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## Female Literacy in Bengal: The Journey of a Woman from *Antahpur* to a Professional

**Mita Bandyopadhyay**

Research Fellow, National Institute of Technology, Durgapur

### Abstract

One of the primary effects of the British colonial rule in India was the opening of the gateways of western liberal education in the country. While the male education system had a quick revive, the women education system slowly gathered momentum before reaching its final destination in the form of higher and professional education. Even after the initiation of formal education through schools and colleges, women had no recourse to higher education and especially the professional education, because such education was considered solely to be in the possession of the male. It was against such elitist, narrow-minded, discriminatory precepts set by the urban educated *bhadralok* that the professional education of Kadambini Ganguli made a significant mark. It was through her active service as the first practising female medical professional in India along with her reformatory social functions which is to be considered as the first step towards the journey of the female from the *antahpur* to the external world. The article attempts to explore this journey of the first female in professional education undergone by Dr. Kadambini Ganguli with the active and staunch support of her father, Braja Kishore Basu, her cousin, Monomohan Ghose and the most efficient of all her husband, Dwarakanath Ganguli whose indomitable spirit and fervent zeal to elevate the status of women enabled Kadambini to smash the glass ceiling and shatter all stereotype and become the trailblazer for generations to come.

### Keywords

Dwarakanath Ganguli, Dr. Kadambini Ganguli

One of the major outcomes of the British colonial settlement on the Indian soil was the exposure of Indians to western liberal ideas, though the motive behind this intention was to secure English speaking educated and devoted youth for their personal gains. Their needs led to the establishment of the Hindu College in 1816 (later renamed the Presidency College) and the establishment of one of the first libraries of the country in 1818 (later renamed The National Library) by the British government. The Western education gave rise to a new wave of social, cultural, scientific, artistic and national reawakening that during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century in the Bengal Province of colonial India was termed as the Bengal Renaissance or the New Awakening of Bengal (Bāmlār Nabajāgaran).

Education or learning, the repository of which was the sole possession of the middle class urban male made a great progress during the period of Bengal Renaissance. Education of woman was also not left far behind; social reformists and nationalist thinkers like Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820 – 1891) became the pioneers of education for woman in Bengal. Education imparted to women during the initial decades of the early nineteenth century operated merely as an instrument of making them an ideal wife, *sahadharminī*, one who was supposed to support and understand the ideas and beliefs of her husband (Chakrabarti) and also develop skills and competency to perform her function as a mother.

The “renaissance” culture of Bengal procured a particular class of western educated urban youth, generally termed *bhadralok*, whose sole possession was the unified power to speak for the betterment of all. So as to bear the claim of being in charge of the well-being of almost an entire society, it became a necessity for them to formulate certain reformative strategies and measures. Thus evolved a tacit and crafty manner of formulating principles and norms by the *bhadralok* class, which though appeared to be “universal”, but was neatly crafted to assign a tolerable space for the “other” half of the section. “In other words, the ‘others’, the marginal beings, must be given the opportunity to ‘speak’, but in such a way, that their speech remains subject to and be regulated by a regime of ‘silence’. As far as the others are concerned, there is one group, one very special group, that cannot but be taken into cognizance: the women” (Bandyopadhyay, Sibaji 21).

### Condition of Women in Colonial Bengal

Bengal for a long time was overshadowed by superstitious, bigotry, and evil practices of woman subjugation like the Sati, Child Marriage, Polygamy, Kulinism, and Infanticide; practices which were planned and chalked to push the women more into the secluded interior of “private lives” where her world would comprise of child rearing and household chores. The domestic world in which she devoted her entire life shunned her capacity to understand the wicked practices enforced on her. Devoid of the self-knowledge and social awareness of the external world, she was pushed into the darkness of “antahpur” from where the aspiration to find an exit hardly occurred to her. The extent of constriction levied on women can be estimated from their state of illiteracy through the survey by William Adam. The survey concluded that almost all Bengali women were illiterate, irrespective of the socio-economic conditions of their families (Forbes 32). Whatever little education a few women received was through *Zenana*, a form of private tutorial in which women were taught to read, write, and keep some minor accounts, in case the knowledge was required during their widowhood.

To begin with education among women was not at all a prevalent practice; female education was tabooed and was looked down as somewhat offensive and malevolent. Report on the State of Education in Bengal in 1836 (Forbes 33), a survey conducted by William Adams brought to light the popular conviction regarding female education in contemporary Bengal. It was reported that educated women were believed either to be the cause of death of her husband or be involved in romantic intrigue; in both cases, female education was blamed because of the lurking male fear of losing their control over their wives, a form of insecurity of the dominating class. While this was the scenario of a large section of the society, there were several others who had fought for the rights of women, and it was their constant efforts that placed women on equal footing with men.

The cause for women was taken up as a matter of deep concern by social reformists like Ram Mohan Roy, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, at the initial stages of Bengal Renaissance and further supported and propagated by Henri Derozio, Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Gourmohon Vidyānāth, Akshay Kumar Dutta, Durgamohon Das, Shibnath Shastri, Radha Madhav Deb, Kesab Chandra Sen, and Dwarakanath Ganguli. Keen on education for women, Ram Mohan Roy promulgated the rights of women education and enlightenment in the article, “Brief Remarks Regarding Modern Encroachments on The Ancient Rights of Females” (1822). In support of Ram Mohan’s educational reforms and Gourmohon Vidyānāth’s (1822) *Strīśikṣāvidhāyak*

(Prescriptions for Women's Education), the Christian missionaries initiated the foundation of public schools for girls. Personnel efforts by the great Sanskrit scholar and educationist, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar led to the establishment of 35 schools for girls in the districts of Hugli, Bardhaman, Medinipur, and Nadia (Bandyopadhyay, Brajendranath). Reformatory activities of Ram Mohan Roy and later Vidyasagar and Derozio did improve the condition of women in the society; they were now somewhat better placed as compared to their plight half a century ago, but still they were deprived and were imprisoned within the golden cage of domestic life, the keys of which remained in the hands of their male counterpart.

### **Female Literacy**

Development of school education was mainly because, both the liberals and conservatives had acknowledged the importance and necessity of educated women in the family. The reason for conceding to such an acceptance is to be comprehended from the essay written by Michael Madhusudan Dutta, in the year 1842, merely at an age of seventeen years, on the topic benefits of "Female Education" for which he was awarded the first prize by the authorities of the Hindu College. As usual his writing style had been power packed and forceful.

Many people have been unable to have given up their belief in the existence of ghosts, notwithstanding the strong remonstrance of reason and the evidence of Science, because the impression left on the mind by the idle tale heard or recited in the nursery could not be effaced! It is needless to dwell upon the numerous benefits a child may derive from an educated nurse. In a country like India, where the nurseship (if I may so call, the office of a nurse) generally devolves on the mother, the importance of educating the females...it is very great; for unless they are enlightened, they spread the infection of their ignorance in the minds of those they bring up. Extensive dissemination of knowledge among women is the surest way that leads a nation to civilization and refinement. (Dutta 551)

The authoritarian and the vantage point with which he dictated the need of female education and the way he made use of the words "science", "reason", "ignorance" "civilization" all reflected the mind-set of the male youth of the country. The passage above is a befitting example of one of the contemporary male psyches, one who later turned into an eminent personality of the Renaissance Bengal and whose concepts of a

mother narrating ghost tales to her child is that of the spread of “the infection of their ignorance in the minds of those they bring up”. Therefore it was for the advancement of the society as a whole that education of women was deemed to be necessary; it was not for their personal growth and establishment that the mission for woman education had been started. Woman’s education had only two motives to be satisfied that of imparting the right knowledge to her children, she being the sole nurturer and care giver for them, and in being an ideal wife competent enough to share the beliefs and ideologies of her husband.

The necessity of educated female as a befitting companion to an educated youth was again brought to light by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune after seven years on May 7, 1849, at the opening ceremony of Calcutta Female School:

I believe that you, having felt in your own person that elevating influence of good education, would before long begin to feel the want of companions, the cultivation of whose taste and intellect might correspond in some degree to your own; that you would gradually begin to understand how indefinitely the happiness of domestic life may be enhanced by the charm which can be thrown over it by the graceful virtues and elegant accomplishments of well educated women. (Bethune 107)

His speech having justified the need of female education was careful enough not to let lose the male hierarchical position in the world of knowledge, something that had been prevailing in the society through ages; on the contrary he pointed towards transforming woman into finer shades of femininity comprising of “grace” and “elegance” through education, at the end perfecting the marital life. Therefore, consent for female education was granted mostly on the grounds of creating the *bhadramahila*; one, whose education was to be sacrificed at the altar of being an ideal wife and a mother. This particular aim of female education has been aptly described by Bethune, “I thought, too, that you could not fail to discover, as soon as you began to reflect at all upon the matter, how infinite is the importance of the part which every mother has to perform in the education of her offspring” (Bethune 107). Life for women even after going to school did not change much; it was a life primarily constricted within the domains of private lives merely improving her duties most of which was “a self-sacrificial and digestible holiness of motherhood” (Auerbach 219).

## Women's Reconciliation to Her Predicament

Centuries of authoritative attitude of the male section of the society, developed and encouraged a subdued and docile mind set of the women. Acceptance of women to her predicament becomes evident from the books and articles written by the educated women themselves. Authors such as Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919), who had travelled to the west and had been exposed to the liberal ideas of the west, never failed to prioritise the feminine qualities of chastity, domesticity and motherhood. These qualities acted as the supreme virtues of woman through her journey of marriage and motherhood as described by Kailasbasini Debi (b. 1837), wife of Kishorichand Mitra (1822-1873) an eminent personality of Bengal Renaissance, in an article, *Hindu Mahilāganer Hīnābasthā* (The Terrible Plight of Hindu Women) 1863:

From the particular nature and capacities with which God had endowed women, it is quite clear that the subservience of women is God's will. By becoming strong, therefore, women can never become independent . . . It does not become a woman to be without protection. An unprotected woman will not be respected anywhere . . . (cited in Sil 3)

Proceeding further, Hemangini Chaudhury, the author of one of the popular contemporary women's magazine *Antahpur* advised her readers of a certain code of conduct to the women in the presence of her husband: "even if the husband uses abusive language out of blind anger and behaves rudely, the wife's duty is to accept it in silence" (cited in Banerjee 165). The wife cast in the role of *sahadharminī* [co-upholders of dharma] considered it to be her utmost virtue to shoulder the burden of patriarchy, bestowed upon her by her husband. Two treatises by Girijaprasanna Raychaudhury's (1862-1899) *Ramanīr Kartabya* [Woman's Duties, 1884] and *Grihalaksmī* [Domestic Goddess, 1890] dictated the rules of conduct to the women within their domestic life. Therefore, it is to be noted that over the decades, though the male solely formulated the rules of conduct and decorum for the women of the society, the women too kept accepting everything under the benefit of the bondage called "family".

Subjugation borne by woman was the outcome of the education and social system in which they had been educated and moulded, something that was strategically planned to make her efficient to carry on her role of "stree-dharma" as had been advised in the ancient scriptures. Such a proposal for female education, one that would strictly be in tune with the demands of the male compatriots was designed and encrypted in the pamphlet *Streeshikshsbidhayak* by Gourmohan Vidyalkar way back in 1822. With such a

proposal to be achieved, education in Bengal received a green signal and by 1854 there were as many as 288 schools for the female, having 6,869 girls enrolled in them (Ghosh 200-201).

The above discussion has elaborated the foundation pillars of female education in Bengal during the period of Renaissance. Though outwardly the shackles of bondage appeared to have loosened, because of the termination of certain malicious practices, internally its rigidity remained intact merely casting itself into a new mould to bear with the changing times. Education policy for women imparted elementary knowledge of reading, writing, hygiene, arithmetic, needle work, study of the languages such as Bengali and English; this syllabus being markedly different from their male counterparts. This led to debates on the syllabi and the text books for the females among the members of the Brahmo Samaj. It was during the period of uncertainties over whether to restrict females to their role of housewives and mothers or allow them to move into the outer world as professionals, that the rise of Dr. Kadambini Ganguli, the wife of the social reformer Dwarakanath Ganguli, as the first female to be professionally qualified in the field of medical science is to be taken into account. Dr. Kadambini Ganguli was the first woman to have broken the glass ceiling of male prejudice and dominance in the field of professional education, especially in matters of science, and earn her a living through her medical practise. But such an educational, professional, and marital life would not have been accomplished without the staunch support of her husband, Dwarakanath Ganguli, the stalwart and social reformer who set an example before the world by not only making his wife, Kadambini Basu to Dr. Kadambini Ganguli, but also by being an active support all throughout her life and the cause of woman emancipation of Bengal.

### **Kadambini Basu**

Kadambini Basu (1862–1923) was born to Braja Kishore Basu, the headmaster of Bhagalpur School, during the period of Renaissance in Bengal. Kadambini completed her early education in Bhagalpur, Bihar, under the guidance of her father, an eminent member of the Brahmo Samaj and a staunch supporter of women education and empowerment. After the completion of her initial education, she came to Kolkata at the residence of her cousin Monomohan Ghose to receive higher education. It was here that Kadambini came under the influence of educator and social reformer Dwarakanath Ganguli, who initially happened to be a teacher in one of the early schools where she had started her schooling. Kadambini as a student was way ahead of her companions because of the dream she

nurtured for her future which hardly any girl of her age, bearing in mind the societal pattern discussed earlier, could have dared. It was during those days when women education did not allow them to move beyond the fixed role of a wife and a mother that she dared to take up a study that involved her in open competition with the male compatriots. But all her desires and dreams could not have been fulfilled without the support from a certain section of the male population of the society at various stages of growth and development.

Kadambini's birth as the daughter of Braja Kishore Basu paved her way for the satisfaction of her dreams because Braja Kishore Basu himself was committed to women's emancipation and set up one of the earliest women's organisation in the country. It was with his consent and support that she moved out of her native place Bhagalpur in Bihar to pursue her education in Hindu Mahila Vidyalay, a form of boarding school in Kolkata for women, during her early teenage years. It was there that they were trained in the western liberal education system under the able guidance of Annette Akroyd and Dwarakanath Ganguli. Again it was with the due permission of her father that she could venture into the field of her higher education. It should be remembered that those were the days of early marriage, but Kadambini was never forced to settle on marriage. One of her compatriots, Sarala Das, daughter of Durga Mohan Das who was also an eminent member of the Brahma Samaj settled her daughter into early marriage, despite of her complete preparation to clear the University exams. On her arrival to Kolkata, Kadambini enjoyed the due support and companionship of her cousin brother, Monomohan Ghose, the first practicing barrister of Indian Origin and a notable contributor towards female education. All throughout her early education, Kadambini received unhindered support from most of her relatives, paving her way towards the study of medicine which she had always desired. But her greatest support came from Dwarakanath Ganguli, Kadambini's mentor and her husband.

### **Dwarakanath Ganguli**

Dwarakanath Ganguli (1844–1898) originally hailed from Dacca (now in Bangladesh). At a very early age, he came under the influence of the article *Dharma Niti* (Religious Principles) by Akshay Kumar Dutta one of the eminent members of the Brahma Samaj. In the article, discussion on the contemporary social practices of polygamy, child marriage, and widow remarriage shook his moral foundation and affected him considerably. Professionally Dwarakanath was a school teacher in

Bangladesh who later took over the editorship of the weekly journal, *Abalabandhab* (a friend for the weaker sex). The journal was basically of women's interest, publishing articles on vocational training, matters related to the social, political, and religious issues, some latest invention like the telephone, gramophone, electricity, and issues related to the scriptures or the contemporary eminent personalities, topics which a female should be aware of. According to David Kopf, the author of *The Brahmo Samaj and Shaping of Modern India Mind* (1979), "This journal was probably first in the world to be devoted solely to the liberation of women" (125-126). *Abalabandhab* consequently turned into a powerful journal exposing the unjust practices meted out to women and also paved the way for progressive views of women development.

Reformative zeal for a greater cause brought Dwarakanath from Dacca to Kolkata in 1870. Satisfied with the social functions of the Brahmo Samaj, Dwarakanath joined the congregation and became one of their active members. But within a few years his ideas on female education came in stark contradiction with his associates headed by Keshab Chandra Sen. While Keshab Chandra Sen, an eminent scholar and philosopher of the Bengal Renaissance, had framed a separate school syllabi and text books for women and also propagated a seclusion between men and women on the social and educational front, Dwarakanath and a few of his compatriots comprising of Shibnath Shastri, Durgamohan Das, Monomohan Ghose, Ananda Charon Khastigir and Rajani Nath Roy supported the cause of same educational reforms for both men and women, that is, they demanded a syllabus comprising of mathematics, philosophy and science. This led to a rift between the followers of Keshab Chandra Sen and Dwarakanath Ganguli and the formation of Samadarshi Dal by Dwarakanath Ganguli in 1874. Though the radical views of Dwarakanath Ganguli were far more reformative and emancipatory as compared to the age old views of Keshab Chandra Sen, the contemporary Bengali Society and the Brahmo Samaj supported the cause of Keshab Chandra Sen. But lack of adequate support could not deter the reformative acts of Dwarakanath Ganguli, Monomohan Ghose and Durga Mohan Das whose spirit and his sheer determination to find parity and justice for one half of the society made them march ahead leaving behind all the hurdles that society tried to enforce repeatedly.

Dwarakanath started "Hindu Mahila Vidyalay" in 1873 with the help of Monomohan Ghose, Durgamohan Das, his wife Brohmomoyee, under the supervision of Miss Annette Akroyd at 22, Beniapur Lane, Calcutta with only five boarders of which one was Kadambini Basu. The school followed the western education pattern and taught

the students everything from science, mathematics, English to even music and lace work. Dwarakanath singlehandedly looked over everything efficiently; he even wrote books on mathematics, geography and health science for his students to assist them in higher education. The effective functioning of the school became the cause of envy for many, leading to the closure of the school within a short span of time. But Dwarakanath's enthusiasm soon reopened another new school named, "Banga Mahila Vidyalay" in 1876. This school was later merged with Bethune College, a merger made possible by Monomohan Ghose, the then secretary of Bethune committee. Over here the educational platform provided by Monomohan Ghose proved to be a great help to Kadambini for her advancement in her professional life.

Again Dwarakanath's unmitigated efforts to open the doors of higher education for women made him persuade the professors and the academicians and ultimately secure the rights of University examination for two of his students, Sarala Das and Kadambini Bose in 1877. His efforts for higher education of women bore result when Kadambini Basu cleared the University exam in 1879. The Vice- Chancellor, Sir Arthur Hobbhouse, commented at the meeting of the Senate, "the young lady has passed the entrance examination with great credit" (Gangopadhyay 88). About her marks, he further said "very high marks in Bengali, tolerable marks in History and even in Science – a subject which is usually not considered congenial to the female intellect" (Gangopadhyay 88). However, she missed her first division by one mark.

### **From Kadambini Basu to Dr. Kadambini Ganguli**

The next major hurdle overcome by Kadambini was her qualification in the medical entrance examination. Even after qualifying in the entrance examination admission in Calcutta Medical College was forbidden for woman candidates in the Bengal province, though the study of medical science by female candidates had already started in the Madras Presidency in the year 1875. Taking admission into the medical college was one of the biggest challenges won in the history of female education by both Kadambini and Dwarakanath, because the profession of a "doctor" had till then been male dominated. Her admission into the specialised professional field opened the doors of professional education for women in colonial patriarchal Bengal. Kadambini fulfilled Dwarakanath's dream of placing woman on equal footing with that of men, achieving success that very few people could have imagined in the late nineteenth century. At the initiation of her medical education, Kadambini and Dwarakanath settled down in their

marital relationship which despite of having an age difference of 17 years was based on mutual love and respect for each other and a common goal to be achieved for both of them.

Kadambini's hurdles continued all throughout her days of medical college where she had to confront her male compatriots as well as professors on daily basis, but her cherished dreams never faltered her steps from reaching towards the goal. Kadambini was unable to qualify in one of the important papers and so instead of MB degree, she was awarded GBMC (Graduate of Bengal Medical College) in 1886 allowing her the right to start her medical profession (Gangopadhyay 88). From 1888 onwards Kadambini started practicing as a doctor in the Lady Dufferin Women's Hospital at a salary of three-hundred rupees per month (Murshid 106).

In the year 1889, four years after the foundation of Indian National Congress in 1885, Dwarakanath fought for women's representation in the Congress, leading to Kadambini's entry into the socio political front. At the very next year during the Kolkata session of the Congress, Kadambini delivered a vote of thanks in English. Praising Kadambini of her confidence and courage, Annie Besant in her book, *How India Wrought for her Freedom* wrote, "One of the delegates, Mrs Kadambini Ganguli, was called on to move the vote of thanks to the chairman, the first woman who spoke from Congress platform, a symbol that India's freedom would uplift India's womanhood" (Chanda).

Kadambini's advancement in her professional career as a doctor and her life as a social and political activist became the cause of envy and fear to a large section of the male population and very soon a journal of orthodox Hindu clan, *Bangobasi* (the resident of Bengal) accused Kadambini, then a mother of five children, of being a degraded Brahmo woman, especially a whore (Kopf 125-126). Accusation against Kadambini as a whore was merely an externalisation of the male fear at the hands of a female competitor, whose future should have been constricted by her duties as a mother and wife. It was Kadambini's association and success in the external world that threatened the superior male sentiments. Dwarakanath was not to bear such an insult, not because it targeted his wife, but it was a defamatory complement against the newly achieved freedom and liberation of women. He took legal action against the editor of the journal, Mohesh Chandra Pal, fined him one-hundred rupees and sent him to six months of imprisonment.

Dissatisfied with her incomplete degree, due to which she had to work under British Lady Doctors, Dwarakanath and Monomohan Ghose arranged for her further education in the West. Kadambini set sail for the West in 1893, leaving back her children

under the care of Dwarakanath and his sisters. She achieved her triple degrees, LRCP (Edinburg) LRCS (Glasgow), GFPC (Dublin), returned back to India and moved forward with her medical profession.

The achievements of Dr. Kadambini Ganguli is the story of the earliest female emancipation in pre-partition India; it is the story of how a single woman smashed the glass ceiling and shattered all stereotype to become a trailblazer for generations to come, especially in a society infested by elitist and narrow-minded precepts set by the urban educated *bhadralok*. But this journey of the first female from the darkened passages of the *Antahpur* to the enlightened world of education and liberation would have hardly been achieved without the reformative spirit and support of mainly Dwarakanath Ganguli, the teacher and husband of Dr. Kadambini Ganguli, Braja Kishore Basu, the father of Kadambini, Monomohan Ghose, the cousin of Kadambini and Durga Mohan Das, an eminent member of the Brahma Samaj. Hence, it was not only Kadambini, but the stalwarts whose crusade for granting equal status to females made Dr. Kadambini Ganguli the representative figure of this journey from *Antahpur* to a professional world.

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