
EDUCATION OF WOMEN AMONG THE TRIBES OF CHITTAGONG HILL TRACTS

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Abstract: The study of education of women among the tribal groups of Chittagong Hill Tracts, a south-eastern region of present Bangladesh is significant. Considerable volume of research has been conducted on the tribes of this region, their origin, political background, their chiefs or kings, etc., but the important issue, that is, education among these tribes is neglected by the scholars. Historians who have worked on the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts have not paid their attention to women's education which plays a very significant role in overall development of individuals, especially for women. Research dealt with the Chittagong Hill Tracts and its tribes are silent on women's education. The tribal women being more visible in every sphere of life are less visible in the studies of the tribal societies that have been conducted so far. The researchers find difficulties with the sources as they are very scanty and scattered. In fact, the historical records of this region begin only after the arrival of the British, and the records are also not very helpful in providing information on this aspect. However, employing secondary sources, the present study has attempted to dig out the required things from the available historical sources, i.e. writings of the British administrators, accounts of foreign travellers and the contemporary history of Arakan and Tripura, etc. to showcase the education of women. Simultaneously, the researcher has used alternative sources, like folklore, oral traditions, etc. Together these sources have explained the education of women. Hopefully, the study will be helpful to the future researchers, academicians etc. and will provide a wider view on education of women among the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts.

Keywords: Tribes, Education, Family, Marriage, Religion, Ritual.

Introduction: The Chittagong Hill Tracts is a south-eastern region of present Bangladesh. Various tribal groups were ruling in the different parts of the area independently from the beginning. Some parts of northern Chittagong Hill Tracts were under the control of Tripura king while southern parts were under the king of Arakan. In the 17th century, the Mughal invasion of Chittagong and the defeat of Arakanese king by the Mughals had shown Mughal influence in the region. In 1757 (*Committee of Revenue*, 6 May, 1784) with the conquest of Bengal by the British, Chittagong Hill Tracts became a part of Bengal and remained under British control until the partition of India in August, 1947. On 14th August, 1947, with the partition of India as well as with the emergence of Pakistan, the Chittagong Hill Tracts area was annexed with East Pakistan. In December, 1971, East Pakistan emerged as an independent state known as Bangladesh. Since then the Chittagong Hill Tracts has become an integral part of Bangladesh.

The various tribal groups living in Chittagong Hill Tracts from the beginning have their own customs, tradition and culture. For centuries they lived their lives within themselves. The difficult geographical terrain also kept them aloof from the outside world. So the society of the hill people was stagnant, unchanging. In the 18th century, with the arrival of the British many changes had taken place among them as well as in their society and culture. The British rule over the Chittagong Hill Tracts region had a deep impact on various aspects of the lives of the hill people especially, in the field of education. After

taking up the administration of the region, the British government took important measurement to bring out the hill people from the darkness of illiteracy.

Importance of Education: For overall development of any society, education plays very significant role, and it raises one's status and develops one's personality too. It enables an individual to fulfill certain economic, political and cultural functions, and improve socio-economic status. Later on, education became a powerful weapon to improve the position of women because education improves the intellectual, social and emotional development and enables women to meet their basic needs of daily life whether at home or in the society. It supplies strength to retain position against many hazards of life. Education is considered a very powerful weapon to bring changes in the society in general and women's status in particular. It is one of the most important aspects that demarcate social changes through the passage of time. A society or a nation cannot be considered as developed if its women are not educated.

Education and the Tribes: In the beginning, the hill people were almost illiterate. The earlier sources do not reflect on education imparted to the hill people. It seems that in the beginning, majority of them were illiterate. Earlier, *Kyang* (Vihara) or Monastic schools were introduced for Buddhist and Arkanese Children (Chakma, 2002). During British period, the education in the Chittagong Hill Tracts was in the hands of the Department of the Public Instruction and under the supervision of the Inspector of Schools at Chittagong assisted by the superintendent. In the year 1862, the British established a Boarding School at Chandraghona where elementary education was imparted for the hill boys (Hutchinson, 1909). It was a Primary School till fourth standard and students were divided on social basis: – (i) Chakma and (ii) Burmese. They were taught differently.

Bengali and English subjects were taught in the Chakma class and Burmese and English in the Burmese class. In the year 1869, with the shifting of the District Head Quarter from Chandraghona to Rangamati, the school was also shifted to Rangamati as Rangamati Government Boarding School. Arrangement was made for 50 (fifty) students, including free lodging and boarding. In addition to it, British government used to bear expenditure of study materials of the students. Besides, a sweeper, washer-man and a doctor were appointed for the students. In the beginning, students used to get cloths and pocket money also. In 1878, the school was promoted to a Middle English School till sixth standard, and by the year 1890/91, it was promoted as Rangamati Government English High School. In the year 1893, Entrance Examination was introduced for the first time (Chakma, 2002). Some dignitaries were also students of this school; among them Chakma King Bhuban Mohan Roy (1897-1933) was one who studied in this school. Chakma King Bhuban Mohan Roy and Abinash Chandra Dewan were the first persons among the Chakmas who passed entrance examination in 1893. Though few were literate in the earlier days also, but they were not mentioned in the sources. Modern education system implemented in late 19th century or early 20th century among the hill people.

Earlier, students were very less in schools. Though arrangement was made for 50 students in the Rangamati Government Boarding School, in the year 1869, the number of the students was below the limit (Chakma, 2002) Hence, teachers used to go to various places to search for students and get them admission in the school. In some places, teachers had to face dangerous situations while searching for students as the hill people thought them (teachers) 'Child-catcher'. The then Headmaster, Ram Kamal Das was one of them, whose boat was floated by the hill people when he went to the rural villages to search for students (Ghosh, 1909). The British also used to take the young hill boys to get them admission in Rangamati Government English High School at free of cost. That is why at the end of 19th century and in the beginning of 20th century, a rumour spreads that British are taking away the young boys. So, the parents forbade the young boys to go to the market places (Chakma, 2002). The mindset of the hill people debarred them from getting education though the government was making all efforts to attract them by providing free lodging and boarding. Among the hill people of the region, Chakmas were the pioneers in the field of education. However, only 4% Chakmas could be claimed as literate during this period (Ghosh, 1909). The report shows that the literacy rate of the Chakmas as well as other hill tribes was pathetic.

Besides British government, the attempt of Christian Missionaries was also very important towards education among the hill people. During British period the missionaries along with their preachings played an important role in the field of education. In 1812, The London Baptist Missionary Society opened many lower primary schools in many villages and a boarding school at Rangamati. This boarding school has been raised to the status of Middle English School. Around 1903, they opened lower primary schools and boarding schools in fourteen villages. But the Chakma students rarely attended the missionary schools. There was a fear among the Chakmas that the Christian Missionaries will convert them into Christianity, though there was neither Christian teacher in the schools nor Christianity was preached there. The missionaries even started giving medical aid to attract them to their schools (Ghosh, 1909). But parents were not convinced. They would like to keep their children illiterate instead of sending them to the missionary schools.

Women and Education: After coming into the light of education also, in the beginning the society of the hill people was averse to female education. The expertise of a girl used to be judged in terms of her expertise in household work, weaving etc. A girl was selected for marriage if she is expert in house hold work, *jum* or shifting cultivation work, weaving and so on. Her status raises on the basis of her skill in weaving in earlier days. Weaving is considered a women's work in the society. Men are not seen in this activity. Women make their own traditional dress in the traditional handloom.

Education was taken as an income generating source in the family. Though male and female child both are welcomed in the family, son becomes the heir of the family who carries the generation ties further. Therefore, son's education was given more importance who provides help to the family, to his parents. There was a notion that after marriage a girl goes to her husband's house and becomes the permanent member of his family, so it is irrational to impart education to a daughter. So, in the earlier days, women's education in the society was completely neglected. Women themselves were also not aware of it.

For girls education, the earlier sources are silent. Historians and scholars hardly talk about female education. In fact we get references about female education from the late 19th century only. In the beginning, it seems that female education was neglected by the society. After taking the administration in the Chittagong Hill Tracts, British favoured the education of the hill people. Many schools were opened in the region. There were 90 schools for boys and 2 schools for girls in all. A marked feature was that presence of girls in British or Christian missionary schools was negligible. Besides, there were 23 *Kyang* Schools. In the beginning, we find that the girls were imparted education till the primary or lower primary school level only.

Kings or Chiefs' did not even make efforts in the field of education. Chakma Queen Kalindi's reign (1844-74), which is considered for socio-religious development, also did not take interest in the field of education as well as female education. Later on, the elite class and the common people took initiative. 1901 census report shows only 2156 male and 44 female were literate among total 44,329 Chakmas (male 23,526 and female 20,803). Out of these educated population, 788 male and 24 female were educated in Bengali and 55 male in English. For example, to encourage the students, in the early 20th century, Kumar Ramani Babu announced a scholarship of Rs. 5 (five) per month for two years to a Chakma student who will pass the entrance examination. He also declared a prize of Rs. 500 (five hundred) to first Chakma graduate (Ghosh, 1909). Jamini Kumar Dewan was the first graduate in 1913 among the Chakmas. It was also a popular perception that Chakma King Bhuban Mohan Roy (1897-1933) will give his daughter in marriage to the person who will be the first graduate among the Chakmas. And one sees with interest that Jamini Kumar, the first Chakma graduate got married to princess Bijan Bala in 1914 (Chakma, 2002). From various aspects, Chakmas got encouragement and realized the need of education as well as higher education. In late 19th century, among the respected Chakmas Indrajoy Dewan was the pioneer to educate his daughters. Till then, women's participation in the field of higher education was negligible. Moreover, the other hill women were far behind of education comparing to the Chakmas.

Though the education among common hill women is not seen, but like other parts of India, elite Chakma women of the different tribal groups were also not debarred from education, which is well documented in the sources. However, sources do not give information about the education of the other hill women except the Chakma women. The reason behind this might be that among the other tribal groups Chakmas were the pioneer in the field of education, so its women.

In late 19th century, among the respected Chakmas Indrajoy Dewan was the pioneer to educate his daughters. His two daughters, Sarjubala and Sorashibala both received education. Sarjubala passed higher primary school examination and also received scholarship for her second position. Sorashibala passed lower primary school examination and got the first position. She also completed higher primary school education. Purna Chandra Dewan's daughter Sarojini received higher primary school education. Raj Chandra Dewan's daughters Indrani and Surabala, Rasik Chandra Dewan's daughter Kumudini and Deputy collector Krishna Chandra Dewan's daughter passed lower primary school examination. In 1937, Kadombalata Chakma got admitted in 5th class and Renukabala Dewan in 6th class. They were the first Chakma women who got admission in Rangamati Government High School. Kumud Bikash Chakma named it as 'auspicious beginning' of the Chakma women in this school. Manorama Dewan was the first Chakma woman who passed matriculation Examination in 1938. Till 1947, total 4 Chakma women passed matriculation examination. Bakul Bala Chakma was the first women passed intermediate examination in 1948 and Anjulika Talukder was the first woman graduate (1963) among the Chakmas.

Slowly and gradually the tribes of Chittagong Hill Tracts realized the importance of female education. In late 20th century sons and daughters were equally seen attending schools, colleges and universities. Once importance of women's education is realized, and girls are no more judged on the basis of her expertise in house hold work and weaving, but on the basis of her educational qualification. Women from many tribal groups have become doctors, engineers and many are holding higher posts in administration. Educated women naturally give importance to the higher education of their daughters.

Education, especially women's education among these tribes had brought tremendous change in the society. Women become very much aware of their rights. Polygamy now is hardly seen among the educated class. The irrational belief system in the customs and traditions of the tribes have disappeared. Now-a-days, education is given the priority, not the family background. Parents of the royals or elite groups are selecting highly educated grooms for their daughters whatever is his family background is.

However, the majority of the population who live in the remote hill top areas are still in the dark of illiteracy because there is no school even no primary school have been set up there. So, there is naturally a gap between the educated and illiterate women.

Conclusion: In spite of many opportunities provided by the British and the Christian Missionaries, majority of the tribes were not taking education. In the beginning, they could not realize the need of education. Moreover, the majority of the population were dwelling in the villages and remote areas where no schools, not even primary schools had been set up. Even in these days, many young hill boys and girls in the remote areas are not receiving even primary school education.

However, slowly and gradually the hill people were realizing the need of education. Teachers did not need to go in search for students door to door as before. Satish Chandra Ghosh, who was a teacher in Rangamati government High School in the early 20th Century, says that comparing to other hill people, the majority of the students were Chakmas and, comparatively Chakmas start going to school at early age (Ghosh, 1909).

By analyzing the growth of education, the researchers have traced how the society of the hill people of Chittagong Hill Tracts has been transformed. Education played a vital role in the society, which was helpful in creating awareness among the people. The educated group has pioneered to modify some rites and rituals. It has brought changes in the society, and the old methods of performing *pūja* through animal sacrifice has disappeared among the educated people.

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