

The Role of Western Education in the Emancipation of Indian Women in Nineteenth-Century Bengal

Partha Banerjee

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Asannagar Madan Mohan Tarkalankar College

Abstract: *This article examines Western education as a contested resource in the emancipation of women in nineteenth-century Bengal. It moves beyond the familiar claim that female education was simply a colonial gift and instead locates girls' schooling within a complex set of negotiations among missionaries, the colonial state, Bengali reformers, families and women learners themselves. Drawing on a historical-interpretive approach, the study utilises colonial education reports, institutional histories, autobiographical writing and major scholarship on gender and colonial modernity, it argues that Western-style education expanded literacy, created schools and examination systems, supported women's entry into teaching and medicine, and supplied a critical language through which oppressive customs could be questioned. Its benefits, however, were profoundly unequal. Access remained concentrated among urban, upper-caste and middle-class families, whilst curricula often prepared girls for respectable domesticity rather than equal citizenship, and male reformers frequently defined women's interests on their behalf. The histories of Bethune School, Banga Mahila Vidyalaya and women such as Rassundari Devi, Chandramukhi Basu, Kadambini Ganguly, Swarnakumari Devi and Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain reveal both the possibilities and the limits of this educational order. Emancipation is therefore understood here as a gradual expansion of literacy, mobility, professional choice and public voice. Western education became most transformative when Bengali women appropriated its institutions and redirected its knowledge toward their own social and intellectual purposes.*

Keywords: women's education; colonial Bengal; emancipation; Bethune School; bhadramahila; social reform; colonial modernity

1. Introduction

Nineteenth-century Bengal witnessed profound transformations in administration, print culture, law and education. British rule created new institutions and introduced new forms of public debate. Christian missionaries opened schools and published textbooks. Bengali associations founded educational institutions, supported journals and organised campaigns for social reform. Within this changing environment, the position of women became a central measure of social progress. Practices such as sati, child marriage, widowhood, female seclusion, literacy and domestic authority were discussed with unprecedented intensity in newspapers, pamphlets, legislative councils, religious associations and private households. Education stood at the centre of these debates because it appeared capable of altering both women's lives and the structure of the family itself (Forbes, 1996; Sangari & Vaid, 1989).

The meaning of "Western education" requires careful definition. It did not refer to a single curriculum, a single language or a single type of school. In colonial Bengal, it encompassed missionary day schools, state-aided institutions, English-language higher education, Bengali-medium primary schools, zenana instruction, teacher training, printed textbooks and examinations linked to the University of Calcutta. These institutions interacted with older forms of learning. Women had long acquired religious knowledge, oral traditions, household skills and, in some families, literacy in Bengali, Sanskrit, Persian or Arabic. The nineteenth-century change was therefore not a simple movement from ignorance to knowledge. The more decisive shift was the public legitimisation, institutional organisation and certification of women's learning (Borthwick, 1984; Chatterjee, 1989).

Indian society did not receive the new education passively. Reformers adapted imported educational ideas to local conditions. Families weighed the benefits of schooling against fears of conversion, loss of caste, social criticism and difficulty in arranging marriages. Women used literacy in ways that were not always intended by their teachers. Some became writers, teachers, doctors and administrators. Others used reading and writing within the home to create private intellectual spaces or to record experiences that had rarely appeared in the public historical record. Female education is therefore best understood as a process of negotiation and selective appropriation rather than a direct transfer of Western modernity.

This article addresses three questions. First, which institutions and social alliances enabled the growth of female education in nineteenth-century Bengal? Second, how did education affect women's literacy, social position, mobility and participation in public life? Third, why did the new educational system fail to become a broadly egalitarian project? The central argument is that Western education was an enabling but contradictory resource. It widened the range of possibilities available to a small number of women and supported the first generation of female university graduates and professionals. At the same time, it remained constrained by colonial priorities, caste, class, religion, geography and the ideology of respectable domestic femininity.

The term "emancipation" is used here in a restrained historical sense. It does not imply complete equality or freedom from household obligations. It refers to measurable gains in literacy, self-representation, physical mobility, academic attainment, paid employment, associational life and the ability to criticise oppressive customs. This definition recognises the limited scale of nineteenth-century change without dismissing its importance. The careers and writings of educated women demonstrate that restricted

institutions could produce consequences that their founders did not fully anticipate (Karlekar, 1991; Forbes, 1996).

2. Historical Approach and Sources

This study follows a historical-interpretive method based on the comparison of different types of evidence. Colonial reports are useful for reconstructing school numbers, enrolment patterns, public expenditure and administrative policy. They must nevertheless be read critically. British officials often represented Indian society as backward in order to strengthen the moral claims of colonial rule. Missionary records provide important information about early schools, vernacular textbooks and zenana teaching, but they also reflect evangelical aims. The writings of Bengali reformers clarify debates within the educated public, although most of these texts were written by urban, upper-caste men. Women's autobiographies, essays, fiction and professional careers are therefore essential. They reveal how education was experienced within the home and how women gave their own meanings to literacy (Adam, 1941; Hunter, 1883; Karlekar, 1991).

The analysis also draws on feminist scholarship that has revised celebratory accounts of the Bengal Renaissance. Older histories often described reform as a steady advance led by enlightened men and supported by a benevolent colonial state. Later scholarship has shown that the "women's question" was tied to conflicts over religious authority, class formation, community identity and nationalism. Reform could improve women's material conditions whilst also defining the educated woman as the moral guardian of a respectable home. This ideal helped the emerging middle class distinguish itself from both colonial rulers and poorer Indians (Chatterjee, 1989; Sangari & Vaid, 1989). A balanced interpretation must therefore consider both institutional gains and new forms of discipline.

Women, Household and Learning before Institutional Expansion

Women's lives in early nineteenth-century Bengal differed according to caste, class, religion, region and marital status. There was no single experience of "the Bengali woman". Even so, patriarchal family structures placed marriage and domestic duty at the centre of respectable femininity. Child marriage often curtailed opportunities for learning. Widowhood could bring severe social and economic hardship. Elite practices of seclusion restricted women's movement outside the home, and dependence on male relative's further limited autonomy. Poorer women worked in agriculture, domestic service, crafts and petty trade, but economic contribution did not necessarily produce social authority (Borthwick, 1984; Forbes, 1996).

Formal schooling for girls was rare, but learning was not absent. Some women received religious instruction, learned songs and narratives, or acquired practical numeracy within the household. Elite Hindu women might learn Bengali or Sanskrit from relatives. Some Muslim women received private instruction in Arabic, Persian or religious texts. Such education, however, rarely produced recognised qualifications or access to employment. William Adam's surveys recorded only a negligible institutional presence of

female pupils, yet domestic teaching was difficult for official surveys to capture (Adam, 1941). The decisive nineteenth-century development was therefore the movement of female learning into publicly recognised institutions.

Resistance to girls' schools had several causes. Missionary institutions raised fears of religious conversion. Travel to school could conflict with norms of seclusion or expose girls to harassment. Families worried about caste observance and about whether an educated daughter would find a suitable husband. Education could also invite public criticism of the family. These anxieties were not simply irrational remnants of tradition. Missionary teaching could include explicit proselytisation, and families that sent daughters to school sometimes faced genuine social hostility.

Reformers responded by presenting education as a support for the household. Early curricula emphasised Bengali literacy, moral instruction, sewing and domestic management, together with selected academic subjects. This strategy made schooling more acceptable and helped institutions recruit students. It also defined female education in narrow terms. The educated girl was expected to become a better wife, a more informed mother and a suitable companion for an educated husband. Education gained legitimacy within domestic ideology rather than through a direct claim to equal citizenship. This compromise opened the school door, but it also restricted what women were expected to do after entering it (Borthwick, 1984; Paul, 2019).

Missionaries, Colonial Policy and the Formation of a School System

Christian missionaries were among the earliest organisers of sustained schooling for girls in Bengal. Baptist networks around Serampore and later Protestant missions founded local day schools, prepared vernacular textbooks and developed zenana instruction for women who could not attend public institutions. Missionary women, including Hannah Marshman, played important roles in teaching and administration. These schools challenged the belief that girls were incapable of regular study. They also demonstrated that some parents would enrol daughters when schools were nearby, inexpensive and practically useful.

The early schools often had unstable enrolment and limited resources. Their wider importance lay in the precedents they established. They produced textbooks, trained teachers and made female education a subject of public discussion. At the same time, the close relationship between schooling and evangelisation created opposition. Biblical instruction and the possibility of conversion discouraged many Hindu and Muslim families. Bengali reformers therefore founded non-missionary schools that separated female education from Christian teaching. Competition among missions, reform associations and community leaders helped expand the educational field, even though each group sought to shape the moral purpose of women's learning (Borthwick, 1984; Chatterjee, 1996).

Colonial education policy remained hesitant. The Charter Act of 1813 allowed greater missionary activity and

assigned funds for education, but it did not establish a substantial programme for girls. The policy associated with Macaulay's Minute of 1835 concentrated on English education for a small, predominantly male group that could serve the colonial administration. Female education occupied a marginal place in this design. Wood's Despatch of 1854 gave greater recognition to vernacular education, teacher training, grants-in-aid and schooling for girls. Yet implementation depended heavily on local initiative and private philanthropy (Borthwick, 1984; Hunter, 1883).

The Indian Education Commission of 1882 acknowledged the poor condition of female education and recommended local support. Its report also revealed continuing structural weaknesses. Enrolment remained a very small proportion of the school-age female population. Attendance varied markedly by district and community. Many girls left school at puberty or marriage. There were too few trained female teachers, and only a small number of pupils moved from primary to secondary study (Hunter, 1883). Rising numbers of schools did not necessarily indicate continuous attendance or durable literacy.

Colonial policy contained a basic contradiction. Officials frequently referred to the degraded condition of Indian women as evidence of Britain's civilising mission. At the same time, the state avoided the expenditure and social conflict that mass female education required. Administrators preferred cautious reforms that did not alienate influential male elites. The state supported schooling more readily when it promised orderly homes and useful colonial subjects than when it implied gender equality. Western education was therefore neither a coordinated liberation programme nor an empty gesture. It was a restricted institutional framework that Indian reformers and women could utilise for purposes beyond those intended by the colonial government.

Bengali Reformers and the Institutionalisation of Female Education

Bengali reformers were central to the social acceptance of female education. Rammohun Roy's campaign against sati and his support for reasoned debate helped make women's status a matter of public concern. His importance lies not in founding a system of girls' schools, but in creating an intellectual language that connected scriptural interpretation, humanitarian reform and social progress. The Brahmo Samaj and its later branches extended this work by supporting schools, journals, companionate marriage and women's participation in associational life. Their reach, however, remained strongest among educated urban families (Forbes, 1996; Kopf, 1979).

Iswar Chandra Vidyasagar joined educational administration with campaigns for widow remarriage and against child marriage and polygamy. As an inspector and Bengali scholar, he promoted vernacular textbooks, raised funds and helped establish girls' schools in several districts. He treated female education as part of a wider programme of accessible vernacular learning. His use of Sanskrit texts in support of widow remarriage showed how indigenous scholarship could be combined with modern petitioning and legislation. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 did not end the

hardships of widowhood, but it gave reform a legal basis and strengthened the argument that custom could be publicly examined (Borthwick, 1984; Forbes, 1996).

The history of Bethune School illustrates the collaborative and contested character of institutional reform. John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune established the Hindu Female School in Calcutta in 1849 with the support of Indian patrons and reformers. Vidyasagar later served as an important secretary and defender. The school should therefore not be credited to one founder alone. Its survival depended on British initiative, Indian philanthropy, administrative support and families willing to face social criticism. Renamed Bethune School, it became a major institution of female education in South Asia (Borthwick, 1984; Paul, 2019).

Bethune School succeeded partly because it offered a non-missionary setting in which elite Hindu families could enrol daughters without direct fear of conversion. Its curriculum and discipline balanced academic learning with accepted standards of respectability. This balance contributed to the ideal of the *bhadramahila*, the educated gentlewoman. Her literacy and refinement were presented as improvements to domestic life rather than challenges to male authority. The ideal widened access to education, but it remained upper-caste and middle-class. It also placed strong demands on women to combine learning with modesty, obedience and domestic competence (Borthwick, 1984; Paul, 2019).

Higher education required another stage of institutional development. Hindu Mahila Vidyalaya was established in 1873 through the efforts of Annette Akroyd and Brahmo reformers. It became Banga Mahila Vidyalaya in 1876 and merged with Bethune School in 1878. A college department followed in 1879. This sequence shows that women's higher education emerged through experimentation, disagreement and institutional consolidation rather than from a single policy decision. University preparation also challenged the assumption that women should receive only ornamental or domestic training (Borthwick, 1984).

The University of Calcutta's admission of women to degree examinations created a new standard of public achievement. In 1883, Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Ganguly became its first women graduates. Their success offered visible evidence that women could meet the same academic standards as men. Basu later entered educational administration and became principal of Bethune College. Ganguly pursued medicine and public work. Their careers changed the debate from whether women possessed intellectual ability to whether institutions would continue to exclude qualified women (Forbes, 1996; Borthwick, 1984).

These institutions relied on a fragile network of families, donors, teachers, reformers and print culture. Journals helped normalise the educated woman and carried discussions of health, marriage, household management and literature. Some periodicals reinforced domestic ideals, whilst others enabled women to write, edit, correspond and reach readers beyond their immediate families. Schooling and print therefore grew together. One created literacy and credentials; the other created an expanding field of public expression.

Education, Social Reform and Legal Change

Education did not directly cause every major social reform of the period. The abolition of sati in 1829 preceded the broad expansion of girls' schools. It resulted from a combination of colonial law, indigenous reform, humanitarian argument and scriptural debate. The Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 likewise did not remove the social stigma attached to widows or guarantee remarriage. Law could create permission without changing inheritance disputes, family pressure or community attitudes (Forbes, 1996).

Female education nevertheless changed the terms of later debate. Literate women could read newspapers, interpret religious texts, maintain correspondence and encounter arguments from outside the household. Girls' schools also produced women teachers, whose presence was essential where older girls could not be taught by men. Most importantly, education enabled women to describe widowhood, domestic confinement, ill health and intellectual deprivation from their own experience. The movement from women as objects of reform to women as speaking subjects was gradual and incomplete, but it marked a major change in public culture (Karlekar, 1991; Forbes, 1996).

The relationship between education and marriage remained contradictory. Some progressive families delayed marriage so that daughters could continue their studies. Education also encouraged ideals of companionship between husband and wife. Yet academic achievement could become another qualification in the marriage market. An educated bride increased family prestige but did not necessarily gain authority over property, mobility or reproduction. Because curricula often aimed to produce efficient wives and mothers, education could enlarge women's responsibilities without increasing their power.

The Age of Consent controversy of 1891 exposed these tensions. The legislation raised the age of marital consent from ten to twelve. Its supporters invoked medicine and humanitarian protection, whilst opponents described it as colonial interference in Hindu domestic life. Male reformers, nationalist leaders, religious conservatives and officials dominated the debate. Educated women were more visible than before, but they did not control the political discussion of their bodies. The controversy showed that colonial paternalism and nationalist claims to cultural autonomy could both limit women's agency (Sarkar, 2001).

Law, education and print were mutually supporting but distinct. Laws could remove specific legal barriers. Schools could cultivate skills and aspirations. Print could circulate criticism. None of these guaranteed bodily autonomy, secure employment or authority within the home. Educational emancipation required changes in property, health, labour and family relations that the nineteenth-century system only partially addressed.

Women as Learners, Writers and Professionals

A history centred only on male reformers repeats the silence that female education began to challenge. Bengali women pursued learning against strong social barriers, taught

themselves in private, entered new institutions and redefined the purposes of education. Their lives show that agency developed both within formal schools and outside them.

Rassundari Devi's autobiography, *Amar Jiban*, first published in 1868, is a powerful account of self-education. Married as a child and occupied by demanding household labour, she learned to read in secrecy. She memorised letters and compared them with religious texts whilst managing domestic work. Her story does not fit a simple narrative in which a Western school rescued an uneducated woman. Instead, print culture, devotion, domestic restriction and individual determination came together in her search for literacy. Writing allowed her to place women's interior and domestic lives within the historical record (Karlekar, 1991). Her experience broadens the meaning of emancipation beyond formal certificates.

Chandramukhi Basu followed the institutional route. Her graduation in 1883 and later career in college administration showed that women could exercise intellectual and administrative authority. At the same time, the unusual nature of her success reveals the narrow path available to female students. Higher education required family support, access to urban institutions, financial resources and the ability to survive a demanding examination system. Her achievement opened a door, but it did not make that door widely accessible.

Kadambini Ganguly converted academic qualification into professional mobility. After graduation, she entered Calcutta Medical College and later pursued further medical qualifications in Britain. Her work responded to a gendered health problem. Seclusion often prevented women from consulting male doctors, and trained female physicians were urgently needed. Ganguly maintained a medical career, participated in public meetings and joined reform activities. Her life challenged claims that women lacked the capacity for advanced study or professional practice (Forbes, 1996). Her progress also depended on supportive Brahmo networks and on her husband, Dwarkanath Ganguly. Individual achievement rested on collective support.

Medicine created opportunity but also reproduced gender divisions. Female doctors were often welcomed because they could enter zenanas and treat women without disturbing seclusion. This justification created employment whilst confining women to a separate professional field. The Lady Dufferin Fund, established in 1885, expanded medical services for women, but its imperial structure could reproduce racial and class hierarchies. Even within these limits, medical knowledge and income gave some women a recognised public identity and greater bargaining power.

Swarnakumari Devi represents literary and associational emancipation. As a novelist, editor and organiser connected to the Tagore family, she became an important figure in Bengali cultural life. Her social privilege gave her opportunities unavailable to most women, yet her public authorship helped normalise women as producers rather than merely consumers of literature. Print gave educated women an audience and allowed them to join debates on family, society and the nation (Borthwick, 1984).

Muslim women faced additional barriers within an educational system shaped largely by Hindu bhadrak priorities. Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain's major institutional work belongs partly to the early twentieth century, but her intellectual formation arose from nineteenth-century debates. Through essays, fiction and school founding, she argued that women's intellectual subordination was socially produced rather than divinely ordained. *Sultana's Dream*, published in 1905, used satire to reverse the logic of seclusion and expose its injustice. Rokeya's work demonstrates both the reach of the educational changes of the nineteenth century and their unfinished character (Forbes, 1996).

Together, these women changed the location of authority. Earlier reform debates mainly asked what educated men and the colonial state should do for women. Female writers and professionals increasingly stated what women knew, needed and intended to create. Male mediation did not disappear, but it no longer held an uncontested monopoly over the women's question.

Economic and Public Consequences

The economic effects of female education were real but limited in scale. Teaching became the most acceptable occupation because girls' schools needed women instructors. Medicine and nursing professions offered additional opportunities, especially where seclusion restricted treatment by male practitioners. Writing, editing and philanthropy supported public participation but did not always provide stable income. Clerical and administrative employment remained largely closed to women. Since female enrolment was small, it would be misleading to claim that education transformed the wider economy of Bengal during the nineteenth century (Borthwick, 1984; Forbes, 1996).

For women who obtained paid work, income could reduce dependence on male relatives and strengthen their position within the family. Professional titles such as teacher, doctor or principal also created public identities that were not defined only by marriage and motherhood. These gains remained subject to respectability. Teaching and medicine were accepted partly because they could be described as extensions of feminine care. Paid employment also did not remove domestic labour. Professional women were expected to succeed in public whilst continuing to meet demanding household obligations.

Many economic effects were indirect and intergenerational. Literate mothers could support children's schooling, maintain household accounts and make more informed decisions about health. Such abilities could increase influence within the home even without wages. Yet the ideal of the educated mother also placed new burdens on women. They became responsible for the moral and physical improvement of the family whilst legal ownership and final authority often remained with men.

Mechanisms of Emancipation: Literacy, Credentials, Networks and Voice:

The impact of a small educational system can be explained through four connected mechanisms: literacy, certification, networks and public voice. Literacy reduced dependence on male intermediaries. A woman who could read could

approach religious texts, newspapers, letters and practical information directly. Writing made it possible to preserve memory, develop arguments and represent the self. Rassundari Devi's experience shows how literacy could create a private intellectual space before it became public testimony (Karlekar, 1991).

Certification gave formal recognition to female achievement. Domestic tutoring could be dismissed as an accomplishment, but university examinations placed women within an official system of evaluation. Degrees were colonial credentials, yet women used them to claim entry into colleges and professions. The success of Basu and Ganguly made exclusion based on supposed intellectual incapacity more difficult to defend (Borthwick, 1984).

Networks connected pupils, teachers, donors, reformers and families. Brahmo circles were especially important in providing scholarships, employment, public support and protection from social attack. Networks converted individual ambition into a collective project and helped women cross boundaries that would have been difficult to cross alone (Kopf, 1979; Borthwick, 1984).

Public voice emerged through autobiography, fiction, essays, journalism and petitions. Education gave women access to recognised forms of argument. Print preserved their words and carried them beyond local settings. Women could now describe child marriage, widowhood, ill health and intellectual deprivation from lived experience. Their interventions weakened the male monopoly over social reform (Forbes, 1996).

These mechanisms reinforced one another. Literacy enabled examination study. Credentials supported employment and wider networks. Networks assisted publication. Public writing generated further demands for education. The cycle was nevertheless fragile. Marriage, poverty, illness or social harassment could end a woman's education. Progress was not inevitable. It depended on the continuing construction of institutions and support systems.

Urban, Caste, Class and Religious Limits

The geography of female education was highly unequal. Calcutta contained the largest concentration of missions, reform societies, printing presses, colleges, donors and trained teachers. Rural districts lacked secure transport, female instructors and stable funding. Grants-in-aid often required local financial contributions, which disadvantaged poor communities. The expansion of schools therefore remained uneven across Bengal (Hunter, 1883).

Caste and class were equally important. The bhadramahila ideal reflected upper-caste, middle-class Hindu norms. Poor women, lower-caste women, agricultural workers and domestic servants rarely entered the institutions celebrated in reformist histories. The labour of poorer women sometimes made elite women's education possible by relieving them of household work, yet the workers themselves received little recognition or access. A history based only on prominent schools and famous graduates can therefore mistake elite mobility for general emancipation (Sangari & Vaid, 1989; Borthwick, 1984).

Religious difference also shaped access. Mission schools might admit girls across caste lines, but fear of conversion restricted participation. Elite Hindu schools could reproduce caste exclusiveness. Muslim families debated education in relation to religious learning, purdah, language and colonial power. Muslim girls were poorly served by institutions dominated by Hindu middle-class interests. The category "Indian woman" thus conceals major inequalities among communities.

Curriculum placed another limit on emancipation. A small group received university-level education, but most girls encountered simplified courses that stressed obedience, morality, sewing and household management. English opened access to elite employment and international knowledge, yet it could also distance educated women from vernacular and working-class communities. Literacy alone could not end child marriage, maternal mortality, domestic violence or unequal property rights. Education needed to be accompanied by reform in law, health, labour and the family.

3. Discussion

Education as a Contested Emancipatory Resource

The evidence does not support either a triumphalist or a wholly dismissive interpretation. The triumphalist account treats Western education as a generous colonial gift that rescued passive Indian women. This view ignores imperial interests, indigenous initiative and unequal access. A purely dismissive interpretation is also inadequate. If education is seen only as a nationalist method for producing disciplined wives, the significance of women's writing, graduation, employment and organisation disappears.

Western education is better understood as a contested resource. Colonial officials, missionaries, reformers and families gave schooling different purposes. Some valued conversion, some social discipline, some domestic improvement, some community prestige and some social reform. Women entered these institutions under restrictive conditions, but they did not always accept the purposes assigned to them. Literacy intended to create better wives could support autobiography and criticism. Medical training justified by seclusion could produce independent doctors. University examinations designed within a male institution could become evidence of female equality.

Translation was central to this process. Ideas associated with reason, liberalism and science were reshaped through Bengali languages, religious debate, family strategies and local institutions. Women then translated this mixed education through their own experience. Rassundari Devi linked literacy to devotion and selfhood. Kadambini Ganguly used academic credentials to build a medical and public career. Rokeya used education and satire to expose the socially constructed character of female inferiority. Emancipation emerged through appropriation rather than imitation.

It is therefore too broad to claim that Western education liberated the women of Bengal. It made emancipation more institutionally possible for a minority, provided tools for a

longer struggle and created precedents that later movements could extend. The nineteenth century did not complete women's liberation. It established schools, qualifications, professions, networks and forms of expression that contributed to the feminist, social and nationalist politics of the twentieth century.

4. Conclusion

Western education was an important but incomplete catalyst in the emancipation of women in nineteenth-century Bengal. Missionaries challenged taboos against organised schooling and developed early institutional models. The colonial state supplied limited policy support and an examination system. Bengali reformers secured funds, adapted curricula and gave female education social legitimacy. Families bore the risks of sending daughters to school. Women then turned literacy and credentials into forms of self-expression, professional authority and public participation.

Bethune School and the institutions connected with Banga Mahila Vidyalaya showed that female learning could be sustained and linked to higher education. Rassundari Devi demonstrated the emancipatory force of self-taught literacy. Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Ganguly proved that women could succeed in university and professional life. Swarnakumari Devi expanded women's role in literary culture, whilst Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain exposed the continuing exclusions of the educational order.

The gains remained narrow. Most women were excluded by poverty, caste, rural isolation, religious marginalisation, early marriage and lack of female teachers. Curricula often reinforced domestic femininity, and education did not by itself transform property rights or household power. The new system therefore enabled emancipation without securing equality.

Its most important legacy lay in outcomes that exceeded institutional intentions. Schools established partly to create respectable wives also produced writers, teachers, principals and doctors. Academic credentials gave women a recognised basis for entering public institutions. Networks reduced isolation, and print allowed women to define their own concerns. Western education mattered most when Bengali women appropriated it, translated it into local terms and used it to enlarge the range of possible female lives. The nineteenth century should thus be seen not as the completion of emancipation, but as a formative stage in the emergence of modern women's public and intellectual agency in South Asia.

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