

Girls' Education in Bihar: From Government Initiatives to Societal Transformations

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Abstract

The post-1854 period witnessed the establishment of schools by the Government in Bihar, with significant developments such as the Zila Schools and the Hill School. The inception of Patna College in 1863 marked the initial phase of higher education in the region. Beyond government initiatives, various agencies, including Christian missionaries and cultural associations, contributed to Bihar's educational growth. However, English education faced challenges in Bihar due to limited demand. The state of girls' education began to change in the late 19th century, primarily driven by efforts from the local Bengali community and some English officers. Despite progress, female education faced obstacles related to societal expectations and a shortage of female teachers. The early 20th century saw debates on the role of women and a gradual shift toward co-education as a practical approach to primary education. The evolving landscape of education in Bihar reflected a complex interplay of government policies, societal norms, and external influences.

Keywords

Bihar education history, colonial era education, Government initiatives, Girls' education, Vernacular schools, English education, Missionary influence, Societal transformations, Female education challenges-education trends

The colonial period in India underwent a multifaceted transformation in its education system. Starting from the East India Company's initial apathy, the trajectory shifted significantly with the enactment of the Charter Act of 1813 and subsequent events, making education a pivotal element of British governance. The discussions surrounding language and curriculum, the impact of missionary activities, and the evolving attitudes toward English education were instrumental in shaping the educational landscape during colonial rule. The policies and choices made in this era left an enduring mark on education, creating a legacy that continued to exert influence on India's educational path even after achieving independence.

After 1854, the Government started with the job of establishing schools. The resolution of 1859, led to the establishment of *Zila* Schools of Patna, Arrah, Chhapra and the Hill School at Bhagalpur. In 1863, the district of Deoghar, Motihari, Hazaribagh and Chaibasa got one school each.¹ It was reported in 1866 that the education in Patna district was progressing well. As there

¹*Educational Proceedings* (Government of Bengal), August 1863, cf., J.S.Jha, *op.cit.* pp. 43-45.

arose a great demand for English knowing Indians, most people wanted their children to receive modern education. This resulted in the establishment of a vernacular school at every important place, and an English school at every principal town.²

The first attempt to impart higher education in Bihar was made by the middle of the nineteenth century at Patna (it being the administrative headquarters of Bihar). Attempts to start a college at Patna failed twice during the first half of the nineteenth century. Gradually, public interest in higher education was noticed, partly as a result of the introduction of English in the Chief Appellate Court and, partly due to the extension of the railways. At last the Patna College was opened with five students in 1863³.

The Government was not alone in working for the growth of education in Bihar. Other agencies were also at work. The Christian missionaries, the Brahmo Samaj Arya Samaj, Theosophical Society, Ram Krishna Mission and other voluntary institutions and some Philanthropic persons played no less important a part in the development of education for girls in Bihar. The British authorities seemed mainly concerned with teaching those destined for married life a modicum of domestic science and how to play the harmonium. Indeed they seemed to accept that a woman would either be as professionally qualified as a man in order to become an educator or that she would marry: -“There is a necessity that India should produce women who after receiving the highest academic education are capable of inspecting and advising in the planning of women’s education of all grades. On the other hand the fact must be kept in view that the overwhelming majority of Indian girls are destined for married life”⁴. British educational policy seemed fixed upon the model of separate spheres. The British authorities seemed incapable of imagining that there might be women in India who would combine marriage and professional activity as these were in their own country- or conversely, that there might be women who had the means to achieve higher education for the love of learning and as mark of prestige, who would then stay at home, serving society in voluntary ways. At the end reformers and educational authorities alike left to women themselves the job of reconciling the seemingly irreconcilable aims of their education in the course of their everyday lives, which was not expected to generate its own dynamics. (1863-Bhagalpur *Mahila Samity*-first organization for women, 1936-*Chhapra Mahila Samity* had its own journal *Mahila Darpan*).

At the same time, it also seems true that one of the reasons why English education failed to make headway in Bihar, on the whole, was the existence of a comparatively little demand for English educated persons. Babu Gurucharan Mitter, Head Master of the Bhagalpur Hill School, very truly observed:

I am aware that the educational measures of the government have been eminently successful in Bengal, and wish they have been so throughout India, but at the

² J.W. Dairymple to the Government of Bengal, 20 August, 1866, cf, Syed Mehmood, *op.cit.* p. 89.

³ K.K. Datta, *op.cit.* p. 69.

⁴ Phillip Hartog, *Some Aspects of Indian Education Past and Present*, London, 1939, pp.172-74.

same time I do not think we have reason to regret, if the progress of education has not been equally rapid in Bihar, for the pages of history teach us that every thing at and near the seat of government has always been and is ever in advance of what prevails in the more distant part of an empire and that this disadvantage is proportionate to their distance from the Metropolis⁵.

The Director of Public Instruction, Mr. W. S. Atkinson, placed this viewpoint even more clearly when he observed:

In Bengal proper English education has an ascertained and increasing commercial value. It pays, and therefore it is sought for. In Behar, on the contrary, the demand for it has yet to be created. As soon as a certain kind of education is known to be necessary for advancement in life, it cannot be doubted that the people of Behar will ask for it as eagerly as those of any other country. My recent tour in that District (Patna has firmly convinced me that the apathy of the people, of which so many complaints are made, is the simple and natural result of the ordinary law of demand and supply. There is no market for what we understand by education, and therefore the people will not trouble themselves to bring forward a supply⁶.

Initial Phase

There were no girls' schools in Bihar till late sixties of the nineteenth century except those of the Christian missionaries in 1853, when Fr. Anastasinns Hartman after obtaining the services of the sisters of the Institute of Blessed Virgin Mary of Munich established St. Joseph's ConventSchool with nine students, three boards, and six orphans at Bankipore, Patna.⁷ It mainly served the Christian community as a school and an orphanage.⁸

The credit for setting up of girls' schools on modern lines in Bihar goes to the local educated Bengalis and some of the cultural associations of Calcutta. In 1867 the first girl's school was established in Patna by the Bengali community with the active cooperation of the Principal of Patna College, Mc. Crindle. The name of Girish Chandra Ghose, Judge of the Small Causes Court, may specially be mentioned in this connection.⁹ In January 1868, the Secretary of the Bengal Social Science Association, Calcutta, addressed a letter to the Commissioner of Patna Division to enquire about the State of female education in Bihar. The reply of the Commissioner reveals that till August of that year there were only two girl's schools at Patna, the other being the NonmoohiaSchool established by Mohammad Aziz Khan. There was a female teacher in the school. It was held in the house of Mohammad Aziz Khan.

⁵General Department, Education Branch, Prog. No. 23, 5Jan, 1848', cf.J.S.Jha, *op.cit.* p.48.

⁶ 'From W.S. Atkinson, Director of Public Instructions, to the Secretary to the Government of Bengal, dated the 3 May 1861', cf. *Ibid.* p.67.

⁷ P.C. Horo, *Christian Mission and Christian Communities in Bihar*, (P.U.) unpublished, 1983, p. 21.

⁸*Ibid* p. 21.

⁹ Datta, *op.cit.* p 442.

Apart from his children, other girls in the school belonged to lower order of the society. But Aziz had to encounter severe criticism from the members of his community.¹⁰ The Deputy Inspector of School at Patna reported his conversation with a respectable old man of Phoolwari Sharif at a *Mushaira*. The old man had heard about opening of a girl's school at Bhagalpur. 'Have you any such school in Patna also?' he asked with some anxiety. On being told that there were two girls' schools in Patna, he heaved a deep sigh and said, '*Bas, ab Kya raha, Zamanah Ulat Gya*' (It is all up now; the world is turned upside down).¹¹

The Bengali school at Patna was superintended by a mistress. During the year 1868 there was a move to set up a girl school at Muzaffarpur also. There was a Zenana School of Bengalis at Rajmahal.¹² The salary of the mistress, a European lady was Rs. 50 a month. The ladies were taught fancy work. The school received an aid of Rs. 20 a month from the government. There was a Bengali girl's school at Bhagalpur also.¹³ In Darbhanga again the credit for opening the first girl's school goes to the Bengali community of the place.¹⁴ About this time some girl's schools were established in other parts of Bihar on the initiative of some English officers. These were supported either from the Reward Fund or by private subscription. In a report of 1875-76 Croft recorded the following about the state of female education:

"The genuine desire (or reluctance) of the people about education of girls is shown by the number at school in boys' *paths alas*, about a dozen in every district, except Patna and Champaran. In Patna, however there is some female education which does not appear on the returns. A tailor at Dinapur teaches 10 Mohammedan girls as he sits at work. At Lai, near the Bihata railway station an old woman teaches 30-40 girls *Hindi*. The people of that are the most advanced in the district, and the Deputy and Sub-Inspector are convinced that 30(?) percent of the women of the *Kayastha, Rajput, Brahman and Baniya* castes have some education, a few even read the *Ramayana*. In Gaya some rich men teach their daughters to sign their names; some years ago a girl from Deo in this district passed the Vernacular scholarship examination. In Champaran many of the Kurmis about Bettiah (mostly servants of the Raj) teach their girls *Kaithi*, and even reading as far as the *Ramayana* is concerned, they have applied for a school, which will be opened. A *khidmutgar*(attendant) at Bettiah teaches 12 girls *Hindi, Persian*, the multiplication table, cooking and basket making."¹⁵

In subsequent years also the increase in the number of schools and pupils continued, but till the

¹⁰*Ibid.*

¹¹*Ibid.*

¹²K.K Datta *op.cit.* p. 442.

¹³*Ibid.*

¹⁴JS Jha, *op.cit.* p. 138.

¹⁵ K.K.Datta *op.cit.* p.443.

close of the century female education of the school type had not taken firm root.¹⁶ The conception of people regarding the duties of a woman did not allow much scope for it. The want of female teachers had made the situation more irksome.

Since Hindu and Mohammedan girls educated in government classes' found it difficult to take to teaching as a career. This is no doubt, because social custom and public opinion alike point to the home as the proper place for women and to marriage as the summum bonum.¹⁷ The female education among the Mohammedans was carried on by *Atus* or *Pardanashin* ladies who did not stir out in public.¹⁸ Zenana education in the Province is conducted by peripatetic teachers and by central gathering classes, the latter including certain classes for Mohammedan women of which the teachers are termed *Atus* first Quinquennial Review on POE (Bihar and Orissa) described the *Atus* in these terms: "The *Atus* worked in Patna and Tirhut divisions and the inspectress of schools considered that their work had improved considerably during the period 1912-1917."

In Patna city during this period (1906) there were 10-15 *Atus* who taught girls who went to them. There was a female *Madarsa* in Patna city opened by Rasidan, a literate lady, wife of Maulvi Mohammaed Yehia, a pleader; even this *Madarasaw* closed after sometime.¹⁹

Due to scarcity of female teachers, the existing girl's schools had to be managed by old male teachers.²⁰ : Government realized that it is desirable to replace these old men by women teachers as soon as this is practicable and in the meantime and until women teachers were forthcoming to amalgamate inefficient girls' schools with efficient boys schools, encouraging girls to attend these efficient schools for boys".²¹ Following this problem many girls' primary schools were closed down as it was not in accordance with the committee's stand, which was formed on 8th June 1914 to examine the whole question of female education in the province, recommendations in appendix (no.3) that separate girls' schools should be established whenever the number of girls in boys schools crossed 20, though it was not opposed to co-education.

Girls of tender age could be allowed to read in boys schools due to decrease in the number of schools for girl's from 2,971 in 1926 to 2,725 in 1930 and 2,695 in 1931 but the number of girls attending them which was 71,329 in 1926 and 70,838 in 1930 now rose to 71,883 in 1931.²² It shows that both local bodies and parents realized that at the primary stage it was seldom necessary to have separate schools for girls. There could be little objection from any but the most conservative parents to co-education if all the boys could be made to complete the lower primary stage by the age

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 444

¹⁷ *Fifth Quinquennial Review of the POE in Bihar & Orissa* (1932-37), Patna, p. 117.

¹⁸ S.N. Pandey, *Education and Social Changes in Bihar*, Delhi, 1975, p 27.

¹⁹ Proceedings of Government of Bengal, General Department, (Education), 1906, No. 70, pp. 96-97.

²⁰ "The majority of girl's' primary schools have been condemned by the District Inspectresses as inefficient and useless and their teachers as "old, lazy, uncertified men who have proved unfit for boys' schools." *Fifth Quinquennial Review of the POE in Bihar and Orissa*, (1932-37), Patna, p. 116.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

of 10.²³ Co-education gradually gained popularity due to:

- i. The public demand for female education in places where there was no school for girls.
- ii. The demand for superior teaching facilities and for selection for wider range of subjects offered by institutions for boys, especially in high schools and college.
- iii. The gradual relaxation of the Purdah system.²⁴ Thus, we see in 1925 for the first time a girl student was admitted into the Patna College.²⁵

It was the Ram Mohan Roy Seminary in the case of schools which took the lead in 1923 to start co-education at the high school level. The idea came in the course of a casual discussion which Srish Chandra had with the then director of public instruction, C.E. Fraucus, about the paucity of girl schools and general difficulties of providing girls education.²⁶ In spite of terrific social opposition Srish Chandra (a Brahmo) admitted his two daughters in the school, however, co-education did not gain popularity fast and it was only in the mid-forties that this school with 125 girls became the leading co-educational institution in the province.²⁷

Cost of Education

The direct expenditure on recognized schools for girls increased from Rs. 652, 381 in 1931 to Rs. 789, 105 in 1936.²⁸ During the five years (1932-37) the annual per capita cost of educating pupils in schools of all kinds for boys and in primary schools for girls was considerably reduced as will appear from the following table²⁹:-

Table no. 1 Cost of Education in Primary Schools

	Boys Schools		Girl's Schools	
	1931-32	1936-37	1931-32	1936-37
	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.	Rs.
High	45.02	40.08	73.3	74.4
Middle English	20.7	18.3	36.2	31.7
Middle Vernacular	16.0	14.1	23.3	23.6
Primary	6.5	6.3	7.3	6.9

Source: Fifth Quinquennial Review of the Progress of Education in Bihar (1932-37), Patna, p.114.

This difference continued as long as the difference in average roll number between a boys school and a girls' school continued and qualified women teachers remained much more expensive than male teachers of the same qualification, other factors which added to it were the need for the provision of conveyance and the escorts for pupil.³⁰

²³ *Fourth Quinquennial Review of the POE in Bihar and Orissa*, (1927-32) Patna, p. 79.

²⁴ *Annual Report on the POE in Bihar* (1938-39), Patna, p.45.

²⁵ R.K. Sharma, *Nationalism, Social Reform and Indian Women*, New Delhi, 1981, p. 42.

²⁶ Sumanta Niyogi, *Brhamo Samaj and Development of Education*, Patna, 1981, p. 26.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Fifth Quinquennial Review of the POE in Bihar* (1932-37), Patna, p. 114.

²⁹ *Ibid.*

³⁰ "The provision of conveyances especially at secondary schools is still a difficult problem. At the Bankipur Girls' school five large buses have been provided and the numbers in the school have increased accordingly but the expense of

The female education on Committee (1914) made changes and made provisions (see appendix no.1) for optional subjects which were to be introduced from 1918.³¹

It was in 1909 that the first mistress's training college; B.N.R.TrainingCollege was established at Patna with help of an endowment, made by Syed Badshah Nawab Rizvi of Patna city yielding an annual income of Rs. 7267. The Bettiah Raj provided accommodation for it in its palace at Patna. Miss Parsons of the Indian Educational Service was appointed the first lady principal in the college.³² There was a *pardanashin* class attached to it, on which the following extracts from the lady principal's report are of interest: -

All students from outside Patna are resident in the hostels and even some who live in PatnaCity prefer living in the hostels to attending as day pupils. The food given them is good and plentiful and it is wonderful to see how much stronger and better they look after a few months' residence in the hostels. The life there improves them in every way, they learn to keep regular hours, to keep their rooms neat and clean to give and take. When the college was first opened, the Hindu students would not allow a Mohammedan student to even pass through their class room. Now they are good friends and often sit and work together, and if they happen to be going the same way, will travel together. They feel they must work together. They feel they must work together, without petty prejudices, if they mean to benefit their country. Hostel life has done a great deal of good for the women.

The lady doctor at the Duchess of Teck Hospital is now in medical charge of the hotels and as the Hospital itself is very close to us, many of the women attend there if they are ill. This arrangement was sanctioned in 1913, and has worked well. I had all the students medically examined last year and out of 26 women only one was physically fit. Purdah women as a class are certainly not robust.

Though the college was established in 1909 the hostel for Hindu students was built in 1912 only.³³

During the year 1915-16 a commencement was made in the province with the higher education of women, Intermediate classes³⁴ being opened, since most of the parents were against educating their daughters away from home, after a certain age.³⁵ Most parents were unwilling to invest in education

maintaining these buses are heavy and practically none of the parents who have conveyance of their own are willing to use them to send their girls to school." *Third Quinquennial Review of POE in Bihar & Orissa (1922-1927)*, Patna, pp. 97-98.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² K.K. Datta, *op.cit.* p.443.

³³ *First Quinquennial Review of POE in Bihar & Orissa, (1912-1917)*, p. 101.

³⁴ Intermediate of Arts, equal to 10+2.

³⁵ The likelihood of Educated Girls becoming less adjustable and even defiant, added to the reluctance of parents to

which they viewed as wastage since the girls were unlikely to take up jobs and after marriage they had to go to the husband's home. Curricular content has always been a key issue in women's education and continues to be so even now, although in a modified form. There was considerable public opinion in favor of such a differentiated curriculum and the Education Committee of 1882 supported this view while advising a cautious approach to its implementation.³⁶ The government grant-in-aid policy required conformity to the government established curriculum.

This policy did not allow innovation in subject matter, although private school could teach additional subjects if they wanted to offer special fields of study for girls.³⁷ In this process certain subjects emerged as feminine" subjects (e.g. hygiene, domestic science, needlework, music, home science, etc), while others (e.g. physics, chemistry and mathematics) became 'masculine' subjects.³⁸

But we come across an interesting experiment in the case of C.M.S. school at Godda (*Santhal* Parangana) which had an agricultural class attached to it, as reported by the Inspector of Schools of the Bhagalpur Division: "There are a few fields in which the girls grow rice and a garden in which they grow vegetables".³⁹ On this curricular change Miss Honeyburne, Inspector of schools, commented that: "it appears that in many cases objection is made to sending girls away to school and there are no day schools in most small *Santal* villages on the ground that when they leave they cannot manage their rice fields and are too old to learn. I hope the experiment will prove successful".⁴⁰

In connection with the Ravenshaw Girls' School at Cuttack, (then in the province of Bihar, Orissa separated in 1936) the subjects taught were English, Logic, History, Sanskrit and the Vernacular⁴¹.

Again, there is evidence of two recognized primary Sanskrit schools for girls. The *Jain Bala Bishram* at Arrah prepares candidates for the *madhyama* and higher Sanskrit examinations" (Annual Report on the Progress of Education in Bihar 1938-39, pg.56), and I would attempt to clear some myths specially around the Muslim women since what appears that the leaders of the community were not greatly exercised about educational backwardness of the women folk, there were a few exceptions later like Abdul Aziz of Chhapra, a barrister as well as a member of the executive committee of the Governor of Bihar and later first education minister of Bihar, after independence who founded *Aziz Kanya Pathshala* in 1936 in Chhapra, which was later shifted to the Hathwa Raj manager's residence (Souvenir, *Aziz Kanya Pathshala*) and here there were some lesser known women of the community trying to raise their voice. As early as in (1855-1929) Rashid-un-Nisa Begum was quite vehemently advocating for women's education. She wrote a novel *Islah-un-*

send their daughters to school, cf. Karuna Chanana, (ed.), *Socialization, Education and Women: Explorations in Gender Identity*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 55.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

³⁷ Chanana, *op.cit.* 1988, p. 56.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ *Annual POE Report (Bihar & Orissa) 1918-1919*, Patna, p.17.

⁴⁰ *First Quinquennial Review Bihar and Orissa 1912-1917*, Patna, p. 103.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 107.

Nisa (Feminist Reform) in 1894, which stressed the value of women's education and condemned useless, expensive strenuous social ceremonies and customs. She also started a school for girls known as *Madarsa Islamia* in 1906 which was supervised by Lady Fraser herself and it was a landmark incidence, the same institution was later taken over by Badshah Nawab Rizwi who donated a chunk of his property to the institute and renamed it as B.N.R. School, Maharani Bettiah donated the building, so this school is also known as Bettiah House, there was a hostel also for the girls, which was supervised by daughter of Rashid-un-Nisa, Nasib-un-Nisa. Lady Imam, wife of Sir Ali Imam, was also a resident in the hostel and a product of the same school. And many more like Sughra Begum (1884 -1959), wife of Humayun Mirza who wrote articles for Urdu magazines and edited a journal *Al-Nisa*(The Indian Annual Register 1930,vol.1,pp144-148, 12 issues of the journal is there in KhudaBhksh Oriental Public Library, Patna),Begum Rokaiya Sakhawat Hossain of Bhagalpur who later shifted her base to Bengal, Begum Mazharul Haque who as Chairman of the Reception Committee of the All India Women's Education conference, held at Patna in Jan.1929 denounced prevailing system of Purdah stressed the need of developing education among women of Bihar (The Indian Quarterly Register,1929,vol.1,no.1 and 2 pp.419-420).) Contrary to the stereotyped picture of British government solely carrying the burden of female education against the obduracy of its inert Indian subjects (Bhattacharya, 2000), there is ample indication of initiatives and participation of the indigenous intellectuals, the "local notables", moneyed people, the "English educated" gentry and secondary, lesser-known reformers who continues the momentum. In *Tarikh-I-Ujjainia* by Munshi Vinayak Prasad,(vol.4,Book 2),there is a crucial reference of a girls' school has been mentioned, founded by Maharaja of Dumraon Raja Radha Prasad Singh in1882,the school had on its rolls, Hindu and Muslim girls as many as 200 by 1887,when the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Bailey came to Dumraon with Lady Bailey who laid the foundation stone of the building of the Girls' School(Tarikh-I-Ujjainia,pp.58-60These were some straws in the wind indicating that a new breeze was blowing and while visiting Darbhanga Raj Record Room one gets a lot more straws[the records under reference are kept in big cloth bundles and consist of correspondence, office-notes, diaries etc.].In 1868 there was a move to set up a girls' school at Muzaffarpur,the manager of Raj Darbhanga was approached for a monthly subscription of Rs. 30 for the school(S. No.,209,dtd.30-11-1868,from Deputy Inspector of Schools, Tirhoot Division).Again the Secretary of the Bengali Middle English School (first girls' school in Darbhanga) approached the *Maharaja* in 1886 for aid ,in response Maharaja Lakshmishwar Singh sanctioned the school a monthly grant of Rs. 40 besides the use of a house free of rent[S. No., 130],then in 1905-6 the Chapman Girls' school and the *Levinge Zenana Institute* were established at Muzaffarpur,the former was a branch of the *Mahakali Pathshala* of Calcutta{1893} to which Maharaja Rameshwar Singh donated Rs.1500, in 1932 the Lady Stephenson Girls' school was established in Darbhanga to which the Maharaja advanced a sum of Rs.3000.

Education in general and girl's education in particular continued to suffer from limited financial resources during the period. Girls education involved higher investment since not only

there were separate schools to be set up but hostels had to be provided where the distance between home and school was not commutable, escorts had to be arranged to see girls home in areas where they were traditionally allowed to go outdoors; women teachers had to be trained because parents were reluctant to let their daughters come in contact with male teachers and lastly scholarships had to be provided as incentives so parents would forego the earnings and labour of their daughters or overcome traditional prejudices.