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**WOMEN'S EDUCATION IN COLONIAL TIMES : THE PIONEERING EFFORTS OF
MARGARET E. COUSIN**

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Margaret E. Cousins was an ardent worker for the Suffrage in England and contributed to the awakening of India and to her rights as a great nation. She was one of the women pioneers who not only worked in the field of Political reform but contributed valuably in the field of Educational reform for women as well. Paraphrasing Emerson's saying "The world is a symbol, in the whole and in all its parts", Margaret E. Cousins, once famously pronounced that "India is a paradox, in the whole and in all its parts". She thus understood the Indian social reality. Mixing with the life of the Indian people in their homes, in festivals, in politics, among the rich and poor and all castes and communities, Cousins found such gentle character, such nuances of refinement, such inherent intelligence, such response to traditional art and culture, that it was difficult for her to realize that India had the lowest percentage of literacy in the world.¹ She found that India had the fewest number of its youth in schools and colleges, and the fewest literate adults of any civilized nation on the face of the earth. She found that in the official Education Report of 1838, there existed then in Bengal and Bihar as many as 100,000 schools, that is one school for every 400 children. In 1912 G.K. Gokhale stated that there was at that time only one school for every six villages in India. By 1930, there were only 5 literate women in Bihar out of every thousand Bihari women. In the year 1941, Cousins estimated that only 5000 odd institutions in India were intended solely for the education of girls. Thus the condition of women's education was abominable.

Before the East India Company took over the government of India and later transferred it to the British Government, "the large number of indigenous schools were religious in character and regarded knowledge as the means of spiritual growth." The English criticized the old system as ridiculous. Under the influence of Macaulay, English was established as the language of the

Court and Government, and enforced as the medium of instruction in the High Schools. The whole aim of education was forcibly wrested by a foreign people and a foreign policy from reverence for knowledge as a means of improving character to looking on it as a means for gaining Government jobs.² Teaching became a system of dictating simple notes that could be crammed for the purpose of passing the Government public examinations. In all this transition, the education of girls became worst affected for they did not need English education for their future destiny of wives and mothers, nor for the jobs, nor did the secular type of education attract the parents of the girls to support their education. It was only when the movements for co-education of boys and girls became popular and was permitted by the authorities that female education witnessed a spurt. But it was observed in the schools where co-education existed that girls came in as an extra and were made to feel on sufferance and their optional subjects and physical culture training were not given facilities equal to those of the boy students. Understanding the situation, Margaret E. Cousins realized that a better physical standard was essential for Indian progress. It was necessary to have educational means to cope up with the disastrously high rate of infant mortality and the high death-rate of young married women.³

In reference to education, Cousins found that a resume of the division of the population threw interesting light on the education of women in India. There was almost cent percent literacy among girls of the Parsi and Christian community. During the past couple of years, the ranks of women teachers and women hospital nurses were almost entirely recruited from amongst the Christian missionary educated girls, and they continue to constitute an invaluable mainstay of these services. The women of the Brahmin caste she found, considered their religious duty to know how to read and write, and carry on the dharma of reverence for the Guru. But she analyzed that there are only ten million Brahmins in the 270 odd millions of Hindus. This ratio got further reduced because of the custom of early marriage, and the girls who had barely learned to read and write were withdrawn from the schools at about twelve years of age. The Muhammadan women received fair literacy in their own language as it is obligatory among their community that each boy and girl should know how to read the Koran in Arabic. But Cousins observed that, the prevalence of purdah system among these women kept them within the zenana walls, denying them fresh air and freedom of movement and doomed their masses to an appallingly high percentage of ill-health, and of mortality from childbirth. The unschooled condition of the millions of women of the non-Brahmins families attracted her attention. These

were the women of the agricultural areas, the women of the great tea and coffee estates, of the cotton, coir, and the jute areas, of the factories, cities, and mines. Then there were the lower class of women workers, coolies, stone-breakers, scavengers. In India, these women were all unschooled.⁴ She observed that only a politically free country having control over its own finances and initiative can ever begin to grapple with such a vast problem as the liquidating of the illiteracy of the millions of India's masses.⁵ Cousins was horrified at the lack of response to the idea of education as a birth-right in India, while in countries like Japan, Ireland, England, Russia and America this idea held sway.

She analysed that only 8% of the Indian revenue was devoted to elementary education (for 350 million people). Britain spent 86 crores for 40 million, and the United States 347 crores for 130 million.⁶ Gokhale claimed that two-thirds of the national revenue should be spent on education. Women's education being treated as irrelevant was partly due to the general view that held sway in the Indian society that the curriculum was out of focus with the everyday needs of the women. Cousins understood the urgency to revolutionize the curriculum to attract girls towards education.

It remained the happy privilege of the All India Women's Conference, called together first in 1926 at the behest of Margaret E. Cousins specifically to initiate reforms in the education system particularly in the curriculum of the girls. It brought into existence a new type of College for Indian girls, The Lady Irwin Home Science College in New Delhi which opened in November, 1932. Its aim was to enable women to utilize the advantages of science in their homes and to add to them the loveliness of Art interwoven with "that particular heritage which is embodied in India's own culture and tradition, in its national games and dances, arts and craft, sagas and songs, and spiritual aspirations."⁷ This college took a firm hold on groping desires of parents for a curriculum for their girls that was both "natural and national," and fitted the young girls to be new type of teachers, up-to-date home-makers, mothers and capable organizers of public services such as their new status as citizens demands. Another of the aims of this growing and popular College was the restoration to teachers of the high status in society that used to be theirs in olden times. All through the country the women teachers were amongst the most capable of the country's women. This was recognized when the authorities chose the women teachers as the officers in charge of the Polling Booths for Women in the General Election for

the Legislative Assemblies and Councils in 1937, when for the first time 5,000,000 women were entitled to vote. In demanding that teachers should be considered as high in the social scale as wives of officials of higher or lesser degree, or as relatives of the rich landlords or the merchants, the college did a great service to the women who were amongst its pioneers in the Dark Ages of India's literacy. The existence of too much of caste and class snobbery could only be eliminated by education, purer patriotism, applied science and spirituality as identified by Cousins.⁸

The changes proposed in the Wardha Scheme of Basic Education threatened to shorten the number of years of the schooling of girls and to defeat its purpose by allowing girls to stop their education at twelve before they had completed their training in any basic craft such as spinning, though the boys had the advantage of a compulsory number of years of training during which they become sufficiently expert to be able to earn their living through that craft.⁹ The Central Advisory Board on Education tried to prevent such a retrograde step in the midst of the proposed necessary reform based on racial need and character in fundamental mass literacy. Cousins lamented the absence in India of a dynamic, active zeal of the few who were literate to teach all the ignorant, which characterized the Revolution in Russia, nor the drive of a complete self directed government which compelled every village in Japan to have primary schools and compelled every child to attend those schools, and provided the finance for what Japanese statesmanship saw to be the modern necessity and the best investment for their country. Cousins sincerely hoped that the young men and women students themselves who were filled with patriotic emotions and enthusiasm would influence the educational authorities to include as part of their qualifications for passing the School Final tests and the academic degrees atleast one year of successful teaching in schools for the masses. Thus students would pass their own advantages as a National Educational Trust and a privileged opportunity of constructive national service. The presence of such new cadre of teachers would bridge the gulf between the educated and the masses and would reinstate the honour to women of being "the first Guru."¹⁰

Inspired by the Director of Public Instruction, Margaret E. Cousins along with eminent women of India like Rajkumari Amrit Kaur, Muthulakshmi Reddy, Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay felt that it was necessary to organize Women's Conferences on Education Reform in various provinces which would formulate their local solutions and also give views which may be All India centered. From each of these conferences, representatives were elected to attend an All

India Conference which first took place in Poona in 1927. The suggested subjects for discussion at the conference were primary education where the focus would be on co-education, attendance and adequate supply of teachers. The discussion on secondary education would focus on the formation of alternative courses to suit girls who intended leaving college at 14 or 16. The thrust of the discussion on college education would be to attract girls to the Medical, Legal, Domestic or Arts courses. A significant reform demanded was the inclusion of religion, moral or ethical teaching as a compulsory subject, and also the inclusion of the fine arts and the stage at which vocational training should be added to literary education.¹¹ This conference defined Education as training which enabled the child or the individual to develop his or her latent capabilities to their fullest extent for the service of humanity. It must, therefore, include elements for physical, mental, emotional, civic and spiritual development. The courses of study arranged for this purpose must be so flexible as to allow for adaptation to the conditions of the individual, the locality and the community.¹² This became the ideal of all-Indian womanhood as the foundation on which all changes in education were to be based. The Provincial Councils were exhorted to pass suitable legislations and the self governing bodies such as the Municipalities and District boards and other authorities concerned were requested to use their power to this end.¹³ The conference deeply deplores the effect of early marriage on education and urges the Government of India to pass legislation making marriage under sixteen years of age a penal offence.¹⁴ The conference suggested that systematic medical inspection should be made compulsory in all schools and colleges, and in the case of girls the inspection should be carried out by the lady doctors. A complete course of physical training was considered compulsory in all boys and girls schools. The Conference stressed that the lack of education was the greatest impediment in the progress of women and further broadened its agenda to include social reforms which would further help in spreading education among women.¹⁵ The Hartog Report too highlighted the abolition of Pardah, the enforcement of the Sarda Act and the improvement of the existing schools to be given first place for the development of women's education. The success of the conference is highlighted by the fact that it became the most powerful women's organization and shaped the Indian women's movement. Cousins's zeal inspired the Colonial government to adopt as far as possible a uniform educational policy as far as the boys and girls were concerned throughout the British India. She repeatedly asked the Government to make pronouncement in favour of Compulsory and Free Primary Education. She urged the removal of the unwise

differentiation which provided facilities for ten times as many boys as girls, a policy which defeated its own end, as the uneducated wives of these boys would later hold back their progress.¹⁶ She stressed the need to make available travelling scholarships to assist Associations which were widely attempting to continue the education of married women outside ordinary school hours and curricula. She was courageous enough to demand that every individual and every nation had the unfettered right of self-expression for the enrichment of the human synthesis and considered it imperative for every country to have full responsible self-government.¹⁷ So potent was the seed of self assertion sown and so psychologically right was the moment of its planting that Margaret E. Cousins was able to wield international influence of a powerful kind. The stress she laid on women finding adequate representation on legislative councils, local bodies, senate, syndicate and educational boards and councils that control stages of education was to facilitate the reorganization and development of women's education. Thus she addressed the issue of educational reform for women in a wholesome manner and was able to convince the British government to take formidable steps to strengthen the spread of education among Indian women.

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