

Protestant Women's Missions and the Quiet Revolution of Female Education in Indian Society,  
1860 – 1900

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For a revolution – as opposed to a forced imposition of a new social order – to be successful, two basic conditions need to adhere. First, the revolutionaries need to have the ideological and material wherewithal in order to carry out the revolution successfully. Second, the context in which the revolution takes place needs to be ready for it. In other words, the people need to be sufficiently receptive to the ideas of the revolutionaries, and the society needs to have the necessary structures and infrastructure, both social and material, for the implementation of the revolution. If these conditions are not met, revolutionary transformation will not occur.

Today I would like to explore one of the more remarkable revolutionary transformations in Indian society in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This was the broad acceptance among Indians of all classes, over the course of merely half a century, of the desirability of women's formal western education. Such education was promoted by both the British imperial government and Christian missions, but the real engines of this revolution were Christian missions, and more specifically the women involved in Christian missions. Government certainly provided important material resources for education, but the personnel, energy, ideology, unwavering perseverance and crucial funding for the establishment and flourishing of women's formal western education – which I shall from now on refer to as “women's education” – came from Christian women missionaries, and their Indian female coworkers, with support from male missionaries and Indian men sympathetic to the cause.

I wish to provide a note about education in India prior to the arrival of the British empire. According to general Hindu theory, all boys of the four main castes were supposed to have some

education based upon the religious and philosophical texts of the tradition. The higher the caste, the more education the boys were supposed to have. For those who were considered too degraded to be part of caste society, or for some other reason were outside the caste hierarchy, there was no expectation of any formal education. For Muslim boys as well, education based on religious and philosophical texts was the ideal expectation. In reality, however, as far as both Hindus and Muslims were concerned, formal education of boys was restricted to the upper classes and castes, and to families who were known as scholars. Brahmins were the most likely to receive a good education, as were Muslim boys whose families were attached to the courts and government, and to religious and educational institutions. Boys in lower classes and castes received proportionately less formal education, and the vast majority of the peasantry, whether Muslim or Hindu, was illiterate. I use the word “formal” to remind ourselves that, with certain unusual (and sometimes cruel) exceptions, all children in all societies are educated. For both theological and cultural reasons, we tend to see formal, western education as “real” education, and as something that, if properly carried out, is inherently good, even a right.

But let us return to India. Certainly, the formal education of Hindu and Muslim girls was not unknown in pre-British India. Pandita Ramabai, who lived from 1858 to 1922, and was one of the most famous Brahmin converts to Christianity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, received a thorough education in Sanskrit texts from her father beginning at the age of 5 or 6. Her father also insisted that he teach his wife how to read, write and memorize Sanskrit texts. And in the Islamic courts of India, there were many famous women poets and singers who were highly educated. Yet these were the exceptions rather than the rule. Even more so than boys, girls in almost all strata of Indian society received either little or no formal education, and were mainly educated for the tasks of running a household – which could include some reading, writing and arithmetic,

depending upon the household. Although to our ears “running a household” sounds rather mundane, Indian society placed – and still places – a huge emphasis on family life. Everything from one’s personal happiness to one’s status in society depends upon one’s family (traditionally even more so than on one’s wealth), in which the women have had an important part. This is why 19<sup>th</sup> century missionaries were befuddled by their observations of women in Indian society – on the one hand overworked, decidedly second class citizens in comparison to males, on the other hand highly revered and obeyed, especially as mothers and then matriarchs. Again, gender relations in Indian society did (and do) vary tremendously according to caste and class. What would be considered absolutely taboo in certain segments of society – for example, divorce – was not only permissible but carried out with some frequency in other segments. Speaking very generally, by the nineteenth century, the higher the caste and class of women, the more restricted they were in society. Upper class and caste women were known to be confined to women’s quarters in their homes. Women of the lowest classes and castes, however, worked beside their husbands in fields and homes, and were otherwise seen in public (where they could also be considered “public” goods for men).

The advent of the Anglo-American evangelical missionary movement in India at the beginning of the 19<sup>th</sup> century coincided with, and was in fact part of a new British attitude to Indian society and people. Prior to 1800, the British ruled India with the assumption that they could best accomplish their purposes of extracting wealth by adapting themselves to Indian society. In fact, they consciously adopted customs and practices of Hindu and Muslim rulers of the land. In North India, Persian was the language of British courts in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, and numerous male officials of the British East India Company set up households like their upper class Indian counterparts, complete with several Indian wives. The second half of the 18<sup>th</sup>

century also witnessed a deep interest by British scholars in Indian religious texts and practices. Just before 1800, though, due to developments in Britain, British attitudes towards Indians started to change. Indians were no longer to be emulated; they were to be reformed. Moreover, differences between westerners and Indians were not to be bridged, but to be reinforced, with reformed Indians looking as much as possible as their British reformers. The ensuing reformation was assumed to be asymptotic: while Indians could approach the British Victorian ideals of humanity, they could never completely embody them.

The acceptance of western education for Indian girls and women, especially those of the upper castes and classes, occurred roughly between 1860 and 1900. In the former year, Christian missionary agencies were finally able to start convincing middle and upper class Indians to send their daughters to school. In the latter year, Indians from those classes were seeking out female western education.

This historical revolution, like all revolutions, did not occur without a prehistory. For a half century *before* 1860, evangelical missionaries had been promoting female education with some success, though not the kind they wanted. When missionaries from Britain and America landed in India in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, they immediately opened schools for boys and girls. The boys' schools were rather well attended; families did not mind sending their boys out into public schools, even though most of these boys were from the lower castes and classes. The girls' schools were another story. They were popular enough, but only with the existing Christian population. This consisted almost exclusively of Eurasian children, known as "half-castes" or "East Indians" at the time. They were, by and large, the offspring of British soldiers and Indian women, many of whom were not legally married. While the upper class British in India could (and did) take good care of their children, many of whom went to England for

education until the 1790s when the practice was made illegal, the vast majority of these children were the result of the unions of ordinary, lower class British soldiers and their correspondingly low caste and low class Indian wives. Among both the British and the Indians, therefore, Eurasian children were considered part of the bottom of the social hierarchy, and were treated as such. The fact that they had foreign (“mleccha”) blood made their status even worse in Indian eyes. Because their fathers were officially Christian, the children were considered Christians. (A number of the “wives” of soldiers also became Christian.) It was these children who populated the newly opened mission schools, and the girls’ schools catered almost exclusively to this willing clientele. For the parents of Eurasian children, education was a means to try and elevate their status in the Indian and British social hierarchies. The educated girls would be trained by and associated with middle-class European women, and their future claims to higher social status could then perhaps be taken with some seriousness.

From almost the beginning, girls’ schools were run by missionary wives and single women of the missions. It was their zeal to educate members of their own sex that ensured the launching and then success of this mission project. Since education was not considered part of the official missionary duty, which was to preach and convert, the women of the mission had free reign to engage in it.

Not satisfied with the results of their female education program in India, which was greatly restricted by the population from which they drew, the women of the missions started to reach out to the non-Christian sectors of Indian society, which basically entailed the vast majority of the population. However, here again their efforts were stymied by Indian social prejudices. For one thing, no decent middle or upper caste/class Indian family would send their girls to a school that was known to be filled with low caste/class children. For another thing,

girls' formal education was seen to be a waste of time and money: the girls should be at home, being educated in proper Indian ways of being a female in society. The missions tried to deal with the financial issue not simply by making girls' education free: they actually started paying girls to come to school. For this, they did find a willing non-Christian clientele, namely Indians from the lowest classes and castes – and even Untouchables. The families of these girls appreciated the money, and they did not mind their girls sharing space with low class Christians. Again, the high hopes of the missions to reach and evangelize Indian society through the education of its influential classes were being frustrated by the people who were actually interested in Christianity: namely, the poor and despised among the population.

Two crucial events beyond the control of missionary women began to change the minds of the influential classes of Indian society. The first was a bold new venture by the Scottish missionary, Alexander Duff. Duff arrived in Calcutta in 1830 and noticed that mission education in Bengali, the local language, was not having the desirable effect of converting the Indian people to Christianity. So he proposed that the missions establish a completely western and Christian education, taught in English, which would convince the Indian intelligentsia of the falsity of their understanding of the world, and would move them to embrace the truth of the Christian faith. Through English education he would, in his words, “prepare a mine which would one day explode beneath the very citadel of Hinduism.” Duff's new school did indeed prove attractive to a certain type of Bengali intellectual: one who saw in British thought the way forward for Indian civilization. Boys from respectable Bengali families started attending Duff's school over the course of the next few decades, and a handful of them converted to the Christian faith. While the numbers were not great, they certainly were a significant improvement on previous numbers of converts from the middle and upper classes. Others, who did not convert,

became sympathetic to the Western Enlightenment-based Christian education they received, and the teachers who imparted it to them. In this, though, they were also enacting traditional Indian models of education, where a deep and personal relationship is established between the student and his (the gender is important) guru in the learning process.

The second crucial event external to the women's missionary movement was the Great Uprising (sometimes called the First War of Independence) of 1857, in which Indian troops in the British military mutinied and set off a large-scale revolt against British rule in North India. The Uprising was almost successful, but over the course of two years the British were able to reestablish military and government control over the subcontinent, often using extreme brutality fueled by deep racism and chauvinism. By 1860, it had become clear that the British had come to stay. One of the signs of the new situation was that the government of India passed from the East India Company to the British Crown. Victoria became the Empress of India in 1858.

Indians adjusted to the new reality – which was in some ways a development of events started two centuries previously – in many different ways. One of them was that boys from all classes of society, and most notably from the upper classes of society, sought to get a British education in order to deal with the new imperial power of the land. Christian missions in India opened up numerous schools for the Indian elite. The respectable families of India, however, saw that educating their boys would not be enough to gain access to the ruling classes of British society. A great influx of European women coming to live in India during the 19<sup>th</sup> century meant that British families, and soon a diasporic British society, were established in the subcontinent. Indians had to deal with colonies of British, and so Indian women had to interface with their European counterparts. The girls and young women would have to be educated according to western norms along with the boys and young men. And so mission schools and eventually

colleges for girls and young women were opened up in the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and became hugely successful. For example, the first woman's college in Asia was established by a Methodist missionary, Isabella Thoburn, in 1886. It was a natural extension of the schools for girls that she started upon her arrival in India in 1870.

However, it was not simply factors external to the women's missionary movement that spurred on the education of the girls and young women of India's middle and upper classes. The work of women missionaries was also crucial for the acceptance of upper class female education. Two aspects of women's missionary work were vital in this regard. The first is that women missionaries were, in fact, successful in educating and reforming the low class and caste females who attended their early schools. Girls who came to mission schools learned not only to read, write and do basic arithmetic; they also learned new forms of domesticity based on Victorian Anglo-American ideals. Perhaps surprisingly, a number of these ideals were also valued in indigenous Indian society. Cleanliness, for example, and feminine self-control in the face of affliction, were values that were prized by both Western middle classes and Indian upper classes. So the economically and socially disadvantaged girls who went to mission school were able to achieve a degree of status enhancement in the eyes of the Indian public.

The second initiative of women missionaries that helped to popularize women's education generally in Indian society was the development of *zenana* missions. Very soon after arriving in India, evangelical missionaries – men all of them – recognized that they had no access to upper class women, due to the fact that the latter were kept away from the general public, not to mention suspicious foreign men. European women, however, were able to engage in social intercourse with Indian women who were secluded from the general public, and from men who were not family members. Therefore, in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century women missionaries



decided that since females of the Indian influential classes were not going to come to them in their schools, the missionaries would go to the Indian women. The term used for the women's quarters of a household was *zenana*, and so the evangelical missionary force developed *zenana* missions where women missionaries, accompanied by Indian Christian women, would visit upper class Indian women in their homes. This arrangement not only respected Indian mores for gender interaction. It also ensured that missionaries were operating on indigenous terrain, on terms that were dictated by Indians. What missionaries could say and do, how long they could stay, which rooms they could visit, were all determined by the men and women of the Indian households. Women missionaries got access to Indian women; Indians determined the conditions of this access.

One of the key elements of *zenana* missions – which of course were portrayed to the Western public as outreach to enchained and benighted Indian women – was the European missionaries' use of Indian Christian women during the visits. The European women often did not have the linguistic skills, and even less the cultural skills, to operate on (to them) foreign territory. So low caste Indian Christian women who had been taught to read and write, and to communicate in English with the European woman missionary, were vital for the *zenana* missions. In the course of the visits to the *zenanas*, the Indian hosts would be able to see the European missionary woman interacting with her coreligionist, and even dependent upon her in strange surroundings. The hosts would also see the low caste Christian woman behaving in ways that were above her humble social status. In the *zenana*, the upper class hostess could observe the effect of Christian ideology on Indian and European women.

The *zenana* missions were abject failures in their stated purpose, which was to convert upper class Indian women to Christianity. However, what the missions did accomplish was to

establish a level of trust and friendship between Christian missionaries and Indian women from the more influential sectors of Indian society. European missionary reports are effusive about the friendship and sympathy felt between the European woman and her Indian hosts. There is no reason to assume that Indian women had the same degree of tenderness towards their European visitors. However, no doubt a level of trust and kinship was established – otherwise the Indians would have closed off their homes (as indeed some of them did) to the European women missionaries. The trust and good will established between missionary women and upper caste/class Indian women in the course of *zenana* missions was crucial for the acceptance throughout Indian society of women's education.

This essay has provided an explanatory sketch for the social revolution of female education that was successfully instigated by Protestant women missionaries in India during the second half of the nineteenth century. A number of factors went into this rather extraordinary accomplishment. First was the presence and power of the British Empire. The Empire provided both ideological and material force to make Indian women's education desirable. Second was the great efforts of women missionaries, who refused to be dissuaded from their mission of providing Indian women with a European education – all in the hopes of converting the Indians to Christ. Rather than give up on their mission, women missionaries changed their methods of approaching Indian women, and these changes eventually led to changes in women's missionary practices and ideologies. The good relations cultivated by European and Indian Christian women engaging in the *zenana* missions allayed the fears of middle and upper class Indians regarding the exposure of women and girls to missionary forces outside the home. Third was the presence and work – rarely acknowledged in the missionary archives – of the Indian Christian coworkers

of women missionaries. The effect that these humble women had on their upper caste and class compatriots is hardly known, but must have been significant.

Fourth and finally, Indian society perceived that social status in the future would be linked to western education of Indian women. Eager for status maintenance or improvement, influential Indians – many of them men – decided that women’s education was a desirable good. Women’s education in India, then, was a foreign ideal and institution that was absorbed into the indigenous social structures. Yet this foreign influence did not leave the indigenous structures unchanged, as can be witnessed by the ways in which middle and upper class and caste Indian women have mobilized themselves, and their allies, in the contemporary Indian public space.

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