EDUCATION AND MODERNITY OF WOMEN:
A STUDY OF BENGALI WOMEN

CHAPTER II

EDUCATION AND CHANGING STATUS OF WOMEN:
A HISTORICAL OVERVIEW
In the present chapter, we propose to study the various 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. Our concern will be to show 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 in the present chapter.

I

It is generally assumed that in the Vedic age, the women enjoyed an honourable status in society. No distinction was made between a son and a daughter in matter of education. The girls had opportunities of receiving education and sharing the different branches of knowledge. Many women rose to become Vedic scholars, debaters, poets and teachers. The names of Lopamudra, Goshha, Apala, Vak and Visavara are worth mentioning. Being educated, they took an intelligent part in public assemblies and religious and social gatherings. They used to move freely in society. It may be said that they enjoyed an equal status with men.

The status of women was also an honoured one in the family. The birth of a female child was not unwelcomed. The marriage of girls used to take place at a mature age. As a consequence, women could pursue education for a longer period of time. Educated women in the Vedic age had an effective voice in the selection of their life partners. Some form of Swayamvar or self-choice of a husband was in vogue. Ordinarily, monogamy happened to be the rule. Divorce and widow remarriages were also permitted. Even some women could remain unmarried for a life-long pursuit of knowledge—without being treated as a liability to society or facing social ostracism. For example, Gargi, an outstanding woman philosopher in the Vedic period, did not marry, and dedicated her life in the pursuit of truth and knowledge.

The only discrimination between men and women was made over property right. Women in the Vedic age could hold no property.

Notwithstanding the limitations with regard to women's right to property, it has to be acknowledged that on the whole the


status of women was satisfactory in the Vedic age. But this might not be applicable to women of all strata of society. As Kalpana Dasgupta rightly observes, "while we must acknowledge the contribution of modern historians in discovering considerable information regarding the position of women in the earlier periods of our history, it has to be emphasised that all this information relates to the elite sections of society viz. the high caste, upper strata. Very little material is available on the lives and conditions of the large majority of women, who were not members of the elite group".  

This ideal atmosphere of male-female parity in matters of education, marriage and property, began to change from 500 B.C. onward as the caste system, followed up by the priestly oligarchy, began to be firmly established in the Indian society. The status of women gradually deteriorated. Ruled by the infamous code of Manu, women were deprived of all their basic human rights and treated as mere objects for the satisfaction of men's lust and greed. The right to secure education became an exclusive prerogative of the menfolk. Absolute subjugation of women to father during childhood, to husband during youth, and to son at old age, was prescribed.


The marriageable age for girls, according to Manu, was eight to twelve. Being uneducated and immature, girls had no voice in the selection of their life partners. Child-wives with little education could not demand respect from their husbands. If the wife was not submissive to her husband, the husband could reject her. But there was no provision for the wife to take a similar step. This differential treatment was due to the fact that women, devoid of education, had no knowledge of their previous rights and privileges.

From early Hindu periods up to the advent of Islam during Turko-Afghan and Mughal periods, the plight of women remained miserable on the whole, notwithstanding some notable exceptions like Bharati of Mithila, Pravabati Gupta, daughter of emperor Chandragupta, or Rajyashri, king Harsha's sister, who earned reputation for their erudition, scholarship or administrative skill. The misery of women was compounded by the complete denial of any opportunity for their education. For instance, there was no reference to female students in any educational institution of this period. Female education was not provided in Taxila or Nalanda. The early and late medieval periods, when the Muslims were the ruling classes, strengthened

9 Ibid., pp.5-6.
religious fundamentalism and orthodoxies among, both the Hindus and the Muslims. Subjugation and humiliation of women of both the communities resulted during this period. Early marriage, dowry system, sati, purdah and kulinism were chief evils prevalent among both Hindus and Muslims. Akbar had tried to bring about reforms in the society but he could not succeed. In an atmosphere of absolute male domination and superiority, education of women was equally neglected by the Hindu priests and the Muslim rulers. The Bhakti movement intervened for a short while to dissolve religious orthodoxies and reform the prevailing superstitions, militating against the ideals of love and equality for all. But its impact also did not prove permanent.

During the medieval period, some eminent women made their mark in different walks of life. Mention may be made of Raziyya, Nurjahan, Chandbibi, Rupmati, Padmavati, Rudrama Devi, Lakshmi Devi or Ahilyabai, among others. But here again, they represented only the exceptional few. In general, no attempt was made to fight out various social evils, like early marriage, polygamy, purdah or satidaha. Neither the rulers nor the religious preachers took any initiative to spread education among women. As a result, for more than 2000 years, there was

10 Ibid., p.6.
11 Ibid., p.7.
practically no education for women\textsuperscript{12}. During this period women's status was too much inferior to men both in the family and in the society. Most of the women had been treated as objects in the family. They could not assert their rights and privileges in the society. By the time of the British period, the condition of education had become very unsatisfactory, since no organized system of private or government schools was in existence\textsuperscript{13}.

Needless to say, during the early stage of the British period female education was practically unknown in Bengal. Only a few women of upper classes could read and write. Girls belonging to rich families received education from private tutors at home. The East India Company's government remained indifferent to female education in India during the early period of its empire-building. The British government did not want to interfere with the religious sentiments of the Indian people. It believed that any effort to encourage female education might be interpreted as undue interference in the social and religious practices of the Indians. So it apprehended that any support to female education might jeopardize

\textsuperscript{12} B.Kuppuswamy, Social Change in India, Vikas Publishing House Pvt. Ltd., Delhi, 1975, p.246.

\textsuperscript{13} Sindhu Phadke, 'Special Problems of the Education of Women' in M.S.Gore, I.P.Desai and Suma Chitnis (eds.), Papers in the Sociology of Education in India, National Council of Educational Research and Training, New Delhi, 1967, p.175.
their political work in India. As a result, women in India had long been denied an access to education. By 1800 A.D. they were confined within the four walls of home. Almost all of their fundamental birthrights - rights to justice, freedom, education, equality - domestically, socially, legally, economically, politically - had been denied.

II

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.


15 Ibid., p.112.
The Calcutta Juvenile Society established female schools at places like Shyambazar, Jaunbazar, Entaly 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\textsuperscript{16}.

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\textsuperscript{17}.

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 up to an advanced age, and that, in Burdwan, particularly, girls aged fourteen or fifteen years came to schools\textsuperscript{18}.

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\item[16] Ibid., pp.111-114.
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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.19

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.20

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.21

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

19 Ibid., p.130.
20 Ibid., p.121.
orthodox Hinduism had imposed on society) were attracted to these institutions for a few pice 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".22

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.23

22 Ibid., pp.52-53.
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. We shall discuss the contribution of Bethune and his school to the cause of spreading female education in Bengal, in great details afterwards.

Meanwhile, let us concentrate on 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 Radhakant 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. 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.

27 Ibid.
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\textsuperscript{28}. 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\textsuperscript{29}.

The ex-students of the Hindu College also opened their columns for the spread of female education through newspapers and journals. The \textit{Enquirer} of Rev. K.M. Banerjea, \textit{Gnanaweshwn} 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 \textit{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 \textit{Masik Patrika}, especially for the study of our womenfolk\textsuperscript{30}.

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\item \textsuperscript{28} Jogesh Chandra Bagal, \textit{Op.cit.}, p.70.
\item \textsuperscript{29} Kanak Mukhopadhyay, \textit{Unabingsha Shatabdir Nari Pragati O Rammohan Vidyasagar} (in Bengali), \textit{Paschimbanga Ganatantrik Mahila Samiti}, Kalikata, 1983, p.53.
\item \textsuperscript{30} Jogesh Chandra Bagal, \textit{Op.cit.}, p.78.
\end{itemize}
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\textsuperscript{31}.

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\textsuperscript{32}.

Peary Charan Sarkar, an ex-student of the Hindu College, had made earnest efforts to spread female education. He was also actively engaged in opening a free school for girls at Barasat, 24 Parganas, in 1847\textsuperscript{33}.

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.

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. 34

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 7 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.

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

language. And English education was given to those pupils whose parents or guardians might desire it. It may be said that the content of education of this school was, to some extent, modern. Bethune also stressed eastern culture and Indian tradition. The content of education imparted by this school was naturally a synthesis between the old and the new.

The foundation of the Hindu Valika Vidyalaya in May, 1849, marked a turning point in the history of female education in India. The foundation of this school had also far-reaching consequences. It gave the signal for further efforts on the same line. Raja Radhakanta Deb started a girls' school in his house at Sobhabazar, Calcutta, only fifteen days after Bethune had founded his institution. The Barasat Girls' School was remodelled on the pattern of the Bethune School and some new girls' schools were started at Nebudhia, Soosagar and Uttarpara. But there was local opposition and the Government also did not help these institutions.36

It is well known that Vidyasagar had contributed much to improve the status of deprived Bengali women. Naturally, he vigorously supported the cause of female education and whole-heartedly strove for the spread of women's education.

36 Ibid., p.83.
He also helped Mr. Bethune in establishing his school. It is worth mentioning here that he was also appointed special Inspector of Schools. Due to his position and personal encouragement, thirty-five schools were established in Bengal only between 1857 and May 1858 - twenty in Hoogli District, eleven in Burdwan, three in Midnapore and one in Nadia. The Government of Bengal helped him in establishing these schools. The attitude of the Bengal Government was helpful to Vidyasagar. But the supreme Government of India was unwilling to sanction any grants to these schools. Vidyasagar also resigned from government service in November 1858. But, even then, a few schools were started here and there at his own initiative. Thus the energetic Vidyasagar alone established some 43 female schools. But the refusal of aid choked his institutions at their very birth and only 9 schools survived out of 43. And their survival was made possible by the generous financial support of a few persons. The Sarbasubhakari Patrika, which was started in August 1850 by the senior students of the Hindu College, also supported Vidyasagar. Around this time, some Bengali Newspapers, such as Sambad Bhaskar and Sambad Prabhakar, advocated the cause of female education. Vidyasagar himself was one of the editors of Sambad Bhaskar.

37 Ibid., p.84.
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 9 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.\(^{38}\)

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.\footnote{Ibid., p.177.}

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.\footnote{Usha Nayar, 'Cultural Roots of Oppression : Patterns of
Women's Education in India' in Susheela Kaushik (ed.),
Women's Oppression : Patterns and Perspectives, Shakti
Books, New Delhi, 1985, p.53.}

The Hunter Commission of 1882 also recommended aid for
girls' education from provincial and municipal funds. The
implementation of the recommendations of the Hunter Commiss-
ion 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, we should mention 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.

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 make-ups. 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 themselves 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.

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 1893-97, the girl students who passed higher examinations in Arts in Bengal were: 193 Entrance, 29 F.A., 7 B.A. and 2 M.A. 42.

42 Ibid., p.179.
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' school 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.43

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.

43 Ibid., pp. 174-175.
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.

Let us see the development of women's education in India during the first half of the present 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 increase 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 1902.44

44 Ibid., p.193.
Higher education could not spread among Hindu and Muslim women. They were confined to the primary stage. Only ten Hindu and four Muslim women were literate in English 45.

Around this time, the Government of India believed that in certain areas there were indications of a swiftly growing demand for more extensive education of girls. The Report of the Calcutta University Commission, 1917, recommended special attention for women's education. It also emphasized the training of women teachers and advocated the education of women in technical subjects 46.

Between 1910 and 1920, various personal and organizational efforts were made for the improvement of female education. In order to develop humanist studies and a liberal culture, Rabindranath Tagore established the Visva Bharati in 1916 which provided equal opportunities of education for boys and girls. Thus, it facilitated the progress of higher education of girls. In this context, the name of Ramkrishna Mission is worth mentioning. The main objectives of the Mission were to promote social reforms and spread the education of men and women. It had worked for the improvement

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.

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.

48 M.K.Gandhi, Young India, 3 February, 1927 and 28 June, 1928, quoted in Radha Krishna Sharma, Ibid.
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.\textsuperscript{50}

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 number for village teacherships.\textsuperscript{51}

Not only the school education, but also the prospects of women's collegiate education were growing brighter. A landmark


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 upto the advent of independence, we find that the gap between men's and women's education remains wide. This may be seen from Table-1.

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, we have traced 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

Table 1. Education of Girls and Women in India (1946-47)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institutions</th>
<th>No. of boys enrolled</th>
<th>No. of girls enrolled</th>
<th>Total</th>
<th>No. of girls for every 100 boys at school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Universities and Colleges of General Education</td>
<td>175854</td>
<td>20304</td>
<td>196158</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Colleges of Profession and Special Education</td>
<td>41234</td>
<td>2903</td>
<td>44137</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>High Schools</td>
<td>1912667</td>
<td>280772</td>
<td>2193439</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Middle Schools</td>
<td>1459882</td>
<td>321508</td>
<td>1781390</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary Schools</td>
<td>9561083</td>
<td>3475165</td>
<td>13036248</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Special Schools</td>
<td>442801</td>
<td>56090</td>
<td>498891</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total*</td>
<td>13593521</td>
<td>4156742</td>
<td>17750263</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Unrecognized Institutions are excluded.

of Independence in 1947. We have noted that 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.

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

57 Ibid., p.25.
58 Ibid., p.29.
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 wives 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 set up.

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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."

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

62 Ibid
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 inequalitarian 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.

III

There has been a perceptible growth of female education in India since independence. The framers of the Constitution of India laid special stress on literacy and education of all segments of society and provided for universal elementary education of boys and girls upto the age of 14, within ten years from the commencement of the Constitution in 1950, as one of the Directive Principles of State Policy (Article 45 of the Constitution). The policy makers of free India were
also opposed to any discrimination between males and females in matters of education. Hence, there was quantitative expansion of educational institutions for girls. The number of girl students also increased at various levels of education. For example, the number of girl students in schools, above the primary level, rose to 498,227 during 1949-50 and to 3,264,509 during 1965-66. Similarly, the number of girls, enrolled in universities and colleges of general education, rose to 38,376 (inclusive of those enrolled in various Research Institutions) during 1949-50 and to 2,98,926 during 1965-66. Enrolled girl students in colleges of professional and technical education numbered 3,606 in 1949-50 and 96,465 in 1965-66. Again, in colleges of special education, there were 811 women in 1949-50, but the number shot up to 8,280 during 1965-66.64

There are two more indicators of the quantitative expansion of female education during this period. First, the number of educational institutions for girls. While, there were 66 colleges of general education for girls in 1949-50, the same increased to 230 in 1965-66. Colleges of professional and

technical education for girls increased from 17 in 1949-50 to 389 in 1965-66. Similarly, schools of vocational and technical education increased from 438 to 582 during the same period, and secondary schools for girls rose from 997 to 3879. Secondly, the number of women teachers. During 1949-50, women teachers numbered 18,656 in secondary schools, and 1,813 in colleges and universities. During 1965-66, the number went up to 97,071 and 17,444 respectively.

We may furnish some other information with regard to the quantitative expansion of female education in India. The number of girls enrolled at all levels of the educational system has gone up from 64,00,763 in 1950-51 to 3,00,30,484 in 1970-71. The number of girls enrolled per 100 boys shows an increase from 33 to 54 during the same period. Enrolment of women in university education (all levels included), covering all faculties, has increased from 43,126 in 1950-51 to 6,55,822 in 1970-71. The increase per 100 men for the corresponding period is from 10.9 to 21.9.

65 Ibid., p.19.
66 Ibid., p.21.
68 Ibid., p.149.
Upto 1982-83, this trend of increasing enrolment of girls has continued at all stages of education. According to a document, prepared by the Ministry of Education, Government of India in 1985, the total student population in India has increased from 2.8 crores in 1951 to 11.4 crores in 1982-83. Girls' enrolment during this period has increased at the compound growth rate of 5.5%. For each boy, 0.63 girls have been enrolled at the primary level, and the figure is 0.51 at the middle level. At the Secondary/Higher Secondary level, girls' enrolment has registered a growth rate of 10.1% during the period 1950-81.

In higher education (college and university level), the share of women in total enrolment has increased from 21.5% in 1966-67 to 27.7% in 1981-82.

Now, notwithstanding the growth of female education in post-independence India, there still remains a wide gulf between


boys and girls with regard to education. As noted in some official reports, published by the Government of India from time to time, "India woefully lacks educated woman power in a large variety of professions and occupations." The Report of the National Committee on the Status of Women, while appreciating the "unprecedented advance" made in the sphere of female education since independence, still feels that "the overall situation left a good deal to be desired." The Report points out that in classes I to V, one girl out of three is out of school, that of every 100 girls enrolled in class I, only about 30 reach class V, that in classes V to VIII, only one girl out of five is at school. At the Secondary stage, only one girl out of eight is in school, the small percentage coming mostly from the upper and the middle classes in urban areas. In the sphere of professional education, the report shows, "women have substantial enrolments in teaching, medicine and fine arts but meagre ones in commerce, law, agriculture or engineering. Higher education of women is even more confined to the urban upper and middle classes."

73 Ibid.
74 Ibid.
Various factors may be adduced for male-female disparity in education. Given the value system of traditional Indian society, education of boys has always received priority to that of girls. Lack of hostel facilities, the parents' unwillingness to send their daughters away from home in the pursuit of education, and their near obsession with the idea that marriage is the be all and end all of a woman's life, have resulted in lack of investment in, and, motivation for female education in India. Governmental efforts at both national and state levels also leave much to be desired in this respect. Budgetary provisions of the Union Government for education have never reached even 10% of the total expenditure. The Constitutional Directive for universal, elementary education for boys and girls has not been implemented even four decades after Independence. Moreover, no serious initiative has been taken by the Government at the Centre and in most of the States to prevent large-scale drop out of students, particularly of girl students from schools. The Ministry of Education, Government of India, has acknowledged recently that drop out rates in schools range around 77%, which render increase in enrolment figures quite meaningless. 

Viewed in a broad perspective, the spread of female education in India is more apparent than real. Secondly, such expansion has taken place only in some specific branches of knowledge, in some typical feminine subjects. Thirdly, the quality, content and curricula of education betray a culture of male-dominance.

In West Bengal, the percentage of literate persons to total population has gone up from 29.28 in 1961, to 33.20 in 1971 and finally reached 40.88 in 1981. Female literacy has gone up from 16.96% in 1961, to 22.42% in 1971 and to 30.33% in 1981. In literacy, West Bengal ranks 15th among the States and Union Territories in India. Known for its educational achievements before Independence and partition, when Bengal was undivided, West Bengal has since lost its enviable position in the sphere of education. Women in West Bengal have, however, made some progress in different levels of education. During the mid-1970s, the percentage of girl pupils in primary schools was 37.6. This has gone up still further by now. Again, in the early '70s, girls' education upto standard VIII was made free in rural and urban areas, including Calcutta. This

76 Census of India 1981, Series-23, West Bengal. See also Sachindra Lal Ghosh, West Bengal, National Book Trust, India, New Delhi, 1976, p.22.
provided incentives for female education at school levels.

The Marxist-led Left Front Government which has been ruling the State since 1977, has made education free up to School Final level. The State Government's expenditure on education has increased from Rupees 114 crores in 1976-77 to Rupees 520 crores in 1985-86. Such measures have benefitted both boys and girls who can now afford to complete at least school level education. A large number of new schools, colleges and one new University, the Vidyasagar University at Midnapore, have been set up in recent years.

The Census Report of 1971 provides some insights into the nature and growth of women's education in West Bengal. Out of West Bengal's total female population of 20,876,024, literate and educated women numbered 4,679,848. In Calcutta, out of 1,224,241 women, 665,988 were literate and educated. For Burdwan, the corresponding figures were 1,839,964 and 455,359. Out of West Bengal's 4,679,848 literate and educated women in 1971, 102,843 belonged to the category of graduate and above, 431,872 to the category of Matriculation or Higher Secondary.

Table 2. Year-wise Enrolment of Boys and Girls in Post-Graduate Studies in Humanities and Commerce, and Science at the University of Burdwan.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total No. of Students</th>
<th>Male</th>
<th>Female</th>
<th>Humanities and Commerce</th>
<th>Science</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1969-70</td>
<td>634</td>
<td>487</td>
<td>147</td>
<td>359</td>
<td>99</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1970-71</td>
<td>708</td>
<td>576</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>432</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1971-72</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>502</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>355</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1980-81</td>
<td>500</td>
<td>376</td>
<td>124</td>
<td>240</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1981-82</td>
<td>535</td>
<td>383</td>
<td>152</td>
<td>231</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1982-83</td>
<td>640</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>238</td>
<td>271</td>
<td>163</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1983-84</td>
<td>668</td>
<td>370</td>
<td>298</td>
<td>234</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Enrolment Registers, Office of the Superintendent of Post-Graduate Studies, The University of Burdwan.
828,165 to the category of Middle (School) and 1,807,820 to Primary level. 1,506,795 women were mere literate without any level of education. Besides, there were 973 non-technical, and 1380 technical diploma holders among the women of West Bengal.

This scenario of female education in West Bengal is far from satisfactory. Although, in absolute number, there has been an increase, given the total female population, the actual educational status of women is not encouraging. In certain spheres of education, the presence of women is almost imperceptible. These include commerce, agriculture, law, engineering and technology. Women in the category of Graduate and above constitute merely 2% of the total number of literate and educated women in West Bengal. Even, according to the Census Report of 1981, 70 out of every 100 women are illiterate in West Bengal. At every higher stage of education, the number of women gets reduced. In terms of the relative growth of the enrolment of girls at the university level, West Bengal having 20 girls per 100 boys was the third among all States in 1955-56. The position changed to 29 girls for every 100 boys in 1960-61, and West Bengal's rank among the Indian States came down to fourth. In 1965-66, West Bengal had 35 girls per 100 boys at the university level.

78 Census of India 1971, Series 22, West Bengal.
with fifth rank. In 1970-71 and 1973-74, the number of girls per 100 boys rose to 36, but the rank remained the same.  

We have made a review of the pattern of enrolment of boys and girls in Post-Graduate Studies in the University of Burdwan during 1969-72 and also during 1980-84. We present our findings in Table 2.

From the table, it appears that enrolment of women in Post-Graduate Studies in the University has doubled during the period under review. In Humanities and Commerce, women's enrolment has more than doubled. In various Science Departments also, it has increased perceptibly. Another interesting feature is that the number of male students has decreased considerably. It suggests that in general, non-technical education, women are concentrating, sometimes even at the expense of male students. In the category of Humanities and Commerce, women are conspicuous by their nearly total absence from commerce - only 3 for the seven years under review. From these trends, we may guess that higher education of women, confined to a narrow base, is also undiversified. Courses with larger employment potentials are still eluding women in West Bengal.

In the following chapters, we shall be examining the relationship between the type of education imparted to women in West Bengal - its quantity and quality - on the one hand, and the unleashing of various socio-cultural forces and processes leading to women's modernity on the other. The socio-cultural make-up of contemporary West Bengal is marked by an uneasy truce between age-old customs, practices and values which permit the humiliation, subjugation and repression of women without scruples on the one hand, and progressive ideas, enlightened values which regard them as the co-equals of men in every respect, on the other. How does education intervene in this complex milieu and with what consequences for the lives of women are questions, the answers to which may indicate the level of modernity of women in West Bengal.