

FEMALE EDUCATION IN BENGAL:

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A SIDE SKETCH.

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FEMALE EDUCATION IN BENGAL:

A SIDE SKETCH.



IT is interesting to watch any development in the course of civilisation, and especially any new departure in the midst of a community that has existed in marked conservatism. Even in countries that are considered progressive, changes are often met with opposition. In such cases, the general activity of the community brings the antagonism into active conflict, and true principles ultimately prevail. This is not the case so markedly in the East, where the conservative spirit animates the social body. In many cases, the idea of change is met, not with active opposition which would lead to battle and conquest, one way or another, but it is met either with freezing indifference, or that passive resistance which is the most difficult to overcome. In most oriental countries the position of women has been a degraded one, and it never seems to have been thought that she was capable of being more than a toy for pleasure, or a domestic drudge. The idea of intellectual companionship for man was a novelty rarely conceived, and, when broached, so generally scouted that it required no inconsiderable moral courage to become the apostle of such a faith, to preach it, and act upon it in the very home of conservatism. Such an idea, however, was conceived by Mr. Sasipada Banerjee, of Baranagar near Calcutta, and the following pages show some of the difficulties that he had to encounter, and the success that has attended his efforts. The record here is only of the institutions under his immediate care. But the measure of his work would be inadequate if the influence of his example be not duly recognised. The idea has grown, his efforts have been recognised by those who are in a position to estimate their effect and tendency, and this modest beginning may be fraught with consequences of the highest importance to the people of India.

The Baranagar Female school has received a favorable notice from the highest authority in the Province. His Honor Sir Steuart Bayley spoke of it in the following terms at the Annual Meeting of the National Indian Association, held under His Honor's presidency, at Belvedere, on the 3rd January 1890 :—

“I do not think we have expressed too strongly our thanks to Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee, not only for the trouble they have taken, but also for the exceedingly charitable work that they are doing—estimated whether at a money value or a moral value.”—*Statesman*, 4th January 1890.

The Hon'ble Sir Alfred Croft, Director of Public Instruction of Bengal, also made a kind mention of their work in the following terms :—

“He referred to the case of a young widow who was taken from the school and was remarried to a Brahmin—a professional man, a Doctor. The Association had nothing to do with the marriage, but the fact that her husband chose her because he wanted an educated wife spoke in favor of the Institution. He thought it desirable in presenting the Report to lay particular attention to the great services rendered by Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee. The work they did was of a very high character, and they would see from the Report the great service it was to the pupils to be in such excellent hands.”—*Indian Daily News*, 4th January 1890.

Sir Steuart Bayley has not ceased to take an interest in the work of the Baranagar Female Boarding School and Hindu Widows Home even after leaving this country. At a meeting held at the Society of Arts Rooms in London in the year 1891 Sir Steuart made the following reference to it. “I may mention from my own knowledge the admirable work that is being done with regard to the training of widows by Mr. Sasipada Banerjee and his wife, who, starting from very small beginning, and having to rely upon very little prolonged and certain help, are now making real and marked progress, and keeping a firm footing in Calcutta.”—In a letter which he wrote to Babu Sasipada on the 15th July 1892 he made the following mention of it :—

“I shall always take an interest in your school and the very useful work you are pioneering—a work which, I trust, will multiply itself spontaneously in the next generation, but of which, you, as showing the way, will always be honored as the founder.”

All this, however encouraging to those who have been watching the movement from its commencement, 28 years ago, cannot lessen the importance of the struggles which the founder of the school, Babu Sasipada Banerjee, had to go through in its different stages of progress.

Mr. Tudor Trevor, of the Government of India, Financial Department, thus wrote of the School in the *Indian Mirror*, of September 1866 :—

“The Baranagar Girls' school traces its origin to the family of the founder, who commenced it by teaching his wife and one or two relations in his own house. It was then increased by the addition of some girls who were desirous of obtaining instruction; and so great was its success that it was removed from the sacred precincts of the Zenana—or, to speak more correctly, Zenana education was given

to grown-up persons, and a school for girls was opened under the superintendence of a Pandit."

The founder of the school, Sasipada Banerjee, was married at the age of 20. This was an advanced age of marriage for a high caste Brahmin as he was. His two elder brothers were married according to the custom of the family at a very early age; and his immediate elder dying when a boy leaving a child widow, his mother did not accept any of the proposals for his marriage which came to her in numbers after he had the Brahminical Baptism, at the age of 9, lest he should also die at an early age, leaving another widow to burden her miserable life. Fathers of marriageable girls came and begged her to have him married, but she was firm. When Babu Bhola Nath Ghosal of Arreadah came to her with the proposal, she gave him a flat denial, saying that she was not willing to get Sasipada married even at 20. But Bhola Nath Ghosal prostrated himself before her, implored and begged her with closed hands to save him from his caste difficulty, as his daughter was far advanced in the age enjoined in the *Sastras* for the marriage of high caste Hindu girls, and as there was no other high caste *Kulin* to whom he could make over his daughter. His importunities were so very earnest and pressing that the mother had at last to yield. She, however, showed sufficient magnanimity in not realizing from him the full share of allowance in the way of money, ornaments, and other things, which by birth-right Sasipada was entitled to at the time of marriage. Bhola Nath pleaded poverty and Sasipada's mother excused him of a large portion of what was his due. Mrs. Banerjee was a very sensible woman, and was much in advance in ideas of her sex of the times. She gave her son an opportunity of seeing the girl before the marriage question was settled, and though this may not now appear to be of much consequence, yet for that age it was a great innovation over the prevailing custom of the country. A settlement of marriages is made on the choice of parents and not on the choice of those who were to marry; but in his case his mother gave him an opportunity to exercise his own choice.

For the first year after marriage his wife remained at her father's at Arreadah, and in the second year, *i. e.*, in 1861, she came to live in the house of her husband's mother, and in the same year he commenced privately to teach her. There was no talk of female education in the place at the time, but he felt within himself that he could not be happy with one who would not be able to share with him in his aspirations. English education taught him to look upon the superstitious practices of the country as absurd and foolish, and he thought that he could not be happy with a wife who was not above these superstitions. This was an anxious thought to him—either he must help her up or himself go down to her level. He passed several days and nights in earnest solitary prayers for help to get over this difficulty, and his prayers were not

in vain. His wife was a thorough-going idolator—devout and earnest. She used to enter the family Pooja-room in the morning and would not leave it before 11 or 12 noon. Sometimes he used to be anxious to see her before going out for business, which was at 8 or 8-30 a. m., but she could not be seen. This went keenly to his heart. It was not a small trial on his part to persuade her to take to letters. She was against female education and would not give herself up to it. She used all the prevalent orthodox arguments against female education to desist her husband from the attempt, but he knew what he was to do. She was, however, obedient and his loving persuasion had at last its effect on her. She began to learn during the end of the year 1861. In a short time she made good progress, which attracted the notice of his widow sister-in-law (brother's wife) whom they persuaded to begin with the alphabets. These two formed his first class, and though at the time he had no idea of opening a school, this may very well be called the beginning of female education work in Baranagar. Gradually his niece came to the age when she could receive some education, and though it was not at all considered a necessity at the time, he felt it his duty to educate her. Mrs. Banerjee took charge of her. When he found that his wife and sister-in-law could take charge of little girls he opened a class for them in his house, and another for adults. The family consisted of a large number of inmates, seven generations both by the male and female lines, living in the same house. The work of education was originally confined to the family, but gradually some girls came and joined the class from the neighbouring houses.

When Sasipada commenced to teach his wife there was a hue and cry against them, for it was not then customary to teach females. Moreover, for a young wife to speak with her husband during the day and receive instruction from him was a great social offence which the community could not easily pass over. They, however, patiently bore all the calumny, and in faith and prayer went on with the work; and the consequence was that, in a short time, almost all the elderly females of the house, not to speak of the girls, began to gather round his wife and sister-in-law to receive instruction. His cousin, Babu Saroda Prasad Banerjee, late Chairman of the Baranagar Municipality, was at that time Head Master of the Naral High Class English School, in the District of Jessore. In a letter dated Naral, the 5th September 1864, he wrote to Sasipada of the work in the following manner:—

“The establishment of a Zenana Girls' school has given me more satisfaction than I can express. May it thrive well under the management of Mr. and Mrs. Sasi.”

Though his wife made progress in her education and was helping in the teaching work she did not write to his cousin, nor did he to her, though they were so nearly and dearly related to

each other. The custom of the country prohibited them from corresponding with, or talking to, each other. It was not before 1865 when they had made sufficient advance over the prevailing superstitious notions of the country that his cousin could be persuaded to write to her, and she to him. The following is an extract from his letter, dated 8th July 1865, on receipt of Mrs. Banerjee's first communication to him : " I am very glad to see Mrs. Sasi's letter, which I received not so much as a token of friendship from a dear relative but as a literary performance of one of the female sex. Great credit is due to you, for her progress has been remarkable, and I am sure she beats the *Patshalla* boys hollow and has disgraced the Pandits and *us*, school masters, for the long years we would take to train up a boy to that degree of progress which has just been evinced to me by Mrs. Sasi." In another letter he thus speaks of the progress made by her sister-in-law :—

" I am much pleased to see Khira's mother write so well on her first exercise, and shall be equally glad to see the other females of our house displaying the same rapid progress. It is delightful to see how your wife as well as Khira's mother speak of the Brahma religion. 'Years' prejudices are swept away as so much dust before the winds."

All difficulties vanish before perseverance and devotion, and such has been the case with the work in connection with the early history of female education in Baranagar in its different stages of progress. Those who had nothing but taunting remarks against it when it was commenced now began to look at it with interest, and even the more elderly females of the house began to pass hours with their first Bengali primer. This was a sight never to be forgotten—what an earnestness did they show in attempting to master difficult spellings ! Sasipada's brother, Kedar Nath, was at that time at Mozufferpore, where he had been for a change. In a letter dated Mozufferpore, the 3rd Chyet (1865), he wrote thus about the work which was being silently carried on in the house :—

" I am highly delighted to learn from *Bow* (sister-in-law) that Abinash's mother and many other women of our house are learning near *Bow* and your wife. For they who were once against us in our endeavours for educating the girls and grown-up females have now not only understood its importance but have begun to prosecute their studies themselves."

His cousin, Babu Saroda Prasad Banerjee, wrote of the work in the following words in his letter dated Naral, the 18th February 1865 :—

" I am very glad that almost all the members of the family have commenced educating themselves. It would be a great blessing when my mother and *Natoon Khoori* and if possible *Bemho Pishi* (aunt),

those staunch desisters of female education, will be brought under the discipline of your girls school." And they *did* come under its discipline, for in a short time all of them had books in their hands, and they sat round Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee for instruction. It will thus be apparent that the female education work of Baranagar commenced with the teaching of grown-up females, many of whom were widows of the ancestral family-house of Sasipada Banerjee.

These worthy people worked upon the prejudices of the times against female education by imparting education in a quiet manner to the ladies of the house, and such was their success that in a short time they got a number of girls from the neighbouring houses to the Zenana School. And now it was time for opening a Public School for Girls. Hitherto the classes were held in the ordinary domestic manner without any form or ceremony, the pupils sitting on mats on the floor. Now some furniture was procured, and on the 19th of March 1865, the Girls' School was formally opened in the *Pooja Dalan* (prayer hall) of the late Dinanath Nandi, a Pandit and a maid servant were all the establishment. Krista Dhone Sen Gupta of Baranagar was the first Pundit. The Zenana teaching went on within the house, Mr. Banerjee and her sister-in-law looking after the beginners, and Mr. Banerjee the more advanced class.

Deep religious convictions were the secret propelling force working within the heart of Sasipada at the time. Having no faith in idolatory he began to look with anxious concerns on the evils of the caste-system and of the social vices which prevailed in the country. He was always impetuous in doing whatever seemed to him to be right and proper, and this disposition has always shown itself in all his public and private life. It pained his heart to identify himself any longer with the idolatory of the country and to conform to the caste rules (though as a High Caste Brahmin he had homage from all), both of which seemed to be strong engines for degrading and demoralizing the nation. When this feeling was working within him and showing itself in all his works in Baranagar, Baboo Keshub Chunder Sen was working in earnestness in Calcutta in connection with the Brahma Samaj which Sasipada had joined some years before; but he did not come in contact with Keshub, nor was he introduced to him till the latter's lecture on "The Struggles for Independence and Progress in the Brahma Samaj," delivered on Sunday the 23rd July 1865, at the house of the late Gopal Mullick at Sinduriaputty, Calcutta, which Sasipada went to hear. It was a fiery torrent of faith and earnestness which gave a form to his inward convictions as it did to those of several other young men of other places who went to hear Keshub. He now publicly declared his faith, which had so long been silently working within him.

And now his trials and difficulties began, and with them his school suffered, The sensation caused by his throwing off the

Brahminical thread was very great; the tremendously large family was all in uproar; and day and night meetings were held to put him and his wife to all sorts of inconveniences. They had hard fighting to go through. Not a friend to help nor a kind word of sympathy from any quarter, but, resigning themselves to the will of God, they defied persecution and triumphed over their misfortunes which came one after another in overwhelming numbers. The account of all these, however interesting, cannot very well find a place in this paper. The persecution, however, did him good—it helped the inward growth and strengthening of his faith and devotion. But the school received a severe shock; the Zenana class for grown-up females at once dispersed, and all its pupils threw away their books and writing materials, not again to be touched for fear of contamination from Sasipada and his wife. An “Englishman’s” letter in the *Indian Mirror* described the state of things in the following terms:—“A sudden stop was put to its (School’s) progress by the fact of the founder having embraced Brahmosim (Theism). A revulsion of feeling took place; all the pupils of the Zenana and many from the school were withdrawn, and all were warned from further contact with the heretic who had forsaken his ancestral religion.” The girls were withdrawn from the school, and the Pandit, who was a native of the place, was threatened with excommunication if he continued to teach in the school. The poor man with disheartened look came one morning to Sasipada to say that he could not any longer stay at his post. That very day Sasipada went to Calcutta, appointed a teacher, and the school or rather the benches (for excepting his niece and one or two more girls none were then to be seen) had not to go for a single day without a teacher. Amidst all the difficulties which Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee were subjected to, his heart was always in the school. The orthodox party was bent upon closing the school for good and when they saw that he had appointed a teacher from Calcutta who could not be intimidated from not joining the school, they devised other plans to put their idea into execution. One fine morning all the benches and other furniture were put out of the school-room and left scattered in the court-yard. The landlady of the place said that the leaders of society would not allow the school to be held any longer in her house, and therefore the furniture must at once be removed and the school closed. Sasipada was not the man for that; with firm enthusiasm he ran about the whole town to find accommodation for the school, and it was not without great difficulty that he could secure a small thatched room in the out-house of the late Wooma Churn Nandi. The other party were not slow to follow him, but they were once more defeated. Least they should come upon his new landlady, as they did on the former one, to exercise their influence to oust him from the place, he at once got an agreement executed by her for a term of one year, during which time she could not remove the school from the place. With a feeling of satisfaction in having been able to secure a place

on a firm understanding, he removed the furniture, and the school was opened in the new place. The leaders of the other party met to devise plans to oust him from this place, and they in a body waited upon the late Baboo Krishna Mohun Mookerjee, the Zemindar, with a view to get his assistance in the matter. The landlady of the place was summoned, and she was ordered not to allow her place to the school. But this she could not do, as Sasipada had got a firm footing on the virtue of the written agreement.

And thus was he able once more to overcome the difficulty about a place for the school. Though defeated they still gathered strength. They went from house to house dissuading guardians from sending their girls to the school and for months together no girl came to the school except his niece. He did not give way to opposition, but kept the School open and sent round the maid servant (female hurkara) from house to house with a view to secure girls. And they began to come one after another : he made presents to them of dolls, sweets, books, slates and even of Dacca clothes, and these had their effect, for without the permission of the masters of the houses the maid servant could persuade the mothers to send their girls to the school, who themselves were eager to come not for the education which was imparted but for the presents they received. Such encouragements are necessary on such occasions. When the first Female school was opened (1849) in Calcutta by the Hon'ble J. E. Bethune he paid monthly stipends to girls whose parents had the courage to send them to his school. Persistently working on in this way, matters gradually took a good turn in Sasipada's school, and the number of pupils increased. At the time of the First Annual Distribution of Prizes, which took place on Sunday, the 10th September 1866, presided over by Professor Lobb of the Presidency College, 57 pupils formed the strength of the school, divided into four classes. In giving an account of the distribution to the papers Mr. Tudor Trevor, who was present at the meeting, wrote thus about the difficulties and the result :—

“The heart of the young reformer was not to be discouraged by persecution ; but he manfully stood his ground, kept open his school, and has lived down the tyranny of his persecutors, and the result of his perseverance was last Sunday's gratifying ceremony which was attended by a large number of his neighbours and a few European gentlemen.”

In the same year the late lamented Miss Carpenter visited India and gave a great impetus to female education and to the cause of social progress in the country. She came to Calcutta on the 20th November 1866, and Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee were present at a meeting of Bengali ladies held there on Saturday the 24th idem to give her a welcome. Her noble presence had a magnetic influence, and

Sasipada looked upon her with reverence and began to watch her movements and follow her teachings with very great interest. "The evening awakened in the minds of many of those present higher aspirations, which led to higher improvement," has been recorded by her in her "Six Months in India," and this is more than verified in the case under notice. They again saw her at the evening party at Dr. Chuckrabarty's, which was held on the following Monday.

She made the following mention of the party in her excellent book :—

"The meeting passed thus agreeably; there was no painful shyness or reserve, and yet at the same time there was throughout a propriety of demeanour which was very remarkable, when it is to be remembered that such an assembly was probably the first of the kind ever held."

Besides these public meetings and evening parties Sasipada had the honour of several private interviews with Miss Carpenter during her first visit to Calcutta which were very useful to him. She spoke out her mind and understood his feelings and aspirations which she encouraged. He asked her to come and see the schools, of which he had then three, one Girls' school, a Vernacular school for Boys, and the third a Night school for Working Men and Boys, and she gladly accepted the invitation. A correspondent of the *Indian Daily News* reported to that paper of her visit in the following terms : "She came accompanied by Mr. Mon Mohan Ghose. She visited the Girls' school and the Vernacular school which has also been lately established by the managers of the Girls' school and some of the well-to-do gentlemen of Bon-Hooghly. It is getting fresh strength every day. Miss Carpenter also visited the Night school and she seemed to be well pleased with what she saw."

Miss Carpenter made the following mention of her visit in her "Six Months in India," page 249, vol. 1 :—

"On Wednesday, December 12th, I set off to visit the school, under the escort of the Secretary, Babu Sasipada Banerjee, a Brahmo, and one of those who had accompanied his wife to the tea-party at Dr. Chuckrabarty's. He informed me that when he renounced idolatry, he was excommunicated, and exiled from his ancestral home, receiving only a portion of his patrimony. This, however, gave him a degree of freedom in which he rejoiced. His is the only case I met with, throughout India, in which excommunication was not regarded with the greatest dread by the Hindus. This first step having been courageously taken, he secured a small separate house for himself and wife, and there devoted all the leisure he could command to movements connected with social progress. The diffusion of the knowledge of one True God was his first concern in connection with the Brahmo

Somaj. He devoted himself also to the Temperance movement, for which he had to suffer much persecution, being once imprisoned on a charge of murder by a publican whom he had offended. The murdered man having been produced alive and well the next morning by his friends, he was released, but not without much expense and annoyance. * * "Though it was becoming late, my young friend would not allow me to depart without a visit to his abode, as his lady was expecting me there. And well indeed was I rewarded for any trouble I may have taken to come here. For the first, and for the last time, during my whole visit, had I the happiness of being in a simple native dwelling which had the domestic charms of an English home."

The next visit of Miss Carpenter to Baranagar was on the 6th January 1867, when a public meeting was convened to hear an address from her. When inviting her to come, Sasipada made the following suggestion to her in a letter dated 6th January :—

"That your coming to Baranagar may be of some practical good to our place I wish that you would kindly form a Committee of 10 or 12 gentlemen to carry out your plans in due time. I shall try my best to assist the Committee and write to you informing you of the progress we make."

Miss Carpenter mentioned of the meeting in the following terms in her "Six Months in India :"—

"The meeting did not conclude without passing a resolution, proposed by my friend the Secretary, Babu Sasipada Banerjee, that a Committee should be formed of English and Native gentlemen, to consider the formation of a Society for the improvement of the working classes. This was not a mere formal resolution, barren of results. The disinterested zeal of the young man, who had already given so much practical proof of his earnestness and perseverance, enlisted the warm co-operation of some enlightened and benevolent gentlemen ; and in the *Indian Daily News*, of July 24th, 1867, we find a Report of the Half-yearly Meeting of the 'Baranagar Social Improvement Society,' Dr. Waldie, President in the Chair. A Committee was formed, a Public Library was commenced, and arrangements made to obtain a room for the proceedings. A valuable address was made by the chairman, and he showed how much might be done by even one true-hearted individual, by remarking, "A Girls' school has been in progress for some time, and with as much success as in the circumstances can be expected. For the institution of this, and also for the Night school for men and boys, and mainly also for carrying them on, we are indebted to the highly praiseworthy labours of the Secretary, Babu Sasipada Banerjee. But, in my mind, it is unfair to have such institutions so entirely under his care, and the Society ought to make it their business to assist him."

Things went on well for some time after the formation of the Social Improvement Society ; but fresh difficulties and of a more serious nature were in store for them, and these were to a great extent of their own making. When they carried on the work of female education in the family-house there were, among others, their cousin-sister and her widow daughter in the Zenana class, receiving education near Mr. Banerjee and his wife. Light and darkness cannot remain together in the same place and at the same time ; with the advent of the one the other must recede, and such is also the case with education. If a really good education is given to the females they cannot long remain in darkness and superstition. Receiving some education his cousin became naturally anxious to better the condition of her widow daughter, and when Sasipada left his ancestral house with his wife, they expressed a desire to follow them. But having no house of their own and their movements being then uncertain on account of the hot persecution which raged against them at the time they could not give a favourable response to their wishes, but assured them that when they had their own house ready they would be happy to give them shelter. In the year 1868, by which time they had their own dwelling-house built, they invited them and they came (26th June) and lived with the Banerjees as members of the family. Arrangements were made for their education and thus again the original feature of the school was once more established in the way of imparting education to grown-up women. The young widow was after some time remarried, and this marriage and their coming entirely upset the state of things, and fresh persecution raged in the most virulent manner. The school suffered another shock, but carefully working at it they were able to get over it within a year. The attitude of the inhabitants of Baranagar against Sasipada after the remarriage of his widow niece was most fearful, and the result was that all the local institutions suffered by it. Sir J. B. Phear thus wrote on the 26th December 1868 about the treatment which Sasipada received from his people : "The treatment which you receive from your relations and neighbours affords an illustration of the deplorable amount of prejudice and bigotry which prevails even among the respectable classes of people in this country. Time and the spread of information can alone furnish the remedy." The following extract from the Seventh Half-yearly Report of the Social Improvement Society, drawn up by the Vice-President Dr. Sambu Chunder Mookerjee, will also give an idea of the state of feelings at the time :—

"The President Dr. Waldie, who took the chair (16th July 1870), opened the meeting. He congratulated the Society in reviewing its half-year's work of the present year on its recovery—of which the present well-attended meeting was one of the signs—from its unfortunate condition, its death struggles as it were, of last year, and paid a high compliment to the Secretary Babu Sasipada Banerjee, on

whose return to his proper post, from which he had been kept out by religious and social bigotry in the shape of rampant Hindu orthodoxy, he felicitated the Society. That the Secretary of every such Society is its life was well exemplified in the history of the Baranagar Society for the last year. In consequence of the outcry and combination alluded to, Babu Sasipada was not re-elected Secretary for 1869, and for the whole year the proceedings of the Society were almost a blank, diversified by the attempts of certain parties who had gained the support of nearly the majority of the members, to expel Babu Sasipada, driven from the post of Secretary, from the society itself; there were few lectures on the literary side of the Society, and none of them good; there were more withdrawals than new members, the attendance at both the Monthly General and the Committee Meetings was miserable; and there was none of the practical 'improvement' work in Committee which was such a feature in the Society. Since the re-election of Babu Sasipada at the beginning of this year there has, in the last six months, been a marked change." Mr. W. C. Bonnerjee, who could not for "some very pressing matters" be present at the wedding of Sasipada's widow niece thus mentioned of the importance of the step taken by him in getting the widow remarried:—"I fully sympathise with you on this grand movement. I cannot call it any thing but grand: and though not present in body I shall be with you in spirit. May all your enlightened efforts be crowned with all the success they deserve."

In the month of September of the following year (1870) Sasipada helped another Brahmin widow of his village, and then again there was a revulsion of feeling against him, but this he did not mind so long as he felt his conscience satisfied. Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee took this new widow in the family (25th September) and began to teach her. It will thus be seen that they had been going on with the work of helping Hindu widows in a quiet manner since 1868 and that Sasipada had an idea of making some organized effort in this direction from that time, as would appear from the following extract from his letter to Miss Carpenter, dated 28th September 1870 (*vide* Journal of the National Indian Association of 1871, page 40): "We are now teaching her (the new widow) that she may be a useful member of society. There has been fresh persecution against me and my wife for helping this widow. If there can be made *an organized effort thus to help widows, we can hope to succeed to do good to many such widows.* In Baranagar there is no one who is willing to help me privately or publicly in this work; still for the sake of duty, and even risking many of my and my family's comforts I take it up; and it gives me a great delight that, though poor, I have been able, by the blessing of God, to help three widows in the course of two-and-a-half years." Besides these three widows others from different parts of the Province from time to time came and

took shelter in the house of Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee, and they did all they could to make them happy and comfortable. They gave them some education and some of them have since been remarried and are managing happy families, while three are engaged in the noble work of teaching girls. The difficulties which had to be met could not deter them from their work, and the *Indian Daily News*, of the 31st January 1871, thus wrote of the position while reviewing the Fourth Annual Report of the Social Improvement Society of which Sasipada was the Honorary Secretary :—

“In the midst of so much talk as to the improvement of the people of this country, it is refreshing to review actual work, and the results attending it. There is too much reliance upon outside assistance, and too little self-help in India; but there is yet hope that when some of the difficulties are removed which stand in the way of free action, much more will be accomplished. This at least we judge from a perusal of the Annual Report of the Baranagar Social Improvement Society for the past year, which we note is the fourth of the Society’s existence. It appears that for some considerable time after the foundation of the Society, very little could be done, owing to the conservative character of the Hindu community. Few have the moral courage to move out of the beaten path, and those who do so, soon bring upon themselves the condemnation of the ill-disposed, and have to pay rather heavy penalties for desiring to improve. Baranagar is no exception to this, but is rather an example of it, as well as showing what may be done, by sincere and earnest effort, by men who know how to suffer for and to win a cause. For several years not much could be done at Baranagar, because one of the most energetic of the social reformers of the place went faster than the majority of his countrymen thought prudent. He had, therefore, to suffer much in the way of persecution, and the work he desired to promote met with obstruction in every possible way. * * * The Report of the year read by the indefatigable Secretary, Babu Sasipada Banerjee, who has been the apostle of improvement, and almost a martyr to his love of it, tells a story of success gained amidst difficulties, a triumph of earnestness of purpose which we should rejoice to see more common.”

The Committee of the National Indian Association of England, who have, from its very commencement, been watching the work, noticed it in the following encouraging terms in their Journal for March 1871 :—

“The progress of the work of civilization and development at Baranagar, during the last six years, has thus been chiefly owing to the untiring and wisely-directed efforts of one individual,—who, animated by true devotion, has been daunted by no opposition, and has finally induced those around him to sympathize with him in his work.

It is encouraging to observe how valuable is the co-operation of English residents with such a man, and how much may be accomplished by native effort, even with very small pecuniary means."

In the summer of 1871, Sasipada visited England with his wife, the first Hindu lady from Bengal who had been to England. The *Friend of India*, in its issue of the 16th March of that year, thus noticed their visit to England :—

"Babu Sasipada Banerjee of Baranagar is starting for England with his wife. The Babu has done good service in the village in which he resides. He has established a Night School and a Working Men's Club, a Girls' School and a Vernacular School, a Savings Bank, a Public Library, a Social Improvement Society and a Temperance Society. His visit to England, therefore, ought to have some interest."

Miss Carpenter thus wrote of the approaching visit of Mrs. Banerjee to England : "If she learnt nothing here, the simple fact of her braving all difficulties and persecutions, courageously to devote herself with her husband to take the first great step for the emancipation of her sisters, is most important and has a significance which can hardly be exaggerated."

But this was a step much in advance of the times and was not therefore approved by his own people. He did not however mind much of the disapprobation so long as he felt that he had a duty to fulfil. He sailed with his wife from Calcutta in the Steamer "*Olga*" on the 19th April against much opposition and bitter feelings from his countrymen. The charge of the Girls' School was left in the hands of his brother Kader Nath Banerjee; Dr. David Waldie kindly offering to supervise the working during their absence from the country. They were away from home for ten months, and while in England they were under the hospitable roof of their friend, Miss Carpenter. Mr. Banerjee was most enthusiastically received in every town he visited, and everywhere he aroused much sympathy in his work. He is not a public speaker but by his devoted earnestness and strong faith he made a favourable impression about native character in the mind of the British public. Taking his wife with him he had more opportunities to mix in society and to see real English home life than many of his countrymen who go there as agitators or for education. While he was being kindly received everywhere, by the Secretary of State for India down to the common English working men and women, and when tokens of friendship and sympathy showered upon them from all quarters, there was jealousy and bitter feelings against them from his own townspeople. But blind jealousy soon vanishes before earnest and faithful work, and such has been the case in the present instance.

After his return from England (1872), he resumed his old work with renewed energy and introduced other measures of reform for the improvement of his countrymen and women. And such was his love for his work that he politely declined the kind offer of a Deputy Magistracy made to him by Sir George Campbell, simply because he felt he could not leave Baranagar. At this time he opened a Branch Girls' School at Kutighata, in the southern portion of Baranagar, and thus extended the operations of the school to quarters hitherto untouched by its influence. Sir John Phear, who, with Lady Phear, took a great interest in all Mr. Banerjee's works and who befriended him in all his trials and difficulties for the whole time that they were in this country, mentioned of this development of the school in the following terms at the Annual Meeting held on the 8th June 1873 :—

“After dwelling shortly on this topic (the progress of the Girls' School), Sir John went on to say that Lady Phear and himself took peculiar interest in the success of the Baranagar Girls' School, for they had seen it rise from a very small beginning when Babu Sasipada started it some eight or nine years ago under every circumstance of discouragement, and they had watched its growth year by year, until by his excellent and most praiseworthy exertions it attained its present considerable dimensions and developed into two branches, one in the northern and the other in the southern part of the town.”

The early history of the school has shown the great difficulty which was felt from time to time for house accommodation for the school, and this difficulty increased as years rolled on. The late Babu Goloc Chunder Mookerjee, a rich influential gentleman of orthodox ideas, built (1874) a commodious house especially for the use of the Kutighata Branch, and though he charged rent for it, the fact shows the change of feelings in the elderly portion of the community towards the school. With the aid of Miss Carpenter and some other English friends and partly with his own money Babu Sasipada built a Hall near his dwelling-house for the use of the Northern Branch, which was formally opened during the visit of Miss Carpenter in India in the year 1876.

The following extract from the opening speech of Sir John B. Phear will not be quite out of place here :—

“It is a peculiar satisfaction to me to occupy the chair, to which I have had the honour of being called this afternoon. For many years—I cannot at the moment reckon up how many—I have been a witness of Babu Sasipada Banerjee's unceasing and untiring efforts to promote the education and social improvement of the poor people of this place. In spite of every obstacle, with those turned against him who ought to have been the first to give him countenance and help, he has never halted in his course. I will not stay to describe

to you his difficulties, nor his persecution, you know all this as well as I do. This is the occasion of the annual distribution of prizes to the girls of his school, which alone would have been to most of us sufficient attraction to bring us here, and sufficient cause for our rejoicing with him over his success. But more than this, we have to congratulate him and the people of this neighbourhood upon his having to-day attained an end, towards which he has long been earnestly working. By unremitting exertion and with the pecuniary support afforded him by a few sympathizing friends, of whom Miss Carpenter is the chief, he has at last completed the building in which we now are, and he dedicates it to the use of his fellow-countrymen as the Baranagar Institute. The Hall will be used during the day as the school-room for one of his Girls' schools. In the evening classes will be maintained in it for the instruction of working men, and it will be a place wherein meetings may be held to promote objects of local improvement and advantage, and to advance the cause of religion and morals."

Dr. David Waldie thus mentioned of the Hall at the Distribution of Prizes to the Girls' school: "He was glad to have had the opportunity of being again present on such an occasion and to find the school so flourishing in point of numbers and so well accommodated in this handsome building. He could remind his hearers of those to whom the community of Baranagar was indebted for such an institution. A small amount had been raised by contribution in the neighbourhood, Miss Carpenter had herself contributed liberally and obtained valued aid from friends in England, but it was mainly by sacrifices from his own income that Babu Sasipada Banerjee had at last succeeded in completing it in its present condition."

Thus with good house accommodation the school went on making gradual progress, and it received the sympathy and support from several kind friends. Lord Northbrook took much interest in the school and granted several private interviews to Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee with a view to inquire about his good works at Baranagar. His daughter the Hon'ble Miss Baring very kindly paid a visit to the school on the 7th February 1874, which was looked upon as a great personal honour done to Mr. Banerjee and also not a small encouragement to his work. She further showed her kindness by presenting him with a photograph of herself and another of His Excellency the Viceroy. The school also received the patronage and support of the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Richard Temple, who, at the invitation of Babu Sasipada, paid a kind visit to Baranagar on the 16th December 1876, when the latter on behalf of the town read out to His Honor an address signed by all the leading and respectable inhabitants of Baranagar, to which Sir Richard Temple made a suitable reply. His Honor also distributed the prizes to the Girls' School the

same day and thus showed his interest in Mr. Banerjee's work. His Honor had always been a great patron and kind friend to Babu Sasipada. The good work done by Babu Sasipada had also some recognition from the Royal Family. The Princess Alice and her sister the Crown Princess of Prussia once sent a number of portraits and other presents to Mr. Banerjee's school to show their sympathy in Hindu Female education.

Though the year 1876 passed off with great enthusiasm consequent on the honour done to the school and to the town of Baranagar by the visit to them of Sir Richard Temple, it was not a year of unmixed joy, for during the same year (8th March) Babu Sasipada lost his wife who had been with him to England in 1871 and who had always helped him in his works. Mrs. Banerjee had a hand in the formation of the Girls' school in which she afterwards always took a great interest. Her death was a severe loss to him and also to the school. The *Indian Daily News* thus refers to Mr. Banerjee in a notice of her death :—

“We regret to record the death of Mrs. Banerjee, wife of Babu Sasipada Banerjee, of Baranagar. This lady was not known to fame as are some of her sex. It may nevertheless be mentioned that she was the first, if not the only, native lady of Bengal, who ever visited England. Through much persecution which her husband has endured from those who ought to have known better, she ‘stuck to him’—we use the phrase for its expressiveness—with all the tenderness of womanly nature, against all the prejudices of her race; and accompanied her husband on a visit to England, where a son was born to them, whose name is Albion. We know of no native gentleman who has borne stronger testimony to his convictions, or shown more honesty and independence of character than Babu Sasipada; and no feeling of race or religious divergence can overcome the ‘touch of nature that makes the world kin,’ or prevent us offering sincere condolence with him in his present bereavement. If there were more like him, the world would be better than it is; and he was as fortunate in the possession of so sensible and good a wife as he is unfortunate now in her loss.”

Single-handed Sasipada now carried on his work of reform at Baranagar amidst various trials and difficulties achieving such a measure of success as was possible in the circumstances. On the 2nd June 1877, he married his second wife, a widow and a pupil from the Bengal Female Boarding School. When his desire for marriage was known to his friends a proposal came from a rich family, but it was a proposal to marry a girl of 15. He had long laboured for the cause of widow marriage, and had helped in the remarriage of several widows, and now in his own case to marry a girl would not, he felt, be showing a good example. Here he has shown in his life a force of character and steadiness of purpose which are rarely equalled.

Now Sasipada got a sensible and a happy companion in his female education work. From time to time several widows obtained shelter under their roofs to whom Mrs. Banerjee had been more than a mother and in their joint-hands the schools flourished. J. B. Knight, Esq., C.I.E., made the following mention of the school at the Annual Distribution Meeting of 1878 :—

“The interesting report which they had just heard read showed how much had been done in the face of limited means and great obstacles. Even in England, it was only in comparatively recent times that the great principle of education for the masses had been fully recognised; while high education for girls was a thing, as it were, of the present day. In this country, religion, caste, religious and social prejudices were all arrayed against female education, and all honour was due to those who, in the face of such prejudices, had organized and successfully conducted a school such as that in which they now met. Such a work could only have been accomplished by strong faith, earnest work, and great self-denial. He was very glad to have the opportunity of congratulating his friend Babu Sasipada Banerjee in the success of his efforts; and he hoped all who were interested in education would give him the support and encouragement he so much needed.” The Annual Report of the Girls’ School, read on the occasion of the distribution of prizes on the 5th June 1886, did not however give a very bright picture of the working as will appear from the following extract :—

“The Baranagar Girls’ school was opened on the 19th March 1865, thus completing a career of 21 years. When we take a review of this long time we feel rather disappointed, for after all what have we been able to do!! This feeling of despondency is natural, and it is participated not by a few around us. But we ought to remember that, as in the case of a nation so in the case of such institutions and also in the sphere of our domestic circles, we cannot hope to see anything like real, sound, onward progress, so long as there is internal discord and social or political disunion. This fact is admitted by history so far as the career of nations is concerned, and that this is also true as regards our social movements is sufficiently borne out by facts. This school has been in existence for 21 years, and this in itself is, to all right-spirited people, a matter of sufficient rejoicing, for it shows that we are learning to hold fast to true ideas, and to act upon them. The more we can stick to right ideas, and work them out, the better shall be the days for the nation. We have lived for 21 years, but all this time has not been a time of peaceful work unto us, as is known to friends who have been watching the reform movements introduced in this town. The Government of a country cannot find time to introduce internal reforms when the attention of the nation is directed to civil or other wars. And if it were eager enough for such reforms

at such times, its endeavours cannot bear adequate fruits. The Baranagar Girls' school had to undergo various trials which from time to time had shaken its very foundation. Girls were taken away, doors of school-houses closed, furnitures scattered out and public feeling roused so much against the school that no one could think that the school could again be collected together. Those who had a hand in the management of the school at those trying times know how difficult it was to bring together the agencies for work. For such a little school to have such repeated trials was indeed very trying. It is therefore not a small satisfaction to think that after all we have, by the blessing of God, outlived those trials and difficulties."

The feelings of Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee were rightly expressed in the following prophetic words in the above Report: "They feel that this little school is also in His keeping and that whatever may have been their shortcomings as regards their management of the school, it is destined to exercise a very powerful influence over our social organization." On the following year the usefulness of the school was much increased by the addition of a Boarding and a Training Department, and such has been the success of the novel experiment that on the following year the school received the patronage of Lady Bayley who kindly visited the school on the 15th January 1889, and distributed prizes to the girls. The school has since been steadily increasing in number and also in its usefulness; while the Boarding Department is giving shelter to several Hindu widows and others, the total number of its inmates being at present 26.

The *Indian Magazine* of London, in its issue of November 1889, noticed the work in the following manner:—

"We have often called attention to the new undertaking of Mr. and Mrs. Sasipada Banerjee in connection with their school for girls at Baranagar, Calcutta, which has existed for over 25 years. The addition consists of a Boarding Department, for the express purpose of training young women, and especially Hindu widows, as teachers. No effort of a social kind can be more important at the present time than this. Ramabai has commenced a Home for Widows at Bombay; and Mr. S. Banerjee's is equally required for Bengal. The need for female teachers will grow as the age for keeping girls at school becomes extended, and it is hoped that widows may find an honourable and interesting occupation in this direction. It will be long before more than a very few widows will be allowed to leave their homes for taking up such an unusual line of work; but the value of starting an institution to receive those few cannot be overrated. Until experiments are made, no new system can have any chance of succeeding. Brave beginners may meet with discouragement and opposition, as has been the case with Mr. Banerjee, but they will have made it a hundred times easier for others to carry out the same fruitful ideas.

“ At Baranagar the Girls’ School affords excellent opportunities for that class practice which is an essential part of a teacher’s preparation. The Deputy Inspector gave a favourable account of this school in his last Report, stating that the girls were in advance of the corresponding classes of boys.

“ A few weeks ago the Archdeacon of Calcutta, Rev. F. R. Michell, went to see it, accompanied by Mrs. Michell, Mrs. K. S. Macdonald, and Mrs. Colquhoun Grant. The Archdeacon wrote the following remarks in the Visitors’ Book : ‘ The building seems most suitable and in good repair, and the school a most interesting one. I heard the elder class read in English, and several of them wrote a short letter in English, which was very well done. They write very neatly. I gave a short address, which Mr. Banerjee kindly translated into Bengalee. The school deserves every support.’ ”

“ The boarders live in a healthy house close to the school, and it is satisfactory to find that Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee treat them as members of their family. Great care is taken to secure their comfort and their general development. On the occasion of the Archdeacon’s visit, the ladies inspected the arrangements, and wrote down the following remarks : ‘ Saw all the domestic arrangements, and liked the way in which things are carried on.’ ”

“ The success of this institution must to a great extent depend at present on private liberality ; for though some of the students are paid for by their friends, others are in very poor circumstances. Besides, funds are required to keep up the teaching staff.

“ It is not two or three such institutions that are needed ; but very many all over India. It is well, however, to proceed slowly and to make no hasty experiments. Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee are tried workers in the cause of girls’ education ; they are stimulated by keen sympathy with the sad condition of so many young widows ; and they know well how to deal with their boarders as to habits and customs.”

The good work done by Babu Sasipada Banerjee in establishing various educational and social institutions at Baranagar, and working them up, has not gone unnoticed by Government ; for at the time of the great festival (January 1st 1877) on the occasion of the assumption by our Beloved Queen of the title of the Empress of India he has been granted the following Certificate of Honour as a “ token of Her Majesty’s approbation : ”

“ By command of His Excellency the Vicery and Governor-General this certificate is presented in the name of Her Most Gracious Majesty Victoria, Empress of India, to Babu Sasipada Banerjee in recognition of his services rendered to the public in connection with various benevolent projects.”

The Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, His Honor Sir Steurt Bayley sent his photograph and an autograph letter to Babu Sasipada Banerjee, on the 27th November 1890, referring his female education work at Baranagar in the following terms :—

“The good work you have done for the education of your countrywomen, especially of widows, needs no commendation from me. Nevertheless, I should like to assure you, before I leave, of the earnest sympathy I feel in your labours, of my hearty admiration for your self-sacrificing exertions, and my great satisfaction at hearing of the daily multiplication of the successful results attending them.”

The foregoing account is a fair and yet a very incomplete narrative of the difficulties encountered by Sasipada Banerjee in the establishment of the schools. But that is only also a part of his work. He has shown how to meet the forces of bigotry and superstition and to overcome them by a combination of passive resistance and abounding resources which are unfortunately too rare. He has demonstrated what may be done by force of character against some of the most persevering and malignant powers of opposition that were ever employed by the most unscrupulous sectaries. A complete record of what he and his home had to suffer in the way of insult and indignities would be simply incredible. Even in the greatest extremity of maternity, help was denied to his wife, because they had contravened what their hearts told them was the falsehoods of the prevailing systems of social and “religious”—what a mockery of the term—life. The great work done is not the mere establishment of the schools, but the demonstration that a right and consistent course, with the patience of suffering in a good cause and a determination to win it, will in the end succeed. Even his opponents now recognize Sasipada and his work. He has won his cause, and while rejoicing in it he is not given to boasting of his success. He rather has the quiet satisfaction of feeling that their sufferings have not only brought success to their work, but has won respect for consistent conduct even from the bitterest opponents. Another effect is—or should be—to win for his cause the more active practical sympathy of those who appreciate his work, as showing that even the strongholds of superstition are not impregnable when assailed in such a spirit as has been shown at this little village in Bengal. It is further seen, that in this, as in other cases, the influence of woman when her mind is properly enlightened and directed is powerful for good; and the help Sasipada received from his wife and other lady members of his family contributed not a little to his success by the encouragement they afforded when once they tasted the fruits of the tree of knowledge. There is great hope from the influence of the women of India, when they can once be brought within the field of educated agencies. With their help instead of being the most conservative powers of obstruction, what may not be

accomplished? There is a great work to be done; but the agencies at work are few and not too rich in resources. There is need of help, and in no other direction could it be more advantageously applied. With the advance of education among the male population of India, there will arise a demand for something more than mere animal companionship. The other—the better—half of society must be helped to become suitable wives and mothers, and the agencies to attain this great end require to be recognized and strengthened. In no other form could help for India be more advantageously applied, in none could the ladies of England more effectually show their sympathy for their Indian sisters than in helping to raise them to the position which they are fitted to occupy, as shown in their noble devotion to duty and conviction by the ladies referred to in the foregoing narrative of the seed sown at Baranagar.

In addition to the work on behalf of females in general, Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee have for some time past taken in hand another much needed practical work: 'the education of young widows, and training them to useful purposes in life.' This is perhaps one of the boldest experiments yet undertaken, and can only be carried on by generous support. The widows themselves are not in a position to meet the expenses of board and clothing: and for these are dependent largely upon the generosity of friends. Seeing the importance of the work Mr. and Mrs. Banerjee have not shrunk from the responsibility which this involves, and rely upon the generosity of friends to give the needful support to make the work successful and of lasting good in a direction where much has to be done with very inadequate means.



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