

Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha and Its Role for Progress of Women Education of Colonial Bengal

Supriya Biswas

Assistant Professor, Department of History, Gour Mahavidyalaya, Malda, West Bengal

After the establishment of British rule in India nay Bengal some Bengali intelligentsia especially in the nineteenth century introduced with Western education and thoughts. They were inspired in a collective way for benevolent activities of their countrymen. As a result many educational, cultural and literary based associations emerged in the first half of the nineteenth century for social reform in Bengal such as 'Academic Association'(1828), 'Society for the Acquisition of General Knowledge'(12th March,1838) of Henry Vivian Derozio, 'Tattvabodhini Sabha'(21st October,1839) of Debendra Nath Tagore, 'Vernacular Translation Society' (December, 1850), 'Bethune Society'(11th December, 1851) of Dr. J.F.Mouat, the Council of Education, 'Bidyotsahini Sabha' (June, 1853) of Kaliprasanna Singha, 'Bamabodhini Sabha'(1863)¹ etc. But 'Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha' was one of them, established on 5th April (Sunday), 1863 by some local (Uttarpara) educated youths under the leadership of Harihar Chattopadhyay². This paper is intended to explore the rise of *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* and its role for the cause of women emancipation of colonial Bengal.

Before going to the detailed discussion on '*Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha*' it is necessary to find out what was the background behind the establishment of '*Hitakari Sabha*'. Nilmani Mukherjee in his book '*A Bengal Zamindar, Jaykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara and His Times 1808-1888*' wrote that "Jaykrishna Mukherjee had no active role in the history of the *Hitakari Sabha*"³. But this organisation for public welfare in Uttarpara, a few miles from Calcutta, owed its origin to the illustrious Mukherjee family of Uttarpara of whom Jaykrishna Mukherjee and his brother Rajkrishna Mukherjee were well-known for their philanthropy and patronage of public causes⁴. Incidentally, Jaykrishna Mukherjee was born on August 24, 1808(9th Bhadra, 1215,) in the village of Uttarpara, now a municipal town in West Bengal, owing its present day importance to the factory of the Hindustan Motors Limited⁵. He was one of the great controversial figures of nineteenth century Bengal. An archetypal member of the 'New Zamindars' who emerged after the Permanent Settlement, he got qualified himself in many fields of activity. Jaykrishna initiated many overtures in society, necessitating reorganisations, especially in the field of education.

In order to understand the rise of '*Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha*' it is essential to note down a few words about the contributions of Jaykrishna Mukherjee to bring Uttarpara to the limelight of history. The *Hitakari Sabha* and the history of Uttarpara are intimate connected and very lightly the importance of Uttarpara as a centre of intellectual activities directly or indirectly contributed to the origin and growth of the *Hitakari Sabha* in this subsequent period. The general picture of Uttarpara society was extremely depressing. Their existence was marked by certain aimlessness. Mentally they lived in a kind of fatalistic torpor and they had no will for change. They lived an idle and monotonous life, their only recreation being music, dramatic performances and addiction to drugs and the wine. For education they were almost care less. This was the pattern of life of old and youths both⁶.

Jaykrishna was, however, immediately concerned with the problem of his own backward village because Jaykrishna studied the movements which were changing the intellectual climate of Bengal. He believed that what it urgently needed was a good English School. Towards the end of 1845 the two brothers sent an application to G. F. Cockburn, Magistrate of Howrah, pointing out the necessity of opening a good school to serve the populous villages of Uttarpara, Konnagar and Bali. The Government welcomed this proposal, accepting the terms and conditions of the endowment. The school was opened on May 16, 1846 by Robert Hand, its first Headmaster⁷.

Founding the boys' English School was, however, only a part of Jaykrishna's educational programme for Uttarpara. Simultaneously, with their proposal for the boys' school, Jaykrishna and Rajkrishna had submitted another similar proposal for establishing a girls' school at Uttarpara for which also they promised an endowment. Jaykrishna not only made the proposal to open a public school for girls but intimated his readiness to send his two daughters Laxmi and Saraswati there to be educated. In 1845, the step was nothing short of being revolutionary. Up to that time only the missionaries had been active in this field. It is true, some leaders like Raja Radhakanta Deb and Raja Vaidyanath Roy of Jorasanko had supported female education, but no one had as yet dared thinking in Jaykrishna's terms. It was remarkable that in formulating his educational programme for Uttarpara Jaykrishna thought not only of the boys of his village but also of the little girls behind the *purdah* whose opportunities were even less. The Council of Education considered the proposal but thought it advisable to put off the matter for the time being. Jaykrishna and Rajkrishna received a vaguely encouraging but non-committal reply from the Council in June, 1845. In this way, Jaykrishna's first effort to promote female education, which anticipated Bethune's by at least four years, proved to be unsuccessful⁸.

Again in 1849 Jaykrishna and Rajkrishna wrote to the Council of Education, renewing their proposal of 1845 to found a girls' school at Uttarpara. As this proposal awaited the decision of the Council of Education, its President, J. E. D. Bethune, the new Law Member, went ahead with his own scheme of founding a girls' school in Calcutta. The Hindu Female School (later known as Bethune School) was opened on May 7, 1849 which Bethune described as a day "of no common gladness and Triumph". Bethune then alluded to the problems he had to face in formulating his school. Similar difficulties would doubtless beset Jaykrishna's venture. So, once again Jaykrishna and his brother received a polite negative reply from the Council. Jaykrishna, however, was unable to take any immediate steps to open a girls' school at Uttarpara⁹.

After that as we shall see later, initiative in this respect eventually passed to his brothers Rajkrishna Mukherjee and Bijaykrishna Mukherjee (step-brother of Jaykrishna Mukherjee). It may be noted that, the modern Bengali educated middle class elite were intellectually alert, socially progressive and politically conscious. They were also sufficiently conscious to lead the social reform movement of Bengal and naturally had taken much interest in the cause of education and of course female education and all other injurious social customs that barricaded the progress of the society. Incidentally, the Mukherjee family of Uttarpara seems to have been directly influenced by such a situation and having been failed to establish girls' school, they took up other course of action to materialise their goal. Though they did not get any co-operation from Government to open a girls' school at Uttarpara but they continued their impetus with private enterprise. Here we can say that, they were inspired by some kind of mentality which was the impact of Western education and Bengal Renaissance. In fact, they had the credit to internalise the degraded position of women in society and realised that without education the women emancipation was impossible in those days. Finally, on 23rd February, 1863 Rajkrishna Mukherjee and Bijoykrishna Mukherjee established Uttarpara girls' school and in that time the students was only 8 (eight) in number. This may be considered a success of their endeavours first of its kind and obviously further attempt was suppose to be taken up for a overall development of women and of course to save them from so called social customs.

Fortunately, the situation was favourable to them. Because, at this hour there was a trend of establishing cultural and literary societies in Bengal and the purpose was to ameliorate the social, intellectual and moral condition of people of Bengal¹⁰. In these circumstances '*Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha*' was established. This was in fact, a result of the enthusiasm of the period and the responses of the educated youths a feeling developed in Uttarpara for the cause of the formation of an association which could bring to light the issues of women particularly the modern education leading to emancipation from the age old tradition.

After the establishment of Uttarpara *Hitakari Sabha* the sessions of the *Sabha* were held firstly at Uttarpara Government Vernacular School and then by the request of Jogindra Chandra Mukhopadhyay it was held in Uttarpara Girls School. Hence, the Uttarpara Girls' School and *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* merged with each other. But from 19th July, 1863, the office of the *Hitakari Sabha* was permanently established in the resident of Rajkrishna Mukherjee and the annual sessions of the *Sabha* was held in his residence. So, on one hand, the *Sabha* enjoyed the co-operation of Rajkrishna Mukherjee and on the other, Bijoykrishna Mukherjee attached himself with the welfare activities of *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha*. Bijoykrishna was the first President of the *Sabha*¹¹.

In the words of Mary Carpenter, who visited India in 1866, "The great objects of the *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* are to educate the poor, to distribute medicines to the indigent sick, to support poor widows and orphans, to encourage female education and to ameliorate the social, moral and intellectual condition of the inhabitants of Ootterparah and the places adjoining"¹². Though the organisation had very wide objects, it mainly concentrated on the spread of women's education for its economic crises and the Report on Public Instruction for 1876-77 stated that "The chief authority on the subject of female education in the Burdwan division is the *Hitakari Sabha*"¹³.

In the second half of the nineteenth century Bengal those organizations were took the impetus for the spread of female education, amongst them *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* was most important for its wideness and permanency. Women education was being promoted in many districts of Bengal such as Burdwan, Bankura, Hooghly and Howrah for the assistance of *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha*. It was the contemporary organization of *Bamabodhini Sabha* and for the growth of encouragement in women education and this *muffosil* organization initiated examination of the school girls'. This *Sabha* did the advertisement in 1864 and from 1865 started taking the examination of girls' students of Hooghly and Howrah district. The *Hitakari Sabha* realised the importance of scholarship to the girls' as an inspiration for education and this was as a recognition of their merit in the examinations held throughout the year. There were three types of scholarship examinations namely 'Lower Primary', 'Upper Primary' and 'Middle Vernacular' (Previously known as Junior, Senior and Final scholarship examinations). The course of studies in each scholarship examination was for two years. For the participation in the scholarship examinations affiliated school authority had to appeal the *Sabha*. The Eighth Annual Report of the *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* stated that girls' school of Uttarpara, Bali, Konnagar, Rishra, Serampore, Mahesh, Johannagar, Shibpur and Ariadaha use to participate in the above mentioned scholarship examinations¹⁴.

Gradually, the students of the *Sabha* were increased in every year. At first the examinations of affiliated schools of the *Sabha* were held at the end of academic year or on March. In later period, the examinations were held in the month of December or earlier. There were no examination fees for entry to sit in the examination until 1915. One could enjoy her scholarship if she regularly studied in the next course in any school. In that connection, poet Kamini Roy from Howrah girls' school got the scholarship for her good result in the examination of the *Sabha*. Side by side, *Hitakari Sabha* initiated to award head *Pundit* of girls' schools to encourage them through competition for which girls' would be prepared to take highest position in the examinations¹⁵. So, the honour and recognition of teacher is truly appreciable. *Hitakari Sabha* firstly took initiatives to spread the primary education for women to Howrah and Hooghly district and then in all Burdwan division. It is very clear that, the *Sabha* followed the model of modern education of the British.

This *Sabha* not only established girls' schools, but also it arranged *Zenana* education for aged women. Though the female education got the special attention by the impact of Renaissance, but for aged women seclusion was the obstacle for education. So, the *Sabha* had to device the alternative way for female education that was '*Zenana Education*'. In this connection, we may refer the initiative of Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjee who for the first time in 1840 realised the importance of *Zenana* education¹⁶. It is likely that, the *Hitakari Sabha* successfully responded to this trend and this example no doubt justifies the

realistic attitude towards the progress of women education of colonial Bengal and this single example sufficiently justifies the progressive attitude of the *Zamindar* family of Uttarpara. From 1868 *Hitakari Sabha* started 'Zenana Examination' or 'Antahpurika Examination' for the girls of Final examination - "A *Zenana* candidate is one who prosecutes her studies at home after the age of twelve or after marriage"¹⁷. Mary Carpenter wrote in her book "Six Months in India" about this type of special education that "Young ladies who are obliged to leave the school on account of marriage are permitted to continue their studies in the *Zenana*, and to hold scholarships. A native convent female teacher, who was employed in the school, visits them at their home and conducts the necessary examinations"¹⁸.

The course of studies prescribed by the *Sabha* was appropriately suited to their condition of life, calculated to make them exemplary mothers and wives consisting of advanced literature including ethics and studies from *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Arithmetic, Hygiene, Midwifery and so on. From 1871, the *Sabha* started scholarship for *Antahpurika* candidates to pay sufficient attention to their studies. In 1872, Rajbala Devi of Uttarpara and Sailanandini Devi of Bali took part in the *Antahpurika* Examinations and got the scholarship. In this way, from 1868-1939 *Hitakari Sabha* continued the *Zenana* Examinations and during the years total 80 women passed out and got the degree in these examinations. Most important thing is that, many Muslims and Santhals women took part in this examination and came out successful¹⁹. It is thus clear that, the *Sabha* had broad based attitude towards society and the women in particular and their programme was never confined in a narrow circle.

The *Hitakari Sabha* and its various welfare activities did mentioned again and again in several Governmental Reports and cotemporary periodicals regarding women education. For example, Mr. Henry Woodrow, Inspector of Central Division stated in his Report: "The greatest progress in Female Education, and the best schools, whether English or Vernacular, are to be found in the district under *Pundit* Madhab Chunder Turko Sindhanta,the progress of female education is greatly due to the labours of the OOTERPARAH HITOKARI SHOVA....."²⁰. In this Report he mentioned *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* as '*Ooterpara Desh Hitoyeni Shova*' because of its increase of the numbers under instruction, beneficial action and prospect of general improvement in the quality of the instruction imparted. Mary Carpenter wrote in her book titled 'Six Months in India' about the activities of *Hitakari Sabha* in which displayed by a body of young men interested in the training of their sisters and daughters²¹. Beside these, many cotemporary periodicals like '*Hindoo Patriot Patrika*', '*Aryadarshan Patrika*', '*Bamabodhini Patrika*' etc. were also highly appreciated about its activities and achievements²².

Keeping in view the burning need of education among women and even the aged ones the *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* did an admirable job to diffuse education among women. Its contributions were even recognized and appreciated H. J. Reynolds, Vice Chancellor of the Calcutta University and he cited it in his convocation address on March 10, 1883 that, "The exertions of that admirable institution, the *Uttarpara Sabha* have largely contributed to the measure of success which has been attained". Lastly, it is perhaps worthy of mention that, for its admirable effort in the field of female education, the *Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha* in those days had rightly been called the "Female University"²³.

We have already seen how the *Hitakari Sabha* had taken up certain initiatives to uplift the status of Bengali women and in this respect, they had to cross over many socio-political barricades to materialize its goal. It is likely that, the *Hitakari Sabha* was nothing but the product of the age, I mean that of nineteenth century and when the women question became an issue of the Bengal Renaissance. The *zamindar* family of Uttarpara timely responded to this cause and in this regard, they made an exceptional contribution for the progress of female education of colonial Bengal.

Notes and References

1. Jogesh Chandra Bagal, 'Banglar Nabya Sanskriti' (in Bengali), Viswabharati, 1958, p.1; see also Maleka Begum & Saiyad Ajjil Hoque, 'Ami Nari, Tinsho Bacharer Bangali Narir Itihas' (in Bengali), The University Press Limited, Dhaka, First Published- 2001, p.61.
2. Basanta Kumar Samanta, 'Hitakari Sabha, Stree Siksha O Tatkalin Bangasamaj' (in Bengali), Sahityalok, Kolkata, Agrahayan 1394 (B.S), November 1987, p.11.
3. Nilmani Mukherjee, A Bengal Zamindar, Jaykrishna Mukherjee of Uttarpara and His Times 1808-1888, Firma K. L. Mukhopadhyay, Calcutta, 1975, p.156.
4. Nema Sadhan Bose, Indian Awakening And Bengal, Firma KLM Private Limited, Calcutta, Reprint-1990, p.364.
5. Shri Jnanendra Nath Kumar (Compiled), Bangsha Parichoy, Vol.3, Aswin 1330(B.S), Kolkata, p.170
6. Nilmani Mukherjee, op.cit. p.77
7. ibid, pp.78-81.
8. ibid, pp. 82-83.
9. ibid, pp. 153-156.
10. Basanta Kumar Samanta, op.cit. p.15. The young educated youths of Uttarpara they should aspire for some kind of associations and institutions such as 'Bethune Society' (1851), 'Uttarpara Samaj' (1853) by Jadunath Mukhopadhyay (father of Jaykrishna Mukherjee), 'Uttarpara Association' by Jaykrishna Mukherjee and Hindu School (1817) in Calcutta, Serampore College (1818), social welfare activities of Serampore missionaries etc. through which they could put their ideas into practices and which could serve as a forum for their intellectual activities. These groups of young aspirants were sufficiently near Calcutta to be influenced by the intellectual movements of the Capital, and also near Serampore to derive some lessons from the work of the Baptist Missionaries.
11. Basanta Kumar Samanta, op.cit. pp. 15-16.
12. Nema Sadhan Bose, op.cit. pp. 364-365.
13. Loc.cit.
14. Basanta Kumar Samanta, op.cit. PP. 34-36. They enjoyed monthly scholarship in the Lower Pimary, Upper Primary and Middle Vernacular examinations respectively Rs.1 (one), Rs.2 (two) and 3(three). The duration of enjoyment of the scholarships were for two years (in previous for one year).
15. The Eighth Annual Report of the Uttarpara Hitakari Sabha for the year 1870-71, p.14; see also Basanta Kumar Samanta, op.cit. p.37.
16. 'Social and Educational Movements for women and by Women 1820-1950' an article by Latika Ghose in Bethune College & School Centenary Volume 1849-1949, Calcutta, p.132. Reverend Krishna Mohan Banerjee wrote an essay in 1840 on "Indian Female Education" and here he recommended 'private tuition' instead of 'a system of public school', in view of the influence of purdah.
17. Mary Carpenter, 'Six Months in India', Vol. 1, London, 1868, p. 244.
18. Basanta Kumar Samanta, op.cit. p. 39.
19. Report of the Director of Public Instruction 1865-66, Appendix A- Inspectors' Reports, p.10.
20. Mary Carpenter, op.cit. pp. 242-243.
21. The Hindoo Patriot Patrika, May 7, 1866, wrote: "It is much to be wished that every town in the Muffosil had its Hitakari Sabha";
22. Aryadarshan Patrika, Chaitra, 1283 (B.S) wrote: "The spread of female education is the most important activities of the Sabha and for this Bangladeh is specially indebted to the Sabha"; see also 'Samayik Prasanga' an article in Bamabodhini Patrika, Baishakh, 1307 (B.S), p.3.
23. Sudhir Kumar Mitra, Hooogly Zelar Itihas -O- Banga Samaj (in Bengali), 1968, Vol.3, p.1238.