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RNI MAHMUL/2011/38595

ISSN No.2231-5063

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WOMEN EDUCATION IN BRAHMA SAMAJ: A HISTORICAL STUDY



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Short Profile

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ABSTRACT:

Though the main idea of Brahma Samaj of Ram Mohun Roy was to purify the Hinduism, it was a social reform movement that included abolition of Sati, dowry and caste system; the emancipation of women by improving their educational system. In renescent Bengal the first initiatives concerning women education were taken by Brahmos. Keshab Chandra Sen, a prominent Brahma invoked *zenana education* and domestic art and modicum of liberal education for women. He insisted to continue *purdah* system. But emergence of New Progressive Brahmos gave a new impetus to women education. They propagated the idea of equal education for women as men and wanted an end to the *purdah* system. The progressives were greatly influenced by two British Unitarian ladies, Mary Carpenter and Annette Akroyd who came to India to promote women education in India.

Many Brahma women achieved English and western education and played a key role in promoting women education in late 19th century and early 20th century Bengal.

KEYWORDS

Brahma Samaj, Brahmos, Unitarian, Renaissance, Bhadrolak(Gentleman), Zenana Education, Purdah, Brahma Vidya (Brahmo Education), Brahma Gyan (Brahmo Knowledge).

INTRODUCTION

The problem of women education had received considerable attention from social reformers in 19th century Bengal. Indian society in the 1st half of the 19th century was full of superstition and inhuman practices in the name of religion. Social evils such as *Sati*, female infanticide, child marriage, *pardah* etc. placed the women in an inferior position. In order to save the plight of women the initiatives were taken only by men especially upper caste '*Hindu Bhadrolak*' because numbers of educated Bengali women were insufficient to provide indigenous female leadership. Firstly, the Christian missionaries attempted to provide English education to the girls in India. British Government gave little support to their initiatives after 1835. As Wood's Despatch (1854) mentioned the important of female education, they extended their interest in women education to some extent. But it was Brahma Samaj whose one of the primary aim was to begin a movement to promote women condition in the society and to spread female education. The Brahmos felt that to improve the position of women in society, it was necessary to ameliorate female education. But still today, there are no works on the role of Brahma samaj in promoting women education.

This paper seeks to present how Brahma Samaj movement had addressed the issue of women education. To address this women education some points are necessary to elaborate which include about the position of women in 19th century Bengal society. Different issues like the role of Raja Ram Mohun Roy and his Brahma Samaj in ameliorating the women education, the influence of Unitarians on Brahmos' thinking, the movement of Keshab Chandra Sen in order to uplift the position of women in the society, conflict between Progressives and Keshab regarding women education, the development of Bethune College and the role played by Brahma women who achieved English Education and participated in promoting women education in late 19th century and early 20th century will be also explained in this paper.

This paper will try to focus in between 1820's, initiated taken by Raja Ram Mohun Roy for promoting women education to 1880's, when the influence of Brahma Samaj began to decrease as Hindu religion revived itself.

To address the above mention issues we have to depend on different types of sources including primary sources and secondary sources. Among the primary sources the most important books are *Atmacarit* and *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj* written by Shivnath Shastri. Among the secondary sources, we have to depend on different books published in the contemporary time which deal with Brahma Samaj and their activities. Secondary books collected from different library of Kolkata also help me a lot in this regard. Though the books which have been published yet, have not discussed about the education of women led by Brahma Samaj. Most of the books focussed on the ideology of Brahma Movement. Naturally no highlight has been given about the women education which was taken by the Brahma members. Here lies the important of this paper.

A huge numbers of books are published on Brahma Samaj and their ideologies. Most important among them is *Ramtanu Lahiri O Tatkalin Banga Samaj* by Shivnath Shastri, the book which discusses the life history of Ramtanu Lahiri as well as social system of contemporary Bengal. It also provides some data related to women education and discusses about the initiatives taken by the Brahmos in promoting women education. David Kopf in his book *The Brahma Samaj and Shaping of the Modern Indian Mind* also provides some information about the educational scheme of Brahmos for women. But he emphasises more on Unitarian influence on Brahma Samaj. He also puts an emphasis more on the religious ideology of Brahma Samaj than social issues. *Atmacarit*, autobiography of Shivnath Shastri not only presents his life history but contemporary social history of late 19th century and early 20th century Bengal. It can be treated as a primary source. As Shivnath was an eye witness of the maturity of

renascent India, he describes about the social upliftment of women and their educational development but dispersedly. Besides these books others mentionable books are *The Religion of The Brahma Samaj* by H. C. Sarkar, *Rammahon Charcha* by Nirmalya Bagchi, Keshab Chandra Sen and *Brahma Samaj* by T. E. Slater, *Brahma Samaj: A Short History* by M. C. Parekh etc. In these books, there are a minor and Scatter reference about the women education promoted by Brahmos.

Brahma Samaj was established by Raja Ram Mohun Roy in Calcutta in 1828. He was supported by Dwarkanath Tegore, grandfather of Rabindranath Tegore.

Ram Mohun Roy was born in an Orthodox Brahmin Vaishnav family and his early upbringing made him a follower of the religious practices of his family. He was sent to Patna to learn Persian and Arabic languages, because English was yet to be introduced as the official language of administration. He studied, among other subjects, the Koran and Islamic theology. He was most impressed by the concept of monotheism of the Koran and was disillusioned by the idolatry and superstitions then prevailing in the Hindu society. Later on Ram Mohun spent several years in Benaras studying Sanskrit, and also Buddhism in Tibet. He came across the Upanishads, the Brahmasutra and the Gita and was convinced that the concept of Unity of God constituted the essence of Hinduism. During that period the Vedas and the Upanishads had been virtually forgotten in Bengal. Ram Mohun translated and published Vedantasutra and several Upanishads in Bengali and English to make his countrymen aware of the Vedantic teachings. Ram Mohun studied the Bible in the original for which he had to learn Hebrew and Greek. Having made a comprehensive study of Hindu, Islamic and Christian scriptures in their original, he realised that the essence of the teachings of all of them was the same -- the unity of God, immortality of the soul, ethical discipline as the basis of spiritual life. This is the basis of his concept of what he called the 'Universal Religion' and this universal religion is what Rammohun tried to propagate through the establishment of 'Brahmo Sabha' or 'Brahmo Samaj'.

To Ram Mohun Roy the question of religion was not limited to the development of individual. He realised that there was a strong relation between the religion and society. So, social form of religion and its changes was very necessary. Though the main idea of Brahma Samaj of Ram Mohun Roy was to purify Hinduism and to preach the worship of omnipresent and omnipotent God, it was a social reform movement that included abolition of *Sati*, dowry and caste system; the emancipation of women and improving their educational system.

According to Ram Mohun Roy, 'first feminist of modern India' as entitled by K. M. Panikkar, woman is not only a mother, or a wife but a human being. He mentioned that Maitreyi, Leelabaty, Vanumati, wife of Karnatraj, and wife of Kalidas of Ancient India were expert in all scriptures.

Ram Mohun Roy mentioned that there were many reference in Veda and Smriti that women could achieved Universal Knowledge (Brahmo Gyan). By reading history (Itihas), purana and agam, a domestic woman could access 'Brahma Vidya'.

When school book society was setup (1817) a debate arose among the members of the society, whether education should be given to the girls or not. Secretary of the society, Radhakanta Dev supported women education and some school under the society began to provide education to the girls with boys. But it was condemned by other members of the society. By 1819 women of 'Mr. Lowson and Pearce's Seminary' school established a society, 'Female Juvenile Society' to spread women education in India. Radhakanta Dev, encourage their initiatives and wrote 'Stree Siksha Bidhayak'. In 1821 Miss Cooke under the supervision of 'Church Missionary Society' began to spread women education and set up 10 girls schools where approximate 277 girls were studying.

Lady Amherst (wife of Lord Amherst) established 'Bengal Ladies' Society' to promote women's education. She also set up many girls schools. According to Adam's report there were 14 school and 450 girls have receiving education in the school. But these school established by Christian women to spread

the Christianity. First non-communal girls school was established by Bethun in 1849. Though orthodox Hindu opposed this effort, Madanmohan Tarkalanker and many Brahmos like Debendranath Tagore, Ramgopal Ghosh etc. sent their daughter to these schools. Thus the Brahmo women began to dominate the women education movement in the late 19th century and the early 20th century.

After the death of Raja Ram Mohan Roy, the organisation of Brahmo Samaj was revived by Maharshi Debendranath Tagore, who also belonged to a Brahman family. He formed the Tattvabodhini Sabha (Truth-Teaching Association), in 1838. It was a society that held weekly religious discussions and monthly worship. Like Roy, he and his society also accepted Vedanta, however, he emphasised more on the superiority of Hinduism. He soon gained a major voice in the propagation of theistic Hinduism.

In 1857 when Keshab Chandra Sen joined Brahmo Samaj, it gave a new lease of life to the Samaj. From that time Debendranath and Keshab took a great interest in ameliorating the women position in society. They set up '*Sangat Sabha*' and one of the main oaths had taken in Sangat was to promote the condition of women. They also established dept. of women education (*Stree Siksha Bibhag*) to spread *Zenana* education and founded monthly journal '*Bamabodhini Patrika*' for women. In 1863 Keshab set up '*Brahmo Bondhu Sabha*' for the same purpose. A distinct prayer hall '*Brahmik Samaj*' was established in 1864 for meditation of the women and Keshab became its chancellor. But the initiatives concerning women of the New Brahmos under the leadership of Keshab was not limited only to the *Zenana* education. In Jan. 1866, Keshab managed the seats for women behind the screen in prayer hall of Calcutta Brahmo Samaj. It was the first effort of Brahmos to give the right to women to sit with men in prayer hall. Meanwhile, a group of young Brahmos brought their wives out of the *purdah* and introduced them to their male friends thus setting the first steps of free mixing. It was then that the women were allowed to come out of the house. But the conservatives like Debendranath Tagore did not like that. Conflicts between Keshab and Debendranath started from that time.

Due to the internal difference among the members of the Brahmo Samaj, it split into two in 1866. The group under Debendranath became *Adi Brahmo Samaj* and other group led by Keshab Chandra as *Bharatbarshiya Brahmo Samaj* (*Brahmo Samaj of India*). This period is also referred to in the histories of the secessionists as the '*first schism*'. Keshab Chandra established '*Bharatashram*' in 1872 to demonstrate the ideal of Brahmo Samaj. There was a school for women. The wife, daughters, sisters of Brahmos got education from that school.

Two British Unitarian ladies Mary Carpenter and Annette Akroyd had a profound impact on Brahmo thinking in Calcutta. Mary, who fought for equal right for women in England and came to India and met the members of Brahmo Samaj. She urged them to help the issue of women emancipation in India. She proposed the establishment of a Brahmo normal school to train women teachers for girls' schools and urged them to expand the usual domestic art program by offering additional subjects. Keshab backed by Shastri, Ghosh, Deb and others started a normal school for women. Akroyd who was a close friend of Monmohun Ghosh came to Calcutta in 1872 and was welcomed by progressive Brahmos. Meanwhile Keshab proved far more conservative on the issue of women's emancipation.

In Feb. 1872, Durga Mohun Das insisted that ladies be permitted to sit with their families during services at the Mandir. But Keshab insisted that ladies should sit behind the *purdah*. Dwarkanath Ganduli and others progressives demanded an end to the *purdah* system. Finally Keshab had to provide seats outside the screen for the women.

In late 19th century there was a considerable debate on the issue of what type of education was suitable for the women. It was a major cause of the schism between Keshab Chandra and the progressive section who founded *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj* in 1878. The former group wished to restrict women education to traditional Indian ideals of being a good wife and mother. The progressives propagated the idea of equal education for women as men and insisted that women should be given all

the new knowledge coming from the west.

Miss Akroyd played a leading role in this debate. Keshab carefully selected non-progressives for the executive committee of normal school. Though he tried to convince Shastri, Ghosh and Akroyd that he was a progressive, he was wary of radical change. He told the progressive 'Go slow' and 'give women the inner strength with which to protect themselves'. Keshab invited Akroyd to the committee but she had no patience with Keshab's gradualist methods. She opened the Hindu Mohila Vidyalaya with Dwarkanath Ganguly. Dwarkanath founded a weekly journal 'Abalabandhab'.

With the establishment of the Vidyalaya the progressive Brahmos founded themselves into a semi-autonomous group. Greater portion of the school's expense came from the Ananda Mohun Bose, Durga Mohun Das and Dwarkanath Ganguli. The progressives founded 'Samadarshi Party' in 1874 and a journal of same name. Backed by the Samadarshi Party, they founded the Banga Mahila Vidyalaya in 1876, the first women college in India which merged with the Bethune School to become Bethune College in 1878.

Bethune College became an accredited affiliate of Calcutta University. Thus, when the two Bengali women Miss Kadambini Bose, a Brahmo and Miss Chandra Mukhi Bose, a Christian, received their B.A. degree in 1882, they became the first women graduate in the entire British Empire. In 1895, 29 of the 44 girls attending Bethune College were progressive Brahmos and only 4 were orthodox Hindus.

Keshab opposed such type of education for women and accused that the main objectives of Bethune College was to 'Europeanize the girls'. The Victoria institution which transformed into Victoria College in 1911 under the tutelage of Navajivan Brahma Samaj (established by Keshab Chandra Sen) offered domestic art and modicum of liberal education to the women to make them better wives and better mother.

Two famous Brahmo sisters, Lady Jagdish Chandra Bose (Abala Das) and Mrs P. K. Ray (Sarala Das), took the lead in the formation of the Bengal Women's Education League. They were daughters of Durga Mohan Das, a leader of the Sadharan Brahma Samaj, who had championed the cause of female emancipation in the nineteenth century. Abala Bose was educated at Bethune College in Calcutta and attended medical College in Madras. She married the eminent scientist, Jagdish Chandra Bose, also a Brahmo. Lady Bose became directress of the Brahma Girls School, founded by the Sadharan Brahma Samaj which was acclaimed as the best girls' school in the province. She had established the Vidyasagar Widows Home and the Nari Siksha Samiti (Women's Educational Association) to spread education among women in Bengal before becoming the first president of the League and the Bengal Women's Education Conference. Mrs P. K. Ray was the founder of the Gokhale Memorial School, the first girls' school in Bengal founded by a Bengali woman. Maharani Suniti Devi of Cooch Behar, daughter of Keshab played a key role in promoting women education. Daughter-in-law of Keshab, Mrinalini Sen also promoted female education. Sarala Devi Choudhurani, famous nationalist leader, Protima Bose, daughter of Pramatha Nath Bose, Mrs. Latika Basu, daughter of Manmohun Ghosh, Miss. Nirbhapriya Ghosh all came from Brahmo families who possessed modern education and actively participated in promoting female education.

Though Brahma movement was started as a religious reform movement it was a social reform movement. Rabindranath Tagore said, "Raja Ram Mohan Roy inaugurated the modern age in India. He was the father of Indian Renaissance and the prophet of Indian nationalism." One of his greatest achievements was the uplift of the position of women in India. First of all, he tried to give women proper education in order to give them better social status in society. Maharaja Manindra Chandra Nandi though not belonging to the Samaj said, "Brahmo Samaj has progressed so much along the path of female education." The Brahmos believed that only by freeing women and treating them as human

beings Indian society could free itself from social stagnant. Though the higher education for women could not bring immediate change in Hindu society, it was the first step in the process of achieving the equal rights for women. It was Brahma Samaj which opened the path for women to become socially or financially independent in 19th century Bengal.

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