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The Indian Mission of the Institute of Blessed Virgin Mary (IBVM) Nuns: Convents, Curriculum, and Indian Women

By Nilanjana Paul¹

Abstract

This study focuses on the Indian mission of IBVM nuns, and the role played by them in the spread of female education in India. While acknowledging that missionaries were part of the imperial process, this study analyzes the work of Catholic nuns in India, their convents, and curriculum to show how their work advanced women's educational opportunities in India. In the process the study examines how Catholic nuns resisted the dominating attitude of the Catholic Church in India. The last section of the article examines how Christian influence under missionaries not only prepared good mothers and wives but also trained Indian women to defy tradition and become economically independent. By evaluating both the contributions and the limitations of the work of IBVM nuns this article shows the complex nature of their work under colonial rule, their confrontations with the Christian patriarchs and efforts to fight for the rights of colonized women.

Keywords: Loreto, education, missionaries, India, female education, colonialism, convents, nuns, Indian Missions

Introduction

Great Britain had the largest colonial empire in the world with a diversity of imperial practices. In the case of India, the British government abolished the indigenous institutions and replaced them with new ruling institutions and bureaucracies that were maintained with the help of Indian and chartered company agents. This colonial framework allowed Western women in India to engage in a variety of roles.² Antoinette Burton argued that British liberal feminists in India promoted themselves as saviors of Indian women. Feminist newspapers in Britain represented Indian women as enslaved thus, justifying the responsibility of British women saving their Indian sisters. Burton argued that after World War I, British feminists recognized Indian women's contribution to the independence movement. Nonetheless, it would be an exaggeration to say that the war radically changed British women's perception of Indian women or that prewar perceptions evaporated after the international conflict subsided. Like Burton, Indrani Sen explored the participation of missionaries in the "civilizing mission" but also documented their anxieties about the gendered division of their colonial home.³ Kumari Jayawardane steps out of the dominant

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² Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, "Introduction," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 1-6.

³ Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1994); 98-9 & 208-9; Indrani Sen, *Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India c.1820-1930* (Cheshire: Manchester University Press, 2017), 1-19.

image of British women or missionaries in India being arrogant or involved in Christianizing the “savage” Indian population and evaluated the role of a wide variety of Western women in India who were speaking a “different voice” despite colonial rule. In that context, she used the example of Loreto nuns who did not restrict themselves to the narrow objectives of Christianizing Indian women but feminized Christianity, increased educational opportunities for Indian women and challenged the male supremacy of the Catholic Church in India.⁴

This essay builds on Jayawardena’s work to study the role of a small group of Irish Catholic nuns who came to India with a genuine concern for improving the educational status of women in India. Mary Ward (1585-1645), born in England to a wealthy Catholic family, was condemned by the Roman Church for educating women in England. In 1609 she founded the Institute of Blessed Virgin Mary (henceforth IBVM), which was a congregation of nuns that travelled to different parts of Europe to educate women and children. Mary Ward saw empowering women through education as a means of renewing the suppressed Catholic faith in England. The Indian Mission of IBVM began when Mother Frances Teresa Ball (henceforth Teresa Ball), Superior of the Irish Branch of IBVM, which was referred to as ‘Loreto’ in Rathfarnham, responded to an appeal from the Vicar Apostolic of Calcutta in 1841, by sending a group of twelve nuns and postulants under the leadership of Mother Mary Delphine Hart (1818 -1889) (hereafter Delphine Hart) to educate Catholic girls.⁵ The main goal of Loreto education was a ‘school for all classes, schools to suit all pockets, even the empty ones!’⁶ An analysis of their missionary work and expansion of convents in India shows how they transcended racial and gender barriers to provide modern western education to Eurasian and Indian women within a restrictive and colonial structure. While missionaries were referred to as ‘agents of imperialism,’ this case study shows that Loreto nuns were not overtly trying to convert, through their curriculum they advanced women’s position in Indian society by increasing educational opportunities for them. The leadership roles of these nuns provided an agency to Indian women who either individually or collectively, made efforts to improve the disadvantaged status of their sex. In short, Loreto nuns combined the roles of being missionaries, reformers opposing male hierarchy of the Catholic Church and feminist allies for Indian women within the colonial framework.⁷

The final section of this paper examines the impact of missionary education on Indian women. To traditional Hindu families, access to female education was a colonial onslaught on the very essence of Hinduism and Indianness. Tanika Sarkar translated Rasasundari’s autobiography, *Amar Jiban* (My Life), where she self-taught herself and kept it secret as her traditional Hindu family opposed female education.⁸ Liberal Hindu, Muslim and Parsi families wanted educated wives and allowed missionaries to educate their daughters and wives without bringing Christianity home.

⁴ Kumari Jayawardena, *The White Woman’s Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia During British Rule* (New York: Routledge, 1995), 21-51.

⁵ Aditi Dasgupta *Change and Continuity: English Studies in Loreto College 1912-2012* (Calcutta: Salesian College Publication 2016), 1-12; The Spirit of Loreto,’ *The Statesman*, January 21, 1985.

⁶ Mother Mary Colmcille, *First the Blade: History of IBVM (Loreto) in India 1841-1962* (Calcutta: Firma K.I. Mukhopadhyay, 1968), 24.

⁷ Jayawardena, *The White Woman’s Other Burden*, 8-10; The idea that Loreto nuns could combine the roles of cultural missionaries, maternal imperialists and be feminist allies builds on Barbara N. Ramusack’s work on British women activists in India. See Barbara N. Ramusack, British Women Activists in India,” in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, 117-36.

⁸ Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife Hindu Nation: Community Religion and Cultural Nationalism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001), 95-98; Tanika Sarkar, “Forward,” in *Talking of Power: Early Writings of Bengali Women from the Mid-Nineteenth Century to the Beginning of the Twentieth Century* eds. Malini Bhattacharya and Abhijit Sen (Kolkata: Stree, 2003), x-xi.

However, missionaries preferred institutional education as it allowed them to civilize Indian women. Nevertheless, there were shifts in attitudes and policies of some missionaries towards Indian women. They were concerned about Indian women, their rights and were anxious to make changes. Both Padma Anagol and Claire Midgely argued that Indian women educated at convents and missionary schools or those who converted to Christianity challenged the roles prescribed for women by Hinduism and were engaged with the gendered critique of Hinduism. They built homes for widows and prostitutes and were influenced by a sense of equality in Christianity that did not destroy women's individual liberty.⁹ Based on institutional records of Loreto Convents, reports of Director of Public Instruction (DPI) and *Palm Leaves*, this study shows that education at Loreto convents was not always synonymous with conversion. While it is difficult to separate missionary schools from the larger imperial process of converting indigenous people, Loreto convents produced the educated Indian women who opposed caste discrimination and organized resistance against the structures of oppression that denied women their rights.

East India Company and IBVM nuns in Calcutta

The Charter Act of 1813 renewed East India Company's (henceforth EIC) privilege for trade and had two extraordinary clauses. First, Company's responsibility for educating Indians and second, it permitted missionaries to proselytize in India. The act envisaged the establishment of schools and colleges, but East India Company spent most of their money on higher education and educating wealthy classes. They believed that knowledge would descend from this class to those at the bottom of the society. Hence, mass education was left to the missionaries. Church Missionary Society of the evangelical Clapham sect was the first group to start schools. However, Company officials were worried about Protestant missionaries as they wanted to convert heathen minds. In contrast, Jesuits and Catholic nuns who opened schools for all castes and classes in an around the country were welcomed by the Company.¹⁰

By the time the EIC officials arrived in India, Catholics were already part of the Indian scene. They seemed less threatening to the company in comparison to Protestant missionaries, who were in India to proselytize the population. Catholic missionaries converted Protestants instead of Hindus and Muslims. Catholics believed that Protestants were heretics whereas pagans like Hindus who lived in good faith would not go to hell. Next, EIC appointed Catholic missionaries as part-time chaplains to Catholic soldiers since forty percent of British troops in India were Irish Catholics. Thus, EIC welcomed Roman Catholics missionaries during the first half of the nineteenth century.¹¹

In Bengal, Vicar Apostolic, Father Robert St. Leger S.J. and his band of English, Irish, and French Jesuits came to Calcutta in 1834. Over the next six years, they traveled throughout Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa, where they baptized, established churches, and set up St. Xavier's School for Catholic boys in Calcutta. It was at the initiative of Father Chadwick of St. Xavier's that the idea of a Catholic school for girls was first proposed. In 1840, Dr. Bakhaus, a military chaplain of Hazaribagh, was traveling to Rome when he requested Ursuline nuns to set up Catholic girls'

⁹ Padma Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India, 1850-1920* (Burlington: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2005), 19-55; Clare Midgely, *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865* (Oxon: Routledge, 2007), 92-122.

¹⁰ Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Caste, Class and Catholicism in India 1789-1914* (Surrey: Curzon Press, 1998), 13-22; Collin Parsons, "A new religion? Literary study and elementary education in India and Ireland in the nineteenth century," in *Ireland and India: Colonies, Culture and Empire*. Eds. Tadhg Foley and Maureen O'Connor (Dublin: Irish Academic Press, 2006), 28-9.

¹¹ Ballhatchet, *Caste, Class and Catholicism in India*, 14-5.

school in India, but they declined as they were busy setting up a convent in South Carolina. Dr. Murray, the Archbishop of Dublin, encouraged Bakhaus to present his case to Teresa Ball. After negotiations, Dr. Bakhaus was able to convince Ball to send Loreto nuns to India. In Calcutta, Loreto nuns lived in the country house of Governor Henry Vansittart that extended from Chowringhee to Park Street in Central Calcutta. Initially, Jesuit fathers helped the nuns adjust with the circumstances, though nuns opposed the supremacy of the Jesuits as discussed later. In the heyday of EIC rule, the company welcomed Roman Catholic missionaries and its administrators, allowed Jesuits to promote education at all levels, including female education.¹²

After reaching India, Delphine Hart had to cope with the task of setting up the convent in Calcutta, educate girls in slum areas, and deal with the rising tension between the Loreto Order and Archbishop Monseignor Carew, who wanted to keep the nuns under his control. Despite hardships, Hart started Loreto House Calcutta on January 10, 1842, with sixty students. Loreto House was in the garden house of Chief Justice, Sir Elijah Impey on Middleton Row. Initially, Loreto House included Catholic girls from affluent Eurasian families. Overtime, the convent included girls from Indian families.¹³

In the summer of 1842, Bishop Carew wanted to set up a Loreto Convent at Chandanagore, which was a French Colony in Bengal. The French settlement had a population of thirty thousand of which about one thousand were Catholics. Hart was doubtful as she did not have enough Loreto nuns to look after the convent. However, she finally gave into the request of the bishop and sent three nuns to Loreto Convent Chandanagore, which started on August 1, 1842, inside the old Capuchin monastery. The convent included poor children and orphans and lasted for five years. In 1847, the nuns established Loreto Entally, in the heart of Calcutta, where the orphans were transferred, and the old monastery, which housed Loreto Chandanagore was taken over by the Sisters of St. Joseph Cluny. Along with a convent at Chandanagore, Archbishop Carew wanted to start a convent at Srerampore, which had a Catholic mission since early Portuguese days but did not have a chaplain. The convent at Srerampore started in 1845 with Mother Alexia Egan (hereafter Alexia Egan) as the Mother Superior. It included students who could not pay the fees of Loreto House and day scholars from the military families in Barrackpore. However, within two years, the school was transferred to Loreto Entally.¹⁴ The figures in the table below reflect the enrollment of students at Loreto convents in the early nineteenth century.

Table 1: Number of students at Loreto Convents in Bengal in 1846

Name of the Institution	Number of students
Loreto Convent Chandernagore	74
Loreto House Calcutta	50
Loreto Convent Srerampore	24
Loreto Convent Chittagong	100

Source: Loreto South Asia Province Archive, "Irish Annals: On the Indian Province," *Beginnings*, 1846.

Over the course of three years, IBVM nuns worked alongside the Jesuits, traveled to different parts of Bengal, and worked in slums. They established three boarding schools, two orphanages and three day schools in an around Calcutta. Most of the convents were established in areas, which had a large Catholic population to cater to the needs of Catholic girls. In short, they took active

¹² Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 21-8.

¹³ Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 24-5; Jayawardane, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 44-5.

¹⁴ Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 24-8.

interests in education and social work. EIC did not have problems with Loreto nuns or their convents, which included women from all classes of the population. In the second half of the nineteenth century, as the support for female education increased, Loreto convents and orphanages spread all over India. Loreto nuns reached out to more Indian families and educated their daughters at their convents. They introduced western values and ways of living and were part of the modernizing process, which was essential for their success. However, Loreto nuns in India had to fight many battles against the domination of the Catholic Church, which was a complex web of ecclesiastical patriarchy based on conflicting pontifical and diocesan territorialities.¹⁵

Conflict with the Male Hierarchy of the Catholic Church

In Ireland, IBVM nuns lived under the authority of the Archbishop of Dublin. Teresa Ball had to fight the male dominance of local Catholic bishops to establish a central government for the Irish convents. The convents in India did not share the same benefits as Rathfarnham. This was mainly because of the growing estrangement between Teresa Ball and Vicar Apostolic of Bengal. In India, Hart had to set up schools, teach, look after other nuns, and attend charity calls either in slums or in hospitals. However, the bigger issue was the tension between the Loreto Order and Archbishop of Calcutta, Monseignor Carew. He was described as ‘domineering’ with ‘absolute or authoritarian’¹⁶ tendencies. He wanted to keep the nuns under his control. Hart resisted many of the intrusions including the effort by Carew to move Loreto House somewhere else. Moreover, the Archbishop intervened in the internal working of the convent. She fought back and ensured that education of girls in Bengal was not interrupted. Nevertheless, the atmosphere was oppressive, and Hart gave up her position to Mother Joseph Hogan (hereafter Joseph Hogan) who was her assistant. Later, Hart became the Chief Superior of Loreto Convents in and around Calcutta from 1855 to 1881.¹⁷

Joseph Hogan also had to struggle against Bishop Carew to secure Loreto House for the nuns who came to India in 1844. In 1845, Carew insisted that Loreto nuns undertake the running of the women’s section of the Medical College in Calcutta and train Indian students in Western medicine. Loreto nuns specialized in teaching for which the demand increased as the convents multiplied. Hogan opposed Carew’s demands, particularly, the two-year contract for nuns to serve in hospitals where they could not talk about their religion to the patients or be critical of the health care system in India. Moreover, the contracts were developed without consulting Hogan. When she appealed to the Pope, the Archbishop stepped down, but Hogan was removed from the position of Mother Superior of Loreto House. Mother Mary Xaveria MacDonnell (hereafter Xaveria MacDonnell) was appointed as Mother Superior. However, the tension between MacDonnell and the Archbishop continued over whether the nuns should work at hospitals or educate women. In the meantime, the Loreto Order wanted to remove their nuns from the control of the Archbishop. In the end, MacDonnell stayed on and expanded her educational work to different parts of India.¹⁸

Though the Loreto nuns were conformist within the colonial framework, they had to constantly fight against the male chauvinism and authoritarian attitudes of the church hierarchies. Jayawardane called them “independent” unmarried women who broke the image of white women being involved just in conversion. In opposite, they stepped into the male world of work and were

¹⁵ Jayawardana, *The White Woman’s Other Burden*, 42-3; Tim Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India, 1820-1932* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2016), 274-8.

¹⁶ Jayawardana, *The White Woman’s Other Burden*, 44.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 44-5.

¹⁸ Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 41-3.

aware of the problems faced by local women. They fought for their right to head schools, travel and above all to be respected and accepted as single women in the evangelical culture, which subordinated women and focused on women's domestic roles.¹⁹ Through the convents, Loreto nuns created spaces that exposed Indian women to modern education. Hindu and Muslim students learned to respect different religions and were also involved in social service at orphanages. In limited ways, Loreto nuns expanded educational opportunities for Indian women and contributed to their emancipation.²⁰

Expansion of Loreto Convents in India

The Charles Wood Despatch of 1854 promoted English education and the system of grants in aid (subsidies) favored missionary schools as English was necessary to secure a lucrative profession under colonial rule. However, it did little to change the female learning space in India. The Despatch of 1860 advanced female education to strengthen English middle-class norms, which moved women from traditional Indian education to a colonial classroom. This allowed missionaries and other Western philanthropic groups to spread western education among Indian women and train them to become teachers and school inspectors.²¹

Mother Mary Colmcille the author of *First the Blade: History of IBVM (Loreto) in India 1841-1962* indicated that after the Revolt of 1857, there was further expansion of Loreto Convents outside of Bengal. Railways increased connectivity, which helped nuns to travel outside Calcutta to start three new convents in the 1870s: Loreto Lucknow (1872), Loreto Hazaribagh (1874) and Loreto Asansol (1877). Loreto Lucknow had students from upper middle-class military and landlord families. Initially, in 1872, nuns were afraid of their security as the story of Kanpur massacre was still popular among the Western and Anglo-Indian population.²² Hence, the colonial government gave them temporary accommodation near the cantonment area. Later, Loreto Lucknow was housed on the property owned by the Nawab of Oudh for seven years. Over time, Loreto Lucknow acquired their own property that had over eleven hundred students.²³

At Loreto Convent Hazaribagh located in the Chota Nagpur Plateau, nuns were involved in evangelistic, educational, medical, and pastoral work. Hazaribagh had over two hundred Catholics as well as seventy Anglo-Indian and Irish soldiers. The Jesuits sent military chaplains to cater to needs of Irish soldiers. This motivated Hart to open a convent at Hazaribagh, which was referred to as the 'Priory' and consisted of *adivasi* (tribal) students. The colonial government provided permanent rent-free land to the convent. Students were provided with basic education in English and needlework. However, the convent closed after an outbreak of diphtheria that killed many nuns including Delphine Hart.²⁴

¹⁹ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 9-10.

²⁰ Ibid., 46-7.

²¹ Geraldine Forbes, *Women in Modern India* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 36-44; Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India*, 87-8 & 93-4.

²² For more information on the Kanpur massacre and the glorification of English women slaughtered as martyrs see Mary Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India 1883 -1947* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), 111-32.

²³ Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 127-31.

²⁴ Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 127-37; Sangeeta Dasgupta, "From 'Heathen Aborigines' to Christian Tribes": Locating the Oraons in Missionary Writings on Chotanagpur," in *Christianity in Indian History: Issues of Culture, Power and Knowledge*, eds. Pius Malekandathil, Joy Pachuau, and Tanika Sarkar (New Delhi: Primus Books, 2016), 3915-4098.

Finally, Loreto Asansol was about one hundred kilometers from Calcutta. The industrial town of Asansol had a large Catholic Eurasian population who worked for the railways. The convent started with five sisters and thirty-five Eurasian girls. The railway company gave the land and the colonial government helped in the construction of buildings. The low fees of the convent helped in educating girls from lower middle class Eurasian families. By the 1890s Loreto Asansol expanded their network to include Hindu and Muslim girls.²⁵

The 1880s marked a new era in the history of the Loreto order. Loreto in India was united with the Mother House of the Irish Branch Institute. This step gave nuns the freedom from control of the Jesuits and ensured the regular exchange of nuns between Ireland and India. The Indian Education Commission (Hunter's Commission) in 1882 recommended more support for female education. Subsequently, Loreto nuns established two more convents at Ranchi (1890) and Simla (1892). Loreto Convent Simla was one of the prestigious institutions for female education in India. All six students from Loreto Simla who appeared for Cambridge School Leaving Examination passed with high grades. In contrast, Loreto Ranchi was started by Mother Gonzaga Joynt (hereafter Gonzaga Joynt) and Archbishop Goethals admitted tribal girls. They received basic education in English, Hindi, music, sewing, and gardening.²⁶

EIC allowed Jesuits and Catholic nuns to start schools and convents as it did not impact the working of the government. After the revolt of 1857, the British Raj justified the expansion of Loreto convents as part of the philanthropic project and not a conscious effort to improve women's access to education. To the Loreto nuns, the expansion of the Loreto venture allowed them to remain committed to female education after the British lost interest in their education project with limited decentralization started by the Morley-Minto reforms of 1909. Loreto nuns established Loreto College in Calcutta on February 2, 1912, with ten students, which was affiliated with Calcutta University in 1913, for Intermediate of Arts (henceforth I.A.) with Licentiate in Teaching. Initially, the college included Indian students who wanted to improve their educational standards and secure a college degree. Overtime, India Office Records on European schools indicate gradual increase in enrollment a few years after its establishment with some fluctuations during the interwar period. The table below confirms it.²⁷

Table 2: Enrollment of students at Loreto College

1917-18	314
1918-19	287
1919-20	315
1920-21	306

British Library (Hereafter BL), *Annual Report on European Education in Bengal 1917-18 to 1920-21*, IOR /N/24/4437.

Loreto College followed a high standard of education. For example, *Report on Public Instruction in Bengal for 1925-26* indicates that in 1925-26 Loreto College sent nine students for I.A. exams and all were successful. Moreover, the college was one of the two institutions in Calcutta that trained teachers as the colonial government did not have a teacher training college

²⁵ Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India*, 278-9; Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 138-41.

²⁶ Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 142-59; Forbes, *Women in Modern India*, 44-5.

²⁷ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 46; Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 162-3; Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India*, 273-8.

for women. Teachers from Loreto College were employed in primary schools and lower classes of secondary schools.²⁸

In terms of financial support, Loreto nuns maintained their relative separateness from the colonial state. For example, *the Report on Public Instruction in Bengal* indicated that in 1937-38, Bengal had just two government colleges for women's higher education, Bethune College in Calcutta, and Eden Intermediate College in Dacca. Loreto College received just 500 rupees from Provincial Revenues and the rest 17,720 rupees from private sources for its maintenance. Even Dr. W.A. Jenkins in his *Report upon Girls' and Women's Education in Bengal* acknowledged that the colonial government provided no accommodation for students from Loreto College. However, these obstacles did not discourage Loreto nuns from educating local women. They hired European Catholic religious women as teaching staff to run their convents. These teachers required just living expenses, could deliver instruction of a standard that would please parents. After First World War, these women constituted forty-six percent of the entire teaching staff at Loreto convents and provided quality Western education to Indian and Eurasian girls.²⁹

Deirdre Raftery argues that Loreto nuns depended on donations for building the convents, which included classroom, dormitories, and chapels. She refers to the nuns as transnational figures as they worked to establish convents for female education in different parts of the world. However, Raftery does not highlight the limitations of their work. As a private order, Loreto convents worked within the colonial framework to advance women's education in India. Despite financial disengagement with the colonial state, Loreto nuns invited British officers on Sports Day and Prize Distribution ceremonies. Furthermore, the colonial government gave the medal of *Kaisar-i-Hind* to Gonzaga Joynt for her contributions to women's education. In short, while conforming to colonial rule, Loreto nuns fought many battles against the structures of oppression in India to advance educational opportunities for local women. They may not have intended to produce feminist students but were instrumental in advancing female emancipation.³⁰ In that context, a survey of the curricula will highlight how education at Loreto convents generated a feminist consciousness among colonized women who opposed discriminatory traditional beliefs, fought for their rights, and wanted to change women's position in society.

Loreto education

Through the convents, Loreto nuns stressed neatness, cleanliness, obedience, and modesty. They encouraged specific behavioral patterns such as eating together with girls from all castes, races, and socio-economic backgrounds. Another break with the tradition was in the age of marriage. Indian girls at Loreto convents remained unmarried till the age of seventeen or eighteen. Students' broke caste taboos and followed a western model of education. Loreto nuns did not restrict themselves to just teaching music and sewing but advanced local women's emancipation by combining education with piety.³¹

²⁸ West Bengal State Archives (Hereafter WBSA), Education Department, *Proceedings of the Government of Bengal for the Quarter Ending September 1927*, Proceedings No: 8, File No: Edn 8 R-1 (3), September 1927; British Library (Hereafter BL), *Report on Public Instruction in Bengal 1938-39*, IOR/V/24/989; Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India*, 271-2.

²⁹ BL, *Report on Public Instruction in Bengal 1937-38*, IOR/V/24/989; W. A. Jenkins, *Report upon Girls' and Women's Education in Bengal*, IOR/V/27/860/26; Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India*, 275-6.

³⁰ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 46-7; Allender, *Learning Femininity in Colonial India*, 278-9; Deirdre Raftery, Convents as Transnational Education Spaces in the Long Nineteenth Century. *Espacio, Tiempo y Educación*, v.7, n.2 (2020), 193-205.

³¹ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 37-8.

English was the most important language taught at Loreto schools. Major emphasis was placed on the study of English Literature where students read plays written by Shakespeare. Freny Tehsildar, a student of Loreto Tara Hall in Simla, in an essay titled, 'My opinion on Our English Course,' published in *Palm Lives* in 1936 indicated that they studied *King Lear* for English literature. Many students found it difficult because they had not seen the play or were generally disinterested in plays. At Loreto College, the study of English Honours at the bachelor's level started in 1927. In 1929 Chitra Majumdar was the first Bengali student to secure first class in English from the college. All the successful students of English honors from Loreto College pursued university education. The decision to promote the study of English language and literature was prompted by the idea that the knowledge of English would help to secure higher education and professional careers under colonial rule.³²

Along with English, students of Loreto convents and the College studied Bengali, Hindi, Sanskrit, and Urdu. This was predominantly because Cambridge Examination Syndicate agreed to accept modern Indian languages instead of French and Latin. Students studied Hindi or Urdu as their second language at Loreto Lucknow and Hindi for a long time was the medium of instruction at Loreto Ranchi. At the B.A. level, Zakiah Ahmed and Razia Ahmed studied Persian Honours with Urdu minor at Loreto College. They secured First Class in the B.A. Examination. Moreover, the introduction of Indian languages in the curriculum allowed Loreto Convents to attract students from Hindu, Muslim, and tribal families. Indian students were exposed to both Western and Indian literature.³³

From 1880s onwards, there was shift in the curriculum of Loreto Convents to meet the demands for higher education. Science education became popular among women. Loreto Teachers College, which was part of Loreto College, introduced intermediary courses in Science and Mathematics and qualifying studies for medical education. Beyond the narrow limits of Catholic education, nuns at Loreto schools prepared Eurasian and Indian middle-class women for professional careers when opportunities for science education were extremely limited for women in India.³⁴

Music, Needlework, Cookery, and Physical Exercise were also part of the curriculum at Loreto Schools. Students prepared for music examinations conducted by Trinity College of Music and examiners like Doctor Creser and Mr. St. George were sent from London to conduct practical examinations. In 1928, six students from Loreto Lucknow appeared for the Royal Academy music examination and all of them were successful with one gaining distinction. Romola Lahiry better known as Sister Stella, joined Loreto College as a staff in 1946 and guided Loreto teams for success in basketball tournaments. Hence, modern education at Loreto convents included the study of domestic management, music, and sports.³⁵

Girls at Loreto convents were exposed to modern western education, which was the main goal of IBVM nuns. Outside academics, school magazine *Palm Leaves*, gave women a space to express their opinions on a variety of issues and develop a social network where they demanded rights and freedom for women. For example, Lotika Ghose, daughter of Indian leader Manmohon Ghose, from Loreto House was extremely critical of the Hindu household and the position of women in

³² Madhumita Roy, "Englishing" India, Reinstating Class and Social Privilege, *Social Text*, v.39 (Summer 1994), 83-109; Dasgupta, *Change and Continuity*, 42-55.

³³ Dasgupta, *Change and Continuity*, 49-54; BL, *Annual Report on European Education in Bengal for the year 1917-1918* IOR/V/24/4437.

³⁴ Dasgupta, *Change and Continuity*, 42-5; Jayawardane, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 42.

³⁵ Dasgupta, *Change and Continuity*, 27-8 & 56-7; 'Loreto Convent High School Lucknow,' *Palm Leaves from Loreto in India*, 1928, 90.

it. In 'A Scene from Hindu Home,' published in *Palm Leaves* in 1920, she indicated how cruelly Hindu widows were treated at homes and that young Indian women were eager to receive education. Loreto nuns did not challenge the foundations of colonial rule but provided good secondary education that allowed women to enter new professions like teaching and law. They trained teachers at Loreto College since Government of Bengal provided most support to training male teachers. In short, Loreto nuns combined the roles of superintendents and matriarchs, which would become a tradition for missionary schools and colleges in India. In limited ways, the convents introduced reform programs that uplifted women's position in India. Subsequently, these young Indian women defied early marriage and broke away from conventional beliefs like caste and religious prejudices. They struggled for greater equality between men and women.³⁶

Westernized Indian women or feminists

Manjula Ray who was admitted to Loreto House in 1931 and later became a senior judge of the Calcutta High Court, praised the secular character of her school, which included students from different classes, castes, and religions. To quote Manjula Ray, 'My school where through the years I befriended young girls of different castes, creeds, and religions and was never adversely conscious of the diversity amongst us, in language, food habits, culture or religion, and later in life was quite at a loss to understand why the Nation was required to be torn apart?'³⁷ Similarly, Meena Hasan who attended Loreto House in the 1940s praised European nuns for maintaining a secular atmosphere at school. Professor Ratnabali Chatterjee in an interview indicated that during her school days at Loreto House, she had the opportunity to interact with girls from Armenian, Jewish, Muslim, and Parsi backgrounds. This was also the case at other convents like Loreto Darjeeling and Shillong in the 1930s and 1940s, where they provided higher education to Nepali, Bhutanese, Garo, and Khasi girls. Loreto College in Calcutta included Muslim girls at a time when many prominent educational institutions for women in Bengal discriminated against minority women. Finally, I interviewed Professor Fawzia Afzal Khan on her experience of studying at the Convent of Jesus and Mary in Lahore Pakistan. She appreciated the secular environment and diversity of cultures at her school and indicated that nuns never made any effort to convert non-Christian students.³⁸

Table 3: Hindu and Muslim students at Loreto College

Year	Hindus	Muslims
1936-37	22	3
1937-38	21	6
1938-39	28	12

Source: (Compiled by the author) BL, *Report on Public Instruction in Bengal 1935-36 to 1947-48*, IOR/V/989.

³⁶ Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India*, 28-9; Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 9-10; Marthal Nalini, 'Gender Dynamics of Missionary Work in India: Isabella Thoburn-A Case Study,' *Journal of International Women's Studies* v. 7 n. 4 (May 2006), 266-86; 'A Scene from Hindu Home,' *Palm Leaves from Loreto in India*, 1920, 24-5.

³⁷ *Loreto House Calcutta, 1842-1992* (Calcutta: Eureka Publicity Service, 1992).

³⁸ Interview with Professor Ratnabali Chatterjee, 29th July 2019; For more information on Muslim women's education see Sonia Amin, *The World of Muslim Women in Colonial Bengal, 1876-1939* (Leiden: E.J.Brill, 1996); Colmcille, *First the Blade*, 158-9; *Loreto House Calcutta*; Interview with Professor Fawzia Afzal Khan, 1st March 2022.

The above examples indicate that Christian education and influence at Loreto convents produced not just good wives but also educated Indian women. They acknowledged that they benefited from missionary education, which helped them to see the world in a different light. Indian students at Loreto schools preferred a more secular atmosphere in school and opposed Hindu vilification of women. This was a departure from the dominant Hindu revivalist discourse, which blamed Muslims for the decline of women's position in India. This 'break with the past'³⁹ allowed educated Indian women from Loreto convents to oppose hegemonic ideologies of the conservative Indian nationalists and British officials. These educated and emancipated Indian women forged links with the West, pursued welfare programs for the improving the lives of downtrodden women and redefined their relationship between Hinduism and Christianity to secure dignity and self-respect in society.⁴⁰

Through education at Loreto convents, the 'new Indian woman' broke the image of western educated women being luxurious and caring little about their families. Rather, advancement in communication (print media, vernacular press) helped these women to articulate their needs, insecurities, and challenge patriarchal traditions. They communicated with women outside their own religious communities, had professional careers, and expressed their views on gender equality and religious freedom in school magazines and newspapers like the *Palm Leaves* and *The Statesman*, respectively. Women learned to cross the boundaries of home and inspired successive generations to seek education. Even after independence, Loreto Convents had a wider relevance to the progress of female education in India.⁴¹

Conclusion

Scholars have argued that missionaries viewed colonized women as subjects upon which the liberating reform project depended. They wanted to transform the Indian family system according to the principles of British middle-class structure where they defended western superiority and the imperial agenda. While acknowledging the imperial aspect of their work, this essay evaluates the various dimensions of their work in India. Loreto nuns stepped out of homes, educated local women, raised consciousness about women's issues, and ventured into hostile territories. They introduced some cultural trends of Western Europe like classics, music, and art within India but also encouraged the revival of local arts and crafts and the teaching of vernacular literature. Indian students from these convents secured high scores in foreign examinations and were geared towards graduate studies. Furthermore, the convents in India had Hindu, Muslim, Christian, and tribal women at a time when there was very little scope for minority women's education. At orphanages like Loreto Entally and Ranchi, girls received education that helped them to secure employment. Thus, with limited resources, Loreto nuns made strong efforts to educate Indian women and advance their emancipation.⁴²

Overall, Loreto nuns established a network of convents across the British Empire where they transcended racial divides and cultural differences to provide education to colonized women and

³⁹ Anagol, *The Emergence of Feminism in India*, 35.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 30-7.

⁴¹ Aditi Dasgupta, 'A Missionary Initiative: The Foundation of Loreto College,' in *Women and Education in India: A Representative Study*, eds., Shantanu Majee (Kolkata: Jogamaya Devi College, 2020), 105-7; Dasgupta, *Change and Continuity*, 56-7; Kathinka Kerkhoff, *Save Ourselves and the Girls! Girlhood in Calcutta Under the Raj* (Rotterdam: University of Amsterdam, 1995), 41-2; Forbes, *The New Cambridge History of India*: 60-2.

⁴² Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 26-7; Stephanie O'Brien, *Towards Life in Its Fullness: A Story of Loreto (IBVM) in Eastern Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2015), 50-1.

helped them strive for economic independence. For example, they educated Kenyan women at Loreto Mosongari (1921) and Loreto Limaru (1936). Both institutions were praised for their contributions to female education. Written from a feminist perspective, this article shows how Catholic Loreto nuns influenced the movement towards women's rights in India, which included the right to study, work, travel abroad, and respect for independent women even within the constraints of colonial rule. Indian women under the influence of Christian education opposed caste system, miseries of widowhood and patriarchy.⁴³ To quote Jayawardena, 'It is not surprising that many South Asian feminists were products of mission schools and convents.'⁴⁴

⁴³ O'Brien, *Towards Life in Its Fullness*, 40-3.

⁴⁴ Jayawardena, *The White Woman's Other Burden*, 26.

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