

## **The Status of Women in Barak Valley during the Colonial Period**

**Sujit K. Ghosh**

One of the best ways to understand the spirit of civilisation and to appreciate its excellences and realise its limitations is to study the history of the position and status of women in the society. Civilisation is to a great extent the result of a society's capacity to control some of the instinctive activities of human nature.

The Bengali society in the Barak Valley during the colonial period was conservative in its attitude to women. When Cachar was completely engulfed in the abyss of ignorance, the people hopelessly lingered with the phantoms of an ever present past. Education helped the people of the valley to sever all regressive links with thoughtless superstitions and ultimately widened the horizons of their very existence. We find new vigour and life force which enabled the people to interpret life around and assess their true worth in the schemata of new life. The impact of the Bengal Renaissance in the nineteenth century was felt in Sylhet too and through Sylhet, Cachar was also not entirely remote from the new rays of dynamic urge. As a sun was shining at a considerable distance, the warmth travelled late and perhaps, in the process, lost much of its intensity. Yet, nevertheless, Cachar became aware of the essentiality of participation in a new world order only when new system of education came into force. Babu Kamini Kumar Chanda was a strong advocate of women education.

### **Female Education**

Until 1854, the authorities at the Fort William were not inclined to undertake any responsibility for the education of the women on account of the social and religious prejudices of the age. Nevertheless, the Despatch of 1854, declared that by laying emphasis on female education a greater importance might be attached to the educational and moral tone of the

people than by the education of man alone.

Ever since the British occupation of Cachar by the English the local authorities of the Company were confronted with many difficulties for the promotion of female education. It is observed that Hindu Law has not made any vital progress with the fewest possible exceptions by the British legislation out of deference to Hindu sentiment<sup>1</sup>. It will, however, appear that until the advent of the British rule in the Barak Valley, traditional Hindu system kept pace in its own way with the slightest progress made under the British administration. The most formidable obstacle was the absence of a genuine demand for girls' education as means of livelihood. The material contributory factors in the spread of boys' education were totally absent in the case of female education<sup>2</sup>. Secondly, the conservative sensibility of the parents of the upper and middle classes, in general, and apathy to the education of their daughters. Lastly, another barrier to women education was the seclusion of girls at an age when their education actually began.

Drawing a comparison between male and female learners in the Barak Valley, Sir Edward Gait, the Editor of 1891 census Report, had indicated that "the proportion of literate males is highest in Cachar plains<sup>3</sup>." The Welsh Presbyterian Mission started a Girls' High School at Silchar in 1895, which should be taken as the beginning of the women education in the valley<sup>4</sup>. The people were not enthusiastic for the spread of female education because of their conservative outlook. Babu Kamini Kumar Chanda, a strong supporter of female education, offered active help to the Mission by convincing the orthodox guardians to send their daughters and he himself set the example by sending his daughter<sup>5</sup> to the School.

The society is composed of both male and female and every member of the society has a mission to fulfil. The people of Cachar gradually realised the necessity of female education. They could feel that the cross-currents of the movements of social awakening made an impact on their mind as mothers, women play an important role in moulding the character of children as educated mothers can best train up their children in the right perspective. The society of Silchar did never think for the female education in the first decade of the century. Ninety years back female education was looked-down upon by the guardians, because they believed the child marriage to be a sacred thing and the women had nothing

to do in the external world. So, the school education was not permitted by the then society. Babu Bipin Chandra Pal mentioned in his autobiography "My mother used to take veil whenever she accrosses an unknown man in the street."<sup>5</sup> It is also not easy to determine when the childhood of a girl ends and her married life begins.

The English Missionaries Miss William, Miss Ivans and Miss Lloyd tried their best to impart female education in Cachar. During Miss Lloyds illness, resulting in retirement, Mrs Glyn Genkins, who had the highest qualification and some years of practical experience as a high school teacher, was placed in charge of Silchar Girls' High School. Miss Ivans greatly welcomed Mrs Genkins in order to give full use to her experience and qualification for the success of the Silchar Mission's Girls' High School. Another name that conjugated with the development of female education in the valley was that of Miss Gwen C Evans, a trained teacher with considerable natural ability, appointed by the Foreign Mission of the Presbyterian Church of Wales.<sup>6</sup> Being inspired by their noble efforts Mrs Saudamini Deb and Kadambini Devi dedicated their lives for the spread of female education.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, Srimati Mrinalini Chatterjee worked as a teacher since 1932 in the Mission Girls' Vocational School.

### **Social Participation**

In an underdeveloped district like Cachar, Miss Ivans had to face various problems to prepare the mentality of women folk for education. Miss Giribala Singh was the first woman in the valley who passed the M. V. Examination in 1896. Being enthusiastic over her success Miss Ivans explained in Bengali, "Maider Kache shikshar dwar (door) jore bandha chila. Giribala dhakka diya sei dwar khulia dilo"<sup>8</sup>

Among those, who pioneered the lofty cause of women education and emancipation in the valley about a century ago, the name of Pandita Ramabai deserves special mention. She was born in April, 1858 in a conservative Brahmin family of Poona. She started career as a little reformer. She acquired the knowledge of Kanarese, Hindustani and Bengali while wandering from one sacred locality to the next.<sup>9</sup> By travelling she developed rare talent. Her scholastic attainments had been publicly recognised in Calcutta. She travelled various

places of India, for example, the Punjab, Rajputana, the Central provinces, Bengal, Madras and Barak Valley also in order to establish herself as an unconquerable scholar. She spent her time in advocating female education. According to her, before marriage, hindu girls should be instructed in Sanskrit and in their respective vernaculars. This young sanskrit scholar and champion of classical learning when reached Calcutta she created a sensation by her advanced views and her scholarship. She was also summoned before the assembled Pundits of the capital city ; and as a result of their examination, the distinguished title of Sarasvati was publicly conferred upon her by them.<sup>10</sup> In 1887 she married a Bengali gentleman Bipin Bihari Das, M. A., B. L., in the Marjatkandi of Karimganj, as per the civil marriage rite. This illustration greatly influenced the then society of the valley. The society in the Barak Valley was stirred with the first utterances of her unfamiliar voice. Her perseverance, undaunted courage, and devotion to her husband encouraged the women of the valley. The role of historic woman who had striven to serve and elevate the nation inspired the women folk of the valley in a tremendous way. She battled hand to hand with every situation, resolved as a Hindu, to work for the emancipation of women. The example she had set was a unprecedented and glorious one.

After nineteen months of their happy married life Babu Bipin Bihari Das died of cholera. A few months before the death of Babu Bipin Bihari, a little daughter was born named Manorama. The widow Ramabai now returned to her former occupation as a preacher of women awakening.

Ramabai's earnestness and enthusiasm gained her many admirers, among whom was Dr. W. W Hunter, prominently connected with the British educational interests of India. He thought her career and the good she was doing so well worthy of admiration that Mr. Hunter made her the subject of a lecture delivered in Edinburgh.<sup>11</sup> Henceforth, her name was well known also in England as in India, to all who were interested in the social amelioration of the people of Hindustan.

The name of Miss J. Helen Rowlands\* is a household word in the Valley. She came to Silchar in 1932 which ushered in a new era in the Socio-cultural development of Cachar. Her arrival in the Presbyterian church of Silchar created new enthusiasm in the work of the Mission. Her strong personality,

sincerity of purpose and her high standard of justice have attracted attention of all concerned. The S. D. O., Sylhet, in a letter to Miss Rowlands wrote, "In these days of moral degradation, institutions like your mission are badly needed for the rejuvination of mankind."<sup>12</sup>

Miss Rowlands took her D. Litt degree from Paris. She passed M.A. in Bengali from the Calcutta University and secured a first class first position in order of merit. She was a patron of learning. She served as a honorary teacher in the Department of Bengali in Karimganj College. She is remembered for her pure character and charity. She made a gift of all her educational property to Karimganj College for the development of higher education. She hated untouchability from the depths of her heart. Her notable charitable works was the establishment of 'Dipti Nivash', an orphan house, at Karimganj. She nourished the orphans like a mother.<sup>13</sup>

In honour of Dr. Rowlands' memory, the people of Karimganj, erected a Hall and Reading Room in the Karimganj College named Dr. Rowlands' Hall. Fazl Ali, Governor of Assam, inaugurated this hall. She was the last European missionary in Karimganj.\*

During the age of Non-Cooperation with the noble effort of Babu Kamini Kumar Chanda another school was set up in 1921 which was nourished by the funds of tea-planters Babu Naba Kishore Sen and Dinanath Dutta and the school was named the Dina-Nath Naba-Kishore Balika Vidyalaya. To the common people the school was known as the "Swadeshi School" because it was greatly influenced and directed by the Swadeshi or Nationalistic ideas.<sup>14</sup> From 1931 census report it appeared that 51,692 acquired literacy in the valley, of them 46,271 were males and 5,421 females.<sup>15</sup>

Babu Shyama Charan Deb was the founder teacher of this "Swadeshi School". Saudamini Devi, devoted wife of Babu Shyama Charan Deb, helped him in all his efforts. Women Welfare Samiti, Nari - Siksha - Srama-Prasuti Mangalalaya were the examples of their noble endeavours. Another commendable endeavour which cannot escape our attention was made by Mrs Kiranshashi Naug. Under her noble initiative and also by her donation the Gurucharan College was started in 1935 at Rangpur on the bank of river Barak. The establishment of G. C. College marked the beginning of higher education in the valley.

In the later part of the nineteenth century the women in Cachar could not dream of attending a public meeting. Babu Bipin Chandra Pal came to Silchar and addressed a public gathering in 1906, by which time he was already a legendary figure. So the women were very much eager to listen to him. But the meeting was conspicuous by the absence of women. Consequent upon pressing demands from a section of women an arrangement was ultimately made in the house of Mahesh Chandra Dutta, where the women from the elitist families of the town were assembled to listen Bipin Chandra Pal's address from behind a curtain. Some ladies also presented a chorus of Bipin Chandra's song,\*

*"Na jagile sab Bharat lalana  
ai Bharat ar jage na ;....."*

This was the first historic meeting attended by the women in Silchar and it was undoubtedly a significant thing which cannot be lost sight of.<sup>16</sup> In the thirties of the century, 'Antahpur', the first monthly organ of women of the valley was published and its editor was Hemanta Kumari Choudhury. During the Quit India Movement of 1942 Cachar also felt the pulse beating of the national movement. Srimati Jyotsna Chanda, among others, came out in the street and joined the Movement whole-heartedly.

### **The movement against Infant Marriages**

The practice of infant marriage prevailed in the social life of the valley irrespective of caste and sects, particularly among the Brahmins, to marry girls before they reached puberty. A premature consummation of such marriages was not an uncommon practice. Many child-wives were put to death or suffered from long life with physical deformities as a result of it<sup>17</sup>. A large number of those, who survived, became widows and suffered from the evils of enforced widowhood.

Bipin Chandra Pal was the first in the valley to react against the practice of child marriage. The Brahmos also raised agitation for raising the marriage age of girls. The Government of India, persuaded chiefly by the exertions of Keshav Chandra Sen and his supporters, passed the Act III of 1872, which laid down 14 as the minimum marriage age for girls<sup>18</sup>. In 1890 the young men of Sylhet and Cachar led by Bipin Chandra Pal and Kamini Kumar Chanda formed a kind of

league to fight against child marriage and described the social and moral evils of the custom and thus sought to champion the cause of infant girls<sup>19</sup>. The majority of enlightened people who responded to this appeal, recognised the inhumanity of practice of infant marriages and enforced widowhood. They favoured this idea to check infant marriage and suggested numerous methods to tackle the problem of enforced widowhood.

Contemporary newspapers and journals frequently published editorials and articles on the subject. They brought to the public notice the injustice and inhumanity behind these practices.

### Notes and References

1. Dwarkanath Mitter, *The Position of Women in Hindu Law*, Calcutta, 1913, p. 21.
2. Report on the education in Eastern Bengal and Assam, 1901-02, 1906-07, p. 82.
3. Census of India, 1891 Pt I (Assam), p. 146.
4. J. B Bhattacharjee, *Cachar under British Rule in North-East India*, New Delhi, 1977, p. 235.
- \* Mis. Amita Chanda.
5. Bipin Chandra Pal, *Memories of My Life and Times*, Vol. I, p. 27.
6. Records from the Presbyterian Church File, Silchar.
7. *Hate Kari*, Souvenir, D.N.N.K. School, 1368 B.S. ; also S. Ghosh., "Cacharer Stri Sikshar Krama Bibartan", *Ninad*, 1978.
8. *Purbashree*, issue dated March 31 of 1979.
- \* The door of education was closed to women. Giribala was the first women who opened the door.
9. Rachel L. Bodley, *In Memoriam-Anandibai Joshee*, Philadelphia, 1887, Introduction.
10. Pandita Ramabai Sarasvati, *The High Caste Hindu Woman*, Philadelphia, 1839, P. XIV, XV.
11. *Ibid.*
- \* Miss J. H. Rowlands came from Portmadoc, North Wales.

12. Letter No. 5252 dated March 8, 1946, available in the Plains Assembly Welsh Mission Library.
13. The author is grateful to Sri Rabindra Aditya, Calcutta, for supplying the material.
  - \* Karimganj College Records.
14. Bhattacharjee, n. 4. p. 258., also Hate Kari, 1368 B.S.
15. Census of India, 1931, Vol. III, Part II, p. 214.
  - \* *Hate Kari*, 1368 B.S. Introduction, p. 3.
16. H. C. Datta, Souvenir, Bipin Chandra Pal Centenary Celebration Committee, Silchar, 1958, p. 6.
17. Vide the testimony of the session court, Sylhet, March 1890 ; and also the case of Sarnalata Devi aged 11 years done to death in an act of forcible intercourse.
18. Sivnath Sastri, *History of the Brahma Samaj*, Calcutta, 1911, Vol. V, pp. 250 & 251.
19. *The Eastern Chronicle*, 20 April, 1900.