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The First Phase

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THE FIRST PHASE

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(Mainly Based on Contemporary Records)

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BY

JOGESH CHANDRA BAGAL



CALCUTTA

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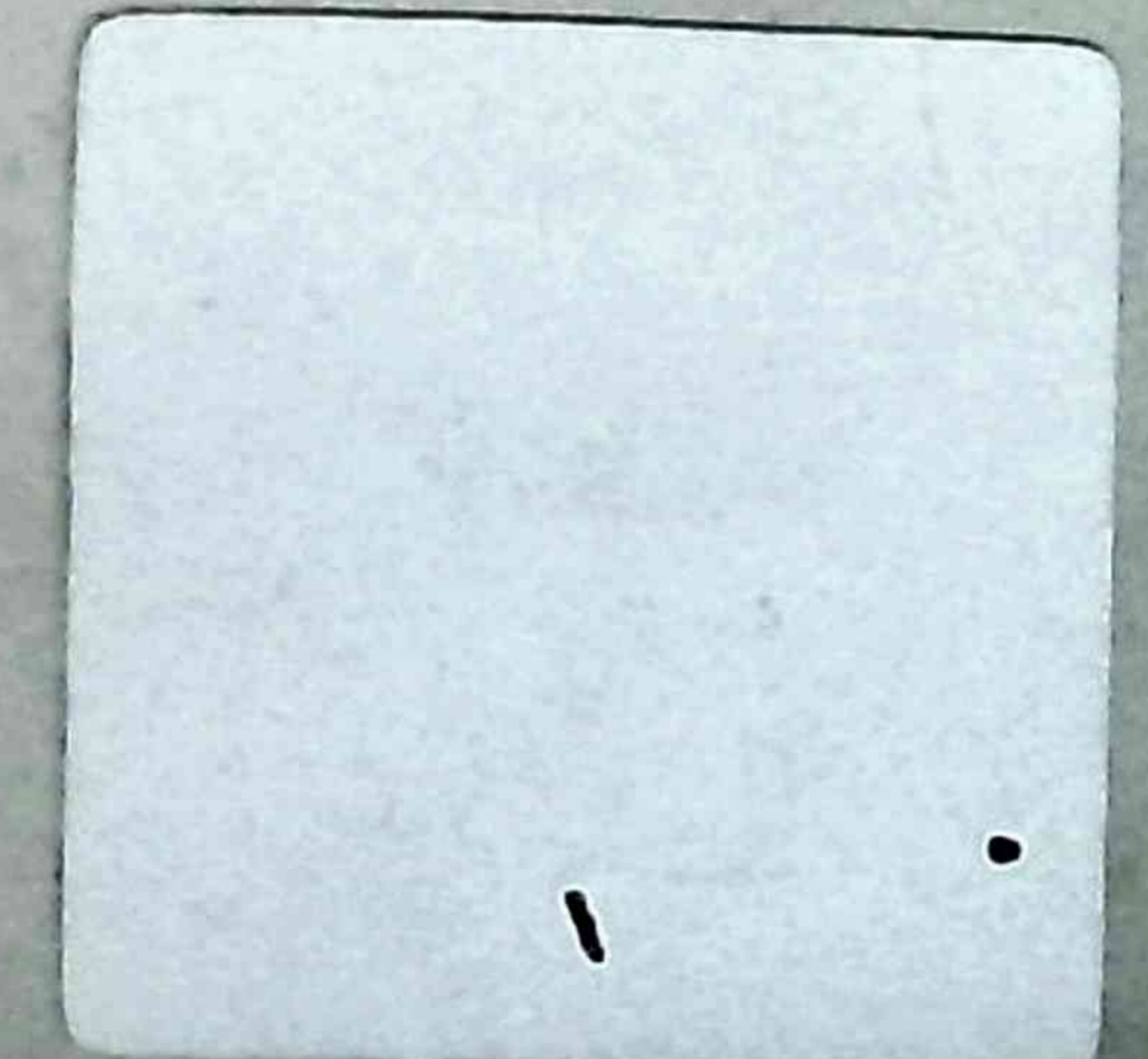
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PREFACE

Eastern India, or to be more precise the Bengal Presidency, passed through a good deal of turmoil during the eighteenth century. In the early days of the nineteenth century peace was sufficiently established in this part of India, so that the leading and thoughtful persons, both Indian and European, could turn their attention towards the solution of the cultural and educational problems of the country. Education of our girls constituted a part of their programme. I have narrated the story of their efforts in this direction, leading upto the foundation of Mr. Bethune's school in 1849 and its reorganization by the Government in 1856.

Thanks to S. S. Sajan Kanta Das, the book was first published in August 1944 in a smaller form by the Ranjan Publishing House, Calcutta. It had rather a long title, "Beginnings of Modern Education in Bengal: Women's Education". My original idea was to bring out two more brochures on "Primary Education" and on "Higher Education" on this side of the country. But that idea has not yet been realised. Two Bengali books of mine on the above subjects have, however, been included in the Visvavidya-Samgraha series of the Visva-Bharati. The present volume has been thoroughly revised and recast and considerably enlarged. The title of the book has been changed to suit its present form.

The University of Calcutta included the brochure in their curriculum of Higher Studies for the B. T. Examination, and I have reasons to believe that it proved useful to the students of Education. The book has long been exhausted. It is due to the zeal of Dr. Mahadeb Saha, a student of Indology, that the book has seen the light of day in its present garb. I

am specially thankful to Sj. Chittaranjan Banerjea of the National Library of India. It was very good of him to introduce me to Sj. Sripati Bhattacharjee of the World Press, who has kindly arranged for its early publication. Two notes—one from Dr. Mahadeb Saha and another from Sj. Debendra Nath Mitra—have been inserted in the Appendix.

I have spared no pains to utilise the contemporary records, both in scripts and print in the preparation of this book. I shall be thankful to my readers if they please read “lack of” before “proper means” on page 1, line 23.

Dr. Jadunath Sarkar, the doyen among Indian historians, has written a Foreword for the book, for which no expression of thanks is too adequate.

Calcutta,
15th July, 1956

Jogesh Chandra Bagal

FOREWORD

(The greatest benefit that India has derived from the influence of English society and European thought, is a social revolution which has transformed our religion, literature, social rules and domestic life.) And in Bengal the most potent agent of this change has been the education, and through education the emancipation of our women. (The confinement of women behind the *purda*, and its inevitable corollary child marriage, have now almost disappeared from Bengali society,—not by the action of the British Indian Government (which always dreaded to lay its reforming hand on Indian society), but by the zeal of noble-hearted British men and women and the dynamic force of modern rationalistic thought which began to percolate from Europe into India with the dawning of the nineteenth century and which our intelligentsia eagerly embraced.)

(By the abolition of the *purda* system, Bengal's man-power has been doubled and this province has been enabled to rival Madras and Maharashtra, where the women have always been free to move about and work in public.

It is merely patriotic sophistry to boast that (we had learned Hindu women in the dim Vedic age or cite the names of a few modern rare birdslike Hati Vidyalankar and Rani Bhawani.) No honest man can deny the fact that upto the accession of Queen Victoria (1837), (the universal belief among the Bengali Hindus was that a woman who took to reading and writing was an accursed sinner, doomed to widowhood and the life of a harlot.) Bankim Chandra—which of us can claim to be a greater lover of our people than he?—gives a true picture of our old high class mentality when he makes Devi .

Chaudhurani, on her return to her father-in-law's family, conceal every trace of her having learned to read and write during her ten years of obscure exile.

(On such a dark and heart-breaking social background, the Christian missionaries (the Baptist Mission first in 1819 and the Anglican C. M. S. in 1824) began the experiment of the *public* education of Bengali girls in *general* classes, without any aid from the State funds. A few generous Hindu helpers far ahead of their times, boldly came forward to support them. Here the names of Rajah Baidyanath Roy of Jorasanko (donated Rs. 20,000 for a school-house in 1825) and Raja Radhakant Dev of Sova Bazar should not be forgotten. The first whole-time teacher from England was Miss Mary Ann Cooke, who joined her work in Calcutta (C. M. S. colony in the Mirzapur ward) in 1821, married the Rev. Isaac Wilson of the C. M. S. in 1824 and retired from India in 1845.)

(But as the aim of the missionaries was naturally to spread the light of the Gospel in Indian homes through their Hindu girl-students and Bible teaching was compulsory, the inevitable reaction began in educated Hindu Society. Their grumbling first became vocal in 1831 and it culminated in the foundation of our first secular public school for Indian girls, in 1849, which was the seed of the famous Bethune College.)

The story of these pioneer attempts and the fortunes of each benevolent society for promoting female education in Bengal during those eventful thirty years is told with full documentation and exact details in the present book. It is a piece of sound historical work and a source indispensable to every student of our social and cultural development. The information has been patiently dug out of many a forgotten,

many a dark mine, and presented here with admirable literary skill.

As I rise after reading this book, I feel that if we Bengalis of today are blessed with fully cultured partners in life, if we see our sisters worthily holding high positions in the administration and public life, in literary and social work, in the learned professions and business,—almost on a par with their brothers, then we must thank those Christian missionaries and their supporting lay sisters who fought our battle for thirty years from 1819 amidst appalling difficulties and lack of finance, till at last light conquered darkness, and the exotic of female education in public took root in Bengal.)

No proper study of the great social revolution which we call the *Renaissance of India* is possible without the works of Brojendra Nath Banerjee (alas, lost to us in his early sixties) and Jogesh Chandra Bagal (still working and year by year adding to the rich garner of our knowledge). Each of them has devoted a life of patient labour to this subject and rigidly followed the correct scientific principles of history-writing by going to the original sources, and critically examining and methodically piecing together all the evidence. They have shunned the path to cheap popularity, through frothy rhetoric and popular misbeliefs. And, therefore, their work will endure.

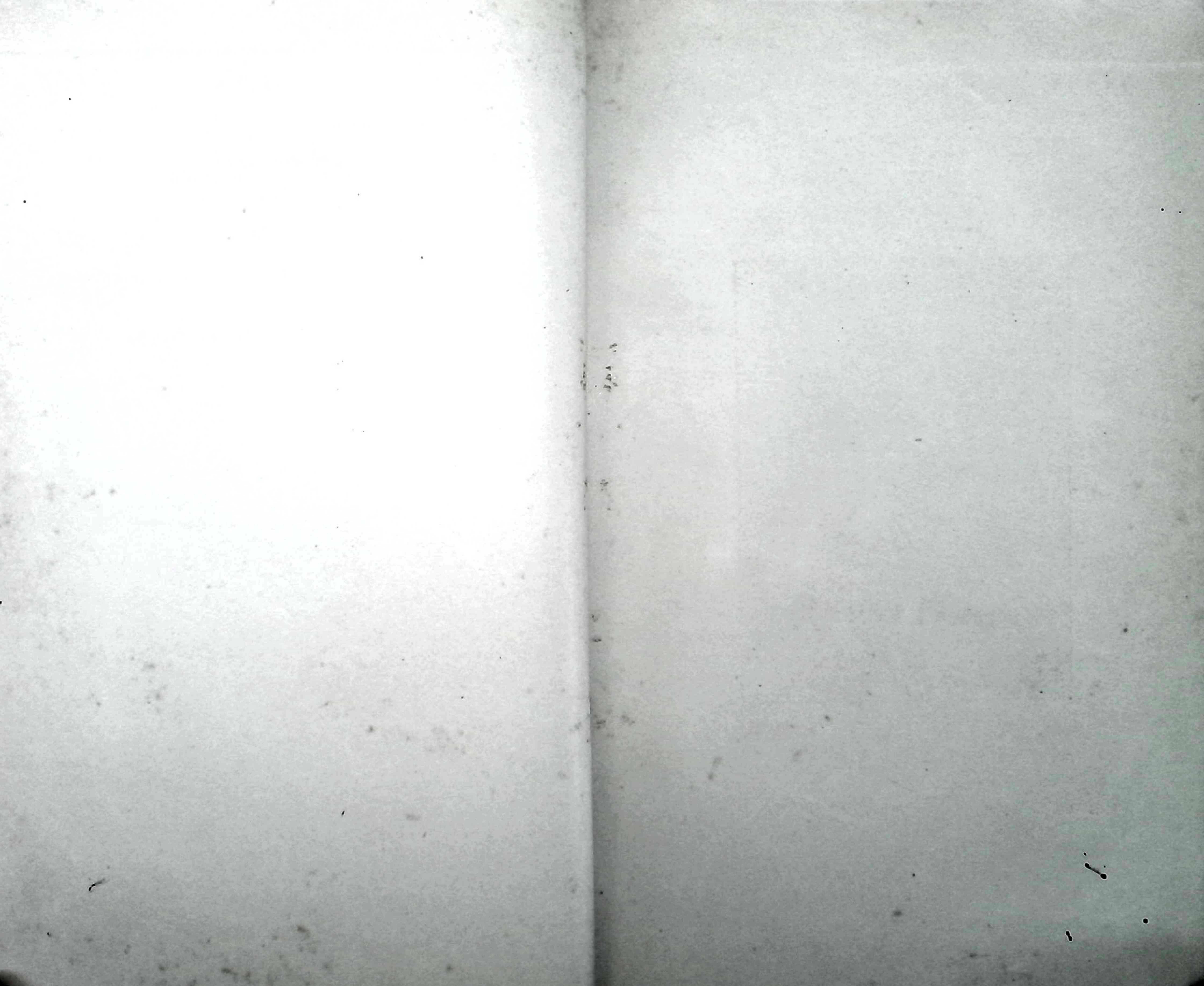
Jadunath Sarker

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INTRODUCTORY

Education of women is not a new thing in India. In ancient times they used to compose hymns, some of which have found a place in the Vedas. They took part in religious and philosophical discussions with men. Amongst the Buddhist preachers women were not a few. There were organisations of nuns and life-long devotees of the Lord Buddha.

The culture that was so widely prevalent amongst our womenfolk, found a severe set-back with the advent of the Moslems in India. The *purdah* system had to be widely introduced and rigidly followed. Free movements of women came to be restricted. Education of women was out of the question. Even in the early period of the British regime, people considered the education of women almost as a sin. They believed that a literate woman would lose her husband sooner than an illiterate one.

But even in those dark days, Indian women maintained their love of culture. The stories of the *Ramayana*, the *Mahabharata*, the *Puranas*, as well as the *Mangal Kavyas* of the middle ages supplied the vacuum created by the proper means of education. Their love of art found expression in *Alpana*, painting, sewing and many other useful crafts.

It is also not a fact that none of our women were literate in this period. We find some women both amongst Hindus and Moslems making their mark as authors and poets. Women were also versed in statecraft. Rani Bhawani of hallowed memory managed her big Zemindary covering one third of the Bengal Presidency even before the commencement of



Raja Radhakant Deb

the British rule. Herself well-versed in Indian lore, she maintained a large number of *tols* or *Chatuspathis*, throughout her Zemindary and patronised the study of Sanskrit in all its aspects.

Accounts of some women scholars of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century have come down to us. Hati Vidyalankar, a Bengali resident at Benares, Shyammohini Devi of Katalipara, district Faridpur, and Dravamayi of Khamakul Krishnagar, district Hugli, were eminent women Pandits or Sanskrit Scholars. They each not only mastered the Sanskrit studies, but came out to debate important and knotty points of the Hindu Sastras with the prominent men-scholars of the time. They also accepted presents from the people in recognition of their scholarship like men-scholars. Hati Vidyalankar ran a *Tol* at Benares, where she taught students Sanskrit Vyakarana, Kavya and Nabyanyaya.¹

Though the superstitions of common men persisted against women's education, those of the upper classes some times did not pay heed to them. And we have it on record that they often induced their womenfolk to read and write, and pursue their studies even later. Radhakant Deb wrote as early

¹ "I am informed that at present there is a female philosopher at Benares, whose name is Hutee Vidyalunkara. She was born in Bengal, her father was a Koolinu bramhun; her husband also was a koolinu. It is not the practice of the koolinu bramhuns, when they marry the daughters of koolinus, to take these wives to their own houses, but they stay with their parents. Thus it was with Hutee. Her father being a learned man instructed his daughter in the knowledge of several shastrus; he particularly taught her the sungskritu grammar, and the kavyu shastrus. However ridiculous the notion may be, that if a woman pursue learning she will become a widow, the husband of Hutee left her a widow. Her father also died; and in consequence she fell into great distress. In these circumstances, like many others who are tired of the world, she went to reside at Benares. Here she pursued learning afresh, and got some little knowledge of the smritee and other shastrus. At length she began to teach others, and obtained a number of pupils, who came to her from different parts; so that she is now universally known in those parts by the name of Hutee Vidyalunkara, viz. learning is her ornament."—W. Ward's *Account of the Writings, Religion, and Manners of the Hindoos*, Vol. I, 1811, pp. 195-6.

as in 1819: "We get our girls taught in Bengalee before they are married."² Women of the Sobhabazar Debs, those of the Jorasanko Raj, of the Tagores of Pathuriaghata and Jorasanko, Calcutta, and those of the Burdwan Raj family at Burdwan, were mostly literate. Some belonging to the middle-class families could also read and write. They however, never went to a public school, but were taught at home. Pearychand Mitra, a great public man and literary figure of the nineteenth century, thus wrote in the preface to his *Adhvatmika*:

I was born in the year 1814 (12th July) corresponding with the Bengali era 1221 (8 Shraavan). While a pupil of *Pathsala* at home, I found my grandmother, mother and aunts reading Bengali books. They could write in Bengali and keep accounts. There were no female schools then.

This fact of the domestic education of women did not fail to draw the attention of the notable Europeans. Sir Edward Hyde East, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court (later, High Court) of Calcutta and a friend of Indian education, referred to the system of domestic education of women in some of the respectable families of Calcutta and elsewhere in his presidential address at the second annual meeting of the Calcutta School Society on June 2, 1822. The *Government Gazette* (June 7, 1822) reported this portion of Sir Edward's speech as follows:

The Hon'ble the Chief Justice also observed in continuation of the subject, that though for various reasons the disposition of the respectable natives, to see their females raised by a plain education to the level they are entitled to hold, had not been evinced in a public manner, yet he had the gratification to know that some natives were to be found of the highest respectability who were giving their attention to the subject and in some instances privately endeavouring in their domestic

² See Appendix.

circles to give effect to their designs for the instruction of their females.

But one should not remain satisfied with this narrow system of education alone. The thoughtful section of our countrymen were striving hard to raise the common womenfolk from their low state in society. Raja Rammohun Ray, the great Indian reformer, started a movement against the *Suttee*, or immolation of women on dead husband's funeral pyre, even before the twenties of the last century. To popularise this movement he used to issue pamphlets in Bengali. In these much stress was laid *inter alia* on the rights and claims of women. He also advocated the cause of women's education so that they might be conscious of their own position in society and discharge their duties to themselves as well as to the people at large. Pandit Gourmohan Vidyalankar's *Stri Sikshavidhayaka*, of which more is to be said later on, did much for popularising the cause of women's education. Besides mentioning the instances of ancient and modern educated women in India, Pandit Gourmohan emphasised the need of women's education in public schools for the general improvement of the females.

But as it then stood, it was the only well-to-do among the people who could provide for the domestic education of their women. But what about the education of Indian women in general, and how to combat the superstitious notions against female education? Here stepped in other agencies to fill up this deficiency. The credit of starting free public schools for the education of Indian women was solely due to the Societies and Associations formed in Calcutta by the European women in the early decades of the nineteenth century. Radhakant Deb, Gourmohan Vidyalankar and Baidya Nath Roy, to name

only a few among the generous Hindus, helped these efforts materially in various ways; especially Radhakant Deb, who has been rightly called the pioneer of women's education among his countrymen, and the Hindus of Calcutta in particular. That the girls of the upper classes gradually resorted to public schools was also no less due to his enlightened and ceaseless endeavours.