

Colonial Education System, New Language Policy, and the Bengali-Urdu Debate: Bengali Muslim Women's Education in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century

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Abstract:

To perpetuate cultural colonisation, the British implemented a new education system in the English language in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal. Again, during this time, Bengal witnessed the rise of the local intelligentsia or the *Bhadralok* class and the emergence of a codified or standard Bangla (Bengali), *Sadhubhasha*. The new education system also had an agenda of imparting formal education to women. But there emerged a debate on language use regarding women's education. Social reformers and educationists of contemporary Bengal decided to promote women's education in standard Bangla, and English and English education was mostly restricted for them. Promoting *Sadhubhasha* (Pure Bengali) as the language of vernacular education by the *Bhadralok* and celebrating English as the language of the new education system in nineteenth-century colonial Bengal resulted in an identity crisis in Bengali Muslims. Due to the Sanskrit affiliation of the newly codified *Sadhubhasha*, Muslims preferred to use Urdu as their vernacular, while in most cases, their mother tongue was Bengali. Actually, they used Urdu as a link language to have pan-Indian Muslim solidarity. This language conundrum of Bengali Muslims affected the education of the community as a whole. This linguistic conflict regarding the community's vernacular seriously impacted Muslim women's education in particular, as women's education, in general, was promoted mostly in vernacular in colonial Bengal. While exploring the Muslim community's reaction to the new language policy of education, this study also investigates how education for Muslim women was designed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It examines how the Bengali-Urdu debate in the Muslim community had an impact on the education of their women. The study also discusses the language of education and the curriculum for general women of colonial Bengal and for Muslim women of the colonial time in order to understand the distinctions and disparities in educational patterns between women in general and Muslim women in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bengal. To carry out this research, we have used content analysis of textbooks and curricula used for school education in nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century colonial Bengal. Relevant policy documents, newspapers, and administrative reports extracted from various archives are analysed to substantiate the arguments.

Keywords: *Sadhubhasha*, Linguistic conflict and education, Muslim women, Vernacular, Colonial Bengal