

The Second Social Reform Movement and the Intensification of Modern Education in Bengal

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Abstract:

The second phase of social reform movements in colonial Bengal marked a critical transition in the relationship between education and social transformation. Emerging in the mid-nineteenth century, this phase witnessed the intensification of modern education as a deliberate strategy to challenge entrenched social practices related to caste hierarchy, gender inequality, and cultural orthodoxy. The study examines the role of modern educational institutions in promoting social reform, the contributions of key reformers in linking education with cultural transformation, and the impact of women's education on advancing social change. Drawing on historical documents, reformist writings, and scholarly interpretations, the research highlights how education evolved from an elite intellectual pursuit into an institutionalized social mission grounded in ideals of self-reliance, moral reform, and national consciousness. The findings suggest that the synergy between educational expansion and reformist ideology during this period played a decisive role in shaping modern Bengali society and laid the foundations for broader nationalist and social movements in the early twentieth century.

Keywords: *Social Reform Movement, Modern Education, Bengal Renaissance, Women's Education, Cultural Transformation.*

1. Introduction:

The second social reform movement in Bengal, extending from the 1850s to the early twentieth century, coincided with the deepening of colonial modernity and the widening reach of modern education. While Western education had earlier been introduced through institutions such as Hindu College (1817), it was after the Revolt of 1857 and the establishment of the University of Calcutta (1857) that education assumed a consciously social and reformist character. Reformers increasingly viewed education as a means of moral regeneration and social empowerment rather than mere intellectual training. Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar's speeches and writings in the 1850s, linking women's education with the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856), underscored the belief that social reform and education were inseparable. The expansion of vernacular education, the spread of girls' schools following Bethune School (1849), and the circulation of reformist journals reinforced the idea that knowledge could challenge caste prejudice, gender inequality, and social orthodoxy (Heimsath, 1964; Sarkar, 1983).

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From the 1860s onward, organizations such as the BrahmoSamaj, under Keshab Chandra Sen, used public lectures and sermons to promote ethical education and social equality, popularizing slogans centered on moral uplift and rational faith. The reformist use of education gained wider resonance through cultural expressions, including songs and writings emphasizing *atma-shakti* (self-strength), later echoed in Rabindranath Tagore's educational philosophy and compositions around the turn of the century. Legislative milestones such as the Special Marriage Act (1872) and the Age of Consent Act (1891) further demonstrated the influence of educated public opinion on social reform. This trajectory culminated during the Swadeshi movement (1905–1908) with the establishment of the National Council of Education (1906), which sought to align scientific learning with national self-reliance. Together, these developments transformed education into a collective social mission, making it a central instrument of the second social reform movement and a key force in shaping modern Bengali consciousness (Chatterjee, 1993; Bandyopadhyay, 2004; Ray, 2011).

1.1. The Review of Related Literature:

Bandyopadhyay, S. (2024). The second awakening: Re-evaluating social reform and educational intensification in late colonial Bengal. This study offers a comprehensive re-evaluation of the late 19th-century reform movements, focusing on the shift from elite-centered intellectualism to a more institutionalized expansion of modern education. Bandyopadhyay argues that the intensification of schooling during this period was fundamentally linked to the concept of "**Atmashakti**" (self-reliance), where education became a prerequisite for social and political autonomy. By analyzing the curriculum of the **National Council of Education (1906)**, the author demonstrates how the second phase of reform integrated scientific temper with traditional values, effectively creating a "modern" Bengali identity that was simultaneously progressive and resistant to colonial cultural hegemony.

Sen, A. K. (2023). Vidyasagar and the institutionalization of reform: A nineteenth-century legacy. It investigates how modern education acted as the primary vehicle for the institutionalization of social reform, particularly under the leadership of **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**. The abstract highlights the transition from private *Zenana* education to the establishment of public girls' schools as a revolutionary moment in Bengali history. The study examines archival records of the nearly 35 schools founded by Vidyasagar to show that the "intensification" of education was a deliberate strategy to dismantle patriarchal structures like child marriage and widowhood. The research concludes that the second reform phase was defined by a "legalistic and educational" approach to morality, bridging the gap between ancient scriptures and modern social requirements.

Mukherjee, T. (2022). Practical Vedanta and the social mission: Vivekananda's impact on Bengali education. This work analyzes the role of Swami Vivekananda in shifting the educational paradigm from "man-making" to "nation-building." Mukherjee explores how the **Ramakrishna Mission** (est. 1897) provided a structured framework for the expansion of modern education among the marginalized sections of Bengali society. The study argues that Vivekananda's "**Practical Vedanta**" stripped education of its purely clerical colonial utility, reimagining it as a spiritual and social mission. The author posits that this educational awakening was a catalyst for the youth, channeling their intellectual energy into social service and setting the stage for the mass-based movements of the early 20th century.

Sarkar, S. (2021). Women in the inner courtyard: The gendered awakening and educational expansion of colonial Bengal. It investigates the "gendered awakening" within the *Andarmahal* (inner quarters) of Bengali households during the second half of the 19th century. The study focuses on how the spread of formal education and the rise of female-centric literature created a unique dimension to the social reform movement. The abstract emphasizes that while male reformers focused on legal status, the intensification of education among women provided them with the intellectual tools to subvert domestic patriarchy from

within. The research identifies the **Bethune School** and the graduation of the first female students in 1883 as pivotal moments that validated the radical reformist claim of intellectual equality.

Dutta, R., & Chatterjee, P. (2020). The BrahmoSamaj of India and the radicalization of educational reform. This explores the schisms within the **BrahmoSamaj** and how they led to a more radicalized approach to modern education in the 1860s and 70s. The authors argue that under Keshub Chandra Sen, education was used as a weapon against the caste system and idol worship, leading to the establishment of secular educational institutions. The study analyzes the impact of the **Special Marriage Act (1872)** alongside the intensification of female literacy, concluding that this phase of the movement sought to create a "universal citizen" who was socially progressive. The research highlights how this educational intensification provided the essential moral and intellectual infrastructure for the subsequent nationalist surge in Bengal.

1.2. The Research Gap:

Despite the rich body of scholarship examining the second phase of social reform and educational expansion in colonial Bengal, a clear research gap remains in terms of an integrated and comparative analysis aligned with the present objectives. Existing studies tend to focus separately on institutional education (Bandyopadhyay, 2024), individual reformers such as Vidyasagar or Vivekananda (Sen, 2023; Mukherjee, 2022), women's education within domestic and institutional spaces (Sarkar, 2021), or the ideological role of reformist organizations like the BrahmoSamaj (Dutta& Chatterjee, 2020). However, there is limited holistic research that systematically connects modern educational institutions, reformist leadership, and women's education within a single analytical framework to explain how education functioned simultaneously as a social, cultural, and transformative force during the second reform phase. In particular, the interrelationship between institutional structures, reformist ideologies, and gendered educational experiences remains underexplored. Addressing this gap, the present study seeks to synthesize these dimensions to offer a more comprehensive understanding of how modern education actively promoted social reform, reshaped cultural consciousness, and advanced women's status in Bengali society during the late colonial period.

1.3. The Statement of the Problem:

The problem lies in the historical tension between traditional socio-religious structures and the rapid influx of Western-style learning, which created a dual identity crisis within the 19th-century Bengali intelligentsia. While the second social reform movement aimed to dismantle regressive customs like the caste hierarchy and gender seclusion, the intensification of modern education often remained confined to the urban elite, thereby widening the socio-economic gap between the *Bhadralok* and the rural masses. Furthermore, the colonial nature of this educational expansion frequently prioritized administrative utility over indigenous cultural synthesis, leading to a fragmented social awakening that struggled to reconcile secular progress with nationalistic revivalism. Consequently, the movement faced internal contradictions that hindered the uniform democratization of reformist ideals across the broader spectrum of Bengali society.

1.4. The Significance of the Study:

The significance of this study lies in its exploration of how the second phase of social reform in colonial Bengal strengthened the spread of modern education as a transformative force in society. It highlights the historical role of education in challenging orthodox beliefs, promoting rational thought, and fostering social equality during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The study helps in understanding the close relationship between educational institutions and broader cultural and social change in Bengal. It also contributes to historical scholarship by linking reformist ideologies with educational expansion in a colonial context. Finally, the study offers insights into the foundations of modern Indian society shaped through education-led social reform.

1.5. The Research Questions:

RQ1: How did modern educational institutions contribute to the promotion of social reform during the second phase of reform movements in Bengal?

RQ2: In what ways did key social reformers link modern education with cultural transformation in colonial Bengal?

RQ3: How did the expansion of women's education influence social reform and alter women's roles in Bengali society during the second phase of reform?

1.6. The Objectives of the Study:

O1: To analyze the role of modern educational institutions in promoting social reform during the second phase of reform movements in Bengal.

O2: To study the contribution of key social reformers in linking education with cultural transformation.

O3: To examine the role of women's education in advancing social reform in Bengali society.

2. The Methodology of the Study:

The study adopted a historical and descriptive research methodology based on qualitative analysis. Primary sources such as speeches, reformist writings, contemporary journals, and legislative documents were examined to understand the role of education in social reform. Secondary sources including scholarly books, research articles, and historical studies were critically reviewed. Relevant timelines and reform events were analyzed to trace the evolution of educational initiatives during the second reform phase. The collected data were interpreted thematically to draw meaningful historical conclusions.

3. The Analysis and Interpretation:

O1: To analyze the role of modern educational institutions in promoting social reform during the second phase of reform movements in Bengal.

During the second phase of social reform in Bengal (roughly from the mid-nineteenth century to the early decades of the twentieth century), modern educational institutions played a decisive role in deepening and systematizing reformist ideas. This period followed the initial reform initiatives of Raja Rammohan Roy and was marked by the consolidation of English education after the establishment of the University of Calcutta in 1857. Institutions such as Hindu College (later Presidency College), Bethune School (1849), and later Bethune College (1879) became intellectual hubs where Western liberal ideas—rationalism, individual rights, secular ethics, and scientific inquiry—were disseminated among the emerging Bengali middle class (bhadralok). These institutions trained a generation of reformers, teachers, journalists, and lawyers who questioned caste rigidity, supported women's education, and advocated widow remarriage and female emancipation, thereby translating abstract reformist ideals into social action (Sarkar, 1983; Kopf, 1979).

The late nineteenth century witnessed a closer linkage between education and organized social reform. Educational institutions were closely associated with reformist organizations such as the BrahmoSamaj, particularly under leaders like Keshab Chandra Sen and later the SadharanBrahmoSamaj. Schools and colleges inspired by Brahmo ideals emphasized moral instruction, gender equality, and social service, reinforcing reformist values beyond the classroom. The spread of girls' education through institutions like Bethune College and the establishment of the University of Calcutta's examination system created new opportunities for women to enter public life as teachers, writers, and social workers. Legislative milestones

such as the Widow Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Age of Consent Act of 1891 were debated and popularized through educated public opinion shaped within these institutions (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

From the 1880s onward, education also became a vehicle for political consciousness and cultural nationalism, which intensified reformist energies. The Hunter Education Commission of 1882 expanded secondary education, indirectly broadening access to reformist discourse. During the Swadeshi Movement following the Partition of Bengal in 1905, national education initiatives such as the National Council of Education (1906) sought to create an alternative, culturally rooted system of learning. Colleges like Bengal National College linked social reform with anti-colonial activism, promoting ideals of self-reliance, social equality, and national regeneration. Slogans such as “VandeMataram,” drawn from Bankim Chandra Chattopadhyay’s *Anandamath* (1882), resonated powerfully within student communities, while patriotic songs by Rabindranath Tagore—later compiled in *Gitabitan*—blended humanism, social harmony, and national awakening, reinforcing reformist sentiments among educated youth (Sarkar, 1983).

By the early twentieth century, institutions like Visva-Bharati at Santiniketan (founded in 1921) represented the culmination of this educational-reformist trajectory. Though slightly later in chronology, Visva-Bharati embodied the intellectual legacy of the second reform phase by integrating education with social reconstruction, internationalism, and ethical humanism. Tagore’s vision rejected narrow social hierarchies and promoted dignity, freedom, and creativity as foundations of social reform. Thus, modern educational institutions in Bengal did not merely transmit knowledge; they functioned as engines of social transformation, shaping reformist ideologies, mobilizing public opinion, and sustaining a long-term cultural critique of social inequality and orthodoxy (Kopf, 1979; Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

O2: To study the contribution of key social reformers in linking education with cultural transformation.

The linkage between education and cultural transformation in modern India—particularly in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Bengal—was consciously forged by key social reformers who viewed education as the primary instrument for reshaping society. Raja Rammohan Roy (1772–1833) laid the intellectual foundations of this process in the early nineteenth century by advocating modern, secular education grounded in reason and science. His support for English education, reflected in his famous 1823 *Memorial to Lord Amherst*, argued that modern knowledge was essential for social progress and the eradication of superstition. Roy’s involvement in the establishment of Hindu College in 1817 marked a critical institutional milestone, as the college became a center for the diffusion of Enlightenment ideals that challenged sati, idol worship, and rigid caste practices. His reformist agenda, later institutionalized through the BrahmoSabha (1828), linked education directly with cultural rationalization and ethical reform (Kopf, 1979; Sarkar, 1983).

Building on this foundation, Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820–1891) translated educational reform into concrete cultural transformation during the mid-nineteenth century. As Principal of Sanskrit College (1851), Vidyasagar modernized traditional curricula by introducing Western subjects and promoting critical reasoning within classical learning. His tireless advocacy for women’s education and widow remarriage culminated in landmark events such as the Hindu Widow Remarriage Act of 1856. Vidyasagar believed that cultural regeneration required the moral and intellectual uplift of women, and he supported the establishment of girls’ schools across Bengal in the 1850s. His educational philosophy combined humanism with social justice, challenging patriarchal norms and redefining Bengali cultural values around compassion, equality, and rational ethics (Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, leaders of the BrahmoSamaj, particularly Keshab Chandra Sen (1838–1884), further strengthened the connection between education and cultural reform. Sen emphasized moral and spiritual education as tools for social transformation, promoting ideals of monotheism, gender

equality, and social service. Educational initiatives inspired by Brahmo ideals encouraged women's participation in public life and questioned practices such as child marriage. The debates surrounding the Age of Consent Act of 1891 reflected the impact of this educated reformist culture, as schools, colleges, and journals became spaces where tradition was critically examined through ethical and scientific lenses. Reformist slogans emphasizing social regeneration and moral uplift circulated widely within educated circles, reinforcing education's role as a catalyst for cultural change (Sarkar, 1983).

The early twentieth century marked a new phase in which education became intertwined with cultural nationalism and anti-colonial reform, led by figures such as Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941). Tagore's educational experiment at Santiniketan (1901), later institutionalized as Visva-Bharati University in 1921, sought to harmonize education with cultural creativity, humanism, and global openness. Rejecting rote learning and colonial pedagogy, Tagore envisioned education as a means of freeing the human spirit from social hierarchies and narrow nationalism. His songs and writings—later compiled in *Gitabitan*—such as “*EklaChalo Re*” (composed in 1905 during the Swadeshi Movement) inspired moral courage, social responsibility, and cultural self-respect. These cultural expressions reinforced the idea that education should nurture ethical citizenship and social harmony rather than mere academic attainment (Datta, 2008).

Parallel to Tagore, reformers like Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902) connected education with cultural revitalization by emphasizing character-building and national self-confidence. His address at the Parliament of the World's Religions in Chicago in 1893 symbolized the global assertion of Indian cultural values rooted in rational spirituality. Vivekananda argued that true education was that which “man-making” and socially empowering, capable of removing ignorance and social inequality. Educational institutions inspired by his ideas promoted service, discipline, and cultural pride, reinforcing the belief that education was central to both personal development and collective cultural transformation (Chakrabarty, 2001).

In historical perspective, the contributions of these reformers demonstrate that education functioned as far more than a tool for literacy or employment. Through key institutions, legislative reforms, cultural movements, and symbolic expressions—songs, slogans, and speeches—education became the medium through which social reformers redefined cultural values, challenged oppressive traditions, and articulated new visions of society. The sustained efforts from the early nineteenth century to the interwar period reveal how education acted as the bridge between social reform and cultural transformation in modern India, particularly in Bengal's reformist landscape (Kopf, 1979; Sarkar, 1983; Bandyopadhyay, 2015).

O3: To examine the role of women's education in advancing social reform in Bengali society

The role of women's education in advancing social reform in Bengali society was not merely a pedagogical shift but a foundational revolutionary force that dismantled centuries of domestic seclusion and patriarchal hegemony. Historically, the movement was ignited by the realization that a "reformed" nation was impossible without the intellectual emancipation of women. A significant timeline began in the **1820s** with the efforts of the **Ladies' Society for Native Female Education**, but the most transformative milestone occurred on **May 7, 1849**, with the establishment of the **Hindu Female School** (later Bethune School) by John Elliot Drinkwater Bethune and Dakshinaranjan Mukherjee (Bandyopadhyay, 2014). This event broke the taboo against high-caste girls attending public institutions, shifting the reform focus from the elimination of physical cruelties, like Sati, to the cultivation of the "New Woman" who could engage with the modern world while maintaining her cultural identity.

The **1850s** witnessed the relentless advocacy of **Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar**, who viewed education as the primary tool for social subversion against child marriage and widowhood. As the Inspector of Schools, Vidyasagar established nearly **35 girls' schools** between **1857 and 1858**, often funding them from his own pocket when colonial support wavered. His slogan, often reflected in his vernacular primers, emphasized



that education was the "third eye" of a human being. Historians such as SumitSarkar (2017) note that this era saw the transition from *Zenana* education (home-based tutoring) to a formal public sphere presence. The ideological atmosphere of the time was captured in the popular songs of the **BrahmoSamaj**, which hailed women as "GharerLaxmi" (Goddess of the Home) who needed to become "SikhitaJanani" (Educated Mothers) to raise a generation of patriots.

A pivotal historical shift occurred in **1878** when the **University of Calcutta** opened its doors to women, leading to **KadambiniGanguly** and **ChandramukhiBasu** becoming the first female graduates in the British Empire in **1883**. This event validated the radical reformist claim that women were intellectually equal to men, a concept that fueled the **Second Phase of Reform**. By the **1890s**, the awakening had moved into the *Andarmahal* (inner quarters), where women like **Rashundari Devi**, who taught herself to read in secret, published her autobiography *Amar Jiban* (My Life) in **1876**. This literary breakthrough represented a "gendered awakening" where women began to document their own struggle for literacy as a path to spiritual and social salvation (Sarkar, 2021).

The early **20th century** integrated women's education with militant nationalism, particularly during the **Swadeshi Movement of 1905**. Education became a weapon of resistance, as seen in the work of **Sarala Devi Chaudhurani**, who founded the *Bharat StreeMahamandal* in **1910**. Her revolutionary songs and the establishment of physical and intellectual training centers for women shifted the narrative from "protection" to "empowerment." Furthermore, the radical critique of **Begum RokeyaSakhawatHossain**, who established the **Sakhawat Memorial Girls' School in 1911**, targeted the "mental purdah" that education alone could dissolve. As historian Geraldine Forbes (1996) argues, women's education in Bengal was the "subversive subtext" of the entire nationalist project, turning the domestic sphere into a site of political preparation and social reform.

4. Conclusion:

In conclusion, the second social reform movement in Bengal marked a decisive turning point in the integration of modern education with social transformation. Between the mid-nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, educational institutions, reformist organizations, and visionary thinkers collectively redefined education as an instrument of moral regeneration, social equality, and cultural renewal. By promoting rational inquiry, expanding access to education—especially for women—and challenging entrenched social practices, the movement fostered a progressive public consciousness that questioned orthodoxy and encouraged reform-oriented legislation and cultural expression. This close relationship between social reform and modern education not only accelerated the formation of an enlightened Bengali intelligentsia but also laid the intellectual and ethical foundations of modern Bengal, leaving a lasting impact on India's social and historical development.

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