

IMPRESSION OF IMPERIALISM IN ZENANA EDUCATION: THE CASE OF COLONIAL BENGAL

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Abstract: The female counter part of native population was always neglected from many rights which they enjoyed in the ancient times. Right to education was one of them. Against many social and official intricacies the Christian Missionaries wanted to educate the Indian women. And the way they choose to impart education of the ladies of India was through the zenana system i.e. the mistresses go from house to house and teach women in their own homes. But if we closely monitor and analyse the aims behind the missionary activity we would find that through lessons in literacy and needlework, Western women missionaries, with the help of educated Indian Christian assistants, were to transform Indian women into suitable wives and mothers for a new generation of "civilized" Indian men i.e. the Victorian concept of womanhood. In this essay I have tried to note that it was in the dynamic and continual negotiation between the different cultural assumptions behind these ideologies that a new model of ideal womanhood took shape in colonial India. Taking Bengal as the case study I have shown that the missionaries enabled exactly the kind of insinuation into everyday life that is the hallmark of colonialism and with the acknowledgement of the state the zenana mission had also become one of the apparatus of practicing imperial ideology of education.

Keywords: Zenana education, Victorian Womanhood, Imperialism, Needlework, Christian Missionary women, Bible Women.

Introduction: Perhaps one of the most pernicious and permanent of the evils brought on India by the Muslim conquest is the ignorance and jealous seclusion of women. Even after the coming of the English the circumstances for the women of India remained largely unmovable. They did not want to intrude into the existing social structure of seclusion of women from the public life. The education system which the colonial authority introduced primarily aimed to fulfill the need of the clerks. In the January number of East and West Mrs. Annie Besant writes a short but well-reasoned article on "The Recovery of Indian Women" which runs :

But there is no break in the glorious history of Indian womanhood down to the time when English education made a new culture for the man in which the woman did not share, carrying him away from her into a new world of interests from which she was shut out (The Modern Review).

The Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Education in India of 1882-1883 published from London had identified four major obscurities in female education in India. Firstly, the effective desire for education as a means of earning a livelihood did not exist as regards the female part of the population. Secondly, the social customs of India in regard to child marriage and the seclusion in which women of the well-to-do classes spend their married life in most parts of the country created difficulties which embarrass the promoters of female education at every step. Thirdly, the supply of teachers for girls' school was scantier in quantity and less satisfactory in quality, than the supply of teachers for boys' school. And finally the state system of instruction was

conducted in a large measure by a male staff and the text-books were as a rule framed with a view to the education of boys rather than of girls (Abstract and Analysis of the Report of the Commission of Inquiry on Education in India of 1882 – 83, p. 95). Analyzing these factors it can be noticed that the social customs of contemporary India were the main tribulations in the way of female education and the indifferent attitude of the state added to the misery of the women folk of India. Against these intricacies the Christian Missionaries wanted to educate the Indian women. And the focal system of imparting education to the Indian womanhood was *Zenana* system which approached mainly in two different ways i.e. 'central gathering system' where women gather at a place and receive instruction and 'house-to-house visitation system' where the mistresses go from house to house and teach women in their own homes (Quinquennial Report On the Progress of education in The Presidency Division, 1917-18 to 1921-22, p. 27).

Background to Zenana education: The Indian *Zenana* Mission was simply a mission to Indian women, conducted by women, carried on in the harems, or *Zenanas*, of India by lady missionaries, both married and single. The larger number of *Zenana* missionaries were however, unmarried, sent out by various Societies and Ladies' Committees, to labour solely among the female natives of our vast Indian empire. It was a work of recent years, and, to many of our older missionary societies, a new agency ; but it is one imperatively needed, and where-ever tried abundantly successful. Indeed, those who were acquainted with India and her needs did not hesitate to say that the regeneration of that land depends

upon her women (Pitman, Emma Raymond, *Indian Zenana Missions*, p. 1).

Before the rise of the *Zenana* missions in the 1860s, the only way for women with a strong sense of evangelical duty to enter the overseas missionary field was to marry a seminary graduate bound for foreign lands. Missionary wives frequently established schools for girls and visited, where possible, with the wives of socially respectable classes. But such projects often floundered in the wake of domestic crises like sick children, sick husbands or the sudden flight of servants as the wives of clergymen discovered that the demands of family life took precedence over evangelism. The emergence of the *Zenana* missions, with their formal, organized evangelical and educational projects, depended on a number of conditions both social and ideological. Among the most important factors was the active recruitment of unmarried women who did not carry the responsibilities of housekeeping and raising a family. Overextended missionary wives themselves were the first to urge the denominational missionary boards to recruit single women as teachers for the girls' schools. They then formed *Zenana* missionary societies to further the evangelization and education of Indian women (Kent, Eliza F., *Tamil Bible Women and the Zenana Missions of Colonial South India*, pp. 117-149). *Zenana* missions drew their personnel mostly from the unmarried graduates of newly established women's seminaries and normal schools.

These organizations created fund-raising channels for women's projects that ran separately from those of the male-dominated denominational missionary boards and allowed women missionaries to pursue their own philanthropic ventures (Prochaska, F. K., *Women and Philanthropy in Nineteenth Century England*, p. 310). As this brief account of the historical factors behind the rise of the *Zenana* missions suggests, these institutions were in many ways built on the ideology of separate spheres, a complex set of beliefs, practices, and assumptions about gender that profoundly influenced gender relations in both western Europe and North America from the late eighteenth to the early twentieth century (Linda K. Kerber, *Separate Spheres, Female Worlds, Woman's Place: The Rhetoric of Women's History*, pp. 9-39). Among other things, the idea of separate spheres lent force to the idea that women's moral influence through their nurturing activities could be extended beyond the literal home to a world felt badly in need of such influence. Such concerns legitimated the creation of separate women's organizations to further this cause (Freedman, Estelle, *Separatism as Strategy: Female Institution Building and American Feminism, 1870-1930*, pp. 512-29).

Uma Chakravarti and Nur Yalman have suggested through very different studies that *purdah* ideologies may be derived from Brahmanical ideas of the

importance of a woman's chastity to the honor and status of her family (Chakravarti, Uma, *Conceptualizing Brahmanical Purity in Early India: Gender, Caste, Class and State*, pp. 579-85; Yalman, Nur, *On the Purity of Women in the Castes of Ceylon and Malabar*, pp. 25-28). Whatever its historical origins, the practice of *purdah* was well suited to carry meanings that signal prestige: at one stroke it demonstrated the delicacy of women who needed protection, the absence of compulsion for them to work outside the home, and visible evidence that the women were shielded from any contact with men outside the family that might lead to miscegenation. A final perspective on the Indian home is found in the reports that Bible women produced for their supervisors. These reports convey an image of the home as an entity with relatively fluid boundaries. Bible women's reports suggest that in practice the codes of *purdah* were capable of negotiation and that Bible women taught and preached to both men and women, to anyone, in fact, who paused in the course of their paths to listen to them (Gold, Ann Grodzins, *Purdah Is as Purdah's Kept*, pp. 164-181).

Scope of the Paper: Several recent interventions into the historiography of colonialism have focused on the participation of Western women in the imposition of metropolitan gender ideologies and notions of domesticity onto colonized peoples around the world. A few important studies have examined the contribution of Western women missionaries to the exportation of these metropolitan models of gender and social space to the colonies, and two of these have specifically focused on the role of *Zenana* missions in the "domestication" of colonial India i.e. The two studies that have treated the subject of the *Zenana* missions in India are Forbes; and Jane Haggis's recent article, "'Good Wives and Mothers' or 'Dedicated Workers'? Contradictions of Domesticity in the 'Mission of Sisterhood,' Travancore, South India," in *Maternities and Modernities: Colonial and Postcolonial Experiences in Asia and the Pacific*, ed. Kalpana Ram and Margaret Jolly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 81-113. Here Forbes focuses on the experience of English women missionaries in colonial Bombay, while Jane Haggis directs her attention to the ambivalent position of the Indian women who worked for the South Indian *Zenana* missions. All of these studies have considerably advanced our understanding of the gendered aspects of imperial cultural politics, yet most of them underemphasized the organization of the system and the Government strategy towards it in colonial Bengal. The colonial encounter with the *Zenana* teachers and the objectives behind the *Zenana* education in Bengal is a serious oversight, which this article attempts to redress.

The Aims of Education: The *Zenana* missions, women's missionary organizations for the education and evangelization of Indian women, came into existence in the mid-nineteenth century, in part in response to the urgent need to contain what were seen as the subversive capabilities wielded by Indian women. Through lessons in literacy and needlework, Western women missionaries, with the help of educated Indian Christian assistants, were to transform Indian women into suitable wives and mothers for a new generation of "civilized" Indian men. As the impassioned speech of Miss Greenfield makes clear, the *Zenana* missions were organized around Victorian ideas about gender, which glorified women's role as the moral guardian of the home. According to the prevailing (though not uncontested) "doctrine of separate spheres," men and women were by nature suited for work in distinct arenas of life. Women's social responsibility was to create a home where weary husbands could retreat from the morally unsavory, market-driven world of the marketplace and where women could exercise a benevolent moral influence over their children. In keeping with this view, the *Zenana* missions also embraced a concept of religion that downplayed belief and doctrine and stressed instead that the most deeply held religious commitments were embedded in the contours of everyday life, cultivated in children by women in the close, sheltered quarters of the home (Chandler, John S., *Seventy-Five Years in the Madura Mission: A History of the Mission in South India under the ABCFM* p. 227).

This is due, I believe, to a peculiar convergence in the discourse of the *Zenana* missions of nineteenth-century, middle-class Western gender ideology and the gender ideology of indigenous elite groups in colonial India. Though based on very different arguments and assumptions, both the middle-class Western ideology of separate spheres and the elite Indian ideology that justified *purdah* practices measured women's social and moral status by their proximity to the home. Both ideologies held that women's moral constitution suited them "by nature" for lives lived out within the socially constructed limits of the domestic arena. Both ideologies were inherently class-inflected perspectives in that they denigrated the experience of working-class women (in the West) and low-caste or laboring women (in India), who by necessity worked outside the home, deeming such women less than feminine. Clearly, that women who traveled far beyond the confines of their own homes were responsible for the dissemination of such ideas implies a contradiction. As we will see, this contradiction was resolved differently by Western women missionaries and Indian Christian Bible women. Here, it is important to note that it was in the dynamic and continual

negotiation between the different cultural assumptions behind these ideologies that a new model of ideal womanhood took shape in colonial India.

The *Zenana* missions were intended to make Indian women into better wives and mothers through the training of both their minds and their bodies. The two components of the work of *Zenana* missions were instruction in reading and training in needlework. Drawing on a long-standing association between needlework and femininity in European traditions, Western women missionaries felt that sewing, embroidery, knitting, and lacework would inculcate in Indian women a particular style of genteel femininity (Parker, Rozcika, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, p. 54). As Mala de Alwis argues in her study of Christian boarding schools in colonial Sri Lanka, "Sewing played a crucial role in the very moulding of Christian women, in the construction of a particular moral demeanor. It was a practice that insisted on neatness, orderliness, concentration, patience, and precision." (De Alwis, *The Subversive Stitch: Embroidery and the Making of the Feminine*, p. 119). In addition, missionaries and Indians alike saw instruction in sewing as an inducement; an incentive offered to Indian women so that Western women could gain access to the *Zenana* and preach the gospel (Chamberlain, Mary, *Fifty Years in Foreign Fields: A History of Five Decades of the Woman's Board of Foreign Missions Reformed Church in America*, p. 28).

In the Report on the Progress of Education in Bengal for the years 1917-18 to 1921-22 Mr. J. W. Holme, Professor, Presidency College noted that:

The education of *zanana* women by governesses who teach them at their houses has not been a very successful experiment and requires reorganization; but the scheme of teaching needle work through the agency of peripatetic mistresses has worked well and it is reported that in the towns proficiency in needle work has much improved and that increasing numbers of girls' complete in the needle work diploma examination which was instituted at the instance of Lady Carmichael (Government Of Bengal, Education Department, Calcutta, 20th November, 1923, Resolution No. 3346 Edn., p. 209).

But in the wake of debates over women's education that continued throughout the nineteenth century, the attention given to needlework in the *Zenana* missions attracted considerable criticism. Considering it a point-less diversion from their attention to household duties, Mr. Bulloram Mullick, a judge in the Bengal courts, condemned the phasis paid to "fancy work" in the *Zenana* missions. "What is wanted," he wrote, "is knowledge that will fit her for companionship, for bringing up children, for nursing

her family, and for taking an interest in the welfare of all women." (Murdoch, J., *The Women of India and What Can Be Done for Them: Papers on Indian Reform*, p. 52).

Though progressive Indian advocates of women's education appreciated the methods of the *Zenana* missions, which allowed respectable women to study at home and protect their modesty, they were repelled by the overt proselytizing and apparent frivolity of *Zenana* education. Subsequent to the success of Protestant *Zenana* missions, many Indian reformers began their own institutions for instructing women (Borthwick, Meredith, *The Changing Role of Women in Bengal, 1849-1905*, pp. 73). Perhaps in response, the missionaries redoubled their efforts to use women's education as a vehicle for spreading the gospel. Amy Carmichael of the Church of England *Zenana* Missionary Society in Tirunelveli deplored the suggestion of one of her Bible women, Saral, that she could attract more women to hear the gospel by teaching them to knit (Elliot, Elisabeth, *A Chance to Die: The Life and Legacy of Amy Carmichael*, p. 100). Knitting as a womanly virtue was fitted for the Indian womanhood.

Instruction in literacy in the *Zenana* missions was organized around tracts, pamphlets, and readers produced in large numbers by missionary society printing presses. These lesson books introduced concepts such as the solar system, germ theory, and Christian notions of the good life through a series of increasingly difficult chapters. Designed to provoke discussion about the subjects of the lessons, the primers were to guide the readers and listeners to an appreciation of the greatness of the Christian God and the superiority of Christianity. In one English language lesson book, *The Zenana Reader*, written by Charlotte M. Tucker under the pseudonym of A.L.O.E. (A Lady of England), the fictionalized dialogue between a young Muslim wife (Sukara Bibi) and a Western woman missionary (Miss Ada) gives a highly idealized representation of this style of teaching. For example, a lesson on the rotation of the planets culminates with Sukara Bibi's ecstatic wonder at the marvels of creation and its Creator: "Great-glorious-most wonderful Being, who made all the suns, moons, and planets, who sends them all on their courses, and never lets them go wrong or fall." (A.L.O.E. [Charlotte Tucker], *The Zenana Reader*, p. 15). The *Zenana* pupils had no separate syllabus, and were made to read children's books and follow the syllabuses prescribed for girl's school. A separate and suitable syllabus has been introduced during 1917 for *Zenana* education. In it books and subjects interesting and useful for grown up women have been included and it has been found very suitable (Annual Report On The Progress Of Female Education In The Presidency And Burdwan Divisions, 1917-1918, p. 9).

Therefore we can see that a separate and suitable syllabus well fitted for the *Zenana* educational needs of India was formed as late as in 1917. Prior to that Christian Missionaries with the aim of creating good mother and good wife followed a typical feminine curriculum keeping in mind that women are to be educated not for themselves, but for the male counterpart of her family.

Conclusion: The conservative nature of the women's foreign missionary movement suggests that by dwelling on the horrors of the treatment of women in India, missionary women deflected attention from the critique of gender relations that was emerging at the same time in Europe and North America. One of the ironies of the women's foreign missionary movement is that while the institution of the *Zenana* was repeatedly condemned in the movement's rhetoric, the missionaries did very little to eradicate it. Rather, the West's socially constructed image of *purdah* lent force to the notion that only women could teach, heal, or minister to India's women and thus opened up professional opportunities for women in India that were not available in their home countries (Haggis; Maneesha Lal, *The Politics of Gender and Medicine in Colonial India: The Countess of Dufferin's Fund, 1885-1888*, pp. 29-60). Life in the *Zenana* appears very differently in the writings of many Indians, both Hindu and Christian. The distance between many indigenous representations of the *Zenana* and Western ones suggests that the missionaries' image was a stereotype. It was an exaggerated representation of Indian culture that obscured the enormous diversity of practices and beliefs known as *purdah* and lent great force to the idea that Indian women needed to be rescued from their miserable condition, creating absences that Western intervention was to fill and perversions that missionaries were to set right. This is not to say that there could be a "real" or reliably accurate representation of such a hotly contested icon of social life at any time, let alone in the context of colonial society in which home life stood so often as a measure of civilization for colonizers and nationalists alike (Sangari, Kumkum and Sudesh Vaid, eds., *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History*, pp. 1-26).

Indians themselves had their own diverse ideas about the meaning of the home and of women's place within it. The gender segregation and the limitations placed on women's mobility that characterized *purdah* were an important part of the gender norms of Indian society, structuring relations between men and women and between different social classes. In the nineteenth century, the most common explanation for the practice of secluding women was that it had been adopted during the Muslim interregnum as a means of preventing miscegenation.

From the point of view of the *Zenana* missions, supple techniques of exposure and persuasion were required for the task of establishing the truth of Christian ways of living and transforming the home into a space that would produce "enlightened" subjects through the cultivation of Christian habits and dispositions. In terms of their personal interactions with Indian students, British and North American women may have been clumsy improvisers; but, from a broader perspective, one can see that through their collusion with the colonial state and through the apparatus of the larger missionary project (including schools, presses, and vast fund-raising networks in the metropole), they enabled exactly the kind of insinuation into everyday life that is the hallmark of colonialism. Building on top of preexisting systems of gender segregation manifest in *pardah* practices, Western women missionaries

attempted to turn these toward a new sociomoral project-the transformation of Indian women into "enlightened" wives and mothers according to a Victorian ideal (Kent, Eliza F., *Tamil Bible Women and the Zenana Missions of Colonial South India*, pp. 117-149).

But they were limited, as they themselves recognized, in terms of their face-to-face encounters with Indian women. The main reason behind that was their mental acceptance to the Victorian ideal although they were being missionary women came to far off India for the civilizing mission of the Indian girls. But the colonial authority in Bengal while giving financial assistance to the *Zenana* education inspected over every aims of objectives of the missionaries and they had to work within the imperial mission of education itself.

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