

**BREAKING THE MYTH OF THE ‘WHITE WOMAN’S BURDEN’: FEMALE MISSIONARIES IN BENGAL AND THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF *ZENANA* EDUCATION**

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**Abstract**

Any discussion about the initial steps taken for the spread of women’s education in Eastern Bengal in the nineteenth century involves the contribution of female Christian missionaries from England. By the second half of the nineteenth century large numbers of educated young white women were joining the Church as overseas missionaries to work in every corner of the world that England had colonized. In Bengal, the arrival of female Christian missionaries in considerable numbers resulted in bringing Western education to the doorstep of the Bengali woman. The very traditional method of home teaching was established as a parallel system of formal education which in due time was acknowledged by Government as the *Zenana* Education System. The process of the institutionalization of the age-old custom of home teaching is explored in this paper. Also, the paper questions the validity of the assumption that sheer altruism and the noble idea of civilizing the uncivilized was the driving motivation for the women of England to endure the hardship of life away from home, in the colonies.

In the rapidly changing socio-economic and political environment of the nineteenth century colonial Bengal, the uneasiness regarding modernization and its troubled relationship with tradition came into conflict on the question of women’s emancipation through formal education. The *andarmahal*, apart from being a dwelling place for women, functioned as a repository of culture and tradition and it symbolized the one space that colonialism had not yet penetrated. The British Raj came to view it as the ‘unreasonable’, ‘illogical’ space that resisted colonization and where the civilizing rhetoric of colonialism needed to find a foothold. In the second half of the nineteenth century, the *andarmahal*, or, interchangeably, the *zenana mahal*, became the site where the Christian missionaries began active proselytization through institutionalizing the age-old practice of home education which gained cognition as the *Zenana* Education System. This alternative system of institutionalized home education was the direct result of a unique phenomenon in the history of Church missions,

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which involved educated and young women of British, North American and Canadian origin to deliver the Christ's message. These Christian educators would improve the life of Indian women who were apparently looked down upon by their men. Cultural arrogance led the imperialists to believe that it was a humanitarian responsibility of the white race to civilize the Indians. In doing so, they would judge the level of civilization by looking at how the women of a society were treated. The publication in 1899 of Rudyard Kipling's poem 'The White Man's Burden' encapsulated in one phrase the ideological basis of that cultural arrogance, which explains why the phrase 'the white man's burden' became the catchword of the imperialist school of thought as justification for the subjugation of such large numbers of people in Asia and Africa.<sup>1</sup> Female missionaries became part of the imperial design as access to the mothers of future colonial citizens was a cornerstone of the philosophy of cultural imperialism. Two groups of English women began to arrive in India in large numbers in the second half of the nineteenth century. The first group consisted of the wives and other female relatives of the administrative officers of the British Raj, who carried the ideological baggage of racial supremacy and generally, with a few exceptions of course, kept themselves segregated from the inferior natives. The second group was composed of the female missionaries, teachers, nurses and doctors, who took upon themselves the mighty task of alleviating the status of the downtrodden Indian woman; hence we term it the 'white woman's burden'.

However, the questions that perplex us are: why the sudden surge of altruism towards the women of the Empire? Why did the second half of the nineteenth century bring so many women missionaries from Britain, America and Canada to the colonies and why did the phenomenon erode in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century? Given the dominant-subordinate characteristic of the power structure of the colonial society in Bengal, which category of women benefitted more: the dominant race/ethnic group of the white woman, or the subordinate race/ethnic group of indigenous women? Were the colonies a place where the educated women from England could escape for opportunities of spiritual satisfaction and professional achievement? What effect, if any, did missionary imperialism have

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1 For a discussion on Indo-British race relations centering around the so-called moral burden of the white race, see Islam, Sirajul, 'The Briton in India: How Heavy Was the 'White Man's Burden'?', *Bangladesh Historical Studies*, Journal of the Bangladesh History Association, Vol. XVII, 1996-98, pp. 1-33.

on the development of movements and institutions for the progress of Indian women? This paper explores these questions within the cultural, social and political contexts of tradition versus modernity and patriarchal control versus colonial intervention. It attempts to show that the so-called 'white men's burden' was indeed a myth because throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and up to World War I, overseas missions provided the safe haven for white educated females who needed to escape the economic and social degradation back home. The case of Eastern Bengal, the region which is now Bangladesh, has been chosen for this study precisely because it was there where the female Christian missionaries began the practice of home visits to render educational services in the 1840s and it was there where the *Zenana* Education System became most successful compared to other parts of India and endured till 1933. While the imperial school perpetuates the myth of how the British women made huge sacrifices for their *heathen* sisters, this paper attempts to break that myth and show that the benefits, rather than being a one way process, were quite mutual.

#### **Zenana Education before the Colonial Intervention**

British colonial documents relating to female education in India during the nineteenth century use the term '*zenana* education' in connection with a certain experiment in the method of female education. *Zenana* is the Persian word for woman. In Bengal, before the term *bhadramahila* caught on as the counterpart of the English gentlewoman,<sup>2</sup> the term *zenana* was used to refer to the ladies of the upper echelon of society. In Eastern Bengal, the aristocratic classes consisted of Mughal, Afghan and Turkish stock.<sup>3</sup> The handful of Mughal, Afghan and Turkish nobility resided in Dhaka as representatives of the central Mughal government in Delhi. The Hindu ladies of the upper classes were also

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2 For information on the historical process of the birth of the Bengali *bhadramahila*, see Murshid, Ghulam, *Reluctant Debutante: Response of Bengali Women to Modernization, 1849-1905* (Rajshahi: Sahitya Samsad, Rajshahi University, 1983), Borthwick, Meredith, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), and, Amin, Sonia Nishat, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

3 For details on the demographic composition of Eastern Bengal, see Ahmed, Sharifuddin, *Dhaka: A Study in Urban History and Development, 1840-1921* (London: Curzon Press Ltd., 1986, 2nd edition by Academic Publishers Limited, Dhaka, 2004), and Mamoon, Muntasir, *Unish Shotokey Purva Banger Samaj, 1857-1905* (The Society of Eastern Bengal in the Nineteenth Century), Dhaka: CSS, Samaj Nirikshan Kendra, 1986.

included in the term *zenana*, as were the ladies of the rising Hindu and Muslim middle classes by the end of the nineteenth century. The domestic space these women occupied or, the women's quarters, was called the *zenana mahal* or, alternatively, the *antahpur*. The several generations of women who lived in that secluded space were called *zenana* or, *antahpurbashini*. Seclusion was a sign of nobility as it meant that they could afford the luxury of a leisured and protected life. Beginning from ancient times, throughout the middle ages, and during the Mughal rule, these upper class ladies were, more often than not, accomplished women of letters. It was not uncommon for them to receive lessons in Arabic and Persian inside the *zenana*.<sup>4</sup> Apart from the princesses and daughters of ministers, the other group of women who possessed a good knowledge of Vedic literature and poetry were courtesans and concubines.<sup>5</sup> This education, as was the case in England also, was not institutional or formal. Well-to-do families who could afford it, arranged for the girls of the family to receive rudimentary education based on religious scriptures from in-house governesses or peripatetic teachers.

The daughters of non-elite members of society did, on occasion, attend the village *pathshala*, *madrassah* or *maktab*, the indigenous educational institutions that were set up adjacent to a temple or a mosque to cater to the educational needs of the boys.<sup>6</sup> The girls who attended these indigenous schools left too young to retain any of the education they gained, as the average age at marriage of a girl ranged between eight and eleven years. In the predominantly agricultural society of Eastern Bengal, formal education for boys was a luxury in itself, while the institutional education of girls was not an option at all. The investment in an education for a girl yielded no benefits, least of all in the marriage market. The Reverend William Adam of Dunfermline, Scotland, who was appointed by the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) to work in India in 1818 and who later seceded from the BMS in 1821, writes in his reports on indigenous elementary education in Bengal that because it was considered 'improper' to bestow any education on girls and because that sort of knowledge

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4 See Keay, F.E., *A History of Education in India and Pakistan* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959), and Hossain, Shahanara, *The Social Life of Women in Early Medieval Bengal* (Dhaka: The Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1985).

5 Hossain, Shahanara, *Ibid.*, p. 45.

6 For detailed information on indigenous schools, see Shahidullah, Kazi, *Patshalas into Schools: The Development of Indigenous Elementary Education in Bengal, 1854-1905* (Calcutta: Firma KLM Private Limited, 1987).

was supposed to be most inauspicious to their spouses, the husbands were sometimes deceived into believing that their young wives had not acquired any form of literacy.<sup>7</sup> It is this mindset that the pioneers of women's education, namely, the Christian missionaries, had to contend against and eventually conquer. But how much of this zeal was pure altruism?

#### **How Burdensome was the 'White Woman's Burden'?**

The phenomenal rise in the number of female missionaries in every denomination of the Christian Church in the second half of the nineteenth century has been termed by Barbara Ramusack as a period of 'maternal imperialism'. She views the pioneering women whose arrival in India paved the way for other white women as 'cultural missionaries' who preached the gospel of women's uplift.<sup>8</sup> While the British colonial government was least concerned with initiating reforms for women and the native men were deeply suspicious of any attempt on the part of the imperial power to pervade the sacred area of home and hearth, the British women like Hanna Marshman, Mary Carpenter, Annette Akroyd, Annie Besant, and Margaret Noble made it their mission to alleviate the position of colonized Indian women. Barbara Ramusack records, however, that for most of these single and educated women, India was a kind of escape from the emotional and spiritual barrenness of the post-industrial society of the nineteenth century Britain.<sup>9</sup> Annette Akroyd, who had shifted her position from one of an ardent activist for the spread of female education in Bengal, to settle into a quiet life of domesticity after her marriage with the notable Orientalist and civil servant Henry Beveridge, thought that life in England was a "boring life of moral classes, ragged school collections, balls, social engagements, visits, journeys to London and yearly trips to the seaside"<sup>10</sup> and to escape such a life of "blankness" and "dreariness inexpressible", she came to Bengal in search of a more meaningful existence that her Unitarian upbringing urged her to lead.

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7 Hartog, Sir Philip, *Some Aspects of Indian Education Past and Present*, published for the University of London Institute of Education by Oxford University Press, 1939, p. 53.

8 Ramusack, Barbara N., 'Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945' in Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds.), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), pp.120-136.

9 *Ibid.*, p. 128.

10 Quoted in Kopf, David, *The Brahma Samaj and the Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), p. 35.

By the second half of the nineteenth century, England had a sizeable number of educated women who suffered emotionally and materially from the lack of gainful employment. These women, who did not belong to the working class and were aspiring to climb the social hierarchical ladder through an education, could only become governesses in upper class homes. There were only so many teaching jobs to be held at formal institutions as primary and secondary education for girls was not all that widespread and higher education was still out of bounds for women. The problem was truly acute for middle class educated women as summarized by Michael Sanderson: “The problem in the 1840-70 period was largely a middle-class one of finding careers for unmarried middle-class ladies ... Around 1850 existing careers were limited and becoming a governess was the only means of earning her livelihood open to the woman of gentle birth.”<sup>11</sup> In Rosalind Miles’ opinion, it was the paradox of Empire that while the colonized women fell victim to the domination of white males in addition to their own, ‘Britannia’s daughters’, as she terms the white women who took advantage of their superior position as representatives of the ruling race, seized the opportunity “of escaping the stifling narrowness of home to become doctors, teachers, leaders, fighters or farmers in the field.”<sup>12</sup>

It was not, however, only the British women for whom missionary engagement was a romantic alternative to the “excruciatingly boring life”<sup>13</sup> of women whose life options were limited to becoming a factory girl or a governess or finding a suitable matrimonial match. In North America, in the nineteenth century, college graduates increasingly began to find joining the women's foreign missionary movement more attractive than taking up a life of improved domesticity and motherhood as a profession. By the end of the nineteenth century, American women missionaries came to numerically dominate the Christian missions in India. In Canada, the Toronto-based Women’s Foreign Missionary Society (WFMS) was set up under the auspices of the Presbyterian Church. Following the footsteps of British and American women, in Canada, by

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11 Sanderson, Michael, *Education, economic change and society in England 1780-1870* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995. Second edition published by the Cambridge University Press on behalf of the Economic History Society, 1995), p. 56.

12 Miles, Rosalind, *The Women’s History of the World* (London: Paladin Grafton Books, A Division of the Collins Publishing Group, 1988), p. 216.

13 Barbara Miller Solomon’s *In the Company Educated Women: A History of Women and Higher Education in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1985) describes in detail how frustrated the college educated women were in the second half of the nineteenth century at the lack of meaningful employment.

the 1870s and 1880s, the three largest Protestant denominations, the Methodists, Presbyterians, and Anglicans, began to support women's missionary work. For the Canadian women like Dr. Dean Dow, Dr. Marion Olive, Jean Sinclair or Maggie Mackellar, the work they did in the distant Eastern lands halfway across the globe, held rich possibilities for personal and spiritual fulfillment.<sup>14</sup> The mission fields in India and China provided women with career opportunities that were virtually unavailable in Canada. When these women returned home on furlough or after completing their mission, they were treated as celebrities and recognized as public role models. Though these exceptional women extended the boundaries of women's traditional roles through their work in the mission fields, such contributions did not necessarily open up new and larger opportunities for professional women in Canada.<sup>15</sup>

Missionary societies, well aware, by the second half of the nineteenth century of the great reservoir of potential that remained untapped, began to appeal to those 'whose energies find little scope in their own land'.<sup>16</sup> Irene Petrie, a young woman from an upper-middle-class background, had come to Kashmir in 1894 as a missionary of the Church Missionary Society only to die three years later doing mission work in Tibet. Irene Petrie's biographer Carus-Wilson went to great lengths to explain the motive of Petrie and so many other young women like her who joined foreign missions and endured the hardship of life in the colonies. Carus-Wilson, writing in the age of high imperialism, endorses the imperialist ideology of the supremacy of the white race and their mission of civilizing the 'uncivilized' races by stating that it was only in response to the call of duty and purely a sense of altruism that motivated the educated women of Victorian England to sacrifice their lives in the service of the Church.<sup>17</sup> But the truth seems otherwise. For the Victorian women, missionary work not only

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<sup>14</sup> The full history of Canadian women's involvement in overseas missionary work can be found in Brouwer, Ruth Compton, *New Women for God: Canadian Presbyterian Women and India Missions, 1876-1914* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1990).

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 193.

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the London Missionary Society for 1882*, p. 32, cited in Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood and Shirley Ardener (eds.), *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions* (Providence: Berg Publishers, 1993), p.61.

<sup>17</sup> Carus-Wilson, A., *Irene Petrie: Missionary to Kashmir* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1901), p.27, cited in Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener (eds.), *Women and Missions, ibid.*, p. 61.

provided avenues for independent adventure, it also created opportunities to forge matrimonial relationships, opportunities which had not been available at home. The missionary historian C.P. Williams shows how mission societies tried to deter women from leaving the missions for marriage or other reasons by signing an agreement stating that the costs of training, outfit and travel would be repaid on a sliding scale according to length of service by those who left the societies within an agreed period, which usually was five years.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, a sufficiently large number did get married, which, in the World Missionary Conference of 1910 held in Edinburgh was viewed as a 'grave problem', and created often as a result of taking up a 'mistaken vocation'.<sup>19</sup> The typical salary of about 100 pounds sterling per annum (a single man could expect 140 pounds sterling per annum) together with accommodation, by contemporary standards, was also a temptation to many women as that amount was much more than could be expected in other spheres of work. Having said that, it is important to remember that a large number of women came from a holiness background and the sacred ambition of suffering for Christ's sake and total submission to God's will was axiomatic of that age.

In Britain, the census of 1851 had come as a startling awakening to the fact that a considerable number of women would face the prospect of spinsterhood as the male-female ratio stood at 1,000 men for 1,050 women. According to the Registrar-General, "Out of every 100 females of twenty years of age and upwards, fifty-seven are wives, thirteen are widows, and thirty are spinsters."<sup>20</sup> That meant that they would have to carve out occupations for themselves which, in the second half of the nineteenth century, were not easy to come by. The thousands who were being absorbed into the textile industry as 'factory girls' were not the problem. It was the thousands of women of the middle and upper classes who were counted among the "surplus" or the "redundant" women.<sup>21</sup> Emigration from England to the Americas, to New Zealand, Canada and the

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<sup>18</sup> Williams, C.P., 'The Recruitment and Training of Overseas Missionaries in England between 1850 and 1900, with Special Reference to the Records of the Church Missionary Society, the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, the London Missionary Society and the China Inland Mission', University of Bristol MLitt (1976), cited in Bowie, Kirkwood and Ardener (eds.), *Women and Missions*, p. 62.

<sup>19</sup> World Missionary Conference, 1910 (n.d.), *Report of Commissions*, 10 vols, (Edinburgh: Oliphant, Anderson & Ferrier, 1910), cited in *ibid*.

<sup>20</sup> *Population Return*, 1851, vol. ii, p. clxv, cited in Greg, William Rathbone, *Why Are Women Redundant* (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1869), p. 12.

<sup>21</sup> W.R. Greg, *Why Are Women Redundant*, p. 18.

colonies, not to mention casualties from the incessant wars England was embroiled in, created the population imbalance. As Rathbone puts it in *Why Are Women Redundant*, it is the women from the middle and upper classes “who were raised by fortune above the necessity of caring for their own subsistence, but to whom employment is a necessity as imperious to the milliner or the husbandman, because only employment can fill the dreary void of an unshared existence; – beautiful lay nuns, involuntary takers of the veil, – who pine for work, who beg for occupation, who pant for interest in life...”<sup>22</sup> Inherent in such representations of Victorian women are the tensions of a complex society born out of industrialization in the previous century.<sup>23</sup> As a direct result of the failure of the western societies to provide for their educated women in the professions and in the matrimonial sector, it was the colonies where they were eventually absorbed as educators, nurses, doctors, but most of all, as missionaries of different categories.

#### **Categorizing Female Missionaries**

Women were active as missionary apostles from the earliest days of Christianity, as is known from the letters of St. Paul. In his letter to the Romans the apostle Paul seeks all cooperation for Sister Phoebe who served the Church at Chenchrae. Priscilla appears to be the first example of the missionary wife, helping her husband Aquila, as mentioned in the New Testament. Women missionaries maintained a prominent role in the Church throughout the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, but gradually became marginalized from the 17<sup>th</sup> century onwards as a side effect of the Inquisition’s war against the practice of witchcraft. It was in the second half of the nineteenth century that feminization of the Protestant missions began to take place as the dual effect of the socio-economic changes in post-Industrial England and the establishment of Empire. British missionary activities during that period opened up avenues for American and Canadian missions as well. A distinct feature of renewed female missions was the presence of a large number of single women. They formed a separate category and were missionaries in their own right, doing paid work. Mission historians Stephen Neill, Ruth Compton Brouwer, and Deborah Kirkwood have

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<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>23</sup> For a discussion on the sharpening cultural devaluation and marginalization of women in metropolitan England and the complex role the colonial enterprise played in the tensions and contradictions of gender, race and class, see Sen, Indrani, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900)* (Hyderabad: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2002).

drawn attention to two more categories, which are, wives of missionaries, and missionary wives. The differences between the two latter categories, the historians insist, should not be overlooked.

Missionaries were encouraged to take their wives with them so that they could set examples of good Christian wives and mothers, serve as models of good female behavior, and, with their husbands, demonstrate the virtues and merits of a monogamous Christian way of live. An important part of their work was the task of imparting knowledge of Western domestic skills like primary health and hygiene, cooking, sewing and laundry to the indigenous women.<sup>24</sup> Women who went overseas with their missionary husbands had to set examples of good wives and good mothers as the ultimate Christian ideal in every missionary outpost, whether in India, Africa or Australia, for the locals to see first-hand how Christianity promised a 'better' life. Joining in the proselytizing work of their husbands, beyond their domestic duties, was optional for the wives of missionaries. Many diaries and letters of the wives of missionaries have survived to show how much the Church demanded of them and how little of their work was acknowledged.<sup>25</sup> Norman Goodall pays tribute to the wives of missionaries in his authoritative history of the London Missionary Society in the following way:

Apart from all that a wife's companionship means in a man's work, apart from the distinctive contribution in Christian witness which a missionary's home offers, there has always been rendered by missionaries' wives an immense volume of work in schools, dispensaries and cottage industries, in translation and literary work, in the training of women workers, and in experiments that bear the stamp of creative originality. To have attempted a record of this work, or even to have named all the outstanding illustrations of it would have been too large an undertaking.<sup>26</sup>

Missionary wives, on the other hand, were required by the Church to assist their husbands in their missionary work. In fact, in Deborah Kirk's words, "missionary wives were not only 'married to the job' but they were often married for the job; when a young missionary wife died her widower would

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24 For more, see Deborah Kirkwood, 'Protestant Missionary Women: Wives and Spinsters', in Fiona Bowie, Deborah Kirkwood and Shirley Ardener (eds.), *Women and Missions: Past and Present: Anthropological and Historical Perceptions*, pp.23-41.

25 Grimshaw, Patricia and Kirkby, Diane (eds.), *Dealing with Difference: Essays in Gender, Culture and History* (Melbourne: History Department, University of Melbourne, 1997), p. 48.

26 Goodall, Norman, *A History of the London Missionary Society, 1895-1945* (London, 1954), cited in Fiona Bowie et al. (eds.), *Women and Missions, op.cit.*, p. 28.

seek a replacement, very often from within the wider family circle of missionaries.<sup>27</sup> There were missions-minded women who sought husbands who would take them to heathen lands, just as male missionaries sought helpmates who would support them in their work. Becoming a missionary wife thus allowed women to have both marriage and career. The relative 'invisibility' of the missionary wives in official reports has caused most researchers to gloss over the crucial contribution they made. The unfortunate part was that in most cases, they were not even remunerated, depending on the financial condition of a particular mission. When a single female missionary got married to a colleague, most Missions, like the LMS, stopped remuneration to the missionary wife even though she continued her work in the field.<sup>28</sup> The Church Missionary Society, however, provided a joint allowance to husband and wife.

In whatever category they may have been, female missionaries were invaluable to the Church because unless the women of India could be reached, conversion would remain negligible. Indian women may have had little influence in the public space but in the private space, their effectiveness as the tutor of early religious and moral education of the rising generation was unlimited. Thus, access to women was of vital importance for effective proselytization and such access was next to impossible to gain by male missionaries. Opening schools for girls was the first step towards influencing the future generations of mothers. Education is implicit in the concept of mission and all missionaries, therefore, were educators of sorts. The problem in Bengal, however, appeared to be that the upper classes did not send their female wards to the schools that the missionaries had established. So a method was devised that suited the social norms of Bengal while serving the ends of the Church. That method was the zenana education scheme, where education was taken to the homes of girls through the peripatetic teaching method. Once the missionaries devised the scheme of going from door to door to educate the ladies of the households instead of direct proselytization, the method gained the full support of the Government in the form of grants of financial aid to missionary societies.<sup>29</sup>

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27 Kirkwood, *Ibid.*, p. 27.

28 *Ibid.*, p. 28.

29 The Annual Report on Education for 1877-78 shows that, of the Rs.16,420 spent on zenana education, Rs. 14,804 was spent as grants to missionary societies. Bengal Education Proceedings (A) for the month of July 1878 to July 1879, Circular n. 45 and nos. 3691-92, dated October, 1878, File III, No. 12, NA,B.

In the hands of the Christian missionaries, peripatetic teaching received the cognition of 'zenana education'. *Zenana* education was institutionalized chiefly because the upper class girls, as a rule, maintained strict *purdah* and thus were not sent to the various schools the Christian missionaries had established. The Christian missionaries desperately wanted to convert the social leaders of the native population to achieve the ripple down effect (which did not happen). In course of time, active participation from the colonial government and local agency turned the small ventures of a few missionary women into an institution. As the very epistemology of the term suggests, it was education for the ladies of the upper echelon of Bengal society. It was quite costly to recruit a peripatetic teacher to visit one's home once or twice a week. Meredith Borthwick is rather unceremonious about the non-egalitarian aspect of this mode of education: "*Zenana* education was not freely available to the *chotolok*, and therefore was compatible with the preservation of *bhadralok* status".<sup>30</sup>

#### **Distinction between Home Education and Zenana Education**

The tradition of giving education to upper class girls at home and the institution of *zenana* education were distinct from one another. Meredith Borthwick in her pioneering work, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal*<sup>31</sup> says that home education is the education that female wards received informally from the male members of the family. It could be the father, or a brother or the husband. The most illustrious figure in Bengal who was educated at home, secretly, at the dead of night, first by her brother and then by her husband, was Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain. Her contribution to the spread of female education in Calcutta has earned her a permanent place in the annals of the history of female education in Bengal.

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30 Borthwick, Meredith, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), p. 71.

31 Borthwick, Meredith, *Ibid.*, pp. 68-80. For detailed discussions on zenana education see, Roy, Benoy Bhusan and Ray, Pranati, *Zenana Mission: The Role of Christian Missionaries for the Education of Women in 19th Century Bengal* (Delhi: Indian Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1998), Roy, Benoy Bhusan, *Antahpurer Strisiksha* (A short history of women's education in Bengal), Kolkata: Naya Udyog, 1998, Lahiri, Krishna, 'Education of Women in Bengal, 1849-1882, With Special Reference to Missionary Contributions' (Ph.D. Thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1979), University Microfilm International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A., 1985. References to *zenana* education in other parts of India are available in Minault, Gail, *Secluded Scholars: Women's Education and Muslim Social Reform in Colonial India* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998) and Hasan, Zoya and Menon, Ritu, *Educating Muslim Girls: a comparison of five Indian cities* (New Delhi: Women Unlimited, an associate of Kali for Women, 2005).

Women of the elite classes in both the Hindu and Muslim communities would be given rudimentary education so that their respective religious scriptures could be read. They learned how to sew clothes and do some embroidery as well. A clear demarcation between home education and *zenana* education can be made regarding the content of study. The home education scheme did not follow any recognized structure or curricula. Peripatetic teachers called *ustadnis* came to the homes of well-to-do people to teach their daughters how to read chiefly religious scripts. *Zenana* education is different from home education because when Christian missionaries began to teach in the *zenana*, they devised certain curricula and methods. Beginning from the 1860s, Hindu and Brahma centers of *zenana* teaching sprang up with their own structured curricula in reaction to the aggressive proselytization attempts of the female Christian missionaries. By the end of the nineteenth century, the Muslim leaders of society also organized *zenana* teaching centres for their womenfolk and they based that education on the curricula formulated by the Calcutta University. The Muslim *Suhrid Sammilani*, established in Dhaka in 1883 was one such group of enlightened Muslim men who dared not violate *pardah*, but wanted to spread education among Muslim girls. The group drew up a syllabus corresponding to the one in the Calcutta University, distributed books, provided private tuitions and held examinations in the *zenana*. They even distributed certificates.<sup>32</sup> Until 1905, the year it ceased to exist, the Muslim *Suhrid Sammilani* had distributed certificates to a total of 37 students from Dhaka, Barisal, Mymensingh and Calcutta. In the latter years after the Indian Education Commission of 1882, popularly known as the Hunter Commission, praised this method which had grown out of the socio-cultural and religious necessities of Bengal as a good method of education and made specific recommendations for its improvement. Government Inspectors monitored *zenana* education centers and took examinations. The indigenous efforts received the cognate of '*Antahpur Stree Shiksha*', the Sankrit for *zenana* education.

#### **The Shift from Missionary Schools to the Zenana Education Scheme**

Historians give different dates for the beginning of *zenana* education in Bengal which turned into a parallel institution to the modern formal schools rather than an alternative system. Binoy Bhushon Roy and Pranati Roy mention that *zenana* education was introduced in 1841 in Calcutta by Miss Saville under the

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32 Amin, Sonia Nishat, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), p. 150.

auspices of the Church of Scotland Women's Mission.<sup>33</sup> On the other hand, Helen Barrett Montgomery insists that the practice of *zenana* education began in Jessore of Eastern Bengal when Mrs. John Sully gained access to a local gentleman's home but unfortunately does not give a date!<sup>34</sup> Yet another historian, Geraldine Forbes, attributes the beginning of *zenana* education to Ms. H.C. Mullens (spelled Mulence by Benoy Bhushon Roy) who was invited by a gentleman in Calcutta to teach his wife embroidery.<sup>35</sup> The missionary newspaper *Somprakash* corroborates this information.<sup>36</sup> Hanna Catherine Mullens (or Mulence), however, took over the *zenana* work from Mrs. Elizabeth Sully, wife of the missionary John Sully, when they sailed back to England in 1861.

Prior to gaining government patronage and social recognition throughout the late nineteenth and the early twentieth century, the method of door-to-door teaching faced some resistance from Christian missionaries themselves at the beginning. In 1840, Dr. Thomas, a missionary of the United Free Church of Scotland submitted a proposal for a scheme of door-to-door education of Indian women which was turned down by other missionaries.<sup>37</sup> He re-submitted the proposal at the Conference of the Calcutta Missionaries in 1853 which was rejected again on the grounds that it was 'unrealistic'. That was the year Alexander Duff sent Reverend Fordyce to Calcutta. His wife, not a missionary in her own right, assisted him in his work. A conference in Calcutta in 1855 where the missionaries working in Bengal met, Mrs. Fordyce read an article that put forward the necessity of *zenana* education and Dr. Mulence (spelled Mullens by some historians) supported it. The proposal was finally accepted, after which seven denominations, including the Baptist and the London Mission, began *zenana* work immediately. The seven denominations were joined later by other missionary organizations including ones from North America. So it was that although *zenana* work started in approximately 1841, it gained full steam after the 1850s.

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33 Roy, Benoy Bhusan and Ray, Pranati, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

34 Montgomery, Helen Barrett, *Western Women in Eastern Lands* (New York, 1910), p. 108.

35 Forbes, Geraldine, 'In Search of the 'Pure Heathen': Missionary Women in Nineteenth Century India', *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. XXI, No. 17, Review of Women Studies, April 26, 1986, p. WS-3.

36 Lewis, C.B., *Zenana Work: its origin and progress*, Calcutta, 1876, p. 5, cited in Roy, Benoy Bhusan and Ray, Pranati, *Ibid.*, p. 184.

37 Roy, Benoy Bhusan and Ray, Pranati, *Ibid.*, p. 19.

### Eastern Bengal as a Missionary Outpost

Single white women looking for a vocation kept joining overseas Church missions as the most respectable option. Hence, various denominational churches had the numerical strength to send representatives to the remotest parts of the British Empire. The Roman Catholic Mission had visiting governesses even in the Khasiya and Jaintia Hills. The Raj encouraged missionary activities among the tribal people as part of the grand imperial design to bring them, to use Kalyan Kumar Sengupta's phrase, 'within the vortex of colonial economy and exploitation.'<sup>38</sup> In *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters*, Sita Ram Goel, however, has argued the case of the thrust of missionary activity among the tribal people from a strong Hindu nationalistic perspective.<sup>39</sup> He argues that, although Alexander Duff, a member of the Committee of Public Instruction in 1834, and T.B. Macaulay, a member of the Governor General's Council, were both highly optimistic that Western education would be instrumental in bringing the idolaters of India under the fold of Christianity,<sup>40</sup> their dreams were thwarted by one Narendranath Datta (1863-1902), known better as Swami Vivekananda. Swami Vivekananda, says Goel, single-handedly turned the tide against Christianity among the educated, upper class Bengalis, forcing the Christian missionaries to recede into the tribal belts for achieving conversions.<sup>41</sup> Apart from the tribal belts of Mymensingh and Chittagong, *zenana* agencies were at work in Faridpur, Barisal, Bogra, Comilla, Noakhali, and, of course, Dhaka. According to education reports of 1910, *zenana* agencies were planning to extend their work in Pabna and Sylhet.<sup>42</sup>

Another factor in the proliferation of missionary activity in Eastern Bengal since the latter half of the nineteenth century was the strong anti-missionary reaction that grew in strength from the 1860s in Calcutta. Societies and associations were formed to counter the evangelical attempts of the missionary

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38 Sengupta, Kalyan Kumar, 'Peasant and Tribal Movements in Eastern India in the Second Half of the 19th Century: Some Conceptual Problems', in Roy, Ranjit Kumar (ed.), *The Imperial Embrace: Society and Polity under the Raj* (Kolkata: Rabindra Bharati University, 1993), pp. 22.

39 Goel, Sita Ram, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters: AD 304 to 1996* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1986), second revised and enlarged edition, 1996, p. 92.

40 *Ibid.*, pp. 93-94.

41 *Ibid.*, p. 92.

42 Education A Proceedings, Government of East Bengal and Assam (Sylhet Proceedings), File No. E/946 of 1909, Nos. 1-8, Bangladesh National Archives, Dhaka.

organizations. The radical nationalist note in the neo-Hindu movement of the 1880s and 1890s was also an added factor.<sup>43</sup> It became increasingly difficult for the Christian missions to run smoothly as the Hindu revivalist movement aimed chiefly to attack imperialism and western culture. That made them directly to clash with Christian missions as they represented western culture and were infiltrating Indian homes and ‘corrupting’ the women and children. Thus, while the Christian Evangelist Movement of the 1850s brought a rush of missionary activities in Bengal, the Hindu revivalism of the 1870s, especially ignited by Swami Vivekananda presented missionary activity with serious resistance.<sup>44</sup> In the face of such resistance that was developing in the major urban centres, the missionary societies moved more into the hinterland and into tribal areas. In the remote, hilly areas, the missionaries did not encounter any resistance from Hindus and Muslims, but were made to feel welcome by the tribal communities. For the Garos and tribals of Khasia, Jyantia mountains, Christianity was accompanied by modern education and a chance to improve their financial conditions, which was why they welcomed the missionaries. It was not, therefore, sheer altruism that Christian missions began working in larger numbers in marginalized communities in the second half of the nineteenth century.

Since the British intrusion in the Khasi and Jyantia Hills in 1824, the Christian missionaries had followed in the heels of government officials, teachers, artisans, in search of new horizons.<sup>45</sup> The presence of Welsh missionaries in those areas is now almost slipping into oblivion. The Welsh historian Aled Gruffydd Jones regrets that the account of the long association between Bengal and Wales through the missionaries of the Calvinist sect, the Welsh Calvinistic Methodists, has lapsed into historical amnesia.<sup>46</sup> They had established a base in Shillong in the Khasi Hills in 1840.<sup>47</sup> Having met little or no resistance from

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43 See Chaudhuri, Tripti, ‘The Brahmo and the Neo-Hindu Movements: Perceptions of the British Protestant Missionaries,’ in Roy, Ranjit Kumar (ed.), *The Imperial Embrace: Society and Polity under the Raj* (Kolkata: Rabindra Bharati University, 1993), pp. 51-72.

44 See Goel, Sita Ram, *History of Hindu-Christian Encounters: AD 304 to 1996* (New Delhi: Voice of India, 1st edition, 1986, 2nd and enlarged edition, 1996).

45 Ray, B. Datta elaborates this theme in *The Emergence and Role of the Middle Class in Northern India* (New Delhi: Uppal Publishing House, 1983).

46 See Jones, Aled Gruffydd, ‘Imagining Bengal: Bengali Culture and the Welsh National Awakening, 1840-1966,’ *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh* (Humanities), Vol. 49, Number 1, June, 2004, p. 81,

47 *Ibid.*, p. 83.

Hinduism and Islam, the Christian church they established consisted of thousands of converted members. When the Welsh missionaries extended their work to the plains of Sylhet in 1850, they began to face difficulty in evangelical work and thus conversion became limited. The Islamic civic culture was firmly established in the plains of Sylhet due to the legacy of Hazrat Shah Jalal (R), which the external force of Christianity had no way of challenging.<sup>48</sup> Despite producing limited results in conversions, the Welsh Calvinistic mission in Sylhet was so successful in providing female missionaries to visit *zenanas* regularly from the 1880s that requests for visitations have been more than the Mission was able to meet.<sup>49</sup> The missionaries visited the *zenanas* once or twice a week, between twelve noon and five o'clock in the afternoon because that was when the ladies and girls of the household could spare some time out of domestic responsibilities. All the *zenana* pupils were drawn from respectable Hindu and Muslim families. They were taught reading, writing, arithmetic, sewing, cutting and nursing. The Welsh Calvinistic Mission strongly advocated the need for holding examinations and giving prizes and certificates to the successful students to give them a sense of purpose. The Welsh presence in Sylhet continued until 1966.

#### **Recommendations of the Education Commission of 1882**

The thrust into the remotest parts of the British Empire got further incentive from the Hunter Commission of 1882 which recommended that government grant-in-aid be extended to peripatetic teachers. On the basis of the apparent demand for peripatetic teachers from both the Hindu and Muslim communities, the Simla Education Conference of 1901 recorded recommendations to formulate proper government policy that would facilitate the expansion of *zenana* education. The greatest impetus, however, came on the eve of the Partition of Bengal in 1905. Eastern Bengal gained an importance it had not hitherto enjoyed in the political game of the colonizers. In the face of nascent nationalist agitation led by the Calcutta-based intelligentsia, the colonial

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48 For a discussion on the history of the expansion of Islam in Sylhet, see Karim, Abdul, 'Advent of Islam in Sylhet and Hazrat Shah Jalal (R)' in Ahmed Ahmed, Sharif uddin (ed.), *Sylhet, History and Heritage* (Dhaka: Bangladesh Itihas Samiti, 1999), pp. 129-149.

49 'Circular Issued to Missions Relating to Zenana Classes and Reports coming in from the various Missions,' Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam Education (A) Proceedings, File no. E/946 of 1909, nos. 1-8, pp. 207-215, National Archives of Bangladesh.

government sought to woo the densely populated, vast agricultural hinterland of Eastern Bengal by promising them a better future under the British Raj.<sup>50</sup>

The Eastern part of Bengal could be a strong power base if the hitherto neglected province could be transformed and modernized. A better way to do it was to concentrate on the education for both men and women. The new Government of East Bengal and Assam (1905-1911) took heed of the recommendations made by the Simla Conference. These recommendations were basically a reiteration of the proposals made by the Education Commission of 1882. The Commission had made three main recommendations: a) that grants for *zenana* teaching should be recognized as a charge on public funds; b) that education for the *zenana* should be secular; and, c) that the pupils should be tested by an Inspectress or any other female agent. The Government of India agreed that the instruction given by governesses in *zenanas* ought to be encouraged by grants-in-aid and that the work of *zenana* education should be developed under the control of an adequate female inspecting agency. About the recommendation of a secular curriculum, the Government of India remained silent. But that the Hunter Commission recommended a secular curriculum is a reflection of the strong message the interviewees could get across to the Commission about how they felt about the attempts at proselytization in the name of education in the *zenana*.

#### **Government Experiments with Zenana Education**

A qualitative change was introduced among the teaching staff for the *zenana* education at the turn of the new century. In 1902, twelve peripatetic teachers were placed on the Government pay-roll for the first time. None of them were Christian or missionaries, but were Hindus and Muslims. They were to receive salaries of Tk. 30 per month. As they were on the government pay-roll, they were not allowed to take remuneration from the families they were visiting, which was hitherto the practice. The government called this scheme '*zenana* education by house-to-house visitation'. The native aversion towards proselytization by Christian missionary teachers must have been quite pronounced, and the government must have felt obliged to pay attention to that aversion because the peripatetic teachers on government pay-roll had to be

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50 See McClane, John R., 'Partition of Bengal 1905: A Political Analysis', in Islam, Sirajul (ed.), *History of Bangladesh 1704-1971* (Dhaka: Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1992), Vol. II, pp. 165-67.

orthodox Hindu or Muslim women. However, in the quinquennial report of 1901-02 to 1906-07, the Inspectress of Education, Miss Brock, expressed great dissatisfaction with the work of these twelve governesses. There was a huge question mark about the qualifications of these governesses and their commitment to the work they were entrusted with. The Inspectress felt that the reason that these teachers lacked commitment and showed no eagerness to improve themselves was because their salary did not depend on the exam results obtained by the students. Reports about *zenana* governesses reveal that, in Dhaka, in 1907, a Muslim and Brahmo *zenana* governess would receive Tk. 50 per month, with an additional amount of Tk. 25 per month as conveyance allowance.<sup>51</sup> Twenty-one Hindu and seventeen Muslim girls were on the rolls of these classes during the period between 1901-02 and 1906-07. The Hindu classes appeared to have done good work but, according to the Inspectress' report, the Muslim pupils failed to show progress due to the incompetence of the Muslim teacher.

Government experiments with *zenana* education were extended to Barisal and Noakhali too. A *zenana* class for Muslim *pardanashin* ladies was opened at Ulania in 1903 at an annual cost of Tk. 360. The amount was met from provincial revenues. It had twelve ladies under its instruction but the number dropped to ten the following year. The experiment proved to be a frustrating one both from the financial and the academic points of view. The comments of Mr. H.E. Stapleton, Esq., the Inspector of Schools, Dhaka Division, is worth noting here. Mr. Stapleton remarked that "beyond teaching elements of Bengali language to about a dozen Mohammedan girls of a particular family it did nothing good".<sup>52</sup> He strongly felt that the primary duty of the State was educating the masses and that the cost of one *zenana* class may help to run half-a-dozen primary schools for girls. Nevertheless, *zenana* classes continued to be held there and the *zenana* teachers were supervised by Miss Moore of the American Baptist Mission. This continuation was consistent with the findings of a report of the Female Education Committee set up in 1908 to improve the condition of female education in the new province of Eastern Bengal and

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51 Extract from the Report on the Progress of Education in Eastern Bengal and Assam during the years 1901-1902—1906-1907, Education (A) Proceedings, Assam Secretariat (Sylhet Proceedings), Government of East Bengal and Assam, File No. E/946 of 1909, April 1910, Nos. 1-8, Bangladesh National Archives, Dhaka.

52 Education (A) Proceedings, Assam Secretariat (Sylhet Proceedings), Government of East Bengal and Assam, File No. E-946 of 1909, April 1910, Nos. 1-8, NAL, B.

Assam. The Committee recommended that Government should make a grant of Rs. 100 a month to the American Baptist Mission in Barisal, for the improvement and development of *zenana* work.

The experiment in *zenana* education with governesses on government pay-roll in Noakhali (then a town in the Chittagong Division) appeared to produce better results than that of Barisal. The experiment began in January 1904. The classes started with 60 pupils although the report does not say how many of them were Hindus and how many were Muslims. By the fiscal year 1906-1907 the numbers rose to 105 pupils (98 Hindu and 7 Muslims). In 1907-08, there were 122 pupils enrolled in 18 *zenana* centers. Each centre received a visit from a governess once a month. The governess refused to visit the centers more frequently because of the high cost of conveyance which was not included in her allowance. How much progress can be achieved from one lesson once a month is not too hard to imagine. Nevertheless, the *zenana* work at Noakhali seems to have impressed the Inspectress of Schools, Miss Brock. In her report of 1919-20, she wrote that the governesses at Noakhali were doing the best job in East Bengal.<sup>53</sup> In 1909, the report of the Directory of Public Instruction stated that there were eighty-three pupils attending *zenana* classes. Of them, sixty-eight were married or widowed. There was only one teacher for all these pupils. The mistress was Srimati Premamayee Aich, wife of the Head Pandit of the Noakhali Girls' Middle Vernacular School.<sup>54</sup> Her educational qualifications were up to the Upper Primary Standard and an added advantage was her skill at needlework. The classes were held in nineteen centers, all located in Hindu quarters. The centers were all within a radius of half a mile. The teaching was confined to reading, writing, sewing and knitting, with more attention paid to the latter two. The mistress attended one centre a day where only two or three pupils attended. If the central gathering system could be introduced there, the mistress could make good on time spent on traveling from one centre to the other.

Although most of the missionary outposts of Eastern Bengal that had begun *zenana* education in the middle of the nineteenth century were gradually being taken over by the Government, the Bengal Evangelical Mission remained firmly

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53 Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1919-20 (Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1921), compiled by W.W. Hornell, Director of Public Instruction, Bengal, p.18.

54 Assam Secretariat (Sylhet Proceedings), Bengal Education (A) Proceedings, April 1910, File No. E-946 of 1909, Nos. 1-8, NAL,B.

stationed in Faridpur, a district south-west of Dhaka. Set up in 1847 by one Mathuranath Basu, the Bengal Evangelical Mission there had sixty women from different religious communities such as the Hindus, the Muslims and the Christians. According to a report of 1911, they would study under three peripatetic teachers.<sup>55</sup> The Mission report names Mrs. H.B. Sarkar, Miss H. Biswas and Mrs. H. Paul as the three teachers who had to go to the students' houses by boat.<sup>56</sup> The *zenana* education program ran there at a cost of Rs. 711/- and 5 annas per month. The Government grant-in-aid amounted to Rs. 60/- per month. The Female Education Committee mentions the good work of the Faridpur *Suhrid Sabha* for promoting female education in the district.<sup>57</sup>

### **Changes in Modes of *Zenana* Education**

The *Zenana* education formed a sub-category in female education in the nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial Bengal. After putting the experiment with '*zenana* education by house-to-house visitation' in motion, the Education Department convened a conference of Hindu and Muslim educational officers and took proposals from them regarding what else could be done. The Indian officials came up with a proposal which was accepted by the government. It was called the Central Gathering Scheme. The proposed scheme aimed at tackling the inter-related problem of the dearth of qualified teachers, both Hindu and Muslim, and the small amount of time the available teachers could devote to each pupil under the house-to-house visitation system that was the general practice. The proposal was accepted by the government and it went into force in 1903. A similar scheme was suggested as early as 1877 by the then Director of Public Instruction (DPI) A.W. Croft. To tackle the problem of the dearth of qualified teachers for the *zenana*, the DPI had suggested that *zenana* pupils be concentrated and brought together in one place for more continuous instruction rather than the two hours a week a peripatetic teacher could afford on house-to-house visitations.<sup>58</sup> The proposal did not create any ripple effect,

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55 Cited in Roy, Binoy Bhusan and Ray, Pranati, *Zenana Mission: The Role of Christian Missionaries for the Education of Women in 19th Century Bengal* (Delhi: SPCK, 1998), p.22.

56 *30th Year's Report of the Bengal Evangelical Mission*, Faridpur, 1911, pp. 19-30, cited in Binoy Bhusan and Ray, Pranati, *Ibid.*, p. 22.

57 Education (A) Proceedings, Assam Secretariat (Sylhet Proceedings), Government of East Bengal and Assam, File No. E-349 of 1908, April 1908, Nos. 125-143, NAL,B.

58 Annual Report on Education for 1877-1878 by A.W. Croft, Esq., M.A., Director of Public Instruction, Proceedings for October 1878, Circular No. 45, Nos. 3691-92, October 29, 1878, Government of Bengal, General Department (Education), NAB.

but, in course of time, necessity induced the Education Department to act on such a proposal that had been presented without any reference to the early ideas of A.W. Croft.

The Central Gathering Scheme required students to attend at a designated place, almost in all cases a respectable gentleman's house where the women and girls of the neighborhood would feel comfortable. A small committee of local gentlemen would appoint the teacher and have control over management. They could be orthodox Hindus or Muslims, or their numbers could be in proportion to the pupils of a particular Centre. No male inspector was to visit the centers or contact the teachers. Male inspecting officers not lower in rank than the Deputy Inspectors of Schools were to visit the members of management committee to collect information and make recommendations. Thus, strict *purdah* was ensured and the management committee could be entrusted with the highest responsibility for smooth running of the operation. The Government sanctioned a recurring cost of Tk. 30 per month for each centre. The teacher was to be paid Tk. 20 per month. Tk. 4 per month was to be paid to a servant. And Tk. 6 per month was earmarked for prizes and contingent charges.

Many Central Gathering Centers had sprung up in Dhaka during the first quinquennium of 1901-1902 to 1906-1907. In the Center in Roy Saheb Bazar, such was the assortment of women and children that the age range of the pupils varied from five to forty-five years. In Rokanpur also, there was a mixture of young girls and older women. In the part of Dhaka that is called Becharam Deury, three little girls were learning Bengali and Urdu letters. Some little girls were learning to read Bengali and Urdu in the Center at Bangsal. In the Lakshmi Bazar Center also, Bengali and Urdu letters were being taught. In Narinda, the Center was housed in the governess's own home. In Makim Bazar three girls were learning to read the Koran. The Center in Saheb Sharafat Gunge was teaching five girls who were learning Bengali, one girl who was learning Urdu and there was one girl who was learning both. In the Fulbaria Center the age of the pupils ranged from eleven to forty years. There, six pupils were learning Urdu and Bengali, two were learning only Urdu and one other was learning only Bengali. There were three other Centers in Monoharkhar Bazaar, Kagzitoa and Dakhin Moisondi where the number of pupils is not given in the report of the first quinquennium of the twentieth century.

The Christian missionary lobby was strong enough to extract from the government a Resolution (Resolution of Government of the 4<sup>th</sup> June 1903)

issuing a caution that “this scheme was not to conflict in any way with the system of *zenana* instruction imparted by Mission ladies”.<sup>59</sup> At the time when the *Zenana* Education Scheme was abolished in 1933, both the House-to-House Visitation Scheme and the Central Gathering Scheme were in operation. The Central Gathering system proved to be the more popular of the two schemes probably because it provided a chance for *zenana* ladies to venture out of the house and socialize with other ladies.

### **The Education Policy of 1904 and the Impetus to *Zenana* Education**

The *zenana* education was given a significant push in the Indian Education policy of 1904. Although the following year Bengal became divided and the government of the new province of Eastern Bengal and Assam set up a Female Education Committee to review the status of women’s education, the decisions of the Education Policy of 1904 regarding *zenana* education were implemented in Eastern Bengal notwithstanding political and administrative divisions. The most noticeable features of the Policy that gave impetus to female education were: (a) the strengthening of the inspecting staff by appointing of an Inspectress of Schools from England; and (b) facilitating the further expansion of female education by recruiting *zenana* teachers belonging to the orthodox class of Hindus and Muhammedans; and (c) by the opening of training classes for Hindu and Muhammedan widows and school-masters’ wives.<sup>60</sup> Until then there were three categories of *zenana* teachers. In one category were the single female missionaries coming out of Britain, America and Canada, with the noble mission of freeing the Indian women from the shackles of servitude in a patriarchal society through the light of education and Christianity. The second category would be the wives of missionaries, discussed earlier in the paper, whose method of assisting their husbands was by reaching out to the women of the area where their husbands worked. Thirdly, there were the native converted women who were classified as the Bible Women by *zenana* agencies. These Bible Women assisted the missionaries with their instruction and were very useful as interpreters.

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59 Cited in the ‘*Report on Work of Zenana Governesses up to Date*’, Enclosure No. 11, p. 202, Education (A) Proceedings, Assam Secretariat (Sylhet Proceedings), Government of East Bengal and Assam, File No. E/946 of 1909, April 1910, Nos. 1-8, NA, B.

60 General Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1903-04, Government of Bengal, General Department Education A Proceedings for the month of February, 1905, Nos. 1-6, File 8-R/3, NAB.

The lack of qualified female teachers was acutely felt in Eastern Bengal by the beginning of the twentieth century when the Muslim community gradually began to embrace the idea of educating their girls. Marriage at an early age, however, remained the norm and, more often than not, girls removed from schools after marriage lapsed into illiteracy. Therefore, the Education Department came to the conclusion that girls' instruction should be continued in the *zenana*; and, if good results were to be secured, the teachers should be neither Christians, nor Brahmos, but Hindus and Muslims.<sup>61</sup> The Hindu and Muslim ladies appointed by the government were to form the fourth category of *zenana* teachers that emerged in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Bibi Amirunnessa, wife of Maulvi Abdus Samad, became the first Muslim lady in Eastern Bengal to become a Government-appointed peripatetic *zenana* teacher. No other personal information about her could be found from records. Miss M.E.A. Garret, the Inspectress of Schools for the province of Eastern Bengal was highly impressed with the keenness and hard work Bibi Amirunnessa put into her job.<sup>62</sup> Garret was also pleased to report in the academic year 1910-1911 that there had arisen amongst the Dhaka ladies a demand for an English tutor and a suitable lady, Mrs. Rudra had presented herself at the right time. Mrs. Rudra was unwilling to work on a salary less than Rs. 100 a month, so a grant-in-aid of Rs. 50 a month had been applied for her, the rest being charged from the students at Rs. per student.<sup>63</sup> Miss Garret was in praise of the two Hindu teachers on the Government pay-roll, Miss Suniti Chatterji and Miss Giribala Biswas who appeared to be well trained. The Inspectress was disappointed with the performance of the second Muslim teacher, Fayajarenessa Khatun, wife of Ramjan Bhuiya, a teacher of Narinda School. Fayajarenessa Khatun was a village woman with weak command over both Bengali and Urdu languages. The students she had to teach mostly spoke in Urdu. She could do simple arithmetic, but had no drawing or sewing skills. The Inspectress recommended she be sent to the teachers' training classes in Eden School that had opened since 1907.

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61 'Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for the year 1905-06', Government of Bengal, Education Proceedings (A) for the month of January, 1907, File 8-R/5, Nos. 138-142, p. 34, NA, B.

62 'Note by Inspectress on Zenana Classes, Dacca, 1910-1911,' *Government of Eastern Bengal and Assam Education (A) Proceedings for the month of January, 1912*, File No. E/25/E, Nos. 53-56, p. 59, National Archives, Bangladesh.

63 *Ibid.*, p. 61.

The Government appointed peripatetic governesses were getting Rs. 50 as salary and Rs. 30 as conveyance allowance. Miss Giribala Biswas worked under the supervision of the Baptist Zenana Mission (BZM), Dhaka, for which the government sanctioned a monthly grant-in-aid of Rs. 76 to the Mission. Before Miss Giribala was appointed, six households belonging to the Subarn Banikya caste were being taught by Miss Shemoyoni Mondol under the supervision of Miss Williamson of the BZM. The age structure of the pupils in those centres ranged from ten, eleven, twelve year-olds to twenty, thirty-six, thirty-seven, thirty-eight and to forty-four year-old ladies. They were taught the Lower Primary and Upper Primary Science Reader, *Saral Shikha* and *Balya Shikha*, easy mathematical problems, tables, plain sewing, and simple drawing. Approximately three hundred ladies in Dhaka were taught to read, write, keep accounts, and acquire special needlework skills by the four governesses appointed by Government. It was Miss Garrett's personal opinion that compared to the results obtained, the expenditure of Rs. 316 a month on governesses' salary and their conveyance allowance, along with a yearly contingent grant of Rs. 300 cannot be called a heavy toll.<sup>64</sup> Government also sanctioned a sum of Rs. 250 a year to spend on prizes for the *zenana* pupils. Such was the satisfaction of Government with the *zenana* scheme of education.

The work load of the four peripatetic *zenana* teachers was quite heavy. They had to work double shifts and had to cover quite a distance going from one centre to another. The teachers worked six days a week, two shifts a day, with only Sunday as a weekly holiday. Each governess was assigned to six teaching centres. But Bibi Amirunnessa took upon a more hectic workload than usual, which prompted the Inspectress Miss Garret to comment: "I would especially commend Bibi Amirunnessa, wife of Maulvi Abdul Samad, the first Mahommedan lady in the province to undertake such work. Unfortunately she has been over keen and has knocked herself up so that she is now obliged to take leave."<sup>65</sup> The general impression was that once the attention of the *zenana* ladies could be drawn, they were eager learners.

As an attempt to further facilitate the spread of *zenana* education, and add stimulus to it, the Government of Bengal agreed to the Director of Public Instruction Alexander Pedlar's proposal of modifying the rules and regulations of the scholarship funds for girls in favor of the *zenana* pupils. Because of the custom of early marriage, girls would end up getting married off any time

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64 *Ibid.*, p. 58

65 *Ibid.*, p. 61

between the ages of nine to fourteen and invariably would have to drop out of school after marriage. According to the prevailing rules, a girl who had obtained a Primary or a Middle scholarship, had to forfeit the scholarship if she continued her studies in the *zenana* instead of attending a formal institution. As a sure sign of the government's sincere wishes to strengthen the work of *zenana* education, the following relaxation to the rules was made:

If a Hindu or Muhammadan girl obtains a Primary or a Middle scholarship and is unable to attend any recognized school, owing to the custom of the country, or of the particular class to which she belongs, or to distance from a suitable school, the scholarship due to her should not be paid to her month by month. If, however, before the expiration of the period for which the scholarship is to be held, the girl pupil in question submits to an examination by an Inspectress of Schools, or by a female teacher for *zenana* education, or by an Inspector of Schools, or even by a Deputy Inspector of Schools and is found on such examination to have attained the desired higher stage of education, then the scholarship money may be paid to her as a prize.<sup>66</sup>

The relaxation of scholarship rules provided much incentive for the *zenana* education system and proved the government's favorable attitude towards it. The system, by the beginning of the twentieth century, had established itself as a parallel mode of institutional education.

A most pertinent question was, in what way peripatetic governesses could be recruited and how best they could be educated and trained. The dearth of appropriate teachers, was a perennial problem throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Dr. P. Chatterjee, a physician and Inspector of Schools on Special Duty and some other Education Department officials thought that peripatetic governesses could be recruited from the Christian and Brahma communities only, as they began the movement for educating girls from the second half of the nineteenth century and thus could draw from a pool of second-generation educated women in the first quarter of the twentieth century. It was proposed that, should liberal stipends be offered, widows and married women of respectable families of their communities could be trained as peripatetic governesses by European ladies or some member of their own family. There were recommendations for setting up a Normal School for training peripatetic teachers, which led to the opening of training classes for teachers at the Eden Female School in the evenings in 1907.

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<sup>66</sup> Government of Bengal, General Department, Education Branch, From L.S.S. O'Malley, Esq., Under-Secretary to Government of Bengal, to DPI, Bengal, Proceedings 84, June 1904, File 2-S/9-2. West Bengal State Archives.

### **The Decline and End of the System of *Zenana* Education**

Although prospects for the system of *zenana* education were looked bright in the first decade of the twentieth century, it quickly began to decline by the second decade and was completely abandoned by the third decade of the century. There were some very pertinent factors that caused a decline in the missionary efforts of *zenana* education. The First World War (1914-18) seriously crippled the resources of the Missions. The chief resource for continuing *zenana* missions in India were the constant flow of women joining the Church as eager missionaries who were ready to go to great lengths to spread the Gospel. But the war effort now needed these women in the factories and fields at home in England. Women no longer had to look towards the Church as the means of gainful employment. When the War ended, everything changed.

The Christian missionary organizations lost a lot of their earlier support from the natives during the Hindu revivalist movement which had begun in the 1870s and 1880s. These movements eventually turned into the nationalist struggle for independence during the first half of the twentieth century. As a result of anti-colonial movements, the missionaries had to give up, in the face of strong resistance, targeting the upper segment of society and turned to evangelical work in the poorer segments of society instead. There, *zenana* education had never been an option as the lower classes neither could afford the luxury of home education, nor did they deem it necessary for their daughters to have an education in the first place. On the other hand, one of the main reasons behind the institutionalization of *zenana* education had been the social restrictions that required upper class girls to remain at home and in *pardah*. By the 1870s, however, the attitude towards missionaries began to sour. Local newspapers and periodicals published articles condemning the proselytizing methods of the missionaries. The *Dacca Prakash*, an influential weekly paper, regretted that while sewing and English language were the two good things that the British ladies could teach, their wish to convert the ladies of Bengal was what turned the locals against them.<sup>67</sup>

Meanwhile, the spread of modernist ideas and the coming to age of the second generation of English-educated Bengali men and women weakened the *pardah* system also. It was evident during the anti-British political agitation in Calcutta which eventually spilled over in East Bengal. Women all over India were coming out of seclusion and Eastern Bengal was no exception. With the

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<sup>67</sup> *Dacca Prakash*, Editorial for May 21, 1870.

removal of the most tenacious justification for *zenana* education, that of *pardah*, its appeal and necessity was diminished quickly.

The quality of education imparted by the *zenana* teachers had always come under fire from Inspectresses.<sup>68</sup> This is due to the fact that the instructors not only lacked effective teaching skills, the great majority of the pupils also lacked preliminary instructions in schools. Therefore, the time given by the peripatetic teachers to each house which amounted to not more than two hours a week was painfully inadequate, as those two hours would also include devoting time to Bible stories and needlework. As observed by A.W. Croft, Director of Public Instruction, in the Annual Report on Education for 1877-78, much of the unfavorable results appeared to be due to pressure created on the missions from England to show increasing number of students under instruction year by year.<sup>69</sup> The same report also stresses that because Christian missionary societies were receiving government aid, the ability of the teachers would have to be guaranteed. The teachers would have to subject themselves to examinations and obtain “certificates of fitness” before beginning work. A.W. Croft further suggested that to test the work of these certified teachers, their pupils would have to be examined and the government grants to the missions would have to be rated on the basis of the result of those examinations.<sup>70</sup> Such recommendations, however, were never seriously entertained. As the demand for teachers would always exceed the supply, such lofty idea of maintaining high standards of *zenana* education remained a rhetoric only.

By the second decade of the twentieth century, women had crossed an important threshold to venture into tertiary education. Social acceptance and recognition of the fact that women were to be educated drove more and more women towards proper institutional education which rendered more satisfactory and fruitful results. Finally, once prejudice against girls attending schools diminished considerably, institutional education proved much cheaper than peripatetic teaching. Official records abounded with reports about what a drain on the education budget *zenana* education was.

In 1933, the curtain finally fell on an experiment with female education initiated by the Christian missionaries and supported by the colonial Government that

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68 The Inspectress of Schools Mrs. Monmohini Wheeler expressed dissatisfaction about the condition of *zenana* education in Dacca, Tipperah, Backergunge and Furredpore, as well as Calcutta. Annual Report on Education for 1877-78, Bengal Education (A) Proceedings, General Department, Government of Bengal, 1878.

69 *Ibid.*, p. 12, paragraph 31.

70 *Ibid.*

lasted more than half a century. The experiment was called Zenana Education in Government official education records and missionary papers. In the second half of the nineteenth century there had arisen the Bengali counterpart of the missionary *zenana* education scheme which was the *Antahpur Stri Siksa*, run by the native *bhadralok* class. In 1933 the government declared the Zenana Education scheme officially closed and reallocated the scheme's funds to other projects. By that time social and political changes had rendered the *zenana* education system ineffective and unpopular. While the Bengal Legislative Assembly cited reports of the inefficacy and inefficiency of the system as the reason why it should be discontinued, even as late as 1913-14, reports stated that in Bengal the work of the *zenana* agencies was considered to be "full of promise".<sup>71</sup> In 1933, when the *zenana* education scheme was officially abolished, in the whole of Bengal, there were 61 *zenana* teachers with 1,262 pupils.<sup>72</sup> Some of the *zenana* classes in Eastern Bengal suffered considerably owing to constant change of centres.<sup>73</sup> The work was also hampered by the ever increasing cost of conveyance. The *zenana* scheme was, from the perspective of all parties involved, quite expensive.

The high water mark of the *Zenana* Education System had been achieved by 1901, when, at the Simla Education Conference held in that year, the system was praised and policies were formulated thereafter to further expand its activities. Before that, The Education Commission of 1882, popularly known as the Hunter Commission, noted that *zenana* teaching by missionary agency was the most successful means of educating Indian women after they were taken out of school. An important aspect of the *zenana* work was not just the imparting of English language knowledge along with some education. One of the values of *zenana* work was the free exchange of views between the teacher and the pupil who never went out of the house. The peripatetic instructor, be she an English Christian missionary or local teacher, was the window to the outside world for the *pardanishin* lady, a great many of whom never set foot outside their homes.

In 1919 education was transferred from the responsibility of the central government to that of the provincial government. When it had to be maintained from the provincial revenue, if at all, the cost-effectiveness of the *Zenana*

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71 Government of India, Department of Education, *Indian Education in 1913-14*, (Calcutta: superintendent Government Printing, 1915).

72 *Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1920-1921*, Calcutta: The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1922.

73 *Ibid.*

Education System came into question. Levying taxes for allocating enough money for the zenana schools became increasingly difficult for the elected ministries. The enactment of the Free Primary Education Bill of 1929 and the Communal Award of 1932, and, most importantly, the virtual breaking up of the *purdah* system since the political upheaval of the 1920s made the zenana education scheme an anachronism in the system of modern institutionalized education, and hence it was abolished in 1933.<sup>74</sup>

The history of the beginning of female education in Eastern Bengal, now Bangladesh, is closely linked to the work of female Christian missionaries of all denominations. The spread of education then took its own course and ushered in the process of women's emancipation in this part of the world. Modernity of the colonial stamp had been achieved through the breaking up of old social, economic and political structures. The white woman had borne her share of the 'white man's burden' by sowing the seeds of what resulted in the unshackling of the local woman from the bondage of her traditions. On the question of how far the white women strove to work for pure altruistic reasons, we must take into account that by mid-nineteenth century, for both English men and women, the colonies were a source of employment and livelihood which also provided opportunities for matrimony at a time in British history when the population imbalance created a pool of 'redundant' or 'surplus' women. By the end of the nineteenth century the Victorian domestic ideology had completely limited the fulfillment of a woman's life in the assigned role of wife and mother. Such an ideology was stifling, to say the very least, for the middle-class educated women for whom the only career option was to become a governess and only life option was to embrace spinsterhood. The hardships of the imperial frontier paled in comparison.

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74 'Report of the Committee to Advise on the Policy of Advancing Muslim Education in Bengal,' Calcutta Gazette, 1935.