



National Institutes for the Humanities (NIHU)

# RINDAS

The Center for the Study of Contemporary India, Ryukoku University

RINDAS Series of Working Papers 16

## Hundred years of Higher Education for Indian Women:

1913-2013, with a focus on the Methodist Christian Contribution

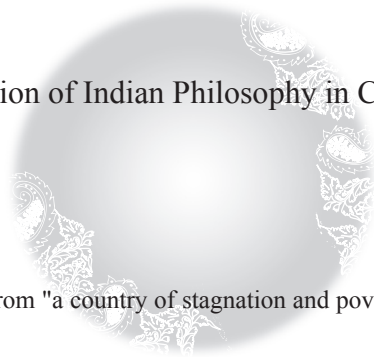
Shobhana Bhattacharji



龍谷大学  
RYUKOKU UNIVERSITY

# The Center for the Study of Contemporary India, Ryukoku University

## The Living Tradition of Indian Philosophy in Contemporary India



The image of India has recently shifted from "a country of stagnation and poverty" to "a country of great power" as a result of its growing economic strength.

India has realized this remarkable economic development primarily because of its relatively stable "democratic" politics. What interests us is that the norms and morals that maintain the Indian economy and politics reflect traditional Indian thought and philosophical concepts such as *Satya* (truth), *Dharma* (morality or duty), and *Ahiṃsā* (nonviolence), which have been formed during India's long history.

Our project attempts to integrate the knowledge and materials on Indian philosophy and Buddhism accumulated during the 370-year history of Ryukoku University with the new findings of contemporary India studies, focusing on the "Living Tradition of Indian Philosophy in Contemporary India". To that end, we opened the Center for the Study of Contemporary India (RINDAS), in collaboration with the National Institutes for the Humanities, for five years from April of 2010 through March of 2014.

Unit 1 Politics, Economy and Philosophy of Contemporary India

Unit 2 Social Movements in Modern India Across Borders

RINDAS Series of Working Papers 16

# **Hundred years of Higher Education for Indian Women:**

*1913-2013, with a focus on the Methodist Christian Contribution*

Shobhana Bhattacharji



# **Hundred years of Higher Education for Indian Women: 1913-2013, with a focus on the Methodist Christian Contribution<sup>1</sup>**

**Shobhana Bhattacharji**

## **Introduction**

'Hundred Years of Higher Education for Indian Women' is a hopelessly optimistic title. It cannot be done, not in the time available, probably never. In India ideas about higher education are in perpetual flux. The material is unwieldy, the data unreliable. In 2008, even the UGC didn't have accurate data for its approach paper to the 11<sup>th</sup> Five Year Plan. But there are plenty of reports and studies on it, each with a relatively narrow focus. This is the practical approach I will use.

I had hoped to organize this talk around three stories. The first was the true story of Dr. Constance Prem Nath Dass (1886-1971), who was the first Indian principal of Isabella Thoburn College, Lucknow, UP, from 1940-1945. I had great trouble putting her story together thanks to problems of gender, aggressively secular modernism, and scant regard for archiving historical material.<sup>2</sup> That formed a paper I presented at a conference on Empire and Education in Ireland (2010). But when I began to think about Constance in relation to higher education in India, I realised I would have to go back to the founding of Isabella Thoburn College, the first Christian women's college in Asia and the model for many subsequent colleges, Christian and non-Christian. (It was the second women's college in India). Its first classes were held in 1886, a year before they commenced in the Woman's College, Baltimore, now called Goucher College after Rev. James Goucher, a Methodist philanthropist who funded school and college education in India and Japan, including the Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, which has a Goucher Memorial Chapel and Goucher Hall.

The second story was to be a fictional story by Manju Kapur set in the 1990s, fifty years after Constance finished her term as principal. In this story a young girl studies English literature in a Delhi college only because it will increase her value in the marriage market. Unlike the early students of Isabella Thoburn College, this girl takes her higher education for granted, and it means nothing to her other than as an add-on in the marriage stakes. The story won't be a part of my presentation, unfortunately. The third is an ongoing true story about my students, and how they are markers of change in the status and thinking of women.

Some of these issues will be woven into my talk which is about higher education for women in India via the history of Isabella Thoburn College. The three unequal sections of my presentation will be: The making of Isabella

---

1 This working paper is part of my ongoing research on North Indian Protestant Christians, with special regard to education. For their help with this paper I am grateful to Dr. P.S. Jacob, former president, All India Christian Higher Education Association; Dr. Sudhir Joseph, Director, St. Stephen's Hospital, Delhi; Sister (Dr.) Marina John, rjm, Principal, Jesus and Mary College, Delhi; and Marilyn Warshawsky, Trustee, Goucher College, Baltimore, Maryland, USA, and biographer of Rev. J. Goucher. I am very grateful to RINDAS, Ryukoku University, Kyoto, for the opportunity to present this paper.

2 I presented a paper about it, 'Constance Prem Nath Dass (1886-1971): A Christian Educator,' at the *Sixth Conference on Empire and Education*, National University of Ireland, Galway, 2010. A version of it was published in the *Christian Medical Association of India*, volume 26 numbers 3 and 4. Also available at <[http://issuu.com/cmaj/docs/cmji\\_vol.26\\_no.3](http://issuu.com/cmaj/docs/cmji_vol.26_no.3)> and <[http://issuu.com/cmaj/docs/cmji\\_vol.26.4\\_27.1\\_oct\\_2011\\_-\\_mar\\_2012](http://issuu.com/cmaj/docs/cmji_vol.26.4_27.1_oct_2011_-_mar_2012)> [4. 3. 2013].

Thoburn College from 1886 to 1946; higher education for women as envisaged in India's Five-Year Plans, starting in 1951; and finally, recent trends in higher education for women, focussing on two factors, professional science-based courses and the apparent resurgence of all-women institutions.

---

## Part I: 1886-1946

In 1911, the Christian educator Constance Mayadas graduated from Baltimore Woman's College (Goucher College). She was a second generation Protestant Christian from a well-off, well-connected Punjabi Presbyterian family of Ferozepore in north west India, now on India's border with Pakistan. Her father sent her older sisters for a modern western education to America and Edinburgh. It was very unusual for an Indian father to be concerned about his daughters' education, and to be so concerned as to pay for it beyond school, that too in foreign universities. He didn't do the same for Constance (it is said she was not a favourite daughter). So, in 1904, Constance went for her modern western education to Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. Here she either met or was brought to the attention of Rev. Goucher who paid for her study at Goucher College from 1909 to 1911. In 1906 or so, the man she would eventually marry, proposed to her. She told him she wanted to study in America; he said he would wait.

Domesticity and education and working outside the home are still treated as a binary opposition of lifestyles choices for thousands of Indian women. They are also still considered a basis for educational planning for women.

Constance returned to India in 1911 but did not marry immediately. Instead, she taught for two years at Isabella Thoburn College, simultaneously studying for a Masters in English Literature from Allahabad University. In 1913, when the MA was done, she finally married Prem Nath Dass (b.1871). He was forty-two years old, she was twenty-seven, which from the view-point of marriage, is still considered pretty old for an Indian woman. But then, Constance's story is not usual. In 1931, Prem Nath died of cancer. Constance became a single mother with six children. The youngest was six years old, and the eldest was fourteen. Prem Nath had left some property, so she *may* not have needed to work for a living, but she went back to teach at Isabella Thoburn College, became Vice-Principal in 1933, and principal in 1938, the first Indian principal of the college. Before taking over as principal, she went to Teachers College in Columbia University, New York, for a Masters in Advanced Courses in English Literature and Teaching, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. She was installed as Principal in 1940, and was principal through World War II till 1945. In 1946 she went back to America for the third and last time. Goucher College had invited her to deliver the Commencement address and receive an honorary LL.D. She also received honorary doctorates from the Universities of Columbia and Boston for her contribution to women's education and as an outstanding Methodist Christian educator. From there, she went to Ontario for a Peace Conference initiated by the Methodist Nobel Laureate John Mott for the rehabilitation of War refugees. She continued her association with Isabella Thoburn College, serving on the Board of Governors and so on, until her death in 1971.

Told like this her story is clear, simple, and even a little pointless. But it took me almost ten years to put it together because there was little information and many misremembered 'facts.'<sup>3</sup>

By now you will be wondering – and rightly -- 'Is there a point to all this? What does it have to do with the topic of my talk? Is there a larger significance to this personal story?' The answer is 'yes.'

---

3 See Shobhana Bhattacharji, 'Christian Educator' for more details.

1. Is there a point to all this? Yes indeed. Through the story of Constance I have tried to recover a larger story about the Christian contribution to women's higher education in India. It is an urgent task. So much of the information about the early days is in the memories of people, many of whom are no longer alive, others are very old, and their memories uncertain.
2. What does it have to do with today's talk? Constance led an unusual life for an upper middle class Indian woman. She left her home in Ferozepore, first for schooling in Lahore, and then hundreds of miles away to Isabella Thoburn College in Lucknow. She never returned to her father's home. Instead, she studied abroad, married late, became a single working mother in her forties, and took a second Masters degree from America when she was fifty-two years old. She was an advanced and modern Indian woman for whom there were few role models but she became a role model for generations of Indian women. She did not really have to struggle to be modern. Of course, she needed scholarships to study in America, which American Methodists provided; she had some financial struggle to manage her six children when she was widowed, where Christian missionary schools and hostels came to her aid; she also struggled to manage the college during World War II and the intensifying demand for independence. But she did not have to fight her family or society to study in college or abroad, to work, or to return to studying in her fifties. She was not castigated for being away when her daughter's first child was born (usually considered a mother's 'natural' task). She did not need to struggle for any of this because she was a Christian. Modernisation came with Christianity. Christian women in India didn't have to fight against tradition to be educated. Constance led an unusual life because she could choose how she wanted to live, and she had that choice because she was a Christian.
3. Is there a larger significance to this personal story? Yes. When it became academically stylish to look at the nineteenth century through post-colonial lenses there were several studies of colonial education. An influential and widespread though not entirely accurate view was that all colonial education in India derived from Macaulay's 1835 Minute on Education, that its purpose was to turn out clerks for the British Indian bureaucracy, and that missionary education served this end. For one thing, some Indians who thought that modern western education was a good thing were instrumental in creating institutions for it, and that became an important basis of modern education in India. For another, all missionaries in India were not British, nor did all missionaries want to turn Indians into government clerks. Sometimes even in a balanced account of colonial education, the role of Christians is distorted because of the dismissive language used. For example, an otherwise exemplary history of Lady Hardinge Medical College, India's first medical college for women, the writer has the interesting information that in 1911 there were only 89 women in the medical colleges of India, 73 were Christians and nine were Parsis or Jews. There were 96 women in the medical schools, 83 of them Christians.<sup>4</sup> These are remarkable figures and should be considered historically wonderful, but the writer dismisses the Christian achievement by saying that the number of Christians was 'disproportionately' large. We need a more nuanced history of education in general, and of higher education for Indian women in particular, than this implies. For example, James Thoburn wrote in his memoir of Isabella Thoburn: 'Christianity is a religion of service. [Jesus said] that he "came not to be ministered unto, but to minister."' This was the basis of Isabella

---

4 N.N.Mathur, 'Lady Hardinge Medical College,' in *Indian Medical Colleges*, *National Medical Journal of India* Vol.11, No.2 (1998). The medical school students received training to become sub-assistant surgeons at Vishakapatnam, Tanjore, Cuttack, Pune, Ahmedabad, Calcutta, Dhaka (now in Bangladesh), Agra and Patna (Mathur).

Thoburn's ideas about educating women in India.'<sup>5</sup>

From my ongoing research on modern education for Indian women, I have found that the Christian influence was still strong in 1946 when Constance wrote that 'The history of women's education, through the [nineteenth] century is limited almost entirely to the efforts of Christians from England and America.'<sup>6</sup> In 2013, it continues to be a powerful component of education in India. Admission to Christian schools and colleges is much sought after because Christians are perceived as wanting to serve rather than make money.<sup>7</sup> Christians in India today run between 30,000 and 32,000-33,000 institutions of learning. 360 of these are institutions of higher learning (colleges, universities, professional institutions), the rest are schools. (See Appendix 1). These figures are fairly accurate but incomplete. Researchers in government and elsewhere have found that **all** figures for education in India are unreliable because, for example, Government reports only look at 'recognised' institutions, and even those are not fully covered, while 'aided' institutions provide researchers with inaccurate data.<sup>8</sup> Yet planning for education is based on these not completely inexact figures. These data also tell us that Christians are more literate and read more for leisure than other groups; according to a UGC study in 2009, the highest enrolment of women was in states that have more Christians than elsewhere; gross enrolment (GER) is better for Christians as compared with other religious groups; gender disparities are fewer among Christians; and the sex ratio for Christians in urban and rural India is the highest.<sup>9</sup> Literacy, education, emancipation, and the sex ratio are human development indicators or HDI (our contemporary term for being civilized).

How did this happen? How did Christians, who are not the wealthiest or the most powerful group in India, get to top figures for literacy, education and the sex ratio? This is where the story of Constance merges with the larger

---

5 James M. Thoburn, *Life of Isabella Thoburn* (Cincinnati: Jennings and Pye; New York: Eaton and Mains, 1903), cited as JT, without the page number.

<<http://www.ebooksread.com/authors-eng/j-m-james-mills-thoburn/life-of-isabella-thoburn-hci/1-life-of-isabella-thoburn-hci.shtml>> [14. 2. 2013]. All quotations are from this version. I come from a line of Christian women who have benefitted from the missionary education of our forebear Constance; I know from experience that there is another, less talked about aspect of Christian education in India.

6 '... the primary and secondary schools and later high schools were almost exclusively established by Christian bodies' (Constance Maya-Das Dass, 'The Changing Face of Education for Women in India,' *Goucher Alumnae Quarterly* (1946): 9-12, cited as *Changing Face of Education*, 10).

7 My students corroborated this in an informal survey. But see P.S. Jacob, 'Christianity's service to the People of India: In the field of Education,' emailed to me by the author, 5. 3. 2013.

8 Failing or unpopular publicly funded schools exaggerate their student enrolment, and private ones do not give complete data. See Geeta Gandhi Kingdon, 'Private and public schooling: The Indian experience,' Preliminary draft for conference, October 2005; and Karuna Chanana, 'Treading the Hallowed Halls,' *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 35, No. 12 (Mar. 18-24, 2000), pp. 1012-1022, p.1019. In many studies, there is usually no separate figure for Christian educational institutions, which are often clubbed with 'other minorities.'

9 '[...]a higher proportion of literate youth come from the north-eastern states,' which could be because there have been Christian schools, colleges (and hospitals) in the north since the 19<sup>th</sup> century[...]. 'About 43 per cent of Christian and 25 per cent of Hindu youth read leisure books' way above 13 per cent Sikhs, who are the next largest group (Rajesh Shukla *Indian Youth: Demographics and Readership, Results from the National Youth Readership Survey* [Delhi: National Book Trust, India and National Council of Applied Economic Research, 2010], p.xxvi). See also Sonalde B. Desai et al, *Human Development in India: Challenges for a Society in Transition* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2010).

<<http://www.ncaer.org/downloads/Reports/HumanDevelopmentinIndia.pdf>> [2. 2. 2013].



story of higher education for Indian women. Constance could not have become what she was had it not been for the American Methodist missionary Isabella Thoburn who was single-mindedly committed to educating Indian women. American Methodists had a two-pronged approach to mission work—evangelism and education. For Isabella Thoburn, however, education was above everything else.

The Methodist missionaries' vision and attitude to both education and women was forward looking in spite of disagreements among them, which Isabella Thoburn faced and overcame. In general, the missionaries thought it was sufficient to teach Indians how to read and write, but Isabella Thoburn wanted to teach them 'everything' that Americans learnt; some missionaries wanted converts before educating them, but Isabella Thoburn wanted to educate (Christian teaching was high on her agenda, though not conversion); the missionaries concentrated on Hindu and Muslim women, but Isabella Thoburn decided to teach the Indian Christian girls neglected by the missionaries. Her decisions had consequences, as TV serials say.

Before looking at Isabella Thoburn's pioneering work in women's higher education, it will be useful to know something about these Methodists.

### **The Methodists**

The Methodists were originally a break away section of the Anglican Church in England. Their biggest presence in the nineteenth century was in America where they are known as American Methodists or Methodist Episcopalians. Methodist missionaries went where English speakers had settled and where it would be profitable to invest their money—not in terms of monetary returns but in terms of visible signs of having made a change.<sup>10</sup> They were practical, entrepreneurial, opportunistic, adaptable, flexible, and optimistic about what a zealous minority could accomplish.<sup>11</sup> 'On the whole they believed in forming partnerships with local people and not lording it over them.'<sup>12</sup> They were committed to social change and were educational pioneers. Among Methodist philanthropists who aided the missions was Reverend Goucher, founder and president of the Woman's College, Baltimore, who invested in education in India and Japan. By 1900, he had given over one hundred thousand dollars to educational work in India.<sup>13</sup>

American Methodists made two incursions into India in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, one to South India in 1817, the

---

10 See David Hempton, *Methodism: Empire of the Spirit* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2005), 168.

11 Hempton 168.

12 Hempton 168.

13 Rev. and Mrs. Goucher gave money to begin 120 primary vernacular schools in North India for both boys and girls and mainly for the lowest castes. The couple also gave more than 120 scholarships for the best students from these schools to go to boarding high schools in Moradabad. They sponsored these primary schools for more than 20 years. When Isabella Thoburn's school was raised to college level, he provided a salary for a teacher (1891), a position filled by Lilavati Singh, whom Miss Thoburn was grooming to take over as principal. She also asked Dr. Goucher if the students of Woman's College would contribute towards library books, lab equipment, etc., for her college, encouraged students of the Baltimore College to collect money for it. By 1932, they had contributed more than \$25,000, from which two new wings were added, one a science wing, which was named the Goucher College Wing "as a tribute to the association of this college with its sister college in Baltimore." It was from this connection that the concept of the "Sister College" movement began among women's colleges in the US.' There were exchanges of faculty and students between IT College and Goucher even up to the early 1970s. (From The 50th anniversary article notes, Isabella Thoburn College Collection in the Estelle Dennis Dance Theatre Collection, Goucher College, and email correspondence with Marilyn Warshawsky. My thanks to Tara J. Olivero, Special Collections Librarian, for sending me the material, and to Ms. Warshawsky for generously sharing her knowledge of Dr. Goucher with me. )

second to north India in 1856. My focus is these latter Methodists. After a little to-ing and fro-ing between Bareilly, the city of the Rohilla rulers, and 'the great city of Lucknow,'<sup>14</sup> they settled on Bareilly as the centre of their mission. That is where Isabella Thoburn and her fellow missionary Dr. Clara Swain went in January 1870. From this time on the Methodists became a major force for women's higher education.<sup>15</sup> The woman who pioneered this on their behalf was Isabella Thoburn (1840-1901).

### **The Methodist attitude to women**

Methodists thought of men and women as equals even though in practice this didn't always seem the case. The Methodist Bishop James Thoburn writes that when he asked his sister Isabella – whom he had invited to India to teach Indian women -- to copy a few letters for him, she did as he asked but quietly reminded him that hiring a copyist would help both of them.

'The remark made me think, and I discovered that I had been putting a comparatively low estimate on all the work which the missionaries were not doing. Woman's work was at a discount, and I had to reconsider the situation and once for all accept the fact that a Christian woman sent out into the field was a Christian missionary, and that her time was as precious, her work as important and her rights as sacred as those of the more conventional missionaries of the other sex. The old-time notion that a woman in her best estate is only a helper and should only be recognized as an assistant is based on a very shallow fallacy. She is a helper in the married relation, but in God's wide vine-yard there are many departments of labor in which she can successfully maintain the position of an independent worker.'<sup>16</sup>

With regard to Indian women, Bishop Thoburn said that all missionaries in India had noted the 'harshest and most unsympathetic treatment of women;'<sup>17</sup> their 'terse history was "Unwelcomed at birth, unhonored in life, unwept in

---

14 JT.

15 They were famous for education in the Lucknow Area, one of four districts of their Mission. In 1858 the Lucknow Area had a population of about seventy-five millions, with 68 towns and cities ranging in population from 15,000 to 300,000, in which the Methodist Episcopal Church has missionary work, including 64 educational institutions, aside from village schools of various types. The city of Lucknow became one of Methodism's great centres of missionary operations in Asia. In Lucknow, the Methodists maintained their two colleges 'in the Southern Asia field,' the Lucknow Christian College for men and the Isabella Thoburn College, linked to a High School for girls and a Middle School for boys, both with the finest hostel accommodations attached' (Elia Pradeep Samuel, *150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Of Methodism In India [North India]: A Torch to Hold High: 150 Years of Methodism in India*. <[http://gbgm-umc.org/global\\_news/full\\_article.cfm?articleid=3171#](http://gbgm-umc.org/global_news/full_article.cfm?articleid=3171#)>[1. 3. 2010]).

Ms. Samuel says that the story of Methodism began in 1856, but 'According to Mr. P. Dayanand, a leading researcher on the subject, Methodism first came to India in 1817 with the arrival of Rev. James Lynch to Madras (now Chennai), at a place called Black Town (Broadway), later known as George Town. Lynch conducted the first Methodist Missionary service on 2nd March, 1817 in a stable. The first Methodist church was dedicated in 1819 at Royapettah. A chapel was later built and dedicated on 25th April, 1822 at George Town. This church was rebuilt in 1844 since the earlier structure was collapsing. At this time there were around 100 Methodist members in Chennai, all of them either European or of Eurasian descent.' <[http://www.tmcparel.org/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=51&Itemid=54](http://www.tmcparel.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=51&Itemid=54)> [23. 2. 2013]. The Methodists opened village schools and made rural visits for the propagation of education and Christianity (most often in that order) but they concentrated on urban centres.

16 JT.

17 JT. See also W.F. Oldham, 'Isabella Thoburn, 1840-1901,' *Effective Workers in Needy Fields* by W.F. McDowell et al (New York: Student Volunteer Movement for Foreign Missions, 1903), pp.83-114. <[http://archive.org/stream/effectiveworkers00mcdo/effectiveworkers00mcdo\\_djvu.txt](http://archive.org/stream/effectiveworkers00mcdo/effectiveworkers00mcdo_djvu.txt)> [2. 2013].

death.” Indian reformers concurred.<sup>18</sup> (See Pandita Ramabai’s Prayer for Indian Women in the Appendix). The most ‘futile’ defence was ‘that the Indian woman desires the conditions under which she lives and most earnestly resists any alteration of social conditions.’

### **Who was Isabella Thoburn?**

Isabella Thoburn (1840-1901) was an American Methodist missionary. As I have said, her brother James invited her to India to teach Indian women.<sup>19</sup> She and Clara Swain—the first woman doctor in India – arrived in India in January 1870. Dr. Swain began work in Bareilly, Miss Thoburn in Lucknow, then the capital of Oudh (Avadh) and the largest city in inland India.

Isabella Thoburn opened a school in a Lucknow bazaar with six students. Within two months, the number of students doubled and trebled. Initially meant for ‘native’ Christian girls, soon Eurasians and Europeans were asking for admission.<sup>20</sup> After some soul searching about whether the races should be kept separate as they were elsewhere in India, Miss Thoburn decided that her school would be open to all denominations of Christians, all races, and all religions. Her establishment became known for equal opportunity education, which, after Independence, was also the Indian state’s idea of education. As more students joined the school, it moved to the large Lal Bagh (Ruby Garden) estate, and as students passed out of one class, Miss Thoburn would open a higher class for them until the small school was a high school, that is, it prepared students for the entrance examination to college. Colleges in India were then teaching institutions. They did not form their syllabi or examine their students. The university did that. Colleges were affiliated to universities, as they largely are even today. The Government controlled course content and examinations.

The first three students to pass the high school examination were Lilavati Singh, Shorat Chuckerbutty and her widowed mother Mrs. Chuckerbutty. It was ‘a remarkable achievement, in 1886’ for Indian women, and they need not have studied further, but Miss Thoburn’s modern education had opened their minds to other possibilities and created new ambition in them. Shorat, for example, wanted to become a doctor. During their last years in high school, when they were in especially close contact with Miss Thoburn, they would talk about studying in college. All three would have liked to study in a Christian college but as there was none, they went to Calcutta’s Bethune College – a government college. Mrs. Chuckerbutty, however, pleaded with Isabella Thoburn to start a women’s college for Christians and gave her Rs.500 towards it. At first Miss Thoburn tried to put her off but then, in 1886 – the year Constance was born – she began college classes in her school. The college became known as the Woman’s College, Lucknow. Miss Thoburn was its first principal. But from the beginning, she wanted Indian women to

---

18 Oldham.

19 He said that he wrote her this letter to test a new feather pen he had just made and was surprised at the alacrity with which she accepted his invitation.

20 ‘Indian’ or ‘native’ Christian was a category distinction, to distinguish them from Eurasians and Europeans. It was a widely used and accepted categorization. In the 1935 Government of India Act, electoral constituencies were drawn up along these divisions. As soon as Isabella Thoburn arrived in India, she decided to use ‘native’ rather than the far more offensive ‘heathen.’ ‘The words, “a heathen land.” These words would convey to the average mind an idea of an uncivilized, barbarous, and grossly-wicked people, which the people of India certainly are not. They were a civilized people long ages before our own ancestors had ceased to be roving pirates[...]. The word “heathen” has become an equivocal term in our modern times. The people of India, with the exception of a few remote tribes, are a civilized people, and strangers going among them need have no fear of being left without home, food, or clothing. The ordinary comforts of life can be found in sufficient measure to meet the moderate needs of strangers from other lands, and all misgivings on this head may be at once dismissed. . . ’ (JT).

become leaders and run their own institutions. She groomed Lilavati Singh to take over as principal after her.<sup>21</sup> When Miss Thoburn died in 1901, Lilavati was asked to take over, but she felt Indian women could never be efficient workers unless they had something of the educational advantages of the missionaries, so she went to America for two years to hone her skills, where she fell ill and died in 1909. Thereafter the college was headed by Americans until 1938, when Constance Prem Nath Dass was appointed principal, the first Indian and first alumna of the college to become principal.<sup>22</sup>

This is broadly the framework of the first part of my story about how Christian missionaries, chiefly Isabella Thoburn, shaped higher education for Indian women, inventing (as we shall see) methods and a curriculum as they proceeded.

Time for a recap.

I am looking at higher education for women in India, the Methodist mission's investment in it, and at the work of Isabella Thoburn, who founded the first Christian woman's college in Asia at Lucknow in 1886. I became interested in her as part of my ongoing research on North Indian Protestant Christians, especially on Christian educators, among them Constance Prem Nath Dass. My hope is that bringing in the Christian contribution into various discourses about the making of modern India will help to create a more nuanced history, of education in particular.

**Why did Isabella Thoburn make such an impact?** What did she teach? How did she teach? What were her goals?

#### **Goals**

1. To teach Indian Christian girls, and to teach them 'everything,' botany, geography, history, English literature, geometry, English language, Urdu, and Hindi, as well as reading and writing. In 1886, she said, "Ten years ago missionaries who were preparing boys for the university degrees insisted that their sisters would be spoiled if taught English. Less than half of ten years ago I have myself turned a blackboard to the wall to hide a geometrical diagram, when visitors were announced who would be grieved, if not shocked, at what they considered wholly out of place in a girls' school."<sup>23</sup> "When the girls had learned their Euclid and had matriculated, and had brought up the whole tone of the school, lifting the ambition of its pupils from idleness and dress to work and study, observers were convinced, and it was no longer necessary to avoid argument by concealing the unfinished work of the upper classes."<sup>24</sup>
2. Her 'idea of a high school for native girls was entirely too advanced [...] for all interior India. [It was] too radical for Hindus, [and] even the English and Americans [...] spoke dark parables about "spoiling the native women" and educating them beyond their sphere[...].'<sup>25</sup>
4. She wanted to 'combat the utterly mistaken notion that heathen converts do not require any education beyond a knowledge of reading and writing. [...] She] really believed that her calling was not only a

---

21 She even took her on a fund raising trip to America where Lilavati bowled over audiences with her calm demeanour, her poised speeches, her command of English literature, and her saris.

22 Unlike earlier principals, Constance was married with six children, but she had been widowed in 1931; she joined the college faculty in 1933.

23 Isabella Thoburn, 1886.

24 Quoted in ?JT.

25 JT.

sacred calling, but that it stood second to no other calling under the sun.<sup>26</sup>

5. She wanted to win over potential students who were initially indifferent, or even the hostile. Using 'every grace and art,' she and her team relieved sickness and poverty, protected widows, gave advice 'in every possible difficulty or emergency,' trained teachers and Bible-women, built houses, bought horses and cattle, planted gardens, and kept accounts of it all. 'We have found ourselves pioneers to open new paths,' she said.<sup>27</sup>
6. To introduce kindergartens. 'It was once thought that any one who knew the three R's could teach little children [...] But we now know this instruction of little children to be one of the most difficult things in the whole school course.'<sup>28</sup> In 1892, she started the first kindergarten training course in India in her college. She anticipated and prepared for the needs of education through trained teachers for the higher classes as well.<sup>29</sup>
7. 'Among the objections made when it was first proposed to educate Indian girls [...] was that [...] they would find nothing suitable to read, and hence would seek for books unfit for their perusal.'<sup>30</sup> For some time, Miss Thoburn said, 'the women of India will require a literature of a special character,' which must be created for them [...]; 'young women having special aptitude for that line of literary work should be set apart for it.' She started magazines in Hindi and Urdu for the 'ordinary inmates of the zenana,' women and children, and a press to print them (the Lucknow Literacy House, still in operation). Sons of illiterate mothers would read the magazines to them. Some literature was translated. Lilavati Singh translated the autobiography of Booker T. Washington into Urdu. She was interested in 'the Negro question,' probably because of Miss Thoburn who, unlike the rest of her family, had sided with Lincoln in the Civil War in America. Democracy and education were closely allied not only in Methodist thought. Independent India's early Five-Year Plans categorically said that the purpose of education was to serve democracy.
8. Almost as soon as Miss Thoburn came to India, she noticed that 'the men were more intelligent than the women, and that the schools for boys were very far in advance of those for girls.'<sup>31</sup> She wanted to make the education for girls as good as what boys received, because "No people ever rise higher, as a people, than the point to which they elevate their women."<sup>32</sup>
9. She wanted to make her girls ambitious. "There were incitements to ambition among the young men from time immemorial. Learning for them was honorable and remunerative. At present no lucrative position is open without it, and by means of it high places are attained. But an educated girl wins as much blame as praise, is often misunderstood by her own friends, and is not sure of even a money recompense. If she is

---

26 JT.

27 Isabella Thoburn.

28 Isabella Thoburn, 'The Power of Education,' 1900, quoted in JT.

29 'Any education at all presupposes higher education. The infant school requires teachers who have passed in the primary standards; these teachers must have studied at least in the middle or grammar schools; the grammar-school teachers should be high-school graduates, and the high-school teacher requires a college education. Step by step, led by the necessity of the situation, the advance has been made from the lowest to the highest standards. Then, added to the demand for teachers, comes the call for medical students' (Isabella Thoburn, 'Higher Education of Women,' 1900).

30 JT.

31 JT.

32 JT. This was more or less the view of the Radhakrishnan Commission in 1948-49, while the superiority of boy's institutions was noted in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Five Year Plan.

a Christian, she is freed from the old chains of seclusion and ignorance; but the shadow of the past is still over her, and its cold benumbs her aspirations, and, I have sometimes thought, her heart and brain. She must have time, and her teachers must have time, to develop her capacity and mental character.’<sup>33</sup>

10. She wanted to make her Indian students ‘Like us,’ i.e., like educated American women who had “bright, hopeful lives, in comparison with the limited privileges and dark prospects” of the Indian girls she saw.<sup>34</sup> The Americans had ‘every incentive and opportunity’ to cultivate their minds; whereas the Indian girls were ‘shut away from all means of improvement, and [...] kept in a state of perpetual childhood [...] in ignorance, but not in innocence or happiness.’<sup>35</sup> When American girls desired education, their friends gladly assisted them, but the Indians met with discouragement and ‘jealous suspicion.’

You enjoy a wide world of earth and sky (she told her American audience); you have treasures untold in books; in the fine arts you have measureless fields of delight, and in society all your pleasures are redoubled by participation and sympathy; their world is bounded by the walls of the zenana.<sup>36</sup>

11. To made her students learn Hindi and Urdu, partly because Indian languages were essential for mission work, but also because, “it is a painful fact [she said] that English schools in India teach girls everything but what they most require, the language that fills their ears. It is said they should know French, because they may go to England some-time; but the fact that they are in India now makes the study of its languages most essential.”<sup>37</sup>
12. To teach her girls that the ‘power of educated womanhood is simply the power of skilled service’. Indian girls needed training more than the Americans ‘because of their harder task. We are trusted and respected [Miss Thoburn told her America audience in 1900]. Few doubt our right to knowledge or our wisdom in its use. They meet doubt and opposition. They have little sympathy, or support, or inspiration from friends, and no precedents to follow.’<sup>38</sup> ‘We are not in the world to be ministered unto, but to minister. The world is full of need, and every opportunity to help is a duty. Preparation for these duties is education, whatever form it may take or whatever service may result.’ (‘The Power of Education,’ see Appendix 5).
13. Her desire was to turn Indian women into leaders, so that they headed their own institutions: If ‘India’s womanhood [was] to be brought to a worthy place, it must be under the leadership of Indian women [not men].’ She thrust them ‘into every place of responsibility that opened, to afford them every possible advantage and to give them ever widening opportunities for service and responsible position.’<sup>39</sup>
14. She wanted her students to be independent and self-sufficient. To this end, she introduced the American system of allowing students to pay their way through college, by teaching while studying. She was

---

33 JT.

34 Isabella Thoburn, letter to *The Friend*, March 1870, quoted in JT.

35 JT.

36 Quoted in JT. She also wished to educate Indian women for service. She had been training her students to do the same work as the missionaries, ‘establishing their Christian character, teaching them self-reliance; and laying upon their consciences the same sense of duty’ that had brought the Methodists to India. See JT.

37 JT.

38 Isabella Thoburn, ‘The Power of Education,’ 1900.

39 JT.



against scholarships on the whole. (See 'Higher education' in Appendix V).<sup>40</sup> Any scholarships that were given had to be returned. But when Constance became principal, she was worried about poor Christians who could not pay for a college education. Despite the War economy, she helped poor students by getting grants and donations for scholarships from various sources.<sup>41</sup>

15. Miss Thoburn widened students' choice of lifestyles by offering professional courses and excellent education in science which qualified them to join medical colleges. But she also prepared her students to become wives and mothers. '[T]hese schools will provide stronger, as well as wiser, mothers for the rising generation, mothers who will impart to their children what they have received in both body and mind.'<sup>42</sup> Advanced study required a stronger physique, more nutritious foods, open-air exercise, and a gymnasium.

This list makes it seem as if Miss Thoburn came with a manifesto to guide her, whereas in fact she responded to the needs and desires of the women, and adapted her work to accordingly. She came to teach Indian women in general, found that native Christian girls were neglected by the missionaries, so she decided she would teach these girls, giving them a modern education exactly like the one Indian boys and Americans received. She faced down opposition from her fellow missionaries; she expanded her Lucknow school into a high school and then a college; she got land, money, and bigger buildings. Like Methodists everywhere, she was practical first, and whatever 'theory' emerges from her writings and speeches was an assessment of the work she had already achieved, and based on that, her plans for the future.

### **What and how did she teach?**

As we have seen, while most missionaries thought reading and writing was sufficient education for Indian women, Isabella Thoburn taught them 'everything.' Constance added Urdu as a medium of instruction in the 1940s.<sup>43</sup>

In the early days, when Miss Thoburn was the only teacher in her school, she would chat to her students in the garden about botany and about missionaries' lives on the way to zenanas. The girls had never heard anything like it. Lilavati Singh wrote of the impact it had on her:

'When I first came to school, I did not know the name of a single flower, except perhaps the common Edward rose, and the various kinds of jasmine that we Indians love so much; and to-day as I walk through the garden I say to myself, "Here she taught me the name of the nasturtium; here she showed me a bird's nest; there she analyzed a hibiscus for me." What a new world was opened to me the day she gave us our first baby lesson in botany! I felt my heart and mind expanding as she told us that leaves were to the trees what our lungs are to

40 "Some have taken scholarships, but in the majority of cases these have been returned." Lilavati Singh's Recollection of Miss Thoburn, 29 March 1902, quoted in JT. See also Nichols, pp 7-8.

41 'Constance received a letter from a poor pastor who was willing to pay for his daughter, but it would have cost him his entire month's salary. She got money for the college from the Presbyterian Mission, Clementine Butler (daughter of the first Methodist missionaries), and Rs.10, 000 from the Pandita Ramabai Association (see Dimmit 146-147). See 'Christian Educator.'

42 'Higher Education,' 1900. In preparing her students to become wives and mothers, she was again responded to a demand. She was aware that men [I think she meant missionaries in particular] wanted educated wives and 'native Indian pastors and leaders [wanted] to give their daughters the best possible training.'

43 Education was a 24-hour affair for her, using multiple tools: 'this higher education, as well as that which begins with the kindergarten, should be full of Bible teaching[...]. To this end, libraries should be chosen, young people's associations organized, lectures arranged, and every possible religious influence be brought to bear upon the heart and life of every pupil' ('Higher Education,' 1900).

us, and how we could find out the age of trees by the rings under the bark, etc. These are simple things for educated people; but O what a world they opened to us!<sup>44</sup>

In addition to her formal and informal teaching, we have seen that Miss Thoburn created teaching material and literature for reading.

One of her innovations was the Lal Bagh boarding facility, which was soon considered the finest in the Lucknow area. Boarding schools 'marked a new departure in missionary work.'<sup>45</sup> Methodist work was primarily urban centred. Boarding schools brought village girls into the fold of education. For ten-year old Lilavati Singh, boarding-school life was 'a new world, bringing her the companionship of girls of her own age from other rural areas, and 'the dawning of intellectual and religious ambition.' Isabella Thoburn looked forward to a time when a boarding school would be needed in every district, and soon similar schools opened in all parts of the country. These boarding schools would require well-educated teachers, so she added teachers' training to the college curriculum.<sup>46</sup> The architecture of the Lal Bagh hostel became the model for women's hostels in particular, and was still in use in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The rooms were built in a square around a quadrangle large enough to have a garden and trees. Its single entrance made it easy to guard and thus safe for women.

She also invested in education in two ways. She invested in buildings, facilities, and teachers, for which she got the funds from philanthropists like Dr. Goucher and fund-raising in America. Secondly, she invested in people, encouraging her students to join the college faculty so that the culture of the college was strengthened. [Delhi University followed a similar policy until very recently. It was a good policy.]

In 1900, three decades after she began to teach in India, Isabella Thoburn noted that "Christian women in India are much more prominent, and relatively more important, than Christian men. There are men all over the empire, wearing more or less European dress and occupying all manner of public positions, who profess any or no religion; but there are few women seen in public places, or capable of talking in public, who are not Christians, and their limited number attracts attention to them. Their prominence is not due to any merit or demerit or choice of their own, but to the freedom which the religion of freedom has brought them, the education it has given them, and the duties to which it has called them. If they live in a village, they are probably the only women in the community who can read and write; no others go to a place of worship with men, sing and pray with them, or are addressed by men in public assemblies. Their daughters go away to boarding schools and return to become village oracles, consulted at times by their own fathers, who have had less opportunity of seeing and knowing Christian usages and duties. If their homes are in a city where their class is more numerous, they perhaps attract less attention as a novelty; but even there they are observed, and often subjected to painful criticism [...]. They stand as the representatives of all the women of India, as they will be when they are free."

Christian women were freer of social constraints, freer to choose how they would live, to study, to work, things we associate with modernity. This is what Isabella Thoburn offered all Indian girls. Two of her goals were especially in evidence during the politically and economically difficult 1930s and 1940s: That all women, regardless of religion or region, were entitled to the high quality education in the college, and that they should be

---

44 Nichols 360.

45 JT.

46 Christian hostels also acted as a bulwark against 'backsliding', or reverting to the old religion. Some Christian families would not allow their children to have non-Christian friends for this reason. In Calcutta, Lilavati Singh had come under Brahmo influence and decided against becoming a missionary. She got a government job in Dhaka, where she re-thought her decision and returned to the fold, as it were.



able to choose how they would live. In the late 1930s, women of all religions and regions of India wanted college education, and there was a demand for taking in more and more students. In addition, when Burma fell to the Japanese in 1942, Rangoon University shut down, intensifying the pressure on I T College to admit its students. The quality of education was not diluted despite and other these pressures. By 1940, the College had an impressive list of firsts among its students—the first dentist, the first Muslim doctor, and many more.<sup>47</sup>

#### **To summarise**

Isabella Thoburn College was a women's Methodist Christian College, which welcomed students of all religions, classes, and castes.<sup>48</sup> It showed that all-women institutions were valuable in furthering higher education for Indian women. It also set a standard for state controlled higher education in Independent India, especially the idea of universal education, and education for a definite purpose, which in state-planned education was chiefly to strengthen democracy.

## **SECTION II: 1947-1990s**

### **Five Year Plans**

After Independence, the state became a big player in education, planning and investing in all levels of education. The Five Year Plans addressed its goals of secular, equal and universal education. It seems to me that one of the biggest changes in the ideas and language of education since 1947 has been the shift away from people into statistics and commodities. The First Five-Year Plan aimed at education for people, but the tendency to treat people like cogs in an assembly line had begun. Miss Thoburn had wanted to train her students for service of others, whereas for the planners of modern India, education was to serve heavy industry and the commanding heights of science, to feed into the planned economy. Not at all an unworthy aim. But what did it offer women?

A 1999 study noted that the state spent more money on education with each Five Year Plan, including the education of women, but more funds were allocated for men's education. More higher education institutions were opened for women, including professional institutions, but the range of subjects they offered was very limited whereas men had a wider range of professional options. More women were in higher education than before, yet far more money was spent on men, even though their enrolment had been dropping.

A curious aspect of many such reports is that Uttar Pradesh [roughly the Methodist mission's Lucknow Area] is often cited separately for its work in education, especially women's education. Even the Kothari commission in the late 1960s commended Uttar Pradesh for its superiority in women's education. I don't yet know why it did well in the early years after Independence, but could it have been a consequence of the head start the Methodists gave it? But that's another paper. The most recent figures for Uttar Pradesh are dismal, as if the state simply does not care whether its women are educated, as if it wanted to return to the situation Miss Thoburn found when she came to Lucknow in 1870. At the same time – and in other states -- there has been a small rise in the number of all-

---

47 Constance was principal World War II when money was tight. Missionary funds had already begun to dry up during the Depression and were almost impossible during the War. Constance wrote in 1943: 'Over and over I have put it to men of means, Hindu and Muslim, that they are receiving the benefit of education in a Christian institution, where all the dormitories have been built through charity of friends in the United States. It is now up to them to help erect another dormitory if they want their daughters to come to this college.' For a fuller account of Constance's management of the college during World War II, see 'Christian Educator.'

48 The troubled voluntarily turned to it for succour. Its care of the troubled was formalized in the 1950s as the psychiatric facility, Noor Manzil, founded by Constance's friend, the Methodist 'missionary at large', E. Stanley Jones

women institutions. I don't believe these signs are wonders, but this may be the route out of an apparent regression in higher education for women.

But is it really a regression? Let's take a look at the policies and investment for the education of men and women with regard to the arts and sciences. The information is twisted yet a kind of story does emerge from it.

### **Arts and Sciences: Ideas and Investment**

For a few years after Independence, it was thought that some subjects were for men, others for women. The Radhakrishnan University Education Commission, 1948-49, said that though men and women are 'equally competent in academic work [...] it does not follow that in all things [their] education should be identical;' in general, men provide the income, women keep the home; keeping the home is an art which women may be taught through diploma courses.<sup>49</sup> During the First Five Year Plan (1951-56), only 7 new colleges for the professional education of girls were founded while boys' institutions increased by 131. Out of 24 girls' professional colleges, 21 were training colleges, whereas men's professional colleges included all types. Girls' colleges for special education increased by 7, men's by 13. Enrolment of girls in professional colleges increased by 97.4 per cent as against 63.6 per cent increase in enrolment of boys. Yet the overall enrolment of boys was fifteen times more than that of girls. More girls had entered education, but the number of boys in education was still two and half times more. Despite this assessment, in the Second Five-Year Plan, co-education was assumed to be modern and necessary, and planners used a resource crunch to **not** invest in women's institutions, arguing that since co-education was the way ahead, women could study in men's institutions. They also claimed that girls preferred on the whole to study in boys' institutions because they were better equipped, but apparently that was not grounds for improving standards in women's institutions.

During the first two five-year plans, heavy investment in the sciences favoured urban men. IITs and RECs (Indian Institutes of Technology, Regional Engineering Colleges) were started in metropolitan and industrially active areas.<sup>50</sup> 'The total provision for university education in the second five year plan was about Rs.57 crores' [one crore=10 million], most of it for consolidating and increasing technical and scientific education in the universities. There was additional money for technical and scientific research and scholarships, agricultural education etc. but not for the arts and humanities.<sup>51</sup> By 1993-94, there were 54.2% women in arts courses, compared to 35.4% men.<sup>52</sup> In 2010, more women enrolled in arts courses than men.<sup>53</sup> (See Appendix VII, 'Women

---

49 <<http://www.teindia.nic.in/Files/Reports/CCR/Report%20of%20the%20University%20Education%20Commission.pdf>>[28. 2. 2013].

50 The IITs were set up at Mumbai, Chennai, Delhi, Kharagpur, and Kanpur (then industrially alive).

51 Rs.13 crores for engineering and technology at the university and higher stages; Rs.10 crores for scholarships; Rs.4.6 crores for agricultural education; Rs.10 crores for health education at the university and higher stages; and Rs.20 crores 'for scientific and industrial research in the programme of the Council of Scientific and Industrial Research and other associated programmes. Some regions, such as the most backward tribal areas, have more female arts students than others, possibly because there are no technical colleges in those regions. So, enrolment in the arts can be seen as a consequence of state planning and investment.' See also Shantoo Gurnani and Madhuri Sheth, 'Women Scientists in India: Their Position and Role' (*Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, Volume 9, Number 3, September 1984, pp. 259-270 (12); <http://www.ingentaconnect.com/content/maney/isr/1984/00000009/00000003/art00008> [2. 2. 2013]).

52 The other faculties in order of priority were science and commerce, which had 19.8 per cent and 14.6 per cent women, respectively. See Chanana.

53 See Rajesh Shukla.

and Science'). Till today the IITs have very few women students.<sup>54</sup> In 2006, there were only 32 women undergraduates among 650 in the undergraduate departments of the IIT Kharagpur, which is more or less the ratio for other IITs as well; women constitute only one-eighth of the total number IIT entrance test applicants.<sup>55</sup> Why is this? People say the course and entrance exam are too tough for women; the entrance exam is geared in favour of men; women cannot afford the fee for the necessary tuition and the entrance examination. This fee was scrapped for women in 2011, but enrolment did not go up.<sup>56</sup> Once more, I don't know the reason, but I must get on with the concluding part of this talk to see if there is a solution to these imbalances.

### PART III: Conclusion: 2011-2013

In this last part I want to look at the idea of all-woman institutions in relation to Isabella Thoburn, the Indian state, and the present. The three subsections are not logically connected but there is a pattern in them.

One reason for Isabella Thoburn's success was that she knew women were a separate social group. Their education could be as good as what boys received, but they had to be taught in women's schools and colleges. Women and men had studied together in Indian medical colleges since 1875 but most Indian families would not have dreamt of sending their daughters to co-educational institutions. From her own experience, Miss Thoburn knew that an all-woman group, controlled by women, could best further their ambition to work in the great world. Thus when the regular mission societies delayed sending her to India, she and some others formed the Women's Foreign Missionary Society, which immediately sent her to India. By 1910, there was a three-fold increase in the number of women missionaries in the field of education, from 'the modest little mission schools for girls' of thirty years earlier, to 'high grade and regularly-chartered colleges, recognized by the governments of the day [...] teaching in medical schools; practicing medicine among the poor and the helpless [...] writing books and tracts for the coming generations,' and of course, in Christian work of all kinds.' (JT).<sup>57</sup> Missionaries like Miss Thoburn chose to live as a group of celibate women to devote themselves to their service as teachers and doctors, and they became role models. Miss Thoburn, Lilavati Singh and Constance had home making skills but found it limiting

---

54 For a discussion on women in the IITs, see <<http://nanopolitan.blogspot.in/2008/10/paniit-2008-one-day-conference-on-women.html>>[1. 2. 2013].

<<http://nanopolitan.blogspot.in/2006/05/women-in-iits.html>>[3. 2. 2013].

<<http://www.iitb.ac.in/WomensCell/data/biswa-essay.pdf>>[Friday, February 01, 2013]

<<http://www.hindustantimes.com/StoryPage/Print/739821.aspx>>[1. 2. 2013].

<<http://www.kamalsinha.com/iit/women.html>>[2. 2. 2013]

<<http://www.kamalsinha.com/iit/issues.html>>[2. 1. 2013]

On the proposed all women's IIT at Amravati, see

<<http://www.insightiitb.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/12/April-11.pdf>>[1. 2. 2013].

55 <<http://nanopolitan.blogspot.in/2006/05/women-in-iits.html>>[3. 2. 2013]

56 At the same time it was raised for men who thus in effect subsidized women's applications.

57 JT. According to James Thoburn, 'in 1860 the Woman's Union Missionary Society had been organized on an undenominational basis, and two or three ladies had been sent out, under its auspices, to India and Japan.' Hearing of this movement, he wrote to her suggesting that she should apply for an appointment under the new Society.' Bishop Oldham reports that Miss Thoburn preferred to try the Methodists route first, and when there was a delay, the WFMS was formed. For American Women's Missions to India, see also Alexandra C. Feldberg, *Lillian Picken: Bringing Her Home to India, An American, Female Missionary in Twentieth Century India* (A senior Thesis, Columbia University in the City of New York, April 2008), p.5, and *passim*.

and frustrating. They preferred using their minds for study, thinking and teaching. The point is not that this was a superior way of life to being homemakers but that because of their education, they could choose how they wanted to live, and they opted out of domesticity to follow their natural inclination to study and teach, knowing that there is no such thing as a 'natural domestic sphere' for women. This underlies a lot of feminist and other efforts to modernize women through education even now.

### **The Indian state, engineering, and all-woman institutions**

In 2008, India's first woman president, Pratibha Patil, wanted an all-woman IIT opened in her hometown Amravati. The proposal went to the Planning Commission where one official found nothing amiss with the idea: "What is wrong if there is a demand for an all-women IIM or NIT? The world over there are institutions exclusively for women. Japan has more than 10 all-women universities offering courses in varied disciplines." But the Planning Commission turned down the proposal because calling it 'Indira Gandhi IIT' as suggested by Ms. Patil would be considered an unfair (and punishable) election ploy. The other reason it gave was that 'none of the higher education institutions, including the IIMs, NITs, IITs etc were gender-specific and therefore accepting such a proposal for an all-woman IIT would hurt the premier engineering institute's brand.'<sup>58</sup> In terms of equal opportunity education, the Planning Commission's observation that an all-woman IIT would ruin the IIT brand is hardly gender-neutral.<sup>59</sup> Whether women had access to IITs or not apparently did not enter the discussion which seemed to be about how much political capital could be made out of the issue of women's education, but I am relying on newspaper reports here, and hope to research this further to get a clearer idea of the issue.

However, Ms. Pratibha Patil's idea for an all-woman IIT wasn't a stray notion. Until the early 1990s, there were no all-woman engineering colleges in India. Then a dozen or more appeared, offering mostly 'women's' engineering subjects, i.e., Computer Application and Business Management. Businessmen or private trusts run most of these institutions, which probably came up as a consequence of the shift towards privatization of education in the 11<sup>th</sup> Plan. Nevertheless, all-woman technical institutions seem to be a new trend.

Until this recent outcrop of women's engineering colleges, the medical professions (medicine, nursing, physiotherapy) were considered the appropriate science based courses for women. Even so, there was just one women's medical college, Lady Hardinge College, Delhi, established in 1914. Missionaries had founded two women's medical schools, in Ludhiana, Punjab (1894) and Vellore, Tamil Nadu (1909), but Lady Hardinge was the first college. (Medical colleges conferred MBBS degrees; medical schools conferred licences to practise medicine.) According to the Lady Hardinge College website, a 'separate medical college for women made it possible for Indian women to study medicine.'<sup>60</sup> Yet Indian women had been studying medicine, albeit in mixed colleges, in India, Britain, and the US since the 1880s. If you remember, the Indian medical colleges had large numbers of Christian women. In 1912, a year after Constance graduated from Baltimore, it was argued that because women students had to study with men at men's colleges, 'conservative' Indian women of the 'right type and class' were not coming forward in sufficient numbers to become medical practitioners. So the state-run Lady

---

<sup>58</sup> <[http://indiaedunews.net/IIT/President's\\_proposal\\_for\\_allwomen\\_IIT\\_in\\_Amravati\\_rejected\\_5838/](http://indiaedunews.net/IIT/President's_proposal_for_allwomen_IIT_in_Amravati_rejected_5838/)> [6. 2. 2012]. See also <[http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-08-20/nagpur/27910718\\_1\\_iits-or-iims-hrd-minister-new-airport](http://articles.timesofindia.indiatimes.com/2008-08-20/nagpur/27910718_1_iits-or-iims-hrd-minister-new-airport)> [6. 2. 2012].

<sup>59</sup> Equating education with branded commodities would have baffled Isabella Thoburn and Constance Prem Nath Dass.

<sup>60</sup> <http://www.lhmc.in/>

Hardinge Medical College came into being. (24 IT College girls joined it during World War II.)<sup>61</sup> It remained the only women's medical college for nearly a century, until 2010, when a second women's medical college came up in Andhra Pradesh, with 60% seats reserved for Muslim girls. Its founder said, 'The idea of establishing a separate medical college for women is to enable the meritorious girls from poorer sections to study medicine [...] [and to] empower minorities,' the same argument used for founding Lady Hardinge College.<sup>62</sup>

This brings me to the second true story I mentioned at the outset.

When I began to teach at Jesus and Mary College in 1970, students would ask where I had studied. I would jokingly reply that I had studied in an obscure college and was the first woman in my family to graduate from college. In fact I am privileged to be a third generation woman with college degrees. Constance was the first woman in my family to have a college education and she studied in more places than I have. My other grandmother was not formally educated, which made no difference to her capabilities as a manager and teacher. But my students accepted my made-up story because it is the continuing true story of many Indian women and of at least one class I teach. These are students of Hindi literature. They belong to poor families. They are undernourished and hard worked. They did not do well in their school leaving examination and had no hope of getting into college, but Jesus and Mary College admitted them as part of policy of service to the weaker sections of society. They are very proud of being in one of the four best women's colleges of Delhi University. They are even more proud of being the first college going girls in their families. According to a 2010 study:

The level of education among the youth is directly related to their parents' education. Nearly 54 per cent of the professional degree holders, 38 per cent of post graduates and 30 per cent of graduates have parents who have 'above matric' qualifications. Most thinly educated youth come from parents who have not completed their school education.<sup>63</sup>

But class after class of the Jesus and Mary College Hindi literature students belies this. Their mothers have studied up to the 5<sup>th</sup> or 8<sup>th</sup> class, if at all; none of the mothers has been to college. Most of their fathers have completed 12 years of school; only 5 or 6 are graduates, none a post-graduate. A 1999 study found that 'Among the lower middle class, an increasingly large section is now ready to make substantial sacrifice for girls education because of economic need.' This is borne out by the Hindi literature students, whose mothers insisted that they study in college, and even fought for them when required. Their fathers and brothers also support 99% of them. They are proud of that, too. All the girls want to work outside the home, and probably will. But if they wish to study further, especially outside Delhi, their fathers and brothers will not let them, even if their mothers support them.

Sometimes as I listen to these girls, I think that a hundred years after Constance graduated from Goucher College, not much has changed. Women still have to fight for higher education; Christian educationists still run women's colleges. The truth is that higher education for women in India has an uneven trajectory. We need the

---

61 N.N.Mathur. The idea of having a separate medical college for women where 'women would be taught by women to attend on women' was conceived in 1912 and given concrete shape in 1914 [...]. [It had] hostels providing separate accommodation to Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and Christians.' It was run by the state, and was at first affiliated to Punjab University, Lahore, then to Delhi University in the 1950s. Contrary to what Mathur says, the first school of nursing was not opened in Lady Hardinge College in 1916 but in 1909 by Dr. Ida Scudder in the Christian Medical College, Vellore, Tamil Nadu.

62 Dr. Vizarat Rasool Khan, Shadan Group of Institutions. The college, called the Dr. V.R.K. Women's Medical College, is in Aziznagar, Ranga Reddy district (*The Hindu*, Sep 08, 2010). <http://www.hindu.com/2010/09/08/stories/2010090860700200.htm> [5. 2. 2013].

63 Rajesh Shukla, p.xxvi.

kind of education that Isabella Thoburn pioneered—equal to the best in the world, but if every kind of Indian woman is to benefit from it, we will need all-women's institutions for many years to come.

**Shobhana Bhattacharji**

New Delhi, 6. 3. 2013

Ryukoku University, 30. 1. 2014

## Appendix I

### Isabella Thoburn (1840-1901)

- Isabella Thoburn founded the first Christian women's college in Asia, which became the model for many subsequent colleges in Asia. After her death, it was named Isabella Thoburn College.
- The first classes of Isabella Thoburn College were held in 1886, one year before they commenced in the Baltimore Womans College, now called Goucher College, after Rev. James Goucher, a Methodist philanthropist.
- Rev. Goucher also funded school and college education in India and Japan, including the Aoyama Gakuin University in Tokyo, which has a Goucher Memorial Chapel and Goucher Hall.

----

From Isabella Thoburn's addresses at the Ecumenical Missionary Conference, New York, 1900

#### 'The Higher Education of Women'

- There has never been any question on the mission field, or elsewhere, about the propriety or necessity of higher education for men. The manner or the quality of it may be discussed, but the fact is taken for granted. . . . The case was necessarily otherwise with women at the first, and some forgot that it could not remain so to the last. . . .
- The women have been reached and taught, and now they wait for the advantages and opportunities their brothers have received without asking...
- There are now three colleges for women in India, and collegiate courses in several high schools. There are thirty-five women in men's colleges, showing progress both in the colleges and the women. . . .
- Advanced schools for women are generally Christian. The exceptions are the Government high schools in Japan and the Bethune College in Calcutta. The latter is largely under the control and patronage of the Brahmo Somaj and of Hindus who have adopted Christian ideas in regard to the capacity and privileges of women.
- Asiatic women have proved that they are capable of leadership, not only by their history in the past, but some are proving it to-day. . . . The Pandita Ramabai fears no difficulty in carrying out her plans. . . .
- There are others doing brave and strong work . . . Mrs. Sathianadan, Miss Bose, Miss Sorabji, Mrs. Chuckerbutty, in India; Miss Hu and Miss Kahn, in China; Miss Tsuda, Miss Omura, and Mrs. Iwaoto, in Japan, are representatives.
- . . . education can not at present be given in any other language [than English]. The text-books do not exist, and it is a shorter way to learn English and use English books than to wait until missionaries have so learned Oriental languages, and so devoted time to their translation, that they can put whole college curriculums into these diverse tongues.
- The new educational system in Japan has introduced English into the lower schools, and as the grades rise, more of the text-books are in that tongue until the collegiate course, when they are entirely English. In India all subjects are taught in English, from the middle school upward. . .

#### 'The Power of Educated Womanhood'

- The power of educated womanhood is simply the power of skilled service. . . . Preparation for these duties is education, whatever form it may take or whatever service may result.
- [Asian girls need] the same training which we [American women] need, as well as skill for service. They



need this more than we do because . . . They meet doubt and opposition. They have little sympathy, or support, or inspiration from friends, and no precedents to follow.

## Appendix II

### Pandita Ramabai's Prayer for the Women of India

"O Lord, hear my prayer. For ages dark ignorance has brooded over our minds and spirits; like a cloud of dust it rises and wraps us round; and we are like prisoners in an old and moldering house, choked and buried in the dust of custom; and we have no strength to get out. Bruised and beaten, we are like the dry husks of the sugar-cane when the sweet juice has been extracted. Criminals confined in jails are happier than we, for they know something of the world. They were not born in prison; but we have not for one day, no, not even in our dreams, seen Thy world, and what we have not seen we cannot imagine. To us it is nothing but a name; and not having seen Thy world we cannot know Thee, its Maker. We have been in this jail; we have died here, and are dying.

O God of mercies, our prayer to Thee is this, that the curse may be removed from the women of India."<sup>64</sup>

## Appendix III

### Number of Christian Educational Institutions in India

#### 1. Higher education, excluding medical education

Christian higher education institutions in India inclusive of Colleges: 360 (approx).

- Christian schools: Roman Catholics - 17000; Protestants - between 8000-10,000. Protestant figures are unreliable 'due to lack of coordination among numerous denominations. The mainline Churches cite their figures. . . . But they leave out other missions and denominations.'
- Total number of Christian school and higher level institutions: 30,000 including 'could be acceptable!'<sup>65</sup> Another figure is between 32,000-33,000.

#### 2. Medical and health units

- Protestants: 3,500 hospitals and health units. Roughly 1750 are teaching institutions, including nursing schools and Auxiliary Nursing and Midwifery courses. Christian Medical College (founded 1900), Vellore, Tamil Nadu, is considered the best medical college in India.
- Roman Catholics: 2,800 health programmes, including one-room health clinics, and about 200 teaching institutions.
- Splinter Church Groups: About 100 health [and teaching?] institutions.

Total (approx) number of Christian medical teaching facilities in India in 2013: 2050.

In 2013: The Medical Council of India, a statutory body set up in the 1950s, responsible for establishing and

---

<sup>64</sup> Pandita Ramabai (1858-1922), quoted by James Mill Thoburn in his *Life of Isabella Thoburn*

<sup>65</sup> Dr.P.S.Jacob, President, All-India Christian Higher Education Association (1991-1993), via email 24 Feb 2013. Dr.Jacob's 'definite figure' for higher education institutions is '350; and probably another 10 new institutions could be added at that level. So let us say, the total is 360.'



maintaining high standards of medical education and recognizing medical qualifications in India, currently recognizes 355 medical colleges, with 44250 seats, which confer MBBS degrees.<sup>66</sup> This does not include institutes of dentistry, nursing, Pharma, and indigenous systems of medicine.

## Appendix IV

### India's Five Year Plans

First Plan (1951-56)	Focus on agriculture, price stability, power and transport
Second Plan (1956 - 61) Target Growth: 4.5% Actual Growth: 4.27%	Focus - rapid industrialization
	Advocated huge imports through foreign loans.
	Shifted basic emphasis from agriculture to industry far too soon.
	During this plan, prices increased by 30%, against a decline of 13% during the First Plan
Eleventh Plan (2007 - 2012)  Goals for education and women	Reduce dropout rates of children from elementary school from 52.2% in 2003-04 to 20% by 2011-12. Increase literacy rate for persons of age 7 years or above to 85%.
	Lower gender gap in literacy to 10 percentage point. Increase the percentage of each cohort going to higher education from the present 10% to 15%.
	Reduce infant mortality rate to 28 and maternal mortality ratio to 1 per 1000 live births
	Reduce anaemia among women and girls by 50%.
	Raise the sex ratio for age group 0-6 to 935 by 2011-12 and to 950 by 2016-17
	Ensure that at least 33 percent of the direct and indirect beneficiaries of all government schemes are women and girl children

## Appendix V

### Progress Of Women's Education (1947-1991): Quantitative Aspects

'We have examined women's educational development –(1) by quantitative indicators like enrolment, outturn, educational facilities, literacy rates, and total stock of educated women, and (2) in the light of the stated national objective of integration of women as equals of men in all aspects of national development. . . .

- (1) Enrolments . . .even though Indian universities had proved to be more liberal than their western counterparts in admitting women, their enrolment in higher education (23,000) was only less than one half of 1% of the total enrolment. . . .
- (4) At the university stage, the proportion of girls is higher at the post-graduate than at the under-graduate level. In professional education, women had substantial enrolment in teaching, medicine, and fine arts but meager ones in commerce, law, agriculture, or engineering. Higher education of women is even more confined to the urban upper and middle classes.
- (5) The National Committee on Women's Education (1958-59) had been perturbed by the widening gap in the education of boys and girls [and had] recommended special programmes and efforts

66 <<http://www.mciindia.org/InformationDesk/MedicalCollegeHospitals/ListofCollegesTeachingMBBS.aspx>> [27. 2. 2013].

to close this gap in as short a time as possible. As a result of special efforts, girls enrolment stepped up from 1960. We regret to observe, however, that these efforts were slackened after 1966. The quinquennial growth in enrolment of girls declined [in 1961-66 from] 109.4% to 78.4% at the university level. In professional and special schools the decline was from 74.6% to 34.6%.<sup>67</sup>

### **Attitudes to Women's Education (1999)**

'Social attitudes to girls education vary from acceptance to absolute indifference. According to our survey, only 16.8% of the respondents felt that girls should be given any education, but 64.5% observed that girls should not go in for higher education even if they are very intelligent. About 77.5% both male and female supported compulsory education for girls up to the 8<sup>th</sup> class. . . . Among the lower middle class, an increasingly large section is now ready to make substantial sacrifice for girls education because of economic need, but a very large section still finds itself unable to do so for economic and social difficulties. . . .

A large number of girls have to undertake domestic chores, including looking after siblings, by the time they reach the age of 8 years. A very large number are also engaged in earning for the family. . . . It should be noted that girls constitute a higher proportion of unpaid family workers throughout the country and that is the reason for their exclusion from schools. Other social reasons for this adverse attitude to girls education are early marriages or betrothal, though these are on the decline, except in admittedly backward states. . . . The other reasons mentioned to us, which stand in the way of girls education, are inadequacy of facilities, particularly distance of schools; irrelevance of the content of education; and fear of alienation of girls from their environment as a result of education.

The strongest social support for girls education comes from its increasing demand in the marriage market. About 64.5% of our respondents stated that education helped to improve the girls marriage prospects. Since it is considered necessary to find bridegrooms with still higher education [and highly educated grooms require higher dowries], education of girls contributes to the increase in dowry, and the double expenditure [on education as well as dowry] acts as a deterrent to girls education. We were told by many parents that this was the reason for their withdrawing their girls from schools after the primary stage.<sup>68</sup>

## **Appendix VI**

### **Radhakrishnan University Education Commission, 1948-49<sup>69</sup>**

The report included a short paper on Women's education, without thinking of women a special group. In this respect it was retrogressive as compared with Miss Thoburn's education. Its few points were that women must be educated because children learn from her, but otherwise she must learn skills that would make her useful at home and a good hostess, 'pretty accomplishments such as drawing, painting and the like—skills that will enable well-to-do women to pass their time harmlessly while their husbands do the [really] important work' (N.L.Gupta, 127).

The National Committee on Women's education (1958-59) was perturbed by the widening gap in the

---

67 1961-66 was the Third Plan Period: 'Target Growth: 5.6% Actual Growth: 2.84%. Complete failure in reaching the targets due to unforeseen events - Chinese aggression (1962), Indo-Pak war (1965), severe drought 1965-66.'

68 From K.P.Yadav, *International Encyclopedia of Education Planning and Development* (1999), vol.1, pp.71, 73

69 Usually referred to as the Radhakrishnan Report, Its proper title is *The Report of The University Education Commission (December 1948 – August 1949)*, Volume 1 (1950; rpt. Delhi: Ministry of Education, Government of India, 1962). <<http://www.teindia.nic.in/Files/Reports/CCR/Report%20of%20the%20University%20Education%20Commission.pdf>>[30. 1. 2014]

education of boys and girls [and had] recommended special programmes and efforts to close this gap in as short a time as possible. As a result of special efforts, girls' enrolment stepped up from 1960. These efforts were slackened after 1966.

However, it also held up Isabella Thoburn College as a model for women's higher education in India, and (along with two Christian colleges in Madras, the Women's Christian College and Queen Mary's College) for training teachers for higher education.

## **Appendix VII**

### **Women and Science (1984)**

'Women in India joined modern science professions at the beginning of this century. Starting with medicine they have since been entering all fields of science, including engineering. Almost one-third of women are engaged in bio-sciences. Recently, pure sciences such as physics and chemistry have also been drawing greater number of women. In proportion to their number seeking employment, women scientists are well represented in public sector research and development laboratories; there is a greater tendency among women scientists to go in for teaching. The private sector seems to prefer employing men in the application areas. In professions such as engineering, some discrimination exists. So far, the number of women at the higher policy-making levels in organisations is small, and many women scientists do not feel accepted professionally by their male colleague and superiors. Women scientists in India have shown serious interest in science. There are, and have been, many individual women scientists who have contributed a great deal to science and society. However, most of them continue to accept fully their family roles as well, resulting in extra demands on their energy. The industrial Indian society is giving them all an opportunity to contribute to science, but the cultural awareness of their role at home may demand compromises from them in their careers.'<sup>70</sup>

---

70 Shantoo Gurnani and Madhuri Sheth, 'Women Scientists in India: Their Position and Role' (Interdisciplinary Science Reviews, Volume 9, Number 3, September 1984, pp. 259-270 (12)

*RINDAS Series of Working Papers* by Contemporary India Area Studies,  
National Institutes for the Humanities

National Institutes for the Humanities (NIHU)

<http://www.nihu.jp/sougou/areastudies/index.html>

Contemporary India Area Studies (INDAS)

<http://www.indas.asafas.kyoto-u.ac.jp/>

The Center for the Study of Contemporary India Ryukoku University (RINDAS)

<http://rindas.ryukoku.ac.jp/>

RINDAS Series of Working Papers 16

## **Hundred years of Higher Education for Indian Women: 1913-2013, with a focus on the Methodist Christian Contribution**

Shobhana Bhattacharji

---

March, 2014

Published by The Center for the Study of Contemporary India  
Ryukoku University 4F Haku-kan, Omiya Campus, 125-1 Daiku-cho, Shichijo-dori Omiya Higashi-iru,  
Shimogyo-ku, Kyoto 600-8268, JAPAN  
TEL : +81-75-343-3813 FAX : +81-75-343-3810  
<http://rindas.ryukoku.ac.jp/>

Printed by Tanaka Print. co. ltd.  
677-2 Ishifudono-cho, Fuyacho-higashiiru, Matsubara-dori, Shimogyo-ku, Kyoto 600-8047, JAPAN  
TEL : +81-75-343-0006

---

ISBN 978-4-904945-49-0



