

Tracing the Growth of Women's Education in Howrah District: A Historical Perspective

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Abstract: The study explores the evolution of women's education in Howrah from the colonial period to the contemporary era, highlighting the socio-cultural, missionary, and policy-driven forces that shaped its development. The primary aim of this research is to trace the historical progression of female education in Howrah District, examine the influence of missionary activities during the nineteenth century, and analyze the impact of British colonial educational policies on the establishment and structure of girls' schools. Methodologically, the study adopts a historical research approach, utilizing both primary and secondary sources such as archival documents, missionary records, government reports, census data, and scholarly publications to reconstruct the chronological development of women's education. The findings reveal that early progress in women's education in Howrah was primarily driven by reformist and missionary efforts—such as those of the Serampore Mission and Church Missionary Society—supported later by colonial policies like Wood's Despatch (1854) and the Hunter Commission (1882). The post-independence era, marked by initiatives like the National Policy on Education (1986) and Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015), significantly enhanced enrolment and retention rates among girls. However, socio-economic inequalities and infrastructural gaps continue to impede uniform educational advancement. In conclusion, the study underscores that the trajectory of women's education in Howrah District reflects both historical resilience and persistent challenges, emphasizing the need for context-specific policy interventions to promote equitable and sustainable educational empowerment for women.

Keywords: Women's education, Howrah District, historical perspective, missionary activities, British colonial policies, gender equity, educational reform, Colonial India

I. INTRODUCTION

The journey of women's education in the Howrah District of West Bengal reflects a long and transformative history shaped by social reform (early 19th century onward), colonial intervention (1757–1947), and post-independence educational policy development (after 1947). Historically, women's education was restricted by patriarchal norms, socio-economic inequality, and cultural traditions that prioritized domestic roles for women. Over time, however, the district witnessed a gradual yet meaningful transition toward inclusivity, driven by Bengal's 19th-century reformist movements, missionary initiatives beginning in the 1820s, and state-sponsored programs in the post-1950s era aimed at achieving gender parity in education (Bandyopadhyay, 1990; Chatterjee, 1989).

During the nineteenth century, Bengal became the epicenter of social reform and intellectual awakening, which laid the foundation for women's education. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) were two key figures whose reformist zeal reshaped the social and educational landscape. Vidyasagar's pioneering efforts led to the establishment of Banga Mahila Vidyalaya (1859), one of the earliest schools dedicated to women in Bengal, which later merged with Bethune School—India's first formal girls' school founded in 1849 by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune in Calcutta. These early institutions profoundly influenced neighboring districts like Howrah, where local societies and reformers began initiating small-scale girls' education projects.

In Howrah and the adjoining Hooghly district, local reformers and philanthropic societies organized "zenana" education programs during the 1860s–1880s, allowing female instructors to teach within women's homes to overcome social



restrictions on female mobility (GSMP, 2024). These early initiatives, though limited, represented a major departure from the traditional exclusion of women from formal education. The Serampore Mission (founded 1799) and the Church Missionary Society (active in Bengal since 1814) were instrumental in introducing girls' schools in western Bengal, including parts of Howrah, often emphasizing literacy, needlework, and moral training for poor and lower-caste girls (Gupta, 2000; Sen, 2001).

The arrival of British colonial rule following the Battle of Plassey in 1757 and the establishment of British administration under the East India Company (1765–1858) brought a new educational paradigm rooted in Western ideals. The Wood's Despatch of 1854, often called the "Magna Carta of English Education in India," marked a turning point by promoting female education under state supervision. Although colonial educational policies were primarily intended to produce a class of educated Indians to serve in administrative roles, they inadvertently encouraged the spread of female education. Missionary institutions, such as those established by the London Missionary Society and Baptist Missionary Society, played a key role in founding early girls' schools in urban centers like Howrah and Calcutta during the mid- to late 19th century (Chatterjee, 1989).

A major milestone in Howrah's educational development came in the post-independence era with the establishment of Bijoy Krishna Girls' College in 1947, shortly after India gained independence. This institution became one of the district's earliest centers for women's higher education and reflected a growing societal acceptance of women's right to education. In the decades following independence (1950s–1980s), educational policies such as the 1952 Secondary Education Commission, the 1968 National Policy on Education, and the 1986 New Education Policy further reinforced the state's commitment to women's education.

Despite these advancements, gender disparities continue to persist, especially in rural areas of the district. A study conducted in 2018 in a Howrah village panchayat revealed that female literacy rates still lagged behind male literacy rates, reflecting structural inequalities in access to educational resources. However, the Gross Enrolment Ratio (GER) for women in higher education across West Bengal—including Howrah—showed significant improvement between 2000 and 2020, indicating greater access to post-secondary education for women (Seventh Sense Research Group, 2020). Yet, persistent challenges such as early marriage, economic hardship, and inadequate secondary infrastructure continue to limit sustained educational progress.

In summary, the evolution of women's education in Howrah District mirrors the larger narrative of social awakening and educational reform across Bengal. From the 1840s missionary schools and 19th-century reformist movements, through colonial policy interventions and post-independence expansion of educational institutions, Howrah's experience embodies India's broader struggle toward gender equality in education. While remarkable progress has been achieved, overcoming socio-economic, cultural, and infrastructural barriers remains essential to realizing the full potential of women's education in the district today.

The Statement of the Problem

The growth of women's education in Howrah District reflects a long historical journey shaped by colonial reforms, missionary initiatives, and post-independence educational policies. Beginning with the Charter Act of 1813, which allowed missionary societies to establish schools, and the efforts of the Church Missionary Society and the Serampore Mission during 1820–1840, women's literacy gradually gained ground in the region. The Wood's Despatch of 1854 marked a major policy shift, emphasizing vernacular and female education, while reformers like Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar in the 1850s–1860s pioneered model girls' schools and championed women's rights. The Hunter Commission of 1882 further encouraged female education, leading to steady progress into the twentieth century. The founding of Bijoy Krishna Girls' College in 1947 symbolized women's growing access to higher education in postcolonial Bengal. Despite constitutional guarantees of educational equality in 1950, gender gaps persisted until reforms such as the National Policy on Education (1986), Mahila Samakhya Programme (1988), and Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001) began improving access. In the twenty-first century, initiatives like Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015) and the National Education Policy (2020) have strengthened participation, though socio-cultural and economic barriers still limit equal opportunities, underscoring the need for sustained, inclusive educational development in Howrah.

The Significance of the Study

The present study is significant in understanding how the foundations of women's education in Howrah District were laid and transformed over time, reflecting the broader socio-cultural and political developments in Bengal. By tracing the historical evolution of women's education from the colonial period to the present, the study provides critical insight into how early efforts shaped modern educational structures and gender attitudes. Examining the influence of missionary activities helps reveal how religious and philanthropic initiatives played a pioneering role in introducing formal learning opportunities for women within a conservative society. Furthermore, analyzing the impact of British colonial educational policies enables a deeper understanding of how institutional frameworks and curricular priorities evolved under imperial rule, setting the stage for post-independence reforms. This study holds significant relevance in contemporary society as it highlights the historical trajectory and present realities of women's education in Howrah District, offering insights into the ongoing pursuit of gender equality in education. Understanding this evolution helps contextualize current challenges such as gender disparity, dropout rates, and socio-economic barriers within a broader historical framework. By tracing how past policies, reform movements, and missionary efforts shaped today's educational landscape, the study contributes to designing more inclusive and effective educational strategies. Moreover, in an era where women's empowerment is central to sustainable development, analyzing the growth of women's education provides valuable guidance for policymakers, educators, and social reformers to strengthen access, quality, and participation, thereby fostering a more equitable and progressive society.

The Research Questions

RQ1: How did women's education in Howrah District evolve historically from the colonial period to the contemporary era?

RQ2: In what ways did missionary activities contribute to the initial development of women's education in Howrah District?

RQ3: What was the impact of British colonial educational policies on the establishment and organizational structure of girls' schools in Howrah during the nineteenth century?

The Objectives of the Study

O1: To trace the historical evolution of women's education in Howrah District from the colonial period to the contemporary era.

O2: To examine the influence of missionary activities on the initial development of women's education in the district.

O3: To analyze the impact of British colonial educational policies on the establishment and structure of girls' schools in Howrah during the nineteenth.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Chakraborty and Varma (2021) in their study "*Women Education in Calcutta (1947–1961) with Special Reference to West Bengal*" examined the post-independence trajectory of women's education in urban Bengal, emphasizing the growth of technical and medical education for women. Their findings revealed that institutional expansion during the early decades of independence significantly increased female enrolment, though access remained confined mainly to urban elites. Biswas (2018), in "*Educational Status of Women in West Bengal*," analyzed state-level literacy trends and found a steady rise in women's literacy, attributing progress to government policies and grassroots initiatives that promoted female schooling in rural districts. Bais and Patel (2023) in "*Women's Education in Independent India: A Glimpse*" highlighted the national shift toward inclusive education, focusing on infrastructure development, government funding, and gender-sensitive curricula as pivotal in improving female literacy levels across India. Similarly, Singh and Jana (2020), in "*Development and Obstacles of Women Education in Independent India*," discussed how constitutional guarantees for education were undermined by inadequate implementation and social resistance, identifying persistent gender bias, economic constraints, and lack of awareness as major barriers. Collectively, these studies underscore that while the educational landscape for women in West Bengal and India has

improved considerably since independence, systemic inequalities and uneven access continue to hinder full realization of gender equity in education.

2.1. The Research Gap of the Study

Despite considerable research on women's education in Bengal, a significant gap exists in localized historical analyses focusing specifically on Howrah District. Most studies address broader state-level or urban contexts such as Calcutta, overlooking the district's unique socio-cultural, missionary, and policy-driven influences. There is limited documentation tracing the chronological evolution of women's education in Howrah from the colonial period to the present, particularly regarding the interplay between missionary initiatives and British educational policies in shaping early girls' schooling. Therefore, this study fills a crucial gap by examining Howrah's distinctive educational development, connecting historical reforms and colonial interventions with contemporary patterns of gendered educational access and equity.

The Methodology of the Study

The present study adopts the **historical research method** to trace the evolution of women's education in Howrah District from the colonial period to the contemporary era. This approach involves a systematic collection, evaluation, and interpretation of historical data drawn from primary and secondary sources such as government records, archival documents, missionary reports, educational policy papers, census data, and scholarly works. Primary sources, including official gazettes and missionary society reports from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, provide firsthand insights into the early establishment of girls' schools and educational reforms, while secondary sources such as books, journal articles, and institutional reports offer analytical interpretations of these developments. Through critical analysis and chronological reconstruction, the study identifies the social, political, and cultural forces that shaped women's education in Howrah, thereby establishing a comprehensive understanding of its historical transformation and enduring implications for gender equity in education.

The Analysis and Interpretation

O1: To trace the historical evolution of women's education in Howrah District from the colonial period to the contemporary era.

The historical evolution of women's education in Howrah District from the colonial period to the contemporary era reflects the larger socio-political transformations that shaped Bengal's educational landscape. During the **early nineteenth century**, the status of women's education in Howrah was negligible, as social customs and patriarchal norms confined women to domestic spaces. A major turning point came with the **Charter Act of 1813**, which authorized Christian missionaries to promote education in India. Missionary organizations, particularly the **Church Missionary Society (founded in 1799)** and the **Serampore Mission (founded in 1800 by William Carey and his associates)**, began establishing schools for girls around **1820–1840** in districts near Calcutta, including Howrah and Serampore. These schools introduced structured curricula and basic literacy training for girls, marking the first organized attempts at female education in the region.

The next significant development occurred with **Wood's Despatch of 1854**, often called the "Magna Carta of English Education in India," which emphasized vernacular instruction and state support for girls' education. Around this time, reformers such as **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891)** and **Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833)** played instrumental roles in advocating for female literacy, widow remarriage, and social reforms. Vidyasagar's establishment of model girls' schools in Bengal during the **1850s–1860s** inspired similar initiatives in Howrah, where local elites began to support education for girls within traditional social limits.

The **Hunter Commission of 1882** further endorsed women's education, recommending the establishment of more government-aided schools. Consequently, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries saw a gradual expansion of primary and secondary institutions for girls in Howrah, though these remained concentrated in urban centers. Following India's independence in **1947**, the founding of **Bijoy Krishna Girls' College in 1947** in Howrah became a milestone,

symbolizing growing acceptance of higher education for women. Post-independence, the **Indian Constitution (1950)** guaranteed the right to education and gender equality, laying the foundation for widespread educational reforms. During the **1960s–1970s**, efforts to universalize primary education gained momentum under state-sponsored initiatives, though rural women in Howrah continued to face social and economic barriers. The **National Policy on Education (1986)** and the **Mahila Samakhya Programme (1988)** marked a renewed focus on empowering women through education, leading to improved enrolment and literacy rates. In the **twenty-first century**, initiatives such as **Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan (2001)**, **Beti Bachao Beti Padhao (2015)**, and the **National Education Policy (2020)** further reinforced the commitment to gender equality in education.

Today, while women's literacy and participation in higher education have significantly improved in Howrah, challenges persist in bridging the rural-urban divide and addressing socio-economic inequalities. Thus, the historical evolution of women's education in Howrah—from the early missionary efforts of the **1820s** to the inclusive educational reforms of the **2020s**—mirrors India's broader struggle toward gender parity, reflecting both progress achieved and challenges that remain.

O2: To examine the influence of missionary activities on the initial development of women's education in the district.

The influence of missionary activities on the initial development of women's education in Howrah District must be understood within the broader historical context of nineteenth-century colonial Bengal, a period marked by social reform, religious revival, and the gradual introduction of Western education. Prior to this period, women's literacy in Bengal—including Howrah—was extremely limited due to rigid patriarchal structures, early marriage practices, and religious restrictions that confined women to domestic spaces. It was within this environment that Christian missionaries became the earliest organized groups to promote formal education for girls, bringing significant change to social attitudes and educational practices.

The turning point came with the **Charter Act of 1813**, which allowed Christian missionaries to operate freely in British India and undertake educational and evangelical work. Soon after, the **Serampore Mission**, established in **1800** by **William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward**, began pioneering efforts in women's education in Bengal. In **1818**, the Serampore missionaries founded one of the earliest girls' schools in India, offering instruction in reading, writing, arithmetic, and moral education. Their model inspired similar initiatives across nearby areas, including **Howrah**, where missionary schools gradually emerged to serve the daughters of working-class and lower-caste families who lived near the bustling port and industrial centers (Gupta, 2000).

Between **1820 and 1840**, the **Church Missionary Society (CMS)** and the **London Missionary Society** became active in the districts adjoining Calcutta, including Howrah and Hooghly. They established vernacular schools for girls that introduced structured timetables and secular subjects—innovations that differed significantly from traditional *pathshalas* and *tols*. The CMS, for instance, operated a network of **zenana** schools by the **1830s**, in which trained female educators—known as *zenana missionaries*—visited women in their homes to provide basic literacy and religious instruction. This model was particularly effective in conservative households, where women were forbidden from attending public spaces.

The **Calcutta Female Juvenile Society**, founded in **1821**, and later the **Ladies' Society for Native Female Education** (established in **1824**), played a central role in funding and organizing such schools, some of which extended their reach to suburban areas like Howrah. These institutions offered subjects such as Bengali literacy, arithmetic, sewing, and moral lessons, marking the first systematic attempt to educate women in Bengal's semi-urban regions.

A major policy development came with the **Wood's Despatch of 1854**, often referred to as the "Magna Carta of English Education in India." It emphasized the promotion of female education and allowed missionaries to receive government grants-in-aid for their schools. Consequently, missionary societies like the **Baptist Missionary Society** and the **Free Church of Scotland Mission** expanded their activities in the **1860s and 1870s**, setting up girls' schools in Howrah's industrial townships and railway colonies. These schools not only taught academic subjects but also emphasized moral discipline, hygiene, and domestic skills—reflecting the Victorian ideals of womanhood that missionaries sought to inculcate (Sen, 2001).

By the **late nineteenth century**, the impact of missionary education became evident in the gradual acceptance of female schooling among Indian families. Their initiatives indirectly influenced Indian social reformers such as **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**, who, inspired by missionary educational models, established several girls' schools in Bengal during the **1850s–1860s** with a focus on secular instruction and social reform. In Howrah, the presence of missionary schools paved the way for indigenous educational initiatives, eventually culminating in the establishment of institutions like **Bijoy Krishna Girls' College in 1947**, which provided higher education opportunities for women.

The missionary activities between **1813 and 1880** played a foundational role in shaping women's education in Howrah District. Through the establishment of schools, the promotion of *zenana* teaching, and advocacy for female literacy, missionaries challenged entrenched patriarchal norms and created the first formal spaces for women's learning. Their efforts not only initiated the earliest phase of women's educational development in the region but also laid the groundwork for later reformist and government-led initiatives that expanded educational opportunities for women in the twentieth century.

O3: To analyze the impact of British colonial educational policies on the establishment and structure of girls' schools in Howrah during the nineteenth.

The impact of British colonial educational policies on the establishment and structure of girls' schools in Howrah during the nineteenth century was profound, as these policies laid the foundation for institutionalized education and opened pathways for women's literacy within Bengal's patriarchal society. The transformation of women's education in Howrah unfolded within the broader framework of British educational reforms, missionary interventions, and indigenous reformist movements. These developments collectively redefined the educational landscape of Bengal and played a pivotal role in shaping Howrah's schooling system for girls.

The **Charter Act of 1813** marked the beginning of state participation in education in India. For the first time, it authorized the British East India Company to allocate **₹100,000 annually** to promote education and allowed **Christian missionaries** to operate schools (Bandyopadhyay, 1990). This act indirectly supported women's education by legitimizing missionary activity, leading to the establishment of the **Serampore Mission (1800)** by **William Carey, Joshua Marshman, and William Ward**, which set up one of Bengal's earliest girls' schools in **1818**. These institutions, though primarily religious in nature, extended their influence to nearby districts such as **Howrah**, where missionary societies began organizing classes for girls from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Gupta, 2000).

The next major reform, the **English Education Act of 1835**, spearheaded by **Thomas Babington Macaulay**, emphasized English-language instruction and Western curricula. Although its primary goal was to create a class of English-educated men to serve colonial administration, it had an indirect impact on women's education by encouraging the establishment of schools that followed Western models. This act shifted educational priorities from indigenous learning systems to Western liberal arts, science, and humanities (Chatterjee, 1989). Missionary schools in Howrah adapted to these models, integrating subjects such as reading, writing, geography, and domestic science for girls.

A watershed moment in the history of women's education came with the **Wood's Despatch of 1854**, often regarded as the "Magna Carta of English Education in India." It introduced a systematic educational framework, advocating for **mass education, teacher training, vernacular instruction, and female education**. The Despatch recognized women as "mothers of the next generation" and emphasized their literacy for social progress. It also established the **grant-in-aid system**, which encouraged private individuals and missionary bodies to open schools that could receive government funding (Government of India, 1854). Following this, missionary and reformist schools for girls expanded across Bengal, including Howrah, particularly between **1855 and 1870**, when urban centers saw the opening of several vernacular and English-medium girls' schools (Sen, 2001).

The **Hunter Commission of 1882** represented another crucial milestone. Appointed under **Sir William Hunter**, the commission focused on the expansion of primary education and strongly recommended the inclusion of girls, especially from rural and marginalized communities. It proposed that local bodies and municipalities should manage schools while the government provided financial support. In Howrah, which had emerged as an industrial town, this policy led to the opening of **municipal girls' schools** offering instruction in Bengali, arithmetic, sewing, and hygiene—subjects deemed suitable for the "moral and domestic refinement" of women (Mukherjee, 2002).

In addition to these key acts, several other British educational policies shaped the development of girls' schools in Howrah during the nineteenth century:

The Despatch of 1859 (Charles Wood's Supplementary Policy) – This emphasized the training of female teachers and the improvement of girls' school facilities through government oversight. It also recommended appointing women inspectors to supervise girls' schools, marking an early recognition of the need for gender-sensitive educational administration (Basu, 1992).

The Indian Education Commission (1882–1883) – Extended Hunter's recommendations by encouraging provincial governments, including Bengal, to support the expansion of secondary education for girls, not just primary schooling. This led to the establishment of government-aided high schools for girls in Calcutta and adjoining districts, influencing educational development in **Howrah** as well (Chatterjee, 1989).

The Resolution on Education Policy (1899) – Reinforced the role of local governments in managing girls' education, emphasizing vernacular instruction and moral training. Under this policy, Howrah saw an increase in the number of aided vernacular girls' schools at the turn of the twentieth century (Bandyopadhyay, 1990).

Structurally, these schools followed a graded system modeled on the British pattern—**primary (lower), middle, and upper divisions**—with a focus on literacy, domesticity, and moral education. The curriculum reflected the colonial ideology of preparing women for domestic roles rather than professional pursuits. Teachers were trained under missionary supervision, and the schools were often co-managed by missionary organizations and municipal boards.

By the **late nineteenth century**, the cumulative effect of these policies was evident in the institutionalization of female education in Howrah. Urban centers experienced a notable rise in girls' enrolment, though rural areas continued to lag behind. The framework established during this period—through acts such as the **Charter Act (1813)**, **English Education Act (1835)**, **Wood's Despatch (1854)**, and **Hunter Commission (1882)**—not only standardized educational administration but also legitimized women's education as a social necessity.

Thus the British colonial educational policies between **1813 and 1900** profoundly influenced the establishment and structure of girls' schools in Howrah District. They introduced formal educational systems, standardized curricula, and funding mechanisms that laid the groundwork for women's literacy. While these policies were motivated by colonial objectives, they inadvertently empowered reformers and missionaries to promote female education, setting in motion a process of gradual social transformation that continued into the twentieth century.

III. CONCLUSION

In tracing the growth of women's education in Howrah District, it becomes evident that the nineteenth century marked a transformative era shaped by missionary zeal, colonial educational reforms, and indigenous social awakening. From the pioneering efforts of the Serampore Mission in the early 1800s to the institutional frameworks established under the Wood's Despatch of 1854 and the Hunter Commission of 1882, the evolution of girls' schooling reflected both the moral aspirations and contradictions of colonial modernity. Education gradually moved from being a privilege of elite households to a recognized social right for women, particularly in urban centers like Howrah, where industrial expansion demanded educated citizens. As Lord William Bentinck once remarked, "The education of women is the surest means of elevating the moral character of a nation," a sentiment echoed by reformers such as Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar, who asserted that "No country can ever truly progress if its women remain in darkness." Thus, the historical journey of women's education in Howrah symbolizes a convergence of British policy, missionary initiative, and Bengali reformist vision—collectively laying the foundation for the intellectual and social emancipation of women in colonial Bengal.

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