



**Winning Punjabi Women through Education:  
A Study of Christian Missionaries' Activities (1849-1900)**

Mohammad Dilshad Mohabbat,<sup>1</sup> Abid Hussain,<sup>2</sup> & Najeeb ur Rehman<sup>3</sup>

**Abstract**

*Women's formal education was initiated by the Colonial government in collaboration with the Christian missionaries in Punjab. It was a very difficult task at that time because of the conservative character of the native community. The participation of Christian missionaries in the movement of women's education is sometimes considered beyond their scope. They were expected to take popular decisions to establish good relationship with the population of this region to achieve their ultimate goal of conversion. On the contrary, they decided to work for women's education, which was considered to be against society's prevalent socio-religious customs and conventions. It could be counterproductive for them by arousing the sentiments of the native society. This research attempts to explore, why they were involved in the education of the female multitude of the society instead of getting converts through preaching to the native community. Following the historical research method, the data was collected from different archival sources. The data analysis shows that the missionaries had some specific objectives behind their educational enterprise. They were serving their theological obligation by rendering academic service to the female folk of the Punjabi society.*

**Key Words:** Colonial Punjab, Christian Missionaries, social service, women's education, objectives

**INTRODUCTION**

The British East India Company annexed the province of Punjab in March, 1849. The Punjabi women, except those of privileged classes, were deprived of sufficient formal education at that time. Those belonging to the higher class were given education in their own houses by the learned ladies or old male tutors. They were mostly taught literature, elementary arithmetic, and religious scriptures (Singh, 1989). However, it should be noted that the proportion of these women was very meager, and they would not exceed a few hundred (Indian Education Commission, 1884). But the girls of ordinary classes of the society were accepted only for the religious education. They were allowed to join the boys' elementary schools to a certain age, where they learned to read the religious scriptures of their sect (Leitner, 2002). The female education at elementary level was entirely religious in character and Hindu, Muslim, and Sikh girls were required to recite their

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<sup>1</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad, Punjab, Pakistan. Email: [mdilshadmohabbat@gmail.com](mailto:mdilshadmohabbat@gmail.com)

<sup>2</sup> Associate Lecturer, University of Narowal, Narowal, Punjab, Pakistan.  
Email: [abid.hussain@uon.edu.pk](mailto:abid.hussain@uon.edu.pk)

<sup>3</sup> Assistant Professor, Department of History & Pakistan Studies, Government College University, Faisalabad. Email: [najeebalvi2004@yahoo.com](mailto:najeebalvi2004@yahoo.com)

respective religious books (Mehta, 1929). But the doors of secondary or secular educational institutions remained close for the Punjabi women; hence, vast majority of Punjab women were deprived of formal education. The historical evidence affirms that the indigenous education system of colonial Punjab had a little arrangement for the formal education of an ordinary woman of that time. Punjabi conservatism was considered the major hindrance in establishing the proper girls' schools, and female education in the province remained confined to religious instruction only (Haq, 1981).

After the annexation of the province, the British administration was keen to foster women's education in the region. Lord Dalhousie was the iconoclast to attack the conservative view of "educating the men first" in India. He decided to extend the Government's open patronage to the education of women (Nurullah & Naik, 1956). Afterwards, Wood's Education dispatch suggested the initiation of "grants in aid" scheme for the private educational agencies. Immediately after its inception in 1855, the provincial education department of Punjab set its efforts to foster separate girls' schools in the province. It focused on promoting educational institutions of two kinds— the Government schools and the aided schools— under its supervision. The campaign of Sir Robert Montgomery is considered to be a milestone in the support of women's education. He launched an awareness campaign to convince the people of the province to educate their daughters. He held a durbar, in February 1862, at Lahore and impressed upon, the European officials and the native gentlemen present, the importance he attached to the education of the women and invited their co-operation.

Christian missionaries were present at Ludhiana, a part of Punjab, since 1834 even before its annexation to the British Empire. They are considered to be the pioneers in the field of formal women education in the province. Their efforts in this field are vital because of the sensitivity of the native population attached to female education. Despite its anticipated negative social implications for the missionaries, they decided to establish exclusive girls' schools in the region. American Presbyterian Mission led the field by opening American Presbyterian Mission School for orphan girls at Ludhiana, in 1836. Church Missionary Society of the Church of England opened its Mission at Simla in 1840 and laid the foundation of Church Mission School for girls in 1844. The wives of the missionaries were involved in imparting education among the women in these schools.

After annexation of the province, missionaries found conducive environment for their missionary operations. They became the major beneficiaries of the scheme of grant in aid which proved to be beneficial in resolving most of their financial issues. Their administrative issues were also resolved because of the presence of pro-missionary administrators in the hierarchy. As, in spite of Queen's declared policy of religious neutrality, most of the British Governors of the province, like Lawrence Brothers, Montgomery, and Metcalf, supported missionaries' activities (Malik, 1982). The British administration was not only supporting its cause of female education but also propagating for it. That is why different missionary organizations put their labors in this direction and established girls' schools throughout the province. Due to the collaborative efforts of the British administration and missionaries, girls' education was cultivated in the province. Although the outcome of the efforts did not seem satisfactory, it was vital to establish the lines on which the educational setup of Punjab was sought to be formulated. So it provided a launching pad for women's education and a great output in the form of foundation of an education system on present lines.

The role of Christian missionaries, especially female missionaries, in fostering female education is highly appreciated by the historians of missionary activities in Asia. Leslie A Flemming characterized them as “agents of profound changes in the traditional cultures of Asia” to acknowledge their contribution (Flemming 1989, 35). Glendora B. Paul considered missionaries important because of their contribution in changing women’s status with their emphasis on education and their demonstration of active care and concern for women which spurred Indian social reformers to act (Paul, 1984). John C. B. Webster and Ellen Low Webster (1985) characterized much of their work for the education and uplift of Indian women, as pioneering and socially radical. Shirley Garrett (1982) suggested that missionary women’s attitudes and actions were to introduce new concepts that struck at the heart of the cultures they entered. She also advocated that “whether mildly or militantly, the missionary women worked on behalf of Asian women, challenging prevailing social norms and customs” (Garrett, 1982).

On the other hand, a group of historians terms the missionaries’ efforts as part of their religious enterprise for getting converts from the native society. Mavra Farooq (2014) examined the aims and objectives of Christian missionaries’ education in India and stated that the missionaries used their education as a tool for propagation of Christianity. To her, the real aims of Christian education in 19<sup>th</sup> century India, became the themes such as conversions, trainings of Christian leaders, the distribution of Christian knowledge, and the like. Rudolf C Heredia termed the school as “principal agent of evangelism in the modern missionary movement” that began with the colonial expansion and ended with the decline of the west (Heredia 1995, 2332). Sanjay Seth thought the efforts of Christian missionaries as part of Europe’s enterprise to export its religion to the colonies. He believed that missionary education was an answer to the question, “how to spread the message of Christianity in India” (Seth 2001, p. 115; Seth, 2007).

This paper tries to explore the missionaries’ objectives behind their enterprise for women’s education in the Punjab province during the second half of the nineteenth century. The real decisions, based on the implicit agenda, influenced the anticipated vital role of education in the society and should be contextualized in the appropriate socio-religious and political realities. So educating the female folk of the province was valuable but it should be brought forth that what were they being taught for? Were they being taught to emancipate them from different socio-religious customs to raise their status or paving the way for Christ’s spirit? Were they being educated for raising their status in the society or increasing the missionaries’ influence in the society which would be further used for spreading the gospel in the society?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research uses a historical method to analyze the published sources of the time. It evaluates primary and secondary sources to conclude by applying descriptive and analytical approaches. The sources like journal articles, annual reports of Education department, reports of Missionaries’ conferences, the books including other published sources of the colonial period, are analyzed to draw conclusions.

## **CONDITION OF WOMEN’S EDUCATION IN THE PRE-BRITISH PUNJABI SOCIETY**

Women education was considered a sensitive area in the conservative society of the nineteenth century Punjab. At that time, women were facing huge problems in terms of their education which

was considered unnecessary, unorthodox, and dangerous in society (Malhotra, 2000). Almost all the indigenous education system stakeholders—the Muslims, the Hindus, and the Sikhs—considered formal female education against their dignity. They thought it contradictory to their religion and their social norms, conventions, and customs. The conservative character of the oriental society and its great regard for its specific set of social values, norms, and conventions deprived women of their fundamental right to education. The orthodox lifestyle of the society, customs like child marriage, *Purdah* and some distorted religious beliefs were primarily responsible for keeping women away from their education. The sensitivity of the matter can be judged from the fact that even the native champions of Western education in the Punjabi society, like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan and G. W. Leitner, were failed to exhibit any significant contribution in this direction.

Sir Syed Ahmed Khan can be considered as the pioneer Muslim educationist who motivated the Muslims towards Western education. The majority of the Muslim community of India, including that in the province of the Punjab, was not in good terms with their colonial masters and therefore had a biased feeling for everything that had the British label. The people with different approaches were expected to face a harsh reaction from their co-religionists, and they had to fight hard against this tendency (Wasti, 1966). Sir Syed Ahmed Khan was one of the early crusaders against this tendency. He devoted his life to the uphill task of revitalizing the Muslim gentry and the enlightened intellectual class. He was ridiculed, even rebuked by his co-religionists, but he was strong enough to hold his ground and realized the dream during his life time (Wasti, 1966). Establishment of different educational institutions like *Madrassas of Muradabad and Ghazipur*, MAO High School Aligarh, MAO College Aligarh, Scientific Society, All India Muslim Educational Conference, etc. were his major contributions for the education of the Indian Muslims. Due to his efforts, after the War of Independence in 1857, the Muslims were able to save their separate identity as an independent nation.

No doubt Sir Syed's contribution was gigantic as without showing any regard for the popular prejudices of that time, he dared to convince the people to learn Western education. But despite his liberal character and disregard for the conservative character of the society towards Western Education, his attitude towards female education could not be squared with his role as a pioneer of Western education in this region (Hamid, 1970). On the contrary, he believed that women's education should not precede men's education, and it is the education of men which would pave the way for that of their female counterparts. He felt that the parents of the Muslim girls were justified in not sending their daughters to the government girls' schools (Hamid, 1970). That is why, he had little contribution on his credit in the field of women's education.

G. W. Leitner was another eminent educationist of the nineteenth century Punjab. He has been honoured to understand the need to instill respect for native culture and oriental identity in the students' minds. He agreed and found it necessary to introduce Western knowledge to the local people through their own language. He believed that it would bring forth the true genius of the people of Punjab and ultimately would result in the flowering of local traditions and culture. So he endeavored to arouse a spirit of self-reliance among the natives, especially among their natural leaders, the chiefs, the priests, and the wealthier merchants (Rani, 1994). He warned that the system introduced by Macaulay of conducting education through English and the introduction and

inculcation of the English culture would destroy local pride and retard the development of the native population. So he set his efforts to focus on the study of local classics and, therefore, had a great Orientalist's reputation. His active presence in Lahore made the city centre of educational and literary activities (Rani, 1994). He founded the "Anjuman-i-Panjab," in 1865, here in Lahore, to boost up the educational activities in this city.

On the other hand, despite his massive contribution towards the education of the male population of the Punjab, G. W. Leitner lacked efforts of the same magnitude in the field of women education. He, very much like Sir Syed Ahmed Khan, contributed very little to the education of women. He advocated the diffusion of Western education among the Punjabi population but was reluctant to do any serious work to educate the female multitude of the same region. Even the vernacular literary society, the "Anjuman-i-Panjab" founded by him, did not include the issue of women's education in the objectives of the society (Wasti, 1966). In fact, Leitner gave some suggestions for promoting education among the women and proposed developing some system of women's education within the fold of indigenous education (Leitner, 2002). Being an adamant supporter of the indigenous education system, he believed that this system had much potential, if managed properly. He thought that some minor modifications, according to the ground realities of the new era, could broaden the scope of women's education in this education system. But it is a noteworthy fact that Leitner, in spite of being an essential part of the educational hierarchy of the colonial regime, practically had minimal contribution on his credit regarding the education of the women of Punjab.

### **CHRISTIAN MISSIONARIES' EFFORTS IN THE FIELD**

In spite of the sensitivity attached to the issue of women's education in the Punjab, the missionaries took up the cudgels and set their efforts for the education of the female folk of the society. Their efforts were vital for the commencement of formal females on modern lines in the province. They worked in collaboration with the contemporary British government and rendered valuable services in the field. Due to their revolutionary activities, they are considered pioneers in women's education in the province.

Christian missionaries adopted different modes of action in women's education. At the first place, they acted through the female missionaries, popularly known as *Zanana* missions. They established a regular system of *zenana* visiting in which the women missionaries, accompanied by the trained native women, visited the women of the native society at their homes. It was considered important to access the secluded women of the society. They established separate girls' schools and the Boarding Schools for girls. The former was essential in lessening the native apprehensions of *Purdah* whereas the later was considered vital in affecting Christian lifestyle in the lives of the boarders. The Teachers' Training Schools were established at different missionary stations to fulfill the existing needs of female teaching staff in the province.

### **Christian Missionaries' Objectives behind Women Education**

Christian missionaries rendered valuable services in the field of women's education in the Punjab. It was a sensitive area to work, and it looks like they were divagating from their original task of preaching. But they had some particular objectives behind their educational enterprise for the female folk of the province, which are discussed as follows:



### ***Importance of Women in the Society***

After their initial working in the oriental society, Christian missionaries concluded that their ultimate goal of converting the Indian population to the World of Christianity could not be achieved without winning the female folk of the native society. Their experiences led them to know the extent of power and authority of the Punjabi woman over her family—acting as a mother, a wife, a sister, or a daughter. Especially her supreme role, as a mother, in molding the moral and religious character of her young ones was quite critical for the missionaries (Gordon, 1886). Women were supposed to play a crucial role in taking the all-important decision of embracing a new religion. So the missionaries concluded that conversion of the male population, in the oriental setting, was not possible without winning the female members of the society. The evidence of a young high-caste Hindu, who had professed faith in Christ but refused to convert due to the fear of offending his wife and mother (Flemming, 1989), was a typical example of women’s dominance in the decision making process. These experiences played an important role in developing this kind of thinking in the missionary ranks. Sir W. Mackworth Young, addressing a great gathering of Oxford men, briefly stated his views in the same vein by saying, “Win the women of India, and you will win the men!” (Stock, 1916). C.B. Newton expressed his views in the following words:

The incidents....show that the women of India are a power in the land, and their faith and religious zeal are today one of the most serious obstacles to the success of the Gospel.....My conclusion then is that the work which demands the most earnest, persistent and prayerful effort of the Church and Mission Board is Woman’s work for woman (Newton, 1893).

The realization of women importance, in a family, led the missionaries to initiate Christian vernacular education for the female portion of the society. The seclusion of women kept them in a state of ignorance. Due to the strict social bindings, the women could not go out to hear gospel nor could the male missionaries carry it to their homes. Being unable to read, they could not learn the glad tidings of Savior through the Bible and its tracts. The missionaries thought that their (women’s) isolation and ignorance are the most effectual barriers between them and the light (Gordon, 1886). Efforts were launched to bring them into contact with Christian influence in the school and introduce a living Christian worker, with her Bible, to the *Zanana* portion of the family. So, the girls’ missionary schools were established to teach the women to read and write. *Zenana* visiting was also introduced to contact the secluded women of the society (Gordon, 1886).

The natives were well aware of the fact too. In 1885, a Muslim of Amritsar pleaded his co-religionists to teach their women in such words:

The missionaries, who pour like a flood into the country, are striking deadly blows at the root of our faith. They know how much depends upon the women, ... they enter your houses and sometimes even plant schools there! By this means a loophole is made for the Bible. Soon the women learn to despise their own religion and the evil seed is shown in their hearts (Webster 2007, 232).

### ***Cultural change***

Historians of American missionaries’ activities in Asia have often characterized missionaries as agents of profound changes in the Oriental traditional culture, due to their major stress on the cultural change in this region. Christian missionaries were profoundly disturbed by significant

aspects of Indian culture and approached the Indian society with a distinctly reformist intent (Flemming, 1989). Social customs and conventions of the Oriental society were the major stumbling blocks in the way of women's education and of conversion of the Indian people. They, time and again, complained that the institutions of cast, *purdah*, child marriage, etc., had made their work almost impossible. To them, the stubborn attachment, of the natives to illogical and irrational superstitions was also an insuperable barrier to the cause of conversion (Seth, 2007). So, they decided to fight against these obstacles through their educational institutions. They decided to establish educational institutions to incorporate cultural change in the Punjabi society.

Christian missionaries fancied a positive cultural change through the diffusion of Western knowledge of science and the growth of reasoning in their students. Their institutions were supposed to develop their distinct ethos, based on Western Christian ideals (Maskiell, 1985) and aimed at fostering common characteristics in their students' lifestyle. They focused on developing a change in the behavior of their students, which was expected to challenge the existing social customs and conventions. It was intended to provide an atmosphere to the female students to live free of any social restrictions. The native institutions of caste and *purdah* were the major victims of missionaries' cultural assault.<sup>4</sup> To them, this change in the thought and mind of the native people was necessary to win over their souls for the word of God.

### ***Preparatory Character of Education***

Alexander Duff and Miller took education as a preparatory tool for converting the native population, which afterward became the majority view of the later missionaries (Mohabbat, 2017). Education was considered helpful in preparing the minds of the native population for conversion. In this way, it could play an important role in getting missionaries' ultimate goal of conversion. E.S. Summer explained the same views as, "these colleges are leavening society with Christian thought and developing Christian feeling, and so preparing for a great harvest of conversions in the future." Preparation of the native mind was the most desired aim of missionaries' education and therefore many of the missionaries, from their inception in Punjab, came up with education as one of their basic operations (Seth, 2007).

Christian missionaries believed that the general clearing away of ignorance, folly, and superstition, through their educational institutions would ultimately pave the way for the spread of Christian thought (Seth, 2007). They decided to move in this direction by stages, and the reformation of the native mind by eliminating the irrational and illogical thinking of the people became their foremost priority. The spread of western education in the native society was the ultimate choice of Christian missionaries to achieve their ultimate aim of conversion. They were fully convinced that their education would prepare the native mind for the later cultivation of Christian thought. Their educational endeavors aimed at seeking "a change of thought and feeling, a modification of character and formation of principles tending towards Christian direction" (Mathew, 1988).

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the behavioral standards, at Kinnaird College, were found opposite to the concept of *purdah* and that of caste.

Women education in Punjab was also started as *praeparatio evangelica*. The logical and analytical nourishment of native female mind was considered necessary, first for the rejection of prevalent socio-religious norms and customs and ultimately for the embracement of the Christian religion. The removal of the barrier of *Purdah* was also considered necessary for the extension of Christian influence in the *Zananas* of the society, and missionary educational institutions were the best means to achieve this target. So the preparatory character of education was more important for Women than that for the Punjabi men. For the missionaries, education continued to be *praeparatio evangelica* and they. They convinced that the introduction of Western education in India would ultimately pave the way for the triumph of Christianity, in this region of the subcontinent (Seth, 2001).

### ***Education: A Means of Social interaction***

Christian missionaries entered the subcontinent mainly due to their religious obligations and conversion of the native population was their only goal. They required some social interaction with the targeted population to fulfill their religious agenda. So they tried to establish a social link with the native population of Punjab, through their social service programs—by providing education and health services.

Targeting the female sect of the society required missionaries' social interaction with the female multitude of the native community. Christian missionaries started to pinpoint some weak links of the Punjabi society through which they might act to form some influential links with the female folk. The subservient social status of women and the socio-religious norms and customs governing women provided them the required weak link. They decided to enter the social arena of the Punjabi society through their social work for the emancipation of women from the above mentioned restrictions. So they set their efforts in the said direction and dreamt of some considerable influence over society through their social work for women. Andrew Gordon shared a practical experience when they rented a building intending to establish a girls' school but the citizens were agreed only if the Bible teaching should be excluded from the studies. The missionaries modified their plan and opened a *Zanana* hospital in this building. The hospital became popular soon, and the patients started to come from the city and the surrounding villages. The people who were previously in demand of excluding Bible from the school, now voluntarily attended the devotional exercises and the proceedings of Sabbath-school. This social service mode helped the missionaries establish a social link with the native population and opened the doors for the missionaries. Rev. Andrew Gordon described it in words:

these patients, from city and village, rich and poor, and whether living in seclusion or otherwise, after the kind treatment they had received, were found ever ready to open their doors to those who had relieved their bodily ailments, now when they came to visit them with Bible in hand. Among the *Zananas* opened by this means were some in regard to which other methods had long been tried in vain—even men noted for their public opposition to the gospel, on seeing their suffering wives and daughters relieved of their painful and dangerous maladies, gratefully welcoming to their *zananas* the missionary, their benefactress, with her Bible. (Gordon 1886, 478-80)



## CONCLUSION

Christian missionaries came to the Indian subcontinent mainly because of their religious obligation of getting converts through preaching activity. The stubborn attachment of the native Indians to their religious beliefs forced them to adopt indirect methods. Consequently, they involved themselves in different social service programs, mainly in health and education. Education, because of its multifunctional character, was developed as a compulsory component of missionary operations in Punjab. The missionaries also involved themselves in the field of women's education which, because of the sensitivity of the native population attached to it, was not an easy task to do. But a Punjabi woman, as a mother, a wife, a sister, a daughter, had a considerable influence in the decision making process of her family. The missionaries considered the influence of women vital for the achievement of their ultimate goal. So they decided to win the Punjabi women through their educational activities. The prevalent socio-religious customs and conventions like the seclusion of women in the form of *purdah*, child marriage, women's dependence on their male counterparts, existing superstitions, etc. were the major challenges of the field. The missionaries considered the promotion of education as the best remedy to eliminate these kinds of social norms and customs. To them, both the issues of women's education and that of social restructuring were co-related and any advancement in the one had its proportional implications.

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