

Missionary Education and Social Transformation: The London Missionary Society in Colonial Murshidabad (1772–1946)

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Abstract : The London Missionary Society (LMS) played a significant role in shaping the educational landscape of colonial Murshidabad between 1772 and 1946. By introducing Western-style formal education, the Society contributed to a gradual transformation of the region's traditional learning structures. It established missionary schools, promoted vernacular education, and encouraged female literacy. Although founded in 1795 at Chinsurah, the LMS began its activities in Murshidabad around 1824. This study examines the Society's role as a catalyst in the district's educational reform during the colonial period. It analyzes key initiatives, including the establishment of English and vernacular schools in Berhampore and Khagra, along with early efforts to expand female education. Drawing on missionary records and colonial sources, the paper argues that, despite its primary objective of proselytization, the LMS inadvertently broadened access to education and facilitated the emergence of a new middle-class intelligentsia. The study concludes that the LMS significantly contributed to the transition from a predominantly traditional, religious system of learning to a more structured and modern educational framework, the legacy of which continues to influence the region's academic institutions.

Index Terms - London Missionary Society, Vernacular education, Female literacy, Proselytizing.

I. INTRODUCTION

The transformation of the educational scenario in Murshidabad from a medieval indigenous system to a modern colonial system is a very important part of the social history of Bengal. During the period from 1772 to 1946, the district, which was once the home of the Nawabs, underwent a radical transformation in the field of education. Although the British East India Company was initially reluctant to disturb the indigenous practices, the entry of the London Missionary Society (LMS) proved to be a catalyst for this change. This paper will examine how the LMS went beyond the boundaries of religious education to impart a systematic and Westernized form of education that changed the intellectual landscape of the region.

During the early colonial period, education in Murshidabad was limited to Pathshalas, Tolls, and Madrasas, which were catering to the socio-religious requirements of the elite class. The LMS, with its inception in the early part of the 19th century through the efforts of Micaiah Hill and other visionaries, brought in a radical idea of using education as an instrument of social and moral change. Through the establishment of their centers in Berhampore, Khagra, and Jiaganj, the Society brought in a new curriculum that combined modern science, geography, and mathematics with literature in the vernacular and English languages. This was not just an educational change but a social one as well, as the missionary schools started opening their doors to the marginalized sections of society, including the Dalits who had been hitherto denied access to formal education.

Moreover, the LMS was a trailblazer in women's education in the region. In an era where the social fabric dictated that women's presence in the public domain was strictly limited, missionary wives and educators founded "native female schools," thus paving the way for a gender-neutral literacy program. Although the ultimate agenda of the Society was sometimes thought to be proselytizing, it is hard to overlook the secular implications of their activities. They were instrumental in creating a middle-class intelligentsia and an institutional legacy, such as the Union Christian Training College, which improved the standards of teaching in the area. The objective of this study is to investigate the multifaceted implications of the LMS, not only as a religious body, but also as a force of modernization that crossed the boundary between traditional Bengal and the modern world.

This study aims to critically examine how the London Missionary Society functioned as a catalytic agent in transforming the educational structure of Murshidabad from indigenous systems to a modern, inclusive, and institutionalized framework between 1772 and 1946.

1.1 Review of the Literature

The literature under review portrays the following subjects such as vernacular education in the district of Murshidabad, the growth of female education during the period mentioned above, point of view of education in the contemporary time, the impact of London Missionary Society in education in the Bengal Subah.

Rakibul Islam (2019) in "Education System of Murshidabad District in the Colonial Era: A Historical Investigation" shows the education system in Murshidabad during the colonial rule also depicts the importance of Education among the vernacular people. Prodyut Mondal (2021) in the journal "London Missionary Society in Spreading Education in Colonial Murshidabad District, 1824-1947: A Historical Review" focuses on the essence of preliminary education amongst the indigenous population of colonial Bengal, the role of LMS in English education and vernacular schooling for the boys and girls in that district. Dr. Md. Siddique Hossain (2024) in "Unveiling the Educational Landscape of Murshidabad District during the Colonial Era: an in-depth Historical Analysis"

highlights the points discussed beneath the educational landscape in Murshidabad, the challenges phased by various voluntary organizations who tried to educate the people of Murshidabad, the conventional society of the district, the interest of girls' education. Kalidas Roy (2025) in his paper in the journal of "An analytical Study on Education System in Murshidabad District (India) during Colonial Rule (1787-1947)" explores the role of colonial policies on the transformation of traditional learning into modern, English-oriented education in Murshidabad directorate by the local elite and general people in increased literacy and societal transformation in Murshidabad district.

1.2 Research Gaps

To justify the originality of this paper I figured out few of the flaws made by the previous scholars. The missed areas will be highlighted on this paper. The gaps are as follows.

- a) Regional Specificity: Most research on colonial education has been very metropolitan, focusing on either the "metropolis" (Calcutta) or the "Serampore Trio" (Baptist Mission). There is a research gap in Murshidabad's transformation from being the "Nawabi capital" to a "missionary educational centre."
- b) Intersectionality of Impacts: Most research has been conducted from either a purely religious angle (missionary activities as proselytizing) or a purely humanitarian angle (missionary activities as a humanitarian effort). There is a research gap in understanding the overall socio-economic impact on certain sub-groups, such as the specific professional paths of Dalits and marginalized women who attended these particular LMS schools.
- c) The "Agency" of the Locals: There is very little research done on how the local people of Murshidabad resisted, negotiated, or appropriated the missionary education for their own social mobility.
- d) Professionalization of Teaching: Although the establishment of the Union Christian Training College is mentioned, very little research has been done on how it brought about a change in the teaching standards of non-missionary schools (government or private) in the district in the mid-20th century.

This study advances existing historiography by moving beyond descriptive accounts of missionary activity and instead situating the London Missionary Society within a broader analytical framework of social transformation, educational modernization, and subaltern agency. By integrating regional specificity with themes of caste, gender, and institutional change, the paper contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how missionary education operated not merely as a colonial imposition but as a negotiated and adaptive process within local society.

1.3 Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this research is to evaluate the transformative role of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in the educational development of Murshidabad District during the period from 1772 to 1946. The research aims to:

- i) Map the Institutional Development: To trace the historical development and expansion of LMS schools (English and Vernacular) in major centre such as Berhampore, Khagra, and Jiaganj.
- ii) Analyze the Pedagogical Changes: To analyze the changes from the conventional religious-oriented syllabus (Pathshalas/ Madrasas) to a modern Western syllabus including science, geography, and professional teacher education.
- iii) Assess Social Inclusiveness: To investigate the role of the society in making education socially inclusive by imparting education to women, Dalits, and other marginalized sections of society who were hitherto denied access to formal education.
- iv) Assess the Dual Motive: To critically assess the interface between the society's evangelical motive (proselytization) and its secular contribution to social reform and the emergence of a local middle-class intelligentsia.
- v) Determine the Long-term Effect: To determine the long-term effect of LMS institutions, such as the Union Christian Training College, on the present-day educational setup of Murshidabad.

II. NEED OF THE STUDY

The present study is significant as it addresses critical gaps in the historiography of colonial education in Bengal by focusing on the relatively underexplored region of Murshidabad and the transformative role of the London Missionary Society (LMS). While existing scholarship has largely concentrated on metropolitan centres or broader colonial policies, there remains a lack of in-depth analysis of how missionary education operated at the district level and influenced local social structures. This study examines the transition from indigenous educational systems to a modern, institutionalized framework, with particular emphasis on inclusivity across caste, class, and gender. Furthermore, it seeks to examine the complex interaction between evangelical objectives and secular educational outcomes, thereby offering a nuanced perspective on how local communities negotiated, adapted, and appropriated missionary initiatives. By integrating themes of social mobility, female literacy, and vernacular education, the study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of educational transformation and its long-term implications for regional development.

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research will use a historical-analytical method to analyze the educational interventions of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Murshidabad. The methodology of this research is described below:

- a) Archival Research (Primary Sources): The research work is based on the analysis of digitized and hard copies of colonial archives. The primary sources of the research work are the LMS Annual Reports (1795-1946), missionary letters from the archives of the

Council for World Mission (CWM), and the Bengal District Gazetteers (Murshidabad). These sources are extremely informative in respect of statistical information regarding school enrolment and educational curricula, as well as experiential information regarding social reception.

b) **Documentary Analysis (Secondary Sources):** A critical assessment of the existing literature, such as books by Richard Lovett and other academic articles on the topic of the Bengal Renaissance, is made to situate the missionary activities in the larger socio-political context of British India.

c) **Chronological Mapping:** The study employs a diachronic approach to map the development of LMS activity from the early 19th-century landing of missionaries to the mid-20th-century establishment of teacher training institutions.

d) **Thematic Synthesis:** To analyze the social impact, the study employs thematic analysis to organize the data under distinct themes: gender-responsive literacy, caste-inclusive education, and the Vernacular-English medium issue.

e) **Comparative Framework:** The study compares the modern educational framework established by the LMS with the indigenous framework (Tools and Madrasas) in place to assess the extent of "catalytic" change introduced by the Society.

f) **Oral History and Data Validation:** This study incorporates qualitative insights derived from oral history interviews conducted with 15–20 respondents, including retired teachers, local historians, and community elders from Berhampore, Khagra, and Jiaganj. A purposive sampling method was adopted to ensure that participants possessed intergenerational knowledge of missionary educational institutions. To ensure reliability, oral testimonies were cross-verified with archival records, census data, and missionary reports. In cases of archival gaps, triangulation methods were employed by comparing multiple secondary sources and administrative records to reconstruct historical trends systematically. This methodological integration strengthens the evidentiary base of the study while addressing the limitations of fragmented colonial archives.

3.1 Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in an interdisciplinary theoretical framework that integrates perspectives from the sociology of education, postcolonial theory, and modernization theory to analyze the transformative role of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in colonial Murshidabad.

1. Modernization Theory

The research draws upon modernization theory to interpret the transition of Murshidabad's educational system from traditional indigenous institutions (Pathshalas, Tolls, Madrasas) to a structured, Western-oriented model. Missionary education is viewed as a key agent of modernization, introducing rational curricula, institutional organization, and professional teacher training. The LMS functioned as a catalyst in shifting the region from a feudal-elitist knowledge structure to a more inclusive and institutionalized system of education.

2. Sociology of Education (Functionalist Perspective)

From a functionalist standpoint, education is considered a mechanism for social integration and mobility. The LMS schools contributed to:

- a) Expanding access to education among marginalized groups (Dalits, women),
- b) Creating a new middle-class intelligentsia,
- c) Facilitating occupational diversification through vocational and formal education.

Thus, education is analyzed as a social institution that helped restructure the existing social order and promote limited forms of social mobility within colonial constraints.

3. Postcolonial Theory

The study engages with postcolonial theoretical perspectives to critically examine missionary education as part of the broader colonial project. While the LMS aimed at proselytization, its activities also reflect cultural hegemony through the dissemination of Western knowledge systems and values. However, this framework also highlights:

- a) The non-linear nature of colonial influence, and
- b) The coexistence of domination and adaptation.

This allows the study to move beyond a simplistic "imposition model" and instead view education as a site of negotiation.

4. Subaltern Agency and Negotiation

Inspired by subaltern studies, this research emphasizes the agency of local populations. Rather than being passive recipients, the people of Murshidabad:

- a) Selectively adopted Western education for socio-economic advancement,
- b) Resisted religious conversion,
- c) Negotiated the terms of engagement with missionary institutions.

This framework helps explain the paradox identified in the study—high educational impact but relatively low religious conversion.

5. Gender and Intersectionality

The framework incorporates an intersectional approach to analyze how education influenced different social groups differently, particularly:

- a) Women, who gained access through “native female schools,”
- b) Lower-caste communities, who benefited from inclusive policies.

This approach highlights how caste, gender, and class intersected to shape access to and outcomes of missionary education.

6. Institutional Theory

Institutional theory is used to understand how LMS-established institutions, such as schools and teacher training colleges, contributed to long-term structural change. These institutions:

- a) Standardized curricula and pedagogy,
- b) Influenced non-missionary educational systems,
- c) Created a lasting educational legacy beyond the colonial period.

Synthesis of Framework

By combining these theoretical perspectives, the study conceptualizes missionary education not merely as a religious or colonial tool, but as a multidimensional process of social transformation, characterized by:

- a) Modernization and institutional change,
- b) Social inclusion and stratification,
- c) Cultural negotiation and local agency.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 Contribution of LMS in Regional Literacy

The LMS played a crucial role in transforming education from informal, home-based learning to a structured institutional framework with fixed curricula and examination systems in centres such as Berhampore and Khagra (Adam, 1941; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003). Their pioneering initiatives in female education through the establishment of “native female schools” marked a significant departure from prevailing social norms (Laird, 1972; Sarwar, 2017). Furthermore, the establishment of the Union Christian Training College in 1937 contributed to the professionalization of teaching in the region, ensuring long-term sustainability of educational reforms (Sengupta, 1971). The LMS targeted students from marginalized castes and Dalits (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003; Das, 2008).

Though they brought English education to the shores of Bengal, their contribution to the development of the Bengali vernacular was enormous. They wrote and published textbooks in the vernacular language, and modern subjects like Geography, History, and Science were made accessible to the common man of Murshidabad. The LMS went beyond the conventional subjects of education and provided vocational education in printing and carpentry to help students achieve economic self-reliance (Adam, 1941; Hunter, 1876).

Year	Month	Number of students	Increased number of students
1868	March	35	
1868	August	248	213

Source: (Banerjee, 1971)

4.2 Obstacles and Resistance

The expansion of education in Murshidabad by the London Missionary Society (LMS) was accompanied by several structural and socio-cultural challenges. The spread of missionary education in a geographically vast and socially conservative district posed logistical and ideological constraints (Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003; Das, 2008).

With the gradual expansion of British administrative structures, many students began to prefer government-assisted secular institutions over missionary schools, as the former provided more direct access to colonial employment opportunities (Kerr, 1852; Hunter, 1876). Additionally, the LMS remained heavily dependent on financial support from Britain, and periods of economic depression as well as the disruptions caused by the World Wars led to significant reductions in funding, resulting in the closure of several rural vernacular schools (Lovett, 1899).

Environmental and health-related challenges also posed serious obstacles. The prevalence of diseases such as malaria and cholera in 19th-century Murshidabad frequently affected missionary personnel, thereby disrupting educational continuity (O’Malley, 1916).

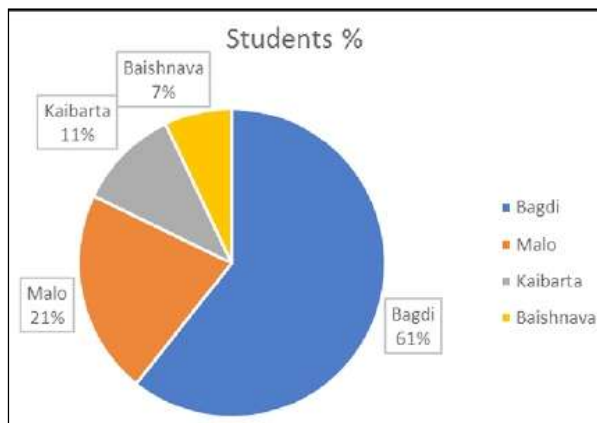
Social resistance constituted another major barrier. Missionary schools were often perceived as instruments of religious conversion, leading many Hindu and Muslim families to withdraw their children when Christian teachings became prominent (Laird, 1972; Sengupta, 1971). Resistance to female education was particularly strong, as prevailing social norms discouraged women’s literacy and reinforced superstitions regarding its consequences (Sarwar, 2017).

Furthermore, the LMS’s attempts to promote inclusive education frequently conflicted with entrenched caste hierarchies. Upper-caste families were reluctant to allow their children to study alongside those from marginalized communities, compelling missionaries to navigate complex social dynamics in order to sustain integrated schooling systems (Das, 2002; Bandyopadhyay et al., 2003).

4.3 Caste-wise Literacy Statistics

Age Group: 0-21 Years: There are 344,992 Hindus between the age group 0 to 21 years old in Murshidabad. This includes 174,248 males and 170,744 females. Out of this Hindus 39,015 are educated. The literacy rate is 11.31 percent (Chandra, 2004). If we look at the literacy rate for males and females we see that the rate for males is 15.29 percent and for females it is 7.24 percent. This shows that there is a difference in the literacy rate between males and females. However it is good to see that the literacy rate for females in this age group is higher than in the age group. This means that more Hindu girls are getting an education.

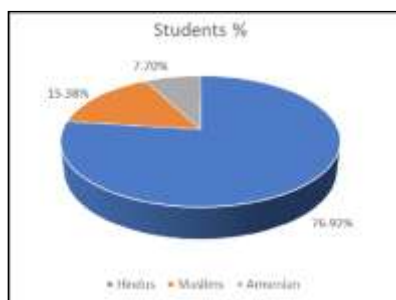
Age Group: 21 Years Old and Above: For Hindus who are 21 years old and above there are 339,995 people in total. This includes 171,925 males and 168,070 females. Out of these people, 64,398 are educated. The literacy rate is 18.97 percent (Mitra, 1953). If we look at the literacy rate for males and females, we see that the rate for males is 30.56 percent and for females, it is 7.06 percent. This shows that there is a difference in the literacy rate between males and females. The difference is even bigger in this age group than in the 0-21 age group.



Source: Chandra (Ed.), *Murshidabad Itibritta, Part 2* (Basabhumii Publication, 2004).

Age Group: 0-21 Years: The total Muslim population in this age group is 517,820. This includes 264,859 males and 252,961 females. 21,323 Muslims are literate. The literacy rate is 4.12 percent. If we look at the literacy rate for males and females we see that the rate for males is 6.55 percent and for females it is 1.57 percent. This shows that the Muslim population has low literacy rates. There is also a difference in the literacy rate between males and females.

Age Group: 21 Years and Above: The total Muslim population in this age group is 409,927. This includes 199,755 males and 210,172 females. There are 31,797 Muslims. The literacy rate is 7.76 percent. If we look at the literacy rate for males and females we see that the rate for males is 14.7 percent and for females it is 1.16 percent. This shows that the Muslim population has low literacy rates, especially for females. The difference in literacy rate, between males and females is very big. This problem needs to be addressed. Hindus and Muslims both have literacy rates but the Muslim population has even lower rates. The female literacy rate is especially low. This is a concern because it means that many females are not getting an education.



Source: Mitra, *District Handbook: Murshidabad* (Census 1951), p. 109.

4.4 Findings

Late 19th-century data reveals that the LMS Khagra High School was always successful in the Entrance Examinations of Calcutta University. This proves that missionary education in Murshidabad was on a par with the best in Calcutta. The most important aspect of this research is the sustainability factor introduced by the Union Christian Training College. The LMS thus ensured that their educational approach would continue even after the departure of the British administration in 1947. It is revealed in this research that although the total literacy rate of females was lower than that of males, the growth rate of female enrolment in LMS-influenced districts was substantially higher than in other districts, where the missionary influence was not as strong. This was because of the "Zenana" missions and female-only primary schools. What is particularly interesting about these results is that they reveal a paradox: although the LMS was very successful in establishing schools and spreading literacy, the number of actual religious conversions was relatively low. This shows that the local population was successful in separating the benefits of Western education from the religious aims of the missionaries.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the London Missionary Society functioned as a significant catalyst in reshaping the educational landscape of Murshidabad during the colonial period. While its initial objective was rooted in evangelical expansion, its long-term impact extended far beyond religious goals, contributing to the institutionalization of modern education, expansion of

vernacular learning, and increased access for marginalized groups, including women and lower castes. Importantly, the study highlights that the spread of education was not a one-sided colonial imposition but a negotiated process in which local communities selectively appropriated educational benefits while resisting religious conversion.

Implications: The research underscores the role of non-state actors in educational transformation and offers insights into how grassroots educational interventions can influence long-term social mobility.

Future Research Directions: Further studies may explore micro-level institutional histories, comparative district analyses, and the post-independence legacy of missionary education in shaping contemporary educational inequalities in West Bengal.

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