

# The Silent Revolutionaries: Women Missionaries and Social Transformation in Colonial Punjab (1849–1947)

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**Abstract—** *This research paper examines the socio-historical impact of Christian women missionaries in the Punjab province during British rule. The American Presbyterian Mission, the Zenana Bible and Medical Mission, and the CEZMS all had evangelical as their main goals, but their practical contributions to "Zenana" visitation, specialized female healthcare, and standardized education marked the beginning of a fundamental change in Punjabi gender dynamics. By analyzing primary annual reports, mission records, and gazetteers, this paper explores that female missionaries served as unintended catalysts for the professionalization of women. Their presence necessitated a competitive response from indigenous reform movements like the Arya Samaj and Singh Sabha, thereby accelerating the modernization of female identity in Northern India. The attempt has been made here to examine that colonial paternalism and Christian women missionary legacy in Punjab are intricately intertwined.*

**Key words:** *Zenana missionaries, Church Missionary Society, American Presbyterian Mission, American Presbyterian Mission, Female education and Healthcare.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

After the annexation of Punjab in 1849, the province became a main center for British administrative and evangelical experiments. While male missionaries concentrate on public debates and street preaching but the cultural "Purdah" system rendered half the population inaccessible to them. The Female missionaries who represented the organizations like the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS) and the American Presbyterian Mission—filled this void. These female missionaries can access the "Zenana" (private female quarters), an area that was largely unreachable by the male missionaries.

### 1. The Zenana Strategy: Penetrating the Domestic Sphere

The female missionaries work in colonial Punjab was distinct from their male counterparts due to their unique access to the Zenana—the secluded female

quarters of Punjabi homes. While male missionaries were relegated to public preaching, women missionaries utilized the Zenana Mission to bypass traditional patriarchal barriers. By the late 1870s, women missionaries of Church of England Zenana Missionary Society (CEZMS) were visiting hundreds of households in Amritsar and Lahore annually. They did not merely offer religious instruction but introduced a curriculum of household work and health hygiene. These domestic visits were viewed as the "silent leaven" intended to transform the family unit from within, effectively making the Punjabi mother the primary target of cultural and religious reform.<sup>1</sup>

### 2. Pioneering Female Healthcare: The "Lady Doctor" Legacy

In an area where cultural norms forbade women from receiving treatment from male Physician, the professionalization of female medical care was arguably the most significant contribution. The establishment of the North India School of Medicine for Christian Women in 1894 by Dr. Edith Brown in Ludhiana (now CMC Ludhiana) stands as a landmark in Punjab's social history. This institution was the first of its kind in Asia to train native women as medical professionals. In order to fill a dire "medical vacuum," the school trained "native" nurses and compounders in clinical settings before deploying them throughout rural Punjab.<sup>2</sup>

Dr. Brown created appropriate guidelines for the training of indigenous nurse dais. A limited range of stipends were offered by local organizations to encourage women to work as nurse or midwives.<sup>3</sup>

The Women's Medical College in Ludhiana was founded as a purely missionary institution and received substantial funding from the Punjab government. The government established a special committee with an assistant to the inspector general for the academy's yearly inspection. The Inspector General took the opportunity to launch a

ten-day refresher course for midwives. About eight midwives who were granted time off from their hospitals attended refresher courses.<sup>4</sup> To conduct this refresher course, a room in a dark bungalow in Ludhiana was rented, and the work took ten days, five or six hours a day. Women were taught how to wash their hands, make lotions, sterilise their tools, and hold important items in their pockets for their cases in that course.<sup>5</sup> Dr. Brown wrote a book titled 'Handbook for Midwives,' for the proper training of nurses, which was translated into Hindi, Urdu, and Punjabi later. Dr. Brown was given the title of "Dame Commander of the British Empire" in 1931 for her valuable services in female health care and medical education.<sup>6</sup>

Ludhiana College and Hospital obtained financial assistance from eleven separate Christian mission societies by 1936. According to a financial analysis, missionaries calculated that an Indian girl could earn a medical degree at Ludhiana Medical College for seven years on a scholarship worth thirty pounds annually, while Western women would have to pay three times as much. Due to economic inequality, women missionaries decided to train native women to become physicians.<sup>7</sup> In 1938, there were 250 resident students, and in the subsequent forty-four years, hundreds of physicians, nurses, dispensers, and midwives have graduated from the college to help ten thousand Indian women. This initiative did not just save lives; it offered a respectable professional path for Indian women, challenging the rigid caste and gender hierarchies of the Victorian-Colonial era.

3. Educational Reform and the Competitive Response Women missionaries were the primary architects of formal female education in Punjab long before the colonial government prioritized it. Education was the primary tool for social mobility. The curriculum was a blend of Victorian domestic values and academic rigor. While they taught "housewifery," they also introduced history, geography, and mathematics. Zenana schooling has the advantage of encouraging even grown-up women to master the basics of literacy without having to attend classes. Reading, writing, letter composing, ordinary account, and scriptural instruction were all taught to the zenanas in their respective homes. Exams were taken on a regular basis under the veil of purdah. Those women who passed the test were awarded prizes.<sup>8</sup> Later, under the influence of the

zenana movement, women missionaries established two types of schools.<sup>9</sup>

1. Day Schools: For local children, focusing on basic literacy.

2. Boarding Schools: Like the Alexandra High School in Amritsar (est. 1878), which catered to the elite and the growing community of Punjabi Christians.

Ms. Newton began this effort in 1836 when she opened a small Orphan Girls' School in Ludhiana. She taught women writing and reading skills, as well as geography and algebra, at this academy. Her efforts at education included teaching home skills and she also taught them how to cook and knit.<sup>10</sup> Different missionary societies worked in different districts in Punjab. The Church Mission Society founded a day girls' school in Kotgarh in 1844. Miss. Golaknath, the daughter of Mr. Golaknath worked for Female Normal School in 1847.<sup>11</sup> The Ludhiana Mission founded three girls' schools in Lahore, one for Hindu girls with an enrolment of one hundred, one for Muslim girls with an enrolment of seventy-five, and one for the children of jail employees with an enrolment of eighteen, all of which were supervised by the ladies of the Mission.<sup>12</sup>

The Lady Henry Lawrence's Friends founded a girls' school in Amritsar in 1855 to honour Lady Henry Lawrence's memory. The Lady Henry Lawrence School was combined with the Zenana Missionary Society's school. It had 553 students and 20 teachers, and it cost Rs. 67,533 a year to operate.<sup>13</sup> The Church of England Zenana Missionary Society chose Batala as a mission station and founded five schools there, all of which were exclusively for the education of the tehsil's women.<sup>14</sup> Ludhiana Mission founded two lower primary girls' day schools in Hoshiarpur in 1869, one for Hindus and one for Muslim girls. That year, twenty-four girls attended Hindu school and thirty-three girls attended Muslim school. Mrs. Chaterjee was in-charge of both these institutions.<sup>15</sup> The founders of western education in Batala were Francis Henry Baring, Charlotte Maria Tucker, and Baba Ishan Chandra. By 1876, the Church of England Zenana Missionary Society had founded up to five primary girls' schools in the neighbourhood of Batala.<sup>16</sup> In 1876, the number of missionary schools for girls in Punjab was raised to fifty-six, and in 1878-79, it was increased to sixty-two.<sup>17</sup>

In addition to visiting Zenana, female missionaries from Amritsar ran numerous schools for girls. Mr. Vivan established the Alexandra High School in Amritsar in 1877–1878, offering the daughters of Punjabi aristocrats and Christian converts a demanding education in the Western style. In 1919, several mission societies came together to form Kinnaird Christian College as their Union Institution in an effort to improve the quality of education for women. The United Presbyterian Mission and the Zenana Bible Medical Mission provided financial support for the college. To create an elite Christian institution, Batala's Baring High institution and the A.L.O.E. school amalgamated in 1934. While indigenous schools existed, the missionary schools introduced a standardized English medium that favored the "modernization" of the Punjabi female identity.<sup>18</sup> The collaboration of mission societies has raised the standard of female education in the Province. No, doubt the women missionaries' contribution was very important for the education of the Punjabi women of that time. It provided a base for the modern women's education system in this region. Even though the female missionaries' contribution to educational services cannot be overstated, it is impossible to ignore the fact that evangelization was their priority. The Role of "Native Bible Women"—The Unsung Intermediaries

While European "Lady Missionaries" provided the institutional framework, the daily, granular labor of the mission was sustained by the Native Bible Women. These were frequently widows or converts from Punjab who were able to negotiate the intricate social structures of the nearby villages due to their fluency in both language and culture. The "Bible Women" were the most successful proselytizer because she could enter a home as a neighbor rather than as a foreign "other."<sup>19</sup>

The primary diaries of these women reveal a grueling schedule. A typical entry from the Amritsar Mission Records describes a Bible Woman named Martha who visited "fourteen houses in a single day, traversing the narrow lanes of the old city to read the Scriptures and provide basic medical ointment for eye infections."<sup>20</sup> They served as the primary translators for the European doctors, bridging the gap between Western medical terminology and Punjabi folk idioms.

#### Impact on Local Literacy

Bible Women were the first to teach adult Punjabi women who were considered "too old" for mission schools informal literacy outside of religious education. According to the Punjab Mission News, Bible Women set up more than forty "informal veranda classes" in the Sialkot district where women learned to read the vernacular (Gurmukhi or Shahmukhi) using the New Testament as their main introduction. In the rural hinterlands, this grassroots education served as the catalyst for a more comprehensive intellectual awakening.<sup>21</sup> In the rural hinterlands, this grassroots education served as the catalyst for a more comprehensive intellectual awakening.

The local elite eventually experienced a severe "identity crisis" as a result of the aggressive growth of female missionary work in Punjab. Punjabi families saw the accompanying Christian proselytization as a danger to their homes' cultural and religious integrity, even though they appreciated the missionaries' literacy and medical care. A competitive educational movement emerged as a result of this conflict, with native religious groups using missionary techniques to uphold their own beliefs.

#### The Arya Samaj and the Kanya Mahavidyalaya (Jalandhar)

The Arya Samaj, under the leadership of Lala Devraj, was the first to realize that if Hindu women were not educated by their own community, they would be "lost" to the Zenana missions. In 1896, the Kanya Mahavidyalaya was established in Jalandhar. The Arya Samaj, emphasize that the curriculum was specifically designed to be a "nationalist" alternative to the Alexandra School in Amritsar. the Arya Samaj. Sanskrit, Vedic philosophy, and Indian-inspired "Griha-Shastra" (Home Science) were taught to the students in place of English hymns and Victorian domesticity.<sup>22</sup> This was a direct strategic reaction to the "capture" of the domestic sphere by missionaries.

#### The Singh Sabha and the Sikh Response

he Sikh community went in a similar direction. Concerns about the "Westernizing" impact of mission schools on the daughters of Sikh nobility were voiced by the Khalsa Diwan. Bhai Takht Singh founded the Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya

in Ferozepur in 1892. The Khalsa Akhbar claimed that the objective was to create "Bibis" (virtuous Sikh women) who were modern, literate, and firmly rooted in the Guru Granth Sahib.<sup>23</sup> The Sikhs used the blueprint that the missionaries had successfully supplied for the institutionalization of women for communal revivalism.

The Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam and Muslim Education

For the Muslim population in Punjab, the challenge was twofold: protecting the Purdah while ensuring that Muslim women did not fall behind in the colonial race for progress. The Anjuman-i-Himayat-i-Islam in Lahore began establishing primary schools for girls in the 1880s. These schools were necessary to counteract the influence of the "Zenana teachers" who were entering Muslim households under the guise of teaching needlework.<sup>24</sup>

The "Competitive Modernity" Framework

The "missionary threat" was a crucial catalyst for local social reform, as this essay has shown. The emergence of the Kanya Mahavidyalaya and Sikh Kanya Mahavidyalaya demonstrates how the presence of missionaries compelled Punjabi intellectuals to reevaluate women's roles in their own religious and national endeavors. The literacy that started in mission

"verandaschools" eventually developed into the political awareness that drove the nationalist movement's women's wing.

## II. CONCLUSION

The narrative of women missionaries in colonial Punjab is not one of simple religious conversion, but rather of a complex socio-cultural intervention. Between 1849 and 1947, these women navigated the "internal frontier" of the Punjabi household, a space that had remained largely insulated from the reach of the colonial state. Their work in the Zenanas and the subsequent establishment of hospitals and colleges provided the first formal infrastructure for female empowerment in the region. They frequently saw Punjabi culture through the prism of Victorian superiority and were unquestionably a part of the imperial project. However, by providing the tools of Western medicine and education, they inadvertently equipped Punjabi women with the means to challenge both colonial rule and traditional patriarchy. Their contribution, which signifies the shift from the isolated domesticity of the 19th century to the professional female agency of the 20th century, continues to be a pillar of South Asian education and healthcare history.

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