but a sacrament which extended the relationship of the two persons for the life to come.

Divorce was looked down upon by the upholders of Brahmanical religion. According to them it was a negation of the very principle of sacrament. Another noticeable feature during this time was that these marriages did not have any legal constraints except customary norms. And people followed their social heritage without questioning the validity of the norms which permitted the abandoning of wives. A group of Buddhist nuns called Therigathas (senior nuns) composed verses and were noted chroniclers of the time. They played an important part in propagating Buddhism. Thus the admission of women into the monastic order secured for them a religious status. Ashoka's own daughter Sanghamitra went to Ceylon to propagate Buddhism. Many women joined the order of nuns to pursue religious activities. In order to propagate Buddhism, they travelled from place to place. Some women even went to Burma, Ceylon, Nepal in order to spread the great teachings of their Master.

Buddha followed the Vedic tradition of legalising the daughter or putrika to inherit the father's property in the absence of a son. The unmarried daughters, were to be provided for by the father or on his death by their brothers. They could own a part of their father's property in case there were brothers. These laws, which gave them the right of inheritance provided them economic independence. This also gave them freedom to choose between marriage and spinsterhood. The belief that "earthlier happy is the rose distilled / than that
which withers on a virgin throne" \(^{35}\) was slowly changing. Buddha showed great compassion towards widows. In order to remove the prejudice that existed in society, he admitted them to the Sanghas. Through his discourses he tried to convince his followers that these women were not responsible for their husbands' death. Buddha also encouraged widow remarriage. But the only anathema that surfaced was the sanctioning of "Niyoga", which forced a widow to marry her younger brother-in-law in order to continue the family line. This was encouraged for protecting the family's property and wealth. In the absence of children, a widow could inherit the property of her husband. The steps taken by Buddhism gave the average Indian woman a great sense of security. This stance by Buddha became an issue of debate among the law-givers of India. It was finally in twelfth century A.D., that the widow's right of inheritance finally was recognized.

The Buddhist social code with its emphasis on compassion, was kind in its treatment of prostitutes. Consequently prostitutes were admitted to Sanghas where they could lead the life of alms-women. Buddhism also gave a legal status to concubines if ever they got married and made their children legitimate. In this way the Buddhist interlude partially ameliorated the situation of the unprivileged section of the society. Instead of applying the canons of justice, the Buddhist society doled out heavy doses of social compassion, offering, in the process, a glimpse of social salvation and self-worth.

Though Buddha was more charitable than the Hindu Dharmasastras, the attitude of the great saviour was to a certain extent prejudiced by the age-old values and traditions. The impact of these traditions can be seen in his many teachings. There were separate rules for women who wanted to join the Sanghas as nuns. Inspite of being mostly conventional in his teaching and partly prejudiced against women, Buddha was large-hearted to welcome

women to the Sanghas or the Buddhist monasteries. And yet he had two different sets of rules, obviously discriminatory, for men and women. This wouldn't do Buddha much credit. But a great fact remains that he was high-minded enough to reach out to the suffering women of society, and to raise their level of status as human entities.

The annual "Upostha Ceremony" that was there in Buddhism also reveals the prejudice against women. According to this custom an alms-woman should confess her sins before a monk and should receive absolution, from him, for all her sins. Another discriminatory rule is mentioned in Sulla Vogga according to which "the official admonition by an almswoman is forbidden, whereas the official admonition of an alms woman by a monk is not forbidden." 36

"The commentary Manoratha Purana on the Angutta Nikaya mentions a list of the foremost nuns (Teres), female novices (Shrameneris) and female lay devotees (Upasikas)." 37 This classification, obviously discriminatory, may be justified on the basis of the fact that they came from different back grounds, sections of the society and social rungs. Moreover they had to be integrated through a process of synthesis spread over a long period of initiation, training and ascetic discipline.

According to Angutta Nikaya the most important woman in Buddhist hierarchy was Mahapajapati Gotami, who secured Buddha's consent for the formation of the order of nuns. The next important Buddhist disciple was Kshema, the queen of Bimbisara. It was mainly the efforts of Mahapajapati and Therigathas that finally cleared the bias that seeped through Buddha. He finally realised that "one and the same self is present in all beings." 38

change in his attitude is clearly revealed in a passage in Samyutta(1-5-6): "And be it a woman, be it a man for whom / into Nirvana's presence they shall come."\(^{39}\)

The analysis of the data given above reveals very clearly that Buddhism exposed many flaws that existed in the Brahmanical society. The stress that had been laid on "dharma" or duties and privileges of a member of the community by the Brahmanical injunction stood at cross roads by the end of the era, as Buddhism convinced its followers that it was the individual that mattered more. This resulted in an upsurge of human dignity which had its off-shoot in the form of a raised level of female status.

In a way Buddhism improved the status of at least a section of women who embraced that religion. The majority of women at that time lived in abject subordination, under the restraints imposed by the Brahmanical religion. The protest registered by Buddhism was not long-sustained as Buddha was mainly concerned with salvation of his followers. The overall development in women's life and work was soon eclipsed by the reassertion of Brahmanical religion resulting in yet another spell of darkness in this subcontinent.

Buddhism never tried to abolish the existing social order. The discriminatory feeling against women that was there in the minds of the majority of people remained unaffected. Thus the two major forces that joined hands in degrading women like the joint family and the caste system, remained unalterables. Many customs and traditions were implicitly followed by the majority of people of India during this time, which certainly went against the interest of women in general. Buddhism made the adoption of daughters valid which went against the prevailing custom. This squashed the general belief that the birth of a son was necessary to attain moksha. Thus Buddhism was effecting a radical psychological change from that of the Vedic religion. On analysis it is found that Buddhism as prevailed in India at that time,

wanted to have a solid faith in the essential man-woman equality. That religion had compassion as one of its prime postulates finding Indian woman deserving compassion of the deepest variety, Buddhism reached out to her as part of its journey towards glory.

But it is to be noted that Buddhism also failed miserably to understand the situation of woman from the angle of social justice. "If justice were to be really done mere laws are not sufficient. It takes a total re-orientation in judicial thinking and attitude, if gender,.....justice is to be done ..." 

Even though Buddhism failed to achieve man-woman equality from the angle of legalistic perception it achieved a lot for Indian woman on the basis of its postulate of compassion which virtually took Indian woman much nearer to the goal of gender justice.

1.2.3 A Time of Stagnation

During the pre-medieval period which covers the span of time between 3rd century A.D and 12th century A.D. the status of women underwent further deterioration and they were regarded as equal to Sudras. The sphere of their activity was again confined to the home. Seclusion of women became very common even before the advent of Muslims, especially in the upperclass society, due to the rigidity of the caste system. The Smriti writers prohibited intercaste marriages. Especially for an upper caste woman it was strictly prohibited to marry men from lower castes even as the upper caste man retained his right to many from the lower caste of his choice. As far as the Indian woman was concerned, social mobility, both vertical and horizontal had become a mirage which defied an easy solution.

In the 8th century the all-pervading influence of Adi Shankara was felt across the length and breadth of the Indian subcontinent. Yet his views on women's role in terms of worldly functions and spiritual services were strongly oriented towards an anti-woman posture.

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1.2.4 The Position of Women during Bhakti Movement

The Hindu religious revival namely the Bhakti movement which took place roughly around 11th century A.D. was the direct outcome of the proselytisation activity of the Muslims in India. The leaders and the propagators of the Bhakti cult were greatly impressed by the ideas of one God and universal brotherhood which were introduced by this great religion based on monotheism. The impact of the Bhakti movement lasted till the first half of the 16th century A.D.

The number of followers of Islam increased under the sultans. The non-Muslims had to pay a tax called Jizia - the military tax. The proselytisation was effectively carried on under the patronage of sultans and it literally swept through the poorer classes. First of all they were unable to pay this aforesaid tax. Secondly, there was persecution carried out by the Brahanical injunctions.

The founder of the Bhakti cult was Ramanuja, a Vaishnava saint. Other teachers of the movement like Kabir, Namdev and Randev hailed from the lower castes. This itself shows that it was indeed a reformist movement which aimed at the abolition of the various discriminations perpetrated by the existing Hindu religion. The religious leaders gave emphasis to the fact that there is only one God. In its attitude to women it followed the footsteps of Buddhism, i.e. on the grounds of compassion towards the suffering multitudes of the feminine gender and also on the realisation that men and women are of equal significance before God. It also restored for the time being a religious status to women. They were encouraged to come out of their homes, to listen to the saints and to sing of God's glory in public. There were a few women saints who become very popular. Meera Bai was not only
acclaimed as a saint but also as a poet of lasting significance. This clearly indicates the possibilities of artistic excellence lying dormant among the Indian women folk.

Even during this period of nascent glory the majority of women in India lived under in subjugation. Their position was deteriorating rapidly. Except for a short while the conservative attitude of the religious leaders did not undergo any change, radical or otherwise. The ancient ascetic ideal which considered women as an obstacle in the path of achieving salvation continued to dominate. So after the initial success, it failed miserably to bring about any long term change owing to the lack of co-ordination among the cult leaders and also due to the absence of sustained efforts based on organisational structures.

It can be very well concluded that the ideal of equality was misconceived by all these ascetically-oriented religious leaders. For them as far as women were concerned, equality meant a consideration arising from pity and not justice. They failed to comprehend the fact that they should "restore to half humanity its rightful place in human society."

1.2.5 Medieval India

As far as this study is concerned the medieval period is spread over four centuries from the 12th to the first half of the 16th century. The real history of India in the middle ages is a struggle for political power and economic supremacy between two systems which were totally different in their outlook. The incursion of Muslims in India began with the Arab invasion of Sind in the beginning of the 8th century A.D. The large majority of Muslims who came to India were Turks, Afghans and Persians. "And thus for the first time in recorded history Indian religion and social customs were faced with a system which was equally formulated and definite."\(^4\)

The caste system became more rigid in the medieval period. Occupation now began to be determined by birth. Such a situation brought about a lot of conservation in the Hindu society. Those who were low in the social scale of Hindu society found in Islam an opportunity to assert their dignity. The more sensitive among them were attracted by its democratic appeal. This is one of the reasons why Islam spread very fast in certain parts of India. Another reason was that two options were given to the Indian prisoners of war by Muslims: either acceptance of Islam or slavery. Obviously most of them preferred the first.

Dependence of women on their husbands or other male relatives was a prominent feature of this period. Devoid of avenues of any education, having lost the access to Streedhana or dowry, they virtually became the exploited class with disastrous results for themselves and the nation. Indian women were politically, socially and economically inactive except for those engaged in farming and weaving. This inactivity in a way contributed to their subordination. Most of the women accepted meekly the idea that the proper place for them was their home. This diffusive awareness which was ideologically stereotyped obviously on the wrong lines, was their undoing during this period of darkness, thus proving the veracity of the statement that "there are three dimensions to subordination of women - the political, ideological and the economic which may co-exist in different balances with one another."  

Political subordination includes the exclusion of women from all important decision-making processes. With the advent of Muslims in India, the social movement of Indian women was restricted. They were prohibited to attend public functions and were not free to participate as men's equals in religious functions like yajnas, obviously indicating a degradation of her role as she was getting wrapped in isolation. Another social evil that existed in society during this period was child marriage. These pre-pubescent marriages

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adversely affected the health of the girls. These child brides were denied all intellectual, physical and spiritual development. It virtually punctured the fragile psyche of Indian girl child. Her self-image was torn into shreds by the patriarchal family which denied her basic freedom. Indian womanhood was mercilessly locked in the echo chamber.

Similarly most of the women made themselves believe that the ideal place for them was the home. Thus they were persuaded by circumstances to accept their inferiority and secondary position. Men being providers, women became dependent on them economically, for their subsistence except for the labour classes, where both men and women participated in subsistence farming and other occupations. Many social evils like female infanticide, sati, child marriages, Purdah system or zenana, the seclusion of women developed during the middle ages, due to the political instability of northern India, especially due to various invasions. Muslims who came to India were mainly warriors and they did not give much importance to Hindu ideals like chastity and pativrata dharma. So the seclusion of women was encouraged mainly by the Rajputs and the other upper castes like Brahmins. Polygamy was the first reason which contributed to the subordination of women. Muslim rulers in India had large harems. Thus women came to be regarded as instruments of sensual satisfaction. Even among the Hindus there was no limit set to the number of wives a man could take.

Marriage in Islam is a contract. But a Muslim man can have as many as four wives. Thus even religion encouraged the abject subordination of women for the reasons best known to it. Islam also made husband the head of the family and insisted that a wife should obey all his commands and should serve him with utmost loyalty, whether he was worthy of it or not.

Another social evil that existed in medieval India was female infanticide. This particular system was prevalent among Rajputs and other high castes. Even among the Muslims this custom existed. The evil mainly originated from the belief that only the birth of a son could make salvation possible for parents. Only a son had the privilege of performing
Samskaras. And lastly the son began to be considered as the maintainer of the race. So in most of the noble families the female child was killed either by poisoning or by burying her alive. Some of them were drowned to death. Even among the Muslims the birth of a daughter was ominous:

“The mid wife who receives a son deserves a gold coin to make a ring for her nose.

But you! Oh midwife! Deserve thirty strokes of the stick!

Oh! you who announce the little girl when the censorious are there!”

Purdah gained popularity with the advent of the Muslims. Many writers feel that the purdah system existed among Kshatriyas in the period of Dharma Sastras. But the Hindu women veiled only their face or sometimes only covered their heads with sarees or "dupattas." But for Muslims it meant complete veiling. Purdah actually is a Persian word which means curtain. According to Patricia Jeffrey "Purdah is a part and parcel of stratification in India It becomes the mental foot binding, the frogs in a well syndrome, the submissiveness of the young bride and the inability of adult women to cope with the world outside."  

Dowry system was a common phenomenon. It actually meant "Stridhana" which included gifts, ornaments, property, and cash presented to her by her father or her relatives. But in the medieval period the term acquired special significance. It meant money or "Dakshina" which was actually presented to the bride groom along with the bride. In Vedic

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times it ensured some sort of security for her. But during the middle ages she was not free to use it as it was owned by her husband and his kith and kin.

During the Middle Ages the term "Stridhana" acquired huge dimensions. The Hindus and Muslims favoured this custom of dowry. It could be paid in cash or kind along with the bride. During the Vedic ages it was given with the intention of providing security for women when a crisis occurs. She was free to make use of this "Dhana." But the Middle Ages witnessed a sudden transformation. The Stridhana received by the groom belonged completely to the in-laws. The bride did not have free access to this wealth, which rightfully belonged to her.

Dowry system existed even among the Muslims, especially among the Shias. As years rolled by dowry became an integral part of the marriage ceremony. This in a way contributed to female infanticide, as it became a heavy burden on the poor. The birth of girls became a nightmare to the majority of the population. Another negative effect of the dowry system was that the Indian woman lost her importance as a worthy human being. She began to be regarded as movable and removable property by her husband.

Created by the so-called law-givers and upholders of religion in the medieval age it literally induced physical as well as intellectual damage on women in medieval India. It took away her fledgling morale which was as expectedly delicate. Above all it resulted in the emotional break-downs and the traumas of a serious kind. Thus her self-concept received another lethal lash at the hands of the dark forces that ruled the roost.

The condition of the Hindu widows became more miserable during the medieval period. Rigidity of caste system denied them the right to freedom and social mobility. Inhuman treatment was offered to the widow. She was forced to lead a life away from worldly pleasures. A widow was also secluded from society as well as family. Another pre-requisite for a widow was shaving the head. She was thus humiliated mercilessly by
contemporary society. The condition of the Muslim widow was slightly better owing to the fact that she could marry after a certain lapse of time following her husband's death.

The feudal society of the time encouraged "Sati" which meant self-immolation of the widow. By burning herself on the pyre of her husband, she proves her loyalty. Even the child widows were not spared from this gruesome ritual. According to Saroj Gulati "because of the continuous wars, there were chances of too many widows young and old, and a big question was how to accommodate them without bringing stigma to the family or creating problems for society." 45 And Sati was considered as the best course even though it was the worst crime perpetrated on Indian women from many angles of reason or humanity.

Prostitution became a recognised institution. The Devadasi system which was prevalent among the Hindus and the courtesans who adorned the court of Muslim rulers, degraded the status of women in society. Under the Devadasi system women were the brides of gods. But they were supposed to entertain kings, priests and even members of the upper classes. The fact that they were exploited by the existing male-dominated society is clearly revealed in the testimony of Alberuni: "the kings make them an attraction for their cities, a bait of pleasure for their subjects, for no other but financial reasons."46

Earnest efforts for the cause of female education in India were made by Christian Missionaries during the first half of the 19th century. The first educational institution for girls was started by a man called May in Chinsura in 1818. He may be regarded as the pioneer of 'lower female education' in India. But his efforts had not succeeded much. In 1819, the Calcutta Female Juvenile Society which had been organized by several English


ladies tried for the establishment and support of Bengali female schools. In a public examination arranged by the school society in 1822, about forty poor Bengali girls belonging to the Female Juvenile society were examined.47

The Calcutta Juvenile Society established female schools at places like Shyambazar, Jaunbazar, Entally etc. and at the end of five years of its existence the society maintained 160 female students in six schools. This society was also assisted by social reformers in Bengal. Pandit Radhakanta Deb was one of the illustrious secretaries of the school society. He had encouraged this society in various ways. It may be said that Calcutta Female Juvenile Society had the honour of leading the way in native female education in Bengal. In 1821, the Calcutta School Society engaged the services of one Miss Cooke (later Mrs. Wilson) from London, whose committed work led to the organization of the Ladies Society For Native Female Education. By 1829, she had started 30 schools which were formed into a Central School in the same year.

The Samachar Chandrika of 13 Srabana, 1234 B.S. (28 July, 1827) noted that the Bengali had begun to keep their daughters attached to schools for education upto an advanced age, and that, in Burdwan, particularly, girls aged fourteen or fifteen years came to schools. It may be pointed out that there were 175 girls in four female schools in 1838 in the Burdwan district - one in the Kalna thana, a second in the town of Burdwan, a third in the neighbourhood of Burdwan, and a fourth in Katwa. The European ladies and gentlemen, connected with the Calcutta Ladies Society, managed the schools for girls which were set up at places like Burdwan, Bankura, Krishnagar, Nadia and Kalna. But all the schools did not continue most of the schools disappeared in course of time.

The Serampore Mission also started girls' schools at different centres in Bengal. But most of these schools went out of existence in course of time. Despite all their efforts, the Christian Missionaries could not gain popularity among the upper strata of Indian society. It was noted that the majority of non-Christian pupils of Missionary schools were drawn from lower ranks. The lower classes (i.e. those who were not much under the bonds which orthodox Hinduism had imposed on society) were attracted to these institutions for a few piece or other gifts occasionally given to the girl students for ensuring their attendance at schools. The primary motive of the Christian Mission was to inculcate the Christian doctrine in the minds of the young girls. So the majority of the Hindus did not like these schools. In 1855, one Dr. Thomas Smyth was reported as making a candid confession in the following words:

"We will not conceal the fact, that our own earnest desire is that India were thoroughly Christianised and we regard our Female Education as an important means towards that end."

Such overt proselytizing motive of the Christian Missionaries quite naturally alienated Hindu upper caste women from such educational institutions. Even women belonging to lower castes gradually withdrew themselves from these missionary schools. However, limited success was achieved by such efforts of the missionaries in the sphere of female education, as is evident from the fact that at the close of 1850, they opened 354 day schools for girls in India. In Bengal, there were 26 such schools with 690 girls and 28 boarding-schools with 836 girls who were taught almost exclusively in the vernacular languages.

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After continuous efforts for a decade and more, the first secular public female school was established in Calcutta in 1849. John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune was mainly responsible for the establishment of this school. A section of the Bengali intelligentsia and also well-to-do members of Bengal assisted him in various ways.

Bethune and his school contributed a lot to the cause of spreading female education in Bengal in great details afterwards. It should also be mentioned in the later chapters that Sita Devi and Shanta Devi also had their formal education in Bethune school as well as Bethune College which also contributed a lot in enriching their education.

1.2.6. **The social cultural conditions of Bengal in the past two decades**

The socio-cultural conditions of Bengal during the early 19th century which appear to have posed severe constraints on the spread of female education. In the early 19th century) the condition of Bengal was not in favour of female education. The spread of women's education in Bengal was very difficult because of religious orthodoxy of the upper caste Hindus. Apart from this the Bengali women were also victims of the social practices prevalent in Bengal around this time. Child-marriage, polygamy, the practice of sati, and other evil practices, were plaguing the life of women. In many royal families, purdah was a common practice. All these socio-religious practices had led to the curtailment or denial of educational opportunities to girls in Bengal. The objective social condition of women around this time had created serious impediment to the spread of female education. But despite reactionary socio-religious forces, female education received considerable impetus from the renaissance spirit which permeated Indian life, especially Bengali life, in the second half of the 19th century. Calcutta was the central place, of renaissance in Bengal. During this time, a section of Bengali people were inspired by modern ideas and values. They took the role of social reformers. Those people had become conscious about the degradation of the status of
women. They believed that the deterioration in the status of women is related to the decline in their education. So they realized the need for educating girls, and emphasized the cause of female education.

The renaissance of Indian social life in the 19th century was led by some prominent Indians. In Bengal, Raja Rammohan Roy, Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar and Raja Radhakanta Deb vigorously tried to further the cause of female education. Religious reform movements such as those of the Brahmo Samaj, Arya samaj, Prarthana Samaj were engaged in promoting female education. Brahmo Samaj was a great supporter of women's right to education. In the subsequent history of the Brahmo Samaj, men like Keshav Chandra Sen, Sasipada Banerjee, Dwarkanath Ganguli, Durgamohon Das, Anandamohon Bose, Pandit Sivnath Sastri earnestly strove for the spread of female education in Bengal. ⁴⁹

The contribution of Raja Rammohan Roy to the cause of female education and to the improvement of the status of women must be mentioned here. Raja Rammohan Roy, the spiritual father of this renaissance, who appeared as the herald of a new age, was a strong advocate of female education. He defended the right to education of women and their enlightenment so that they might be conscious of their own position in society and discharge their duties to themselves as well as to the people at large. Above all, he made earnest efforts for saving the women of Bengal from a cruel death. Rammohan Roy was mainly responsible for the abolition of sati. This however, posed the problem of widowhood. Despite the enactment of Widow Remarriage Act, due to economic dependence and educational backwardness, this act was not successful. The widows could secure to themselves an

honourable life only if they could find an access to education. It is not fortuitous that a large number of women who took to education during the 19th century happened to be widows.\footnote{50}

1.2.7 The contribution of Hindu college in spreading women education

But during the first half of the nineteenth century, the structure and the culture of the society in Bengal were not conducive to the spread of female education. The social taboos, caste rites and rituals were so strong that it was difficult to overcome those social restrictions for educating the girls. Above all, due to the paucity of education, women believed in these evil social practices and bowed down almost ungrudgingly. The laws which were enacted in favour of women met with little success. Unconscious and ignorant as they were, women could not utilize the legal support available to them in those days to combat the unwholesome social and cultural practices condemning them to sub-human existence. Although, an orthodox opposition against the attempts at female education prevailed in society, an enlightened public opinion, favourable to girls' education was gradually growing. The young scholars of the Hindu College were thinking of the education of women even in the 1830s. In early 1830, they published a paper “Parthenon”. In this paper, they wrote an article advocating women's education. Unfortunately, publication of this paper was stopped by the College authorities for advancing extra academic views. But the alumni of the College did not hesitate to take up the cause of women's education, and associated themselves, later on, in all the initiatives made in this direction. The Hindu College was becoming a centre of renaissance in Bengal. The educated young students of this College were waging a relentless battle against various orthodoxies and obscurantism of traditional Hindu Society.\footnote{51}


The ex-students of the Hindu College also opened their columns for the spread of female education through newspapers and journals. The Enquirer of Rev. K.M.Banerjea, Gyananweshan of Ramkrishna Mallik and Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee, all ex-students of the Hindu College, supported the cause of female education, even in the first half of the 19th century. The Bengal Spectator of Ramgopal Ghosh and Tarachand Chakravarty supported not only female education but also advocated the general improvement of the condition of women. Pearychand Mitra and Radhanath Sikdar started a popular Bengali Patrika called Masik Patrika- especially for the study of Bengali womenfolk. Ramgopal Ghosh, a brilliant alumnus of the Hindu College and a prominent figure in Indian public life in those days, had encouraged the spread of female education in several ways. In 1842 he offered two prizes - one gold medal and one silver for the best and second best essays on Native Female Education to the students of the first and second classes of the Hindu College. The prizes were won by Madhusudan Dutta and Bhudev Mukhopadhyay.

The Young Bengal, a group of young students of the Hindu College, Calcutta, under the leadership of Ramgopal Ghosh, made efforts to promote the cause of female education through the Bengal British Indian Society of Calcutta. This Society, which was established in early 1843, engaged itself mainly in political activities. But its members also had a keen interest in social questions. So they had dealt with female education. Peary Charan Sarkar, an ex-student of the Hindu College, had made earnest efforts to spread female education. Thus we find that, at a time when female education was still in its infancy, and when there was stubborn resistance against women's going out of the confines of home into the corridors of educational institutions, quite a few learned men of Calcutta, mostly students of the Hindu College, came forward to champion the cause of female education. They became the early modernizers of Bengali Society including its womenfolk.
1.2.8 The contribution of Bethune in the spread of women education

This growing recognition of the cause of female education in Bengal culminated in the establishment in May, 1849 of the first school for the instruction of the girls of upper class Hindus under the name of the Hindu Valika Vidyalaya through the efforts of John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune, Legal Member of the Governor General's Council and President of the Council of Education and of Pandit Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar, one of the great educationists and social reformers of modern India. Mr. Bethune had to tolerate the opposition of many influential natives of Calcutta. But he also received considerable encouragement and help from some educated and rich Bengalis. He was spending between seven and eight hundred rupees for its maintenance from his own pocket. Beside the establishment of Hindu Valika Vidyalaya, Bethune had done much for the spread of female education. By virtue of his position as President of the Council of Education, he had to visit different centres of education in Bengal. In most of these centres, he emphasized the need of female education, and the duties the recipients of new education had to perform, and the responsibilities they had to discharge in the direction of women's enlightenment. This newly founded school was a lay public institution and girls could attend it in large number. But attending schools was not yet the custom among the respectable classes. The conservative people publicly opposed the school. Some of those, who sent their girls before, had stopped sending them any longer in this school. Thus though the Hindu Valika Vidyalaya had started with 21 pupils, at one time the number of students dwindled to 07 due to the opposition of conservative people. But despite the opposition of orthodox Hindu people, at the end of the first year the number rose to 34.\(^5\)

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It should be mentioned here that in Bengal, women's modern education was started through this Hindu Valika Vidyalaya. The course of study of this school included reading and writing the Bengali language, arithmetic, physics, geography and needlework. All these girl students were taught in Bengali of women's education. The Bharat Stri Mandal organized by Saralabala Devi Choudhurani in 1910, was the first all-India women's organization which took up the cause of promoting female education. Here, it must be referred to that a number of social and political factors had worked for the improvement of women's education in the 20th century. A slow, gradual but perceptible change was found in the mental make-ups of male members in the society. The boys wanted to marry after completing their education. Moreover, the educated boys were beginning to prefer educated girls as life partners. There is no doubt that these factors indirectly motivated the girls' taking to education. Even for a bright marital prospect, a modicum of education for the girl was deemed necessary.  

1.2.9 The National movement and women education

The National Movement, which became a mass movement from the early 1920s under the leadership of Mahatma Gandhi, also contributed to the growth and spread of female education. It brought the women out into the larger socio-political arena, aroused in them a sense of dignity, self-respect and freedom from bondages of their family lives. Women were quite naturally induced to look up to education which they felt, could bring about their liberation from various unwholesome social practices. Such liberation through social and political awakening, backed up by proper expansion of education among women, was largely indebted to the radical social reform programmes, launched by Gandhiji :"Gandhiji firmly believed in the theory that the status of women in a society is a proper measuring-rod of the civilization in that society". Condemning various customs and practices which stood in the

way of women's emancipation, Gandhiji stated emphatically, "Let us not live with one limb completely or partially paralysed; we must be incapable of defending ourselves or healthily competing with the other nations, if we allow the better half of ourselves to become paralysed". Hence, this movement strengthened the belief that with a view to enabling women of India to take their place in the tasks of social and political reconstruction, they must be given the opportunities for education. A number of new careers, beside teaching and medicine, began to open for women in the first quarter of the 20th century. As a result, the Indian society's rigid attitude towards girls' education had begun to change. From 1920 onward, female education was receiving greater attention than before. The success of a girl at a public examination was now appreciated and admired. The younger generation of India's women set their hearts on being educated. The number of school-going girls had gradually gone up. In 1921, the number of special girls' institutions was 23,778, enrolling 1,224,128 girls.

Women's increasing access to education is also proved by the fact that between 1917 and 1921, the number of trained primary women teachers rose from 2,751 to 4,391. The girls preferred to go to school and become teachers, and, despite all the difficulties and the scandals which they had to face, women turned up in increasing numbers for village teacherships. Not only the school education, but also the prospects of women's collegiate education were growing brighter. In the progress of higher education of women in India was the foundation of the S.N.D.T. Women's University, till now the only one of its kind, in Bombay in the year 1916. Colleges for women's education were started at different places. Between 1927-1932, the Vidyasagar College in Calcutta opened a women's section, which enrolled 110 women. Some other men's colleges also made special arrangements for women students. Women's departments were started in the Banaras and Aligarh Universities.
Another notable feature of the spread of female education in India, between 1921-22 and 1946-47, was the increasing enrolment of girl students in co-educational institutions. While in 1921-22, 35% of the girl students were in mixed institutions, by 1946-47, more than half of the girls in primary and 50% of those in higher education belonged to such institutions. Besides, girls' institutions also proliferated in large numbers and around 1946-47, their number rose to 28,196 out of a total of 210,165 educational institutions in India, 'enrolling 34.75 lakh girls. Female literacy on the eve of independence, was 6% compared to 0.7%, in 1881-82. Similarly women's share in total enrolment, which was 1.24% in 1916-17 reached 'the high watermark at 9.35% on the eve of independence'. During the colonial period, educational opportunities had been opened to women at all stages. But with all this progress up to the advent of independence, we find that the gap between men's and women's education remains wide.

1.2.10 The growth of female education

The growth rate of female education in colonial period was slow. There were various handicaps in the progress of women's education. Social prejudice, poverty, dearth of trained and qualified women teachers, inadequate financial support, inadequacy of pay of teachers in rural schools and the absence of suitable communications, were some of the major obstacles to the spread of female education.

In the foregoing, the course of evolution of female education in India, with special reference to Bengal from the first quarter of the 19th century to the attainment of Independence in 1947. Although in the first half of the 19th century, the development of female education in Bengal was very poor and almost imperceptible, a wave of change came regarding the cause of female education in the later half of the 19th and in the early 20th century. Here we provide a brief account of the changes brought about in the status of women
as a consequence of the spread of education. During the 19th century, a handful of women received education and became conscious of the inhuman cruelties, inflicted on them by the rigid, inegalitarian, male-dominated society. Their voice of protest against such cruelties, initially feeble and meek, was reinforced by the reformist zeal of the 19th century modernizers of India, and resulted ultimately in some significant changes in the legal status of women. Reference may be made here to the Prevention of Sati Act, 1829, the widow Remarriage Act, 1856 and the Child Marriage Restraint Act, 1929. The cumulative impact of these measures was an increasing awareness among women about their rights, and a greater degree of confidence to assert those. Widows were remarried in and around Calcutta. About 40 widow marriages took place under the supervision of Sasipada Banerjee at Baranagar. For widows, who did not remarry, Sasipada Banerjee established a widows' home near Calcutta where they could receive education and training in small industries. The Mahila Silpasrama, founded in Calcutta in 1907, also provided shelter to widows and enabled them to earn an honourable livelihood. 54

It is worth mentioning that in the early 20th century, Saroj Nalini, a Bengali Woman Social Worker, had been devoted to the improvement of the women's status in India. She organized Mahila Samitis (women's organizations) in every district, town or village with a view to imparting education to women. They took steps to abolish purdah, early marriage, and encouraged widow remarriage. They pleaded for the equal rights of women, in franchise and education. A handful of educated women came forward to combine social reform with political protest movements against the colonial rulers. They began to demand franchise for women, and a delegation of women, led by Sarojini Naidu, went to England to press for it. Due to persistent efforts of these women, supported by the nationalist leadership in India, women could finally achieve limited franchise in 1919. The Government of India Act of 1919

conferred limited franchise, based on education and ownership of property on the lives of men voters. The emphasis on being wives as an essential qualification for women to acquire political rights indicated the limited achievement of women's cause till that date.

The credit for improving the education and status of women mainly goes to the efforts of social reformers, a few of whom happened to belong to the fair sex, other socio-political factors, beyond doubt had worked for the spread of female education. However, it has to be acknowledged that: social reformers, to a large extent, helped to focus attention on the condition of women's education. They emphasized education as the most significant instrument for changing women's subjugated position in society. And due to the initiative taken by the social reformers, a number of institutions for female 'education were opened, albeit with much difficulties, and, in the face of stiff social resistance offered by the protagonists of orthodox Hinduism. But the fact is that the aim of the social reformers was to use education to make women more capable of fulfilling their traditional roles as wives and mothers, and not to make them more efficient and active units in the process of socio-economic or political development. Because of this limited perspective, the type of female education which the social reformers had sought to introduce so zealously, failed to redefine the role of women in society. As Vina Mazumdar observes:

"The plea that education would only improve women's efficiency as wives and mothers left its indelible mark on the educational policy. Demands for separate institutions, different curricula, even different media and standards have been put forward by most champions of women's education ... The purpose of educating women, according to these reformers, was not to make them independent, but to train them to perform their functions as makers of home - hence the emphasis on home
science and simpler liberal arts - rather than the 'manly' subjects like mathematics, sciences, or professional courses like law, engineering etc." 55

On the whole then, despite the limited spread of education, the status of women could not be very significantly altered through various social reforms and political movements, from the mid-19th century to the eve of independence. The main reason for this was that the social and political reformers, with perhaps the exception of Gandhiji, were hardly concerned with changing the status of women, attributed to them by the values and norms of an inegalitarian society. The aim of the reformer, was to secure to the Indian women, a sense of dignity and honour within the family and in the larger societal setting without effecting any significant change in the social structure that accounted for the women's deprivation, exploitation and humiliation. In this context, it should be mentioned that-much of the ameliorative movements organized by social reformers were directed essentially towards the women of the urban middle class.

1.2.11 Constraints in the spread of Female education in India and the Renaissance during that period

It may be pointed out that although the respectable Hindu people were induced to help Vidyasagar on the cause of female education, most of the Bengali people did not take interest in it. The Government's enthusiasm was only in terms of spending some public money for the maintenance of only a few female schools. Vidyasagar had obtained aid for his schools only. So he was also not able to revive the rest of the schools. It should be noted here that the colonial government indirectly opposed the spread of female education by expressing its unwillingness to sanction any grants for these schools. During the nineteenth century, female education could not spread for two reasons: first, the society did not permit the women of all

classes to attend these schools in large number. Secondly, owing to the colonial government's lukewarm attitude to female education, the Bengali women of all classes and of all places did not get the opportunities to receive education. Because of the colonial government's refusal of aid, the cost of female education was relatively high. As a result, the lower middle class and middle class women had long been denied an equal access to education. The wood Despatch of 1854, realized the need for the education of women. In order to encourage the education of women, it suggested a policy of grants-in-aid from public funds to voluntary educational activities, besides providing for the establishment of universities. It may be pointed out here that the belief was embodied in the statement that education of women would in the long run have a greater civilizing effect than education of men only. Negatively, it was recognized that the progress of western culture and civilization in India could not be achieved without educating women. The Wood Despatch was the first recognition made by the colonial government of its responsibility for female education. It was beyond doubt the outcome of a protracted course of movements initiated by the 19th century modernizers of Bengal for spread of education of women. The colonial government found it difficult not to respond to the pressure exerted by enlightened native public opinion towards this purpose. The Indian Commission of 1881 had also championed the cause of female education. It had advocated a policy of liberalizing grants-in-aid to girls' schools and providing substantial assistance to teachers' training. Around this time, some of the earliest institutions for the training of teachers were established through the efforts of Miss Mary Carpenter, an English Social reformer. But even then not much tangible gains were made. The disparity between the numbers of boys and girls at school remained wide. According to the 1881 Census returns, for every 1000 boys in schools, the number of girls under instruction was 46, and while one adult male out of 16 could read and write, only one adult woman in 434 could do so.

The Hunter Commission of 1882 also recommended aid for girls' education from provincial and municipal funds. The implementation of the recommendations of the Hunter Commission and other policies of colonial rulers made a positive impact on women's education during the first quarter of the 20th century. It should be pointed out here that even at the later half of the 19th century which was enlightened by renaissance, there was no arrangement for higher education of women in India. In 1879, the Syndicate of Calcutta University, for the first time, made provisions for women's appearing at its examinations. The social condition of Bengal was not congenial to higher education of women at this time, although the supporters of women's education were gradually growing. In the history of education of women of Bengal the names of Chandramukhi Basu, who was the first Bengali woman to have passed the M.A. examination, and Kadambini Ganguli, who was the first woman to become a doctor must be mentioned. The latter was one of the scholars of the Bethune School.

In 1877, Miss Chandramukhi Basu, a student of the Native Christian Girls' School at Dehradoon, sought the permission of the University of Calcutta for appearing at the Entrance Examination. But in 1877, Calcutta University had no provision for female candidates. So she could not appear in the year 1877. However, Chandramukhi had not lost her energy. Her father was also very much interested in her education. So, she kept waiting for her turn to come. Considering the application of Miss Basu, the Calcutta University passed the regulations for examination of female candidates. In 1879, the syndicate of the University permitted her to appear at the First Arts Examinations of 1879 or of any subsequent year. In 1882, the year of the Silver Jubilee of the University of Calcutta, the two women candidates Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Ganguli passed the B.A. Examination of the University, and both were allowed to take their B.A. degrees at the Annual Convocation of 1883. There is no doubt that this event was a landmark in the history of education of women in Bengal.
They had paved the way for Bengali women's higher education. Needless to say, they were the pioneers in this respect. Higher education had also enabled Chandramukhi and Kadambini to reorientate their mental makeups. It had instilled in them new ideas and values. A change in their attitude to life was also noticed. They became conscious about women's need for an independent source of income. So they engaged them-selves in professions. They also wanted to utilize their higher education for building up professional career instead of keeping themselves exclusively preoccupied with household chores. Chandramukhi had become the Principal of Bethune College, Calcutta and Kadambini had become a practising physician. Despite stiff social resistance, they had succeeded both in education and in profession owing to their self-confidence. It has to be pointed out that their families were also interested in female education and assisting them in various ways. It may be said that education, especially higher education, had contributed to modernize the way of life of these two women.

But, it is worth mentioning that during the nineteenth century, female education entirely depended on the condition of family. A change in the living conditions of women, enlightened circumstances, would help a girl to receive education in schools, colleges and universities. Orthodox Hindu families were not showing much eagerness for women's education even at this stage. Support was forthcoming, mostly from the Brahmos and the Christian families of Bengal. 57

The history of the renaissance in the 19th century Bengal also points to the fact that only after a handful of women received education, they could voice the demands of the women for various socio-economic reforms. By the end of the 19th century, the number of higher educated women in Bengal was minimal. In 1896/97, there were 33 girls in Arts Colleges against 24 in 1891-92. Six of the students were reading for B.A. in the Bethune College, the rest were reading in the F.A. Course. During the five years 1693-97, the girl

students who passed higher examinations in Arts in Bengal were: 193 Entrance, 29 F.A., 7 B.A. and 2 M.A.

The growth rate of higher education for girls was very poor. The trend remained unchanged until 1901-2. The number of Arts Colleges remained what it had been five years ago. During this time, no female student obtained the M.A. degree, but 37 students passed the B.A. Examination, 85 F.A.? Examination and 152 the Entrance Examination. The number of female teachers for girls' schools continued to be small. But there was special provision for female students at the Medical College in Calcutta and at the four Medical Schools. At the College, they got free quarters at the Swarnamayi Hostel with scholarships under certain conditions. At the Medical Schools, improved arrangements were made for separate tuition and separate boarding.

Here we may note that the Arts stream for girls had been neglected. Although, among the educated women, the majority studied in Arts Colleges, proper efforts had not been made for increasing the financial resources and other facilities for them. Moreover, additional colleges for girls which became a necessity in view of the expansion of school education for girls, were not set up during this time. As a result, suitable expansion of higher education for women could not be achieved. No doubt, progress of education of women was very slow in the 19th century. But even then, the attempt made by Indian social reformers and various agencies during the 19th century to spread education among women bore fruit in the early 20th century. Due to various forces and processes of 19th century reforms which supplied considerable impetus to the improvement of female education in modern India and due to the policies of colonial government during the later part of the 19th century, recommending grants-in-aid to girls' schools, there began a gradual recognition in all, circles about the need for the right type of development in this matter. Thanks to such efforts, in the first twelve years of the present century, some progress in female education had been achieved. The
demand for the in-crease of educational institutions for girls had also been made from
different quarters.

As a result, the number of girls' institutions rose to 5,801 in 1901, from 2,697 in 1882.
The number of school going girls in India rose from 446,282 in 1901-1902 to 954,616 in
1911-12. Altogether, nearly 5% of the total female population were school going girls in
1912, as compared with 2.5% in 1902.  \textsuperscript{58}

\textbf{1.2.12 Education of women after Independence}

The condition of Indian women developed in the colonial period. After independence
the scope for women increased and Women Education in Modern India widened. By 1947
when the British power was withdrawn from India, the modem education of women was
about a hundred and twenty five years old. The evaluation of the achievements of this period
can be done in two ways. The first is to compare the conditions that existed in India in 1800
to those that existed in 1946-47. This backward look shows a great achievement - qualitative
as well as quantitative. Educational opportunities had been opened to women at all stages
during this period and their social status had been raised to some extent qualitatively this
education had brought women a new awareness of themselves and opened out to them a large
way of life.

The period and after 1948 in India, highest priority was given to women education.
Women Education in Modern India became the major concern for both the government and
civil society as educated women can play a vital role in the development of the country. Thus
there was a great upsurge in awareness regarding women's rights among all sections of
society. Various developmental programmes and policies were introduced in order to
improve the social status of women. Education is creditable as it is beneficial for women as

this reduces female infant mortality and child mortality rates. In India the educational system was modified and three-tier instruction process was developed. All citizens of India are offered the right to education and Women Education in modern India was opened to a new vista.

The advance of the education of women in 1951, shorter after independence, the census recorded that only 25 percent men and 7 percent of women were literate. The pattern of women education today, therefore, starts with the girls and extends up to the mother, who can now attend social and adult education classes. In order to meet this large demand, the number of girl's schools and colleges increased. In this context mention must be made about the education of the Muslim girls. They started going to school and colleges also increased slowly but steadily. Muslim parents who are anxious to educate their sons and also anxious to provide their daughter with education. Goswami (1991) correctly observes that "it is even possible for educated women to combine motherhood and a career. Educated women very easily share in decision making about children's schooling abut family planning about finance and over all perspectives of family".

National policy on Education (1986) has laid much emphasis upon equal opportunities of education to every one but it is not being translated into practiced. Thus there is much to be achieved in respect of education of Muslim women there is need of whole hearted support and efforts from the community itself".

In the post independent India, the importance of education of women education gained momentum and it was realized that education for women is also necessary to achieve the goal of democracy and equality. The door of schools and colleges were thrown open to women. Who started availing the increased opportunities for education. Women started
thinking and feeling that they should not be confined to home only but should also share the responsibilities of the society and participate in all spheres of life equally with men. 59

After independence realizing the exploited condition of women in general, efforts were made by Government of India in several directions. Several committee and commissions were setup time to time. The all recommendations were to improve the quality of life of women in general these were as follows:

1. University Education Commission (1948-49)


3. National Committee on Women Education (1958-59)


5. Bhaktavasalam Committee (1963)


The recommendations of these committees in relation to women's education is given below:

- University Education Commission: (1948-49)

Regarding the need and importance of women's education, the University Education Commission (1948–49) has rightly observed: "there cannot be an educated people without

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educated women. If general education had to be limited to men or to women, that opportunity should be given to women; because it is the education that makes men's or women's living interesting and intelligent. It also makes a person a good, useful and productive citizen of his society."

University education commission made the following recommendations:

(1) that the ordinary amenities and decencies of life should be provided for women in colleges originally planned for men, but to which women are being admitted in increasing numbers,

(2) that there should be no curtailment but rather increase in the educational opportunities for women,

(3) that women students in general should be helped to see and get their normal places in a normal society, both as citizen and as women, to prepare them for their life career, the college programme should be so designed as to suit them,

(4) that through educational counsel and by example the prevailing prejudice against study of home economic, home management should be over come,

(5) that standard of country and social responsibility should be emphasized on the part of men in mixed college,

(6) that women teachers should be paid the same salaries as men teachers for equal work (UEC 1948-49).\(^6\)

Secondary Education Commission Report that "there is no special justification to deal with women's education because every type of education open to men should also be open to women. Many women have joined the faculties of Engineering, Agriculture, Veterinary Science, Commerce, Law and teaching as well as the Arts and Science and have taken to research" (Sec, 1952-53). The fact that a large number of women have joined the faculties of science, Arts, Commerce and teaching, etc. While girls can take courses in Arts, Commerce and research along with boys in the same educational institutions, it is desirable that special arrangements should be made for them for the study of Home Science and Home Economics.

The Secondary Education commission made the following recommendations in favour of coeducation:

(1) While no distinction need be made between education imparted to boys and girls special facilities for the study of home science should be made available in all girls' schools and coeducational or mixed schools.

(2) Efforts should be made by state governments to open separate schools for girls wherever there is demand for them.

(3) Definite conditions should be laid down in regard to coeducational or mixed schools to satisfy the special needs of girls students and women members of the teaching staff (SEC,1952-53).

➢ National Committee on Women Education (1958-59):

Education panels of the planning commission at its meeting held in July 1957, this recommendation was placed before the conference of the State Education ministers held in September 1957. The conference also agreed that a special committee should be appointed to examine the whole question of women's education. A National Committee on Women's
Education was accordingly set up by the government of India in the Ministry of Education, under the Chairmanship of Smt. Durgabai Deshmukh, who was also the Chairman of 'Central Social Welfare Board.'

The major recommendations made by the National Committee on Women's Education under different sections are as:

Section A: A special recommendations are:

(a) Steps should be taken to constitute as early as possible, a National Council for the education of girls and women.

(b) The problem of the education of women is so vital and of such great national significance that it is absolutely necessary for the centre to assume more responsibility for its rapid development.

(c) The State Government should established State Councils for the education of girls and women. 61

Section B: Other special recommendations:

(1) Primary Education (Age group 6-11):

(a) The government should formulate a scheme for awarding prizes to the village showing the highest proportional enrolment and attendance of girls.

(2) Middle and Secondary Education (Age group 11 to 17):

(a) At the secondary stage, however, separate schools for girls should be established specially in rural areas, at the same time giving parents full freedom to admit their girls to boys schools. If they so desire.

(b) At the middle stage, and more especially at the secondary stage, there is need for differentiation of curricula for boys and girls.

(c) With a view to inducing women from urban areas to accept posts of teachers in rural schools, women teachers serving in rural areas may be provided with quarters and a village allowance may be given to such teachers.

(d) Girls should be encouraged to take up courses in commerce, Engineering, Agriculture, Medicine, etc. at the university stage by offering them scholarships and other concessions.

Section C: General Recommendations:

(a) As a scientific study of the problem wastage on an all-India basis is needed the ministry of Education should carry out special studies of this problem in all parts of the country.

(b) About 65 percent of the cases of wastage at the primary level are due to economic causes. This wastage can be eliminated only if provision for part-time instruction is made for those children who cannot attend on a whole-time basis.


The national council for women's education in its meeting held on May 10, 1961, appointed a committee, under the chairmanship of Smt. Hansa Mehta, to examine comprehensively the problem of curricula for girls at all stages of education. The committee made the following observation and recommendations:

(a) No differentiation should be made in the curricula for boys and girls at the primary stage.

(b) Women should be appointed on the staff of all primary schools.
(c) The curriculum of general education should be common to boys and girls and no differentiation should be made therein on the basis of sex.

(d) Sex education is essential at the middle and secondary stages.

(e) One of the important values which education should develop through proper textbooks is the mutual respect of individuals.

(f) Coeducation should be adopted as the general pattern at the elementary stage. 62

➢ Report of the Bhaktavatsalam Committee 1963:

The National Council for Women's Education at its meeting held in April 1963 appointed a Small Committee under the Chairmanship of M. Bhaktavasalam, Chief Minister of Chennai to look into the causes of lack of public support, particularly in rural areas, for girl's education and to enlist public cooperation. The committee made the following recommendations:

(a) A separate women inspectorate will help to bring in more girls to school.

(b) It is only by providing women teachers with quarters near the schools that many educated women can be attracted to the teaching profession.

(c) It is only by providing women teachers with quarters near the school that many educated women can be attracted to the teaching profession.

➢ Kothari Education Commission 1964-66:

It has made some suggestions and recommendations of its own:

According to Kothari Commission, there can be two strategies for the development of education of girls and women:

(a) The special programmes recommended by the National Committee on Women's Education and

(b) The general programmes that is to give attention to the education of girls at all stages and in all sectors and for the expansion and improvement of education. For the accelerations of women's education in the field of higher education, the Kothari commission recommended two programmes as follows:

(a) A programme of scholarships and financial assistance to women students in colleges, and universities on a liberal scale, and

(b) A programme of the provision of suitable but economical hostel accommodation for women students with all the necessary amenities on a large scale liberal grants should be provided by

the government of India for this purpose as also by the state governments. Both these programmes are particularly necessary to encourage girls from rural areas to take advantage of higher education.

The commission felt that there is a special need to link up higher education with. Specific avenues of employment not only for boys but also for girls women should be encouraged to enter the professional fields like teaching, social work, nursing, nutrition, and institutional management etc.
➢ National Policy on Education - 1979:

In March 1976, the Janata party formed the government. It devoted considerable thought to education and presented to the parliament a statement on the National policy on Education in April, 1979. 63

The National policy on Education emphasized that highest priority must be given to free education for all up to the age of 14 as laid down in the Directive principles of the constitution. Education up to this stage should be general and not specialized. With the help of tool subjects, it should develop among students. Scientific attitude, Elementary Education should be an integral stage. 64

For improving literacy among girls the National policy on education recommended to give suitable incentives to them for improving attendance. It wrote:

"Incentives such as mid day meals, free textbooks, stationery and uniforms should be given to the education of girls and children of scheduled castes and scheduled tribes" (NPE 1979) in favour of women. The National education system will play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women. It will foster the development of new values through redesigned curricula, textbooks, the training and orientation of teachers, decision makers and administrators and the active involvement of educational institutions. This will be an act of faith and social engineering. Women's studies will be promoted as a part of various courses and educational institutions encouraged to take up active programmes to further women's development.

The removal of women's illiteracy and obstacles inhibiting their access to, and retention in, elementary education will receive over-riding priority, through provision of

64 Ibid
special support-services, setting of time targets, and effective monitoring, major emphasis will be laid on women's participation in vocational, technical and professional education at different levels. The policy of non-discrimination will be pursued vigorously to eliminate sex stereotyping in vocational and professional courses and to promote women's participation in non-traditional occupations, as well as in existing and emergent technologies.

➢ The National Policy of Education -1986:

The National policy statement on education presented by the Janata Government in 1979 could not be fully implemented for soon after the Janata government went out of power. In May 1986, however, a new education policy was approved by the parliament, covering different aspects of education, including women education. The new education policy was severely criticized by various educationists and thinkers. Some said that there was nothing new in it. But the Human resource development minister, Mr. P.V. Narasimha Rao rejected the criticism that there was 'nothing new' in the new policy and that it was a repetition of the 1968 policy. In fact, as Mr. Rao said, all element of the draft policy were new except the language policy. The language policy incorporated in the 1968 education policy, according to him, was perfect and therefore needed no change.

The following provisions regarding women education have been made in the text of the new education policy 1986.

**Part IV of the document namely education for equity:**

4.1 The New policy will lay special emphasis on the removal of disparities and to equalize educational opportunities by attending to the specific needs of those who have been denied equality so far.
4.2 Education will be used as an agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well conceived edge in this study education will be used as agent of basic change in the status of women. In order to neutralize the accumulated distortions of the past, there will be a well conceived edge in favour of women.

➢ The National Perspective Plan on Women 1988:

Was drawn up for the mainstreaming of women's issues in policies and programmes and giving women at least one-third share in the decision making bodies from Panchayats to parliament.

The main drawbacks in women's development have been mainly ill health due to repeated pregnancies, child birth, malnutrition, over work and stresses, lack of education and lack of independent of economic generation activities. Thus, the strategy for women's development should be three fold, i.e., health, education and employment which are the stepping stones for empowerment.

In the seventh plan (1986-91) government decided that "polytechnic education for women will be given greater attention to meet their special requirements" (seventh five-year plan, p. 254)\(^6\) some facilities were given to the faculty to keep themselves abreast of the latest knowledge and advancements taking place elsewhere in the world, and also have to be in constant touch with industry. Government assisted polytechnic to undertake extension services for the benefit of community. Serious efforts were made to remove the dominance of examination system over the educational process, that has led not only to the wrong type of learning but also was responsible for many malpractices.

Under the eighth plan (1991-96) the central government has launched a massive project with the assistance of the world bank to upgrade the polytechnic in different states. Suggestions were given to encourage creativity and innovation in experimental work by introducing problem-process oriented laboratory exercises (VIIIth five year plan, p. 298).

Bureau for industrial consultancy and research development (BICARD) was set up in universities and technological institutes to prepare comprehensive directory of technology experts so that required changes would be made in the curriculum and interaction between teaching institutes and industries would begin. Beyond this, no specific programmes were set for the women to promote their participation in engineering and technology education. It was realized by the policy makers that the government should, "provide adequate hostel accommodation and special incentives such as scholarship, freeship, stipends etc. to attract girls students to professional courses" (Rammurthi Committee, 1990).

The progress of free India depends upon the active cooperation of all the citizens of India. India has to progress in every field of human activity, i.e., India has to progress educationally, socially, industrially, agriculturally and economically and the women of free India should participate in every important work in their country. This is possible only if they are given the right type of education.

Thus Indian women are now venturing in thousands to compete with men in different walks of life with their improved social status and their claims to educational opportunities receiving greater recognition, the old attitude towards women's education has given place to an appreciation of its urgency and value. As the Hartog Reports says, The importance of the education of girls and women in India at the present moment cannot be overrated. The middle and higher classes of India have long suffered from the dualism of an educated manhood and

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66 Ibid,p.298
an ignorant womanhood - a dualism that lowers the whole level of the home and domestic life and has its reaction on personal and national character... The innate intelligence of the Indian women, her feeling of domestic responsibility, her experience of household management, make her shrewd, penetrating and wise within her own sphere. The education of women will make available to the country a wealth of capacity that is now largely wasted through lack of opportunity.

Education means growth and action, both are essential, one is the productive aspect, the other the cultural aspect; there should be no stage of one's dependence on the other. It is here that accent has to be put on women's education. A creative imagination is highly valuable to attain this goal.

If men's education is neglected, it is a folly, but to neglect women's education is a greater folly. A well-trained and educated mother with a good character is essential in a progressive nation. We hardly realize that the character of a nation is judged by the status, education and social position of women. The progress of a country is measured by the progress of women in that country. The worst is that those who realize it, do not help the country to reach this goal. They are lacking in zeal and enthusiasm.

Women have not at all been given a fair deal in this country, yet those who have had limited education and training have brought credit and honour to India and left a good impression wherever they have been. Women have had the freedom to choose their own courses suitable to their strength, aptitudes, intelligence and creative ability, but they have not had equality with men in opportunities, in moral standards, and in the providing of the same kind of environments in which the vitality of the mind and body can flourish. The spirit of adventure and dynamism on the part of men to face this and show a spirit of cooperation and understanding can bring women's education on part with them. So, the National policy on
education (NDE) envisages that education would be used as a strategy for achieving a basic change in the status of women.68

The National education system would:

(1) Play a positive interventionist role in the empowerment of women;

(2) Contribute towards development of new values through redesigned curricula and textbooks and

(3) Women's studies will be promoted as part of various courses. Thus, Education for women must be given utmost importance. There should not be any discrimination against women in this regard. They should have equal opportunity as men to be educated. Because "If we wish to have an enlightened and progressive society, it goes without saying that both men and women, should have the right kind of education.

In addition to the constitutional provisions, the government of India has been showing concern about the education of Muslim minorities at different times and different levels.

At the convention in Delhi, 350 Muslim women from across the country along with academics, social experts and parliamentarians called for the implementation of Justice Sachar Committee recommendations. The Sachar Committee report released in 2006 exposes the severe socio-economic marginalization of Muslims in India. The Committee had recommended more educational facilities and employment opportunities for the communities.

BMMA (Bharatiya Muslim Mahila Andolan) members urged for meome-generating schemes, credit-facilities and educational opportunities for the communities, especially Muslim women, the worst-affected in an acutely marginalized social group.69

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The Census Reports regarding the Literacy Rate in India with special reference to Women Education between 1951 to 2011 can be observed in the following Figure 01(a) and Figure 01(b) below:

![Figure 01(a)](image1)

![Figure 01(b)](image2)

(Source: Retrieved from - http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Library/Provisional_Population_Total_link/PDF_Links/chapter7.pdf)

Figure 2(a) and Figure 2(b) provided below is the total population or the crude literacy rate for India by sex during 1901-2011. The crude literacy rate from 1901 onwards show a consistent increase both for males and females.

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Retrieved from: http://www.minorityaffairs.gov.in/sachar
Crude literacy rate in India by sex: 1901 to 2011

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Census Year</th>
<th>Crude literacy rate</th>
<th>Change in Percent points</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Persons</td>
<td>Males</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1901</td>
<td>5.35</td>
<td>9.83</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1911</td>
<td>5.92</td>
<td>10.56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1921</td>
<td>7.16</td>
<td>12.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1931</td>
<td>9.5</td>
<td>15.59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1941</td>
<td>16.1</td>
<td>24.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>1951</td>
<td>16.67</td>
<td>24.95</td>
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<tr>
<td>1961</td>
<td>24.02</td>
<td>34.44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971</td>
<td>29.45</td>
<td>39.45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981</td>
<td>36.23</td>
<td>46.89</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>42.84</td>
<td>52.74</td>
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<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>54.51</td>
<td>63.24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>64.22</td>
<td>71.22</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

1. Figures upto 1941 are for undivided India
2. Figures for 1981 excludes Assam as 1981 Census could not be conducted in this State due to disturbed conditions.
3. Figures for 1991 census do not include Jammu & Kashmir, as no census was held in the State.

(Source: Retrieved from -http://www.censusindia.gov.in/Data_Products/Library/Provisional_Population_Total_link/PDF_Links/chapter7.pdf)

1.3 Women writers of the last two decades spreading education and social issues related to women

Many Indian women composed poetry and short stories in Bengali, Hindi, Punjabi, Urdu, Tamil, Malayalam and Kannada for the past two decades. With special reference to Bengal (as this study will primarily focus upon) mention must be made of Swarnakumari

In the very modern period Ashapurna Devi (who has a trilogy) and Mahasweta Devi were awarded Akademi prizes. 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.

Mention should also be made of Begum Rokeya Roquia Khatun 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.
Women were the chief upholders of a rich oral tradition of story-telling, through myths, legends, songs and fables. Once literacy began to filter through society, those stories were transformed into poetry and drama. The novel was not at first a common form, perhaps because the majority of women had less access to education than men. It was not until prose began to be used in the late nineteenth century by Bengali writers who had been exposed to European culture that the novel form took hold in India. The volume of Indian literature written in English is smaller than that written in the various regional languages, and spans a smaller range of time, having only commenced with the spread of the English language and education.

Yet Santa Devi and Sita Devi are segregated from the above writers due to their views about the emancipation of women. They always maintained a much different view about women emancipation. Their writings does not represent in any way, “feminism” in the wider form. It will also be noticed further, that their writings portrayed women protagonists and the male characters in their novels(unlike other novels/stories of that era) more than being dominant characters are more practical and have a soft corner towards womenfolk. It may be observed that both Shanta and Sita Devi have portrayed in their writings the sorry plight of the women as well as the man which are depicted in the story “Loyalty”. They both had excellent command over English language and writing. They succeeded in challenging the patriarchal defying 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 their writings different was the attempt to look at the issues through the eyes of women characters.

The authors were western educated, middle-class women who express in their writing their discontent with the plight of upper-caste and class traditional Hindu women trapped in
repressive institutions such as child-marriage, dowry, prohibitions on women's education, arranged marriages, sati and enforced widowhood.\footnote{Sen, Sukumar (1979) [1960]. History of Bengali Literature (3rd ed.). New Delhi: Sahitya Akademi}

1.4 Rationale of the study

The rationale of this study is to portray Sita Devi and Shanta Devi as a literary genius who had their own independent style of writing. Through their fiery writing they contributed immensely to the development of women’s education during that time and for the future also. Their writings portray the intellectual and personal element, their keen, scornful vision and the angry contempt which blazes out. During that time no independent thinking women writers were found who were not only literary genius and also not feminist. Sita Devi's stories has a touch of playful malice while Shanta Devi often show a delightful humour, with lifelike pictures of manners and persons. Their writings portray a sense of social preaching as well as educational development of women during that century and for the future centuries also.

The study aims to highlight and analysed historically how the two sisters, Sita and Shanta Devi attempted to create a different and strong place for themselves through their writings as well as in their educational works which had a positive influence on the society till now. Effective criticism of a society comes best from those who are members of it. Indian society has been portrayed in the writings of Shanta Devi and Sita Devi who had their own way of independent thinking. The fire of personality and personal feeling gives Shanta Devi-Sita Devi's work significance beyond itself, and will make it a matter of deep interest to observe the development and widening of their powers.