

Educational Resilience: Muslim Women in Bengal Amidst the Historical Shifts of 1905-1919

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ABSTRACT

The partition of Bengal in 1905 and its subsequent reunification in 1911 is a significant chapter in the history of the region. This abstract delves into the specific focus on the education of Muslim women during the years spanning from 1905 to 1919. The partition had far-reaching effects on socio-economic, political, and educational aspects, with substantial consequences for the education of Muslim women playing a pivotal role in a nation's progress and development. Those who have advanced education and harnessed technology have contributed significantly to the prosperity of their country. Education is a fundamental human right, irrespective of gender. During British colonial rule, several initiatives were undertaken to enhance the educational system in Bengal, leading to a transformation of traditional education through the formation of an Education Commission. Initially, due to the policies imposed by the British educational system, Muslims faced challenges. However, with time, they became more aware of their rights and, acknowledging their past errors, started embracing Western education. It wasn't until the 1930s that both Hindu and Muslim women began showing interest in English and Western education. This article aims to provide a concise overview of the state of Muslim women's education in the early 20th century following the partition of Bengal and to illustrate the progress in education since that time.

Keywords: Partition of Bengal, Female Education in Bengal, Empowerment of Muslim Women, British Colonial Education Policies, Socio-Political Transformations.

INTRODUCTION

The early 20th century in Bengal witnessed a period of significant socio-political upheaval, marked notably by the partition of Bengal in 1905 and the cancellation of partition in 1911. Amidst these historical transitions, the status and role of Muslim women underwent a transformative evolution, particularly in the realm of education. This study, titled "Educational Resilience: Muslim Women in Bengal Amidst the Historical Shifts of 1905-1919", aims to delve into the intricacies of this pivotal era, exploring the profound impact of historical events on the educational landscape for Muslim women.

The partition of Bengal not only delineated geographical boundaries but also left an indelible imprint on the socio-economic, political, and educational fabric of the region. Education, as a fundamental human right, played a central role in shaping the trajectory of societal progress, with implications that extended beyond immediate temporal boundaries. Within the framework of British colonial rule, initiatives were undertaken

to reform the educational system in Bengal, culminating in the establishment of an Education Commission.

This study will navigate through the challenges faced by Muslim women in accessing education within the British educational system during this period. It will trace the gradual evolution of awareness among Muslims about their educational rights, leading to an increasing embrace of Western education. Notably, the 1930s emerged as a turning point when both Hindu and Muslim women began demonstrating a discernible interest in English and Western education.

Against this historical backdrop, the study endeavours to provide a comprehensive overview of the state of Muslim women's education in Bengal from 1905 to 1919. By examining the transformative journey of educational opportunities during this time, the research seeks to elucidate the empowering impact of education on Muslim women, contributing to a nuanced understanding of their evolving role and agency in the historical narrative of Bengal.

METHODOLOGY

The research methodology employed in this study is grounded in historical analysis, offering a meticulous examination of the partition of Bengal and its ramifications on the education of Muslim women between 1905 and 1919. The approach involves a systematic review of primary sources, including historical documents, government resolutions, and reports from the colonial period. By scrutinizing these materials, the study aims to reconstruct the socio-educational milieu of the time. Additionally, the research utilizes a qualitative lens to analyze the policies, challenges, and societal attitudes influencing Muslim women's education during this period. The study employs a comparative analysis of data, integrating tables and statistics to elucidate trends in female enrollment and educational institutions. Through this historical analysis, the research endeavors to contribute nuanced insights into the evolving landscape of education for Muslim women in Bengal, considering the broader historical context and implications of the partition on their empowerment.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Partition of Bengal in 1905 and Abolition of Partition in 1911 are significant chapters in the history of Bengal. The impact of these events is evident in the socio-economic, political, and educational domains of Bengal, particularly in the realm of women's education. The area that comprises present-day Bangladesh, Bihar, and Orissa encompassed 179,000 square miles. The news that Assam with Dacca, Chittagong and Rajshahi Divisions of Bengal would be constituted as a separate Province first appeared in the Calcutta Press on 6 July 1905, and the next day it was officially announced from Simla. The revised Scheme of Partition was conveyed to the public in the form of Government resolution dated 19 July, and published in the Calcutta Press on the 20th. (Majumdar, Pp 6). On July 10, 1905, the declaration of Bengal's partition was announced (Majumdar, Pp 12). The new province, consisting of East Bengal and Assam, covered an area of 1,06,504 square miles and had a population of 3,100,000, with 18,000,000 Muslims and 12,000,000 Hindus (Majumdar, Pp 12).

The partition of Bengal was officially executed on October 6, 1905. The backward Muslims living in East Bengal and Assam welcomed the partition of Bengal (Chattopadhyay, Pp 369). The partition appeared as a blessing for them. The British government's policy of partition had a significant role in the introduction of education for Muslim women (Chattopadhyay, Pp 369).

In the context of education in Islam, the acquisition of knowledge is deemed mandatory for every Muslim, irrespective of gender (Majah, Pp 121) After the advent of British rule in Bengal, the advancement of education for Muslim women was relatively sluggish until 1905. At that time, though the Company

Government took part in educational activities at the demand of the Christian Missionaries, the government did not pay any attention to female education (Masum, Pp 12). Even though issues like early marriages, veiling, and societal barriers hindered the education of Muslim women, the government did not actively endorse women's education during this period.

The British Government were at first definitely opposed to it and then adopted a neutral attitude. It was not till 1835 that they took upon themselves the responsibility of imparting English education in this country. (Majumdar, Pp 23). However, under the influence of Charles Grant's counsel, the notion of educating the native population in the English language and culture began to take shape. The history of Protestant Christian Missionary activities in Bengal is generally dated from the arrival of William Carey in 1793, although there were one or two predecessors of him in that province (Ali, Pp 10) and English education began in Bengal with the establishment of a Christian mission in Srirampur. Serampore is a historical town which has witnessed a cultural renaissance and has been very instrumental in the development of Western education in Bengal and India as a whole (Mukherjee and Biswas, Pp 3). Christian missionaries began to establish schools in various regions of Bengal. The quarter-century 1830-1857 is the age of the mission school (Richter, Pp 183).

The final decision of the Government of India was announced on 7th March 1835, in a brief resolution of which the substance was that the great object of the Government ought to be the promotion of European literature and science among the natives of India; that the medium to be used was the English language; and that the education Fund should be employed on English education alone (Majumdar, Pp 46) and the Government issue a declaration to the effect that as soon as sufficient number of English-known men are available they shall cease to recruit officers based on knowledge of Persian alone (Majumdar, Pp 49). This shift disadvantaged the Muslim community in Bengal and across India, leading to their lagging behind in various aspects, including education, within the state.

The commencement of educational institutions for women in Bengal by Christian missionaries signified the initiation of a noteworthy chapter. Under the influence of Missionary activities, western education and culture, people, particularly those educated in Hindu society started to think over "Zenana Education" (Masum, Pp 12). The first efforts towards women's education were made by the Christian missionaries, almost immediately after the restrictions against missionary work in this country were removed by the Charter Act of 1813 (Majumdar, Pp 56). However, these missionary schools faced the prospect of closure in 1830 due to resistance from conservative Hindus (Chattopadhyay, Pp 261). Which led to a halt in the progress of women's education.

The majority of students attending the girls' schools established by missionaries belonged to lower-caste Hindu communities. Including Bagdi, Vaidya, Gypsy, Bairagi, and women engaged in prostitution (Chattopadhyay, Pp 262). Although there were upper-caste Hindu girls who received education in missionary schools, their numbers were minimal. The Christian Missionaries did not get much cooperation from the nobles or rich and the conservative families of both the Hindu and the Muslim Communities did not send their girls to those schools ignoring "Pardah System." (Long, Pp 216).

According to Adam's report in 1838, the 50 schools for women's education in Bengal predominantly enrolled female students from lower-caste Hindu backgrounds. During this period, a few educated gentlemen from affluent families would hire educated Vaishnavite or English women to invest in the education of their wives and daughters (Chattopadhyay, Pp 261). This suggests that lower-caste Hindu women were involved in teaching upper-caste women (Majumdar, Pp 49).

The reluctance of Muslims towards English education posed a barrier to English education for girls in the Muslim community during this time. Typically, girls in Muslim families receive education in Maktabas, mosques, or at home. Wealthy Muslims would arrange for private tutors to educate their sons and daughters

(Rahim, Pp 351). However, Muslim girls were not sent to English schools like their male counterparts. Consequently, there was limited progress in the education of Muslim women until the partition of Bengal, a fact highlighted in the Education Report of 1854.

The number of Muslim female students in various educational institutions in 1881-82 is shown in Table: (Hossain, Pp 39)

Educational Institution's Name	Total Female Students	Total Muslim Female Students	In Percentage
English High School	184	*	*
Secondary English Girls School	340	6	1.76%
Local High School	527	6	1.13%
Local Primary School	17452	1570	8.9%
Woman Teacher Training Centre	41	*	*

Table 1: The number of Muslim female students in various educational institutions in 1881-82.

Despite the efforts of the ruling class about Muslim women's education following the Education Commission of 1882-83, there was little observable progress in this field until the partition of Bengal. The backwardness of the Moslem community was one of the questions taken up by the Education Commission of 1882-83 ("Report of the Committee Appointed by the Bengal Government to Consider Question Connected with Muhammeden Education", Pp 04). The division of Bengal in 1905 marked a change in the British administration's approach to the education of Muslim women. The education of girls among Moslems has made a rapid advance during the last decade, especially in Eastern Bengal where there has been a rise from 5,564 in 1901-02 to 16,468 in 1906-07 and 56,683 in 1911-12 ("Report of the Committee Appointed by the Bengal Government to Consider Question Connected with Muhammeden Education", Pp 04).

In 1906-07, government grants were allocated to the Maktabs of Mofussil, which ignited growing interest within the Muslim community regarding women's education. After the withdrawal of the Bengal partition in 1911, there was a great difference between the education of East and West Bengal. For this reason, the Government started new thinking on female education. The prime object of this was to introduce a new policy of female education by accepting the good aspects of both parts based on past experiences (Masum, Pp 13). Begum Rokeya sakhawat Hossain took exemplary in the education of Bengali Muslim women. In 1909, Begum Rokeya established Shakhawat Memorial Girls School. A few days after, her husband's death in 1909, she established the school with the help of 56 students at her husband's home in Bhagalpur Bihar. In 1911, the number of Muslim students in Eden Girls School increased to 11, in 1880 it was just one. The college started at Eden Girls School in 1926, opening the way for higher education for the women of East Bengal. For the women of East Bengal, it was the first institution for higher education many prominent College students received recognition from this institution (Begam, Pp 675). In 1913, Urdu classes were introduced in Dhaka's Eden High School and two other educational institutions, further nurturing enthusiasm for the education of Muslim girls. The implementation of the committee's decision in 1914 facilitated the expansion of educational opportunities for Muslim women.

The number of schools of different Zillas in Bengal in 1914 is shown in the table. (Hossain, Pp 40).

Name of Zilla	Number of Schools
Kolkata	47
Nodia	53
Khulna	105

Hawra	22
24 Porgona	23
Jessore	67
Bakura	*
Bardhaman	14
Birbhum	42
Hoogly	22
Dhaka	312
Mymensingh	400
Faridpur	194
Bakhriganj	322
Rajshahi	112
Dinajpur	51
Rangpur	108
Pabna	83
Bogura	280
Darjeeling	1
Jalpaiguri	24
Maldah	42
Tripura	285
Noakhali	186
Chattogram	168

Table 2: The number of schools of different Zillas in Bengal in 1914

It is not unfounded to conclude from these statistics that substantial advancements in the field of education were occurring in East Bengal following the partition. Given the majority of Muslims in East Bengal, the Muslim community was reaping the benefits of these developments. Notably, Muslim girls were also actively participating in the realm of education, alongside their male counterparts.

The changing socio-economic conditions after World War I led to an interest in women’s education in both the Hindu and Muslim communities of Bengal. During this period, Muslims were ahead of Hindus in Bengal. The following table -03 shows the number of Hindu and Muslim female students in 1918-19 and 1919-20. (Hossain, Pp 41).

Session	Hindu Female Student	Muslim Female Student
1918/19	1,51,980	1,61,152
1919/20	1,52,164	1,77,458

Table 3: The number of Hindu and Muslim female students in 1918-19.

During that period, girls from the upper echelons of Muslim society received their education at institutions like Sakhawat Memorial Girls School, Ghuradi Muslim Girls School, and Mahamedan Orphanage. In 1917, Amrita Bazar Patrika reported that 1 in every 5 Muslim students was. By 1918, the number of Muslim female students had risen to 44,904, constituting 51.9 per cent of the female population in Bengal. In 1917, there were 73,236 Muslim girls enrolled in 2,808 Maktabs, in addition to the 14 girls’ schools in Bengal.

Following the partition of Bengal, Muslims were able to preserve the traditional form of education. (Chattopadhyay, Pp 150).

Following the partition of Bengal, Muslim women faced considerable societal barriers that hindered their advancement in secondary and higher education. However, the positive momentum initiated at the lower educational levels continued to progress in the later years. It was only after the partition of Bengal that practical measures were taken to address the challenges in Muslim education. Increasing scholarships for Muslim students, and appointing teachers and inspectors, all contributed to accelerating educational progress, which also benefited Muslim women.

It's worth noting that Hindu landlords, intellectuals, and political leaders were not supportive of the educational progress made by Muslims. Instead, they organized a strong movement to reverse the partition of Bengal. (Majumdar, Pp 14). The partition was indeed revoked in 1911 in response to this Hindu community movement. Even after the cancellation of the partition of Bengal, the trajectory of Muslim women's education, which had been initiated, continued to progress. It can be observed that the partition of Bengal played a pivotal role in opening doors for Muslim progress in Bengal, especially in East Bengal, and facilitated ongoing progress in the education of Muslim women.

CONCLUSION

The partition of Bengal, a significant chapter in the region's history, had far-reaching effects on education, particularly for Muslim women. Despite initial challenges and opposition, the partition catalyzed educational progress. It prompted practical steps to address problems in Muslim education, resulting in increased scholarships, teacher appointments, and inspections, which accelerated educational advancement, benefiting Muslim women. The cancellation of the partition in 1911 due to a movement led by the Hindu community did not deter the momentum of progress that had already been set in motion. Muslim women's education continued to evolve and thrive. Ultimately, the partition of Bengal played a pivotal role in opening doors for the advancement of Muslims, particularly in East Bengal, and fostering sustained progress in the education of Muslim women. This historical chapter underscores the resilience and determination of communities to overcome obstacles in the pursuit of education and progress.

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