

Child Health in Late Colonial Bengal: Awareness Programme for Healthy Future

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Abstract

I explored how children's health care began to get importance in the late nineteenth century colonial Bengal. Also how much it was different from our traditional child rearing method. Here, I limited my discussion within the analysis of Bengali periodicals of late nineteenth and early twentieth century. From the late nineteenth century a lot of magazines, journals began to give importance on children related articles. Also various juvenile magazines began to publish from 1880s. Their main target was to build up a good and strong Bengali race like Europeans. For that, not only the intellectual development is important, but good health also necessary for the future development. So, various Bengali periodicals began to publish articles on the western method of the child care from the late nineteenth century. Interestingly, these articles were not tried create awareness among the whole society, their target was newly emerged middle-class society. For children's intellectual development, the western-educated bharalok class begins to give importance to their children's care. By creation of new idea the role of children for the society began to change from traditional society to modern society. In traditional Indian society, the role of a child was mainly confined within his family. Ancestral duty was his main duty. In modern society it became wider, now children are a part of the nation-building process which is reflected in these writings. By this, child-rearing in a scientific way became an identity of a middle-class family. It gradually makes a difference between educated and uneducated family as well as rich and poor.

KEYWORDS: Children, Juvenile magazine, Sandesh, Bamabodhini Patrika, Balak.

INTRODUCTION

Successful societies safeguard their future by continually striving to improve the well-being of their children. They understand that healthy, well-developed, educated, and respected progeny ensure that past achievements serve as the foundation for continuing progress.¹

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Nurture a strong, healthy, and intellectual childhood becomes mandatory for every nation and every society. Because, the wealth of a nation lays not so much in its economical and natural resources but it lies more decidedly in its children and youth. Children are the creators and shapers of a nation's future. Investing in child development, early years will bring up a bright future with lifelong benefits for them and economic and social benefits for our entire nation. Philippe Aries argued in his book 'Centuries of Childhood' that childhood is not a natural phenomenon but a

creation of society.² Anthropologist Margaret Mead demonstrates that different cultures and environments affect the experience of childhood.³

It is a time in which one should have to take care of child's diet, health, and immunity. The government of India has acknowledged this fact and has started several reform projects like Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE), Sarva Shiksha Abhiyan, and so on.⁴ This is the present phenomena, but as a student of history I have some questions. What was our traditional idea about child care? How much it was different from today? When the new idea emerged and why? Also, how much does it affect society?

I tried to find out these answers by analysing the Bengali periodicals of late nineteenth and early twentieth-century. Before going to this main discussion, I will highlight the tradition of child care in India through a brief analysis of Ayurvedic medical text for a better understanding of the changing process of child care in the late colonial period.

CHILD CARE IN TRADITIONAL MEDICAL TEXTS

What is childhood? Which period of life we will mark as childhood? Anthropologists, historians, sociologists identified that, there is no single and universal experience or understanding of where childhood begins and ends but that this has altered according to time and place. In India eighteen is the legally fixed age when childhood ends and a person becomes an adult. In present days we considered childhood starts from the day of birth. French scholar Philippe Aries wrote in his book *Centuries of Childhood* (1962) that in Europe, ancient societies did not have a clear mental representation of the child. Before the seventeenth century, children were viewed as tiny adults. They had no special clothing, food, social space, or time which addressed to a childhood culture. They thought that children are same as adult but something they have different. Aries published his study in 1961 of paintings, gravestones, furniture, and school records. He found that before the seventeenth century, children were represented as mini-adults. According to Philippe Aries, the ancient societies did not have a clear mental representation of the child and of the adolescent. Infancy was considered mainly as a period when the child could not take care of itself. As soon as it could understand its surroundings the child was quickly included in the adult circles. He was considered a young adolescent. Foul language, sexual activities, death, and so on were all permitted in their presence.⁵ From the middle of eighteenth century, western world began to view childhood as a stage of life characterized by dependency, learning, growth, and development. So, they need a special care.

But traditional Indian context is different from Europe. Traditional medical texts (*Ayurveda, Charak Samhita, Susruta Samhita*), Mahabharat, Ramayana and other ancient texts represents that India had tradition to take special care for children. Ayurveda discussed on health care and development of children in *Baala Chikitsa* which is one of the eight branches of Ayurveda. The chapter entitled, '*kumarabratya*' in *Charak* and *Susruta Samhitas* also wrote on child care and child rearing method. So, children got special importance in ancient Indian society as reflects in traditional medical texts. According to Indian traditional medical texts, the development of a child begins not from birth but from conception. Moreover, they considered birth as the end of the first stage of life cycle rather than beginning. That's why, they gave special importance on the prenatal care for the physical and mental development of the child. Ayurveda instructed that, the desires of a pregnant woman is actually the desire of unborn child, which indicates the unborn child's psychological predispositions and character. For instance, the mother's desire to see a king means that the son will become rich and famous; if the mother wishes for fine clothes and ornaments then, the child's nature will be aesthetic and so on. Also this text instructed to fulfil the wishes of the mother even if this is harmful for her or unborn child. Although, it further instructed for antidotes against harmful food.⁶ Moreover, these texts have wide-ranging instructions on various topics such as the time when a child should be encouraged to sit up or the specification of toys with regard to colour, size, shape and texture – revealing great solicitude concerning the period of infancy and early childhood. Most of these are unacceptable from the scientific point of view but we cannot ignore that, traditional society took special care for children.⁷ But according to Sudhir Kakar, "large parts of the Indian tradition of child-hood are solely concerned with boys and ignore, if dispossess, girls of their childhood."⁸ It is important to point out that, traditional Indian families tried to nurture children as good family members rather than as nation builders. Most of the traditional children were prepared to take their father's profession as their carrier.

CHILD CARE IN JUVENILE MAGAZINES

The social value of children was changed in European society by the major economic transformations, the shift from agricultural economy to industrialized economy in the nineteenth century. But from the end of the seventeenth century in Europe, the child stopped living with the adults and learning how to work from them. But major transformation in child care took place by the industrial revolution. From that time parents became very fond to the children's education and health care. As a result, the family began to organize itself around the children. Children were no longer seen as economic requirements after the industrial revolution.⁹

It's the factor of Europe where the new method of child care developed by the economic transformation. We know that, Indian traditional child care was different from European tradition. So, how and when did Indian society begin to take care of children in western way?

From the second half of the nineteenth century rigidly structured and extended childhood was introduced in colonial Bengal. Changed social conditions forced them to make such types of decisions. A large number of new middle-class people emerged in this period which created a competition for government jobs among middle-class children. So, there was a necessity for the intellectual development of these children which will prepare them for the competition.

In Bengal from the early nineteenth century, European Christian missionary schools began to write books for children. Writing about science for children was begun by Europeans, but Indians uptake it quickly. This is why a large number of juvenile magazines like *Sakha* (1883-1894), *Sathi* (1893-1894), *Sakha O Sathi* (1894-1897), *Balak* (1885), *Mukul* (1894-1914), *Sandesh* (1913-1923), *Sisu* (1912-1914) and others were published in this period which contained 'ideal biographies, charming stories, easy articles on science, health advise, history, and *whatever else is worth knowing*—after all the aim was *sarbangin shiksha* (all-round education). At least thirty-six juvenile magazines came out between 1883 to 1923.¹⁰ About the purpose of publishing *Sakha*, The editor put it,

In our unfortunate country, not too many people think about the intellectual and characteristic development of the child. *Sakha* is being published so that children can be real humans.¹¹

Not only intellectual and characteristic development, but healthy children also became necessary for the future development of Bengali race. Colonial and nationalist representations of child health care were attached with the question of community and national health, strength, and well-being. So, these journals also published some articles on, how to maintain good health, how to build up a healthy future, how to avoid intoxication. Articles like '*Sisu Swasthya Rakhya*' (*Sakha*), '*Moddopaner Fol*' (*Sakha*), '*Rog Sarano*' (*Sandesh*), '*Vikharider Maye*', (*Sandesh*), '*Petuk*' (*Sandesh*), '*Nongra Lok*' (*Sandesh*) tried to create an awareness among children.¹² *Sakha* advised their little readers by the publication of a series of articles entitled '*Sisu Swasthya Rakhya*' on the necessity of regular bathing, brushing, early rising, exercising, playing. *Sisu* another little's magazine suggested their readers on the importance of health care along with proper education. It gives the example of Mr. W.W. Hornel, who joined as Director of education department in 1913. This

article enthusiastically pointed out that, he is a highly educated person with potential health consciousness.

Unlike our indigenous good students, Hornel *Saheb* did educate himself with attention to his health. Therefore, he successfully achieved good health and active performance with his education. Active people like him are not commonly seen.¹³

Not all of these health articles gave importance on what to do, a significant number of articles advised on what not to do, what is worst for health, how to refrain yourself from bad habits. *Sakha* Published numberers of articles on the bad effect of any kind of intoxication. In the article '*Maddapaner Fol*', portrayed an image of an educated middle-class family which is unhappy, unhealthy, and ruined due to intoxicants.¹⁴ By this, they advised the little readers not to intoxicated themselves.

Any kind of drink without water is not necessary for our health. Despite that, we see that some people drink liquids other than water.....Liquor is one of them. Since this poison came into society, the health, economy, development of the country gradually declining. So, children do not touch this sin.¹⁵

So, they warned that liquor is harmful for our body. For the creation of awareness against tobacco another part of this article pointed out that, 'In our country, we have a tradition of smoking tobacco, *Gaza*, opium, etc; all of these are harmful. *Gaza* is more harmful, *Gajakhors* became hatred in our *bhadralok* society.'¹⁶ *Sandesh*, another popular little's magazine tried to create health awareness among readers through the imaginary character of unhealthy people like '*Nongra Lok*', '*Vikharider Maye*'. Under the heading *Nongra Lok*, it highlighted the social habit, attitude, dress, daily habits of unhealthy, unconscious people.¹⁷

CHILDREN IN BENGALI PERIODICALS

Childhood is a period of development and dependency. But children are not enough conscious to take care itself. So, their health and well-being are greatly dependent on their parents, especially on their mothers. Therefore, several articles began to publish from the 1880s on western based child care which was mostly addressed to the middle-class women, *Bhadramahila*. Allopathic physician Gangaprasad Mukhopadhyay in his very popular book, '*Matrisikha Arthat Garbhabasthay o Sutikagrihey Matar ebong Ballabastha porjonto Santaner Sasthyarakkha Bishayak Upodesh*' (Education of the Mother Meaning Advice Regarding Health Welfare during Pregnancy and in Lying-Room of Mother and Child Till Adolescence, 1871) addressed to the educated *Bangamahila* to aware themselves what to do and what not to do in pregnancy period. Also, it highlights the significance of following a well-disciplined

life before and after childbirth to ensure health and comfort to the mother and infant.¹⁸ Not only books various periodicals like *Chikitsak o Samalochak* (1895-1896), *Bamabodhini Patrika* (1863-1922), *Grihasthali* (1884), *Chikitsa Sanmmilani* (1885-1894), and others began to publish articles on how to deliver healthy child, how to take care of infants, advised mothers about the symptoms and basic medicines for illness. 'Griha Chikitsa', a series of article of *Bamabodhini Patrika* mentioned that,

Like other education, women need to know some medical education as it was not easy and useful to call doctors for all ailments. If they call doctors for some diseases of their own and their children's, there was a possibility of death or harm instead of benefits.¹⁹

Various articles advised mothers about the primary remedies for Malaria, Cholera, Fever, and so on. In an article entitled '*Saral Griha Chikitsa*' advised mothers how to protect their children from worm disease.²⁰ For the well-being of children, some of the articles warned mothers about the bad effect of raw milk, artificial milk and suggested them for breastfeeding or boiled milk which is hygienic for children.²¹

Also, some articles suggested a hygienic and scientific method of midwifery practice which is necessary for the well-being of maternity and infant. In this way, print media tried to spread awareness among women for the health care of their children and other family members. Moreover, the special report of Victoria Memorial Scholarship Fund²² suggested awareness campaigns among the mothers for the improvement of conditions of maternity and infant care. They tried to spread awareness among women through the lectures to women on ante-natal and pre-natal care.²³ Hence, child care becomes an important issue in society since the last quarter of the nineteenth century.

CONCLUSION

In June 1884 the editor of *Sakha* wrote that 'these boys and girls are our future citizens and helping them means contributing towards the future development of our country.'²⁴ The growing competition for government jobs created an atmosphere for the intellectual development of the children. Not only intellectual development, but good health also became necessary for the nation-building process. In this way, child care became an important issue in late colonial Bengal. In this way the role of children began to change from traditional society to modern society. In traditional Indian society, the role of a child was mainly confined within his family. In modern society it became wider, now children are a part of the nation-building process. Through this new idea motherhood and child care were gradually becoming scientific and modern issue that required education, scientific knowledge and skills. And interestingly, most of the awareness campaigns were middle-class semi-educated *Bhadramahila* centric. So, female education became mandatory for the well-being of children. It began to distinguish between the child-rearing method of literate and illiterate women. Therefore, the modern scientific based child-rearing method gradually became an identity of elite middle-class people, when illiterate families

especially mothers were stuck in the traditional method of child care. It also affected the mentality and future of the children.

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