According to the historian Bharati Roy, the history of women’s education in India, among both the Hindu and the Muslim communities, is by and large the same. The principal difference was that Hindus had started earlier, but both faced the same problems, the same debate, and the same hurdles (Ray 442). Before analyzing the implication of this statement, let me begin by quoting from a short story. In this feminist utopian narrative, an unnamed lady narrator visits a land in her reverie and meets a stranger.

“What is the matter dear? She said affectionately.
“I feel somewhat awkward,” I said in a rather apologetic tone, “as being a purdahnashin woman I am not accustomed to walking about unveiled.”
“You need not be afraid of coming across a man here. This is Ladyland, free from sin and harm. Virtue herself reigns here.”
“Your Calcutta could become a nicer garden than this if only your countrymen wanted to make it so.”
I became very curious to know where the men were. I met more than a hundred women while walking there, but not a single man.
“Where are the men?” I asked her.
“In their proper places, where they ought to be.”
“Pray let me know what you mean by “their proper places.”
“O, I see my mistake, you cannot know our customs, as you were never here before. We shut up our men indoors.”
“Just as we are kept in the zenana.”
“Exactly so.” (4-5)

This excerpt, as one can easily guess, is from Rokeya Sakhawat Hossain’s “Sultana’s Dream” written in English in 1905, almost half a century after Calcutta University opened its doors for higher education in Calcutta. I quote from this narrative to show that the wish fulfillment of freeing purdahnashin women and reversing patriarchal role models is not the crux of this utopian vision. Coming from an educationist, we are told later in the narrative that the Queen who ruled Ladyland “...liked science very much. She circulated an order that all the women in her country should be educated. Accordingly a number of girls’ schools were founded and supported by the government.
Education was spread far and wide among women. And early marriage was also stopped. No woman was to be allowed to marry before she was twenty one” (7). But what was more important, the narrator realizes that in the capital where the Queen lived, there were two universities. One of these invented a wonderful balloon, to which they attached a number of pipes. By means of this captive balloon which they managed to keep afloat above the cloud-land, they could draw as much water from the atmosphere as they pleased. When the other university came to know of this invention, they became jealous and tried to do something more extraordinary still. They invented an instrument by which they could collect as much sun-heat as they wanted and kept the heat stored up to be distributed among others as required. They are further informed:

While the women were engaged in scientific researches, the men of this country were busy increasing their military power. When they came to know that the female universities were able to draw water from the atmosphere and collect heat from the sun, they only laughed at the members of the universities and called the whole thing “a sentimental nightmare”! (8).

The queen was also conversant in using well-polished hydrogen balls which were used to overcome the force of gravity. The rest of the journey is undertaken in an “air-car” which had two wing-like blades, which “were worked by electricity.” The story ends thus:

After visiting the above places of interest we got again into the air-car, but as soon as it began moving, I somehow slipped down and the fall startled me out of my dream. And on opening my eyes, I found myself in my own bedroom still lounging in the easy-chair! (14).

From this story it becomes clear that Rokeya was a visionary enough to ascertain that women’s emancipation was inextricably linked to education. Even more daring than “Sultana’s Dream” was Rokeya’s essay “Alankar Na Badge of Slavery” that had first appeared in the Brahmo journal Mahila in 1903. Republished in Nabanoor in 1904 with the title “Strijatir Abanoti” [The Degradation of Women], she dreamed of Muslim women being able to liberate themselves and how education held the key to this possibility:

Like our bedrooms that shut out sunlight, our intellect is denied the fruits of enlightenment because there are no adequate schools and institutions of learning available to women. A man can go on learning, but will ever access to education be fully open to women? If one single liberal man attempts to assist us as a thousand men put up obstacles (Rachanavali: 17).
She saw two major obstacles in the path of Muslim women’s education, namely, the custom of strict purdah that denied women access to education and secondly, the custom of early marriage for girls. “I ask for that kind of education that will equip women to acquire their rights as citizens…Education must be for both physical and mental advancement” (“Subeh Sadek”; Rachanavali, 272). Further she did not believe that women’s education should avoid having an economic function; one of her main arguments was the need for economic independence of women. When she asked in “Strijati Abanati,” why should women not have access to gainful employment, what do they lack – she was more radical than her contemporaries. It is interesting to note here that at a time when Muslim women were under purdah and ‘progressive’ Brahmo women like Swarnaprabha Basu and Hemlata Sarkar were defining educated women’s dutiful role at home, Rokeya talked of the right to employment. In 1905, when Rokeya was advocating this point of view, some women like Kamini Roy and Kadambini Ganguly had already taken up paid jobs, but from them too, no ideological assertion of this nature had come. Nor had society accepted gainful employment as desirable. Rokeya, almost alone, dared to say that marriage was not the ultimate goal, family was not the ultimate end.

Standing at the threshold of celebrating a hundred and fifty years of education imparted by the University of Calcutta, the basic thrust of my paper is to give a socio-historical approach to the idea of women’s liberation, strisiksha, and striswadhinata in the field of higher education for women in colonial Calcutta and examine how the whole issue moved in between the ideal and the real. Here it is necessary to recapitulate certain important historical dates and events, which, though familiar, are nevertheless necessary at this point to place things in proper perspective. The first step of retracing this century and a half’s journey began in the middle of the nineteenth century. Protestant missionaries in India developed a fully articulated ideology of female education in the 1840s. They employed a separate sphere of gender construction in the colonial context, assigning to the female the leading role as the custodian of culture, thus regarding her as the key to successful proselytism and cultural transformation. It was Fredrick John, the education secretary to the then British Government in India, who first tendered a proposal to the British Government in London for the establishment of a university in Calcutta, along the lines of London University, but at that time the plan failed to obtain the necessary approval. In 1853, Col. Jacob told the Select Committee of Parliament, “I do not think a single female has come under the government system of education
yet.” However a proposal to establish two universities, one in Calcutta and the other in Bombay was later accepted in 1854 and the necessary authority was given. In his famous Education Dispatch of 1854 (the same year), Sir Charles Wood stated in Item no. 83:

The importance of female education in India cannot be over-rated; and we have observed with pleasure the evidence which is now afforded of an increased desire on the part of many natives to give a good education to their daughters. By this means a far greater proportional impulse is imparted to the educational and moral tone of the people than by the education of men.

Dalhousie hailed it as “the beginning of a great revolution in Indian habits.” Three years later, on 24 January 1857 the Calcutta University Act came into force and a 41-member senate was formed as the policy making body of the university. When the university was first established it had a catchment area covering the area from Lahore to Rangoon -- hence any educational movement got either directly or indirectly related to the history of this hallowed institution. During the British era and through the period until Independence, as the Wikipedia website informs us, “it was regarded as one of the few seats of academic excellence to the east of Suez to teach European classics, English literature, European and Indian philosophy, Occidental and Oriental history”.

What was the socio-cultural scenario in Calcutta during that time? Bethune School, opened in 1849, had already begun imparting female education, and gained greater impetus under the aegis of “Society for Promoting Female Education in the East” established in 1855. By 1862, Keshub Chunder Sen had established the Bamabodhini Sabha (though it would be wrong to assume that hundreds of girls flocked to it and that it was run very efficiently). The same year saw the publication of the Bamabodhini Patrika which carried articles on women’s issues and organized a correspondence course for girls through its columns known as antahpur siksha or education in the seclusion of the house. Sen saw women’s education as a necessary means to the end of providing sufficiently ‘qualified’ wives for the modern young men of Bengal. He particularly discouraged teaching young women about science or mathematics so as not to “unnecessarily tax the brain and distract from a girl’s primary goal of happy, uncomplicated domesticity.” It took nearly two decades to bring women out into the open (Calcutta University first opened its doors for girl students in 1877 ) and Bethune College, the first college for women in India, was set up in 1879. Three years later, the Indian Education Commission (Hunter Commission) was established. In 1883, Chandramukhi Basu and Kadambini Basu became the first women graduates in India and the
rest is history. [Incidentally, female students were admitted into Oxford University in 1879 and the tripos was opened to women at Cambridge only in 1881].

As all these facts show, by the late 19th century, in spite of women’s education, the home provided the space for contestants of colonialism. It became the site where modernity was negotiated. Was the choice of living by different rules open to all women irrespective of class? Even within the aristocratic and relevantly affluent classes, where change was not spontaneous, was there any way in which the colonial government could initiate change and chip away at female seclusion in barely perceptible ways? A survey of the history of Bengal during this time shows that the content and purpose of girls’ education became an area of considerable debate among a wide cross-section of people – social reformers, conservatives, housewives and also the women who were being educated. Three years after Begum Rokeya dreamt of imparting scientific education to women, the ground reality remained different. According to the Census of 1901, in Bengal only 1156 women worked as teachers, 67 worked as clerks, 849 were nurses and 151 were doctors (Ray, 452). The question raised by the Committee on Female Education in Bengal in 1908 whether it would be appropriate for purdanashin women, who had up to that point been educated within the household, to attend centers in each locality that drew from different households together, introduced the peripatetic approach to zenana education, an idea that drew much support from the local intelligentsia. What about the reaction of the family and community? Did they open up? Thus till the beginning of the twentieth century, the debate on what girls should be taught continued.

Factual records show that the progress of women in tertiary education was very slow. In 1897, forty years after the established of the Universities of Calcutta, Bombay and Madras, less than 90 women in the whole of India were enrolled for a university degree. Even in 1915-1916, the number was only 457. The Calcutta University Commission (1919) in its Report stated that two distinct needs must be kept in mind in the organization of women’s education.

…the vast majority who will spend their lives in zenana, whose education will cease at an early age, and who ought to be trained to perform their zenana duties with interest and knowledge, and on the other to understand and sympathize with the interest and work of their husbands and brothers; and secondly, the need of the
small but very important minority who will go out into the world to serve their fellows in professional callings, or will play their part in the intellectual activities of the progressive section of Indian society, and want a higher training to be enabled to do so.[ Document no. 119 as quoted in Bhattacharya et al.]

If we study this report carefully we observe three things – a) that the makers of the commission report (in all probabilities men deciding on behalf of the weaker sex) still took it for granted that education will help the zenana perform their domestic duties with interest and knowledge; b) that educated women would be able to sympathize better with the male members of their family and c) only a very small minority among these women will go out in the world and become professionals. Teaching and medicine were the two professions for women that the Commission could envisage. As the title of my paper suggests, I would like to devote the rest of this paper in trying to locate the status of the two professions that the university authorities envisaged for women.

I: Teacher
The first attempt to bring together all women interested in female education in Bengal was the convocation of a Bengal Women’s Education Conference in February 1927 which led to the formation of the Bengal Women’s Education League. According to Lady Abala Bose, first president of the BWEL, the catalyst that stimulated women to organize and promote female education on the provincial and national level was the challenging speech given by Mr. Oaten at Bethune College. In his speech, the Director of Public Education in Bengal proclaimed that women “who can only adequately help us, should tell us with one voice what they want and keep on telling us till they get it.” He went on to enquire of the women present: “How long are you going to tolerate a man-made syllabus, a man-made examination, and a controlling authority in which women have no influence, as the dominant arbiter of your educational destinies?” If we take the objects of the League, they were:

a) To unite all women in Bengal who are interested in the education of the girls and women of India
b) To suggest means and, if necessary, create facilities for the education of girls of all classes and communities in Bengal
c) To provide a channel for expression of expert opinion on educational matters
The primary purpose of the League was to organize in favour of reforms to open up educational opportunities for women. However, the wording of the last objective listed above makes it clear that the League also functioned as a professional association for women educators who welcomed the annual conference as an opportunity to exchange views. The fact that the league functioned not only as a pressure group, but also as a professional association, accounts for the fact that its tone was rarely strident even while espousing radical reforms. In spite of education, we are all aware of how the social conditions of the time did not liberate some of these women from deeply held notions of female modesty and the necessity of male protection. The members of women’s organizations defined themselves as modern, yet at the same time they were also influenced and constrained by the reconfigured notion of the “ideal Indian woman.” For example, they stood for equal educational opportunities but supported both separate schools for girls and home science education to make girls into efficient homemakers. At the same time, they insisted co-educational institutions be opened to women who wanted to attend them. And while they wanted to help poor women, they were seldom willing to work with prostitutes, and some worried they might be confused with their fallen sisters. In 1924, written much later than “Sultana’s Dream,” Rokeya wrote *Padmaraag* in Bengali not only complementing it but wherein she presents a complex educational and philanthropic female utopia. As Barnita Bagchi succinctly explains, “this novella also serves as a polemical, passionate and intellectual treatise on feminism, education and social welfare”(xiv). Drawing from her own experiences of running a pioneering school for Muslim girls, Rokeya not only offers a wryly humorous account of the countless trials faced by the administration of a girls’ school, but introduces us to ordinary women who are trying through their everyday activities to create a utopia in the midst of a humdrum world. She shows how women are all victims of patriarchal oppression and they all need a refuge and the means to become self-reliant. The uncompromisingly ambitious and non–sectarian nature of her vision on education remained once again a far cry from the reality of her times.

II: Medicine

Before the establishment of the University of Calcutta, the first medical school of Asia, the Calcutta Medical College was set up in 1835. It was later affiliated to the university. The study of medicine brings into focus the dichotomy in the definition of the voice of progressive Indian women once again. We know that Kadambini Basu was the first Indian woman to get a
degree in medicine in 1886. She was awarded the GBMC (Graduate of Bengal Medical College) instead of the MB (Bachelor of Medicine) degree because she had failed one part of her final examination. Other Indian women who sought medical degrees were either from reformist religious families, like Kadambini, members of families who were converts to Christianity, or rebels against tradition. Most of them were somehow marginal in their own societies and continued to be disadvantaged in a system that placed men above women. The newspaper *Bangabasi* caricatured a man led “by the nose” by his prostitute wife and later confirmed the man to be Dwarkanath Ganguly, husband of Kadambini. This was another way of calling Kadambini a whore. Many women gave up their practice after marriage because their husbands opposed their employment (cf. Virginia Mary Mitter). Still others, like Dr. Jamini Sen, remained single and had long careers but had to cover her head whenever she stepped out of her home in order to look more “dignified.”

Geraldine Forbes, to whom we owe much pioneering work on the history of Indian and Bengali women, tells us about three kinds of medical education for women – that of midwives (or *dhais*), medical doctors and hospital assistants. In the late nineteenth century, the colonial government decided to promote Western medical care for Indian women from high-ranking and respectable families. Their efforts were informed by a static view of purdah and a construction of the zenana as a dangerous and unhealthy place where disloyalty flourished and women suffered without medical aid. Their goal was to penetrate the zenana, not with force but through lady doctors. To do this they created a new and inferior class of lady doctors, trained in Western medicine through the vernacular, and supported their employment in women-only hospitals in the districts of Bengal. At the same time they worked to discredit traditional medicines and medical practitioners. The reference is to the students of the Campbell Medical School in Calcutta who actually delivered a hybrid form of medicine. This school began the VLMS [Vernacular Licentiate in Medicine and Surgery] course and prepared women with very little formal education to “assist” doctors and admitted its first batch of women students in 1888, five years later than Calcutta Medical College but with fifteen women instead of one. The majority of Campbell’s students lacked formal education and even those who had gone to school had not studied science. They began their study of Western medicine with lectures and textbooks in the Bengali language. Many had thought that the programme would appeal only to Brahmo and native Christian women but this
was not the case. In the first two years there were more Hindu women than Brahmos or native Christians enrolled for the course. The number of women from Hindu and Muslim homes was so high that it prompted *The Indian Messenger* to comment that a “craving for lucrative and useful occupations is daily rising among the indigent class of middle-class Hindu women.” There can be little doubt about the impact of this programme on Bengal between 1891, the year the first student graduated, and 1905, when the programme required more formal schooling, Campbell produced over 50 Bengali women hospital assistants. In spite of their ‘inferior’ degrees, these Campbell graduates had an easy time finding positions in the new women’s hospitals and dispensaries being built in the districts of Bengal. Though well-paid and often having long and productive careers, these professional women still had to face sexual harassment from doctors and other men. Sometimes even public attitude hampered their work. Here we can cite the example of Haimabati Sen (1866-1932), one of India’s early women doctors, who had been trained as a “hospital assistant” and not a full-fledged doctor. Straddling modern medicine and Indian modernity, Haimabati traveled from being a child widow and became a lady doctor. As a practicing doctor in government service from 1894 onwards, her struggle for autonomy against sexual harassment in an all male profession, her fight against domestic abuse and the strains of double work could not prevent her insatiable urge to provide succour to her patients against all odds. We are told how she held her own in difficult circumstances, how her methods differed depending on the situation and how she skillfully framed demands sometimes in the language of the Raj, sometimes acting outside their view and at other times openly defiant of orders.

One interesting fact regarding women’s education at this time remains that nowhere do we get issues associated with employment such as salaries and terms of service discussed or debated. Instead, medical education for women was just validated in terms of service to humanity. In the resolution to admit Kadambini to Calcutta Medical College, the Lieutenant-Governor stated that it was “natural and reasonable” for Indian women who want to “enter a profession which would find, in India…a wide sphere of action and of beneficent service.” Instead of discussing the work of the women doctors, he focused on the clients: “women in every position of life who would prefer death to treatment by a male physician” (quoted in Forbes 118-19). Forbes also points out that by reiterating essentialist views about women’s nature, government officials and reformers rationalized a curriculum for women doctors that would be the same for both sexes and taught in
the same classroom. In contrast, the midwifery programmes were designed for women only. Because these new practitioners would treat only women, they did not appear to be taking “men’s jobs” or competing with men. At the same time, the sites where they practiced, women-only hospitals and private homes, theoretically offered them the protection women needed and desired. The women, many of whom pursued education primarily because they needed to earn a living, were captives of this discourse. Earning an income must have given them some bargaining power within their families but we do not know how much. Because their work roles were the creation of imagined desire (of purdah women for medical care), they never practiced medicine outside of male control.

This dichotomous attitude towards lady doctors continued unabated for several decades and is also reflected in fiction of the times. When Urmimala, the progressive female protagonist of Rabindranath Tagore’s novel Dui Bon expressed her desire to go to England and qualify for the medical profession, her father Raja Ram found himself in a dilemma. Being a bhadralok, a member of a western educated Bengali elite, complying with her wishes meant jeopardizing his social preeminence. At the same time, as an advocate of the movement for emancipation of bhadramahila through education, he did not want to discourage her. Raja Ram’s attitude represents the quandary of the bhadralok at the entrance of women into the medical profession. Tagore published this novel around the 1930s, almost five decades after Bengali women had won a protracted battle to enter the medical schools. A few years later Sarat Chandra Chattpadhyay portrayed the problems that Nalini, the Brahmo protagonist of his famous novel Dotta encountered when she indicated she wanted to enter the medical profession. These novels reflect the social pressures that continued to exist in the early 20th century Bengali society whenever women aspired to enter the medical profession. Was the age-old Calcutta University Commission also indirectly responsible for it?

To conclude, I want to reiterate that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, the margin between the ideal and the real world of women’s education in colonial Calcutta either blurs or overlaps so much that it is hard to believe what is fiction and what is fact.
Works Cited:


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