Empire and Women: Perspectives on Literacy in 19th Century Punjab

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Since time immemorial utilitarian considerations have continued to determine both human behaviour and conduct. Wars, military conquests, arms build-ups, tribal feuds, and armed rebellions, have all been the functions of man's infinite desire to maximise wealth. The quest for a more humane and civil society, committed to the rule of law and equality of mankind, has yet to overcome numerous impediments preserved in the name of a 'hallowed' tradition. Eradication of the traditional gender-based division of labour, and many other barriers to female literacy and progress, so vital from the point of an egalitarian society, would be well nigh impossible without protective legislation and restructing of administrative and professional hierarchies of the state. Deconstruction of gender and elimination of gender-based discrimination, inspired and assisted by the state, have been less problematic in the context of developed economies and the industrialised states, than in transitional societies where feudo-political systems have remained impervious to egalitarian change. Unlike the modern nation-state where the imperatives of democratic order have compelled reluctant recognition of women's worth, the unresponsiveness of the colonial state a century ago in the colonial Punjab was detrimental to the people in general and women in particular. The British rule in the Punjab, with its typically masculine ambience, encouraged both social and economic dependence of women.

Could universal literacy fight off the evils of antiquarian tradition which encouraged domestication of women and reduced them to mere

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adjuncts of men? Since discrimination against women has persisted even in most literate and industrialised nations, it is less sure whether literacy alone would be a guarantee for a gender-free society of equal opportunities. Nevertheless, the importance of literacy in the empowerment of women at home and in the society cannot be underestimated, as educated women, like men, are known to have made greater contribution, through enlightened choices, to the welfare of the family and society in general. Despite that accepted relevance of literacy to the development of an equitable system, the male-dominated political edifices of the state have blocked the creation of opportunity for women's progress and social mobility.

Researches in the past, with their European perspectives, have tended to overlook political contexts in their accounts of female literacy. This is to ignore the varied experiences of women and differential growth of literacy from one region or state to another, which cry for separate investigation. The aim of this article is to situate the process of female literacy in the colonial context, with a view to highlighting the inadequacy of the government's role as an instrument of egalitarian change.

Education was not exotic in Punjab at the time of its annexation in 1849. The people in general sought the education of their children with a view to encouraging the cultivation of tastes and high morals. Neither Islam, nor Hinduism, and Sikhism made distinction of gender, age, caste, and colour while stressing a community of literate believers. They lauded the virtues of *ilm* (knowledge) over the vices of *jahalat* (ignorance) and stressed education, whether religious or profane. A somewhat egalitarian educational tradition was prevalent in pre-British Punjab, where literacy and its sources, *masajids* and *makatibs* for Muslims, and *patshala* and Gurmukhi schools for Hindus and Sikhs, were open to everyone regardless of financial status. Those indigenous institutions had to suffer, quantitatively as well as qualitatively, from the ravages of internecine Sikh wars. As after the death of Aurangzeb (1707) peace and tranquillity had never visited Punjab, its political instability and feeble economy impinged on the course of learning. The Sikh interlude (1799-1849), imbedded in public memory as *sikha shahi*,[1] connoting lawlessness, passed without evidence of government support to the cause of education. Yet the colonial administrators were struck by the presence of a large

1. For general images of Sikh rule from public memory, see Parkash Tandon, *Punjabi Century*, (New Delhi: 1961).

number of indigenous schools, however dormant,[2] as the indices of public interest in education.

The Punjab government had no intention of reviving the indigenous schools, as it was bound by the imperial policy of restricting official patronage to Western-type education. To its surprise, Punjabis showed a great resilience to adjust to the new milieu and British policy on education. The utilitarian advantages of English education elsewhere in India had impressed the literate castes and classes in Punjab, including Hindu *Khatris*, *Banias*, *Aroras*, and *Brahmans*, and Muslim *Sayyids*, *Mughals* and *Sheikhs*, and Sikh *Bedis* and *Sodhis*. Their insistence on English, the language of the government and the rulers, in preference to Urdu, Hindo-Nagri, and Punjabi-Gurmukhi, revealed their anxiety to improve their life stations with its help. Also underlying their insistence upon English was an animated desire to replace the English-educated Bengali *babu* and Hindu *Brahmans* from the North-Western Provinces, who, having accompanied the British to the Punjab at the time of annexation, occupied most of the jobs in the province. Thus the nascent desire for English education in Punjab stemmed from mundane considerations, a phenomena that has persisted to this date. With restricted scope, the avenues of colonial education were open only to a tiny urban bourgeoisie, and least to peasant population, working classes and women in general.

The bulk of Punjab's peasant population, living in sparse and scattered hamlets or colony villages, had no access to the new city-based government, and non-government missionary and private schools and colleges. And it was not till the close of the 19th century that the British policy makers, in pursuance of Lord Curzon's educational reforms (1902), recognised the need for elementary education of the peasants, who, despite their loyalty to the *Raj*, had been the unprotected victims of exploitation by the Hindu moneylender, courtesy of the British policy of *laissez-faire*. Even that cosmetic shift, stressing the three R'S (reading, writing and a little arithmetic), was aimed at preserving the rural order through rudimentary education barely adequate to enable a poor peasant to maintain his accounts and become a more productive cultivator.[3] Struck

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2. According to Leitner there were indigenous schools in almost every village and town of Punjab at the time of annexation. See G.W. Leitner, *History of the Indigenous Education in Punjab Since Annexation and in 1881* (Calcutta: 1882).

3. This was because English education at the post-primary level was presumed by the officials to have encouraged disinclination towards ancestral occupations, and was

by the masculinity, sturdiness and enterprising outlook of the Punjabi peasant, and driven also by imperial considerations, the colonial administrators encouraged the former to persevere in his ancestral occupation and millenarian characteristics. Having seen the emergence of an English-educated elite in Bengal, Bombay and Madras, generally critical of the British rule, they came to discourage any random proliferation of educational opportunities. In fact, the peasant population of Punjab, whether male of or female, Muslim or non-Muslim, remained educationally backward during this period.

Most of the girls in Punjab who attended colonial schools were those who lived in towns and cities where educational institutions were set up by the government, Christian missions, and Hindu, Muslim and Sikh religio-reform organisations, and whose fathers and brother were either in government service or had been educated. By the time of the famous Education Commission's inquiry (Hunter) (1882), there were only nine girls of Indian origin at secondary stage in the Punjab's only secondary school for girls, the Alexandria School at Amritsar, and 9,207 in primary schools.[4] Two decades later, by the time of Curzon's reforms, the number had increased to 35 secondary schools for girls with 2,795 scholars (1,786 Christian, 691 Hindu, 295 Muslim, and 77 Sikh, Parsi and others).[5] As a minuscule minority of girls in Punjab was under Public instruction,[6] female education was what a Punjabi official called "a tender plant".[7]

While the small number of girls under public instruction revealed the general apathy of the people towards female education, their larger number in free primary as opposed to fee charging secondary schools and colleges was the function of normative conformity among the elites to seclude girls after the age of ten. The tendency among the *ashraf* (genteel) Muslims and caste Hindus not to seek paid work by women resulted in the absence of elites from girls' schools, which in turn discouraged the lower

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also held responsible for producing a class of 'ungrateful *babus*' who were generally critical of the Raj.

4. *Report on Public Instruction in Punjab* [hereafter PPIR], (1882-83), 70.

5. *Fourth Quinquennial Review of Education in India*, 1897-98-1901-02, 111.

6. Inhabited by some 236 major and minor tribes and castes, the total population of Punjab minus North-West Frontier in 1901 was 20,330,339, which included 10,825,698 Muslims, 7,874,413 Hindus, 1,517,019 Sikhs, 65811 Christians. See, *Census of India, 1901, Punjab*, vol.xvii-A, Table xiii-ii.

7. James Douie, *The Punjab, North-West Frontier Province and Kashmir*, (Cambridge: 1916), 124.

classes from entering an arena reproached by their social superiors. The undergrowth of female literacy demonstrated parental dislike of what they considered as amoral, Euro-centric and Christian curriculum of government and mission schools, incompatible with the life stations of Punjabi women.[8] Devoid of religious content, colonial education was predestined to a lukewarm support among the Punjabis who attached great importance to moral upbringing of girls, the bearers of 'hallowed' tradition and future generations. A bold stroke of policy was needed to stir public sympathy.

The role of the state as a balancer between its unequally developed ethnic groups and interests has been widely recognised. In the United States, legislation aimed at racial equality of blacks and whites has had a diminutive effect on racial prejudices against blacks. In India too, the government had recognised the lopsided effects of *laissez-faire* as early as the year 1870. To this effect, William Wilson Hunter, the master statistician, inspired by the viceroy, Lord Mayo, wrote his famous *The Indian Muslamans* (1870). In Punjab, the Anglo Indian bureaucracy launched passionate appeals to Lahore and Calcutta, the provincial and imperial capitals, for policy intervention on behalf of the peasants, mostly Muslims to save them from the exploitation of the moneylenders. Arthur Brandreth and S.S. Thorburn,[9] the two civilians, made ample please for protective class legislation. And their efforts, with active support from many more civilians, finally led to the passage of the pro-peasant Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900, which prohibited the sale of agricultural land to non-agriculturists, effectively Hindu moneylenders.[10] Since 1870, Calcutta also sent intermittent reminders and educational dispatches to the provincial governments urging intervention on behalf of the educationally underdeveloped strata, Muslims and women. To what extent was his noble exhortation followed by the Punjab government?

The government records exaggerated official sympathy for the cause of women's education. The Annual Education and Administration Reports

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8. In keeping with its so-called of religious neutrality, the Imperial government did not allow the teaching of religious subjects in government schools nor made the same examinable when introduced by non-governmental institutions.

9. For Thorburn's views on *Laissez-faire*, See S.S. Thorburn, *Muslamans and Moneylenders in the Punjab* (Edinburgh: 1887).

10. For an authoritative account of Anglo-Indian views on *Laissez-faire*, See Peter H.M. Van Dungen, *The Punjab Tradition: Influence and Authority in the 19th Century India* (London: 1972).

regularly pointed to public prejudices against female education. Official *durbars* (grand assemblies) exhorted the affluent Punjabis to give equal importance to the education of sons and daughters. John Lawrence (1859). Robert Montgomery (1859-65), Donald Macleod (1865-70) and Charles Aitchison (1880-87), distinguished civilian lieutenant-governors of Punjab, all urged the need for female education. Of them, John Lawrence and Robert Montgomery also took bold steps to eliminate female infanticide by propaganda and a fool-proof system of registering births and deaths.[11] Even Christian women from the United States petitioned Queen Victoria for the eradication of female infanticide and early marriages among women. The mounting criticism of indigenous tradition, followed by appeals for equal treatment of women, failed to influence policy intervention. Even the liberal colonial administrators were not prepared to do more than lip service to the cause of female literacy. The evasive reaction of Charles Aitchison to the recommendations of the *Hunter Report* urging various incentives to female literacy was an example. Reaffirming commitment to the filtration theory of education, Aitchison refused to do more and preferred to await the emergence of a demand from the perculatory effects of male education.[12] His reaction was yet another reminder of the conservative streaks so common in colonial administrators, whether liberal or conservatives, who stressed the importance of Western education from a male perspective. Nearly half a century ago when William Bentinck, the governor-general, had decided to introduce English education in India, female education was not even on his agenda. And when in 1849, the unconventional, Drinkwater Bethune, Dalhousie's Law Member, set up the Bethune School at Calcutta for girls, the first ever in the public sector, there were more official counsels to discourage him than support the idea. It was the imaginary fear of indigenous reactions that haunted the officials, although the success of Bethune School had pointed to the contrary. Thus the colonial officials and their Indian deputies recognised the primacy of male education. What purpose would be served by a woman taught in Western-type schools, as opposed to one taught in an indigenous school or home-tutored; Such

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11. Masood Akhtar Zahid, 'Traditionalism and Female Literacy in Late Nineteenth Century Punjab", *Journal of Pakistan Historical Society*, vol.xlv, April 1997, 203-13.

12. Aitchison was a liberal lieutenant-governor of Punjab who actively promoted education in the province. He played a major role in the establishment of Punjab University College and the famous Aitchison College in Lahore in 1867 and 1886.

questions often governed official-parental thinking on the question of female literacy.

The traditional education of a woman was designed so as to enhance her marriagibility and fitness for the sole career of wife. This in view, most Punjabi families laid stress on the rote learning of the Qur`an, basics of Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism, and certain religious and moral primers (mostly by the elderly ladies of the house or from the neighbourhood). Girls were discouraged from learning to write, as writing was considered of no practical use to a woman.[13] Respect for age and service to the parents, family, and in-laws was carefully ingrained in girls from childhood through adolescence. Knitting sewing, and cookery were the preferred items in a girl`s informal education tailored to her pre and post-marriage domestic responsibilities. It was this type of education, circumscribed in scope and aim, that was popular in the patriarchal Punjabi society.

As in India, so in the Punjab, the patriarchal modes of the society displayed little dissimilarities from those in the Western countries, including colonial powers. Their identical features were the separation of the public and private spheres of life, the exclusion of women from the economic marketplace and decision-making the belief that the chaste behaviour of women represents the moral fibre of society, that women are repositories of a society`s mores, and that upper class women are fragile beings.[14] The free use of faith to justify patriarchy, reinforced by the imperial encounter and policies, deprived women of their rights, regardless of ethnic, religious and class backgrounds. The historical male justification of patriarchy in the name of religion forced women into a reluctant acceptance of an unequal and inferior position vis-a-vis men.[15] The British strengthened the patriarchy in a number of ways. They introduced the customary law of Hindus in Punjab which deprived women of a share in property; and when the same law was revised in 1937, women were still not allowed a share in agricultural land. This discrimination, opposed to the injunctions of Islam, the religion of the

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13. It was because of this reason that census commissioners in Punjab always found it hard to define and determine the precise level of female literacy, as most men would not disclose the ability of their women to write, a social taboo.

14. Farida Shaheed, "The Cultural Articulation of Patriarchy" in Fareeha Zafar, (ed), *Finding Our Way: Reading on Women in Pakistan*, (Lahore: 1991), 127.

15. *Ibid.*, 135

majority in Punjab, was allowed in deference to the feudal and tribal structures in the rural areas, so crucial to the Raj.

Given the patriarchal nature of the Punjabi society, it fell to the educated male reformers to defend and promote female literacy. A large number of Hindu, Muslim and Sikh reform organisations sprang up during the 1888s and 1890s, which adopted female education as an important item on their reformist agenda. The leading reform organisations were the Hindu Arya Samaj, Muslim *Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam*, *Anjuman-i-Islamia*, and Sikh Singh Sabha. Local Arya Samajes of Lahore, Amritsar and Jullundur distinguished themselves as promoters of female literacy. By September 1885, there were three girls' primary schools under the management of Amritsar Sabha; and the Jullundur Sabha opened the famous Kanya Patshala in the city in 1890, and a high school, Kanya Maha Vidyala, in 1896.[16] The Arya girls' schools owed their origin to the selfless philanthropy and consistent efforts by Lala Munshi Ram and Lala Dev Raj. Unlike other Aryas, such as Lajpat Rai, Lala Lal Chand, Ralla Ram, Kashi Ram and Sundur Suri, who either opposed female education beyond primary school or supported a differentiated curriculum to suit gender and separate functions of Hindu men and women,[17] Munshi Ram and Dev Raj were persistent in their advocacy of unrestricted growth of female education at all levels. Apart from them, the work of Bibi Guru Devi as the headmistress of the Patshala at Jullundur commanded respect among the Aryas and educated circles throughout the province. The curriculum at the Patshala and its descendent, Kanya Maha Vidyalya stressed in addition to basic literacy, sewing, embroidery, drawing cooking, some music, poetry, games, arithmetic, hygiene, and religious literature of the Samaj.

More or less identical considerations motivated the Muslim reformers in Punjab to defend female literacy. On the one hand, some Urdu newspapers waged a valiant struggle to change the predicament of women. From Delhi, *Akhbari-un-Niswan*, (women's newspaper, 1884) and *Talim-un-Niswan* (female literacy, 1885) continually stressed women's birthright to education and social mobility. The publication from Lahore of *Shareef Bibyan* (respectable women) in 1893 and *Tehzib-i-Niswan* (reform of women) in 1898 marked the advent of nascent

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16. Kenneth W. Jones, *Arya Dharm: Hindu Consciousness in 19th Century Punjab*, (Berkeley: 1976), 217.

17. These Aryas were opposed to a standardised form of education which would 'unsex' the women. *The Tribune*, Lahore, 1 April 1894, 5.

feminism in Urdu journalism. Maulvi Mahboob Alam, the editor of Punjab's most popular newspaper, *The Paisa Akhbar*, wrote regular columns to attack male conservatism and other barriers to women's literacy.[18] Drawing on Quran and the saying of the Prophet, he helped generate a demand for female literacy. Most trumpeted defense of women's rights and literacy was offered, however, by the literary activism of Syed Mumtaz Ali and his illustrious wife, Muhammadi Begum. Mumtaz Ali's book *Huquq-un-Niwan* (rights of women) and their weekly *Tehzib-i-Niswan*, edited by his wife, deprecated the traditional lot of a woman and her servile existence.[19] The couple regarded female literacy as indispensable to any attempt at the empowerment of women and thus paved the ground for educational work by the Muslim *anjumans*.

To counter the influence of missionary propaganda and to provide an alternative to Christian education in mission schools, or secular curriculum in government schools, *Anjuman Himayat-i-Islam* of Lahore and its local branches established schools for girls in various cities. The curriculum in *anjuman* schools was same as in Arya schools, the distinction being that a special care was taken in Islamia schools to promote Muslim identity through an emphasis on Urdu and *dinyat* (study of Islam). Besides the *Himayat-i Islam*, the *Anjuman Islamia* of Amritsar, led by its untiring president Maulvi Barkat Ali, also launched a crusade to raise the Muslim community, particularly its illiterate female population. The interesting feature of the activities of *Anjuman Islamia* or, for that matter, of the *Himayat-i Islam* was that unlike Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, the foremost Muslim reformer, whose educational work in the North Western Provinces had inspired them to initiate similar work in Punjab, they did not share his conservatism on the question of female education. Sir Sayyid had described the defence of women's education as anachronistic and ahead of its time, yet the *anjumans* went ahead with their programme of providing Western education to Muslim girls. Eminent Punjabis associated with the work of Muslim *anjumans*, which included Justice Shah Din of Lahore High Court, Allama Iqbal, Mian Mohammad Shafi and Sheikh Abdul Qadir. *Anjumans* relied for financial assistance

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18. Dushka H. Saiyid, *Muslim Women of the British Punjab: From Seclusion to Politics*, (London: 1998), 53-55.

19. For an authoritative account of their struggle, see Gail Minault, Syed Mumtaz Ali and Tehzib-e Niswan: Women's Rights in Islam and Women's Journalism in Urdu", in Kenneth W. Jones, (ed), *Religious Controversy in British India: Dialogues in South Asian Languages*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 179-99.

on Refuse Fund, *atta* (flour) fund, individual donations, endowments and collection of animal hides on *Eid*.

As for the Sikhs, they had a number of Singh Sabhas established in major cities including Lahore and Amritsar, which worked for the rebirth of Sikh community through modern education. But the man who distinguished himself in the field of female literacy was an influential Sikh, Baba Khem Singh Bedi, the direct descendent of Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism, who established girls' schools in the districts of Rawalpindi and Jhelum, and thus earned a high applause from his community and the government. Besides Khem Singh, the name of Bhai Gurmukh Singh, the first professor of Punjabi in the Punjab University's Oriental College at Lahore, would be indispensable to any account of Sabha movement in Punjab, of which he was a relentless leader and the ideologue.

What triggered the male reformers to stress female literacy? Educated as they were in modern schools, these distinguished Punjabis owed their social eminence to English education. Aware of the utilitarian benefits of colonial education, they advocated its spread among their co-religionists. They criticised the rigidity of their own tradition, including the scruples of *pardah*, which consigned women to the separate and secluded world of *zenana* (women's part of the household). They stressed a woman's birthright to education from the religious and utilitarian standpoints. They knew how the Christian missions in Punjab had taken up female education as part of their evangelical effort. They were distressed with way the 'captive' and impressionable audience of girls' schools was made to listen to naked attacks on their faith. In reaction, they set up schools, which according to K.W. Jones, offered educational opportunity with safety, by blending religious and secular education.[20]

Despite their noble exertions, education imparted in reform schools did not seek a radical reconstruction of women with redefined roles. Like the Anglo-Indian administrators, the reformists denounced excesses against women whether perpetrated in the name of a 'hallowed' tradition or a misinterpreted faith, such as polygamy, female infanticide, child-marriages, *pardah* and prohibition of widow-remarriage. Yet they did not anticipate any public role for women. They still believed in sexual division of labour and did not consider gender as social and cultural construction. Therefore, they did not seek to create unconventional women, but moral

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20. Kenneth Jones, *Arya Dharm*, (Berkeley: 1976), 68.

mothers and wives. Girls were educated to make them more desirable in the marriage market. The reformists shared and promoted the elite perceptions with relation to women and their social roles. To them, as also to most European men in India, a woman existed to marry and bear children,[21] and must be an affectionate wife and tender mother. It is no wonder they emphasised domestic economy, needlework, knitting and sewing as the pivots of a girl's education. Commonly taught in the reform schools, and also in government and mission schools, was the popular subject of *sughar bivi* (wife adept in household), a palpable device of gender construction. Apart from this, girls' formal schooling was invariably augmented at home by the learning of religious books, precepts and primers, so as to promote obedience, loyalty, and faithfulness. history, algebra, mathematics and science were considered inessential for women's education. This gender-based streaming of curriculum was not stressed however only by Indian male reformers, including Sir Sayyid, but also by the European males. Decades later, in England, in 1920, when Jon and Rumer Godden's aunt suggested that they might study algebra, geometry and Latin, their father's reaction was swift: "non-sense ... girls don't need to learn such things".[22] Thus the reformist's support for female education was aimed at revitalising the tradition in pursuance of somewhat harmonious views between them and the coloniser.

Most of the Victorian Englishmen who served in the Punjab sympathised with the general aims of female literacy as perceived by elite Punjabis. Reforming the male first, they thought, was a prerequisite for creating a demand for female literacy. Presumptuous of male opposition to women's rights and privileges, this pragmatic approach contained the course and content of female literacy. In insisting upon male precedence, colonial administrators were in fact commending their own tradition of prioritising male literacy to the colonial audience. Trained in the sex-segregating Victorian public schools, which preached manliness, bravery, and white man's duty to rule, they defended gender differentiation in matters of education as in the ascription of societal roles. The alumna of British public schools, assisted by their like-minded Punjabi subordinates, worked as self-designated agents of Victorian tradition. As an embodiment of racial prejudices, their discourse and writings promoted the seclusion of European women. Haunted by the isolated incidents of rape during the 1857 rebellion, they came to believe that most 'native' men were lusting

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21. Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, (London: 1998), 125.

22. *Ibid.*, 110.

after white women. Not only the Anglo-Indians secluded their wives, they urged caution in connection with *zenana* visitations by missionary ladies, lest they were exposed to rapist's attack from inside the house.[23] Like Punjabis, they also believed in sexual division of labour. According to a contemporary educational officer, Arthur Mathew, colonial administrators must have thought that the sex which was marketed by nature to be a domestic ornament in England might safely be left to the same function in India".[24] Thus domestication, rather than emancipation, of women was the ultimate goal of colonial education, regardless of its source. The colonial education policy, if any, trivialised female education by overlooking standards, examinations, punctuality, hostels, link-up secondary schools, and various other essentials of quality education.

Add to the conservatism of the Punjabi and the colonial administrator, the imperial obsession with *laissez-faire* and the plea for liberal free trade in education, which weighed heavily on the prospects of female learning. This so-called liberal philosophy, the weapon of the rich and powerful, prevented state intervention on behalf of the weak and neglected strata, including women. Its insistence upon self-reliance in education and gradual without of government grant from secondary education (as recommended by the 1854 Charless Wood's Educational Dispatch and the 1882 *Hunter Report*), created hurdles for female literacy. In partial implementation of the withdrawal policy, the transfer of management of government schools to the local bodies in 1886 was a bad augury for education in general and female education in particular. Local bodies, municipal, district and local boards, blamed their lack of interest in female education on the indifference of their electors. According to Miss Francis, they were generally reluctant to give grants-in-aid; the municipalities of Lahore, Gujrat and Jullundur were particularly obstructive. Presided and backed by the Anglo-Indian officials as chairmen, local bodies not only failed to defray the required expenditure on education, but often diverted educational budgets to non-educational heads of expenditure, such as police, hospitals, roads and sanitation.[25] They often bragged about their support for the cause of male literacy but would make the support for female education conditional upon public

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23. *Ibid.*, 125.

24. Arthur Mahew, *Education of India,* (London: n.d.), 96.

25. Zahid, 210.

demand.[26] Mostly manned by uneducated conservative males, local bodies displayed neither the foresight nor they intent to promote female literacy. They encouraged nepotism in matters of appointment and transfer of teachers and, therefore, drew sharp reactions from the press and the intelligentsia who questioned their suitability for educational government. They failed to popularise female literacy and remained inattentive to its needs.

What of the occupational openings for an educated girl? The purely male composition of imperial administrative hierarchies left little incentive for girls or even for their parents to seek education in the first place or beyond a primary school. Even in the educational bureaucracy, women were totally absent. Till 1886, there was not a single woman in the Punjab Inspectorate, although educated women were not uncommon among the Indians and *memsahibs* (wives of Anglo-Indians). As a result, girls' schools remained either un-inspected or were subjected to unpopular male inspection. Male inspectors, failing to appreciate the impediments to female literacy, wrote annihilating reports about girls' schools urging their closure.[27] The reluctant appointment of Miss Francis, a woman of great literary charms, as inspectress in 1886, at half the salary of her male counterparts, was a sop to the popular clamour and general dislike of male inspection of girls' schools. As opposed to the narrow territorial jurisdiction of a male inspector, her province-wide jurisdiction was too onerous a duty to perform satisfactorily. Even in the medical profession male doctors built barrages to prevent female entry and considered women unsuitable particularly for the posts of surgeon. The entry of women in the profession was also by default and in concession to the shared prejudices of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh and European men against male gynaecologists. People preferred illiterate and unskilled midwives, responsible for high infant morality, over the skilled male doctors. It was in deference to such prejudices that degree and midwifery classes were opened to girls in the

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26. For example, the Hoshiarpur District Board opened five new boys' primary schools in 1890 but justified their refusal to open even a single school for girls unless it was demanded by the people. Deputy commissioner of Hoshiarpur to commissioner of Jullundur, 3 September 1890, *Punjab Home (Education) Proceedings*, February 1891, Proc. 6A.

27. On grounds of quality and efficiency they recommended to the Punjab government the closure of Bedi Khem Singh's girls' schools in Rawalpindi and Jhelum districts. As Khem Singh was an aristocratic Punjabi and direct descendent of Guru Nanak, Aitchison did not heed his officers' advice in order to maintain such upper class interest in female literacy.

Punjab's only co-educational college, Lahore Medical School (est. 1860), from the beginning although most of the girls in the first few classes came from non-*pardha* observing Christian families.

Teaching had not yet acquired the status of a profession. In general, colonial schools did not attract competent teachers, for teaching was an unattractive preposition from the salary and prestige points of view. At the most, a primary teacher was paid Rs.10 in a government school, Rs.3.50 in an aided mission school, and even less in an unaided school by the indigenous reform organisations.[28] The salary of a primary school teacher in the 1890s compared unfavourably even with that of a domestic servant (butlers and sweepers were paid Rs.20 and Rs.10 respectively) in an Anglo-Indian household. That teaching did not attract the girls can be gauged from the fact that recruits were almost bribed to sign an undertaking to complete training and become school teachers. In fact, domestic obligations outweighed the unattractive career of school teaching. Moreover, the proverbial respect for a teacher, a distinct feature of pre-British education in Punjab, was woefully lacking in colonial schools. This apart, despite ample teaching vacancies,[29] facilities for teacher training were non-existent. There were no normal schools for female teacher training in the province, except the non-descript training classes attached to a number of ordinary schools. The attendance and quality of those classes was so poor and dropout rate so high that Flora Annie Steel, who inspected the same in 1882-83, described them as a misnomer for normal schools.[30] The alternative of mixed schools, tried with great success in Madras, remained unpalatable to the segregationist Punjabis.

In the final analysis, explaining female literacy or, for that matter, any complex social phenomena based on age-old man-made tradition is a hazardous task. Apparently, the British Raj came to symbolise the supremacy of the European civilization, as reflected through its better-organised sub-systems: army, judiciary, Indian and provincial civil services, legislatures, etc. As representatives of a technically advanced nation, the colonial administrators came to rationalise their alien rule as mission-oriented. As apologists of 'white man's burden', they acted as

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28. Zahid, 211.

29. The scarcity of female teachers, let alone the trained ones, was acutely felt in Punjab. See, *Progress of Education in India, 1902-07*, vol.i, (Calcutta: 1909), 226.

30. PPIR, 1883-84, 81.

self-styled civilizers and looked condescendingly upon most things Punjabi. They abetted the missionary attack on indigenous beliefs and practices and derisively descried the people as 'natives' and 'heathens'. They made laws to eliminate *sati*, female infanticide and early marriages, and exhorted, through public platforms, official reports and enquiries, a humane treatment of women. Their discourse on the predicament of women, laced with rare oratory, was suggestive of egalitarian images of British society as compared with the 'reactionary' Punjabi. Despite the richness of Anglo-Indian rhetoric, the balance sheet of British social policy did not reveal pro-female radicalism of any sort.

The colonial administrators had a tendency to judge the social customs and practices of the colonised by British standards. Although they took strong exceptions to the tradition-borne crime against women, they, like most Punjabi social reformers, did not seek to create an unconventional woman, the kind of which neither existed in contemporary Great Britain nor among the *memsahibs*. By their own racially-inspired example of segregating women from the Punjabi males, they vindicated the *ashraf* and upper-class tradition of *pardah* from strangers and social inferiors. In the furtherance of common cultural identities, they also strengthened patriarchy in Punjab and so created the administrative hierarchies that women could seldom fit into them. Thus women, appearing as the 'step-children' of the empire, were encouraged to persevere in their domestic career and were denied any public role. And the few radical voices that were raised during the last decades of the century to liberalise the hold of discriminatory tradition were either resisted by both the religiously orthodox and Westernised social autonomists or ignored by the policy-makers. It was not wonder that occasional manifestation of official sympathy for the women's cause could not provide the needs impetus to the growth of female literacy, and the growth, if any, in female education during this period was the after-effect of male literacy.

Although antiquarian attitudes did not and were not expected to die so quickly, the process of change, however slow, was at work in the transitional society of colonial Punjab. The new century held greater prospects for female literacy. With the emergence of a burgeoning market economy, urbanisation, better communication, free flow of trade between the city and the village, and a greater encounter between the universalist urban and isolationist rural ethos, the province was favourably disposed to social regeneration of its people. The educational reforms of Lord Curzon,

regardless of the usual nationalist disenchantment with most acts of his government, was the first serious attempt towards educating the masses, not only urban elites, that helped the emergence of schools in small towns and villages thus bringing the avenues of literacy closer to the home of the aspiring girls. The growth of education was bound to be greater under the Montagu-Chelmsford reforms (1918), which introduced an element of self-responsibility in the provinces and made elected ministers in the 'transferred' subjects, including education, answerable to the legislature and a further enfranchised population Ministers unencumbered by the imperial policy of restraint, lent full support to the cause of literacy.